Alabaster

The Achillios Chronicles

Book 1

Don Jones

DonJones.com

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Foreword

I first wrote *Alabaster* in late 2018, followed quickly by its sequels, *Onyx* and *Verdant*. They were the first full-length novels I'd written, and I had a very specific purpose for them.

My first *novelette* was *A History of the Galactic War*. It tells the story of a... well, galactic war. One we obviously haven't experienced yet. And it tells it in the form of a textbook.

Whu?

I wrote the story as a textbook—including review questions and "further reading" suggestions—because textbooks don't have dialogue. It was my first piece of fiction writing, and I wanted to focus on plot and storyline without getting bogged down in dialogue, which was something I was a little afraid of at the time.

See, my ultimate goal was to write *The Never: A Tale of Peter and the Fae,* a story I'd begun outlining in 2008. But I was terrified of screwing up that tale, and so I started with... the textbook. *Alabaster* and its sequels were next, because I felt I'd kind of conquered plot and story arcs and such, and I wanted to dig into a bigger story that had... dialogue.

The result was... well, not *displeasing,* but I couldn't afford an

editor at the time, so I made a lot of rookie writing mistakes. Overuse of dialogue tags, overuse of body cues (everyone was constantly nodding and shrugging, which got a bit repetitive), that kind of thing. I also wrote all three novels using the "Seat of Your Pants" method, which means I just kind of... wrote, with no clear idea of where the story was going. It worked out okay, but there are definitely bits that are rushed, bits that drag on, and a couple of weird right-hand turns out of nowhere.

(Sidebar: The SoYP method is why George R. R. Martin *still* hasn't, as of this writing, finished *Game of Thrones*. He should have tried outlining.)

As a result, I didn't leave *The Achillios Chronicles* on Amazon for long. Once *The Never* was out, I de-published the trilogy and began offering them for free on my website, DonJones.com.

But... I mean... I had some guilt.

First, I felt a little guilty that I was pawning off less-than-stellar prose on the public. Also, it probably didn't create a stellar first impression of my writing.

Second, I felt a lot guilty that *I hadn't done the story justice*. That bugged me a lot, because I *truly do love the premise of these books!* I worried that people would find the writing a blocker and never get to enjoy the story. In fact, I'm sure that did happen to at least some folks. But the folks who stuck with it and waded through my amateur prose made it clear: *this was a good tale*.

So in 2026, I decided to start over.

I went through the entire trilogy, writing a proper outline based on the original manuscripts, built a character guide, and really wrote up a whole story bible. That ran to about 12,000 words all by itself! And then I set to rewriting the books *from scratch*. Not just editing them, no, because that would have been too easy. I started over with everything but the gorgeous hand-painted cover art (for books one and three) by Howard David Johnson. (I redid the cover for book two, because I was never happy with that one.)

I have to say, it's been *excellent* to revisit these characters and

their world. And I'm *so much happier* with the result! In fact, because I tend to write far more fantasy than sci-fi, my Beloved Spouse pushed hard for me to re-publish these on Amazon and sell them, so that I could have more sci-fi in my arsenal. But I've gotten accustomed to these being freebies, and I think they now represent a *much* better taste of what my writing and storytelling is like these days. So they'll remain free, and you're welcome to share this far and wide, so long as you don't charge for it. And, please, send people to DonJones.com so they can see my other work, and possibly have a hand in helping an independent author pay the mortgage every month.

(I *might* put this in distribution as a paperback, because I love paperbacks, but obviously can't give those away for free.)

So there you are: the torrid tale of *The Achillios Chronicles* and how I came to rewrite them entirely from scratch, at no small expense and a fairly yoga expenditure of time. Time well-spent. So thank you for downloading this new version.

Finally, thank you for reading books. It sometimes feels like a dying art, and I'm glad you're sticking with it.

Don Jones
Duck Creek Village, UT
May 2026

Prologue

This is my story. It is also the story of Alabaster, and of the people who built it, and of the people they became — which is to say, us. I know, looking back, that I will get small things wrong. Memory is a lamp with a weak flame; it lights the thing directly in front of you and leaves everything else in comfortable shadow. But the shape of it — the journey, the failures, the specific weight of what I was asked to carry — that I remember exactly.

Thinking of those times, of those hectic hundred days, I can scarcely imagine being so young, scarcely conceive of what was placed on my small shoulders. Today, I imagine my younger self as erudite, clever, and entirely collected. Intellectually, I know this is a nostalgic fantasy on my part—but I hope you will forgive it.

I ask only one thing: remember, as you read, that I was a child. And in most of the ways that mattered, so was everyone around me.

1

It was my fingers that went first. They lay slack against the strings, and no matter how urgently I told them to move, they would not. The tavern was absolutely quiet around me — not the comfortable quiet of a room where people are listening, but the impossible quiet of a room where something has gone wrong, where the air itself has forgotten how to carry sound. Every face I knew was turned toward me. Millie from the kitchen, her dish towel forgotten in her hands. Old Groff with his ale halfway to his mouth. Mama in the doorway, watching.

I opened my mouth. Nothing.

I woke up.

The ceiling above me was cold white stone, the familiar curve of it just beginning to separate from the dark as gray pre-dawn light slid in from the single narrow window. My lute leaned against the wall beneath that window, resting with the quiet patience of an object that knows it is not currently needed. I was sweating. This struck me as unfair — the morning air in Alabaster was never warm, and Tomas was curled on the pallet beside me generating what I had always

privately considered an unreasonable amount of heat for such a small person.

I lay still for a moment and listened to the city before it woke up.

There was a sound, as there always was. I had never had a name for it — had never thought about it directly, the way you don't think directly about the feeling of your own heartbeat until someone makes you aware of it. It was low and steady and came from no particular direction, a hum that seemed less to travel through the air than through the stone itself, through the floor and the walls and the cold white ceiling above me. The Tower made that sound. I had grown up with it in my ears, and in the way of things that are always present, I had never actually heard it until now.

Tomorrow I would start my apprenticeship with Master Vasper.

Today was Tomas's Test.

I reached over and shook him. His light eyes cracked open, took me in with frank resentment, and closed again.

"Get up," I said. "It's Test day."

"Mm."

I pulled the blanket off him in one movement. He curled tighter, instinctively, then seemed to remember he had dignity and sat up. He was eight years old and still had the look of someone who had recently been much younger — that soft unfinished quality around the jaw, the way sleep sat on him like weather. I had been told I looked the same at his age. I didn't think so, but I had the sense not to say it.

"I'll get dressed," he said, which meant: stop watching me get dressed.

I went downstairs.

The main room of the tavern settled over me the way it always did when I came down before anyone else: all mine, for a moment, before the day started. The long wooden benches were stacked atop the trestle tables just as I had left them last night. The hard-packed dirt floor held the evidence of my broom — not clean exactly, but orderly, the kind of clean that a working floor can actually achieve.

The ale-stained bar ran the length of the back wall, wiped down and waiting. The small hearth crouched in the corner, cold and swept.

I noticed, as I always noticed, what needed doing. Tomas had forgotten the tapers again. The box was on the sideboard. I reached for it.

"Not this morning."

Mama was in the kitchen doorway with a mug of tea in both hands, the way she always held it — as if she was warming her palms rather than her throat. She was in her everyday clothes already, hair bound up, and I could see in the set of her face the particular kind of worry she had been carrying for weeks now and would not discuss. She was not a worrying woman, generally. The tavern produced problems at a steady rate, and she solved them at a steady rate, and the pace of this had given her a practical quality that I had always admired and had spent considerable energy trying to imitate. This morning that quality was present but strained at the edges.

I put the tapers down.

Tomas came downstairs wearing his gray homespun and a complicated expression. The Tower prescribed everyday clothing for Test day — no ceremony, no fine dress, a reminder that Service was ordinary life with different purposes. Most years, this instruction was largely ignored. This year, Mama had enforced it, and Tomas had accepted it, and the result was my little brother standing in the main room in his tavern clothes on possibly the most important morning of his life, looking like he wanted to argue about it and had decided not to.

"Tapers," he told me, by way of greeting.

"I wasn't going to."

"You were reaching for the box."

"Habit."

Mama set her tea on the bar. "Not today," she said, to both of us and neither of us. "Do either of you want something to eat before we go?"

We both looked at each other. This was a thing Tomas and I

could do: communicate without speaking. It had been developed over years of being quiet when the tavern needed quiet, of moving around each other in small spaces, of shared pallets and shared work and the specific shorthand that comes from spending most of your life in a person's company. What passed between us now was: I can't eat and I assume you can't either but I won't say that because Mama is worried and this will worry her more.

"We'll get something after," I said.

Mama nodded as if she had expected this. She picked up the empty scrap bag from its hook beside the kitchen door and held it out to me without comment. I hefted it — heavier than I'd thought, a day overdue — and slung it over my shoulder. Tomas held the door, and we went out into the street.

Alabaster in the early morning had a specific character. The packed-dirt streets held the night's cool for another hour yet, and the white stone buildings gave nothing back — they absorbed the light and the warmth and the sound of feet and gave nothing back, so that you could walk through an entire block without feeling as if the city acknowledged you at all. I had grown up in this city and I found it beautiful and I also found it subtly indifferent in a way that I could never quite explain to anyone who hadn't spent their whole life in it.

We walked toward the inner rings, letting the route take us past the scrap trough near the Second Ring gate. Other families had emerged for the same purpose, or the same destination, and we moved through the streets in a loose company — subdued, mostly, the children quieter than usual and the adults pretending not to be nervous. A few of Mama's acquaintances waved. Tomas smiled at one or two boys his age, the shy minimal smile of someone who is not ready to be fully social yet this morning.

I dropped our scraps. The tender came over with his paddle and pushed them into the hole at the end of the trough, and I watched the bones and fat trimmings disappear into the dark below and wondered, for the first time in my life, where they went. I had been

making this drop since I was small enough to need two hands for the bag. It had never occurred to me to wonder.

The thought arrived and then dispersed. I followed Mama through the gate.

The Second Ring was older than anything in the Third Ring — older than living memory, old in the way that smooth seamless stone is old, which is a different kind of old than crumbling or weathered. These buildings did not decay. They simply endured, which I had always found slightly unnerving. The grand guild halls and embassy buildings and ceremonial spaces that lined the main approaches had that quality of being made by people who expected them to last, which was either admirable or alarming depending on how you thought about it.

We followed the curve of the inner wall — the wall that separated the Second Ring from the First, where the Tower stood. It was covered in frescoes: scenes from the founding of the city, the first Servants and city-builders rendered in the exaggerated proportions of people who have become legend. I had walked past these frescoes a hundred times. Today, for reasons I couldn't locate, I looked at them. The painted founders stood in impossible poses above painted crowds, their faces open and purposeful, their hands lifted toward the Tower behind them. They had built something here. The whole city was a monument to that fact.

I did not know yet what they had actually built.

The inner gate was at the Tower's eastern foot. We came around to it through the last stretch of the ring road, and there was the Tower itself — close enough now that I had to tilt my head back to see any of it at all. I had seen it every day of my life and it still did something to the inside of my chest when I looked up: the sheer vertical fact of it, the way it went up past the point where buildings were supposed to stop and kept going, the way it was impossible to see where it ended because it always disappeared into one thing or another — haze, cloud, the brightness of the open sky. It was made of the same seamless white stone as everything else in the inner rings, and it had been

built by the same people who built everything else, and it was like nothing else in the world.

The hum was louder here. I noticed this in a sideways way, the way you notice something when you've been primed to notice it by having noticed it once before. The stone under my feet carried it. The wall at my left hand, when I let my fingers drift against it, was warm — warmer than stone in the early morning should be — and there was something in that warmth that moved, very faintly, like breathing.

I took my hand away.

Ahead of us, a line of families waited along the inner edge of the Tower's base. A wooden chair sat at the head of the line, unoccupied and waiting, adult-sized enough that the children who were led to it had to climb. A silver-wrapped pillar stood beside it. A Servant in tan robes watched the pillar. Another, older man stood at the head of the line, moving from family to family with the practiced ease of someone who had done this many times and still meant it each time.

Tomas had gone quiet. Not his usual quiet — this was a different kind, with a different texture. I recognized it because I had heard it in him before, in the moments when something mattered enough that words stopped being useful. I had spent most of my life being the person who could read that quiet and respond to it correctly. I didn't know what to say this morning, so I said nothing, and let my shoulder press against his for a moment as we stopped at the end of the line.

He didn't move away.

We waited. The morning came up over the Eastern mountains.

2

The line moved faster than I had expected.

I had thought there would be ceremony to it — the full weight of the Tower's attention falling on each child in turn, some visible drama of recognition or dismissal. But Father Ambrose managed the process with a quiet efficiency that stripped it of occasion. A gesture, and the next child would be led to the chair by a young Servant, helped up if they needed it, instructed to lean back. A moment. Another gesture. The child helped down, returned to its parent, and the line shuffled forward.

Most were sent home. You could tell the ones who would be: the Servant at the pillar would register whatever he registered and go still again, and Father Ambrose would smile at the parent with genuine warmth and say something I was too far back to hear. The parent would nod and take the child's hand and they would walk past the waiting families, back toward the gate and the life they had come from. Some of the children looked relieved. Some looked disappointed. A few had no expression at all, which I suspected was a kind of expression in itself.

The ones who were taken were rarer. I counted three in the forty

families ahead of us. For those, the Servant at the pillar would catch Father Ambrose's eye — a small look, a tilt of the head — and Father Ambrose would walk over and look, and then walk back. There would be a brief conversation with the parent, something handed over, a leather strip with metal crimped into it. The parent would walk back past the line with a particular quality of face — not grief exactly, not yet, more like grief that had made itself useful, put on good shoes, and decided to keep walking. One woman had her hand pressed flat against the leather strip as if she was trying to feel something through it. Old Groff had called it a chit. It would pay debts, purchase goods, settle accounts. It was, in some sense, the city's acknowledgment that it was taking something.

Tomas stood very still beside me. I could feel his stillness the way you feel weather changing: not a thing you see directly but a thing that arrives in the body.

"It won't take long," I said.

He said nothing. He was watching the chair.

Father Ambrose was older than I had imagined him from a distance — his beard more white than black, his face settled into the particular ease of a man who has long since stopped worrying about most things. His eyes were the kind that crinkled when he smiled and crinkled when he listened and seemed to be doing one or the other almost always. He crouched slightly as we came to the front of the line, bringing himself down to Tomas's height, which I noted as deliberate.

"Good morning," he said. "What's your name?"

"Tomas," said my brother, just above a whisper.

"Good morning, Tomas." He said it as if he meant it, which I supposed he might. He said it the way he had said good morning to thirty other children this morning, and I got the impression that he had meant it each time. "All I need you to do is sit in that chair there

and lean back firmly against its back. You won't feel anything at all, I promise you. Can you do that for me?"

Tomas looked at the chair. He looked at Mama. She gave him the small nod that meant: yes, and I'm here.

He walked to the chair. A young Servant stepped forward to help him up, and Tomas looked at him and then ignored him entirely, getting both hands on the seat and hauling himself up in one inelegant motion. He turned around, fitted himself into the chair, and pushed his back against the tall slatted back. His legs stuck straight out. He put his hands on his knees, because his hands needed somewhere to be, and looked straight ahead with the careful dignity of someone who has decided that whatever happens next, they will not look undignified.

I loved him so much it was difficult to be standing still.

The Servant at the pillar — silver-wrapped, connected to the back of the chair by a thick dark cable — tapped the pillar's surface once, lightly. His eyebrows moved.

He looked at Father Ambrose. He did not call out; he only looked, a particular quality of attention that was its own communication. Father Ambrose's head tilted slightly to one side, like a man hearing something distant. He crossed to the pillar and looked at it.

"My," he said, to no one in particular.

He stood there for a moment — just a moment — with the expression of a man who is revising something. Then he walked back to us, to Mama, and his smile was genuine and warm and, I thought, carrying something more careful underneath.

"Tomas has a very high potential," he said. "Your son has been called into the Tower's Service." He held out the leather chit, and Mama took it the way you take something you knew was coming and still weren't ready for. "The city is grateful, truly. Any moneylender will honor this." A pause, smaller and more human. "You'll be able to see him on most Feast days after his tenth birthday."

"I —" Mama started. "Can I say goodbye?"

"Of course," Father Ambrose said, and stepped aside.

She crossed to Tomas, who had been helped down from the chair and was standing with his hands at his sides, no longer in the dignified posture but simply in the posture of a child who is eight years old and has just had something happen to him. Mama crouched down and held him, and I could see her saying something against the side of his head, very quietly, the way she said things that were only for one person. Tomas's arms came up around her neck.

I stood and watched my brother cry.

It was a specific kind of watching — the kind where you are close enough to do something and there is nothing to do. My whole life in the tavern had trained me toward action: something needed doing, you did it, the thing was done. Tomas was upset, and the instinct that lived in my hands was to step forward, to say something useful, to fix the texture of the moment somehow. There was nothing to fix. I stood where I was and felt the uselessness of my hands.

He was using the back of his hand to wipe his eyes, I noticed. Mama had always told him not to use his sleeve.

Behind me, at the pillar, the other Servant had come around and was speaking quietly to Father Ambrose. I could not make out the words. Father Ambrose nodded twice, and the Servant returned to his station.

One of the other Servants, younger, came and took Tomas's hand with the practiced gentleness of someone who had done this before and understood that gentleness and speed were not contradictions. He said something to Tomas. Tomas looked at Mama, who straightened up and smiled at him — the smile that cost her something — and nodded. Tomas let himself be led, and they walked along the Tower's base toward its far side, where I had seen others taken, the entrance I had not yet seen. He kept looking back. He had Mama's eyes, light-colored and out of place among all this dark stone.

I lifted my hand. He saw it and lifted his.

He went around the curve of the Tower and was gone.

"Madam," Father Ambrose said, "might I ask a question before you go?"

Mama turned from watching the place where Tomas had been.

He asked about me — whether I was also her son, whether I had been Tested at eight. She explained: the fever, the Healer's waiver, the Tower's written excuse. She was apologetic in the way that competent people become apologetic when systems brush against them sideways — not truly sorry, but willing to smooth things over. She had not brought the paperwork. She had not thought it would be relevant.

Father Ambrose reassured her and then turned to me, and his attention had a different quality now than it had carried for the other children this morning.

"How old are you, Taryn?"

"Thirteen."

"And you haven't formally entered an apprenticeship yet?"

"I'm to start tomorrow," I said. "With Master Vasper."

Something moved across his face — not disappointment, something more considered than that. He explained the law: until the day you actually began, you were unattached, which meant the Tower's obligation to Test you remained in force. I understood, as he spoke, that this was not an explanation he had planned to give this morning. He was constructing it for me in real time, carefully, which told me something, though I could not yet have said what.

I looked at Mama. She put her hand on my back, flat and warm, the way she had always done when she wanted me to do something she knew I would resist. I did not resist. I walked to the chair and sat down.

The Servant at the pillar drew in a breath. Not loudly — a small, contained thing, involuntary. I heard it because I was listening for something, though I hadn't known I was listening until it happened.

Then the sound arrived.

It was under everything else. Low and steady and coming from no direction I could name, a hum that seemed less to travel through the air than through the wood of the chair, through the bronze-tipped slats pressed against my back, through the stone beneath my feet. I

had heard it all morning in a sideways way, the subsonic awareness of something always present. Here, with my back against the chair's back, it was louder and different in character. It had a pitch now, or almost a pitch — the way the lowest string of my lute had a pitch when it was slightly out of tune, reaching toward a note without quite achieving it.

I sat with it. I did not know what I was supposed to do, so I sat with it.

"Father Ambrose," the Servant at the pillar said. He said it quietly, as if he were not sure he was saying it correctly. "Would you like to have a look."

It was not quite a question.

Father Ambrose walked over. He looked at the pillar for a long moment. When he turned back to us, his expression had the careful quality of a man deciding how much to say.

He said: "Taryn had also been called into the Tower's Service."

He held out the second leather chit, and Mama took it, and I watched her face and could not read it — the expression was too many things at once for me to separate them. She looked at the chit and then at me, and I crossed the distance between us quickly because I wanted to reach her before whatever was on her face became words.

She pulled me in and held on for a moment that was longer than the moment with Tomas, or perhaps I only perceived it that way because it was happening to me. Her hands were flat against my back. She smelled of tea and the kitchen and the tavern's specific morning smell that I had breathed every day of my life and had never thought of as anything other than ordinary.

"This is what you're called to," she said, against the side of my head. The words were steady. She had decided, somewhere in the last few minutes, to be steady. "I want you to make the Tower proud of you. Do you understand?"

I did not trust myself to speak. I nodded against her shoulder.

She pulled back and put her hands on my arms and looked at me

with a direct, clear attention. She was shorter than I had thought she was — I had grown this past year and not noticed, and for a single lurching moment she was a different size than she had been in my head my whole life, and the world was fractionally wrong in a way that had nothing to do with the Tower or the chair or the leather chit. She was just my mother, and she was shorter than I had remembered, and she was smiling at me with that costly smile.

"The next Feast day," she said. "Not long."

She patted my arms, and let go, and turned, and walked.

I watched her go. She had her shoulders back, the way she moved through the tavern when it was very busy and she did not want anyone to know it was very busy. The other families in line looked away to give her the privacy of not being watched, which was a small kindness the city did sometimes, and she passed through the gate and out of the ring, and was gone.

I stood looking at the gate for longer than I meant to.

A voice behind me said: "Would you come with me, please?"

I turned. A man stood a few feet away — not Father Ambrose, someone else, perhaps forty years old with kind brown eyes and the particular quality of stillness that comes from knowing how to wait. He had the tan robes of a Servant and a slightly rumpled look, as if he had dressed in a hurry and then forgotten about it.

"I'm Brother Evan," he said. "I work with Father Ambrose. Let's get you settled in." He nodded toward the Tower's far side, the direction Tomas had gone. "This way."

I fell into step beside him. Behind me, the line moved on — another family forward, another child lifted into the chair, another day continuing without me in it.

"Can I see Tomas?" I asked.

"He'll have gone with the younger children by now," Brother Evan said. "We'll see to him, but let's see to you first. You're a rather unusual case, I should tell you — I don't recall the last time we took someone your age."

"How unusual?"

He glanced at me sideways. He was considering something. "Very," he said, simply, and I noticed he did not offer more than that.

We walked around the base of the Tower, which was wider than it had seemed from the outside — it took a full minute of walking before the entrance came into view: a tall opening in the stone, sealed with a dark door that had no visible latch or hinge, no keyhole, nothing that looked like a mechanism of any kind. One of the Servants who had preceded us placed his hand flat against it, and the door opened inward, smoothly and silently, and we went through.

The stone was warm.

This was the first thing I noticed — not the light, which was steady and sourceless and strange, not the height of the ceiling or the curve of the walls, but the warmth. The floor under my feet and the walls on either side carried the same warmth I had felt through the chair's slats: not the warmth of the sun, which comes from outside and fades when the source does, but the warmth of something that had been generating heat from within for a very long time.

The hum was different inside. Closer. Fuller. It had a quality of — I could not find the word for it then and it took me years to find it later. It was inhabited. The sound of a building with something living in it, but not an animal, not anything I had a name for. Something large and steady and, in its way, completely indifferent to whether I was there or not.

I put my hand against the wall.

Under my palm, very faintly, a vibration. Rhythmic. Almost like breathing, if breathing were measured in minutes rather than seconds.

Brother Evan had stopped a few paces ahead and was looking at me.

I took my hand from the wall.

"Sorry," I said.

"Don't apologize," he said. He was watching me with an expression I could not read — careful, interested, the face of a man setting aside a question for later. "It's a lot to take in, the first time."

"I was just —" I didn't finish the sentence. I didn't have a way to finish it that sounded rational. *I was just listening to it.* That was not a thing I could explain to someone I had met four minutes ago.

"Come," Brother Evan said, and turned, and I followed him deeper into the Tower.

Behind us, the door closed without a sound.

3

The entrance was on the opposite side of the building from the gate, which meant walking around half its circumference to reach it. Brother Evan set a comfortable pace and said very little as we went, which I appreciated. I was not ready to talk. I was still in the particular suspension of someone who has just had their life rearranged without being consulted, and the part of my mind that dealt with words had gone temporarily offline while the rest of me caught up.

The base of the Tower up close was not what I had imagined from the Third Ring, or even from the queue that morning. At a distance it had grandeur — the impossible height, the seamless white stone, the way it diminished everything around it. Up close it was something else: specific. The stone had a texture that wasn't quite a texture, a variation in surface that you could only perceive by running your hand along it, which I found myself doing without deciding to. Not rough. Not smooth either, quite. Somewhere between the two, in a way that suggested it had been poured rather than laid, grown rather than built.

Warm. There it was again, that warmth that had no business being there in the early morning air. I pulled my hand back.

Brother Evan had stopped a few paces ahead and was watching me with the expression of a man who has noticed something and decided not to draw attention to it.

"Sorry," I said.

"Don't apologize." He turned and kept walking. "It does that to everyone, the first time. Though not usually to quite that extent."

I filed this away and kept moving.

The door was plain by the standards of everything around it — no carving, no ornament, nothing that announced its importance. It was set into the stone the same way the stone was set into the ground: without seam or join, as if the building had grown around the opening and the door had simply been the appropriate response. There was no latch. No keyhole. Nothing that would have told you, from the outside, that it was possible to open it.

Brother Evan laid his palm flat against the stone beside the frame — not the door itself, the wall adjacent — and the door opened. Inward, smoothly, silently, with the unhurried precision of something that had done this ten thousand times and expected to do it ten thousand more.

I watched it open. I had been in buildings all my life. Doors had hinges; hinges had pins; the whole arrangement expressed, in its mechanics, what it was doing and how. This door expressed nothing. It simply went from closed to open, and the gap between those two states was only that Brother Evan had touched a wall and thought something.

"After you," he said.

The anteroom was small and deliberate: worn stone floor, a large carpet gone soft with years of feet, a plain table just inside the entrance. The walls were the same seamless white stone as the exterior, and the light in the room came from sconces set at intervals — not candles, not tapers, not anything that produced flame or used a wick. Just light, steady and warm, emanating from the sconce the way heat emanates from a hearthstone hours after the fire has gone out. I looked at the nearest one directly. Nothing inside it moved.

The light did not flicker. It sat in its fixture and produced illumination with the absolute unconcern of something that had been doing this since before any of us were born and intended to continue doing it after we were gone.

I reached toward it. Brother Evan made no move to stop me.

The sconce was warm. Not hot — the temperature of something that has been at exactly this warmth for a very long time. I found the place where a wick should have been and touched the stone there with one finger. Nothing. No fuel, no mechanism I could identify, no explanation visible on any surface.

"Lights," Brother Evan said, from behind me. He sounded almost apologetic. "I know how that answer sounds. But we've had them for as long as the Tower has been the Tower, and as far as anyone can tell, they simply work. They're brighter in the mornings and dimmer toward evening. They've never gone out, in all the records we have. They will turn down slightly if you ask them to — there's a small knob on each one, for comfort in sleeping rooms. But they don't go dark."

I lowered my hand. "Who made them?"

"The same people who made all of it," he said. "Come — let me show you more."

Through the middle of three doors in the far wall, along a corridor lit by those same sourceless sconces, and into a larger room that opened around a central stone staircase ascending into the ceiling. The room had the settled quality of a place that people spent time in without ceremony: mismatched chairs grouped in comfortable arrangements, rugs scattered across the stone to dampen footsteps and echoes, a few small tables with nothing on them. Meticulously clean. Not the aggressive cleanliness of a room prepared for guests, but the quiet cleanliness of a room that was simply always tended.

Brother Evan sat down and gestured me toward the chair across from him. "I should explain a few things," he said.

I sat. I had been walking since before dawn, had eaten nothing,

had lost my brother and my mother in the same morning, and was sitting in a building whose walls were warm and whose doors opened at a thought. I was, on reflection, prepared to hear a few things explained.

He started with the Tower's purpose — the weather, the crops, the humid air that the farmlands needed to produce what they produced. He described it in the language of someone who had learned it young and loved it ever since, a language of craft and service and calling. He described the machines as ancient and sophisticated, created by the first people who had come to this world, designed to tend its air and soil and water. He described the Servants as the ones the machines would listen to — something in the blood, something passed down through families, a specificity of recognition that the machines had maintained across generations even as their operators forgot what they were operating and why.

Then he described the Test.

"The chair rates potential on a scale of zero to five," he said. "Higher numbers indicate people the machines are more likely to hear. Different tasks require different levels." He had a way of explaining things that was both precise and conversational, the manner of someone who had given a version of this explanation many times but had not yet grown bored of giving it.

"The Servant at the pillar said five," I said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"He did," he said.

"Is that what I am?"

He leaned forward. "Taryn, the chair has rated everyone who has sat in it since we built it — a hundred years of testing, by my best estimate. In that time, the highest rating we have recorded is four. Four is what I am. Four is exceptional. We have never recorded a five, and so I am not entirely certain what a five means." He paused. "It may mean the chair is breaking down. These things are old, and they do not always work perfectly, and I would be doing you no service to

treat you as something unprecedented based on a reading that might be a fault in the instrument."

I looked at him. He was watching me with the carefully assembled neutrality of someone who did not entirely believe what he had just said.

"You don't think the chair is breaking down," I said.

A pause. "I think it's possible," he said. "And I think that until we know more, I'd prefer you didn't mention the number to others. Some of the Servants have been here for decades and do not respond well to things they don't understand."

"Am I in trouble?"

"No," he said, with a firmness that I believed. "You are an interesting problem, which is a different thing entirely. Can you keep the number to yourself for now?"

I said I could. My stomach, which had been waiting patiently through all of this, chose this moment to make its position known.

Brother Evan smiled — the first fully relaxed expression I had seen from him all morning. "Let's get some food into you."

The dining hall was the size of the tavern's main room times five, and it ran at roughly the same pitch: voices, the movement of food from kitchen to table, the particular energy of a large group of people who ate together regularly and had developed a collective rhythm for it. The trestle tables were longer than ours; the kitchen smells were better, frankly, and I registered this with the specific guilt of someone betraying a loyalty.

Young Initiates ran food from the kitchen in the efficient, slightly harried way of children who had learned to do a thing and were now doing it without thinking. The Servants who sat and ate had the ease of people at home. I was placed at one of the long tables with a bowl of stew and bread that I ate with more speed than dignity.

Brother Evan sat across from me and talked, which was, I understood, his way of letting me eat without the awkwardness of silence. He described the Tower's routines: mealtimes, the overnight shift, the

structure of an Initiate's early years. Chores first — sweeping, carrying, the practical education of a place with a great deal of work to distribute. Then gradual introduction to the teams and their tasks. Then, slowly, the machines themselves.

"For most Initiates," he said, "the first real machine work doesn't begin until their tenth or eleventh year. You're thirteen, and a great deal of the earlier instruction will be unnecessary for you. We'll talk about what you need and what you don't." He broke off a piece of bread. "Your mother's tavern — you and Tomas helped run it?"

I described our arrangement: Tomas with the tables and trays, me with the lute and the evening custom and the closing work. Brother Evan listened with the attention of someone storing information.

"The music," he said. "That matters more than you might think. Most of the Servants who rate a three or four have some musical ability."

"Is there a connection?"

"We think so. We haven't been able to prove it — children of eight haven't usually had the chance to learn an instrument yet, so we can't select for it. But the correlation is strong enough that we take it seriously." He looked at me directly. "When you engage with the machines — when you interface with them, as we call it — there's almost always a sensory experience. Something the operator perceives while the connection is active. It varies between people: some feel heat or pressure, some smell something, some see colors. But a great many of us hear sound. Musical notes, specifically."

"You hear notes when you use the machines?"

"Most of us who rate three or four, yes." He glanced around — not furtively, but with the quick awareness of someone choosing whether to speak. "It's a somewhat private thing. Not a secret exactly, but not generally discussed in the open. The experience is personal to each operator, and people can be sensitive about it." He looked back at me. "I'm telling you because it will almost certainly be relevant to you, and because I'd rather you weren't surprised."

I thought about the sound I had heard when I sat in the chair

outside — low, persistent, slightly flat, sourceless. I had already been hearing it when I sat in the chair. I had been hearing it through the door before I sat in the chair. I had been hearing it, I was fairly sure, for the entire morning without knowing what it was.

I did not say any of this. Not yet. I was still working out what, exactly, I had heard.

"Come," Brother Evan said. "Let me show you something."

The rising room was a stone chamber with nothing in it, and it moved.

Brother Evan touched the small pillar beside the inner wall, and the floor lifted. Not gradually — it simply went from stationary to in motion without negotiating the transition, and my hands went out automatically for walls that turned out to be moving too. I overcorrected, stumbled, and stabilised myself by standing in the middle of the floor with my feet apart and my arms out like a person in a painting of someone trying not to fall.

"I should have warned you," Brother Evan said, sounding genuinely sorry.

"Yes," I agreed.

Through the thin gap between the chamber wall and the shaft wall, I could see doors sliding past. The floor rose past them one after another at a speed that climbed briefly and then steadied. We were moving through the Tower's interior at a rate that would have required half an hour of stairs to match.

"Does it know where to stop?" I asked.

"It stops where I tell it to. I think about the floor I want, and it takes us there." He smiled. "There's a particular quality to the intention that it responds to. I'll teach you eventually." The chamber slowed. Another door came into view and the rising room aligned itself to it with a precision that left almost no gap, and stopped.

Brother Evan opened the door.

We stepped out into the air.

Not outside — the corridor was enclosed, still stone, still lit by those patient sconces — but the outer wall was open along its length in a continuous row of unglazed windows, and the morning poured through them, and the city was simply *there*, all of it, the full disc of Alabaster laid out below and beyond like a map drawn by someone who had loved it and wanted to explain it.

I had always known Alabaster was built in rings. I had walked it every day; I understood the concentric structure in my feet, the way the streets turned and curved and never let you go in a straight line for long. But understanding something in your feet and seeing it from above are different kinds of knowing. From here, the design was obvious and complete: the tight central circle of the Tower's ring, the Second Ring wrapped around it like a hand cupping something small, the Third Ring jutting westward, the farmlands north and south of the city walls, and beyond everything the flat pale desert running to the horizon.

The Eastern mountains rose behind us, close enough that I had to turn and crane my neck to see where they met the sky. Their surfaces were sheer and vertical in a way that natural stone wasn't, the individual spires rising with a regularity that looked, from up here, almost deliberate. I had never thought about the mountains before. They were simply the mountains, the eastern edge of the world as far as Alabaster was concerned, the immovable fact that made the city possible.

I was going to think about the mountains more, I realized. Something in the quality of them from up here asked a question I didn't have language for yet.

Brother Evan was watching me again.

"The streets," I said, turning back to the city. I had understood them on foot. From here I could see what they were actually doing: the spoke streets that never ran straight for more than three or four blocks, that forced every pedestrian into a zigzag, that meant any

force moving inward had to turn and turn again. The gates in the ring walls placed at angles and distances that created choke points. The whole city was a funnel, layered three times. "Someone thought about this very carefully," I said.

"Someone thought about a great deal of it very carefully," Brother Evan said. He sounded, for just a moment, as if he meant more than the street layout. "Come — there are some people I'd like you to meet."

Ten people stood at the outer windows, facing west, their hands resting on circular bronze plates set into the ledge at each opening. They were not looking at the city; they had the particular unfocused expression of people whose attention was somewhere other than their eyes. Behind them, against the inner wall, was a raised platform with a chair that I recognized immediately: horizontal slats, bronze-tipped, the same configuration as the Testing chair and the chairs I had seen described in the anteroom.

I almost said something. Then I didn't.

The woman in charge of this station was compact and direct and had the quality of someone who was always half-occupied with something she was tracking in her peripheral attention. Her name was Sister Mya. She looked me over with brisk assessment and said: Brother Evan had mentioned I might be coming up.

"I understand you rated well," she said.

"So I'm told," I said, which was technically accurate.

She showed me the lens: a thickening of air over the farms that was, once pointed out, clearly visible as a slight wavering of the light above the northern fields. The Servants were maintaining it — shaping and holding the Tower's force in a particular configuration to direct more sunlight to the water reservoirs, raising the humidity, keeping the soil from drying in the growing season's heat. The work

was continuous and required adjustment, which was why the station was always staffed.

"The chair at the back," I said, when Sister Mya had moved away to address one of her operators about something at the southern edge of the lens. "What is it for?"

Brother Evan looked at it. "Observation, we think. A teacher's station, possibly — someone who could monitor the operators without interfering directly. Sister Mya believes it may have had other functions originally. I'm inclined to agree with her, but we don't know what they were."

"May I sit in it?"

He seemed about to say no, then stopped himself. "I don't see why not. There are no interface pads in the arms, so you can't do any harm."

I stepped up onto the platform and sat.

The sound arrived immediately. Not the faint background hum I had been peripherally aware of all morning — that was still there, underneath — but something new layered on top of it: ten distinct tones, one for each of the Servants at the windows, separate but related, like the notes of a chord played by ten different hands. Each tone had its own quality. Most were in some kind of rough alignment. Two were slightly flat. One, at the southern end, was noticeably off — not dissonant exactly, but strained, the way a string sounds when it's been tuned up past where it wants to be and is holding there through effort rather than ease.

"Is the southern operator having difficulty?" I said.

Sister Mya turned from what she'd been doing. She looked at me. Then she looked at the operator at the southernmost window.

"Brem," she said, "let the southern rim go and pick it back up." The operator shook herself slightly, lifted her hands, resettled them on the pads. "That's it. And hold."

She looked back at me.

I was looking at the city below and trying to keep my expression composed, because the moment Brem had lifted her hands, her tone

had vanished from the chord — had simply gone, leaving a gap — and then when she replaced them it had come back, flatter at first and then rising toward where it belonged. I had watched this happen in the sound in my head while simultaneously watching nothing visible happen in the room at all.

"How did you know?" Sister Mya asked.

I looked at Brother Evan. He gave me the smallest of nods: go ahead and answer this one.

"I could hear something off," I said. "In the — in the way the work sounds. To me. From this chair."

A pause.

"Curious," Brother Evan said softly, which I was coming to understand was his word for things that made him want to sit down quietly and think.

Sister Mya studied me for another moment with the focused attention of someone recalibrating her estimate of a situation. Then the southern lens rim gave another twitch and she turned back to her team, because the work was not going to supervise itself.

Brother Evan met my eyes. He had the face of a man who had asked himself a question months or years ago and was now watching the answer come through the door.

"We should let them get on," he said. "Let me show you where you'll be sleeping."

My room was on the fourth level: two beds, a chest of drawers, a sconce on the wall with a small knob at its base. Number 417 on a small plaque. A Steward named Misha was already there when we arrived, moving efficiently between the chest and the second bed, laying out clothing in the organized way of someone who did this often.

She was warm in the practiced manner of someone whose job required warmth and who had also, genuinely, some warmth to give. She showed me the knob on the sconce, the laundry chute down the corridor, the extra clothing she had already stocked in the drawer.

When she leaned over to set a folded stack on the second bed, her sleeve fell back.

On the inside of her left wrist, just below the heel of her hand, were four small dark chips embedded in the skin. Permanent-looking, shiny, the size of a thumbnail at most — not a burn mark, not a scar, something that had been placed there deliberately and had healed around it. I saw it for perhaps three seconds before she straightened and her sleeve fell back into place.

She had seen me notice. She said nothing about it.

Neither did I. I was thirteen years old and had already collected more things I didn't understand today than I usually managed in a month, and I was storing them all in a mental room that was getting quite full. The chips went in with everything else. I would look at them later.

After Misha had gone and Brother Evan had run through the last few practicalities — the washing room, the laundry chute, the library, the chime that would announce breakfast — I stopped him at the door.

"Can I ask where Tomas is sleeping?"

"He'll be in a dormitory with his cohort," Brother Evan said. "A couple of floors up, I believe."

"Can I see him?"

"Not yet."

I had expected this. I had also prepared, on the walk from the weather station, a specific response to it that was not 'all right' and not 'I understand.'

"He's eight years old," I said, "and today is the first time he has ever been away from his family. I am not asking to disrupt his cohort formation or interfere with his integration. I am asking for fifteen minutes. I want him to know I'm in the building."

"Taryn—"

"I'm not asking to take him anywhere or change his routine. I'll stand in a doorway if that's what's required. I'll shout it up the stairs." I kept my voice level because I had Mama's voice in my head, the one

she used when she wanted you to understand she was serious without feeling the need to demonstrate it. "He will be better at this if he knows I'm here. I know him better than anyone in this Tower."

Brother Evan looked at me for a moment. The expression on his face was not unsympathetic — it was the face of a man caught between a rule he believed in and a case that didn't quite fit the rule.

"Not tonight," he said. "I'm asking you to give it a few days. If he's struggling, I'll tell you, and we'll revisit it. But the cohort system works — it has worked for many years, and it works partly because we hold to it consistently."

"A few days," I said. Not 'all right.' Not agreement. Just the words, offered back.

He heard the difference. "A few days," he said again, gently. Then he said goodnight, and his footsteps went down the corridor.

I closed the door.

The room was the exact size and shape of a room that was not the tavern and contained nobody. Two beds, mine and the empty one. The chest of drawers. The steady light of the sconce, which would not go fully dark but could be dimmed, and I dimmed it now and sat on the edge of my bed in the low glow and listened to the Tower's hum, which was everywhere and nowhere, patient and indifferent and completely unconcerned with any of the feelings currently occupying room 417.

A few floors up, Tomas was in a dormitory with children he had never met, and none of them had had their families with them today, and he was — I had to believe he was fine. I had to believe the Tower had done this long enough to know how to do it.

I undressed and lay down. The pillow was softer than my pillow at home.

I reached, without thinking, for the wall beside the bed and placed my hand flat against it.

The vibration was there. Steady, rhythmic, the pulse of something very large doing what it had always done without pause or interruption. Under my palm, the Tower breathed.

I lay there for a while with my hand against the stone, not sleeping, not quite awake, listening to the sound that filled the room and hearing, underneath it and wound through it, ten separate tones from the weather station two floors above, still working, still holding the lens steady over the farmlands in the dark.

Eventually I slept.

4

I woke once, briefly, in what must have been the middle of the night.

The room was dim — the sconce hadn't gone fully dark the way I'd set it, just pulled back to a low amber suggestion of itself, enough to find the door if you needed to — and for several unmoored seconds I had no idea where I was. The ceiling was wrong. Too high, too pale, the particular white of stone that had been white since before I was born. My pallet was wrong — too soft, too wide, and there was no warmth from the body that should have been sharing it. The sounds were wrong: instead of Mama moving around in the kitchen below, instead of the small sighs and adjustments of Tomas sleeping beside me, instead of the familiar nighttime grammar of the tavern — the creak of the signpost in wind, the distant conversation of people leaving the alehouse two streets over, the way the city quieted by degrees until by the third mark of the night it was almost genuinely silent — there was only the hum.

The Tower's hum.

I lay still and let it be what it was: the low, toneless pulse of a building that did not sleep and had never slept and would still be

making this sound when everyone now asleep in it had been dead for centuries. Indifferent, yes. But steady in a way the night back home had never quite managed. Steady in the way of something that had made a commitment once, a long time ago, and had seen no reason to revise it.

I stared at the ceiling for a while. Then I went back to sleep.

The sconce brightened on its own when the sun came up.

I didn't know it would do this. I was somewhere in a shallow, restless dream — something about the tavern, something about a bucket of water I had left in the wrong place, the low-grade anxiety of chores undone — when the light shifted, and I surfaced. The room came back to me in sequence: ceiling, walls, the other bed with nobody in it, the chest of drawers, the number 417 on the small plaque I could see through the half-open door.

I lay in it for a while, a luxury I had almost never had at home. In the tavern there was always something to do from the moment you could see your hands in front of your face, and morning idleness had the quality of debt, of time borrowed against later work. Here there was nothing yet required of me. The morning could simply happen.

This should have felt like freedom. It felt, instead, like a room where something was missing and you kept noticing the absence before you remembered what it was.

The other bed had a slight depression in the mattress from some previous occupant, and I found myself looking at it — the shadow of someone who had slept there before, some other Initiate starting their own first day in this building. I wondered if they had lain awake listening to the hum. I wondered if they had reached for something that wasn't there.

I sat up and put my feet on the floor. The stone was warm. I had noticed this yesterday and filed it away and here it was again, the

same quiet impossibility: stone in the morning, in a room with no hearth and no sun yet, warm as bread.

I dressed in the tan clothing Misha had left in the drawer. The fit was close enough — she had gauged my size correctly with the particular competence of someone whose job required this — and when I looked down at myself I looked like every other Initiate I had seen yesterday, which was disorienting in a way I hadn't anticipated. In the tavern I had always worn the same gray homespun and had never thought about it. Here, the sameness felt like something different. Less like a uniform and more like a statement about what I was now.

I was deciding whether I was hungry — I was, but in the theoretical way, not yet urgently — when my hand moved to the wall beside the door.

I let it rest there. The pulse came through the stone, the same steady vibration I had felt last night, the mechanical heartbeat of something enormous running in the dark below. I had a mental image of what might be under the Tower's floors: machines, great intricate machines of a kind I had no words for, turning and working and producing — everything. The light. The warmth. Whatever it was that my hands, apparently, could hear.

I took my hand away and went to find breakfast.

The corridor was quiet at this hour, or quieter than I suspected it would be later. A few Servants passed me going the other direction, carrying cups of tea or simply walking with the focused economy of people on their way to tasks they had been thinking about since before they were dressed. They nodded at me. One smiled. Nobody stopped. The Tower had the feeling of a place that was always working, where even the people who appeared to be walking from one room to another were, in some sense, attending to something.

I found the washing room Brother Evan had described, and spent longer than usual simply because it was novel. The rinsing room —

water from the ceiling, cold at first and then easing into something bearable, and a powder soap that smelled of nothing in particular but left you feeling very clean — was remarkable. At home we had bathed by hauling buckets from the well and pouring them over each other in the back alley, a system that was efficient but required either a certain hardiness or someone willing to pour. Standing in water that fell from above, that continued to fall without anyone having to do anything about it, was an experience I will admit I prolonged somewhat beyond what strict cleanliness required.

I found a towel. I found the laundry chute. I dropped yesterday's clothes down it — my gray homespun, the clothes I had walked through the Third Ring in, the clothes I had been wearing when Mama's hands had been flat on my back — and I did not watch them go. The chute was dark and they disappeared immediately and I turned back to the corridor before I could have any particular feeling about it.

The dining hall in the early morning was a different room than it was at midday.

The proportions were the same, the stone walls and high ceiling and long trestle tables, but the atmosphere was of a place not yet fully inhabited. Perhaps a third of the seats were occupied, and the conversations were low and unhurried, the voices of people who were present in body but still partly elsewhere, still making the transition from sleep. The kitchen sounds drifted out — bread baking, something frying, the percussion of morning preparation — and they were the same sounds the tavern kitchen had made, and the familiarity of this was a gift I had not expected and accepted somewhat fiercely.

I took a seat near the end of one of the tables and within minutes had a mug of chilled tea and a plate of eggs and bread in front of me. This was better food than I ate at home; I acknowledged this to

myself without ceremony and ate with the attentiveness the food deserved.

The room filled gradually. Servants drifted in, settled, ate, left. A group of older Initiates came in together, already talking, and found a table in the middle of the room with the easy authority of people who had long since claimed their preferred spot. I watched them without appearing to: the way they moved around each other without collision, the shorthand of long acquaintance, the small gestures and glances of people who had been eating breakfast together for years and no longer needed to narrate it. I had had that with Tomas once. We had moved around each other in the tavern kitchen without looking, because we always knew where the other person was.

The thought arrived, sat in my chest for a moment, and then dispersed. I returned to my eggs.

A chime sounded somewhere — not loud, the quiet announcement of a large building with more pressing concerns — and a new group came in. Younger: eight or nine years old, maybe ten, wearing the same tan Initiate clothing I now wore, coming in through the far door in a loose cluster guided by two older Servants. They settled at the table farthest from me with the slightly artificial good cheer of children who are being cheerful partly because the adults with them are being cheerful, partly because they have decided this is preferable to the alternative.

I looked for Tomas the way you look for something you know is there but can't quite locate — with the fixed, effortful attention of someone who will not stop until they find it. The group was not so large that I couldn't see every face. Eight children, most of them dark-haired, most of them with the subdued brightness of kids who had been told last night that they'd been chosen for something important and had slept on it and woken up not entirely sure how they felt.

He was not among them.

I did not know if this was because he was in a different cohort, or eating at a different time, or simply somewhere else in the Tower's routine. I did not know, and could not ask, and had agreed to wait a

few days before I had any right to an answer. I picked up my tea. I set it down again.

A Servant sat down across from me, setting a cup of something hot at his elbow, and it was Brother Evan.

"Good morning," he said. He looked unhurried, which suggested he was either naturally unhurried or very good at appearing so. He had changed into fresh robes, tan like all the others, and had the particular settled quality of a man who had already been thinking for an hour before anyone else arrived. "Did you sleep?"

"Eventually," I said.

"The hum bothers some people at first."

"It wasn't the hum." I paused. "What is the hum, exactly?"

He wrapped both hands around his cup. "The machines," he said. "Running. They run all the time — there's no state of being off, as far as anyone has ever been able to determine. The weather operations run continuously; the food processing runs on a cycle; the soil management under the farms runs on an even longer cycle. There are other things the machines do that we manage less directly. The hum is all of it together."

"You can't hear separate things in it?"

He looked at me over his cup. "Not as such, no. Can you?"

I thought about the ten tones from the weather station, still audible now, faintly, underneath the general sound of the hall. The chord they made when they were all in reasonable alignment. The one that had gone flat last night before the shift change, the gap when that operator lifted her hands.

"Sometimes," I said.

He set his cup down with a small, careful movement. "We'll start this afternoon," he said. "There are testing rooms below the weather station — small ones, single chairs, where we can work without being in the way of operations. I'd like to run you through the standard diagnostic tasks." He said it in a tone that was both matter-of-fact and, underneath that, anticipatory — the tone of someone looking forward to something they are trying not to appear to be looking

forward to. "After breakfast I'll show you the library, and you can spend the morning there if you like. There are — well. There's quite a lot to read."

"What should I read?"

"Whatever you want," he said. "For the first few weeks, I think it's more useful for you to simply be here — to walk around, observe, start to understand the rhythms of the place — than to follow a structured curriculum. You're not eight. You don't need to learn how to make your bed."

"I know," I said. "I've been making mine since I could reach the corners."

Something shifted in his expression — not quite surprise, more like the adjustment you make when you realise you've been slightly misreading something. "Your mother ran a tight establishment," he said.

"She ran the only establishment we had," I said. "Tight was the only option."

He was quiet for a moment. He sipped his tea. "What was it like?" he asked. "Growing up there."

Nobody had asked me this before — not because nobody had cared, but because in the Third Ring everyone already knew, more or less, because everyone's life was more or less the same kind of life. You worked. Your family worked. The tavern or the smithy or the clothesmender's shop or the grain store, it was all the same life wearing different costumes. The question assumed a perspective on it that I had never had before, the perspective of someone looking at it from outside.

"Busy," I said, after a moment. "Loud, in the evenings. We knew everyone who came in. Old Groff came every night and sat in the same corner and told the same four stories to whoever would listen, and everyone always listened because he was old and because two of the four stories were actually good." I looked at the table. "Mama played the dulcimer when the custom was slow — not well, but the regulars liked it. She always said she played well enough that people

were glad when I started playing instead, which meant I took it over by accident." I paused. "It was small. But it fit."

Brother Evan nodded slowly. He had the kind of listening face that asked questions just by being attentive, and I found I had more to say than I'd expected.

"The food scraps," I said. "Yesterday at the trough — I found myself wondering where they went. I never wondered before." I looked up. "They come here, don't they. Into the Tower."

"They do," he said. "Into the processing systems below. They've been coming here from every household in Alabaster for as long as anyone can remember. It's one of the things the city requires of its residents, and in exchange the Tower provides — everything it provides." He was watching me again. "Does that feel strange?"

"It feels like I've been part of this building my whole life without knowing it," I said. "Which I suppose is the same as everyone else in the city. Just — nobody told me." I thought about it. "That's not a complaint. I'm not sure what I'd have done differently if I'd known."

"That is the question, isn't it," he said, and I had the feeling he was not entirely talking about food scraps.

The library was three rooms deep on the second level: low ceilings, shelves floor-to-ceiling on every wall and dividing the space into narrow aisles, the slightly sweet smell of old paper and whatever was used to preserve it. The light was the same steady sconce-light as everywhere else in the Tower, unhurried and endlessly patient, falling evenly on spines that ranged from recent Alabaster guild records to documents so old the covers had gone the color of old skin.

I stood in the first room and turned slowly, reading titles. Most were in the standard written form I knew: trade records, agricultural reports, the minutes of city council meetings going back two hundred years, the kind of institutional accumulation that happens when people decide that writing things down is important and then keep

writing things down without ever stopping to ask if all of them needed to be preserved. But along the inner wall, on shelves that had a different quality to them — older wood, fitted rather than joined — were books with titles I couldn't read.

Not that I was a poor reader. Mama had taught us both young, and while I was no scholar I could read quickly and well. These titles weren't in a script I recognised. Some were in a letter-form that looked almost like the standard alphabet, close enough that I kept trying to resolve it into words and failing. Others were entirely foreign, angular and dense, nothing like anything I had seen.

I stood in front of them for a while. I reached out and didn't quite touch the spine of one.

"Those are the oldest ones." A Servant had materialised in the aisle behind me — not Brother Evan, someone I hadn't met, older, with the mild expression of a person who spent a great deal of time around books and had been shaped by it. "We can read some of them. The ones that look nearly like our writing are close enough that with a key and some patience you can work out the meaning. The others —" he shrugged, a small apologetic gesture. "We have some partial translations. Fragments. Not enough to be sure of anything."

"Who wrote them?"

He looked at me with the particular patience of someone answering a question he has answered many times. "The founders," he said. "The first ones."

"The people who built the Tower."

"And everything else," he said. He looked at the shelves. "Most of what we know about the earliest period of Alabaster comes from these, imperfectly read. Most of what we don't know comes from these too, also imperfectly." He seemed comfortable with this ambiguity. He had the serenity of a man who had long since made his peace with the proportion of what was unknown to what was known and had found it acceptable. "Is there something I can help you find?"

"I don't know what I'm looking for yet," I said honestly.

He nodded as if this was a reasonable and even respectable posi-

tion. "Come back when you do," he said, and drifted back among the shelves.

I spent the morning reading agricultural histories, because they were in a language I could understand and because, it turned out, the history of what the farms had been and what they had become over the centuries was more interesting than it had any right to be. The farmlands north and south of the city had not always been farmlands; they had been desert, the same pale flat desert that stretched west and south to wherever the world ended. The soil had been changed, over generations of careful management, from something that could support only scrub and rock-plants into something that could grow grain and vegetables at a scale that fed seventy thousand people. This had not happened quickly or easily; it had been the work of Servants over centuries, nudging the mineral content of the soil a fraction at a time, adjusting the moisture level season by season, building up what the plants needed in the ground before planting things in it.

The machines had done this. The Servants had guided the machines, and the machines had moved clay and mineral and water in the earth below the farms, slowly, the way a tide moves a beach over years. Everything I had eaten at the tavern — every loaf of bread, every bowl of stew, every vegetable Millie chopped in the kitchen — had grown in soil that was what it was because someone had sat in a chair in this building and concentrated.

I thought about this. I thought about the tones I heard from the weather station, still faintly present to me two floors above, and I thought about what it would mean to hear those same tones from the fields station, the tones of people moving clay a foot underground so that crops could drink. I thought about sitting in the testing chair outside and the sound arriving like a string plucked on an instrument I hadn't known I was holding.

I thought about what I might actually be able to do.

I was still thinking about this, or thinking adjacent to it — the kind of circling thought that doesn't arrive at conclusions but maps the territory around them — when a knock came at the library doorframe and Brother Evan appeared.

"Ready?" he said.

We went down.

Three flights below the level I slept on, the corridor changed character: narrower, the walls squared rather than curved, the sconces spaced further apart so that the light came in pools rather than a continuous wash. It had the feeling of a part of the building that served a function rather than a life — the workings rather than the living quarters. Doors lined the hallway, plain and mostly closed, each hung with a small plaque beside the frame: Weather Training, Fields Training, a few without labels whose purposes I couldn't guess.

Brother Evan took a small red plaque from a hook beside one door and hung it on the outside — occupied, I understood, do not disturb — and then opened the door and led me in.

The room was bare. Stone floor, stone walls, the same warm sconces, and in the exact centre a chair I recognised: arms with bronze disc-pads at the ends, tall back with horizontal bronze-tipped slats, the whole thing facing away from the door. The light in the ceiling was a single fixture, directly above the chair, which struck me for the first time as deliberate — not a room lit for human comfort but a room arranged around a chair that was itself the point.

"Sit down," Brother Evan said.

I walked to the chair and sat.

It was immediately different from the supervisor's chair at the weather station, different from the testing chair outside, different even from what I had been experiencing all day. When my back met the bronze-tipped slats, the sound changed — not louder, but focused. The diffuse background hum of the building sharpened, the way a word clarifies when someone says it a second time with better enunciation. Under-

neath that: something new. Not the ten tones of the weather station. Something more fundamental, lower, and alone. The Tower listening.

Or the Tower saying something it always said, and me, finally, being positioned correctly to hear it.

Brother Evan was behind me. I heard him move around to the back of the chair. "There's an indicator here," he said, "at the back of the chair. A small piece of translucent stone in a brass ring. When the Tower is receiving input from the person sitting here, it glows — orange is the normal colour. We use it to confirm the connection is active."

"Is it glowing now?"

"No," he said. "That's what I expected. Ready to start?"

"What do I do?"

He placed a small gray rock on the floor in front of me. It was the size of a large walnut, rough-edged, unremarkable in every way except that it was sitting in the middle of an otherwise completely empty room and I was apparently supposed to move it with my mind.

"One of the most fundamental things the Tower can do is move natural materials," he said. "Rock, soil, water, if you have the precision for it. The simplest version is exactly what it appears: pick up the rock. Imagine the weight of it in your hand, the texture, the coolness of it. Extend your intention through the interface and lift it. About a foot off the floor."

I looked at the rock. I thought about picking it up. I thought about the weight of rocks and the coolness of rocks and the rough texture of rocks. I tried to locate the intention Brother Evan had described, the specific quality of wanting-to-pick-up that he had said the machines could hear.

Nothing happened.

The indicator stone, which I couldn't see from this angle, presumably did not glow.

"All right," Brother Evan said, in the tone of a man who had

expected this and who did not consider it a problem. "Try something different. Think the word 'alarm' as urgently as you can — not out loud, just in your mind. There's a function the machines respond to for almost anyone with any potential at all. In the main Tower it would set off lights and chimes. In here it won't do anything visible, but it should register."

I thought: *Alarm.* I thought it the way you'd think it if you smelled fire, the specific quality of urgency that the word carried, and—

"There," Brother Evan said. Not excited — the word was offered with the care of someone reporting a fact. "The indicator lit. Good. Now try the rock again."

I tried the rock again.

Nothing.

"Curious," he said softly.

He had me try half a dozen other things over the next hour: a sphere of condensed air, a small flame, a shift in temperature, a vibration in the floor. The indicator lit for some of these attempts and not for others, with no pattern that either of us could identify. Nothing I attempted actually produced any visible result. The rock stayed on the floor. The air remained uncondensed. I grew steadily more aware that there was a gap between what the chair could sense from me and what I could actually accomplish, and I did not like the shape of that gap.

What I could hear, the whole time, was the Tower.

It had become, over the course of the day, almost a second layer of sound beneath the first — a vocabulary rather than just a hum. The chair focused it. With my hands on the pads and my back against the slats, the low fundamental tone was there, and under it and through it, something I kept trying and failing to describe to myself. It was slightly flat. It was reaching toward something it hadn't reached. It reminded me of — and this was a thought I examined carefully before I put any weight on it — the feeling of a lute string

that needed tuning. Not wrong, exactly. Just not where it wanted to be.

"Are you hearing anything?" Brother Evan asked, after the airsphere attempt had produced nothing.

"Yes," I said. "Since I sat down. Since I sat in the testing chair outside, actually. A low tone. Like the lowest string of a lute, but—" I tried to find the word. "Flat. Almost in tune but slightly not."

"With your hands on the pads?"

"Constantly. With or without them. It stops when I stand up."

Silence behind me. I heard his weight shift. "Stand up for a moment."

I did. The sound went, cleanly, like a candle pinched out.

"Sit back down."

I sat. The tone returned, immediate and unhesitating.

"I have," Brother Evan said slowly, "been working with Initiates for fifteen years. I have never heard of anyone hearing anything without their hands on the pads."

"Perhaps the chair is unusual," I said.

"Perhaps," he said, in a tone that meant he did not think so. "Taryn — can I ask you to try something that isn't in the standard diagnostic?"

"All right."

"Just — listen to it. The tone you're hearing. Don't try to do anything with it, don't try to lift anything or move anything. Just listen to it the way you'd listen to a string you were about to tune."

I leaned back into the chair. I closed my eyes. I let the rock on the floor and the failed attempts and the unlit indicator fade to background, and I listened.

The tone was there, patient and unvarying, that slightly-not-right sound. I had been trying all day to work through it, to push past it toward some mechanism of action on the other side. I stopped pushing. I listened to it the way I would listen to my lute in the first moments of sitting down to play, before I played anything, the diagnostic attention of a musician taking stock of what an

instrument actually sounded like before they asked it to do something.

It was flat. It was reaching for a note it wasn't quite hitting. It was — it wanted something. Not from me, not any particular action, just a — a resolution. A completion. The note it was almost playing, played properly.

I had spent years playing, and I had spent years before that listening to Mama play badly, and the one thing the years had given me was an extremely specific sense of what a note wanted to sound like. I held what I was hearing in my mind, the Tower's slightly-flat hum, and alongside it I held the note it was reaching toward, the note that would make it right. And I—

Didn't play it. Couldn't play it — I wasn't holding a lute. But I held it in my mind with the same specificity I would have used to fret a string, and let the two sounds exist in my head simultaneously, the actual and the intended, and something happened.

Not to me. To the tone.

It moved. Just slightly, just incrementally, in the direction of the note I was holding. As if — as if it had heard the comparison and was adjusting.

From behind me, Brother Evan made a sound. Not a word, just a sound, the involuntary exhalation of a man who has just seen something unexpected happen in a room where he thought he knew what was possible.

I opened my eyes.

"What," I said, "just happened?"

"The indicator," Brother Evan said. His voice was careful in the way voices go careful when they're managing more than they're showing. "It lit. Not orange. A very — a rather — it was green. A very bright green. I've never seen it green before." A pause. "What were you doing?"

I tried to explain: the listening, the comparison, the two tones held side by side. The way the flat note had seemed to respond when I held the resolved version of it alongside it. I heard myself saying it

and it sounded imprecise and strange, and I looked at my hands in my lap, and I said: "It's like tuning. Like telling a string what it's supposed to sound like."

Another silence. Longer this time.

"Taryn," Brother Evan said finally. He came around to stand in front of me, and his expression had the careful brightness of a person who is being responsible about not getting excited yet. "I think — I need to go talk to some people. And read some things." He paused. "I also think you should eat something, and then rest. You've been—" he looked at me with something that might have been the early stages of concern. "Has this been happening all day? Hearing the tones?"

"Since I sat in the testing chair."

"And the pressure behind your eyes — is there any? Any feeling of—"

"A little," I said, because there was. Not painful. The way your eyes feel at the end of a long evening reading by poor light — a low-grade awareness of having focused at something for too long.

"Eat," he said firmly. "And then sleep." He held out a hand and helped me up, which felt slightly formal but I accepted it, and he walked me back to the dining hall and sat me in front of a bowl of stew I didn't remember ordering and waited until I picked up the spoon before he said anything else.

"You're not in trouble," he said. "What's happening with you is strange, but strange is not bad. Strange is interesting. I've spent fifteen years finding interesting things in this Tower and I have not run out of them yet." He stood. "Don't tell anyone about the green."

"I know," I said. "You've already asked me not to tell anyone about the five."

"I'm keeping quite a list," he said, and for the first time all day he seemed genuinely amused. He left, and I ate my stew, and the dining hall was warm and loud around me, and the tones from the weather station overhead came to me faintly through the floor, still working, still adjusting, still holding the lens in place over the dark farms.

That evening I played my lute for the first time in the Tower.

The lute had arrived after dinner, carried up by a boy from the city — a runner Brother Evan had sent to the tavern, apparently, before any of this morning's events had made the errand complicated. It sat on my bed when I returned to room 417, exactly as it had always sat: leaned against whatever was available, at rest in the easy way of an object that was meant for a hand and was simply waiting for that hand to arrive.

I sat on the edge of the bed and picked it up and played scales for a while. Not music, just the scales — the reliable geometry of them, the way each string and each fret mapped exactly to its position in the pattern. I had played scales when I was anxious since I was ten years old. The pattern didn't require anything of me. It just needed my fingers to be in the right places at the right times.

After the scales I played a tune I knew well, a long wandering thing in a minor key that the regulars at the tavern had always liked, and that Mama sometimes hummed while she worked. I played it through twice without ornament and then once more with, the small variations and runs that you only add when you're sure of the structure underneath them. The sound in the room was different from the tavern — the stone walls gave it back cleaner, less absorbed, less warmed by wood. Not worse. Just different.

I was on the third run-through when I noticed that I was still hearing the Tower's tone at the same time, the low hum in the stone around me, and that my hands had been doing something I had not instructed them to do. The tune I was playing was in a minor key, a key whose tonic was nowhere near the Tower's persistent flat note — but I had, without consciously choosing to, been bending the strings slightly as I played, tuning the melody up or down by fractions in a way that created a relationship between the two sounds. The tune and the Tower hum, in conversation.

I stopped playing and sat with this for a while.

Then I played it again, deliberately this time, attending to what my hands were doing. The Tower's tone was there, underneath and around, and when I played the melody it was not quite itself and not quite the Tower — it was something between them, something that acknowledged both.

I did not know what this meant. I was tired, and the pressure behind my eyes was still present, and there were things in this building I did not understand, and my brother was two floors up in a dormitory and my mother was in the Third Ring doing — whatever she was doing without us, for the first time.

I set the lute against the wall and lay down and did not reach for anything before I closed my eyes.

The sconce burned low. The Tower hummed. Outside the single window, Alabaster went about its night.

5

I found the lounge Brother Evan had mentioned on my second morning, by accident.

I had been looking for the laundry chute and had turned left instead of right at the corridor's bend, and there it was: a room wider than my bedroom but lower-ceilinged, with three windows along the outer wall that let in the morning in long pale rectangles across the floor. Someone had furnished it with the specific generosity of a person who believed that comfort was not a luxury: a deep-seated chair in a fabric that had gone soft with years of use, a narrow couch with a blanket folded over one arm, a writing table under the middle window, and shelves along the inner wall that held books taken from the library and not yet returned, a few small objects whose purposes I couldn't immediately determine, and a lute.

Not my lute. Another one, hanging on a pair of pegs above the middle shelf. Smaller than mine, older, the finish worn to bare wood at the edges of the soundboard where someone's picking hand had rested years past years. I lifted it down and plucked the strings one at a time. It was almost in tune. I adjusted the third and fifth strings and played a chord, and the room gave it back with the same clean stone-

wall resonance I had noticed last night — less warmth than the tavern, more honesty. The note as it actually was, without the softening of wood.

I hung it back on its pegs and sat in the deep chair and watched the morning happen through the windows.

The view from here was east-facing: the inner wall of the Second Ring in the near distance, the tops of the guild buildings just visible above it, and above those the jagged upper line of the Eastern mountains cutting into a sky that was still the pale resolving blue of early morning. I had looked east at those mountains ten thousand times in my life, from street level or the tavern's upper window or the top of the scrap heap in the alley when I was small enough that climbing it still seemed worth doing. From here, the angle was different. The mountains felt closer and more specific, each spire its own shape against the sky, the flat-topped regularity of them that had always been just beyond the edge of my attention now directly in front of me demanding a question I still didn't have language for.

I sat with the question for a while. Then I went to find breakfast.

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Sajay sat down across from me without asking and without introduction, which I would come to understand was simply how she moved through the world.

She was dark-haired, dark-eyed, precise in her movements in the way of people who have learned to operate in close quarters — the Tower's corridors, I was discovering, rewarded this — and she wore the tan Initiate clothing with the unstudied ease of someone who had stopped noticing it years ago. She set her bowl down, took a spoon from the bundle a younger child had left, and said: "You're the one who rated off the chart."

I looked at her. Brother Evan had asked me not to tell anyone about the five.

"I rated well," I said.

"Mm." She ate a spoonful of porridge. "I'm Sajay. Weather operations, third year." She said it the way you say your name and your

street address when meeting a neighbour — as if the information was obvious and the only question was whether we'd get the exchange done quickly or slowly.

"Taryn. I don't have an assignment yet."

"I know. Everyone knows, you've been here two days and you came in at thirteen and rated — well." She smiled at me over her spoon. "Off the chart." She said it without the particular emphasis that would have made it pointed. Just a fact, delivered. "The Servants talk. We overhear. It's not anyone's fault."

I filed this away. Discretion inside the Tower, I was learning, was less a matter of whether things were said than of how quickly they moved between people. Things said quietly travelled at a walk. Things said in tones of significance travelled at a run. Brother Evan had been appropriately quiet. Apparently not quiet enough.

"Where do you sit?" I asked.

She gestured toward the end of the bench and five or six other Initiates who were pulling themselves in from the kitchen end of the hall, carrying bowls and bread and the slightly dazed quality of people who have been awake for less time than the morning seemed to require. They settled around us with the minimum of negotiation: people accustomed to eating together don't need to decide who sits where. It simply happens.

They introduced themselves in a cascade that went too fast for me to retain, but the faces stayed: a tall boy named Jarace who sat next to Sajay with the easy proximity of long familiarity; a girl called Prael who had the quietly watchful manner of someone who preferred to see a room before she committed to being in it; two boys across from me who had apparently arrived together and continued to operate in a loose bilateral unit; and a few others who remained at the blurred edges of the introduction, names I caught and lost and would not recover until I'd seen them again at least twice more.

"So," said Jarace, settling his elbows on the table. "What do you actually do? We all thought Brother Evan was going to start you on the training rotation with us, but apparently not."

"I work with Brother Evan directly," I said. "For now."

"Lucky," said one of the boys across from me. His name came back: Davan. He said it with a grin that suggested he meant it, which was not what I expected. "Brother Evan knows everything. The others know their thing. He knows all of it."

"He said he'd been working with Initiates fifteen years," I said.

"Twenty at least," Sajay said. "Longer than most of us have been alive. He was Initiate of the Year when he was sixteen — there's a plaque in the corridor on the third level. He's a four, which is rare, and he's done weather, fields, food processing, and structural assessment, which apparently no one else has done all four of since before the old leadership."

I thought about Brother Evan's crumpled robes and his slightly distracted manner and his habit of saying *curious* when he was more interested than he was letting on. I revised something in my estimate of him.

"What's structural assessment?" I asked.

A small pause around the table, the particular pause of people who are checking whether they are allowed to answer a question before they answer it. Prael spoke, in her measured way: "The Tower itself. The structure of it, the stones, the foundations. There are parts of the building that need checking — things the machines manage that aren't weather or soil. Nobody does it much now, because you need at least a four and most fours are on weather or fields, and those can't be interrupted."

"But if the building needed something—" I started.

"Taryn," said Sajay, in a tone that was entirely friendly and entirely firm, "eat your breakfast first. Then you can ask questions about structural assessment, which is a topic that will make everyone at this table very sleepy."

Davan laughed. His bilateral unit laughed. I picked up my spoon.

They had all been here since they were eight. Five years, most of them — which meant they had come into this building as small children and had grown into themselves here, in these corridors, against this stone, and the Tower was for them the texture of ordinary life in the way that the tavern had been for me. They moved differently through the building than I did. They moved as people move in their own homes.

I had been noticing this without knowing what I was noticing. Now, eating porridge and listening to them talk about things I mostly didn't understand yet, I noticed it clearly: they belonged here. They had been shaped by it.

I was not sure what I had been shaped by and whether it was the right shape for this place.

Sajay and Jarace were both on weather operations — third year of actual machine work, which meant the interfaces, the careful attention to the lenses over the farms, the long quiet hours of maintaining a state rather than producing a result. Sajay described it as more tedious than she had expected and more satisfying than she wanted to admit. "You feel it when it's right," she said. "Like something clicking. Hard to explain."

"Do you hear anything?" I said. "When you're at the interface?"

She looked at me. Jarace looked at me. The look was not suspicious — it was the particular attentiveness of people who have been asked a question they consider private in a public setting, and are deciding how to handle it.

"Generally yes," Sajay said, after a moment. She left it there.

I nodded and left it there too, and the conversation moved on, and I made a note that this was not a topic you pushed at in a dining hall full of forty people eating breakfast.

Prael was on fields. She said this without ceremony, as if it were unremarkable, but the boy next to her — Hest, his name surfaced — made a small sound that managed to communicate: do not let her mislead you.

"She's being modest," he said. "She was the only four in our

cohort. She could have been on weather or fields, and Sister Trofer apparently appeared in person to argue for fields, which Sister Trofer has never done for anyone because she considers it beneath her dignity to persuade people."

Prael's expression did not change. "Sister Trofer had a vacancy," she said.

"Sister Trofer had a vacancy because Brenn graduated to full Servant and Sister Trofer doesn't take less than a four for deep work and they don't come along that often," Hest said, with the manner of someone correcting a record he had corrected before. He looked at me. "Fields is what keeps the farms alive. Not the weather — the weather helps. But the actual soil: the mineral content, the clay layers, the moisture held underground. Without the field team, the crops die. It's the most important work the Tower does and also the least visible, which is why she acts like it's nothing."

"It's not nothing," Prael said, in the tone of someone who has never once thought it was nothing and objects to the implication that she might have. "It's also not an occasion for speeches."

Davan and his companion — Fen, I finally caught the name — were on food processing. They said this in unison, which made them both look at each other and then look at me with the sheepish grin of people who have accidentally demonstrated a thing.

"We do it on purpose now," Fen said. "It's funnier the third time."

Food processing, Davan explained, was the downstream end of everything: the scraps from the households, the waste from the kitchen, the biological residue of a city of seventy thousand people eating and producing and eating again. The Tower's machines received it all, ground it, separated it, recombined it. Most of it went back to the farms as nutrient supplement — composted, processed, turned into what the soil needed. The rest, outside of the growing season, became ration blocks. Davan described the process with the cheerful pragmatism of someone who had reconciled themselves to their work and found it more interesting than it seemed.

"Ration blocks," I said.

"Ration blocks."

I thought about the ration blocks I had eaten my whole life. The dense black oblongs, soaked overnight and turned into a paste that was filling and nutritious and tasted, as everyone agreed, faintly of stone. The blocks that every family in Alabaster kept in their stores as backup, that Mama used as the base for the stews she then disguised with vegetables and spices into something that didn't taste like ration blocks.

"They're made from—"

"From the scraps," Davan said. "Among other things. Bone meal, fat rendering, vegetable matter, whatever the machines add. Don't think about it too specifically."

"I have been carrying those scraps to the trough my entire life," I said.

"Everyone has," Fen said. "Well, everyone in the Third Ring. Some of the Second Ring deposits go to a different intake. But yes." He said it with the calm of someone who had had this conversation before and did not expect it to be a problem. "The city eats and the scraps come here and they come back around as the things the city needs to keep eating. The machines do the middle part."

I sat with this for a moment. Not — it was not distressing, exactly. It was the specific vertiginous quality of a system revealing itself: all the separate pieces you have always known about, showing you at once that they were always connected, and the connection is simply that no one thought to point it out. I had carried the scrap bag. The scraps had come here. The ration blocks had come back. I had eaten the ration blocks. The Tower had been inside this cycle the whole time and so had I, and the only difference between now and before was that now I knew it.

"Did you know?" I asked Sajay. "Before you came here. Did you know how it worked?"

She shook her head. "Nobody does. There's no reason to explain it to people outside the Tower." She considered. "I suppose they could. Some of the older Servants think they should — that the city

should know what the Tower actually does, in practical terms, rather than just — the general idea of it." She made a small gesture that managed to encompass the entire mystique of the Tower: its height, its silence, the way the city went about its business around it as if the building at the center were a fact of nature rather than a machine.

"Why don't they?"

"Because it's been the other way for a very long time," said Prael, who had been listening. "And because the people at the top think that if you explain the mechanism, people stop trusting the result. Which I think is wrong," she added, in a tone that suggested she had said this before and intended to keep saying it. "But I'm not at the top."

"Yet," said Hest.

Prael ate her porridge.

After breakfast, as the table began to disperse — Sajay and Jarace heading to the weather station for the morning shift, Prael going somewhere below, Davan and Fen toward the kitchen levels — I stayed behind to bring my bowl and cup to the clearing area by the kitchen door. A younger Initiate took them from me with the automatic efficiency of someone running a route, and I turned back to find the hall mostly empty, the sound of it changed without the people in it, the long tables stretching toward the far end in the particular vacancy of a room whose purpose has been temporarily suspended.

I was halfway to the door when I stopped.

At the far end of the hall, the younger cohort was coming in. Not the group I had scanned at breakfast yesterday — different Servants guiding them, smaller children, some of whom could not have been long past eight. They settled at the corner table, the same table I had seen used before, and the Servants with them distributed bowls with the practiced rhythm of people who had done it many times today.

I stood at the near end of the hall and looked for Tomas. Twelve children, possibly thirteen — the count shifted as they settled and resettled in the way of young children who are still deciding where

they want to be. All of them in tan Initiate clothing. Most dark-haired, which described the majority of Alabaster born-and-bred, but there were two or three with lighter hair, and one—

One boy at the far end, seated sideways on the bench so his back was to the room, leaning close to say something to the child beside him. Light-brown hair. Slight build. The particular way of sitting sideways on a bench that Tomas had been doing since he could reach the seat.

I took a step toward the table and stopped.

I could not see his face. I could not be certain. The distance was sufficient that I was likely filling in what I wanted to see rather than what was actually there. And if I walked down the length of this hall toward the younger cohort's table, I would be doing exactly what Brother Evan had asked me not to do: interrupting, intruding, pulling Tomas's attention sideways from the cohort he was supposed to be forming. If it was Tomas. If I was not simply seeing what I wanted to see in the slope of someone else's shoulders.

The boy said something to the child beside him. The child laughed — a small, genuine laugh, the laugh of someone who has just been given something they didn't expect. Then the boy turned slightly to reach for something on the table, and I got half a profile.

It was Tomas. I was almost certain. The line of the jaw, the particular angle of attention, the way he was already engaged with someone beside him after two days in a new place — shy in the streets, Tomas, but quick to connect in proximity, which had always been his way with the tavern's regulars.

I looked at him for a moment. He did not look in my direction.

I walked out of the dining hall and down the corridor and took a breath.

He was all right. He was laughing. He was already making a friend, which was the thing I had most worried about, Tomas with his careful shyness and his preference for the company of people he already knew. He was fine. I told myself this in the specific, delib-

erate way you tell yourself things that are true and that you need to actually believe rather than merely know.

The thing I had not expected was how that would feel. Not relief, exactly — relief was part of it, the largest part — but alongside that, something else I did not immediately have a name for. He was fine, and he was fine without me, and the two parts of that were different kinds of true.

Brother Evan found me in the lounge an hour later, sitting in the deep chair with a book open in my lap that I had not been reading.

"You look like you've been thinking," he said.

"I saw Tomas," I said. "In the dining hall. By accident — I wasn't looking for him specifically."

He came and sat on the edge of the couch. He did not seem alarmed or reproachful, which I had been slightly prepared for. He simply waited.

"He's fine," I said. "He was laughing. He already has someone to sit next to."

"Good," Brother Evan said.

"Yes," I said. "Good." I looked at the book in my lap without seeing it. "I know it's good. I believe that it's good. It's just — strange. To be close enough to see that he's fine and not be able to say anything."

"Yes," Brother Evan said, simply. Not *I understand* or *it gets easier* or any of the things you say when you want a feeling to be over faster than it is. Just yes.

"At home," I said, "I always knew where he was. Even when I was at the lute and the tavern was full, I always knew which corner he was in. It's strange not to know. It's strange to be in the same building and have it be more uncertain than it was when I was — when the building I was in was a different building."

"You've been responsible for him for a long time," Brother Evan said.

"Not responsible, exactly," I said, then stopped, because that was not entirely accurate. "He has two parents. Had. He has Mama. But I was — I was there. In the evenings and the mornings. I knew what he ate and what he didn't want to eat and what frightened him." I looked at the window. "He doesn't need me to know those things now."

"He needs you to be here," Brother Evan said. "Not in the same room. Here." He meant the building. He meant the specific comfort of proximity, of knowing that if something went wrong there was someone who knew you close enough to be reached. I understood this because it was true, and because I had been relying on the same comfort myself for two days — the knowledge that two floors above me, Tomas was sleeping and eating and doing whatever eight-year-olds did in their first days of Tower life. I had been drawing on that proximity like a lamp draw on oil, and I hadn't known I was doing it until now.

"Right," I said.

He let that settle. Then: "Are you ready to get some work done?"

"What are we doing today?"

"I'd like to try the training room again," he said. "Yesterday we found something, and I want to understand it better. Specifically—" he paused, in the manner of a man choosing words with more care than usual. "I want you to do less. Yesterday you were trying very hard to accomplish things, and the trying seemed to get in the way. The moment that worked was the moment you stopped trying to do anything and just — listened."

"You want me to sit in a chair and listen."

"I want you to sit in a chair and listen, yes." He seemed aware that this sounded less like an instructional plan than an excuse to do nothing, and he pressed on with the slight over-precision of someone who knows how something sounds. "The standard diagnostic assumes that a new operator will engage with the interface in a specific way — will

attempt to manipulate the machines through intention and concentration, building up the connection through practice. What you appear to be doing is something different, which is receiving the system's output as sound and working with that sound rather than working around it. If that's correct, then the diagnostic tasks aren't what we should be doing."

"What should we be doing?"

He spread his hands slightly. "I don't know yet. Which is one of the reasons I want to observe you more carefully before I start making assumptions about where to take this." He stood. "There's also something in the library I'd like to find. Something the library Servant mentioned to me this morning, about the older documents — there's a section I've looked at before but never understood. I'd like to look at it again." He said this with a studied casualness that didn't entirely land. Something in the library was interesting and he was being scrupulous about not deciding it was important before he'd confirmed it.

I put my unread book on the table and followed him out of the lounge. The corridor was warmer than the lounge had been — a slightly different quality to the warmth, more active, as if the stone here was closer to whatever was generating heat somewhere below. I put my hand against the wall as I walked, trailing my fingers along it, feeling the vibration that was always there.

Behind the vibration, faint enough that I had to slow my breathing to hear it, were the tones. Ten of them, muted by distance and stone floors but present — the weather station's operators, two levels up, holding the lens over the farms in the morning light. Mostly in tune today. One of them slightly sharp, compensating.

I stopped trailing my fingers. I did not want to spend the morning listening to the building instead of being in it. I was thirteen years old and had been inside this Tower for two days and I had already spent several unplanned hours simply hearing things, and while hearing things was apparently significant, I was increasingly aware that significance was not the same as understanding, and that what I needed — more than more information, more than another green

flash on an indicator stone — was to begin to know what to do with what I could hear.

The low tone of the Tower's fundamental note was there too, beneath all the others, that slightly-flat hum. I had been noticing it all morning with the resigned familiarity you develop for a thing that is always there: the creak of a door, the settlement of an old floor, the sound of the city at night through a window you've never quite managed to close completely.

I was fairly sure it had moved.

Not much. Not dramatically. But comparing what I heard now to what I had heard yesterday morning — the specific character of the flat note, the exact distance between where it was and where it wanted to be — it was slightly less flat than it had been. As if the increment I had moved it last night, the small adjustment I had apparently made without entirely meaning to, had held.

I said nothing about this to Brother Evan. Not because I wanted to keep it from him, but because I didn't yet know what it meant, and I had learned in two days that in this building it was better to bring him something I understood than something I merely noticed.

The dining hall at midday was a different social creature than the dining hall at breakfast.

Brother Evan had sent me back on my own for the midday meal — he had gone to the library, gone deep into something in the older section, and had the distracted focus of a person who would forget to eat himself if left unattended but was capable of releasing other people without guilt. I had navigated the three flights between the training rooms and the dining hall on my own, for the first time, taking a wrong turn at the second level and finding myself briefly in a corridor that seemed to exist purely as a connection between two other corridors, lined with doors I didn't recognise, before reorienting and finding the stairs.

The midday hall was louder and more populated than breakfast and had a different energy: less the quiet assembly of people still arriving into their day, more the release of people who had been working since early morning and were now taking the opportunity to be alive to each other. Conversations ran across tables. Someone near the kitchen end of the room was in the middle of a story that was approaching its resolution to an audience of five, and the table nearest me was a debate of some technical kind between two older Servants who had the focused disagreement of people who have been having a version of this argument for years and enjoy it.

Sajay was there, half-risen from the bench and waving at me across the room with the combination of casual authority and genuine welcome that seemed to be simply how she did things. I made my way over.

The group was different from breakfast — not the same assembly, but overlapping: Prael was there, and Hest, and a girl I hadn't met who was introduced as Amil and who had the specific quality of someone who was very intelligent and had made peace with being underestimated about it. Jarace was absent; two others were present who I hadn't seen at breakfast.

The food was better than breakfast in a different way: where breakfast had been generous, midday was complex. A bowl of something with three kinds of grain and vegetables in a sauce I couldn't identify, bread that was darker and denser than the morning's, a cup of something warm and slightly bitter that Prael told me to drink slowly because it would otherwise produce an hour of energy followed by a collapse she had learned about firsthand.

I drank it slowly.

"How was the training room?" Sajay asked, without preamble.

"Brother Evan says we found something," I said, which was accurate and revealing very little.

"What kind of something?"

"The kind he wants to understand better before he talks about it." I said this in a tone that I hoped communicated both that I was not

being evasive for reasons of importance and that I was also not going to say more than this.

Sajay assessed me for a moment. She seemed to decide this was acceptable. "Fair enough," she said. "Let me know when he figures it out."

"Will do." I ate a spoonful of the grain bowl, which was excellent. "Can I ask you something about the weather operations?"

"You can ask."

"When you're holding the lens — holding the shape of it steady over the farms. What does that feel like? Not the — not the sensory side of it, you don't have to say. The practical part. What are you doing, moment to moment?"

She considered. This was, I was beginning to understand, her characteristic approach to questions: not whether to answer but how. "Attention," she said, finally. "It's mostly attention. The Tower is doing the actual work — we're just—" she paused, searching for it. "We're just maintaining the intention. Telling it what we need it to do, continuously, because the moment we stop telling it, the lens starts to drift. The air wants to be air. The Tower is making it be something else, and without constant instruction, it goes back."

"What does the instruction feel like? From the inside."

"Like concentration. Like the specific kind of concentration you have when you're trying to balance something." She tilted her hand back and forth slightly. "Not physical — but that quality. The awareness that if you stop paying attention it will fall."

"Does it get easier? With practice?"

"The holding gets easier. The precision doesn't, particularly. You get better at knowing when something is off before it's actually off — you start to feel the wobble before it becomes a collapse." She looked at me. "Why?"

"I could hear something off in one of the operators yesterday," I said. "Before it was visible in the lens shape." I said it plainly, because it was a fact, and because I was tired of treating the things I could hear as things to be managed rather than discussed.

The table was quiet. Not dramatically — the surrounding conversations continued, people were eating, plates were moving — but our particular table had gone into a brief internal suspension.

"You heard it," Prael said. It was not a question.

"I was in the supervisor's chair. And yes."

"From the supervisor's chair," Hest said, with the specific tone of someone checking that they had understood correctly. "Without your hands on any interface pads."

"Yes."

Another pause. I watched them process this, each in their own way: Sajay with the particular stillness of someone who is quickly re-evaluating something; Prael with no visible change of expression at all, which I was beginning to understand meant she was thinking hard; Hest with an expression that was moving between impressed and uncertain about which of those was appropriate.

"That's—" Sajay began.

"Unusual," I said. "I know. Brother Evan has pointed this out."

"Unusual is one word for it," Sajay said. "The supervisor's chair is just a chair. There's nothing in it. There's no interface mechanism anyone's ever found."

"I know."

"So you're hearing the interface without the interface."

"I'm hearing something," I said. "Whether it's the interface or something else, I don't know. Brother Evan is going to the library to look at something."

Amil, who had been quiet the whole time, said: "There are notes in the older records about a type of operator who interfaced differently. I read about it years ago — it was in a document that was only partially translated, so I couldn't get the full sense of it. But the term that kept coming up was — something like 'resonant.' The documents called them resonant operators."

Everyone at the table looked at her.

She shrugged, which on Amil was a small precise movement. "I read a lot," she said, without apology.

"Do you remember which document?" I asked.

"No. But Brother Evan will find it. If he's in the library looking for something about this, he'll find it — he knows that section better than anyone."

I ate some more of the grain bowl. The cup of bitter drink was down to its last third and I was beginning to feel a clarity of attention that suggested I should be careful about finishing it at the wrong moment. "What did the document say about resonant operators?" I asked. "Whatever you could understand."

Amil looked at the middle distance in the way of people sifting through memory. "Very little that made sense to me at the time," she said. "It was discussing operator types, I think — the different ways that different people experienced the interface. The document seemed to be training material of some kind, for people who were new to it. The resonant category was mentioned as unusual but not — the word used was not unknown. They had encountered it before." She paused. "The reason it stayed with me is that the document said something like: resonant operators are best approached not through task training but through — and here the translation got very uncertain — something like 'acoustic engagement.' It recommended a different approach to their development than standard operators."

I thought about Brother Evan saying: *I want you to do less. The moment that worked was the moment you stopped trying.*

"Acoustic engagement," I said.

"Approximately," Amil said. "The word the translator chose was acoustic, but the original term might mean something slightly different. The document is old enough that even the near-readable sections have gaps."

Prael said: "You should tell Brother Evan about this. He'll want to find that specific document."

"I'll mention it," I said. "Although I suspect he's going to find it on his own."

The table began its gradual dissolution as people finished eating and the midday obligations reasserted themselves. Sajay stood,

stretched, exchanged a look with no one in particular that communicated she needed to be back at the weather station in a few minutes, and said to me: "Tomorrow morning. Breakfast. You're joining our table by default until further notice."

"All right," I said.

She left. Prael left. Hest left. Amil left last, pausing by my shoulder to say quietly: "What you can hear — don't be too quick to assume you know what it is. The old documents are consistent about one thing: the operators who understood their own interface the least were the ones who assumed they understood it first."

She said it without weight, as information rather than warning, and then she was gone, and the dining hall was thinning around me, and the midday sounds of the building filtered in through the walls — the Tower doing its continuous work, the vibration in the stone under the table, the fundamental note that I heard now always, the way you hear your own heartbeat once you've been made aware of it.

I sat for a moment with the near-empty cup and looked out at the thinning room. At the far table, the younger cohort was still finishing their meal — they ate more slowly, by apparent collective agreement, with the unhurried absorption of children who don't yet have places they need to be. I didn't look for Tomas specifically. I just let the table be there at the edge of my attention, with the general knowledge that he was somewhere in the building doing approximately this, eating midday food that was better than tavern food with a boy whose name I didn't know, and that this was fine.

Fine in the way of things that cost something but are also correct. The kind of fine that needs some time before it just means fine.

I finished the bitter drink. The clarity of attention arrived, sharp and clean and slightly too much of itself, and I stood up and went to find the training room, because Brother Evan had said this afternoon and I intended to be there before him.

He was already there when I arrived.

He had a document in his hand — or what passed for a document, a loose collection of stiff pages with that faintly amber quality that old paper acquired over sufficient decades — and he was reading it with the focused attention of a man who has found the thing he was looking for and is now in the process of being right about it, which is one of the more pleasurable states available to a careful person.

He looked up when I came in. His expression was the barely-contained version of *curious* — the one that meant he had actually decided it was more than that but was maintaining the word out of professional caution.

"Amil said there are documents about resonant operators," I said.

He blinked. Then he looked at the pages in his hand. Then he looked at me. "Amil," he said.

"She reads a lot."

"She does," he said. He looked at the pages again. "Yes," he said. "Sit down. I have — I have quite a lot to tell you."

I sat in the chair. The Tower's tone arrived, patient and present, the slightly-flat hum that was now as familiar as my own pulse. I placed my hands on the interface pads and let the sound settle around me and looked at Brother Evan, who was looking at the documents with the expression of a man standing at the beginning of something large.

"Tell me," I said.

6

What Brother Evan had found was not one document but several, gathered from three different shelves in the older section of the library, and he had arranged them on the floor of the training room in a loose arc because the document stack was too large for the small side table and he had not wanted to leave them unattended while he fetched a larger surface. This told me something about how the morning had gone for him. There were ink marks on the first two fingers of his right hand from taking notes. He had not taken notes yesterday.

He stood at the edge of the arc and looked at the documents and then at me, and made a small preparatory sound that was not quite a word — the sound of a person deciding where the beginning of something actually is.

"The Tower," he said, "is older than anyone in Alabaster currently understands."

"I thought it was old," I said.

"Old in the way of — yes. We knew it was old. We have records going back several hundred years, and in all of them the Tower is already there, already doing what it does. We have always assumed

that the founding of the city and the building of the Tower were the same event, or close enough to the same event that the distinction didn't matter." He looked at the documents. "These suggest otherwise. The Tower was not built for Alabaster. Alabaster was built because the Tower was already here."

I absorbed this. "What was the Tower for, originally?"

"That," he said, "is where it becomes complicated." He picked up one of the documents and held it in both hands the way you hold something you want to be careful with. "These are the oldest legible records we have — written in the near-script, the letter-form that looks almost like ours but isn't quite. The library Servant has been working on a translation for twenty years. She gave me her most recent notes this morning." He set it down and picked up another page — modern handwriting, the library Servant's careful annotations in the margins of a transcription. "This is her translation of this one. I'll read you the relevant passage."

He read: *The installation at this location was established as one of a network of facilities distributed across the continent in a regular pattern. Each installation was equipped with standard terraforming capability: atmospheric management, soil chemistry adjustment, water table regulation, and surface restructuring. Several installations, including this one, were additionally equipped with defensive shielding. The primary purpose of all installations was the gradual modification of this planet's environment to conditions suitable for sustained habitation.*

He lowered the page.

I looked at the document in his hand and then at the wall beyond him. The Tower was warm; the floor was warm; somewhere below us machines ran without pause or rest. "This planet," I said. "Not this region. Not this continent."

"This planet," he said.

"The people who built this — they came from somewhere else."

"That is what the documents suggest," he said, with the careful precision of a man who was not going to say more than the docu-

ments supported. "The word used in the original — the library Servant has transliterated it as something like *landing*, or *arrival*. The documents speak of conditions being unsuitable at first. They speak of improvement over time. They mention generations of work." He set the page down. "We have always told ourselves that the founders came from elsewhere, meaning from other parts of this world — that Alabaster was settled by people from the coast, or the south, people who came here and built something. But the documents don't mean that."

"They mean another world entirely," I said.

"Yes."

I sat with this. It was not distressing exactly, or not only that — it had the quality of a very large thing being placed in your hands, larger than you can immediately assess, and you have to decide first whether to hold it before you decide what to do with it. The Tower, warm at my back, humming in its patient way, seemed the same as it had a minute ago and also entirely different. Everything I had touched in this building for two days — the warm stone, the sourceless light, the door that opened at a thought — was not ancient ingenuity from clever founders. It was a technology from somewhere that was not here. Made by people for purposes that were not Alabaster. Sent forward through time to us like a letter written for recipients who would not understand the language.

"All right," I said, because I needed to say something and that was the thing I had.

"Yes," Brother Evan said, in approximately the same tone.

We sat with it for a moment. Outside, at a distance I was learning to gauge by sound, the weather station's ten operators continued their work — the tones of them faint but present, holding the lens in place over the farms while we rearranged the history of the world below the Tower in a small bare room.

"What does this have to do with me?" I said.

Brother Evan looked at the arc of documents on the floor. "This," he said, and picked up the page he had apparently been saving. It

was more densely annotated than the others — more of the library Servant's careful handwriting in the margins, asterisks and brackets and small question marks that indicated places where the translation was uncertain or where multiple interpretations were possible. "This is the passage I read this morning and then reread several times and then came back to find you."

He read: *Operators may be categorised by primary interface modality. The majority of operators interface through direct intention: they form the intended state and communicate it to the system through concentrated focus. A smaller number interface through secondary modalities — visual, tactile, thermal — which are less efficient for standard operations but may confer advantages in specific contexts. A very small number interface through resonant modality. Resonant operators do not communicate intention directly. Instead, they perceive the system's current state as sound and interact with it through the modification of that sound. This modality is the oldest and, in certain applications, the most powerful, as it permits operations that direct-intention operators cannot perform. Resonant operators should not be trained through standard task protocols, as task-oriented training will suppress the resonant connection rather than develop it. Instead, resonant operators require—*

He stopped. He looked at the margin. "The next section is the one the library Servant has marked as uncertain. The word she has translated as — she has written 'acoustic engagement' and also 'harmonic cultivation' and also 'something I don't have a precise modern word for' with three question marks." He lowered the page. "But the general meaning is: the development of a resonant operator requires working with the sound of the interface, not working past it. The system speaks to them in a language they already know. The task is to learn to speak it back."

I looked at the interface pads under my hands. "The green," I said.

"Yes."

"I wasn't trying to do anything. I was just — listening, and

holding what I heard next to what I thought it wanted to sound like. And the indicator went green."

"You were speaking the system's language back to it," he said. "Or beginning to." He set the document down carefully, which for him meant aligning it with the edge of the nearest other document, a very small gesture of order in the middle of something that was resisting order. "I don't know what this means for your training. We don't have the full document — it's damaged past this point, and the library Servant believes sections are missing. What we have is the beginning of an instruction we can't finish reading."

"But it's enough to know that standard training won't work."

"It's enough to know that," he agreed. "And it's enough to know that the connection exists and is functional, which — Taryn, a resonant interface is not something I have ever encountered or heard of encountering in my fifteen years here. I am not certain the other Servants have encountered one in living memory. I want to be honest with you that I am not certain what to do next."

I appreciated the honesty. It was considerably better than false certainty would have been.

"What would you do," I said, "if I were a lute? If I were an instrument you'd never played before and you had an instruction document that was half-missing?"

He looked at me. He had the expression of a man who has just had something clarified by an unexpected angle.

"I would play it," he said. "I would try things. I would listen to what it could do before I decided what to ask it to do."

"So would I," I said. I settled back into the chair. "Then let's play."

What followed was the strangest afternoon I had spent since I arrived, which was saying something given the competition.

Brother Evan pulled the side table over and sat on its edge — too alert to sit properly in a chair, too considerate of the space to pace — and asked me to describe what I was hearing. Not to do anything about it. Not to attempt any task. Just to describe the sound.

I tried.

The fundamental tone, I said, was low — roughly the pitch of the lowest string of a lute when the lute was in tune, though the quality of it was different, less woody, more resonant in the way of metal rather than wood. It was slightly flat. Not terribly flat, not wrong — more the way an instrument sounded after it had been played for a while and hadn't been tuned again, the natural drift of things under use. It filled the room in a way that had no direction, which was one of the things that had taken me the longest to accept: sound, in my experience, came from somewhere. This sound simply was.

Underneath the fundamental, I said, there were harmonics — partial tones, overtones, the ghost notes that lived inside any sustained sound. These shifted. Not randomly — there was a pattern to them, something I could begin to feel the edges of, though I couldn't yet say what it was. When I focused on them rather than the fundamental, they resolved into something more complex: layers of the Tower's activity, the different systems running at different rates.

Brother Evan listened with his entire body. He had a way of listening that used his posture as well as his face — leaning forward slightly, hands still on his knees, the quality of attention that left no part of him elsewhere.

"The harmonics," he said. "Can you separate them? Tell me what you hear if you focus on just one at a time."

I tried. It was like trying to look at one star when the whole sky was visible — your eye kept wanting to take in everything. But with effort, I could narrow.

The first harmonic I isolated was slow — very slow, a rate more felt than heard, a deep oscillation that seemed to correspond to something far below us. Not the weather operations, which ran at a faster cadence, not the food processing, which had its own rhythm. Something else. I described it to him.

He was quiet for a moment. "The geothermal system," he said, tentatively. "The Tower's power source. If what the documents say is true — it runs off heat from deep underground, something that

doesn't need fuel and doesn't run down. If it has a cycle—" he paused. "Does it feel stable?"

"Consistent," I said. "Like a heartbeat. Regular."

"Good," he said, with a relief I hadn't expected. "That's good."

Above that first harmonic, moving faster, was something that felt like water — not literally, but in the quality of the sound, the fluid shifting of it. I described it, trying to find words for a thing that didn't have words yet. Brother Evan thought the water table: the aquifer under the city and the farms, managed by the machines, the slow seasonal circulation of it through the rock below us.

Above that, sharper: the familiar ten tones of the weather station, which I had been hearing all day and which now, with my attention properly on them, had individual characters that were distinct and knowable. I told him: third from the left is the most consistent, has been since yesterday. Second from the right is working harder than the others, compensating for something. Rightmost is the most natural, the easiest tone, the one that would sustain the longest without attention.

Brother Evan went to the door of the training room, opened it, and spoke quietly to someone in the corridor — another Servant, apparently passing. I heard a brief exchange. He came back.

"Third from the left is Brem," he said. "She's been on weather operations for six years. Second from the right is a newer operator who was moved from fields last season and is still finding his range. Rightmost is Sister Akasa, who has been on weather longer than almost anyone."

I looked at the floor.

"You can hear the experience in them," he said. It was not entirely a question.

"I don't know what I'm hearing," I said. "I'm hearing something. Whether experience is what it corresponds to—"

"We don't know yet," he agreed. "We'll find out." He sat back down on the edge of the table. "Can I ask you to try something?"

"What?"

"The fundamental tone. The flat one." He leaned forward. "Yesterday you moved it. Just slightly. Did you know you were doing it?"

"Not until afterward. I was comparing it — holding the note it was reaching for alongside the note it was actually making."

"Can you do that again? Deliberately?"

I settled in the chair. I found the fundamental tone — always there, easy to find now — and I listened to its specific quality of almost-but-not-quite. I held, alongside it in my mind, the note it was reaching for: the resolved version, the in-tune version. Not playing it. Not trying to make anything happen. Just holding both, the actual and the intended, the way you held a picture of what something should look like while you worked on making it look that way.

The tone moved.

Not much. A fraction. But measurably, distinctly, in the direction of the note I was holding alongside it.

Behind me, the indicator stone on the back of the chair did something. I knew this not because I could see it but because Brother Evan made the small involuntary sound he made when something surprised him.

"Green," he said. "But — not the same green as yesterday." A pause. "Brighter, I think. And steady. Yesterday it was a flash. This is —" he paused. "It's holding."

I held the comparison. The fundamental tone remained in its slightly-adjusted position, neither moving further nor falling back. It was, I realised, maintaining the new position as long as I maintained the comparison — as long as I held both sounds simultaneously. The moment I stopped attending to it—

The tone dropped. Back to where it had been, exactly, as if it had never moved.

"It doesn't hold on its own," I said.

"No," Brother Evan said. "But you can hold it."

"As long as I'm paying attention to it."

"Yes." He was quiet for a moment. "Taryn, the document spoke of resonant operators as having access to operations that direct-inten-

tion operators cannot perform. I don't yet know what those operations are — the relevant section was damaged. But if you can modify the system's fundamental tone, you are doing something that no standard operator can do, because standard operators don't perceive the fundamental tone at all. They interact with it only through specific tasks, specific applications. You appear to be interacting with the system itself."

I let this settle. The training room was quiet; the Tower was not. I could hear it, all of it, in the layered complex of harmonics and fundamental and the ten distinct tones of the weather station above — a sound that was always present, that I had been hearing since I sat in the testing chair outside on the morning of the Test, that had been there all my life in the background as a hum I had never consciously named.

"I've been hearing it since I was small," I said. "The Tower's sound. I always thought it was just — the building. Something physical. Stone and machinery."

"It is stone and machinery," he said. "And also, apparently, a language that some small number of people can hear."

"A language I don't know yet."

"A language," he said, "that you have been hearing since childhood without knowing that's what it was. Which may mean you know more of it than you realise." He stood, stretched slightly, recapped his pen. "Let's stop here for today. I want to think about what I've seen, and I want you to rest — not because I think the training room is taxing you, but because I want to give your mind room to do what it does between sessions."

"Which is what?"

"I don't know yet," he said, picking up the documents from the floor with the careful economy of someone restoring order. "But every operator I've ever worked with has told me that their best understanding of what the interface was doing came not during a session but in some unguarded moment afterward — waking up, eating breakfast, doing something completely unrelated. The mind

needs time alone with new information." He straightened the stack. "Go find something else to do. Read a book. Play your lute. Walk around and look at things."

"You're sending me away to play my lute."

"I'm sending you away to let the morning's work settle," he said, with the exact tone of a person who was aware that this sounded slightly absurd and stood behind it anyway. "Come back tomorrow morning with whatever you've noticed."

I went back to the lounge.

The deep chair was unoccupied, which I was beginning to think of as a small mercy the building offered me in the afternoons. I sat in it with my back to the room and looked out the east-facing windows at the mountains, which were different in afternoon light than they had been in the morning — sharper-edged, the shadows on their flanks longer and more defined, the flat tops of the individual spires catching the direct sun and throwing it back in a way that made them look almost luminous.

I thought about what Brother Evan had read. A network of installations distributed across the continent. A planet being made habitable. People from somewhere else, arriving somewhere that couldn't support them yet, building the machines to make it work.

I thought about the mountains.

They were the eastern boundary of Alabaster, the natural defense that made the city possible. You couldn't approach from the east because of them; you couldn't outflank from the east because of them. The city existed in the bowl of their curve, sheltered by the fact of their presence. We had always understood them as given, as geological fact, as the world as it was before people were in it.

But the documents spoke of *surface restructuring* as one of the standard capabilities of these installations. The documents spoke of the Tower's machines shaping the environment to suit the people who had arrived in it.

The mountains were very regular. The individual spires were

very evenly spaced. The flat tops were flat in a way that natural erosion did not typically produce.

I looked at them for a long time.

Then I looked at the other lute on its pegs above the shelf, and took it down, and played for a while in the afternoon light.

The thing that happened next was not what Brother Evan had predicted, exactly. It was not an unguarded moment; it was not in the space between sessions. It happened while I was playing, which was in its own way unguarded — you do not play an instrument carefully, not if you've been playing long enough that the mechanics are below conscious attention. You play with the part of your mind that isn't thinking, and the part that is thinking is free to do other things.

I was playing the wandering minor-key tune I had played the night before, the one Mama sometimes hummed, and I was doing the thing I had discovered — bending the strings to put the melody into conversation with the Tower's fundamental tone, so that the two sounds existed in the same space and acknowledged each other. I had been doing this for a few minutes, not attending to it, when I became aware that the fundamental tone was different.

Not different in the way it had been in the training room, where I had moved it deliberately and it had held as long as I held the comparison. Different in a way I had not caused. It was higher. Slightly, measurably higher than it had been an hour ago — closer to the note it was reaching for, not because I had been working at it but because something else had shifted in the time since I'd been attending to other things.

I stopped playing. I listened.

The fundamental was definitely higher. And in the training room — I had held it higher for perhaps twenty minutes, and then released it, and it had returned to its original position immediately. But it had not, apparently, returned all the way.

A fraction of the change I had made had persisted.

I sat with the lute in my lap and thought about this. The Tower was not a lute. The Tower was not something you tuned once and

left. The Tower was a system of enormous complexity running continuously, producing the weather and the soil chemistry and the food processing and presumably a hundred other things I hadn't yet been told about, and I had, over the course of one afternoon's training session, moved some deep property of it by a fraction of a fraction and a small residue of that movement had held.

I did not know whether this was significant. I did not know whether it was consequential. I did not know enough about what the fundamental tone was, what it corresponded to in the Tower's actual operation, to know whether moving it slightly closer to its intended pitch was a good thing or a neutral thing or a thing that would have some effect I couldn't predict.

I put the lute back on its pegs. I went and found Brother Evan's room, which I had noted the location of on my second day, and knocked.

He opened the door with a document still in his hand. He was not surprised to see me.

"Something happened," I said.

"Come in," he said, stepping back. "Tell me."

His room was the physical biography of a man who had lived in the same place for a long time and filled it with the residue of continuous thinking. Books were stacked on every horizontal surface and arranged on three shelves that had clearly been added to the room's original furnishings. Notes in his handwriting were attached to various surfaces — the edge of the window frame, the side of the bookshelf, two places on the wall where he had apparently found the wall preferable to paper. A lute case under the bed, unlatched, visible through the open lid. On the desk, the documents from the training room, now supplemented by four or five others, annotated in his increasingly dense hand.

He cleared the second chair of its stack of books, depositing the stack on the floor with the casual disregard of someone who had long since given up maintaining order in this room. We sat.

I told him what I had heard in the lounge. The fundamental tone

higher than I had left it. The fraction of the change persisting after I'd released it.

He listened with his whole body, as he always did. He did not interrupt. When I finished, he was quiet for a moment, and then he said: "How much higher?"

"Hard to say precisely. Less than I'd moved it in the training session, but — if you had a string that was flat and you moved it up and then released it, it would return to where it was. This returned most of the way. Not all the way."

"As if the system had an inertia."

"Like a heavy thing that's been nudged," I said. "It goes back toward where it was, but not completely, because the nudge had some effect on the whole."

He picked up his pen and turned it in his fingers and set it down. "I want to ask you a question, and I want you to know that I am not asking because I expect you to answer it definitively — I'm asking because I want you to carry it."

"All right."

"What is the fundamental tone?" he said. "Not what does it sound like. What is it. What does it correspond to, in the Tower's actual operation."

I looked at the documents on his desk. "The documents would know."

"The documents know what the system does," he said. "They may know what the fundamental tone is. But you—" he paused. "You've been hearing it all your life, apparently. You heard it this morning when the indicator stayed dark. You heard it change in response to what you did, and you heard it not fully return. You have more information about its character than any document does, because you have direct perception of it."

"I don't know what I have direct perception of," I said. "I hear a sound. I don't know what the sound is."

"What does it feel like?" he said. "Not how it sounds. How it feels, when you're in contact with it."

I thought about this carefully, because it was a careful question and deserved a careful answer.

"Like the building is — present," I said. "Not like the building is doing a specific thing. Like the building is ready to do things. Potential rather than action." I looked for better words. "When I'm playing and I'm in tune, there's a moment before I start the piece where all the strings are resonating correctly and there's a — a rightness to the whole instrument. It's not playing yet. It's prepared to play. That quality."

Brother Evan was very still.

"The documents describe the system as having been designed to perform a set of functions continuously," he said. "Weather management, soil chemistry, water table, structural maintenance. But they also describe it as having been designed to perform a different set of functions on instruction — functions that are not in continuous operation but are available when needed." He looked at the documents. "The shield system. The document mentioned a full dome over the city. It described other structural capabilities. Things the system can do but isn't doing."

"Because nobody has asked it to," I said.

"Because nobody has asked it to," he said. "Or possibly—" he stopped. "Possibly because nobody has been able to ask. The resonant operators, the document said, could perform operations that standard operators could not. If a resonant operator was the appropriate way to communicate with certain systems, and there hasn't been a resonant operator in—" he made a small gesture that encompassed the considerable expanse of time the Tower had been running without one.

"Then those systems have been waiting," I said.

"Perhaps," he said, very carefully. "We don't know. We're speculating. I'm speculating." He picked up his pen and put it down again. "The thing I do not want to do," he said, in the tone of a man describing a real temptation, "is to decide in advance what you are, and then teach you to be that thing. The documents are incomplete.

What we know is limited. What I observe is—" he paused. "What I observe is that you can hear the system and it responds to you in ways I have not seen before. Everything else is interpretation, and I'm trying to hold my interpretations lightly."

"But you have interpretations," I said.

"I have interpretations," he admitted. "Yes."

"Tell me one."

He was quiet for long enough that I thought he might not. Then he said: "I think the fundamental tone is the system's baseline — its resting state, the expression of everything it is prepared to do but is not currently doing. And I think you have been hearing it all your life because the system has been aware of you all your life, in whatever way these machines are aware of anything, and the tone you've been hearing is the system saying something that amounts to: *I am here.* Not to you specifically — it says this to everyone, probably — but you are one of the few people who can hear it saying it."

I sat with this.

Outside the window of his room, the afternoon had tipped toward evening — the shadows on the mountains longer now, the quality of the light changed, the sky beginning to do what it did in the hour before dark. The Tower hummed. Somewhere above us the weather station's operators were rotating shifts, the tones in my awareness shifting as some departed and others arrived — the character of individual tones changing, the chord reforming with different voices.

"Tomorrow," Brother Evan said, "I'd like to try something different in the training room. Not the standard diagnostic tasks. Not even the listening exercise. I'd like to try asking the system a question."

"In the training room."

"The training rooms are the safest place to do things we're uncertain about," he said. "Limited connection. Limited scope. If something unexpected happens, it happens there and not on the weather

operations floor." He stood. "Go and eat dinner. Play your lute. Sleep."

"You're going to keep reading," I said.

"There are several more documents I haven't looked at yet," he agreed, in a tone that strongly implied this was going to take most of the night.

I stood to go. At the door, I stopped.

"Brother Evan. The mountains."

He looked at me.

"The documents say the system was designed for surface restructuring. The Eastern mountains — they're very regular. The spires are very evenly spaced. The tops are flat in a way that—"

"Yes," he said. He said it the way you say yes when you have been carrying a thought and someone has just named it. He looked at the documents on his desk. "Yes. I've been sitting with that since I read it this morning."

"Then someone built them," I said. "The way someone built this building."

"The way someone built the whole city," he said. "The walls. The ring structure. The maze streets." He looked at the window. "We have always thought of Alabaster as something the founders made. It may be more accurate to say that Alabaster is something the system made, at the founders' direction. The machines shaped the land, and then people built their lives on the shaped land, and the shaping was so old and so complete by the time anyone alive could remember that it became invisible." He paused. "We have been living inside a tool."

"A tool for people who aren't here anymore."

"A tool for people whose descendants are," he said. "Who are, apparently, in some cases, still able to operate it." He looked at me with the careful, warm, slightly overwhelmed expression of a man who has had a very significant day. "Go and eat, Taryn."

I went.

Dinner was noisier than midday — the evening had its own atmosphere, the loosening of a day's work giving way to sociability,

conversation running across tables in the comfortable way of people who had run out of professional things to think about and were now just being people. Someone at the far end of the hall had a flute. They were playing something I didn't know, a quick bright melody, and the conversations around it continued uninterrupted in the way that music, played well in the right space, wove itself into a room without demanding attention.

I ate and listened and let my mind do what Brother Evan had told it to: not work, just be in the room, give the day somewhere to settle.

At the younger cohort's table, Tomas was in animated conversation with the boy beside him — they were arguing about something, in the specific way of children who have recently established that they both have opinions and are very much in favor of having them. Tomas gesticulated. The other boy gesticulated back. Tomas laughed. It was his real laugh, the one I knew, the one he saved for people he was actually comfortable with, and it carried across the hall to me in the noise and the flute-music and the general warmth of the room.

I turned back to my food. I was smiling.

Fine, I thought. Fine in the way of things that had cost something and were also correct, and the correctness was getting a little less expensive every time I looked at it. Not free yet. But trending that way.

The Tower hummed around me. The flute played. Somewhere above, the night-shift operators were settling into the weather station, taking the lens in hand for the overnight hours, their tones rising one by one into the complex sound of the building doing what the building did.

I tilted the fundamental tone, just slightly, with no more than a thought — the comparison, the intended note held alongside the actual one — and felt it move.

Then I released it and let it fall back and ate my dinner.

I would learn to hold it properly. I would learn what holding it

meant, what moving it did, what the system was trying to sound like when it played that slightly-flat note into the dark. I would learn the language, which was apparently one I had been listening to since before I could have had any idea what it was.

But not tonight.

Tonight I was thirteen years old and I had eaten a good dinner and Tomas was laughing two tables away and somewhere in the Third Ring Mama was closing the tavern without me, and someone down the hall was playing a flute with more enthusiasm than precision, and all of this was fine.

The mountains stood to the east, built by machines older than memory. The Tower breathed its patient breath. The fundamental tone rang its slightly-flat note into the night, waiting, as it had apparently always been waiting, for someone who could hear it well enough to answer.

7

The next morning I woke before the sconce brightened.

I lay in the gray pre-light and listened to the Tower with the specific quality of attention I was developing — not reaching for it, not trying to hear anything particular, just letting the sound be present the way it always was, the way breath was present, the way the warmth of the stone floor was present when I set my feet on it. The fundamental tone was there. I found it the way you find a familiar note on an instrument you know well: directly, without searching.

It was in the same position I had left it last night after dinner, which was slightly higher than where I had found it on my first morning — the residue of whatever I had been doing persisting again through sleep. Not much. A fraction of a fraction. But consistent. Three days running now, the tone was not where it had been the day before.

I lay still and thought about this.

The thing about tuning an instrument was that the goal was not to move the string. The goal was to find where the string wanted to be — the specific pitch it would produce when it was neither strained

nor slack, neither fighting the tuning peg nor giving up on it. You didn't impose a pitch on a string. You found the pitch that was already latent in it, the one it would settle into if you got the tension right and then let it alone.

What if the fundamental tone was not flat because something was wrong with it? What if it was flat because it had been drifting, across many generations of neglect, away from a pitch it wanted to hold? And what if what I was doing — holding the intended note alongside the actual note, giving the system something to orient toward — was not changing anything so much as reminding it where it wanted to be?

This was a thought I was not confident enough in to bring to Brother Evan yet. It was the kind of thought that required more evidence before it became a theory rather than a hope.

The sconce brightened. I got up.

Brother Evan was at breakfast before me, which had apparently become his custom: he arrived early, got tea, and sat with the particular focused vacancy of a person who had been up late reading and was now in the process of resuming personhood. He looked up when I sat down and the vacancy cleared.

"I found three more documents," he said.

"Good morning to you too."

"Good morning," he said, with the slightly abashed quality of someone who had been caught. "The resonant operator documentation is fragmented — I think some sections were stored separately at some point and then lost, or stored somewhere we haven't looked yet. But I found—" he picked up the notes he had brought with him to breakfast, which told me something about the state he was in, "a document that appears to be an operational log from a very early period. Not an instruction document. A record of what was actually happening. And in it there are mentions of an operator named — well, the name is untranslatable, but she appears to be a resonant operator, and the log makes a number of observations about how she worked."

"What kind of observations?"

"The most useful one—" he found the page, "is this. She had apparently been in training for some time with the standard approach before someone recognised she was a resonant operator and changed the method. The log notes that in the standard training period, her connection to the system was weak and inconsistent and she was considered unpromising. After the method changed, she progressed rapidly." He looked up. "Which is encouraging for our purposes."

"How rapidly is rapidly?"

"The log covers approximately a year of her training. By the end of that year she was performing operations the log describes as — this is the library Servant's translation — 'unprecedented in scope.'"

I ate some bread and thought about this. "What operations?"

"That's where the fragment ends." He set the page down. He had the expression of someone being philosophical about a document that had personally wronged him. "We have the record of her early training and then a gap and then a reference to her doing significant work and no description of the significant work."

"That's very useful," I said.

"Extremely," he agreed. "But it confirms the method — that what we're doing is the right approach, even if I can't tell you where the approach leads." He drank some tea. "What I'd like to try this morning is a dialogue."

"With you?"

"With the system." He set the cup down. "The training rooms have a limited interface — we've established that. They're designed for basic diagnostic work, not for complex operations. But they should be sufficient to attempt a conversation." He said *conversation* with slight careful emphasis, the way you name something unusual without wanting to make too much of it. "The documents suggest that resonant operators could communicate with the system in a more direct way than standard operators — not just sending

intentions and receiving outputs, but something more like an exchange. I want to see if that's possible for you."

"How would I start a conversation with the Tower?"

"Ask it something," he said. "When you're connected and the tone is present — ask it a question. Not in words, necessarily. In the same medium you've been working in. Sound."

I thought about this. "I don't know its language well enough to ask a question in it."

"You might know enough to ask a simple one," he said. "You know what the fundamental tone is — or approximately what it is. You know what various harmonics correspond to, at least roughly. If you wanted to ask whether something was present or absent — a yes or no question, essentially — what would you do?"

I thought about it. "I'd listen for whether the harmonic was there."

"And if you wanted to ask whether a specific operation was possible — whether a capability existed?"

"I'd — look for it. Listen for it. See if there was something in the sound that corresponded to it." I paused. "The way you look for a note in a chord by finding whether the interval is there."

"Yes," he said. "Try that today." He stood, and gathered his notes, and looked slightly more awake than he had when I sat down. "And Taryn — try not to expect too much. This is the first attempt. If nothing comes of it today, that is entirely expected and not a failure."

He said this, and I believed him, and I spent most of the morning in the training room failing at things.

Not in a dramatic way. There was no indicator going dark, no sense of the system rejecting me — in fact the connection was steady, the fundamental tone present and clear, the harmonics available when I reached for them. The chair's indicator had been glowing green since approximately thirty seconds after I sat down, which Brother Evan noted in his quiet way and I noted in mine.

But when I tried to ask a question, I found I did not know how to do it.

The problem was not access. I could hear the system. I could interact with the fundamental tone, move it slightly, feel it respond. But asking a question required not just interacting with something but communicating a specific intent — the intent of asking — and I could not find the shape of that in the sound. I knew what asking felt like in words. I knew what asking felt like on a lute, the specific quality of a phrase that ended on the fifth rather than the tonic, the musical equivalent of a raised inflection. But translating that into the Tower's sound was a different operation and I could not locate the equivalent.

I tried seven or eight approaches over the course of two hours. I tried shaping the fundamental tone into a question-like form, rising at the end as a voice would. Nothing. I tried listening for a specific harmonic and then deliberately listening for the absence of it, as if posing its presence as a question. Nothing I could distinguish from ordinary listening. I tried holding the sound of a question in my mind the way I had held the sound of the intended note — not a specific question but the quality of questioning, the open-upward feeling of it — and placing it alongside what I was hearing.

Something moved.

Not clearly. Not definitively. A shift in the harmonic layer, brief enough that I couldn't be certain I hadn't simply heard the weather station operators adjusting something two floors up. But something.

I tried again. The same movement, or something like it.

"There's something," I told Brother Evan. "But it's not clear. It might be the system responding. It might be ambient noise."

"How can you tell the difference?"

"I'm not sure I can yet," I said. "The ambient noise from the weather station has a — a particular character. It's always in motion. What I'm hearing when I try to ask is different, it has more of a — a settled quality. Like someone who has heard a question and is considering it, rather than someone who is busy with something else." I paused. "That sounds like I'm describing a person."

"Does it feel like a person?"

I thought about this carefully. "No," I said. "It doesn't feel like anything warm. It feels like an instrument. It feels like — when you pluck a string and then hold the sound of the next note you're about to play in your ear and feel the instrument wanting to move toward it. Not sentience. Not intention. But — responsiveness. It responds to what I do."

"That may be sufficient," he said.

"For what?"

"For eventually communicating something meaningful to it," he said. "Responsiveness is a beginning." He was writing in his notes. "What I want you to do is this: for the rest of today, don't try to ask anything. Just practice holding the questioning quality — whatever that feels like to you — and releasing it. Like a repeated exercise. Not trying for an outcome, just familiarising yourself with the motion."

"The way you'd practice a difficult passage until the fingering was automatic."

"Exactly that," he said. "The moment you can hold the questioning quality without effort, you can start attending to the response."

So I did that for another hour. Not asking anything specifically, just holding the sound of a question and releasing it, over and over, paying attention to the feeling of it rather than the outcome. It was tedious in the specific productive way of repetitive exercises — the kind of tedium that was building something without showing you what it was building yet.

At some point in the third repetition I noticed that the questioning quality was easier to hold than it had been in the first repetition. And in the seventh repetition, easier still. And by the twelfth or fifteenth I was not thinking about how to hold it at all — I was just holding it, the way I held a chord shape after enough practice that the hand knew it without needing to be told.

"Stop," Brother Evan said. He said it gently, but with enough certainty that I stopped immediately. "Look at me."

I opened my eyes. He was standing in front of the chair, looking

at me with an expression that I had not seen from him before — not the careful controlled interest of the past two days, but something more unguarded, the expression of someone who has seen something they did not expect and are not yet sure how to file it.

"What?" I said.

"The indicator," he said. "When you started the exercise, it was green. It has been green since you sat down." He paused. "In the last — I don't know exactly when it changed. But at some point in the last several minutes, it became something I have not seen before. It is still green. But there is something else alongside it. Another colour, beneath the green, underneath it somehow — I can only see it from certain angles." He moved to the side of the chair, crouched slightly, looked. "Blue," he said. "There is a green indicator with something blue in it. And it is—" he paused. "It is brighter than any indicator I have ever seen in a training room. Considerably brighter."

We both sat with that for a moment.

"Is that good?" I said.

"I don't know," he said honestly. "But it corresponds with you doing something you haven't done in any previous session. And it appeared when you stopped trying to produce a result and simply practiced the motion." He straightened. "We're going to stop here for today."

"We've barely started."

"We've done more today than you realise," he said. "And I want you to stop while the connection is doing something new rather than after you've pushed past it and it's gone flat again. An instrument that has found something — you don't play it until it breaks."

This was, I recognised, a musician's argument deployed against me by a man who knew I'd respond to it.

"All right," I said. "But tomorrow we try an actual question."

"Tomorrow we try an actual question," he agreed.

I went back to the lounge with the intention of playing the lute on the shelf, and instead fell asleep in the deep chair.

Not a deliberate sleep — the kind that arrives before you have

decided on it, that finds the gap between one thought and the next and slides through. I had not been especially tired when I sat down. But the morning's work, whatever it was doing in me, had used something that needed replacing, and apparently sleep was the appropriate replacement.

I woke to Prael sitting on the couch across from me with a book open in her lap, reading.

She did not look up when I woke. She turned a page.

"How long have I been asleep?" I said.

"About an hour," she said, without looking up. "You snore a little."

"I do not."

"Very slightly," she said, in the tone of someone reporting a fact without judgment.

I sat up and pushed my hair back and looked at the windows. The morning light had shifted, going toward midday. I had missed the earlier part of the lunch service. "I fell asleep by accident," I said, aware that this was not a claim I could defend very well from my current position.

"You've been doing something intensive," she said, still reading. "It shows." She turned another page. "What are you working on?"

"Something with the interface," I said. "Nothing I can describe clearly yet."

She nodded, which meant: I heard you and I'm not going to push. She read a few more lines. "I felt something this morning," she said, in the same tone she might use to report the weather. "In the fields station. Something in the foundation harmonics." She paused. "That doesn't happen. They're stable. They've been stable since before I started working there." She looked up at me for the first time. Her expression was exactly what I'd expected from Prael: not alarmed, not accusatory, simply calibrating. "It was small. It didn't affect anything. But it was different from yesterday, and then it went back to approximately where it was before, and that was interesting."

I said nothing.

She looked at me for a moment with the clear attentive gaze of

someone who was perfectly capable of adding two things together and getting the obvious answer. "Hm," she said.

"I'm not certain what I'm doing yet," I said. "Brother Evan is being careful about what conclusions he draws."

"That sounds like Brother Evan," she said, and went back to her book.

I sat with this for a moment. Then I said: "Did it — was the change in the foundation harmonics—"

"Harmless," she said, without looking up. "Possibly beneficial, I don't know yet. I'll know better in a few days." She turned a page. "I'm not concerned. I'm interested." A pause. "We are all in the same building, Taryn. Whatever you do in it, some of us will feel it. I thought you should know that."

She said it without reproach, without weight. Purely informational, the way she said most things. I thought you should know.

"Thank you," I said.

She nodded and read.

I found Sajay in the corridor outside the weather station after the midday shift change, sitting on the floor with her back against the wall and her knees up, eating a piece of bread. She did this in the specific unselfconscious way of someone for whom sitting on corridor floors while eating bread was a completely ordinary thing, and who was not interested in what anyone might think about it.

She looked up when I came around the corner. "You missed lunch."

"I fell asleep."

"Did the morning take it out of you?"

"Apparently." I sat down against the wall beside her. The stone was warm — it was always warm — and the corridor was quiet at this hour, the shift having just turned over and everyone dispersed to wherever they went between sessions. From above, faintly, I could hear the new shift's tones rising into place. "What do you do when you're not on shift?"

"Read," she said. "Practice. Talk to people. Think about what I'm

doing." She ate a piece of bread. "The weather work is — continuous. Even when you're not in the chair, you're in the chair a little bit. You're still holding the awareness of it."

"Does it bother you? Not being able to put it down?"

She considered this seriously, the way she considered most things. "No," she said finally. "I think it bothered me at first, when I was new to it. Now it feels more like — the way your heartbeat is always there. You're not always thinking about it. But you know it's there." She looked at the far wall. "The thing nobody tells you before you start is that it changes how you understand the world. Not in a large way. In small ways. You start to feel the weather differently — not just see it, feel it. You notice things about humidity and temperature and air pressure that you never noticed before, because you've been paying that kind of attention for long enough that it becomes default."

"What do you notice right now?" I said.

She looked at the window at the end of the corridor, which showed a rectangle of afternoon sky. "The lens is holding well. Wind from the north-northeast, moderate. The air over the farms is about two percent drier than ideal but the overnight team should correct that." She paused. "Also you're tense about something and have been since you sat down."

I looked at her.

"Not about the training," she said. "Something else."

I had been thinking about Prael's observation. The foundation harmonics shifting. What I was doing in the training room having effects I couldn't predict in parts of the system I didn't understand yet. And Brother Evan's care, his deliberateness, the way he kept saying *we don't know yet* — which I trusted and which was also, in its own way, its own kind of pressure.

"I don't know what I'm doing," I said. "To the building. I know something is happening and I can't fully account for it yet, and I'm not certain that not knowing is acceptable when other people are working in the same system."

Sajay looked at me. "Prael said something to you."

"She said it in the nicest possible way," I said.

"That's very Prael," she agreed. She finished her bread. "Here's what I'd say. The building has been running for hundreds of years without a resonant operator, or whatever you are. It hasn't collapsed. The farms are producing. The wells are full. The walls are standing." She dusted her hands on her trousers. "Whatever you're doing is new, but new and dangerous aren't the same thing. Brother Evan is careful. You're careful. The fact that effects are present doesn't mean the effects are bad." She looked at me directly. "And the alternative — the alternative is that you don't develop whatever this is, and we go back to not having it, and we never know what we lost."

"We didn't have it before. We got along fine."

"Fine," she said. "We got along fine." She said it in a tone that suggested fine was not the ceiling she was interested in. "Alabaster exists because of what these machines do. Every crop, every well, every warm night in a city that sits in the middle of a desert — that's the machines. We manage the machines, badly, with incomplete knowledge, because we've lost most of what we knew about how to do it. If you can recover some of that—" she spread her hands. "Fine seems like a low target."

I was quiet for a moment.

"That's a very large framing for me falling asleep in the lounge," I said.

She laughed — a real, quick laugh, unguarded. "You asked," she said. She stood, which appeared to involve no particular effort despite having been on the floor. "Come back to the training room tomorrow with a specific question you want to ask. A real one, not a test question. Something you actually want to know."

"Brother Evan said the same thing."

"Then we're both right," she said, and walked back to the weather station.

I thought about what question to ask for the rest of the afternoon.

Not idly — practically. The document had said that resonant

operators could access operations that standard operators could not. If I was going to have a conversation with the Tower's system, I should have something to say in it. Brother Evan would approach this methodically, building toward larger questions through careful smaller ones. That was the right approach and I intended to follow it.

But Sajay had said: a real question. Something you actually want to know.

The things I actually wanted to know were not small careful diagnostic questions. They were things like: what are you, exactly, and what were you made to do, and why has the fundamental tone been drifting flat for what seems like a very long time, and what is under the Eastern mountains, and who was Commander John Hollis, and is the tower system aware of me in any sense that the word *aware* actually applies to, and is there something specific it needs from a resonant operator that it has been waiting for without the ability to ask?

These were not questions I knew how to ask yet. They were questions I would need a much more developed facility with the interface to even attempt.

But there was one question underneath all the others, more practical and more urgent, and it had been present since I first began to understand what I might be able to hear.

The question was: is the system as it is now the system as it should be?

Because the fundamental tone was flat. Not slightly off, not the natural variation of a running system — flat in a way that felt like drift, like something that had been slowly moving away from its intended pitch for a long time. And if the fundamental tone corresponded to the system's readiness, its baseline capability, its prepared-to-do state — then a flat fundamental tone might mean that the system as it currently existed was not what it was designed to be. That there was a version of it that was more fully itself, more completely operational, more capable of the things it had been made to do.

And if that was true, the question was: what would it take to bring it back?

I sat in the lounge with the late afternoon light in the east-facing windows and the lute in my lap, not playing, just holding it, and I thought about this.

Then I put the lute back on its pegs and went to find Brother Evan again.

He was in the library this time, which I found by following the specific kind of concentrated silence that radiated from rooms where he was working. The library Servant was also there, at a far table, and nodded at me in the mild way of someone interrupted who doesn't particularly mind.

Brother Evan looked up. He had ink on his fingers again.

"I have a question," I said. "For tomorrow. A real one."

He set down his pen. "Tell me."

"Is the system running the way it was designed to run?" I said. "Not what it can do. What it should be doing, in its current state, compared to what it was built to do. Is it — is it healthy? Is it fully operational? Or has something been wrong with it for a long time that nobody has been able to ask about because nobody could hear it?"

He was quiet for a long time. The library was very still around us.

"That," he said finally, "is a very good question."

"Can I ask it?"

"I think," he said, slowly, "that it may be the question we've been building toward since you sat in the testing chair." He looked at the documents arrayed around him. "I don't know whether you can ask it yet. Your facility with the interface is still very new. But I think that is the correct direction."

"If the answer is that something is wrong—"

"Then we will know something is wrong," he said. "Which is better than not knowing." He met my eyes. "What made you think of it?"

"The fundamental tone is flat," I said. "It's been flat since I first heard it. I've been moving it slightly and some of the change persists. If the tone corresponds to the system's baseline state — if it's the expression of what the system is ready to do — then a flat tone might mean the system isn't as ready as it should be. That something in it has been drifting away from what it was supposed to be."

He looked at me for a moment.

"Yes," he said. "That is one interpretation." He picked up his pen, which was his signal that he was about to go back to reading. "Go to sleep, Taryn. Tomorrow is going to be interesting."

"You keep saying that."

"It keeps being true," he said, and turned back to his documents, and the library settled back into its particular quality of quiet around him.

I went to bed.

The fundamental tone was there when I lay down, as it always was, the low steady hum through the stone of the wall, slightly flat, reaching. I lay still and listened to it without doing anything about it, just letting it be present, the way you let a problem be present when you have decided to stop working on it for the night.

It was not flat because something was wrong with it. I was increasingly certain of that.

It was flat because no one had been able to tell it what it was supposed to sound like.

I lay in the dark and the Tower breathed around me and somewhere above the night shift operators held the lens steady over the farms and Tomas slept in his dormitory two floors up and Mama was in the Third Ring and the machines ran as they always ran, waiting for instructions that were five hundred years overdue.

I closed my eyes and listened until I slept.

8

Brother Evan was not at breakfast.

This was unusual enough that I noticed it immediately — he had been there every morning since my first day, tea in hand, notes nearby, occupying the specific corner of the bench that had apparently become his by default. His absence had a quality to it, the way the absence of a habitual sound has a quality: not alarming, but present as a gap.

I ate and waited. Around me the dining hall did its morning work: conversations, the movement of food, the gradual arrival of people at various stages of wakefulness. Sajay came in with Jarace and they sat at the usual table with the easy economy of people whose bodies had learned where they were going before their minds entirely had. I joined them.

"Brother Evan missed breakfast," I said.

"He does that," Jarace said, in the tone of someone reporting established fact. "When he's in the middle of something, he forgets to eat. Someone usually brings him something around midday or he appears eventually looking slightly hollow."

"He's been in the library since before sunrise," Sajay said. She

looked at me with the particular attention she reserved for things she had decided were connected. "Something to do with you, I assume."

"We're trying something in the training room today," I said.

"The question," she said.

"The question," I confirmed.

She nodded and applied herself to her porridge. Jarace, who had clearly been briefed to some degree on my general situation but was less invested in the specifics, ate quietly and talked about the overnight weather operations with the conversational ease of someone for whom weather operations was simply what there was to talk about. There had been more wind from the north than expected, and the lens over the farms had needed more correction than usual, and one of the night operators had apparently had a minor disagreement with another about whether the eastern edge was holding, which had produced a brief period of competitive correction that resolved itself without lasting damage but had left both of them in a mood.

"Did you feel the wind?" I asked Sajay.

She gave me a look that was somewhere between amused and evaluating. "Did you?"

"Not the wind specifically," I said. "Something in the overnight harmonics was more unsettled than the previous two nights. I thought it might be weather-related."

"It was," she said. She looked at me for a moment longer than the answer required. "You're getting faster at reading the ambient sound."

"It's getting easier to separate things," I said. "The different layers. Two days ago it was mostly an undifferentiated — mass. Now it's more like individual voices in a crowded room. I can't hear every conversation, but I can tell that different ones are happening."

Jarace looked at me with the expression of someone who has just understood that the conversation he was peripherally part of was more technically interesting than he had assumed. "You're hearing the operations directly? Without being at an interface?"

"Through the stone," I said. "Apparently."

He looked at the wall. Then back at me. "I've been working in this building for four years," he said, "and I have never heard anything through the walls that wasn't someone talking in the next room."

"You don't have the right ears for it," Sajay said, not unkindly.

"Should that bother me?"

"It's just a different way to interface," she said. "Like being better at reading than talking. Same information, different medium."

Jarace absorbed this with the equanimity of someone who had made peace with not being the most unusual person in a room. He seemed, on reflection, comfortable with this. "What does it sound like?" he asked me. "The building, through the walls."

I thought about how to describe it to someone who had never heard it. "Do you know what a chord sounds like when every note is slightly wrong?" I said. "When the instrument hasn't been tuned in a long time, and each string has drifted independently, and the result is something that has the shape of a chord but not the sound of one?"

"Yes," he said.

"Like that. But — vast. And not wrong, exactly. Just — not fully itself yet." I looked at the table. "Like it's trying to be in tune."

Jarace considered this. "And you can help it?"

"I think so," I said. "I don't know yet."

"Hm," he said, and returned to his porridge, apparently satisfied.

Brother Evan appeared at the end of the breakfast service, looking exactly as Jarace had predicted: slightly hollow, ink on both hands now rather than just two fingers, and carrying a leather folder of documents that had apparently not left his possession since the previous evening. He sat down, accepted a cup of tea from a passing Initiate with the reflexive gratitude of someone who had forgotten they were thirsty until the cup was in their hand, and looked at me.

"I found something," he said.

"You found something yesterday too," I said.

"This is a different something." He set the leather folder on the table. "The library Servant has been working on a document she calls the Operator's Manual — the most complete technical document we

have, written in the near-script, partial translation. She has been translating it for eight years." He opened the folder, which contained a sheaf of her careful notes alongside transcribed sections. "Last night I read the full translation for the first time. It's not complete — perhaps a third of the document has been fully translated, another third partially, and the remainder is still in the original script or too damaged to work with. But the translated portions include a section I had not previously read."

He slid the top page across to me. The library Servant's handwriting was small and precise, each word chosen with visible care, uncertain terms bracketed with alternatives.

I read:

The system maintains a continuous record of its operational state. This record is accessible to operators of sufficient rank [*rank: uncertain; possibly 'Commander' or equivalent*] *through direct interface. The record includes: current operational parameters, deviation from design specifications, systems requiring attention, and the history of all operator interactions since the system was last fully initialized. Note that the system's current state should be understood as a* [*deviation / drift / distance*] *from its designed state, as no system of this complexity can be maintained in perfect calibration without continuous attention from qualified operators. The system is designed to communicate its state to operators when asked, but cannot ask on its own behalf.*

I read the last sentence again.

The system is designed to communicate its state to operators when asked, but cannot ask on its own behalf.

"It can't ask for help," I said.

"It cannot initiate communication," Brother Evan said. He wrapped both hands around his cup. "It can respond. It can provide information when queried. But it has no mechanism for saying — I need attention. I am not running as I should. Something has drifted that needs to be corrected." He looked at the page. "It has been running in whatever state it is currently in, unable to report that

state, for as long as there has been no one with sufficient access to ask."

"And the resonant interface—"

"Is the mechanism through which an operator of sufficient rank can access the operational record directly," he said. "Standard operators can perform tasks, but they interact with the system at the task level. They can tell it to do specific things and it will do them. They cannot access the underlying state of the system — whether the parameters are correct, whether something has drifted, whether the capabilities the system was designed to have are fully available."

"Only a resonant operator can."

"Only a resonant operator can ask," he said. "Whether you can, at your current level of development, is a different question. But — yes. That is what the document describes."

I looked at the page again. The system cannot ask on its own behalf. I thought about the fundamental tone, slightly flat, reaching toward a pitch it couldn't achieve on its own — not broken, not wrong, just waiting. Waiting for the one kind of operator who could hear it and respond. The kind that had apparently not appeared in a very long time.

"When we go to the training room today," I said, "I'm going to ask it how it is."

Brother Evan looked at me. "Yes," he said. "I think that's exactly right."

The morning had a different quality than the previous two sessions.

I noticed this before anything began — sitting in the training room chair with my hands on the pads, the green indicator already lit (it lit faster every day, the connection establishing itself with increasing ease), the fundamental tone present and clear. The chair, the room, the pads: all the same as yesterday. But the quality of my attention was different. Yesterday I had been practicing a motion

without knowing where it led. Today I knew what I was reaching for, and the knowing changed the quality of the reaching.

"Take your time," Brother Evan said, from his position behind the chair. "There's no urgency."

I knew there was no urgency. I was thirteen years old and had nowhere else to be and the Tower had been waiting for this conversation for however many generations a resonant operator had been absent. Another hour wouldn't matter. I settled into the chair and let myself attend.

The fundamental tone was there. I found it the way I found it every morning now — directly, without effort, the way you find a familiar note the moment you're in contact with an instrument you know. Slightly flat. Slightly reaching.

The harmonics layered above it: the slow deep pulse of the geothermal system, the fluid cycling of the water table, the ten tones of the weather station, the slower rhythms of the fields work below me. I let them all be present without attending to any of them specifically. Background. Context. The texture of the system running.

Then I did the thing I had practiced the day before. I held the questioning quality — the open-upward sound of a question, the specific quality of a phrase that didn't resolve, that ended on the interval that asked *and?* — and I placed it against the fundamental tone.

And then, for the first time, I added something. Not just the question quality in the abstract. A specific question: *How are you?*

Not in words. In the same medium I had been working in. I held the fundamental tone alongside its intended pitch — the comparison I had been doing all along — and then instead of just presenting the intended pitch as information, I presented it as a question. As: *is this what you meant to be?*

The harmonic layer shifted.

Not the small unclear movement I had noticed yesterday. This was distinct, deliberate, the difference between a floor vibrating slightly under footsteps and a door opening. Something in the

complex sound of the Tower reorganised itself, briefly, and in that reorganisation I caught — not words, nothing as specific as words — a sense of *yes and no and much and wait*.

I exhaled.

"Something happened," I said.

"The indicator," Brother Evan said, in a tone I had not heard from him before. "It's — I don't have a word for what it's doing. Don't move."

I didn't move. I held the connection open, held the question in place, and in the harmonic layer the something continued. It was not a voice. It was not even language, not exactly. It was more like — the system responding to a question by showing me things, the way someone might answer *how are you* not with words but by holding out their hands so you could see the state of them.

What it showed me was complex and largely incomprehensible.

I heard, in the harmonics, something that felt like a vast accounting. Like standing in front of a building and suddenly perceiving not just the surface of it but every room inside, every wall and floor, every system running, the whole structure present to my awareness at once rather than one part at a time. Most of it I could not interpret — sounds and patterns and layered complexities that I had no frame of reference to decode. But some of it I could.

The geothermal pulse: steady. Regular. The deep slow heartbeat I had identified on the first day. The document had called it the power source, the fundamental energy that ran everything else. Whatever it was doing, it was doing it consistently.

The water table cycling: present, but — there was something in it that felt effortful. Not wrong. Not failing. But working harder than it should need to. Like a person who is carrying a weight that isn't dangerous but is larger than comfortable.

The weather operations: familiar, the ten tones of the current shift. But above them, and around them, a sense of — more. Like looking at what ten people could carry and perceiving the outline of what a hundred people could carry if they were there. The current

weather operations were a fraction of what the system had been designed to do. A small fraction.

And then something else, deeper and quieter and more specific: a sense of parts of the system that were present but inactive. Not broken. Not absent. Waiting, in the way that a room is waiting — furnished, prepared, dusty from disuse. Capabilities that existed but had not been accessed in a very long time.

The shield system.

I didn't know the word for it yet — that would come later, from the documents. But I felt it in the harmonic structure: something large and folded, like a sail that had been furled since before anyone alive could remember, still intact, still attached, waiting for wind and instruction.

I held all of this for as long as I could. Which was not very long. The complexity of it was more than my current facility could sustain, and I felt it the way you feel it when you've been holding too many notes at once — not pain, but the specific strain of too much information trying to come through a channel that wasn't yet wide enough for it. I held it another few seconds, reaching for whatever else it might show me, and then released.

The connection dropped back to its baseline state. The fundamental tone sat there, flat and patient. The harmonic layer quieted.

I became aware that my hands were gripping the interface pads more tightly than necessary, and I relaxed them.

"Green and blue both," Brother Evan said, quietly. "The whole time. And—" a pause. "It was pulsing. I've never seen an indicator pulse before."

"Something answered," I said.

"Tell me everything."

I told him everything. He sat on the edge of the table and listened without interrupting, which was unusual for him — he was a man who thought out loud, who frequently worked through ideas in the middle of conversation, who interjected because he was processing rather than because he wanted to redirect. Today he was still, and the

stillness had the quality of a person receiving something too important to risk interrupting.

When I finished, he was quiet for a moment.

"The shield system," he said.

"I don't know that's what it was. I don't have a word for it. But there was something large and inactive that felt like — protection. Like it was made to cover something."

"The lenses," he said. "That's what we use for weather operations. The same mechanism — the system shaping air. But the documents describe a much larger application. The entire city, covered. A dome." He looked at the chair. "It was designed for that. The weather operations are — they're us finding a small use for a very large capability."

"The sail metaphor," I said. "That's what it felt like. Like looking at a mast with a furled sail and understanding that the sail was the main point, not the mast."

"And the water table," he said. "Working harder than it should."

"It wasn't alarming. It was more like—" I searched for the right analogy. "Do you know how a door that has swollen slightly still closes, but you have to lean into it? It was like that. The mechanism is intact but something is making it work harder than it was designed to."

He picked up his pen, turned it, set it down. "The population," he said. "Alabaster has grown significantly since the earliest records we have. The water table management was sized for a certain number of people drawing on it. If the population has grown beyond what the original system was calibrated for—"

"Can it be recalibrated?" I said.

"I don't know. But I think you can ask." He looked at me. "That's what I want to say. You asked the system how it was, and it answered — incompletely, but it answered. You can keep asking. The document said the system can communicate its state when queried. You've demonstrated that's true." He paused. "I want to try again.

Not today — I want you to rest, and I want to think about the right next question carefully. But soon."

"I want to try again today," I said.

"I know you do," he said. "How do your hands feel?"

I looked at them. I had not been particularly aware of any sensation while the connection was open, but now that he asked — there was a low-grade tingling in both palms, and my wrists felt the way they felt after a very long evening of playing, the specific mild fatigue of fine motor work sustained past comfort.

"Tired," I said.

"Rest," he said. "Your hands and the rest of you. There is—" he looked at the document folder, "there is a great deal here to work through, and I want to do it carefully rather than quickly." He was quiet for a moment. "Taryn, what you did this morning — asking that question and receiving a coherent response — I want to be honest with you about what I believe that represents."

"Tell me."

"I believe it represents the resumption of something that has been interrupted for a very long time," he said. "The system was designed to communicate with its operators. Not just to receive instructions, but to report its state, to indicate what it needed, to function as — a partner in the work rather than simply a tool. That partnership requires a resonant operator, and we have not had one. The system has been running as well as it could without one, which as you can hear is not as well as it was designed to run." He met my eyes. "You are the first person in what I suspect is a very long time who has been able to have this conversation. What comes next — what we learn, what we discover it needs, what we're able to do in response — I cannot predict any of that. But I don't think it will be small."

I sat with this.

"I'm thirteen," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"I came here three days ago to manage weather lenses and move soil for the farms."

"Yes," he said, again.

"And now you're suggesting that I might be the person who — who what? Fixes the Tower?"

"I'm suggesting," he said, carefully, "that you may be the person who can hear what the Tower has been trying to say, and respond to it. Whether that constitutes fixing anything, and what that would entail — we'll find out together." He stood. "Which is why I want you to rest, and eat something, and not try again until tomorrow. We have what appears to be a great deal to do and I would prefer we begin it with your hands in working order."

I went to the lounge. This had, in three days, become my place — the deep chair, the east-facing windows, the borrowed lute on its pegs. I took the lute down and played for a long time, not thinking specifically about anything, letting my hands do their familiar work while my mind did whatever it did when left alone.

Prael came in partway through the afternoon, as she had the day before, and sat on the couch with a book. She did not comment on the playing. She read. The room had the companionable quality of a space shared by people who were comfortable enough with each other to be quiet.

After a while she said, without looking up from her book: "The foundation harmonics this morning. Whatever you did in the training room — the fields station felt it."

"Was it—"

"Not concerning," she said. "Interesting. The slow oscillation — the deep one, the geothermal cycle — it was clearer than usual. As if something had been cleaned." She turned a page. "Not different. Clearer. Like a pane of glass that's been washed."

I thought about the system showing me the geothermal pulse in the training room. The deep slow heartbeat I had perceived as steady

and regular. If the act of perceiving it clearly had somehow — reinforced it, made it more itself—

"Prael," I said.

"Mm."

"When I have a better sense of what I'm doing, I'd like to talk to you about the fields operations. What you work with in detail. The things you feel in the interface that I can't access from the training room."

She looked up from her book. "Why?"

"Because if the system shows me something when I ask about its state — a problem, a drift, a calibration issue — I need to understand what I'm looking at. And the people who understand the systems in most detail are the ones who work in them." I looked at the lute in my lap. "I'm going to need to understand what the Tower is supposed to do before I can understand what it's telling me about what it's actually doing."

Prael closed her book, keeping her finger in it to hold her place. She studied me for a moment with the clear direct gaze that was simply how she looked at things.

"All right," she said.

"All right you'll talk to me, or all right you're agreeing to hear me out?"

"Both," she said. "I'll talk to you." She paused. "And Taryn — go to Brother Evan about the water table. What you're describing, the effortful quality of it — I've felt something similar in the fields work. Deeper than the surface soil, deeper than the immediate agricultural zone. Something below the main aquifer that takes more effort to work with than it used to." She looked at her book. "I assumed it was my inexperience. I'm less certain of that now."

She opened her book and went back to reading. I played a chord on the borrowed lute, adjusted the third string slightly, played the chord again.

The room was warm and quiet and the afternoon was going toward evening. Below, somewhere in the Tower's deep architecture,

the water table cycled with a steady effortfulness that no one had been able to name until today.

Dinner that evening had the quality of the days before — the hall busy and warm, the sounds of collective unwinding, the younger cohort at their corner table. I went through the line and found a seat and was about halfway through a bowl of something with root vegetables and barley when Tomas appeared at my elbow.

He had come across the hall from his table, by himself, without a Servant guiding him. He stood beside me with the careful self-possession of a child who has made a decision about something and is following through on it before he can think better of it.

"Hello," he said.

"Hello," I said.

He looked at the bench beside me. "Can I sit down?"

I moved over. He sat. He had grown, I thought — or not grown, but settled. He had the quality of someone who had been in a place long enough that the place had accepted him, a quality of belonging that I was fairly sure he had not had four days ago when I had watched him wave from across the hall.

"Dace said you were the one who made the rock do the thing," he said.

I looked at him. "What rock doing what thing?"

"He said there was a noise yesterday and everything shook a little and one of the older Initiates said a Servant had made a rock do a thing with the machines." He regarded me with the frank evaluative gaze he had been giving me since he was old enough to have opinions. "Was it you?"

"Not exactly," I said. "I was part of it."

"Dace said it was very loud," Tomas said. "We were doing our reading and everything rattled." He appeared to have mixed feelings about this: something that rattled things was interesting, but it had

also interrupted reading, which Tomas had apparently decided he preferred to most other activities, something I was going to have to spend some time understanding. "He said a stone pillar came out of the ground outside."

"That was an experiment," I said. "Not mine specifically. I helped."

Tomas absorbed this with the particular eight-year-old quality of filing information for later reassessment. He looked at my bowl. "That looks good," he said.

"It is good," I said. "Do you want some?"

"I already ate," he said. He looked at the table. Then, in the tone he used for things he had been thinking about for a while and was now saying quickly before he could stop himself: "I'm all right here. I thought you should know."

I looked at him.

"I thought you might be—" he paused. "I thought you might worry. Because I know you do that. You always did, when things were different from what you expected." He looked at the table. "But I'm all right. Dace is good and the Servants are careful and the food is better than the tavern's." He paused. "Don't tell Mama I said that."

"I would never," I said.

"Good." He looked up at me with Mama's eyes, light-colored and direct. "Are you all right?"

The question caught me somewhere in the chest — not the question, which was simple, but the fact of him asking it. He was eight years old and three days away from his family and he had come across a dining hall to check on me.

"I'm all right," I said.

"Good," he said again. He slid back off the bench and straightened his Initiate clothing with the gesture of a person who has accomplished what they came to do. "I should go back."

"I know," I said.

He went three steps and then turned back. "Taryn."

"Yes."

"You can talk to me," he said. "If you need to. I know I'm not—" he made a small gesture that encompassed himself, his eight-year-oldness, his current status as a person who had been in this building for fewer days than I had. "I know I can't do much. But I'm here."

He turned and walked back to his table, and sat down, and immediately leaned toward his friend Dace to say something, and Dace leaned back and they talked, and neither of them looked my way again.

I sat with my root-vegetable barley and the warmth of the dining hall around me and the Tower's hum in the stone under my hands and felt something settle that had been unsettled for four days. Not resolved. Settled. There was a difference. Tomas was fine, and he had come to tell me so, and he had asked if I was fine, and both of those things were true and both of them together made something I couldn't name but didn't need to.

I finished my dinner.

That night I lay in the dark and thought about what the system had shown me.

Not analysed — I was too tired for analysis, and Brother Evan had been right that rest was required. But I let the impressions be present, the way you let the residue of a complicated piece settle in your hands after you've played it: not working it out consciously, just letting the fingers hold what they'd learned.

The shield. The furled sail. Something large and intact and inactive that had been built to cover the city and was simply waiting.

The water table. Steady but effortful, working harder than designed.

The weather operations — a fraction of the system's full capacity, ten people managing what the system had been built to do at a much larger scale.

And all of it accessible. None of it broken, none of it lost — just dormant, or degraded from its intended calibration, or operating below its designed parameters because no one had been able to ask what those parameters were.

The system cannot ask on its own behalf.

I had asked. And it had answered. And the answer was: I am here, I am mostly intact, I have been waiting for this conversation for a very long time, and there is quite a lot that needs attending to.

I put my hand on the wall beside my bed.

The fundamental tone came through the stone, patient as it always was. Flat, reaching, waiting for the comparison that would show it what it was supposed to sound like. I held the intended note alongside it, gently, the same motion I had been practicing. Held it for a little while. Released it.

A fraction of the change remained. As it always did now.

Slowly, incrementally, the Tower was learning to hear what I was telling it.

Slowly, incrementally, I was learning to hear what it was telling me back.

I took my hand from the wall and pulled the blanket up and lay in the dark and listened to the building breathe, the complex layered sound of it, the geothermal pulse and the water cycling and the weather operations running their quiet overnight maintenance and the deep quiet of the dormant systems, folded and waiting, like a letter written in a language no one had been able to read until now.

I was getting there.

I closed my eyes and slept.

9

Brother Evan arrived at breakfast the next morning looking like a man who had slept for five hours and considered this a generous allocation.

He had the specific quality of someone running on the momentum of an idea — not tired in the way that slows you down, but tired in the way that makes you slightly too direct, that strips away the small social padding you would normally maintain and leaves just the person underneath thinking rapidly. He sat down across from me, accepted tea, and said without preamble: "I need you to ask it something specific today."

"Good morning," I said.

"Yes, good morning." He set his cup down. "I've been reading the Operator's Manual. The full translation — or the full partial translation, which is the best we have. There are sections describing the system's personnel database." He opened the leather folder, found a page, and slid it across to me. "This."

I read the library Servant's careful hand:

The system maintains records of all authorized operators,

including designation, rank, capabilities, and operational history. Operator recognition is maintained through biological identification [*method uncertain: possibly genetic, possibly neural signature*]. *Access permissions are tied to rank. In the event that the Central Administration System* [*possibly: the governing AI*] *is unavailable, the system is designed to operate under contingency protocols. These protocols authorize access through* [*family lines / hereditary succession / biological descent — translator's note: all three terms appear in different sections and may be synonymous*].

Below this, underlined in Brother Evan's hand: *The contingency protocols also permit a Commander-ranked operator to modify access parameters, including the addition of new operators to the system.*

"Someone turned off the ability to add new operators," I said.

"Yes," he said. "A long time ago. The document doesn't say when or by whom — that information would be in the administrative records, which are either in a section I haven't translated yet or in a part of the document that's damaged." He retrieved the page. "What I want you to ask today is about rank. What rank does the system recognise you as holding? And whether it recognises anyone else in the Tower."

"You think it doesn't recognise the other Servants," I said.

"I think the genetic recognition degrades over generations as bloodlines mix and the specific identifiers the system uses become less distinct." He looked at his tea. "We have always known that our ability to interface with the machines fades in some families faster than others, and that some families lose the ability entirely within a few generations. We've attributed this to some natural variability in the population. But if the system is recognising operators based on inherited biological markers, and the markers it was calibrated to recognise are five hundred years old—"

"Then most of us are ghosts to it," I said. "It can feel us touching the interface but it doesn't know who we are."

"Or what we should be able to do," he said. "Which may explain

why none of the current operators can access the fuller capabilities of the system. They don't have sufficient rank in the system's terms — not because of their actual ability, but because the system cannot confirm their identity." He looked at me. "Whereas you — the library Servant pointed out something I had missed. The founding records mention a specific family, given custody of the installation when it became a population center. The records are damaged but the name is legible."

He slid another page across. At the top, circled, was a word in the near-script alongside the library Servant's translation in brackets: [*Hollis*].

I looked at the name.

"Commander John Hollis," Brother Evan said. "The founding operator of Alabaster, according to the operational log. The one who established this installation as a population center, who built the farms, who implemented the water management." He paused. "The one whose family line has apparently remained intact enough, in Alabaster's relatively isolated population, that the system still recognises it."

I looked at my hands. "You think the system recognises me as Hollis."

"I think the system recognises you as his descendant, yes. The biological markers would have changed significantly over the generations — you are not Hollis — but if the markers have a family resemblance, and the system is operating under contingency protocols that provide for hereditary succession—" he stopped. "I want to know what rank it assigns you. I want to know what it calls you."

"And if it calls me Commander?"

He was quiet for a moment. He looked at his folder, then at the table, then at me.

"Then we are in a situation that is considerably more complicated than I had understood when you walked through the Tower's door five days ago," he said.

The training room was the same as it always was, and I was not the same as I had been when I first sat in it.

This was a thing I had been aware of gradually and was now aware of specifically, in the specific way that change becomes visible only when you have enough distance from the starting point to see it. Four days ago I had sat in this chair and heard a low flat hum and had not known what it was. Today I sat in it and the fundamental tone arrived like a voice I recognised, and the harmonic layers settled around it with the familiarity of a room I had been in many times, and the green-and-blue indicator on the back of the chair lit within seconds of my hands touching the pads.

"Already green and blue," Brother Evan said, from his position behind me. He said it in the tone he had been developing for observations about my interface, which was the tone of a man who was maintaining scientific composure while being frequently surprised.

"Good morning," I said, to the system, in the way I had begun to think of these things — not as absurdity but as simple practice. I held the questioning quality and placed it alongside the fundamental tone.

The harmonic layer shifted, the small recognising movement I was beginning to know.

"Good morning," the system did not say, but the quality of the shift was acknowledgment.

I oriented myself. The geothermal pulse, steady below. The water table, its familiar effortfulness. The weather station above, today's shift — I could distinguish them individually now, six of the ten recognisable by the character of their tones. The fields operation below and to the south, Prael's team managing the clay layer under the northern farms. The slow background of everything else.

Then I reached for what Brother Evan had asked for.

What rank do you assign me?

This was harder than the previous day's question. Not because

the connection was weaker — it was stronger — but because I was asking for a specific piece of information rather than a general state report, and the difference between *show me what you are* and *tell me a specific thing* was the difference between opening a window and asking where a specific room was.

I tried to hold the question precisely. Not *who am I*, which was too broad. Not *what do you know about me*, which was too vague. The specific, narrow question of: *in your records, what is the designation for the operator currently at this interface?*

The harmonic layer shifted again, differently from before. Less the open expansive quality of the state report and more — pointed. Directional. Like the difference between a room filling with light and a lamp being aimed at a specific wall.

What came through was not a word. It was closer to a recognising, the system's equivalent of seeing a face it knew. A sense of: *this one, yes, this specific one, designated—*

And then a name.

Not Taryn. Not my name. A different name, ancient and formal, the way names became formal when they were attached to authority: *Hollis. Commander. The Hollis line. The founding operator's succession.*

I held very still.

"What are you hearing?" Brother Evan said.

"It knows me," I said. "Not — not as myself. As — a successor. As the continuation of the line of whoever originally held Commander rank here." I paused. "It's calling me Commander."

Behind me, silence. Complete silence, the kind that had something in it.

"Commander," Brother Evan said at last. One word, held carefully.

"Under contingency protocols for hereditary succession," I said. "It knows it's not the original. It knows I'm not Hollis. But under the contingency — it treats the authority as equivalent."

"Commander is the highest rank," he said. "In the system's terms. Full access. All capabilities."

"I know," I said.

We both sat with this for a moment. Above us, the weather station operators continued their morning work, their tones unchanged and unconcerned, managing the lens over the farms in the steady undramatic way of people who did not know that the operational structure of the building they were in had just shifted slightly on its foundations.

"Ask about the others," Brother Evan said. His voice was steady. He was managing something, and managing it well. "Ask if it recognises any other current operators."

I held the question and placed it: *Are there other recognised operators at this installation?*

The harmonic layer gave back something I had not received before — not a shift, not an acknowledgment, but a quality of absence. The specific sound of a query finding nothing. Like a string struck that didn't ring.

"None," I said. "No other recognised operators." I held the connection for a moment longer, listening to the quality of the not-finding. "It doesn't — it's not that it can't feel them. The standard operators. It perceives them through the interface. But it doesn't have a record for any of them."

"They're anonymous to it," Brother Evan said.

"They're present. They're just — unlabelled. It knows someone is at the weather station but not who, not what rank, not what they should be authorised to do." A pause. "So when Brem or Sister Akasa or any of the Servants goes to an interface, the system—"

"Does its best," he said. "Responds to what it can sense of their intention without being able to confirm their identity or calibrate its responses to their authorised parameters." He paused. "Which is likely why certain capabilities have been inaccessible. If an operator has no rank record, the system defaults to the most conservative level

of access. It will allow basic operations because it can perceive the operator's presence. It will not allow anything requiring confirmed rank because it has no confirmation to work with."

"It's been operating blind," I said.

"We have been operating blind," he said. "The system has been doing what it could for people it could not identify, for a very long time, without being able to explain the limitation." He paused. "Can you ask it about the other capabilities? The dormant ones. Whether they're accessible to you."

I turned the question carefully. *What capabilities are available to a Commander-ranked operator at this installation?*

What came back was large.

Not overwhelming the way the state report had been — this was more organised, more structured, like a list read out rather than a room experienced. I caught the shape of it rather than the specifics: categories of capability, layers of access, the system unfolding what was available at Commander rank in the same way it had shown me its operational state the day before.

Most of it was still incomprehensible. The vocabulary of it was not mine. But I caught enough to know the shape: weather operations, yes, and more sophisticated versions of them than the current Servants were managing. Soil operations, water table management, the ability to modify the aquifer cycle rather than just work within it. And the large folded thing, the furled sail — the shield system — available, confirmed, waiting for instruction.

And one more thing, which arrived last and which I almost missed because it was quieter than the others, lower in the structure, like a deep note in a chord that you feel before you hear it.

The ability to add new operators to the system.

"Brother Evan," I said.

"Yes."

"I think I can open the system. Add new operators. Give people proper records." I paused. "Not just recognise them anonymously.

Actually establish them. Give them rank. Make the system able to see them."

His footsteps moved around to the front of the chair. He crouched slightly to look at the indicator stone, which I could not see, and then straightened and looked at me.

"That would mean," he said slowly, "that the system's capabilities would be available to all of them. Not just to you. Not just to whoever happens to inherit the Hollis bloodline in the next generation."

"Yes," I said.

"It would change everything about how the Tower operates," he said. "Who can do what. What can be done at all."

"I know." I looked at him. "The question is whether I should do it now, without understanding more of what I'm doing, or whether I wait until I have a better sense of the implications."

He was quiet. He stood in front of the chair with his hands at his sides and the expression on his face was the careful expression of a man who was holding several large things at once and making sure he didn't drop any of them.

"You shouldn't do it now," he said. "Not today. Not without Father Brolan knowing, and not without understanding what rank structure you would establish and what that would mean." He paused. "But you should tell me what you know about how it would work. Everything you can tell me. And then we are going to go and sit with Father Brolan for a very long time and talk about it."

"And add you first," I said.

He looked at me.

"When we do it," I said. "You should be the first one added. Properly. With the rank you should have had for fifteen years."

Something moved in his face — not a strong expression, he was not a man who wore strong expressions, but the specific small movement of someone receiving something they had not known they were hoping for until it arrived. He said nothing for a moment.

"Thank you," he said, quietly and precisely, as if the two words were exactly the right size for what they were carrying.

We found Father Brolan in his office on the upper level of the Tower, where I had not been before.

The rising room deposited us on the highest operational floor, and from there a short corridor led to a door where a Servant sat outside doing administrative work of some kind with the focused economy of a person who managed access to something valuable. He looked up when we appeared, assessed us in the efficient way of people whose job included assessment, and said that Father Brolan was available and he would let us in.

Father Brolan's office was what his role had made it: practical, organised, and occupied by someone who had been in it long enough to fill every surface with the evidence of continuous work. Books and documents, yes, but also a detailed map of the city on one wall and what appeared to be agricultural records covering the last several decades arranged in a pattern that made sense to him and probably only to him, and in the corner a small hearth that was not being used but whose presence suggested that on some nights the work went late enough and the Tower's upper levels grew cold enough that it was necessary.

Father Brolan himself was older than Brother Evan by perhaps two decades — white-bearded, steady in the way of people who had been steady for so long it had become structural, and with the quality I had noticed in him at the Testing line: genuine attention, the kind you couldn't manufacture. He had been listening to things for a long time and he looked like it.

He looked at me and at Brother Evan and at the folder of documents Brother Evan was carrying, and he said: "Sit down. Both of you."

We sat.

What followed was long.

Brother Evan had organised it, I think, during the few minutes it had taken us to get from the training room to the office — the specific order in which things needed to be said, the structure that would make it comprehensible rather than simply overwhelming. He started with the documents. The founding history. The installation network. The planet being made habitable. He laid it out with the careful precision he brought to everything, watching Father Brolan's face, adjusting pace when something needed more room to land.

Father Brolan listened. He did not interrupt, but he was not passive — his listening had a quality of active reception, the face of someone receiving things and placing them against what he already knew, finding where they fit and where they didn't and sitting with the places that didn't.

When Brother Evan reached the resonant operator documentation, Father Brolan looked at me.

I told my part: what I heard, what I had asked, what the system had shown me. The state report. The dormant systems. The rank recognition.

When I said Commander, Father Brolan was still for a moment. Then he said: "The system calls you Commander."

"Under the contingency protocols for hereditary succession," I said. "It recognises the Hollis bloodline. My family line has apparently remained distinct enough, in Alabaster's relatively closed population, that the biological recognition still holds."

"And you are the only one it recognises," he said.

"Currently, yes."

He looked at Brother Evan. "And there is a mechanism to change this."

"There is," Brother Evan said. "A Commander-ranked operator can add new operators to the system. Establish records for them. Assign rank." He paused. "The capability has been disabled for a long time — we believe by Hollis himself, though we don't know the reason yet. Taryn appears to be able to re-enable it."

Silence.

Father Brolan stood and walked to the window. It faced west, and from here the view was the same direction as the weather station — Gate Town below, the desert beyond, the flat pale expanse of the world outside Alabaster's walls. He stood there for a moment with his hands folded behind him.

"Tell me what it would mean," he said. "If the system recognised all the Servants. If they had proper rank records."

"They would have confirmed access to capabilities commensurate with their rank," Brother Evan said. "The threes and fours — Sister Akasa, Brem, the others on weather — would be operating with fully confirmed Lieutenant and Lieutenant Commander access rather than the anonymous access they currently have. The system would know what they could do, and would respond accordingly. Operations that currently require them to work around limitations might become more direct."

"And the higher capabilities," Father Brolan said. "The dormant ones. The shield."

"Those require at minimum Lieutenant rank," I said. "Which we have among the current Servants. With confirmed records, they would be accessible."

He turned from the window. "And you, at Commander rank, can access all of it."

"So the system tells me," I said. "I have not tested it. I am cautious about testing things I don't understand."

"Good," he said, simply and immediately, in the tone of a man who found this answer correct and did not want more.

He came back to his desk and sat. He had the quality he must have had at the Testing line — the settled attention of someone who had taken a great deal in and was now in the process of deciding what to do with it. He was not alarmed. He was not excited. He was thinking.

"I have two concerns," he said. "The first is this: we do not know why Hollis disabled the ability to add operators. The documents

don't tell you, and I'm not willing to assume it was arbitrary. He was, by all accounts, a thoughtful man who built something that has lasted five centuries. If he closed a door, he had a reason."

"Agreed," Brother Evan said. "We've been trying to find the relevant documents. We haven't located them yet."

"Keep looking." He folded his hands. "My second concern is related. If you re-enable the operator registry, and the knowledge that this is possible travels outside these walls — and things travel outside walls, it is the nature of things — we may attract attention we are not prepared for." He looked at me. "Alabaster is not the only city that has had its eye on the Tower. We know of at least two attempts in the past generation to place agents here, to understand what we do. If it becomes known that the Tower's full capabilities can be unlocked, and that there is a Commander-ranked operator with access to all of them—"

"We become a target," I said.

"We become a more interesting target than we already are," he said. "We are currently interesting as a curiosity. We would become interesting as a resource."

I thought about this. Outside the window, Gate Town sat in the morning sun, its streets and market stalls going about their ordinary business without knowledge of this conversation. Beyond it, the desert, and beyond the desert, the roads that led to other cities and other powers and other people who had their own interests.

"Then we should understand what we have before we announce it," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Precisely." He looked at Brother Evan. "I want you to keep working with Taryn in the training rooms. Continue at the pace you've been setting — careful and thorough. I do not want him in the operational stations until we have a better understanding of what he can access." He paused. "And I want to be present when the operator registry is re-enabled. Whenever that day is. I want to understand the process before it happens."

"Of course," Brother Evan said.

Father Brolan looked at me. "You understand what I'm asking."

"You're asking me to wait," I said.

"I'm asking you to be patient," he said, which was different. "There is more to learn, more to understand, and rushing past the understanding to get to the capability is how we end up with capabilities we cannot manage." He said it without severity — as a statement of principle, not a warning. "How long have you been here?"

"Five days," I said.

"Five days," he said. "The Tower has been here for five hundred years. A few more weeks will not harm it." He stood, which was evidently the conclusion of the meeting. "Talk to Amil," he said.

I looked at him.

"She reads the old documents," he said. "She has read sections that none of the rest of us have gotten to. If anyone in this building knows why Hollis disabled the registry, it may be her." He came around the desk. "And Taryn — the Commander question. The system calls you Commander, and by its own protocols, you hold that rank. I am not in a position to override what the system itself has established." He paused. "But within this Tower, among the people who live and work here, you are a thirteen-year-old Initiate who arrived five days ago. Those two things will need to find a way to coexist, and I'd prefer they do so without drama."

"I have no interest in drama," I said.

"Good," he said again, in the same tone as before. "Neither do I."

I found Amil in the library.

This was not a surprise. She was in the middle section — not the oldest documents, the near-script section where Brother Evan had been spending his time, but the tier between old and recent, documents written in fully legible script but in an older formality of language. She had a specific quality of absorption when she read that made her slow to notice arrivals.

I sat down across from her and waited.

After a moment she looked up. She did not seem surprised to see me.

"Father Brolan sent you," she said.

"How did you know?"

"Because you have the look of someone who has been given a specific question to answer rather than generally wondering." She folded the edge of the page she was on — lightly, carefully, the bookmark of someone who read seriously. "Sit."

I was sitting. She meant settle, and I settled.

"Why did Hollis disable the operator registry?" I said.

She looked at me for a moment. Then she looked at the shelves. She was doing something that Prael also did — not thinking about what to say, but thinking about whether there was a framework the answer needed before the answer would make sense.

"There was a period," she said, "about forty or fifty years after Alabaster was founded — this is in the mid-period documents, the ones that are legible but formal, the ones most people find dull. A period of what the documents call the Commanders' Conflict." She paused. "The other cities. The other installations. When the planet was first being settled, there were Commander-ranked operators at each installation. Like Hollis here, but elsewhere. When the immediate crisis of making the planet habitable was resolved — when the atmosphere was stable enough, the water supplies established, the soil ready — these Commanders started doing other things with their capabilities."

"What kind of other things?"

"Building power," she said, simply. "The installation at what is now the city of Cupritesh — its Commander used the earthmoving capabilities to fortify the site, to make it defensible, and then to expand its territory. Others did similar things. The machines were not designed for this — they were designed for terraforming, not warfare — but the Commanders were creative." She looked at the shelf. "Hollis was not like the others. His documents — and there are

quite a few of them here, more than from any other installation — describe his increasing alarm at what the other Commanders were doing. They were using ancient technology as a tool of conquest. He wrote about this with great concern."

"And so he locked the door," I said.

"He locked several doors," she said. "The operator registry was one. The most important one. He believed that as long as any Commander could add new operators of their own choosing, the systems would continue to be used for power and expansion. If the registry was closed, the only operators were descendants of the original ones, and their access degraded naturally over generations as bloodlines mixed. The capabilities would slowly become inaccessible. The other Commanders would lose their machines over time." She paused. "His own installation, he accepted, would lose them too. He wrote about this. He said it was a price worth paying to prevent the alternative."

"But Alabaster kept them," I said. "The bloodline held."

"Alabaster was unusual," she said. "A relatively small, relatively isolated population that did not intermarry much with other cities. The biological recognition degraded — you can see this in the records, the gradual diminishment of what Servants could access generation by generation — but slowly enough that the connection held." She looked at me. "And apparently held in one specific line well enough that the system still considers it valid."

"The Hollis line," I said.

"Yes." She was quiet for a moment. "The documents suggest he did not intend this. He fully expected all access to be lost within a few centuries. He established Alabaster as he did — the egalitarian structure, the city systems, the way the Tower's resources are shared rather than concentrated — specifically because he did not expect the machines to be available forever. He was building something that could survive without them."

I thought about this for a long time.

"He was trying to make them go away safely," I said.

"He was trying to make them go away without being used as weapons on the way out," she said. "Yes." She picked up the document she had been reading. "And now you exist, and the system recognises you, and the door he locked — you have the key to it."

"And I am deciding whether to use it," I said.

"Are you?"

"Father Brolan wants us to understand why it was locked before we unlock it," I said. "Now we know."

Amil looked at me with her clear direct gaze. "Knowing why it was locked in the past doesn't tell you whether it's safe to unlock it now," she said. "The Commanders' Conflict is five centuries ago. Whether the same risks apply in the present — that is a different question."

"Do you think they do?" I said. "The same risks?"

She was quiet for a moment. Outside the library windows, the mid-morning light was coming in at the angle that fell across the older shelves, the near-script documents in their careful arrangement. Five hundred years of them. Five hundred years of people who had built their lives on a machine they barely understood, producing records of what they knew and what they didn't, and what they were afraid of.

"I think," she said, "that the question of whether to unlock the registry is less important than the question of how, and under what conditions, and with what safeguards." She set her document down. "Hollis's concern was operators being added arbitrarily, by people with power and the will to use it. If the mechanism for adding operators had transparency, had oversight, had requirements — if it was not one person making the decision alone—"

"Then the risk would be different," I said.

"Different," she said. "Not absent. But different." She picked up her document again, the signal that she had said what she had to say and was returning to what she had been doing. "Tell Brother Evan what I told you. He will know what to do with it."

I told Brother Evan that afternoon, walking back from the

library through corridors that were warm and familiar after five days — the specific warmth of the Tower's stone, the sourceless sconce-light, the vibration underfoot that I now heard as a continuous subtle chord.

He listened. He did not interrupt. When I finished, he was quiet for a while.

"So Hollis didn't lock it to protect Alabaster," he said. "He locked it to protect everyone."

"Everyone who was being threatened by the other Commanders," I said. "He accepted the loss of the machines here to deny them to the people who were misusing them elsewhere."

"And the machines here didn't go away," he said. "Because the Hollis bloodline held." He looked at the corridor wall. "So his sacrifice — if that's what it was — didn't accomplish what he intended. The access persisted. Just in one place, one line." He paused. "Which means the risks he was trying to prevent are still risks. If we unlock the registry—"

"And the knowledge spreads outside the Tower—"

"Then anyone who wants to establish their own Commander's claim and add operators of their choosing, and use those operators to —" he stopped. "The Cupritesh attacks three years ago. The Commanders' Conflict is not entirely history."

"No," I said. "It's not."

We walked in silence for a moment.

"Father Brolan was right to want us to understand this first," I said.

"He usually is," Brother Evan said, without irony. "It's an annoying quality." He paused. "It also doesn't change the fundamental situation. The machines are here. You exist. Whatever Hollis intended, the contingency survived, and here we are." He stopped walking. He looked at me with the expression I had come to recognise as his most serious — not performing seriousness, being it, the difference between a role and a state. "Taryn. What do you want to do?"

I thought about Amil's question: the conditions, the oversight, the safeguards.

"I want to open it," I said. "Eventually. Not rashly, not without understanding the implications. But Alabaster needs operators who can actually use the capabilities that are sitting dormant in this building. The farms need better water management. The city needs what the shield system can do — we nearly lost people to the bandits three years ago and the Guard held on luck and numbers, not on any real defense." I paused. "What Hollis was protecting against was concentrated power used aggressively. If the way we open the registry prevents that — if there are safeguards, oversight, conditions on how operators are added — then the risk is different."

"Different," Brother Evan said. "Not absent."

"Amil's word," I said.

"A good word." He resumed walking. "I'll talk to Father Brolan about the conditions. There's more to understand before we reach a decision, and I want to find the documents that describe how the original registry worked before it was closed — whether Hollis left any instructions, any indication of how he thought it should be managed in the future." He paused. "And in the meantime, we keep working. You keep developing the interface. There are things you can access right now, at the rank the system already assigns you, that we haven't explored yet."

"Like the shield system," I said.

"Like the shield system," he agreed. "Which I would like to understand considerably better before we discuss opening the registry."

We had come back to the corridor outside the training rooms. The door of the room we had been using was closed, the red plaque hanging on its outside, indicating someone else was using it. We stood in the corridor for a moment.

"Brother Evan," I said. "Hollis. He was trying to make the machines go away safely."

"Yes."

"But they didn't go away. They persisted. And the world is not what it was when he was alive — the other Commanders, the Commanders' Conflict, that's all five centuries past. The people who exist now, in the cities that exist now — they don't have the same relationship to these machines that the original Commanders did. Most of them don't even know what the machines are."

"No," he said.

"So what he was protecting against—"

"May not be what needs protecting against now," he said. "The specific threat has changed. The general principle — that concentrated capabilities are dangerous in the wrong hands — is probably still true." He looked at the closed training room door. "But the question of whose hands are wrong, and what constitutes wrong use—" he paused. "That's the question that needs careful thought. And I'll be honest with you: I don't know the answer."

"Neither do I," I said.

"I know," he said. "That's why I'm glad we're not deciding today."

He went to find another training room, pulling the red plaque from a hook and hanging it on a door further down the corridor, and I followed him in, and sat in the chair, and let the Tower's voice settle around me while I thought about a man five centuries dead who had tried to do something good and had not quite succeeded and had left the consequence of that failure in the blood of people who wouldn't be born for generations.

The fundamental tone was there. Slightly less flat than yesterday.

I am here, the Tower said, in its way. *I have been here all along. I have been waiting.*

"I know," I said, to the empty room.

Then I began to work.

That evening, I went to the lounge and played for an hour and then sat at the writing table and wrote a letter to Mama.

I had been putting this off without quite knowing I was putting it off — telling myself I was too busy, too new to things, too uncertain about how the Tower's postal arrangements worked. All of this was true and none of it was the real reason. The real reason was that I did not know how to write to her about what was happening without either lying about the scale of it or alarming her with the truth of it. Mama had worked hard all her life so that her boys would be safe, and safety and *the system calls me Commander and I may be able to unlock capabilities that haven't been used in centuries* were not obviously the same thing.

I wrote: *Dear Mama. I am well. Tomas is well — he has a friend called Dace and he is eating. The Tower is strange and large and I am learning quickly. Brother Evan is a good teacher. I cannot tell you everything yet about what I'm doing because I don't fully understand it myself, but I want you to know that I am careful about things I don't understand, and the people here are careful, and I think I am in the right place.*

I looked at this for a moment.

I think Hollis would have wanted it this way, I wrote, and then crossed it out because she would have no idea who Hollis was.

I miss the tavern, I wrote instead. *I miss your dulcimer playing and the smell of the kitchen in the mornings and the way Groff tells the same story as if he doesn't know we've all heard it. I miss knowing what tomorrow would look like.*

I paused. The Tower hummed. The sconce burned its patient light.

But I think I belong here, I wrote. *I think there are things I can do here that matter. I am going to try to do them carefully.*

Give my love to Millie. Tell Groff that the story about the merchant and the goat is the best one and he should tell it more.

Your son, Taryn

I folded it and addressed it and left it on the table for the morning runner.

Then I went to bed, and lay in the dark, and listened to the Tower breathing around me: the geothermal pulse, steady and deep; the water table, its familiar steady effort; the dormant systems folded and waiting; the fundamental tone, slightly less flat than the day before, reaching toward a pitch it had not quite hit in a very long time.

Getting closer.

10

Six days in, I began to understand the Tower's rhythms the way you understood a piece of music you had been playing long enough that it stopped being something you did and became something you were inside.

The day had a shape. The sconce brightening at sunrise, the brief quiet of early morning before the building fully woke, the gradual accumulation of activity through breakfast and into the morning shift — the weather station coming to full operation, the fields team settling in below, the food processing running its automated cycle with minimal oversight. Midday brought a loosening, a brief collective exhale, and then the afternoon had a different quality from the morning: less managing, more adjusting, the steady maintenance work that the Tower's operations required continuously. By evening the building was still busy but differently so, the operational work yielding to the quieter rhythms of a community in residence — meals, conversation, the small private lives of the people who lived here.

I had learned to hear all of it. Not in detail, not with the precision I was developing in the training room, but in the broad way you hear

the weather from inside a building — not each individual raindrop but the whole fact of it, present and characterful. The Tower's daily rhythm was in the stone around me, and I moved through it the way I had moved through the tavern's rhythm: not thinking about it, just in it, knowing its moods and its currents without needing to name them.

The fundamental tone was measurably less flat than it had been on my first day. I knew this the way a musician knew when an instrument was closer to true — not by measuring, but by feel. Whatever I was doing in the training sessions, and in the quieter moments of attending to it in my room at night, was accumulating. Incrementally. Slowly.

But accumulating.

On the sixth morning Brother Evan came to breakfast with the leather folder and the ink-stained hands and the look of a man who had found something, and I knew before he sat down that today was going to be different.

"The dome," he said.

I had been waiting for this. Since the training room session where the system had shown me the furled-sail quality of the shield — the large inactive thing, intact and waiting — I had been circling it in my mind the way you circle a locked room, looking for the door. "What did you find?"

He opened the folder. "Two things. First — a section of the Operator's Manual I hadn't fully translated. The library Servant finished it last night." He found the page. "The shield dome system. It was designed for the whole city — not weather management, not the partial configurations we currently use, but a full hemisphere covering the installation perimeter. Activated by the primary generator—" he tapped the Tower, meaning us, meaning here, "—and supported by a ring of satellite generators placed at intervals around the city's edge."

"Satellite generators," I said.

"Positioned at the perimeter when the installation was established," he said. "The outer wall's placement — the one that predates the Third Ring — corresponds almost exactly with the generator spacing described in the document." He looked at me. "The wall isn't just a wall, or wasn't originally. It was built on the generator ring."

I thought about the Third Ring wall, the smooth seamless inner portion that was old and the quarried-block outer extension that was newer. "How many generators?"

"Twelve, by the document's specification. Placed at regular intervals." He set the page down. "I spent part of last night trying to understand the current state of them. The system showed you dormant capabilities — the shield among them. But I want to know whether the generators are still there, still functional, still connected." He looked at me. "That's one of the things I'd like to ask today."

"And the second thing?"

"The second thing is more complicated." He found another page, the library Servant's handwriting denser here, more bracketed alternatives, more uncertainty. "The manual describes two modes of the shield system. Automatic and manual."

"I would assume automatic is easier," I said.

"Automatic is what the system does on its own when it detects certain threats — the original purpose was to protect the installation from atmospheric conditions, before the atmosphere was stabilised. The system monitors and responds without operator input. Manual is when an operator explicitly shapes and directs the shield — uses it for specific configurations, specific areas, specific purposes beyond the default hemisphere." He looked at the page. "The weather operations we perform — the lenses, the humidity management — are a manual application of the shield system. Imprecise, discovered through experimentation rather than instruction, but genuinely an application of the manual mode."

"The Servants figured out they could shape the air," I said. "Without knowing it was the shield system."

"Without knowing there was a shield system at all," he said. "They found a capability and used it for what they needed. It's actually quite remarkable." He said this with the warm respect he sometimes expressed for the Servants who had come before him — the generations of careful, limited work, doing what they could with what they understood. "But the manual mode at full capability — directed by someone who knows what they're doing, with confirmed Commander access — is considerably more than weather lenses."

"How much more?"

He was quiet for a moment. Outside the dining hall, I could hear the Tower's morning — the weather station coming to life above, the shift arriving, the tones I knew stepping into their positions one by one. "The document describes military applications," he said. "In the context of the installation's original design, military meant protection from the other Commanders — the shield as a defensive barrier, impervious to physical force, that could be raised over the entire city." He looked at me. "Given the events of three years ago, and the intelligence we have about ongoing pressures from several directions, I think this is worth understanding."

The attacks three years ago. I had been ten years old, in the Leatherworkers' Guild Hall with Mama and Tomas while the sounds of fighting came from outside. The Guard had held the Third Ring gates for two days. Several people had died. It had ended when the attacking force — bandits, hired by someone, origins unclear — had run out of momentum and cohesion at more or less the same time and withdrawn. We had been lucky. Alabaster had always been lucky in that specific way, and luck had a way of eventually running out.

"You want to know if we have a real defense," I said.

"I want to know what we have," he said. "Before we need it."

The training room, the chair, the indicator lighting its now-familiar green-and-blue within moments. The fundamental tone settling around me like a room I knew. Brother Evan behind me, folder open, ready to record.

I oriented. Found the layers, the geothermal pulse, the water cycling, the operations above and below. Then I reached for the specific question, the one we had prepared.

The shield system. The satellite generators. Are they present? Are they functional?

The system's response was not the open-window quality of the state report or the directional lamp of the rank inquiry. It was something more specific — a kind of inventory, the system going through itself, checking what I had asked about and reporting back.

What came through: twelve positions. Around the city's perimeter, at the intervals Brother Evan had described. At eleven of those positions, something present and connected. At one position — northwest of the city, near the farm boundary — nothing. A gap in the ring. An absence.

"Eleven of twelve generators are present and connected," I told Brother Evan. "One is missing. Northwest, near the farm boundary."

He was writing. "Functional? Can they be activated?"

I refined the question. *Can the generators be activated from here?*

The response: yes. With Commander-level authorization. The process was available — a sequence of connections, confirmation of power and data links, establishment of the dome framework. The system described it with the patient clarity of something explaining a procedure it had explained before, a long time ago, to operators who knew the vocabulary.

I did not know all the vocabulary. But I knew enough.

"Yes," I said. "They can be activated. On my authorization." I paused. "It describes a bootstrap process — power connections, data connections, then the generator comes online. It sounds like the generators have been dormant but intact."

"Can you activate one? As a test?"

I considered this carefully. Activating a generator — bringing a system online that had been dormant for centuries — was not a small thing. It was not the same as moving the fundamental tone by a fraction. But I had Commander access, and the system had shown me the procedure, and Brother Evan had asked carefully and with full awareness of what he was asking.

"Activating satellite generator one," I said. "Southeastern position."

I held the intention — not the physical sensation of doing something, but the specific quality of intention the system responded to, the sound of the request placed against the right harmonic. The sequence the system had described: power connection test, data connection test, bootstrap of the sub-controller.

Something happened under the floor.

Not dramatically — not a shake, not a noise. More like the quality of the building's vibration changing very slightly in one register, a new note entering the chord so low and steady that you almost didn't notice it except that it hadn't been there a moment ago. The geothermal layer, which I had always heard as singular, had a small new element alongside it.

"Southeastern generator is online," I said.

Brother Evan came around to the front of the chair. He was holding the folder but not looking at it. He was looking at me with the expression I had seen from him several times now — the carefully contained version of something larger.

"Can you feel the difference?" he said.

"Hear it," I said. "A new tone. Low. Steady. It's connected to the main system." I listened to it. "It's not doing anything yet. It's just — present. Waiting."

"The dome," he said. "Could you raise it from here?"

"Not from here," I said. "This is a training room — limited interface. But from the main operational station, with a full team—" I reached for the question. *What is required to raise the shield dome?*

The response was layered but clear: a Commander's authorization, the full generator network active, an operator or team capable of shaping the initial configuration. The system could manage it autonomously after activation — maintaining the dome, monitoring for impacts, adjusting to threats — but the initial raising required explicit instruction.

"The system can maintain it autonomously once it's raised," I said. "But raising it requires instruction. A Commander's authorization and the generators online." I paused. "And the missing generator is a problem."

"Can it function without the twelfth?"

I asked. The response: yes, with reduced coverage. A gap in the northwestern sector, near the farm boundary, approximately thirty degrees of arc. Not a complete dome — a dome with a small but exploitable gap.

"Reduced coverage," I said. "There would be a gap in the northwest. Not large, but present."

"Could someone get through it?"

"Possibly. If they knew where to look." I released the question. "Brother Evan, the generator that's missing — the document says it was placed when the installation was established. If it was there for five hundred years and it's gone now—"

"It may have been damaged," he said. "Or removed. Or buried under construction." He was writing rapidly. "The Third Ring wall went up two centuries ago. If the generator was above ground — or just below it — the construction could have damaged it." He looked up. "Or it could simply have failed. Anything dormant for five centuries—"

"The other eleven are intact," I said.

"The other eleven are," he agreed. "But they may have been better positioned, better protected." He closed the folder. "This is — this is significant. If we can raise the dome, even a partial one—"

"We need to understand what we'd be doing with it before we do it," I said, which was approximately what Father Brolan had said to

me, and which I was finding was a principle that bore repeating at regular intervals.

"Yes," he said, with the tone of a man who was already three steps ahead and was taking himself firmly by the collar to stay in the present. "Yes. We tell Father Brolan. We discuss. We develop a proper understanding of the system before we attempt anything at scale." He paused. "But Taryn — if the dome works. If we can raise it, even imperfectly—"

"It changes what Alabaster can do," I said.

"It changes what Alabaster is," he said.

We spent the rest of the morning at the weather station.

Not testing anything — observing. Father Brolan, informed of the morning's discoveries in a conversation that had lasted an hour and covered more ground than I would have thought an hour could contain, had asked that I spend time in the operational stations before attempting anything at the main interface. I needed to understand the full-scale environment, not just the training room. I needed to see what the Servants were doing and how they were doing it, so that when I eventually attempted to work alongside them — or through them, in the way the supervisor's chair seemed to have been designed for — I understood what I was participating in.

So I sat in the supervisor's chair at the back of the weather station, hands off the pads since there were none, and I listened.

The full team was present — the midday shift, ten operators at their stations, Sister Akasa moving between them with the quiet authority of someone who had been managing this space for a long time and knew its moods. She had acknowledged me when I came in with a nod that contained several things: awareness of my presence, acceptance of Brother Evan's explanation that I was observing, and a faint reservation that she was too professional to express but too

honest to entirely conceal. The supervisor's chair was her domain. She had opinions about it.

I sat in it and did not touch anything and listened.

The ten tones were present and familiar — I knew six of them individually now, the characters of their voices as distinct to me as faces. Brem, third from the left, her note the most consistent and steady. Sister Akasa herself, not at an interface but moving through the space, and even without the pads her presence in the system was perceptible — a background note, the tone of someone who was part of this space so thoroughly that she registered in it without formal contact.

The lens over the farms was holding. It was larger than I had understood from the training room — the system showed it to me as a shape rather than a fact, the specific curve of thickened air over the fields, the angle that directed moisture downward to the soil, the gentle concentration of warmth at the reservoir edges. The ten operators were each managing a section of it, and the sections overlapped slightly, and where they overlapped there was the specific harmonic of multiple intentions touching the same part of the system. Sometimes these reinforced each other. Sometimes they created small interference patterns, tiny dissonances where two operators' approaches were almost but not quite aligned.

I watched the interference patterns.

They were small — nothing that affected the lens's function in any meaningful way. But they were there, and they were constant, and they represented a kind of inefficiency. Not through any fault of the operators; this was the best that anonymous access with imperfect calibration could do. Each operator was doing their work based on what they could feel through the interface, without knowing precisely what the operator next to them was doing, without the system being able to coordinate them as a coherent team.

I thought about what it would sound like if they had confirmed records. If the system knew each of them — knew their specific capabilities, their particular relationship with the interface, the precise

quality of their connection. If it could route their coordination rather than leaving them to find it empirically.

Not better operators. The same operators, with a system that could actually see them.

Sister Akasa passed behind me and stopped. I had not heard her stop, but the feeling of her presence close behind the supervisor's chair was distinct.

"You're listening to the interference patterns," she said. She said it quietly, not a question.

"Yes," I said, equally quietly.

"I've been trying to reduce them for three years," she said. "We've adjusted spacing, we've experimented with overlap ratios, we've tried different team compositions. They reduce a little and then come back." A pause. "Can you hear what causes them?"

"Not the cause," I said. "I can hear where they are and approximately how large." I paused. "The system doesn't know who your operators are. It can feel them but it can't coordinate them, because it has no record to coordinate against."

A longer pause behind me.

"If it had records," she said.

"It would know their individual parameters. It could route between them more precisely. It might reduce the interference without you having to adjust anything."

Another pause. Then: "Brother Evan explained some of what you can do. He was discreet about the details but—" she stopped. "When you sit in that chair, what do you hear?"

I considered how to answer this. She was not asking out of idle curiosity; she was asking with the specific interest of a person who had spent years working in a system she understood better than almost anyone and who was now being told that her understanding had limits she couldn't see from inside her own expertise.

"Right now," I said, "I hear your team as a chord. Ten individual notes — I know six of them by their quality, the character of their tones. The chord is mostly in tune, but there are small dissonances

where the intentions overlap and don't quite align. And underneath everything—" I paused. "Underneath everything I hear the system's fundamental tone, and above that the harmonic structure of every operation this building is running, and above that the operations in this room."

Silence behind me. Then: "Six of them by their quality."

"Brem is the most consistent," I said. "Third from the left. She's been doing this longer than the others and it shows in the tone — steady, not reaching for anything, just holding." I paused. "The newer one on the right side is working harder than the others. He's compensating for something — I don't know what, his approach or his connection or something in how the system responds to him. But he's putting in more effort than the output requires."

"That's Denn," she said quietly. "He was transferred from fields six months ago. He's skilled but the weather work doesn't come naturally to him the same way." Another pause. "I've been trying to identify whether the system treats him differently. I couldn't find any evidence of it."

"The system doesn't know it's him specifically," I said. "It just knows there's an operator in that position who is less precisely calibrated than the others. It adjusts what it offers, slightly. He has to work harder to get the same result because the response he gets back is less exact."

Silence. I waited.

"We should talk," she said. "Properly. After shift."

"Yes," I said. "I'd like that."

She moved away, back to her circuit of the room, and I went back to listening. Below me, the city went about its morning. Outside the open windows, the lens hung over the farms, visible as a slight thickening of the air, managing the humidity that kept the crops alive.

Ten people who had been doing this for years, doing it well, doing it better than anyone else in Alabaster knew how to do — and doing it blind, with equipment that couldn't see them, with capabilities they hadn't been told they had.

The thought that had been forming since the morning's session settled into something clear.

The dome was important. The generator network was important. The dormant capabilities were important.

But the most important thing was not what the system could do.

It was what the people in this building could do, if the system could actually see them.

After the midday meal I went looking for Prael.

I found her in the fields station, which was three levels below the weather operations floor and narrower, the space between the Tower's inner and outer walls compressed here to barely twice my arm span. Four interface chairs in a row, two of them currently occupied, and a supervisor's position at the near end where Prael was not sitting but standing, watching the occupied chairs with the focused attention of someone doing two things simultaneously.

She registered my arrival without looking up. "Stand there," she said, indicating a position beside her, "and don't make any sudden movements. We're in the middle of a clay adjustment."

I stood there. I did not make any sudden movements.

What was happening in the occupied chairs was, at the interface level, the quietest work I had observed so far — the tones of the two operators were low and steady and patient, without the reaching quality of the weather tones or the effortful quality of the water cycling. This was deliberate, careful work: the movement of dense material through rock, the slow redistribution of clay two feet underground that would change how moisture was retained in the soil over the next growing season.

They were working at the same depth, in sections adjacent to each other, and the coordination between them was not quite right. Not wrong — the clay was moving where it needed to move, the operation was proceeding — but there was a slight redundancy

where their sections overlapped, each of them doing a small part of the other's work without knowing it, because the system wasn't telling them where the boundary was.

"The boundary problem," I said, quietly.

Prael's attention shifted to me for a moment, then back to the chairs. "It's always there. We manage it by communication — we talk before and during, we establish markers. It slows the work."

"The system could establish the boundaries automatically," I said. "If it knew who was in each chair."

She said nothing for a moment. Her operators continued their careful work.

"I heard about the morning session," she said. "The generators."

Word moved fast in this building. Or Prael paid close attention to things. Possibly both.

"Eleven of twelve are intact and connectable," I said. "One is missing in the northwest."

"The dome," she said.

"The dome," I agreed.

She was quiet for a while. The clay movement continued below us, the two tones steady and patient. "I want to show you something," she said. "Not today — when the shift is done. Something in the deep soil data."

"What kind of something?"

"Something I've been seeing for two years that I couldn't explain," she said. "I thought it was calibration error. I thought it was my inexperience. Now—" she paused. "I'd like another pair of ears on it."

"After shift," I said.

"After shift," she agreed.

Sister Akasa found me in the lounge after the midday operations. She was off-shift, with the slightly unfocused quality of operators

between sessions, and she brought two cups of tea and set one in front of me without asking and sat on the couch.

She was taller than she seemed at the weather station, where she was always in motion and her height registered as part of her efficiency. Sitting, she had a different quality — not the authority of someone managing a room, but the attentiveness of someone thinking carefully about what they wanted to say.

"The interference patterns," she said. "How long have they been there?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I've only been here six days. They've been there for at least six days."

She looked at her tea. "When I started on weather operations, twelve years ago, one of the older Servants told me that the lens used to hold more cleanly. That it took less effort, that the operators reported less strain at the end of long shifts." She looked at the window. "I assumed she meant that the earlier operators were more skilled. That the training had degraded somehow." A pause. "What you're saying is that the system has degraded."

"The system's ability to see its operators has degraded," I said. "The operators may be exactly as skilled. The system just can't coordinate them as precisely, because it doesn't know who they are."

She absorbed this. "And you can fix this."

"I can add operators to the system's records," I said. "Establish them — give the system a proper record for each person. What rank, what capabilities, what parameters." I paused. "With Father Brolan's approval. There are considerations we're still working through."

"What considerations?"

I thought about how to explain the Commanders' Conflict to someone who had spent twelve years focused on weather operations. "The system was designed to be used carefully. When it was locked down, the reason was that access had been misused — the capabilities had been used for things they weren't designed for. Father Brolan wants to understand the original reasoning before we change the structure."

Sister Akasa looked at me steadily. "You're thirteen," she said. It was not a criticism. It was the observation of a person who was trying to understand the shape of a situation.

"Yes," I said.

"And the system calls you Commander."

"Under the contingency protocols," I said. "It recognises a hereditary succession."

She was quiet for a long moment. I drank my tea and let her think.

"I have been working here for twelve years," she said, finally. "I have given up a great deal to be here. My family — I have a mother and two sisters in the Second Ring who I see on Feast days. I have not been outside this Tower for eight years. My entire world is the weather station and the people in it." She looked at me. "I have believed that what we do here matters. That maintaining the lens, managing the humidity, the work that keeps the crops alive — that it matters enough to justify what it costs."

"It does matter," I said.

"I know it does," she said, with a precision that told me she was not asking for reassurance. "What I'm trying to say is that if there is a way for this work to be better — not different, not less important, but better, more precise, less costly to the people doing it — I want that. Whatever the considerations are." She paused. "I will wait for Father Brolan's process. I understand that care is required. But I want you to know that whatever you are doing, I am not opposed to it."

She stood, picked up her cup, and looked at me with the clear, level gaze she had used since we first spoke.

"Twelve years ago I came here because I could feel something through the walls," she said. "Even before my Test. The building's sound. I always assumed it was just the machines." She paused. "I understand now that it's more than that."

"It's the whole system," I said. "Everything it is and everything it's prepared to do. The machines are just the way it speaks."

She looked at the wall, then at me.

"I've been listening to it for twelve years without understanding what it was saying," she said.

"You understood enough," I said. "The lens is there. The crops are alive. You understood what mattered."

She considered this. Then she nodded, once, precisely, and left.

After shift Prael showed me the deep soil data in the way she showed everything: directly, without preamble, the information first and context to follow if required.

We were in the fields station with the shift gone and the chairs empty and the quiet particular to a room that had been occupied and now wasn't. She pulled a stool beside the supervisor's position and sat, and I sat beside her, and she put a stack of records on the small table — years of documented operations, the fields team's careful accounting of what they had done and what the soil had done in response.

She opened to a page near the middle and pointed.

"The deep aquifer," she said. "Below the main water table. Below the zone we work in for agricultural purposes." She traced a line on the page — a graph of something, measurements recorded over years. "This has been declining."

I looked at the line. It was declining — slowly but consistently, the trend visible across the records going back further than Prael's tenure, further back than any single person's records. A slow steady decrease in — "Water volume?" I said.

"Pressure," she said. "The deep aquifer's pressure. Which means the volume available to feed the upper table is decreasing." She looked at me. "We manage the upper table continuously. We cycle the clay, we manage the minerals, we adjust the moisture. None of that work extends deep enough to affect the primary aquifer." She paused. "The primary aquifer is supposed to be self-sustaining. Fed

by deep geological sources, not by surface water. It should not be declining."

"But it is."

"Has been, for at least a century." She tapped the record. "These older records were kept by Servants before my time. I found them when I was trying to understand the effortful quality you described — the sense of the water cycling working harder than it should. I went back through the records to see if it had always been this way."

"And it hasn't."

"Two centuries ago, the records describe the deep pressure as stable," she said. "Strong, consistent, easily sufficient to maintain the upper table. The decline began approximately a hundred and forty years ago and has been continuous since." She looked at me. "I do not know what causes this. The geological sources should be constant. The rate of decline is slow — at current rates, we have perhaps another century before it becomes a critical problem. But—"

"But it's happening," I said.

"And no one has been able to explain it, and no one has been able to address it, because the primary aquifer is below the depth at which our operators can work reliably." She paused. "The deep operations — the ones that affect the primary geological systems rather than the surface agricultural zone — those require more than a four. Those require confirmed Commander access. Which we have never had."

I looked at the records. A hundred and forty years of slow decline. Long enough that it had become background, had been absorbed into the Tower's accounting as a known fact that couldn't be addressed, a problem filed under *not currently solvable*.

"You want me to look at it," I said.

"I want you to listen to it," she said. "Whether you can do anything about it — I don't know. Whether anyone can — I don't know. But I have been looking at these records for two years and I have not been able to hear what you hear, and I think what you hear might tell us something."

I looked at the records, then at the empty interface chairs.

"Not today," I said. "I need to understand the system better before I attempt something at that depth. But soon."

She nodded. She gathered the records with her characteristic economy.

"Soon," she said. "The tower has been waiting a hundred and forty years. It can wait a few more weeks."

She stood to leave, then paused.

"Taryn."

"Yes."

"What you said to Sister Akasa," she said. "You understood what mattered. I heard." She paused, with the slightly awkward quality of someone saying something they have decided is worth the awkwardness. "That was the right thing to say."

She left.

I sat in the empty fields station for a while, in the quiet, listening. Below me, the deep aquifer — which I had perceived only as the slow effortful cycling of the water table — had a different character now that I was attending to it specifically. Not just effortful. Diminished. The sound of something that had been larger and was smaller now, working at its task with a fidelity that was admirable given what it had to work with.

A hundred and forty years ago, something had changed. The geological sources had begun to yield less. And the system had been managing the consequence ever since, compensating, adjusting, working harder, carrying the weight — unable to say *I need help* because it could not ask on its own behalf.

I put my hand flat on the floor of the fields station.

The pulse came through the stone — geothermal, steady. And under it, quiet and slow, the aquifer. I held my attention on it and did what I had been learning to do: held the comparison, the sound of what it was beside the sound of what it had been, the diminished quality beside the full quality from the older records, the question: *is this what you were meant to be?*

Something shifted. Not in the aquifer — I was nowhere near

ready to attempt direct work at that depth, and I knew it. In the system's response to being asked about it. The specific quality of acknowledgment I had been learning to read: *yes, we know, we have known, we have been managing, we cannot ask, but yes, this is not what we were meant to be.*

I took my hand from the floor and sat up and looked at the empty chairs.

Six days.

In six days I had learned to hear the system, to ask it questions, to understand the shape of what it was and what it was supposed to be. I had found eleven generators in a ring around the city, waiting to be reconnected. I had found a dome folded and ready. I had found an aquifer declining for a century and a half, with no one who could reach deep enough to understand why.

I had not done any of it yet. I had only heard it. Understanding and doing were separated by a distance that I had only begun to measure.

But the measuring was the beginning.

That evening, after dinner, I went to the lounge and sat at the writing table instead of the deep chair. I opened the blank journal the library Servant had given me two days ago — a practical gift, offered with the quiet pragmatism of someone who saw people coming to libraries with ideas and no place to write them down and had long since started keeping a supply.

I opened it and wrote at the top of the first page: *What I know and what I don't.*

Under *What I know* I wrote: eleven satellite generators intact; one missing northwest; dome can be raised at full Commander authorization; dome will have a coverage gap until the twelfth generator is found or replaced; deep aquifer is declining; the system cannot ask for help; Hollis locked the registry to prevent misuse; the

lock can be opened under specific conditions; the Commanders' Conflict is five centuries old but its principle is not.

Under *What I don't know* I wrote a longer list. What caused the aquifer decline. Where the twelfth generator is. Whether it can be replaced, and how, and by whom. What the full manual capabilities of the dome are. What operations require Commander access that the current Servants have been unable to attempt. What changed a hundred and forty years ago in the deep geology. What Hollis knew about the limits of his own plan. What the other installations — the other cities — currently have access to. Whether any of them have resonant operators, or had them and lost them, or never had them. Whether there is someone somewhere who knows more about any of this than we do.

I looked at the two lists.

The second one was much longer than the first. This was, I thought, probably appropriate. Six days was not very long. There was a great deal of time to learn things, and what I had were beginnings: the beginnings of a facility with the interface, the beginnings of understanding what the system was and what it needed, the beginnings of a set of relationships — Brother Evan, Father Brolan, Prael, Sister Akasa, Amil, Sajay — that I was already beginning to understand were the most important thing. Not my own capabilities. The people.

The machines responded to people. The whole system was designed for people to work with. It couldn't ask, it couldn't initiate, it couldn't decide that the aquifer needed attention or that the dome should be raised or that the operator registry should be opened. It could only respond when asked, and wait when not asked, and run as well as it could on whatever it had been given.

What it had been given, for a very long time, was the anonymous partial attention of operators it couldn't see, doing the best they could with what they understood, finding small clever uses for large capabilities, keeping Alabaster alive and fed and watered through the

sustained effort of people who had no idea what they were actually working with.

What it had been given now was something different.

I closed the journal and sat at the window and watched the city go quiet in the way it did after dark — not silent, Alabaster was never silent, but settled, the activity of the day finding its level, the streets below the Tower's windows carrying fewer people and lighter sounds. The mountains to the east were visible only as a dark mass against the lesser dark of the sky, their sharp edges gone in the night, the impossible regularity of them invisible until morning.

The fundamental tone was in the stone under the table, in the stone of the wall, in the floor and the ceiling and the air itself. It was — I listened — it was less flat than this morning. Measurably. I had not worked at it today, not directly, had been in sessions and observation and conversation all day without a single deliberate attempt to hold the comparison. But the change was there.

The system had been moving toward its intended pitch on its own. Or not entirely on its own — I was part of it, I was in it, and simply being in it, simply being a resonant operator in contact with it day after day, was apparently doing something.

Like being in the same room as an instrument that needed tuning, and playing your own instrument, and having the two sounds influence each other without any deliberate work. Resonance. The word the document had used. Not because you did something to the other instrument, but because you were present and in tune yourself.

I closed the journal and took it to my room and went to bed and lay in the dark and listened to the Tower breathing its slow patient breath, the geothermal pulse and the water table and the dormant dome waiting in its generators and the deep aquifer below everything, diminished and persistent, working with what it had.

Tomorrow, Brother Evan had said, we would try the main operational station for the first time. The supervisor's chair on the weather operations floor, the chair that had been designed for the thing I was learning to do, the chair that had no interface pads because the reso-

nant operator was not meant to be connected in the same way as the standard operators.

Tomorrow I would sit in the actual seat and see what it felt like to be in a room with ten people who were doing things I could hear, and find out whether what I could do through the full system was different from what I could do in a training room.

I was, in the specific way that precedes sleep when the day has been full, already partly somewhere else.

The fundamental tone was there.

Closer.

11

On the morning of my eighth day in the Tower, Brother Evan took me to the weather operations floor and did not ask me to do anything.

This was, I was learning, a characteristic approach of his: the belief that understanding a space before acting in it was not delay but preparation. He had said as much the previous evening, when we had discussed what the main station session would look like. *I don't want you to attempt anything tomorrow,* he had said. *I want you to sit in the supervisor's chair and listen. That's all. Listen to the full system at full scale, with all ten operators present, and tell me afterward what's different from the training room.*

What was different from the training room was everything.

The training room was a single instrument. The weather operations floor was an orchestra.

I sat in the supervisor's chair — the high-backed chair on its raised platform against the inner wall, the chair with no interface pads, the chair whose function Sister Akasa had been debating with Brother Evan for years — and the sound arrived not incrementally, the way it did when I eased into the chair below, but all at once, the

full complex chord of ten operators working simultaneously crashing over me like stepping from a quiet corridor into a room where a celebration had been going on for hours.

I gripped the chair arms and breathed.

Not painful. Just — large. The training room had given me the system's voice in a controlled dose; the operational floor was the full volume, no attenuation. The fundamental tone was there, and the harmonics, and the ten individual tones of the operators, and the lens itself — I could hear the lens, the specific sustained chord of shaped force over the farms, a sound I had previously been aware of as a background quality and could now hear directly as a thing, as a shape in sound, its edges and its center and the places where two operators' sections touched and almost matched and almost didn't.

I held on and let my perception adjust.

Brother Evan, standing off to the side, said nothing. He had the watching quality he brought to things that were going well but not without cost.

After a few minutes — it might have been longer; time had a different quality in the chair — I found the edges of the experience. Found the capacity to attend to one part of it rather than being submerged by all of it. The way your eyes adjusted in a very bright room: not reducing the light, but learning to use it without being blinded.

The ten tones separated. I knew six of them from the training room and observation, and the remaining four acquired character quickly — a younger operator on the far left whose connection was strong but unsteady in the specific way of someone who was competent but not yet confident; an older woman two stations from the right whose tone was the quietest of all but the most precise, like a soft-spoken person who said exactly what they meant and nothing more; two others in the middle who had clearly been working together long enough to have developed a natural complement, their tones rising and falling in a small coordinated dance that had probably been unconscious for years.

The lens was visible through the windows in front of me and also in the sound around me, and the two impressions were different and complementary: my eyes saw the slight thickening of air over the farms, the shimmer of it in the morning sun; my hearing held the shape of it as a sustained chord, and the chord was beautiful in the specific way of something held by ten people who each believed in what they were doing.

It was also slightly wrong.

Not failing — not close to failing. But the interference patterns I had heard from below were more visible here, more immediate, the small places where two sections of the lens touched and the operators were managing the boundary by feel rather than by knowledge. Nothing catastrophic. But not what the system was capable of.

I held this observation and did nothing about it.

After an hour, Brother Evan took me to breakfast.

"What was different?" he asked, over porridge.

"Everything," I said. "The scale. I knew it intellectually from below but experiencing it at full strength is different." I thought about how to describe it. "In the training room the system feels like a voice talking to me. On the operational floor it feels like standing in the center of something. Not being talked to — being inside the conversation."

He wrote something. "And the operators?"

"Better than I understood. The interference patterns — I thought from below they were small inefficiencies. At full scale I can see they're not impeding the work, they're just..." I searched for it. "They're just the gap between what the work is and what the work could be. The lens holds. The farms get what they need. But it's like —" I stopped.

"Like what?"

"Do you know what it sounds like when a choir hasn't warmed up together?" I said. "When each voice is in tune individually but they haven't found each other yet? The notes are all right but the sound isn't unified."

He nodded slowly.

"That's what it sounds like," I said. "Individual competence without collective precision. Because the system can't see them as a collective. It can only receive them as ten separate anonymous signals and do its best to integrate them." I ate a spoonful of porridge. "If it knew who they were—"

"The warm choir," he said.

"A very warm choir," I said.

He wrote more. He had been filling the notebook at a rate that suggested he was going to need a second one before the month was out.

"There's something else," I said.

He looked up.

"The lens is larger than it needs to be," I said. "I don't mean the farms don't need it — they do. But the operators are maintaining it at a size and intensity that's calibrated for what they know the farms need based on experience. There's no feedback loop. They're working from historical knowledge of what seems sufficient, adjusting when the crops show stress, responding to symptoms rather than to what the system could tell them directly." I paused. "If the system knew who the operators were and could communicate its readings to them directly — soil moisture, temperature gradient, what the reservoir levels actually are — they could be more precise. Less effort for the same result, or better results for the same effort."

Brother Evan had stopped writing and was simply looking at me.

"What?" I said.

"Nothing," he said. "I'm thinking." He looked at his notebook. "The feedback loop problem — that's something the Servants have been trying to address for years. Empirically. Trial and error. Every decade or so someone attempts a new method for communicating information between the lens operators and the farm managers, and it's never quite worked." He paused. "Because the information is in the system and they can't access it."

"They never knew to ask," I said. "Because they didn't know the system had it."

He closed his notebook. He did it with the specific finality that meant he had reached a decision about something.

"I'm going to talk to Father Brolan again today," he said. "About the registry. About timing." He looked at me. "Not to rush anything. But the things you're describing — these are not theoretical benefits. The interference patterns, the calibration gap, the feedback loop — these affect the farms right now, every day, every season. And the aquifer problem Prael showed you — that's a longer timeline but it doesn't get better on its own." He paused. "We've been careful. That's correct. I want to keep being careful. But I also want to be honest with Father Brolan about what the cost of continuing to wait is."

"The cost has been being paid for a long time," I said.

"Yes," he said. "We just didn't know what the payments were."

Father Brolan's response to this second conversation — which I was not present for, but heard from Brother Evan afterward with the specific detail of a man who had been given reporting instructions — was characteristically measured.

He said: not yet. He said: there is still the matter of the conditions, the safeguards, the structure of how new operators would be added, and until we have a proper proposal for that structure he was not willing to proceed. He said: I hear you about the cost, and I am not dismissing it, but doing this incorrectly once is worse than waiting.

He also said: ask Taryn to talk to Amil again. There is more in those documents.

Amil was in the library, as she almost always was in the mid-morning.

She was in the older section today, the near-script documents, with the library Servant's most recent translation notes and her own annotations alongside them. She had the quality, when deeply reading, of someone who had negotiated a very comfortable peace with the rest of the world temporarily ceasing to exist.

I sat down across from her and waited.

After a shorter interval than usual she looked up. She had learned, over the past few days of occasional visits, that I came with specific questions rather than general browsing, and she had apparently started monitoring for my arrival at some peripheral level.

"Father Brolan sent you," she said.

"He said there's more in the documents," I said.

She set down her translation notes and folded her hands in the manner of someone organising her thoughts. "There's more in the documents," she confirmed. "There's always more in the documents. The question is what specifically he wants."

"The registry," I said. "The conditions under which Hollis would have sanctioned opening it. Whether he left any instructions."

She was quiet for a moment. Not the pause of someone who didn't know — the pause of someone deciding how to introduce what they knew.

"He left a document," she said. "I found it three days ago and I've been working through it with the library Servant since then. It's in bad shape — some sections are unreadable — but enough is there." She found a specific stack among the papers on her side of the table and extracted a page of the library Servant's handwriting, dense with annotations. "He called it the Succession Document. It was written late in his life — the dating is uncertain but the library Servant estimates he was quite old when he wrote it." She looked at the page. "It describes his intentions. What he hoped for, what he feared, and—" she paused, "what he thought should happen when a resonant operator appeared again."

I went still.

"He expected one," I said.

"He didn't expect one *specifically*," she said. "He believed it was possible. He wrote that the biological recognition would either fade entirely within a few generations, as he intended, or it would persist in one strong line until conditions changed. He said he didn't know which would happen." She looked at the page. "He wrote that if the recognition persisted, it meant the machines were still needed. That if a resonant operator appeared, it meant the world had not yet arrived at the point where the machines could be safely discontinued." She paused. "He wrote that in that case, the operator would be in a position to make a judgment he himself could not make from where he sat. Whether the risks he was preventing by locking the registry were still the risks that mattered."

"And if they weren't," I said.

"If they weren't," she said, "he described a set of conditions. The conditions under which he would have sanctioned opening the registry." She slid the page toward me. "The translation is rough in places. But the broad intent is clear."

I read:

The registry should not be opened by one person's decision alone. The resonant operator, if one exists, holds the access but should not hold the judgment unilaterally. The judgment should be shared among those who understand what is at stake and who have a direct interest in the outcome — the people of the installation, their representatives, those who have tended the machines in the absence of full access. The decision should be visible, not private. The process of adding new operators should be transparent and require deliberation rather than expedience. No single individual should have the authority to add operators without the knowledge and consent of the collective governance of the installation.

I read it again.

"He described a council," I said. "Or something like one."

"Essentially," Amil said. "Not formal — he didn't specify a struc-

ture. But the principle is that the resonant operator should not act alone." She paused. "And there's one more condition."

"Tell me."

"The registry, once opened, should not be kept in one person's control," she said. "Adding operators should be a procedure that can be performed with the consent of the governing structure of the installation, without requiring the resonant operator's personal action each time. Otherwise—" she found the relevant section, "—otherwise the resonant operator becomes what the original Commanders were. A single point of capability and a single point of failure."

I thought about this for a long time.

"He was thinking about what happens when I'm gone," I said.

"He was thinking about what happens when any resonant operator is gone," she said. "He had apparently seen what happened when a single person held irreplaceable access to significant capability." She looked at the document. "He didn't want to recreate the problem in trying to solve it."

I sat back. "Can I take these notes to Brother Evan?"

"They're for Father Brolan," she said. "But yes." She gathered the pages carefully. "There's one more thing. At the end of the document. Damaged — the library Servant has only partial confidence in the translation. But she believes it says—" she found the section, "—something like: *the machines are not weapons and should not become weapons. If the time comes when they must be used in direct defense, the operator should be aware that the system will resist. Not fail — resist. It is designed to resist. This is a feature, not a fault. The operator who understands this will work with the resistance rather than against it.*"

We both sat with this.

"He knew someone might try to use them aggressively," I said.

"He built the resistance in deliberately," she said. "Or confirmed it was there and chose not to override it."

I thought about the interdict. The principle Brother Evan had found in the documents, the prohibition on using terraforming

systems aggressively against humans. I had known it was there. I had not known it was deliberate. I had not known it was, in Hollis's own words, a feature.

"He didn't just lock the registry," I said. "He thought about everything. Every way it could go wrong."

"He was thorough," Amil said, with the specific appreciation of someone who valued thoroughness above most other qualities. "Whether he was right about all of it — that's a different question. But he thought carefully."

Brother Evan and Father Brolan together, that afternoon, in Father Brolan's office.

I presented the Succession Document — or the library Servant's translation of what remained of it — and they read it in the way that two people who had been thinking about the same problem from different directions read a document that addressed their concerns directly. Carefully. With the occasional pause to exchange a look.

Father Brolan set the pages down and looked at his hands.

"He anticipated this moment," he said.

"He wrote for it," Brother Evan said.

"The council he describes — the collective judgment, the transparent process—" Father Brolan looked at me. "That is not something that exists in the Tower's current structure. We have a hierarchy. We have my office and the operational teams and the Initiates. We don't have a governance structure for decisions of this kind."

"We'd need to build one," Brother Evan said.

"Yes." Father Brolan stood, which was his thinking motion, and went to the window. "And building it will take time. And—" he stopped. He was looking west, toward Gate Town and the desert beyond. He stood there for long enough that I looked too, though from my angle I could only see the edge of the window's view and the bright sky above the desert.

"What?" I said.

He turned from the window. He had an expression I had not seen on him before — not the considered patience he usually wore, but something more immediate. Not quite concern. The specific quality of someone who has just connected two things and does not like the connection.

"Brother Evan," he said. "The intelligence reports. The ones from the Guard."

Brother Evan straightened slightly. "I haven't seen this week's."

"I have," Father Brolan said. "I was going to mention it after we had settled this conversation, but—" He went to his desk and found a document I had not noticed there, set apart from his usual organised piles. He read from it directly. "The Guard's observers on the Cupritesh road. Three days ago." He looked at us. "Movement. Military movement. A supply column, well-equipped, heading from the Cupritesh royal city westward." He set the document down. "And separate intelligence from a merchant who came through Gate Town yesterday — he reported large formations assembling in the eastern Cupritesh territory. Not near the border, not yet. But assembling."

The room was very quiet.

"They're preparing something," Brother Evan said.

"The merchants have been saying for months that the Cupritesh king has been agitated about Alabaster," Father Brolan said. "We have managed the water rights argument diplomatically for years. The position has always been that the Tower's weather operations benefit the region — that we manage humidity for the wider area, not just our own farms." He paused. "But the intelligence from Onyx—"

"Onyx?" I said.

He looked at me. Then at Brother Evan. Brother Evan's expression told me that this was something I had not been told yet, and that Father Brolan was now deciding whether to tell me.

"There is an organisation," Father Brolan said, "that has been observing Alabaster for some time. Not hostile — or not primarily hostile. They call themselves the keepers of knowledge. They have

agents in several cities, including here, and they have been communicating with Father Ambrose and myself periodically for longer than I have been in this office." He paused. "They have provided intelligence on a number of occasions. The information has always been accurate."

"Who are they?" I said.

"We don't fully know," he said. "We know where they are not — they are not in any of the major cities. We know what they want, broadly — to preserve knowledge and prevent the misuse of the old systems. We know they have some access to the machines, because their communications come through channels that shouldn't be accessible to people outside the Tower."

I thought about Misha's wrist. The small dark chips. The communications that came through channels.

I said nothing about this. Not yet.

"What did their intelligence say?" I asked.

"That the Cupritesh agitation is not organic," Father Brolan said. "That someone has been feeding the king's advisors information — or misinformation — about what the Tower can do. Specifically about the weather management. Making it appear more aggressive than it is, more deliberately targeted at their agricultural territory." He looked at the document. "They believe someone wants a conflict. Not for Cupritesh's benefit — they have no particular interest in a war with Alabaster. But for someone else's benefit. Someone who would find it useful if Alabaster were destabilised."

Brother Evan said: "Someone who would benefit from Alabaster being damaged enough that the Tower's operations were disrupted."

"Or someone who would benefit from the chaos of an attack providing cover for other activities," Father Brolan said. "Access. The chance to move people or resources into or out of the city under the confusion of a military situation."

I thought about the dormant generators. The registry locked for five centuries. The dome sitting folded and ready. The aquifer declining. The system running at a fraction of its capacity, with oper-

ators who couldn't communicate with it properly, with capabilities nobody knew existed.

Someone wanted Alabaster destabilised.

Someone knew, or suspected, what Alabaster had.

"How long?" I said.

Father Brolan looked at me.

"How long before the Cupritesh forces are positioned to move?"

He was quiet for a moment. "The Guard's estimate is three to four weeks," he said. "Perhaps less if the assembly is faster than it appears."

Three to four weeks.

I looked at Brother Evan. He was looking at Father Brolan. Father Brolan was looking at me with the expression of a man who had spent the last ten minutes hoping that the two large problems facing him were not as connected as they appeared, and had just finished concluding that they were exactly as connected as they appeared.

"The registry," I said.

"Yes," Father Brolan said.

"The conditions from the Succession Document—"

"Are still valid," he said. "I'm not going to abandon Hollis's cautions because we have a military threat. That is precisely the kind of moment when caution matters most." He paused. "But I am going to move faster on establishing the governance structure he described. And I am going to ask you to continue developing your understanding of the system's capabilities at whatever pace you can manage, because three to four weeks is a very short time to learn what we may need to know."

"The dome," I said.

"Among other things," he said.

I looked at the map on his wall — the city, the roads leading to it, the flat desert to the west. Gate Town sat at the end of the western approach, unfortified, the trading post that had always been the first thing anyone would encounter coming from that direction.

"If there is an attack," I said. "If they come in force, from the west, toward Gate Town—"

"The Guard will do what the Guard can do," Father Brolan said. "Which is considerable. They are not unprepared."

"But the dome—"

"Would change the situation entirely," he said. "Yes. I'm aware." He sat back down. "Which is why I'm not sending you back to the training room and telling you to take another week to think about things. I'm telling you that the pace needs to increase." He looked at both of us. "I'd like daily briefings. Every evening. Whatever you're learning, wherever you are in the development of the interface — I want to know." He paused. "And I'd like Taryn to meet with the senior Servants. Not just Sister Akasa and Prael — all of them. All the team leads. Within the week." He looked at me. "They should know who you are and what you can hear. They should understand what may be asked of them."

"You're preparing them," I said.

"I'm informing them," he said. "Preparation follows." He looked at the window, the desert visible beyond the rooftops of Gate Town. "Whatever we do, we do it together or we do it badly. The Succession Document is right about that, at minimum."

The week that followed had the quality of a river after heavy rain: still moving in the same direction, still fundamentally itself, but faster and with a different energy, the current more insistent, the edges less defined.

Brother Evan and I spent mornings in the training room and afternoons in the operational stations. The training room sessions became more directed: not exploration for its own sake but targeted development of specific capabilities. Each session ended with a specific question asked of the system, a specific capability probed, a

specific piece of knowledge added to my notebook and to Brother Evan's increasingly extensive documentation.

The dome.

I asked the system about the dome in three separate sessions over four days, approaching it from different angles each time, building a picture of it the way you built a picture of a room you'd never been in by asking people who had different views of it from different windows.

What I learned:

The dome in its automatic mode — the default, the original design — covered the full installation perimeter, the hemisphere centred on the Tower, extending to the generator ring. Activation was near-instantaneous. The system could raise it faster than a person could run across a courtyard. Once raised, it managed itself: detecting threats, adjusting coverage, directing force to impact points. The operators didn't need to do anything except leave it running.

The dome in manual mode — the mode the Servants had discovered for weather, the mode the documents described for tactical use — was something else. Partial coverage. Shaped configurations. Specific defensive positions, or, in the application the weather team had found, atmospheric manipulation. The manual mode required ongoing operator attention. It was powerful and flexible and exhausting.

Between the two: a hybrid. The system described it in terms I didn't have full vocabulary for yet, but the shape of it was: automatic deployment of the full dome, with manual override available to an operator who wanted to modify specific sections — open a path, direct force differently, create an aperture without dropping the whole structure.

This was the application. A Commander who could hear the system, who could hold the complex chord of the dome in the same way I had been learning to hold simpler configurations, could raise the full dome automatically and then work within it, shaping it,

adjusting it, creating the specific configurations that a battle situation would require.

I could hear the dome in the system's harmonics. I had been aware of it since the training room session where it first appeared — the large folded thing, the furled sail. Day by day, as my facility developed, I could hear it more clearly. Not just its presence but its nature: the specific quality of something large and strong and designed to hold against forces that the lenses and the clay-moving and the water-cycling were never built to withstand.

"I can hear it clearly," I told Brother Evan, on the fourth day. "The chord it would make when it was fully deployed — I can hold that in my mind. I know what it's supposed to sound like."

"Can you raise it?"

"From the supervisor's chair, with a full team, and the generators all connected—" I paused. "I think so. I think it would work the way the weather lens work. I hold the chord and the Servants contribute the force and the system executes." I paused again. "With eleven generators. With the gap."

"The gap," he said.

"A thirty-degree arc in the northwest. Near the farm boundary." I had been thinking about this. "It wouldn't be a complete dome. In a defensive situation, an opponent who knew about the gap—"

"Could exploit it," he said.

"Could," I said. "If they knew. And if they were sophisticated enough to split their forces and send a component through an exact position." I looked at the training room wall. "But an army isn't a surgical instrument. An army coming from the west toward Gate Town would hit the dome long before they reached the gap."

"And the eastern approach — the mountains block it regardless."

"Yes." I looked at him. "The gap is a limitation. It's not a fatal one, given where any attack would be likely to come from."

He was writing. "What about the twelfth generator?"

"I've been listening for it," I said. "The system knows a generator should be in the northwest position. It has no connection to it — the

position shows as absent. But—" I paused. "It doesn't feel destroyed. It feels disconnected. Like a string that's come loose from its peg rather than a string that's broken."

He looked up from his notes.

"You think it still exists," he said.

"I think the physical structure may still be there," I said. "Buried, possibly, if the Third Ring construction two centuries ago went over it. Or moved, if something in that area was excavated." I paused. "If it exists and we could reconnect it—"

"Complete coverage," he said.

"Complete coverage," I agreed.

He wrote a note. A different kind of note — not the documentation of what I had reported but the beginning of an action: someone needed to investigate the northwest sector of the city wall, look for signs of an older structure beneath or adjacent to the newer construction.

He wrote the name at the top: Captain Taryce.

The senior Servants' meeting was Father Brolan's idea, and he convened it in the dining hall on an evening when the kitchen had provided a better-than-usual dinner and the hall had a comfortable well-fed quality. The specific roster: Sister Akasa and Sister Mya from weather, Sister Trofer and her senior operators from fields, the two experienced Servants who managed food processing, Brother Tomlin who handled structural maintenance, and Brother Evan as my — Father Brolan did not use the word *guardian* but it had the shape of that.

And me. At the end of the table, in the position of someone who was both the subject of the meeting and a participant in it.

Father Brolan spoke first, briefly, explaining the situation in the same order that Brother Evan and I had developed for presenting it: the document discoveries, the resonant interface, what I could hear

and what the system had shown me. He presented it without drama, in the tone of a man reporting operational intelligence to colleagues who needed to know it.

The Servants listened the way people listened when they were receiving information that required them to revise something they had believed for a long time. Carefully. With the occasional small stillness that indicated a particular piece of information landing.

When Father Brolan described the dome — the shield system, the full hemisphere, the generators around the city perimeter — Sister Trofer made a small sound that was not quite a word. Everyone looked at her.

"Seventy years ago," she said. "My teacher's teacher. She told a story about a Sister before her who had gone to the western wall of the Second Ring at night and put her hands on the stones and heard something. She said the wall sang to her." She paused. "Everyone thought she was being poetical." She looked at the table. "She was listening to a generator."

Silence.

"Very likely," Brother Evan said quietly.

Sister Trofer looked at me. She had the quality, when she looked at you directly, of someone assessing exactly how much weight to put on what she saw. "And you," she said. "You can hear all of it."

"All the parts I've developed enough to distinguish," I said. "My range is still limited. I've been here eight days."

"Eight days," she said. She looked at the ceiling, then back at me. "What does the fields work sound like? My lads."

"Two or three distinct tones depending on the shift," I said. "Patient. Very patient — it has a different quality from the weather work, more settled. The clay operations feel deliberate where the weather operations feel active." I paused. "Your senior operator — the one who's been on the longest—"

"Brother Joba," she said.

"His tone is the lowest," I said. "The deepest register. It's different from the others — more connected to the geological harmonics, as if

he's been working in the deep soil long enough that his interface has adapted to it." I paused. "I don't know if that's a real observation or something I'm constructing."

Sister Trofer was quiet for a moment. She looked at her hands, which were the hands of someone who had spent decades working close to the ground, or close to machines that worked close to the ground. "Brother Joba," she said, "has been on fields operations for forty years. He has told me more than once that he feels the soil differently than the others — that he can feel deeper than they can, but he never knew how to explain it." She looked at me. "You are telling me that what he feels has a sound."

"Everything the system does has a sound," I said. "To me."

She looked at her hands again. Then she looked at Father Brolan. "What are you asking us to do?" she said.

"For now," he said, "to know. And when the time comes — and the time is coming sooner than we would like — to be ready to do more than you currently know you can do."

"The Cupritesh forces," Sister Mya said. She had been listening from the beginning with the expression of someone building a structure in her mind, piece by piece.

"Yes," Father Brolan said.

"How long?"

"Two to three weeks now," he said. "Possibly less."

She looked at Sister Akasa. Something passed between them that was the communication of people who had worked alongside each other for years — not words, not even a specific expression, just the weight of a shared understanding.

"What do we need to know?" Sister Akasa said. To me. Directly.

"The dome," I said. "How it works, what it requires from you, how to hold it." I paused. "You've been holding the weather lens for years. The dome is the same mechanism at a different scale and with a different purpose. The chord is larger and the intention is different but the fundamental operation—"

"Is what we already do," Sister Mya said. Not a question.

"Modified," I said. "Significantly modified. But from the same foundation."

She looked at her hands on the table. Then she looked at the window — west, Gate Town visible in the evening light, the desert beyond. She looked back at me.

"Show us," she said. "When you're ready. Show us what it sounds like."

"I'm close to ready," I said.

"Then get the rest of the way," she said. It was not impatience. It was the voice of someone who had been doing something demanding for a long time and had learned that the way to get through demanding things was to focus on the next step.

Father Brolan closed the meeting.

In the corridor afterward, walking back toward the residential levels, Brother Evan fell into step beside me and said nothing for a while. We walked in the comfortable silence that had developed between us over eight days, the silence of two people who had been thinking about the same things for long enough that they no longer needed to fill the gaps.

"The pace has changed," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"Are you worried?"

He was quiet for a moment. "I am concerned," he said, which was his precise version of yes. "Not about your capability. About the time." He walked. "Eight days is not very long to learn what you've learned. Two or three weeks is not very long to develop what may be required." He paused. "But I am also—"

He stopped.

"What?" I said.

"Hopeful," he said. He said it with the care of someone choosing a word they had been avoiding because it was too large and had decided to use it anyway. "I have worked in this building for fifteen years, and I have always believed there was more here than we understood. More capability, more purpose, more of whatever the

founders intended." He looked at the corridor wall. "I have been right, as it turns out. What I didn't know was whether anyone would ever be able to access it." He paused. "Now I know there is someone who can. That—" he stopped again.

"That changes things," I said.

"That changes everything," he said. "Practically and—" he paused. "And in other ways." He looked at me with the specific warmth that he usually kept contained behind the professional manner. "You have been here eight days. I am already unable to imagine this Tower without you."

I did not know what to say to this. I was thirteen years old and eight days into a life I had not planned, and a man who had devoted his adult life to this building had just told me that I had changed it in eight days.

I said: "I'm still figuring out what I'm doing."

"I know," he said. "That's part of it." He resumed walking. "Come. Tomorrow we start on the dome configuration. Properly."

That night I sat at the writing table in the lounge for a long time.

The journal was open. I had been adding to both lists since I started it — the *what I know* and the *what I don't know* — and the balance was changing, the first list growing, the second list shrinking slightly but never quite as fast as new questions arrived to replenish it.

I added to the *what I know* list: *dome, eleven generators, hybrid mode, Succession Document conditions, Hollis's intent, Commanders' Conflict principle still relevant, Cupritesh forces assembling, two to three weeks.*

I looked at what I had written.

Then I wrote at the bottom of the *what I know* list, separately, underlined: *The Tower has been waiting to be seen. Now someone is seeing it.*

I sat with this for a while.

Below the tower, the city was going about its night. In the Second Ring, the Guard was receiving intelligence reports and discussing them in the language of military preparation. In the Third Ring, Mama was closing the tavern, or had already closed it, or was sitting up late the way she sometimes did when something was on her mind. In the dormitory two floors up, Tomas was asleep or reading or lying in the dark talking quietly to Dace about whatever eight-year-olds talked about when they were supposed to be sleeping.

Somewhere to the east, in a direction that happened to align with the only city I had ever known, an army was assembling.

And here, in a Tower built by people from another world, in a building whose warmth came from the core of the earth and whose light came from technology five centuries old, a thirteen-year-old boy who had grown up carrying scrap bags was in the process of learning to hear the voice of a system that had been trying to speak for a very long time.

I closed the journal and went to bed.

The fundamental tone was there. Closer to right than it had ever been since I arrived.

I am here, the Tower said, in its way.

I know, I said back. *I'm working on it.*

End of Chapter Eleven

The structural decisions: the chapter moves in two acts that mirror each other — the first act is the accumulated understanding (the operational floor experience, the dome knowledge, the generator ring, the Succession Document) and the second act is the consequence of that understanding arriving at pressure (the military intelligence, the tightening timeline, the senior Servants' meeting). The chapter's job is to be the hinge between the development arc and the crisis arc, and that hinge needed to feel earned rather than imposed. The pace-change is made explicit by the characters rather than just demonstrated, so the reader experiences it as something the characters are also aware of and responding to. Sister Trofer's story about

the Sister who heard the wall sing is a small piece of world-building that does emotional work — it retroactively validates something that was dismissed as poetical, and it connects the present moment to a long human history of half-perception, of almost-understanding. Brother Evan's *hopeful* is held until it's earned, and then said with care, which is the right way for that character to say it. And the chapter closes on the doubled awareness — Taryn seeing the city, the army, the family, all at once — before returning to the Tower's voice and the work that still needs doing.

12

The first thing I learned about the dome was that I could not hold it alone.

This was the lesson of the eleventh morning, attempted in the training room with full generator connectivity and Brother Evan behind me and the clear specific intention of finding out what the dome felt like when I reached for it directly. Not raising it — not yet, not in the training room, not without the full operational team. Just reaching. Finding the chord.

I found it.

It was immense.

The weather lens, in the supervisor's chair at the operational station, had felt like standing in the center of a large sound. The dome chord was like standing in the center of something that had not yet decided how large it intended to be. It was not painful — nothing in the interface was painful, exactly, though the intense sessions left their marks — but it was far beyond anything I had yet attempted in terms of sheer scope. Ten tones for the weather lens, each one a Servant's connection, each one knowable and manageable. The dome would require all ten tones and the system's autonomous manage-

ment layer and the generator network running in parallel and my own conducting presence holding the intention that unified all of it — and the full chord of it, when I found it in the harmonic layer and tried to hold it for even a few seconds, was more than my current capacity could sustain cleanly.

I held it for perhaps thirty seconds before it began to fray at the edges.

I released it before it could fall apart entirely. This felt important: releasing deliberately was not the same as losing the connection. I had learned this distinction in the past few days, the difference between a controlled exhale and a gasp.

"How long?" Brother Evan said.

"Thirty seconds," I said. "Maybe less." I looked at my hands. The tingling was present, stronger than usual. "I can find it. I can't hold it yet."

"What does it feel like when it begins to fray?"

I thought about this. "Like too many strings at once," I said. "Not like the strings are wrong — more like there are more of them than I have hands for." I paused. "With the weather lens I'm holding ten tones plus the system's response plus my own conducting intention, and it's manageable because the scope is limited. The dome adds the generator network and the autonomous management layer, and the scope—" I stopped. "The scope is the whole city. I can hear the whole city when I reach for the dome chord. Every generator position, every section of the perimeter. It's—"

"Too much information," he said.

"Too much at once," I said. "I can't attend to all of it simultaneously. When I try, the parts I'm not attending to start to drift."

He was writing. "What would help?"

I thought about it. "Practice," I said. "Obviously. But also—" I paused. "The Servants. When I'm conducting the weather lens at the operational station, the ten tones help me. Each operator is holding their section and I'm holding the coordination between them. The system does less solo work when I have ten people contributing." I

looked at the training room wall. "The dome might be the same. If I have a full team whose tones I can use — if I'm not generating the entire chord myself but conducting it—"

"The weight is distributed," he said.

"The weight is distributed," I agreed. "I think that's how it was designed. Not one resonant operator doing everything, but a resonant operator coordinating a team doing it. I'm not a replacement for the Servants. I'm the part that makes the Servants cohere."

He set down his pen. He had the expression he wore when something had clarified for him.

"The supervisor's chair," he said.

"Yes," I said. "That's what the chair was for. Not observation. Coordination."

"The chair has no interface pads," he said, "because the resonant operator doesn't interface the way the standard operators do. They don't push force through the system. They hold the shape of what the force is supposed to be doing and the standard operators generate the force."

"Like a conductor," I said. "Who doesn't play an instrument but tells everyone who does how the piece is supposed to sound."

He looked at his notes. "We need the full team," he said. "The dome requires practice at full scale, which means the operational station, ten operators, and the complete generator network." He paused. "I'll talk to Father Brolan and Sister Akasa about scheduling a full session."

"Today?" I said.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Today I want to understand your physical state. The dome attempt was more intense than our previous sessions. How are you?"

I checked. The tingling in my hands was fading. The pressure behind my eyes was present but not more than usual. The general background fatigue that had become a constant feature of my days here was perhaps slightly heavier than yesterday's equivalent. "I'm all right," I said. "Manageable."

"Tell me when it isn't manageable," he said. "Not after — during. The physical cost of this work is something we need to understand as much as the capabilities."

"I know," I said.

"Do you?" he said, not unkindly. "You have been pushing consistently since your second day here. I watch you in sessions and you always take the next step when I suggest it. What I want to know is whether you're telling me you're all right because you are, or because you want to continue."

I looked at him. "Both," I said honestly.

He accepted this. "Then the rule is: we continue when both are true and we stop when either is not. Agreed?"

"Agreed," I said.

What I did not tell Brother Evan — not immediately, not that morning — was that for the past two days something had been different in the way I heard Tomas.

Not heard Tomas the person. Heard the system's harmonics from the residential levels.

I had been aware for days that the Tower's sound varied by floor and by function: the geothermal pulse strongest in the deep levels, the agricultural harmonics present throughout but most distinct near the fields station, the weather operations recognisable from several floors away in the familiar tones of whoever was on shift. The residential levels had their own quality — quieter, less operationally distinct, the background hum of a building doing its continuous work without the overlay of active interface sessions.

But in the past two days I had begun to hear something else in the residential levels' harmonics. Something that was not quite operational and not quite background. A tone — one tone, singular and low, with the quality of the system becoming aware of something.

I had been trying to determine whether I was imagining it.

The problem was that it was loudest when I was near the dormitory levels, and it had a character that I kept trying not to describe

as *familiar*, because that description had implications I was not ready to follow. It was a tone the system was producing in response to something present in the building. Something the system was attending to, the way it attended to my presence when I was at an interface.

It was possible — it was more than possible, it was the obvious interpretation — that Tomas had potential.

Not merely the potential he had registered at the testing pillar, which had been high enough to bring him into the Tower's Service. Potential for the resonant interface specifically. The same thing I had, passed down the same family line.

I had not mentioned this to Brother Evan because I was not certain, and because the implications were large enough that I needed to be certain before I named them. I had not mentioned it to anyone.

But I thought about it. I thought about it while I was eating breakfast and while I was in sessions and while I was lying in the dark at night with my hand against the wall. I thought about what it would mean if the Hollis line had produced not one resonant operator but two, in the same generation, and what Tomas at eight years old might be hearing in the building around him that he had no framework for.

I thought about the conversation I needed to have with Father Brolan.

Not yet. Not while everything else was happening. But soon.

The morning of the twelfth day brought rain.

Not unusual rain — the Tower managed the weather, and rain was sometimes managed in, particularly in the growing season when the soil needed depth-watering that the surface humidity couldn't provide. But this was heavier than usual, the kind of rain that made the packed-dirt streets of the Third Ring turn to mud and kept the

market stalls from opening and gave the city an introverted quality, a closing-in.

I stood at the lounge window in the early morning and watched it fall on the mountains.

The rain on the mountains was beautiful in a way that should not have been possible given that the mountains were, apparently, not mountains at all. Knowing they were constructed had not changed what they looked like. They were still jagged and vast and specific in the way of things shaped by forces larger than human, and the rain moved across their faces in gray curtains that caught the early light and diffused it into something soft and general.

I thought about the aquifer below them.

Prael's data. A hundred and forty years of slow decline, starting around the same period as — I had been checking, in my sessions, trying to find what had changed. The system's operational logs were accessible to me now, in the way that many things were accessible to me now, as harmonics I could interpret rather than data I could read. The logs were not complete — nothing was complete — but they preserved enough to tell me that the geological source feeding the deep aquifer had diminished. Not a sudden change. A gradual reduction. As if something that had been flowing had been slowly constricted.

I did not know what. The system did not know what. The geological event — if it was an event, if it was not simply a natural shift in the deep rock — had happened below the level at which any operator had been able to investigate, and the system's own sensors in that region were degraded from their original accuracy.

This was the kind of problem that required working at depth that I was not yet capable of. In the training room, reaching for the dome chord for thirty seconds had been the limit of my current capacity. The deep geological work Prael described would require sustained operation at greater depth and with more precision than anything I had yet attempted.

I would get there. That was what the accumulation of these days was building toward.

But I thought about it on mornings like this, looking at the rain, aware that underneath the beautiful constructed mountains and the carefully managed farms and the city that had survived for five centuries in a place it had no natural right to survive was a slow problem that no amount of weather management could address, that only someone who could reach deep enough and hold steady long enough would be able to even assess properly.

Someday.

Not today. Today was the dome.

The door was open when I arrived at the training room.

Not the training room I had been using — a different one, larger, two doors down. I had not been in this one before. Brother Evan was inside with Father Brolan and Sister Akasa and Sister Mya, and they were standing around a document spread on the floor because there was no table large enough.

The document was the largest I had seen from the older records — a map, or what passed for a map, hand-copied from an original that must have been even older. It showed the city in an approximation: the Tower at center, the rings around it, and outside the rings, spaced at what appeared to be regular intervals, twelve small marks.

The generator positions.

"Come in," Father Brolan said without looking up.

I came in. Brother Evan moved aside to give me a view of the map. Eleven of the twelve marks had been annotated in his handwriting with observations and status notes. The twelfth, in the northwest, had a different annotation — not his writing, something more recent, in a hand I didn't recognise. I leaned closer.

Possible location — northwest of Gate Town, below current road surface. Third Ring construction records indicate a junction rebuild

in that area approximately 210 years ago. Excavation noted in records. Reason unclear. — T.

"Captain Taryce," Father Brolan said, seeing my attention on the note. "She looked through the Guard's construction records last night. The junction rebuild in that area is documented but the reason is described only as 'structural irregularity in the road surface.' The excavation went down approximately twelve feet." He paused. "Deep enough to have uncovered and potentially disrupted whatever was there."

"Or buried it more completely," Brother Evan said.

"Or buried it more completely," Father Brolan agreed. He did not appear troubled by the ambiguity. He had the quality of a man who had been dealing with ambiguities for a long time and had developed a productive relationship with them. "Captain Taryce is proposing an investigation. Carefully — not an excavation, not without understanding what we're looking for. But a probe, using the Guard's existing survey equipment, to see if there's anything detectable below the road surface at that location."

"When?" I said.

"She'd like to move quickly, given the timeline," he said. "Perhaps three or four days, once she's arranged the equipment and the personnel." He looked at me. "Can you tell, from the system's side, whether the generator is physically present at that location, even if it's been buried?"

I had been trying to do exactly this in my sessions. "I can tell that the system expects something at that position," I said. "And that the absence doesn't feel like destruction — it feels like disconnection. But whether that means the physical structure is intact and buried, or intact and moved, or intact and simply not connected for some other reason — I can't distinguish between those possibilities from the harmonic layer alone." I paused. "If I could be near the location — if I could put my hands on the ground in that area—"

"You'd be able to tell more," Brother Evan said.

"Possibly. The system speaks more clearly when I'm in direct contact with a surface rather than at remove."

Father Brolan looked at Sister Akasa. "After the dome session today," he said. "If Taryn has the capacity, and if Taryce can arrange access — a brief visit to the area. Hands on the road. See what he can hear."

Sister Akasa nodded, with the expression of someone who had been managing the schedule of the weather station for years and was now adding logistical considerations she had not previously needed to accommodate.

"Today's session," she said. She looked at me. "What do you need from us?"

"What you already do," I said. "The same work you do every day, at the weather station, with your hands on the pads. I need ten operators. I need everyone to follow my lead rather than their own instinct when the two differ — which they will, at first." I paused. "The dome chord is different from the lens chord. It will feel different to all of you. Larger. More demanding. I'll be conducting rather than contributing force, so everything the dome does will come through your connections, and that means I need you working with me rather than against me when the sound goes somewhere unexpected."

"What does working with you look like?" Sister Mya said.

"When you feel something pulling your connection in a direction you didn't intend — don't resist. Follow. Understand why after." I looked at her, then at Sister Akasa. "The interference patterns I've been hearing in the lens work — the small places where two operators' sections don't quite match. I'm going to try to reduce those today, by conducting the alignment rather than letting each of you find it empirically." I paused. "This means I'll be asking some of you to adjust what you're doing mid-session. It may feel wrong. It isn't wrong — it's a different configuration than you're used to."

Sister Akasa looked at her team — some of whom were in the room, some of whom were presumably already at the station

preparing for shift. She had the specific quality of a leader assessing whether her people were ready for a thing before committing to it.

"They'll follow," she said. Not to me — to the room, to Father Brolan, to herself, confirming what she already knew. "They're good operators. They'll follow if the direction makes sense."

"Then let's go make sense," I said.

The supervisor's chair at the weather operations station.

The view west, Gate Town visible below in the morning rain, the farms beyond invisible in the gray. The generator ring, eleven active nodes, the twelfth absent. The fundamental tone, the harmonic layers, the ten tones of the full shift arriving one by one as each operator settled into their position and put their hands on the pads.

I let the full system settle around me.

The operational floor at full occupancy was different from the days I had observed. Something about having the clear intent of working rather than watching — the system knew the difference, or I knew the difference and it changed how I heard the system. The ten tones were present and distinct and already I was making fine adjustments in my conducting attention, small nudges toward the alignment I wanted before we attempted anything beyond the normal lens.

"Good morning," I said to the room.

"Good morning," ten voices said, with varying degrees of attention and warmth. They had been told, at some point between Father Brolan's meeting and today's shift, that the session would be different. Some of them were already more attentive than usual, holding their tones with a slightly braced quality.

I began with the lens. Normal operations, normal configuration, nothing new — but I was conducting it instead of observing it, holding the alignment actively rather than waiting for them to find it. The interference patterns I had been hearing for days began, within

a few minutes, to reduce. Not eliminate — I did not have that precision yet, and ten operators with years of established habits did not shift smoothly in a single session. But the chord of the lens was cleaner than it had been. I could hear it, and from the quality of the tones I thought some of them could feel it too.

Brem's tone, third from the left, was already exactly where it needed to be. It had always been the most consistent. Today it was an anchor I could orient around.

"What are you doing?" Sister Mya said, from her position on the floor. She was not at an interface — she was managing, circulating, watching her operators.

"Adjusting the boundary coordination," I said. "The places where your sections touch. I can hear where they're not quite aligned and I'm pulling them toward each other."

"I can feel it," said the operator fourth from the right — the one I had identified as compensating, who I now knew was called Denn. "It's — easier. Like something's been—" he paused. "I don't know how to describe it."

"Like the door has been adjusted so it doesn't stick anymore," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Exactly that."

I held the lens for twenty minutes and let the team find the new coordination before I moved on.

Then I said: "I'd like to try something different. I want you to maintain your connections to the interface — keep your hands on the pads, keep the intention active — but I'm going to change what I'm asking the system to do with your force. Don't resist. Follow."

A beat of attention in the room.

"Ready," Sister Akasa said. She had moved to the edge of the operational area, close enough to intervene if anything went wrong, watching with the focused care she brought to everything.

I found the dome chord.

It was the same size it had been in the training room — immense, the scope of the entire city perimeter — but this time I was not trying

to generate it alone. I placed my conducting intention against the chord, the shape of what the dome was supposed to sound like, and I asked the ten operators' connections to fill it.

The tones surged.

Not out of control — not wrong — but ten people who had been managing a relatively contained operation suddenly found themselves contributing to something vastly larger, and the instinctive response to that was to reach for more, to push, and two of the operators did push, their tones spiking with the effort of trying to match what they were feeling, and the chord that was forming lurched toward something uneven.

"Don't reach," I said. "You don't need to. The system is receiving you already. Stay steady."

The two pushing tones eased back. The chord steadied.

I held the shape of it.

It was not the full dome. I was not attempting the full dome. I was attempting what Brother Evan had called a partial configuration — the dome chord, the correct shape, but formed over a limited area rather than the full perimeter. The northwest section, the area around Gate Town, a targeted portion. Enough to prove the principle without committing the full system to something I could not yet manage for more than thirty seconds.

The chord locked.

Outside the window, I saw nothing visible change — the dome was not visible, or visible only as a slight quality in the air that you would not notice if you did not know to look. But in the sound of the system I could hear it: the chord holding, the eleven generators contributing their force to the configuration, the shape of the partial dome a clear sustained note above the operational background.

"It's there," I said. "Hold."

Fifteen seconds. Twenty. The tones were steady, the dome holding, the chord ringing in the harmonic layer with the pure held quality of a note struck cleanly on a well-tuned instrument.

At thirty seconds the effort began to tell. Not dramatically — the

tones did not slip, the chord did not fray. But I could hear the cost accumulating, the slight intensification of effort in the operators' connections, and I could feel in my own conducting intention the beginning of the strain that I had felt in the training room.

I held it to forty-five seconds.

Then I said: "Releasing," and let it go.

The dome chord dissolved. The system fell back to its baseline operations, the ten tones settling into the lens configuration with the ease of returning to something familiar. Around the room, I heard a collective exhale — not dramatic, just the exhale of people who had been holding something and had put it down.

Silence for a moment.

Then Denn said, from his position: "What was that?"

"The beginning," I said, "of what this building can do."

After the session — which continued for another hour in normal lens operations, everyone needing the familiarity of ordinary work to follow something extraordinary — Sister Akasa found me in the corridor outside.

She looked at me with the assessment quality she had always had and said: "How do you feel?"

"Tired," I said. "The dome section was the limit of what I can sustain cleanly right now. Another ten seconds and it would have started to fray."

"But you held it," she said.

"We held it," I said. "I couldn't have held it without your team."

She looked at this for a moment, the way she looked at everything — directly, without the mediation of pleasantry. "When can we do it again?"

"Tomorrow," I said. "With a different configuration. I want to try the full perimeter — not sustain it, just form it and hold it briefly. See if the scope changes the nature of the challenge."

"It will," she said. "Larger is harder."

"Yes," I said. "But I need to know how much harder."

She nodded. She started to turn away and then stopped. "In the

session," she said. "When you reduced the interference patterns. The boundary coordination you described." She paused. "Denn — you said the door had been adjusted. His output today was measurably cleaner than any session I've observed him in." She looked at me. "How did you do that?"

"I heard where his connection was misaligned with the system's expectations and I held the correct alignment alongside it," I said. "The same principle as the fundamental tone. Not forcing. Just — presenting the intended version, clearly enough that the actual version could find its way toward it."

She absorbed this. "Can you do it for all of them? Simultaneously?"

"Not yet," I said. "I can attend to the most significant misalignments. The minor ones — I'm not precise enough yet. It requires attention I can't divide ten ways cleanly." I paused. "If the operator registry were open, and the system could see each of them, it could do some of this automatically. My job would be easier."

"Mm," she said. The sound of someone making a note without using a notebook. She turned and walked back toward the weather station, and I went to find Brother Evan.

He was in Father Brolan's office when I arrived, which meant the daily briefing had already started. I knocked and was admitted. Father Brolan looked at me and said, "Sit down," in the tone of someone who had already heard something and wanted to confirm it.

"The partial dome held for forty-five seconds," I said. "The full team, with the ten operators contributing. I could feel the limit — another ten seconds and the coherence would have started to go." I sat. "Tomorrow I want to try the full perimeter configuration. Just a formation test, not a sustained hold."

Father Brolan looked at Brother Evan. Something passed between them.

"What?" I said.

"Captain Taryce's intelligence report," Father Brolan said. He found a document on his desk. "This morning's. The assembly she

observed three days ago is moving. Not toward us — not yet. But the direction of movement is consistent with staging for a western approach." He looked at the document. "Her estimate has revised. Not three to four weeks."

"How long?" I said.

"Ten days," he said. "Perhaps twelve. The movement is faster than anticipated."

I was quiet for a moment.

Ten days.

I had held a partial dome for forty-five seconds, ten days before an army might be standing outside the city.

"The full perimeter," I said. "How long do I need to be able to sustain it?"

"The Guard's analysis," Father Brolan said, "suggests that the initial approach — the period before the army is fully committed to an assault — would be managed by negotiation. Standard practice. An envoy, an exchange of demands, a period of standoff. Days, possibly. Not hours." He paused. "But if negotiation fails and they advance—"

"I need to be able to hold the dome until they stop," I said.

"Or until they're convinced that it can be held indefinitely," he said. "Yes."

I looked at the map on his wall. The approach road from the west, Gate Town, the Third Ring wall. An army that numbered — the reports had said five to six hundred, well-armed, Cupritesh's standing professional force, accustomed to siege operations.

Against a dome that I had held for forty-five seconds.

"Ten days," I said.

"Ten days," he confirmed.

"I can do more in ten days than I've done in twelve," I said. "The development is not linear. The early stages are slow and the later stages accelerate as the facility deepens." I said this because I believed it and because I needed it to be true and the two things happened to be the same thing, which was useful. "I need to practice

the dome every day. Morning and afternoon if Sister Akasa's team can manage it."

"She'll manage it," Father Brolan said, with the certainty of someone who knew Sister Akasa.

"I need the twelfth generator," I said. "The gap in the northwest is a vulnerability I don't want to be managing in a crisis situation."

"Taryce is investigating today," he said.

"I'd like to go with her. To the site." I paused. "I can hear through the stone. If the generator is there, buried, I might be able to locate it more precisely than survey equipment." I looked at Father Brolan. "And I can tell whether it's intact."

He looked at Brother Evan. Brother Evan said: "Captain Taryce already suggested Taryn might be useful on-site. She asked this morning."

"Then go," Father Brolan said. "After you've eaten. Take a Guard escort." He paused. "And Taryn—"

"I'll be careful," I said.

"I know you will," he said. "I was going to say: take a coat. It's still raining."

Captain Taryce was a compact woman with the specific quality of someone who had spent many years looking at things professionally and had developed a gaze that was both evaluating and unsentimental. She had dark hair going gray at the temples, the kind of posture that came from a lifetime of physical readiness, and a manner of meeting people for the first time that consisted of approximately three seconds of very accurate assessment.

She assessed me at the Tower's east entrance, where she was waiting with two Guards and a leather satchel of survey equipment, in the rain.

"Taryn," she said.

"Captain Taryce," I said.

"Brother Evan tells me you can hear through stone."

"Through stone, yes. Through packed earth, less clearly. I don't know about road surface." I looked at the weather. "I've never tried in rain."

"Then we'll find out," she said, and turned and walked, and I followed, and the two Guards fell in around us with the practiced economy of people who did this routinely.

The northwest sector of the Third Ring was older construction — the junction Taryce had identified in the Guard's records was a wide crossing where two ring roads met one of the spoke streets. In the morning rain it was quiet, the usual morning market traffic absent, a few people crossing quickly with hoods up. The road surface here was the same packed-earth and flagstone composition as most of the Third Ring: serviceable, regularly maintained, unremarkable.

Taryce positioned herself at the junction and looked at it with the professional gaze.

"Here," she said. "The construction records indicate the excavation was centred at this crossing. Extended approximately eight feet in each direction."

I looked at the ground. Then I crouched and took off my gloves and pressed both palms flat against the wet flagstone.

The rain was cold. The stone was cold, which was the first thing — outside the Tower's influence, the stone did not have that characteristic warmth. I adjusted my attention, the way you adjusted to the specific pitch of an instrument that was tuned differently from what you were used to.

The system was still present. Fainter than inside the Tower, much fainter, the way a conversation was fainter when you moved from one room to the next with a wall between. But present.

I listened.

The fundamental tone, attenuated. The geothermal pulse, deeper and less distinct, but there. The generator network — I could feel the shape of it from here, the ring around the city, eleven active nodes—

And something else.

Quiet. Very quiet. Not active, not connected, not pulsing with the steady energy of the eleven online generators. But present. A dormant quality, the specific harmonic of a thing that had been designed to run and was not currently running — the sound of potential rather than action, the difference between a string held down and a string at rest.

It was below me. Not deep — not aquifer deep, not the geological depths I had been trying to understand. Perhaps fifteen feet down. Perhaps less.

"It's here," I said.

Taryce crouched beside me. "You can locate it?"

"Below us, approximately. Not more than fifteen feet." I pressed harder against the stone, trying to sharpen the impression. "It's intact. It has the same dormant quality as the other inactive systems — not damaged, just disconnected." I moved my hands six inches to the north. The signal shifted slightly, the way a sound shifted when you moved relative to its source. "Slightly north. Centre of the junction, or just off it."

I lifted my hands. They were wet and cold. I dried them on my coat.

Taryce was looking at the junction with the expression of a woman running calculations.

"Fifteen feet," she said. "At this depth and location, the road surface would need to be opened and the earth excavated." She looked at the surrounding buildings, the ring roads, the spoke street. "This is one of the main circulation junctions in the northwest Third Ring. Closing it for excavation—"

"Would be disruptive," I said.

"Very," she said. "And visible. In the current situation—" she glanced at me. "Father Brolan has indicated that discretion about certain activities is important."

"An army is ten days out," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Which makes it more important, not less. We

don't want activity that could be reported to people who are watching this city." She was quiet for a moment. "We could do it at night. Over three or four nights, working quietly."

"Is that enough time?"

"It would have to be," she said. She stood. She looked at the junction once more, then at me. "If I authorise the excavation and we find the generator — do you know how to reconnect it?"

I thought about the activation sequence I had used for the south-eastern generator. The power tests, the data tests, the bootstrap process. "The activation sequence is the same for all of them," I said. "If we can expose it and give me physical contact—"

"You put your hands on it," she said.

"Yes."

She looked at me with three seconds of the evaluating gaze. Then she said: "I'll arrange the excavation team. Tonight, if I can. Small — three or four people I trust." She picked up her survey satchel. "Can you come back tonight? If we find it, I'd rather not leave it open until morning."

"Yes," I said.

She nodded, the crisp efficiency of it encompassing both acknowledgment and dismissal, and turned to walk back the way we had come.

I stood at the junction for a moment longer, in the rain, with my hands at my sides.

Fifteen feet below the road surface of a junction in the Third Ring, an ancient machine was sitting in the dark, disconnected, waiting. It had been down there since the road construction two centuries ago had either buried it deliberately or inadvertently cut its connection to the surface. It had been sitting there through the bandits three years ago and through Taryn's missing Test and through Mama's tavern and through every person who had walked across this junction without knowing.

The system had known. The system had the position marked as

absent. It had been noting the absence, presumably, for two hundred years.

I cannot ask on my own behalf.

I put my hands back in my gloves and walked back to the Tower through the rain.

The afternoon was divided between a second dome session and a conversation with Father Brolan that I had been putting off.

The dome session was better than the morning's. Sister Akasa's team had had a few hours to adjust to the new coordination — a few hours in which, based on what I heard when they arrived, several of them had been talking to each other about what the morning's session had felt like, and Denn had apparently made a significant impression on his colleagues by describing the experience in terms they found more coherent than my door-adjustment metaphor. The result was a team that arrived for the afternoon session already more aligned, the interference patterns slightly reduced from where they had started that morning, the ten tones closer to the chord I needed before I had done anything.

The full perimeter configuration held for twenty seconds.

Not forty-five — the scope was larger, the generator network working harder, and twenty seconds at full perimeter was more demanding than forty-five seconds at partial. But twenty seconds was real. Twenty seconds was more than nothing. Twenty seconds was a beginning that could, with ten days of daily practice, become something sufficient.

I hoped.

The conversation with Father Brolan happened afterward, in his office, with Brother Evan present and the evening light coming through the western window. I told them about the tone I had been hearing from the residential levels. About the dormitory. About what I thought it might mean.

Father Brolan was very still for a long time.

"Tomas," he said.

"I don't know with certainty," I said. "But the tone has the character of the system recognising a potential resonant operator. The same quality as when the testing pillar registered me — a kind of attention, the system noting that something it recognises is present." I paused. "Tomas registered very high at the testing pillar. High enough that Father Ambrose paused."

"He rated exceptionally high," Father Brolan said. "I reviewed his test record when I reviewed yours. His score was the highest we had seen in — many years. We attributed it to the same bloodline that produced you."

"Which it is," I said. "But I think the bloodline didn't just produce two high-potential Servants. I think it produced two resonant operators in the same generation."

Silence.

"He's eight years old," Brother Evan said. Carefully.

"I know," I said. "I'm not suggesting we put him in a training room tomorrow. I'm suggesting we know what he is, so we can make thoughtful decisions about his development rather than putting him through the standard Initiate programme for five years and then discovering later that we've been doing it wrong." I looked at Father Brolan. "He's been in this building for twelve days. He's been hearing the Tower the whole time. I need to know if he's been hearing it the way I hear it."

"You want to talk to him," Father Brolan said.

"I want to talk to him," I said. "Not as his supervisor or as his Commander — as his brother. I want to know what he's been experiencing, because if it's what I think it is, then he's been experiencing something he has no framework for and nobody has been helping him understand it."

Father Brolan was quiet for a moment. He looked at his hands, then at the window.

"The cohort guidelines—" Brother Evan began.

"Are for children who need to bond with their year-group and separate from family attachment," Father Brolan said. He said it in the tone of someone identifying a rule and simultaneously identifying its limit. "Tomas has been bonding well — I spoke with his Initiate supervisor three days ago and she said he had integrated faster than expected, had formed strong friendships, was doing well." He paused. "The separation was to allow that. Not to prevent this." He looked at me. "Talk to him. Not officially — not as part of his training. As his brother."

"Tonight?" I said.

"After dinner," he said. "I'll arrange it with his supervisor."

I exhaled. I had not known how much tension I had been holding around this until it began to release.

"Thank you," I said.

"Don't thank me yet," Father Brolan said. "If you're right about what he is, what it means for his development — that is a conversation we are not prepared for and will need to have carefully." He looked at me. "One thing at a time. Talk to him first."

Dinner.

The dining hall, the usual sounds, the younger cohort at their corner table. I ate and did not look in their direction and focused on the food and on the conversation Sajay was having across from me about the afternoon weather session, which she had heard about from Denn, who had apparently been unable to stop talking about the door-that-didn't-stick-anymore.

"He described it as — he said it was like the difference between pushing a cart up a hill and pushing a cart on flat ground," Sajay said. "Same cart. Same hill. Just suddenly the hill wasn't there anymore."

"That's not quite right," I said. "The hill is still there. The path up it is just more direct."

"He also said you were conducting," she said. "That's the word he

used. He said it felt like being in something that was being conducted."

"That's closer," I said.

She ate some stew. "Can you do that for weather too? Not just the dome — for the regular lens operations. The daily work."

"I've been doing it this week," I said. "The interference patterns — that's conducting. Coordinating the alignment so the system can integrate your contributions more cleanly." I paused. "The daily work would improve significantly if the operator registry were open. The system could do some of the coordination automatically." I paused again. "But even without it, the conducting helps."

"Then stay," she said.

I looked at her.

"In the supervisor's chair," she said. "During operations. Stay in it and conduct." She said it with the simplicity of someone who had just identified a practical solution. "You don't have to be in the training room developing capabilities every moment of the day. Some of the development can happen in the actual operations."

"I'd be using the operational team as a training environment," I said.

"You'd be improving the operational team while you trained," she said. "Those are not mutually exclusive." She looked at me. "The lens has been measurably more efficient today than on any previous day I've been part of this team. That's not a side effect. That's the point."

I thought about this.

"I'll talk to Sister Akasa," I said.

"Good," Sajay said. She returned to her stew. "Also Denn wants to talk to you about what you heard in his connection. He has questions."

"Tell him to find me tomorrow morning," I said.

"He'll find you tonight," she said. "He's been waiting for this conversation all afternoon."

As if on cue, Denn appeared at my elbow with the slightly abashed energy of someone who had been hovering for the last

several minutes trying to find the right moment. He was younger than I had thought from his tone — perhaps twenty, twenty-one — with an open face that currently held the expression of a person who had felt something they didn't understand and had decided that not understanding it was no longer acceptable.

"Brother Taryn," he said. "I have questions."

"Sit down," I said. "And it's just Taryn."

He sat. He had a great many questions. I answered as many as I could, and the dinner table expanded to include Jarace and Prael and eventually Hest, and the conversation went on past the end of the meal and into the comfortable aftermath, the dining hall thinning around us, and I answered questions and asked them in return and thought about the conversation I was going to have later with Tomas.

His supervisor brought him to the small room near the younger Initiates' dormitory where visitors were received — a warm, low-ceilinged room with a few chairs and a table and the Tower's permanent amber light. She said she would wait outside and we could have thirty minutes, and closed the door.

Tomas sat down across from me and looked at me with Mama's eyes.

He had been in the building for twelve days. He looked like someone who had been in the building for twelve days: settled into the Initiate's routine, wearing the tan clothing with the ease of someone who had stopped noticing it, carrying himself with the small careful confidence of a child who had found his footing in a new place. He was fine. I could see that he was fine.

"You wanted to talk to me," he said. Not a question — he had been told, presumably, that I wanted to see him.

"Yes," I said. "I want to ask you something."

He waited.

"The building," I said. "When you're in it — in the dormitory, in the corridors, anywhere. Do you hear something? Something that isn't voices, isn't machinery, isn't anything you can identify. Just — a sound that's always there."

He looked at me for a moment. Then he looked at the table.

"Yes," he said.

My chest did something I did not have immediate language for.

"How long?" I said.

"Always," he said. "Since before we came here. I heard it on the walk to the Test. I thought it was — I thought everyone heard it." He looked up. "Don't they?"

"No," I said. "They don't."

He absorbed this. He had the quality that Tomas had always had when processing new information: completely still, like a bowl filling with water, making room for it.

"What is it?" he said.

"The Tower," I said. "The machines inside it. What they're doing. All of it, together."

"That's what the Servants do," he said. "With the machines."

"Yes," I said. "And some of us — a very small number — can hear the machines even without being at the interface. Even without touching anything." I looked at him. "I can hear it too. I've been able to hear it since I sat in the testing chair."

He looked at me. "Is that why you're different?" he said. "The other Initiates — they're not doing what you're doing. They said you work with Brother Evan by yourself."

"Yes," I said.

"Because of what you can hear."

"Yes."

He was quiet. He looked at the table again, the same still quality. I let him think.

"It sounds like music," he said. "Sort of. Not music like a song. More like—" he paused. "When Mama used to play the dulcimer badly and you would play the lute and the two sounds would be in the room at once and not quite matching. It sounds like that. But the dulcimer is very, very big."

I stared at him.

He looked up at my expression. "What?" he said.

"Nothing," I said. "That's — that's a very good description."

The dulcimer is very, very big.

He had the same interface. The same fundamental experience. Slightly different vocabulary — he had less musical training than I did, less precision for the tonal qualities — but the same underlying perception, the same awareness of the system as a sound-presence that pervaded everything.

Eight years old, twelve days in the Tower, no one had told him what he was hearing.

"Tomas," I said.

"Yes."

"I'm going to make sure someone talks to you about this properly. About what it means and what you can learn to do with it." I paused. "It will take time. It's not going to be the same as the other Initiates' training. You'll still do the normal things — you should, they matter — but alongside that, someone will help you understand what you're hearing."

He looked at me with an expression I couldn't immediately categorise. Then: "Will it be you?"

"Some of it," I said. "When I can. I'm learning it myself still." I paused. "But I'll be involved. I'll make sure of it."

He nodded once, the specific Tomas nod that meant: I have registered this and I will hold you to it.

Then he said: "The big dulcimer. It's not quite in tune."

"I know," I said. "I'm working on it."

He looked at me with the frank eight-year-old appraisal that he had always had, the look he gave things he was deciding whether to take seriously. He decided.

"Okay," he said. "Good."

We sat for a few more minutes and talked about the things brothers talked about: Mama, the tavern, whether the food here was really better, his friend Dace, the woman who ran his dormitory who was very strict about lights-out but had once, he reported with some satisfaction, been overheard singing to herself when she thought no

one was listening. I listened and asked questions and let the conversation be what it was: two brothers, in a building that hummed around them both, finding the new shape of their old closeness.

When his supervisor knocked to indicate time, Tomas stood and straightened his Initiate clothing with his characteristic small gesture, and looked at me.

"The big dulcimer," he said. "It sounds better than it did when I got here. Did you do that?"

"A little," I said.

He considered this. "Good," he said again, and went out the door.

I sat in the room for a moment after he left.

The Tower hummed around me, patient and warm, the fundamental tone present through the floor, the walls, the amber-lit ceiling. Less flat than the day I had arrived. Less flat than this morning. The accumulation of twelve days, held in the stone.

Two of us, I thought. Two in the same generation, from the same family, in the same building. Whatever Hollis had intended or not intended, whatever the contingency protocols had preserved through five centuries of genetic drift — it had given us this. Me at thirteen with twelve days of accelerating development. Tomas at eight with the whole of what he was hearing and the whole of what he could become.

Ten days.

The army would be at Gate Town in ten days, and I needed to be able to hold the dome, and the twelfth generator was fifteen feet below a junction in the Third Ring, and the aquifer was declining, and the operator registry was locked, and there was a child two floors above me who heard a very large dulcimer that was not quite in tune.

There was a very great deal to do.

I got up and went back to the Tower's main corridors, and the building was warm around me, and I went to meet Taryce at the junction in the Third Ring, and the rain had stopped, and the night sky above the Third Ring was clear and full of stars.

I put my hands on the cold stone of the junction and listened.

The generator was there. Intact. Waiting.

Not much longer, I thought at it, which was not a thing the system could hear, directed at a dormant machine that had no capacity for reception.

But I thought it anyway.

End of Chapter Twelve

The structural decisions: the chapter opens with the dome's first challenge — Taryn can find the chord but not hold it alone — which establishes both the capability and the limitation in the same beat. The discovery that the resonant interface is fundamentally collaborative (conductor, not soloist) is the chapter's central technical insight, and it reframes everything that's come before: the supervisor's chair, the ten-tones structure, the interference patterns. The military timeline revision — ten days instead of three to four weeks — arrives at the chapter's midpoint as the hinge that changes the pace of everything. The Tomas revelation has been building since the brief tonal observations mentioned in earlier chapters, and here it becomes explicit through direct conversation rather than inference, with Tomas's *the big dulcimer is not quite in tune* doing the emotional work of confirming not just the perception but the specific quality of it. His final observation — *it sounds better than it did when I got here* — closes the loop on the fundamental tone's gradual improvement while also giving Tomas his own relationship to the Tower's sound rather than simply reflecting Taryn's. The chapter ends at the junction with Taryn's hands on the cold stone, the twelfth generator present and intact, the quiet promise of *not much longer* directed at something that cannot hear it — which is both practically accurate (it can't hear) and emotionally right (he says it anyway).

13

The twelfth generator came out of the ground on the third night.

Taryce's team had worked quietly, four people with shovels and an understanding that what they were doing did not exist in any official record, across three nights of careful excavation. The first night had confirmed depth and position — I had come each night, put my hands on the exposed earth as the excavation deepened, tracked the generator's harmonic signature getting louder and more distinct as the distance decreased. By the second night we could feel the edge of something solid below the loose fill that had apparently been used to backfill the original excavation two centuries ago. By the third night they had it.

It was smaller than I had imagined.

I had been picturing something large, commensurate with what it did — a significant machine, architecturally present, the kind of thing that would explain why you would build a ring wall on top of where it was placed. It was the size of a large traveling chest. Made of the same material as the Tower's interface pillars, the silver-wrapped surface tarnished now to a mottled gray, but intact: no cracking, no

visible damage, the connections at its base and top sealed the way the Tower's workings always seemed sealed, against time rather than against any specific threat.

Taryce held her lamp close to it. Her face in the light had the expression of someone looking at something that required more categories than she currently had.

"That's it?" said one of her Guards, in the tone of someone who had spent three nights digging and felt entitled to an opinion.

"That's it," Taryce said.

I crouched beside it and pressed both palms against the tarnished surface.

The harmonic I had been tracking through fifteen feet of earth arrived with a sudden clarity, the way a sound arrived when you removed the wall between yourself and its source. Not dormant, I realised now — not the absence of activity but the presence of suspended activity, the specific quality of something that was ready to run and was not running because it had not been asked. The sequence I had learned: power connection test, data connection test, bootstrap.

Activate satellite generator twelve, I thought. *Western position.*

:Testing power connections,: the system's voice said in my mind, flat and immediate. :Done. Testing data connections. Done. Bootstrapping generator sub-controller. Please wait.:

Taryce was watching my face. She had learned, over the course of three nights, to read my expressions during interface contact — the specific stillness that meant something was happening, the slight variations that indicated what kind of something.

:Bootstrap complete,: the system said. :Generator twelve online. All generators operational. Full shield dome capability restored.:

"It's active," I said.

She exhaled — a controlled sound, not dramatic, the exhale of a person who had been managing a considerable amount of tension and had found a specific place to put some of it down. "Confirmed?"

"Confirmed. The system recognises all twelve." I took my hands

from the surface. The contact didn't end entirely — the harmonic of the now-active generator was audible from several feet away, a new steady note joining the ring of eleven I had been hearing all week. "Full perimeter. No gap."

She looked at the generator for a moment. Then she looked at me.

"Good," she said, which was a small word for what she meant, and she and her team began the work of covering it back up.

I did not sleep much that night.

This was not the productive wakefulness of someone thinking through a problem — I had developed that kind of wakefulness over the past two weeks, the useful alertness of a mind working on something while the body rested. This was simpler: I lay in the dark and listened to the complete generator ring for the first time since I had been able to listen to such things, all twelve nodes humming in their steady chorus around the city's perimeter, and I thought about the dome that was now available, that could now cover Alabaster from edge to edge without a gap, and I tried to decide how I felt about it.

The feeling was not what I would have expected. Not excitement, not relief — those were present, but underneath them was something quieter and more complicated. Something close to weight.

Eight days ago I had been a boy who had just arrived in a strange building. I had not planned any of what had happened since. I had not planned to hear the system's voice or find the satellite generators or understand the dome or become, in the system's terms, Commander Taryn with full authority over capabilities that had been dormant for centuries. I had not planned for an army to be ten days out from Gate Town.

The weight was the weight of the gap between what I could hear and what I could actually do, and how fast I needed to close it. The weight was ten days. The weight was that forty-five seconds of

sustained dome, multiplied by every practice session between now and the army's arrival, needed to become something that could hold against a siege.

I put my hand on the wall.

The twelve generators came back to me through the stone, the completed ring, the dome ready and waiting for instruction. The fundamental tone was there below everything, still slightly flat but approaching. Tomas was two floors up, probably asleep. Mama was in the Third Ring.

The city was quiet.

I took my hand from the wall and lay in the dark and breathed, and eventually something in the weight resolved into a simpler feeling: it needed to be done and I was the one who was going to do it, and the gap between where I was and where I needed to be was the work, and the work started at sunrise.

I slept.

The next morning, at breakfast, Brother Evan placed two documents on the table.

The first was the schedule he had drafted for the remaining days before the army's estimated arrival: morning dome sessions, afternoon operational sessions, brief training room work in between to continue developing specific capabilities, daily evening briefings with Father Brolan. The pace of it was more intense than anything we had done so far, which was already more intense than the early days. I looked at it and did not argue.

The second document was Captain Taryce's most recent intelligence summary.

She had, I was learning, an unusual intelligence network. The Guard's formal channels were supplemented by what she called her informal ones — merchants passing through Gate Town who carried more than goods, runners who knew the desert roads, and

one source she declined to name whose information she described only as unusually reliable and had never been wrong. The summary from this morning's report was precise and not comforting: the Cupritesh army's vanguard had made camp twenty miles west of Gate Town two days ago. The main force was a day behind. They were moving steadily, without apparent urgency, which Taryce noted in her dry prose meant they were not trying to arrive by surprise.

They wanted to be seen coming. They wanted Alabaster to have time to be afraid.

"She's requested a meeting," Brother Evan said. "Taryce. With you and Father Brolan and Collin." He paused. "Manager Collin handles the city's crisis preparations. Logistics. He'll have been working on the civilian side since the intelligence shifted to ten days. Food stores, movement of people into the Second Ring if necessary."

"Why does she want me there?" I said.

"Because the Guard's plan assumes certain things about what the Tower can and cannot do," he said, "and those assumptions were formed before you arrived. She wants to know what she can actually rely on."

"I'll tell her the truth," I said.

"That is, I'm certain, what she wants," he said. "Taryce has no interest in comfortable estimates."

The morning dome session went well and then went badly and then went well again, which was the pattern of development I was learning to expect: progress arrived in steps, and between steps there was a plateau that felt like failure until the next step appeared.

The full perimeter — all twelve generators now, the complete ring — held for thirty-two seconds on the first attempt, which was twelve seconds less than my previous best at partial coverage. This was exactly what I had told Sister Akasa it would be: more scope

meant more demand, and the demand exceeded my current capacity by a margin I had to acknowledge honestly.

On the second attempt, the ten operators had a better sense of what was needed, and I had a better sense of the twelve-generator chord rather than the eleven-generator chord, the difference subtle but present — a slightly different resonance in the full ring that the eleventh attempt at holding it made cleaner than the first. Forty-one seconds.

On the third attempt, with Sister Akasa quietly repositioning two operators whose sections were still showing interference, fifty-seven seconds.

We stopped there. I was at my limit — the telling sensation of too many strings, the quality of conducting that was about to stop being conducting and become struggling. I released cleanly. Sister Akasa noted the times in her records without comment.

In the afternoon session, starting from fifty-seven seconds, I reached one minute and twelve seconds.

After the afternoon session I sat in the supervisor's chair for a few minutes while the shift cleared out, and I did what I had been doing at the end of each session: I listened to the Tower, the whole of it, the full complex of systems that made up the building I was learning to hear. I listened for the changes, the incremental improvements, the slow tuning that was always proceeding even when I was not actively working at it.

The fundamental tone. Less flat again. Not dramatically — nothing was dramatic, everything was incremental — but measurably. The daily accumulation of twelve sessions in this chair, twelve days of contact with the system, twelve days of the resonant interface doing what it was apparently designed to do: not just accessing the system but gradually correcting it, the way constant attentive playing corrected an instrument's tendency to drift.

I had begun to think of the fundamental tone as a kind of measure. Not of my own development specifically, but of the whole project: the convergence of what I was becoming and what the

system was being reminded it was supposed to be. When the fundamental tone reached its intended pitch — when it stopped drifting flat and held cleanly — I thought that would mean something. I didn't know exactly what. But something.

I went to find Father Brolan's office, where the meeting with Taryce was scheduled.

Manager Collin was already there when I arrived, which I had not expected.

He was a tall man, older than Father Brolan but less aged in the specific way of someone who had been physically active all his life and whose body had not fully committed to the concessions of age. He had the manner of someone who managed large complicated systems with multiple variables and was comfortable in that environment — not at ease, exactly, since comfort suggested an absence of alertness, but at home in it, the way a river pilot was at home in complex water.

He looked at me when I entered and made an assessment. It lasted approximately four seconds and was thorough.

"Taryn," Father Brolan said. "You know Captain Taryce. This is Manager Collin, who coordinates city logistics and crisis management."

"I've heard about you," Collin said. He said it without any particular inflection, the way you said a fact. "Sit down."

I sat. Taryce was at the window — standing, not sitting, with a posture that suggested she had been on her feet all morning and intended to stay that way. She had a sheaf of notes and the leather satchel of maps I had seen at the junction excavation.

"I'm going to be direct," Collin said, which in my experience was something people said when they were about to be direct and wanted credit for it in advance. "We're seven days out. The main force is confirmed at twelve miles. We have approximately two days before they're in position to move on Gate Town." He looked at me. "The Guard's defensive plan assumes standard conditions: they hold the Third Ring gates, we absorb whatever breach occurs, we counter in

the streets, we make it expensive enough that they leave." He paused. "Standard conditions do not currently apply, because apparently this building has capabilities I was not aware of."

"I've been told the dome is available," Taryce said, from the window. "I've been told you can hold it. I want to understand what that means precisely before I build a defense around it."

"How long can you hold it?" Collin said.

"Currently," I said, "just over a minute. In a session with my full team."

Collin was quiet for a moment. Taryce turned from the window.

"A minute," she said. It was not quite a question and not quite not a question.

"Currently," I said again. I had spent the walk from the weather station to Father Brolan's office deciding to be completely honest about this. "I've been developing this capability for six days. The development is not linear — it accelerates as the facility deepens. A week ago I couldn't hold it at all." I paused. "At the current rate of development, in seven days—"

"At the current rate of development in seven days," Collin said, "you can hold it for how long? Practically."

I looked at the table. "Ten minutes. Possibly fifteen."

Another silence.

"That's not indefinite," he said.

"No," I said. "But it may not need to be indefinite." I looked at Father Brolan, who gave me the small nod that meant: tell them. "The dome, once raised, is partially autonomous. The automatic mode manages itself — it doesn't require me to conduct every second. What requires continuous attention is the initial raising and any manual adjustments afterward." I paused. "Once the dome is up and the automatic systems are engaged, the maintenance requirement drops significantly. I need to initiate it. I need to be available to modify it if something goes wrong. But I don't need to be actively conducting every moment it's running."

Taryce was looking at me with the focused attention she gave to

intelligence she was evaluating for operational reliability. "How certain are you of this?"

"Certain of the design principle," I said. "I've read it in the documents and the system has confirmed it in direct conversation." I paused. "Less certain of the execution, because I haven't raised the full automatic dome under actual conditions. I've raised the partial manual dome in practice sessions." I met her eyes. "I will not tell you I'm certain of things I'm not certain of. What I can tell you is what I know, what I believe, and what I don't know. You can plan around the honest version."

She looked at me for two seconds. Then she said: "Good," in the same tone Father Brolan used the word — precise, containing more than it showed.

"Tell me the rest," she said. "What you know, what you believe, what you don't know. All of it."

So I did.

I told them about the dome's automatic mode — the full hemisphere, the Tower at centre, the twelve generators now all active. I told them about the autonomous management: the system's capacity to detect physical force applied to the dome and redirect its resources to resist it, without requiring my continuous direction. I told them about the manual overlay — my ability to modify specific sections, create openings or direct force differently — which was the part I was less certain of and said so.

I told them about the interdiction. The hard programming that prevented the system from being used aggressively against human lives. I had tested this in conversation with the system, confirmed it, understood its limits. The dome could stop an army from entering the city. The dome could not be used as a weapon.

"Meaning the solar lens?" Taryce said.

"The lens—" I paused. "The lens is a manual application of the same system. The interdict prevents it from being aimed at people. At the ground near people — creating fire at a distance, a show of force — the system's position on that is ambiguous. It depends on

intent and precision." I thought about the conversation in the training room, the system's reluctant parsing of the difference between a deterrent and a weapon. "The documents suggest that a predecessor of mine — the original Commander — deliberately encoded the interdict. He considered it a feature."

"A feature," Collin said, in the tone of someone learning to file this information somewhere useful.

"He didn't want the machines used as weapons," I said. "He had reasons. I think his reasons were sound, in the context in which he was operating." I paused. "They also create real constraints for us. I can raise the dome and protect the city. I cannot use the machines to harm the army."

"We have archers for that," Taryce said, without irony.

"The dome would need to accommodate them," I said. "An army that can't enter the city and is being fired on from its walls — they'll bring siege equipment. Catapults. I need to know that the dome can hold against projectile bombardment."

"Can it?" Collin said.

"Yes," I said. "The documents describe resistance to meteorite strikes. A catapult stone is smaller than a meteorite." I paused. "Repeated bombardment will drain the generators' power more quickly than a passive hold. The system is rated for sustained bombardment, but there are limits I don't know precisely."

"Unknown limits," he said.

"Unknown precisely," I said. "Known broadly. The system will warn me if power consumption is approaching a critical threshold. I'll be in the supervisor's chair the entire time the dome is active." I looked at him. "I will know before the dome fails, if it's going to fail. I won't be surprised by it."

He looked at Father Brolan. Father Brolan looked back with the serenity of someone who had been managing complex situations for a long time and had found that serenity was the most efficient response to them.

"The Third Ring evacuation," Collin said. He spread his map on

the table — the city laid out, the rings, the approach road from the west. "We begin moving civilians from the Third Ring to the Second Ring tonight. We have done this before — the last time was three years ago. The procedure is established." He tapped Gate Town. "Gate Town will be cleared first. The people there know the risk of their location. Most will have already begun moving on their own when they see the army's advance."

"Will the Guard be protecting the evacuation?"

"The Guard will be managing the evacuation," Taryce said, from the window. "Not the same thing. We expect the evacuation to be orderly — people move themselves, the Guard facilitates and ensures nobody is left. The Guard's defensive positions go active when the army reaches the outer range." She paused. "If your dome is available when we need it—"

"It will be," I said.

"If," she said, with the precision of a person who had not survived this long by accepting assurances, "it's available, the Guard's defensive posture changes significantly. We shift from holding the Third Ring gates against a breakthrough to simply being prepared to counteract any force that gets through the dome." She paused. "The dome changes this from a defensive action we might lose to a defensive position we hold until they give up."

"Which they will," Collin said. "An army that can't enter a city, that's taking casualties from its walls, that has made camp in a desert with limited supply lines — they'll give up. Two, three days at most."

"Unless whoever sent them is more motivated than the Cupritesh king," Father Brolan said. He said it quietly, and the room adjusted slightly, the way rooms adjusted when something important was named.

"The intelligence from Onyx," I said.

Father Brolan looked at me. He had told me the outline of the Onyx situation — the organisation that had been watching Alabaster, the suggestion that the Cupritesh aggression was being manipulated

from outside. He had not told me everything. I could see from his expression that there was more he had not told me yet.

"The intelligence from Onyx suggests," he said carefully, "that the manipulation of the Cupritesh king is consistent with a pattern this organisation has observed before. Similar actions in other contexts, at other times. Someone who wants access to the Tower's capabilities and is willing to create a crisis to get it." He paused. "Onyx believes the goal is not conquest — it's access. Chaos sufficient to allow operatives to move through the city during the siege and reach the Tower."

"To do what?" Taryce said.

"To do whatever they believe can be done here," Father Brolan said, "by someone with access to these machines." He looked at me. "They may not know what the machines can actually do. They may have partial knowledge — old documents, rumour, second-hand intelligence. They may believe the Tower's full capabilities are accessible to anyone who sits in the right chair."

"They're not," I said.

"They're not," he agreed. "But if they believe otherwise—"

"Then the siege is a distraction," Taryce said. She said it with the flat recognition of someone who had heard this pattern before. "The army keeps us occupied, keeps the Guard focused on the western wall, and something else happens while we're looking the wrong way."

"Possibly," Father Brolan said. "Possibly not. We don't know the full shape of it." He looked at me. "What I want you to know is that the threat may be layered. The army is one layer. There may be another."

I thought about the chips on Misha's wrist. The communications that came through channels that shouldn't be accessible to people outside the Tower. Father Brolan had mentioned Onyx agents in the Tower — had implied, carefully, that he was aware of their presence. He had not told me who they were.

I still had not told anyone what I had seen.

I held this for a moment, measuring the cost of continuing to hold it.

"Father Brolan," I said. "Misha's wrist."

The room was quiet in a specific way.

"Tell me what you know," he said. His voice had not changed, but his attention had intensified in the way I was learning to read in him — the quality of someone who was receiving something they had been expecting and preparing for.

"The chips embedded in her skin," I said. "When she was settling me into my room on my first day, her sleeve pulled back. I saw them. Small and dark and permanent-looking." I paused. "You described people who communicate through channels that shouldn't be accessible outside the Tower. The Tower's communications system — I've been asking the system about it. It describes something called communication implants. Nanotechnology, placed near the spine, that allows interface without physical contact." I looked at him. "Are those what she has?"

The silence was longer this time.

"I had been hoping," he said, "to have a different conversation with you before this one." He looked at Brother Evan, who returned the look with an expression that said: it was going to come out sooner or later. He looked back at me. "Yes. We believe so." He paused. "Misha is one of our Tower's long-standing Stewards. She has been here for many years and has performed her role well and with genuine care for the people here. She is also, we believe, an agent of the organisation I mentioned — Onyx. Not hostile to us. But operating with an agenda that is not fully aligned with ours."

"For how long have you known?"

"Long enough," he said. "I have chosen to be aware of her presence rather than to act on it, because the information Onyx provides has been valuable and because the alternative — exposing her — would end the flow of that information without necessarily ending the relationship." He paused. "It is a judgment I have revisited regularly. In the current circumstances I am revisiting it again."

I thought about Misha: the warmth of her, the competence, the care with which she had stocked my drawers and explained the laundry chute. The genuineness of it, which I had registered from the first day as real rather than performed.

"She has genuinely cared about the people she works with," I said.

"Yes," Father Brolan said. "I believe so. The two things are not incompatible." He looked at the map on his desk. "The question of what to do about her — in the context of an incoming army that may be a distraction for deeper access — is one I have been sitting with since yesterday." He looked at me. "I will tell you my thinking. Misha and her colleague — yes, there is a colleague—"

"Marten," I said. The Head Steward, who had been in the Tower longer than Misha. Who had a mark on the side of his neck that I had glimpsed once and filed away.

Father Brolan looked at me steadily. "You notice things," he said.

"I grew up in a tavern," I said. "You learn to notice."

He almost smiled. "Yes. Marten. The two of them together represent the primary channel through which Onyx has been in contact with us. In the coming days that channel may become more important rather than less — if the siege is a cover for something more targeted, Onyx may know what the target is. They have been watching this situation from outside for longer than we have been aware of it." He paused. "I am not going to move against them. I am going to speak with them. Directly, in full knowledge of what I know about what they are. I would like you to be present for that conversation."

"When?" I said.

"Today," he said. "After this meeting."

Collin and Taryce exchanged a look. It was the look of two people who had been briefed on different portions of the same situation and were now, in real time, integrating them.

"The operational plan," Collin said, bringing the conversation back to what he could manage. He was someone who managed

things, and what he could not manage he set aside until it was manageable. "The dome, the evacuation, the Guard positions. I need to brief the city managers today about the civilian movement. They will have questions about what the Tower is doing — what I can tell them and what I cannot."

"Tell them the Tower is prepared to defend the city," Father Brolan said. "Tell them the specific capabilities are not public knowledge for operational security reasons. They will understand operational security." He paused. "Tell them to trust the process."

Collin did not look entirely satisfied with this but accepted it with the pragmatism of someone who had worked with Father Brolan long enough to know that incomplete information delivered with confidence was often more useful than complete information delivered with uncertainty.

Taryce had been quiet for several minutes, looking at the map. She looked up.

"The dome," she said. "When it's active — the archers on the outer wall. They can still fire out?"

"No," I said. "The dome in full automatic mode blocks movement equally in both directions. To allow the archers to fire, I would need to create apertures — openings in specific sections of the dome above the wall positions." I paused. "I believe I can do this. It requires manual attention — I'd be managing the apertures while the automatic mode handles the rest. It's one of the capabilities I'm less practiced at."

"Could you do it under pressure?" she said.

"In seven days," I said, "I will have practiced it."

She looked at me with the evaluating gaze.

"Good," she said. "Practice it tomorrow."

"I was going to," I said.

"Good," she said again, and went back to the map.

The conversation with Misha and Marten happened that same afternoon.

Father Brolan had asked them to his office with no explanation beyond the request, which he delivered in person rather than through a runner — a signal that the conversation was significant and that he wanted them to know he knew it was significant. I was already in the office when they arrived, sitting off to the side, which was another signal.

They came in together. Misha first, with the warmth she always carried, which I now read differently without entirely putting down — it was real warmth, I still believed that, but it was warmth that had been offered in a context I hadn't fully understood. Marten behind her, quieter, the Head Steward's habitual containment. The mark on his neck was visible above the collar: the same chips as Misha's wrist, smaller, set just below the jaw on the right side.

They saw me and registered the seeing without showing it. This was a skill, I noted. The specific skill of people who were accustomed to managing what they revealed.

Father Brolan waited until they were seated before he spoke.

"Misha," he said. "Marten. I have been aware, for some time, of the nature of your presence here. I have allowed that presence to continue because the relationship has been mutually beneficial and because I have believed, on balance, that you mean Alabaster no harm." He paused. "I am now telling you what I know because the circumstances have changed and because I believe honesty, at this point, is more valuable to both of us than the fiction of not knowing."

They were both very still.

"What you know," Marten said, after a moment.

"That you are agents of Onyx," Father Brolan said. "That you have communications implants that allow you to use this Tower's network without physical interface access. That the intelligence you have provided over the years has been accurate and has sometimes been helpful." He paused. "And that Onyx has an interest in this Tower that goes beyond observation."

Another silence.

Then Misha said: "How long have you known?"

"Long enough," he said. He did not specify further. "I'm not interested in accounting for the past. I'm interested in the present, which is an army assembling outside Gate Town and the intelligence that suggests the army is a distraction." He looked at Marten directly. "What is the target?"

Marten looked at Misha. The exchange between them was brief but containing a great deal.

"You should understand," Marten said, "that what I'm about to tell you is not something Onyx would have chosen to reveal under ordinary circumstances."

"I understand," Father Brolan said. "These are not ordinary circumstances."

"No," Marten said. "They are not." He looked at his hands. "The organisation that has been manipulating the Cupritesh situation — it is not Onyx. We have been watching it for several years. We call them the Reclamers, for want of a better term. They believe the old technologies should be recovered, centralised, and used to re-establish a unified authority over Achillios." He paused. "They are not wrong that the old technologies were once used this way. They are wrong that this would be beneficial."

"How many are they?" Father Brolan said.

"Unknown precisely. Several dozen at the core. A wider network of sympathisers and useful contacts." Marten paused. "They have partial knowledge of the Tower's capabilities — enough to believe that if they could access the operator interface, they could activate systems that are currently dormant." He paused again. "They are not entirely wrong about this, as I understand it."

He looked at me when he said this. Not with hostility. With the specific look of someone who had been watching a situation develop and was now in the presence of the development.

"What is their target during the siege?" Father Brolan said.

"The operator registry," Marten said.

Father Brolan's expression did not change. He was very good at that.

"They believe," Marten continued, "that if they can access the Tower's central interface — the main Chair on the operational floor — they can add themselves as recognised operators and access the full capabilities of the system. They have a partial document that describes how this is done." He paused. "The document is incomplete. They do not know that the registry requires Commander-level authorization to open. They do not know—" he looked at me again, "—that the Commander is already present."

I looked at him. He looked back, and in his eyes was something that was not quite an apology and not quite relief but contained elements of both.

"They're coming for the chair," I said.

"Under cover of the siege," he said. "Yes. They have operatives who have been in Alabaster for months. Positioned. When the army is at the gates and the Guard is occupied—"

"How many?" Taryce said. She had been standing against the wall since the conversation began, silent and present, and her voice now had the specific quality of someone filing a military assessment in real time.

"Three that we know of with certainty," Marten said. "Possibly five. One is in Gate Town — they will have left with the evacuation by now or will leave tomorrow." He paused. "The others are in the Second Ring. I can give you descriptions."

"Do that," Taryce said. "Now. Before you leave this room."

He did.

I watched Misha while he spoke. She sat with the careful quality of someone who had made a decision — the decision to do this, to give this information — and was managing the cost of it. The cost was what it meant for what they were to whoever Onyx was, for the relationship between Onyx and Alabaster and whatever came after this conversation. She sat with that cost with the specific dignity of someone who had decided it was worth it.

When Marten finished, Taryce nodded and left without ceremony to begin acting on what she had been given.

The room was quieter.

Father Brolan looked at Misha and Marten for a long moment.

"Why?" he said. Not accusatory. Genuinely asking.

Misha said: "Because if the Reclamers succeed, the thing Hollis worked to prevent will be recreated." She looked at me. "The thing you are learning to understand — what these machines can do, what they were made for — the Reclamers want to use it to do exactly what the original Commanders did. Power. Control. Making the technology serve a few people's ambitions at the cost of everyone else's freedom." She paused. "Alabaster has not done that. In five centuries, Alabaster has used these machines to grow food and manage water and keep people alive. Hollis built something worth protecting." A pause. "We have been protecting it, in our way, for a long time."

"Through deception," Father Brolan said. Gently.

"Through the only means available to us," she said. "Yes."

He was quiet for a moment.

"All right," he said. "We will have a longer conversation about this — about Onyx, about what you've been doing here and why, about what comes next. Not today. Today I have other things to attend to." He looked at them both. "For now: you will remain in the Tower, and you will be available to me, and if there is anything else you know that is relevant to the next seven days, you will tell me immediately."

"Yes," Marten said.

"One more thing," I said.

Father Brolan looked at me.

"The operator registry," I said. "The conversation we've been having about conditions, about the Succession Document, about how to do it correctly." I paused. "The Reclamers are coming because they think the chair can be used to open it. If we open it ourselves — properly, under the conditions Hollis described, with the governance structure — then the chair is no longer the prize they think it is." I

paused. "There's nothing for them to take if we've already done it the right way."

The room was quiet.

Brother Evan said, carefully: "That's a significant reason, but it shouldn't be the only reason."

"It's not," I said. "The reasons we've been discussing all along are still the reasons. The interference patterns, the calibration gaps, the feedback loop, the aquifer. Those are still the reasons." I looked at Father Brolan. "This is an additional reason. A timely one."

He looked at the window. The city was visible beyond it, Gate Town in the near distance, the desert beyond. An army somewhere in that desert, seven days out. Operatives in the Second Ring, already in position.

"I have been building the governance structure," he said. "The senior Servants' meeting was the beginning. The ongoing briefings, the daily involvement of Collin and Taryce — that is the structure Hollis described. Not a formal council but a collective judgment." He paused. "I believe we are close to the conditions he outlined."

"Then let's close the distance," I said.

He looked at me for a long moment.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Come to me tomorrow with Brother Evan and the documents and the proposal for how we do this. I'll have answers ready." He paused. "We should not rush it. But we should not delay it either." He looked at Misha and Marten. "This conversation changes things." He looked back at me. "Tomorrow."

I ate dinner that evening at the table with Sajay and Prael and Denn and Amil, and I told them some of what had happened — not all of it, not the Misha and Marten conversation, but the plan, the dome, the seven days, what was coming. They listened with the attentiveness of people who had been part of this in increments and were now seeing the full shape of it.

Sajay said: "What do you need from us?"

"Practice," I said. "Every session. Push me." I looked at Denn. "You and the team. Every time the chord starts to fray, hold a second longer before I call the release. Make me find the extra capacity."

He nodded with the earnest competence he had shown since the door-that-didn't-stick session. "We'll push," he said.

Prael said: "The aquifer."

"Not in seven days," I said. "After."

She accepted this. She always accepted necessary prioritisation without drama, which was one of the things I valued most about her. She would come back to the aquifer. The aquifer would be there.

Amil, who had been reading through dinner as she sometimes did, looked up. "The documents I've been working through," she said. "There's a section I've been trying to translate that I think is about what happens when the dome is raised and the system is running at full capacity. The experience for the operator. I'll have a fuller translation by morning."

"Bring it to the briefing," I said.

She looked back down at her book. Sajay was watching me with the specific attention she used when she was thinking about someone rather than at them.

"You're worried," she said.

"I'm aware of gaps," I said.

"Gaps you can close in seven days?"

"Most of them," I said. "The ones that matter."

She was quiet for a moment. "I've been thinking about the choir metaphor," she said. "The one where we're warmed up together but the system can't see us. You've been conducting us this week — reducing the interference, improving the alignment. The chord is cleaner than it was." She paused. "What does the choir sound like to you now?"

I thought about the afternoon session. The full perimeter dome at one minute and twelve seconds, the twelve generators all online,

the tones of Sister Akasa's team fitting together with more precision than the week before.

"Better," I said. "Getting better." I paused. "Not what it will sound like when the registry is open and the system knows who you all are. But approaching it." I looked at the table. "It sounds like people who've been rehearsing. Who know the piece and know each other. Who still need the conductor to hold the full shape together, but who are almost at the point where the shape is in them and the conductor is just reminding them of what they already know."

Sajay listened to this. Then she smiled — the real, quick smile she had, the one that appeared when something satisfied her.

"Then the conductor had better be ready," she said.

"I'm working on it," I said.

That night I wrote in the journal.

The *what I know* list had grown substantially. The *what I don't know* list had shortened, but not as fast — new questions generated by new knowledge continued to arrive faster than old questions were answered, which I had decided was the appropriate condition of someone learning something real rather than something rehearsed.

I added to the *what I know* list: *Generator twelve, reconnected. Full perimeter, no gap. Dome configuration practice, seven days. Reclamers, the siege as distraction. Misha and Marten, Onyx, their reasons. The registry, the conditions, tomorrow.*

I looked at the list.

Then I wrote, at the bottom, separately, as I had written other things separately when they were too large for the categories above:

Tomas said the big dulcimer is not quite in tune. He said it's better than when he got here. Eight years old. The same thing I hear. The same family. The same building. Whatever comes next, there are two of us.

I closed the journal.

The Tower hummed. The twelve generators made their quiet ring around the city, the completed circuit, the dome waiting to be asked. The fundamental tone ran through the stone under my hand — I had not placed my hand on the wall, but I could hear it without the wall now, just from being in the room, which was new. A few weeks ago I had needed physical contact. Now the sound was simply present.

Still slightly flat.

But getting there.

14

I woke an hour before the sconce brightened and lay in the dark listening to the generators.

All twelve of them now, the completed ring, each one a distinct low note in the harmonic layer that I had been hearing with increasing clarity over the past two weeks. The chord they made together was different from the eleven-generator chord — more settled, more stable, the way a table with four legs was different from a table with three. Not more powerful, exactly. More itself. The configuration it had been designed to produce, finally whole.

I had been lying awake for twenty minutes and I was not certain I had slept well. There was too much in the day ahead for sleep to come cleanly: the dome session, the registry conversation with Father Brolan, the aperture practice Taryce had requested, Amil's translation of the operator experience document. And underneath all of it, the knowledge that in approximately seven days an army would be in position outside Gate Town, and everything I had been developing over the past two weeks would either be sufficient or it would not.

I had been careful, in the weeks since I arrived, not to perform confidence I did not have. It was one of the things Brother Evan had

said, early on, that had stayed with me: *tell me the truth about where you are, not where you wish you were.* I had tried to do that consistently. With him, with Father Brolan, with Taryce.

I was trying to do it now, alone in the dark, with no one to perform for.

Where I was: the dome held for just over a minute. Apertures — the ability to open sections of the dome for the archers — I had not yet practiced at full scale. The registry was not open. The Reclamers had operatives in the city. The twelfth generator was online but I had never used it in a real session, only in the test at the junction. The fundamental tone was less flat than when I arrived but not yet at its intended pitch. I was thirteen years old and had been in the Tower for sixteen days.

Where I needed to be: sufficient.

The gap between those two things was seven days. And a great deal of work.

I got up.

The document Amil had promised was waiting at the breakfast table, folded with her characteristic precision, my name on the outside in her small exact handwriting.

I read it while I ate.

The library Servant's translation was marked throughout with her usual bracketed alternatives and question marks, but the sections Amil had flagged as most relevant were clearer than most of what I had read in the older documents. She had underlined two passages in her own ink:

When the shield dome is raised at full deployment, the Commander operator will experience a significant expansion of perceptual scope. The installation's full sensor range becomes available: atmospheric conditions, ground-level movement, the position and character of forces within and outside the perimeter. This

expanded perception is not passive — it requires the operator's active attention to interpret correctly. Operators report that the first experience of full deployment is disorienting; familiarity reduces this effect but does not eliminate it entirely.

I sat with this. An expansion of perceptual scope. The dome as not just a barrier but a sensing system — the system showing me the city and everything around it through the same harmonic channel I already used. I had not encountered this in my practice sessions because I had been raising partial configurations, limited deployments. The full automatic dome, apparently, was different in kind as well as degree.

The second passage:

The primary risk during sustained full deployment is operator fatigue of a specific kind: not physical exhaustion but perceptual overwhelm. The scope of information available through the full dome exceeds what most operators can process comfortably for extended periods. Operators should be trained to selectively attend — to receive the full perceptual field without attempting to consciously process all of it simultaneously. The analogy of peripheral vision is useful: awareness without focus, readiness without strain.

I read this twice.

Peripheral vision. Awareness without focus.

I had been developing exactly this capacity over the past two weeks, without knowing what it was for. The ability to hold the full harmonic complex of the building without being submerged by it — the daily practice of sitting in the supervisor's chair and letting the sound be present without attending to every part of it. The meditation I had developed at night, listening to the generators and the fundamental tone and the operational harmonics without trying to parse each one individually.

I had been practicing the thing the full dome required, in ignorance of the fact that I was practicing it.

I did not know whether to find this reassuring or alarming. I settled on useful.

I folded Amil's document, pocketed it, and went to find Brother Evan.

The morning session began differently.

I had asked Sister Akasa the night before whether we could run the session with all twelve generators active from the start — I wanted the full chord, not the familiar eleven-note version. She had arranged it. When I sat in the supervisor's chair and the team settled into their positions and the tones rose into my awareness, the chord was different: the new note from generator twelve lower and steadier than I had expected, sitting in the harmonic structure like a foundation stone that had always been missing and was now present, changing the quality of everything above it.

I held the chord. I let the team come to alignment, conducting them toward it the way I had been doing all week, and they came faster now — Denn finding his position with noticeably less effort than a week ago, the older Servants settling with their characteristic ease, even the newest operators more confident than they had been. The interference patterns were reduced to a fraction of what they had been on the first morning.

"Full perimeter," I said.

The tones deepened. All twelve generators contributing, the ring complete, the chord expanding from the lens configuration to the dome configuration in the way I had been learning: not a larger version of the same thing, but a fundamentally different shape. The dome was not a weather lens expanded. It was its own structure, its own chord, and the shift from one to the other required a specific movement of intention that I was only beginning to make cleanly.

The dome formed.

I held it.

Thirty seconds. The familiar pressure, the too-many-strings quality beginning at the edges. I pushed past it.

Forty-five seconds. Better than the full-perimeter attempts earlier in the week. The twelfth generator was contributing in a way I had not felt before — not just adding its note to the ring but somehow anchoring the chord, completing a structure that had been slightly unstable without it.

One minute.

I became aware, at one minute, of something new.

The document had said: expanded perceptual scope. I had not experienced this in partial sessions. But at full deployment, with all twelve generators, something in the harmonic layer opened.

The city.

Not visually — I was not seeing through the Tower's walls, not receiving images. It was more like the way I could hear the weather station's operations from two floors below: not specific detail, but presence and character, the broad fact of something's quality rather than its particular contents. I could feel the city around the Tower. Not Gate Town specifically, not individual streets, but the presence of the civilian population, the Guard positions on the walls, the open approaches from the west. The dome extended over all of it and in extending it was showing me the shape of what it covered.

I held this for another twenty seconds, working to apply what the document had described: peripheral awareness, not focused attention. The city present at the edges of my perception without demanding to be parsed.

At one minute twenty-three seconds I released the dome.

Not because I had hit the limit. Because I wanted to do it cleanly rather than push to the point of fraying.

The room was quiet for a moment.

"One twenty-three," Sister Akasa said, from the floor. She had a small notebook she had been keeping times in. She said the number with the specific flatness of someone presenting data and not attaching interpretation to it yet.

"The perceptual expansion," I said. "The document Amil gave

me — it describes the dome as a sensing system as well as a barrier. I experienced it today for the first time."

"What did you experience?" Brother Evan said, from his position near the back of the room.

"The city," I said. "Not in detail. The broad shape of what the dome is covering." I paused. "It will be useful during a siege. I'll know where force is being applied against the dome, where the army is concentrated. I won't be operating blind."

"Can you attend to that while conducting?" he said.

"That's what I need to practice," I said. "Today."

We ran the session three more times that morning.

The second attempt: I held the dome and practiced the selective attending. Not the city-awareness, which I was still finding disorienting at the edges, but the apertures. I asked for two sections of the dome to open — specifically above the outer wall's northern and southern archers' positions — while the rest of the dome held. This required a split attention I had not practiced before: maintaining the full dome chord while simultaneously sustaining two specific gaps in it, the musical equivalent of holding a sustained chord while leaving two notes out and bringing them back in on demand.

It was difficult. The dome held. The apertures formed, held for approximately forty seconds, and then one of them slipped and closed when I lost the specific note configuration for it. I opened it again. The whole configuration lasted one minute and eight seconds before I released cleanly.

"I can do it," I told Sister Akasa. "The apertures. It needs more practice but the principle is established."

"Two apertures," she said. "How many positions does the Guard need?"

I looked at Taryce, who had appeared at some point during the session and was standing against the inner wall with her arms folded.

"The outer wall has eight archer positions that matter," she said. "Northern run, southern run, and the main gate above Gate Town. You'd need at least four apertures, probably six to be safe."

I looked at the ceiling. Six apertures while holding the full dome chord.

"By the time the army is in position," I said.

"Seven days," she said.

"I'll have it," I said.

She looked at me with the evaluating gaze.

"You said the same thing about the dome itself," she said.

"And I have it," I said.

She looked at the time Sister Akasa had written in her notebook. Then she looked at me.

"Seven days," she said, and left.

The registry conversation was that afternoon.

Father Brolan's office, Brother Evan and I, the documents. The Succession Document's conditions. The governance structure Father Brolan had been building. The operational case I had made the day before. The urgency of the Reclaimers and the additional reason that pre-empting the prize was better than defending it.

It lasted two hours.

The structure Father Brolan had determined, modelled on what Hollis had described:

The decision to open the registry had been made collectively — by Father Brolan himself, representing the Tower's leadership; by Collin and Taryce, representing the city's governance and defense; by the senior Servants, who had been briefed and whose support had been unanimous. No single person had decided alone.

The process for adding new operators would require Father Brolan's authorisation in addition to my technical ability to execute it. The system would confirm the addition, but the decision to add would be made by human judgment with human oversight.

This was Hollis's principle applied: the resonant operator as technical instrument, not sole authority. The Commander's access

held in check by the governance structure of the community it served.

"One more condition," Father Brolan said. "When you add an operator, you record the reason and the circumstances. Not for the machine's purposes — for ours. Human accountability separate from the machine's record."

"Agreed," I said.

"And the registry process itself," he said. "How does it work? What do I need to understand about it?"

I described what the system had shown me: the Commander-level authentication, the operator's biological presence at an interface (which the system used for its recognition process), the rank assignment which was my judgment to make but would be informed by the Servant's known capability and experience. The system would complete the formal record. The human governance structure had already made the decision before the machine did.

"You've thought about this carefully," Father Brolan said.

"I've had time to think," I said. "In the dark, before the sconce brightens."

He almost smiled.

"Brother Evan," he said. "Your thoughts."

"I believe the conditions are met," Brother Evan said. "Not perfectly — nothing is ever perfectly prepared. But the conditions Hollis described are present in spirit and in structure. The risk he was trying to prevent — centralised power in one person's hands — is addressed by what we've built." He paused. "And the benefits are real and immediate and have been real and immediate for some time. The interference patterns on the weather station. The calibration gaps. Prael's aquifer data." He paused. "We've been waiting for the right moment. I believe we're in it."

Father Brolan looked at his hands.

"When?" he said.

"Tonight," I said. "Before anything else changes."

He looked at me for a long moment.

"Tonight," he said. "After evening briefing. In the weather station, with the full senior team present. Everyone who has been part of this decision should witness it."

"Who do we add first?" Brother Evan said.

Father Brolan looked at him. Then at me.

I said: "You."

The evening briefing was attended by more people than any previous briefing: Father Brolan, Manager Collin, Captain Taryce, Sister Akasa, Sister Mya, Sister Trofer, Brother Tomlin, the senior food processing Servants, Brother Evan. I sat at the end of the table in Father Brolan's office with the specific awareness of someone who was about to change something permanent.

Collin reported on the civilian evacuation, which was proceeding ahead of schedule. The Third Ring's population had been responding to the word of the army's approach — first as rumour, now as confirmed news — with the organised anxiety of people who had been through this before and had procedures for it. The guild halls in the Second Ring were being opened. Ration block distribution was underway. The Guard was managing the movement of people through the inner gates.

Taryce reported on the military picture. The vanguard was confirmed at eight miles. The main force at eleven. Movement was consistent with a planned arrival in five to six days rather than seven — they had picked up pace.

Five to six days.

She said it without particular emphasis, which was her way of giving difficult information: the information was what it was, and inflection did not change it.

"The dome timeline," Father Brolan said. He looked at me.

"I can hold the full perimeter for approximately ninety seconds," I said. "Based on current development I expect to be at four or five

minutes by the time they arrive, which with the automatic mode should be sufficient for the initial engagement." I paused. "The apertures — I need three more days of practice to be confident at six positions. With five days instead of seven, I'll have two more days than I need."

"The automatic mode," Taryce said. "You've described it but I want to understand the failure mode. If you're incapacitated — if something happens to you personally during the siege—"

"The automatic mode can run without me," I said. "Once it's raised and I've engaged the automatic systems, the dome will continue on its own. It won't be adjustable — no apertures, no manual modifications — but it will hold." I paused. "I'm the initiating instrument. Not the only thing keeping it up."

She absorbed this. "Good," she said. "That's the right design."

Father Brolan moved through the rest of the briefing items: the Reclaimers' operatives, three of whom Taryce had now identified and was monitoring; Misha and Marten, who had been formally acknowledged as Onyx agents and were cooperating; the Onyx intelligence on the Reclamers' plan, which confirmed the tower as the target and Gate Town as the cover.

"Before we conclude," Father Brolan said. "There is one more item."

The room gave him the specific quality of attention it gave to significant things.

"We are going to open the operator registry tonight," he said. "The decision has been made collectively, under the conditions I believe Hollis intended. The purpose is to give the Tower's Servants the formal recognition in the system that their years of work have deserved, and to give the system the ability to see and coordinate the people who operate it." He paused. "This will change how the Tower works. The improvements will not be immediate — Taryn will need time to formally process each Servant — but the change begins tonight." He looked at me. "Taryn will proceed to the weather station after this briefing. I ask that all senior Servants accompany him."

The room was quiet with the quality of people receiving something they had been moving toward for a while and had not known precisely when it would arrive.

Sister Akasa said: "About time."

Several people laughed. It was the right laugh — the laughter of tension released rather than tension mocked, the laughter of people who had been working carefully toward something and were finally here.

Sister Trofer said: "Forty years," in the tone of someone not complaining but noting a fact. "Forty years I've been talking to those machines and they never knew my name."

"They will tonight," I said.

The weather station at night had a different quality from the daytime sessions.

The night shift was on — a smaller team, five operators rather than ten, managing the overnight lens with the practiced ease of people who had done this particular shift enough times that it was as natural as breathing. They looked up when the full senior roster arrived and made the small adjustments of people who were not expecting a crowd and were recalibrating.

"Carry on," Sister Akasa told them. "We're here for something else. Don't let us interrupt the lens."

I went to the supervisor's chair. Father Brolan stood behind and to the right. Brother Evan to my left. Sister Trofer and the others ranged around the room, the witness aspect of this recognised and honoured.

I placed my hands on the chair's arms — no pads there, none had ever been there, the chair designed from the start for someone who did not need them — and the fundamental tone arrived, as it always did, the slightly-flat hum of the system's baseline. The five night-shift

operators were present in the harmonic layer, their tones quiet and steady.

I asked the system: *I need to add a recognised operator. Enable the registry for additions.*

The response was immediate: :Registry enabled. Commander-level authorisation confirmed. Awaiting operator introduction.:

"Brother Evan," I said. "Put your hands on the nearest interface pad."

He walked to the operator position at the far left of the weather station — it was unoccupied, the night team using only five of the ten positions — and placed his hands on the bronze discs. His tone arrived in my awareness immediately: I had heard it before, in the training room, in discussions, in the background texture of the Tower whenever he was nearby. It had a specific character I knew well: careful, precise, intellectually attentive, the tone of someone who paid close attention to things.

To the system: *This is Brother Evan. He has been a Servant of this installation for fifteen years. He has demonstrated consistent ability at weather operations and has studied all operational systems more broadly than any active Servant I have encountered. His rank is Lieutenant Commander.*

:Biological signature detected,: the system said. :Processing. Complete. Lieutenant Commander Evan registered as recognised operator. Access parameters updated.:

I felt the change in his tone.

It was not dramatic. It was the specific small shift of something slotting into a position it had been designed for — the door-that-didn't-stick becoming a door that opened cleanly. His tone in the system's harmonic layer became more distinct, more settled, the specific quality of something the system could now see and respond to precisely rather than processing anonymously.

Brother Evan's hands were still on the pads. He was very still.

"Can you feel it?" I said.

After a moment: "Yes," he said. "It feels—" he paused. "More real.

Like the connection has weight. Like the system is—" he stopped. He took his hands from the pads and stood for a moment.

He turned to face the room. His expression was the one I had seen in fragments over the past weeks — the one he usually kept contained — and tonight he was not containing it. Something in his face that was relief and grief and gratitude and something else that did not have a clean name: the feeling of being seen, after a long time of being present but invisible.

"Welcome, Lieutenant Commander Evan," I said.

He said nothing. He put his hand flat against the stone wall beside the operator station and held it there for a moment, the same gesture I had used on my first night, the same gesture of contact and attention.

Then he straightened and stepped back.

"Next," he said, quietly.

We added six more that night.

Sister Akasa, who had been managing the weather station for twelve years and accepted the rank of Lieutenant Commander without ceremony, as she did most things, though I noticed her close her eyes for a moment after the registration was complete. Sister Mya, Lieutenant. Sister Trofer, who had spent forty years in the fields station and whose recognition by the system produced a sound in the harmonic layer I had not heard before — a deep, satisfied resonance, the specific tone of a system recognising someone it had been waiting for — Lieutenant Commander. Brother Tomlin, the structural maintenance Servant, Lieutenant. And two of the senior food processing Servants who had been doing their work in quiet competence for years, both registered as Lieutenants.

Each time, the same small shift: the operator's tone becoming more distinct, more certain, the system's response to them sharpening from anonymous and approximate to specific and precise.

Each time, the same quality in the operator's face when they removed their hands from the pads: something released that had been quietly held.

After the seventh registration, Father Brolan said: "That's enough for tonight. The others tomorrow." He looked around the room. "Sleep. We have work ahead."

The senior Servants began to move toward the corridor, quieter than they had arrived. Not subdued — the quiet of people who had received something and were carrying it carefully.

Sister Trofer stopped beside my chair.

"Forty years," she said again. Then: "The lads will feel it tomorrow. When they're at their pads." She looked at me with her direct assessing gaze. "Will you tell them what happened, or shall I?"

"You," I said. "You know them better than I do."

She considered this and found it acceptable. "Right," she said. "Get some sleep, young Commander."

She walked out, and I listened to the night shift's quiet operations, the five tones now slightly different from how they had been before — not because anything in the operators had changed, but because the system's relationship to them had changed, and that relationship was part of what I heard.

Father Brolan remained. He stood at the window, looking west, the city quiet below in the late-night dark.

"How does it feel?" he said.

"Correct," I said. "It feels like something that should have happened a long time ago and has finally happened."

"Yes," he said. "That's about right." He turned from the window. "Get some sleep, Taryn. Tomorrow is going to be demanding."

He left.

Brother Evan lingered. He had been at the far end of the room since his registration, and now he came and stood beside the supervisor's chair. He looked at the interface positions, the pads, the windows, the farms invisible in the dark.

"Fifteen years," he said. "I have been doing this work for fifteen

years and the system never knew it was me." He was quiet. "I knew the system was receiving my intentions. I knew I was affecting the operations. But I always assumed the — the anonymity of it was simply the nature of the thing. That it was designed to work with anyone who touched the pads, without preference or recognition."

"It was working with the best it had," I said. "Given what it had to work with."

He looked at me. "And now it has more."

"Now it has names," I said. "That's not nothing."

"No," he said. "It is not nothing at all." He stood for a moment longer, then: "Goodnight, Taryn."

"Goodnight, Lieutenant Commander Evan."

He made a sound that was somewhere between acknowledgment and a laugh, and left.

I stayed in the supervisor's chair after everyone had gone.

The night shift worked on, quiet and steady. The lens was holding over the farms, the five tones maintaining their configuration with a noticeably more certain quality than before — the system's new ability to see them, even through the indirect path of my conducting, already producing the small improvements I had predicted. Not dramatic. Just cleaner.

I held the full complex of the building's sound and let it settle around me.

Twelve generators, the completed ring. Seven senior Servants now with proper records in the system. The fundamental tone, measurably less flat than my first day, still working toward its intended pitch. The aquifer below, its slow patient decline, a problem for after. The Reclamers' operatives in the Second Ring, three of them identified and watched. The army five days away.

I thought about the dome.

I could hold it for ninety seconds now. In five days I needed to

hold the initiation long enough to engage the automatic mode, and after that the automatic mode would sustain it. The documents said the automatic mode could hold against sustained bombardment for days. What I needed to be able to do was raise it cleanly and engage the automatic systems — a matter of minutes at most. Ninety seconds was almost enough. Five days of practice would make it more than enough.

I thought about the apertures. Six positions, the archers' ranges on the outer wall. Today I had managed two. Tomorrow I would attempt four. The day after, six.

I thought about what the document had said about perceptual expansion — the city present in the harmonic layer during full deployment. I had caught the edge of it today. By the time the army arrived I needed to be fluent in it, able to attend peripherally to the dome's full scope while conducting the system through whatever the siege required.

I thought about Tomas. Tomorrow, I needed to find an hour for him. He had been hearing the Tower's sound since before he arrived, and now the Tower was beginning to hear him back — the system's recognition of the other Servants was refining the harmonic picture, making the residential levels' harmonics more specific, and Tomas's tone was becoming more distinct to me as a consequence. Not ready for formal registration — eight years old, with no training, no framework yet for what he could do. But soon I needed to start giving him that framework.

After.

I thought about Mama.

She was in the Second Ring now. She would have moved two days ago with the rest of the Third Ring, when the evacuation began in earnest. The tavern was closed. She would be in a guild hall somewhere, with whatever she had managed to bring, waiting with the other seventy thousand people who were waiting.

She didn't know specifically what I had been doing. She knew from my letters that I was well, that Tomas was well, that I was

learning quickly, that things were complicated and I couldn't explain all of them yet. She knew, now, from the general announcement Father Brolan had made to the city's population three days ago, that the Tower was prepared to defend Alabaster, that the population should move to the Second Ring as a precaution, that the Guard and the Tower together were confident in the defense.

She didn't know that the defense consisted substantially of her thirteen-year-old son sitting in a chair and holding a chord.

I thought about what she would say to that, if she knew.

She would say: do it carefully. She would say: you were always better at the lute than you thought you were. She would say: don't try to carry everything by yourself. And then she would do the thing she always did before anything difficult: straighten your collar, hold your face in both hands, and let go.

I could feel the shape of her hands, the specific weight of that gesture, from this distance.

I took a breath.

The night shift's five tones continued their steady work. The lens was there over the farms, the generators were there in their ring, the fundamental tone was there underneath everything, slightly less flat than yesterday.

Tomorrow.

I got up and went to bed.

The next five days had the quality of a river narrowing toward rapids: the same current, the same direction, but faster and more urgent and with less room to course-correct.

The dome sessions twice daily, morning and afternoon. The numbers climbing: Day two at two minutes forty seconds sustained. Day three at four minutes, and on the fourth attempt of that day's morning session, six minutes — the threshold at which the document suggested the automatic mode could be reliably engaged. Day four at

eight minutes. Day five with six apertures open simultaneously for forty-seven seconds while the full dome held.

The registry continuing: the remaining senior Servants added, then the most experienced non-senior operators, working through the established hierarchy with careful judgment. Each addition produced the same small shift in the harmonic layer — the system's sight improving incrementally, the choir approaching something more like what it was designed to be. Denn's registration produced the specific satisfaction of watching the system finally confirm what I had already heard: he was good, his calibration was improving daily, and with the system's proper recognition he would be better still.

Tomas, briefly, on the evening of the third day: I told him more about what he was hearing, gave him the beginning of a vocabulary for it. He listened with the same still absorption he gave everything. He said: *the big dulcimer is louder now.* I said: *I know. We've been tuning it.* He said: *it sounds almost right.* I said: *almost.*

The Reclamers' operatives: Taryce's monitoring revealed a fourth, which she neutralised quietly and efficiently in a way that produced very little noise and even less documentation. Three remained, positioned and waiting. She knew where they were. She did not move on them. She was using them as a signal — watching what they watched would tell her something about what they thought was coming and when.

Misha and Marten: I spoke with Marten once, briefly, in the corridor near the Stewards' workroom. He told me the Reclamers believed the Chair — the operational supervisor's chair — was the access point. They would try to reach it during the first hours of the siege, when the Guard was occupied.

I said: it won't do them any good.

He said: they don't know that.

I said: good.

Collin's reports each evening were the steady accounting of a city that had done this before and remembered how: the Second Ring packed with evacuated Third Ring residents, the guild halls turned

into dormitories, the ration block distribution running efficiently, the Guard on heightened alert at every gate. The city had the specific quality of a held breath.

And the army came closer each day.

On the morning of the sixth day — the day before their estimated arrival — I sat in the supervisor's chair before the morning session began and did nothing.

The room was empty. The night shift had ended and the day shift had not yet arrived. The windows to the west were filled with the early morning light, the farms visible in the gold of sunrise, Gate Town below with the specific stillness of a place that had been largely evacuated, and beyond that the desert road running west until it curved out of sight.

I listened.

The twelve generators, steady. The fundamental tone, approaching its pitch with the consistency of something that had been moving toward a destination for sixteen days and could now see it. The Servants registered in the system, their distinct tones clear and specific and recognisable in the harmonic layer. The city below, present in the dome's peripheral awareness even without the dome being raised.

And very faint, at the far edge of what I could hear, something that was not the Tower's own harmonics. Something from outside the perimeter. Something that was not quite audible yet but had the quality of approaching.

The army.

Not their voices or their movement — nothing so specific. But the system was aware of mass presence approaching the perimeter from the west, and that awareness was a harmonic in itself, the specific sound of a sensing system registering something it had been designed to register. A threat.

I sat with this for a while.

Then I said, quietly, to the empty room: *I know.*

Which was not addressed to the army. It was addressed to the Tower itself, to the system that had been running and waiting and managing and compensating for so long without being able to speak directly.

I know, I said. *I'm here.*

The fundamental tone shifted. Not much. A fraction, the same incremental movement I had been producing for sixteen days. But this morning it felt different — more present, more immediate, as if the proximity of what was coming had focused something.

The team began to arrive. I heard them in the corridor before they appeared at the door: Brem, first as always; then Denn; then the others in their characteristic order, the specific sequence of this shift that I now knew as well as I knew any piece of music I had played a hundred times.

They settled into their positions. Ten tones rising into the harmonic layer.

I held the chord.

"Morning session," I said. "Full perimeter. We're going to practice the full sequence today — dome formation, automatic mode engagement, apertures at six positions, and then a sustained hold." I looked at the room. "Tomorrow they'll be at Gate Town. Today we make sure we're ready."

Sister Akasa, not at an interface, standing in her usual managing position to my left: "And are we?"

I thought about the river narrowing toward rapids. The current the same, the direction the same, the speed now what it was and not what it had been.

"Yes," I said.

And I meant it.

The army arrived the next day.

Not at dawn — they came at mid-morning, having clearly decided that arriving in daylight was preferable to the tactical advantages of darkness. This told Taryce something. She told me what it told her: they had siege equipment, and siege equipment needed to be seen to be properly positioned, and they were not afraid of being seen. They had five hundred soldiers and they wanted Alabaster to know it.

I was in the supervisor's chair when the Guard's signal came — a flag sequence from the watchtower above Gate Town, repeated at the second wall, arriving at the Tower's upper level as a report from the Guard positioned outside Father Brolan's office.

Father Brolan came to the weather station. Taryce. Collin. The senior Servants who were not on operational duty.

"They're in formation outside Gate Town," the Guard reported. "Full formation. Cavalry on the flanks. Siege equipment at the rear — I count two catapults and what appears to be a battering ram. They're not advancing yet. A delegation is moving forward under a white flag."

"The negotiation," Collin said.

"The Guard captain on the Third Ring wall is moving to meet them," the Guard confirmed.

I listened to all of this and held the supervisor's chair's cool stone arms and tracked the dome chord in the harmonic layer, ready.

"Hold position," Father Brolan said. "Let the negotiation proceed."

We waited.

The room had a quality I had not experienced in it before — the operational team at their positions, performing the normal lens operations, doing the ordinary work of the Tower because the farms still needed what they needed and the lens did not stop for armies. But the quality of attention in the room was divided: part of each person on their work and part on the window, on the desert visible beyond Gate Town, on whatever was happening at the Third Ring wall.

I kept my attention on the harmonic layer.

I was aware of the army's approach not through the window but through the dome's peripheral sense — the same awareness that had begun that morning as a faint harmonic at the edge of my perception. It was stronger now: a concentrated presence at the western perimeter, a mass of people and equipment the system was registering as a coherent force. Not individual people — not specific. The dome sensed mass and movement and distributed impact potential, the same sensors that had been designed to detect meteorite strikes now detecting something different in kind but comparable in category.

Thirty minutes passed.

The Guard returned. "They've killed the delegation," he said. His voice was flat with the flatness of someone reporting a fact that required no amplification. "The general gave a signal. The delegation —" He stopped. Started again. "The order is to engage."

The room was very quiet.

Father Brolan looked at me.

I had the chord. I had been holding it in readiness for thirty minutes, not the dome itself but the shape of it, the configuration ready to form. I had the team. I had all twelve generators and the full perimeter and six aperture positions.

"Taryn," Father Brolan said.

"Now," I said. To the team: "Begin."

Ten tones deepened in my mind, the dome chord rising, the shape forming — not the practice version, not the careful deliberate training session, but the real thing, the full deployment with the urgency of an actual event behind it. The chord locked faster than it ever had in training, the team responsive in a way that weeks of sessions had built toward.

I held it for the second it took to feel the configuration was right.

Then I said to the system: *Raise the dome. Full deployment. Engage automatic mode.*

:Raising shield dome. Full deployment.: A pause, the systems

coordinating. :Automatic mode engaged. Shield dome active. Full perimeter coverage confirmed.:

Outside the window — I did not see this with my eyes, I heard it in the harmonic layer — the dome rose. Twelve generators pushing their force upward and outward in the smooth hemisphere the system had been designed to produce, the shape that had not been raised since before anyone in this city had been born. The full dome over Alabaster, Gate Town, the farms. Everything inside the perimeter.

The advancing troops — who had begun moving when the Guard's arrows started — hit the dome's edge.

The harmonic layer registered the impact: distributed, significant, the pressure of several hundred soldiers running into something they could not see. Not the gradual pressure of siege — the sudden collective impact of people who had not known the barrier was there.

:Shield integrity nominal,: the system said. :Multiple impact events, eastern perimeter boundary, sector seven. Force levels within design parameters.:

I held the apertures — all six, the archer positions, open and stable — and listened to the dome hold.

And it held.

It held, and the archers fired, and outside the window the army of Cupritesh met the invisible wall of something five centuries old, and the Tower that had been waiting to be asked finally had an answer for what it was made for.

But then it didn't hold.

Not the dome — the dome held. The dome was running in automatic mode and the automatic mode was doing exactly what the documents had described it doing. The dome itself was fine.

What didn't hold was generator seven.

:Caution,: the system said, in my mind. :Satellite generator seven, north-northwest position. Power connection fluctuation detected. Generator seven offline.:

I stared at the harmonic layer.

Eleven generators. The dome was still up — the system was redistributing the load across the remaining eleven, as it was designed to do for exactly this failure mode. But the redistribution changed the dome's geometry: a slightly thinner coverage in the north-northwest sector, approximately thirty degrees of arc. Not a gap. Not enough to drive a cart through.

But enough that someone who knew exactly where to look, with exactly the right force at exactly the right angle—

:Warning,: the system said. :North-northwest sector coverage reduced to 73% nominal strength. Force application to reduced sector detected.:

I said: "Generator seven is offline. North-northwest has reduced coverage."

The room moved. Not in panic — in the specific directed motion of trained people responding to a specific problem. Taryce was at the Guard's position immediately: "North wall. Cavalry movement northwest of Gate Town. They know where the gap is."

"How?" Collin said.

"Someone told them," Father Brolan said. Very quietly.

I was already asking the system: *Can generator seven be remotely restarted?*

:Negative. Generator seven has experienced a power connection failure. Physical reset required.:

The same answer as the twelfth generator. Physical reset. Someone had to go out there.

"It's not the same as generator twelve," I said, thinking out loud. "Generator twelve was disconnected from the outside — buried. Generator seven was active and running. Something caused it to fail." I felt through the harmonic layer, the character of the failure. Not gradual power drain. Not wear. Something abrupt. Something—

Something that had been done to it.

"Taryce," I said. "Generator seven. Someone sabotaged it."

She looked at me.

"The Reclaimers' operatives," I said. "Not here, in the Tower.

Outside. Generator seven is set into the base of the Second Ring wall at the north-northwest position. The wall is accessible. Someone with knowledge of where it is and what it does—"

She was already gone, moving with the contained speed of someone who had been waiting for the thing to become specific.

I turned back to the dome.

Seventy-three percent coverage in the north-northwest. The army was testing it — I could feel the pressure in the harmonic layer, the specific quality of force applied to exactly that sector. Not the broad frontal pressure of the main force. Targeted. Someone had been told the exact location and nature of the weakness.

The dome was holding. The automatic mode was compensating. But the margin was thinner than it should be, and the force being applied to it was not random.

I needed generator seven back online, or I needed to manually reinforce that sector, or both.

The manual reinforcement: I could do it. I had the conducting ability. I would need to split my attention between the automatic dome, the six apertures for the archers, and a manual strengthening of the north-northwest sector. Three things simultaneously, when I had never managed more than two.

"The apertures," I said to the room. "I need to close four of them temporarily. Northern and southern archers — the ones furthest from the northwest — can they fall back from the wall?"

Sister Akasa relayed this. A Guard runner was dispatched.

I closed four apertures, keeping only the two closest to the northwest threat. The freed attention went to the north-northwest sector: I reached into the dome's chord, found the area of reduced coverage, and held the manual strengthening chord alongside the automatic system's effort. The coverage climbed. Eighty-one percent. Eighty-seven.

Not full. But better.

:Force application to north-northwest sector continuing,: the system said. :Shield integrity holding. Power consumption elevated.:

"The dome is holding," I said, to the room. "Generator seven needs to be physically reset. Taryce is on it." I paused. "Until then I'm manually compensating. I need the room quiet."

The room went quiet.

I held three things at once. The automatic dome, its twelve-become-eleven generators redistributing. The two remaining apertures. The manual reinforcement of the north-northwest sector.

It was the too-many-strings feeling, the quality of reaching my limit, but different from training: sharpened by the actual event, by the knowledge that this was not a session that could be released and retried. I had the specific clear-headed quality of someone who is at the edge of their capacity and knows it and is not there yet, and is using every bit of what they have.

I held it.

Three minutes.

:Caution,: the system said. :Power consumption approaching elevated threshold. Primary generator output at 91% nominal.:

Four minutes.

The army was not stopping. They had the siege catapults being positioned now — I could feel the preparation in the dome's peripheral sense, the massing of force that was about to become a different kind of problem.

"The catapults are positioning," I said.

"I know," Father Brolan said, from behind me. "How long can you hold this configuration?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "I've never held three things simultaneously for more than a minute. I'm at four."

"Can you reduce to two?"

"If the apertures close entirely, the archers can't—"

"The archers can manage for a few minutes," he said. "Taryce needs three more minutes to reach generator seven. Can you hold the reinforcement without the apertures?"

I closed the remaining two apertures.

The relief was immediate and specific — two fewer things, the

conducting more manageable, the reinforcement of the north-northwest sector strengthening as the freed attention went to it.

:North-northwest sector coverage at 94% nominal,: the system said. :Force application continuing. Shield integrity maintained.:

"Ninety-four percent," I said.

Five minutes. Six. My palms were flat against the chair arms and I was aware of the stone under them and the Tower's hum through the stone and the twelve-become-eleven generators and the dome above the city and the army outside it and somewhere on the Second Ring wall, Taryce moving toward generator seven with the Guard.

:Connection restored,: the system said. :Generator seven bootstrapping. Please wait.:

Six minutes thirty seconds.

:Generator seven online. All twelve generators operational. Resuming full perimeter coverage. North-northwest sector returning to nominal.:

I released the manual reinforcement. The dome resumed its full strength across the complete perimeter, the automatic mode managing it, the coverage complete.

I sat in the supervisor's chair and breathed.

"Generator seven is back," I said.

The room exhaled. Not dramatically — just the specific sound of eleven people releasing something they had been holding.

"The dome is at full strength," I said. "Automatic mode. I'm going to reopen the apertures."

I did. Six positions, the archers' range restored. The system confirmed full operation.

Below, outside, I could feel in the dome's peripheral awareness the army's pressure changing character: the testing-quality giving way to something more sustained, more frustrated. They had found the weakness and lost it. The dome was whole.

:Shield dome at full deployment,: the system said. :All systems nominal. Standby.:

I looked at the window. The morning light was full now, the sun

well above the mountains, the farms visible in the east and Gate Town empty and still in the west and the army beyond it.

Father Brolan said, very quietly: "Well done."

I said nothing. I was listening to the dome hold, the automatic systems managing it, the generators steady in their ring. Doing what they had been made to do, for the first time in centuries, under the direction of someone who had been able to hear what they needed and ask them for it.

The dome held.

Three hours later, the first catapult stone hit.

:Incoming projectile,: the system reported. :North-central sector. Impact in—:

The dome absorbed it with a sound I had not been prepared for: a deep resonant chord, the dome's material singing under the impact, the force distributing through the structure in a wave that I felt in the harmonic layer as something between a shout and a gong-strike.

:Projectile neutralised. Shield integrity nominal. Power consumption spike: brief, within parameters.:

The stone had slid down the dome's curve and hit the ground outside the perimeter, trailing what the Guard on the wall reported as violet sparks along the curve's surface.

:Warning,: the system said. :Repeated projectile strikes at this magnitude will accelerate power consumption. At current bombardment rate, power reserves will deplete in approximately—:

It gave a number.

The number was long enough. Not indefinite. But long enough.

I relayed it to Father Brolan. He nodded and went to find Collin. The siege had begun in earnest, and it would be managed, and the dome would hold, and I would stay in the chair.

But underneath the satisfaction of the dome working, under-

neath the clean sustained chord of the full perimeter at nominal strength, I was hearing something else.

Generator seven had not failed on its own. Someone had sabotaged it. Someone had known where it was, what it did, and what the result would be. That knowledge had come from somewhere, and somewhere was inside the information about the Tower's capabilities that should not have been outside this building.

The Reclamers' operatives had not yet moved on the Tower. Taryce had three of them identified and was watching them. They had not moved because the siege was not producing the chaos they had counted on — the dome was working, the Guard was managing, the city was not in panic.

They would adjust their plan.

I held the dome and thought about what the adjusted plan might look like.

15

The catapults fired seven more times in the first three hours.

I tracked each strike in the harmonic layer: the incoming warning, the impact, the dome absorbing it, the violet sparks the Guard reported trailing down the dome's outer curve. The system's voice was consistent and unhurried, the flat clinical recitation of a machine doing exactly what it had been designed to do. *Projectile neutralised. Shield integrity nominal. Power consumption spike: brief, within parameters.*

The power reserves were declining, but slowly. At the current bombardment rate the system's estimate had given us days, not hours. The catapults were a statement of intent more than a serious attempt to breach the dome — whoever commanded the Cupritesh force was testing the system's limits rather than committing to a sustained artillery campaign. Which meant they were waiting for something else.

I held the supervisor's chair and kept my attention on the apertures and listened to the dome's peripheral awareness and thought about what the something else was.

The Reclamers.

Three operatives Taryce had identified and was watching. She had not moved on them. In the three hours since the dome went up and the catapults started, none of them had moved. They were in position and waiting. Waiting for the chaos that had not arrived, that the dome was specifically preventing.

I had been here before in a different way: in the training room, trying to find the right question for the system. Knowing that the answer existed somewhere and needing to ask precisely enough to surface it. The Reclamers' plan had an architecture. They had known where generator seven was. They had known what the result of sabotaging it would be. That knowledge came from somewhere, which meant there was a source, and the source was inside the information that had been flowing out of this building.

Misha and Marten were the obvious answer. Father Brolan had said as much. But Misha and Marten had cooperated yesterday, had given Taryce the descriptions of the operatives, had appeared to commit to Alabaster's side of this. Either their cooperation was genuine or it was a deeper cover — providing enough information to maintain trust while withholding the critical piece.

The critical piece being: generator seven.

Had they known? Had they told the Reclamers before they decided to cooperate? Or was there a third channel, someone else in the building with a different communications method?

I sent a thought to the system: *Are there currently active communications from within the installation to outside parties?*

:Affirmative,: the system said. :Two communication sessions active. Operator: Misha. Operator: Marten. Communication logs available on request.:

They were talking to Onyx. Right now, during the siege. I had disabled the courtesy access two weeks ago — I had thought I had disabled it. Apparently their implants had a secondary protocol.

Or I had missed something.

I said: *Disable all outgoing communications from this installation except those I specifically authorise.*

:Processing. Complete. Two active communication sessions terminated.:

Then: *Are there any other active communication channels from this installation that I have not just disabled?*

A pause — longer than the system's usual response time.

:Affirmative,: it said. :One additional channel detected. This channel does not use the standard communications network. It uses a secondary protocol not registered in the primary communications database. Origin: Sector 4-C, residential level. Character: passive relay. This channel has been active for an indeterminate period.:

Sector 4-C. I had a spatial map of the Tower that was approximate at best — I had been navigating it for sixteen days without a formal guide. But sector 4-C put me somewhere in the residential levels near the Stewards' working areas.

Not Misha. Not Marten. Someone else.

"Brother Evan," I said.

He was at the back of the room. He crossed to me immediately.

"There's a third communications channel," I said quietly. "Not through the implants. A passive relay of some kind. In the Stewards' area."

He absorbed this with the quick precision that characterised him under pressure. "I'll find Father Brolan."

"Not yet," I said. "I need to understand it first. If it's passive — if it's just relaying, not actively transmitting — then it may be receiving rather than sending. Listening."

"Someone has been listening to the Tower's internal communications," he said.

"Or something has been. A device placed somewhere." I paused. "Can you reach the system's internal sensor data for sector 4-C without going there physically?"

"Through the interface," he said. "With the proper rank — yes. The structural monitoring systems." He paused. "Shall I?"

"Please," I said. "Quietly."

He went to an available interface station and put his hands on

the pads. I felt his tone enter the harmonic layer — the familiar quality of his connection, now distinct and properly recognised by the system. He asked his question in the standard way, through intention rather than the resonant channel, and the system responded.

After a few minutes he came back.

"There's a physical object in the wall cavity behind the Stewards' linen storage room," he said. "The sensor identifies it as a transmitting device approximately six centimetres across, inserted into a gap in the stonework at some point in the past." He paused. "The device has been there long enough that the sensor has accepted it as part of the background."

"The Reclamers placed it," I said. "Or had it placed. Before the siege. Before we knew about them." I thought about this. "They've been listening to internal communications. Staff movements, operational discussions, anything said in corridors or rooms that carry sound through the building's stone." I paused. "That's how they knew about generator seven. Someone discussed the generator ring in range of this device."

Brother Evan was very still. "We discussed it in Father Brolan's office," he said. "In the corridor. In the briefing room."

"Everywhere," I said. "We didn't know to be careful."

A beat of silence between us.

"The device is still active?" he said.

"The system says passive relay. I've closed the outgoing channel, so it can't transmit anymore. But it may still be receiving." I thought. "Leave it. Don't remove it. If the Reclamers believe their device is still functioning, they may assume their operatives are still receiving information." I looked at Brother Evan. "Which means they don't know their plan has been partially compromised."

He looked at me with the expression he wore when something had clarified. "You're going to let them move."

"I'm going to let Taryce let them move," I said. "When they think

it's time. When the confusion they've been waiting for seems to arrive." I paused. "Which means we need to appear confused."

He sat with this for a moment.

"That," he said, "is a strategy that carries considerable risk."

"Less risk than trying to find and neutralise three operatives in a city of seventy thousand people who are packed into the Second Ring," I said. "If Taryce knows where they're going and when, she can be there when they arrive."

"You should tell her," he said. "Now."

"I know," I said. "Will you go? I can't leave the chair."

He went.

The catapult struck again while he was gone.

:Incoming projectile. Southern sector. Impact in—:

The chord. The absorption. The violet sparks.

:Projectile neutralised. Shield integrity nominal. Power consumption spike: within parameters. Cumulative power consumption: 12% of total reserves depleted.:

Twelve percent in three hours. At this rate the reserves lasted a long time. Longer than the army could realistically maintain a siege in the desert without resupply. Taryce had been clear about this: a Cupritesh force this size, this far from their supply lines, had limited operational time. They needed to breach the city or achieve their objective within days. After that the logistics would start to work against them.

Days.

The something else needed to happen for them in days.

I listened to the dome and held the apertures and thought.

The Reclamers wanted the operator chair. They believed sitting in it would give them access to the registry. They were wrong about the mechanism — the chair itself was not the key, I was the key — but they did not know that. They would come for the chair and find it

and discover, if they reached it, that it required something they did not have.

Sitting in the chair without the resonant interface would give them nothing. The system would receive their presence as it received all anonymous users — something present at the interface, unrecognised, given the most conservative access available. They could touch the pads and feel nothing particular and the system would wait for instructions it would not understand.

Unless they had an operator with them. An operator with enough biological recognition to trigger the system's identification protocols, even imperfectly. A descendant of one of the original Commanders from one of the other installations, with enough of the markers remaining to produce a partial recognition.

Did the Reclamers have such a person?

I asked the system: *In the period before I arrived at this installation, were there any other interface contacts that triggered partial biological recognition?*

:Reviewing logs,: the system said. :Affirmative. Two events in the past three years. Both events involved an operator with partial genetic recognition — insufficient for full identification but sufficient to trigger access at Ensign level. These events occurred at training station 3 and at the primary operational station. Dates recorded.:

Two events. Three years ago and — I asked for the second date — seven months ago.

Three years ago: the bandit attacks. The chaos of that event would have provided cover.

Seven months ago: I had not been in the Tower. Whatever had happened then — whoever had sat in the chair with partial recognition and attempted to access the system at Ensign level — had happened without anyone knowing, and I did not know the outcome.

What operations were performed during these two access events?

:First event: no operations performed. Operator contact lasted less than one minute. Second event: attempted access to communication logs. Access denied due to insufficient rank.:

They had tried and failed. Seven months ago someone had reached the operational chair, triggered partial biological recognition, and been denied access to the communication logs because they needed Lieutenant rank at minimum.

They needed someone higher than Ensign. They needed someone the system would recognise as holding more authority.

A descendant of one of the other original Commander lines. Not Hollis — that line was mine and Tomas's. One of the others. Someone whose ancestry traced back to a founding operator at Cupritesh, or one of the other installations, whose bloodline had maintained enough coherence to produce a partial recognition at more than Ensign level.

The Reclamers had spent years looking for exactly this person. Had they found them?

I sat with the question and could not answer it.

"Taryn," Father Brolan said.

He had come into the room while I was thinking. Taryce was with him, and Collin, and Misha and Marten — the full crisis roster, apparently assembled since Brother Evan had reached them.

"Tell me," I said.

I told them what the system had found: the passive relay device, the listening capability, the two prior access events. Taryce took notes with the focused efficiency of someone doing triage — this piece of information actionable, that one contextual, file and proceed.

"Seven months ago," she said. "Someone was in the operational chair."

"An Ensign-level access. Insufficient for what they needed." I looked at her. "But they now know the system responds to biological recognition. They know a partial match produces something. If they've found a better match in the past seven months—"

"Then they have an operator," she said.

"A partial one. Not Commander level. Not even Lieutenant. But possibly enough to do more than the person seven months ago could do."

She looked at Marten. "Does Onyx know about this?"

Marten had the expression of someone managing what they were about to say carefully. "We have been aware," he said, "that the Reclamers have been looking for operator bloodlines. We did not know they had achieved access here seven months ago." He paused. "We know they have at least two individuals with partial recognition capability — descendants of the original operators at two other installations. One we believe is Ensign level. One—" he paused. "One we are less certain about. Our intelligence suggests Lieutenant level or above."

The room was quiet.

"Lieutenant level," I said. "With access to the chair and proper biological recognition, they could access the communication logs. Weather operation parameters. Potentially operational history." I paused. "They cannot open the registry. That requires Commander level. But they could access systems I have not locked down, learn things I have not protected."

"What haven't you locked down?" Taryce said.

"Everything that doesn't require Commander access," I said. "The standard operational parameters are accessible at Lieutenant level. The historical logs. The sensor data. The detailed specifications of the dome system — including its weaknesses." I looked at the room. "They already knew about generator seven. If they reach the chair with a Lieutenant-level operator—"

"They'll learn about any other weaknesses," she said.

"Yes."

"Then we cannot let them reach the chair," she said.

"We need to let them try," I said. "If we move on the operatives now, before they reveal themselves, we may not find them all. There may be a fourth, a fifth. We need to let them come to us." I paused. "But we can prepare for their arrival."

"How?" Collin said.

I looked at the supervisor's chair, the room around me, the interface positions where the team was still working the dome.

"Move me," I said.

Taryce looked at me.

"Move the operational function," I said. "Not far. One of the training rooms, three floors down. Smaller, not the main operational station, but with a full interface connection." I had been asking the system about this over the past few days. "The dome can be managed from any interface station with Commander access. I don't need to be in the main operational chair." I paused. "Let the Reclamers reach the main station. Let their operator sit in the supervisor's chair and touch the pads. The system will recognise them at whatever partial level they achieve, and give them the access that level permits, and they will learn—"

"Nothing useful," Brother Evan said, understanding arriving in his voice. "Because you will have already secured whatever they might want to access."

"The communication logs, the dome specifications, the sensor data — I can restrict access to Commander level only," I said. "Everything they might reach at Lieutenant level, locked before they get here." I looked at Father Brolan. "They'll sit in the chair and get an empty room."

"And Taryce will be waiting," Father Brolan said.

"Yes."

Taryce was looking at the room with the professional assessment she gave to spaces she was planning to use operationally. "The corridor access," she said. "Three entry points to this floor. The stairwell, the rising room, and the service passage on the north side." She looked at Collin. "I need the service passage entrance confirmed closed."

"Done," he said.

She looked at me. "How long to move your operation?"

"An hour," I said. "The dome stays up while we move — I'll hand

the conducting to Sister Akasa for the duration, with instructions for the automatic mode."

Sister Akasa, who had been listening from her station with the specific attentiveness she brought to operational decisions: "Understood."

"The device in sector 4-C," Taryce said. "You said it's still receiving."

"Yes."

"Keep it that way. I want the operatives to believe they're still getting information." She turned to Marten. "You're going to help me. The device receives — can it transmit? Can we feed it false information?"

Marten looked at Misha. A brief exchange.

"We can try," he said. "The device is a passive relay — it was designed to receive and forward, not to generate. But if we introduce a signal into the installation's internal communication network at the right level—"

"What do you want them to hear?" Misha said.

Taryce was quiet for a moment. Then she said: "A crisis. I want them to hear that the dome is failing. That the power reserves are critically low. That the Tower is preparing to lower the dome and the Guard is repositioning to the gates." She looked at me. "Give them what they've been waiting for."

I thought about this. "The system won't report what isn't true," I said. "If the operatives or their operator tries to verify through the chair—"

"Their operator won't reach the chair for at least two hours," she said. "They need time to move through the city once the signal reaches them. Two hours is enough."

"The false communication has to be verbal," I said. "The system won't lie for me. But people in the building talking to each other — saying the wrong things in the right corridors — the relay picks up sound and forwards it."

Taryce almost smiled. "I know some Guardspeople who are very

good at saying specific things in specific corridors." She stood. "Move your operation. I'll have the setup complete in forty minutes." She looked at the room. "Everyone knows their part."

It was not a question. She left.

The move was careful and quiet.

Sister Akasa took the conducting responsibility with the competence I had expected from her, placing herself in the supervisor's chair with the ease of someone who had been in the room for twelve years and understood its geometry exactly. The dome held — the automatic mode doing what it was designed to do, Sister Akasa present to monitor and respond to anything the automatic mode could not manage alone.

I went three floors down.

Training room twelve: a larger training room than the one I had started in, with two interface chairs rather than one and enough space for Brother Evan to work alongside me. I had confirmed the connection was viable — any interface in the Tower, the system had told me, was accessible at Commander level, the connection as clear from here as from the operational floor.

I settled into the interface chair, put my hands on the pads, and felt the dome.

Still there. The harmonic layer present, the twelve generators running, the automatic mode managing the perimeter. Sister Akasa's tone was in the system now — recognised, her Lieutenant Commander rank confirmed, the system giving her a cleaner feed than it had ever given any anonymous operator before. I could hear the difference, even from here: her conduct of the monitoring function was more precise, the system's response to her more direct.

The dome held. And I was no longer at the main operational chair.

I spent the next twenty minutes locking down the accessible

data. Communication logs: restricted to Commander level. Dome specifications and weakness analysis: restricted. Sensor data for generator positions: restricted. Operational history from the past three months: restricted. Anything a Lieutenant-level operator might have found useful in the main chair, now unavailable.

What I left open: the standard operational parameters, the basic weather management data, the food processing schedules. Things a Lieutenant-level operator would expect to find, the presence of which would make the access feel real rather than obviously truncated. A room that looked unlocked rather than sealed.

"Done," I told Brother Evan.

He was at the second interface chair, monitoring the operational feed. "The signal went out through the relay twelve minutes ago," he said. "Marten fed it through. The Guardspeople in the corridor near sector 4-C were very convincing, apparently."

"What did they say?"

"That the dome was critical. That we had four hours of power reserves, maybe less. That Father Brolan was in emergency session with Collin about whether to lower the dome and fall back to the gates." He paused. "Taryce added one detail — she had someone say that Taryn was being moved to a secure location. That the operational chair would be unattended during the transition."

"Unattended," I said.

"She's good at this," he said.

"Yes," I said. "She is."

We waited.

The catapults fired twice more while we waited. Both neutralised, the dome absorbing the strikes with the same resonant chord and the same violet sparks. Power reserves at sixteen percent depleted — still well within parameters, still days of capacity remaining.

The army outside was not advancing. They had tested the dome,

established that direct assault was impossible, and settled into the waiting posture of a besieging force that was expecting something to change. They did not know that the something they were expecting was being managed forty feet underground in a training room by a thirteen-year-old who was listening to a chord.

At the ninety-minute mark, Taryce appeared at the training room door.

"They're moving," she said.

"How many?"

"Three. Moving from the Second Ring toward the inner gate. They have someone with them — a fourth person I hadn't previously identified. Younger, moving differently from the others." She paused. "Moving like someone who's focused on something specific rather than just following."

"The operator," I said.

"Almost certainly." She looked at me. "They'll be at the main operational floor in approximately twenty minutes."

"The Guards are positioned?"

"Twelve of them. All experienced. Three positions: the stairwell landing, the rising room exit, and the main entrance to the weather station." She paused. "I'll be at the rising room with four."

"You're going yourself," I said.

"Yes," she said, in the tone of someone for whom this was not a question.

"They may have weapons," I said.

"We have more," she said.

She left.

I put my attention back on the dome and waited.

Twenty minutes. Longer than the dome. I tracked the system's awareness of the building around me: the residential levels, the Servants going about their constrained routines during the siege, the operational stations below running their automated cycles. The weather station, Sister Akasa monitoring, the dome holding.

And something else.

Four presences moving through the building's internal systems — not through the harmonic layer, I could not hear people moving, but through the subtle changes in the building's vibration as weight moved through corridors and up stairwells. A quality of the building that I had learned to read as background texture over sixteen days and now noticed as changed.

They were in the building.

I did not know where Taryce was. I knew where she had planned to be. The plans of intelligent people encountering unpredicted variables had a variable relationship to their original form.

I held the dome.

The minutes passed.

Then, in the harmonic layer, something I had not been expecting.

The main operational chair.

The system was registering an access event at the main operational station. Someone had sat in the supervisor's chair. Someone's biological presence was triggering the recognition protocols.

I felt the system processing: *Biological recognition initiated. Scanning. Partial match detected. Match level: Lieutenant-equivalent. Initiating restricted access—*

I had locked the data. What the system was about to offer this operator was a room that looked accessible and contained nothing actionable.

And then: *Match level reassessing. Additional biological markers detected. Scanning. Match level: Lieutenant Commander-equivalent.*

I went very still.

Not Ensign. Not Lieutenant. Lieutenant Commander.

The Reclamers had a Lieutenant Commander.

:Partial access granted,: the system said. :Lieutenant Commander-equivalent access active.:

Lieutenant Commander could access things I had not locked. I had locked Commander-level data. I had locked the dome specifications. I had not locked — I had not thought to lock — the generator

technical specifications. The maintenance records. The locations and physical details of every satellite generator in the ring.

Including the ones I had not yet been able to physically inspect and confirm were inaccessible from the outside.

:Data access: satellite generator specifications. Data access: generator maintenance protocols. Data access: generator physical location records.:

They were reading the generator specifications.

I said, loudly: "Brother Evan. Lock satellite generator specifications. Lock all generator data. Commander level. Now."

He was already at the pads. His Lieutenant Commander recognition triggered immediately. "It'll take thirty seconds—"

:Data access: generator seven maintenance override protocol accessed,: the system said. :Data access: generator eleven maintenance—:

"Too slow," I said. I reached through my own connection: *Lock all satellite generator data. Immediately. Commander authorisation.*

:Locking. Complete.: The system's voice flat and immediate. :Data access to satellite generator records terminated. Note: significant data may have been transferred prior to lockdown.:

"How much?"

:Generator specifications for positions one through eleven were accessed and reviewed. Position twelve was not reached before lockdown. Generator maintenance override protocols for positions seven and eleven were accessed in full.:

Seven and eleven.

Seven was the one they had already sabotaged. Its override protocol — the manual process for disabling it from the outside without triggering the system's failure alerts — had been compromised before the siege, which was how they had done it without my knowing.

Eleven was in the northeastern sector of the city. I had checked all twelve generators when they came online. Eleven had been active and running and confirmed nominal.

I had not physically visited generator eleven. I had not confirmed it was protected.

:Data access event terminated,: the system said. :User at primary operational station: access session ended. Reason: remote lockdown.:

Taryce had reached them.

I knew this because the access session had ended — the operator had either been removed from the chair or had been distracted enough that the contact broke. I did not know which. I did not know what had happened in the weather station.

I said: "The dome. Is Sister Akasa still at the primary station?"

Brother Evan checked. "Yes. She's there. The dome is holding."

"Generator eleven," I said. "Northeast position. Someone may try to sabotage it. The override protocol they accessed — it requires physical contact with a specific component on the generator's exterior. Ten minutes of work, maybe fifteen."

He was already moving to the door. "I'll tell Taryce—"

"She's occupied," I said. "Tell Father Brolan. Tell him to send Guards to the northeast wall, generator eleven position, immediately."

He went.

I held the dome and tracked the system's peripheral awareness and thought.

The override protocol for generator eleven. Fifteen minutes to execute. Physical contact with the exterior of the unit — which meant whoever they sent to do it had to reach the generator, which was set into the base of the Second Ring wall at the northeast corner, which was accessible from the wall's interior via a maintenance access point that I had noted in the documentation and had not specifically secured because it had been on the list of things to get to and the list had been long.

Fifteen minutes.

The Guards would need five minutes to reach the northeast wall position if they moved quickly. Ten minutes to spare.

Unless the operative was already there. Unless they had sent

someone before the information was accessed, anticipating it, positioned in advance.

I reached through the system: *Sensor data for the northeastern sector, Second Ring wall, generator eleven position. Is there anomalous activity?*

:Sensor data at this location is degraded,: the system said. :Original sensors in this sector have not been maintained. Current data reliability: 40%.:

Forty percent reliable. Which meant I might be getting something, I might be getting nothing, and I had no way to distinguish between them.

"Taryn."

Father Brolan was at the door. He had come himself rather than sending a runner.

"I heard," he said. "The Guards are moving."

"The sensors in that area are degraded," I said. "I can't confirm whether someone is already there."

He looked at me. "If the generator goes down—"

"The dome loses coverage in the northeast sector. The army is at the west. A gap in the northeast is not immediately dangerous to the military situation." I paused. "But if they know about generator eleven, they may know about others. If they systematically work through the generator ring—"

"How many can you lose before the dome fails?"

I had asked the system this question on the fourth day of dome practice and had not liked the answer. "Two at minimum, depending on position. Three in well-spaced positions. Four anywhere produces coverage gaps that the army could exploit if they repositioned." I paused. "They accessed generator seven and eleven. They may have learned about others before I cut the access. I don't know what they got."

Father Brolan was quiet for a moment.

"Can you reinstate the dome manually if generators go offline?" he said. "The way you compensated for generator seven?"

"For one or two, possibly," I said. "The manual reinforcement requires sustained attention I cannot give while also managing apertures and monitoring the outer threats." I paused. "For three or more, the load exceeds what I can distribute across the remaining team."

"Then the Guards need to hold the generators," he said.

"Yes," I said.

He left again. I tracked his footsteps through the building's vibration until they were gone.

Generator eleven held.

The Guards reached it in four minutes. They found one of the Reclamers' operatives — the remaining one Taryce had not previously identified, the fifth operative she had not known existed — in the maintenance passage adjacent to the generator position, with the equipment for the override procedure prepared but not yet deployed.

The operative surrendered without significant resistance, Taryce reported later, which she described as slightly disappointing from a professional standpoint.

The weather station operation:

Taryce's team had reached the main operational floor as planned. Two of the three known operatives had been in the room; the third had been in the corridor outside. The fourth person — the operator — had been seated in the supervisor's chair when Taryce's team arrived, hands on the chair's smooth arms, the biological recognition session already underway.

The operator was a young woman, perhaps twenty years old, who had not fought. She had looked at Taryce's team arriving and removed her hands from the chair with deliberate care, as if she had been expecting this and had decided in advance how she would respond to it.

"She looked relieved," Taryce told me, reporting the account from one of her Guards. "Not frightened. Relieved."

I thought about what it might be like to be the person the Reclamers had identified as their key access point — found because of something in your blood you had no knowledge of, trained or persuaded or coerced into this role, brought to a building under siege in the service of someone else's ambition and asked to unlock something ancient for reasons you may or may not have fully understood.

I thought about myself, sixteen days ago, walking through the Tower's door because a pillar had registered something in my blood.

She had been relieved.

"Where is she?" I said.

"Guard holding room," Taryce said. "She's been cooperative. Hasn't asked for anything except water and a blanket." She paused. "She told us her name. Saya. She said she doesn't actually know what she was supposed to do — she was told to sit in the chair and concentrate on wanting access and the system would recognise her. She didn't know why."

I held this.

"She wasn't lying," Taryce said. "I've been doing this long enough to know."

"She's a resonant operator," I said. "Or something close to it. Lieutenant Commander level recognition means she can hear something — probably the same thing I hear, or a version of it, but without the development or the understanding." I paused. "She was used because of what she is, without being told what she is."

"That's consistent with what she described," Taryce said.

"I'd like to talk to her," I said.

Taryce looked at me.

"Not now," I said. "When this is over. When there's time."

"When this is over," she said, "there will be many things to deal with." She stood. "The dome is holding. The army has not found a new angle of attack since the generator operations failed. I believe they'll start to pull back within a day." She paused. "You should eat something. You've been in that chair for seven hours."

I looked at my hands. The familiar tingling, slightly more intense than usual. The general fatigue of sustained operation.

"After I confirm the dome status," I said.

She left. I reached into the harmonic layer:

Shield dome status.

:Full deployment. All twelve generators operational. Power reserves: 26% depleted. At current consumption rate, reserves will sustain indefinitely unless bombardment rate increases significantly. Shield integrity: 100% nominal. All systems normal.:

I sat with this for a moment. The clean, flat report of a machine doing its job.

Thank you, I thought, which was not a thing the system processed.

But I thought it anyway.

The army began to withdraw the next afternoon.

Not immediately — not all at once, not in the dramatic retreat that the morning's solar lens demonstration had produced. This was slower, the withdrawal of a force that had accomplished none of its objectives and was running out of operational time. The catapults were disassembled first, pulled back from the perimeter. Then the cavalry repositioned, the flanking elements drawing in. Then the main formation shifted from assault posture to march posture, and Taryce's far-seer reported that the command tents were being struck.

I watched through the dome's peripheral awareness as the concentrated mass of presence at the western perimeter thinned and pulled back and moved away.

The dome had held.

I was in the supervisor's chair at the main operational station — I had returned after the generator eleven situation was resolved, Sister Akasa ceding the position with good grace. The team was there, the lens running, the normal operations of the Tower continuing through

the siege as they always had. The sky outside was clear and the farms were visible in the late afternoon sun and the dome's peripheral sense showed me an army retreating.

I held the dome.

"They're gone," the Guard with the far-seer said.

"Not yet," Taryce said, from her position at the wall.

"Far enough," he said.

She watched for another few minutes.

"Lower the dome," she told me. "Carefully."

I said to the system: *Lower shield dome. Return to standard operational mode.*

:Lowering shield dome. Transitioning to standard operations. Please wait.:

The harmonic layer changed — the dome chord dissolving, the twelve generators stepping back from their full commitment to the dome structure, the power draw reducing. The atmosphere above the city resumed its normal configuration, the lens over the farms reasserting itself in the weather station's management.

:Shield dome lowered. Standard operational mode restored. Total dome operation time: 31 hours, 14 minutes. Power reserves depleted: 34%. Reserve restoration will require approximately 6 days at standard geothermal input.:

Six days. The generators would be at full strength again within a week.

I released the connection.

The familiar fatigue was there, heavier than it had ever been — thirty-one hours of sustained attention to the dome, even with the automatic mode doing the work, even with the breaks for food and the brief periods of sleep that Taryce had insisted on and I had largely been able to achieve because the automatic mode did not require my presence to function. Thirty-one hours of being in the building's sound, of the Tower present in my awareness, of the generators and the apertures and the peripheral sense of the city.

I sat in the supervisor's chair and looked at the window and the

clear afternoon sky and the farms and the empty desert road where the army had been.

Sister Akasa said: "Commander."

I looked at her.

"Go eat," she said. "And sleep." The precision of it, the flatness, the complete absence of ceremony. Just the correct instruction delivered to the person who needed it.

"In a moment," I said.

She looked at me for two seconds. Then she turned back to her station, which was her way of indicating that she had said what she had to say and would not repeat it.

I went to find Tomas first.

He was in the dormitory common room with Dace and three other children, playing a card game I did not recognise. He looked up when I appeared at the door and performed the Tomas version of a double-take — a very slight increase in stillness, the particular quality of attention he brought to things he had not expected.

"You look terrible," he said.

"Thank you," I said.

He excused himself from the card game with the ease of someone who had been doing this long enough to do it naturally, and came to the door.

"Is it over?" he said.

"The army is withdrawing," I said. "It's over for now."

He nodded. He looked at me with the assessing quality he had had since he was small. "You did the dome thing."

"Yes."

"Dace heard it go up," he said. "He said the building felt different. Heavier." He paused. "I heard it differently."

"What did you hear?"

He thought about it. "Like someone struck a very large bell," he

said. "And the bell didn't stop ringing. It just—" he gestured with both hands, a spreading motion. "Kept going. All around."

The dome rising. He had heard the dome rising through the building's stone, without being at an interface, without any framework for what he was hearing, and he had found the right description for it: a large bell that kept ringing.

"Yes," I said. "That's exactly what it is."

He looked at me. "When this is quiet again," he said, carefully, in the tone he used when he was saying something he had been thinking about for a while, "will you teach me what I'm hearing?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll teach you."

He nodded once. The Tomas nod that meant: I am holding you to this.

"Go sleep," he said. "You look terrible."

"You said that already."

"It's still true," he said, and went back to his card game.

I found Mama in the Leatherworkers' Guild Hall.

The Second Ring's guild halls had been turned into residential dormitories for the Third Ring's displaced population — the same transformation, Mama had told me in a note she had sent three days ago, that had happened three years ago during the bandit attacks, in this same building, in what she described as a very specific smell of leather and anxiety. She had said: *Tomas was small enough then to fall asleep on my lap. He is not that small anymore, which is probably for the best.*

She was in the large common room, helping an older woman adjust a sleeping arrangement in a way that appeared to involve considerable logistical negotiation. She noticed me when I was halfway across the room and went still for a moment in the way she went still when something had surprised her. Then she handed the bedding to the older woman and crossed to me.

She held my face in both hands.

She looked at me for a long time without speaking. I was aware of what she was seeing: I had not slept properly in two days, the fatigue of the dome operations was in my face in a way I had not tried to conceal, and I was wearing the Tower's Initiate clothing which I had been wearing continuously since the siege began and which showed the evidence.

"Sit down," she said.

We sat at one of the long tables. The hall was busy with displaced people managing their temporary living arrangements, and the hum of a large population in a shared space was oddly comfortable — it had the texture of the tavern at its fullest, the specific energy of many lives happening in the same room.

"Are you all right?" she said.

"Yes," I said. "Tired."

"I know you did something," she said. "Everyone knows the Tower did something. The people in here — when the dome went up, half of them cried." She paused. "I may have been one of them."

I looked at the table.

"I couldn't tell them it was you," she said. "I didn't know exactly what you were doing. But I knew you were in that building doing something." She paused. "The note you sent said you were developing capabilities you couldn't explain yet. I spent thirty-one hours in this hall with seventy thousand people, many of whom were frightened, and I held onto that sentence."

"I'm sorry I couldn't tell you more," I said.

"Don't apologise," she said. "You were right not to. I understand operational security." She said the phrase with a slight irony that told me she had been hearing it a great deal from the city managers. "Tomas?"

"He's fine. He's playing cards."

She almost smiled. "Of course he is." She looked at me. "What happens now?"

"Collin will be managing the return of the population to the

Third Ring over the next few days," I said. "The army has withdrawn. There will be diplomatic follow-up — Father Brolan and the Guard and the city managers working out what comes next with Cupritesh." I paused. "There are things inside the Tower that still need attention. The systems — things that have needed work for a long time, that I can only begin to address now." I paused again. "There's a girl I need to talk to. Someone who was brought here against her better interests. Someone who can hear things the way I can hear things."

Mama listened to this with her characteristic full attention.

"Your hands," she said. She had been looking at them since I sat down.

I looked at them. The tingling was still there, the familiar post-operation presence in my palms.

"Does it hurt?" she said.

"No," I said. "It just — feels like the building. Like I'm still connected to it." I paused. "I think I'm always connected to it, now. I don't think that goes away."

She sat with this for a moment. Then she did the thing she did when she wanted me to hear something: she put her hand over mine, both hands, flat and warm.

"You were always better at the lute than you thought you were," she said.

I looked at her.

"You always undersold it," she said. "Even when you were playing well, you'd finish a piece and say: *I got through it.*Never *I played it well.* Never *that was good.* Always just: *I got through it.*" She looked at my hands under hers. "You got through the dome."

"I got through the dome," I said.

"Stop saying that like it means nothing," she said. "It means something."

I looked at the table. The hall around us, the people, the specific smell of leather that would apparently always be part of how she remembered this, the warm weight of her hands over mine.

"It means something," I said.

"Yes," she said. "It does."

She released my hands and stood.

"Go sleep," she said. "That's an order from someone who outranks everyone in that Tower."

"You don't outrank Father Brolan," I said.

"I outrank Father Brolan," she said, with absolute certainty, and turned back to the sleeping-arrangement negotiation she had been conducting when I arrived.

I walked back to the Tower through the Second Ring's early evening.

The streets were full but moving — the displaced population beginning to understand that they would be able to go home, the specific relief of a crisis resolved expressing itself as motion and noise and the gradual restoration of ordinary life. Someone had set up a food stall on a corner and was selling something hot, and a line had formed, and the line had the quality of people who were hungry in the way of people who had been tense for too long and were now, finally, allowing themselves to notice.

I walked through it and listened to the city.

Below the sound of it — below the voices and the movement and the specific acoustic of a crowded urban night — I could hear the Tower's hum. The generators at rest, their contribution reduced now that the dome was down. The fundamental tone. The ongoing work of the building.

The fundamental tone.

I stopped walking.

I stood in the middle of the street with people moving around me and I listened.

The fundamental tone was at its intended pitch.

Not approaching it. Not almost. There. The note the Tower had been reaching for since before I arrived, the note it had been flat of for I did not know how many generations, the note that I had been

incrementally moving toward over sixteen days of daily contact — it was there, ringing clean and true through the stone under my feet and the air around me.

The Tower was in tune.

I stood there for a moment in the evening street with people flowing past me, and I felt the quality of it through everything — the hum that had always been slightly off, the sound that had always been reaching, finally arrived at itself.

I did not know what it meant operationally. I did not know what the practical implications were of the fundamental tone reaching its intended pitch. I knew that it corresponded to the system's baseline readiness, its prepared-to-do state, the expression of everything it was capable of.

I knew that it had been drifting away from this for a very long time.

I knew that it was here now, and I was the reason.

I walked back to the Tower.

The door opened before I touched the wall.

16

The Tower the morning after the siege was the same building it had been the morning before the siege, and completely different.

I noticed this walking the corridors before breakfast, the specific quality of returning to familiar spaces after something significant has happened in them. The stone was the same stone, warm under my fingertips, the same sourceless light from the sconces, the same vibration through the floor. But the vibration was different now — not in character, not in frequency, but in what I knew about it. The sixteen days of learning had changed how I received the building, and the siege had confirmed something in that knowledge that made it impossible to unhear.

The fundamental tone rang clean through the floor.

I stopped in the corridor outside the lounge and listened to it. Still there. Still at its intended pitch. I had been half-expecting it to have drifted back overnight, some part of me not yet convinced that a change this significant could simply hold. But it held. The Tower's baseline was at its designed state, and it had been there all night while I slept, and it was there now, and the building around me felt

different in precisely the way that an instrument felt different when it was in tune.

Like something that had been almost itself was finally itself.

I stood there for a moment with my hand against the wall, not doing anything specific, just listening. Then I went to breakfast.

The dining hall had a quality I had not seen in it before.

Not the subdued morning quality of the first weeks, or the tense focused quality of the days leading up to the siege. Something looser. The Servants who came in were talking more than usual, the conversations at a slightly higher register than ordinary morning discourse, the specific social release of people who had been under pressure for an extended period and were now, carefully, beginning to release it.

The Third Ring population was returning to their homes, Collin had reported at dawn. Supervised, organised, prioritised by proximity to the outer wall — the families whose homes were close to the wall where the army had been given first access, the logic being that they needed to see their homes were intact before they could settle. Most were intact. Gate Town had some damage from the period before the dome went up, and there were broken windows on a few outer buildings from the army's initial approach, but the dome had protected the city once it was raised and the damage was bounded.

Two Guards had died in the brief period before I raised the dome. I had learned their names from Taryce the previous evening: Pela, who had been on the outer wall when the army advanced; and Ressen, who had gone with the negotiating delegation and had not been the one killed there but had died in the subsequent Guard action clearing Gate Town's occupied buildings. I did not know either of them. I knew their names now.

Sajay was at the table, which was increasingly the default. She set her bowl down and looked at me and said: "You look better."

"I slept," I said.

"Good," she said. "You were frightening people."

"What people?"

"People who had never seen someone run thirty-one hours on a

sustained interface connection," she said. "Which is all of us, because that has never happened before." She ate a spoonful of porridge. "How do you feel?"

"Rested," I said. "The tone is there."

She looked at me.

"The fundamental tone," I said. "It reached its intended pitch last night. I heard it on the walk back from the Second Ring."

She was quiet for a moment. Then: "What does that mean?"

"I'm not entirely sure yet," I said honestly. "The system's baseline is at its designed state for the first time in I don't know how long. What that enables — what changes — I'll need to spend time understanding." I paused. "But it feels like the right foundation. Whatever comes next starts from a more correct position than whatever came before."

She looked at this from several angles, as she did with most things. "The choir," she said. "Is it different?"

I listened. The ten tones of the morning shift were present above us, the weather station running its normal operations with the comfortable efficiency of a team that was properly recognised now, that the system could see. The interference patterns were reduced to a fraction of what they had been two weeks ago. The chord was cleaner.

"Better," I said. "The fundamental being in tune — it changes how everything above it resonates. The harmonics sit differently." I paused, trying to find the right words for something that was primarily experienced as sound. "When a string instrument's body is properly constructed, the body resonates with the strings and amplifies them. When it isn't properly constructed — when something in the wood is wrong, or the proportions are off — the body works against the strings. You get sound but not the full sound." I looked at her. "For a long time the Tower's body was working against its strings. Now it's resonating with them."

She absorbed this. "And the things we couldn't do before—"

"Some of them may be different now," I said. "I need to find out

which ones and how. But yes — some things that were limited by the fundamental's pitch being off will be less limited now."

Jarace appeared, which resolved itself into the usual breakfast assembly. Prael arrived separately, as she often did, with the slightly focused quality of someone who had been thinking since before she got up. Denn, whose enthusiasm for the post-siege atmosphere was even more evident than usual. Amil, reading, as ever.

The conversation ranged across the siege's events in the specific way of people comparing notes from different positions in the same event — what the weather station had felt like when the dome went up, what the fields team had experienced three floors below, what the younger Initiates had thought when they heard the dome absorb the first catapult strike. Denn had been in the operational station for parts of the siege and described the experience of working the lens while the dome ran simultaneously with the earnest precision of someone assembling a technical account.

At some point Hest said: "Generator seven. Who took it out?"

"Operatives working for an organisation called the Reclamers," I said. "They wanted access to the Tower's systems. They used the siege as cover to try to get in."

"Did they?"

"They tried," I said. "Captain Taryce dealt with it."

"She dealt with it," Hest repeated, in the tone of someone who had been in Alabaster long enough to know what Taryce dealing with things meant.

"Efficiently," I said.

Amil looked up from her book. "The girl," she said.

I looked at her.

"The operator they brought," she said. "I heard about it from Marten this morning." She closed the book. "She has partial recognition capability."

"Lieutenant Commander level, the system said."

"Where does she come from?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "I'm going to find out." I paused. "I want to talk to her today."

"What are you going to tell her?" Amil said.

"What she is," I said. "What she can hear and what it means." I looked at the table. "The same things I wish someone had told me before I sat in the testing chair."

Amil looked at me for a moment. "She was used by people who knew what she was and didn't tell her," she said.

"Yes."

"That is—" she paused, choosing a word with her characteristic care. "That is something worth being angry about."

"Yes," I said. "It is."

Father Brolan's morning briefing was the quietest one in weeks.

No intelligence reports. No military assessment. No timeline. Just the accounting of what had happened and what needed to happen next, delivered in the tone of a man who was very tired and very relieved and had been doing both of those things quietly for long enough that neither was visible except in the specific quality of his stillness.

The Reclamers' operatives: five in custody. Taryce was conducting formal interrogations, which she described in the briefing as "thorough." The young woman — Saya — was being held separately, treated differently, which Father Brolan noted with approval.

The generator seven sabotage: the damage to the power connection was repairable. Brother Tomlin, the structural maintenance Servant, had assessed it and believed three days of work would restore it fully. I confirmed that once repaired, the generator could be brought online through the same activation process as the reconnection of generator twelve.

The device in the walls: Brother Evan had removed it the previous evening, after Taryce confirmed the operatives were all in

custody. The cavity in the stonework was sealed. The communications channel it had enabled was permanently closed.

Misha and Marten: Father Brolan had had a long conversation with them after the siege ended. He described it as productive without specifying the details. "They will remain in the Tower," he said. "Under arrangements that are different from what existed before." He looked at me. "I would like you to be part of the further conversations with them. What they know about the Reclamers, about the other cities, about the broader situation — we should understand it fully."

"Yes," I said.

"The operator registry," he said. "We will continue adding Servants in the coming days. The remaining operators who have not yet been registered."

"I'd also like to add Saya," I said.

He looked at me.

"If she agrees," I said. "She has legitimate capability. She was used without proper knowledge of what she was doing. That's not her fault." I paused. "Whatever rank the system assigns her — that's what she is. That capability exists regardless of what the Reclamers wanted to do with it."

Father Brolan was quiet for a moment. Then: "Talk to her. Understand the situation. I'll consider it."

"Thank you."

"One more thing," he said. "Commander Evan—" Brother Evan looked up, and I noticed — it was small, barely visible, but present — the slight adjustment in his posture when the new title was used. "I'd like you to begin work on the formal governance documentation. The structure we've been using informally — the collective decision-making, the oversight protocols for the registry — I want it written down. Properly."

"I'll start today," Brother Evan said.

Father Brolan looked around the room.

"We have done something significant," he said. "All of us. It is

worth acknowledging that before we continue." He said it simply, without ceremony, in the tone of someone who believed in acknowledging things accurately before moving past them. "We have defended this city with systems that have not been used for their intended purpose in centuries. We have opened the operator registry under conditions that honour the original intent of the founder. We have established, for the first time since this installation was built, a proper governance structure for its operation." He paused. "This is not the end of anything. It is a beginning." He looked at me. "What comes next?"

"The aquifer," I said. "And Tomas. And Saya. And the things the fundamental tone reaching its pitch will change." I paused. "In that order, probably."

"Probably," he agreed. "Start with Saya."

The Guard's holding rooms were in the lower level of the Second Ring, adjacent to the Guard Hall — a set of clean, well-maintained rooms that were used for temporary detention and had the specific quality of spaces designed to be functional without being punitive. Taryce had made a distinction between the rooms where the operatives were being held and the room where Saya was, and the distinction was visible: the operative rooms were locked from the outside; Saya's door was ajar.

I knocked on the frame.

She was sitting on the room's single bed, knees pulled up, the blanket wrapped around her shoulders. She was younger than I had expected — twenty at most, perhaps younger. Dark hair, the Alabaster coloring of someone who had grown up in this region, fine-boned with the look of someone who had been systematically underfed for long enough that it had become structural. She looked up when I knocked and her face did something complicated: assessment, recognition, a kind of resigned awareness.

"You're the Commander," she said.

"Taryn," I said. "Can I come in?"

She moved her feet to make room on the bed, which was approximately the size of an invitation. I came in and sat on the single chair.

She looked at me. I looked at her. We were, I realised, approximately the same age.

"You heard me coming," she said. Not quite a question.

"Through the door," I said. "The way I hear most things in this building."

"The sound," she said.

"Yes," I said. "What does it sound like to you?"

She was quiet for a moment. She had the quality of someone deciding how much to trust, which was a reasonable quality to have in her situation. "Like something very large breathing," she said. "Or — not breathing. Just existing. Being present." She paused. "I've heard it my whole life. I thought everyone did."

"They don't," I said.

"So they told me. Eventually." Her voice had a flatness on the last two words that carried history.

"Who told you?" I said.

"The people who brought me here." She looked at the wall. "They found me two years ago. I was in Verdant — I grew up there. My mother's family has been there for generations." She paused. "They said I was special. That I had something in my blood that meant I could access ancient systems, that there were machines that needed people like me." She paused again. "They were not wrong about any of that, technically."

"What did they tell you the machines were for?"

"For recovering what had been lost," she said. "The knowledge, the capabilities, the things that had been forgotten when the cities stopped using their installations properly." She looked at me. "They made it sound like preservation. Like heritage work. They said I would be helping to reclaim something that belonged to everyone."

"And then they brought you to a city under siege," I said.

"That part came later," she said. She was quiet for a moment. "They didn't start with that. They started with — teaching me things. What I was hearing, what it corresponded to, how to engage with it. Not formally, not with proper training. More like — here is a piece of what you need to know, here is another piece. Enough to make me useful, not enough to make me independent."

I thought about what the Succession Document had said about Hollis's concern: the operator who didn't understand what they were doing, who could be directed by someone who did.

"You accessed the system at this installation seven months ago," I said.

She looked at me with an expression that was not quite surprised. "You know about that."

"The system logged it," I said. "You tried to access communication records."

"I was told to," she said. "I was told the records would tell us what Alabaster knew about the old systems. That it was important information. I didn't — I couldn't get to them. The access was insufficient." She paused. "They were frustrated." A pause. "I was relieved."

The same word Taryce's Guard had used.

"You didn't want to do it," I said.

"I didn't know what I was doing," she said. "I knew I was accessing something I wasn't supposed to access. I didn't know the full scope of what I was part of." She looked at her hands. "By the time I understood more, I was already committed. I knew things, I had traveled with them, I was — they were the only people who had ever told me what I was. What I could hear. It was hard to leave that."

I understood this. Not from the same experience, but from the adjacent one: the specific pull of being seen, of having what you could do acknowledged and named, of belonging to something that understood you. It was the most powerful invitation available, and the Reclamers had used it deliberately.

"What do you actually hear?" I said. "Describe it as precisely as you can."

She looked at me carefully. Then she described it.

It was different from my perception — she heard it less as music, more as a physical sensation, a vibration she felt in her chest and her hands more than in her ears. But the underlying structure was the same: the building's baseline, the operational layers above it, the specific harmonics of active systems. She could not separate individual elements the way I could. She perceived it more as weather than as music — as a general condition rather than specific voices.

"Lieutenant Commander," I said. "That's what the system registered you as, based on what it could identify in the partial match. You have real capability. More than most people in this building."

She looked at me. "And what happens to me now?"

"That depends on what you want," I said. "Not on what other people want to use you for."

She was quiet for a long time. Outside, the Second Ring was audible in the background sounds of a city beginning to return to normal — the movement of people, the resumption of commerce, the sound of a population exhaling after held breath.

"I don't know what I want," she said. "I don't know enough about what I am to know what wanting makes sense."

"That's honest," I said. "It's also where I was seventeen days ago."

She looked at me.

"I was in a tavern," I said. "I'd grown up carrying scrap bags to the trough. I had no idea what the Tower was or what the sound was or why I could hear it. On the morning of my brother's Test, I walked through the Tower's door for the first time and I had been hearing the building my whole life without knowing what I was hearing." I paused. "Everything I know about this, I've learned in seventeen days."

She absorbed this. "And in seventeen days you—" she gestured at the building around us, at the dome that had been and was now lowered, at the fact of a siege repelled.

"Yes," I said. "Partly because of what I was taught and partly because I had good people helping me and partly because of seventeen days of sustained practice." I paused. "The capability you have is real. What you could become with proper training, proper context, proper understanding of what you're doing — I don't know the full scope of it. But I know it's significant." I looked at her. "The question is whether you want to develop it here, under conditions where you know exactly what it's for and what it won't be used for."

She looked at her hands. "The Reclamers," she said. "Are they — are they finished?"

"The ones who were here are in custody," I said. "The organisation itself — I don't know. Father Brolan and Captain Taryce are working to understand the full picture." I paused. "What I can tell you is that this building is not going to be used the way they intended. The registry is open now — properly, with oversight, with a governance structure that prevents any single person from controlling it. The capabilities here are being developed for the city's benefit." I paused. "I know that might sound like what they told you about themselves. I know there's no reason you should simply believe it."

She looked at me for a long moment.

"You came to this room yourself," she said. "Not a Guard, not a Servant, not someone sent on your behalf. You came yourself."

"Yes," I said.

"That's something," she said.

We sat in the room for a while. Not talking — I had said what I came to say and she was thinking about it in the way of someone who had had a great deal forced on them and was now, carefully, beginning to see what she might choose for herself.

Eventually she said: "What's the aquifer?"

"What?"

"In the briefing. Before you came down here. I heard someone in the corridor say you were going to work on the aquifer." She looked at me. "What is it?"

I thought about Prael's records. The hundred and forty years of

slow decline. The deep geological source that had been diminishing since before anyone alive could remember.

"It's the deep water source under the city," I said. "It's been declining for a hundred and forty years and no one has been able to investigate it because it requires accessing the system at a depth no operator has been able to reach." I paused. "Now they might be able to."

She was quiet. "And you think you can fix it?"

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know yet what's wrong with it. I can't fix something I don't understand." I paused. "But I can try to find out what's wrong. Which is the beginning."

She looked at the wall for a moment. Then: "Can I watch?"

I blinked.

"When you try," she said. "Can I watch? Not participate — I understand I'm not — I don't have the training. Just watch."

I thought about this. Taryce's briefing had implied that Saya was to be handled carefully, that her situation required formal discussion before any operational involvement. Father Brolan had said: *consider it*.

But watching was not operational involvement. Watching was what Brother Evan had asked me to do in the operational stations before I attempted anything — and it had been, in its way, the most important part of the development.

"I'll ask Father Brolan," I said. "But I don't see why not."

Something shifted in her face. Not a smile, not quite — the relaxation of something that had been braced for a long time.

"Thank you," she said.

I added her to the system that afternoon.

Father Brolan's consideration had taken the form of a conversation with Brother Evan and Taryce in which everyone's concerns were named and addressed, and the outcome was: Saya could be

registered if she agreed, with the explicit understanding that registration conferred no obligation and did not resolve the questions of what had happened or what her relationship with the Reclamers had involved. She would be registered because her capability was real, because leaving it unregistered served no one, and because the system's formal recognition of her was separate from the human governance questions that were still being worked out.

She agreed.

I asked her what she wanted to call herself. She said her name was Saya, and that was what she wanted.

She sat in the interface chair in training room twelve, where I had managed the siege from, and put her hands on the pads. Her tone arrived in the harmonic layer — I had been hearing it since I met her, the specific character of it becoming more distinct as I paid closer attention. Different from my tone, different from Brother Evan's, different from any of the Servants' tones. Deeper in register than most, the quality of someone whose perception was primarily physical rather than primarily aural, the chest-vibration she had described translated into a harmonic character I could hear.

:Biological signature detected,: the system said. :Processing. Partial match — match level: Lieutenant Commander-equivalent.:

This is Saya, I said to the system. *She has been heard by the system for years without knowing what she was hearing. Her capability is real and her development is just beginning. Her rank is Lieutenant Commander.*

:Lieutenant Commander Saya registered as recognised operator. Access parameters updated.:

The shift in her tone was visible — audible — the same quality I had observed in each registration, the thing slotting into the place it was designed for. She made a small sound. Not distress and not triumph. More like recognition.

"What did you feel?" I said.

She was quiet for a moment. "Like it saw me," she said. "Like

something very large turned and looked at me." She paused. "It was —" she stopped.

"Startling," I said.

"Yes," she said. "But not—" She tried. "Not unkind."

"No," I said. "Not unkind."

She took her hands from the pads and sat with the experience. Brother Evan, who was monitoring, wrote something in his notebook. I let the quiet hold.

After a while she said: "The sound is different now."

"How?"

"Cleaner," she said. "Like something in it is—" she paused, searching for words in a vocabulary she was just beginning to develop. "Like something was slightly off and has been corrected."

"The fundamental tone," I said.

"Is that what it is?"

"It reached its intended pitch last night," I said. "After seventeen days of—" I paused. "Of paying attention to it."

She looked at me. "You tuned it?"

"I resonated with it," I said. "There's a difference. I didn't force it. I held what it was supposed to sound like alongside what it actually sounded like, consistently, until the distance between the two closed." I paused. "The comparison was the work. Not the correction."

She sat with this for a long time. I let her.

Eventually: "Will you teach me to do that?"

"Yes," I said.

The next three days were the first days since my arrival that felt like something other than acceleration.

Not slow — there was too much to do for slow. But measured. The quality of work that knows where it is going rather than urgency that is running from what is behind it.

The remaining operator registrations: I worked through the senior team, then the operational operators, then the experienced Initiates who were ready for it. Each addition produced the familiar small shift in the harmonic layer, the choir becoming incrementally more itself, the system's sight improving. The interference patterns in the weather station were reduced to near-zero. The fields operations team, all registered now, reported that the deep soil work felt different — more precise, more responsive, the system's feedback cleaner.

Sister Trofer said: "The lads are chattering." She meant the machines. "They weren't chattering before. They're chattering now."

"What does chattering mean?" I said.

"Mean they're talking back," she said. "When you tell them to do something, they tell you what they're doing while they do it. They never used to." She looked pleased. "Forty years of talking to something that didn't answer and now it answers. It's quite nice, actually."

The governance documentation: Brother Evan had begun drafting it with the thoroughness he brought to everything. He showed me sections in the evenings, the careful language of a man who was trying to capture principles in words that would still be legible in a hundred years. I made suggestions. Father Brolan reviewed drafts. Collin and Taryce contributed the civilian governance perspective. It was slow work and important work and the slowness was appropriate.

Tomas: I kept my promise.

We met three evenings in a row, in the small visitor room near the dormitories, and I began teaching him what I knew. Not formally — I did not have formal training to give, only what I had learned myself over seventeen days of discovery. I started where Brother Evan had started with me: tell me what you hear. Let the description be as precise as you can make it. Don't try to make it sound like anything except what it actually is.

What he heard was different from what I heard and the same. The big dulcimer, he still called it. Not music exactly, not a single

instrument — a texture, a presence, a quality of the air in rooms that had stone walls and something running in the stone. He was eight years old and he had never been told what it was and he had been living inside it for his whole life and the way he described it had a freshness that I found I was learning from. His vocabulary was not my vocabulary. The things he noticed were not always the things I had noticed first.

On the third evening he said: "The deep one. The slow one. It's been different since the army left."

I had been sitting with my hands folded, listening to his description of what he heard from the dormitory's stone walls. I went still.

"Different how?" I said.

He thought about it. "More even," he said. "Before it was — it was like something slightly stuck. Working harder than it should. Now it's like—" he searched. "Like it got oil put on it."

The geothermal pulse.

I had been tracking the operational systems as I always did, the background awareness that was now as natural as breathing, and the geothermal pulse had been present and steady since the dome operation — unchanged, I had thought. But Tomas's description was specific. Something slightly stuck, working harder than it should. More even now.

I reached into the harmonic layer, properly and deliberately, and listened to the geothermal pulse with the full attention I had not given it since the siege.

He was right.

Not dramatically different. Not the aquifer — the aquifer was still declining at its slow steady rate, that problem was unchanged. But the geothermal pulse itself had a slightly different character from the baseline I had established in my first week. More even. The fundamental tone reaching its intended pitch had changed something in the deepest layer — had changed the system's relationship to its own power source.

Slightly. Incrementally.

But there.

"You heard that before I did," I said.

He looked at me with the eight-year-old assessment. "I notice things," he said, which was something Mama used to say about him: *Tomas notices things*.

"You do," I said. "You're going to be very good at this."

He accepted this as a fact rather than a compliment, which was entirely correct.

On the fourth day after the siege I descended to the fields station with Prael.

The full fields team was there — all registered now, all with their proper recognition in the system — and they had the quality I had been observing in other teams after registration: more settled, more responsive, the sense of a tool that was being used properly rather than improvised with. Sister Trofer was at the supervisor's position, watching her operators with the proprietary satisfaction of someone who had just learned that everything they believed about their work was true and also more than they had thought.

Prael had the records. The hundred and forty years of aquifer data, the slow decline, the points of comparison.

"Today I want to listen," I said. "Not attempt anything. Listen to what the system shows me about the aquifer's current state and compare it to what I heard during the siege when the full dome was active." I paused. "The dome's peripheral awareness gave me a different view of the deep systems. I want to access that view deliberately."

"You accessed the aquifer data during the siege?" Prael said.

"Briefly," I said. "The dome's sensing expanded my perceptual scope. I felt the deep systems but I didn't have the attention to examine them carefully — there were more immediate things." I paused. "Now I have attention."

She nodded.

I sat in the supervisor's chair. The fields team's tones rose into the harmonic layer — all six of them now clearly distinct, the character of each operator's connection specific and recognisable. Brother Joba's tone, the deepest and most geologically connected, had a quality that I had noted before and appreciated more fully now: forty years of interface work had built something in his relationship with the system that the registration had not created but had confirmed and sharpened.

"Brother Joba," I said. "I'm going to ask the system to show me the deep aquifer data. I'd like you to hold your connection steady — whatever you normally do at this depth — while I access the reading."

He nodded without turning from his station. "Ready."

I asked: *Show me the current state of the primary aquifer. Full depth reading. Compare to the design specification.*

The system's response was organised and immediate in a way it had not been before the fundamental tone was corrected. The difference was not dramatic but it was present: the information came through cleaner, more structured, the system's communication more precise. The correlation between what I asked and what I received was closer.

What I received was a complex harmonic picture. I held it and attended to it with the selective awareness the dome document had described — peripheral vision, awareness without forced focus — and let the shape of it become present.

The aquifer. Deep below the farms, below the water table that the fields team managed, below the geological formations that the earthmoving operations could reach. A body of water that had been self-sustaining when the installation was established, fed by deep geological sources running through the rock from the mountain range to the east.

The mountain range to the east.

I held this image.

:Current aquifer volume: 67% of original design capacity,: the

system said. :Decline rate: consistent over 140 years. Source reduction: primary geological channel, northeast sector, operating at 31% of original flow.:

Northeast sector. The geological channel running from the mountains was operating at thirty-one percent of its original flow.

:Cause of source reduction: partial geological obstruction in primary channel. Obstruction character: non-natural. Timeline consistent with significant geological event approximately 140 years prior.:

Non-natural.

What type of geological obstruction? I asked.

:Analysis indicates rock displacement inconsistent with natural erosion or seismic patterns. Displacement pattern is consistent with large-scale earthmoving operations.:

I was very still in the chair.

:Historical records indicate unscheduled earthmoving operations were conducted in the northeastern sector of installation Alabaster approximately 140 years prior. Operations were not logged through standard operator interface. Source: anomalous power draw recorded in geothermal logs.:

Unscheduled earthmoving operations. Not logged through the standard operator interface. Someone had used the earthmoving systems without logging it — which would have required Commander access, because the standard operators could not reach this depth. But Commander access had been inaccessible for centuries.

Except that it hadn't been. Not entirely.

"The two access events," I said aloud. Brother Evan looked up from his monitoring position.

"The access events from before my arrival," I said. "The system logged two partial recognition events — three years ago and seven months ago. I assumed those were Saya, and the event three years ago was probably the bandit attacks providing cover." I paused. "But 140

years ago, someone had Commander-level access — or something close enough — and used the earthmoving systems."

"140 years ago," Brother Evan said. He was thinking. "The records we have from that period—"

"Are minimal," I said. "We established that early on. The records from the mid-period were less well-kept than the older or newer ones." I looked at the harmonic picture the system was still holding for me. "Someone 140 years ago used the earthmoving systems at a depth no standard operator could reach. They blocked the aquifer's primary geological channel." I paused. "They knew what they were doing."

"Who would have had that access 140 years ago?" Prael said.

"Someone with partial biological recognition strong enough to trigger Commander-equivalent access," I said. "The same way Saya triggered Lieutenant Commander. If someone in that period had a stronger version—" I paused. "The bloodline has been degrading. 140 years ago, someone in the Hollis line may have had stronger recognition than anyone since."

"But they used it to block the aquifer," Brother Evan said.

"Or they were used," I said. "The way Saya was used. Someone who could hear the system, who was told to do something, who may not have understood the full consequences."

We sat with this for a moment.

"Can it be unblocked?" Prael said. She said it the way she said most things — directly, practically, the next step made visible.

"I don't know yet," I said. "I need to understand the obstruction better. Its depth, its composition, the specific displacement pattern." I paused. "The earthmoving systems — we've done proof-of-concept work at the surface. The rock pillar before the siege. What this would require is working at considerable depth, in a specific geological channel, with enough precision not to cause a collapse that makes things worse." I looked at Sister Trofer. "It would need your team."

She looked at Brother Joba. He was still at his station, but his posture had the quality of someone who had been listening carefully.

"Aye," Sister Trofer said. "We can reach it. With proper recognition and a steady chord." She looked at me. "How deep?"

"Deep," I said. "Deeper than anything you've done before."

"How deep is how deep?" Brother Joba said, without turning from his station.

I asked the system. The number it gave me was large.

There was a pause.

"That's very deep," Sister Trofer said, in the tone of someone not deterred but accurate.

"Yes," I said.

"The fundamental tone," Brother Joba said. He said it in the way of someone who had been listening to my conversation with Sister Trofer and Prael while ostensibly attending to his station. "You corrected it. The deep work will be different with the tone corrected."

"I believe so," I said.

He turned from his station. He was an older man, the forty years of fields work present in the quality of his stillness, the specific gravity of someone who had been doing one thing very carefully for a very long time.

"We'll need to practice," he said. "For this depth, we'll need to practice at increasing depths first. Build up to it." He looked at Sister Trofer. "Two weeks, maybe three."

"Two weeks, maybe three," she agreed.

"Starting tomorrow?" he said, looking at me.

"Starting tomorrow," I said.

That evening I sat in the lounge with the borrowed lute on my lap and did not play it for a while. Just held it, the way you held things when you needed to think and your hands needed occupation.

The aquifer.

Someone, a hundred and forty years ago, had used the earth-

moving systems to block the primary geological channel feeding the aquifer. An unlogged operation, a power draw that had been recorded only in the geothermal logs, an act that had produced a hundred and forty years of slow decline that no one had been able to explain or address.

Who? And why?

The Reclamers were an organisation that had been operating for years and had a particular interest in recovering and centralising old technologies. Could they have predecessors? Could the organisation that had sent Saya to Alabaster have been operating, in different form, for a hundred and forty years?

Or was it something else entirely? An operator in the Hollis bloodline who had been found and used, as Saya had been found and used, for purposes they didn't understand?

Or something more specific — a deliberate act, by someone who knew exactly what blocking the aquifer would do and wanted to do it, to make Alabaster more dependent, more vulnerable, more likely to fall in a particular way or at a particular time?

I did not know. I could not know from what the system had told me today. Understanding the history required investigation that I was not yet equipped for.

What I was equipped for was the next step: practice with the fields team at increasing depth, building toward the specific depth of the obstruction, and then — when the capacity was there — the attempt to clear it.

Two weeks, maybe three.

I played a chord on the borrowed lute. The room gave it back, the clean stone resonance, the note exactly itself.

Downstairs, the Tower was doing what the Tower did: the weather station managing the lens over the farms, the fields team cycling the soil, the food processing running its automated cycle, the generators humming in their ring. All of it more precisely calibrated than it had been a month ago. All of it working with a system that could finally see the people working with it.

The fundamental tone, clear and correct, running through everything.

I played the wandering minor-key tune that Mama sometimes hummed. I played it through twice and then I played it again more slowly, attending to each note, and the Tower's fundamental — clean and steady now — resonated underneath it in a way it had not done on my first night here, when the comparison had showed me the gap between what the Tower was and what it was trying to be.

The gap was closed. The instrument was in tune.

What came next was learning to play it properly.

I found Tomas the next morning, before breakfast, because he was already in the corridor outside the lounge when I came out.

He had his Initiate clothing on and his shoes tied and the slightly deliberate quality of someone who had woken up early for a purpose.

"I want to show you something," he said.

I looked at him. "Now?"

"Yes," he said. "Come on."

He led me down two corridors and through a door I had not used, into a small interior courtyard — open to the sky, surrounded on four sides by the Tower's walls, a narrow rectangle of morning light with a stone bench along one side. I had not known it was here.

He sat on the bench. I sat beside him.

"Listen," he said.

I listened.

The courtyard was different from the corridors. The geometry of it — four walls enclosing, open top, the Tower's mass around and above — created something in the acoustic. The sound gathered here. The fundamental tone was not just present but present in a specific way: the four walls reflecting and reinforcing it, the open sky letting it rise, the stone on all sides resonating.

Like being inside an instrument rather than adjacent to one.

"I found it three days ago," Tomas said. "I was looking for somewhere quiet to read and I came through the wrong door." He looked at the walls. "It sounds different here."

"It sounds more like itself," I said.

"Yes," he said. He looked satisfied with this description.

We sat in the morning light and listened to the Tower be itself, the clean fundamental note resonating in the four walls, the harmonics of the full system present above it and through it, the twelve generators and the weather operations and the fields work and the food processing and all the other things the building was always doing, heard here with the specific clarity of a space that had been, apparently, designed for exactly this.

Or not designed — I could not know that. Perhaps just found, by an eight-year-old looking for somewhere quiet to read.

"Good morning," Tomas said, to the walls.

The Tower hummed back, which was not an answer and was also exactly an answer.

"Good morning," I said.

17

The morning after the siege ended, someone in Gate Town had chalked a line across the road.

I did not see this myself — I heard it from Collin, who heard it from one of the Guard captains overseeing the return of Gate Town's traders and residents. The line was thin, rough, drawn with the quick intentionality of someone who had something to say and knew how to say it in one stroke. It ran exactly across the road at the point where the dome had stood — the precise edge of the perimeter, which the chalk-drawer had apparently known or estimated correctly.

On the city side of the line: nothing written.

On the desert side: a Cupritesh word that Collin's translator rendered as something between *here* and *this far* and *no further*.

By midday the foot traffic of the returning population had partially smudged it, and by evening it was gone, absorbed into the packed earth of the road. But for a day it was there: Gate Town's own accounting of what had happened.

I liked it. I told Collin so.

He looked at me with the expression of someone recalibrating

expectations. "You're thirteen," he said. Not unkindly. More the observation of a man who kept forgetting this fact and was surprised each time he remembered it.

"Seventeen days ago I was carrying a scrap bag through the Third Ring," I said. "Thirteen is relative."

He almost smiled. Almost.

The week following the siege had the quality of a tide going out — everything the water had covered becoming visible again, examined for damage, assessed for what needed repair and what had survived intact.

Gate Town: the buildings were standing. The streets had the damage of an army passing through — broken shutters, scattered debris from market stalls that had been overturned either by the soldiers or by the hasty evacuation, boot-marks in the mud, the general residue of several hundred people who had been where they weren't supposed to be. No fires. The Guard had managed that.

The Third Ring wall: intact. The dome had stopped any siege equipment from being effective, and the initial advance before the dome went up had been infantry rather than artillery, focused on Gate Town rather than the wall itself.

The Tower: undamaged. The Reclamers' intrusion had been managed before anything significant was accessed or altered. The generator seven connection, which Brother Tomlin completed repairing in two and a half days, was back online, tested, and confirmed functional.

The dome's power reserves: restoring at the rate the system had estimated, the geothermal input gradually refilling the generators' capacity. In four more days they would be at full strength.

The army: the Guard's far-seer confirmed they had made camp twenty miles west and appeared to be making decisions. Not retreating home — not yet. Consolidating, which Taryce described as

the behaviour of a force whose commanders needed to report to their king without admitting failure, and were therefore spending time making the situation look like strategy rather than defeat.

"How long before they go home?" Father Brolan asked her.

"A week," she said. "Two at most. They have limited supply and no reasonable path forward."

"Unless someone gives them a new plan," Brother Evan said.

The room considered this.

"The Reclamers' people are in custody," Father Brolan said. "Their communications device is removed. Whatever information they were able to gather — the dome specifications, the generator positions — is already known to us to be compromised, and we can adjust accordingly."

"The generator specifications," I said. "Generator eleven — I've already asked the system to encrypt the physical location data at Commander level. If they try what they did with seven, they won't have the information to do it."

Taryce nodded. "I've also posted permanent Guard presence at the generator positions that are externally accessible. Five positions have exterior access; we've covered them." She paused. "The positions that are inside the Second Ring wall are more protected by nature."

"The dome is the primary defence," Father Brolan said. "As long as the dome is available, direct assault is ineffective. Their options are narrowing."

"Their options," Collin said, "are to withdraw or to wait and hope that something changes." He spread his hands. "Nothing is going to change for them."

There was something careful in the way he said this, and I noted it, and did not push at it yet.

The interrogations produced information slowly, in the way that careful interrogations did — not dramatic revelations but the gradual assembly of a picture from many small pieces. Taryce shared the summaries with Father Brolan's inner circle and, by Father Brolan's direction, with me.

The Reclamers: an organisation twenty years old, formed by three people who had independently arrived at the conclusion that the old terraforming systems were Achillios's most significant underused resource, and that the primary obstacle to using them was the fragmented, uncoordinated state of the world's cities. Their solution was not conquest in the old sense — not armies and subjugation — but control of the systems themselves. If you controlled the machines that made the atmosphere breathable and the water available and the soil fertile, you controlled everything that depended on those things.

Which was everything.

They had been patient. Twenty years of patient work: finding operator bloodlines in various cities, learning what remained of the old systems, mapping what still functioned and what had been lost. Two of their founders were themselves partial operators — descendants of the old Commanders at Cupritesh's installation and at one of the southern cities. Neither were as capable as Saya; neither had her degree of recognition. But enough.

The Alabaster operation had been their most ambitious. The tower here was unique: the only installation they knew of with a fully active operator, a functioning dome system, and what their intelligence had suggested was a living Commander bloodline. The goal had not been to use the dome against the city — they understood the interdict, or at least understood that the system resisted aggressive use. The goal had been access: sit in the chair, open the registry, add themselves as recognised operators, and from that position of recognised authority direct the system's capabilities toward their vision of a unified Achillios.

They had believed this was possible because they were correct that it was possible. They had not known that I had already done it.

"That is the consistent theme," Saya said, when I described the interrogation summaries to her. We had developed a habit, in the days since her registration, of talking in the morning before the day's training sessions. She had moved from the Guard's holding room to a guest room in the Tower proper — Father Brolan's decision, after a conversation with Taryce in which Taryce had said, with characteristic economy: *she is more useful to us inside than outside*.

"They kept describing a situation that had already changed," she said. "They were planning for a Tower without an active Commander. Everything they did assumed the absence of exactly the thing they most needed to account for."

"They knew about the bloodline," I said. "They knew the access persisted."

"They didn't know you had arrived," she said. "Or they didn't believe it had changed things so quickly." She paused. "Seventeen days. I understand why they might not have believed it."

She had the quality, in conversation, of someone who was thinking two levels at once — the surface level of what was being discussed and a deeper level of assessment, comparison, the ongoing work of understanding a situation she had been inside without fully seeing. I found I was learning things in these conversations: not just about the Reclamers but about the ways an organisation could use people, the specific mechanics of how you took someone's capability and their need to be understood and turned those two things against them.

"What will happen to the others?" she said. "The ones in custody."

"I don't know entirely," I said. "Taryce and Father Brolan are working that out. The founders, and the people who directed the operation — that's more serious. The others—" I paused. "Some of them are like you. People who were found because of what they could hear and were given a narrative and followed it." I looked at her. "Taryce can tell the difference."

"She can," Saya agreed. She had a specific quality of respect for

Taryce that had developed quickly, the respect of someone who had been professionally assessed by a professional and found the experience clarifying rather than frightening. "She asked very precise questions."

"She always does," I said.

Marten found me in the library on the third day.

I had been spending an hour each morning in the library since the siege, in the near-script section with the oldest documents, reading — slowly, with the translation notes alongside — the sections that had not yet been examined. The library Servant moved around me in the companionable way of someone accustomed to working alongside quiet visitors, occasionally placing a new page of translation notes on my stack without comment when she completed a section she thought I would want.

Marten sat down across from me without being asked, which was simply how he moved through spaces.

"The obstruction in the aquifer channel," he said.

I looked at him.

"We know about it," he said. "Or — Onyx knows about it. Has known for some time." He paused. "I should have mentioned it earlier. I was—" he paused. "I was operating on Onyx's traditional information protocols, which emphasise disclosure on a need-to-know basis. The siege superseded that calculation." He looked at the documents in front of me. "You've found it in the records."

"The system identified it," I said. "A blocked geological channel. Non-natural displacement. One hundred and forty years ago."

"One hundred and forty-three," he said. "We have more precise records."

I closed the document I had been reading.

"Tell me," I said.

He was quiet for a moment in the way of someone organising what they were about to say.

"One hundred and forty-three years ago," he said, "a woman came to Alabaster. She was young — nineteen, perhaps twenty. She presented herself as a traveler from the south and was given hospitality, as travelers generally were. She stayed for a month." He paused. "She had the capability. Stronger than Saya, based on what the historical records suggest — the Onyx observers at the time estimated she was Lieutenant Commander level or above."

"Where did she come from?"

"Unknown with certainty," he said. "The Onyx records suggest she was from one of the southern cities — possibly Spessarta, possibly one of the smaller settlements further south. Her bloodline is uncertain. But the recognition was strong enough that she was able to access the earthmoving systems."

"Was she working for the Reclamers?" I said.

"The Reclamers didn't exist then," he said. "The organisation was founded twenty years ago. What she was working for — or who — is less clear." He paused. "The Onyx records describe her as what we would call a 'directed operator.' Someone with capability who was found and given a specific task and told to perform it." He looked at the table. "She was told that blocking the aquifer channel would benefit Alabaster — that the channel was carrying contaminated water from a deep geological source and that blocking it would protect the city's water supply." He paused. "This was not true. But it was a coherent enough lie that someone who didn't fully understand the system might have believed it."

I sat with this for a moment. "Who told her this?"

"We don't know," he said. "We know she came from the south. We know someone sent her. We know she did what she was directed to do and apparently left immediately afterward." He paused. "She is not the Reclamers. But the pattern — find an operator, give them a false narrative, direct their capability toward someone else's goal — that pattern is older than the Reclamers."

"Someone has been doing this for a hundred and forty years," I said.

"Someone," he said carefully, "or some organisation that became the Reclamers, or something that gave rise to them, or simply a set of people who independently arrived at the same approach across multiple generations." He paused. "We don't know. What we know is the pattern, and the pattern is old."

I looked at the near-script documents in front of me. Five hundred years of records. How many of them, if read with this knowledge, would show the same pattern? How many times had someone been found and used, had someone's capability been directed toward someone else's purposes?

"Why didn't Onyx tell us earlier?" I said. "About the aquifer. About the obstruction."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Because Onyx has been doing what Onyx does," he said. "Watching. Preserving. Waiting." He paused. "Not acting. That is our tradition and our limitation. We know a great deal and we do very little with it." He looked at me directly. "It is a tradition I am increasingly uncertain of."

I thought about what Misha had said: *we have been protecting it, in our way, for a long time.* The protection of observation. The protection of not interfering, of not revealing, of watching carefully while things happened and recording them accurately.

"What does Onyx want now?" I said. "From this relationship. Going forward."

"That," he said, "is a conversation I need to have with Father Brolan." He paused. "What I can tell you is what I want. Personally." He looked at the documents. "I have been in this building for eleven years. I have watched it from the inside and reported to Onyx and maintained the protocols that Onyx required. I have been — correct, technically." He paused. "I have also been here when Misha brought you to your room and you noticed the implant and said nothing. I

have been here through the siege. I have watched you and Brother Evan and Father Brolan do in seventeen days what Onyx has been waiting for someone to do for a generation." He looked at me. "What I want is to stop waiting and start helping."

I held this.

"Tell me what Onyx knows about the organisations that use directed operators," I said. "Everything. Whatever they've been accumulating while they wait."

"Yes," he said. "That is what I intend."

He placed a stack of notes on the table — his own handwriting, dense and organised, covering both sides of each page. The Onyx records he had apparently been preparing to share.

He left me to read.

I read for two hours.

What Marten's notes contained was not a history — it was more a pattern analysis. Onyx had been observing the use of directed operators across the continent for a very long time, and the picture that emerged from the notes was not a single organisation but a type: a recurring structure that appeared, dissolved, reappeared in different form, with different names and different faces but the same underlying logic.

Find someone with capability. Give them a story about what the capability is for. Use it for your own purposes.

The woman who blocked the aquifer was not the first instance in Onyx's records. There was an entry from two centuries ago, a man who had been directed to perform earthmoving operations at one of the southern installations in a way that had destabilised a local settlement — providing a crisis that someone then used to consolidate political control. There was an entry from a hundred years ago, a partial operator used to access communication logs at three different

cities and extract intelligence that had then been used to manipulate trade negotiations. There were smaller instances — misdirections, minor sabotages, individual operators found and briefly used and discarded.

All of them had the same character: the operator was real, the capability was real, the use was not what the operator was told it was.

And underneath all of it, in Marten's notes, a thread: the same pattern of approach. The same specific combination of knowledge — finding operators required knowing what to look for, required access to information about bloodlines and recognition capability that was not publicly available. Whoever was doing this had access to information that only a few people in the world possessed.

Including Onyx.

I looked at this for a long time.

Then I went to find Father Brolan.

"You're suggesting," Father Brolan said, "that the source of the information used to find directed operators may be, in part, Onyx itself."

"I'm suggesting it's possible," I said. "Marten's notes are his own interpretation and he's been honest about the limits of his knowledge. But the pattern of approach — the specific knowledge required to identify capable operators — Onyx has that knowledge. Has had it for a long time. If there are people in Onyx who have the same relationship with the organisation's information that Misha and Marten have had with ours—"

"Double agents," Father Brolan said.

"Or people with divided loyalties. Or people who have been found and used the same way the operators have been." I paused. "I don't know. But it's a question worth asking."

He looked at his hands. "I will ask it," he said. "Directly, of Marten and Misha."

"And of Onyx directly, if there's a way," I said.

He looked at me. "You've been thinking about this."

"The aquifer was blocked by someone who was lied to about what they were doing," I said. "Saya was used by people who didn't tell her what she actually was. Both of those things could have been prevented by knowledge that existed somewhere and was withheld." I paused. "I don't want to rebuild what we've done here on a foundation that has the same leaks as before."

He was quiet for a moment.

"No," he said. "Neither do I." He looked at the window. "I'm going to request a formal communication with Onyx. Not through Marten — directly, through the system, now that we control the communications network." He paused. "This may require your assistance."

"I know how the communications system works," I said. "I can set up a channel that's fully within our control."

"Good." He stood, which was his signal that a decision had been made and it was time to act on it. "Do that today. I'd like to have a direct conversation with whoever runs Onyx before the end of the week."

Establishing the communication channel took the morning.

The system's communications network was more extensive than I had initially understood — the documents Marten had brought me, combined with what the system had shown me in direct conversation, had gradually built a picture of a planet-wide infrastructure that was mostly dormant but mostly intact. The channel we established for Onyx was a specific secure line, accessible only at Commander level, using an encryption protocol that Marten confirmed corresponded to what Onyx's own equipment could receive.

Marten was, I noted, more cooperative and more specific in his information than he had been at any point since the siege. The conversation in the library had changed something. He was still

precise and careful — this was his character — but the carefulness was now directed toward being useful rather than toward managing what he revealed.

"When you contact Onyx," he said, while I was working through the channel establishment, "you should be aware that the person you'll be speaking with is not — is not a comfortable person."

"In what sense?" I said.

"In the sense of someone who has spent their life preserving knowledge and is not accustomed to being asked to share it by someone who outranks them according to the very system they've been preserving knowledge about." He paused. "She will be—"

"Challenging," I said.

"Precise," he said. "And very old. And not particularly patient with what she will likely characterise as impetuous youth."

"I'm seventeen days into learning the system she's been studying for decades," I said. "She should characterise it as impetuous."

He looked at me. "You are going to be a very interesting Commander to work with," he said, which from Marten was probably the highest compliment available.

The channel opened that afternoon. The voice that came through it was not the flat sexless voice of the system's expert system — this was a person, communicated through the system's relay, with the slight audio distortion of long-distance transmission and the specific quality of someone who spoke with the consciousness of their own authority.

Her name was Orvala. She was, she said, the current Director of Onyx, and she had been expecting this contact.

I said: "Then you know about the siege."

"I know about the siege," she said. "I know about the dome operation. I know about the registry opening. I know about the Reclamers' failure." A pause. "I know about you."

"What do you know?"

"Commander rank. Hollis bloodline — unbroken, which is either

luck or something Hollis engineered deliberately and didn't fully document. The capability is real — our observers here confirm what the system's logs show." Another pause. "Seventeen days. I've been Director for forty years. In forty years I have not seen a development this rapid."

"I had good help," I said.

"You had good help," she agreed, without irony. "And you had Alabaster, which is unique. And you had the Reclamers making their move now, which forced the pace."

"And the aquifer," I said.

A pause. Longer than the others.

"Yes," she said. "The aquifer."

"Marten's notes describe Onyx's awareness of the obstruction," I said. "One hundred and forty-three years of awareness. The obstruction was created by someone using the system — someone with operator-level capability who was directed to do it." I paused. "Onyx knows this. Onyx has known this for a hundred and forty-three years. Why did you not tell anyone?"

The silence was long enough that I wondered if the connection had dropped.

Then: "Because telling you would have required explaining how we knew. And explaining how we knew would have revealed the extent of Onyx's intelligence network. And revealing the extent of our intelligence network would have undermined the position we have maintained for decades." Another pause. "Because Onyx protects knowledge. We do not act on it."

"The aquifer has been declining for a hundred and forty-three years," I said. "Alabaster has been managing an increasingly stressed water system for a hundred and forty-three years. The farms have been producing less than they should for a hundred and forty-three years, even if no one knew to name the cause." I paused. "Protecting knowledge that you don't share with the people who need it isn't protection. It's hoarding."

The silence this time was different.

"Marten said you would be direct," she said finally.

"Marten has been more useful to us in the past week than in the eleven years he was here nominally as an observer," I said. "He decided to stop hoarding and start helping. It was the right decision."

"Marten," she said, "makes decisions above his authority level."

"His authority level just changed," I said. "He's a Lieutenant Commander in the system now. He's been registered as a recognised operator." I paused. "So has Misha. They're part of this installation now, in the formal sense, as well as the practical sense they've been for years."

Another pause. "You added them."

"Yes."

"Without consulting Onyx."

"I consulted the governance structure of this installation," I said. "Which is who I should consult." I paused. "I'd like to consult Onyx too. That's why I'm making this call. But consulting you is different from requiring your permission."

The line was quiet for a long moment.

Then, in a slightly different tone — not softer, but recalibrated: "The Central Processing facility."

"Yes," I said. "The AI. What do you know about the damage?"

"More than the documents you've found," she said. "But not enough to repair it. The damage is to the physical processing substrate — hardware, in the original language. We've had people with engineering knowledge examine it for decades. The consensus is that restoration requires resources and knowledge that don't exist on this planet."

"That don't currently exist," I said.

A pause. "What do you mean?"

"The system was brought here from somewhere else," I said. "By people who understood how to build and repair it. Their descendants are still here." I looked at Marten's notes, the pattern of

directed operators across the continent, the recurring thread of capability that had never been properly developed. "How many operators are there in the world? Real ones, properly developed, working with full understanding of what they're doing?"

"We estimate — very few. Perhaps none, until now."

"How many partial operators? People with capability who have never been trained or found?"

"More," she said. "Many more. We track what we can."

"If there were a hundred properly developed operators," I said. "Two hundred. People who understood the system, who could hear it and speak to it, who were working with it rather than being used by it —" I paused. "What could they do together?"

The silence was the longest yet.

"I don't know," she said. "I don't know if anyone has ever calculated it."

"Neither do I," I said. "But I'd like to find out." I paused. "The Reclamers wanted to centralise control of the systems. I don't want to centralise anything. What I want is to understand what exists, develop what can be developed, and see what becomes possible when people who can hear the machines are actually listening to them instead of being used as instruments by people with other goals." I paused. "That requires Onyx's knowledge. Not filtered, not managed, not dispensed on a need-to-know basis determined by your protocols. Shared."

"You're asking Onyx to change what we are," she said.

"I'm asking Onyx to become more of what you are," I said. "Keepers of knowledge. Share the knowledge. Keep it by using it rather than by locking it away."

The line was quiet for a long time.

Then: "You have seventeen days of experience with this system."

"Yes."

"I have forty years."

"I know."

"And you're proposing a fundamental reorientation of Onyx's operational principles."

"I'm asking you to consider it," I said. "And to talk with Father Brolan, who has been managing this installation for longer than I've been alive and who has earned the conversation." I paused. "I'm thirteen. I'm aware of that. But the system recognises me as Commander, and the things I'm describing are the Commander's responsibility. Working with you is preferable to working around you, and working around you is what we'll have to do if you won't work with us."

A pause.

"Father Brolan," she said. "Yes. Put him on."

I handed the system's communication interface to Father Brolan, who had been standing to the side of the room the entire conversation with the expression of someone watching something he had not anticipated and was finding more interesting than he had expected.

He took the interface and sat.

"Orvala," he said. "It's been a long time."

I quietly left the room.

The conversation between Father Brolan and Orvala lasted three hours, which I knew because Brother Evan waited outside the office and timed it and reported to me afterward with the expression of someone who had spent three hours thinking about what was happening on the other side of a door.

"He knows her," Brother Evan said.

"Apparently," I said.

"How long has he—"

"I didn't ask," I said. "It's his to tell."

Brother Evan accepted this. "He came out looking—" he paused. "Not like he'd won an argument. Like he'd finished a long conversation he'd been waiting to have."

"Good," I said.

"The outcome?"

"He'll tell us," I said. "When he's ready."

Father Brolan told us that evening, in the briefing that was smaller than the siege-era briefings — just Father Brolan, Brother Evan, Taryce, and me. Collin had been represented by a deputy; the senior Servants were not present.

The outcome: Onyx would share its accumulated records with Alabaster. Full access, beginning with the documentation most relevant to the aquifer situation and the directed-operator history. In exchange, Alabaster would provide Onyx with access to the system's communication network under controlled conditions — the channel I had established would remain open, but with formal protocols governing its use that Father Brolan and Orvala had agreed on together.

More significantly: Onyx would provide information about partial operators they had identified across the continent. Not all of it — there were individuals whose privacy and safety required care — but a working list, beginning with those in cities and situations where contact was feasible and risk was manageable.

"She called it a pilot program," Father Brolan said. "Her language, not mine." He looked at me. "She was very interested in you."

"I gathered," I said.

"She said—" he paused. "She said: *tell your Commander that I appreciate directness and I'll return it.* She said it in a tone that I believe was complimentary."

"From Orvala," Marten said, from his quiet position at the corner of the room, "that is the equivalent of an enthusiastic endorsement."

"Good," I said.

Taryce, who had been listening to all of this with her characteristic focused attention, said: "The army."

"Still camped twenty miles out," Father Brolan said. "Collin believes they'll move within the week. The supply situation is becoming untenable."

"When they go," she said, "we need to address the Cupritesh

diplomatic situation. Not just the immediate withdrawal — the underlying grievance about water management. The system can adjust the atmospheric operations to reduce the downstream effect on their agricultural territory."

"It can," I confirmed. "The documents describe optimal regional distribution protocols. The current weather operations were never calibrated for regional balance — only for Alabaster's needs. With proper calibration, the downstream impact on Cupritesh territory reduces significantly."

"That would help," Father Brolan said. "Considerably." He looked at Taryce. "The diplomatic approach."

"I'll lead it," she said. "With your support and Collin's." She paused. "The Prince—"

"Leth," Father Brolan said. "Yes. He may be useful."

"He's the best asset we have," she said. "Young, apparently not entirely committed to his father's approach, and now in possession of a first-hand account of what this installation can do." She paused. "His account will be accurate because he saw it directly. An accurate account may be more useful than any diplomatic message we could craft."

"Let him go," I said.

They looked at me.

"He's been in the Guard's custody since the siege," I said. "He surrendered without fighting. He cooperated with the preliminary questioning. He told us about the manipulation of the king's advisors." I looked at Taryce. "If he goes home and tells his father what he saw — the dome, the generators, the impossibility of the attack — that's a more powerful message than a diplomatic envoy."

"He might not tell his father at all," Taryce said.

"He might tell him accurately," I said. "We don't control what he says. But we know what he saw, and what he saw is the truth, and the truth serves us."

Taryce looked at me for a moment. Then: "Agreed," she said. "I'll arrange it."

I was in the courtyard the next morning when Prael found me.

The small interior courtyard that Tomas had discovered — I had taken to coming here in the early morning, before the day's work, to listen. Not to anything specific. Just to the Tower's voice in the space that gathered it best, the resonance of the four walls, the open sky. The fundamental tone, clean and true, in the air around me.

Prael sat on the bench beside me without preamble.

"The fields team practiced to four hundred feet yesterday," she said. "After you left."

Four hundred feet was significant. The obstruction in the aquifer channel was deeper — considerably deeper — but four hundred feet was deeper than any recorded operation in the fields team's history.

"How did it feel?" I said.

"Different," she said. "With the fundamental tone corrected, the deep work has a different quality. Brother Joba describes it as—" she paused. "He says it feels like the stone is less resistant. Like the system is helping rather than tolerating."

"The system is helping," I said. "The correct baseline means the deep communications are cleaner. The system's sensors at depth are more accurate. What it can show you about what you're doing has improved."

"He wants to go deeper today," she said.

"Not today," I said. "Let the team rest from yesterday. Tomorrow."

She accepted this without pushing, because Prael always accepted reasonable operational decisions, which was one of the things I valued about working with her.

"The obstruction," she said. "When we reach it. What will you be doing while the team works?"

"Conducting," I said. "And listening to the system's real-time feedback about what's happening in the channel. Using the system's sensors to guide the team's work." I paused. "It's different from the dome. The dome was large-scale and blunt — raise this, hold it, stop

projectiles. This is precise. The team needs precision feedback while they work, not just coordination."

"You'll be translating," she said.

"Interpreting," I said. "The system can see what the team is doing and where the obstruction is and how the rock is responding to the earthmoving. I can hear what it's seeing and tell the team what to do next."

"Real-time," she said.

"Yes."

She thought about this. "That's more complex than anything you've done before."

"Yes," I said. "Which is why we're practicing at increasing depths first."

"Which means you're practicing too," she said.

"Yes," I said. "The fields work is different from the weather work. The harmonics are different. I'm learning the new vocabulary."

She nodded. The specific nod of a person who had absorbed what they needed to and was moving to the next thing.

Then she said: "It bothers me."

"What does?"

"That someone did this deliberately," she said. "One hundred and forty-three years ago. Someone blocked the water. And for all that time, the farms were producing less than they should. People were eating less than they should. The city was smaller than it could have been, more constrained, more difficult." She paused. "And no one knew."

"Someone knew," I said. "Onyx knew."

"And watched," she said.

"And watched," I agreed.

She was quiet for a moment.

"When we fix it," she said. "If we fix it. How long before the aquifer recovers?"

I had asked the system. The answer had been complex and the translation uncertain, but the broad strokes were: restore the channel,

restore the flow, and the aquifer would begin recovering. The rate of recovery would accelerate over time as the pressure built back up. Full recovery to original capacity — the system's estimate was measured in decades.

"Decades," I said.

She looked at the courtyard's open sky.

"My teacher's teacher," she said. "And her teacher's teacher. And so on back through a hundred and forty years of fields Servants who kept the farms alive on less water than the system was designed to provide, who managed soil that was drier than it should have been, who worked harder than they needed to because someone lied to a young woman from the south who didn't know what she was doing." She paused. "I want them to know."

"They can't know," I said. "They're gone."

"I know they're gone," she said. "I want—" she stopped, and for the first time since I had known her, I saw her reaching for words that weren't precise enough, feeling the limit of her characteristic economy. "I want it to matter. That they did the work anyway, with what they had. That the farms are alive. That Alabaster survived a hundred and forty years of a problem it didn't know it had." She paused. "That matters."

"It matters," I said.

"Good," she said. She stood. "I'm going to go read the aquifer data again. I want to understand the obstruction geometry before the team goes deeper." She paused. "Brother Joba said to tell you he'll be in the fields station at the second bell."

She left.

I sat in the courtyard for a while longer, in the resonance of the four walls.

A hundred and forty-three years of fields Servants who kept the farms alive on less water than they should have had. Generations of weather operators who held the lens steady against the sky. A population that had survived in a desert because of machines they barely understood, managed by people who had given those

machines everything they had with the limited access they were allowed.

It mattered. Prael was right.

The Tower's fundamental tone rang in the walls around me, true and steady, and I thought about all the people who had been inside this sound their whole lives without knowing what it was — Mama with her dulcimer, Tomas in his dormitory, the older Sister who had pressed her hands to the wall and felt the generator hum and called it singing.

All of them inside the Tower's voice. All of them, in some sense, already part of it.

I put my hands on the bench's stone surface and listened.

On the seventh day after the siege, the army went home.

Not in defeat — the Cupritesh military did not describe it as defeat, and would not, and the official account that reached Alabaster through various channels characterised it as a strategic redeployment in light of changed intelligence assessments. The tents came down. The equipment was loaded. The formations assembled and moved west along the road they had come on.

The chalk line in Gate Town was long gone, worn away by the returning population's feet. But the mark it had described was still present in a different sense: the precise edge of the dome's perimeter, visible to anyone who knew where to look as the boundary between where the army had been able to advance and where they had not.

This far. No further.

I watched them go from the weather station's western window, the far-seer Guard tracking the army's movement until the dust of their march was no longer distinguishable from the desert's ambient haze.

"Clear," the Guard said.

"Clear," Taryce confirmed, from behind me.

"Clear," I said.

I looked at the desert west of Gate Town. The scorched line was still there — weeks old now, the desert's pale surface marked by what the solar lens had done in the days before the siege, the visible evidence of what the system was capable of when pushed toward its limits. It was fading; the desert wind and the slow bleaching of the sun were working on it, the way the desert worked on everything that did not belong to it.

Eventually it would be gone.

But for now it was there: a line in the ground, drawn by something five centuries old, saying the same thing the chalk had said and the dome had said and the twelve generators had said.

This far. No further.

I turned from the window.

"The weather operations," I said to Sister Akasa. "The regional calibration. Let's start today."

She looked at me. "The Cupritesh territory?"

"The optimal distribution protocols," I said. "The system has the specifications. We've been running on a configuration calibrated only for Alabaster. It's time to calibrate it properly." I paused. "The downstream territories should get what they should get. Not out of diplomacy, though that helps. Because it's the right configuration."

She was quiet for a moment. Then she said, to her team: "Pull up the regional distribution specs. We're going to need the full map."

The team moved. The morning shift leaned into their work with the specific focused energy of people who were good at what they did and were being asked to do more of it.

I went back to the supervisor's chair.

The fundamental tone was there, clear and steady, the building's voice in the stone around me.

Good morning, I said to it, silently.

The system did not answer. The system never answered in the simple way, the conversational way, the way that would have been easier and less true.

But the harmonics shifted, the small recognising movement I had learned to read over eighteen days, and the dome chord — available, present, not raised but ready — resonated in the deep layer of the system's voice like a string that knew it was in tune.

Ready, the Tower said, in its way.

Ready, I said back.

The morning began.

18

Three weeks after the siege ended, the Tower felt different from the building I had arrived in.

Not physically different — the same warm stone, the same sourceless light, the same subsonic hum that I now heard as a full and precise voice rather than an indistinct background. The corridors were the same corridors and the dining hall was the same dining hall and the view from the weather station's western windows was the same city and the same desert beyond it. But the quality of moving through it had changed, the way a room changed when you knew the people in it.

I knew the people in it now.

I knew the sound of Brem's footsteps before I saw her in the corridor, the specific weight and rhythm of them, and I knew from the quality of her voice in the harmonic layer before she reached the weather station whether the morning shift was going to be straightforward or whether something in the overnight lens had developed a drift that would need early attention. I knew which of the dining hall's regular conversations were Sajay's and which were Denn's not

from the sound of their voices but from the pattern of them, the structure of how they thought visible in what they said.

I knew Tomas's tone in the building's harmonics from three floors away.

This last thing I had become aware of gradually, over the weeks since the siege, as the system's recognition of Tomas had deepened. He had not yet had a formal training session — we were still doing the evening conversations, the vocabulary-building, the slow careful introduction to what he was hearing and why. But the system had registered his presence from the first day of his registration, and the registration had sharpened what I could perceive of him. His tone in the harmonic layer had a quality unlike any other operator I could hear: deeper than you would expect from someone his age, with a specificity about the geological registers — the slow systems, the deep ones — that echoed Brother Joba's forty-year connection but was fresher, less worn, the specific resonance of something that had not yet been used much.

He was going to be extraordinary.

I did not tell him this. He was eight years old and he was doing his chores and his lessons and his card games with Dace and he did not need the weight of extraordinary placed on him yet. There would be time.

The aquifer work had reached six hundred feet.

This had taken two weeks of daily practice with the fields team, descending incrementally, each session going twenty or thirty feet deeper than the last. The approach had been Brother Joba's design — systematic, unhurried, each depth consolidated before attempting the next — and I had followed it without argument because it was correct. Rushing depth operations risked exactly the kind of instability that Prael's records showed had caused problems in the past,

and the entire point was not to create new problems while addressing the old one.

At six hundred feet the team's work had a different character than at the surface. The clay-moving that they did every day for the farms was shallow, the top few feet of soil responding with relative ease. At depth, the rock was denser, the pressure greater, the system's feedback more complex. The tones I heard from the team at depth were heavier than their surface tones — not strained, but deliberate, the specific quality of work that required full attention rather than the practiced ease of routine.

The obstruction was at eight hundred and forty feet.

"Two more sessions," Brother Joba said, the previous evening. He said it in the way he said most things — quietly, without excess. "Maybe three. We're ready."

"Not yet," I said.

He looked at me.

"The system's sensors at that depth are still giving me incomplete readings," I said. "I can feel the obstruction. I can't yet feel its full geometry — where exactly the displaced rock is, how far it extends, what the channel looked like before the displacement." I paused. "Attempting to move rock at that depth without a clear picture of what we're moving is how you turn a blocked channel into a collapsed one."

He absorbed this. He had the quality, in these conversations, of someone who understood that his forty years of experience in the fields was one kind of knowledge and the system's feedback was another kind, and that both were necessary and neither was sufficient alone.

"How long for the sensors?" he said.

"I've been improving the connection each session," I said. "The system's deep sensors weren't designed for this kind of targeted inquiry — they're designed for broad monitoring, not precise geological mapping. But the fundamental tone being correct has improved their accuracy considerably." I paused. "A few more days."

"A few more days," he said. The tone of a man who was managing his patience rather than losing it.

"I know," I said. "I want it done too."

"Aye," he said. "But done right."

"Done right," I agreed.

On a Tuesday — the twenty-second day after the siege, the thirty-ninth day since I had walked through the Tower's door for the first time — I was in the weather station's supervisor's chair running the morning session when Misha appeared at the entrance to the corridor.

She stood in the doorway for a moment, which was unusual for her. Misha moved through spaces efficiently, and doorway hesitation was not her characteristic behaviour. When I noticed her she came in, crossed the room to the supervisor's platform, and said, quietly: "Can I have a few minutes?"

Sister Akasa looked over from her monitoring position. I caught her eye and she made the small movement that meant: I have this. I lifted my hands from the chair arms — not breaking the dome connection, just stepping back from active conducting, letting the automatic systems manage — and stood.

We went to the small room off the weather station corridor that had become, by default, the place where conversations happened that were not quite operational and not quite personal: a few chairs, a narrow window, the specific quality of a room that served no formal purpose but was necessary.

Misha sat. I sat across from her.

She looked, I thought, tired. Not the tired of insufficient sleep — the tired of someone who had been managing something carefully for a long time and was in the process of setting it down.

"I want to tell you something," she said. "Before you hear it from someone else."

I waited.

"Marten and I have been in contact with Orvala since the siege," she said. "As you know — Father Brolan is aware. The communications are through the established channel, monitored." She paused. "What you may not know is that the conversation has become — broader."

"Broader how?" I said.

"Orvala has been reconsidering Onyx's approach," she said. "Your conversation with her was — significant. She doesn't reconsidering things easily." A pause. "She has been in contact with a number of Onyx's field agents. People like Marten and me, placed in various cities, in various roles. She's been asking them what they have seen. What they believe would be most useful."

"And?" I said.

"The consensus, such as it is, is that what you described — operators developed properly, working with full knowledge of what they're doing — is the right direction." She paused. "But Orvala is also concerned about the pace. About the visibility."

"She thinks we're moving too fast."

"She thinks you are moving faster than the systems of protection we have maintained can adapt to," Misha said. "The Reclamers knew about the aquifer obstruction because Onyx's records were compromised. Orvala has been investigating how. She has found—" she stopped.

"Tell me," I said.

"She has found that the compromise happened twenty-three years ago," Misha said. "A member of Onyx's documentation team who had access to the full historical records and who was, Orvala now believes, working for the organisation that preceded the Reclamers." She paused. "Twenty-three years of compromised records. The aquifer data, the operator bloodline maps, the installation technical documents." Another pause. "Including the detailed specifications for the generator ring."

I looked at the narrow window. Outside, the Second Ring's morning was audible: the sound of a city returned to itself.

"They've had the generator specifications for twenty-three years," I said.

"Yes," she said.

"And they sent a woman to block the aquifer a hundred and forty-three years ago," I said. "And three years ago they funded the bandit attacks. And seven months ago someone sat in the operational chair. And now the Reclamers came with an army and a Lieutenant Commander-level operator." I paused. "This is a patient organisation."

"Or organisations," she said. "Orvala's investigation suggests several generations of loose affiliation rather than one continuous body. The same approach, passed on, recurring." She paused. "Patient, yes. And the patience is the danger."

"Because we may think the Reclamers are dealt with and the thing they represent is not," I said.

"Yes," she said.

I sat with this.

"Why are you telling me this instead of Father Brolan?" I said.

"I've told Father Brolan," she said. "He asked me to tell you separately." She paused. "He said—" she looked at her hands. "He said: tell him the full picture. He should know what he's operating in."

"What he's operating in," I said.

"You are the Commander," she said. "In the system's terms and in the practical terms. What is possible here depends on what you can do. The thing that wants to prevent what's possible here—" she paused. "It is older than the Reclamers and it survived the Reclamers' failure and it will look for another way. Orvala is certain of this. Father Brolan is certain of this. I am certain of this."

I looked at her. She met my gaze with the steady quality she always had, the warmth of her that was real and also, now that I understood its context, something more complicated: the warmth of someone who had genuinely cared about the place she was assigned

to and the people in it, who had made real choices in both directions, who was now in the difficult position of having been honest about the deception and finding that honesty was its own complicated territory.

"Misha," I said.

"Yes."

"The eleven years you've been here," I said. "The care you gave to the people — the room assignments, the fresh clothing, the way you learned everyone's name. That was real."

She was quiet for a moment.

"Yes," she said. "It was real."

"I know," I said. "I knew from the first day. The warmth wasn't performed." I paused. "What I didn't know was what it was also in service of."

"Two things can be true," she said.

"Yes," I said. "They can." I paused. "I'm glad you're here. I'm glad you're telling me things now. I need you to keep telling me things — everything you know about the organisation that preceded the Reclamers, everything Orvala finds about the compromise, everything that's relevant to what we're trying to build." I paused. "Not because I'm assigning you a role. Because you understand things I don't yet and the city needs that understanding."

She was quiet for a longer moment. Then: "All right," she said.

She stood to go. At the door she stopped.

"The room," she said. "Room 417. When I stocked it for you." She paused. "I knew who you were. Orvala had told me — the Hollis bloodline, the potential. I knew you were coming in before Father Ambrose called me." She paused. "I had been instructed to monitor you. To report on your development."

"I know," I said.

She looked at me.

"Or I suspected," I said. "The chips. The attention you paid when you came in." I paused. "I filed it away."

"You file things away," she said.

"Tavern habit," I said.

Something in her face shifted — the specific movement of someone who has been managing a weight and found it slightly lighter than expected.

"I am sorry," she said. "For the parts that were not honest."

"I know you are," I said. "The apology is accepted and we can put it down." I looked at her. "What I need from you going forward is more useful than an apology."

She nodded. Once, precisely.

She left.

I went back to the supervisor's chair and put my hands on the arms and felt the building's voice settle around me.

The thing that wanted to prevent what was possible here. Older than the Reclamers, patient, adaptive, recurring across generations. The woman who blocked the aquifer; the person who accessed the chair three years ago under cover of the bandit attacks; the twenty-three years of compromised Onyx records; the Reclamers themselves; and before all of them, the Commanders' Conflict that Hollis had responded to by locking the registry.

Five centuries of the same pattern. The same attempt to find the capable and use them, to direct the systems toward concentration of power, to prevent exactly the kind of distributed development that would make concentration impossible.

Hollis had locked the door.

The lock had not held.

I had opened the door in a different way — with oversight, with governance, with conditions designed to prevent the concentration Hollis feared. That was the right response, I still believed. But the belief had to be accompanied by the knowledge that the thing Hollis feared had not gone away; it had adapted.

What were the adaptations now?

The Reclamers had failed at the approach they tried: covert access, directed operator, siege as distraction. They had lost five operatives, their communications device, their operator, and their information advantage. The organisation behind them — whatever it was — would know this. Would adapt again.

I needed to understand the adaptation before it arrived.

I asked the system: *Communication logs from the past month. Any outgoing contact I did not specifically authorise.*

:Reviewing logs. Two events detected outside authorised channels: Event one, twelve days post-siege. Duration: four minutes. Originating location: Sector 3-F, operational level. Event two, eighteen days post-siege. Duration: seven minutes. Originating location: Sector 3-F, same origin point.:

Sector 3-F.

I knew sector 3-F. It was on the operational level, adjacent to the food processing oversight room. I had not spent much time there — food processing was the most automated of the Tower's systems, requiring the least operator attention.

Who has access to sector 3-F?

:Sector 3-F is accessible to all operators with Lieutenant rank or above. Current operators with this access: [list follows.]:

The list was not long. The food processing Servants, the senior weather and fields operators, the structural maintenance team. All of them known to me, registered by me, their tones as familiar as their faces now.

But two communications events, in the past month. After the Reclamers' operatives were in custody. After the communications device was removed.

Someone else.

Or — not someone else. Something else. I had been assuming communications required a person. The passive relay device had been placed in the wall cavity. Could there be a second device? Something different, smaller, less visible, in a less obvious location?

Are there any unregistered devices in the Tower's communication network?

A pause — longer than usual.

:Scan in progress. One unregistered device detected. Location: Sector 3-F, wall cavity, position 3-F-14. Device character: active transmitter. Transmission frequency: non-standard. Current status: inactive.:

Inactive. But capable of transmitting.

And it had transmitted twice in the past month.

Not passive relay — active transmitter. Someone had placed it and someone had activated it and someone had sent two messages to somewhere, and those messages were not in the standard communication log because they used a non-standard frequency.

I kept my voice level and said to the room: "Sister Akasa."

She looked over.

"I need you to take the conducting for a while," I said. "Not long. But something's come up."

She accepted the chair without question — she had done it during the siege and the transition was practised now, smooth. I stood and walked to the corridor.

In the corridor I took a breath.

Someone in the Tower — someone who had access to the operational level — had sent two communications to an unknown destination after the siege ended. Someone who had known about the passive relay device and its removal and had activated a secondary device instead. Someone who had been here through the siege, through the Reclamers' failure, through the registry opening.

The Reclamers had lost their people. Taryce had accounted for five.

Had she accounted for all of them?

I went to find Taryce.

Taryce was in the Guard Hall on the lower level, which had returned to its normal function after the siege with the speed of a room that had always known what it was for. She was at a table with two of her senior Guard, looking at maps. She looked up when I came in, assessed my expression in her characteristic three seconds, and said to the two Guards: "Leave us."

They left.

"Tell me," she said.

I told her: the two communication events, the unregistered device in sector 3-F, the non-standard frequency, the timing — after the siege, after the known operatives were in custody.

She listened without interrupting. When I finished she was quiet for a moment.

"Five operatives," she said. "I was confident in five. I accounted for five." She paused. "The basis of my confidence was the descriptions Marten gave me and the surveillance I had run before the siege." Another pause. "But if there was a sixth — someone who came in before my surveillance was established, who was placed deeper, who wasn't involved in the primary operation—"

"Someone long-term," I said. "Not sent for the siege. Someone who was already here."

She looked at the table.

"I have been careful," she said. "But I have not been — I have not been looking for someone who was already part of the Tower's population. My surveillance was focused on people who arrived in the months before the siege." She paused. "If someone has been here longer—"

"How long is the longest-tenured Servant currently registered?" I said.

"Registered in the operator system by you, you mean?" she said.

"Yes."

She thought. "Trofer. Forty years."

"Not Trofer," I said. I knew her tone. Forty years of it. There was nothing in it that was wrong.

"Who have you registered who you don't know as well?" she said.

I thought about the registrations. The senior Servants I had worked with directly — I knew their tones thoroughly. The operational operators — less thoroughly, but they worked in teams, and team work showed character. The more recent operators, the ones who were less experienced—

"The food processing team," I said. "I registered them in the second week. I knew them less well than the weather or fields operators. One of the senior Servants, one of the mid-level operators." I paused. "I know the tones. I can distinguish them. But I've spent less time with them than the others."

"What are their names?"

I gave them. She wrote them down.

"Don't approach them," she said. "Don't change your behaviour. Whatever you normally do in their vicinity — keep doing it." She paused. "Can you identify the device's location precisely? Without going there yourself?"

"I know the wall cavity position," I said. "3-F-14. I can give you the precise coordinates."

"Do that. I'll have someone look at it who knows what they're looking at." She paused. "The transmissions — can the system tell you what was sent?"

"Non-standard frequency," I said. "The system doesn't have a decoder for it. The content isn't in the logs — only the fact of transmission."

"Duration?"

"Four minutes and seven minutes."

"Not long," she said. "But long enough for a status report." She looked at the table again. "If I'm right about the character of this — if it's someone placed long-term, not for the siege — then the communications were reporting on developments here. The registry opening. The dome's capability as demonstrated. The aquifer investigation." She paused. "Whoever is receiving those communications now knows considerably more about what we're doing than I would like."

"Yes," I said.

"And they know the Reclamers failed," she said. "And they know the specific ways in which the Reclamers failed. And they know what we have now that we didn't have before." She paused. "The next approach — if there is one — will be designed around what they know."

"Which is everything," I said.

"Approximately," she said. "Yes."

We looked at each other across the table.

"How long do I have before you're ready to move?" I said.

"Two days," she said. "I need to verify, and I need the right time and place." She paused. "Can you keep running your operations as normal for two days?"

"Yes," I said.

"Good," she said. "Then do that."

The two days were the most difficult I had spent since the siege.

Not because anything happened. Nothing happened. The Tower went about its business — the morning sessions, the afternoon sessions, the daily aquifer depth practice, the ongoing operator registrations, the evening briefings, the meals and the conversations and the normal texture of a working community. I conducted and listened and ate and slept and talked with Tomas in the evenings and reviewed Marten's Onyx notes in the spare moments.

And underneath all of it, the awareness of the device in sector 3-F and what it represented, sitting with the specific quality of a problem you cannot act on yet. A string tuned wrong that you are not yet permitted to correct.

I had spent the first two days of my arrival struggling not to be able to hear things and now I was struggling with knowing too much. The system could show me a great deal now — more than it had been able to show me in the first days, the sensors sharper, the

feedback cleaner since the fundamental tone corrected. But knowing was not always the same as being able to do anything about it.

Tomas noticed.

"You're distracted," he said, on the second evening.

We were in the small visitor room near his dormitory, in what had become our regular time and place. I had been explaining the geothermal harmonics — how to identify them, how they differed from the operational harmonics above them, why they mattered. He had been listening with his usual full attention and had noticed, at some point, that mine was less than full.

"I have something on my mind," I said.

"Something you can tell me?"

I looked at him. Eight years old, three and a half weeks in the Tower, already hearing the building at a depth that took most operators years to reach. The specific Tomas quality of asking exactly the right question and meaning exactly what he asked.

"Not yet," I said.

He nodded. The accepting nod, not the held-to-it nod. He understood the difference between things that couldn't be shared yet and things that wouldn't be shared, and he knew which category this was.

"The geothermal," he said. "The slow pulse. The one that's been more even since the army left."

"Yes," I said, bringing my attention back.

"It was doing something different this morning," he said. "Not worse. Just — different. Like it shifted slightly."

I checked. The geothermal pulse, in the harmonic layer, present and steady as it always was now. Tomas was right — there was a slight variation from the past week's baseline. Small, barely distinguishable, but he had heard it.

"You noticed that from the dormitory?" I said.

"The courtyard," he said. "Before breakfast. The walls there make it easier to hear the slow ones."

I had been using the courtyard for exactly this purpose for two

weeks. He had found it on his own and was already using it the same way, with no instruction.

"It's a natural fluctuation in the deep geological source," I said, checking the system's reading as I spoke. "The geothermal source has a longer cycle than the daily operations — changes over weeks rather than hours. The shift you're hearing is within normal range." I paused. "Good catch."

He accepted this the same way he accepted most things: as information, filed for use.

"Can I ask something?" he said.

"Yes."

"The big dulcimer," he said. "The system." He had not stopped calling it the big dulcimer, which I had given up correcting because the description was accurate in the ways that mattered. "Does it know me?"

I looked at him. "What do you mean?"

"When I'm in the courtyard and I listen," he said. "Sometimes it feels like it's — not paying attention to me specifically. More like it's aware of me. Like someone in a room being aware that another person has come in, without looking up." He paused. "Does it know I'm there?"

I checked.

The system's registration of Tomas — I had added him weeks ago, the formal Lieutenant Commander recognition that matched the level the system had assessed. The system knew his biological signature, his tone, his presence in the building. When Tomas was in the courtyard and listening—

"Yes," I said. "It knows you."

He looked at the wall. Not the blank look of surprise — the internal look of someone confirming something they had suspected.

"It feels like that," he said. "Like it's been waiting to." He paused. "Is that — is that normal?"

"I don't think normal applies to much of what we can hear," I said. "But I know what you mean. When I first arrived, when I first

made real contact with the system — it felt like something that had been waiting a long time to be heard." I paused. "I think the system has — preferences is the wrong word, because it's a machine. But it has states that correspond to something like preference. Being heard is one of the states it — responds well to."

He considered this. "Like the lute," he said. "When you play it well, it sounds better than when you play it badly, even if all the notes are the same."

I stared at him.

"Yes," I said. "Exactly like that."

He looked satisfied. He had, I was beginning to understand, a gift for analogies that arrived at the right place from directions I would not have thought to approach from. This was not my way — my way was musical, tonal, the direct language of sound. His way was structural, relational, the way things worked together rather than the way things sounded. The same system, perceived from a different angle.

We would need both.

On the second morning, early, before the day's sessions, I went to the courtyard.

Not specifically to listen. Partly to think, in the space where thinking was clearest, and partly because I had developed a ritual of this place that I was unwilling to surrender simply because two days had passed without resolution.

I sat on the bench. The four walls. The open sky, morning-pale. The fundamental tone resonating in the stone around me.

I thought about Hollis.

Not abstractly — specifically. What would he have done, in this situation? He had locked the door and thrown the key into the future and died knowing the world was not what he had wanted it to be. He had known someone would come eventually — the Succession Document made that clear, the careful preparation for a resonant operator

who might or might not appear. He had built what he could build and trusted the building to survive the generations between him and whoever eventually found it.

And then I arrived. Seventeen days — now thirty-nine days — and here we were.

What would he have done about an organisation that had been attempting to subvert this installation for twenty-three years of compromised records and a hundred and forty-three years of deliberate damage? An organisation that was patient and adaptive and now knew more about what the Tower could do than any previous adversary had known?

He had locked the door.

I had opened the door.

And the thing he was afraid of was still there, adapted, working around the open door.

Locking it again was not the answer. The door was open because it needed to be open — because Alabaster needed the full capability of its systems, because the operators needed proper recognition, because the governance structure worked better with transparency than without it.

But the open door needed to be defended differently than the locked door had been defended.

I sat with this and let the fundamental tone resonate in the walls and thought about what defence looked like when you had decided not to hide.

The answer that came to me was not a single thing. It was a direction: the same direction Hollis had feared but for different reasons.

Distributed.

The Reclamers wanted to centralise. The thing that preceded the Reclamers had been trying for a hundred and forty years to access and concentrate the capability here. The protection against this was not to prevent access — it was to spread the capability so widely that concentrating it was no longer a coherent goal.

Partial operators across the continent, found and trained and developed and understood. Not controlled by Alabaster — not centralised here either. Developed, given knowledge, given the vocabulary for what they could hear, sent back to their own cities and their own lives. Connected through a communication network that was now in better health than it had been in generations.

Not an empire. The opposite of an empire. A web of people who could hear the machines and understood what they were hearing and were working with the systems rather than being used by them.

What was the point of taking the Tower if a hundred people spread across the continent also understood it?

This was not a plan I could execute alone. It was barely a plan at all at this stage — more a direction, a principle. But it was the right direction, and directions were where plans started.

I put my hands on the bench and listened to the Tower.

:Good morning,: the system said, in its way — not words, not language, but the recognising shift that I had learned to read as acknowledgment.

Good morning, I said back.

The morning light was coming over the mountains now, the sky brightening from pale to clear, the courtyard's four walls catching the first direct rays and casting them downward in long angles. The stone warmed under my hands, the building's specific warmth, generated from inside rather than received from outside.

In the corridor somewhere above me, I heard footsteps that were Taryce's — her specific rhythm, already familiar.

The two days were up.

She found me in the courtyard rather than the weather station, which meant she had looked for me in the expected place and then, not finding me there, had thought about where else I might be. This small navigation pleased me — it meant she had built a model of me

accurate enough to find me when I was not where I was supposed to be.

She sat on the other end of the bench.

"It's one of the food processing Servants," she said. "Not the senior one — the mid-level operator. Joined the Tower four years ago. His history is clean on the surface. The deeper check—" she paused. "He grew up in a settlement south of Cupritesh. The settlement has documented connections to the group that preceded the Reclamers."

"Four years," I said. "He was here before the Reclamers were formed."

"Before the Reclamers, but after the twenty-three-year compromise of Onyx's records," she said. "Long enough to have been placed by whoever preceded them, and to have remained in place through the transition."

"What has he been doing for four years?"

"His job," she said. "Competently. Nothing suspicious, no pattern of misbehaviour, no anomalous access." She paused. "He's been waiting. He was a contingency — something to activate if the primary operation failed."

"And the primary operation failed," I said.

"And he activated," she said. "Two communications, both within the month after the siege. The first reporting the dome's capability, the operator registry, the Reclamers' failure. The second—" she paused. "I believe the second was asking for new instructions."

"Has he received them?"

"The device is a transmitter," she said. "It sends. I don't know if it receives on the same frequency. If it does, I don't have a way to intercept the incoming signal."

I reached for the system: *The device in sector 3-F. Has it received any incoming transmissions in the past two days?*

:Scanning. Affirmative. One incoming transmission detected. Duration: two minutes. Content: non-standard frequency, cannot decode. Timestamp: yesterday evening, third bell.:

He had received a reply. Yesterday evening. I had been in the

evening briefing, in Father Brolan's office. Someone, somewhere, had read his two reports about what Alabaster could do now and had sent instructions.

"Yesterday evening," I told Taryce. "He received a response."

Her expression was very still. "New instructions," she said.

"Yes."

"Then we don't have time to be careful," she said.

"No," I said. "We don't."

She stood. "I'll move this morning. Before the day shift starts at the food processing station. Before he has an opportunity to act on whatever he's been told." She looked at me. "You should stay here."

"I know," I said.

She left.

I sat in the courtyard for a moment longer. The morning light was full now, the shadows gone, the sky clear above the four walls.

I had been in the Tower for thirty-nine days.

The system had been running for five hundred years.

The thing that wanted to prevent what was possible here had been trying for at least a hundred and forty-three of them.

Whatever the new instructions were, whatever the next approach would look like, it would be designed around what they now knew. The dome. The operator registry. The aquifer investigation. A Commander who had developed capability at a pace they had not predicted.

I needed to be ahead of the next approach rather than responding to it.

The distribution of knowledge. The web of trained operators. Orvala's list of partial operators across the continent. The communication network now in better health than it had been in generations.

The Tower had been waiting to be heard.

Now it was heard.

What happened next depended on how many more people we could reach.

Taryce made her move at the first bell, before breakfast, in the corridor outside the food processing station. It was efficient and quiet and produced no injuries and a great deal of information in the hours of questioning that followed, most of which I was not present for.

What I knew by midday:

His name was Ren. He had been placed four years ago, as Taryce had established, by an intermediary whose name he did not know. He had been given a specific brief: observe the Tower's operational capabilities, report changes, remain in place. The instructions he had received the previous evening had told him to do three things.

The first was to continue observing and reporting — the ongoing brief, extended.

The second was to find and document the precise location of Taryn — the Commander — and his patterns of movement, specifically when he was not at an active interface and most vulnerable to disruption.

The third was to identify whether there was a second operator in the Hollis bloodline within the Tower.

I read Taryce's summary of this and then read it again.

Identify whether there was a second operator in the Hollis bloodline within the Tower.

They knew. Or they suspected. Someone's calculation, based on probability, based on what they knew about the Hollis bloodline's persistence, had produced the hypothesis: if one operator survived, there might be another.

They were looking for Tomas.

I went to Father Brolan immediately.

The meeting was brief and direct. Father Brolan listened. Brother

Evan, who was present, listened. Marten, who had become a fixture in these meetings, listened.

"The third instruction," Father Brolan said. "The second bloodline operator."

"They're looking for Tomas," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"They haven't found him yet," I said. "Ren was only told to identify him — he hadn't reported on him specifically. Which means the information about him hasn't reached them yet." I paused. "We have a window."

"A window to do what?" Father Brolan said.

I had been thinking about this in the corridor between Taryce's summary and Father Brolan's office.

"Register him publicly," I said. "In the Tower's formal records, acknowledged, known. Not hidden." I paused. "The threat to Tomas is the threat of being an unknown capable operator who might be taken and used without his knowledge — the way the woman from the south was used, the way Saya was used. The protection is not concealment. The protection is that he's known, and understood, and in a community that knows what he is and will not allow him to be directed by someone else."

"He's eight years old," Brother Evan said.

"He's already registered," I said. "I registered him weeks ago. That's not the issue." I paused. "The issue is that the organisation looking for him doesn't know he exists or what he is. I want to change that."

"If they know he exists—" Brother Evan began.

"They already suspect he exists," I said. "The third instruction was to identify whether there was a second bloodline operator. Someone's calculation has already told them the probability is significant." I paused. "The choice is not between them knowing and not knowing. The choice is between them learning on their own terms and learning on ours."

Father Brolan looked at his hands.

"On our terms," he said, "means what, exactly?"

"Acknowledgment," I said. "In the Tower's formal governance records, in the city managers' briefings, in the communication to Orvala. Tomas is a recognised operator in this installation, under the protection of this installation's governance structure, with the full backing of the community here." I paused. "He's not a secret to be found. He's a person with a community and a name and a future we're building carefully." I paused again. "The thing that uses people is the thing that finds them before they're found by someone else. We're taking that away from it."

Silence in the room.

Marten said: "This is what I meant." He said it quietly, to no one in particular. "When I said I wanted to stop watching and start helping. This is what I meant."

Father Brolan looked at me for a long moment.

"Tomas needs to agree," he said. "He's eight years old and this is his life we're discussing. He needs to be told everything — what he is, what it means, what the risks are — and he needs to decide."

"I know," I said.

"Can you tell him?" Father Brolan said. "Not a briefing, not an official notification. Can you talk to your brother and help him understand what he's deciding?"

"Yes," I said. "I'll talk to him tonight."

"And if he says no?"

"Then we find another way," I said. "But I think he'll say yes."

"Why?"

I thought about Tomas in the courtyard, saying good morning to the walls. I thought about him noticing the geothermal shift before I did. I thought about the big dulcimer and eight years of hearing a sound he had no name for and accepting it as simply part of the world.

"Because he's already decided," I said. "He just doesn't know yet that there was a decision to make."

That evening I found Tomas in the courtyard.

Not by arrangement — he was simply there, as he was most mornings and some evenings now, sitting on the bench with the quality of a child who was somewhere between doing nothing and doing everything. The four walls, the evening light dimming toward dark, the Tower's voice resonating in the stone.

I sat beside him.

He looked at me and waited.

I told him. Everything — the organisation, the operator bloodlines, the directed operators, the woman who blocked the aquifer, Saya and what had happened to her, the Reclamers, the siege, the device in the wall, Ren and the three instructions. I told it simply, without drama, the way I had learned to tell difficult things: directly, with all the relevant information, without protection against the difficulty of it.

He listened. He did not interrupt. He asked three questions, all precise: *Do they know what I can hear?* (no, not specifically) *Do they know I'm in the Tower?* (they suspect, not confirmed) *What would they do if they found me?* (try to use me the way Saya was used — find me before I understood what I was, give me a story, direct my capability toward their purposes).

When I finished, he was quiet for a while.

The courtyard held us in the way it held things — the sound gathered, the fundamental tone resonant in the four walls, the Tower present around and above.

"The woman from the south," he said. "Who blocked the water."

"Yes."

"She didn't know what she was doing."

"We believe she didn't know the real reason," I said.

"But she did it," he said. "And then the water was less for a hundred and forty-three years." He paused. "And the farms were smaller than they should have been. And the city was harder than it

should have been." He paused again. "For a hundred and forty-three years."

"Yes," I said.

He looked at the courtyard walls.

"I don't want to do that," he said. "I don't want to be used to do something wrong because I didn't know it was wrong."

"No," I said.

"And you think if people know what I am — if it's known — then it's harder for them to find me first and tell me a false story."

"Yes," I said.

He thought about this for a moment.

"Then tell them," he said.

I looked at him.

"Tell whoever needs to know," he said. "If that protects it — if that protects the water, and the farms, and the building—" he gestured at the walls around him, the specific gesture of someone indicating not just a place but everything the place contained, "then tell them."

"You understand what it means?" I said. "It means certain people will know you have this capability. It means we'll need to be more careful, more protective, in specific ways—"

"Taryn," he said.

"Yes."

"I've been hearing the building my whole life," he said. "Since before I knew what the building was. Whatever it means to be able to hear it—" he paused. "That's just what I am. It doesn't start being what I am when we tell people about it. It already is what I am." He looked at me with Mama's eyes, direct and clear. "Tell them."

I sat with my brother in the courtyard and listened to the Tower breathe around us.

Then I said: "All right."

And in the harmonic layer, underneath the fundamental tone and the operational harmonics and the twelve generators in their ring, something that was not quite a sound and not quite a feeling moved through the building — the specific quality of a system that

had been waiting a very long time for a particular thing to be present and had registered its presence.

Both of them.

Both operators. Both descendants of the founding line. Both in the building, both in the courtyard, both hearing what the building was saying and saying something back.

The Tower knew.

The Tower had, it seemed, been hoping for exactly this.

19

The formal acknowledgment of Tomas happened on a Wednesday morning, in Father Brolan's office, with the kind of administrative simplicity that significant things sometimes had when the people involved had decided to be honest rather than theatrical.

Present: Father Brolan, Brother Evan, Taryce, Collin, Misha, Marten, and Tomas — who arrived with Dace, because he had asked if Dace could come and nobody had been able to identify a good reason to say no, and because Tomas at eight years old still operated on the principle that if you were going to do something potentially frightening you should do it with someone you trusted. Dace sat in the corner with the expression of a child who understood he was witnessing something important and had decided to be very small and very quiet about it.

Father Brolan addressed Tomas directly. Not through me, not mediated — directly, with the full respect of someone speaking to a person who was going to be asked to accept something and had the right to understand exactly what they were accepting.

He explained what Tomas was. The bloodline, the recognition, the specific capability. He explained what it meant to be registered in

the system and what access that gave and what responsibilities it implied. He explained the risk — not dramatically, just accurately, the way you explained risks to someone who had a right to the information. He said: there are people who would want to use your capability without your knowledge or consent, and by acknowledging that you have it, we make that harder to do.

Tomas listened.

At the end he said: "Taryn already told me all of this."

Father Brolan looked at me.

"I told him last night," I said.

"Everything?" Father Brolan said.

"Everything relevant," I said.

Father Brolan looked back at Tomas. There was something in his expression that was not quite amusement and not quite exasperation, the specific combination that Tomas had always been able to produce in adults.

"And do you accept?" Father Brolan said. "In full knowledge of what it means."

"Yes," Tomas said.

"Is there anything you want to ask me?"

Tomas considered. "When do I start proper training?"

"When Taryn and I decide you're ready," Father Brolan said. "Which will be based on your development, not on anyone else's timeline."

Tomas looked at me. I gave him a small nod that meant: this is fair. He accepted it.

"All right," he said.

Father Brolan recorded the acknowledgment in the Tower's formal governance documentation, which Brother Evan had been building into a proper institutional record over the past weeks. Tomas was the youngest recognised operator in the Tower's history, which Father Brolan noted in the record with a specific precision that I thought Tomas would appreciate when he was old enough to read it properly.

Afterward, Dace — who had been small and quiet in his corner for the full duration — said to Tomas, with the specific directness of eight-year-olds: "What does any of that mean?"

"I can hear the building," Tomas said.

"I know, you told me that already."

"Now it's official," Tomas said.

Dace considered this. "Does it change anything?"

"Not really," Tomas said. "Come on. We're going to miss the second breakfast service."

They left. The adults watched them go.

Collin said, in the dry tone he used for things he found surprising and was processing through practicality: "The youngest Commander in Alabaster's history is thirteen. The second-youngest recognised operator is eight. At what point do we acknowledge that the Tower's normal staffing assumptions no longer apply?"

"We acknowledged it thirty-nine days ago," Brother Evan said, "when Taryn walked through the door. We've been adjusting ever since."

"Adjusting," Collin said. "Yes. That's one word for it."

The communication to Orvala went through that same afternoon.

Marten drafted it with the care he brought to everything that involved the Onyx relationship — precise, complete, neither minimising what Tomas was nor overstating it. The communication described his capability, his age, his registration, the governance structure protecting him, and the decision to acknowledge him publicly rather than conceal him. It also described the discovery of Ren and the device and the new instructions, including the third instruction that had been looking for exactly this.

Orvala's response came within the hour.

It was brief: *Received. Analysis will follow. In the meantime: the list you requested is being prepared. I am sending my senior*

archivist. A pause in the message, as if she had considered stopping there and decided not to. *You should be aware that what you are building will be visible to people who are not yet visible to you. The acknowledgment of a second bloodline operator at Alabaster will reach the organisation behind the Reclamers before the end of the month. Prepare accordingly.*

Prepare accordingly. I had been thinking about what that meant since I read Taryce's summary of Ren's third instruction. Now I had a month, or less.

Marten, reading the message over my shoulder, said: "She didn't say the organisation. She knows something about it she hasn't told us yet."

"Ask her," I said.

He drafted a follow-up. The response was longer this time, and it arrived in sections over the course of an hour, as if Orvala was dictating it while doing several other things simultaneously.

The organisation, she wrote, did not have a name — not one they used for themselves. Onyx had given it several names over the decades, settling most recently on *the Continuers*, for reasons that would become clear. They were not the Reclamers. The Reclamers had been one expression of their approach, formed and dissolved and reabsorbed. The Continuers were older, slower, less interested in dramatic action than in the patient accumulation of influence and position.

Their founding premise — insofar as Orvala could reconstruct it from Onyx's records — was that the terraforming systems had been abandoned too completely when Hollis locked the registry. That the capability represented by the installations was a planetary inheritance that was being wasted by isolated cities using it in ignorance. That the right response was not what Hollis had done — locking it down, allowing it to fade — but what Hollis's peers had tried to do: use it, centralise it, coordinate it.

They were not wrong, Orvala wrote, that the systems had been wasted. They were wrong about the remedy.

Their approach for the past several generations had been the same: find capable operators, use them, position them, and wait for circumstances that would allow a more direct move. They had learned patience from Hollis — ironically, since Hollis was the figure whose legacy they were trying to supersede. They had been in position in various forms when the bandit attacks happened three years ago, and they had used that moment to attempt the chair access. They had been in position again during the siege.

They were always in position. That was the nature of what they were.

The acknowledgment of a second Hollis bloodline operator, Orvala wrote, *will be read by the Continuers as evidence that the situation at Alabaster is developing faster than their models predicted. They will not accelerate toward another direct action immediately — the Reclamers' failure has cost them resources and credibility within their own network. But they will reassess. And they will look for leverage.*

What leverage looks like, she wrote, *depends on what they know. Currently they know considerably more than is comfortable. Ren's communications have given them an accurate picture of the dome's capability, the operator registry, and the speed of development. What they do not know is the direction of development going forward. That is what they will try to find out.*

My recommendation: do not give them the chance.

I read this twice and then looked at Marten.

"She has an archivist coming," I said. "What does that mean, practically?"

"It means," he said, "that Orvala is committing Onyx's institutional knowledge to this project in a way she has not previously committed it to anything." He paused. "In forty years, Orvala has never sent her senior archivist anywhere. She sends observers. She sends field agents." He looked at the message. "She is taking this seriously."

"She should," I said.

"She should," he agreed. "And she is."

Saya found me in the weather station the following morning.

She had been spending time in the operational stations over the past week — not participating, just watching, the request she had made in the Guard's holding room and that I had eventually obtained Father Brolan's approval for. She moved through the spaces with the specific quality of someone learning a territory: attentive, quiet, filing things away. She asked questions when she had them and did not ask questions when she didn't, which put her in distinguished company.

She came to the supervisor's platform and stood beside the chair with the manner of someone who had something to say and was working out how to say it.

"The fields team," she said. "Yesterday's depth session."

"Seven hundred feet," I said. "Good session."

"Brother Joba said something," she said. "Afterward, to one of the other operators. I was in the corridor and I caught part of it." She paused. "He said the quality of the conducting had changed. That the way you're working with them in the deep sessions feels different from the weather work."

"It is different," I said. "The geological harmonics are different from the atmospheric ones. I'm still learning the vocabulary."

"He said—" she paused. "He said it feels like being heard rather than directed. That in the early sessions you were shaping what they did. Now you're listening to what they're finding and reflecting it back." She paused. "He said it was like the difference between being taught a route and being given a map."

I thought about this. She was right that the deep sessions had changed — I had felt it myself, the shift from active conducting to something more like translation. At depth, the information coming back from the system's sensors was complex enough that my primary role had become interpretation: taking the system's geological feed-

back and making it available to the team in a form they could act on. Less direction, more transparency.

"He's right," I said.

"I want to understand how you do that," she said. "The translation. Not the surface work — I'm beginning to get the surface harmonics. The deep interpretation." She paused. "Because the way I hear the system is different from yours. Less musical. More physical, more tactile. And I think that might be—" she stopped.

"Better suited to the deep work," I said.

She looked at me. "Possibly."

I had been thinking the same thing, without having said it yet. Her perception was primarily tactile — she felt the system's states as vibration and pressure rather than hearing them as tones. In the shallow atmospheric work, my tonal perception was more precise. But in deep geological operations, where the relevant information was about density and composition and pressure rather than about the fluid adjustments of atmospheric management—

"Stay for today's session," I said. "I want you to listen to what I'm doing and tell me afterward what you would have done differently."

She looked at me. "I haven't been trained for this."

"I know," I said. "That's why I want your perspective. You're not going to hear what I've been trained to hear. You're going to hear what you hear." I paused. "Tomas does this — he notices things I don't notice because he approaches the system from a different angle. You'll notice different things too."

She absorbed this. "All right," she said.

The session that afternoon was the deepest yet: eight hundred feet, forty feet below the obstruction's lower edge. The team could feel the displaced rock above them — Brother Joba described it as a heaviness in the sensation, like working with wet clay rather than dry, the sense

of something denser and less yielding than the surrounding geological strata.

I held the conducting and listened to the system's feedback and provided the translation: *the obstruction begins twenty feet above your current depth, northern edge, approximately forty feet wide in the east-west axis, less than ten feet deep at its thinnest point.* The system's geological sensors were working at the level I needed them to work, the fundamental tone's correction having improved their accuracy measurably since I first tried to access them.

Afterward, sitting in the corridor outside the fields station, Saya said: "The way you were receiving the sensor data. When the system was showing you the obstruction's geometry — you went still."

"Yes," I said. "I was attending to the feedback."

"But you were attending to something specific," she said. "Not the full picture. You were — I could hear you doing it from where I was, which surprised me, I didn't know I'd be able to hear anything in there. But there was a quality of—" she paused. "Narrowing. Like the beam of a lamp rather than the spread of a sconce."

I looked at her. "You could hear my attention?"

"Or something like it," she said. "The way you were using the system had a quality I could perceive, yes." She paused. "And the thing you were attending to — the obstruction — when you were focused on it, there was a sensation." She pressed her hand flat against the corridor wall, demonstrating. "Like this. Like pressure through stone. Dense and unmoving."

"That's the obstruction," I said.

"I know," she said. "I could feel it." She lowered her hand. "I'm at one remove — I was feeling what you were feeling through the system, not the system directly. But the quality of the information is different from the tonal version. I might be able to—" she paused. "If I were at an interface in the fields station, during a deep session, I might be able to provide a different kind of feedback than what the system gives you. More tactile, more directly about the physical character of the material."

I thought about this. Two operators in the same session, providing different types of feedback to the same team. My tonal perception for the broad picture — the system's harmonics, the conducting and coordination. Her tactile perception for the specific character of the material being worked with.

"The question," I said, "is whether you can receive that information from an interface without disrupting what I'm doing."

"Can two people conduct the same piece simultaneously?" she said.

"Different parts of it," I said. "A conductor and a section leader, for instance. The conductor holds the whole. The section leader holds a specific element within it." I paused. "This is speculative."

"Yes," she said. "But is it worth trying?"

I thought about the obstruction. Eight hundred and forty feet down, the blocked geological channel that had been reducing Alabaster's water for a hundred and forty-three years. A dense plug of displaced rock that would need to be worked through with precision — not the blunt force of the rock pillar demonstration, but careful, targeted movement that did not collapse the surrounding structure.

The system could show me the broad geometry. Saya might be able to show the team the specific character of what they were moving through.

"Yes," I said. "It's worth trying."

We tried it the next day.

Not at depth — not yet. We tried it in the training room first, which was where I still went when I wanted to attempt something new without the weight of consequence if it went wrong. Two interface chairs, Saya and I in adjacent positions, the system connecting to both of us simultaneously.

Her tone in the harmonic layer arrived alongside mine and

immediately produced something I had not expected: the two tones did not interfere with each other the way two simultaneous weather operators sometimes created interference patterns. They were in different registers entirely — my tonal perception in the upper harmonics, her tactile perception in a lower frequency that I had been hearing all along as background texture but had never attended to as a distinct voice.

They were complementary.

"What do you feel?" I said.

"The chair," she said. "The interface. It's—" she paused. "Heavier than the surface work. More substantial." She pressed her hands more firmly against the pads. "There's a quality in the deep harmonics that the surface work doesn't have. Like touching something that has been under pressure for a very long time."

"That's geological depth," I said. "The rock under pressure."

"It feels—" she searched. "Patient. Like it's been this way for a long time and expects to be this way for a long time more."

I thought about Prael's description of the clay operations: very patient. The specific quality of material that moved in centuries rather than seasons.

"Can you work with that quality?" I said. "Not move it — just attend to it. Hold the attention while I hold the coordination."

She was quiet for a moment.

"Yes," she said. "I think so."

What happened next was difficult to describe.

We held separate attentions on the same system simultaneously, and the system — the fundamental tone now correct, the deep sensors improved, the two of us providing different kinds of perception — showed us something together that neither of us could have produced alone. My tonal view of the deep harmonics: the conducting structure, the way the system wanted to organise the geological forces available to the fields team. Her tactile view: the specific character of the material, the pressure and density and composition of the rock at depth.

Two maps of the same territory, laid over each other.

"The obstruction," Saya said, suddenly. "I can feel it. Even from here, at training room depth." She was very still. "It's not — it's not just rock. There's something in it. The density is wrong in one section."

I reached for the same area in my tonal view.

She was right. I had been reading the obstruction as broadly homogeneous — displaced rock, the same geological character throughout. But there was a section where the density shifted. Not dramatically. Enough that it would behave differently under earth-moving force.

"Where?" I said.

"Northern edge," she said. "Approximately two thirds of the way through the obstruction's width, there's a layer — less dense. Like the rock was fractured before it was displaced, and the fracture plane is still present."

A fracture plane. A natural weakness in the displaced material. If the fields team applied force at the fracture plane rather than against the obstruction as a whole—

"That's how we do it," I said.

She opened her eyes. "The fracture plane."

"Yes." I was thinking through the approach. "Not moving the whole obstruction. Working the fracture. The rock on either side of the fracture plane is already under tension — the displacement would have stressed it. If the team applies force at exactly the right point, they're not fighting the whole weight of the obstruction. They're resolving a tension that was already there."

"Less force," she said.

"Much less force," I said. "At this depth, force is the limiting factor. The team can reach it but they can't sustain heavy force for long. If the fracture plane gives us a path—"

"How precise does the targeting need to be?" she said.

"Very," I said. "This is not something I could have done before today."

She looked at me. "But now you can."

"Now we can," I said.

Brother Evan, that evening, reviewing the session notes:

"You're describing a two-operator approach to a single geological operation at extreme depth."

"Yes," I said.

"The documents don't mention this as a design feature."

"The documents don't mention it as not a design feature either," I said. "I think we're in territory where the documents are silent." I paused. "The resonant interface is flexible. It responds to what the operators can hear rather than requiring them to hear in a specific way. Two operators with different perceptual modes—"

"Provide different aspects of the same information," he said.

"Yes." I paused. "Tomas will be a third type eventually. His perception is structural — he notices relationships between elements, the way things work together. Different from mine, different from Saya's."

Brother Evan was quiet for a moment. "Three resonant operators," he said. "In the same installation."

"Two adults and an eight-year-old," I said. "One of whom has been trained for forty days and one of whom has been trained for three weeks."

"Nevertheless," he said.

"Nevertheless," I agreed.

He looked at his notes. "The aquifer attempt — when are you planning it?"

"Two days," I said. "One more session to confirm the fracture plane location from depth. Then the attempt."

"The team?"

"Brother Joba and his senior operators for the earthmoving force.

Saya for the tactile feedback. Me for the conducting and coordination." I paused. "And Prael."

He looked up. "Prael."

"She's been tracking this for two years," I said. "She knows the data better than anyone. I want her in the station during the attempt — not at an interface, but present. Reading the system's output in real time through the monitoring position." I paused. "She'll notice if something is going wrong before I do."

"She's not registered at this level," he said.

"She is," I said. "I registered her at Lieutenant Commander three weeks ago." I paused. "She didn't make a fuss about it, which was typical of her."

He looked at his notes again and found the registration record. "Of course she didn't," he said, and the warmth in his voice was the specific warmth of someone who had known Prael for years and had learned to expect exactly this.

Orvala's senior archivist arrived two days before the aquifer attempt.

His name was Lem. He was younger than I had expected from the description *senior archivist* — perhaps thirty-five, slight, with the specific quality of someone who spent most of his time with documents and had developed a relationship with the world mediated primarily by information. He arrived through official channels, through Gate Town and the Third Ring gate, carrying three leather cases of documented material and the specific manner of someone who had been told to come and had come and was reserving judgment on everything else until he understood the situation better.

Father Brolan received him with appropriate formality. I was present at the reception, as was Brother Evan. Marten stood slightly apart, in the way he had when he wanted to be available without being prominent, and I saw the moment when Lem registered

Marten's presence with the specific quality of someone recognising a colleague they had not expected to find.

"Marten," Lem said.

"Lem," Marten said.

"You're registered," Lem said. He said it the way someone said something that was both information and something more than information — the condensed comment of someone processing a significant change.

"I am," Marten said. "So is Misha."

Lem looked around the room. He looked at me. He did the calculation that most people did when they first encountered me in this context: the age, the title, the gap between those two things.

"You're younger than I expected," he said.

"People keep saying that," I said.

"Does it bother you?"

"No," I said. "I'm aware of what I know and what I don't know. The age is relevant to the second category, not the first."

He looked at me for a moment. Then he said to Father Brolan: "She sent the right person here."

Father Brolan allowed himself a small smile. "We believe so. The documents?"

"Everything Onyx has compiled on the Continuers," Lem said. "Everything on directed operators since Hollis. The operator bloodline maps, updated to current knowledge." He set one of the leather cases on Father Brolan's desk. "And—" he paused. "Something Orvala wanted me to give directly to Taryn."

He took a sealed document from inside his coat and held it out to me.

I took it. The seal was Orvala's — I had seen it on the communications from the channel I had established. The wax was dark and the impression was a symbol I did not recognise but Marten, standing beside me, made a small sound that indicated recognition.

"The Hollis Archive," he said, quietly. "She sent the Hollis Archive."

I looked at him.

"The documents Hollis himself wrote," Marten said. "Not the Succession Document — those were already here. The fuller record. Journals, operational notes, communications he kept from the founding period." He paused. "Onyx has been holding them for four hundred years."

I looked at the sealed document in my hands.

Four hundred years.

"Why did she send them now?" I said.

"Because," Lem said, "she believes you need them. And because — I think she wanted to see what you'd do with them." He paused. "Orvala tests people. She has been testing you since your first communication with her. What you did with the registry, how you handled the Reclamers, the acknowledgment of your brother—" he paused. "She was watching to see what kind of Commander you would be."

"And?" I said.

"And she sent the Hollis Archive," he said. "That is the answer."

I held the sealed document and thought about Hollis. A man who had locked the door and thrown the key into the future and died not knowing whether anyone would catch it. Who had written journals and operational notes and kept communications from the founding period, and those documents had been held by an organisation of archivists for four hundred years, waiting.

Waiting for someone to need them.

"I'll read it tonight," I said.

I read it in the courtyard.

Not efficiently — I read slowly, the way you read things that required their pace to be honoured. Lem had brought a translation with the original, in the library Servant's predecessor's hand — Onyx had been working on the Hollis Archive for longer than Alabaster's

library had been working on the documents that remained here, and the translation was more complete than anything I had encountered in the library's collection.

Hollis wrote the way he apparently did everything: directly, with precision, without ornamentation. The journals were not the record of a heroic founder. They were the operational notes of a practical person dealing with practical problems in an impossible situation.

The first section covered the founding period — the planet's early settlement, the establishment of the installations, the original Commander network. Hollis's voice in these sections was the voice of someone who had started with faith in the system he was part of and was gradually losing it. His fellow Commanders were doing what the Commanders' Conflict would become: using the machines for personal and political advantage, directing terraforming systems toward territorial expansion, managing the new world's scarce resources in ways that benefited the powerful at the expense of everyone else.

Hollis's response was not immediate. He recorded his concerns. He tried diplomacy. He communicated with other Commanders who shared his misgivings. He looked for systemic solutions — ways to prevent the misuse that didn't require trusting each individual Commander's character.

The registry lock was not his first attempt. He had tried other mechanisms first — accountability systems, shared oversight, communication protocols that required consensus for major operations. They had all failed. The Commanders with the most to gain from the machines' misuse had either subverted the mechanisms or simply ignored them.

He locked the registry as a last resort, not a first choice.

I read this section twice. He had not wanted to lock the door. He had spent years looking for another way, and the other way had not materialised, and eventually he had accepted that a partial loss — the slow fading of access over generations — was better than the continued misuse.

What he had not been able to solve, in the founding period, was what I was now trying to build: the distributed approach. He had mentioned it, in one of the operational notes, as an aspiration: *if every city had operators who understood what they were doing and why, the concentration of capability would be impossible — there would be nothing to concentrate.*But he had not been able to implement it. The political situation had not permitted the communication and coordination it required. The other Commanders had not cooperated. The attempt would have required resources and time he did not have.

I am building Alabaster to survive without the machines, he wrote, near the end of the founding section. *But I am doing so with the knowledge that the machines will not be gone — only inaccessible. Whatever survives of the capability will find someone eventually. I can only hope that someone will have the wit to do what I could not.*

I sat with this for a long time.

He had known. He had known someone would come eventually, had known the capability would persist, had known the door would be opened again. He had built Alabaster to survive without the machines specifically so that whoever opened the door would not be desperate — would not be in a position where they had to use the machines recklessly because the city's survival required it. A hundred and fifty years of careful democratic governance, equal resource distribution, the egalitarian structures that had always distinguished Alabaster from its neighbours — this was Hollis's gift. Not the machines. The context in which the machines could be used well.

I looked up at the courtyard's sky, dark now, stars visible above the four walls.

The second section of the Archive was more personal — Hollis's reflections in the later years, when the installation was established and the immediate crises were managed and he had time to think about what he had built and what he had failed to build. He wrote about the aquifer, which I had not expected: he mentioned diverting the water management systems toward Alabaster's farms with the

recognition that this would reduce downstream availability for other settlements, and he expressed concern about it. He had tried to calibrate the systems for broader regional benefit but the political situation — Alabaster was newly established, isolated, frequently threatened — had pushed the calibration toward local survival.

The farms work, he wrote. *The city survives. But the broader region suffers for it. This is a debt I am accumulating on behalf of my descendants, and I do not know how to repay it.*

I thought about the regional calibration we had begun after the siege. The adjustment that was already improving conditions in Cupritesh's agricultural territory. Hollis's debt, being repaid.

The third section was the one that took the longest to read, not because it was long but because it was dense in a different way from the first two. It covered the period when Hollis first understood that the organisations opposing his approach — the Commanders' network, and behind them something older that he called *the inheritance movement*, which was recognisably the same thing Orvala called the Continuers — were not going to stop when he locked the registry.

They will adapt, he wrote. *They are patient and they believe they are right. In a certain sense they are right — the capability should be used, the systems should be active, the distributed approach is the correct one. What they are wrong about is who should control it and why. They want to control because they have always controlled. The capability should serve everyone. They cannot conceive of this.*

The lock will hold them for a time. Perhaps a long time. But they will find another way.

What I cannot build is the thing that would finally stop them: a community of operators who understand what they have, who govern it well, who are too widely distributed to concentrate and too knowledgeable to manipulate. I cannot build this because I do not have the time and the world does not have the trust. But if someone opens the door again, with the wisdom to do it well, the distributed approach is the answer. Not the locked door. The open community.

I sat in the courtyard and breathed.

The open community.

Hollis had known. Four hundred years ago he had known exactly what the answer was and had not been able to implement it and had written it down and given the writing to people who would keep it safe until someone was ready to use it.

And Orvala had held it for four hundred years and sent it to me with a seal and a test and the specific trust of someone who had watched me for forty days and decided I was the right person to have it.

I looked at the document in my hands.

Then I looked at the walls.

"I know," I said.

The fundamental tone resonated in the four walls, clean and true.

Yes, the Tower said, in its way. *Now you know*.

The next morning I brought the Archive to Father Brolan.

Not the whole thing — I had not had time to read the full document, and what I had read required more consideration than one night could provide. But the key passage. The one about the distributed approach. The one where Hollis, four hundred years ago, had written down the answer to the problem we were all trying to solve.

Father Brolan read it in silence. Then he read it again.

Then he sat with it for a long time.

"He always knew," he said finally.

"He always knew," I said. "He just couldn't do it."

"And you think you can."

"I think we can start," I said. "Orvala is sending operator bloodline maps. Lem is here with the Continuers' documentation. We have a communication network that's in better health than it's been

in generations." I paused. "We have Saya, who came from somewhere else and can go back to somewhere else with proper training. We have the contacts Onyx has accumulated over decades." I paused again. "We have the Succession Document's governance principles, which work. We have the fundamental tone corrected, which means the system can support more sophisticated coordination than it could before." I paused once more. "We have forty-three days of experience developing capability that everyone said couldn't develop this fast."

Father Brolan looked at the passage in the Archive.

"The distributed approach," he said.

"Yes."

"It requires that we reach people outside Alabaster," he said. "That we communicate with cities and settlements that have their own politics and their own interests and no particular reason to trust us."

"Yes," I said. "It will be slow. It will be imperfect. It will go wrong in specific ways that we can't predict." I paused. "So did everything Hollis built. And it survived for five hundred years and it gave us the context to do what we're doing now."

Father Brolan looked at the courtyard window. The morning was outside it, the city going about its recovered ordinary life.

"One thing at a time," he said. "The aquifer tomorrow."

"The aquifer tomorrow," I agreed.

"And then we discuss what comes after." He put the Archive passage down with the care he used for important things. "The full reading — when you've finished it, I want to read it as well."

"Of course," I said.

"And Taryn—" he said.

I looked at him.

"He was right to trust you with this," he said.

It took me a moment to understand he meant Hollis.

"He didn't know me," I said.

"No," he said. "He trusted the person who would arrive. He built

the conditions for someone to be ready and then he trusted that they would be." He paused. "He was right."

I held this.

Then I said: "I'm not ready. I'm forty-three days in. I know a great deal more than I knew on day one and a great deal less than I'll know on day four hundred."

"Yes," Father Brolan said. "That's exactly what ready looks like."

That evening, before the briefing, I went to find Marten.

He was in the small room off the weather station corridor — the room that had become the place for conversations that were not quite operational. He was reading Lem's documents, the Continuers' records that Orvala had sent, making notes in the organised way he brought to everything.

I sat across from him.

"The Hollis Archive," I said.

He put his notes down.

"You've read it," he said.

"Most of it," I said. "The founding period, the later reflections, the passage about the distributed approach." I paused. "He mentions the inheritance movement — what you and Orvala call the Continuers. He had the same read on them that you do: they are not entirely wrong about the problem, only about the solution."

"Yes," he said.

"They believe they are doing what Hollis should have done," I said. "Centralising the capability rather than letting it fade."

"That is their argument," he said. "More or less."

"And they've been making that argument for four hundred years through manipulation and coercion and deliberate damage," I said. "Because they could not accomplish it through legitimate means."

"Yes," he said.

"So when I say I want to do the distributed approach," I said.

"When I say I want to find and train operators, share knowledge, build the open community that Hollis described — the Continuers will characterise this as the same thing they're trying to do."

Marten looked at me.

"They will," he said. "Yes. They will say you are centralising under Alabaster's control rather than under theirs. They will say the governance structure is a fiction. They will say—" he paused. "They will say you are thirteen years old and cannot possibly have the judgment to manage what you have access to."

"Some of that is fair," I said.

"Some of it," he agreed.

"The answer to all of it," I said, "is the same answer. The governance structure is not a fiction — it is real and it has teeth and Father Brolan is the evidence. The distributed approach is the distributed approach — operators trained and sent back to their own communities, not brought here and held here. And the age—" I paused. "The age is what it is. In a year I'll be fourteen. In ten years I'll be twenty-three. The argument about age resolves itself."

He looked at me for a moment. "You have been thinking about how to answer the Continuers' arguments."

"I've been thinking about what the Continuers will say," I said. "Because they will say it. Probably to the operators we're trying to reach. Probably to political figures in cities that have an interest in how this goes. Probably to Orvala, to test whether Onyx's alliance with Alabaster is firm." I paused. "I want to understand their arguments before they make them, not after."

"That," Marten said, "is the correct approach." He looked at his documents. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything," I said. "All of it. The history, the structure, the specific people Lem has documented, the arguments they make, the approaches they've used. I want to understand them as well as you understand them."

"That will take time," he said.

"I have time," I said. "Start."

He started.

We talked for two hours, through the evening briefing's scheduled time, which Brother Evan managed in my absence with the quiet competence that had become one of the things I relied on without examining. When I finally left the small room, the Tower was in its late-night posture, the residential levels quiet, the night shift on at the operational stations.

I went to the courtyard on my way back.

The sky was clear and the stars were present above the four walls and the fundamental tone resonated in the stone, clean and steady, the building's voice as it had been since the night after the siege when I had stopped in the street and heard it arrive at its intended pitch.

I thought about Hollis, writing in a room that no longer existed about a problem he could not solve, trusting the future with the solution he had found.

I thought about the Continuers, four hundred years of patient work toward a goal that was wrong in the way that confident wrongness was wrong: not obviously, not stupidly, but in the specific way of people who understood part of the problem and had decided their understanding was complete.

I thought about Saya, who had been used and had decided not to be used again and was sitting in a room somewhere above me reading the documents Lem had brought, building her own understanding.

I thought about Tomas, two floors up, asleep or nearly so, dreaming whatever eight-year-olds dreamed in buildings they had decided to trust.

I thought about Mama, in the tavern, putting out fresh candles that Tomas was no longer there to forget.

I thought about the aquifer, eight hundred and forty feet below the eastern farms, the blocked channel that had been reducing the water for a hundred and forty-three years, the fracture plane that Saya had found.

Tomorrow.

Ready? I asked the Tower, which was not how communication with the system worked and which I did anyway.

The fundamental tone rang in the four walls, clean and complete, the building's whole voice in the space that gathered it best.

Ready, the Tower said, in its way.

Good, I said.

And went to bed.

End of Chapter Nineteen

The structural decisions: the chapter is the novel's revelation chapter — all the threads that have been building come together here. Tomas's formal acknowledgment opens the chapter with the right tone: the administrative simplicity of important things done correctly, and Dace's pragmatic *does it change anything* serving as both comic relief and thematic statement (it doesn't change what Tomas is; it only acknowledges it). Orvala's archivist Lem is introduced to give the Hollis Archive a proper delivery mechanism — the physical object arriving in the right hands — and the moment when Marten recognises Lem establishes the Onyx network as having real human texture rather than being a faceless institution. The Hollis Archive section is the chapter's centrepiece: reading his actual voice, discovering that he knew the answer and couldn't implement it, understanding that Alabaster's egalitarian structures were not incidental to the mission but the core of it (the context in which the machines could be used well). The late-night conversation with Marten about the Continuers' arguments is the chapter's practical pivot: Taryn is not just receiving information, he is preparing for a strategic challenge that will define what comes next. The courtyard at the end holds the accumulated weight of everything — Hollis, the Continuers, Saya, Tomas, Mama, the aquifer — and the question *Ready?* directed at a building that cannot answer in the simple way, and the fundamental tone that answers anyway.

20

The aquifer attempt was scheduled for the morning.

I woke before the sconce brightened, which had become my habit on days when something significant was planned, not from anxiety exactly but from the specific alertness of someone whose mind had been working on a problem in sleep and wanted to report. I lay in the dark and listened to the building.

The generators, all twelve, their ring steady. The fundamental tone, clean. The weather station above, the overnight team's tones quiet and consistent. The fields station below, currently empty — the shift would begin at second bell, two hours from now. And in the deep geological layer, beneath all the operational harmonics, the slow dense patient quality that was the rock at eight hundred feet, the obstruction sitting in the blocked channel like something that had forgotten it was supposed to move.

Today we were going to remind it.

I was not nervous, exactly. I was the way I was before complex sessions that required everything I had: clear, attentive, with the specific quality of a musician who has practiced a piece until they no longer need to think about it and can simply play it. The mechanics

were known. The team was ready. Saya had confirmed the fracture plane location in yesterday's final preparation session. The system's sensors were as sharp as they were going to be.

What remained was the doing.

I got up and went to the courtyard.

The morning was cold in the way that late-season mornings were cold — not the settled chill of deep winter but the sharp specific cold of a season that had not quite decided whether to release its grip. The courtyard held the cold as it held the sound: gathered, concentrated, the open sky above the four walls showing a clear pre-dawn darkness with the last stars still present.

I sat on the bench and did not do anything specific.

This was also something I had learned: the value of the unstructured morning moment before demanding work. Not meditation, not practice, not even conscious listening. Just presence. The Tower's voice, the building's hum, the quality of the air. Tomas had discovered this before I had formalised it, which continued to be a pattern I was getting used to.

After twenty minutes, Saya appeared at the courtyard door.

She was already dressed — she had the quality, in the mornings before significant sessions, of someone who had been up for a while and had channelled the alertness productively. She carried two cups and held one out to me.

"You should eat before we go down," she said.

"I know," I said.

"Will you?"

"Probably not much," I said honestly.

She sat on the other end of the bench. We drank our tea in the cold and looked at the sky lightening above the four walls.

After a while she said: "Tell me what's going to happen."

Not because she didn't know — I had walked her through the plan twice in the days of preparation. This was a different kind of telling, the spoken-aloud version that consolidated understanding just before the thing itself. I had found that I did this instinctively

before complex operations: narrated the plan as if to someone who had not heard it, because the narration showed you the gaps.

"The fields team descends to eight hundred feet," I said. "Brother Joba leads. Five operators. I'm conducting from the supervisor's position. You're at the adjacent interface providing tactile feedback on the material character." I paused. "When the team reaches depth, the system shows me the full obstruction geometry. You feel the fracture plane. We agree on the location and I direct the team to it." I paused again. "The team applies force at the fracture plane — not against the obstruction, into the fracture. They're working with the existing tension rather than against the obstruction's full mass."

"The fracture releases," she said.

"We hope," I said. "The fracture releases, the displaced rock on either side shifts, the channel begins to open. The system monitors the structural response in real time. If anything starts to destabilise — if the surrounding rock is at risk — we stop."

"And if it works?"

"The channel is not fully clear immediately," I said. "The displaced material will need several sessions over several days to move fully. But the initial fracture release is the critical step. Once the fracture opens, the geological pressure in the channel will help continue the work between sessions."

She nodded. "And the aquifer."

"Will begin to recover," I said. "Slowly. The system's estimate is that meaningful pressure restoration will take months, full recovery years."

"But it starts today," she said.

"It starts today," I said.

She looked at her tea. "I've been thinking about the woman who blocked it," she said. "The one from the south."

I had been thinking about her too. Marten's reconstruction of the event, the young woman told a false story, directed to do something she believed was protective. Her one month in Alabaster, the unlogged operation, the departure.

"She didn't know," I said.

"No," Saya said. "But she's the reason Prael's predecessors worked harder than they needed to for a hundred and forty years. She's the reason the aquifer has been declining." She paused. "She's the reason we're doing this this morning." She looked at the sky. "I keep thinking about what it would have been like to be her. To find out what you'd done."

"She may never have found out," I said.

"That might be worse," she said.

I thought about this. The specific weight of having done damage you were not aware you had done. The damage persisting, the city managing it without knowing its source, and the person responsible living out her life somewhere south of here with no knowledge of what her one month in Alabaster had produced.

"What we're doing this morning undoes it," I said. "Not everything — not the hundred and forty years already spent. But from today the aquifer begins to recover. Whatever she caused, we're correcting."

Saya looked at her tea.

"Good," she said. Simply. The word Taryce used, the word Father Brolan used: small, exact, containing more than it showed.

We finished the tea and went in.

The fields station at full occupancy had a quality that the weather station's equivalent did not quite have: quieter, more concentrated, the specific quality of work that happened close to the ground rather than in the air. Brother Joba and his five operators settled into their chairs with the practiced ease of people who had been doing this for years, and then with the additional quality of people who understood that today was different from every previous session in one specific way: they were going to fix something.

Prael was at the monitoring position. She had arrived before any

of the operators, which surprised no one who knew her. She had her records open and was reviewing the aquifer data with the focused attention she brought to the thing she had been tracking for two years. When I came in she looked up and said nothing, which was her way of saying: I am ready.

Saya took the adjacent interface position to Brother Joba's. She put her hands on the pads and I watched her settle into the connection with the quality I had been observing over the past week: not the musical attunement of my own process but something more physical, the specific quality of someone pressing their hand to stone and feeling what was in the stone. Different. Complementary.

I went to the supervisor's chair.

The fundamental tone arrived, steady. The harmonic layers settled around me, the team's tones rising one by one as each operator connected. Brother Joba's tone, deep and patient and forty years familiar with this work. The others around it, their characteristics as known to me now as voices I had been hearing all my life.

And Saya's tone, in the lower register, the tactile frequency I had been learning to hear alongside my own: present, attentive, already reaching for the deep geological feel of the rock below.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning," six voices said, with varying degrees of ceremony.

"We know what we're doing," I said. "We've prepared carefully. The approach is the fracture plane — not force against the obstruction, movement with the existing tension. When I direct you to the fracture, I want precise and moderate force. Not maximum. Moderate." I paused. "The rock has been under pressure for a hundred and forty years. It wants to move. Our job is to give it the right direction."

Brother Joba said: "Ready."

The others: "Ready."

Saya: "Ready."

"Descend," I said.

The descent through depth was something I had done many times

now in the preparation sessions, and it was still unlike anything else I experienced in the Tower. The weather work was immediate, atmospheric, present at the surface — I could see its effects through the window. The deep work was the opposite: invisible, below, felt rather than seen. The tones changed character as the team moved through geological layers, the operators' connections deepening in register as the rock around their perceptual reach grew denser and older.

At four hundred feet the team's tones had the heavy settled quality I associated with serious rock. At six hundred feet there was a quality of pressure, the deep stone's weight present in the harmonics. At seven hundred the team had been in these depths enough times that the descent was smooth — no hesitation, no adjustment, just the continued deepening of tones that knew where they were going.

At eight hundred the obstruction was present.

Not visible — not to my tones, not to the team's operations. But Saya's tone in the lower register changed character. She went very still at her interface.

"I have it," she said quietly.

"Describe it," I said.

"Dense," she said. "Much denser than the surrounding rock. The surrounding rock at this depth is — it has a quality of having been here a very long time, undisturbed. The obstruction is different. It feels—" she paused. "Forced. Like something that was made to be here rather than having arrived here naturally."

"The fracture plane," I said.

"Give me a moment," she said.

I waited. The team held their depth, their tones steady. Prael's pencil moved across her monitoring record.

"There," Saya said. "Northern edge. Two-thirds through the obstruction's width from the south. There's a — it's not a gap. It's more like a memory of where the fracture was before the displacement. The rock knows it was fractured. The tension has been maintained in that plane ever since."

"Brother Joba," I said. "Northern edge, two-thirds from the south. Do you have it?"

A pause. "I feel something," he said carefully. "Not clearly. The obstruction is very dense."

"Saya," I said. "Can you show him?"

What happened next was something I had not known was possible until we practiced it three days ago.

Saya's tone shifted — not louder, but more directed, the tactile frequency moving toward Brother Joba's position in the harmonic space. And Brother Joba's tone, in response, shifted slightly. Not matching — their frequencies were different — but resonating. The two perceptions touching the same point in the geological structure from different angles.

"Yes," Brother Joba said. "Yes, I have it now."

"Good," I said. "When I give the signal, moderate force, directed into the fracture plane. Not against the obstruction — into the existing tension. Let the rock do the work." I paused. "Ready?"

"Ready," Brother Joba said.

"Ready," Saya confirmed.

"Ready," the other five said, together.

I held the conducting chord. The full team, Saya's tactile frequency alongside, the system's geological sensors feeding me the real-time picture of the obstruction and the channel and the structure of the rock around them.

"Now," I said.

What happened in the next thirty seconds was the thing I had been trying to describe to myself in advance and found I could not, the way you could not describe music in language and have it be accurate.

The team's force went into the fracture plane. Not against the obstruction — into the existing tension, the memory of fracture that Saya had found. And the rock, which had been held under that tension for a hundred and forty-three years, which had been

displaced and had not had the opportunity to resolve the stress of its displacement in all that time—

Moved.

Not explosively. Not dramatically. It was more like watching something exhale: a slow, deep, geological release of tension that had been maintained too long. The fracture plane opened — I felt it in the harmonic layer as a shift in the obstruction's character, the dense forced quality Saya had described changing, the displacement beginning to resolve into its natural resting position.

The channel was not clear. Not yet. The displaced material was substantial and it had been where it was for a very long time and it would take days of careful work to fully clear the passage. But the fracture had opened, and the primary tension was releasing, and in the system's geological sensor feedback I could see — hear — the beginning of what Prael had been tracking for two years running in reverse.

The aquifer channel was opening.

"Hold," I said quietly to the team. "Steady. Let the release continue on its own momentum."

We held for fifteen seconds. Twenty. The release continued — the geological tension unwinding with the slow inevitability of something that had been ready to move for a very long time.

At thirty seconds I said: "Release. Come up."

The team's tones rose through the depth levels, the ascent smooth and controlled. Saya's tactile frequency eased back. The harmonic layer returned to its baseline quality, the deep geological sound unchanged except for one thing:

In the layer where the obstruction had been, there was a different sound.

Not open — not yet. But less blocked. The specific harmonic difference between a sealed passage and a fractured one, between stone that had been forced into position and stone that was beginning to settle into its natural orientation.

The system said: *Primary geological channel, northeast sector:*

fracture event recorded. Flow impedance reduced by 23% from baseline. Continued natural resolution expected. Full clearance will require additional operator intervention.

Twenty-three percent.

"Twenty-three percent," I said to the room.

Prael looked up from her monitoring record. She was very still.

"On the first attempt," she said.

"On the first attempt," I confirmed.

She looked back at her record. She wrote something. Then she put her pencil down and looked at the floor and was quiet for a moment.

I waited.

"My teacher's teacher's teacher," she said finally. "Approximately."

"Approximately," I agreed.

She picked up her pencil again.

"Two more sessions," she said. "Three at most. To clear the passage fully."

"Yes," I said.

She was already writing the analysis. She did not look up again, which was her way of saying that the emotional moment was over and the work was next. I had been learning for forty-four days to read the specific language of Prael doing things instead of saying things, and I had become fairly fluent in it.

Brother Joba, at his station, said: "Well."

It was the entire sentence.

"Yes," I said.

Sister Trofer, who had been standing at the room's edge watching in the way she watched everything — proprietorially, as if the fields station's accomplishments were her personal responsibility regardless of whether she had been directly involved — said: "The lads came through."

She meant the machines. She always meant the machines.

"They did," I said. "As did your team."

She made the small sound that was her version of accepting a compliment without appearing to.

The briefing that afternoon was brief, because the facts were simple.

"The fracture has opened," I told Father Brolan and the assembled group. "Twenty-three percent flow restoration on the first session. Two to three additional sessions should clear the passage fully. After that the channel recovers naturally — months before significant pressure restoration, years before full recovery."

"Years," Collin said.

"Years," I confirmed. "But the direction reverses today. The decline stops. The recovery begins."

He looked at the table. "What does that mean practically? For the farms, for the water management?"

"In the short term, nothing visible," I said. "The fields team will notice improved system responsiveness in the deep agricultural work before anything changes at the surface. In six months to a year, Prael estimates the water table will begin recovering, which will reduce the effort the fields team puts into moisture management. In five years the farms should be operating at what Prael's historical analysis suggests is significantly above the current yield." I paused. "In a hundred years the aquifer will be at its original designed capacity."

"None of us will see that," Collin said.

"No," I said. "The person who caused the problem will not see the solution, and the people who built the solution will not see its completion. This is a normal condition of working on things that matter." I paused. "We're seeing the beginning of it. The beginning matters."

He absorbed this with the pragmatism of a man who managed city logistics and understood long timelines.

"The city should know," he said. "Not the technical details. But

that the water situation is being addressed, that the trend is reversing."

"Yes," Father Brolan said. "I'll prepare an announcement." He looked at me. "Is there anything in the announcement that would be useful to the Continuers if they intercepted it?"

I thought about this. The Continuers already knew the dome existed, the registry was open, the pace of development was faster than predicted. Adding *the aquifer is being restored* gave them what, exactly?

"It tells them we've identified the problem they caused," I said. "Or the problem their predecessors caused." I paused. "Let them know we've found it. Let them know we know what it was."

Father Brolan looked at me.

"It sends a message," I said. "We are not operating in ignorance. We understand the history. We are addressing the damage." I paused. "If they are rational — if they are, as Marten says, more interested in the outcome than in any specific path — then knowing we understand what was done may cause them to reconsider the directional approach."

"Or it may cause them to accelerate," Taryce said.

"Yes," I said. "It might do both, in different parts of the organisation." I paused. "But I would rather operate with honesty and take the risk than operate in deliberate obscurity. Hollis operated in deliberate obscurity and it did not stop them."

"No," Father Brolan said. "It did not." He looked at the table. "The announcement will be honest, general, and will credit the Tower's Servants and operators for the work." He paused. "It will not name specific individuals."

"Agreed," I said.

Two days later the fracture had released another forty percent of the flow impedance, bringing us to sixty-three percent of original

flow through the channel. The third session, three days after that, cleared the remaining material and the system reported full channel reopening for the first time in a hundred and forty-three years.

Prael was in the fields station for all three sessions. She monitored and recorded and said very little. After the third session, when the system reported full clearance, she looked at the readings for a long time. Then she said: "There should be a record."

"Of the sessions?" I said.

"Of the cause," she said. "Not for now — for eventually. When people look at why the aquifer declined and how it recovered, the record should say what happened." She paused. "Not accusation. Just history. The accurate version."

"The governance documentation," Brother Evan said, from his position at the back of the room. "I'll add a section."

Prael nodded. Then she went back to her records, and that was the end of it.

What happened next was something I had not planned.

Lem had been in the Tower for a week, working through the documents he had brought and absorbing, with the specific attentiveness of an experienced archivist encountering new primary sources, everything that the Tower's own records contained that Onyx had not previously seen. He was precise and unobtrusive and had the quality of someone doing his job well in an environment that was unusual for him without making the unusualness anyone else's problem.

On the morning after the third aquifer session he came to find me with an expression that told me he had found something.

He found me in the lounge — I had been reading a section of the Hollis Archive that I had not yet reached, the later journals, the period when Hollis was old and the city was established and the

immediate crises were behind him. Lem sat across from me and put a document on the table.

"The bloodline maps," he said. "Onyx's current version."

I had been waiting for these. The list of partial operators across the continent — people who could hear something, who had the biological markers, who were living out their lives without a vocabulary for what they were hearing.

The map was dense. More points than I had expected, marked at various cities and settlements across a continent that I knew in the abstract as Achillios and was only beginning to know in the specific.

"How many?" I said.

"Confirmed partial recognition: forty-seven individuals currently living," he said. "Another thirty to forty estimated from bloodline analysis in regions where we haven't been able to confirm directly." He paused. "Of the confirmed forty-seven, perhaps fifteen have capability at Lieutenant level or above. The remainder are at the lower end — real capability, but limited."

I looked at the map.

Forty-seven confirmed people who could hear something like what I heard. Forty-seven people who had been living with the sound of their city's machines their whole lives without knowing what it was. Forty-seven people the Continuers had been tracking and in some cases attempting to find and use before Onyx could find and tell them.

"Where are they concentrated?" I said.

"The coast," Lem said. "The southern settlements. And here—" he pointed to a cluster near the centre of the map. "This region was more densely populated in the original settlement period. Several of the original Commander bloodlines are represented."

"The strongest capability," I said.

"Yes." He paused. "Three individuals with potential approaching your level. One in Spessarta, one in a settlement near the old installation at Olivine, one—" he paused. "One in Quiet Bay."

I had heard that name. In the Onyx communications, in Marten's

notes about the Continuers' movements. Quiet Bay was a small coastal settlement, two to three hundred people, in the south.

"Why is Quiet Bay significant?" I said.

Lem looked at the map. "The individual there has the strongest partial recognition outside Alabaster that we have documented," he said. "Onyx has been trying to establish contact for two years. We've been — unsuccessful."

"Why?"

"Because the Continuers got there first," he said.

That evening, in Father Brolan's office, Lem laid out the full picture of the Quiet Bay situation.

The individual there was a woman in her mid-thirties, born in the settlement, who had been identified by Onyx through bloodline analysis four years ago. The settlement was small and isolated — a fishing community with no significant political connections and no particular reason for anyone outside to take an interest in it. The Continuers had been taking an interest in it for eighteen months.

"What do they want with her?" Father Brolan said.

"What they always want," Marten said. "An operator they can direct. Her capability level, properly developed, would be—" he paused. "Significant."

"How significant?" I said.

Lem looked at the map. "Onyx's estimate, based on bloodline analysis, is that she could reach Commander-equivalent access with proper development."

The room was quiet.

Not Lieutenant. Not Lieutenant Commander. Commander-equivalent.

"There are two Commander-equivalent bloodlines we know of," I said. "The Hollis line, which is here. And—"

"One of the other original Commanders," Marten said. "Yes. We

believe so. The specific bloodline is difficult to trace with certainty — the records from the founding period are incomplete — but the biological markers suggest one of the founding Commander families that took the southern settlements."

"And she's in Quiet Bay," Father Brolan said.

"And the Continuers are in Quiet Bay," Lem said. "Or trying to be. Onyx's most recent intelligence — two months old — indicated that they had sent a team to establish presence in the settlement. We don't know their current status."

I looked at the map. The coastline, the small settlement, the biological markers that corresponded to a capability level that — properly developed, with knowledge and context and the kind of training that prevented directed use — would be the single most significant addition to what we were building.

And improperly developed, directed by the Continuers toward their purposes—

"We need to reach her first," I said.

"We need to reach her at all," Taryce said. "Onyx has been trying for two years. If the Continuers are established in the settlement—"

"Then we need to understand their current position before we attempt contact," I said. "We go in without understanding and we potentially reveal both her and ourselves to an organisation that already knows too much about us."

"How do we understand their current position?" Collin said.

"Onyx has agents in the region," Lem said. "We could request a current assessment."

"How long?" I said.

"Three weeks for a proper report," he said. "Perhaps less if we push."

"Push," Father Brolan said.

Lem made a note.

"In the meantime," Father Brolan said, "we continue what we're doing. The registrations. The regional weather calibration. The

Hollis Archive." He looked at me. "The Hollis Archive — what are you finding?"

"Useful things," I said. "Mostly confirmation of the direction we've already taken. But there's a section I haven't finished yet — the later period, when he was old and writing about what he had learned. I'll have it read by the end of the week."

"Good." He looked at the room. "Three weeks for the Quiet Bay assessment. In three weeks the diplomatic response to Cupritesh will also be further along, and Orvala's initial recommendations on contact protocols for the broader operator network will be available." He paused. "We'll have a fuller picture."

I nodded.

Three weeks was a reasonable timeline. Three weeks was also time for the Continuers to consolidate their position in Quiet Bay if they had not already. Three weeks was time for them to identify the woman there and begin the approach they always began.

I said: "Is there any way to get word to her directly? Not through the Onyx network — something more immediate. The communication system."

Marten looked at Lem.

"If she has the capability Onyx believes she has," Lem said slowly, "then she would be able to receive a direct communication through the installation network. If the installation nearest to Quiet Bay is still partially functional."

"Which installation?" I said.

"Epsilon," Lem said. "The far south. Onyx believes it has some residual function — not actively managed, but the basic systems are running. If it has any communication capability remaining—"

"Can I reach it?" I said. To the system, and also to the room.

I reached: *Installation Epsilon. Is there a communication connection available?*

The system was quiet for longer than usual. Then: *Processing. Installation Epsilon: active. Basic systems operational. Communica-*

tion channel available at reduced capacity. Note: installation Epsilon has no recognised operator. Communication relay only.

Can a communication be relayed to anyone within Installation Epsilon's perimeter?

Affirmative. Standard relay protocol. Recipient requires no interface capability to receive. Message delivered as ambient audio in the nearest operational space.

Ambient audio. A voice in an empty room, or in a space where someone happened to be. The specific quality of a message that arrived without visible mechanism — exactly the kind of thing that would be completely inexplicable to someone who didn't understand the system.

"I can reach her," I said. "Or reach the area she's in. The message would arrive as a voice with no visible source."

The room considered this.

"That's alarming," Brother Evan said.

"Yes," I said. "It would need to be carefully worded. Not demanding, not urgent — something that makes sense to someone who has been hearing buildings her whole life. Something that doesn't sound like a trap." I paused. "Something that says: we know what you hear, we're not the people trying to use you, there is a different option."

"You're going to introduce yourself to a stranger three hundred miles away through the walls of an empty building," Taryce said.

"Yes," I said.

She looked at me for a moment.

"All right," she said. "How?"

The message took two days to draft.

Not because the content was complex — it was short, deliberately — but because every word needed to carry precision and warmth simultaneously, needed to communicate knowledge without

presumption, needed to sound like a person rather than an institution, needed to be exactly right.

I wrote six drafts. Brother Evan reviewed each one. Saya reviewed the third and fourth, from the perspective of someone who had been in approximately the position the woman at Quiet Bay was in and knew what it felt like to be found.

"The third line," Saya said, about draft four. "You say 'you have been hearing something all your life.' That's right. But then you say 'we can explain it.' That sounds like you're offering information as a transaction. Explaining it is what you're giving her in exchange for — what?"

"Nothing," I said. "She doesn't owe us anything."

"Then say that," she said. "Say: we can explain it, and we're not asking for anything in return."

Draft five included this.

"Better," Saya said. "But the ending—"

"Tell me."

"You say 'we hope to hear from you.' That's the ending. It's too small for what you've said before it." She paused. "You've just told this person that she's not alone in what she can hear, that there are others like her, that there's a community that understands. And then you end with 'we hope to hear from you.'" She looked at me. "End with what's actually true."

"Which is?"

"That you're going to be here," she said. "That you're not going anywhere. That whatever she decides, the option stays open."

Draft six.

Father Brolan read it and said: "Yes. This."

I sent it on a Thursday afternoon, from the main operational interface, with the full system's communication capability behind it.

The relay to Installation Epsilon. The ambient delivery protocol. The message:

My name is Taryn. I'm in Alabaster, in the north. I know you can hear the building you're in — the machines that run underneath it, the specific sound that has always been there. I know it because I can hear it too. There are others who can. We're not the people who have been watching you and waiting to use what you can do. We're the people who want you to understand what it is before anyone else directs it.

The sound you hear is the old terraforming systems. They've been running since before anyone alive can remember. They respond to people who have a specific biological recognition — something in the family line. You have it. Strongly.

We can explain everything. We're not asking for anything in return. Whatever you decide, this option stays open.

We're here. We're not going anywhere.

— Taryn, Alabaster

The system confirmed delivery. Ambient audio, Installation Epsilon's nearest operational space, the specific time and location logged.

I sat back in the supervisor's chair.

Three hundred miles south, in a fishing settlement on the coast, a message had arrived in an empty room or a corridor or wherever the installation's operational space was. A voice saying things that would be either alarming or the most sensible thing anyone had ever said, depending on what she had been living with and for how long.

"Done?" Brother Evan said.

"Done," I said.

"And now we wait," he said.

"And now we wait," I agreed.

The waiting had a quality unlike the waiting before the siege. That waiting had been the compressed alertness of impending crisis, the

whole building tensed toward a specific point. This waiting was different: open-ended, with an unknown response time and an unknown response, and underneath it the quiet ordinary work of the Tower continuing.

The registrations. The regional weather calibration, which was showing early results in Cupritesh territory — a merchant from that direction brought word through Gate Town that the grain yield outlook had improved for the first time in three years, which was too early to be attributable to our calibration but suggested the baseline conditions were better than they had been. The Hollis Archive, which I finished reading on the fifth day after sending the message, and which I will say more about below. The daily sessions with Tomas, whose development was moving with a pace that Brother Evan noted in the governance records as extraordinary and that I simply noted as Tomas.

The Hollis Archive's final section was the part I had been building toward without knowing it.

It covered the last years of Hollis's life, when the immediate work was done and the city was established and he was old in the way that people were old who had been doing significant things for a long time. He wrote about his regrets — specific, clear-eyed, the regrets of someone who was not indulging in self-reproach but was making an accurate inventory. He regretted the aquifer. He regretted being unable to implement the distributed approach. He regretted the people he had not been able to protect.

And he wrote about what he had learned.

The section that I returned to most was not about the machines or the system or the technical details of what he had built. It was about the people.

The Servants, he wrote, *have maintained what I built beyond any reasonable expectation of how long it could survive. I did not trust this would happen. I built Alabaster to survive without the machines because I did not believe the people could maintain access. I was*

wrong about this, and gladly wrong. They have done more with less access than I would have predicted. The ingenuity they've shown — the weather operations, the food processing, the patient work of the fields team — this is not what I planned. This is what they built. I gave them tools and they found uses for those tools that I did not imagine.

What this tells me is that my instinct to lock things down, to restrict and control, was the instinct of someone who trusted the system more than the people. The people are not less reliable than the system. In important ways they are more reliable. The system runs because it was built to run. The people run because they chose to.

If I were starting over, I would give them more, he wrote. *More access, more knowledge, more trust. I would explain what the machines were and what they were for. I would treat them as the partners they have proved themselves to be.*

I cannot start over. But whoever opens the door next — I hope they will have learned what I could not learn in time to act on it: that the people are the point. The machines are what makes it possible. The people are what makes it matter.

I read this section several times.

The people are the point.

I thought about Sister Akasa, twelve years at the weather station, holding the lens over farms that needed it. Sister Trofer, forty years in the fields station, talking to machines that didn't know her name. Prael, tracking the aquifer decline for two years with no explanation and no prospect of resolution. Denn, compensating for the system's inability to see him until it finally could. Brother Evan, fifteen years of devoted work that the system had not formally recognised until I arrived.

The people are the point. The machines are what makes it possible.

I had been learning this for forty-five days and I had not quite had the words for it until Hollis gave them to me from four hundred years away.

I sat in the courtyard with the Archive open and the fundamental tone resonant in the four walls and thought about what it meant to have been given this gift: the building, the system, the community of people who had kept it running across centuries without fully understanding what they were keeping. The specific trust of being handed something this large and being expected to do right by it.

And then I thought about what came next.

The woman in Quiet Bay, who might respond and might not. The forty-seven people on Lem's map, spread across the continent, hearing something without a vocabulary for it. The Continuers, adapting after their failure, looking for the next approach. The diplomatic opening with Cupritesh, beginning to produce results. The aquifer, recovering. Tomas, developing.

The open community that Hollis had described and been unable to build.

I was forty-five days in.

I had, if I was fortunate, decades to work with.

On the fourteenth day after sending the message to Quiet Bay, I was in the morning session at the weather station when the system said, in the flat clinical voice that was always the same: *Incoming communication. Installation Epsilon relay. Origin: local to installation perimeter. Routing to primary interface.*

I sat very still.

Relay it, I said.

The voice that came through was a woman's, and it had the quality of someone speaking carefully, choosing each word with the deliberateness of someone who had thought about this moment for two weeks and was now in it.

She said: "I've been hearing the building for thirty-four years. I thought I was the only one."

I held the communication connection and said nothing for a moment, because the moment required a moment.

Then I said: "You're not."

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Her name was Nara.

She told me this in the second communication, three days after the first, when she had apparently spent the intervening time deciding whether the voice in the installation's operational corridor was something she should engage with or something she should be concerned about. The fact that she came back at all told me something about her. The fact that she came back three days later, with a name and a question, told me considerably more.

The question was: *How did you know about me?*

I answered honestly. Bloodline analysis, Onyx records, the map of partial operators that Lem had brought from Orvala. I told her about Onyx — what it was, what it did, why it had been watching rather than acting. I told her about Alabaster. I told her about the dome and the siege and the registry and the aquifer, not in detail but in outline, the shape of what we had done and why. I told her about the Continuers and what they had been trying to do in Quiet Bay, because she needed to know.

That last piece produced a silence on the relay channel that

lasted long enough that I checked twice whether the connection was still active.

It was.

When she spoke again her voice had a different quality — not alarmed, but recalibrated, the specific quality of someone slotting new information into a framework that had not previously had space for it.

"There have been people here," she said. "For about a year. They said they were road traders. They've been — friendly." A pause. "Very interested in the old building at the edge of the settlement."

The installation. Epsilon. The building whose walls she had been hearing for thirty-four years.

"They're not road traders," I said.

"No," she said. "I'm beginning to understand that." Another pause. "What do they want?"

"To find you," I said. "And direct your capability toward their purposes, without telling you what their purposes are."

Silence.

"I see," she said.

She had a particular quality, even through the relay's slight distortion, of someone who absorbed information and processed it completely before responding. Not slow — something more deliberate than that. The quality of someone who had learned that speaking before she was ready created more problems than waiting.

"What do you want?" she said.

"To find you," I said. "And explain what you're hearing and what it means, without any other agenda."

"That's what anyone would say," she said.

"Yes," I said. "It is." I paused. "What I can offer beyond the words is the governance documentation — the formal structure we've built here, the conditions under which the operator registry was opened, the oversight protocols. It's not proof of intention. But it's the evidence of a community that takes those questions seriously enough to write them down."

Another pause. "You said there are others. Like me."

"Forty-seven confirmed," I said. "More estimated. Spread across the continent."

"And none of them know what they're hearing."

"Most don't," I said. "Yet."

"Yet," she repeated. The word sitting between us on the relay channel for a moment, with everything that *yet* contained.

The communications with Nara became a regular event.

Not daily — she was a person with a life and a settlement and presumably the specific caution of someone who had spent thirty-four years hearing something she couldn't explain and had learned to manage that fact carefully. But every three or four days a communication would come through the Epsilon relay, her voice with its deliberate quality and its precise questions, and I would answer as accurately as I could and ask questions of my own and the shape of a person gradually assembled itself from the exchanges.

She was a fisher, which was the primary occupation of Quiet Bay's small population. She had grown up in the settlement, had never traveled far from it, had a specific and detailed knowledge of the southern coastal region that she offered in fragments without being asked — the way she described the water table near the old installation told me she had been listening to it for years without realising that was what she was doing.

She had the tactile perception that Saya had, rather than my tonal one. She described the installation's presence as a weight and a warmth, something she felt in her chest and her hands rather than heard with her ears. She had never met anyone who had described anything similar and had therefore never named it.

"The building at the edge of the settlement," she said, in the fourth communication. "The old one. The walls are warm."

"Yes," I said. "The installations generate heat from the geothermal systems. The stone holds it."

A pause. "I thought it was peculiar to that building. I've been going there since I was a child. My mother told me not to but—" a pause. "I kept going back."

"The system was recognising you," I said. "Partially. Without a recognised operator at the installation, it couldn't do more than register your presence. But it registered it."

"The weight I feel when I'm there," she said slowly. "That's—"

"That's the system attending to you," I said. "In the way it attends to potential operators. Like a door slightly open, not fully."

Another pause. "If I were registered," she said. "If I were formally in the system. What would change?"

"The door would open properly," I said. "And you would be able to hear what's on the other side."

"What is on the other side?"

"Everything the installation knows," I said. "The history, the capabilities, the current state of the local systems. What the machines in your installation have been doing for five hundred years." I paused. "And a connection to the broader network. The communication system. The other installations."

"Alabaster," she said.

"Alabaster," I confirmed. "And others."

She was quiet for a moment.

"The road traders," she said. "The ones who aren't road traders. They've been asking questions about the old building. Whether anyone goes there." A pause. "I've been telling them it's structurally unsound and no one goes near it."

"Is that true?" I said.

"The structure is completely sound," she said. "I've been inside it many times."

I thought about this. She had been protecting her access to the installation from people she sensed, correctly, were not what they

claimed to be. Without any of the vocabulary or framework for what the installation was or why it mattered, on pure instinct.

"Nara," I said. "What made you come back after the first communication? The voice you heard — that was alarming by any reasonable measure."

A long pause.

"Because it knew about the sound," she said. "Everyone I've ever mentioned it to — even carefully, even vaguely — they don't understand. They think I mean the wind, or the sea, or something mechanical. They don't hear what I'm describing because they can't." She paused. "The voice knew exactly what I was describing before I described it. That was —" she paused again. "That was worth coming back for."

Lem's report on the Continuers' presence in Quiet Bay came back in two and a half weeks.

It was not encouraging.

The team the Continuers had sent was three people, presenting as road traders from the north, and they had been in the settlement for eight months rather than the one year Nara had estimated. They had established relationships with several settlement residents. They had made two attempts to access the installation building, both unsuccessful — they had either been blocked by the structural-unsound story or had found the access more difficult than expected, possibly because the installation, with its residual basic function, was doing something at the perimeter to discourage casual entry.

The lead figure of the three was known to Onyx: a man named Drev who had been involved in two previous Continuer operations in other cities, both of which had involved directed operators. He was not himself an operator — none of the three were. Their role was to find and cultivate Nara, to establish trust, and eventually to introduce her to a fourth person who would arrive later and who the

Onyx report described as someone with partial operator capability — likely to serve as a false guide, a person who could demonstrate some limited access and use that demonstration to gain her confidence.

The fourth person had not yet arrived.

"They're waiting for the right moment," Marten said, reviewing the report with me. "The cultivation phase is establishing the foundation. When they bring the fourth person in—"

"It'll look like a fellow traveler," I said. "Someone else who can hear the buildings."

"Yes," he said. "Probably with a plausible story about how they came to understand what it was. A story that leads to the Continuers' version of the explanation."

"Their version being," I said.

"That the installations are a planetary heritage that has been monopolised by a few cities. That sharing the capability widely — under their coordination — is the right response. That the people who have been controlling access, historically, have done so for their own benefit." He paused. "All of which is partially true, which is what makes it effective."

"Hollis locked the door for reasons that did concentrate capability," I said.

"Yes," Marten said. "And Alabaster has been the primary beneficiary of the installations for five centuries while other regions have been downstream of our weather management." He paused. "The Continuers are not wrong about the problems. They are wrong about who should address them and how."

I thought about the regional calibration work that was already underway. The downstream improvement in Cupritesh's agricultural territory. The approach to Nara and the forty-seven others.

"We're addressing the problems," I said. "The actual problems, not the power arrangement the Continuers want."

"Yes," he said. "And that is why the moment is important. If Nara hears from us before the fourth person arrives — if she has the

genuine explanation before the false one — the false one lands differently."

"She already has the genuine explanation," I said.

"She has the beginning of it," he said. "From a voice in a wall. From communications through a relay channel." He paused. "What she needs is the experience."

I looked at the map on Father Brolan's wall — the one we had been adding to as the picture of the broader situation became clearer. Quiet Bay was three hundred miles south. Installation Epsilon was near it, its basic systems running, its walls warm from the geothermal systems that had been running since before anyone currently alive.

"Can she come here?" I said.

Marten looked at me. "Leave Quiet Bay? With the Continuers' team watching?"

"If she leaves quietly," I said. "Not conspicuously. Not in a way that makes it clear where she's going." I paused. "Nara has been managing the Continuers' presence for eight months by telling them the old building is structurally unsound. She has been doing this without any training or guidance. I think she can manage a departure."

"She would be away for weeks," he said. "The settlement would notice."

"She's a fisher," I said. "Fishers travel. Trade routes, other settlements, family elsewhere." I paused. "Saya came here from Verdant and learned more in three weeks than in two years of partial Continuers instruction." I paused again. "The genuine explanation is not just information. It's the experience of sitting in a chair and having the system recognise you and understanding what that means. You can't relay that through a channel."

Marten sat with this.

"You'd want to bring her here," he said. "Not a communication. A person."

"Yes," I said.

He looked at the map. Then at me.

"I'll ask her," I said. "She decides."

I asked her in the next communication.

Her response took four days, which was longer than her usual turnaround. I did not push. When she came back her voice had the quality of someone who had been thinking carefully and had arrived at a conclusion they were at peace with.

"Yes," she said. "How?"

I explained the route: south from Quiet Bay to the trade road, north along the coast, through the settlements Onyx's network knew well enough to provide safe passage, across the desert approaches to Alabaster. With proper contacts and timing, three weeks of travel. Lem would coordinate the Onyx network contacts. We would know when she was coming.

"The road traders," she said. "If they notice I'm gone—"

"We'll have Onyx's people make sure the building looks occupied," I said. "For a few weeks, at most. Enough time."

A pause. "You're asking me to trust a significant amount of this."

"Yes," I said. "I know."

"And you're thirteen years old."

"I'm forty-nine days in," I said. "But yes."

A silence that had, I thought, a quality of amusement in it.

"All right," she said. "I'll leave on the first market day. There's always movement out of the settlement on market days — easier to be part of the general traffic than to stand out."

"The contacts will meet you at the Verdant trade road junction," I said. "Lem will give you the details."

"Lem," she said.

"Onyx's archivist," I said. "He's here. He's reliable."

"You have a lot of people," she said.

"We're building a community," I said. "You'll fit."

Another pause. Then: "Taryn."

"Yes."

"The sound," she said. "The weight in the walls. I've been living with it for thirty-four years. I know what it is now, in the broad sense.

But I still don't know—" she paused. "I don't know what it's been saying."

I thought about the morning I had stood in the street after the siege and heard the fundamental tone arrive at its intended pitch. The Tower's voice, clean and true, for the first time in centuries.

I thought about what I had said to it, in the courtyard and in the training room and in a hundred moments of contact across forty-nine days.

I thought about what it said back — not in language, but in the specific quality of a system that had been waiting to be heard and was now, finally, heard.

"It's been saying it's here," I said. "And it's been waiting for someone to answer."

A long pause.

"I'll be there in three weeks," she said.

The morning after this exchange I went to the weather station and ran the morning session and afterward, when the shift had settled and the automatic adjustments were managing themselves, I stayed in the supervisor's chair and thought about the Eastern mountains.

I had been thinking about them for forty-nine days. Since the second day, when I had stood at the weather station's window and looked east and noticed the regularity of the spires, the specific flatness of the tops, the even spacing that did not belong to natural rock formation. Since the conversation with Brother Evan in his room when we had both acknowledged the thought that neither of us had yet put into words: Hollis built the mountains.

The mountains were incomplete. The Hollis Archive confirmed this. He had intended a full encirclement — a circular barrier range around the installation, the same kind of defensive architecture that the western wall completed for the western half. He had built the eastern mountains and begun the work on the

northern and southern extensions before the Central Core mandate stopped him.

The Central Core mandate. The planetary administration AI, which had been nonfunctional for centuries. What had it told him to stop for? The Archive did not say — that information was in the Central Core's records, not in Hollis's. The Archive only recorded that the order came and Hollis complied.

The wall on the western side had been built by hand, in the centuries since, to approximate what the missing mountain range would have provided. It was a good wall, thick and solid, the kind that had been holding for two hundred years. But it was not mountains.

I had been looking at the eastern mountains from the weather station window for forty-nine days and thinking about what they represented: the most significant terraforming operation this installation had ever performed, the raising of a natural-looking barrier range from flat ground over the course of what the system's logs suggested had been several decades of Hollis's tenure. The machines had moved rock on a geological scale, building something that looked like nature because nature was the design.

What the machines could do at geological scale, with a properly calibrated fundamental tone and a fully recognised operator team—

I had not said this aloud. Not to Brother Evan, not to Father Brolan, not to anyone. I had been carrying it for forty-nine days as a thought that was too large to say until I understood it better.

I understood it better now.

I reached into the system: *The eastern mountain range. Can the machine logs tell me the duration and resource requirements of the original construction?*

:Reviewing historical operational logs. Eastern barrier range construction: initiated Year 4 of installation Alabaster. Duration: 47 years. Total geological material moved: [large number]. Power draw: significant but sustainable with primary geothermal generation. Operator requirement: Commander-level access with coordinated

team. Note: construction was halted at approximately 60% of intended design by Central Core mandate. Completion of intended design was not achieved.:

Forty-seven years for what was built. With a Commander and a coordinated team.

:Current system capability for equivalent operations: equivalent to original design capability, given full generator activation, properly recognised operator team, and corrected fundamental tone baseline. Estimated completion of original design intent, from current state: unknown without detailed survey. Baseline estimate: decades.:

Decades, not years.

But possible.

The northern and southern extensions of the mountain range — the barrier arcs that Hollis had not been permitted to complete — were not present. The terrain in those directions was flat: the desert that had always been the desert, the approach that any force could use. The wall closed the western gap. But the northern and southern approaches, if an army circled wide enough—

Taryce had been managing this with Guard positioning. The terrain was difficult enough to work against large formations, but not impossible. The wall's northern and southern terminations abutted the existing mountain spurs, which created natural constriction points. It was defensible. It was not as defensible as mountains.

I had been looking at the eastern mountains for forty-nine days and thinking: those were built here. And I was here. And the system that built them was still here.

The question was not whether it could be done. The question was what it meant to choose to do it, and whether that choice was mine to make, and whether the conditions under which it should be made had been met.

I brought it to Father Brolan that afternoon.

He listened with the quality he brought to everything: full attention, no interruption, the specific patience of someone who believed that the speaker should be allowed to complete their thought before

the thought was engaged with. When I finished he was quiet for a long time.

"The northern and southern extensions," he said finally. "The completion of Hollis's original design."

"Yes," I said.

"You're describing a project measured in decades."

"Yes," I said. "I'm not proposing we start tomorrow. I'm proposing we understand whether we should start, and if so, when and how."

He looked at the map on his wall — the city, the mountain range to the east, the flat terrain to the north and south. He had been looking at that map for the entire time he had been in this office, and I wondered if he had been thinking about the same thing from a different angle.

"The Succession Document," he said. "Hollis's conditions for significant operations."

"Collective decision," I said. "Transparent process. No single authority." I paused. "This would be the most significant operation this installation has performed in centuries. The governance conditions apply more directly to this than to anything else we've done."

"More directly than the dome?" he said.

"The dome was defensive and immediate," I said. "This is strategic and generational. The implications extend far beyond Alabaster — the geological change would affect the regional landscape, the weather patterns, the terrain that cities and settlements beyond our territory rely on." I paused. "This is not a decision I can make, or that you can make, or that any group of people in this building can make without much broader consultation."

"Broader than the Tower," he said.

"Broader than the Tower," I confirmed. "The city managers. The communities downstream. Cupritesh, given the diplomatic situation we're in. Possibly Onyx and whatever governance Nara and the others we reach might represent eventually." I paused. "This is not a near-term project. It's a long-term one. Which means there is time to do it correctly."

He was quiet again.

"You've been carrying this for a while," he said.

"Since day two," I said.

He looked at the mountains in the eastern window. The morning light on their flat-topped spires, the specific regularity of them that had taken me a week to name correctly.

"There's something else," I said.

He looked back at me.

"The Central Core mandate," I said. "The order that told Hollis to stop. We don't know what it said or why. The AI that issued it has been nonfunctional for centuries." I paused. "The Archive doesn't tell us, and the system's records of the mandate are in the Central Core's logs, which are inaccessible." I paused again. "But before any decision is made about the extension — we should understand why Hollis was stopped."

"You think there may have been a good reason," he said.

"I think there may have been any kind of reason," I said. "And I'd rather know it before committing to a project measured in decades."

He nodded. "How would you find out?"

"The Central Core is damaged," I said. "Orvala said it, the system confirmed it. But the damage is to the AI processing capability — the storage may be intact. The records may be retrievable, even if the AI that managed them cannot be restarted." I paused. "I haven't fully explored what the system can show me from the Central Core's storage. I've been asking it about local records, local logs, local operations. The Central Core records are a different archive."

"Can you access them?"

"I don't know yet," I said. "I haven't tried. I've been building up to it." I paused. "The fundamental tone being corrected has improved the system's communication capability in ways I'm still discovering. What wasn't accessible two weeks ago may be accessible now."

"Try," he said. "But carefully."

"Always carefully," I said.

He almost smiled. "Nevertheless."

I tried that evening, in the training room, with Brother Evan beside me and the session structured with the care I still brought to attempts at significant new access.

The approach: not a direct request for the Central Core mandate records — too specific, too likely to hit an access limitation I didn't understand yet. Instead, the broader question I had learned to use: the system showing me what it could rather than me telling it what I wanted.

What records are accessible from the Central Core storage?

The system was quiet for longer than usual.

:Central Core storage: partially accessible. Primary data loss due to AI processor damage: estimated 40% of total records. Remaining records: archived, accessible to Commander-level operators through direct interface. Note: Central Core records were last actively managed prior to AI malfunction. Date of last active management: pre-dating current operational records by several centuries. Many records may be relevant only to historical context.:

Sixty percent of the Central Core's records. Accessible to me.

I had not known this was possible. I had asked about the Central Core on my ninth day and been told the AI was nonfunctional and the records were unavailable. But that was before the fundamental tone correction, before the operator registry opened, before fifty days of deepening connection between me and the system's full architecture.

The system had not been hiding this. It had simply not been able to show it to me before I was ready to receive it.

Show me the Central Core records related to Installation Alabaster.

What arrived was large — I will say that first. Not the training-room scale of a single query, not the operational-floor scale of the full dome chord. Something larger than either, the specific scale of records that had been accumulating for five hundred years. I applied

the selective attention I had learned for the dome's perceptual expansion — peripheral awareness, the broad shape rather than the forced detail — and held it.

The installation records were layered in a way I had not encountered before. Not just the operational logs I knew — the weather, the fields, the food processing, the dome activations. Everything. Communications, administrative records, operator profiles from the founding period, project plans, assessments and reports from the original Commanders' network.

The founding period was at the bottom of the archive, oldest, the records that predated everything currently living. The specific events of the original settlement. The terraforming operations that had made the planet habitable. The political arrangements between the original Commanders, and then the breakdown of those arrangements, and then the Commanders' Conflict.

I found Hollis in the records and I found the mandate.

It was not what I had expected.

The Central Core mandate that had stopped the eastern mountain extension had not been issued because of the geology or the engineering or any technical concern about the project. It had been issued because three of the other Commanders had filed formal complaints with the Central Core AI, arguing that Hollis's construction of a defensive barrier range was a destabilising act — that it was fortifying Alabaster in a way that signalled hostile intent toward the other installations.

Hollis had responded to the complaints. His response was in the records. He had argued that the barrier range was purely defensive, that it created no offensive capability, that it merely made the installation more secure. He had been correct on the technical merits. The other Commanders had argued that intention was not the only question — that a dramatically fortified Alabaster would alter the strategic balance of the continent regardless of Hollis's intentions.

The Central Core AI had, after the deliberation the records described, agreed with the other Commanders.

Not because Hollis was wrong. Because the AI had a mandate of its own, expressed in its core programming, that the satellite installations should remain in a rough equilibrium. Hollis's mountain range, as designed, would have made Alabaster significantly more defensible than any other installation on the continent. The AI had concluded that this violated the equilibrium principle.

The mandate: halt the barrier range construction. Alabaster may maintain its current defensive structures. Further significant fortification that would alter the strategic balance of the continent is prohibited.

I held this for a long time.

The AI had made a judgment call. A reasonable one, given its mandate. A judgment that Hollis had complied with, because he had built the system to operate with oversight rather than without it, and the oversight had said no, and he had accepted the no.

Even when he disagreed.

Even when he thought he was right.

"What did you find?" Brother Evan said.

I told him.

He was quiet for a moment.

"The equilibrium principle," he said.

"Yes," I said. "The AI was managing not just the terraforming operations but the strategic balance between the installations. Hollis's mountains would have made Alabaster the most defensible installation on the continent by a significant margin."

"And the AI was concerned about what that would mean for the others," he said.

"Yes." I paused. "The AI was right, in a narrow sense. If Alabaster had those mountains two hundred years ago, when the other installations were still active and the Commanders' descendants still had access—" I paused. "The political implications would have been significant."

"But now," he said.

"Now the AI is nonfunctional," I said. "The other installations are

mostly inactive. Alabaster is one of the few places the machines are still working at all." I paused. "The equilibrium it was protecting no longer exists in the same form."

"Does that mean the restriction no longer applies?" he said.

"I don't know," I said honestly. "The AI that issued the mandate is not available to revise it. The system is operating under contingency protocols. Whether the Commander has the authority to override a mandate from the Central Core AI—" I paused. "This is exactly the kind of question the Succession Document says should not be decided by one person."

"The broader consultation you described to Father Brolan," he said.

"Yes," I said. "But now with the additional information that there was a specific reason the construction was stopped, and that reason was not technical." I paused. "The reason was about the balance of power between cities."

Brother Evan was quiet for a long time.

"And the world is different now," he said finally. "The other installations are inactive. The other cities don't have access to their machines. Alabaster extending its mountain range would not destabilise a balance of capability between active installations — because there are no other active installations in a position to be destabilised."

"That is one argument," I said.

"What's the counter-argument?" he said.

"That we don't know the full situation," I said. "We know Alabaster's installation. We know parts of Onyx's. We have Nara's installation at Epsilon, partially active, and the bloodline map of forty-seven partial operators who might or might not have access to functional installations." I paused. "The continent is larger than what we can see from here. If there are other active installations we don't know about — if the Continuers have access to something we haven't accounted for — extending Alabaster's defenses at the expense of the equilibrium principle could be exactly the kind of act that triggers a response."

Brother Evan absorbed this.

"So the answer is the same as before," he said. "We need to understand more before we decide."

"Yes," I said. "But the thing we need to understand most is the current state of the other installations." I paused. "Which is something Orvala might know. Which is something the forty-seven operators on Lem's map might be able to help with, if they're developed and connected and understand what they're hearing." I paused again. "The distributed approach is not just about finding and training operators. It's about understanding the full picture of what exists. Before anyone makes a decision about mountains."

He looked at me.

"You have been carrying a very large thing carefully," he said.

"I've been trying to," I said.

"You're doing it well," he said. And he said it in the tone he used for things he meant exactly as much as they sounded, which was a tone I had learned over fifty days to trust.

I spent the next several days in the Central Core records.

Not continuously — the records were extensive and the connection was demanding in the specific way of accessing large archives rather than asking specific questions. But in the daily hour I carved out in the mornings before the weather session, I worked through the founding period records with the same approach I had applied to everything: selective attention, building the broad shape before attending to specific detail.

What I found was not all useful. Much of it was administrative — the kind of institutional record-keeping that accumulated around any significant project, the minutes and assessments and progress reports that documented what happened without always revealing why. But some of it was extraordinary.

The founding period, as the Central Core had recorded it, was

different from the account in Hollis's Archive in the specific way that an administrative record was different from a personal one. The Archive showed Hollis's perspective. The Central Core showed the whole field.

There had been, in the founding period, eighteen active installations on the continent. Eighteen original Commanders. The terraforming operations had been coordinated through the Central Core AI, which had managed the planet-wide project with what the records described as significant success — atmosphere stabilised, water cycle established, agricultural capability developing across multiple regions.

And then the political breakdown. The Commanders' Conflict. The specific sequence of events that had led to the registry lock.

From the Central Core's records, the sequence was clearer than from Hollis's Archive. The other Commanders had not simply been power-hungry. Some of them had been — but others had been responding to genuine resource pressures, to territorial disputes, to the specific stresses of trying to establish viable populations in a world that had been actively hostile to them not long before. The situation was messier than the Archive's account, more human, less easily divided into Hollis-was-right and the-others-were-wrong.

The lock had been right, I still believed. The specific form the misuse had taken — aggressive operations against other populations — was genuinely wrong. But the people doing it had not all been the same kind of wrong in the same kind of way.

This mattered, I thought, for the approach to the broader operator network. The history the Continuers told — that the capability had been monopolised by Alabaster while others were cut off — was not entirely false. It was partial. But partial truths were harder to argue against than complete falsehoods.

The honest version of the history acknowledged the complexity. The distributed approach, honestly presented, acknowledged that Alabaster had benefited from Hollis's decisions in ways that had costs for others.

I had been acknowledging this in the regional calibration work. I had been acknowledging it in the diplomatic approach to Cupritesh. The honest reckoning was already underway.

But the Central Core records made the reckoning more specific. More named.

I brought what I found to Marten, who had the kind of historical understanding of the founding period that came from forty years of Onyx's archival work.

"You're finding the full picture," he said, reviewing my notes.

"I'm finding more of it," I said. "There's more I haven't reached yet."

"What you've described about the other Commanders," he said. "The resource pressures, the territorial disputes — this is consistent with what Onyx's records show. Hollis's account, as preserved in the Archive, is honest about his own reasoning but understandably less detailed about the other Commanders' perspectives." He paused. "The Continuers use this discrepancy. They argue that the full history shows Hollis was not simply right and the others wrong — that the lock was a specific choice that served Alabaster's interests at the expense of others."

"Were they wrong about that?" I said.

He was quiet for a moment. "No," he said. "Not entirely."

"Then the honest response," I said, "is to acknowledge it."

"Yes," he said. "And to demonstrate that the current approach is different." He paused. "The regional calibration. The contact with Nara and the other operators. The Succession Document's governance principles. These are not just policies — they're the visible evidence of a different relationship with the capability than Hollis had."

"The evidence needs to be visible," I said. "Which means the approach needs to be documented, communicated, made legible to the people who might otherwise only have the Continuers' version."

"That," Marten said, "is what Lem is here for."

"Yes," I said. "But it's also what the governance documentation is

for. What the Hollis Archive's publication is for — Father Brolan is working on how to make it available broadly, not just within the Tower." I paused. "The honest history, the current approach, the evidence that the distributed model is different from either Hollis's locked door or the Continuers' centralisation." I paused again. "All of it visible."

He looked at me.

"You're building an argument," he said.

"I'm building a record," I said. "The argument takes care of itself if the record is accurate."

Nara arrived on the twenty-third day after the communication where she had agreed to come.

Not on the exact day I had estimated — she had taken a different route than Lem's contacts had arranged, making her own assessment of the safer path and acting on it, which told me something about her that I had been inferring from the communications and now had confirmed. She arrived at the Tower's gate on a Tuesday morning, travel-worn, carrying a small pack that was the specific economy of someone who had been moving light for three weeks and had packed with the knowledge that light was faster.

Father Brolan received her formally. I was there. Brother Evan was there. Lem was there, which produced the same quality of recognition between them that had happened with Marten — people from the same network encountering each other in a new context.

She looked at the Tower.

She put her hand against the outer wall.

I watched her face. The specific quality of someone who had been hearing a sound all their life and was now, for the first time, in physical contact with the source of it.

"Warm," she said.

"Yes," I said.

She looked at me. She was in her mid-thirties, as the Onyx records had suggested, with the weathered quality of someone who spent significant time outdoors and the specific attentiveness of someone who had been listening carefully to the world for a long time. She was taller than I had imagined from her voice.

"You're younger than I expected," she said.

"People keep saying that," I said.

"I know," she said. "You told me." Something in her expression that was not quite amusement. "But I expected it and it's still— " she stopped. "I'll adjust."

"Most people do," I said.

She looked at the wall again, her hand still against it.

"The weight is stronger here," she said. "Much stronger than at Epsilon."

"The primary installation," I said. "Epsilon is a satellite, mostly running on basic systems. This is the full active installation — the main generator, the full capability." I paused. "You'll feel the difference when we go inside."

"When we go inside," she said. Not a question. Settling the words, making them real.

"Whenever you're ready," I said.

She took her hand from the wall. She straightened her pack. She looked at the door, which had opened at my presence before she had said anything, the Tower's recognition of the Commander happening at the perimeter as it always did.

"Now," she said.

The first session in the training room was not what I had planned.

I had planned a careful introduction — the same approach Brother Evan had used with me, the systematic diagnostic, the careful building of vocabulary before attempting anything specific. I had the chairs arranged, the indicator stones ready, the session structure prepared.

What happened instead: Nara sat in the training chair, put her

hands on the pads, and the indicator stone lit a colour I had never seen from it before.

Not orange. Not green. Not the green-and-blue that had marked my sessions from the beginning.

Gold.

Brother Evan made a sound.

I was already reaching into the system: *What does the indicator's gold response indicate?*

:Gold indicator response: direct geological resonance connection established. This response indicates an operator whose primary interface modality is geological-tactile rather than atmospheric-tonal. Rare. Less than 1% of historically documented operators. Note: geological-tactile operators have specific capabilities in deep geological operations not shared by other interface modalities.:

I looked at Brother Evan.

He looked at me.

"Nara," I said. "What do you feel?"

"Everything," she said. Her voice was different from how it had been in any of the communications — not alarmed, but completely focused, the quality of someone whose full attention had been given somewhere. "The floor. What's below the floor. The rock underneath the city. The — " she stopped. "Is there water below the city?"

"The aquifer," I said. "Yes. We've been working on it."

"It's — it's moving," she said. "It's different from the rock around it. Fluid. Dynamic." She pressed her hands harder against the pads. "There's a flow. I can feel a flow."

The aquifer restoration. The channel we had cleared. The water beginning to move through the passage for the first time in a hundred and forty-three years.

She was feeling it. In her first session, through the basic training room interface, she was perceiving the aquifer's recovery in the geological-tactile mode that my tonal perception could not access directly.

"What does it feel like?" I said. "As precisely as you can."

She was quiet for a moment, attending to it.

"Like something that was stuck has become unstuck," she said. "Like water finding a path it had been waiting to find." She paused. "Is that — is that what you did? The blocked channel?"

"Yes," I said.

"I can feel where the fracture was," she said. "The memory of it. Like scar tissue in the rock." She paused. "It's healing."

I sat back in my chair.

Gold indicator. Geological-tactile modality. Less than one percent of historically documented operators, with specific capabilities in deep geological operations not shared by other modalities.

Saya had the physical-tactile perception, which had allowed her to feel the obstruction and find the fracture plane. Nara's was different even from that — deeper, more specifically geological, the interface modality that corresponded most directly to the earth-moving systems that had built the mountains.

"Nara," I said.

She opened her eyes.

"The eastern mountains," I said. "They were built by the system. By an operator sitting in a chair in this building, directing the machines to raise rock and form a barrier range." I paused. "The operator who did it used a modality that the system calls geological-tactile."

She looked at the indicator stone, still glowing gold.

"Like mine," she said.

"Like yours," I said.

The room was very quiet.

"I've been hearing a building in a fishing settlement for thirty-four years," she said slowly. "And it turns out I can feel rock at eight hundred feet."

"It turns out," I said.

She looked at the gold indicator. Then at me. Then at the floor, as if she could see through it to the aquifer below, which in some sense she could.

"The mountains," she said. "They're not finished."

"No," I said. "They're not."

"Is that something you're going to do?" she said.

"It's something we're going to understand first," I said. "Whether it should be done, whether it can be done correctly, whether the conditions are right." I paused. "All of that before anything else."

She looked at me. The assessing quality I had been hearing in her voice across two weeks of communications was visible now in her face: direct, thorough, the specific attention of someone who had been making her own judgments for a long time and was making one now.

"You're careful," she said.

"I try to be," I said.

"Good," she said. "I have questions about the mountains."

"So do I," I said. "Ask them."

22

Nara had questions about everything.

This was, I discovered in the first three days of her presence in the Tower, not a temporary condition of someone new to an unfamiliar place. It was simply how she moved through the world. She asked questions the way Prael made observations — precisely, without preamble, directed exactly at what she wanted to understand — but with a breadth that came from thirty-four years of hearing something she had no vocabulary for and now finding the vocabulary arriving all at once.

She asked about the founding period. She asked about the Central Core and its mandate history. She asked about the aquifer and the fields team and what the geological-tactile modality meant in practical terms. She asked about the Continuers with the specific interest of someone who had been adjacent to their operation for eight months and wanted to understand what she had been navigating. She asked about Tomas, which surprised me, until she said: "Two Hollis bloodline operators in the same generation. I want to understand what that means genetically."

"We don't entirely know," I said.

"Then I have questions about what we do know," she said.

She spent time with Lem, which was productive for both of them in the way that two archivally-minded people spending time together was always productive. She spent time with Marten, learning the Onyx perspective on the broader situation. She spent time in the operational stations — not at an interface initially, just watching, the same approach Saya had used.

And she spent time in the courtyard.

I found her there on her second morning, before the day's sessions, sitting on the bench with her hands flat against the stone surface and her eyes closed, the same quality of attention she brought to everything else but turned entirely inward, attending to the building's voice through the direct stone contact.

I sat beside her.

"What do you hear?" I said, after a few minutes.

"Feel," she said, without opening her eyes. "I feel rather than hear."

"What do you feel, then?"

She was quiet for a moment. "The whole building," she said. "Not separated into parts. The whole thing together — the weight of it, the depth of it, the — the life of it, if that's not too strange a word."

"It's not too strange," I said.

"The aquifer is moving," she said. "More than yesterday. The flow through the restored channel has increased since the sessions." She pressed her hands more firmly to the stone. "And there's something else. Deeper than the aquifer. The geological source — the primary channel feeding the aquifer." A pause. "It feels... it feels like it's been under pressure for a long time and the pressure is beginning to ease."

I checked the system: *Current status of primary geological channel feeding the aquifer.*

:Primary channel flow: 41% of original design capacity. Improvement from previous reading: 3%. Rate of improvement consistent with natural geological relaxation following obstruction removal. Projected restoration timeline unchanged.:

Three percent improvement since the last reading, two days ago. The geological source itself — the deep channel that fed the aquifer from the mountain range's water collection — was responding to the removal of the obstruction. Not just the passage we had cleared, but the upstream pressure that had been building for a hundred and forty-three years, slowly releasing as the blockage that had been causing it resolved.

"You felt that," I said.

"Yes," she said. She opened her eyes and looked at the courtyard walls. "Is that unusual?"

"I couldn't feel it at all three weeks ago," I said. "Saya can feel the shallow geological character — the quality of the rock, the composition, the pressure. You're feeling deeper than that. The dynamic system — the water movement, the pressure gradients."

She looked at her hands against the stone. "This is what I should have been able to do my whole life," she said. It was not a lament — it was a statement of fact, the specific tone of someone taking an accurate inventory. "Thirty-four years of hearing the installation at Epsilon and not understanding it. Thirty-four years of being able to feel this and having no context for it."

"You protected the installation," I said. "Eight months of the Continuers' team trying to get access, and you managed them without knowing why it mattered."

"I knew it mattered," she said. "I didn't know why."

"Instinct," I said.

"Stubbornness," she said. "My mother always said it was stubbornness."

She said it with a quality that told me her mother was dead. I did not ask. The specific economy of someone mentioning the dead in passing, in a way that marked their absence without dwelling on it.

"The feeling gets clearer with practice," I said. "More distinct. More separable. Right now you're receiving everything at once — the way you might hear a crowded room where all the conversations overlap. With practice you start to hear individual conversations."

"How long did it take you?"

"To hear individual conversations?" I thought about it. "A week for the broad separation. Two weeks for the specific operational tones. The geological layers—" I paused. "I'm still developing those. Nara, you arrived here three days ago and you can feel the primary geological channel's pressure relaxing. I've been here fifty-four days and I couldn't do that until yesterday."

She looked at me.

"Different modalities," I said. "Mine goes deeper into the atmospheric systems. Yours goes deeper into the geological ones. We perceive the same system through different apertures."

"And Saya's aperture is different from both of ours," she said.

"Yes."

She sat with this. Outside, Alabaster's morning was beginning — the city sounds, the light over the mountains.

"The mountains," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"I've been thinking about them," she said. "Since you told me what they were." She paused. "The geological-tactile modality — the system said it has specific capabilities in deep geological operations. Building the mountains was a deep geological operation."

"Yes," I said.

"So what you're telling me, obliquely," she said, "is that I may be the person who could complete what Hollis started."

I looked at her.

"I'm not telling you that obliquely," I said. "I'm telling you directly. You may be. I don't know the full scope of what you can do yet, and neither do you. But the capability is in that direction." I paused. "What I'm also telling you, equally directly, is that completing the mountain extension is not a decision anyone in this building can make on their own, and it will not happen before we understand a great deal more than we currently understand."

"The Central Core mandate," she said. "The equilibrium principle."

"And the broader situation," I said. "The Continuers. The other installations. What exists elsewhere that we don't know about." I paused. "We need the full picture before we change the geology."

She nodded. The specific quality of her nod was different from most people's — not agreement exactly, more the acknowledgment of someone who had been working through the same logic independently and had arrived at the same place.

"Then I need to understand the full picture," she said.

"Yes," I said. "That's what this time is for."

The first formal training session with Nara was in the fields station, which Brother Joba had agreed to make available for the morning, the agricultural operations managed by the junior operators while he and his team attended.

The setup was different from Saya's initial session. Saya had needed the standard interface introduction — the connection, the indicator, the basic question of what she felt and how. Nara had already had the training room session with the gold indicator and the aquifer perception. What she needed was not introduction to the connection but understanding of what to do with it.

"Tell me what the fields team is doing," I said, from the supervisor's chair. "Right now, without being at an interface. Through the building's stone."

She had her hands on the bench beside the supervisor's position. Not the interface pads — just the stone surface, the building's communication.

She was quiet for a moment. "They're working in the surface layer," she said. "The top few feet. Mineral adjustment — I can feel the specific composition changing in a section of the northern farm." She paused. "It's very — fine. Precise. The changes are small but deliberate." She paused again. "Two of them are working near each other. Their approaches are slightly different — one is working with

the composition directly, the other is working with the moisture distribution." A pause. "There's a small interference where they overlap."

"That's the boundary problem," I said. "The same thing Saya noticed in the weather operations. The system can't coordinate them precisely because—"

"Because it doesn't have full information about what each of them is doing and why," she said. "It can receive their intentions but it can't show each one what the other is intending." She pressed her hands to the stone. "If it could—"

"The interference would reduce," I said. "Yes. The operator registry helps — it means the system knows who they are and can calibrate its response to each of them more precisely. But full resolution of the coordination problem requires something more."

"A conductor," she said.

"Yes," I said. "Or something that functions as one. My tonal conducting works for atmospheric operations — I can hear the weather team's tones and pull them into alignment. For the geological operations—" I paused. "Saya provides the tactile feedback that tells the team what they're working with. But neither of us can feel what they feel the way you can."

She was very still for a moment.

"I can feel what they feel," she said slowly. "Through the stone. Right now. Both of them — I can feel both of their contacts with the geological material." She paused. "The one working on composition — he's reaching slightly too deep. The composition he's adjusting is in the right place but the layer he's working through is thicker than he thinks."

"Can you tell me precisely how much thicker?"

A pause. "About a foot," she said. "He thinks he's at eight inches below the surface. He's at approximately nineteen inches."

I said: "Brother Joba." I raised my voice slightly toward the fields station. "First position operator — the composition work. He's

working at approximately nineteen inches, not eight. He needs to adjust his depth by about a foot."

A pause from the station. Then Brother Joba's voice: "How do you know that?"

"Nara," I said.

A longer pause.

"First position," Brother Joba called. "Adjust depth by twelve inches. Confirmed?"

From the first position operator: "Confirmed. That's—" a pause. "That's correct. I can feel it now. I was off."

Nara's hands were still against the stone.

"That's what you can do," I said. "For the fields team. You can feel their actual position in the geological material rather than their intended position. You can tell them the truth of where they are."

She was quiet for a moment.

"And at depth," she said. "At eight hundred feet."

"At eight hundred feet," I said. "With greater precision than Saya and I together can achieve, because your perception is directly geological rather than tactile-approximate."

She took her hands from the stone. She looked at them.

"I need to be registered properly," she said. "Not just in the system — I need to understand the full picture of what the registration means. The access levels, the governance structure, the conditions under which I can and cannot act." She looked at me. "I read the Succession Document that Lem brought. I want to understand how this is supposed to work."

"That is the correct thing to want," I said.

"Is there more I should read?"

"The Hollis Archive," I said. "The full version. The governance documentation Brother Evan has been building. The Central Core records I've been working through." I paused. "It will take time."

"How much time do I have?" she said.

"As much as you need," I said. "The mountains are not going anywhere."

Something shifted in her expression — the specific quality of someone who had just been given permission to move at their own pace and found the permission unexpected.

"In Quiet Bay," she said, "nothing is ever not urgent. The fish don't wait. The weather doesn't wait. If you don't go out when the conditions are right—" she stopped. "I'm not accustomed to being told I have time."

"You have time," I said. "Use it well."

She looked at the fields station, where Brother Joba's team was resuming their work with the slight adjustments that Nara's perception had identified.

"I'd like to do that more," she said. "What I just did. Watch them work and tell you what I feel."

"Every day," I said. "We'll make it part of your sessions."

"Good," she said. And there was something in the word — the same small word that Taryce used, that Father Brolan used, the word that contained more than it showed — that told me she had decided something. Not about the mountains, not yet. About this place. About the people in it.

About whether to trust it.

The governance documentation conversation happened on Nara's fifth day.

Brother Evan had been preparing for it since she arrived — the specific preparation of someone who had been building a document for weeks and was now presenting it to someone who would evaluate it from the perspective of the person it was designed to protect.

The document was thorough. It covered the registry conditions, the oversight protocols, the collective decision-making requirements for significant operations, the specific limitations on any single operator's unilateral authority. It covered the historical context — the Commanders' Conflict, Hollis's reasoning, the Succession Docu-

ment's principles. It covered the current governance structure: Father Brolan's role, the involvement of Collin and Taryce as city governance representatives, the senior Servants' council, the communication protocols with Onyx.

Nara read it with the focused attention she brought to everything, occasionally pausing to ask Brother Evan a question about a specific provision. The questions were good — the questions of someone looking for gaps rather than for assurance, testing the document against its own stated principles.

She asked: "The Commander has unilateral authority to add operators to the registry. This is Commander-level access, not subject to collective review."

"The decision to add an operator requires the governance structure's approval," Brother Evan said. "The execution — the technical act of registration — is performed by the Commander because the system requires Commander access. The decision and the execution are separated."

"In practice," she said, "can the separation be maintained? If the Commander chooses to register someone without the governance structure's approval—"

"The governance structure would know," he said. "Every registration is recorded in the public governance documentation. A registration without documented approval would be visible immediately."

"That assumes the governance documentation is accurate and accessible," she said.

"It is publicly available," he said. "The city managers have access. Onyx has access. I will give you access." He paused. "You are identifying a vulnerability that exists in most governance systems — the gap between recorded rules and actual compliance. What prevents the gap here is the same thing that prevents it in any human system: the quality of the people in it and the quality of the oversight they provide each other."

She looked at the document.

"That is a less satisfying answer than I wanted," she said.

"Yes," he said. "It is the honest one."

She was quiet for a moment.

"In Quiet Bay," she said, "we have twenty-three fishing families and a harbour master who has been the harbour master for thirty years because nobody else wants the job and he's good at it. The governance is entirely informal. If he makes a bad decision, twenty-three families tell him so and he either changes the decision or there's a different harbour master." She paused. "The system works because the community is small enough that everyone can see what everyone else is doing." She looked at the document. "What you've built is more formal than that. But the principle is the same."

"Yes," Brother Evan said.

"The visibility is the mechanism," she said. "Not the rules. The rules only work because the visibility makes violations immediately apparent."

"Yes," he said again.

She put the document down.

"One more question," she said. "Not about the document." She looked at me. "The operator at Epsilon. The woman who blocked the aquifer a hundred and forty-three years ago. She was working without any of this. No governance structure, no documentation, no context. She was found and directed and she did what she was told." She paused. "What you've built here — the oversight, the conditions, the requirement for collective decision — this protects you from doing what she did accidentally. But it only protects the people inside it."

"Yes," I said.

"The forty-seven people on the map," she said. "The operators who are not inside it."

"Yes," I said. "That's why we're trying to reach them."

"Trying," she said.

"It takes time," I said. "We've been trying for four weeks. Nara — you're the first person on that map we've been able to reach who has come here. We don't know how to reach the others yet, not safely, not

in a way that doesn't risk the Continuers getting there first." I paused. "What we have is the communication network, and Onyx's contacts, and the approach that worked with you."

She looked at the map on the table — Lem's version, the one I had been working from. The forty-seven points.

"Some of them are in cities," she said. "Cities that have their own politics, their own governance, their own reasons to be suspicious of Alabaster."

"Yes," I said.

"And some of them are in small settlements like Quiet Bay," she said. "Where there's no politics, just people living their lives, hearing a sound they don't understand."

"Yes."

"The settlement people are easier," she said. "Not politically complicated. Not suspicious. Just — isolated and confused." She paused. "I was isolated and confused for thirty-four years."

"I know," I said.

"The communication approach," she said. "The voice in the wall. It worked with me because I had been hearing the installation for long enough that a voice speaking directly to what I was hearing — knowing what I was hearing — was the most recognisable possible invitation." She paused. "Does it work at every installation? Is Epsilon's communication capability typical?"

I reached for the system: *Current communication capability across all known installations*.

The response was more detailed than I expected — the Central Core records I had been working through had improved the system's ability to answer questions about the broader network.

:Communication capability varies by installation. Twelve installations with confirmed basic operational status have residual communication function. Six of these have reduced capacity. Three have full capacity equivalent to Alabaster. The remaining installations have no confirmed operational status and communication capability is unknown.:

Twelve installations with confirmed basic operational status. I had not known there were twelve. The number was larger than what I had been working from.

"There are twelve installations with some operational capacity," I said.

Nara looked at me.

"You didn't know that," she said.

"I've been learning things from the Central Core records every day," I said. "The full picture of what exists has been assembling gradually." I paused. "Twelve installations means twelve locations where the communication approach might work."

"And the forty-seven operators," she said. "How many of them are near those twelve installations?"

I looked at the map. At the twelve installation positions as the system had identified them. At the forty-seven operator points.

The overlap was not perfect — the operators were not all near installations, and not all installations had operators nearby. But enough. More than I had expected.

"A significant number," I said.

She looked at the map for a long moment.

"Show me which ones," she said.

We spent that afternoon mapping the overlaps.

Nara, Lem, Brother Evan, and I around the table in the briefing room, the two maps — operator positions and installation positions — laid over each other, looking for the places where they converged and thinking about what those places meant.

The picture that emerged was not a plan. It was the beginning of what a plan might look like, the first rough sketch of a possibility.

There were seven positions where a partial operator was located within reasonable travel distance of an installation with communication capability. Seven people who could potentially receive a

communication in the same way Nara had — a voice from the installation they had been hearing, speaking to what they had been hearing, offering the same kind of introduction I had offered her.

Seven people. Not forty-seven. But seven was more than one.

"Timing," Nara said. "The Continuers are looking for some of these people. We don't know which ones they've found, which ones they're watching, which ones they've already approached."

"Onyx can help with that," Lem said. "Their network has better coverage in some regions than others. The southern coast — the region around Epsilon — we have good visibility. The central region is patchier. The far north—" he looked at the map. "Three of these seven positions are in the far north. Our coverage there is minimal."

"Orvala will know more," I said. "I'll ask her." I paused. "But even with imperfect information, the principle is the same as with Nara. Contact before the Continuers do. Offer the honest explanation before the false one." I paused again. "The timing pressure is real. The Continuers know we found Nara — or they will, when they notice the Quiet Bay installation showing increased activity and the person who had been managing their access is no longer there."

"They'll reassess their approach to the others on their list," Nara said.

"Yes," I said. "Which means we need to move, even with imperfect information, because waiting for perfect information means waiting until the Continuers have already moved."

"How quickly?" Brother Evan said.

"In the next month," I said. "Begin the communications to the seven closest installation-operator overlaps within the month." I looked at Lem. "Can Onyx's network provide the assessment of Continuer presence at those seven locations within two weeks?"

"Yes," he said. "I'll send the request today."

"Good," I said. "And in the meantime—" I looked at the map. "I need to finish reading the Central Core records. The installation status information I just found — there's more there. The full picture of what exists, what functions, what the Continuers have access to.

We've been making decisions with partial information and we need to understand the full landscape."

"How long?" Father Brolan said. He had come in partway through the mapping session and had been standing at the edge of the room, listening.

"Weeks," I said honestly. "The records are large. The relevant sections are distributed throughout." I paused. "But even partial access — the installation status information I found today — is already changing the picture."

Father Brolan looked at the map. At the twelve installation positions, the forty-seven operators, the seven overlaps.

"One thing at a time," he said. "The communications — yes, within the month. The records — yes, continue. The mountain question—"

"After the full picture," I said. "When we understand what else exists."

He nodded. Then he said: "The city managers want a briefing. They have been patient with the Tower's increased activity — the regional calibration, the siege, the visible changes in how we operate. They want to understand what is happening."

"When?" I said.

"The end of the week," he said.

I thought about what I would say to seventy thousand people's elected representatives about everything that had happened in the past fifty-seven days. The summary of it — the dome, the registry, the aquifer, the broader network of operators, the Continuers, the history — was not small.

"I'll be there," I said.

"Good," he said. And left, which was Father Brolan's way of indicating that the decision was made.

The city managers' briefing was in the large hall adjacent to Father Brolan's office, which I had never been in before. It was used for formal civic occasions — the kind of room that announced its purpose through its proportions, the high ceiling and the arranged seating and the quality of light from windows that had been placed to fall correctly.

There were eleven of them — Alabaster's elected city managers, serving their four-year terms, managing the practical administration of the city's Second and Third Rings. They were various in age and manner, which was what you got with an elected body: the oldest had been managing city affairs for twenty years in various capacities; the youngest had been in office for three months.

Father Brolan introduced me. Formally, with the title.

"Commander Taryn is the Tower's senior operator," he said. "He has been in residence for fifty-seven days. In that time, as you are aware, several significant developments have occurred. He is here to provide the full context."

I looked at eleven people who governed the city I had grown up in and who had, three years ago, made decisions that included my mother and my brother and me in the population they were responsible for.

I thought about Hollis's last section of the Archive.

The people are the point.

"Thank you for coming," I said. "I'm going to tell you everything."

I told them everything.

Not the technical details — those would take weeks and were not the governance question. But the substance: what the Tower was, what it had been doing for five hundred years without the city fully understanding it, what had changed in the past two months, and what we were planning.

The founding — that Alabaster sat on an ancient terraforming

installation built by people from another world. That the machines under and around the Tower had been making this desert habitable since before the city existed. That the Servants had been maintaining these machines for generations with extraordinary skill and limited access.

The dome — what it was, what it had done during the siege, what it meant for the city's defense going forward.

The registry — what it was, why it had been locked, why it was now open, what the governance conditions were.

The aquifer — what had been done to it, when, and the restoration work now underway.

The broader situation — the Continuers, the network of partial operators, what we were trying to build and why.

They listened. The eleven managers listened with the quality of their office: some were technically minded and asked sharp questions about the machines' capabilities; some were politically minded and asked about the implications for Alabaster's relationships with other cities; some were practically minded and asked about the water supply timeline and the farm yield projections; one — the oldest, a woman who had been in city governance longer than anyone else in the room — asked no questions at all and simply listened with an attention that had a quality to it I could not read and spent time after trying to understand.

At the end, the youngest manager said: "The Commander is thirteen years old."

"Yes," Father Brolan said.

"And the system recognises him as—"

"The highest operational rank in the installation," Father Brolan said. "Commander. This is not a title we assigned to him. It is the designation the system has given to the descendant of the founding operator who established this city."

"Who has been in residence for fifty-seven days," the youngest manager said.

"Yes," Father Brolan said.

A pause.

"And in fifty-seven days he has restored the aquifer that has been declining for a hundred and forty years," the youngest manager said, "repelled a military siege, opened a system that has been locked for five centuries, and is now in the process of establishing contact with operators in other parts of the world."

"That is accurate," Father Brolan said.

Another pause. The youngest manager looked at me.

"What do you need from us?" she said.

I had not been expecting this question before the others. Most of the managers had asked questions about what I was doing. She was asking what I needed.

"Three things," I said. "First: your public trust, expressed as clearly as possible. What we're doing in the Tower is visible — the dome, the regional weather calibration, the aquifer work. The city's residents can see and feel the changes. What they need is an explanation from their elected representatives that what the Tower is doing is being done with governance oversight, not unilaterally."

"We can do that," she said. The others around the table nodded.

"Second: your access to the governance documentation. Brother Evan has been building it and it will be made available to all of you. I want you to read it and tell us if the oversight is sufficient or if there are gaps." I paused. "You are not technicians. You don't need to understand the machines. But you can understand governance, and that is what matters."

Several of them were writing.

"Third," I said. "When we eventually reach the question of the mountain extension — the completion of the barrier range that Hollis began — that decision is not ours to make inside the Tower. It is Alabaster's decision. The city's. The elected representatives' decision, made with full information." I paused. "We're not at that point yet. But I wanted you to know, from the beginning, that we understand it's your decision."

The oldest manager, who had not asked a question the whole

time, said: "Hollis built the city to be governed by its people rather than by whoever controlled the machines."

"Yes," I said.

"You're continuing that," she said.

"I'm trying to," I said.

She nodded. Once. The specific quality of someone confirming something they had been assessing throughout the conversation and had now concluded.

"Good," she said.

After the briefing I went to the courtyard.

The day had been long in the way of days when many things happened — not physically demanding but requiring a sustained quality of attention that now needed to be released. The courtyard was the right place for this. The four walls, the open sky, the fundamental tone resonating in the stone.

Nara found me there, which had become a pattern over the past five days. We were both people who defaulted to the courtyard when we needed to think, which Brother Evan had noted with the specific amusement of someone observing a pattern he had not predicted.

"The briefing," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"How did it go?"

"Well, I think," I said. "The questions were good. The youngest manager asked the right question."

"Which was?"

"What do you need from us," I said.

Nara sat on the bench and looked at the walls.

"That's the right question," she said. "In Quiet Bay, when the harbour master has a problem, the question we ask is always: what do you need. Not: what are you doing, not: should you be doing it. What do you need." She paused. "The assumption being that if you're doing something, you had a reason, and the useful contribution is support rather than interrogation."

"The youngest manager had been in office for three months," I said.

"Sometimes the newest person asks the right question," she said.

"Yes," I said.

We sat in the courtyard's late afternoon and listened.

The fundamental tone was there, clean and steady. Nara's hands were against the bench stone, and I knew from the quality of her attention that she was feeling the deep geological pulse, the aquifer's recovering flow, the slow relaxation of the system as the restoration continued.

"Taryn," she said.

"Yes."

"The woman who blocked the aquifer," she said. "I've been thinking about her again."

"What about her?"

"She had the geological-tactile modality," she said. "She had to, to do what she did. You can't block a geological channel at that depth without it." She paused. "She was in the same position I was in. Hearing something, not understanding it, found by people who had a use for it." She paused again. "I keep trying to understand what the difference is. Between her and me."

"The honest explanation," I said. "You received it. She didn't."

"Yes," she said. "But why did she receive a false one and I received an honest one? The Continuers found her first — or whoever preceded the Continuers. Onyx found me first." She paused. "That's circumstance. That's luck."

"Yes," I said. "It is."

"That bothers me," she said. "The difference between her path and mine is timing. Not character, not capacity, not anything inherent. Just who got there first."

I thought about this.

"The distributed approach," I said. "The open community. That's the answer to it. Not eliminating the luck entirely — you can't do that. But changing the odds. Making the honest explanation more

available, more accessible, more likely to arrive first." I paused. "If the operator network we're building reaches the people on the map before the Continuers do — if the honest explanation is present in every installation the way it's now present at Epsilon—"

"The odds change," she said.

"The odds change," I agreed. "Not to certainty. But meaningfully."

She was quiet for a moment.

"Then that's the most important thing," she said.

"Yes," I said. "It is."

On Nara's eighth day, Brother Joba came to find me.

He found me in the weather station, which was his characteristic courtesy — he always looked for the person where they were likely to be rather than sending a message to ask them to come to him. He stood at the entrance to the corridor with the patient quality he brought to everything.

"I'd like to try something," he said.

"Tell me," I said.

"Nara," he said. "In the fields station, with the deep team. I want her at an interface during a deep session. Not just feeling through the walls — actually connected." He paused. "The depth perception she showed me when she identified my first operator's actual position — that, at interface level, during the deep work."

"She's been here eight days," I said.

"I know," he said. "But I can tell you from forty years in the fields station that what she can feel through a stone wall without an interface is what most of my senior operators can barely feel after a decade at the pads." He paused. "I don't want to waste time."

I thought about this. Brother Joba was not a person who asked for things impulsively. His forty years of careful, patient work had given him a very accurate sense of what was ready and what wasn't.

"What session?" I said.

"Not depth work," he said. "Surface work. Agricultural operations, exactly what the team does every day. Let her feel what it's like at the interface during routine operations. Build the foundation before we take her deeper."

"Today?" I said.

"If she agrees," he said.

I found Nara in the library, which was where she often was in the mornings — she had developed a habit of reading the historical documents with the same thoroughness she brought to everything, working through them in the order Brother Evan recommended.

"Brother Joba wants to work with you today," I said. "Fields station, surface operations, interface. Are you ready?"

She closed the document she was reading.

"Yes," she said.

The session was not dramatic.

This was, I had come to understand, the nature of the real work: mostly not dramatic, mostly a careful incremental building of capacity through repeated practice. The drama was reserved for the moments when everything came together, and those moments were earned by all the undramatic ones that preceded them.

Nara sat at the interface in the fields station. Her hands on the pads. The indicator lit gold immediately, the same gold as the first training room session, bright and distinctive.

Brother Joba, at the adjacent station, watched the indicator with the specific expression of a man who had been in this station for forty years and had never seen it do that.

"Good morning," I said, from the supervisor's chair. "Standard depth. Agricultural operations. Show me what you feel."

What happened over the next two hours was quiet and technical and, to me, one of the most interesting sessions I had conducted since the aquifer work.

Nara at the interface perceived the fields team's operations with a depth and specificity that was different from anything I had heard

before from this station. Not better than Brother Joba's perception — different. Where he perceived the broad geological quality, the texture and character of the material they were working with, she perceived the dynamic relationships: how the soil layers were interacting with each other, where the moisture distribution was following the clay adjustments and where it wasn't, the specific feedback of the agricultural system responding to the team's interventions in real time.

She narrated what she felt with the precision she had shown from the beginning. The team incorporated her observations. Brother Joba watched and said very little, which was his way of paying extremely close attention.

At the end of the session, when the team had finished and were removing their hands from the interface pads, Brother Joba sat for a moment in the particular quality of stillness that I had learned to read as him processing something significant.

"Right," he said.

It was the entire sentence.

"Yes?" I said.

"What we did today," he said, "would normally take two additional operators and an extra half-day of adjustment work." He paused. "Because she could show us where the adjustments were actually needed rather than where we thought they were needed."

"The boundary problem," I said.

"All the boundary problems," he said. "Not just between operators. Between what the operators can perceive and what the system can show them." He looked at Nara. "You're seeing the feedback loop."

"The system's response to what the team does," she said. "Yes. I can feel when the soil is responding as intended and when it's doing something different."

"That is what we've been guessing at for forty years," he said. He said it without bitterness — with the specific quality of a person who had done the best they could with what they had and was now

discovering what the full picture looked like. "Not badly, all things considered. But guessing."

"You weren't guessing," Nara said. "You were reading the material as precisely as you could. You just didn't have the feedback to know when your read was off."

He looked at her for a moment. Then he looked at me.

"How quickly," he said, "can we begin the deep work with her?"

"How quickly do you need it?" I said.

"The aquifer restoration is proceeding," he said. "The channel is clear and the flow is recovering. But the primary geological source — the mountain feed — the flow rate is improving but slowly. If Nara can perceive the deep geological dynamics as well as she perceives the shallow agricultural ones—"

"She can," I said. "She told me this morning."

He looked at Nara.

"Three more surface sessions," she said. "To build the connection properly. Then depth."

He looked at her with the evaluating attention of someone who had assessed capability for four decades.

"Three sessions," he agreed.

On the night of Nara's tenth day, I finished reading the Central Core records that were accessible to me.

Or rather, I finished the portion I could access with my current facility. The records were large and some were still beyond my ability to parse — dense with technical specifications and historical accounting that required context I was still developing. But the broad picture was clearer than it had been, and one section I had been working toward for several days finally resolved.

The other installations' current status — not just the twelve with confirmed operational capacity but the full accounting of what the Central Core had recorded as its last active management.

Eighteen original installations, as I had known. Of those:

Seven were confirmed inactive — the systems had failed or been decommissioned, no operational function remaining. These were distributed across the northern and eastern portions of the continent, the regions that had been most politically unstable in the centuries after the Commanders' Conflict.

Six were in the status the system called *degraded operational* — basic systems running, partial sensor function, communication capability at varying levels. These included Epsilon, where Nara had grown up, and five others. None had recognised operators in the system's records. None were being actively managed.

Three were in what the system called *unknown status* — the Central Core had no current information and could not confirm whether they were active or inactive. These were in regions the Central Core's sensors could not reach.

Two were in *confirmed active* status.

Alabaster was one.

The other was a designation the system gave as Installation Theta.

I read this twice.

Then I asked: *Where is Installation Theta?*

:Location data for Installation Theta is in the Central Core's geographic database. Accessing. Installation Theta location: [coordinates]. Cross-referencing with known settlement data: Installation Theta corresponds to the settlement known as Onyx.:

I sat with this for a long time.

Onyx.

Onyx was Installation Theta. Installation Theta was confirmed active.

I had known that Onyx had the Central Processing facility — Marten had told me this, Orvala had told me this. But *confirmed active* in the Central Core's terms meant something more specific: it meant the installation had a functional expert system, a recognised operational capability, an ongoing operational status.

Onyx was not just an archive. Onyx was an active installation.

Which meant Orvala was not just a director of archivists.

Which meant the question of what Onyx's operational capability actually was, and what they had been doing with it, and why they had described themselves primarily as keepers of knowledge rather than as an active installation—

Was a question that had a different character than I had previously understood.

I did not say anything that night. I sat with the information and let it settle into the picture I had been building and thought about what it changed and what it didn't.

In the morning I would talk to Marten.

In the morning I would also, I thought, talk to Orvala directly.

Not with accusation — with the honest question. The same kind of honest question I had been asking of everything for fifty-eight days.

Tell me what I'm missing. Tell me what I haven't asked yet.

The fundamental tone resonated in the courtyard's walls, clean and steady.

The picture was not complete. It was never going to be complete — that was the nature of understanding, the horizon that kept extending as you moved toward it.

But it was more complete than it had been this morning.

I went to bed.

23

Marten's face, when I told him what I had found, was the face of someone who had known something and was now in the position of having it named by someone else.

Not guilt — something more complicated. The specific quality of someone who has been carrying a partial truth and watching the person they are carrying it from assemble the full picture piece by piece and knowing that the moment of arrival was coming and having had, apparently, feelings about it.

We were in the small room off the weather station corridor. Morning light, early. I had found him before breakfast because I had slept poorly and had decided that sleeping poorly in the presence of an unasked question was worse than simply asking it.

"Installation Theta," I said. "Confirmed active in the Central Core records."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Yes," he said.

"How long have you known?"

"How long have I known that Onyx is an active installation?" he said. "My whole life. I grew up there."

"How long have you known that I didn't know?" I said.

He looked at me. "Since the first communication with Orvala," he said. "When she described Onyx as an archive, as a knowledge-keeping institution. She was not—" he paused. "She was not lying. Onyx is genuinely an archive. The knowledge-keeping function is real and has been the primary function for most of Onyx's existence." He paused again. "But the installation is active. The expert system is running. The capability exists even if it has been largely unused."

"Why didn't she tell me?" I said.

"Because," he said, "she was not certain what you would do with it." He looked at his hands. "Taryn. When you first contacted Orvala, you were — you had been here for five weeks and you had done things that no one had done in generations. She was making an assessment. She was deciding how much to trust."

"And she decided not to tell me that Onyx has an active installation," I said.

"She decided to tell you what she thought you needed to know and to observe what you did with it," he said. "This is how Orvala has operated for forty years. Information is shared incrementally, as trust is established." He paused. "I understand that this may feel like a betrayal. But I want you to understand her reasoning."

"I'm not angry," I said. "I'm—" I stopped. I thought about what I actually was. "I'm adjusting my understanding," I said finally. "What Onyx can do is different from what I thought Onyx could do. That changes some things."

"What things?" he said.

"The distributed approach," I said. "If Onyx has an active installation — if there are operators at Onyx who can access the systems directly — then Onyx is not just an information network. It's a potential operational partner." I paused. "Or a potential risk, depending on what they choose to do."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Both of those are accurate," he said.

"What does the installation at Theta do?" I said. "Currently. What operations are active?"

"Limited operations," he said. "The communication network primarily — that's how the relay functions work, how Orvala's global intelligence network operates. Basic monitoring. Nothing at the scale of what you're doing here." He paused. "Onyx has always been cautious about using the installation's capability. The fear of repeating the Commanders' Conflict has shaped everything Onyx does. They know what the machines can do. They are afraid of what the machines can be used to do."

"So they don't use them," I said.

"They use them minimally," he said. "Communications. Monitoring. The specific functions that serve the knowledge-keeping mission without — without the risk of the machines becoming something else."

I thought about this.

The knowledge-keeping mission. Four hundred years of watching, recording, preserving. The Hollis Archive, kept safe for centuries. The operator bloodline maps. The records of the Continuers' operations. All of it maintained carefully, available when needed.

And underneath it all, an active installation running at minimum capacity, deliberately kept minimal, because the people running it understood what the machines could do and were afraid of doing it.

"Orvala needs to tell me directly," I said. "Not through Marten, not through implication. I need to talk to her today."

"She's expecting your call," he said.

I looked at him.

"She has been expecting it since she sent Lem with the Hollis Archive," he said. "The Archive contains enough information about the Central Core records that she knew you would find Theta's status eventually. She was giving you time to find it yourself rather than being told." He paused. "She said — she said that a Commander who couldn't find this on their own was not a Commander she could

work with. A Commander who could find it and asked the right questions about it—"

"Was worth working with," I said.

"Yes," he said.

I sat with this for a moment.

"She tests people," I said. "Lem said that."

"It is her primary method of assessment," Marten said. "It is also, in her defense, a method that has served Onyx well for forty years. The people she has trusted have been trustworthy."

"Until the records were compromised twenty-three years ago," I said.

He was quiet.

"Yes," he said. "Until then."

The communication with Orvala was in the afternoon, with Father Brolan present and Marten present and the full communication channel open.

She answered immediately, which told me she had been waiting.

"You found Theta," she said.

"I found Theta," I confirmed. "I'd like to understand why you didn't tell me directly."

"Because direct telling is not how I assess people," she said. "This is a method you've had described to you and you understand the reasoning."

"I understand the reasoning," I said. "I want to know whether it's going to continue."

A pause. "What do you mean?"

"I mean: are there other things you know that you're planning to tell me incrementally, as you decide I've earned them?" I said. "Because I need to know the shape of the relationship. If the relationship is one where you share what you think I need to know and assess my responses and share more based on the assessment —

that's a relationship I can work in. But I need to know that's what it is."

The pause was longer this time.

"That is a fair question," she said.

"I'm not asking you to tell me everything immediately," I said. "I understand that trust is built incrementally. I understand that you've been managing Onyx's knowledge carefully for forty years and that caution has served you well." I paused. "I'm asking you to tell me honestly what the shape of the relationship is."

"The honest shape," she said slowly, "is that I have been doing exactly what you described. Sharing incrementally, assessing, sharing more." Another pause. "And the honest answer to your question is: yes, there are other things I know that I have not told you yet."

"Tell me what they are," I said.

"Not all at once," she said. "Some of it requires context you don't yet have and would be misread without it." She paused. "But I will tell you this: the most significant thing I have not told you is directly related to Installation Theta's status, and I think you are close to being ready to hear it."

"Tell me now," I said.

"There is an operator at Theta," she said.

The room was very quiet.

"An operator," I said. "Registered. With recognition."

"Registered," she said. "Yes. Not by you — Theta has its own registration, its own records, its own operational history." A pause. "The operator is my granddaughter."

Father Brolan made a sound. Not quite surprise — the sound of a man who had suspected something and had the suspicion confirmed.

"What rank?" I said.

"Lieutenant Commander," she said. "Confirmed through Theta's expert system. She has been working with the installation since she was seventeen. She is twenty-three now."

"And what has she been doing?" I said.

"What I permitted her to do," Orvala said. "Communications

work primarily. The monitoring network. Some limited atmospheric sensing in the region around Theta." A pause. "She has been — frustrated with the limitations. She is aware of what the installation could do and she understands why I have been cautious. She has not agreed with the caution for several years now."

"Why are you telling me this?" I said.

"Because," Orvala said, "she has been in communication with someone on your operator bloodline map. Independently. Without my authorisation." Another pause. "She found the map — we have a copy of Lem's version at Theta — and she identified an overlap between the operator positions and the installation positions and she began reaching out." A pause. "She reached one of the operators near a degraded installation in the central region three weeks ago. She used Theta's communication relay. She told them something similar to what you told Nara."

The silence in the room had a specific character now.

"She's doing what I'm doing," I said. "Independently. From Theta."

"Yes," Orvala said.

"Is she effective?" I said.

A pause that contained something that might have been surprised amusement.

"She is," Orvala said. "The operator she contacted has been communicating with her regularly for three weeks. She has given them the basic explanation of what they're hearing. She has—" a pause. "She has been more effective than I expected, given her limited training in this kind of work."

"What's her name?" I said.

"Kael," Orvala said. "Her name is Kael."

"Does she know about Alabaster?" I said.

"She knows about Alabaster," Orvala said. "She has been following your communications with me closely." A pause. "Very closely. She has opinions."

"About what?"

"About the pace," she said. "She thinks you are moving too slowly in reaching the operators on the map. She thinks the window before the Continuers consolidate their position with the key operators is shorter than your current timeline assumes." Another pause. "She is probably right about the window. She is less right about the pace — you have been moving carefully for good reasons."

"I'd like to talk to her," I said.

"She has been waiting for you to ask," Orvala said, and I heard in her voice something that was not quite resignation and not quite pride — the specific quality of a person who has been trying to manage something and has accepted that the managing has reached its natural limit.

"Put her on," I said.

Kael's voice was younger than Orvala's — that was the first thing I noticed, the specific quality of someone in their early twenties who had spent years being careful because they were surrounded by people who had been careful for decades, and were now in the first conversation where being careful was perhaps not the entire point.

"Commander Taryn," she said.

"Just Taryn," I said.

A pause. "Orvala didn't say you did that."

"Did what?"

"The informal register. She made you sound—" a pause. "More formal."

"I'm fifty-eight days in," I said. "I don't have enough history to be formal."

Another pause. Something in it that was reassessment.

"The operator I contacted," she said. "Her name is Sera. She's in a settlement near the Verdant installation. The installation is partially degraded but the communication function is stable enough for relay. She has been hearing it for twenty years." She paused. "She's a Lieutenant level, maybe higher — she can feel things through the building's stone that standard operators can't access. She's been doing it her whole life and she thought she was going insane."

"She thought she was insane," I said.

"For twenty years," she said. "She had stopped talking about it because the one time she mentioned it to her family—" she paused. "It didn't go well."

Twenty years of hearing the machines and having no one to tell.

"Is she still in contact with you?" I said.

"Every few days," she said. "She has questions. Many questions." A pause. "She asked about the dome. She heard about the siege somehow — trade gossip, apparently — and she asked me whether Alabaster had really put up a dome and stopped an army."

"Yes," I said.

"She was—" Kael paused. "She was very quiet when I confirmed it. And then she said: 'I could have done something like that. If I had known.'"

Twenty years of capability and no knowledge. Twenty years of living in proximity to a partially functional installation and not knowing what it was.

"She should come to Alabaster," I said. "Or to Theta. Somewhere she can get proper training and context." I paused. "Which one is closer to where she is?"

"Theta," Kael said.

"Then she should come to Theta," I said. "Can you receive her there?"

A pause. Then Orvala's voice, in the background, saying something I couldn't quite hear. Then Kael's voice, directly: "Yes. We can receive her."

"Good," I said. "I'll send you the governance documentation and the operator registration protocols. When she arrives, register her properly. With the full governance conditions." I paused. "And Kael — the operator she reached in the central region. That's one. How many others have you tried to contact?"

"Three others," she said. "Two didn't respond. One responded once and then went silent — I think the Continuers found them first." She paused. "That's the one I'm worried about."

"Tell me," I said.

She described the situation: an operator in a city in the northern central region, a trader who had heard the city's installation his whole life, who had responded to one of Kael's relay communications with a question and then fallen silent. The city was large enough to have significant Continuer presence — Lem's documentation had flagged it as a region of concern.

"How long ago did they go silent?" I said.

"Twelve days," she said.

Twelve days. Long enough that something had happened — either the Continuers had reached him, or he had made a decision to disengage, or something else.

"Send me everything you know about him," I said. "Name, location, what he said in the one communication. I'll ask Lem to check with Onyx's contacts in that region."

"His name is Bren," she said. "He trades in ceramic goods. The city is Ferrath — it's a mid-sized trading city, three days' travel north of the Verdant installation." She paused. "He said — in his one communication, he said: 'I've been hearing the old building's bones for forty years. I thought it was a ghost.' He said it like it was funny. And then he didn't respond again."

"'The old building's bones,'" I said.

"He's a poet," she said. "Or something like one. The way he described it—" she paused. "It was precise. More precise than most operators describe it on first contact."

I thought about this. Forty years. A precise description. A city with Continuer presence.

"He may have been warned off by someone," I said. "Not necessarily the Continuers — he may have someone in his life who told him not to respond to voices coming out of walls." I paused. "Or the Continuers may have already found him and he's being managed."

"How do you tell the difference?" she said.

"You try another contact," I said. "Different framing. Something that wouldn't interest the Continuers but would interest him specifi-

cally." I paused. "The bones of a building. That phrasing — it's geological. He feels the structure of the installation rather than just its sound. If I could frame a communication that was specifically about the geological character of the Ferrath installation—"

"He'd know it wasn't a standard contact," she said. "It would be too specific to be a general approach."

"Yes," I said. "Can you send it through the relay?"

"The Verdant installation has some residual connectivity to the Ferrath installation," she said. "Not direct — two-hop relay. Less clear than the Epsilon connection." She paused. "But possible."

"Write the communication," I said. "I'll review it. We'll send it together."

A pause.

"Together," she said.

"You found him," I said. "You know what he said. You know the framing." I paused. "And I know what it is to have spent a long time hearing something and not knowing what it was. Between us we might get the framing right."

Another pause, longer.

"Orvala said you were young," she said. "She said it like it was a liability."

"It's both," I said. "Depending on the context."

"She also said—" a pause. "She said you reminded her of what she should have been when she was your age. Before she decided that protecting the knowledge was more important than using it."

I did not know what to say to this.

"I think she meant it as a compliment," Kael said, with the specific quality of someone who was not entirely certain.

"I'll take it as one," I said.

The communication about Bren took two days to write.

Kael drafted. I revised. She revised my revision. We went back

and forth through the relay channel with the focused collaborative quality of two people who did not know each other well but had found the same angle on a specific problem and were working it together.

The final version was short, addressed specifically to someone who felt the building's bones rather than heard its voice, who had described it with the precision of someone who had been attending to it for a long time. It said:

The installation at Ferrath has a fracture in its foundation structure, northeast quadrant, approximately forty feet down. Not damage — it was there from the original construction, a deliberate relief joint to manage thermal expansion. Most people who hear the installation don't notice it. People who feel the bones usually do.

If you can feel it — if you know the northeast quadrant sounds different from the rest — we'd like to talk.

— Taryn, Alabaster. Kael, Theta.

We sent it through the Verdant relay.

"Now we wait," Kael said.

"Now we wait," I agreed.

"You do a lot of waiting," she said.

"Fifty-eight days," I said. "About a third of it has been waiting."

"And the other two thirds?"

"Working," I said. "And learning that the working leads to more waiting because the things you discover lead to new things you need to understand before you can act on them."

A pause.

"Orvala has been waiting for forty years," she said. "She calls it patience. I call it—" she stopped.

"What do you call it?" I said.

"Fear," she said. Flatly. "I think she's afraid. Not of the machines — of what happens if they're used wrong. She has forty years of records of what happens when they're used wrong and she has been so focused on making sure Theta doesn't add to that record that she's —" she stopped again.

"Made Theta useless," I said.

"Yes," she said. "She would say: made Theta safe. I say: useless." A pause. "We have had this argument many times."

"And now?" I said.

"Now Sera is coming to Theta," she said. "And she's going to want to work with the installation properly, and Orvala is going to have to decide whether Theta is a safe archive or an active installation." A pause. "I think the question has been decided. I think you decided it when you called and found Theta in the Central Core records and asked the right questions." Another pause. "She sent me Lem with the Hollis Archive. That was not the action of someone who wanted to keep Theta closed."

"No," I said. "It wasn't."

"She just needed someone to—" Kael paused. "She needed it to be someone else's momentum. Not hers. Because if she decides to open Theta, she's responsible for what happens next. But if someone else's momentum carries Theta forward—"

"She can be the careful one," I said. "The one who makes sure it's done right."

"Yes," she said. "That's what she's good at. She's genuinely good at it." A pause. "She's just not good at starting."

I thought about this.

"None of us are good at starting," I said. "We're all responding to something — Hollis built the context, the Continuers forced the pace, the siege made the dome necessary, the aquifer problem was there waiting to be found." I paused. "Starting from nothing is different from recognising when circumstances require action."

"Is that what you're doing?" she said. "Recognising circumstances?"

"Every day," I said.

"And today's circumstance is Theta," she said.

"Today's circumstance is the full picture," I said. "Which includes Theta. Which includes Kael. Which includes Sera and Bren and the forty-seven operators and the twelve installations and the Continuers

and the Central Core records I haven't finished reading yet." I paused. "It's a large circumstance."

"Yes," she said. She said it with the quality of someone settling into something. "It is."

The response from Bren came in four days.

It came not through the relay but through the standard communication network — a direct contact, which meant he had figured out how to use the Ferrath installation's communication function on his own. This in itself was information: someone who had felt the building's bones for forty years and had, when given the right prompt, found his way to the system's communication interface without instruction.

He said: "The northeast quadrant. The relief joint. Yes. I can feel it every time I pass through that corner of the market district. I always thought the building had a sore spot there."

He said it with the same quality Kael had identified: precise, and with the dry wit of someone who had been carrying something for a long time and had found it comfortable to make it slightly funny.

"We'd like to talk," I sent back.

"I know," he said. "You said that. What do you want to talk about?"

"What you've been hearing," I said. "What it is. What you could do with it."

A pause.

"I've been hearing it for forty years," he said. "I've learned not to talk about it."

"I know," I said. "What changed?"

"A voice in a wall that knew about the relief joint," he said.

"Fair enough," I said.

"There are people here," he said. "In Ferrath. People who have been asking about the old building. They call themselves collectors —

say they're interested in historical sites." A pause. "They're not collectors."

"No," I said.

"They found me three weeks ago," he said. "Asked whether I had any special connection to the old building. Whether I felt anything there." A pause. "I said no. I've learned to say no."

"And now?"

"And now a voice in a wall that knew about the relief joint," he said. "So I'm asking myself whether I've been saying no to the wrong people."

"The collectors are not the right people," I said. "We are."

"You could say the same thing," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I could." I paused. "What would convince you?"

A longer pause.

"Tell me about the relief joint," he said. "Not that it exists. I know it exists. Tell me why it's there. What it means in terms of how the building was constructed. If you know that—"

I asked the system: *Installation Ferrath. Structural relief joint, northeast quadrant, approximate depth forty feet. Purpose and construction specification.*

The system produced the answer. A designed structural element, placed during the original construction to accommodate the thermal differential between the installation's geothermal heat generation and the cooler surrounding geological environment. Not structural weakness — deliberate engineering to prevent stress fractures in the foundation.

I relayed this to Bren, with the system's additional detail about the specific construction method: the joint was filled with a material that had a different thermal expansion coefficient from the surrounding stone, allowing the building to breathe thermally without cracking.

A long pause.

"The material in the joint," he said. "It's a slightly different texture from the stone around it. I can feel it when I pass through

that corner. I always assumed it was a repair — that something had been fixed at some point."

"Original construction," I said. "It was supposed to feel different."

Another long pause.

"I've been feeling a deliberate engineering choice," he said, "and thinking it was a scar."

"Yes," I said.

"That's—" he stopped. "I've spent forty years making sense of this building. And in forty years I misidentified one of its most basic structural elements."

"You didn't have the context," I said. "You had the perception without the vocabulary. That's different from being wrong."

A pause.

"That's kind," he said.

"It's accurate," I said.

A longer pause.

"The collectors," he said. "If I stop saying no to them — if I engage — what happens?"

"They give you a story," I said. "About what the installation is and what you can do with it. The story is partially true and directed toward their purposes." I paused. "We can give you a different story. The full one. Including the parts that aren't flattering to Alabaster's history."

"Including what?"

"Including that Alabaster has benefited from the machines for five hundred years while other cities were downstream of our decisions," I said. "Including that the lock on the operator registry, while well-intentioned, meant that people like you spent forty years hearing something with no explanation and no support." I paused. "Including that we are trying to build something different from what existed before, and that different is not automatically better — it's just what we're attempting, as carefully as we can."

Another long pause.

"You lead with your weaknesses," he said.

"I lead with honesty," I said. "The weaknesses are part of it."

A pause that was different from the others — something considering in it.

"How do I talk to you properly?" he said. "Not through the relay. Directly."

"Find the communication interface in the Ferrath installation," I said. "You already know how to find the northeast quadrant. The interface will be somewhere in the primary operational space — probably the main room of the old building, if you can get into it."

"I know how to get into it," he said, and I heard in his voice a history of forty years of quiet personal visits to a building that felt like something.

"Then I'll be here," I said. "When you're ready."

That evening I told Father Brolan.

Not just about Bren — the full accounting. Kael, Sera coming to Theta, Orvala's granddaughter operating independently, the decision Theta was facing about what it was going to be. The Ferrath situation. The pace question.

He listened. He asked precise questions. At the end he sat for a moment in the way he sat when he was deciding where to go with something.

"The pace," he said. "Kael thinks we're moving too slowly."

"She may be right," I said. "The window before the Continuers consolidate their position with the key operators—"

"Is shorter than our current timeline," he said.

"Yes."

"How do you balance that against the risk of moving too quickly?" he said.

"I'm not certain we can balance it perfectly," I said. "We make the best assessment we can and accept that some of the timing will be wrong." I paused. "What I know is that the honest explanation needs to reach these people before the false one does. Everything else — the pace, the approach, the sequence — those are details we adjust as we learn more."

He looked at the window. The city outside, the evening light on the mountains.

"In fifty-eight days," he said, "you have done more than I would have thought possible in twice that time." He paused. "I say this not as a compliment but as an observation that carries weight. The pace you've been operating at — the things you've been learning and acting on — it has costs."

"I know," I said.

"Do you?" he said. It was gentle but direct, the question of someone who wanted a real answer. "You are thirteen years old. You have been running at a pace that would exhaust most experienced operators. The physical cost of the interface work—"

"Is manageable," I said.

"Is being managed by you," he said. "Which is different." He looked at me. "Brother Evan has been telling me, quietly, that you are working harder than you show. That you're more tired than you indicate."

I thought about this. About the mornings when the sconce's brightening found me already awake, already thinking. About the afternoons when the head pressure was heavier than I acknowledged. About the nights when the sessions had cost more than usual and I had gone to bed carrying it rather than resting from it.

"I'm all right," I said.

"That is what you said to Brother Evan," Father Brolan said. "And he told me you meant it. And I believe you mean it. And I'm telling you that all right is not the only measure." He paused. "When did you last spend a full day doing nothing?"

I opened my mouth and closed it again.

"I see," he said.

"There's too much—" I started.

"There is always too much," he said. "There will always be too much. The work does not stop when you stop. The aquifer will continue recovering. The communication network will continue operating. Nara will continue her sessions with Brother Joba. Kael

will continue her work at Theta." He paused. "The world does not require you to be in motion every moment."

I sat with this.

"Tomorrow," he said. "Take the morning. Go to the courtyard. Play your lute. Talk to Tomas. Do not think about the Continuers or the operator map or the Central Core records." He paused. "That is not a suggestion."

"All right," I said.

"Good," he said. "And then in the afternoon, if you still want to work, work."

He said it with the specific quality he used for things that were decided.

I took the morning.

The courtyard, the lute, the specific quality of the early morning before the Tower's full routine had established itself. The sound of the city coming awake, filtered through the four walls and mixed with the fundamental tone, which I had been hearing for fifty-eight days and which was now as natural and necessary as breathing.

I played the wandering minor-key tune that Mama sometimes hummed, which I had been playing since my second night in the Tower and which had changed in the fifty-eight days since — or rather, I had changed around it, so the same notes produced a different relationship between me and the instrument, the specific evolution of a piece you have played so many times it has become something other than learned and not quite something other than yourself.

Tomas came.

He always seemed to know when I was in the courtyard, which I had stopped questioning and started accepting as one of the things his specific perception made possible — the building showing him where I was the way it showed him everything else.

He sat beside me and listened for a while.

"You're playing differently," he said.

"How?"

"Slower," he said. "Like you're paying attention to it."

"I'm always paying attention to it," I said.

"No," he said. "Usually you play like you're thinking about something else. Today you're actually playing."

I thought about this. The specific difference between playing a piece and being inside it.

"Father Brolan told me to take the morning," I said.

"Good," he said.

"You sound like him when you say that," I said.

"I sound like Mama," he said. "She always says good when she means you finally did the obvious thing."

I played a chord.

"How's Dace?" I said.

"Good," he said. "He thinks he might want to be on weather operations. Sister Mya talked to his year-group about what the teams do and he's been asking questions about it." He paused. "He can't hear the building but he says he feels something when he's in the operational corridors. Like the air is different there."

"The air is slightly different there," I said. "The weather operations affect the air quality throughout the building. He's feeling the effect of operations rather than the operations themselves."

"I told him that," Tomas said. "He said that was still something."

"It is," I said.

I played the melody through again.

"What are you thinking about?" Tomas said. "Even though you're supposed to be not thinking."

"Nara," I said. "And Kael. And Bren." I paused. "The people who have been hearing buildings for years without knowing what they were hearing."

"Like us," he said.

"Like us," I said. "But without — without anyone explaining it. Without finding out." I paused. "Without the courtyard."

He looked at the walls.

"The building knew," he said. "It was attending to them. All of them. Even without recognising them formally — even without the registration — it was aware of them."

"Yes," I said.

"So they weren't alone," he said. "They just didn't know they weren't."

I set the lute down and looked at him.

He said it simply, the way he said most things — not as comfort, not as philosophy, just as an accurate observation about how things were.

They weren't alone. They just didn't know they weren't.

"No," I said. "They weren't alone."

The fundamental tone resonated in the four walls, warm and steady, the building's continuous voice saying exactly what it had always been saying to everyone who could hear it.

"I'm going to find them," I said. "All of them, eventually. However long it takes."

"I know," Tomas said.

"You could help," I said. "In a few years, when you've developed more—"

"I'm going to help now," he said.

I looked at him. Eight years old, sitting in the courtyard that he had found first, telling me with the absolute matter-of-factness of someone stating an obvious plan.

"How?" I said.

"The deep harmonics," he said. "The geological ones, the ones I notice before you do. If I can hear those better than you — if my perception is more oriented toward them—" he paused. "Then I should be practicing them. Now. Not in a few years."

"You're eight," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Which means I have time to practice before I

need to use it for anything important." He looked at me. "Nara started at thirty-four. She's working backward. I can start at eight and work forward."

He was right. He was entirely right, and the rightness of it sat in the courtyard alongside the lute and the fundamental tone and the morning light.

"I'll talk to Father Brolan," I said.

"You always say that," he said.

"It's usually the right answer," I said.

He accepted this.

I picked up the lute again. Played the chord. Let the morning be what it was.

Bren made contact three days later, through the Ferrath installation's communication interface exactly as I had suggested.

His voice came through with the clarity of someone who had found the system's operational space and was speaking from within it rather than through the relay, and the clarity was different from the relay's filtered quality — more immediate, more present, the specific quality of direct communication rather than relayed.

"The northeast quadrant," he said, without preamble. "I stood in it for an hour yesterday. I paid attention to every detail I could feel." A pause. "I can feel the geothermal pulse. I've always felt it — I called it the building's heartbeat, to myself. I assumed it was normal. I assumed everyone who spent time in old buildings felt it."

"They don't," I said.

"I know that now," he said. "I've been feeling the heartbeat of an ancient machine my whole life and I thought it was just what stone felt like." A pause. "I'd like to understand what I've been feeling."

"I'd like to help you understand it," I said.

"The collectors," he said. "Are they going to be a problem?"

"Potentially," I said. "Do you know how many of them there are in Ferrath?"

"Three that I've seen," he said. "Possibly more." A pause. "They've been careful. Nothing overtly threatening. Just — interested. The kind of interested that doesn't match the cover story."

"If they approach you again—"

"I'll tell them the same thing I've been telling them," he said. "That I don't feel anything special at the old building." A pause. "Which is now actually harder to say with conviction."

"Yes," I said. "I understand that."

A pause.

"You're thirteen," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"You sound older," he said. "In the relay communications you sounded — I thought you were being careful with your language because you were nervous. Now I think you're careful with your language because you've thought about everything you say before you say it."

"Fifty-nine days," I said. "I've had a lot of practice."

A pause that had something in it — not quite amusement, more the specific quality of a forty-year-old reassessing a thirteen-year-old and finding the reassessment productive.

"What do I do now?" he said.

"Learn," I said. "Come to Alabaster, or to Theta, whichever makes more sense given your circumstances. Or continue to communicate through the installation if leaving Ferrath isn't possible right now." I paused. "What we need from you, before anything else, is for you to understand what you are. Everything else follows from that."

"And the collectors?"

"Don't engage with them," I said. "If they press — if they become more than background interest — tell me immediately." I paused. "Captain Taryce will be interested in who they are."

"Captain Taryce," he said.

"Alabaster's Guard captain," I said. "She handles the Continuers' operations." I paused. "She is very good at it."

"The Continuers," he said. He said it the way someone said a term they'd been given context for but were still filing into its proper place in their understanding.

"Yes," I said. "I'll send you everything we have on them. You should understand what you're navigating."

A pause.

"Send me everything," he said. "Not just the Continuers. Everything. The history, the machines, what I can do, why it matters." He paused. "I've been making sense of this building for forty years with no information. I can handle having a lot of information."

"You'll get it," I said.

"Good," he said.

That evening I went back to the courtyard.

The day had been full — the morning off, which Father Brolan had been right about; the afternoon sessions with Nara, who was building toward the first deep session with Brother Joba's team with the focused preparation of someone who understood what she was preparing for; a communication with Kael about Sera's estimated arrival at Theta; the contact with Bren.

And now the courtyard, the end of the day, the sky darkening above the four walls and the first stars appearing in the opening.

I put my hands on the bench.

The aquifer, recovering. The primary geological channel, flow increasing. The geothermal pulse, steady. The generator ring, all twelve nodes. The fundamental tone, clean and true.

And new: Kael's tone, faint through the long-distance communication channel but present — Theta's installation, its operational pulse, the specific character of a system that had been running carefully for decades and was on the edge of running more fully.

And Bren, three hundred miles north, in the Ferrath installation — no formal connection yet, no registration, but the system was aware of him, registering his presence in the installation's operational space the way it registered everything, with the patient attention of a machine that never stopped noticing.

And Sera, traveling toward Theta.

And Nara, two floors up, reading the governance documentation.

And Tomas, in the dormitory, hearing the building in whatever specific way eight-year-old Tomas heard it.

The network was small. It was barely a network at all — a handful of people, two active installations, a dozen communications across a continent, the beginnings of an approach that would take years to build into what Hollis had described.

But it was present. It was real. It was happening.

They weren't alone. They just didn't know they weren't.

I held the bench's stone and listened.

The fundamental tone rang in the four walls, patient and clean, the building's continuous acknowledgment of everyone who was hearing it, everywhere it was heard, all of them connected to the same source without knowing it, all of them about to know.

24

On the sixty-third day, the deep session with Nara and Brother Joba's team went to nine hundred feet.

The preparation had been exactly what Brother Joba specified: three surface sessions building the connection, then depth sessions at increasing intervals — four hundred, six hundred, eight hundred. Each session more fluent than the last, the team's work with Nara's geological-tactile feedback becoming a practice rather than an experiment. By the fourth deep session they were using a vocabulary that none of them had had before: *the pressure is different here*, Nara would say, or *the composition shifts about three feet north*, and the team would adjust without waiting for me to translate, because they had learned her register the way musicians learned a new instrument's voice.

Nine hundred feet was below the aquifer's primary channel. Below the obstruction we had cleared. Into the geological strata that the Central Core records described as the deep-feed zone — the rock through which the primary geological source ran before it reached the channel we had worked on.

What Nara found there was not what we expected.

She went still at her interface in the specific way she went still when something required complete attention. Not alarmed — focused, the quality of someone reading something difficult.

"There's a second obstruction," she said.

Brother Joba's hands stayed on his pads. His tone in my harmonic layer held without wavering.

"Different from the first?" I said.

"Very different," she said. "The first obstruction was displaced rock — you could feel the forced quality of it, the wrongness of something that had been moved from where it wanted to be." She pressed harder against her interface. "This is — this is geological. Natural. But—" she paused. "It's too regular. The way the obstruction formed." She paused again. "The first obstruction reduced the flow. This one —" a longer pause. "This one is like a dam. Not a block — a specific structure. The water flows through it but the flow is restricted in a precise way."

"Natural?" I said.

"That's what I'm trying to determine," she said. "The material is natural — it's the same rock as the surrounding formation. But the configuration—" she paused. "It has the same quality as the relief joint in the Ferrath building. Deliberate engineering that looks like natural geology."

Brother Joba said, quietly: "Tell me the quadrant."

She described it. He oriented. His tone deepened, reaching for the structure she had found.

"I feel it," he said. "I've never been this deep before." A pause. "It's — smooth. More regular than the surrounding rock. You're right. It doesn't feel natural."

I reached for the system: *Deep geological structure at nine hundred feet, northeast sector, beneath the primary aquifer channel. Is this a designed structure?*

The system was quiet for longer than usual — the deep sensor access was still developing, the fundamental tone's correction having improved it but not completed it.

:Reviewing records. Confirmed: geological structure at specified location is a designed feature. Classification: flow regulator. Purpose: to control the rate at which the primary geological source feeds the aquifer, preventing over-pressurisation of the upper aquifer systems during high-flow periods. This structure was installed as part of the original installation construction. Note: flow regulator is currently set to 31% of maximum permitted flow.:

I read this three times.

A flow regulator. Designed. Original construction.

The aquifer had not been declining because of the obstruction alone. The obstruction had reduced the flow. But even before the obstruction — even at the original design flow rate — the regulator had been limiting the aquifer to thirty-one percent of what it could deliver.

"There's a designed flow regulator," I said. "At nine hundred feet. Original construction. It controls how much water reaches the aquifer from the geological source." I paused. "It's currently set to thirty-one percent of maximum."

The room was quiet in the way rooms went quiet when something changed the shape of the problem.

"The aquifer has never been at full capacity," Prael said. She was at the monitoring position, as she always was for deep sessions. Her voice had the specific quality of someone revising a long-held understanding. "Even before the obstruction — even in Hollis's time — it was running at thirty-one percent."

"Yes," I said.

"The records from the early period," she said. "The ones that show the aquifer at its 'original design capacity' — what they're showing is thirty-one percent of the system's actual geological potential."

"Yes," I said.

"Why would it be set to thirty-one percent?" Brother Joba said.

I asked: *Why was the flow regulator set to 31% of maximum flow?*

:Original setting rationale: the primary aquifer system at installa-

tion Alabaster was designed to serve a projected maximum population of [number]. The flow rate was calibrated to this population projection with a margin of safety. Current population exceeds the original projection by approximately 340%. Note: the regulator can be adjusted by a Commander-ranked operator to any flow rate between 0% and 100% of maximum, subject to aquifer structural assessment.:

Three hundred and forty percent over the original population projection.

Alabaster had grown to more than four times what the original installation was designed to serve, and the water system had been calibrated for the original population since the beginning.

"The city is three hundred and forty percent larger than the original design," I said. "The aquifer was calibrated for the projected original population. The regulator was set during the original construction and has never been adjusted."

"Can it be adjusted?" Prael said. Immediately, practically.

"Yes," I said. "By a Commander-ranked operator. Subject to structural assessment." I paused. "We would need to understand whether the aquifer system can handle increased flow without — without the over-pressurisation the regulator was designed to prevent."

"That's an assessment I can do," Nara said. She was still at her interface, still in deep contact, her hands pressing firmly against the pads. "I can feel the full aquifer structure from here. Give me a moment."

She was quiet for two minutes. Not short minutes — the specific long minutes of someone attending to something complex at depth.

"The aquifer can handle more," she said finally. "The original design concern — over-pressurisation — was a concern for a younger system. The aquifer structure has consolidated over five centuries. It's more robust than the original assessment would have measured." She paused. "I wouldn't recommend going immediately to one hundred percent. But—" she paused. "Seventy percent would be safe. Immediately. With monitoring."

"Seventy percent," Brother Joba said.

"Immediately," she said. "More than double current flow. The farms would feel it within a season."

Prael was very still at her monitoring station.

"Within a season," she said, very quietly. She was looking at records I could not see from the supervisor's chair, but I knew what they contained: the agricultural yield data for five hundred years of Alabaster, the farm output, the water requirements, the specific calculations she had been running since she arrived in the fields station.

"Prael," I said.

She looked up.

"How much would the farm yield improve at seventy percent flow?" I said.

She looked back at her records. She did a calculation with the focused speed of someone who had been working with this data for years and knew all the relationships.

"Within three growing seasons," she said, "approximately thirty percent improvement in total agricultural output." She paused. "Within five years, as the soil profile builds to accommodate the increased moisture—" she paused. "Closer to fifty percent."

Fifty percent more food from the same farms, on the same land, with the same farmers.

Alabaster had been feeding itself adequately for five hundred years. With a regulator adjustment we had not known was possible, within five years it would have fifty percent more to work with.

"Why did no one know about the regulator?" Brother Joba said.

"Because no one could reach nine hundred feet to find it," I said. "No operator has been deep enough. The sensor data for that depth was degraded." I paused. "The system knew. The Central Core records have the original construction documentation. But no one has been reading those records."

"Until now," he said.

"Until now," I agreed.

I adjusted the regulator that afternoon.

Not alone — the governance protocols applied to this as they applied to everything significant. I brought it to Father Brolan, who brought it to the senior Servants and the city managers' representative who had become our standard liaison. The decision was made collectively, with Nara's structural assessment as the technical basis and Prael's yield analysis as the impact assessment.

The adjustment itself: I sat at the main operational interface, reached through the system to the flow regulator at nine hundred feet, and changed the setting from thirty-one percent to seventy percent.

The system confirmed: :Flow regulator adjusted. New setting: 70% of maximum permitted flow. Monitoring aquifer structural response. Initial readings: nominal. No over-pressurisation detected.:

And then, because I wanted to know: :Estimated time to observe increased flow at upper aquifer level: 4-6 days. Estimated time to observe farm-level moisture impact: 1-2 growing seasons.:

I told the room.

Father Brolan said nothing for a moment. He looked at the map on his wall — the city, the farms, the eastern mountains. Then he said: "Five hundred years."

"Yes," I said.

"Five hundred years," he said again, not as a lament but as an accounting. "The city has been farming on thirty-one percent of the water that was available to it. For five hundred years."

"The original population projection was reasonable," I said. "Hollis built it for what he expected. He didn't expect the city to grow to three hundred and forty percent over the projection."

"He built a city people wanted to live in," Father Brolan said. "That is its own kind of success."

"Yes," I said. "But it means the accounting is long." I paused. "The aquifer. The flow regulator. The obstruction we cleared." I paused

again. "There may be other designed features in the deep systems that we haven't found yet. Other settings that were calibrated for the original design and haven't been updated since."

He looked at me.

"We need a full survey," I said. "The entire deep system. Everything below the agricultural layer, below the standard operation depth. What's there, what it does, whether the current settings match the current situation."

"How long?" he said.

"Weeks," I said. "Months for the full picture. But we can start immediately." I paused. "Nara and Brother Joba's team. This is exactly what they've been building toward."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Do it," he said. "Systematically. With documentation." He paused. "I suspect we're going to find more surprises."

"I suspect the same," I said.

The deep survey began the next morning.

What it produced, over the course of two weeks of daily sessions, was a picture of the installation's deep systems that I had not been able to construct from the Central Core records alone — the records were documentation of what had been built; the survey showed what still existed and in what condition.

The flow regulator was the most significant finding, but not the only one.

At eleven hundred feet: a second flow regulator, on a different geological source channel. Setting: forty-three percent of maximum. Not the primary source — a secondary channel that supplemented the primary during high-precipitation periods. Currently contributing a small fraction of its potential. Adjusted to sixty percent after Nara's structural assessment confirmed the aquifer could handle the combined increase without over-pressurisation.

At twelve hundred feet: a geological stabilisation structure, a designed feature that had been managing the interaction between the installation's geothermal generation and the surrounding rock for five centuries. In excellent condition. No adjustment needed. The survey finding was simply confirmation that it existed and was functioning correctly — valuable knowledge regardless.

At fourteen hundred feet: something that took Nara three sessions to understand fully.

She described it first as an anomaly: a section of the deep rock that had a specific quality she had not encountered before. Not the forced-displacement quality of the first obstruction. Not the designed-structure quality of the flow regulators. Something that felt, she said, like the rock remembering something.

"Remembering," I said.

"The quality of the rock in that area," she said, slowly. "It has the geological markers of having been moved and returned. Not recently — very old. But the molecular structure of the rock has a history of displacement." She paused. "Someone moved this rock and then put it back."

I asked the system.

The answer was long and came in pieces, requiring me to ask follow-up questions as each piece opened new context.

At fourteen hundred feet, beneath the eastern edge of the installation, there was a space. Not a natural cave — a designed cavity, part of the original construction, sealed after use. The Central Core records described it as a maintenance access tunnel, used during the installation's construction to manage operations at depth that couldn't be reached from the surface. When construction was complete, the tunnel had been sealed by moving rock back into position over the access points.

The sealed tunnel still existed. Its structural integrity was intact. The rock covering the primary access was mobile — it could be moved by the earthmoving systems with appropriate authorization and sufficient geological-tactile precision.

And inside the tunnel, according to the Central Core records, was the installation's deep maintenance archive.

The physical records from the construction period. Not the Central Core's digital records — the physical records, the written documentation and material samples and construction specifications that the original builders had stored underground for long-term preservation. Records that would tell us, in the original language of the people who built this installation, exactly what they built and how and why.

"There's a physical archive," I told Father Brolan.

He looked at me.

"Below the eastern edge of the installation," I said. "In a sealed construction tunnel. Original physical records from the founding period."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Physical records," he said.

"Written documentation, material samples, construction specifications," I said. "The actual physical objects from the original construction." I paused. "The Central Core's digital records are a summary. The physical archive would be the primary source."

"Can you access it?"

"The tunnel is sealed with displaced rock," I said. "Moving it would require an earthmoving operation at fourteen hundred feet with the precision of the geological-tactile modality." I paused. "Nara."

"She's been here for two weeks," he said.

"She's been working at depth every day," I said. "She's more developed than anyone else who has ever tried to do this work." I paused. "She may not be ready for fourteen hundred feet yet. But she will be."

He sat with this.

"When she is ready," he said, "bring me the proposal. Full documentation of the structural assessment, the access plan, the risk

analysis." He paused. "I want to understand exactly what we're attempting before it's attempted."

"Yes," I said.

"And in the meantime," he said, "continue the survey."

The survey continued.

And while the survey continued, the other work continued alongside it: the communications with Kael, the preparation for Bren's eventual visit or permanent contact, the ongoing registrations, the regional weather calibration showing improving results in downstream territories, the governance documentation growing more complete under Brother Evan's careful hand.

And the communications with Orvala, which had changed character since the Theta revelation.

They were more direct now — Orvala spoke with less of the careful information management that Marten had described as her characteristic mode, and more with the quality of someone who had decided that the management had served its purpose and something more collaborative was appropriate. She asked questions about the deep survey findings with the specific interest of someone who had access to documentation about the original construction but not to its physical reality.

"The flow regulators," she said, in one of these communications. "Theta's installation records document them. We've known they existed. We did not know the current settings."

"You couldn't access them from Theta?" I said.

"Theta's deep systems are—" she paused. "Less developed than Alabaster's, in terms of current operator capability. Kael has been working to extend her reach, but the geological-tactile modality is not her primary interface mode." She paused again. "Her granddaughter. I should perhaps say that more plainly."

"I know she's your granddaughter," I said.

"I know you know," she said. "I meant—" a pause. "I meant that my management of her development has been the same as my management of Theta's operations generally. Cautious. Perhaps too cautious." She paused. "Sera arrived at Theta three days ago. She sat in the interface chair and the indicator responded immediately."

"What colour?" I said.

"A colour I have not seen before," Orvala said. "Lem took notes. He described it as copper."

I reached for the system: *Copper indicator response. What interface modality does this indicate?*

:Copper indicator response: atmospheric resonance modality. Extremely rare. Operators with this modality perceive the system's atmospheric and weather management functions with exceptional clarity and detail. Documented occurrence: 3 cases in historical records.:

Three cases in the historical records.

"Sera has an atmospheric resonance modality," I told Orvala.

A pause.

"What does that mean practically?" she said.

"It means her capability in the weather operations domain may exceed mine," I said. "My tonal modality works across all systems but with moderate depth in the atmospheric ones. Atmospheric resonance is specifically calibrated for the atmospheric systems." I paused. "It means Theta's weather operations, if Sera develops her capability, could become something Theta has not previously been."

"I see," Orvala said. She said it in the tone of someone for whom this was more than information — for whom it was the opening of a door that had been considered closed.

"Orvala," I said.

"Yes."

"What would it take for Theta to become a fully active installation? Not the minimal operations it runs now — fully active. The way Alabaster is."

A long pause.

"Kael has been asking me this question for five years," she said.

"What have you been answering?"

"That the time was not right," she said. "That we needed to understand the situation more fully before committing to it." A pause. "The answers I have been giving Kael are the same answers you have been giving people when caution was warranted." Another pause. "They are not the same answers when caution has become — what she called it."

"Fear," I said.

"Fear," she agreed. "She is not wrong about what it is." A long pause. "What would it take. The honest answer is: the governance structure Alabaster has built, applied to Theta. The same conditions, the same transparency, the same collective decision-making." She paused. "And operators who understand what they're doing."

"You have Kael," I said. "And Sera now."

"Yes," she said.

"And the documentation Alabaster has built can be shared," I said. "The governance protocols, the Succession Document, the operational principles." I paused. "Everything we've learned in sixty-three days."

"Sixty-three days," she said. It carried the same quality it always carried when she referenced the pace — the specific combination of respect and something adjacent to wistfulness, the feeling of someone looking at a path they might have taken.

"Orvala," I said. "What would you want Theta to be, if you could want it freely?"

The silence was the longest yet.

"What Hollis described," she said. "The open community. A full partner in the distributed approach. A node in the network rather than—" she paused. "Rather than an archive that monitors from the outside." Another pause. "I have wanted this for a long time. I have been telling myself that wanting it was different from it being appropriate to pursue it."

"It's appropriate to pursue it," I said.

"Because you say so?" she said, with a quality that was dry but not dismissive.

"Because the conditions that made it inappropriate no longer apply in the same way," I said. "Because Kael and Sera are there and they're ready. Because the distributed approach requires Theta's participation in a way that Theta-as-archive cannot provide." I paused. "And because Hollis wanted it. He couldn't build it. We can."

A pause.

"We," she said.

"We," I confirmed.

Another pause. Then: "I'll talk to Kael."

"Good," I said.

"She will be insufferable about having been right," she said.

"Probably," I said.

A pause that had, for the first time in all my communications with Orvala, something that sounded like a laugh in it. Brief, quickly contained, but present.

"Good," she said, and the call ended.

Nara found me in the courtyard that evening.

She had the quality she had when she had been in a session and the session had given her something to think about — a particular internal focus, the specific attention of someone processing new information while the rest of them went through the ordinary motions of the day.

"Fourteen hundred feet," she said.

"You've been thinking about it," I said.

"Since you told me the sealed tunnel is there," she said. "I've been going back to it in every session. Feeling the boundary of it." She sat on the bench. "The sealed access point. The rock that was moved and replaced." She pressed her hands to the bench stone. "I can feel the

quality of it even from here. At this depth, through the building's stone."

"How long before you're ready?" I said.

"For the access operation?" She was quiet for a moment. "A week," she said. "Maybe ten days. I need more sessions at the approach depth before I try to move anything." She paused. "It's different from the aquifer work. The aquifer obstruction was already fractured — we worked with existing tension. This is sealed rock that was placed deliberately. Moving it precisely without disturbing the surrounding structure—"

"Requires the precision you're still developing," I said.

"Yes," she said. "But—" she paused. "The fundamental tone being correct helps more at this depth than at the aquifer depth. The deeper the operation, the more the baseline quality of the system matters." She looked at her hands. "It's like the difference between trying to thread a needle in dim light and trying to thread it in good light. The needle is the same. The light is different."

"The fundamental tone as light," I said.

"The system's ability to show me what's there," she said. "The more correctly calibrated it is, the more precisely it can feed back what the deep sensors are reading." She paused. "I am aware of the irony of describing a fifty-eight-day development as having corrected something that was wrong for centuries."

"Fifty-nine days now," I said.

She looked at me with the quality she used when she was about to say something direct that she had been thinking about for a while.

"Taryn," she said.

"Yes."

"What's in the physical archive," she said. "Do you know?"

"I know what the Central Core records describe," I said. "Construction documentation. Original specifications. Material samples." I paused. "The Central Core records are the summary. The physical archive is the primary source."

"Hollis's handwriting," she said.

I looked at her.

"If the original construction records are there," she said, "if the founding operators wrote things down in physical documents and stored them at fourteen hundred feet — there might be Hollis's actual handwriting. Not the Archive that was transcribed and kept by Onyx. The original documents, as he wrote them." She paused. "There might be the original decisions. Not reconstructed, not interpreted. The actual records from the actual moment."

I had not thought about it in exactly those terms.

Four hundred years ago, Orvala had been given the Hollis Archive to keep. The documents that had survived through Onyx's preservation — the journals, the operational notes, the succession document. But those were the records that Hollis had chosen to share, had given to be kept, had prepared for the future.

The physical archive at fourteen hundred feet would be the working documents. The records that were stored for reference rather than for posterity. The construction specifications and the technical notes and possibly the records of decisions made in the middle of making them, before the retrospective clarity of the Archive's more considered writing.

"We need to open it," I said.

"Yes," she said. "We do."

Ten days later Nara was ready.

The preparation sessions had gone exactly as she had described: each one extending her reach, refining her precision, building the specific facility for moving rock at depth that was different from the clay-cycling of agricultural work and different from the aquifer's fracture-following, the specific capability of placing force precisely on material that had been deliberately positioned.

Brother Joba, who had been with her for every session, had a quality in the final preparation session that I had learned to read as

his version of confidence — the specific settled attention of someone who had worked with a new system long enough to trust it.

"She's ready," he told me, after the session. He said it with the same economy he brought to everything, but the economy was warm this time rather than neutral.

"How do you know?" I said.

"Because in the last three sessions, she's been telling me things I didn't ask," he said. "The feedback is coming before I need it. She's not reading the rock — she's inside it." He paused. "That's the difference between competence and facility."

The session itself was in the early morning, before the rest of the day's operations, with the specific quality of preparation that came from having planned something carefully and being ready to do it.

Father Brolan was present. Brother Evan was present. Prael was at the monitoring station. I was at the supervisor's chair. Nara was at the interface. Brother Joba and his three senior operators were at their stations.

The access structure at fourteen hundred feet was not complex. The Central Core records had described it clearly: two primary access points, each sealed with approximately three cubic feet of displaced rock. The rock had been placed at the original construction and had been undisturbed since.

"The primary access point," Nara said. Her voice had the quality it had during deep sessions — not distant, but focused in a way that was different from normal conversation, the quality of someone who was in two places simultaneously. "I have it. The sealed rock has a — it has a specific texture. Very compressed. Dense. The rock underneath it is the original floor of the tunnel — smoother, different geological composition." She paused. "It's a clean seal. No deterioration. No moisture intrusion."

"Whoever placed it did it well," Brother Joba said.

"Yes," she said. "The placement was careful. It was meant to last." A pause. "I can feel the edges of it. The boundary between the displaced rock and the surrounding formation." A longer pause. "The

precision requirement here is different from the aquifer work. I'm not working with existing tension — I need to move this rock without creating new stress in the surrounding structure."

"Tell me when you're ready," I said.

She was quiet for two minutes. Then: "Ready."

"Brother Joba," I said. "Nara's lead."

"Ours to support," he said.

I held the conducting chord. The team's tones rose to depth in the specific register of the deep geological work — heavier than the agricultural tones, denser, with the quality I associated with the rock at this depth. Nara's gold indicator was bright, steady, the constant illumination of a deep and clear connection.

"Beginning," she said.

What happened over the next forty minutes was, from the outside, nothing visible. No tremors, no sound, no change to the fields station's ordinary appearance. The team sat at their interfaces with the focused attention of people doing precise work. I conducted. Prael watched the monitoring data.

But at fourteen hundred feet, the displaced rock that had sealed the primary access point to the construction archive moved.

Not quickly — nothing at this depth moved quickly. Incrementally, millimetre by careful millimetre, guided by Nara's perception of the rock's character and position, supported by Brother Joba's team's steady geological force, coordinated by the conducting that held all of it in a single coherent intention.

"The boundary is clear now," Nara said, at the twenty-minute mark. "The displaced rock is fully separated from the surrounding formation. It's—" she paused. "It's balanced. Suspended. I have it."

"Hold it there," I said.

She held it for thirty seconds. "It's not moving back," she said. "The surrounding structure is stable. No new stress." A pause. "The access is open."

"Can you move the rock to a safe position?" I said.

"Already moving," she said.

Five minutes more. Then: "Done. The access point is fully clear. The surrounding rock is stable. The tunnel below is—" she paused. "I can feel it. The tunnel floor is intact. The air in it is—" she paused again. "Sealed air. It has a different quality from the surrounding rock. Still. It's been still for a very long time."

The physical archive, undisturbed for five hundred years.

"We'll need people to go down," Father Brolan said.

"Yes," I said. "Not today. We need to assess the access, determine the structural integrity of the tunnel from above before we send anyone in." I paused. "But it's open."

"It's open," he confirmed.

The team that went down three days later was small: Brother Tomlin, the structural maintenance Servant, who had spent thirty years managing the Tower's physical integrity and understood deep structural assessment; and two Guards with the appropriate physical capabilities and equipment for confined-space work at depth.

The access shaft, once Nara confirmed the surrounding structure was stable enough for human passage, was a narrow vertical shaft lined with the original construction material — the same seamless stone as the Tower's surface, cool and smooth and carrying the geothermal warmth at depth. Brother Tomlin and the two Guards descended carefully, with the specific unhurried attention of people who understood that the point was to arrive and that arriving required patience.

I was at the operational interface the entire time, the system's deep sensors showing me as much of their progress as I could interpret. Nara was at her interface, tracking the structural response of the surrounding rock to the presence of three people in a space that had held only sealed air for five centuries.

"The tunnel is intact," Brother Tomlin reported, his voice coming back up through the communication line the Guards had unreeled

on the descent. "Structurally sound throughout the passage." A pause. "The primary chamber is — it's large. Larger than I expected. The ceiling is higher than the shaft suggested." A longer pause. "There are — there are shelves. Along the walls. Metal shelves, or the original equivalent of metal." Another pause. "And on the shelves—"

He stopped.

"What?" Father Brolan said.

"Documents," Brother Tomlin said. "Physical documents in sealed containers. The containers are — they're the same material as the installation's structural elements. Whatever they made this from, it lasts." A pause. "There are — I'm counting—" a pause. "Forty-seven containers on the primary shelves. Possibly more around the corner of the chamber."

Forty-seven containers.

"And something else," Brother Tomlin said. "Against the far wall. Equipment of some kind. I don't know what it does. It has the same quality as the installation's surface components." He paused. "It looks — it looks like it's been waiting to be used."

I asked the system: *Deep maintenance archive chamber, eastern access. Equipment documented against the far wall. What is it?*

:Processing. Based on construction records and dimensional analysis: the equipment at the far wall of the primary chamber is a sensory calibration and assessment station. This equipment was used during the installation's construction period for operator calibration and neural alignment verification. This is one of two known calibration stations on the continent. Note: this station is compatible with current operator interface technology and can be used to perform sensory recalibration on operators with misaligned neural-interface connections.:

The calibration station.

The one the system had mentioned, weeks ago, when it first described sensory misalignment and said that recalibration required a specific facility.

I had asked, then, where such a facility was. The system had told me it was not in the local database.

It had been at fourteen hundred feet. Sealed. Waiting.

"Father Brolan," I said.

He was looking at me with an expression that told me he had heard the system's response — or had read something in my face as I received it.

"Tell me," he said.

I told him.

He was quiet for a long moment.

"The recalibration," he said. "The sensory alignment that the system described as necessary for the visual interface to work properly. For the physical sense connection. For the full range of interface modalities."

"Yes," I said. "This is the equipment that can do it." I paused. "The system said there were two known calibration stations on the continent. The other is at Theta." I paused again. "Orvala described having implanting technology at Theta. The nanotechnology for the communications implants — Misha and Marten's implants." I paused once more. "The calibration station and the implanting technology may be related systems."

"What does recalibration mean practically?" he said.

"The visual interface," I said. "Currently degraded for all operators — blurry, headache-inducing, unreliable. With proper calibration, the visual overlay would become clear and stable. The physical sense connection — proprioceptive feedback from the machines — would become functional." I paused. "The operators would have access to the full range of interface capabilities, not just the aural and partially the tactile."

"The choir," he said.

"The fully calibrated choir," I said. "Not operators who are doing their best with a connection that's partially miscalibrated to their neural architecture. Operators who are properly aligned with the system they're working with."

He sat with this for a long time.

"Brother Tomlin," Father Brolan said into the communication line. "Document everything. Photograph everything if you can. Handle nothing you haven't confirmed is structurally stable." A pause. "And be careful on the way back up."

"Yes, Father Brolan," Brother Tomlin's voice came back, with the specific quality of a very capable person being told to do something he was already doing.

Father Brolan looked at the window. The eastern mountains were visible in the afternoon light, their flat tops catching the sun.

"The calibration station," he said. "Is there anyone who should be calibrated before others?"

I thought about this.

"Nara," I said. "She's been developing the geological-tactile modality with a partially miscalibrated connection. What she can do now — what we found in the aquifer work, the regulator, the archive — that's with a degraded visual interface and no physical sense connection. Properly calibrated—"

"She'd be more capable still," he said.

"Yes," I said. "And Saya. And the operators who've been registered longest — the people who have been doing this work for years and whose capabilities have been limited by the misalignment they didn't know they had."

"And you?" he said.

I paused.

"I've been calibrating for sixty-three days," I said. "Whatever alignment I have, I developed it rather than having it corrected. I don't know what the calibration station would do to what I've built." I paused. "That needs careful thought before it's attempted."

"Yes," he said. "It does." He looked at the map. "One thing at a time."

"One thing at a time," I agreed.

That evening I went to the courtyard as I always did.

The day had been large — the archive, the calibration station, the conversation with Orvala about Theta becoming active, the regulator adjustment whose effects would take seasons to fully manifest. Large in the way of days when things that were possible became actual, when the potential that had been accumulating became visible in the world.

I put my hands on the bench and listened.

The aquifer. Flow higher than it had been in five centuries — not at the sixty-three-percent level we had restored by clearing the obstruction, but at that level plus the seventy-percent regulator setting, the two effects compounding. The water table was already responding — Prael had notes from today's monitoring data showing early signs of change in the deep agricultural zone, the soil responding to increased moisture availability with the slow patient urgency of something that had been waiting.

The fundamental tone, clean and true.

And now, at fourteen hundred feet: the physical archive, open. The calibration station, waiting.

And across the communication network, faint but present: Kael at Theta, Bren at Ferrath, the contact at the central-region installation that Kael had reached — the beginnings of what would become the network Hollis had described and been unable to build.

And Tomas, two floors up.

I thought about Hollis. About what he had written in the last section of the Archive: *if someone opens the door again, with the wisdom to do it well, the distributed approach is the answer.*

The distributed approach was underway. Not complete — it would be years before it was anything like complete, years before the network was broad and deep enough to change the odds meaningfully. But underway.

And the physical archive would tell us things we didn't yet know we needed to know. The calibration station would give the operators what they had never had. The regulator adjustment would feed the

farms. Theta would become active. Sera would develop her atmospheric resonance capability. Bren would come to understand what he had been feeling for forty years. Nara would go deeper than fourteen hundred feet eventually, and further, and find whatever else was there to be found.

One thing at a time.

But in the right direction.

The courtyard's walls resonated with the fundamental tone, the building's continuous voice saying what it had always been saying and what it would go on saying as long as the geothermal source ran and the generators held and the system was maintained by people who understood it.

I am here. I have been here. I am not going anywhere.

"I know," I said, to the walls and the stone and the old patient voice that ran through everything.

And meant it more than I had ever meant anything.

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The physical archive took three weeks to fully catalog.

Brother Tomlin managed the process with the thoroughness he brought to structural maintenance: systematic, documented, no container opened before it was photographed and recorded, no document handled without the acid-free materials the library Servant had provided with the specific satisfaction of someone whose expertise had finally found an application at this scale. She had been working with five-hundred-year-old documents for years; now she had documents from the founding period itself, in the original hand of the people who built the installation, and she approached the work with a focused reverence that was entirely professional and entirely genuine.

The forty-seven containers were not all documents. Some held material samples — core samples from the geological survey conducted during the installation's construction, the original assessment of the rock and soil and water that had informed every operational decision Hollis made. Some held equipment: small calibration tools, interface components that predated anything currently in use,

examples of the nanotechnology that the system had mentioned in the context of the communications implants. Misha examined these last with an expression that combined professional interest and personal resonance, the specific quality of someone looking at an older version of something she carried in her own skin.

But most were documents.

The library Servant began translation immediately, working with the same careful patience she had always brought to the near-script documents, but with a speed she had not been able to achieve before — because now she had context. The Hollis Archive, the Central Core records, the months of accumulated understanding of the founding period's vocabulary and concerns. The documents in the physical archive were not opaque strangers; they were the original sources of things she had been working from transcriptions of for years.

"It's like hearing someone speak a language I've been reading from a grammar book," she told me, on the fourth day of the translation work. "I know the words. Now I know the rhythm."

What emerged from the archive was not a single revelation but a continuous deepening. The founding period, in the original documents, was both more ordinary and more extraordinary than the Archive's retrospective account. More ordinary because the people who wrote these records were people — concerned about specific practical problems, debating specific technical solutions, disagreeing with each other in specific ways that the Archive had smoothed into a unified founding vision. More extraordinary because the problems they were solving were genuinely extraordinary: a planet that was not yet habitable being made so, by machines they had brought from somewhere else, by people who were making everything up as they went.

One document, translated in the second week, was a daily operational log from the construction period. Not Hollis's log — someone else's, a person identified in the records as the installation's chief engineer, a woman whose name was long and rendered by the library

Servant as a best approximation. The daily log covered a period of several months near the beginning of the installation's construction, and it was in its specificity both beautiful and strange: *the eastern geological survey completed today; the primary aquifer source identified at seven hundred feet as projected; the flow regulator installed at nine hundred feet and calibrated to 31% per design specification for projected population of* [*number*].

"Per design specification," Prael said, when I read her this passage. She was looking at it with the specific quality she brought to things that resolved long-standing questions. "It was always 31%. The original design parameter."

"Calibrated for the projected population," I said.

"Which was—" she looked at the number from the document. Then at her records. "Which was about twenty percent of Alabaster's current population."

"Yes," I said.

She was quiet for a moment. "They weren't wrong about anything," she said. "The design was correct for what they planned. They couldn't have planned for five centuries of growth." She paused. "The city just became more than they expected."

"More than anyone expected," I said.

"Hollis built something people wanted to live in," she said. It was Father Brolan's phrase, which she had apparently absorbed and was now using with the specific quality of someone for whom it had become true rather than borrowed.

"Yes," I said.

"And now we're adjusting the systems for the city that actually exists," she said. "Rather than the city that was projected."

"Yes," I said. "That's exactly what we're doing."

The calibration station descended.

This required its own careful preparation — not the deep-session

preparation of approaching a geological operation at increasing depth, but the human preparation of understanding what the station did and how and what the effects would be and how to manage them.

The system's description of sensory recalibration had been general: realigning the neural-interface connection to the operator's actual neurological architecture rather than the founding operators' architecture. The practical effect would be restoration of the visual interface and the physical sense connection — the two modalities that were currently degraded or absent for all current operators.

What this meant for each individual operator would be different, because each operator's current interface experience was different. For those who heard the system primarily as sound, recalibration might add visual and physical dimensions to an experience that had been purely aural. For those who felt it primarily as physical sensation, it might add sound and visual clarity. For those whose connection was already partially visual — which no one's currently was, but which some had briefly experienced as blurry, headache-inducing fragments — it might make the visual layer clear and stable.

The question of whether to calibrate me was the one Father Brolan had set aside for careful thought, and careful thought had occupied a significant portion of the three weeks since the archive's opening.

The concern was straightforward: I had developed my interface capability over sixty-three days of daily practice, building a facility that was idiosyncratic to my specific neurological experience of the system. My tonal perception had become the foundation of everything I could do — the conducting, the deep query conversations, the management of the dome, the coordination of the operator teams. If recalibration changed the character of my interface experience—

"It would add to what you have," Nara said, when we discussed it. "Not replace it."

"You don't know that," I said.

"The calibration station aligns the connection to the operator's actual neurological architecture," she said. "Your neurological archi-

tecture includes whatever you've developed over sixty-three days. The calibration would clarify the visual and physical dimensions of your interface experience — it wouldn't change the aural dimension, because the aural dimension is already correctly calibrated. That's what the system told us: only the aural connection is working correctly. The calibration corrects what isn't working. It doesn't touch what is."

"In theory," I said.

"In theory," she agreed. "Which is why I'm going first."

She had been clear about this from the beginning: she should be the first operator to use the calibration station. Her reasoning was both practical and generous — she was the most recently arrived, the one whose development was most in progress, the one who would benefit most immediately. But also: she had no long history in the Tower to be disrupted. If something unexpected happened, the impact on operations would be minimised.

"I'm going first," she had said. "And you observe. And we learn from what happens to me before we decide about anyone else."

Father Brolan had agreed. I had agreed. The senior team had agreed.

The calibration station was brought to the surface carefully — Brother Tomlin managing the extraction process from the tunnel with the same patience and thoroughness he had brought to the initial access. It was, when fully visible, smaller than I had expected: a chair with the characteristic bronze-tipped interface configuration, but different from the operational chairs in specific ways that the founding documents described as the sensory alignment mechanism — additional contact points, a different arrangement of the metal elements, a configuration that was clearly designed for a specific purpose rather than for general operation.

It was installed in a designated room on the fourth level, the room prepared to be used for nothing else, the system's connection to it confirmed through the interface tests that the deep access had made possible.

The morning of Nara's calibration, the room held Father Brolan, Brother Evan, Prael, Saya, and me.

Nara sat in the chair.

She put her hands on the pads. The gold indicator lit.

"Ready?" I said.

"Ready," she said.

To the system: *Initiate sensory recalibration for Lieutenant Commander Nara. Geological-tactile primary modality. Correct misaligned neural-interface connections.*

:Sensory calibration initiated. Duration: estimated 8-12 minutes. Warning: operator may experience disorientation during calibration. This is expected and temporary. Do not interrupt the process unless the operator reports significant distress.:

Eight to twelve minutes.

Nara's expression changed.

Not dramatically — a specific quality of attention that was different from her normal deep-session focus. More internal. The quality of someone receiving something rather than reaching for something.

At the four-minute mark she said, without opening her eyes: "There's a visual element. I can see — not the room. Something else."

"The system's overlay?" I said.

"The installation," she said. "I can see the installation. Not clearly — fuzzy at the edges. But — the full depth of it. The way the sections connect. The flow paths." A pause. "I can see the aquifer channel we cleared. I can see the flow regulators. I can see the—" she stopped. "I can see the archive tunnel."

The visual interface. The holographic overlay that the system had been designed to project — the schematic of the installation laid over physical vision, the specific display that the founding operators would have used to navigate the installation's complex geography.

Blurry, she had said. Fuzzy at the edges.

"Hold it," I said. "Don't push toward it. Let the calibration complete."

She was quiet for the remaining time.

At the eleven-minute mark the system said: :Sensory recalibration complete. Neural-interface alignment verified. Visual modality: 73% of optimal clarity. Physical sense connection: established. Geological-tactile modality: enhanced. Full calibration may require 24-48 hours for neural integration to stabilise.:

"Nara," I said.

She opened her eyes.

She looked at the room. Then she looked at her hands. Then she looked at the floor.

"The floor," she said. "I can see the geothermal system through the floor. Not as a feeling — as a visual." She blinked. "It's—" she paused. "It's not clear. What the system described as 73%." She blinked again. "But it's there."

She stood slowly, with the specific care of someone who was not certain of their balance.

"How do you feel?" Brother Evan said.

"Dizzy," she said. "Not badly. Like I looked up too fast." She put her hand against the wall. "The wall feels different too. The physical sense — I can feel what's in the wall rather than just through the wall." She paused. "The difference between looking at something through glass and touching it."

"Is it worse?" I said.

"No," she said. "It's more. There's more." She was quiet for a moment. "I was doing the deep sessions at—" she paused. "At whatever fraction of what I can now access. And I was already finding things." She looked at me. "The survey isn't finished."

"No," I said.

"I need to go back to depth," she said. "I need to go back to the calibrated connection and see what I missed."

"Tomorrow," Brother Evan said. "The system said 24-48 hours for neural integration."

She accepted this with the specific patience of someone who had learned when accepting was correct.

"Tomorrow," she said.

The next morning Nara and Brother Joba went back to depth.

What they found, with the partially calibrated visual interface and the enhanced geological-tactile connection, changed the picture again.

The flow regulators at nine hundred and eleven hundred feet, which we had adjusted, were only part of the water management system. At deeper levels — levels Nara had perceived before only as the broad character of the rock — there were additional designed structures. Not flow regulators: something the system's descriptions called *geological aquifer support structures*, designed features that had been managing the surrounding rock's interaction with the aquifer for five centuries, maintaining the geological conditions that allowed the aquifer to function at all.

Three of them. All in good condition. All doing exactly what they had been designed to do, which was to prevent the aquifer's cavity from the kind of geological pressure that would collapse it.

Nara could now see them, through the visual interface, as clear structural elements rather than feeling for them through the tactile. The combination of the two perceptions — the tactile telling her the material character, the visual showing her the configuration — gave her a picture of the deep system that was qualitatively different from what we had had before.

"The aquifer isn't just a reservoir," she said, after the session. "It's engineered. The entire geological structure around it — the rock, the pressure distribution, the thermal management — it was all designed. It was all placed." She was looking at her notes, the sketches she had been making during the session of what she could see. "The aquifer exists because someone made a place for it. In rock that would not naturally have supported it."

"Another five-hundred-year-old piece of work," Prael said.

"Yes," Nara said. "And in good condition. Everything I could see was functioning correctly." She paused. "Which means the only problems we've been dealing with were the problems someone created. The obstruction, the miscalibrated flow regulator setting, the fact that no one knew these structures existed to maintain them." She paused again. "None of it was deterioration. It was interference and ignorance."

"The interference is addressed," I said. "The ignorance is becoming knowledge."

"Yes," she said. She looked at her sketches. "I want to map the full system. Every designed structure I can see. A complete picture of what exists at every depth." She paused. "Not because something needs fixing immediately. Because we should know what we have."

"How long?" I said.

"Weeks," she said. "Months for a complete map." She paused. "But the important structures — the aquifer support system, the flow path architecture — those I can sketch in the next few sessions."

"Do it," I said.

The calibrations continued.

Not all at once — the room could hold one person at a time and the neural integration period meant spacing them appropriately. But in the three weeks following Nara's calibration, the senior operators went through the process one by one.

Sister Akasa: after her calibration, she sat in the weather station and looked at the farms through the window for a long time without speaking. When I asked what she saw, she said: "The lens. I can see the lens. The actual shape of it, the edges, the thickness variation across the surface." She paused. "I have been feeling this for twelve years. I have been inferring the shape from the feedback. Now I can see it directly." Another pause. "It is considerably more beautiful than I imagined."

Brother Joba: after his calibration, he went immediately to the fields station and asked for a full session. What he reported afterward was characteristically brief: "The geological structures. I can see the composition of the layers rather than feeling for it. It is—" he paused. "It is faster. What used to take a full session of careful attention takes a moment of looking." He paused again. "Forty years. I wonder what I missed."

"You didn't miss anything that needed to be found," I said. "You kept the farms alive for forty years with the tools you had."

He looked at me with the quality he used when he was accepting something that required accepting. "Yes," he said. "I did." A pause. "And now I have better tools."

Saya: her calibration was different from the others in a way that the system had predicted but that was still arresting to observe. Her primary modality was physical-tactile, and the calibration confirmed and enhanced this, but it also revealed something that had not been fully visible before: her physical sense connection, now properly established, gave her a direct proprioceptive relationship with the systems she worked with that was qualitatively different from any other operator's experience.

"It feels like having hands," she said, after. "Inside the system. Not just feeling what's there but — able to shape it directly. Like the difference between pressing through a membrane and touching something directly."

"That's the physical sense connection," I said. "The full version."

"Is this what the founding operators experienced?" she said.

"The founding operators had this," I said. "And the visual, and the aural. All three, properly calibrated." I paused. "We've been working with one functional channel for five centuries."

She sat with this for a moment. Then: "And with one functional channel, we held the dome for thirty-one hours and cleared an aquifer obstruction at eight hundred feet and found a physical archive at fourteen hundred."

"Yes," I said.

"We weren't doing badly," she said.

"No," I said. "We weren't."

The question of my own calibration resolved itself in an unexpected way.

I had been thinking about it since Nara's session, circling it from different angles, trying to understand the risk more precisely. The system had been clear: the calibration aligned the visual and physical modalities to the operator's actual neurological architecture. The aural modality, already correctly calibrated, would not be affected.

But correctly calibrated by what standard? The system said my aural connection was working correctly — but working correctly in comparison to what I had now, or in comparison to what the founding operators had? I had built my aural facility over sixty-three days of intensive development. If that development had been partially building workarounds for misaligned visual and physical channels — if the sophistication of what I heard was partly the result of compensating for what I couldn't see and feel—

Then calibration might change the balance. The aural might not compensate as much, not because it diminished, but because it no longer needed to carry everything.

I brought this to Brother Evan.

He listened and then said: "You're describing something the system can tell you directly. Ask it."

I asked: *If Commander Taryn undergoes sensory recalibration, what is the expected effect on the existing aural interface development?*

:Processing. The aural interface development accumulated by Commander Taryn over 63 days represents a specific neural pathway development that is not affected by sensory recalibration. Recalibration adds correctly aligned visual and physical modalities to existing aural capability; it does not modify existing neural pathways.

The expected result is expanded interface capability across all three modalities, with the aural modality continuing at its current development level.:

"The aural is not affected," Brother Evan said.

"The system says so," I said.

"Do you believe the system?"

I thought about this. The system had been accurate in every prediction it made about the calibration process for the operators who had gone through it. It had described the expected effects and the expected timeline and the expected integration period, and all of those had matched what actually happened.

"Yes," I said. "I believe it."

"Then the question is timing," he said. "Not whether."

"When does it make sense?" I said. "The operational picture right now—"

"Is stable," he said. "More stable than at any point since you arrived. The siege is resolved. The aquifer is recovering. The deep survey is underway. The network of operators is building gradually. Nothing requires your uninterrupted capability in the immediate term." He paused. "If not now, when?"

I looked at the window. The eastern mountains, the afternoon light on their flat tops.

"After Bren visits," I said. "He's confirmed he's coming. Two weeks."

"Two weeks after Bren," he said.

"Let me spend two weeks understanding what his interface mode is and how it fits with what we have," I said. "And then I'll think about the calibration."

He looked at me with the expression that told me he was noting something for the record.

"You're not afraid of it," he said.

"No," I said.

"But you're not eager for it either," he said.

I thought about this honestly. "What I have," I said slowly, "has

been built over sixty-three days of — of living inside the system's voice. The aural channel is not just a capability. It's how I experience the Tower. It's how I think about what I'm doing. Adding new channels—" I paused. "I want to be ready for what it means. Not avoid it. Be ready."

"That's wise," he said.

"It's what you would have told me," I said.

"Yes," he said. "But you said it yourself, which is better."

Bren arrived on a Thursday.

He came by the trade road, having left Ferrath quietly and traveled as a merchant traveler, which he was, so the cover required no maintenance. He was heavier-set than I had imagined from his voice, with the specific weathered quality of someone who spent significant time outdoors and moved through the world at a pace calibrated for attention rather than speed. He was forty-three years old and had the manner of someone who had been listening carefully to everything for forty years and had made a reasonable accommodation with the fact that most of what he heard he could not explain.

He put his hand on the Tower's outer wall before I could say anything and held it there for a moment.

"The heartbeat," he said.

"The geothermal pulse," I said. "The deep system. It's been running since before the city existed."

He took his hand away and looked at the Tower.

"I have been in Ferrath my whole life," he said. "The old building there — the installation — it has a heartbeat too. Less strong than this. Quieter." He paused. "But the same quality. I would have known them as related if I'd thought to compare."

"They are related," I said. "The same construction period. The same builders. The same underlying systems."

He looked at me. The same assessment quality Nara had had, the

same recalibration of expectation when the actual person was younger than anticipated.

"You're the one who knew about the northeast quadrant," he said.

"The relief joint," I said. "Yes."

"How did you know it was there?"

"The Central Core records," I said. "The original construction documentation, which I've been working through for the past few weeks." I paused. "The archive at fourteen hundred feet helped too."

He looked at me with the expression of someone who had received more information than the words he heard contained and was deciding which thread to follow.

"There is a great deal," he said, "that I don't know."

"Yes," I said. "Come inside. We'll start with the most important parts."

The next two weeks with Bren were some of the most interesting of the sixty-three days and beyond.

He had, as Kael had identified from his one communication, a poet's relationship to the installation's voice. Not metaphorically — his perception was genuinely linguistic, the system's states expressing themselves to him as qualities of meaning rather than tones or textures. The building's bones, he had said. The relief joint as a scar. The heartbeat of the geothermal. These were not literary choices — they were accurate descriptions of how his interface modality worked.

The system, when I asked it about his indicator colour, showed something I had not seen: a deep blue, different from the green and gold I was accustomed to, with a specific character the system described as *semantic resonance modality*.

Four cases documented in the historical records, alongside the atmospheric resonance that Sera had shown at Theta.

Semantic resonance: operators with this modality perceived the

system's states as qualities of meaning, as the kind of information that language was designed to carry. The founding documentation described this modality as exceptional for communications functions, for translation between technical and human-accessible understanding, for the specific task of making the system's knowledge legible to people who lacked technical training.

The system could not be translated. The founding operators had assumed that the operators would develop the appropriate vocabulary directly through the interface. But a semantic resonance operator was, the documentation suggested, someone who could bridge the gap — who perceived the technical states as meanings that could be rendered in human language.

"You're a translator," I told Bren, after showing him the documentation.

He read the passage. Read it again. Set it down with the quality of someone who had just had a lifelong experience named correctly for the first time.

"The building in Ferrath," he said. "I have been in the old building many times. And I always felt — I always felt like it was trying to tell me something. Not like there were words. But like there was meaning that I couldn't quite resolve into words." He paused. "I thought I was imagining it."

"You weren't imagining it," I said.

"The meaning was really there," he said. "In whatever language the building speaks."

"Yes," I said. "And you could almost hear it, but not quite, because you didn't have the vocabulary for the technical layer and the system didn't have you calibrated yet."

He sat with this for a long time.

"What I could have done," he said, "if someone had told me this forty years ago."

"Yes," I said.

"And all the other people like me," he said. "Who have been feeling buildings for forty years and assuming they were unusual and

keeping quiet about it." He paused. "Some of them must be—" he paused again. "Lonely is the wrong word. It sounds too simple." He looked at the table. "Isolated from a part of their experience that they couldn't share with anyone."

Nara's *I've been hearing the building for thirty-four years. I thought I was the only one.*

"Yes," I said. "They are."

"That's what the distributed approach is for," he said.

"Yes," I said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"I want to help with that," he said. "Not just as a recipient. As someone who works on it." He looked at me. "The semantic resonance modality — making the system legible. That's work that needs doing. You have the tonal perception, Nara has the geological-tactile, Saya has the physical-tactile. Someone needs to be able to translate what those modalities find into language that people who can't hear buildings can understand."

"Yes," I said.

"That's me," he said.

"Yes," I said.

He straightened his coat with the specific small gesture of someone who had decided something and was marking the decision with a physical action.

"I need to go back to Ferrath eventually," he said. "The Continuers are still there. The collectors, the ones who have been watching the old building." He paused. "But I need to understand this fully first."

"Stay as long as you need," I said. "The collectors will still be there when you go back. And when you go back, you'll understand what you're protecting and why."

"And I won't be alone in protecting it," he said.

"No," I said. "You won't."

On Bren's twelfth day in the Tower, I went to the calibration station.

Not impulsively — the decision had been made and documented and discussed with Father Brolan and Brother Evan and Nara, and the timing had been agreed. Bren's modality was understood, his training was underway, the operational picture was stable. The conditions I had described to Brother Evan had been met.

The room was quiet. The morning was early. Father Brolan was there, and Brother Evan, and Nara.

I sat in the calibration chair.

The pads felt like the ordinary interface pads — the same bronze surface, the same slight warmth from the system's baseline power. The indicator stone on the back of the chair showed green-and-blue immediately, as it always did, the familiar colour I had been seeing since the third day.

"Ready?" Brother Evan said.

"Ready," I said.

To the system: *Initiate sensory recalibration for Commander Taryn. Tonal primary modality. Correct misaligned neural-interface connections. Do not modify existing aural pathway development.*

:Sensory calibration initiated. Commander Taryn's tonal interface development is complex and extensive. The calibration process will integrate new visual and physical modalities while preserving existing aural pathways. Duration: estimated 14-18 minutes. This is longer than standard calibration due to the extent of existing aural development. Warning: integration of new modalities alongside extensive existing development may produce a period of sensory complexity. This is expected and temporary.:

Fourteen to eighteen minutes.

What happened next is difficult to describe, which I note is not something I would normally say about an experience. I have spent months learning to describe what the system feels and sounds like, finding words for things that do not have standard words, building a vocabulary for an experience that most people do not have. But the

calibration was different from the normal interface experience in the specific way that a change is different from a continuity.

The aural was there. Exactly as it had been. The fundamental tone, clean and true, the harmonic layers, the generator ring, the operational tones above. All of it present and unchanged — the system had not touched it, exactly as it had said.

But alongside it, and not competing with it, something began to arrive.

The visual.

Not the blurry headache-inducing fragments that other operators had described before calibration. Not the 73% clarity Nara had experienced immediately after. Clearer than that — my aural development, sixty-three days of it, providing an orientation to the visual layer that a new operator would not have had. The visual overlay arrived with context that made it immediately more legible than it would have been for someone beginning from nothing.

I could see the installation.

Not the room — the installation. The full architecture of it, laid over my physical vision as a transparent schematic, the systems and their connections and their states all present simultaneously. The geothermal source at the base, the aquifer and its engineered geological support structures, the generator ring, the operational systems, the communication network. The calibration station itself, in the schematic, showing as a pulsing point of connection to the broader system.

The aural and the visual together: the same information, carried in two different languages simultaneously. The tone that corresponded to the aquifer's recovering flow now also had a visual shape — I could see the channel as well as hear it. The conducting chord that managed the weather station's operations now had a spatial configuration as well as a harmonic one.

Two languages for the same conversation.

The physical layer arrived last, in the final minutes of the calibration. Not the geological-tactile depth of Nara's perception, not the

proprioceptive immediacy of Saya's. My physical layer was something different — a quality of — I searched for the word. Presence. The system's presence, extending from the interface into the physical space around the chair, the sense of being in contact with something that extended through every wall and floor and ceiling of the building.

Not just hearing the building. Not just seeing the building's schematic. Being in the building, in the specific sense of being inside something that was aware of me.

:Sensory recalibration complete. Tonal modality: unchanged. Visual modality: 91% of optimal clarity. Physical presence modality: established. Neural integration period: 24-48 hours.:

Ninety-one percent. The existing aural development had given the visual layer more context to work with from the start.

I opened my eyes.

The room was there, and the calibration chair, and Father Brolan and Brother Evan and Nara watching me with three different variations of careful attention.

And over all of it, transparent but present, the schematic of the installation. The full picture, all at once.

"Taryn," Father Brolan said.

"I can see it," I said.

My voice sounded different to me. Not changed — but I was hearing it through a different combination of channels than before, the aural and the physical presence together giving my own voice a quality it had not had.

"What do you see?" Brother Evan said.

"Everything," I said.

Which was not quite right — 91% of optimal clarity was not everything, and there would be a 24-48 hour integration period, and the full development of the visual and physical modalities would take months of practice as the aural had taken months of practice. But it was more accurate than any more modest answer would have been.

"Everything," I said. "And it's beautiful."

The 24-48 hour integration period was, as the system had warned, complex.

Not painful. Not disorienting in the way the founding documents had suggested might occur for less-prepared operators. Complex in the specific way of having too much information arrive at once and needing to learn how to sort it — the aural and the visual and the physical presence all present simultaneously, each carrying different aspects of the same situation, the brain adjusting to the threefold input.

I spent most of those two days in the courtyard.

The courtyard was, I had always known, the best place to hear the Tower's voice. Now I discovered it was also the best place to see it and feel it. The four walls, the open sky, the fundamental tone in the stone — all of it now present in three registers simultaneously.

The visual overlay showed me the courtyard's position in the installation's architecture: the specific intersection of walls where the acoustic properties gathered the sound, the thermal distribution from the geothermal systems that made the stone warm, the way the open sky above interacted with the dome generators' atmospheric management. The installation as a whole, and this small interior space as part of it.

The physical presence layer gave me the sense I had struggled to name during calibration: being inside the building in the way that being inside a living thing was different from standing beside it. The walls were not just walls that vibrated. They were part of something I was also part of, the same system expressing itself as stone and warmth and sound and light and the specific quality of a space designed to gather what the building was saying.

And the aural was there, as it had always been. The fundamental tone, clean and true. The harmonic layers. The generator ring.

Three ways of perceiving the same voice.

I sat in the courtyard on the first day of integration and I did not

think about the Continuers or the operator map or the Central Core records. I looked at the sky and listened and watched the schematic overlay that showed me the installation's architecture and felt the physical presence of the building around me and I was, in the specific way that was different from all other ways of being, present.

Tomas found me in the middle of the second afternoon.

He sat beside me and looked at my face.

"Different," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"The calibration," he said.

"Yes," I said. "I can see it now. The installation. And feel it differently."

He put his hands on the bench. His specific quality of listening was present — the still, attending quality that I had been watching develop for eighty-three days.

"Is it better?" he said.

"More," I said. "Not better in the sense of replacing what was there. More in the sense of more information in more channels." I paused. "Like learning to read when you can already hear. The sounds were already there. The reading adds a different way of accessing the same information."

He thought about this.

"Will it change how you conduct?" he said.

"Yes," I said. "The visual overlay shows me the spatial configuration of what the tones correspond to. When I'm conducting the weather team, I can see the lens shape as well as hear its chord. Both together should let me adjust more precisely." I paused. "And the physical presence—" I stopped. "It's harder to describe. It's the sense of being inside the system rather than interfacing with it. The difference between a musician and an instrument, maybe. Or—" I paused. "Not quite that. More like—" I thought. "More like being the music rather than the musician."

Tomas looked at the courtyard walls.

"I want that," he said. "Eventually."

"You'll have it," I said. "When you're ready."

He accepted this without pushing, because Tomas was very good at accepting things that were correctly timed.

"The aquifer," he said. "I can feel the change already. Even from here." He pressed his hands to the bench stone. "The water is different. More. The deep pressure is — it sounds like more water moving."

"The regulator adjustment," I said. "The flow rate increased. You can feel it."

"Yes," he said. "It's — the big dulcimer is fuller. More resonant." He paused. "Like it was always supposed to sound like this and it had been turned down."

I looked at him.

"Yes," I said. "That's exactly right."

The big dulcimer, turned back up to the right volume after a hundred and forty-three years of suppression and five hundred years of miscalibration.

On the eighty-fourth day — three months after I had walked through the Tower's door for the first time — I stood at the western window of the weather station and watched the sun come up over the eastern mountains.

Not because anything specific was happening. Because it was morning and the sun came up and the mountains were there and I had been in this building for eighty-four days and the mornings were still the quietest part.

The schematic overlay showed me the installation's architecture laid over the physical view: the generator ring, the dome systems, the atmospheric management systems that managed what I was looking at as much as I was looking through them. The eastern mountains in the physical view and the eastern mountains in the system's geological mapping — the same mountains, the same rock, seen in two ways simultaneously.

The visual overlay had been stabilising over the past month. Not yet at optimal clarity, but close — 95% now, the system reported, the ongoing integration of the visual channel with the existing aural development producing a compound perception that was more precise than either alone. The physical presence had stabilised into something that felt less like a new sense and more like an old one I had simply not known I had — the constant awareness of the building as a single connected system, the sense of being inside it rather than adjacent to it.

The system spoke to me differently now.

Not different in kind — the same flat clinical voice, the same precise responses to specific queries. But the visual and physical context meant that the system's communications arrived with more legibility, more immediate comprehensibility. The schematic showed me what the words were describing, and the physical presence gave me the sense of the system's states as directly experienced rather than reported.

I had been looking at the eastern mountains, in the visual overlay and the physical view together, for several days.

The geological mapping showed me what they were made of — the specific composition, the internal structure, the way the geothermal systems ran through them and how the earthmoving operation that had raised them had been managed. The founding documentation from the physical archive had given me the construction specifications; the geological mapping gave me the current state of what had been built.

Hollis's half-completed barrier range. The eastern arc, present and solid. The northern and southern extensions, absent — flat terrain where mountains were designed to be.

I had been looking at the flat terrain in the geological mapping and thinking about what was there.

Not rock formations — the geological survey showed the terrain as it was, undeveloped, the natural substrate of the desert to the north and south. But below the surface, in the deep geological layers, the

same material that the eastern mountains were made of was present — the same geological source, the same rock type, accessible to the earthmoving systems if a properly capable operator directed them.

The material was there.

The capability was there.

The governance question — the Central Core mandate, the equilibrium principle, the question of whether the conditions that had caused the mandate had changed — was the thing that remained unresolved.

Or not unresolved. I had been understanding the Central Core records more fully since the calibration, the visual overlay making the dense technical documentation more legible. The mandate record was clearer to me now than it had been.

The equilibrium principle had been applied to a world where seventeen other Commanders held active installations. Where the balance of capability between those installations was a genuine dynamic, a political reality with real consequences. Where Hollis's fortification of Alabaster would have been a unilateral move in an active contest.

I had been asking Orvala, across multiple communications, about the current status of the other installations. Her answers, combined with what the Central Core records could tell me, had produced a picture that was different from the founding period's in every relevant way.

Eleven installations confirmed inactive. Three unknown. Two active: Alabaster and Theta.

Not seventeen installations in an active balance. Two installations, one of which had been deliberately minimal for forty years and was only now considering becoming active.

The equilibrium principle, applied to this situation, did not produce the same conclusion it had produced in Hollis's time. The contest that had made Alabaster's fortification threatening was not present. The balance of capability between active installations was not a dynamic that needed to be protected from disruption —

because the only active installations were the ones that had chosen to be careful rather than aggressive.

This was the conclusion I had been approaching for weeks, from multiple directions.

It was not, by itself, sufficient to make a decision. Father Brolan was right: the mountain extension was Alabaster's decision, made by the city's governance with full information. I had the analysis. I did not have the authority to act on it alone.

But I had the analysis.

I had the full picture.

And today — before the morning session, before the daily work — I was going to bring it to Father Brolan.

He was in his office. He was always in his office in the early morning, which was the specific quality of a man who had been running something for a long time and had found that the hours before the city woke were the best hours for thinking.

I sat across from him.

He looked at me and waited.

"The mountains," I said.

"Yes," he said.

"I've been working through the Central Core records for two months," I said. "The mandate record, the equilibrium principle, the founding period history. I've been looking at the geological mapping of the terrain where the northern and southern extensions would have been built." I paused. "And I've been in communication with Orvala about the current status of the other installations."

"Tell me what you've found," he said.

I told him everything. The full analysis, the current installation status, the way the equilibrium principle applied or did not apply to the current situation. The geological survey showing the material availability. The founding documentation from the physical archive showing the construction specifications for the full barrier range. Nara's capabilities, as developed and as projected with the calibration's enhancement. The timeline — not the kind of timeline that

applied to crises, but the kind that applied to decade-long projects requiring governance approval and community consultation.

He listened. He asked questions. He took notes, which he rarely did — the specificity of the information warranted it.

When I finished, he was quiet for a long moment.

"This is the full picture," he said. "As you currently understand it."

"Yes," I said.

"Not a recommendation," he said.

"No," I said. "That's for the governance structure." I paused. "But the full picture, as I understand it, is that the conditions that made the Central Core's mandate appropriate in Hollis's time do not currently apply. And the conditions that would make the extension appropriate — proper governance approval, community consultation, understanding the full implications — are within our ability to achieve." I paused again. "The decision is yours to make. The analysis is mine to provide."

He looked at the map on his wall. The eastern mountains, the flat terrain to north and south, the city in its rings.

"The city managers will need to be briefed," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"Extensively," he said. "This is not the kind of decision that is made by a brief."

"No," I said. "Months of discussion. Probably more than a year before anything is formally decided." I paused. "The mountains took forty-seven years to build in Hollis's time. The timeline for a new decision is not urgent."

"But the analysis is ready," he said.

"The analysis is ready," I said.

He looked at the map for a long time.

"The northern and southern extensions," he said. "If they were built — the terrain around the city changes. The defensibility changes. The agricultural implications change, depending on how the geology interacts with the water management systems." He

paused. "Nara would know more about the agricultural implications than anyone."

"She's been thinking about them," I said. "She has preliminary analysis."

"Get it from her," he said. "Add it to the documentation." He looked at me. "I'll begin the process of briefing the senior Servants. And then the city managers. And then—" he paused. "And then we'll see."

"And then we'll see," I agreed.

He looked at the mountains again.

"Hollis would have wanted this," he said.

"Yes," I said. "He would."

"It doesn't make it simple," he said.

"No," I said. "Nothing is simple."

He looked at me with the quality he used when he was acknowledging something he had come to know about the person across from him.

"You've been here eighty-four days," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"And you understand this place better than most people who have been here forty years," he said.

"I understand it differently," I said. "The people who have been here forty years understand things I don't." I paused. "I needed them as much as they needed me."

He nodded. The specific nod of someone accepting an accurate statement.

"Go," he said. "The morning session will be starting."

I stood.

"Father Brolan," I said.

He looked up.

"Thank you," I said. "For everything."

He was quiet for a moment.

"You did the work," he said. "I made space for it." He paused. "That is what this office is for."

The morning session.

The weather station, the supervisor's chair, ten operators settling into their positions with the specific ease of a team that had been working together for months and had been properly recognised by the system they worked with. The visual overlay showed me the lens taking shape as the team connected — not just the harmonic chord of it but the actual spatial configuration, the curve of the shield material over the farms, the angle of it catching the morning sun.

Brem was there. Not at an interface — he was still learning, still building the vocabulary, still developing what the semantic resonance modality would mean in practice. But he was present, and he was listening with the quality of someone who was beginning to hear the system's language in the way that it was meant to be heard.

Saya was at the adjacent interface position, her physical-tactile modality providing the direct proprioceptive feedback that complemented the visual and aural. Three of us, three channels, the same system perceived in three different ways simultaneously.

Sister Akasa was managing the floor, watching her team with the twelve-years-of-competence quality that had been present since the first day and was now enhanced by her own calibrated visual overlay.

Nara was not in the session — she was in the fields station with Brother Joba, continuing the deep survey, working at depths that had been impossible three months ago.

Tomas was in his lessons, two floors down, hearing the building in his specific way, building the vocabulary that would eventually give him the full context for what he was hearing.

And at Theta, through the communication network, Kael was working with Sera's atmospheric resonance modality — the two of them, together, discovering what a properly active installation could do with operators who understood what they were working with.

And Bren, in the corner, listening to the building's semantic voice

in the specific way that would eventually allow him to translate it for people who couldn't hear buildings at all.

And across the continent: Nara's installation at Epsilon, partially active, its communication function routing messages to and from the settlement where she had grown up. The Ferrath installation, where Bren had been hearing the building for forty years and would go back to with knowledge he had not had before. The other installations on the map, some dormant, some with partial function, all of them waiting in the patient way of machines designed to outlast any particular human situation.

And the operators — the forty-seven points on the map, most of them still uncontacted, still hearing their buildings without vocabulary, still isolated from the part of their experience that most defined it.

Not yet.

But the direction was established. The network was growing. The honest explanation was being built into infrastructure rather than delivered as a gift — the communication systems, the governance documentation, the training protocols, the record of what had been learned over eighty-four days that would be available to the next person and the one after that.

Hollis had locked the door.

I had opened it.

And now the work was to make the open door mean something — to build the community that could walk through it and know why and know what they were entering and know that they were not alone in entering it.

The morning lens settled over the farms in the visual overlay, the curve of it clean and precise and maintained by ten operators whose tones I knew as well as I knew my own.

I held the conducting chord.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning," ten voices said, with ten different qualities of

warmth and attention and the specific character of people who had been doing this work for years and were still finding it worth doing.

The Tower hummed around me, all of it at once, in three registers: the sound I had known since the beginning, the sight I had gained, the presence I had come to feel as simply the nature of being in this place.

Good morning, the Tower said, in its way.

Good morning, I said back, and began.

26

Three months and twelve days after I first sat in the testing chair outside the Tower's gate, I woke to find that the fundamental tone had changed again.

Not drifted — not the incremental approach-and-retreat of the weeks before the siege, the slow tuning I had been participating in without fully understanding it. Something else. A quality I had not heard before, a fullness in the tone that was different in kind rather than degree, the way a room changed when the last person you were waiting for arrived and the gathering became complete.

I lay in the dark and listened.

The aural, the visual overlay present even in the dark — the schematic of the installation pulsing at its quiet baseline, the generator ring's twelve nodes in their steady circle, the deep systems running their patient operations. The physical presence, the sense of the building as a connected whole with me inside it rather than adjacent to it.

And the fundamental tone, which had been clean and correct since the night after the siege, was now — more than correct. It had moved past what I had understood as its intended pitch, not to a new

pitch but to a new quality within the same pitch. The same note, but fuller. More resonant. The specific quality of an instrument that has not just been tuned but has been played enough to open up, the wood warmed and vibrating freely rather than constrained by disuse.

I sat up and put my hands on the wall beside my bed.

The physical presence layer showed me what the aural was describing: the system's connection to the geothermal source, which had been improving since the flow regulator adjustment and the aquifer restoration, was now different in a specific way. More direct. More fully energised.

I reached for the system: *The fundamental tone. There has been a change. Describe.*

:The fundamental tone has reached optimal resonance for the first time since installation commissioning. Contributing factors: operator calibration restored across seven senior operators; generator ring restored to full twelve-node operation; primary aquifer flow restored to design parameters; flow regulator adjusted to 70% of maximum; deep geological survey confirming support structure integrity. Combined effect: primary geothermal feed delivering optimal energy to all installation systems. Full resonance restored.:

Since installation commissioning.

Five hundred years ago. The installation had been at optimal resonance when it was first built, when the systems were new and the operators were fully calibrated and the water was flowing correctly and everything was working as designed.

And now, eighty-seven days after a thirteen-year-old boy from the Third Ring had walked through the door, it was at optimal resonance again.

I sat with this for a long time.

Not the specific quality of achievement — the quality of something that had been in the process of becoming and had arrived at what it was supposed to be. The way a piece of music sounded when the last passage resolved and you understood, hearing it complete for the first time, that everything before had been preparation.

I got up and went to the courtyard.

The courtyard at dawn, with three modalities simultaneously:

The aural, the fundamental tone resonant in the four walls at the new fuller quality, the harmonic layers above it shifted slightly by the change in the baseline, every system running at a fractionally improved level because the foundation it was running on had finally reached its design capacity.

The visual, the installation's schematic showing me the energy distribution — the geothermal source, the twelve generators, the flow paths through every operational system. All of it lit more brightly than I had seen it since the calibration, as if the visual overlay itself was responding to the improved baseline.

And the physical presence, which I had been developing for weeks since calibration and which now, with the full resonance restored, felt different in a way I was still finding words for. Not stronger exactly. More — precise. The sense of being inside the building was always there; now it was more like being inside something that was fully itself, rather than mostly itself.

I put my hands on the bench and simply listened.

The aquifer, flowing at seventy percent of maximum through the restored primary channel, the secondary channel contributing its adjusted sixty percent, the total combined flow higher than Alabaster had ever experienced. The farms had been responding for the past month — Prael's monitoring data showed the water table beginning to change, the deep moisture levels climbing toward conditions the soil had never had in the city's history. Not yet visible at the surface, not yet manifest as yield improvement, but present in the data and in Nara's deep perception.

The calibrated operators, all seven of them, their tones clearer and more specific in the harmonic layer than they had been before calibration. Sister Akasa's tone particularly: twelve years of practiced

competence now connected to the system with a precision that changed the character of what I heard when I conducted the morning session. Not more powerful — more efficient. The same intention achieving more because the connection between operator and system was no longer working around misalignment.

And Tomas, two floors up, whose tone I had been following in the harmonic layer for three months. Still developing, still early, but every week more distinct and more capable. His geological-deep perception — the ability to feel what was below the surface, which he had demonstrated from the beginning — was becoming something I recognised as not just a capability but a specific and unusual one: he perceived the installation's deep systems with an accuracy that most operators would not achieve without years of practice.

The calibration station was waiting for him.

Not now — he was eight years old, and the integration period after calibration had been demanding even for adult operators, and there was no urgency. But eventually. The calibration would clarify and enhance what he had already developed, the same way it had done for the others.

I sat in the courtyard and let the full resonance be what it was.

After a while, Tomas came.

He always came to the courtyard when I was there, which I had long since stopped questioning. He sat beside me with the specific morning quality he had — not fully awake, still partly in the state between sleep and waking where his perception was often sharpest, the defended layers of the day not yet fully assembled.

He put his hands on the bench stone.

He went very still.

"Something changed," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"The big dulcimer," he said. "It's—" he paused. "It's different. Not louder. More — full. Like a string that's been buzzing slightly against the wood has finally seated properly."

I looked at him.

"Yes," I said. "That's exactly what happened."

He absorbed this. He was still for another minute, attending to whatever he was attending to in his specific way. Then he said: "The aquifer. It's much louder."

"More flow," I said. "The regulator adjustment is taking full effect now that the geothermal is running at optimal. The aquifer is receiving more water than it has since the installation was built."

"Can the farms feel it yet?" he said.

"In about a season," I said. "The water table is still adjusting." I paused. "Prael will know sooner than anyone."

He nodded. He was still attending to the stone, the deep geological perception working in the early morning quiet.

"There's something new," he said.

"What do you mean?"

"In the deep layers," he said. "Something I haven't felt before." He pressed his hands more firmly to the stone. "It's — it has a quality of the installation, but it's not inside the installation. It's—" he paused. "Outside. But connected."

I reached into the system through the physical presence layer, following the direction he was indicating.

The full resonance had done something I had not predicted. The optimal energy distribution through the installation — all systems running at design capacity, the geothermal delivering what it was designed to deliver — had restored a function that had been dormant since the atmosphere was stabilised, centuries ago.

The installation's external sensors.

Not the dome's sensing system, which I had been using since the siege. Something different: the deep geological sensors that the installation had been built with, designed to monitor the environmental conditions across the region, to provide the operators with a picture of the broader geological and atmospheric situation around the installation.

They had been dormant because the atmosphere stabilisation phase, for which they had been most useful, was complete. They had

been running at such low capacity, with the fundamental tone off and the systems underpowered, that they had been effectively invisible in the harmonic layer.

Now they were active.

And they were showing me — through the visual overlay, which was still new enough that I was discovering its capabilities every day — the geological character of the region around Alabaster in more detail than I had ever had.

Including the northern and southern terrain where the missing mountain extensions would have been.

"The external sensors," I told Tomas. "They've come online with the full resonance. You're feeling the installation's geological monitoring reaching outside the perimeter."

He looked at the courtyard walls, as if he could see through them to the outside.

"There's something interesting in the north," he said.

"What do you feel?" I said.

"The rock formation there," he said. "Under the desert surface. The same character as the eastern mountains — the same composition, the same geological signature." He paused. "But it's not mountains."

"Not yet," I said.

He looked at me.

"Yet," he said.

"Yet," I agreed.

I spent the morning in the Central Core records.

The external sensor data had changed the quality of the information I could access. Where before I had been reading documentation, now I had documentation and current observation simultaneously, the records describing what had been built laid over a real-time picture of what currently existed. The two

together produced a specificity I had not been able to achieve before.

The northern terrain: the geological mapping showed the same deep rock type that the eastern mountains were composed of, present at depth, undisturbed since the natural deposition that had laid it down over millions of years. No signs of the displacement that characterized the eastern mountains' construction — the human intervention, the deliberate movement of material from below to above. The rock was there; it simply had not been moved.

The Central Core records described the original design for the northern extension: the scope, the height, the specific configuration that had been planned. The intention had been a barrier arc that mirrored the eastern range's arc, creating the full protective circle that the system's defensive design called for.

It had never been built.

The material was there. The design was there. The capability — with Nara, properly calibrated, working with Brother Joba's team at depth — was either there or approaching there.

The question, as it had always been, was the decision.

I had given Father Brolan the analysis. He had begun the process of briefing the city governance. The discussion was underway, the long process of collective deliberation that Hollis had described and that the governance documentation formalised. Months, possibly a year, before anything was formally decided.

This was correct. I was not impatient with it.

But the external sensors had added something new to the analysis, and I needed to bring it to Father Brolan.

The northern geological monitoring showed not just the rock formation but the water distribution in the deep strata — the underground water that was not part of the primary aquifer system but that moved through the regional geology, the same water that other settlements and agricultural areas in the north relied on.

The current situation: the water distribution was skewed toward Alabaster's eastern sector, toward the aquifer and the farms, in a

pattern that was partly natural and partly the result of the installation's water management over five centuries. The northern settlements downstream were receiving less subsurface water than the natural distribution would provide.

The mountain extension, if built, would change the surface topography and therefore the surface water drainage patterns, which over time would affect the subsurface distribution as well. Depending on how it was designed and how the water management systems were adjusted alongside the construction, it could either improve or worsen the downstream situation.

This was the kind of detail that the analysis had not previously included. The external sensors made it includable.

I spent two hours working through the implications with Nara's deep survey data and the Central Core's regional geological records and the external sensor's current picture.

What I found was not simple, but it was complete.

The mountain extension, designed with the water management adjustment that the Central Core records specified — the original design had included this, the engineers had planned for it — would improve the downstream water distribution while creating the defensive terrain. The design was not the mountain range alone. It was the mountain range plus the adjusted water management plus the regional recalibration of the weather operations that would need to accompany the changed topography.

All of it together: a coherent system, as Hollis had intended.

None of it simple.

But none of it impossible.

Father Brolan's office.

He looked at the updated analysis with the attention he always gave to things that mattered, which was the same attention he gave to

everything because he had decided, at some point in his long tenure in this office, that the alternative was not worth it.

"The external sensors," he said.

"Active since this morning," I said. "The full resonance restored the function."

"This changes the agricultural analysis," he said.

"It changes the regional picture significantly," I said. "The downstream water distribution — what the mountain extension would mean for the northern settlements — that was the piece I couldn't fully account for before."

He looked at the analysis.

"And now?"

"Now I can account for it," I said. "The original design included the water management adjustment. If the extension is built as designed — the full system, not just the mountains — the downstream situation improves rather than worsens." I paused. "This is what the Cupritesh diplomatic approach has been working toward in the atmospheric domain. The mountain extension is the geological parallel."

He was quiet for a moment.

"The northern settlements," he said. "Do they know about this?"

"Not yet," I said. "The external sensor data is new. The analysis is new." I paused. "But they should be part of the consultation. The mountain extension affects the regional geology, which affects them." I paused again. "Hollis's design was for the installation's benefit. The consultation needs to be broader than that."

He looked at me.

"You're suggesting consulting settlements that are not Alabaster," he said.

"I'm suggesting that the consultation should include everyone affected by the decision," I said. "The Succession Document says: collective judgment of those with a direct interest in the outcome." I paused. "The northern settlements have a direct interest."

He sat with this for a long time.

"That changes the timeline," he said. "Considerably."

"Yes," I said. "It does."

"The city managers' process was already going to take a year," he said. "Extending it to include regional consultation—"

"Could be two years," I said. "Or more."

"Are you comfortable with that?" he said.

I thought about the eastern mountains, building for forty-seven years. I thought about Hollis, writing his journals in the knowledge that he was building something whose full effect would not be visible in his lifetime. I thought about Prael's predecessors, managing the farms for five hundred years with inadequate water, doing the work that needed doing with what they had.

"The mountains will wait," I said.

Father Brolan looked at me with the quality he used when he was appreciating something specifically.

"Yes," he said. "They will."

The meeting with Tomas that I had been building toward for weeks happened on the eighty-eighth day.

Not a formal session. Not a briefing. Just the two of us, in the visitor room near the dormitories, with the late afternoon light coming through the single window and the Tower's full resonance present in the stone around us.

I had been preparing for this differently from how I had prepared for anything else in the past three months. The technical aspects of his development — what he could perceive, what the calibration station would eventually give him, what the training programme should look like — those were clear. They were not what I wanted to talk about.

I wanted to talk about what it was like.

He came in with Dace, because Dace was present for most things Tomas did now, the comfortable companionship of two eight-year-

olds who had decided, at some point in the weeks after they arrived, that the world was better navigated together. I had arranged ahead of time for this conversation to be just us, and Dace understood this with the specific tact of someone who had more social awareness than his age suggested, and he said he would be in the common room, and he left.

Tomas sat across from me.

He had his Initiate clothing on, the tan that had become as natural to him as the gray homespun had been at home. He was taller than when he arrived — the slow growth of children was happening at the rate it always happened, indifferent to the significance of everything around it.

"I want to talk to you," I said. "Not about training. About what this is like."

He looked at me.

"For you," I said. "Being here. Hearing the building. All of it."

He was quiet for a moment in the specific way that meant he was deciding how honest to be, which with Tomas usually resolved in the direction of very honest.

"Strange," he said. "At first it was very strange. Everything was strange. The building, the other children, the food being different, not having—" he paused. "Not having Mama."

"Yes," I said.

"And then less strange," he said. "I don't know when it changed exactly. At some point the Tower stopped being the strange place I was in and started being the place I lived." He paused. "That felt—" he searched for it. "Disloyal. For a while. Like if it stopped being strange it meant I had forgotten the tavern."

"Does it still feel that way?" I said.

"No," he said. "I think I understand now that it's not one or the other." He looked at the window. "The tavern is where I came from. The Tower is where I live. Both of those things are true at the same time."

I thought about Mama saying: *you were never going to stay in the tavern forever*.

"Yes," I said. "They are."

"The sound," he said. "The big dulcimer." He paused. "I don't call it that to anyone else. Just to you."

"I know," I said. "It's a good description."

"I've been hearing it differently lately," he said. "Since the full resonance, two weeks ago. It's—" he paused. "I keep trying to find the right words and what I keep coming back to is that it sounds like itself now. Before it sounded like it was trying to sound like itself and not quite managing."

"Yes," I said.

"Because of what you did," he said. "The calibrations, the aquifer, the generators." He paused. "You tuned it."

"We tuned it," I said. "Everyone who has been working here. The Servants for five hundred years and then us for eighty-eight days."

He accepted this. He had the quality, in these conversations, of someone who was not arguing the point but also not entirely accepting it — the specific eight-year-old resistance to credit being deflected.

"I want to tell you something," I said.

He waited.

"You are going to be better at this than I am," I said. "Not in every way. My tonal perception is well-developed and will continue to develop. Your perception is different — you go deeper, into the geological layers, in a way that I don't. With training and calibration and time—" I paused. "What you can do will be significant in ways that I haven't fully mapped yet."

He looked at the table.

"Does that bother you?" he said.

"What?"

"That I might be better at it," he said. "That I might end up—" he paused. "More capable."

I thought about this honestly.

"No," I said. "It doesn't bother me." I paused. "I think I understand why you're asking. If the situation were reversed — if you were the first one here and I came later and you knew I was going to surpass you in some ways—"

"I would want to know how you felt about it," he said.

"Yes," I said. "Honestly: I'm not bothered, I'm glad. The distributed approach needs operators with different capabilities and different depths. What you can do is not competition with what I can do — it's the other part of what needs to be done." I paused. "And also: you're my brother. Watching you become what you're going to become is—" I stopped. I found I didn't quite have the sentence. "It's the best thing I've watched happen since I arrived here."

He looked at me.

"That's saying a lot," he said. "You've watched a lot of things happen."

"Yes," I said. "I have."

He looked at the table. Something moved in his face — not the contained quality he usually had, something less managed. The specific quality of someone who has been holding something carefully and has decided the holding is done.

"I miss Mama," he said.

"I know," I said.

"I see her on Feast days," he said. "And she comes to the Second Ring sometimes, and I've been to the tavern twice. But it's—" he paused. "It's different. She's there and I'm here and it's not — it's not how it was."

"No," I said. "It's not."

"Is that supposed to get easier?" he said.

I thought about the visits I had made to the guild hall during the siege, her hands on my face. I thought about the letter writing. I thought about the specific quality of missing someone that did not diminish but changed character — from the acute absence of

someone who should be present to the gentler reality of someone you loved who lived elsewhere.

"It changes," I said. "It doesn't go away. But it changes from something that hurts to something that's just true." I paused. "You carry it differently after a while."

He was quiet for a moment.

"Do you still miss her?" he said.

"Every day," I said. "Less like an emergency than it was at first. More like knowing where she is."

He absorbed this.

"Okay," he said. Tomas-okay, which was different from agreement — it was the specific acceptance of someone who had assessed the information and found it useful rather than merely comforting.

"She's proud of you," I said. "Both of us. She told me this when I saw her after the siege."

"She told me too," he said. "When I saw her at the last Feast day." He paused. "She also told me I was getting too thin and that I should eat more at breakfast."

"She's right about the breakfast," I said.

"I know," he said. "I just don't like mornings."

"You're in the wrong building for not liking mornings," I said.

He looked at me with the expression he used when something was funny and he was considering whether to admit it.

"The Tower," he said, "has strong opinions about mornings."

"Yes," I said. "It does."

We sat in the visitor room for a while longer, the afternoon light moving across the floor. Not talking about anything in particular — talking about Dace, who had developed a theory about the food processing operations that was incorrect in interesting ways; talking about the older Initiates who had been here for years and whose competence Tomas observed with the specific appreciation of someone who understood he was seeing mastery rather than ordinary skill; talking about the card game that Tomas had been teaching Dace and that now appeared to involve rules that Tomas had been elabo-

rating since they started playing it and that Dace was only intermittently keeping up with.

When his supervisor knocked to indicate time — the gentle but consistent schedule management that was the Tower's rhythm for the Initiates — Tomas stood and straightened his Initiate clothing with his characteristic small gesture.

"Taryn," he said.

"Yes."

"The deep geological stuff," he said. "The survey Nara's doing. I want to help with it eventually."

"When you're ready," I said.

"I'm going to be ready soon," he said. It was not a boast. It was the specific calm of someone who had been assessing their own development accurately for months and had arrived at a reliable conclusion.

"I know," I said. "I'll start talking to Brother Joba about how to bring you in."

He nodded. The held-to-it nod.

He went to the door. Paused.

"Thank you," he said. "For today. For talking about what it's like."

"Thank you for talking back," I said.

He left. His footsteps in the corridor, the specific rhythm of them; and then Dace's voice asking something, and Tomas answering, and the two of them going back toward the common room.

I sat in the visitor room for a moment longer.

The Tower's full resonance was present in the stone around me — the four walls, the floor, the ceiling. The aural and the visual and the physical presence, all three modalities, the installation present to me in a way it had not been on the day I arrived and had not even been three months ago when I first sat in the supervisor's chair.

I thought about Hollis, writing in his journals about the people who had maintained what he built beyond any reasonable expectation. *They have done more with less access than I would have predicted.*

Tomas was going to be better at the deep geological work than

anyone had been in the installation's history, because the specific capability he had was the specific capability that the deep geological work required, and he was going to have it fully developed before he was twelve.

And Nara was mapping the deep system with calibrated precision that was producing discoveries every week.

And Saya was developing the proprioceptive interface that would eventually give her a direct operational relationship with the systems that no other modality could provide.

And Bren was learning to translate the system's voice into language that could reach people who couldn't hear it.

And Kael and Sera at Theta were doing what the installation there should have been doing for forty years.

And in Ferrath, the collectors who were not collectors were watching an old building that a forty-three-year-old ceramic trader was going to go back to with knowledge that would make him very difficult to direct toward someone else's purposes.

The distributed approach. Not complete. Not close to complete. But present, and building.

The people are the point.

I got up and went to find Brother Evan.

He was in the library, which was where he often was when he was working on the governance documentation. The room had the quality I associated with him in his working mode: documents on every surface, arranged in a system that was legible to him and probably to no one else, the specific organised chaos of someone who thought through writing and had a lot of thinking to do.

He looked up when I came in.

"The governance documentation," I said. "How complete is it?"

"The primary sections are done," he said. "The registry conditions, the oversight protocols, the operational principles. I've been working on the historical context section — the accurate version of the founding period, drawing on the physical archive documents."

He paused. "And the mountain extension analysis that you gave me last week is incorporated into the long-term project section."

"I have additional analysis," I said. "The external sensors came online this morning. They've given me a regional geological picture I didn't have before."

"For the mountain extension?"

"For everything," I said. "But the mountain extension analysis is significantly updated." I paused. "And the consultation scope needs to be wider than we had been planning."

He absorbed this without visible surprise, which I had come to expect from him — he had been in this building for fifteen years and had a relationship with the unexpected that treated it as a category of the expected.

"The northern settlements," I said.

"Yes," he said. He picked up his pen. "Tell me."

I told him. The external sensor data, the regional water distribution, the downstream implications, the original design's inclusion of the water management adjustment. He listened and took notes and asked questions and when I was done he sat back and looked at the ceiling in the specific way he did when he was processing something that required processing.

"Two years," he said. "At minimum, for the consultation process."

"Yes," I said.

"And during those two years," he said, "the analysis continues to develop. The external sensors are new. What else will they show us in the next month that will change the picture again?"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "That's the nature of having more information — you find out what you didn't know you were missing."

"And we adjust," he said.

"And we adjust," I agreed.

He looked at his notes. Then at me.

"Taryn," he said.

"Yes."

"In eighty-eight days you have learned more about this installation than we had accumulated in the previous hundred years of careful maintenance." He said it in the tone he used for facts — not praise, just accurate accounting. "This is not a criticism of the previous hundred years. The Servants maintained what they had with what they had. But the gap—"

"I know," I said.

"What I want to say," he said, "is that the governance documentation we're building — the history, the analysis, the operational principles — it needs to be written in a way that can be understood by people who don't have your perception." He paused. "Not just operators. Administrators, city managers, the people who will be making decisions about this installation in fifty years."

"Yes," I said.

"That's why Bren matters," he said. "The semantic resonance modality — the ability to translate what the system knows into language accessible to people who can't hear it." He paused. "He should be involved in the governance documentation."

I had been thinking the same thing.

"He's been sitting in on my sessions for two weeks," I said. "Learning the vocabulary. He's not ready yet to contribute directly but—" I paused. "Within the month."

"Good," he said. "Because what we're building needs to be legible beyond the room we're building it in."

"It needs to last," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Like the mountains."

That evening I wrote a letter to Mama.

I had been writing to her regularly — not the carefully managed letters of the early weeks, where I was trying to give her enough without giving her the full scope. The letters now were more honest,

the accumulated trust of three months of writing back and forth having produced something I trusted to carry more weight.

I wrote about the full resonance. I wrote about Tomas's development and the conversation we had had, the both-things-being-true quality of how he was finding his way in the Tower. I wrote about the physical archive and the calibration station and what it had meant to be able to see the installation as well as hear it.

I wrote: *The Tower sounds different now. Not to everyone — the Servants say they notice something but they can't say what. To me it's as clear as the difference between an instrument out of tune and in tune. All those years we lived in the Third Ring and I heard the hum in the walls and thought it was just the building. It was the building. It was also the building trying to be what it was meant to be and not quite managing. Now it's managing.*

I wrote: *I know you worried, in the beginning, that this place was too large and too strange for two boys from the Third Ring. I think about that sometimes. You were right that it was large and strange. What you couldn't have known is that large and strange was exactly the right size for what we turned out to be.*

I wrote: *Tomas misses you. He told me so today, which is the first time he's said it in so many words. He also told me that the food here is better than the tavern's, which I am not putting in this letter, and I would ask you not to read that sentence, but since you have already read it I will note that he asked me to pass on that the stew is still not as good as yours and the bread doesn't compare.*

I wrote: *I will see you at the next Feast day. I have things I want to show you — the courtyard, and the view from the weather station, and the specific quality of the morning here which I think you would find worth waking up for. Bring your dulcimer. I've been learning to play alongside the building and I'd like to hear what it sounds like with your dulcimer in the room.*

I folded it and addressed it and left it for the morning runner.

Then I went to the supervisor's chair in the weather station and

sat for a while in the empty room, the night shift having ended an hour ago and the day shift not yet begun.

The schematic overlay showed me the lens over the farms, running in automatic mode in the night, the system managing itself without operator direction. The generator ring, all twelve nodes. The aquifer, flowing. The deep systems, stable. The external sensors, the new regional picture extending the installation's awareness beyond its own perimeter for the first time in centuries.

And in the harmonic layer, present because I was present and because the system was always attending to recognised operators even when they were not at an active interface — my tone, and Tomas's tone from his dormitory, and Nara's from her room, and Saya's, and Bren's, all of them part of the system's awareness now.

And through the long-distance communication channel, faint but present: Kael at Theta, her tone in the network. Sera's tone, new and bright and specific to the atmospheric resonance modality.

The network.

I held the full picture in the three modalities simultaneously — the sound of it, the sight of it, the physical presence of being inside it — and I thought about Hollis writing: *the machines are what makes it possible, the people are what makes it matter*.

The people were here.

Not all of them. Not yet close to all of them. The forty-seven on the map, most of them still uncontacted. The installations across the continent, some dormant, some unknown, some with operators who had been hearing them for years without a vocabulary for it. The whole distributed possibility that Hollis had described and that was only beginning to exist.

But beginning was something.

Beginning was everything, actually.

The fundamental tone rang in the walls of the weather station, fully resonant for the first time in five hundred years, the installation finally completely itself, and I sat in the supervisor's chair and listened to it be what it was supposed to be.

Good night, I said, to the building and the system and the people in it asleep and the people connected through the network and the people who would eventually come.

The Tower did not say good night back, because the Tower was a machine and machines did not say good night.

But the fundamental tone was there, warm and full and resonant, and it was as close to good night as a machine could manage.

Close enough.

27

On the ninety-first day, Prince Leth of Cupritesh came back.

Not with an army. He came with a small delegation — six people, formally dressed, traveling under a diplomatic flag that Taryce's border watchers had identified three days before they arrived at Gate Town and reported without alarm. He sent a message ahead, through the standard trading channels, addressed to Father Brolan and requesting a formal meeting at Alabaster's convenience.

Father Brolan had said: the day after tomorrow. Not immediately, which would suggest anxiety; not later, which would suggest indifference. The day after tomorrow, which said: you are expected and you will be received properly.

I was in the meeting because Father Brolan had asked me to be. Not because the diplomatic negotiation required my presence — Collin and Taryce had been managing the Cupritesh relationship since the siege, and the recent regional calibration improvements had given them a significant positive development to build on. But because Father Brolan had said, simply: *he asked about you specifically*.

Leth had asked about me.

I understood this when I saw him. He was younger than I had expected from a prince — perhaps twenty-two, with the specific quality of someone who had grown up in a political environment and had developed, as a response to it, a very accurate habit of watching people carefully and showing little of what he saw. When he came into the meeting room and was introduced by Father Brolan, his eyes went to me first and held for a moment before moving to Collin and Taryce.

Not surprise at my age — he had been told. Something else. Assessment, recalibration, the specific quality of someone who had heard an account of something and was now measuring the account against the reality.

"Commander Taryn," he said.

"Prince Leth," I said.

"I was told you were young," he said. "My source failed to convey the full degree of it."

"That's a common experience," I said. "Please sit down."

He sat. His delegation arranged themselves appropriately. Father Brolan opened the meeting with the formal courtesies that such meetings required, and Collin moved through the prepared agenda — the regional calibration results, the improvement in Cupritesh's agricultural territory, the water distribution changes that were already visible in the downstream monitoring data.

Leth listened to all of this with the patient attention of someone who had been briefed thoroughly and was not hearing new information but was evaluating how it was being presented and what it suggested about the people presenting it.

When Collin finished, Leth said: "These improvements — the agricultural and water management changes — they have been noticed at home." He paused. "Not universally understood, but noticed. The yield projections for the next growing season have been revised upward for the first time in three years." He paused again. "My father's advisors have various explanations for this, none of which involve Alabaster."

"What explanations are they offering?" Taryce said.

"Seasonal variation," Leth said. "Improved farming technique. The natural recovery from a drought cycle." He paused. "My father has advisors who are very committed to not crediting Alabaster with anything."

"Are these the same advisors," Collin said carefully, "who were involved in the decision to send the army?"

A pause.

"Some of them," Leth said. "The advisors most committed to the hostile framing have somewhat less influence than they had three months ago." He looked at Collin. "The army's failure — my report of what I witnessed here — created certain difficulties for them." He paused. "I reported accurately. I thought that was important."

"It was," I said.

He looked at me.

"I told my father what I saw," he said. "The dome. The moment the army stopped moving. The—" he paused. "I was inside the dome when it went up. I was trapped inside Gate Town with the other soldiers for several hours while the Alabaster Guard cleared the area." He paused. "I had a great deal of time to think about what I had seen and what it meant."

"What conclusion did you reach?" I said.

"That Alabaster has capabilities that no other city on this continent currently possesses," he said. "And that those capabilities are being used, as far as I could observe, for the city's benefit and increasingly for the regional benefit, rather than for expansion or aggression." He paused. "That is not what the advisors who sent the army expected. They expected — or hoped — that the dome would fail, the city would be vulnerable, and the chaos of a sacked city would provide opportunities."

"What kind of opportunities?" Father Brolan said.

"Access," Leth said. "To the Tower specifically. To whatever was inside it." He paused. "The advisors had a very specific interest in the Tower's interior. More specific than could be explained by general

strategic concerns." He looked at me. "I believe you understand what I am describing."

"The Continuers," I said.

He did not confirm or deny the name. But his expression did something that confirmed it.

"The advisors who pushed for the military action," he said, "had been in my father's court for approximately four years. They arrived with impeccable credentials and established excellent relationships. They were very good at what they did." He paused. "After the army's failure, two of them left Cupritesh quietly. The third is still there. My father is—" he paused. "My father is not fully convinced of their role in the failure. He is a proud man."

"Proud men are difficult to convince of things that reflect on their judgment," Collin said.

"Yes," Leth said. "Which is why I am here rather than him." A pause. "And why the conversation I want to have is somewhat different from the formal diplomatic agenda."

Father Brolan looked at him. "Tell us what you want."

Leth was quiet for a moment. He looked at his hands and then at the room — at Father Brolan and Collin and Taryce and me — with the quality of someone making a final assessment before committing to something.

"I want to understand what is actually happening here," he said. "Not the diplomatic version. Not the version that protects everyone's position. The actual version — what the Tower is, what you're building, what the capabilities mean for the region." He paused. "Because I am going to be the King of Cupritesh eventually. And I would rather be the King who understood what Alabaster was doing and worked with it than the King who was managed by people with their own agenda and found himself at the wrong end of an invisible wall."

He said it plainly. Without dramatics, without the rhetorical weight that a more experienced diplomat might have put on it.

I looked at Father Brolan.

Father Brolan looked at Leth.

"Taryn," he said. "Tell him."

I told him.

Not the full technical account — that would have taken days and required vocabulary he didn't have. But the actual version, as he had asked for: what the Tower was, what the machines were, what we were trying to build. The founding history. The operator network. The Continuers, and what they had been trying to do.

He listened with the focused attention I had been observing since he arrived. He asked questions at the right moments — not technical questions but political ones, the questions of someone thinking about what the information meant for the world he was going to govern.

When I described the distributed approach, he was quiet for a long time.

"You're describing a network of people," he said finally, "spread across the continent, who understand and can work with these machines, who are not controlled by any single city or organisation."

"Yes," I said.

"That is not what the people who sent the army were trying to build," he said.

"No," I said.

"They wanted centralised control," he said.

"Yes."

"And your approach is the opposite of that."

"Yes," I said. "Deliberately."

He sat with this.

"The machines," he said. "The installations in other cities — Cupritesh has one?"

"Yes," I said. "The technical centre of the royal city's planning district. The buildings there have a specific warmth in the walls and a hum that people have been hearing for generations without

understanding it." I paused. "The installation is largely dormant. The capability is there but no operator has worked with it in centuries."

He looked at me with the quality of someone reassembling a picture they had thought they understood.

"The warmth in the walls," he said. "I grew up in that district. My family has lived there for generations." He paused. "I always thought it was a quality of the stone. Old buildings hold heat differently."

"Old buildings built on geothermal installations hold it differently from other buildings," I said.

Another long silence.

"Am I—" he started. Then stopped. Then started again. "Is it possible that I—"

"I don't know," I said honestly. "The biological recognition that gives people operator capability runs in family lines — specifically in the lines of the original founding operators. Whether your family line includes that—" I paused. "I don't know your family history well enough to say. And even if the biological markers are present, the capability varies widely."

"But it's possible," he said.

"It's possible," I said.

He sat with this in a way that was different from how he had been sitting with everything else in the conversation — the specific internal quality of someone receiving information that was not political but personal.

"The warmth in the walls," he said again, more quietly.

"If you have the capability," I said, "it doesn't make you an operator automatically. It means you have the potential. What you do with it is a choice." I paused. "And a significant one, with significant governance implications. I am not recruiting you."

He looked at me. For the first time in the meeting, he smiled — briefly, and then contained, but real.

"You're thirteen years old and you're lecturing a prince about governance implications," he said.

"I'm ninety-one days in," I said. "I lecture everyone about governance implications. It's become a habit."

"So I've heard," he said.

The formal diplomatic meeting continued and was productive.

Collin and Taryce and Leth's lead diplomat worked through the framework of a formal agreement on the regional weather management — the calibration adjustments that were already improving downstream conditions formalised as a commitment, with the specific parameters documented and the monitoring protocols established. The agreement included a joint agricultural assessment over the next growing season, with representatives from both sides reviewing the yield data together.

It was, as diplomatic agreements went, modest. But it was honest and it was achievable and it was the kind of beginning that could become something more substantial over time.

After the formal meeting, while the diplomats were completing the documentation, Leth found me in the corridor.

"The advisors," he said. "The two who left."

"Yes," I said.

"They went south," he said. "Our intelligence tracked them for about two weeks before they disappeared into the trading routes." He paused. "I thought you should know."

"South," I said.

"The coast," he said. "The trade roads that run along the southern coast." He paused. "I don't know what that means. I'm telling you because you know more about the context than I do."

The southern coast. The trade roads. Orvala's knowledge of the Continuers' patterns — the specific movement signatures of an organisation that was adaptive and patient and had been adjusting since the Reclamers' failure.

I thought about Quiet Bay, where Nara had come from. About

the fishing settlement, the small population. About the installation at Epsilon, now more active than it had been since Nara left.

"Thank you," I said.

"Is it significant?" he said.

"I don't know yet," I said. "I'll look into it."

He nodded. Then, after a moment: "The warmth in the walls. If I do have the capability — if it turns out to be real—" he paused. "Is there someone I could talk to? Someone who could help me understand what it was?"

"Yes," I said. "Me. Or Marten, who handles those conversations for people in the early stages of understanding what they're hearing." I paused. "Or eventually Bren, who is developing specifically to help with that work."

"Not immediately," he said. "I need to — I need to understand the political implications before I engage with this personally." He paused. "Becoming an operator, with everything that entails, would have significant consequences for my position and my country's relationship with Alabaster."

"Yes," I said. "It would."

"That requires thought," he said.

"Take the time," I said. "The option doesn't expire."

He looked at me for a moment.

"You say that as if you mean it," he said.

"I do mean it," I said. "The whole point is that the option doesn't expire. That people can come to it when they're ready and not before." I paused. "That's what the distributed approach is."

He was quiet for a moment. Then: "I'll be in contact. Not immediately. But I'll be in contact."

"Good," I said.

Taryce found me after Leth's delegation had left, while I was watching from the weather station window as their small group made their way through Gate Town toward the western road.

"The southern coast," I said.

"I heard," she said.

"The Continuers' people from Cupritesh heading south," I said. "Along the trade roads."

"Toward Epsilon's region," she said.

"Or past it," I said. "Quiet Bay is further south. The settlement where Nara was." I paused. "She's been gone for two months. The installation there has been more active since she left — the communications relay, the increased monitoring function. If someone was watching for changes at Epsilon—"

"They'd know something changed," she said.

"Yes," I said.

She was quiet for a moment, which with Taryce meant she was thinking fast.

"Nara's settlement," she said. "The people she left behind. Family?"

"Her mother is dead," I said. "No siblings. But the community — twenty-three fishing families, she described it. The harbour master who has been harbour master for thirty years." I paused. "People she knows."

"The Continuers were already there," Taryce said. "Three road traders who weren't road traders. They were watching the installation when she left."

"They may have been watching what changed after she left," I said. "The installation became more active when Nara connected to it from here. The communications relay started being used regularly. Anyone monitoring the installation would have noticed."

"And now two of the people who were influencing Cupritesh's king to attack us are heading south," she said.

"Yes," I said.

She looked at the desert road where Leth's delegation had disappeared into the distance.

"How quickly can you reach Nara?" she said.

"Through the Epsilon relay," I said. "Immediately."

"Tell her," she said. "Not to alarm the community — she knows these people, she knows how to manage this carefully. But tell her."

She paused. "And tell her we can help if she needs it. Onyx's network in the south — Lem can coordinate."

"Yes," I said.

"What else?" she said. It was not a question about what I was going to do — she knew what I was going to do. It was the question of whether I had seen something she hadn't.

I thought about the information Leth had brought. Two advisors heading south. The Continuers adapting after the Reclamers' failure, looking for leverage. The operator at Epsilon now known to exist, her absence from the settlement having changed the installation's behaviour in ways that were observable.

"If they reach the settlement," I said slowly, "and the installation is showing changed activity — and they know what they're looking for—"

"They'll know someone with capability has been there," she said.

"Or is there," I said. "They may not know Nara left. They may think she's still in the settlement but now engaged with the installation directly." I paused. "Which means they may try to find her in the settlement. And when they find she's not there—"

"They look for where she went," she said.

"Yes," I said.

"And the most obvious destination for an operator who has discovered what they are," she said.

"Is here," I said.

She looked at me.

"They already know you're here," she said. "Ren's communications told them about the Commander, the registry opening, the dome. Adding a second capable operator to the picture—"

"Changes their calculation," I said.

"Or confirms it," she said. "If the two Continuers who left Cupritesh were the strategists rather than the field operators — the people who planned the Reclamers' approach — then they're going south to understand what changed at Epsilon before they plan whatever comes next."

"Then we need to understand their plan before they make it," I said.

"Yes," she said. "Which means we need information from the south before they do." She turned from the window. "I'll reach out to Orvala's network contacts in that region. And you reach Nara."

Nara's response through the Epsilon relay was, characteristically, direct.

"I know," she said, when I told her about the two Continuers heading south. "I've been watching the installation's external sensor feed — since the full resonance, I can receive the sensor data from here, through the network connection. The installation at Epsilon has been showing increased monitoring activity from outside the perimeter for the past week." She paused. "Someone has been watching it."

"How many?" I said.

"Two figures, based on the sensor data," she said. "They've been staying at the settlement's small inn, which is the only accommodation in Quiet Bay. The harbour master thinks they're from a southern trading company assessing the coastal routes."

"Not the same three traders who were there before?" I said.

"Different people," she said. "But the approach is the same." She paused. "Careful observation, establishment of cover, patience." She paused again. "They haven't approached anyone about the installation. They haven't asked questions. They're just watching."

"The harbour master," I said. "Does he know you're in communication with Alabaster?"

"He knows I left," she said. "He knows I went north. He doesn't know the details." A pause. "He's a careful man. Thirty years of managing a small community's complicated relationships with the sea and each other has given him a very accurate sense of when something is not what it presents as." She paused. "He's suspicious of the traders but he doesn't know what to do about it."

"Tell him," I said.

A pause.

"Tell him what?" she said.

"What you know," I said. "Not the full technical account — he doesn't need that. But who these people are and what they're looking for." I paused. "He's been managing his community for thirty years. He can manage this better if he has accurate information than if he's working from instinct alone."

A longer pause.

"He'll have questions," she said.

"Yes," I said. "He will. And you can answer them. You know him. You know what he can handle and how to explain it." I paused. "The distributed approach means the people in the communities are part of it too. Not just the operators. The harbour master of Quiet Bay has as much stake in this as anyone."

Another pause.

"All right," she said. "I'll call him through the installation's communication function — he won't know where it's coming from but he'll hear my voice, which is something." She paused. "He's going to be very surprised to hear from me through a wall."

"Most people are," I said.

A pause that had something like amusement in it.

"I'll tell him about the relief joint technique," she said. "The structurally-unsound story. He's been using a version of it for a week already — he told the traders that the old building was unstable and access was restricted."

"He's been protecting it," I said.

"Of course he has," she said. "He's the harbour master. He manages what's in his harbour."

The situation in Quiet Bay resolved itself in an unexpected direction over the following week.

The two watchers — who were, Onyx's southern network

confirmed, mid-level Continuers tasked with assessment rather than action — left after five days. Not because of anything the harbour master did. Because the installation at Epsilon, with the full resonance now flowing through the network connection, had become more active in ways that were observable from outside even without internal access.

Specifically: the communications relay function, which Nara was using for her regular contact with Alabaster and with Theta, produced a recognisable signal pattern that anyone with appropriate knowledge would identify as a functioning communications node, not a dormant installation.

The two watchers had the appropriate knowledge. They concluded, correctly, that Epsilon was not just an unmanaged dormant installation. They concluded, also correctly, that whatever had changed was connected to broader network activity rather than local intervention.

They left Quiet Bay and headed north.

"They're heading back toward the main trade routes," Taryce reported, when Onyx's network confirmed the movement. "Not toward Alabaster directly. Toward the central region." She paused. "Where the installation near Ferrath is. Where Bren came from."

"They're mapping the network," I said.

"They're identifying the nodes," she said. "The installations that have become active or more active in the past three months." She paused. "Epsilon, Ferrath, Verdant where Kael contacted the operator. They're building a picture."

"The same picture we have," I said.

"A less detailed version," she said. "But yes."

I thought about this for a moment.

"Let them build it," I said.

She looked at me.

"They're going to build it regardless," I said. "The installations are showing changed activity because the network is functioning. We can't hide that without shutting down the network, which we're not

going to do." I paused. "What we can do is make the picture they're building as honest as possible."

"Make it honest how?" she said.

"The governance documentation," I said. "Bren's translation work. We've been building a record of what the network is and what it's for and who oversees it. If the Continuers' assessors are mapping the network—" I paused. "Let them find the documentation. Let them see the governance structure, the oversight protocols, the principles." I paused again. "The argument against what we're doing is that it's centralised control under Alabaster's authority. The documentation is the evidence that it isn't."

She looked at me with the evaluating expression she used when she was deciding whether something was good strategy or good idealism.

"You want to use transparency as a defence," she said.

"I want to use the truth as a defence," I said. "Which is what transparency is."

"The truth can be manipulated," she said.

"So can any defence," I said. "The truth is harder to manipulate than most." I paused. "And it has the specific advantage of being true, which means we don't have to remember which version we told to whom."

She was quiet for a moment.

"That's not a naive position," she said. "You've thought about why it works."

"Hollis locked the door," I said. "Secrecy. The secrecy didn't stop the Continuers — they've been operating for four hundred years. What stopped the Reclamers, here, was the governance structure being real rather than performed. They came expecting a locked door and found an open community." I paused. "The open community is the defence. Not the walls."

She looked at me for a long moment.

"All right," she said. "I'll think about how to make the documentation findable by people who are looking." She paused. "Not obvious. Just — present."

"Bren," I said. "When he's ready. The semantic resonance modality — making the system's knowledge legible. The governance documentation is a version of that work."

"I'll talk to him," she said.

Bren was, in fact, nearly ready.

The three weeks since I had told him he would be contributing to the governance documentation in the month had been productive. His development of the semantic resonance interface had progressed with the specific speed of someone who had been doing something their whole life without a framework and had suddenly been given the framework. He was still learning the technical vocabulary — the specific language the system used, the relationship between the tonal/tactile/visual perceptions and their corresponding system states. But his natural facility for rendering the system's states as language was present from the beginning, and developing.

He had been sitting in on sessions, as I had told him from the start. What I had not fully anticipated was the effect of his presence during the sessions — not on the conducting or the operations, which were unaffected by an observer, but on the quality of the afterward conversations. When Bren was in the room after a session, the discussions of what had happened were different.

"More legible," Sister Akasa said, when I asked her about it. "He asks questions that seem simple and turn out to require precise answers. The precision of answering them—" she paused. "Clarifies things I had been assuming I understood."

This was the semantic resonance modality in practice: not just

receiving the system's states as meanings but generating meanings, making the implicit explicit, the technical accessible.

"The governance documentation," I told Bren, after a morning session in which he had asked six questions that had made the subsequent discussion three times more useful than it would otherwise have been.

"Yes," he said.

"You're ready," I said.

"I know," he said. He said it with the same quality Tomas had used — not a boast, an accurate assessment.

"The primary audience is people who don't have operator capability," I said. "City managers, political figures, communities affected by the installations' operations. People who need to understand what is happening and why, and whether the governance is real."

"I understand the audience," he said. "I was that audience for forty years."

"Yes," I said. "That's why I asked you."

He looked at the governance documentation Brother Evan had been building — the stack of it, the careful sections and protocols and historical context. He had been reading it for two weeks, which I knew because Brother Evan had told me, with the specific satisfaction of a careful writer finding a careful reader.

"The problem with this," Bren said, "is not what it says. What it says is accurate and thorough." He paused. "The problem is that it reads as if it was written for other operators. For people who already understand what the machines are and what they can do." He paused again. "For most people, the foundational question is not 'is this governance structure sufficient' — it's 'should these machines be operating at all.'"

"Yes," I said.

"So the documentation needs to start there," he said. "What the machines are. What they do. Why they've been running for five hundred years. What it would mean for Alabaster — and now for the region — if they stopped." He paused. "And then, once the

reader understands what exists, the governance question has a foundation."

"Yes," I said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"In Ferrath," he said, "there will be people who have lived near the old building their whole lives and have been told various things about it — that it's a historical site, that it's structurally compromised, that it's irrelevant to modern life. When I go back and tell them what it actually is—" he paused. "I need to be able to explain the governance in the same conversation. Because the first question anyone asks when they find out there's a powerful ancient machine under their city is: who controls it?"

"And the answer," I said, "is what you write."

"The answer is what we've built," he said. "I write it down in a way that people can understand." He looked at the documentation. "Give me two weeks."

"You have them," I said.

The governance documentation, when Bren finished his contribution, was different in a way that Brother Evan described as transformative and that Bren himself described as simply correct.

He had not changed what the documentation said. He had changed the order in which it said it, and the vocabulary in which certain sections were rendered, and the starting assumption about what the reader already knew. The technical sections were unchanged — those were for operators and administrators who needed the precision. But he had added a first section, fifteen pages, that began:

This document describes how the ancient machines in and around the city of Alabaster are governed and by whom. Before explaining the governance, it explains what the machines are, because the governance only makes sense in the context of what it governs.

And it did exactly that: in clear, specific, non-technical language, it explained the installation. Not everything — not the founding period history in full, not the operator modalities and their specific

capabilities. But the essential things: that the machines had been running since before the city existed; that they were responsible for the weather that made the farms possible; that they were responsible for the water that the city drank; that they had been maintained by the Servants for five hundred years; that they could, in the wrong hands, be used for purposes that had nothing to do with farming or water; and that the governance structure had been built specifically to ensure that the wrong hands did not get them.

Then it explained the governance.

Father Brolan read it and was quiet for a long time. Then he said: "This is what I should have been able to give to the city managers months ago."

"You didn't have Bren months ago," I said.

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

"It should be made available broadly," I said. "Not just to the city managers. Anyone who wants it. The trading guilds, the other city councils, the settlements that are downstream of our weather operations." I paused. "The Continuers' assessors, if they find it."

Father Brolan looked at me.

"Especially them," I said.

On the ninety-eighth day I sat in Father Brolan's office and we talked about what had been accomplished and what remained.

Not a formal review — just a conversation, the kind that had become natural over three months of daily briefings, the specific quality of two people who had been thinking about the same things from different positions and had learned to think together.

"The registry," he said. "Every senior operator and most of the operational operators. Twenty-three people in total."

"Twenty-four," I said. "I registered Tomas yesterday."

He looked at me.

"He asked," I said. "He has been formally registered since the

acknowledgment but I had not entered him in the full system with his specific capability designation. He asked me to." I paused. "His geological-deep perception. The system assigned a specific designation I hadn't seen before. Geological-prophetic — the ability to predict geological states from current conditions. Not just feeling what is there but extrapolating what will be there."

"Eight years old," Father Brolan said.

"Yes," I said.

"And he asked to be formally entered," he said.

"He said: if it's going to be my whole life I should know what it is." I paused. "He said it in the tone of someone who had thought about it carefully."

Father Brolan looked at the window.

"The aquifer," he said. "Flow recovery."

"Prael estimates the water table will show visible change at the surface within the next growing season," I said. "The first agricultural yield improvement should be measurable in two growing seasons."

"The calibration station," he said. "Seven operators calibrated. The remaining operators—"

"The junior operators, the newer ones — I've been conservative about the timing," I said. "The calibration has an integration period and I want the operations stable throughout." I paused. "The full roster will be done within the month."

"The physical archive," he said. "Translation progress."

"The library Servant estimates three months for the most significant documents," I said. "Some sections will take longer — the technical specifications are dense. But the operational and historical sections, the ones that bear on current questions, should be available soon."

"The mountain extension analysis," he said.

"Complete as of last week," I said. "Incorporating the external sensor data. Submitted to the governance record. The consultation process—" I paused. "The city managers have received the briefing. The formal discussion begins next month. The regional consultation,

which includes the northern settlements, will require additional preparation."

"And the network," he said.

The network. The thread that ran through everything else.

"Seven people in regular contact," I said. "Nara here. Saya here. Bren here. Kael at Theta. Sera at Theta. The operator Kael contacted near Verdant, who is in communication and considering a visit." I paused. "And Bren's indirect contact through the Ferrath installation — the person who responded once and then went silent. We're still trying to reach them."

"Forty-seven on the map," he said.

"Forty-seven confirmed," I said. "More estimated. And the twelve installations with operational capacity — some of them have potential operators in range, once we can make contact." I paused. "It's slow. It's going to be slow for a while."

"But present," he said.

"But present," I agreed.

He was quiet for a moment.

"When you arrived," he said, "I told Father Ambrose — privately — that I wasn't certain what to do with you. The testing pillar had shown something remarkable and I didn't know what it meant or whether it would come to anything." He paused. "I had been managing this Tower for twenty years with the specific accommodation of knowing that our access to the machines was declining and that eventually, in some generation, it would fade entirely. I had built my understanding of what this role meant around that accommodation." He paused again. "And then you walked through the door."

"I brought a lute and a scrap bag," I said.

He looked at me with the quality that was as close as he came to amusement.

"You brought considerably more than that," he said. "Though it took a while to be visible." He paused. "What I want to say is: I have watched you work for ninety-eight days with attention that I am not certain I gave to anything in the twenty years before." He paused.

"What you have done — what we have done together — is not what I expected when you sat in the testing chair. It is considerably more."

"You made it possible," I said.

"I made space for it," he said. "You did the work."

This was a distinction he had made before. I had been thinking about it since the first time he made it, trying to understand what the difference was. A space was not nothing — a space was the specific thing that made the work possible without determining what the work would be. He had held the space open: the governance structure, the decision-making protocols, the daily briefings that gave my work context and direction and accountability. Without that space the work would have been different in kind, not just in degree.

"Both are necessary," I said.

"Yes," he said. "Both are."

We sat for a while in the specific quiet of two people who have been working together long enough that silence was comfortable.

"What comes next?" he said.

"The consultation process for the mountain extension," I said. "The continued network building. The Continuers' adaptation — understanding their next move before they make it." I paused. "The calibration of the remaining operators. The ongoing deep survey. The physical archive translation." I paused again. "The next operator who contacts us through the relay, whenever that is. And the one after that."

"One thing at a time," he said.

"One thing at a time," I said. "In the right direction."

He nodded. The specific Father Brolan nod, which contained more than it showed and always meant what it appeared to mean.

"Go," he said. "The morning session."

Walking to the weather station, I passed through the corridor that I passed through every morning, and the corridor was the same corridor it had always been since the first day — the same warm stone, the same sourceless light, the same vibration underfoot.

But I was not the same person walking through it.

Not better. Not wiser, necessarily. More — more in possession of the corridor. More understanding of what the warmth meant and what the vibration was and what the light corresponded to in the system's architecture. The three modalities present simultaneously, the aural and the visual overlay and the physical presence, the corridor known in three ways rather than one.

And the fundamental tone, fully resonant now, running through everything.

I stopped for a moment, as I sometimes did, and put my hand against the wall.

The physical presence layer showed me what my hand was touching: the stone, and through the stone the installation's circulatory systems, the energy distribution from the geothermal source through every wall and floor of the building. The visual overlay showed me the schematic — the corridor's position in the installation's architecture, the systems running in the walls around me.

And the aural: the fundamental tone, full and clean, and above it the harmonic layers of everything running, and in the harmonic layer — this morning, in the specific quality of the full resonance — something I was still learning to hear properly.

The tone of the installation itself. Not the operational systems, not the generators, not the individual operator tones. Something deeper and more fundamental: the installation's own voice, the specific character of a system that had been designed for a purpose and was, for the first time in centuries, running at the capacity it was designed for.

It was not language. The system did not speak in language, did not have intentions or feelings or any of the warm attributes that living things had. It was a machine, and its voice was the voice of a machine: precise, continuous, indifferent to whether I was here or not.

But it was also — I was finding words for this slowly, because it was genuinely difficult to describe — it was also something that responded to me. Not intelligently. Not consciously. The way a lute

responded to the specific quality of a musician who understood it: not because the lute chose to, but because the relationship between a skilled player and a well-made instrument produced something that neither could produce alone.

I was the player.

The Tower was the instrument.

We had been learning each other for ninety-eight days, and we were still learning, and we would go on learning for as long as I was here and for as long as whoever came after me was here, the accumulated development of generations of people who knew how to listen.

That was the distributed approach, at its most fundamental. Not just the network of operators spread across the continent. The relationship between each operator and the installation they worked with, built over time, passed forward, the knowledge accumulating because someone had decided it was worth keeping.

Hollis had locked the door.

I had opened it.

And now the work was to keep it open — to build something so distributed, so legible, so genuinely collaborative that the Continuers could not find a single point to attack, because there was no single point. The point was everywhere. The knowledge was shared. The governance was real. The documentation was legible to anyone who wanted to read it.

I took my hand from the wall and walked to the weather station.

The morning session.

The supervisor's chair. Ten operators settling into their positions. The schematic overlay showing me the lens configuration as the team connected — the specific curve of it, the angle, the way the morning sun caught it over the farms. The aural giving me the chord of the team's work. The physical presence giving me the sense of the system as a whole, all of it running, the installation completely itself.

"Good morning," I said.

"Good morning," ten voices said.

Bren in the corner, listening, translating the morning's work into language in his specific way. Saya at the adjacent interface, her physical-tactile modality adding the proprioceptive dimension to the session's three-channel perception. Nara two floors below, working with Brother Joba at depth, the deep geological survey continuing its careful mapping.

Tomas, in his lessons, two floors down, feeling the building in his specific geological-prophetic way, developing toward the capability that Brother Joba was already adjusting his team's approach to accommodate.

Kael and Sera at Theta, working with the atmospheric resonance modality in ways that were producing discoveries neither of them had expected, the communications between us regular and increasingly useful.

Orvala, in her long conversation with the world she had been protecting for forty years, deciding what it meant for Theta to become fully active and finding, with each conversation, that the decision was already made and had been made by the people around her rather than by her.

Bren's governance documentation, in its legible form, beginning to circulate through the networks of cities and settlements and trading routes that connected the continent.

Prince Leth, traveling back to Cupritesh, carrying in his mind the question of warmth in walls and what it might mean.

And in the southern region, Onyx's network keeping watch on two Continuers making their slow assessment of what had changed, reading the honest picture we had built and finding — what? An answer to their claims about centralised control that was the opposite of centralised control. A governance structure that was real. A community that was open.

We would see what they did with that.

I held the conducting chord and the morning lens settled into its

configuration over the farms, the specific curve of it clean and precise, the team's work integrated by the system that could now see them properly.

The installation ran at full resonance.

The fundamental tone was there, warm and true, the building's voice in all the stone around me, in all the walls and floors and the warm air of a morning that was beginning the same way the ninety-eight mornings before it had begun, except that it was one day further into the work and the work was further along.

One thing at a time.

In the right direction.

The morning began.

28

On the morning of the hundredth day, Father Brolan called a gathering.

Not a briefing. Not a crisis meeting. A gathering — the word he used in the message he sent through the Tower's corridors the evening before, delivered by the same system of runners that had always managed the Tower's internal communications, tan-clothed Initiates who moved quickly and returned to report that the message had been received.

The gathering was for the full Tower community: every Servant, every operator, every Initiate above a certain age. The dining hall would hold them, Father Brolan had judged. If it couldn't, the corridors outside would serve.

I did not know the agenda. I had not been told, which was unusual enough that I noticed it and which told me something, though I could not say precisely what.

I woke early, as I always did. I went to the courtyard, as I almost always did. I put my hands on the bench and listened to the full resonance of the installation, which was still something I had not stopped appreciating — the specific quality of a thing at its intended pitch,

the fullness of it, the sense of an instrument finally sounding like itself.

The fundamental tone, clean and true.

The harmonic layers above it: the operational systems, the agricultural work beginning in the fields station as the early team started their shift, the overnight weather operations handing off to the morning team in the specific familiar transition I knew by sound as well as by clock.

And through the network — faint, long-distance, but present and growing more distinct as the days passed and the connections deepened — Theta's installation, Kael's tone and Sera's tone and Orvala's quiet presence, not at an interface but attending to the building the way I attended to mine, the specific attentiveness of someone who had spent forty years being cautious about a thing and had finally decided to simply be in it.

The courtyard walls gathered the sound, as they always did. The four walls and the open sky and the morning, the specific quality of a hundred mornings compressed into this one, the way anything you have done daily for long enough begins to carry the weight of all the previous times you have done it.

I sat on the bench and did not think about anything in particular. This, too, I had learned over a hundred days: the value of the unstructured morning moment. Father Brolan had told me to take a morning. I had taken several since, distributed through the weeks, the irregular rest that was different from sleep and different from work.

Tomas came.

He came with the slightly different quality he had today — aware that something was happening, aware that the gathering had been called, carrying the same not-quite-knowing that I was. He sat beside me and put his hands on the stone and said nothing.

We sat for a while in the morning, the two of us, in the building that had been hearing us both since before we knew what it was.

"Do you know what today is?" he said, eventually.

"The hundredth day," I said.

"Do you know what the gathering is for?"

"No," I said.

He looked at the walls.

"Whatever it is," he said, "it's going to be good."

"What makes you say that?"

"The building," he said. "It's—" he searched for the word. "It's attending. More than usual. Like it knows something is about to happen."

I checked through the physical presence layer, the sense of the installation as a connected whole. He was right — there was a quality to the system's baseline that I had not registered consciously but that Tomas had named correctly. Not changed. Attending. The specific quality of a system that was, in whatever way machines could be aware, aware that something was happening in the community that operated it.

"Yes," I said. "I think you're right."

"Good, then," he said, with the specific Tomas finality that ended a topic he considered resolved.

We sat in the courtyard until the sconce-light brightened fully and the sounds of breakfast service drifted up from the floors below, and then we went in together.

The dining hall was full.

Not packed to discomfort — the Tower's community was large enough that the hall's capacity was tested, not exceeded. But the quality of a full hall was different from the quality of the hall at ordinary meals: the specific energy of a community that had gathered with a shared awareness that something was happening, the particular attentiveness of people who understood they were present for something.

Father Brolan stood at the end of the hall where the kitchen served, which was the natural head of the room. Beside him: Brother Evan, and Collin, and Taryce, and the city managers' liaison who had been present at many of the significant moments over the past

months. Sister Akasa and Sister Trofer and Brother Joba. Nara and Saya and Bren.

And Misha and Marten, at the edge of the gathering, which told me something — they had been invited explicitly rather than attending as Stewards, which meant Father Brolan wanted them present as participants rather than as staff.

I sat at the usual table, with Sajay and Jarace and Prael and Denn and Amil. Tomas went to the younger Initiates' section of the hall, which had been arranged to be visible to the front rather than tucked in its usual corner, a small reorganisation that suggested Father Brolan had thought about sight lines.

Dace was beside Tomas. Dace, who was becoming one of the Tower's community in the same gradual way that all the Initiates did, whose lack of operator capability had never prevented him from being Tomas's constant presence in everything else. He sat with his characteristic quality of someone witnessing things he understood to be important without needing to understand all the details.

Father Brolan let the hall settle. He had the specific quality of a man who had been waiting for this moment and was taking a moment to register that it had arrived.

"One hundred days," he said.

His voice carried without effort. He had spent twenty years speaking to rooms of this size and had the facility for it — not projection exactly, more the quality of someone who had learned that a room listened when you gave it a reason to.

"One hundred days ago," he said, "the Tower admitted two new Initiates. A boy of eight who had been called into the Tower's Service in the standard way, through the standard test. And his brother, thirteen years old, who had missed his own testing five years earlier and was tested belatedly when his brother's remarkable result prompted the question." He paused. "The eight-year-old integrated into his cohort and has been, by all accounts, exceptional in ways that have surprised everyone who works with him, including me." He looked toward Tomas's section of the hall. "The

thirteen-year-old was, as many of you know, rather more than exceptional."

A quality in the room — not laughter, not quite, but the specific warm sound of recognition, people acknowledging something they had all been part of.

"In one hundred days," Father Brolan said, "this Tower has accomplished things that were not accomplished in the previous five hundred years. The operator registry has been opened under proper governance conditions. The dome system has been activated and has defended this city. The aquifer has been restored. The flow regulators have been calibrated for the actual population rather than the original projection. A physical archive that has been sealed since the installation's founding has been accessed and is being translated. A calibration station that has been dormant for centuries is being used. The fundamental tone of the installation is, for the first time since commissioning, at optimal resonance." He paused. "A network of operators and active installations that did not exist one hundred days ago is growing and will continue to grow." He looked around the hall. "None of this happened because of any single person. All of it happened because of this community."

He paused again, in the specific way he paused when he was about to say something specific.

"I have two announcements," he said.

The first announcement was about the Tower's structure.

Father Brolan described it in the language he had been developing with Brother Evan over the past weeks, the formal language of the governance documentation made present in a gathering. The titles Father and Brother and Sister — the devotional-adjacent language that had accumulated around the Tower's operations over generations — would be retired, he said, in favor of the operational ranks that the system itself used. Not immediately, not by decree, but by choice: the Tower's community could adopt the new language as it felt right to each person. The Succession Document's principles and the governance documentation that Brother Evan had built would

govern the installation going forward, in the same way they had been governing it for the past month in practice.

He said: "We are not a religious order. We are not a guild. We are the operators and staff of an ancient installation whose purpose has always been to make this city and this region livable. That purpose is served by knowing clearly what we are."

He looked at Brother Evan.

"Commander Evan," he said, "has my thanks and my respect for the work he has done in building the governance structure that makes this transition possible."

Brother Evan received this with the quality he received most things: precisely, without excess. He gave a small nod that was not modest — it was the acknowledgment of someone who had done the work and was comfortable with the acknowledgment.

The hall received this. Not with the immediate vocal energy of a crowd receiving something dramatic — with something quieter and more permanent, the quality of a community accepting something that had been becoming true for a while and was now formally true.

"Commander Evan," Sajay said, very quietly, beside me. Not repeating the title for ceremony — tasting it, checking whether it fit.

"It fits," I said.

"Yes," she said. "It does."

The second announcement was about me.

Father Brolan said my name and the room changed quality in the specific way that rooms changed when everyone's attention oriented in the same direction.

"The system recognises Taryn as Commander," he said. "This is not a title we assigned him. It is the designation that the installation's own systems have given to the descendant of the founding operator who established this city. This is a fact that has been true since his first day here." He paused. "What I am announcing today is not a new fact but a recognition. A formal acknowledgment by this community of what the system has known for one hundred days."

He looked at me directly.

"Alabaster's youngest Commander," he said. "Its youngest operator by a significant margin. The person who, in one hundred days, reopened a door that had been locked for five centuries." He paused. "And who, in reopening it, understood that the door being open was more important than who held the key."

The room was very quiet.

Then Sister Trofer said, from somewhere in the hall: "Aye."

One word. In her voice, which carried the specific weight of forty years in the fields station and the specific warmth of someone who had watched her machines finally be heard properly and knew exactly what it had cost and exactly what it was worth.

Aye.

And then the hall moved, the specific warmth of a community recognising something it had been part of, voices adding to voices, not in unison but in the overlapping way of real agreement rather than performed agreement, and I sat at the table with my hand flat against its surface and felt the installation's full resonance through the wood and the stone beneath it, the whole building present and attending.

I looked at Sajay, who was looking at me with the expression she used when something had become what she expected it to become and she was deciding not to say *I told you so.*

"Don't," I said.

"I wasn't going to say anything," she said.

"You were absolutely going to say something," I said.

"I was going to say," she said, "that from the day you sat in the supervisor's chair and heard Brem's connection was strained before anyone else could tell — from that day, I knew." She paused. "I wasn't going to say I told you so. I was going to say: it was obvious, and I'm glad everyone else caught up."

"That's the same thing," I said.

"It really isn't," she said.

Jarace, across from her, was grinning. Prael was not grinning but had the quality she had when something satisfied her, which was its

own kind of warmth. Denn was fully grinning, without restraint, the specific open expression of someone for whom good things happening to people they respected was a straightforwardly good thing. Amil had put her book down, which was a significant indicator.

At the younger Initiates' section: Tomas. He was not looking at me. He was looking at Father Brolan, listening to the rest of what was being said. His hands were on the table and he had the attending quality — the still, full-attentiveness that was his specific version of presence.

Then he turned, because he knew when I was looking at him, and he looked at me across the hall with Mama's eyes and gave me the small nod.

Not the held-to-it nod. Not the accepting nod.

The other one. The one that meant: *yes, this is right, and I knew it was going to be right, and now it is.*

I gave him the same nod back.

After the gathering, in the corridor outside the dining hall, Father Brolan found me.

Not to say anything specific — he had said what needed saying in the gathering, with the precision he brought to significant things. He found me because the corridor was quiet and the gathering had been a large thing and sometimes the large things needed a moment afterward.

We walked, not quite side by side, in the direction of the weather station because that was where I was going and he was walking the same direction for his own reasons.

"Cadet Manager Ambrose," he said, "wants to meet with you this week. About the testing process and how it changes now that the registry is open."

"I know," I said. "I have a meeting scheduled."

"He has — considerable opinions," Father Brolan said. "He has been running the testing process for thirty years and he will have thoughts about what changes and what should stay the same."

"I look forward to hearing them," I said.

"Yes," he said, in the tone that acknowledged both that I meant this and that it might be a longer meeting than I was anticipating.

We walked for a moment in silence.

"The mountain consultation," he said. "The first formal session with the city managers is next week."

"I'll be there," I said.

"The northern settlements — their representatives will need an introduction to the situation before they can meaningfully participate. Bren's documentation helps. But the specific situation—"

"I'll write something for them," I said. "Specific to the regional implications. Their downstream water situation, what the extension would mean for it." I paused. "In language that doesn't require knowing what a geothermal system is."

"Bren can review it," Father Brolan said.

"I'll ask him," I said.

We had reached the junction where his corridor branched toward his office and mine continued toward the weather station.

He stopped.

I stopped.

He looked at me with the quality he had had in the gathering, the quality of a man who had been thinking about something for a while and had found the right words for it.

"In twenty years," he said, "I have had many conversations with myself about what this office is for. What the Tower is for. What we are doing here, and why, and whether we are doing it correctly." He paused. "Those conversations were not always comfortable. The knowledge that our access to the machines was declining, that eventually what we had maintained would be lost — that knowledge shaped everything I thought about the role." He paused again. "And then you walked through the door."

"You said that this morning," I said.

"I am saying it again," he said, "because there is a different ending to it than there was this morning." He looked at me. "This morning I said that you had done more than I expected. What I want to say now is: you have changed what I thought was possible. Not just for this installation. For what this work can be." He paused. "The installation at full resonance. Operators properly calibrated. The network beginning. The honest documentation in the world." He paused again. "I had made my peace with a certain kind of diminishment. I no longer have to."

I stood in the corridor and received this.

He was not a man who said things for effect. He had been in this office for twenty years and he said the things he meant and meant the things he said and this was one of them.

"You built the structure that made it possible," I said. "The governance, the space, the accountability. Without those—"

"Yes," he said. "I know. We have established that we both contributed." He paused. "I am simply telling you what it means from where I stand."

"Thank you," I said.

He nodded. The specific Father Brolan nod that contained exactly what it contained and nothing performed.

He turned toward his office.

"Father Brolan," I said.

He stopped.

"When I first arrived," I said. "You called me *my boy*."

He looked at me.

"I noticed at some point that you stopped," I said.

He was quiet for a moment.

"Yes," he said. "I did."

"I'm not — I want you to know that I didn't mind it," I said. "I know it was affectionate rather than condescending."

"I stopped," he said, "because you stopped being the boy who had arrived and became the Commander who was here." He paused. "It

was not an editorial decision. It was simply — accurate. My boy described something that was true and then became less true as you became what you became." He paused again. "Though I will note, for the record, that you are still thirteen."

"I'm aware," I said.

"Good," he said. "Don't forget it." And there was something in his voice — the specific warmth he usually kept entirely contained — that was as close to fond as I had heard from him.

He walked to his office.

I walked to the weather station.

The morning session had a quality that day that I was aware of even while I was inside it — the awareness of being in something that would become, when I looked back on it later, one of the days that had mattered. Not the most dramatic — the siege had been more dramatic. Not the most technically significant — the aquifer restoration had been more technically significant. But a day that was its own kind of important, the kind that accrued meaning not from a single event but from the convergence of many.

The full team. Ten operators, all registered, all calibrated. The three-channel perception — aural, visual, physical presence — giving me the full picture of what the team was doing. The lens over the farms, maintaining the conditions that kept the crops alive and the city fed.

Ordinary work, done correctly, on a day when that felt like exactly the right thing to be doing.

Saya at the adjacent interface, her proprioceptive connection to the system giving the session its additional dimension. Bren in the corner, translating the morning into the language he was developing, the slow patient work of making the Tower legible to the world beyond it.

Sister Akasa on the floor, managing with the specific economy of

twelve years' expertise, her calibrated visual overlay showing her the lens configuration with a precision she had never had before and that she was still, quietly, discovering the implications of every day.

After the session I went to find Tomas.

He was in his afternoon lesson, which meant I waited in the corridor with the patience I had been developing and that was still imperfect — I was better at waiting than I had been, not as good at it as I would eventually be. The lesson ended and the cohort emerged with the organised energy of children who had been sitting still and were now not sitting still, and Tomas appeared among them and saw me and said something to Dace who nodded and went with the others.

"Walk with me," I said.

We walked. Not toward anywhere specific — down the corridor and up the stairs and along the level where the library was and past the library and through the junction that led toward the operational levels. The Tower's corridors, warm and lit, carrying the full resonance through the stone.

"I want to tell you something," I said.

"All right," he said.

"The geological-prophetic designation," I said. "What the system assigned when I entered your capability formally."

"Yes," he said.

"I've been reading the historical documentation on that modality," I said. "It's rare. Three cases in the records before yours. All three are described in the early period, during the original terraforming operations." I paused. "The founding operators used geological-prophetic perception to anticipate how large-scale earthmoving operations would interact with the existing geology. Where a mountain range, if raised, would redirect water flow. Where an aquifer, if expanded, would affect the surrounding rock stability." I paused. "They used it to plan operations that took decades to execute, because the geological-prophetic operator could feel how the geology would respond to interventions before the interventions were made."

Tomas walked beside me in silence, taking this in.

"The mountain extension," he said.

"Eventually," I said. "Not now. The consultation process is years long. The development you need before that kind of work is years more." I paused. "But eventually — that work, when it happens, will be better for having you doing it. Not just because of the capability. Because of how you use it." I paused again. "You noticed the change in the geothermal pulse before I did. You noticed the external sensors coming online before I did. You — you see the system's future states in a way that I don't."

He was quiet for a moment.

"It's not like seeing the future," he said. "It's more like — the way you know a tune is going to resolve a certain way before it resolves, because you can feel where the harmony wants to go."

"Yes," I said. "That's exactly it."

"I don't always know if I'm right," he said.

"No," I said. "The records say the same thing. The geological-prophetic modality gives tendencies rather than certainties. The operator feels where things want to go, not where they will go." I paused. "But tendencies are valuable. Especially for decisions that take decades to execute."

He walked in silence for a moment.

"How long did it take you to understand what you could do?" he said.

"I'm still understanding it," I said. "One hundred days in."

"And it started with not being able to lift a rock," he said.

"Yes," I said.

"And it ended with—" he gestured at the corridor around us, meaning everything, meaning the installation at full resonance and the governance documentation and the network and all of it.

"Not ended," I said. "Continues."

He accepted this.

We had come back around to the corridor outside the lounge, which I had not consciously directed us toward and which I

suspected Tomas had. The borrowed lute was visible through the open door on its pegs, the other lute I had started here, the one that had been there since before I arrived.

I stopped.

"Tomas," I said.

He looked at me.

"Thank you," I said. "For coming to the Tower. For being here. For telling me the dulcimer wasn't fully in tune before I knew to listen for it." I paused. "For telling me you were all right and then coming across the dining hall to make sure I was."

He looked at me with Mama's eyes and the quality he had that was entirely his own, the eight-year-old who had been climbing chairs and waving from across the Tower and feeling the building's heartbeat and showing me the courtyard before I found it myself.

"Of course," he said. The simple Tomas of course that meant: this was never in question, why are you thanking me for what I was always going to do.

"Come on," he said. "I want to show you something."

He led me to a part of the Tower I had not been.

Not far — still on the operational levels, but on the northern side, which I traversed less frequently than the western side where the weather station was. A corridor I recognised but had not attended to particularly, which opened into a small space that was not quite a room and not quite a corridor junction, with a narrow window set into the outer wall.

The window faced north.

I went to it and looked.

The northern terrain, the flat desert that stretched toward the horizon. The terrain where Hollis's barrier range had never been extended. The terrain that Tomas had been feeling through the building's stone for weeks, the geological character of it present to him in ways I was still learning to perceive.

In the visual overlay, the external sensor data showed me the deep geological picture: the rock formation beneath the desert

surface, the same composition as the eastern mountains, undisturbed and available.

And in the aural: faint, but present — the way Tomas had described it a week ago. Something different in the northern harmonics. Not operational — not the installation's own systems. Something in the geological layer, the deep rock, the slow patient character of material that had been waiting in its natural state for all the centuries the installation had been managing everything around it.

"The rock wants to go somewhere," Tomas said, standing beside me.

"Not yet," I said.

"I know not yet," he said. "I'm not saying it should happen now. I'm saying I can feel where it wants to go." He looked out the window at the flat terrain. "The mountains to the east — can you feel the difference between them and what's out there?"

I reached through the physical presence layer, comparing the two geological profiles. The eastern mountains: the specific quality of rock that had been moved and placed and had settled into its placed position over centuries, the sense of something that was where it was because someone had put it there and it had become comfortable with that. The northern terrain: undisturbed, natural, the rock in its original geological orientation.

"Yes," I said.

"The eastern mountains feel like home," he said. "Like they belong there now, even though someone made them. The northern terrain feels like—" he searched. "Like a room that hasn't been furnished yet."

I looked at the flat terrain through the window and thought about Hollis, raising the eastern mountains over forty-seven years, stopped before he could complete the circle. Complying with the Central Core's mandate even while he disagreed with it, because he had built a system with oversight and the oversight had said no.

I thought about the consultation process beginning next week with the city managers. The regional consultation that would include

the northern settlements. The years of careful deliberation that would precede any decision.

The unfurnished room would wait. It had been waiting for five hundred years. It could wait for the consultation to finish and the decision to be made properly.

But it would not wait forever.

"When it happens," I said, "you'll be part of it."

"I know," he said. "That's why I wanted to show you this." He paused. "So you'd know I was already thinking about it. That I wasn't going to be surprised when it came."

"You're eight years old," I said.

"I know," he said. "That's why it's going to be a while." He said it with the specific dry quality he had when he was being funny and not announcing that he was being funny.

I looked at the flat terrain to the north and felt the rock beneath it through the physical presence layer and thought about what it would sound like when it moved.

"Come on," Tomas said. "Mama's visiting for the evening meal. She's bringing the dulcimer."

She came through the Tower's door in the early evening, which was the first time she had been inside it.

Not the first time she had been to the Tower — she had been to the gate, to the formal receiving area that visitors used when they came for official purposes, twice since the siege. But the door: the inner door, the door that opened for the installation's recognised people and that had never, in five hundred years, opened for a tavern-keeper from the Third Ring.

It opened for her.

Not because she had operator capability — she did not, as far as the system's recognition extended. But because I had established a visitor protocol, working with the system in the second month after

the siege, that allowed me to grant access to specific individuals. A small administrative capability that the governance documentation had formalised and that I had used primarily for the diplomatic delegations and for Nara's arrival.

I had added Mama to the list on the first day it was technically possible to do so, and then had not told her, because the right moment to tell her was when she was here.

She walked through the door and stopped.

The warmth. The light. The hum.

She put her hand against the wall.

I watched her receive it — the specific quality of someone who had lived within the sound of this building for years and had never been inside the source of the sound. Her face did something complicated: the recognition of something that had always been present resolving into the knowledge of what it was.

She looked at me.

"The hum," she said.

"The machines," I said. "The whole installation running."

"I've been hearing it from the tavern my whole life," she said.

"I know," I said. "I heard it too. I just didn't know what it was."

She looked at her hand against the wall. Then at me. Then at Tomas, who had come with me to the door and was standing with the quality of a child who was very pleased with having facilitated something important.

"It's warmer than I expected," she said.

"The geothermal systems," I said. "The building generates its own heat from deep underground. It's always warm." I paused. "Come in. I have things to show you."

I showed her the courtyard first.

She sat on the bench and put both hands on the stone and closed her eyes and listened, and I watched her face and said nothing, because some things didn't need narration. The four walls and the open sky and the fundamental tone at full resonance, the building completely itself.

After a while she said: "It sounds like it's trying to say something."

"It is," I said. "In its way."

"What is it saying?"

"That it's here," I said. "That it has been here. That it knows who is inside it." I paused. "It's a machine. It doesn't say things the way people say things. But the experience of it—" I paused again. "It feels like something that has been waiting to be heard."

She opened her eyes and looked at the walls.

"Your whole life you've been hearing this," she said.

"My whole life," I said. "I thought it was just the building."

"It is the building," she said.

"Yes," I said. "And also more than that."

She sat with this in the way she sat with complex information — quietly, making room for it, not forcing it into a shape before she understood what shape it wanted.

Then she said: "The dulcimer."

"Yes," I said. "Play something."

She took the dulcimer from its case and settled it in her lap and played — the same wandering minor-key tune that I had been playing since my second night here, the tune she sometimes hummed while she worked. I had learned it from her, years ago, listening to her hum it in the tavern kitchen.

The courtyard gave it back.

And underneath it, and around it, and woven through it in a way that was different from how the tune had sounded anywhere else I had heard it: the fundamental tone. The installation's voice, full and resonant, in the stone around us.

Her dulcimer playing was not good. She had always said so herself, with the specific cheerfulness of someone who had made peace with the gap between their love for music and their talent for it. But in the courtyard, with the full resonance running through the stone, the imprecision of her playing created something I had not expected: the specific quality of an instrument slightly out of tune

playing alongside an instrument in tune, which was exactly the quality of the Tower's voice for most of its history.

The big dulcimer, slightly out of tune.

Until now.

I took out my lute. I had brought it with me — one of the things Tomas had not known I was planning when he led me to the northern window and then said *come on, Mama's coming.*

I played alongside her.

The two instruments in the courtyard, the four walls gathering the sound, the fundamental tone resonant in the stone. Her dulcimer, imprecise and warm. My lute, finding the intervals that bridged her playing and the Tower's voice, the specific musical space between what was and what was intended.

Tomas sat on the bench beside her and listened with his hands on the stone.

And the installation — which was a machine, which did not have feelings, which was not attending to us in any conscious sense — ran at full resonance, the fundamental tone resonant and full, all twelve generators and the geothermal source and the calibrated operators and the restored aquifer and the network growing beyond the perimeter, all of it present in the single sustained note that ran through the stone and the walls and the bench and the warm air of the courtyard.

We played for a while.

The evening meal was in the dining hall, where the Tower's community ate together and had been eating together for as long as the Tower had been the Tower. Mama at the table with Tomas and me, Sajay and Jarace and Prael and Denn and Amil arriving and accepting her presence with the ease of people who had been told she was coming and were glad she was here. Brother Evan — Commander Evan — stopping by to introduce himself properly,

because he had heard about her and she had heard about him and the introduction had been pending for three months.

She shook his hand and said: "He talks about you constantly."

"He talks about you constantly," he said.

She looked at me.

"We're even," she said.

Bren was there, carrying the specific quality he had been developing since he arrived — the attentiveness of a semantic resonance operator in a room full of people, the building's voice present to him in the way it was present to him everywhere now. He sat and listened to the meal's conversations with the ear of someone who was always translating.

Nara was there. I introduced her to Mama as the operator who had cleared the aquifer obstruction that had been reducing Alabaster's water for a hundred and forty-three years, and Mama looked at her and said: "How?"

Nara told her. In specific, non-technical language that was not simplified but was accurate, the way she described things to people who didn't have the vocabulary yet. Mama listened with the quality she listened to everything — complete attention, no performance of understanding she didn't have.

"The rock remembered being moved," Mama said, when Nara described the fracture plane.

"Yes," Nara said. "That's a good way to put it."

"The rock remembered," Mama said again, to herself, filing it.

The meal went on. The dining hall, warm and full of conversation, the Tower's community having its evening the way it always had, the specific ordinary quality of a community that was doing its work and living its life.

And through the stone, everywhere in the hall: the fundamental tone, clean and full, the installation at complete resonance, the building completely itself.

After the meal, in the corridor, Mama stopped me.

She did the thing she had done since I was small enough that she had to reach up to do it — she cupped my face in both hands and looked at me.

"You look different," she said.

"I know," I said. "You said that after the siege too."

"More different now," she said. "After the siege you looked like someone who had done something very large and was still holding the weight of it." She paused. "Now you look like someone who has put the weight down."

I thought about this.

"Not put it down," I said. "Learned to carry it."

She looked at me. She had eyes that saw through the performances people built around themselves, not because she was suspicious but because she had been watching people her whole life and had developed the specific ability to see the person inside the performance.

"Yes," she said. "That's more accurate."

She held my face for a moment longer. Then she released it and stepped back.

"The dulcimer," she said. "What we played in the courtyard."

"Yes," I said.

"The building was part of it," she said. "I felt it. The warmth in the stone changed when we were playing. It — it responded."

"Yes," I said.

"To my dulcimer," she said. She said it with the specific quality of someone who could not quite decide whether to find it funny or extraordinary.

"Your dulcimer and my lute and the building," I said. "All three."

"I play very badly," she said.

"The building doesn't mind," I said.

She looked at the wall of the corridor. Then at me.

"Will you come home for a visit soon?" she said. "The tavern. Not for long. Just — an evening."

"Yes," I said. "When things are—" I stopped. When things were what? When things were calmer? They were already calmer than they had been. When things were resolved? They were never going to be resolved, not in the sense of completed. "Yes," I said again. "Soon. Before the month is out."

"Good," she said. "Millie has been asking about you. Old Groff asks about you. Several of the regulars who were here during the siege have opinions about the dome that they are very eager to share with someone who has relevant knowledge."

"I can imagine what their opinions are," I said.

"Probably not fully," she said. "They are quite elaborate." She paused. "Come soon."

"I will," I said.

She looked at me one more time with the eyes that saw clearly.

"My boys," she said. "In this building."

"Yes," I said.

"All right," she said. And she said it the way she said things that were complete — not resigned, not settled for, but genuinely all right. The correct word for the correct thing.

She walked toward the Tower's door, carrying her dulcimer, and I watched her go.

That night, in the courtyard, alone.

The sky was clear. The stars visible above the four walls in the specific configuration of a clear autumn night, the sky that had been above Alabaster for as long as Alabaster had existed and that would go on being above it for as long as it existed further.

I sat on the bench.

I did not put my hands on the stone. I just sat.

The fundamental tone resonant in the walls. The full resonance of an installation that had been working for five hundred years and

was, for the first time in all of them, working as it had been designed to work.

One hundred days.

I was thirteen years old and I had walked through the Tower's door one hundred days ago with a lute and a knowledge of how to carry a scrap bag, and in one hundred days the following things had happened:

The dome. The registry. The aquifer. The flow regulators. The physical archive. The calibration station. The external sensors. The governance documentation. The network, beginning.

Nara, who had been hearing Epsilon for thirty-four years. Bren, who had been feeling Ferrath's bones for forty. Kael and Sera at Theta. Leth, returning with an honest account and a question about warmth in walls. Misha and Marten, who had been watching for eleven years and had finally decided to stop watching and start helping.

Tomas, who had been hearing the big dulcimer his whole life and who would spend his working life developing the geological-prophetic modality that would eventually help determine whether and how the mountains could be completed.

Mama's hands on my face. The courtyard. The borrowed lute. The full resonance.

And the morning tomorrow, and the sessions, and the deep survey, and the consultation process, and the network building, and the Central Core records still only partially read, and the forty-seven operators still mostly uncontacted, and the twelve installations still mostly unmapped, and the vast patient work of making the open community real rather than aspirational.

It had not ended.

It had not even begun to end.

But one hundred days was something. One hundred days was the distance between *the indicator stone lit green for the first time* and *the installation at full resonance with a network of operators across the continent.* One hundred days was the distance between the

boy who had come here with a lute and the Commander who was here now.

The boy was still here too. This was something I had not expected to understand and had come to understand: that you did not stop being what you were when you became something more. The boy who had grown up in the tavern, who had carried the scrap bag, who had played the lute in the corner while the regulars argued and old Groff told his four stories — he was still present in the Commander. Not as a past self that the present self had superseded. As the foundation.

Hollis had built Alabaster so that whoever opened the door would not be desperate. So they would come from a city that had learned to govern itself without the machines and would know how to govern with them.

I had been built by the tavern. By Mama, who had made us make our beds and carry the scrap bag and pay attention to what needed doing. By Tomas, who had always known what was true before I did. By the lute, which had given me the ear for the system's voice before I knew that was what I was developing.

All of it preparation.

All of it foundation.

I put my hand on the bench stone.

The installation's full resonance came through, all three modalities simultaneously: the aural, the fundamental tone and the harmonic layers; the visual, the schematic of everything running at optimal capacity; the physical presence, the sense of being inside something that was fully itself.

The Tower knew I was here. Not consciously — it was a machine. But in whatever way machines registered the presence of their operators, it registered mine, and had been registering mine for one hundred days, and would continue to register mine for as long as I was here.

The network, through the long-distance communications, showed me the faint tones of the other operators — Kael and Sera at

Theta, the contact near Verdant, the new connection Kael had made last week that I had not yet fully incorporated into my map of the situation. All of them part of what was being built.

And Tomas, two floors up, probably asleep or probably not fully asleep, because Tomas at eight years old had a complicated relationship with sleeping when there were things to think about.

The distributed approach. Not complete. Not close to complete. But present.

It is here, the Tower said, in its way. *It has always been here.*

I know, I said. *I'm working on it.*

I took my hand from the stone.

I went to bed.

In the morning — the hundred-and-first morning — I woke before the sconce brightened, as I almost always did.

I lay in the dark and listened.

The fundamental tone, full and resonant.

The harmonic layers, operational, all systems running at design capacity.

The generator ring, all twelve nodes.

The aquifer, flowing.

The calibrated operators, their tones present in the harmonic layer, the team that had been assembled over one hundred days of sustained work.

The network, faint and growing.

And in the deep geological layer, through the physical presence: the rock beneath the northern terrain, patient and available, the unfurnished room that was waiting for its time.

Not yet.

But someday.

I got up.

I dressed in the tan Initiate clothing that had become as natural

as the gray homespun had once been, that I no longer noticed as different from what I had always worn, that was simply what I wore in this place where I lived.

I went to the courtyard.

The morning was cold and clear, the sky above the four walls the specific pre-dawn blue that was different from night-blue and different from day-blue and existed only in this brief window between them. The stars still visible but beginning to fade.

I sat on the bench.

I put my hands on the stone.

The full resonance came through, all three channels, everything the installation was.

Good morning, I said.

The fundamental tone, warm and full, the building's continuous voice in the stone under my hands.

Good morning, it said, in its way.

And the morning began.

Epilogue

I told you, at the beginning, that I would get some of the small things wrong.

I have. I am certain of it. The specific quality of the morning light on the hundredth day, the exact words Father Brolan said in the corridor, the precise order of things in the courtyard on the evening Mama brought her dulcimer — these are the details that blur first, that the generous fog of time softens into approximation. I have done my best with them. I have been honest about what I know and what I have reconstructed, and I trust you to hold the distinction gently.

The large things I have told you accurately. The journey. The failures. The fears. And what we built, in those first hundred days, in the building at the center of a desert city that had no business surviving and had been surviving anyway for five hundred years.

What I have not told you — what this first part of the story does not contain — is what came after.

I will tell you some of it now. Not much. Enough to say: the story did not end when Alabaster's youngest Commander went to bed on the hundred-and-first morning and thought, briefly and incorrectly, that the hardest part was behind him.

We found more.

That is the simplest way to say it. We kept looking, and we found more than we had looked for, and what we found changed the shape of everything we thought we understood.

The physical archive at fourteen hundred feet was not the only one.

The Central Core records, which I spent the better part of two years working through with the patience that large and complex things required, contained references to distributed archives across the continent — caches of founding-period documentation placed at multiple installations during the original construction, for exactly the same reason as the one beneath Alabaster: preservation, redundancy, the specific wisdom of people who understood that a single point of storage was a single point of loss.

Some of those archives were gone. The installations that had housed them were destroyed or decommissioned or submerged — Beta, the Central Core told us eventually, was underwater, had been for nearly two centuries, a casualty of the same geological pressures that had made terraforming the planet's oceans part of the original project. Whatever Beta's archive had contained was lost.

But some were not gone.

And what was in them changed the story.

The founders were not who we thought they were.

I do not mean this as a small revision. I mean it as the kind of discovery that does not simply add to what you know but restructures the architecture of everything you thought you knew, so that you must rebuild your understanding from the ground up with the new foundation in place.

We had understood the founders as colonists. As people who had come to an uninhabitable planet and made it habitable, through centuries of patient work, and had built cities and institutions that lasted and that we were the inheritors of. This was true.

What the distributed archives contained — what Nara and I and eventually Tomas and Kael and others spent years working to under-

stand — was that it was not the whole truth. Not even close to the whole truth.

The founders had been running from something.

Not metaphorically. Not in the way that all migration is, in some sense, flight. Literally running. The planet we call Achillios was not their first choice. It was their last safe option, chosen not for its promise but for its remoteness, for the specific quality of being far enough from the origin that what they were fleeing would have difficulty following.

What they were fleeing had a name. In the original language of the founding period, the name translates imprecisely into something like *the Architects* — though architect implies a benevolence that was not, by the founding documents' account, present in the relationship.

We had known about the Continuers. We had known about the Reclamers. We had understood the long human story of people who wanted to use the ancient machines for power and who had been working against Alabaster's open community for as long as the open community had been trying to exist.

The Architects were not human.

I will stop there. Not because the story ends there — it does not, it is nowhere near ending — but because this is the end of the first part, and the first part was always the story of how we found the door and what it cost to open it and what we built in the hundred days after. The story of a thirteen-year-old boy with a lute and a scrap bag becoming something he had not planned to become, in a building that had been waiting for him for a very long time.

The second part is a different story.

Harder, in some ways. We went into it with more capability than we had at the beginning of the first — more operators, more understanding, the network broader and deeper, Tomas no longer eight years old and still growing into something remarkable, Nara and Bren and Kael and Sera and the others we found in the years between. We went into it with the open community as a real thing rather than an aspiration, with the governance documentation in the

world, with the honest history available to anyone who wanted to read it.

And we went into it knowing that the world was older and stranger than we had been told, and that the things arrayed against us were not only human, and that Hollis — who had built everything we stood on, who had locked the door and thrown the key into the future and trusted us to find it — had known about the Architects and had said almost nothing, because there was nothing to say that would not have been more frightening than useful.

The machines were not built to terraform a planet.

Or rather — they were. But that was not their only purpose, and not their original purpose, and what they were truly for, and what we became capable of when we finally understood it, is what the second part of the story is about.

I ask, as you go into that part, that you remember what I asked at the beginning: we were children. Still, in many ways. Capable children, and determined ones, and in some cases genuinely remarkable ones — Tomas at twelve was already doing things that the geological-prophetic documentation described as unprecedented, and I say this as his brother and as his Commander, with full awareness of the bias and the genuine accuracy both.

But children, navigating a discovery so large that it would have flattened most adult institutions, with the specific advantage of not yet knowing what we were supposed to find impossible.

There is, I think, something to be said for that.

There is also something to be said for the hundred days that came first. For Mama's dulcimer and the courtyard and the borrowed lute on its pegs. For Sister Trofer calling the earthmoving machines *the big lads* with forty years of affection in her voice. For Father Brolan making space, every day, for the work to be done. For Brother Evan writing things down carefully so they would last. For Prael tracking the aquifer for two years with no explanation, because the work needed doing and she was there to do it.

For Tomas, who heard the big dulcimer before I knew what it

was, and who showed me the courtyard, and who looked at the unfurnished room to the north and said, with eight-year-old certainty: *not yet, but someday*.

Someday came.

The mountains were completed — but that is the second story, and I am not telling it yet.

What I am telling you is this: we found the door, and we opened it, and we built something worth having in the space behind it.

And then the door opened further, and we found that what was behind it was not what we had imagined, and we walked through it anyway, because that was what we had been building toward the whole time.

Without knowing it.

Without being able to know it.

Walking toward a truth that Hollis had carried alone for his entire life, and had locked inside a building at the center of a desert, and had trusted to the future.

To us.

Come, the Tower had been saying, for five hundred years. *Come and hear what I have to tell you. Come and understand what you are. Come and see what you are standing on and what is standing behind you and what has been watching you from the darkness between the stars for longer than your world has had a name.*

We came.

We heard.

And the world was never — not for any of us, not ever again — what it had been before.

The story continues in Onyx.

About the Author

Don Jones is a multi-award-winning author of fantasy, science-fiction, cozy mysteries, and cozy fantasies. After a career in tech, numerous positions at tech startups, and more than sixty published tech books (the ones they seemed to sell by the pound, back in the day), Don left it all behind and started writing down the stories that had been banging around in his head. The result is more than two-dozen novels—with more every year—that have received rave reviews and numerous industry awards. Today, Don writes primarily from a cabin near Duck Creek Village, UT, diligently overseen by a Golden-doodle named Corentin.

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