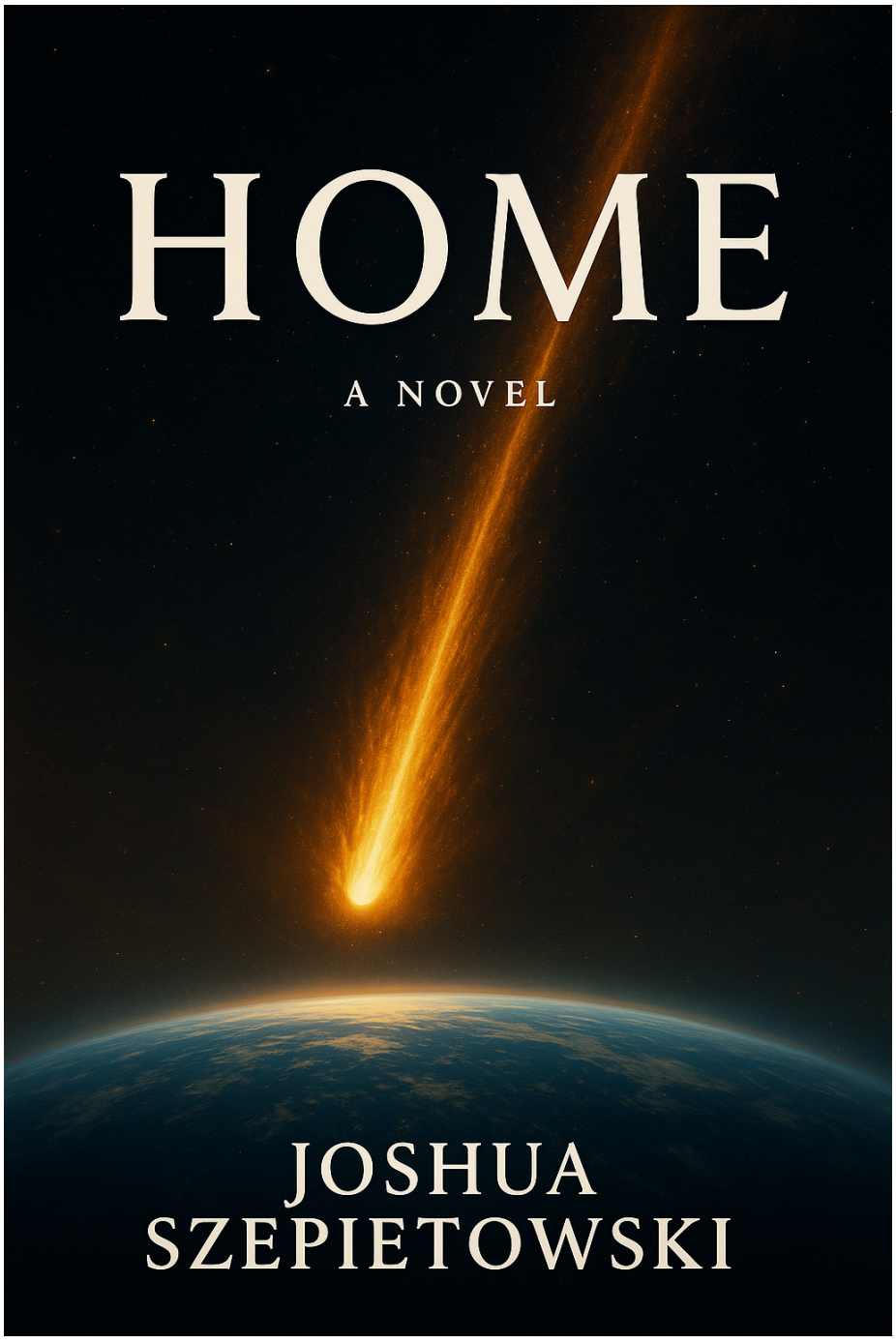
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HOME

A Novel by Joshua Szepietowski

PART I: DETECTION

Chapter 1: Calculation

Dr. Amara Okafor | Year 0, Day 1 | Antarctic Monitoring Station

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3:47 AM.

The Antarctic Monitoring Station hummed its familiar lullaby—cooling systems, data processors, the distant creak of ice beneath titanium foundations. Amara Okafor sat alone at her workstation, the only occupied seat among sixty, the only human presence in a facility designed for constant surveillance. Graveyard shift. Her preference after twenty years of this work. No interruptions. No small talk. Just her, the screens, and the infinite silence of space.

Her tea had gone cold again. She took a sip anyway, grimacing at the bitter metallic taste. The cheap tea never got better, but after two decades, she'd stopped caring. Her fingers moved across the haptic interface with practiced efficiency, reviewing the overnight data stream from the Near-Earth Object Survey Network. Routine work. Comfortable work. The kind that let her mind drift while her hands maintained their expertise.

Asteroid 2024-KJ9 drifted across her primary screen—a small rock, maybe thirty meters across, passing safely at 0.15 AU. Nothing threatening. Nothing interesting. She logged the observation, added it to the archive, moved to the next object. The system had flagged it green: no impact probability, no follow-up required. Standard. Predictable. Safe.

Through the reinforced windows, the Antarctic night pressed dark and absolute. No stars visible through the glare of McMurdo District—one of dozens of urban zones spanning the continent, its lights merging with the glow of neighboring districts to create an unbroken luminous sprawl. Four billion souls living at the bottom of the world, their lights bright enough to drown out the cosmos. Somewhere out there, her husband David was working the solar arrays, maintaining the massive panels that fed power to humanity's greatest concentration of civilization. They'd barely spoken in three months. When had that started? She couldn't remember. Couldn't quite bring herself to care.

The station was so quiet she could hear her own breathing. Quiet enough to think. Too quiet, sometimes. Especially at 3:47 AM, when the night stretched longest and thoughts turned unwelcome directions.

She pulled up the next data set.

And the universe ended.

Not with drama. Not with warning. Just: a priority alert, cutting through the gentle monotony. A red border materializing around a new observation. High-priority detection. Amara's hands paused mid-gesture, hovering above the haptic field. High-priority was rare. She'd seen it three times in twenty years—once for a close approach that turned out to be a sensor error, twice for objects that required immediate trajectory analysis but passed safely.

This would be nothing. Always was.

She pulled up the data.

Object: 3025-AZ1
Mass: ~1.5 × 10^15 kg
Estimated diameter: 10-15 km
Velocity: 28.3 km/s
Distance: 2.4 AU
Impact probability: 94.3%... 96.1%... 98.7%...

The number climbed as she watched, the system integrating new data from the global telescope network, refining its calculations with each passing second. Amara stared at the screen, her mind still processing, not yet comprehending. Big. Fast. Close. Probability climbing.

This was nothing. Always nothing.

The number continued rising: 98.9%... 99.3%... 99.5%...

Her tea fell from her hand. The cup hit the desk with a dull thud, lukewarm liquid spreading across the polymer surface. She didn't notice. Her eyes locked on the screen, watching the impact probability converge toward certainty with the mathematical inevitability of gravity itself.

99.7%... 99.9%... 99.97%.

The number stabilized.

Amara's hands were shaking. She pulled them into her lap, pressed them together, willed them still. Not yet. Not yet. Protocol first. Verification first. This was nothing. System error. Bad data. Calculation mistake. Twenty years of experience, twenty years of false alarms and near-misses and errors that looked catastrophic until they weren't.

This was nothing.

Her fingers returned to the interface, trembling but functional. System diagnostics first. She ran a full check: sensor calibration, data integrity, processing accuracy. Every subsystem reported nominal. No errors. No anomalies. Clean data from three independent telescope stations—Atacama, Mauna Kea, and the lunar observatory. All confirming.

She pulled up the parallax measurements. Perfect triangulation. The object was exactly where the system said it was, moving exactly as calculated. She ran spectral analysis: carbonaceous chondrite, consistent with the mass estimate. Brightness curve confirmed the diameter. Rotation period: seven hours, typical for objects this size.

Everything checked out.

Amara's breath caught. She forced herself to breathe—in through nose, out through mouth, like she'd learned in the meditation class David had convinced her to take eight years ago, back when they still talked about things other than logistics. The breathing exercise didn't help. Her chest felt tight, her vision narrowing to the single point of data on her screen.

Manual calculation. She had to do the math herself, verify the AI's work with her own expertise. Her fingers flew across the interface, pulling up the orbital mechanics software she'd written her dissertation on thirty years ago. Input the position vectors. Input the velocity components. Account for gravitational perturbations from Jupiter, Saturn, Earth-Luna. Calculate the trajectory.

The math was elegant. Beautiful, even. Orbital mechanics always was—pure physics, no ambiguity, no interpretation. Just Newton and Kepler and Einstein, working in perfect harmony to describe how objects moved through space.

The object's orbit was a long ellipse, currently 2.4 AU out—between Mars and Jupiter—but phase-locked with Earth in a slow gravitational dance. Not a bullet racing toward them. Worse: an appointment. The orbital resonance meant fifteen years of patient circling before the two paths finally intersected at the same place, the same moment.

The object would intercept Earth's orbit in exactly 15 years, 2 months, and 14 days.

Cross-section analysis: direct impact. Not a near-miss. Not a close approach. Direct.

Impact probability: 99.97%.

The tea was soaking into her papers. Amara watched the brown stain spread, slow and inevitable, consuming the notes she'd been making about asteroid 2024-KJ9. That object didn't matter now. Nothing she'd been working on mattered. The calculation she'd just completed rendered twenty years of work irrelevant.

She pulled up the deflection calculator.

This was why they maintained the monitoring network. This was why humanity had spent a trillion dollars over a century building the detection and response infrastructure. For this exact scenario. Detect early. Calculate trajectory. Deflect. Survive.

She input the parameters: mass 1.5 × 10^15 kg, velocity 28.3 km/s, time to impact 15.2 years.

Deflection Option: Kinetic Impactor
Status: INSUFFICIENT
Analysis: Object mass exceeds kinetic impactor capacity by factor of 240. Multiple missions required. Insufficient time for development and deployment.

Deflection Option: Nuclear Deflection
Status: INSUFFICIENT
Analysis: Required yield: ~800 megatons for significant trajectory alteration. Largest available warhead: 50 megatons. Multiple warheads required. Delivery system inadequate. Probability of fragmentation: 87%. Result: multiple impacts. Outcome: worse.

Deflection Option: Gravity Tractor
Status: INSUFFICIENT
Analysis: Continuous thrust requirement over 50+ years for measurable effect. Available timeline: 15.2 years. Insufficient for meaningful deflection.

Deflection Option: Mass Driver
Status: INSUFFICIENT
Analysis: Landing and installation timeline: 8-12 years. Operational duration required: 40+ years. Insufficient time.

Every option failed. Every scenario returned the same result: INSUFFICIENT.

The physics was absolute. The object was too massive, moving too fast, arriving too soon. Humanity had built impressive technology over a thousand years of spaceflight—solar-electric propulsion, orbital construction, deep space mining. But physics didn't care about impressiveness. It cared about mass and velocity and time, and the math was unambiguous.

This object could not be stopped.

Amara sat in the silent station, staring at the screen full of failures, and understood: everyone was going to die.

Her colleagues. Her husband. Her sister.

Not eventually. Not in the abstract, distant future. In fifteen years. Everyone she knew. Everyone she'd ever met. The four billion people across Antarctica's continent-spanning megacity. The eight billion scattered across Earth's remaining habitable zones. Her colleagues. Her husband. Her sister.

Her parents, dead twenty years now. At least they wouldn't die again. Zara—her sister in Lagos. Zara's daughter Maya, two years old. David. Her few friends,

scattered across research stations. All of them. Gone. Vaporized or frozen or starved in the aftermath.

Maya.

The thought of her niece hit like a physical blow. Maya was two years old. She'd be seventeen when the asteroid hit. Never turn eighteen. Never fall in love. Never have children of her own. Seventeen years of life, then: nothing.

Amara had only met Maya twice. Once at birth, once at her first birthday. Work kept getting in the way. Antarctica kept getting in the way. The distance between her and Zara—six months since they'd last talked, the conversation ending in silence and unspoken resentment—kept getting in the way. She'd promised herself she'd visit more. Next year, maybe. When the monitoring season calmed down.

There was no next year anymore.

Her sister's contact information glowed on her wrist display. Zara Okafor-Mensah, Lagos District. Last contact: 187 days ago. Last message from Zara: 43 days ago. *"Maya took her first steps! Wish you could have seen it."*

Amara hadn't responded. Too busy. Too distracted. Too comfortable in her isolation.

Now she stared at her sister's name, finger hovering over the call button. What would she say? *Hello, Zara. I just calculated your daughter's death. She has fifteen years. Make them count.*

Her finger didn't press the button.

The priority alert was still active on her screen, waiting for acknowledgment. Waiting for her to follow protocol. Waiting for her to inform the world that the world was ending.

She pulled up the emergency notification system. This was the procedure she'd trained for, drilled for, prepared for over twenty years. Detect the threat. Verify the data. Initiate the alert cascade. UN Security Council first, then space agencies, then national governments, then the civil defense network. The system would handle the distribution automatically once she authenticated the alert.

Her hands moved through the verification sequence with muscle memory. Biometric scan. Voice authentication. Authorization code. Final confirmation.

The system asked: *Are you certain you wish to proceed? This alert will initiate global emergency protocols.*

Was she certain? She looked at the data again. Checked the calculations again. Ran the verification sequence again. Every analysis returned the same result. The math was clean. The physics was clear. The object was real, massive, fast, and unavoidable.

She selected: *CONFIRMED. PROCEED WITH ALERT.*

The system activated. Alert cascade initiating. Emergency protocols engaging. Somewhere in Geneva, alarms were sounding. Somewhere in Washington, Beijing, Mumbai, Lagos, someone's terminal was lighting up with the worst news in human history.

Her screen populated with acknowledgments: UN Security Council alerted. International Space Agency alerted. All member nations alerted. Emergency response protocols initiated.

Her comm system lit up. Incoming calls. Fifteen. Twenty. Thirty. Everyone with clearance wanting to know if this was real, if the data was good, if she was absolutely certain.

She answered the first call. UN Emergency Coordinator, face grainy on the small screen. "Dr. Okafor, we've received your alert. Please confirm the data."

Behind him, she could see others moving urgently—one face she recognized: Secretary General Chen Liwei himself, watching from the edge of the screen. The man who would have to tell the world.

"Confirmed," Amara said. Her voice sounded strange to her own ears. Flat. Clinical. Professional. "Object designated 3025-AZ1. Mass one point five times ten to the fifteenth kilograms. Diameter ten to fifteen kilometers. Impact probability ninety-nine point nine seven percent. Time to impact fifteen years, two months, fourteen days."

Someone was crying. She couldn't tell who. Chen had moved closer, listening intently.

"Are you certain?" The coordinator's face was pale.

"Yes."

"Could the calculations be wrong?"

"No. Seven independent verifications. Manual confirmation completed. The data is accurate."

"Is deflection possible?"

Amara looked at the list of failed scenarios on her screen. "No. The object is too massive, too fast, and we have insufficient time. Every deflection scenario fails."

The coordinator's face seemed to age a decade in real-time. Chen's expression behind him was unreadable—the diplomatic mask of a man absorbing catastrophe. "I see. Thank you, Dr. Okafor. Stand by for further instructions."

The call ended.

The next call was identical. And the next. And the next. Director of the International Space Agency: "Are you certain?" Yes. Chinese Space Administration: "Could it be wrong?" No. Russian Space Agency: "Any possibility of deflection?" No. African Union Space Council: "Time to impact?" Fifteen years.

Every call was a variation of the same desperate hope that she was wrong, that the data was flawed, that there was some solution she'd missed. Every call ended with her delivering the same truth: the asteroid was real, the calculations were correct, and there was nothing anyone could do to stop it.

After the fortieth call, she stopped answering. The calls kept coming—sixty, seventy, eighty—but she let them queue. She'd said everything there was to say. The data spoke for itself. No amount of repetition would change the physics.

She sat in the silent station, surrounded by the blinking lights of unanswered calls, and stared at the asteroid's projected trajectory. The elegant arc that would intersect Earth's orbit. The beautiful mathematics that described the end of everything.

4:37 AM. An hour since detection. An hour since the universe ended.

Outside, McMurdo District was waking up. Early shift workers heading to their jobs. Transit systems cycling through morning routes. Hundreds of millions of people across the Antarctic megacity beginning another ordinary day, not yet knowing this was the day everything changed. Soon, the alerts would cascade through civil defense networks. Soon, the screens would light up with emergency broadcasts. Soon, everyone would know.

But for now, for this brief moment, Amara was the only person on Earth who fully understood that humanity had fifteen years left.

She pulled up Zara's contact again. Stared at her sister's name. Six months of silence. Six months of emails and messages and photos ignored because work always came first, because Antarctica was home now, because family was a distant abstraction that could wait for next year.

There was no next year.

Her finger hovered over the call button.

She couldn't do it. Couldn't find the words. Couldn't transform the clinical calculations into the human reality of telling her sister that Maya would die at seventeen. Couldn't bridge the gap of six months—six months that suddenly felt like an unbridgeable chasm of wasted time.

She closed the contact window.

Returned to the data.

The asteroid was still there, still approaching, still real. The trajectory unchanged by her observation of it. The physics indifferent to her inability to act. The mathematics perfect and terrible and absolute.

5:14 AM. The sun would rise soon, if you could call the pale Antarctic twilight sunrise. David would finish his shift on the solar arrays. Would come home to their shared apartment. Would they talk? Would she tell him? Would he understand?

She didn't know. Couldn't think about it. Could only stare at the screen full of data that described the end of everything she knew.

The tea stain had spread across her entire notebook. Brown and wet and ruined. Like everything else now. Like the future. Like the fifteen years that remained—a brief, inadequate span between now and nothing.

Her hands had stopped shaking. That was something. Professional competence reasserting itself. She could work. Could maintain her expertise. Could update the calculations daily, track the object's approach, refine the trajectory predictions. Could do the job she'd trained for, even if the job no longer mattered.

The calls had stopped coming. Ninety-three unread. She deleted them all. They didn't matter anymore.

Nothing mattered anymore.

Everything mattered now.

She didn't know which was true. Maybe both. Maybe neither. The asteroid didn't care about her philosophical confusion. It would arrive in fifteen years, two months, and fourteen days regardless of what she thought or felt or understood.

6:03 AM. Shift change in thirty minutes. Dr. Park would arrive to take over the station. She'd have to brief him. Have to explain. Have to watch his face as comprehension dawned. Have to see in his eyes the same thing she felt in her chest—the weight of knowing everyone was dying.

She pulled up the countdown timer. Created a new display element on her screen:

TIME REMAINING: 15 years, 2 months, 14 days

The numbers would decrement. Each second bringing the object closer. Each day reducing the time humanity had left. She would watch this countdown for fifteen years, updating it daily, tracking their march toward extinction with the same professional competence she'd brought to every other aspect of her work.

Year 0. That's what they'd call it now. Not 3025 AD anymore—that calendar belonged to a species with a future. This was Year 0 of the new era. The only era that mattered. The countdown had become humanity's clock, and she'd just set it.

She'd reset time itself.

Because what else was there to do?

What else could she do?

The station hummed its familiar lullaby. The screens glowed their familiar glow. Everything looked the same as it had an hour ago, as it had every morning for twenty years. But everything had changed. The universe had ended, quietly, at 3:47 AM, in the form of a simple data alert that nobody else had noticed yet.

Dr. Amara Okafor, astrophysicist, expert in Near-Earth Object detection and tracking, sat alone in the Antarctic Monitoring Station and watched the countdown begin.

First to know.

First to calculate.

First to understand that everyone she loved was going to die.

And she still couldn't call her sister.

The tea stain had reached the edge of her desk. A few drops fell to the floor, dark spots on white tile. She watched them fall. Watched them spread. Watched physics work the same way it always did—indifferent, inexorable, absolute.

Fifteen years, two months, fourteen days.

Then: nothing.

She returned to her calculations. Because that's what she did. That's all she knew how to do. The numbers didn't judge. The data didn't ask for comfort. The mathematics was clean and pure and true, even when the truth was the end of everything.

Outside, the Antarctic dawn approached. Inside, Dr. Amara Okafor updated her trajectory calculations and counted down the days until impact.

The universe had ended at 3:47 AM.

Nobody else knew yet.

But they would soon.

Everyone would.

Chapter 2: Towers

Zara Okafor-Mensah | Year 0, Day 1 | Lagos District

Maya's tower was six blocks tall, wobbling precariously as she reached for the seventh. Her tongue stuck out in concentration—fierce, absolute focus on the task of balancing synthetic wood on synthetic wood. Two years old and already building things. Already an engineer.

"Mama, look!" Maya held the seventh block triumphantly.

"I see, baby. Very good." Zara set down her coffee, genuinely impressed. The tower shouldn't be standing. The base was too narrow, the blocks slightly

misaligned. But Maya had found the balance point anyway, the way children sometimes stumbled onto solutions that adults would calculate for hours.

"Higher!"

"Be careful."

The tower swayed but held. Maya giggled, and Zara laughed with her—couldn't help it, the sound escaping before she could think about it. This was the best part of morning. The Lagos heat already pressing against the windows, humidity fogging the glass where the climate control fought the outside air. The smell of Kwame's synth-banana pancakes mixing with the coffee she'd let go cold again, with the wet-earth scent of his plants crowding every surface. Their apartment wasn't large—seventy square meters—but it felt full. Full of green things growing, full of Maya's blocks scattered across the floor, full of the sounds of family being family.

"Pancakes ready?" Zara called toward the kitchen.

"Synth-banana." Kwame appeared in the doorway, spatula in hand, wearing the ridiculous apron Maya had picked out for his birthday—bright orange with dancing vegetables. "Maya's favorite."

"My favorite!" Maya agreed, not looking away from her construction project. The eighth block was in her hands now. Ambitious.

Zara watched her daughter's small fingers find the placement, adjust, test. She'd grown up scattered—parents in Mumbai, sister in Antarctica, cousins she'd met maybe twice. Always calling across time zones, never quite connecting. But this, here, this morning—Kwame humming off-key in the kitchen, Maya building impossible towers, the plants pressing green against every window—this was what she'd wanted. What she'd built. Seventy square meters of home.

Her tablet chimed. Emergency alert. She glanced at it, expecting a water main break or power fluctuation—the usual infrastructure complaints she'd get called in to help fix.

Every screen in the apartment lit up simultaneously.

Emergency broadcast override. UN Security Council. The kitchen screen. The living room screen. Her tablet. Kwame's wrist display. Even Maya's toy screen. All showing the same thing: blue emergency banner, UN seal, the face of Secretary General Chen Liwei.

"This is not a drill," Secretary General Chen said. His face was composed but pale—the face of someone who'd been told an hour ago that he had to tell eight billion people they were dying. "A near-Earth object has been detected on collision course with Earth. International verification is complete. Impact probability is ninety-nine point nine seven percent. Time to impact is fifteen years."

Zara's coffee cup was halfway to her lips. It stopped. Hovered. The words were processing through her mind but not connecting to meaning yet. Near-Earth object. Collision course. Fifteen years.

"Multiple deflection scenarios have been analyzed," the Secretary General continued. "All existing deflection technologies are insufficient for an object of this size and velocity. Impact cannot be prevented."

The words clicked into place. Impact. Cannot be prevented. Fifteen years.

Asteroid. Extinction. Everyone dies.

Zara's hands went cold. The coffee cup was still in her grip—she could feel the ceramic, the heat, the weight of it—but her hands had gone cold and distant, like they belonged to someone else. Fifteen years. She knew what that meant. Had designed enough systems, run enough failure analyses, understood enough about planetary-scale catastrophe. The numbers weren't abstract to her. Ten-kilometer diameter meant extinction. Full stop. No engineering solution. No backup system. No redundancy.

Fifteen years until impact.

Maya would be seventeen.

The cup slipped. Zara watched it fall, watched the coffee arc across her tablet, watched the brown stain spread across the water reclamation schematics she'd been designing. Watched it happen and couldn't move to stop it.

Maya was still building. Still reaching for the ninth block. Still existing in the world where towers mattered, where breakfast was coming, where Mama and Papa were right here and everything was fine.

Seventeen. Maya would be seventeen.

Zara was on her feet before she knew she was moving.

"The UN Security Council is coordinating with all member nations," Chen continued, his diplomatic training maintaining his composure. "Further information will be provided as it becomes available. We ask for calm. We ask for cooperation. We ask—"

Zara wasn't listening anymore. She was looking at her daughter, watching Maya place the eighth block, watching her accomplish something she couldn't have done yesterday. Growing. Learning. Becoming. All of it temporary now. All of it with an expiration date: fifteen years.

"Mama?" Maya's voice, small and confused. "Mama, why are you crying?"

Zara hadn't known she was crying until Maya said it. She touched her face—wet, her fingers coming away wet—and then she was across the room, Maya in her arms, holding her too tight. Maya's hair smelled like the lavender shampoo they'd used last night, like sleep, like morning, like everything Zara was going to lose.

"Mama, too tight!"

She couldn't let go. Couldn't make her arms work right. Maya squirming, protesting, not understanding.

Then Kwame's arms were around them both. The apron pressing ridiculous orange against Zara's shoulder. His breath ragged in her ear. He'd seen. He knew.

"It's okay, baby," he told Maya, his voice cracking on the lie. "Mama's just sad. Everything's okay."

Maya's tower had fallen. Zara could see it past Kwame's shoulder—blocks scattered across the floor, the whole structure collapsed. Everything falls. Everything ends. Her daughter would be seventeen years old and then she would be nothing.

"Papa, you're crying too," Maya said, confused and frightened. "Why is everyone crying?"

How do you explain extinction to a two-year-old? You don't. You hold her. You let her feel safe even when nothing is safe. You breathe in the lavender smell of her hair and you stay present because she needs you here, not calculating numbers, not drowning in fear.

"We love you so much," Zara managed. "So, so much."

"I love you too!" Maya said, her small hands patting Zara's wet cheeks. "Don't be sad, Mama. I build you a new tower."

Zara almost laughed. Almost broke completely. Maya, offering to fix it. Offering to build something. Two years old and already responding to catastrophe the way engineers did—by making something.

"Okay, baby," Zara whispered. "You build me a new tower."

The screens were still broadcasting—scientists now, explaining what the Secretary General had announced. Zara let the words wash past. She didn't need experts to explain impact physics. She'd taken the same courses Amara had, back before their paths diverged. Amara to space, Zara to water. Amara to watching the sky, Zara to building systems that kept people alive.

Amara. Her sister. The astrophysicist. The one who tracked exactly these kinds of objects.

Was Amara the one who found it?

Six months since they'd last talked. An argument about something stupid—Zara couldn't even remember what now. Something about priorities, about family, about Amara missing Maya's first birthday because of work. Zara had sent messages after that: photos of Maya, updates about her development, attempts to bridge the distance. Amara's responses had been brief, distracted. Eventually, Zara stopped trying.

Now she wanted her sister desperately. Wanted to call, to ask questions, to hear Amara explain the math and make it less real. Or more real. Or bearable, somehow. But she didn't know what to say. *My sister calculated my daughter's death.* How do you begin that conversation?

The apartment comm was ringing. Everyone calling everyone. Zara's parents in Mumbai—she could see the queue lighting up. Kwame's mother in what used to be Vancouver. Friends scattered across Lagos District. Everyone reaching out, everyone desperate, everyone needing connection in the face of the incomprehensible.

Zara answered her parents' call. Her mother's face appeared on the screen, already crying. "Zara! Did you see?"

"I saw."

"Maya—" Her mother couldn't finish.

"I know, Mama."

"What do we do?"

"I don't know."

There was nothing to do. That was the terrible truth. No preparations to make. No safety measures to implement. No way to protect Maya from this. Fifteen years from now, the asteroid would hit. The impact would be unsurvivable. That was it. That was everything.

The calls kept coming. Zara answered some, let others go to voicemail. Everyone asking the same questions: Is it real? Are they sure? What do we do? She had no answers. Just: yes, yes, and I don't know.

Maya had calmed down, distracted by Kwame putting on a children's program. But she kept looking at Zara with worried eyes. Children that age didn't understand words, but they understood fear. They understood their parents' emotional state. Maya knew something was terribly wrong, even if she didn't know what.

Maya was already back on the floor, gathering blocks. Building again. The morning light still came through the windows. The plants still pressed green against the glass. Kwame's pancakes were burning—Zara could smell it, the synthetic banana going acrid—but neither of them moved to save them.

The broadcast continued. Maps now. Impact projections. Casualty estimates.

Zara looked at her tablet, still wet with coffee. The water reclamation system she'd been designing. Forty thousand liters per day. Six months of work. For what? For a city that wouldn't exist in fifteen years?

She should feel something about that. The waste of it. But all she could feel was Maya on the floor, small hands stacking blocks, determined to build something that would stand.

Her hand found her abdomen without her deciding to move it. Flat. Empty. They'd been talking about trying again. Maybe next year, when Maya was three. Give her a sibling.

Kwame saw the gesture. His eyes met hers across Maya's head.

Neither of them spoke. But the question was there between them, heavy as the humid Lagos air pressing against the windows.

The broadcast kept going. Maps, numbers, physics. Zara had stopped listening. She knew enough. Knew too much, probably—the engineering courses, the disaster modeling, the systems thinking that made her good at her job and terrible at denial.

Maya's tower fell again. Blocks scattering across the floor with soft plastic sounds.

"Oh no," Maya said. And then, immediately: "I fix it."

She gathered the blocks. Started again. Tower number three, or four, or five—Zara had lost count. But Maya hadn't. Maya just kept building.

Zara watched her daughter's small hands find the balance points, test the weight, adjust. This was what humans did. Built things. Even when they fell. Even when they couldn't last. Built them anyway.

She was crying again. Couldn't stop. Didn't try.

By evening, the initial shock had worn into something quieter. Not acceptance—nothing so complete. Just: the body could only sustain that level of fear for so long.

The broadcasts continued. Scientists, politicians, religious leaders. Zara had stopped watching hours ago.

Outside, Lagos was stirring again. She could hear it through the walls—voices from neighboring apartments, someone's music playing three floors down, the distant hum of transport moving through the district. The silence of the morning had been unnatural. This was more like Lagos: sound, movement, life insisting on itself even when everything had changed.

Kwame made dinner. The smell of cooking filled the apartment—synth-protein and the snap of vegetables hitting hot oil. Normal smells. Ordinary evening sounds. Maya sat in her high chair, eating with good appetite, kicking her feet against the footrest in some private rhythm. She didn't know. Couldn't know. Was just hungry, just eating, just being two years old.

Zara forced herself to eat. Couldn't taste anything.

After Maya was asleep, they sat on the small balcony. The Lagos night pressed warm and close—humidity like a second skin, the artificial breeze doing little against it. Zara had pulled her hair up off her neck but could still feel sweat

gathering at her temples. Below them, the district spread in all directions. Lights coming on. People moving. Five million lives in this district alone.

Kwame's voice came soft in the darkness. "Should we have another child?"

Zara's stomach clenched. There it was. The question she'd been circling all day.

"I don't know," she said. Honest. Raw.

"Me neither." He was quiet for a moment. "But I keep thinking—fourteen years. That's a childhood. A whole childhood."

"But never adult," Zara said. "Never independent. Never—"

"Never a lot of things." Kwame turned to look at her. His face was hard to read in the dim light, but she could hear the weight in his voice. "But fourteen years of being loved. Fourteen years of existing. Fourteen years of—" He stopped. Swallowed. "Of being part of this family. Isn't that worth something?"

Zara's hands were shaking. She pressed them flat against her thighs. "I don't know. I can't—I can't think about it. Not yet."

He reached for her hand. Found it. Held on.

They sat like that for a long time, watching the lights of Lagos blink and shift below them. Inside, Maya slept. Dreaming whatever two-year-olds dream. Innocent of everything except being loved.

Later, in bed, Zara held her phone in the dark. Amara's contact glowed on the screen—that old photo, her sister looking serious and competent and far away. Six months since they'd talked. Some stupid argument Zara couldn't even remember now.

She started typing: *Did you find it? Was it you?*

Deleted it. Started again: *I'm scared and I don't know what to do and I need my sister.*

Stared at the words. Deleted them. Put the phone down.

Tomorrow. She'd try tomorrow. There was time. Wasn't there? Fifteen years of time.

Beside her, Kwame's breathing had gone slow and even. Sleep or good imitation. She curled against his back, pressed her face between his shoulder blades. Warm. Solid. Here.

From the next room, she could hear Maya breathing. Soft, regular sounds. The rhythm of uncomplicated sleep.

Fifteen years. Maya would be seventeen. Would never be eighteen.

Zara lay in the dark and listened to her daughter breathe, and tried not to count.

She slept eventually, exhausted past thinking.

And dreamed of Maya at seventeen, turning around to smile at her, the light behind her too bright to look at.

Chapter 3: Faith

Ibrahim al-Rashid | Year 0, Day 1 | Jerusalem

Allahu Akbar.

The words were automatic. Ibrahim had spoken them five times daily since he was old enough to speak. God is greatest. The foundation of everything. The opening of every prayer, every call, every moment of submission to Allah's will.

His forehead touched the prayer mat—rough wool, worn soft by three years of use. Around him, his brothers knelt in rows. Forty fighters facing Mecca, moving in perfect synchronization. Backs straight, then bowing. Foreheads to earth, then rising. The choreography of submission performed together, as it had been performed for fourteen centuries.

Bismillah ir-Rahman ir-Rahim.

In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful.

The evening prayer was Ibrahim's favorite. Maghrib—sunset prayer, when the day's fighting paused and peace descended over their camp in the Jerusalem hills. The light slanting golden through the tent fabric. The cooling air after desert heat. The collective presence of his brothers, all aligned toward the same point, all surrendered to the same God.

This was certainty. This was purpose. This was home.

But more than that—and Ibrahim had never told anyone this, would never find words adequate—this was when he *felt* God. Not intellectually understood. Not dutifully believed. *Felt.* The presence arriving like warmth spreading through his chest. The sense of being held, witnessed, loved by something infinitely greater. His brothers around him, moving together, breathing together, prostrating together—and in that synchronized surrender, something opened. A door in his heart that led somewhere vast and luminous and absolutely real.

He'd felt it first at age twelve. Friday prayers at the mosque in his village. The imam's voice calling them to worship. Two hundred men rising, bowing, prostrating in perfect unison. Ibrahim among them, going through motions he'd practiced since childhood. Then: it happened. Like the room filled with light, though his eyes were closed. Like he could feel every person there—their hearts, their prayers, their presence. Like God was so close Ibrahim could almost touch Him. So present that tears ran down his face onto the prayer mat.

He'd asked his father about it afterward. "Baba, did you feel that? In the prayer? Did you feel... something?"

His father had smiled. "Yes, son. That's Allah. That's why we pray. Not just the words—the presence. You felt Him. Be grateful. Some people pray their whole lives and never feel what you just felt."

After that, Ibrahim chased it. Not every prayer brought the feeling. Sometimes it was just rote motion, just words said because they were supposed to be said. But often enough—especially at maghrib, especially with his brothers, especially when the light was right and the air was cool and everyone was aligned—the door opened. God arrived. The presence filled him. And Ibrahim knew, with every cell of his being, that this was real. That Allah saw him. That paradise waited. That dying in service to this was the greatest honor imaginable.

That's what made him a fighter. Not ideology. Not politics. Not even justice. The feeling. The certainty that came from direct encounter. He'd met God. How could he not defend the land where God dwelled? How could he not fight for the holy places where that presence was strongest? How could death be frightening when it meant returning to the source of that light he felt in prayer?

Ibrahim was nineteen years old. He'd joined the militia at sixteen, the moment he was old enough. Before that: madrasah, studying Quran, learning from the imam. His whole life had been preparation for this—defending the holy land, serving Allah, earning paradise through righteous struggle.

Jerusalem had been contested for three millennia. Muslim, Christian, Jew—all claiming the same stones, the same streets, the same sacred spaces. In the era of Forever Earth, when humanity abandoned the stars and accepted planetary confinement, Jerusalem became more precious. Not just spiritually sacred, but eternally so. The conflicts weren't going to end. There would be no exodus to new worlds. This was it. This land. Forever.

So they fought. And Ibrahim believed—totally, completely—that this fight was righteous. That Allah guided their hands. That martyrdom led to paradise. That dying here, defending holy ground, was the greatest honor a Muslim could achieve.

Subhana Rabbiyal Adheem.

Glory be to my Lord, the Great.

The prayer continued. Ibrahim's mind was quiet, centered. Waiting for the door to open. Waiting for the presence.

And: there. It came.

Warmth spreading through his chest. The sense of being witnessed by something infinite. His brothers around him—he could feel them, their hearts beating in rhythm with his. The collective surrender creating space for God to enter. The tent filling with presence the way a room fills with light when you open curtains.

This was what faith felt like. Not belief. Not intellectual assent. But: encounter. Direct experience. God as real as the ground beneath him, as present as the air he breathed. Complete surrender, complete certainty, complete peace. No doubt. No questions. Just: being held in attention so vast and loving it made everything else—combat, death, fear, pain—irrelevant.

Three years in the militia. Dozens of engagements. Ibrahim had killed. Had watched brothers die. Had been wounded twice—once superficially, once seriously enough to require evacuation. Each time, his faith held. Not because he believed in paradise intellectually. Because he'd *felt* it. The presence in prayer was preview. Death would be returning to that light permanently. What was there to fear?

Simple. Clean. True.

Allahu Akbar.

They rose from prostration. Final movements. The prayer was nearly complete. Then: dinner, weapons maintenance, evening briefing. Routine and sacred both. Life structured by prayer and purpose.

Commander Hassan appeared at the tent entrance, breaking protocol. You didn't interrupt prayer. Not ever. But Hassan was standing there, face grim, waiting.

The imam saw him. Paused mid-recitation. "Brothers, hold. Commander?"

"Imam, everyone needs to hear this. Immediately."

The prayer dissolved. Forty fighters looking at each other, confused. In three years, Ibrahim had never seen prayer interrupted. Not for anything. Not even when they were under direct attack.

"The command tent," Hassan said. "Now. Everyone."

They moved quickly, abandoning their prayer mats. The evening light was fading to dusk. The camp sprawled across the hillside—a hundred and fifty fighters total, mix of tents and prefab structures. Jerusalem visible in the valley below, glowing in the twilight. Holy city. Contested city. Their city to defend.

The command tent was designed for thirty. A hundred and fifty fighters packed inside, standing shoulder to shoulder. The air was close and tense. Someone had pulled up a screen—UN broadcast, paused on the face of Secretary General Chen Liwei.

"Brothers," the imam said, moving to stand beside the screen. "The Commander has received news. Significant news. We will watch together and pray together. Whatever comes, we face it with faith."

That was concerning. The imam's face was composed, but Ibrahim could see tension in his shoulders. Whatever this was, it wasn't routine combat update.

Hassan activated the broadcast.

Ibrahim watched as Secretary General Chen explained—a Chinese diplomat, career bridge-builder, chosen to lead the UN three years ago for his patient negotiation. Now chosen by fate to announce extinction. Near-Earth object detected. Collision course. Ninety-nine point nine seven percent impact probability. Fifteen years. Deflection impossible. Extinction inevitable. The screen showed a new calendar notation—Year 0—as if time itself had been reset to count down toward oblivion.

The tent was silent except for the Secretary General's voice. A hundred and fifty men listening to the calm explanation of the end of everything.

When the broadcast ended, nobody spoke. The silence stretched—five seconds, ten, thirty. Ibrahim felt something shifting inside him. Not panic. Not yet. But: a crack forming in the foundation.

The imam spoke first. "Brothers, this is a test. Allah tests those He loves. The faithful will be rewarded with paradise. This changes nothing about our purpose."

Murmurs of agreement. Some fighters nodding. Some looking stunned. Some already praying quietly.

"If anything," the imam continued, "this makes our struggle more meaningful. We defend this land until the last. We serve Allah until He calls us home. Fifteen years or fifteen minutes—our duty is the same. Our faith is unchanged."

More agreement. Stronger now. The brothers gathering themselves, returning to certainty. This was test. This was trial. Faith would see them through.

But Ibrahim was still feeling that crack.

He raised his hand—unusual, but permitted. "Imam, if everyone dies... Muslim, Christian, Jew, atheist... if the asteroid kills everyone regardless... what's the difference? What are we fighting for?"

The tent went quiet. A hundred and fifty pairs of eyes turned to him. Some sympathetic. Some shocked. Some hostile—you didn't question the imam. You didn't question the struggle.

The imam's face was patient. He'd fielded doubt before. "Brother Ibrahim, we fight because Allah commands it. The outcome is His will. Our duty is submission, not understanding."

"But the holy land will be destroyed," Ibrahim pressed. He could hear the crack widening in his own voice. "Jerusalem, Mecca, Medina—all of it. Gone. Vaporized. If that's Allah's plan, then what are we? What's the point of fighting for land that won't exist?"

"The point," the imam said firmly, "is obedience. The point is faith. The point is that we serve Allah, not outcomes. Whether we die in battle or by asteroid, whether Jerusalem stands or falls, our duty is unchanged: submission."

"That sounds like we're puppets," Ibrahim said quietly.

The imam's face hardened. "That sounds like you're losing faith, brother."

The tent was very quiet now. Dangerously quiet. Losing faith was serious. In combat zone, during trial, surrounded by believers—this was the worst time and place for doubt.

Commander Hassan stepped in. "Brothers, it's late. We're all processing difficult news. Let's rest. Tomorrow we'll discuss. For now: pray, reflect, trust in Allah."

The gathering dissolved. Fighters dispersing to tents, small groups forming, urgent conversations starting. Everyone processing. Everyone trying to understand how to integrate extinction into their worldview.

Ibrahim walked alone to his tent. A dozen brothers shared the space, but most were still outside, talking, praying, seeking community. He was grateful for the solitude.

He sat on his bedroll and pulled out his *misbaha*—prayer beads, ninety-nine beads for the ninety-nine names of God. He'd carried these beads since childhood. His father had given them to him at age seven. "Count the names," his father had said. "Remember Allah in every moment."

Ibrahim had worn these beads through madrasah, through training, through combat. They'd been in his pocket when he killed for the first time. They'd been in his hand when his brother Samir died beside him, shrapnel through the chest, blood everywhere, final words: *Allahu Akbar*. The beads were sacred. They were connection. They were reminder and comfort and purpose.

Now they felt like stones.

He tried to pray. Moved his fingers over the beads, one name per bead. *Ar-Rahman. Ar-Rahim. Al-Malik. Al-Quddus.* The Compassionate. The Merciful. The King. The Holy.

The names felt hollow. Just words. Just sounds. No resonance. No connection. He kept going, hoping the practice would restore meaning. *Al-Salam. Al-Mu'min. Al-Muhaymin.* The Source of Peace. The Inspirer of Faith. The Guardian.

Guardian of what? If everyone dies, what is being guarded?

He stopped at the forty-third bead. Sat with the string wrapped around his fingers. The weight was familiar—he could probably identify these specific beads in darkness. But the meaning was gone. Or fading. Or had never been there in the first place, and he was only now noticing its absence.

Footsteps outside his tent. The imam entered without asking—his privilege as spiritual leader.

"Brother Ibrahim. May I sit?"

"Of course, Imam."

The imam lowered himself with care—he was sixty, old for this life. They sat in silence for a moment, the sounds of camp filtering through the tent fabric. Prayers, conversations, someone crying quietly.

"You're troubled," the imam said.

"Yes."

"Tell me."

Ibrahim chose his words carefully. "Imam, I've believed my entire life. Believed totally. The faith made sense. Defending Jerusalem made sense. Martyrdom made sense—death leading to paradise, sacrifice for something greater. It all fit together."

"And now?"

"Now I don't understand how this fits. If everyone dies—righteous and wicked, believer and non-believer, all together—how is that justice? How is that mercy? If this is Allah's plan, what are we to Him? Toys? Entertainment? Why create us only to destroy us after a thousand generations?"

The imam was quiet for a long moment. "These are questions humans have asked since the beginning. Why does Allah allow suffering? Why does death come to the innocent? Why does evil seem to prosper? These questions don't have answers we can grasp. That's why we have faith."

"What if faith doesn't make sense anymore?"

"Faith isn't about sense, brother. Faith is about surrender. About trusting that Allah's wisdom exceeds our understanding. About submitting even when—especially when—we don't understand."

"That sounds like surrender to cruelty."

The imam's face showed pain. "Brother, you're young. Only nineteen. You haven't had time to develop the depth of understanding that sustains faith through trial. This news is shocking, I understand. But don't let the asteroid steal your faith. That would be dying before death."

"What if I can't stop it? What if the faith is already gone?"

"Then you pray for its return. You practice the rituals. You trust that Allah will restore what feels lost. Faith isn't constant feeling—it's constant practice. Even when it feels empty, you continue. The feeling returns."

"What if it doesn't?"

The imam stood slowly. "Then you're lost, brother. And I pray Allah guides you back."

He left. Ibrahim sat alone with his beads, feeling their weight, finding no meaning.

Outside, the brothers were still praying. He could hear their voices, collective and certain. They'd integrated this news into their faith. They'd found a way to believe that extinction was test, that Allah's plan was mysterious but perfect, that death by asteroid was no different than death by blade or bullet.

Ibrahim wanted to believe with them. Wanted the certainty back. Wanted the foundation restored.

But the crack had widened. And he couldn't ignore it anymore.

He tried to pray. Held the beads. Spoke the names. *Al-Aziz. Al-Jabbar. Al-Mutakabbir.* The Mighty. The Compeller. The Supreme.

Waited for the door to open. Waited for the warmth. Waited for the presence.

Nothing.

The words were empty. Just sounds in an empty tent. The door stayed closed. No warmth in his chest. No sense of being held. No feeling of vastness or light or love. Just: Ibrahim, alone, speaking to absence.

God didn't answer. Or God wasn't there. Or God was there but didn't care. Or—worst possibility—God had never been there. The feeling Ibrahim had chased since age twelve, the presence he'd felt hundreds of times, the direct encounter that made him willing to die... what if it was just brain chemistry? Just neurons firing in patterns that felt like meaning? Just human need for connection projected onto emptiness?

He'd lived his entire life for this faith. Structured every decision around it. Chosen this fight, this struggle, this potential martyrdom because he'd *felt* something real. Not just believed—experienced. The presence in prayer wasn't abstract theology. It was as real as another person in the room. More real. The most real thing Ibrahim had ever known.

And now: gone. The door closed. The warmth absent. The feeling vanished like it had never existed.

Now: an asteroid. Physics. Indifferent matter following indifferent laws toward indifferent collision. Fifteen years, then extinction. Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Righteous and wicked together. Jerusalem and Mecca and every holy site—vaporized. Every prayer said, every sacrifice made, every martyr died—all rendered meaningless by simple collision of matter and planet.

And the presence Ibrahim had felt—what was it? If everyone dies regardless, if righteousness and wickedness end the same way, if God allows His holy places to be vaporized and His faithful to be extinguished... then what was that warmth in prayer? What was that feeling of being held? What was that door opening in his chest when his brothers prostrated together?

Delusion? Wish fulfillment? Brain chemistry mistaken for divine encounter?

If that was Allah's plan, Ibrahim couldn't worship it. Couldn't surrender to it. Couldn't call it merciful or compassionate or any of the ninety-nine names he'd memorized.

And if the feeling wasn't real—if the most true thing Ibrahim had ever experienced was just neurons firing—then what?

His whole identity was wrapped in faith. Muslim. Fighter. Servant of Allah. Take that away and what remained? A nineteen-year-old with a gun defending land that wouldn't exist. Fighting enemies who would die with him. Serving cause that ended in fifteen years regardless of who won.

Meaningless. All of it. Suddenly, terribly meaningless.

He lay down on his bedroll, still holding the beads. Through the tent fabric, stars were emerging. Beautiful, distant, indifferent. Somewhere out there, an asteroid was falling toward Earth. Had been falling for millions of years. Would continue falling for fifteen more. Then: impact. Then: end.

God didn't create the asteroid. God didn't guide it. God didn't care about it. It was just: matter, following physics, approaching planet. Natural. Inevitable. Empty of meaning or malice or mercy.

Like everything else, maybe. Like life. Like death. Like the feeling Ibrahim had experienced in prayer—the warmth, the presence, the door opening in his chest. Maybe it was just: neurons, following patterns, creating sensations. Natural. Biochemical. Empty of divine presence or supernatural meaning.

Maybe the prayers Ibrahim had said five times daily for nineteen years were just sounds. Just words said into empty air. Just human need for pattern and purpose in a universe that offered neither.

Maybe God was never there. Maybe the feeling was always illusion. Maybe Ibrahim had structured his entire life around neurochemistry mistaken for the divine.

Ibrahim closed his eyes and tried to feel faith returning.

Felt nothing.

The beads were stones. The prayers were words. The faith was gone, or going, or had never been real in the first place.

Fifteen years left. He didn't know how to live them faithless. Didn't know who he was without the structure of belief.

But he couldn't make himself believe anymore. Couldn't surrender to a plan that seemed cruel, to a God that seemed absent, to a faith that didn't survive contact with physics.

Outside, his brothers prayed. Inside, Ibrahim lay in darkness, holding his beads, finding nothing but weight.

The crack had widened to chasm. And he couldn't see the other side anymore.

First night. Faith breaking. Nothing to replace it yet. Just: emptiness where certainty used to be.

Allahu Akbar, his brothers chanted.

God is greatest.

Ibrahim said nothing.

The beads were stones.

The prayers were empty.

The faith was gone.

And fifteen years remained to figure out what came after.

Chapter 4: Purpose

Kenji Torres | Year 0, Day 1 | Antarctic Megacity, McMurdo District

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The notification woke Kenji at 4:47 AM.

Not his alarm—that wouldn't sound until 7:00. This was his mother's priority signal, the emergency override that bypassed all sleep settings. He'd only heard it three times before: infrastructure failures, civil emergencies, situations where the mayor needed her son immediately.

He sat up in the dark apartment, heart already racing before his brain fully engaged. The message was text only: *"Come now. Official residence. Don't comm. Just come. -Mom"*

No explanation. No context. Just urgency compressed into thirteen words.

Kenji dressed quickly—discarding his usual deliberation over clothes. Whatever this was, it didn't matter what he wore. Five minutes later he was in the transit system, mostly empty at this hour. A handful of night shift workers heading home. A couple maintenance techs. No one looking at him, no one aware that the mayor's son was racing through the pre-dawn darkness toward crisis.

His mind cycled through possibilities. Economic collapse? Another district threatening war? Environmental catastrophe? His mother didn't panic. Twenty years in politics had given her ice in her veins. For her to use the emergency signal meant something unprecedented.

The government district was quiet. Security recognized him at the entrance to his mother's building—they always did, though he visited less frequently than

he should. Too busy with the dissertation. Too absorbed in academic work. Too comfortable keeping family at arm's length while he built his career.

Elevator to the forty-seventh floor. The hallway was empty except for two security officers flanking his mother's door. They nodded, stepped aside. One said quietly: "She's expecting you."

The door opened before he could knock.

Elena Torres stood in her robe, hair loose, face carrying an expression Kenji had never seen before. Not quite devastation. Not quite shock. Something between those states—a kind of hollowed-out comprehension.

"Mom?"

"Come in, mijo. Sit."

Her apartment was dark except for one lamp. His mother guided him to the couch with a hand on his shoulder. She sat beside him, close, and took both his hands in hers. The gesture alone was alarming—his mother wasn't physically demonstrative, had learned to maintain professional distance even at home.

"There's no easy way to say this." Her voice was steady but wrong somehow. Too controlled. "An hour ago, Dr. Okafor at the monitoring station detected an asteroid. Large. Fast. Direct trajectory toward Earth."

Kenji's brain started processing immediately—four years studying asteroid deflection made the analysis automatic. "How large? How much time do we have for deflection?"

"Fifteen kilometers diameter. Fifteen years to impact." She squeezed his hands. "And no, mijo. We can't deflect it. Dr. Okafor ran every scenario. The emergency coordinator consulted with the International Space Agency. I've spent the last forty-five minutes on calls with every space program director on Earth." She paused. "The object is too massive, moving too fast, and we have insufficient time. Every deflection option fails."

The words landed but didn't fully connect. Like information in a language he was learning but hadn't mastered. Asteroid. Fifteen years. Can't deflect. The phrases made sense individually but their combination seemed impossible.

"That's. . . " He stopped. What was it? Impossible? His mother wouldn't summon him at 4:47 AM for a mistake. Wrong? She'd just told him every expert on Earth had confirmed it. "That's everyone."

"Yes."

"Four billion people here in Antarctica. Eight billion total."

"Yes."

"In fifteen years."

"Yes." His mother's eyes were wet now, reflecting the single lamp. "I'm sorry, Kenji. I'm so sorry. I wanted—" Her voice cracked. "I wanted grandchildren. I wanted to see you settled and happy. I wanted to be old. I wanted you to be old." She pulled him close, held him like she hadn't since he was a child. "Your father died at sixty-two and I thought it was too young. You'll be thirty-nine. That's not fair. That's not right."

Kenji sat in his mother's embrace, his mind still processing. The dissertation. "Theoretical Deflection Scenarios for Near-Earth Objects." Four years of research. Two hundred seventy-three pages. Defense scheduled for next month. Every scenario modeled with the assumption that early detection plus appropriate technology equals survival.

But there were limits. Mass limits. Velocity limits. Time limits. He'd written entire chapters on scenarios where deflection became impossible. Academic exercises. Hypothetical edge cases. Never expecting...

"I need to see the data," he said.

"Dr. Okafor is sending it to all relevant personnel. You should have access."

Kenji pulled up his personal screen. The file was there, marked with the highest security classification. He opened it.

Object: 3025-AZ1
Mass: ~1.5 × 10^15 kg
Estimated diameter: 10-15 km
Velocity: 28.3 km/s
Distance: 2.4 AU
Impact probability: 99.97%
Time to impact: 15 years, 2 months, 14 days

Below that: the deflection analysis. Kinetic impactor—insufficient by factor of 240. Nuclear deflection—inadequate yield, high fragmentation risk. Gravity tractor—requires 50+ years. Mass driver—installation time exceeds available window.

Every option: INSUFFICIENT.

His dissertation had a section on exactly this scenario: "Terminal Cases: When Deflection Becomes Physically Impossible." He'd written it academically, dispassionately. Mass too large. Velocity too high. Time too short. The mathematics was elegant—clear boundaries where physics became absolute and human capability irrelevant.

He'd never imagined reading those same conclusions about a real object.

"You understand?" his mother asked.

"Yes." The word came out flat. Clinical. Four years of technical training overriding emotion. "The numbers are correct. Given the parameters, deflection is impossible with current technology."

"I don't need the analysis, mijo. I need to know if my son understands that he's going to die."

The bluntness cracked something in his chest. "I understand."

They sat in silence. Through the windows, McMurdo District sprawled—one district among dozens spanning the Antarctic continent, lights merging into an endless urban horizon. Four billion lives across the megacity, all temporary now. All counting down. His mother had governed Antarctica for eight years. Maintained order, planned futures, built infrastructure designed to last centuries. All of it ending in fifteen years.

"What do you need from me?" Elena asked. "As your mother. Not as mayor. What do you need?"

Kenji didn't know. The question was too large. What do you need when your future disappears? When all the plans crumble? When every assumption about life span and career and meaning evaporates?

"I don't know," he said.

"That's okay. You don't have to know." She stood, moved to the kitchen, started making tea. The automatic ritual of crisis. "I don't know what I need either. I just know I need to do something. Maintain routines. Keep moving. Because if I stop..." She trailed off.

Kenji watched her work through familiar motions. His mother, the most powerful human on Earth, reduced to making tea because that was something concrete, something controllable, something that made sense when nothing else did.

"I have eight more calls," she said, pouring the water. "Emergency coordinators, district governors, security council members. They're all asking the same question: what do we do? And I don't have an answer. How do you govern four billion people—" Her voice caught. "How do you govern when there's no future to govern for?"

"You still govern," Kenji said quietly. He wasn't sure where the words came from. Shock, maybe. Or the clinical detachment that let him analyze problems without feeling them. "The future ended, but today's still happening. People still need... infrastructure. Order. Someone to—" He stopped. The words sounded hollow even as he said them.

"Someone to lie to them that it'll be okay?" Elena brought the tea over. Set a cup in front of him. "Because that's what governance feels like right now. Organized lying."

"Or organized presence," Kenji suggested. "You can't save anyone. But you can show up. Maintain order while order still matters. That's not lying. That's... something."

His mother looked at him, really looked at him. "When did you get wise?"

"I'm not wise. I'm in shock. Ask me again tomorrow and I'll probably be useless."

She smiled slightly. Sad but real. "Tomorrow. That's still a thing, isn't it? Tomorrow. Next week. Fifteen years of tomorrows." She took a sip of tea. "I keep thinking: I won't see you grow old. Won't meet your children. Won't—" She stopped. Collected herself. "But you're here now. That's something."

"That's something," Kenji agreed.

So he stayed. They sat together on the couch, drinking tea, not talking much. His mother leaned against him eventually—seeking comfort, offering it. They watched the city lights through the window. Four billion people across the continent who would learn in the morning that everything had changed.

"The briefings don't matter anymore," she said, back to him. "Everything I've built. Every policy. Every long-term plan. It all ends in fifteen years."

"You could resign. Spend the time differently."

"I could." She poured the tea, handed him a cup. "But I won't. Someone has to maintain order. Someone has to say: we tried, we cared, we didn't give up." She sipped her tea. "Even if it doesn't matter, I'll do it anyway. Because what else is there?"

Kenji understood. His dissertation had been who he was. Four years of work, identity built around research and academic future. Now: meaningless. Defense scheduled for next month. He'd never be Dr. Torres. Never have the career he'd imagined. Never contribute to humanity's long-term survival because there was no long-term anymore.

"I should go," he said.

"Stay a while longer." His mother's voice was gentle. "Please. I don't want to be alone right now."

So he stayed. They sat together on the couch, drinking tea, not talking much. His mother leaned against him eventually—seeking comfort, offering it. They watched the city lights through the window. Four million people who would learn in the morning that everything had changed.

"Do you think people will panic?" Kenji asked.

"Some will. Some will deny. Some will continue as if nothing's different. Everyone will cope in their own way." Elena was quiet for a moment. "I'll need to address the district. Establish protocols. Maintain stability. The work doesn't end just because the world is ending."

"Does that help? Doing the work?"

"I don't know yet. Ask me in fifteen years."

It should have been a joke. Neither of them laughed.

Eventually, Kenji left. The transit system was starting to fill with early shift workers—still unaware, still living in the world before detection. He watched their faces: tired, routine, ordinary. By evening they'd look different. By evening everyone would carry the weight he was carrying now.

He returned to his apartment in the research housing complex. His dissertation was still open on his terminal: Chapter 3, "Long-Term Deflection Strategies."

Long-term. Fifty-year missions. Century-spanning infrastructure. Assuming humanity had time.

Humanity had fifteen years.

Kenji closed the file. Stared at the blank screen. Four years of work. Two hundred and seventy-three pages. Defense scheduled for next month. All of it rendered irrelevant by a single detection.

He thought about deleting it. Erasing everything. But his hand didn't move toward the delete command. Instead, he just: closed the program. Walked away. Left the dissertation unopened.

He'd never open it again. Never finish it. Never defend it. Never become Dr. Torres, asteroid deflection specialist. That future was gone.

What future remained?

The question sat in his chest, heavy and unanswerable. Twenty-four years old. PhD almost complete. Bright future ahead. Career planned. Life trajectory established.

All of it: gone. Fifteen years left. He'd be thirty-nine when the asteroid hit. Never forty. Never middle-aged. Never old. Thirty-nine years of life, then: nothing.

His father had died at sixty-two. Kenji used to think that was young. Now it seemed like a luxury. His father had sixty-two years. Kenji would get thirty-nine. Maya—a cousin's daughter he'd met twice—would get seventeen.

The unfairness was incomprehensible.

By 7:00 AM, his screen showed emergency broadcasts. News spreading through every channel. His personal messages were accumulating: colleagues, classmates, his dissertation advisor Dr. Okafor. Everyone reaching out, everyone needing connection.

He didn't answer. Didn't know what to say.

Outside his window, the Antarctic dawn was approaching—pale twilight that passed for sunrise this time of year. Kenji stood at the glass and watched the sky lighten. Somewhere up there, an asteroid was falling. Had been falling for millions of years. Would continue falling for fifteen more.

Then: impact.

Then: extinction.

Then: nothing.

He thought about his dissertation. Four years studying how to prevent exactly this scenario. All the theory. All the models. All the careful work. And the answer was: we can't. Object too large, timeline too short, technology insufficient.

His life's work was failure before it could even be tested.

What now?

The question echoed. What now? What do you do when your future disappears? When your purpose becomes irrelevant? When all the plans crumble and there's no time to build new ones that matter?

He didn't know.

Didn't know who he was without the dissertation. Without the career ahead. Without the assumption of future.

Twenty-four years old. Fifteen years left. And absolutely no idea what to do with them.

His mother had purpose still—governance, maintaining order, bearing witness. Dr. Okafor had purpose—tracking the object, providing data, serving her function. Everyone would find their role, their way of spending fifteen years.

Kenji had nothing. The dissertation was dead. The academic career was dead. The future was dead. What remained?

The question sat unanswered. Would sit unanswered for a long time. Would drive him to parties, substances, travel, seeking. Would push him through seven years of desperate searching for meaning that might not exist.

But that was later. Right now, in the pale Antarctic dawn of Day 1, Kenji Torres sat in his small apartment and felt the weight of fifteen years pressing down like gravity he couldn't escape.

Twenty-four years old.

PhD candidate.

Former future.

No answers.

Just: the question.

What now?

What now?

What now?

Chapter 5: Garden

Professor Mei-Lin Wei | Year 0, Day 1 | Lagos District

The gardenia bloomed despite the season. Late autumn, and here was this rebellious flower opening its white petals to the manufactured warmth of Lagos District. Professor Mei-Lin Wei touched the bloom gently—soft as paper, fragrant as memory. Her grandmother Jiayi had grown gardenias in the courtyard of their Beijing home, seventy years ago. Wei remembered sitting on the stone bench at five years old, watching her grandmother's weathered hands move among the blooms. Different flowers now, same scent. Everything changed. Everything stayed the same.

Wei's balcony garden was modest—ten square meters of carefully tended life. Native flowers adapted to the engineered tropical climate. Vegetables in raised beds that saved her knees. A small lemon tree she'd transported from Beijing ten years ago when she'd finally retired and moved here to be near her only remaining student who'd become something like family. Everything impermanent. Everything returning to soil eventually.

She was 114 years old. Her left knee reminded her of this with every step. Her right hip joined the complaint on stairs. Her hands shook enough that watering required both attention and a lighter can than she'd used a decade ago. She moved carefully, cane in left hand, water in right. Life extension medicine had added thirty years to human lifespans, but it hadn't made those years comfortable. Her doctors said she might reach 125. Wei suspected they were being optimistic to avoid upsetting the elderly, which she found both patronizing and amusing.

But her mind remained sharp. That's what mattered. Seventy years teaching philosophy. Forty years practicing Buddhist meditation—not religious Buddhism with rebirth and deities, but philosophical Buddhism, the observation of impermanence and suffering and the nature of consciousness. Lifetime spent preparing for death. Not fearfully. Curiously. Death was the one certainty. Everything else was speculation.

The watering complete, Wei lowered herself carefully onto her garden bench. The morning was bright and warm. Lagos District waking up below—five million people beginning another day. She could see the district's green zone from here, the engineered parks and waterways that made this manufactured city feel alive. Humans were good at making homes. Even in deserts, even at poles, even after climate catastrophe forced migrations. The adaptability was admirable. The attachment to permanence was the problem.

Her house system chimed. Emergency alert. The whole building lighting up. Wei set down the watering can carefully. Stood slowly. Walked inside, where her screen was displaying the blue banner of UN Security Council override.

She read the alert. Extinction-level asteroid. Fifteen years. Cannot be deflected.

Read it twice, making sure she understood. The English was clear. The meaning unambiguous. Near-Earth object, ten to fifteen kilometers diameter, 99.97% impact probability. Time to impact: 15 years, 2 months, 14 days. All deflection scenarios insufficient.

Everyone dies.

Wei noticed she had overfilled the watering can. Water was pooling around her feet, soaking into her house slippers. She looked down at the puddle, then back at the screen, then back at her wet feet.

"Hm," she said aloud. The first sound she'd made since waking.

She turned off the screen. Went to get a towel. Dried her feet. Found her outdoor sandals. Then returned to her garden, picked up the watering can—more carefully this time—and continued her morning routine.

This was philosophy made concrete. The asteroid didn't change the present moment. It didn't change what needed doing. The gardenias were thirsty. She would water them. That's what presence meant—attending to what was here, now, regardless of what was coming.

She'd been practicing this for forty years. Now it was test.

The lemon tree needed water too. She watered it carefully, making sure the soil absorbed rather than ran off. Fifty years old, this tree. Her husband Li Chen had planted the seed the year they married. He'd died at sixty-three—heart failure, sudden and complete. The tree had survived him by thirty years. It would not survive this.

Wei had outlived two husbands, three siblings, and countless students. She'd grown accustomed to surviving. Now she would not survive either. In a strange way, that was a relief. She was tired of attending funerals.

But today, the tree needed water. So she watered it.

Movement at her door. Wei turned, saw Zara bursting onto the balcony. Zara Okafor-Mensah, her neighbor and friend—still in sleep clothes, hair uncombed, Maya on her hip. Both crying. Zara's bare feet slapping the tile.

"Professor Wei!" Zara's voice was rising toward hysteria. "An asteroid! Fifteen years! Everyone dies!"

Wei set down the watering can. "Yes," she said. "I saw. Sit."

"Did you hear? An asteroid! It's going to hit!" Zara wasn't sitting, was pacing, agitated. Maya crying harder, scared by her mother's fear. "My daughter will

die! She's two! She'll be seventeen! Never eighteen, never—" Her voice broke. She collapsed onto the bench, sobbing. Maya sobbing too, not understanding but caught in the grief.

Wei sat beside them. Didn't touch yet. Just: present. Grief needed space to move before wisdom could enter. She'd learned this teaching philosophy students for seventy years. You couldn't rush past emotion to understanding. The emotion had to be felt first.

Zara cried for several minutes. Maya gradually calming, thumb in mouth, leaning against her mother. Wei sat patiently. The garden was quiet except for the sounds of grief. The gardenias bloomed. The lemon tree stood still. Everything continuing despite the sorrow.

Eventually, Zara's sobs quieted. She wiped her face roughly. "How are you so calm? Did you not hear? Everyone dies!"

"I heard," Wei said gently.

"Then how are you sitting here watering plants?"

"The plants are thirsty. Should I let them die today because they'll die in fifteen years?"

Zara stared at her. "That's not the same thing."

"Isn't it? The plants were always going to die. This season, next season, the season after. Impermanence was always there. The asteroid just makes the timeline visible."

"My daughter!" Zara's voice rose again. "She's two! She'll be seventeen! She'll never grow up, never—"

"Was she not always going to die?" Wei asked quietly.

The question stopped Zara mid-sentence. "What?"

"Was Maya not always temporary? Was her life not always going to end?" Wei gestured to the gardenias. "This flower bloomed yesterday. Tomorrow, it will start browning. Three days from now, fallen. Two weeks from now, just memory. Same cycle every year. Every gardenia blooms and dies. The asteroid doesn't change the flower's nature. Just makes us pay attention."

"You're comparing my daughter to a flower?"

"I'm comparing all of us to flowers. Temporary. Beautiful. Here for brief moment, then gone. That was always true. Most people pretend otherwise. The asteroid ends the pretending."

Zara was quiet, processing. Maya had stopped crying, was looking at the gardenias with interest. Wei pointed to the white bloom. "See the flower, Maya?"

Maya nodded, thumb still in mouth.

"Beautiful, yes?"

Another nod.

"Tomorrow, less beautiful. Day after, falling. But today—" Wei touched the bloom gently. "Today, perfect. That's all flowers get. Today. Right now. This moment of blooming."

"She's two," Zara whispered. "She doesn't understand."

"She understands more than you think. Children are closer to the truth. They live in the moment naturally. We teach them to plan, to project, to imagine permanence. But originally, they knew. This moment. This moment. This moment. That's all anyone has ever had."

Zara was crying again, but quieter. Not hysteria now. Just: grief. "Fifteen years. It's not enough."

"No," Wei agreed. "It's not. But was seventy years enough? Eighty? A hundred? I'm 114. Is that enough? Would 125 be? Would a thousand?" She was quiet for a moment. "Nothing is ever enough if we think it should be permanent. But if we accept impermanence—really accept it—then every moment becomes enough. Not in the sense of satisfying. In the sense of complete."

"I can't—" Zara shook her head. "I can't think that way."

"No one can, immediately. It's practice. Daily practice for years. I've been preparing for death my entire adult life. This news is shocking. But the truth it reveals? That was always there."

Maya squirmed down from Zara's lap, toddled over to the gardenias. Reached out with small fingers. "Pretty!"

"Gentle," Zara said automatically. Maya touched the bloom carefully, delicately—her whole attention on the flower, nothing else existing for her in that moment. Wei watched the two-year-old examine the petals with complete focus. No worry about tomorrow. No memory of yesterday. Just: here, now, this flower.

That was presence. That was what adults spent decades trying to relearn. Children had it naturally. Then life taught them to live elsewhere—in fear, in planning, in anywhere but here. Maya would lose this too, eventually. But maybe, if Zara brought her here often enough, some of it would stay.

"Come to my garden every day," Wei said to Zara. "Bring Maya. Watch the flowers bloom and die. Watch the lemon tree fruit and rest. Practice seeing impermanence. Practice being present anyway. Won't make the asteroid disappear. But might make fifteen years richer than most people's eighty."

"Will you teach me?" Zara's voice was small, hopeful.

"I will teach you nothing," Wei said. "But I will sit with you while you learn. Possibly I will make tea. Definitely I will complain about my knees."

Zara managed a weak smile. “Is that Buddhist philosophy?”

“That’s gardening philosophy. Same thing, really. Buddhists just wrote more books about it.” Wei stood slowly, using the bench arm for leverage, feeling every year of the 114 in her hip joint. “Go home. Hold your daughter. Make breakfast. Do the things that need doing today. Tomorrow, come back. Every day. We’ll sit together. Watch life being temporary. That’s the practice.”

“What if I can’t do it? What if I panic?”

“Then panic. Then come to the garden anyway. Panic and practice aren’t opposites. Panic is feeling. Practice is action. Do both.”

Zara collected Maya, who protested leaving the flowers. “Tomorrow, baby. We’ll come back tomorrow.”

“Garden!” Maya demanded.

“Yes, the garden. Professor Wei’s garden.”

They left. Wei sat on her bench, listening to their footsteps fade. The balcony was quiet again. The gardenias bloomed. The lemon tree—Li Chen’s tree—stood patient.

Fifteen years. She considered the number. Her father had died at forty-seven, caught in the upheavals before the Climate Compact. Her mother at fifty-two, grief-broken. Her first husband drowned at thirty-one; her second, Li Chen, heart-stopped at sixty-three. So many students over the decades, lost to accidents and illnesses and the quiet despair that took people when they stopped seeing reasons to stay.

Fifteen years was more than many people got. Not that comparison made sense. But Wei had been alive long enough to know that fairness was a human invention. The universe didn’t traffic in fairness. It trafficked in physics. And the physics was clear.

Her body would probably fail before the asteroid arrived. She was 114. Cancer, stroke, simple organ failure—any of them could take her first. She’d been preparing for death for forty years. Now death had a deadline. That was almost helpful. Clarity, at least.

For Zara, for Maya, for the young ones—this was tragedy. All cut off mid-life. All denied the full span.

Was that worse than dying at eighty? Wei had asked this question for forty years of teaching. Never found an answer. But she’d found something else: the question was less important than how you spent your time while asking it.

The morning was advancing. Lagos District fully awake now. Wei could hear agitation in the distance—voices raised, sirens, the sound of disruption. People reacting. People panicking. People trying to process the unprocessable. All of it normal. All of it necessary. The grief would move through at its own pace.

She returned to her watering. A few plants still dry. Her body protested the movement, but she ignored it. Body always protested. That's what 114 years meant. But the work remained. The plants needed tending. That was enough.

When the watering was complete, she sat again. Pulled out her writing materials—old-fashioned paper and pen, not screens. Her eyes were too old for screens. She'd been writing a book for twenty years. Reflections on philosophy, practice, teaching. Never finished it. Might never finish it.

But now, with fifteen years defined—well. Perhaps the deadline would help. She'd always worked better with deadlines. Seventy years of academic life had trained her for that.

Asteroid as writing deadline. Her husband would have found that funny. Li Chen had always said she needed external pressure to finish anything.

"You were right," she said aloud to the lemon tree. The tree didn't answer. It rarely did.

She wrote for an hour. About impermanence. About presence. About her grandmother Jiayi's hands among the gardenias, seventy years ago. The words came easily. Seventy years of teaching had clarified what she knew. And more importantly, what she didn't know.

By noon, she was tired. Her hand cramped around the pen. Her back ached from sitting. 114 years old, and every year made itself felt.

She put away the writing. Made tea—oolong, the good kind she saved for difficult days. Sat in her garden with the cup warm in shaking hands.

The gardenias bloomed. Li Chen's lemon tree stood patient. The sun moved across the sky. Everything temporary. Everything continuing anyway.

Fifteen years until extinction.

But right now, the tea was good, and the flowers were beautiful.

Wei sipped, and watched, and was present.

That was all there was to do. That was everything.

Chapter 6: Isolation

Dr. Amara Okafor | Year 0, Day 45 | Antarctic Monitoring Station & Geneva

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The conference room held two hundred people. Every seat occupied. Another hundred attending virtually. Screens showing faces from Beijing, Washington,

Mumbai, Lagos, Tokyo. Every space-capable nation. Every major research institution. Corporate representatives from the mining consortiums and deep-space infrastructure companies. Everyone who'd ever worked on planetary defense, here or connected, desperate for solutions.

This was Amara's forty-seventh presentation in six weeks.

She stood at the podium, the same data displayed behind her that she'd shown forty-six times before. The asteroid's orbital path. Mass estimates. Velocity vectors. Impact probability. The elegant mathematics of extinction.

"The presentation room in Geneva held three hundred people—UN representatives, space agency directors, corporate executives, military brass. She'd given this briefing forty-seven times now. Forty-seven times explaining the mathematics of their extinction.

"Object 3025-AZ1," she began. Her voice was flat now, clinical. All emotion extracted over dozens of repetitions. "Fifteen-kilometer diameter. Mass one point five times ten to the fifteenth kilograms. Velocity twenty-eight point three kilometers per second. Impact probability ninety-nine point nine seven percent."

The slides changed automatically. Orbital mechanics. Deflection scenarios. Energy calculations."

She clicked through the presentation. Parallax measurements from seven independent observatories. Spectral analysis confirming composition. Rotation period. Albedo. Every detail verified and reverified. The asteroid was real. The mathematics was perfect. The outcome was certain.

"Time to impact," she continued, "is now fourteen years, eleven months, and twenty-nine days."

Fifteen years had become fourteen. Already. Time moving forward with the same indifference as the asteroid.

She showed the deflection scenarios. Every option analyzed, every possibility explored. Kinetic impactor: object too massive. Nuclear deflection: insufficient yield, high fragmentation risk. Gravity tractor: timeline too short. Mass driver: deployment impossible. Every scenario ended the same way: INSUFFICIENT.

"In conclusion," Amara said, reaching the final slide, "no existing deflection technology can alter this object's trajectory. Impact is inevitable. I'm available for questions."

The room erupted. Same as every other presentation. Someone always asked if she was certain. Someone always suggested she'd missed something. Someone always proposed some theoretical scenario that physics made impossible. She answered each question with patience worn thin by repetition.

"Are you absolutely certain?" Chinese delegate, face grave on the screen.

"Yes. Seven independent verifications."

"Could the calculations be wrong?" Russian representative, standing in the back.

"No. The mathematics is straightforward. Multiple teams have confirmed."

"Is there ANY possibility, however small?" Corporate executive, desperation in his voice.

"Below zero point one percent. Effectively impossible."

"That's not zero," someone shouted from the audience.

Amara felt the exhaustion settling into her bones. "Close enough that pursuing it wastes the time we have."

The room erupted again. Arguments. Accusations. Denial dressed as skepticism. The Russian representative stood and walked out. Others followed. Some stayed, pressing for answers that didn't exist.

"We should try anyway," an engineer argued. "Build the kinetic impactor, attempt deflection—"

"With what?" Amara cut him off. "What spacecraft? What launch system? We'd need forty missions carrying payloads we can't build, using technology we don't have, in a timeline that's physically impossible. The math is absolute. We cannot stop this."

"So we should do nothing?" Anger in the voice now.

"I didn't say that. I said we can't deflect it. What humanity does with fifteen years is a different question. Not my expertise."

The Secretary General intervened. "Dr. Okafor has answered these questions forty-seven times. The data stands. This session is concluded." She looked at Amara with something like sympathy. "History will remember you told the truth. That matters."

"Does it?" Amara heard herself say. "Truth doesn't stop asteroids."

"No. But lies won't either."

The conference dissolved. Delegates dispersing, some still arguing, some crying, some blank-faced with shock despite six weeks of knowing. Amara collected her data pad and left through the back exit, avoiding the crowds.

Her hotel room was small and sterile. McMurdo had wanted her to stay in the executive suite—some gesture of honor for the bearer of apocalypse. She'd refused. Didn't want luxury. Wanted isolation. Needed it.

Thirty-seven messages from Zara. Amara scrolled through them without opening. Day 1: "Did you detect it? Are you okay?" Day 3: "Please call." Day 12: "Maya's asking about her aunt." Day 25: "I'm pregnant. Having another baby. I know it's crazy." Day 38: "I need my sister." Day 45: "Please. Just call."

Amara's finger hovered over Zara's contact. Six weeks since detection. Six weeks of silence. What would she say? *Sorry I calculated your children's deaths*? *Sorry I'm famous now for being the bearer of extinction*? *Sorry I can't be the sister you need*?

She closed the messages without responding. Returned to work.

Work was safe. Work was data and calculations and mathematics that didn't ask for emotional connection. She updated the trajectory model, incorporating six weeks of new observations. The asteroid was exactly where the predictions said it would be. Perfect orbital mechanics. Perfect certainty.

Fourteen years, eleven months, twenty-nine days remaining.

Her wrist display chimed. David calling. Her husband. She'd spoken to him twice in six weeks—brief, logistical conversations. "When are you back?" "I don't know." "Okay." That was the extent of their marriage now.

She didn't answer. Let it go to voicemail. Felt guilty but not enough to change behavior. Work needed attention.

The death statistics were updating. Global mortality rates six weeks post-detection. Suicides up 340%. Violence up 280%. Infrastructure failures accelerating as staff abandoned posts. "Natural causes" deaths were down—people weren't dying of old age because they were dying of despair first.

Total deaths in six weeks: forty-three million.

Amara processed this as data. Made graphs. Noted trends. Projected future mortality based on current rates. By Year 15, assuming exponential increase, natural deaths might exceed impact deaths. Humanity killing itself faster than the asteroid would.

She filed the report. Didn't let herself feel it. Couldn't. If she felt forty-three million deaths, she'd break. Better to maintain numbness. Better to stay in the data. Numbers didn't hurt. Statistics didn't demand response. The mathematics was clean even when describing horror.

Two months after detection, Amara returned to Antarctica. The monitoring station felt emptier. Used to be sixty scientists. Now: fifteen. Some quit. Some fled to be with family. Some died—three suicides that Amara knew about. The station was becoming tomb, staffed by the isolated and the devoted in unequal measure.

She settled back into her routine. Graveyard shift. Alone at her workstation. Updating calculations that didn't need updating. The asteroid was exactly where it should be. Every observation confirmed the trajectory. Her presence was unnecessary—automation handled everything. But she showed up anyway. Because what else would she do?

David was home when she arrived. Surprise—she'd expected him to be at the arrays. He was making tea, looking uncomfortable, like he'd been waiting for

her.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi."

Silence. Twelve years of marriage reduced to awkward greetings. When had this happened? Amara tried to remember the last time they'd had a real conversation. Months before detection, at least. Maybe longer. They'd been slowly separating for years, too busy to notice until catastrophe made it obvious.

"How was Geneva?" David asked.

"The same. Everyone desperate. Everyone asking if I'm sure. Everyone wanting different answer than physics allows."

"That must be exhausting."

"It is."

More silence. David brought her tea. She accepted it. They stood in their own kitchen like strangers.

"Amara," David started. "Are we okay?"

The question hung between them. Were they okay? No. They were roommates sharing space. Partners in logistics. Married but separate. She couldn't remember the last time they'd touched beyond accident.

"I don't know," she said honestly.

"We used to talk."

"We used to have future tense."

David winced. "We still have fourteen years."

"Do we? Together?" She heard the harshness in her voice but couldn't soften it. "When's the last time we had a conversation that wasn't about schedules?"

"I've been trying—"

"Have you? Because I've been gone six weeks and got two calls."

"You didn't answer most of them."

That was fair. Amara had ignored most calls, most messages, most attempts at connection. Built a wall of work and isolation. Pushed everyone away—David, Zara, colleagues who'd tried to reach out. Easier to be alone. Safer. No demands. No expectations. No emotional vulnerability.

"I'm tired," she said. "I need to sleep."

She went to bed without touching him. Lay in the dark and felt nothing. That was protection. That was survival. Feel nothing, process nothing, exist in the data. It was working. Mostly.

The months continued. Amara presented, calculated, updated, verified. The asteroid approached with perfect precision. Everyone wanting miracles that physics denied. She became famous—"The woman who detected the apocalypse." Hate mail filled her inbox. Death threats. Also gratitude from people who appreciated truth. She read none of it. Just: deleted and moved on.

Zara's messages accumulated. Day 87: "Had my first ultrasound. Baby's healthy." Day 103: "Maya's growing so fast. You're missing it." Day 134: "People are calling me cruel for having another child. I don't care. He matters. They both matter." Day 167: "I wish you'd respond. I miss you."

Amara read them. Couldn't reply. What would she say? She'd become the calculator of death, the scientist who couldn't find solutions. Zara was creating life—defiant, hopeful, present. They were opposites now. No bridge between calculation and creation.

David stopped trying to talk. They existed in parallel—him maintaining solar arrays, her tracking asteroid. Passing in their apartment like ghosts. Marriage dying slowly, neither willing to acknowledge or address it. Easier to ignore. Easier to work. Easier to stay numb.

The monitoring station continued emptying. Fifteen staff became twelve became eight. Dr. Park quit to spend time with grandchildren. Dr. Chen stopped showing up—suicide suspected but not confirmed. The younger researchers fled to family, to travel, to anything but this sterile tomb watching the end approach.

Amara stayed. Updated calculations. Verified trajectories. Counted down days. Fourteen years, eleven months became fourteen years, nine months became fourteen years, six months. Time passing. Asteroid approaching. Everything proceeding according to mathematics.

She stopped leaving the station except to sleep. Spent sixteen hours daily at her workstation. Stopped eating regular meals—just nutrient bars and cold tea. Lost weight. Looked terrible. Didn't care. Work filled the void. Data was companion. Calculations were conversation. She needed nothing else.

Except she was dying too. Not from asteroid. From isolation. From numbness as survival strategy. From choosing data over humanity until humanity atrophied. She knew this intellectually. Couldn't access it emotionally. The numbness was too complete.

Six months after detection, she received a message from someone unexpected: Professor Mei-Lin Wei, Lagos District, philosopher. Amara had never heard of her. The message was simple: "Dr. Okafor, I understand the burden you carry. Being first to know. Being unable to fix. I want you to know: bearing witness matters. Telling truth matters. Not because it changes the asteroid. Because it honors reality. That's valuable even when—especially when—reality is terrible. With respect and compassion, Professor Wei."

Amara read it three times. Didn't respond. But didn't delete it either. Filed it

under “Read Later.” Returned to work.

The station was empty now except for her and three others. Sixty workstations. Four people. Their footsteps echoed. The facility had been designed for constant activity, vibrant with research and discovery. Now: tomb. Monument to the futility of monitoring what couldn’t be stopped.

Amara sat at her workstation at 3:47 AM—same time as detection six months ago. Screen showing the asteroid’s position. Trajectory perfect. Impact probability unchanged. Time remaining: fourteen years, five months, fourteen days.

She pulled up Zara’s messages. Fifty-three unread. Photos of Maya growing. Videos of Zara’s growing belly. Voice messages asking for connection. The life her sister was creating while Amara calculated death.

Her finger hovered over the call button. Six months of silence. Too long. Too much distance. Too much cowardice. She should call. Should be sister. Should be aunt. Should be human.

She closed the messages. Returned to her calculations. Updated the trajectory model. Verified the numbers. Checked the countdown.

Fourteen years, five months, fourteen days.

The isolation was complete. The numbness was protection. The work was everything. And Amara was alone in a tomb, calculating the end of the world, unable to connect with anyone who still lived in it.

Four months after detection. Population in McMurdo District down from 420 million to 350 million. Elena’s briefings detailed the exodus—people fleeing to other districts, to other continents, seeking preferred locations for their final years. Infrastructure struggling. Crime rising. Order fraying across the megacity.

Elena still governed. Still showed up daily. Still maintained routines that felt increasingly futile.

Kenji was spiraling. Elena mentioned it in their brief conversations—her son disappearing into parties and substances, seeking oblivion. Amara processed this information clinically. Didn’t offer help. Didn’t know how. Wasn’t capable.

David stopped trying to talk to her. They existed in parallel—same apartment, separate lives. He worked the arrays. She worked the calculations. They passed each other like ghosts, acknowledged but not seen.

Outside, McMurdo District glowed—one among dozens of urban zones, lights merging with neighboring districts into continental sprawl. 420 million people becoming 350 million as the exodus continued. Inside, Amara sat at her workstation and counted down to extinction, one day at a time, alone.

This was her choice. This was her survival. This was how she spent the time remaining: isolated, calculating, numb.

The work continued. The asteroid approached. The loneliness deepened.

And Amara still couldn't call her sister.

Chapter 7: Witness

Mayor Elena Torres | Year 0, Day 60 | Antarctic Megacity

7:00 AM. Morning briefing. Elena's ritual since becoming mayor—elected Year -2 on an infrastructure platform that promised to expand Forever Earth's capacity, to build for millennia.

Her first term ended in eighteen months. Election scheduled for Year 2.

The conference room was designed for fifty department heads. Thirty had attended regularly before detection. Today: five people. Elena. Marcus, her assistant. Chen, infrastructure. Kowalski, security. Dr. Ade, health services.

Everyone else had quit, fled, or died.

Elena sat at the head of the table—her seat, her position, her responsibility. The room felt cavernous now, voices echoing in the empty space. She'd asked facilities to set up a smaller room. Marcus had argued against it: "Shows defeat. We maintain appearances."

So they gathered in this too-large room, five people attempting to govern 3.5 billion, pretending normalcy.

"Population report," Elena said, starting with infrastructure as always. Order. Process. The ritual that had structured her years of governance.

Chen pulled up his data. "Three point one billion as of this morning. Down from four point two billion at detection. Rate of departure slowing but still significant. Projecting two point eight billion by end of year."

Three point one billion. One point one billion gone in sixty days. Fled to other continents, to preferred locations, to anywhere but the ice. Elena didn't blame them. Why stay in Antarctica when you had fifteen years left? Why live at the bottom of the world when the world was ending?

But she stayed. Because someone had to govern. Someone had to maintain order. Someone had to say: we still function, we still care, we still try.

"Infrastructure," Elena prompted.

Chen continued. "Power grid at sixty-eight percent capacity. Not due to damage—due to staffing. Maintenance crews down seventy percent. Water systems at seventy-three percent. Waste management at sixty percent. Transit at forty-five percent. Communications stable—automation handles most of it."

Everything falling. Not catastrophically. Not yet. But the slow degradation of systems that required human attention. People abandoning their posts to spend time with family, to travel, to do anything but maintain infrastructure for a civilization with an expiration date.

Elena made notes. Old habit from before. Documenting everything, planning responses. The notes felt futile but she continued anyway. Someone should document. Someone should record. Even if no one would read them.

"Security," she said.

Kowalski grimaced. "Crime up three hundred and forty percent. Mostly property crimes, some violence. Murder rate up two hundred percent. Enforcement capacity down sixty percent—half the force quit. We're responding to maybe forty percent of calls. Rest go unanswered."

"Recommendations?"

"We need more officers. But no one's joining. Why enforce law when law ends in fourteen years?"

Elena wrote this down. Knew she had no solutions. Couldn't make people care about order when order seemed meaningless. But she documented it anyway.

"Health services," she said, turning to Dr. Ade.

Dr. Ade looked exhausted. "Suicides are our primary concern. Rate has plateaued at three hundred percent above baseline, but that's still... terrible. Medical staff down fifty percent. Hospitals barely functioning. We're triaging based on short-term survival—no long-term treatments, obviously. Birth rate down ninety-four percent. Death rate up six hundred percent. The population decline Chen mentioned? Two-thirds is people leaving. One-third is people dying."

One-third dying. Elena felt that number settle like weight. Three hundred and sixty million deaths across Antarctica in sixty days. More than all the deaths in her years as mayor combined. And this was just beginning.

"Orders, Mayor?" Marcus asked gently, the question he asked every morning.

Elena looked at her notes. Infrastructure failing. Crime rising. Deaths accelerating. People fleeing. Her power was supposed to fix these things. She was mayor. Most powerful human on Earth, governing the planet's largest population concentration. Four billion people—three point one now—under her governance.

And she was completely powerless to help any of them.

"Same as yesterday," she said. Her voice was steady, practiced. "Maintain what we can. Document what we can't. Continue essential services as long as staffing allows. Chen, redistribute power resources to critical systems first. Kowalski, focus enforcement on preventing violence. Dr. Ade, prioritize suicide prevention and mental health. We keep functioning. That's the goal."

"That's all?" Kowalski asked, frustration in his voice.

Elena met his eyes. “That’s everything.”

The briefing concluded. Five people dispersing to attempt the impossible—governing a city losing its population and its purpose. Marcus stayed behind as always.

“Elena,” he said. First name. He did that when they were alone. “Why are we doing this?”

She’d wondered when he’d ask. Marcus was thirty-two, brilliant, dedicated. He’d been her assistant for six years. Could have left. Could have spent fifteen years anywhere. But he stayed. Showed up every morning. Took notes. Managed schedules. Governed a dying city beside her.

“I don’t know,” she admitted. “Why are you still here, Marcus?”

“Because you are.”

“That’s not a reason.”

“Isn’t it? You’re my mayor. You’re... you matter. Someone should witness you witnessing all of this.”

Elena felt unexpected tears. Blinked them back. Professional mask. Can’t cry in front of staff, even staff of one who’d become something like family.

“I don’t know why I’m doing this,” she said quietly. “Maintaining government when government ends in fourteen years. Holding briefings that don’t matter. Documenting collapse for archives no one will read. It’s theater. Meaningless theater.”

“Is it meaningless?” Marcus pulled up his tablet. “Look. Last week you redistributed power to hospitals. Saved four thousand lives—four thousand people who’d have died in darkness. Yesterday you authorized emergency housing for climate refugees. Gave a hundred and twenty thousand people shelter. This morning you’ll sign the food distribution update. Keeps three billion people fed for another week. Meaningless?”

“They’re all going to die anyway.”

“So are you. So am I. Does that make today meaningless?”

The question sat between them. Elena had been asking herself the same thing for sixty days. If nothing lasted, if everything ended, if all her governance dissolved in asteroid impact—did it matter? Did the work matter? Did her presence matter?

“I think it does,” Marcus said when she didn’t answer. “Not because it changes the ending. Because it honors the middle. You govern with dignity. You maintain order. You care. That matters even if—especially if—it doesn’t last.”

Elena stared at her assistant, this thirty-two-year-old who understood something she was still grasping toward. “You sound like a philosopher.”

"I've been reading Professor Wei's letters. The ones she sends you."

"I didn't know you read those."

"You leave them on your desk. I may have... absorbed them." Marcus smiled slightly. "She writes about presence. About bearing witness. About how maintenance is practice even when—especially when—outcome is certain. Made me think differently about our work."

Elena had been receiving Wei's letters for three weeks. Simple philosophical observations from a woman she'd never met. The first letter had appeared in her inbox subject: "To the Mayor Who Governs the Ending." Elena almost deleted it. But something made her read it.

Mayor Torres, I understand the burden you carry. Responsibility without agency. Power without ability to save. You maintain order knowing order ends. This seems futile. But: what if governance is its own purpose? Not for outcome. For process. You show up. You hold briefings. You maintain dignity. That's not theater—that's practice. Practice of presence. Practice of care. Practice of continuing even when continuation seems meaningless. This is valuable. This is beautiful. Even if no one sees. Even if nothing changes. The practice itself is the point. With respect, Professor Mei-Lin Wei.

Elena had read it five times. Didn't respond. But she'd read every subsequent letter. Wei wrote weekly—short observations, philosophical reflections, gentle reminders that presence mattered regardless of duration. The letters helped. Elena didn't know why. Maybe because Wei seemed to understand the paradox Elena lived: maintaining what would end, caring despite futility, showing up when showing up seemed meaningless.

"Wei writes that bearing witness is purpose itself," Elena said to Marcus. "Not for outcome. Just: being present. Seeing clearly. Documenting accurately. That's enough."

"Is it enough for you?"

Elena considered this. Was it enough to govern knowing governance ended? To hold briefings for five people when thirty used to attend? To document collapse no one would read? Was the practice itself sufficient?

"I don't know yet," she admitted. "But it's what I have. So I continue."

Her office was quiet after Marcus left. Elena sat at her desk, looking at the megacity through her window. The Antarctic sprawl extending to the horizon—billions of lives, endless lights, all temporary now. She'd fought for this position. Three campaigns. Lost twice, won the third two years ago. Governed with competence since then. Built infrastructure, managed growth, maintained stability across the world's largest city. Wanted to leave legacy.

Now legacy was impossible. In fifteen years, everything—Antarctica, Earth—would be reduced to molten rock and ash. Her governance would vanish.

Her policies would mean nothing. The infrastructure she'd built would vaporize.

There would be no legacy. The asteroid would erase everything. Her governance, her efforts, her years of work—all rendered meaningless by physics.

Unless... unless the work mattered for itself. Not for outcome. Not for legacy. Just: for the doing. She governed because governance was her practice. Because showing up mattered. Because maintaining dignity in collapse was its own purpose.

Maybe.

She pulled up the housing authorization Marcus mentioned. Twelve hundred refugees needing shelter. Simple approval process. She signed it. Twelve hundred people would have housing today. Not forever. Just: today. Was that enough? It had to be. It was all anyone ever had.

Next document: Temporal Standardization Act. She'd been putting this off for weeks. Simple administrative order, really—formalizing what everyone already practiced. Year 0 dating system. Official adoption of detection as temporal origin. Making the countdown calendar Antarctica's legal standard.

Some part of her resisted. Abandoning the old calendar felt like abandoning history itself—millennia of human civilization reduced to irrelevant prologue. But people were already using Year 0. Already measuring time in months until impact. Already living in the countdown. The Act just acknowledged reality.

She signed it. Another piece of the old world formalized into memory. Time itself reset by bureaucratic order.

The comm chimed. Her son's name appeared. Kenji. She'd spoken to him twice since detection, both conversations brief and strained. He'd looked terrible—thin, hollow-eyed, clearly not sleeping. Rumors reached her: parties, substances, self-destruction. She'd wanted to help. Didn't know how. He didn't answer her calls anymore.

She answered immediately. "Kenji? Mijo?"

His face appeared on screen. Looked worse than last time. Unshaven. Glassy-eyed. Background was dark, unfamiliar. Some apartment, some party maybe.

"Mom." His voice was slurred slightly. "Hi."

"Are you okay?"

"Fine." Obviously not fine. Obviously using. Obviously dying slowly while everyone died slowly together. "Just wanted to... I don't know. Say hi."

"Where are you?"

"Friend's place. Or... someone's place. Don't remember." He laughed, bitter and wrong. "Does it matter?"

"It matters to me."

"Why? Why does anything matter?" His voice rising, agitated. "You're governing a dead city. I'm destroying myself slowly. Maya's growing up to die at seventeen. Everyone's pretending their actions matter when nothing matters. Why pretend?"

Elena felt her heart breaking. Her brilliant son, her PhD candidate, reduced to this. "Mijo, please come home. Let me help."

"Help how? Make the asteroid disappear? Give me future back? Fix meaninglessness?" Kenji's laugh was ugly. "You're the most powerful human on Earth, Mom. You can't fix this. No one can."

"I know. But I can be here. I can be your mother. That's not nothing."

"Isn't it? You'll be my mother for fourteen more years, then: physics. Then: nothing. Then it won't matter if you were good mother or terrible mother because I'll be dead and you'll be dead and everyone's relationships will be vaporized."

"Does that make them meaningless right now?"

The question stopped him. He stared at her through the screen, glassy eyes trying to focus.

"I don't know," he said finally, voice small. "I don't know anything anymore."

"Then come home. We'll not-know together."

"I can't." He ended the call.

Elena sat in her office, staring at the blank screen. Her son was destroying himself. She was powerless to stop it. Add that to the list of things her power couldn't affect: asteroid, exodus, deaths, her own child's spiral.

She pulled up Wei's most recent letter. Read it again.

Mayor Torres, you asked in your last message if powerlessness means meaninglessness. I think not. You're confusing outcome with action. You cannot control outcome. Never could. Asteroid makes this visible, but was always true. What you control: action. Presence. Choice. Today, you chose to show up. To govern. To care. Tomorrow, you'll choose again. String of choices, day by day, until no more days. That's not powerless. That's practice. The practice is the power. Outcome is irrelevant. With respect, Professor Wei.

Elena had responded to that letter. First time writing back. Brief message: *Professor Wei, thank you. Your letters help. I don't understand fully yet, but I'm beginning to see. Governance as practice. Presence as purpose. Continuing even when continuation seems futile. I'm trying. Mayor Elena Torres.*

Wei had responded within a day: *Mayor Torres, you understand more than you think. Keep showing up. Keep practicing. That's all any of us can do. Even me, old woman watering garden that will burn. We tend what's here. We're present*

to what is. Together, separately, we practice. That's enough. That's everything. With compassion, Wei.

Elena stood, moved to the window. The Antarctic megacity stretched below. Three point one billion people. Her responsibility. Her practice. Her purpose—not because she could save them, but because she could witness them. Could govern with dignity. Could show up daily and say: you matter. Today, you matter.

Tomorrow: same choice. And the day after. Fourteen years of tomorrows, each one practiced with presence.

She pulled up her schedule. Morning briefing complete. Next: budget review. Then: infrastructure meeting. Then: health crisis response. Then: evening address to the continent. And somewhere in the back of her mind: election planning. Eighteen months until voters decided whether a mayor mattered anymore. Whether governance itself had purpose.

Political opposition was forming. She'd heard whispers—Marcus Rivera, an infrastructure specialist, pragmatist voices asking "what's the point?" Some calling for her resignation outright. Part of her wondered if they were right. What was the point of a mayor when everyone died anyway?

But another part—the part that showed up every morning, that held briefings for five people, that signed housing permits and power allocations—that part understood. The point wasn't saving anyone. The point was bearing witness. Someone should say: dignity mattered until the end. That's what she'd defend in eighteen months. Not power. Not solutions. Just: presence. Just: showing up.

All of it theater, maybe. All of it meaningless, possibly. All of it practice, certainly.

She'd keep doing it. Because what else was there? She was Mayor Elena Torres. This was her function. These were her people. Outcome was beyond her control. But action—action was hers. Today's action. This moment's governance.

That had to be enough.

It was all anyone had.

She returned to her desk and pulled up the budget review. Numbers that didn't matter for future that wouldn't exist. But today, the numbers mattered. Today, the work continued. Today, she governed.

Tomorrow: same choice. Same practice. Same presence.

Fourteen years of todays.

That was governance now. That was power. That was purpose.

She authorized the hospital power allocation. Signed the housing permits. Approved the food distribution. Each document a small act of governance. Each

signature saying: today matters. Today, I care. Today, I'm present.

Marcus knocked, entered. "Next meeting in ten."

"Thank you." Elena saved her work, stood, prepared. Another meeting. Another decision. Another moment of bearing witness.

Elena Torres, Mayor of Antarctica, bearing witness to the end of the world, one briefing at a time.

Fourteen years left. She'd spend them showing up.

Chapter 8: Descent

Kenji Torres | Year 0, Days 60-75 | Lagos District

The apartment wasn't his. Kenji couldn't remember whose it was. Someone he'd met at the last party, or the party before that. Days blurred together now. Parties, substances, bodies, noise. One long spiral of forgetting.

The music was too loud. Lagos-Antarctic fusion—traditional drums mixed with synth bass, vocals processed through effects that made human voices sound alien. The beat pounded through the floor, through Kenji's chest, through his skull. Perfect. Loud enough to drown thought. Loud enough to make feeling impossible.

How many people were here? Fifty? A hundred? Hard to tell in the strobing lights. Bodies everywhere—dancing, coupling, collapsing. Most were young, twenties and early thirties. Everyone desperate. Everyone trying to feel something other than the knowledge that they were dying.

Day 72 since detection. Kenji had counted at first. Now he had to check his wrist display to know. Seventy-two days. Tenth week. Two and a half months. Fourteen years, nine months remaining.

He'd been to thirty-seven parties. Or forty. He'd lost count. Started Day 3—one night of escape. Then Day 5. Then Day 7. By Day 20, daily. By Day 40, he stopped going home between them. Just: party to party, apartment to apartment, stranger to stranger. Always moving. Never still. Stillness meant thinking.

"You're Kenji Torres?" A girl approached. Maybe twenty-two, blonde hair pulled back messily, Scandinavian features. Glassy eyes, pupils wide. On something. Like everyone else. Like him.

"Yeah."

"Elena Torres's son? The mayor?"

"Yeah."

"Must be weird." She swayed to the music, movements loose and uncoordinated. Swedish accent slight but present. "Your mom running a dying city."

Kenji took a drink from whatever was in his hand. Didn't taste it. "Must be weird being anyone right now."

She laughed—too loud, too long. Everything exaggerated. "True! Hey, want something?" She held out her palm. Three pills. Blue, unmarked. "Makes you forget for a while."

"How long?"

"Six hours, maybe. Or six minutes. Time gets weird."

Kenji took two. Swallowed them dry. The girl took the third. They stood in the pounding music, waiting for the chemicals to work.

"I'm Linnea," she said. "Used to be a biologist. Studied trees. Can you believe that? Trees." She laughed again. "What did you do? Before?"

"PhD candidate. Asteroid deflection."

Another laugh. "That's so fucked! You studied how to stop them and couldn't?"

"Yeah." His voice was flat. "That's so fucked."

The pills started working. Reality softened. Edges blurred. The music became texture instead of sound—physical presence wrapping around him. His body felt distant, like he was operating it remotely. Perfect. This was perfect. Consciousness without presence. Sensation without meaning.

Linnea was dancing. Or falling. Hard to tell. Blonde hair catching the strobing lights. Kenji watched her move, feeling nothing. The room pulsed with bodies and light. Everyone seeking the same thing: oblivion. Temporary death before real death. Practice dying. He was good at it now.

Time fractured. He was dancing. He was sitting. He was in a different room. Someone's bedroom, three people he didn't know, sharing substances he didn't ask about. The conversation was about nothing. Everything. The asteroid. Their ex-lovers. Whether anything mattered. The usual desperate philosophy of the doomed.

"If we all die," someone said—man, maybe thirty, face blurred by the drugs, "then nothing we did mattered. Right? Our relationships, our work, our... everything. Gone. Erased."

"So do whatever," someone else responded. "No consequences. Eat, fuck, sleep, die. That's all that's left."

"That's depressing."

"That's freedom."

Kenji listened without engaging. He'd had this conversation twenty times. Thirty times. It never resolved. Just: circular logic spinning in drug-addled minds. Meaning versus meaninglessness. Freedom versus futility. Philosophy without foundation.

He stood. Needed to move. Left the room without saying goodbye. No one noticed. Or cared. Or remembered who he was. All the same in the spiral.

Back in the main room, the party continued. The music had changed—slower now, dreamier, vocals floating over ambient synth. People moving like they were underwater. Kenji moved with them, his body following rhythms his mind couldn't process. Good. Thought was the enemy. Sensation was all.

A hand on his arm. He turned. Different girl. Or the same girl? Linnea again. Hard to tell. Faces blurred.

"You look lost," she said.

"I am."

"Want to be lost together?"

They were kissing. Or had been kissing. Time jumped. Now they were in another room, on someone's bed, clothes complicated and in the way. Kenji's hands moved automatically. His body knew what to do even when his mind was elsewhere. Muscle memory of connection without actual connection.

Afterward, Linnea fell asleep. Kenji lay beside her, staring at the ceiling, feeling the drugs wearing off. The crash always came. High to baseline to below. The payment for forgetting.

The room was too quiet. He could think again. That was bad. Thinking meant remembering: dissertation abandoned, future lost, mother worried, brilliance wasted. Thinking meant feeling: guilt for the spiral, shame for the waste, fear of the asteroid, horror at meaninglessness.

He needed more. More substances. More noise. More people. More anything that stopped the thinking.

He left without waking her. Back to the party. But the party was different now—morning light creeping through windows, many people gone, the ones remaining sprawled on furniture or floor. The aftermath. The waste. The evidence of collective desperation made visible in daylight.

Kenji found more pills. Took them. Chased them with something alcoholic. Sat on a couch beside two people who might have been unconscious or sleeping or dead. Hard to tell. Didn't check. Didn't care. Just: sat and waited for the chemicals to work again.

His wrist display chimed. Message from Elena. Tenth message this week. He read it: "Mijo, please come home. Or just call. Let me know you're alive. I love you."

He almost responded. Almost typed: “I’m alive. Barely. Slowly dying like everyone else. Just faster.” Almost sent it. Instead: deleted. Put the device on silent. Returned to the soft chemicals dissolving reality.

Someone sat beside him. Male, older, maybe forty. Clear-eyed. Not on anything, apparently. Unusual.

“You okay?” the man asked.

Kenji laughed. “No one’s okay.”

“Fair. You look particularly not-okay though.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re dying on my couch.”

Kenji focused on the man. “Your couch?”

“My apartment. My party. Well, was my party. Now it’s just wreckage.”

“Sorry.”

“Don’t be. Everyone’s wrecked.” The man studied him. “How long you been doing this?”

“Doing what?”

“The parties. The substances. The running.”

Kenji calculated. “Ten weeks. Since detection.”

“How’s that working?”

“Terribly.”

“But you keep doing it.”

“What else is there?”

The man stood. “Come on. Food. Water. You look like you haven’t eaten in days.”

“I’m fine.”

“You’re not. Come on.”

Something in the man’s voice—not command, just certainty—made Kenji follow. They went to the kitchen, separated from the party wreckage by a wall. The man made eggs, real protein, expensive. Toast. Coffee. Set it in front of Kenji.

“Eat.”

Kenji ate mechanically. Couldn’t remember last time he’d had real food. Nutrient bars, maybe. Days ago. The food tasted like nothing. His taste buds were burned out. But his body needed it. He ate without pleasure.

“I’m Michael,” the man said.

"Kenji."

"I know. You're Elena Torres's son. PhD candidate. Brilliant, they say."

"Was brilliant. Past tense."

"What happened?"

"Asteroid happened." Kenji finished the eggs. "My dissertation was on deflection scenarios. Theoretical exercises for stopping Near-Earth Objects. Then a real one showed up. Too big, too fast, too close. Every scenario I studied: failure. My whole field: useless. Turns out studying how to save humanity doesn't matter when humanity can't be saved."

Michael poured more coffee. "So you stopped."

"So I stopped. Closed the dissertation. Never opened it again. What's the point?"

"What's the point of anything?"

"Exactly." Kenji drank the coffee. Bitter. Good. Sensation breaking through the numbness. "Everything's pointless. Might as well party until it's over."

"That working?" Michael asked again.

"No. But nothing else would either."

"You sure?"

Kenji stared at him. Clear-eyed. Sober. Present. How? "How are you not... like this?" He gestured at himself. "How are you not drowning?"

"Who says I'm not? I just drown differently." Michael leaned against the counter. "I'm a builder. Was a builder. Infrastructure. Transit systems. Spent twenty years designing things that last centuries. Now? Everything ends in fourteen years. My life's work: erased."

"So why aren't you partying?"

"I did. First three weeks. Exactly like you. Substances, noise, forgetting. Then I woke up in a stranger's apartment and realized: I'd spent three weeks dying faster instead of living better. The asteroid takes fourteen years. I was taking them faster myself."

"What changed?"

"I went back to work."

Kenji laughed. "Work? What's the point of work?"

"Same point as partying. Fills time. But work leaves something. Partying leaves hangover."

"Work leaves nothing. The asteroid erases everything."

"So? Does everything need to last to matter?"

The question sat between them. Kenji's drug-addled mind tried to process it. Does everything need to last to matter? His dissertation hadn't lasted—abandoned after four years. Did those four years not matter? His relationship with his mother—that would end in fourteen years. Did that mean it was meaningless now?

"I don't know," Kenji admitted.

"Me neither. But I'm back at work anyway. Building transit systems that'll operate for fourteen years, then: physics. But those fourteen years matter to the people using them. And the work matters to me. Not because it's permanent. Because it's what I do."

Kenji felt something shifting. Not dramatic. Just: small crack in the certainty that everything was meaningless. If work mattered despite ending... if building mattered despite eventual destruction... then maybe...

"You should go home," Michael said gently. "Your mother's worried. Can see it in the news reports. Mayor Elena Torres, governing brilliantly, dying inside because her son's destroying himself."

"She called you?"

"No. I just watch the broadcasts. And I recognize grief." Michael cleared the dishes. "You don't have to stop partying. You don't have to be okay. But maybe go home. Let your mom see you're alive. That's not nothing."

Kenji sat in the kitchen of a stranger's apartment, coming down from substances he didn't remember taking, and felt: exhausted. Completely, utterly exhausted. Ten weeks of running. Ten weeks of forgetting. Ten weeks of slowly dying.

And he was still here. Still alive. Still carrying the weight. The running hadn't helped. The substances hadn't helped. The spiral was just spiral—going nowhere, accomplishing nothing, just: falling.

"I don't know how to stop," Kenji said quietly.

"You just stop. Or you don't. But maybe stop today. See how it feels. Tomorrow, choose again."

Today. Tomorrow. String of choices. Not fourteen years of choices—too overwhelming. Just: today's choice. Could he stop today? Could he go home, face his mother, try to be present instead of obliterated?

Maybe.

He stood. Unsteady but functional. "Thanks for the food."

"You're welcome. Come back if you need. Or don't. But take care of yourself. As much as anyone can."

Kenji left the apartment. The hallway was bright with morning light. Lagos District waking up—people heading to work, to errands, to normal activities like normal people. Kenji felt alien among them. Hollowed out. Wasted.

But: moving toward home instead of toward the next party. Small change. Barely noticeable. Maybe meaningless.

Maybe not.

The transit system took him across districts. Lagos to Antarctic Central Hub, thirty minutes. Kenji watched the megacity pass—billions of lives, all temporary, all doomed. But all living anyway. Working. Building. Continuing. Like Michael said: filling time with something other than destruction.

Could Kenji do that? Could he work again? Study again? Be human again? The dissertation was gone. That future was dead. But... fourteen years remained. That was time. What could he fill it with?

He didn't know yet. But for the first time in ten weeks, the question felt answerable. Not answered. Just: answerable. Possible. Someday.

Not today. Today, he'd go home. Sleep. Eat. See his mother. Small steps. Practice being alive instead of practicing dying.

Tomorrow: choose again. String of tomorrows. Maybe some of them would include work. Maybe some would include meaning. Maybe some would be present instead of obliterated.

Or maybe he'd spiral again. Maybe the parties would reclaim him. Maybe the substances would win. But: today, he was going home.

Today, that was enough.

The transit stopped at Antarctic Central. Kenji disembarked. His mother's building was ten blocks. He walked slowly, exhausted, barely present. Counted the blocks. Focused on the counting. One step. Another step. Movement forward. Small. Barely.

But forward.

He reached her building. Took the elevator. Stood outside her door. His finger hovered over the call button.

What would he say? "Sorry I'm a mess"? "Sorry I've been dying"? "Sorry I can't handle the truth"?

He pressed the button.

Elena answered immediately. Robe on, like she'd just woken. Saw his face. Her expression: relief, fear, love, pain. Everything at once.

"Mijo," she said. Voice breaking. "Come in."

He came in.

She held him. He fell apart. Sobbed like he hadn't in ten weeks. All the grief, the fear, the meaninglessness pouring out. She held him. Didn't fix it. Didn't try. Just: held.

They sat on her couch. She made tea—the ritual of crisis. He drank it. Bitter. Real. Present.

"I don't know how to do this," he said. "I don't know how to live fourteen years knowing they end."

"Me neither," Elena admitted. "But we try anyway."

"What if trying doesn't help?"

"Then we fail together."

Kenji leaned against his mother. Exhausted. Broken. Still lost. But: home. Not running. Not hiding. Just: here.

Ten weeks of spiral. Today: pause. Tomorrow: unknown. Fourteen years: unfathomable. But today—today he was with his mother, drinking tea, being witnessed.

It wasn't enough. Didn't fix anything. Didn't make meaninglessness meaningful.

But it was something. Small something. Fragile something. Present something.

The spiral might reclaim him tomorrow. Probably would. The parties were easier than presence. Substances were easier than feeling. Running was easier than being.

But today, he'd stopped running. Sat still. Let his mother hold him. Existed in the moment without obliteration.

Small step. Barely noticeable. Maybe temporary.

Maybe beginning.

Time would tell. Fourteen years would tell. Or tomorrow would tell. Or the next party would tell.

But today, Kenji Torres was home.

And that was different than yesterday.

And different was something.

Small something.

Enough for today.

Chapter 9: Anniversary

Seven Voices | Year 0, Day 365 | Multiple Locations

Amara — Antarctic Monitoring Station, 3:47 AM

Exactly one year.

Amara sat at her workstation, the only occupied seat among sixty. The station hummed its familiar lullaby—cooling systems, data processors, the distant creak of ice. Same sounds as 365 days ago. Same time. Same place.

Different world.

Her screen displayed the countdown: **14 years, 2 months, 14 days remaining.**

One year gone. Fourteen left. The asteroid approaching with perfect mathematical precision. She'd updated the trajectory 10,847 times. Every calculation confirmed the same result. Impact probability: 99.97%. Time remaining: precisely 5,183 days.

Fourteen years.

It sounded like a lot. It wasn't.

The station was almost empty now. Amara and two others. Dr. Kim worked day shift. Dr. Patel took evenings. Amara had graveyard—her preference, her isolation, her choice. Sixty workstations. Three people. The building felt like a tomb.

She'd become the face of extinction. "Dr. Amara Okafor, the woman who detected the apocalypse." Her face on every news network. Her data in every briefing. Her calculations describing everyone's death. Famous. Isolated. Numb.

She pulled up Zara's messages. Hadn't opened them in months. The counter read: 127 unread. Her sister had kept trying. Kept sending updates. Photos of Maya. Videos of Kofi—born two months ago, healthy, doomed. Voice messages asking for connection.

Amara read the most recent: *"It's been a year, Amara. A whole year of silence. I don't know if you're getting these. I don't know if you care. But... I'm your sister. Maya is your niece. Kofi is your nephew. We're family. And we have fourteen years left. Please. Just respond."*

Amara stared at her sister's contact information. Her finger hovered over the call button. Had hovered there 365 days ago. Still hovering. Still unable to press.

What would she say? *Sorry I calculated your children's deaths and then vanished into data*?

She closed the messages. Returned to her calculations. Updated the trajectory. The asteroid was exactly where physics said it would be. Perfect. Predictable. Inevitable.

One year. She'd spent it isolated, calculating, numb. David barely spoke to her. Zara had given up. Colleagues had fled. She was alone with the data.

This was her choice. This was her survival. This was how she spent the first year: counting down to extinction, one update at a time, alone.

Reflection in the dark screen: barely recognized herself. Thinner. Older. Hollowed out. The price of numbness.

She returned to work. Because what else? The calculations needed updating. The countdown continued. The isolation deepened.

One year down. Fourteen to go.

Alone.

Zara — Lagos Garden, Morning

Kofi was two months old now. Time blurred in the constant attention babies demanded—sometimes Zara still felt the phantom weight of pregnancy, the anticipation, the defiant choice to create life. But no: he was here. Real. Gurgling in her arms.

Maya was three. Kofi was two months. Both healthy. Both doomed. Zara had chosen this—chosen life despite extinction. Everyone called her cruel. Cruel to give Maya a doomed brother. Cruel to bring Kofi into a dying world.

She didn't care. Her children mattered. Brief didn't mean meaningless. Wei taught her that.

Every morning: Wei's garden. Zara, Maya, and now Kofi. Sitting among the gardenias and vegetables. Learning impermanence. Learning presence. Wei teaching through silence and flowers and the rhythm of growth and decay.

"See how lemon blooms?" Wei said, pointing with her cane. 115 years old now, body failing, mind sharp. "This morning, four new flowers. By evening, one will fall. That's how life works. Blooming and falling. Maya understands. Don't you, Maya?"

Maya nodded seriously. "Flowers don't last. Nothing lasts. But they're still pretty."

"Very good." Wei's approval warmed. "Your mother learned quickly. Now she teaches you."

Zara held Kofi, who babbled happily. Two months old. Fourteen years left. He'd die at fourteen. Never reach fifteen. Never reach adulthood. But right now: alive, healthy, laughing.

That had to count.

One year since detection. Zara had spent it defiant. Pregnant, then parenting. Building family in apocalypse. Rejecting the logic that said brief life wasn't worth living. Choosing presence over despair.

Hard choice. Daily choice. Worth it? She didn't know. But Kofi was here. Maya was growing. Family was real.

Fourteen years left. She'd spend them loving her children completely. Presence until the end. That was her practice. That was her defiance.

"Garden tomorrow?" Maya asked.

"Garden every day," Zara confirmed.

Wei smiled. "Good students."

One year down. Practice continuing. Life defiant. Love despite ending.

Enough.

Elena — Mayor's Office, Morning Briefing

Conference table for fifty. Present: five. Elena, Marcus, Chen, Kowalski, Dr. Ade. Same people as six months ago. Everyone else quit or fled or died.

"Population report," Elena said, starting the ritual.

"Two point eight billion," Chen reported. "Down from four point two billion at detection. Thirty-three percent loss in one year."

Two point eight billion. Elena documented this. Who would read these notes? No one. But someone should record. Someone should say: we were here. We tried. We maintained dignity.

"Infrastructure at fifty-five percent. Security adequate. Health services struggling." The reports continued. Everything declining. Everything failing slowly. Everything maintained as long as possible by skeleton crew.

"Orders, Mayor?"

Elena gave the same answer as always: "Maintain what we can. Document what we can't. Continue."

After: Marcus stayed. "One year," he said.

"One year," Elena confirmed.

"Fourteen more."

"Fourteen more."

They sat in the too-large room, five people governing a dying city, and didn't talk about futility. Didn't need to. The work continued because someone had to do it. Because bearing witness mattered. Because presence was purpose.

Wei's letters helped. Weekly reminders that governance wasn't about outcome. Was about practice. Elena governed not to save anyone. To be present to them. To maintain dignity. To show up.

That was enough. Had to be.

Kenji was home. That mattered. He'd stopped spiraling—mostly. Still struggled. Still broken. But present. Living with her now. Trying. That was all anyone could do.

One year. She'd spent it governing emptiness. Maintaining order in chaos. Bearing witness to collapse. Purpose without outcome. Presence without solution.

Fourteen years left to continue. She would. Because what else? This was her practice. This was her presence. This was enough.

The work continued.

David — Solar Array, Noon

Platform 73. 200 meters up. David and Robot 47B performing maintenance. Connection housing recalibration—127th time in eight years.

One year since detection. David had kept working. Everyone else quit. The arrays barely needed humans anymore—automation handled most tasks. But David showed up. Every day. Maintained the systems that would operate for fourteen more years, then: vaporize.

Why? He'd stopped knowing. Just: work was what he did. Maintenance was practice. Showing up was enough.

Amara was gone. Not dead. Just: absent. Their marriage had died slowly, then quickly. Now: strangers sharing space. He still loved her. She couldn't feel anything. The gulf was unbridgeable.

He'd thought about jumping. Platform edge right there. Quick end instead of slow countdown. But: arrays needed maintaining. Work needed doing. So he kept going.

47B chirped status update. David responded automatically. They worked in comfortable silence. Robot better colleague than most humans. Reliable. Present. Simple.

One year gone. Fourteen left. David would spend them maintaining. Because that's what he did. Because work was better than nothing. Because showing up mattered even when outcome was certain.

Small practice. Quiet practice. Maintenance as meditation.

Enough.

Kenji — Elena's Apartment, Afternoon

One year since detection. Kenji was... alive. Barely. Differently.

He'd stopped the constant parties. Mostly. Still spiraled sometimes—few days lost to substances, to forgetting, to obliteration. But not constantly. Not every day. Progress, maybe.

Living with his mother now. Elena didn't judge. Just: present. Made tea. Held space. Let him figure it out.

He wasn't figured out. Wasn't okay. Wasn't functional. But: present sometimes. That was different than before.

The dissertation was still closed. Career still dead. Future still impossible to imagine. But: he'd started reading. Philosophy mostly. Buddhist stuff. Stoic stuff. People who'd thought about meaninglessness before. Helped slightly.

Michael's words stayed with him: *Does everything need to last to matter?* Kenji didn't have answer. But the question felt important. Felt like maybe there was answer, even if he couldn't access it yet.

One year. Spent in spiral, mostly. But spiraling less. Drowning less. Thinking more. Still lost. But: different lost. Present lost instead of obliterated lost.

Fourteen years left. He had no idea how to spend them. But: today, he was alive. Sitting in his mother's apartment. Reading. Thinking. Being.

Tomorrow: probably harder. Maybe easier. Definitely uncertain.

But today was today. That was something.

Small something.

Beginning something.

Maybe.

Ibrahim — Jerusalem Camp, Evening

One year faithless. One year since time reset and his purpose ended.

Ibrahim knelt with his brothers for evening prayer. Automatic. Body doing what body had always done. But: nothing behind it. No connection. No belief. Just: going through motions because alternative was isolation.

The camp had noticed. Imam had stopped trying to restore his faith. Brothers tolerated him but didn't trust him. He was hollow shell pretending faith.

Why stay? Where else? Faith defined his identity. Without it: nothing. No purpose. No structure. No Ibrahim. The life he'd built before detection—fighter, believer, servant of Allah—felt like someone else's memory.

One year of emptiness. Fourteen years of same ahead. The prospect was unbearable. Prayer beads in hand feeling like stones. Words feeling like noise. Everything meaning nothing.

The question remained: if not faith, then what? No answer yet. Maybe no answer ever. Just: hollow man performing hollow rituals until extinction made it irrelevant.

One year down. This was how he spent it: going through motions. Existing without living. Present without presence.

Fourteen years of this? Impossible. Something had to change. Had to break. Had to end or begin or transform.

But not yet. Not today. Today: hollow prayers. Empty beads. Meaningless words.

Tomorrow: same.

Until it wasn't.

But that was later. Unknown. Distant.

Today: stones.

Wei — Lagos Garden, Evening

115 years old. One year older than when the world learned it was ending. Body failing more—knees worse, back constant pain, hands shaking too much for delicate work. Wheelchair most days now. Death approaching naturally, probably before asteroid.

That was fine. She'd been preparing for death forty years. Ready whenever.

One year teaching. Zara, Maya, little Kofi. Others who came to the garden seeking... something. Wisdom, maybe. Or just: witness. She taught through silence and flowers and the simple practice of being present.

Her book was nearly finished. Twenty years writing, suddenly urgent with fourteen years defined. Almost done. Would finish before death—natural death, before extinction.

That felt right. Complete the work. Not for legacy—no one would read it after extinction. For completion itself. The practice of finishing what was started.

One year since detection. She'd spent it practicing what she'd always practiced: presence. Impermanence made visible didn't change the practice. Made it more necessary.

Fourteen years left. Maybe fewer—body failing. She'd continue teaching. Tending garden. Writing. Being present. Until unable.

Then: death. Natural death. Before the asteroid. Before the end.

Ready. Complete. At peace.

The gardenias bloomed. The lemon tree stood patient. Everything temporary. Everything beautiful. Everything here now.

One year down. As many as remained. All of it: enough.

Practice continued. Presence remained. Life bloomed until it didn't.

Simple. True. Complete.

Closing — Omniscient

Seven glimpses. Seven paths. All diverging.

Amara: isolated in calculation, numb by choice, alone by design. One year counting down extinction. Fourteen years ahead the same.

Zara: defiant in creation, raising doomed children, practicing presence. One year building family. Fourteen years ahead loving completely.

Elena: maintaining governance, bearing witness, showing up daily. One year holding briefings for five. Fourteen years ahead continuing.

David: mechanical maintenance, quiet presence, working despite futility. One year keeping arrays operational. Fourteen years ahead the same.

Kenji: spiraling less, drowning intermittent, seeking something unknown. One year surviving barely. Fourteen years ahead uncertain.

Ibrahim: hollow faith, empty prayers, going through motions. One year faithless. Fourteen years ahead unbearable.

Wei: present teacher, garden tender, preparing for natural death. One year practicing. However many remained the same.

One year gone. Fourteen remain. The fracture complete. Everyone scattered. Everyone coping differently. Everyone facing the end their own way.

The divergence is deepest now. Isolation maximized. Connection minimized. Everyone separate. Everyone alone. Even together—alone.

But: time remains. Fourteen years. 5,113 days. Enough time for change. For reconnection. For transformation. For healing. For whatever comes next.

Not yet. Not today. Today: scattered. Fractured. Separate.

But later...

Later, the scattered begin gathering. The fractured begin healing. The separate begin connecting.

Not because the asteroid changes course. Because people change. Because isolation becomes unbearable. Because presence calls louder than numbness. Because love persists despite ending.

But that's later. That's Part II. That's years ahead.

Today, at the end of Year 1, everyone is scattered. The divergence complete. The fracture maximized.

Eight glimpses. Eight paths. All separate.

Fourteen years remain.

Everything can change in fourteen years.

Everything will.

But not yet.

End Part I: Detection

The world learned. The world reacted. The world fractured.

Now: the long middle. The searching. The separation. The slow movement toward convergence.

But that comes later.

First: these people must live their fracture. Must survive their isolation. Must find—or fail to find—what comes after detection.

Fourteen years.

That's what remains.

How will they spend them?

END PART I: DETECTION

One year completed. Seven characters. Seven paths. All diverging. Isolation beginning—will deepen for seven more years before the first crack appears.

Amara chose calculation. Zara chose defiance. Elena chose witness. David chose maintenance. Kenji chose seeking. Ibrahim chose hollowness. Wei chose teaching.

None complete yet. All beginning. The fracture just starting.

Part II awaits. Years 1-7. The deepening. The searching without finding. The isolation maximized. Kenji will wander five continents. Ibrahim will be wounded and evacuated. Amara will divorce and disappear completely. Elena will govern emptiness. But Wei will teach in Lagos. Zara will build community. Small seeds planted. Barely visible. Real.

Fourteen years remain. Long enough for everything to change. Long enough for nothing to change. Long enough to lose everything. Long enough to find what matters.

The detection complete.

The fracture begins.

PART II: FRACTURE

Chapter 10: Before

David Chen | Year -1, Month 6 | Antarctica, Residential District 7

The morning Amara first told him about the anomaly, David was making eggs.

Not synthetic eggs. Real eggs—a splurge from the premium market in District 3, where you could still find animal products if you didn't mind paying three days' wages for a carton of twelve. Amara had a conference presentation that afternoon, something about orbital mechanics, and David wanted to celebrate.

"The albedo measurements don't match the spectral analysis." Amara's voice drifted from the bedroom, distracted, half-awake. She always thought out loud in the mornings—processing overnight data before her brain fully engaged.

"Mmm." David cracked an egg. Perfect yellow yolk, sliding into the heated pan.

"It's probably instrumentation drift. Malek's team recalibrated last month but the secondary array always runs hot."

"You want cheese?"

"What?" She appeared in the doorway, still wearing her sleep shirt, hair wrapped in the silk scarf she used to protect her curls. Beautiful even half-conscious. Beautiful always. "Did you say cheese?"

"Real cheese. The goat kind from that place near the port."

Her face softened from distracted scientist to present wife. "David. That costs—"

"I know what it costs." He smiled at her. "Your presentation's a big deal. The orbital perturbation thing. I wanted to celebrate."

She crossed the kitchen—twelve steps in their small apartment—and wrapped her arms around him from behind. He felt her cheek against his shoulder blade, warm through his thin shirt. Presence. This was what mornings were supposed to be.

"It's not even a real discovery," she said. "Just methodology. A better way to track objects in the outer system. Nobody cares about methodology."

"You care about methodology."

"Because I'm obsessive."

"You're thorough." He flipped the egg, maintaining the yolk intact. "And brilliant. And about to revolutionize outer system observation. And my wife. In that order."

She laughed. The sound of her laughing—he catalogued it without thinking. Lower register, slightly surprised, genuine. The sound she made when he caught her off guard with affection. He loved catching her off guard.

"Your wife should be higher on that list."

"Okay. Wife, brilliant, thorough, revolutionary. Better?"

"Much."

She released him and reached for the coffee maker—her ancient French press, the one piece of equipment she'd brought from her mother's Lagos kitchen. David had learned to love that press. Learned to love watching her make coffee with the same precision she applied to calculations. Three scoops. Water at exactly ninety-six degrees. Four minutes steep time.

Methodology. She applied it to everything.

They ate together at the small table by the window. District 7 spread below—residential blocks stepping down toward the port, the morning crowd of

commuters visible as moving specks. Antarctica's permanent daylight poured through the glass. Six months into summer, no night for weeks.

"What's your day?" Amara asked, scraping up the last of her eggs. She'd devoured them—always ate fast, brain already racing ahead to the next thing.

"Platform inspections. Sector 4 solar coverage. 47B and I are running efficiency audits."

"You and your robot." Affectionate, not dismissive.

"My very capable colleague."

"Does 47B know it's your colleague?"

"47B knows many things." David sipped his tea—green, properly steeped, because he had methodology too. "It's learning my patterns. Anticipating what I'll need before I know I need it."

"Sounds like a good marriage."

"Jealous?"

She considered. That was Amara—she considered jokes as seriously as she considered data. "Maybe. Sometimes I wish I could anticipate what you need."

"You anticipate plenty."

"I anticipate the wrong things. I anticipate that you need space when you actually need company. I anticipate you need solutions when you need listening."

David set down his tea. This was new territory—the vulnerable morning Amara who sometimes appeared when the data wasn't distracting her. He'd learned to move carefully in these moments.

"You're getting better at it."

"Am I?"

"You're here. Eating eggs. Having coffee. That's what I need most mornings."

"That's nothing."

"It's everything." He reached across the small table, touched her hand. Her fingers were cooler than his—always were. "The showing up. The being present. That's the whole thing."

She looked at him. Something shifted in her expression—the scientist receding, the wife arriving. "I love you. You know that, right? Even when I'm distracted. Even when I'm in my head. I love you."

"I know."

"Good." She squeezed his hand, then released it. "Because I'm going to be very distracted for the next few months. This new methodology—if it works, if the

calibration holds, we could detect objects we've never seen before. The outer system is full of things we've missed."

"Things?"

"Comets. Asteroids. Bodies we've never tracked because we didn't have the resolution." Her eyes were shining now—science-Amara fully awake, passionate and brilliant. "Imagine knowing everything that's out there. Every object on every trajectory. Complete situational awareness of our solar neighborhood."

David smiled. He loved this version of her—the one who got excited about invisible rocks in distant space. The one whose passion made mundane astronomy feel like adventure.

"Sounds important."

"It could be. If the methodology proves out. If—" She stopped. Checked the time. "I need to shower. The presentation's at two and I want to run the simulations one more time."

"Go. I'll clean up."

She stood, paused, came around the table to kiss him. Brief but present. Her lips tasted like coffee and the eggs he'd made her. Home.

"Thank you for breakfast."

"Anytime."

She disappeared toward the bathroom. David heard water running, her voice humming something—she always hummed in the shower, something her mother taught her.

He cleaned the dishes. Washed the pan, dried the plates, wiped down the counter. Domestic rituals that structured his mornings. Amara had her methodology. David had his maintenance.

That evening, she came home late. Ten PM, apologetic, carrying data tablets and the distracted expression that meant she was still processing.

"The presentation went well?"

"Better than well. Dr. Vasquez wants to expand the methodology. Apply it systematically. Do a full survey of known objects, then look for anomalies." She set down her tablets, but didn't sit. Pacing. She paced when excited. "If we can identify everything that's out there—every asteroid, every comet, every body on every trajectory—we'll know exactly what's coming. No surprises. Complete awareness."

"Sounds like a lot of work."

"Years of work. Maybe decades." She finally sat, but on the edge of the chair, energy still humming. "But important work. Work that matters."

"All work matters."

"You don't believe that."

He considered. "I believe all work done well matters. Whether it's mapping asteroids or maintaining solar arrays. The doing well part is what counts."

Amara studied him. That look she got sometimes—seeing him as data, analyzing patterns. "You really believe that."

"I really do."

"Even though my work might discover something that changes everything? And your work just keeps the lights on?"

"Especially because of that." David rose, went to the kitchen, started making her tea—chamomile, for evening. "Someone has to keep the lights on. Someone has to show up every day and do the small work that holds everything together. That's not less important than discovery. It's just different."

"What if I discover something terrible?"

He paused, kettle in hand. "What do you mean?"

"What if my methodology finds something we don't want to know? An object on a collision course. A comet aimed at Earth. Something that changes everything."

David poured water over the tea. Let it steep. Brought it to her.

"Then we'll know. And knowing is better than not knowing. And you'll be the one who gave us the warning. That's a gift, even if the knowledge is hard."

She took the tea. Held it without drinking. Her eyes were distant—calculating probabilities, maybe. The odds of finding something terrible. The weight of being the one who looked.

"I hope I don't find anything," she said quietly.

"I know."

"But I have to look."

"I know that too."

She sipped her tea. He sat beside her. Outside, the Antarctic summer stretched toward midnight without darkness—just the long, pale twilight of a world that never fully slept.

They went to bed together. Made love slowly, present to each other in a way that didn't always happen. Afterward, she curled against him, her cold feet seeking his warmth.

"David?"

"Mm."

"If I find something. Something bad. Will you still be here?"

"I'll always be here."

"Even if the world changes?"

He kissed her forehead. Pulled her closer. "Especially then. The maintaining never stops. The showing up never ends. Whatever comes, I'll still be making eggs and fixing arrays and loving you."

She relaxed against him. Sleep coming, finally. Her brilliant mind quieting for a few hours.

"I love you," she murmured.

"I love you too."

Eight months later, she found the asteroid.

And nothing David had promised held true.

He didn't stay. She didn't stay. The world changed and they changed with it—apart instead of together, isolated instead of connected. The maintaining failed. The showing up ended. They divorced four years after detection, two people who'd promised to hold each other through anything, broken by the weight of knowing what was coming.

But that morning—the eggs, the coffee, her hand in his—that morning was real. Before the asteroid. Before the knowing. Before everything fell apart.

They were happy once.

David carries that knowledge like a tool in his belt: not heavy, but always present. Proof that connection was possible. Proof that they'd managed it, briefly. Proof that what broke could, maybe, be rebuilt.

Eight years after the divorce, he knocked on her door with breakfast and hope. Started again. Learned to stay, learned to show up, learned that the maintaining never really ends.

But some mornings, still, he makes eggs. Real eggs if he can find them. And he remembers the morning before everything changed.

The morning they were still whole.

Chapter 11: Defiance

Zara Okafor-Mensah | Year 0, Month 10 | Lagos District

The contractions came in waves—building, cresting, receding. Zara breathed through them, focusing on the count. In, two, three, four. Out, two, three, four. The delivery room smelled of antiseptic and the faint sweetness of synth-fruit from someone's breakfast down the hall. Between contractions, she stared at the ceiling—clinical blank white where calming nature images used to be. Someone had removed them. Why pretend at serenity?

"You're doing great." Kwame's hand was warm and sweating in hers.

Through the observation window, three rooms occupied out of sixteen. Two years ago, all sixteen full with a waiting list. Now: skeleton crew. One doctor, three nurses. The monitoring machines hummed their quiet assessments—her vitals, the baby's heartbeat, contraction intervals. Machines didn't judge. The humans did.

Another contraction. Worse this time. Zara squeezed Kwame's hand hard enough that he gasped. "Sorry," she managed.

"Don't be sorry. Break my fingers if you need to."

Nurse Chen appeared in the doorway—one of the three who'd stayed. Young, maybe twenty-five, with tired eyes that had seen too much in two years. "How are we doing?"

"Contractions every four minutes," the monitoring system announced in its pleasant, inhuman voice.

Nurse Chen checked the displays, nodded. "You're at eight centimeters. Almost there. I'll get Dr. Okonkwo." She paused at the door. "Dr. Tanaka asked to be paged when you're close—wants to do the newborn exam personally since she'll be his pediatrician."

Zara managed a smile through the pain. Dr. Tanaka had been Maya's doctor since birth—Japanese-Nigerian, specialized in child development, one of the few pediatricians who'd stayed in Lagos after detection. She'd admitted in their last prenatal consult that her entire specialty felt absurd now. "I became a pediatrician to help children grow toward adulthood," she'd said quietly. "Now I watch them grow toward nothing." But she'd stayed anyway. Still showed up. Still cared.

Almost there. Almost to the moment when Zara would hold her son. Her second child. Her choice. Her defiance.

The messages had started the moment she announced the pregnancy six months ago. Strangers on public forums: *"How could you?"* Friends expressing concern carefully: *"Are you sure this is wise?"* Kwame's mother, crying on a video call:

"Why bring a child into this?" Even Maya's daycare teacher, gentle but pointed: *"Have you thought about what you're doing to Maya? Giving her a sibling she'll lose?"*

Zara had thought about it. Had thought about nothing else for months before they'd made the decision. The question Kwame had asked that first night, sitting on their balcony while the world processed its extinction: *Should we have another child?*

They'd talked for hours. Days. Weeks. The arguments against were obvious—fourteen years instead of eighty, the cruelty of consciousness given and taken, the burden on Maya.

But Wei's words kept returning: *Was Maya not always going to die? Was her life not always temporary?*

The asteroid just made it visible. That's what Zara kept coming back to. Everything was always ending. Now everyone knew.

Another contraction. The worst yet. Zara cried out despite herself.

"Almost there," Kwame repeated, his own face pale. "You're so strong. Almost there."

Dr. Okonkwo arrived—mid-fifties, steady hands. She checked Zara's progress with practiced efficiency. "Ten centimeters. Ready to push."

Zara gripped the bed rails. Her body knew what to do even if her mind was still arguing with itself.

"Next contraction, I want you to push," Dr. Okonkwo said. "Big push. Channel everything into it."

The contraction built. Zara pushed. Pain and pressure and the overwhelming sensation of her body doing something enormous, something ancient, something that had been happening for millions of years and would stop happening in fourteen years.

"Good! Again!"

Push. Breathe. Push. The room narrowed to just this—the effort, the pain, the work of bringing life into the world. Kwame's voice in her ear. Dr. Okonkwo's steady instructions. Nurse Chen's hands supporting her.

"I can see the head! One more big push!"

Zara pushed with everything she had. Felt something shift, release, complete. Then: a sound. A cry. Thin and indignant and absolutely alive.

"It's a boy. Healthy. Perfect."

They placed him on her chest—wet, warm, squirming, lighter than she'd expected. His skin was slick against hers. He smelled like iron and salt and something

underneath that was just *him*. Kofi Okafor-Mensah. Six pounds, four ounces. Eyes squeezed shut, mouth open in protest.

Zara's arms knew what to do before her mind caught up. She curved around him, her body making a shelter. Fourteen years. But he was here *now*, warm and real against her heart.

Kwame was crying, his hand gentle on Kofi's tiny head. "He's beautiful."

"He is," Zara agreed.

Nurse Chen's face was professional, but her eyes were sad. "Congratulations," she said carefully. "He's beautiful."

The weight of that sadness—the pity, the judgment, the unspoken question: *How could you?*—settled over the room like fog. Zara felt it but didn't absorb it. She'd made her choice. She'd live with the consequences. And right now, those consequences were squirming against her chest, alive and real and hers.

The first week home was a blur of feeding, changing, sleeping in two-hour increments. Kofi was a good baby—healthy appetite, strong lungs, already tracking faces with his dark eyes. Maya was fascinated and terrified in equal measure, hovering near her brother but afraid to touch him without permission.

"Gentle," Zara said for the hundredth time, guiding Maya's hand to Kofi's soft hair. "See? So soft."

"Baby Kofi," Maya whispered, three years old and suddenly so big compared to her brother. "Hi, baby."

Kofi's eyes found Maya's face. He didn't smile yet—too young—but he looked. Focused. Saw his sister.

"He knows me!" Maya's face lit up with wonder.

"He does," Zara confirmed. "You're his big sister. He'll know you his whole life."

Fourteen years, she didn't say. Kofi would be fourteen when he died. Maya would be seventeen when she died. Brief, precious time. All they'd get.

The messages started that week too. Zara's public profile—an engineering forum where she'd been active for years—exploded with comments after she posted a simple photo: *"Welcome, Kofi."*

"How could you? That baby will know nothing but fear."

"Selfish. Absolutely selfish. You brought him here for YOUR comfort."

"You gave him fourteen years of suffering instead of infinite peace of non-existence."

"What kind of mother does this?"

"He'll grow up knowing exactly when he'll die. That's psychological torture."

Some defenders appeared too:

"Life matters regardless of length."

"She has the right to her choice."

"Fourteen years of love is better than nothing."

But mostly: condemnation. Anger. Disgust. The judgment of strangers who'd decided that choosing life in the apocalypse was unforgivable.

Zara read them all that first week. Let the words cut. Let the anger of others sink in. Then, methodically, she blocked the worst offenders and turned off public comments. She'd made her choice for her reasons. She didn't owe strangers an explanation.

But the doubt crept in anyway. Late nights feeding Kofi, watching his small face in the dim light, Zara wondered: Did I do the right thing? Is this cruelty disguised as love? Will he thank me for his fourteen years, or curse me?

Kwame found her crying at three in the morning, Kofi asleep in her arms.

"What's wrong?" He sat beside her on the couch, exhausted but alert.

"The messages," Zara whispered. "They're right. What did we do? We brought him into this. We made this choice for him, and he'll pay the price."

Kwame was quiet for a long moment. Then: "Everyone makes that choice for their children. Every parent in history. We don't ask to be born. Our parents choose for us. The only difference now is we know the timeline."

"That's not a small difference."

"No," he agreed. "It's not. But Zara—look at him. He's here. He's real. His consciousness exists. Would it be better if he'd never existed at all?"

"I don't know," Zara said honestly. "Ask me again in fourteen years."

"We won't be here in fourteen years."

"Then I guess we'll never know."

They sat together in the darkness, their son sleeping between them. Outside, Lagos District hummed its night sounds—quieter than two years ago, but still alive. Still functioning. Still here.

"Do you regret it?" Kwame asked quietly.

Zara looked at Kofi's face—peaceful in sleep, innocent of everything coming. Did she regret it? She didn't know. Maybe she never would. But regret or not, he was here. Born. Real. Hers to love and protect for fourteen years.

"No," she said finally. "I don't regret it. I'm terrified. I'm heartbroken. But I don't regret him."

Kwame kissed her forehead. “Neither do I.”

Week two brought a different kind of visitor. Zara was home alone—Kwame back at work half-time, Maya at daycare—when her door chimed. She checked the screen, expecting a delivery. Instead: a woman she didn’t recognize. Mid-thirties, carrying a small child, looking nervous.

Zara answered with Kofi strapped to her chest. “Yes?”

“I’m sorry to bother you.” The woman’s voice was hesitant. “I’m Aisha. I live two floors down. I saw your post. About Kofi.”

Zara stiffened, ready for more judgment. “And?”

“And I’m pregnant.” Aisha’s hand went to her abdomen—barely showing, maybe three months. “I found out last month. Everyone is telling me to terminate. My family, my friends, strangers online. They say I’m being cruel. Selfish. Irresponsible.”

“What do you say?” Zara asked.

“I don’t know.” Tears formed in Aisha’s eyes. “I don’t know what’s right. But I saw your post, and I thought—maybe you could tell me. Do you think it was right? Bringing him here?”

Zara looked at this stranger, this woman carrying her own impossible choice, and felt the weight of the question. Did she think it was right? She’d told Kwame she didn’t regret it. But right? That was different.

“Come in,” Zara said, stepping aside.

They sat in the living room—plants everywhere, morning light through windows. Aisha held her daughter while Zara held Kofi.

“I can’t tell you what’s right,” Zara said after a long silence. “I can only tell you what I believe. Brief doesn’t mean meaningless. Everyone has always known life was temporary. The asteroid just makes the timeline visible.”

“But they’ll know,” Aisha said. “They’ll grow up knowing.”

“They’ll grow up knowing what everyone pretended otherwise about. That nothing lasts.”

“Do you think they’ll hate us?”

“Maybe.” Zara looked at Kofi, sleeping against her. “I think about that. Will Maya hate me for giving her a brother she’ll lose? I don’t know.”

“Then how do you justify it?”

“I don’t.” Zara looked at Kofi, sleeping against her chest. “I can’t justify it. I can only do it. Choose life. Choose presence. Choose love despite ending. Maybe that’s enough. Maybe it’s not. But it’s what I have.”

Aisha's daughter squirmed down and toddled over to look at Kofi. "Baby," she said.

"Yes, baby," Aisha confirmed, watching her daughter with the same complicated love Zara felt. "Would you be okay? If Mama had another baby?"

The girl considered seriously. "Baby sister?"

"Maybe brother. Like Kofi."

"Okay." Simple acceptance. The way children processed everything—direct, honest, uncomplicated by philosophy.

Aisha looked at Zara. "Thank you. For not pretending it's easy."

"It's not easy," Zara said. "It's terrible and beautiful and I question it every day. But he's here. And I love him. That has to count for something."

After Aisha left, Zara stood at her window, holding Kofi, watching Lagos District continue. Two years into the apocalypse, and life persisted. People worked. Children played. The engineered climate maintained its tropical warmth. Everything temporary. Everything here.

Her tablet chimed—messages from the blocked accounts piling up, finding new ways to reach her. She ignored them. Their judgment didn't matter. Her doubt mattered. Her love mattered. Kofi's life mattered.

Fourteen years. It wasn't enough. But it was something. It was real.

Month three, and they established a routine. Morning garden visits to Wei—all four of them now, Kofi strapped to Zara's chest, Maya holding Wei's hand, learning about impermanence through flowers. Wei had declined significantly in two years—wheelchair most days, body failing visibly—but her mind remained sharp, her teaching clear.

"See the lemon tree?" Wei pointed with her cane. "Fifty-two years old. Fourteen years left. Same as Kofi. Should I not have planted it fifty-two years ago because it will end in fourteen?"

"No," Maya said seriously. She'd learned this lesson well. "It's still beautiful. Still makes lemons."

"Very good." Wei's approval warmed the air. "Kofi will be beautiful too. Will make his own fruit. Brief life doesn't mean failed life."

Zara held her son, watching him look at the garden with unfocused newborn eyes. He couldn't see the flowers yet. Couldn't understand the philosophy. But someday he would. Someday he'd know he was dying. Know exactly when. Know his life had an expiration date.

How would she explain it to him? At what age did you tell a child about the asteroid? Maya was three—still innocent, still living fully in the present. When would that change? When did childhood end and apocalypse awareness begin?

"You're thinking too far ahead," Wei said, reading Zara's expression. "He's three months old. Be present to three months old."

"How do you always know?"

"Because you're very obvious." Wei smiled. "And because everyone does it. Projects into imagined future instead of attending to actual present. You can't control when he'll understand. Can't prepare him for that moment. Can only be present with him now. This morning. This garden. This moment of his life."

Maya was examining a gardenia that had bloomed overnight—perfect white petals, fragrant and delicate. "This one's new!"

"Bloomed this morning," Wei confirmed. "Tomorrow, less perfect. Day after, falling. But today—perfect."

"Everything falls," Maya said matter-of-factly. Three years old and already fluent in impermanence. It was beautiful and heartbreaking in equal measure.

Kofi made a small sound—not quite crying, just announcing his presence. Zara adjusted him in the carrier, feeling his warm weight against her chest. This was real. This moment. This child. This garden. This teaching.

The messages still came. The judgment still existed. But here, in Wei's garden, surrounded by temporary beauty and ancient wisdom, it mattered less. Zara had made her choice. She would live with it. Would love her children completely for the time they had.

Fourteen years until Kofi died. Fourteen until Maya died. Fourteen until everyone died.

But today: garden. Flowers. Teaching. Presence.

That was enough.

Had to be enough.

The hardest moment came unexpectedly, month four. Zara was scrolling through her contacts—looking for a colleague's information—when she saw her sister's name. Amara Okafor. Astrophysicist.

Outside, Lagos District hummed with afternoon traffic. Someone's music drifted up from the courtyard—old Afrobeat, the kind their grandmother used to play. Kofi slept in the carrier against Zara's chest, his breath warm through her shirt.

Two years since she'd spoken to Amara. The argument before Maya's first birthday—Amara too busy with work, Zara hurt, words exchanged that couldn't be taken back.

Then: the detection. Amara's face on every screen, explaining the calculations, confirming the timeline. Zara had tried to call—sent voice messages, texts, photos. No response. Sent Kofi's birth announcement four months ago: *"You have a nephew. His name is Kofi. Please respond."*

Nothing.

Now, holding Kofi after his feeding, Zara stared at her sister's contact information. Her finger hovered over the call button. What would she say? *I had another baby and you missed it*? *Your nephew exists and you don't care*? *We're dying and you won't even talk to me*?

She pressed call.

It rang once. Twice. Three times. Voicemail.

"Amara, it's Zara. Again. I don't know if you're getting these messages. I don't know if you care. But I'm your sister. Maya is three now. Kofi is four months. They're your family. I'm your family. We have fourteen years left. Please. Just respond. Just once. Let me know you're alive."

She ended the call. Sat holding Kofi in the silence of her apartment. Kwame at work. Maya at daycare. Just her and her son and the absence of her sister.

The next day, she tried again. And the next. Each time: voicemail. Each time: the same message, variations on the theme of *please respond*.

Week two: she sent photos. Kofi's first smile. Maya holding her brother. The four of them in Wei's garden.

Week three: she sent a video. "Hi, Amara. This is Maya. I'm three. This is my brother Kofi. He's a baby. Mama says you're our aunt. Do you want to visit? We live in Lagos District. You can come anytime. Okay, bye!"

Nothing. Complete silence. Her sister had chosen isolation over family. Had chosen data over connection. Had chosen numbness over feeling.

Zara stopped trying after that. Not from anger. From acceptance. This was Amara's choice, just as having Kofi was Zara's choice. Everyone coped differently. Everyone found their own way to survive the countdown.

Amara survived through isolation. Zara survived through defiance. Neither was wrong. Neither was right. Just: different responses to the same impossible situation.

But it hurt. Even understanding it, even accepting it, it hurt. Her sister was alive and present and choosing absence. That loss was its own kind of grief.

"She might come around," Kwame said gently that evening. "When she's ready. When she can."

"Or she won't," Zara said. "And we'll die having never reconciled. That happens too."

"Does it matter? At the end?"

Zara thought about it. Did it matter? Would she regret the estrangement in her final moments? Would Amara?

"Yes," she said finally. "It matters. Not because it changes anything. Because it's real. The absence is real. The loss is real. Brief doesn't make it less meaningful. Terminal doesn't make it less painful."

Kwame held her while she cried—not dramatic sobs, just quiet tears for a relationship that had ended before death ended it. For a sister who was alive but gone. For nieces and nephew who would never know their aunt.

Kofi slept through it, innocent of family drama and complicated grief. Maya climbed into Zara's lap, offering comfort with her small body. "Don't be sad, Mama."

"Sometimes sad is okay," Zara said, holding her daughter. "Sometimes you need to feel it."

"Professor Wei says that too." Maya's wisdom at three years old. "She says feelings come and go. Like flowers."

"Professor Wei is very wise."

"Are you going to be happy again?"

"Yes, baby. I'm going to be happy again."

And she was. The grief for her sister settled into background ache, present but not overwhelming. Life continued. Kofi grew—five months, six months, tracking faces and reaching for objects and beginning to laugh. Maya started pre-school, learning and growing and becoming more herself every day. Kwame maintained his steady presence, working and parenting and loving them all.

The garden visits continued. Wei's teaching continued. The defiant choice to live fully continued.

Year Two, Month Nine. Evening. The four of them in their living room—Kwame cooking dinner, Maya playing with blocks, Kofi on a blanket doing tummy time. Ordinary domestic scene. Beautiful domestic scene. Temporary domestic scene.

Zara watched her family and felt the fierce love that had driven her choice. This mattered. These people mattered. This time mattered.

Brief didn't mean meaningless. Wei taught her that. Impermanence didn't negate value. The garden taught her that. Love despite ending was still love. Her children taught her that.

Thirteen years until Kofi died. Thirteen until Maya died. Thirteen until everyone died.

But right now: Kofi lifting his head, proud of his strength. Maya building a tower, proud of her skill. Kwame humming while he cooked, content in his work. Family alive and together and here.

The messages from strangers had stopped—either they'd given up or Zara's blocks were effective. The judgment persisted somewhere, she knew, but it didn't reach her anymore. She'd made her peace with her choice. Doubt would return—probably often—but peace would too.

This was her practice: choosing life. Choosing presence. Choosing love despite certain ending. Not because it was right or wrong, wise or foolish, brave or selfish. Because it was hers. Her children. Her choice. Her thirteen years with Kofi. Her thirteen years with Maya.

That had to be enough.

And watching Maya show Kofi her block tower, watching her son's face light up with interest, watching her husband smile at both of them—Zara thought: maybe it is. Maybe this is enough. Maybe this is everything.

Brief. Precious. Doomed. Beautiful.

Life continuing because what else would it do?

That was the answer. That was the defiance. That was the practice.

Life continued. Love continued. Presence continued.

Until it didn't.

But that was later. Distant. Unknowable.

Now: dinner cooking. Children playing. Family together.

Now: garden tomorrow. Teaching continuing. Flowers blooming.

Now: enough.

Chapter 12: Departure

Kenji Torres | Year 1, Month 6 | Antarctic Megacity

The apartment was already mostly empty.

Kenji stood in the center of his research housing unit—the place he'd lived for six years, through his PhD work, through the detection, through the year of spiraling—and realized he'd accumulated almost nothing worth keeping. A few clothes. Some books he'd already donated. The terminal that held his unfinished dissertation, now wiped clean.

Everything else was borrowed, institutional, or meaningless.

He'd started packing three days ago. Finished in two hours.

The emptiness felt appropriate. You couldn't carry much when you were going everywhere and nowhere. When the destination was "away" and the purpose was "find something, anything, that makes sense."

His reflection in the dark window looked like a stranger. Thinner than a year ago—the substances and skipped meals had taken their toll. Hollow around the eyes. Twenty-five years old but looking older, worn. The bright PhD candidate who'd had his future mapped was gone. This person in the window was someone else. Someone lost. Someone leaving.

Behind him, the apartment door opened. His mother's keycode—she was one of three people who had access. The others were building security and the emergency medical team. Nobody had needed the medical override yet, though there'd been close calls during the worst months.

"Mijo," Elena said softly.

Kenji turned. His mother looked exhausted—eighteen months of governing the apocalypse etched into every line of her face. She'd aged a decade in the year and a half since detection. Still showed up every morning. Still held briefings. Still maintained order for a population that had shrunk from four billion to just under three billion and falling.

"Mom."

"I brought tea." She held up a thermos. "And those honey cakes you used to like. I don't know if you still..." She trailed off, uncertain.

"I do. Thank you." He took the thermos, gestured to the floor since he'd already packed his chairs. They sat against the wall like they were teenagers sneaking into an empty apartment, not a mayor and her son in his own place.

Elena poured tea into the thermos cap, handed it to him. They sat in silence for a moment. Through the window, the Antarctic sprawl stretched endlessly—lights and structures and three billion people trying to live normally in abnormal times.

"You don't have to go," Elena said finally. Not pleading. Just: stating fact.

"I know."

"You could stay. Help me govern. Or not govern—just be here. Be home."

"I can't." Kenji sipped the tea. Still too hot. "Antarctica feels like... like we're all sitting in a waiting room. Just sitting. Waiting for the appointment we can't cancel."

"That's what everywhere is now."

"Maybe. But here it's worse. Everyone knows what I did—who I am. The asteroid guy. The deflection expert who couldn't deflect anything." He laughed

bitterly. "I can't walk through the transit system without seeing it in people's faces. *There's the one who almost had the answer. Almost.*"

"No one thinks that."

"Everyone thinks that. I think that." He set down the tea. "The dissertation was supposed to save people, Mom. Four years of research on how to deflect asteroids. How to protect Earth. I was going to be important. Useful. I was going to matter."

"You do matter."

"Not the way I meant to. Not in any way that helps." He gestured at the empty apartment. "So I can't stay here. Can't keep drowning in what I'm not. Maybe somewhere else... maybe I can figure out how to be something different. How to live fifteen years when fifteen years is all there is."

Elena was quiet. When she spoke, her voice was thick. "I'm going to miss you terribly."

"I know. I'm sorry."

"Don't be sorry for living your life. Even if—especially if—you only have thirteen and a half years left." She wiped her eyes quickly, professional mask slipping back. "Where will you go first?"

"Tokyo. There's a group there. Philosophical seekers—people trying to answer the same questions. How to live the end. How to make meaning without future. Buddhist, Stoic, Existentialist, everything mixed together." He'd found them online three months ago, spent hours reading their discussions. They seemed as lost as he was, but at least they were lost together. "After that... I don't know. Mumbai maybe. Lagos. Wherever seems right."

"Running toward or running from?"

"Yes." He smiled slightly. "Both. Either. Does it matter?"

"It might. Running from something never works. You take yourself with you. But running toward..." She considered. "That might be different. That might be seeking."

"What's the difference?"

"Intent. Purpose. One is avoidance. The other is search." Elena pulled out a small package, handed it to him. "I wrote you something. Letters. One for each month. Don't read them all at once—pace yourself. Just... when you're feeling lost, read one. Think of it as me being there with you."

Kenji held the package carefully. Thirteen letters from his mother. One for each month he'd be gone—if he came back at all. "Thank you."

"And this." She pulled out a credit chip. "Unlimited access to my personal account. I know you don't need it—you have your own funding. But take it

anyway. So you never have to worry about resources. So you can go anywhere, do anything, come home anytime."

"Mom—"

"Please. Let me do this one thing." Her voice cracked. "Let me know my son can eat and sleep and travel safely. That's all I'm asking."

He took the chip. "Okay."

"When are you leaving?"

"Tomorrow morning. Six AM transport to Tokyo."

Elena nodded. Quiet for a long moment. Then: "I need to tell you something. About the election."

Kenji had almost forgotten. His mother's first term ended in three months. Election scheduled for Year 2, Month 9. People assumed she'd step down or elections would be canceled. She'd insisted on democratic process: "If we abandon democracy, we abandon everything."

"Marcus Rivera is running against me," Elena said. "Do you know him?"

"Infrastructure specialist. Thirty-two. Competent." Kenji had met him once at a government function. Sharp, earnest, younger than most senior staff.

"He's good. His platform is basically: stop pretending, accept reality, make people comfortable, let them leave. End symbolic governance." She smiled sadly. "He's not wrong. Governance is mostly symbolic now. I hold briefings for five people. Sign authorizations no one enforces. Maintain order that barely matters."

"Then why keep doing it?"

"Because someone should show up. Someone should say: we tried, we cared, we didn't abandon each other at the end." Elena met his eyes. "That's what I'm running on. Witness. Presence. Dignity. Not survival—I can't offer that. Just: someone showing up until the end."

"Will you win?"

"I don't know. Maybe. Rivera's younger, pragmatic, fresh. I'm exhausted and offering nothing concrete. But the people who stay—who don't leave Antarctica—maybe they want someone who shows up. Maybe that matters to them." She paused. "I need you to know: I might lose. And if I do, that's fine. That's democracy. But if I win... I'll be governing for another four years. Until Year 6. Then there's supposed to be another election."

"Will there be?"

"I don't know. Who'll bother running? Who'll bother voting when there's nine years left?" She shook her head. "But that's later. Right now: you should know I might lose. Your mother might not be mayor anymore."

"You'll always be mayor," Kenji said. "That's who you are. Election or no election."

"I'm also your mother. That's more important."

They sat together until the tea was gone and the honey cakes were eaten and the sky began its slow Antarctic dawn. Elena told him about the campaign—the debates, the questions, the core philosophical divide between her and Rivera. Both valid. Both honest. Different ways of facing the same ending.

Kenji told her about the seekers' community he'd be joining. The discussions they had online. The questions they wrestled with. No answers yet, but the questions felt important. *How do you live fifteen years? What matters when nothing lasts? Can there be meaning without permanence?*

"I wish I could answer those for you," Elena said.

"If you could, I wouldn't need to go."

"True."

When she left, Elena hugged him tightly. "Come home when you're ready. Or don't. Just stay alive. Please. That's all I ask."

"I'll try."

"Trying is enough."

After she was gone, Kenji sat alone in the empty apartment. His bags were packed. Transport booked. Thirteen months of funding secured. Letters from his mother in his pocket. Tomorrow he'd leave the only home he'd known since childhood.

He wasn't sure if he was brave or cowardly. Running toward seeking or running from failure. Maybe both. Maybe it didn't matter. The dissertation was deleted. The PhD was abandoned. The future he'd imagined was gone. This was something different. This was: find out how to live when there's no future to plan for.

He pulled out his personal screen, opened the seekers' forum one last time. Posted: *Arriving Tokyo tomorrow. Looking forward to meeting you all. Maybe together we can find what alone seems impossible.*

Responses came quickly. Welcome. See you soon. Bring questions—we have plenty. No answers yet, but we're working on it.

That felt right. No answers. Just work. Just seeking. Just people trying to figure out the same impossible thing together.

Kenji walked to the window. Looked out at Antarctica one last time. Three billion people down there. Including his mother, who'd govern them whether she won the election or not because that's what she did. Including Marcus, who'd

run against her honestly because he had different answers. Including everyone trying to live normally in the waiting room of extinction.

He couldn't stay. Couldn't be part of that waiting. Needed motion. Needed distance. Needed to find something he couldn't even name yet.

The apartment was empty. His life was packed. Tomorrow he'd leave.

Tonight he sat in the dark and felt: fear, hope, guilt, relief. All tangled together. All real. All part of the thirteen and a half years he had left.

Outside, the city lights flickered. Inside, Kenji sat in emptiness. Between them: the window. The boundary. The crossing he'd make at dawn.

The transport station was crowded despite the early hour. Hundreds of people departing Antarctica—some for good, some for visits, all for their own reasons. The city had been hemorrhaging population since detection. Four billion to three billion in eighteen months. Everyone going somewhere else. Anywhere else.

Kenji checked in at the Tokyo gate. The attendant barely looked at him—just scanned his documentation, assigned his pod, moved to the next person. Anonymous. Perfect.

He'd been recognized constantly in Antarctica. The mayor's son. The dissertation candidate who'd specialized in the exact thing that failed. The poster child for futile expertise. Here in the crowd, he was no one. Just another traveler. Another person leaving.

The departure hall had floor-to-ceiling windows overlooking the ice shelf. Kenji stood there while waiting for boarding, watching the Antarctic landscape stretch endlessly. He'd been born here. Grown up here. Spent twenty-five years on this continent without ever leaving. It was home.

Home that felt like a trap.

"First time off the ice?"

Kenji turned. A woman about his age, packing light like him. Dark skin, kind eyes, tired smile.

"That obvious?"

"You're staring at the ice like it's the last time you'll see it. Either first departure or final departure." She held out her hand. "Amira. Heading to Lagos."

"Kenji. Tokyo."

"Running from or running toward?"

He laughed. His mother had asked the same thing. "Why does everyone ask that?"

"Because everyone's doing one or the other. I'm running toward—my family's in Lagos. Want to spend the time left with them instead of in the megacity." She paused. "You?"

"Both. Either. Mostly... I need to not be here."

"That's honest." Amira looked out at the ice. "It's strange, isn't it? We spent a thousand years accepting we'd never leave Earth. Forever Earth. This is home. Then: asteroid. Suddenly home is temporary. Suddenly everywhere is temporary. Makes you wonder what home even means."

"Does it matter what it means if it ends anyway?"

"Maybe that's when it matters most." Amira shifted her bag. "My grandmother says: everything is home because nothing is home. Everywhere temporary, so everywhere equal. That's freedom, she says. Freedom to be anywhere in the time left."

"Wise grandmother."

"Hundred and eight years old. Lived through the climate shifts, the Antarctica migration, Forever Earth acceptance. Now: this. She's tired but still wise." Amira smiled. "She told me: go home to family. That's what matters. Not place. People."

The boarding announcement interrupted them. Tokyo gate on the left. Lagos gate on the right. They'd part here.

"Safe travels, Kenji running-from-and-toward."

"You too, Amira running-toward-family."

She laughed, headed to her gate. Kenji watched her go, then turned to his own. The Tokyo transport was sleek, automated, efficient. Pods for two hundred passengers. Half-full—most people weren't traveling to Tokyo, were traveling away from Antarctica to elsewhere.

Kenji found his pod, settled in. The space was small but comfortable. Window seat. He'd spend the next eight hours flying over the Pacific—the ocean he'd seen on maps but never in person. The world he'd studied but never experienced.

The transport lifted smoothly. Kenji watched through the window as Antarctica fell away. The megacity sprawling endlessly. The ice shelf extending beyond sight. The continent that had been his entire life shrinking to landscape, to concept, to memory.

He thought about his mother, probably in morning briefing right now. Five people around a table for fifty. Maintaining governance because someone should. Because witness mattered even when outcome didn't.

He thought about the dissertation. Four years of work. Two hundred seventy-three pages. Defense that would never happen. Dr. Torres who would never exist. All that future: gone.

He thought about the seekers waiting in Tokyo. People asking the same questions. How to live the end. How to make meaning. How to be present when presence was temporary.

No answers yet. Maybe no answers ever. But the questions felt important. Felt like purpose. Felt like something to move toward.

The transport climbed higher. The sky darkened to that perfect blue-black of high altitude. Kenji could see the curve of the Earth now—the planet that had trapped humanity for a thousand years. Forever Earth. The prison and paradise. Home that was temporary too.

In thirteen and a half years, it would all be gone. The ice. The city. His mother. The seekers. Everyone. Everything. Vaporized by physics and cosmic indifference.

But right now: sunrise over the Pacific. The ocean catching light. The world still here, still beautiful, still temporary.

Kenji pulled out his mother's first letter. The envelope said: *Month 1 - For when you arrive somewhere new.*

He opened it carefully.

Mijo,

You've arrived. Wherever you are, whatever you're seeking, you've taken the first step. That's brave. That's important. That's living instead of waiting.

I want to tell you I'm proud. Not because you're solving anything. Not because you're finding answers. Because you're trying. Because you refused to accept paralysis. Because you chose motion over stagnation.

That's what I'm doing here too. Governing not because it saves anyone. Because motion is practice. Seeking is practice. Showing up is practice. We're both practicing how to live fifteen years—me through governance, you through seeking. Different methods. Same question.

I don't know if I'll win the election. By the time you read this, I might know. Or might not—it's Month 9, might still be campaigning. But win or lose: I'll keep showing up. Because that's my practice. That's how I live the end.

Your practice is seeking. So seek. Ask questions. Meet people. Experience the world you studied but never saw. Find what you're looking for. Or don't find it. Or find something different. All of that is valid. All of that is practice.

I miss you already. But I'm glad you left. Glad you're trying. Glad you're alive and seeking and refusing to wait for death.

That's enough. You're enough. The seeking is enough.

Love, Mom

P.S. - Eat properly. Sleep regularly. Comm me when you can. Those are still valid requests even during the apocalypse.

Kenji read it twice. Folded it carefully. Put it in his journal where he'd keep all thirteen letters. Evidence that his mother was with him even when she wasn't. Evidence that practice mattered even without outcome.

The transport flew on. Below: Pacific Ocean, endless and indifferent. Ahead: Tokyo, first destination, first seeking. Beyond that: Mumbai, Lagos, Jerusalem, everywhere and nowhere.

Thirteen and a half years to seek. To find meaning or not find meaning. To practice living when living had an expiration date.

Kenji looked out at the curved horizon. The world was still here. Still beautiful. Still ending.

But not yet.

Not today.

Today: Tokyo. Today: seeking. Today: first step away from waiting toward something he couldn't name yet but needed to find.

The transport flew toward sunrise. Kenji flew with it. Leaving home. Seeking home. Understanding that maybe Amira's grandmother was right: everything is home because nothing is home.

In the meantime: questions. Motion. Practice.

That would have to be enough.

Chapter 13: Traces

Kenji Torres | Year 2, Month 11 | Tokyo

The zendo smelled of incense and cold.

Kenji sat in the third row, back straight, hands folded in cosmic mudra, breath counting itself. Seventeen months of this. Year 1, Month 6 to now—Year 2, Month 11. His body knew zazen perfectly. Knees down, spine aligned, chin tucked, shoulders relaxed. Every detail precise.

His mind? His mind was analyzing his posture. Evaluating his breath. Thinking about the technique of not-thinking. Meta-awareness preventing actual awareness. The gap between form and essence that seventeen months hadn't closed.

The temperature was below freezing outside, barely warmer inside the unheated hall. His breath visible in the pre-dawn darkness. Forty monks in rows, all

sitting in perfect stillness. Sound: nothing but the wind against wooden walls. Then the han struck—three beats of the wooden board signaling meditation's end.

Bodies rose in unison. Kenji unfolded his legs. Numb again. Poor circulation from sitting incorrectly despite correct form. Everything in his practice was like this: technically perfect, essentially missing.

The monks formed a line for kinhin—walking meditation between sitting periods. Kenji joined the circuit around the zendo. Left foot, right foot, synchronized breathing. Ten steps per exhale. The walking should anchor awareness in the body, pull consciousness out of the head and into feet meeting floor, weight shifting, breath moving.

Instead: Kenji analyzed the walking. *Am I walking too fast? Too slow? Is my posture correct? That monk's form is better. I should adjust my pace. No, wait—thinking about adjusting is the problem. Just walk. But how do I just walk without thinking about walking? The instruction is to feel feet on floor. I'm feeling them now. Or am I thinking about feeling them? Is there a difference?*

The circuit continued. The monks walked in perfect silence. Kenji walked in perfect noise—mental chatter disguised as practice. His body moved correctly. His mind was elsewhere. Gap between physical form and embodied presence. Seventeen months of this gap.

Kinhin ended. They returned to cushions for another sitting period. Kenji's legs were less numb from the walking, but his mind was just as scattered. Maybe more scattered—now he was thinking about how walking meditation should have helped but didn't.

He bowed to his cushion and filed out with the others into the grey morning.

After breakfast—rice porridge and pickled vegetables eaten in silence—Roshi announced a special teaching. The senior monks rolled out an ancient scroll, handling it with careful reverence. Ink on silk, colors faded but still visible. Ten images arranged vertically.

"The Ten Ox-Herding Pictures," Roshi said. His voice was quiet, precise. Seventy years old, forty years teaching. "Painted by Kakuan in the twelfth century. Ten stages of the journey from ignorance to enlightenment. From lost to found. From seeking to home."

Kenji leaned forward. This was what he'd come for—a map. A framework. A way to understand the journey he was failing to make.

Roshi began with the first image.

Picture One: Seeking the Ox

A boy in wilderness, arms spread wide, looking everywhere. Trees and mountains surround him. The ox—representing true nature, Buddha-nature, understanding—is nowhere visible. The boy is completely lost.

"This is beginning," Roshi said. "Not knowing what you seek. Not knowing where to look. Not knowing you're already what you're seeking. Just: desperate searching. Confusion. Suffering born from separation that doesn't actually exist but feels completely real."

Kenji recognized himself immediately. Year 1, Month 6—leaving Antarctica because everything felt wrong. Seeking answers about how to live with extinction. Running toward wisdom traditions, running from purposelessness. That was Picture One. Seeking desperately.

Picture Two: Finding the Traces

Same boy, but now he's crouching, studying the ground. Footprints visible. Ox tracks in the dirt. The teaching has left traces—hints, signs, evidence of the way. The boy has intellectual understanding now. He's read the sutras, learned the practices, knows the path exists.

"This is intellectual grasp," Roshi explained. "Reading about enlightenment. Understanding the philosophy. Knowing the techniques. The ox left footprints. You can see them clearly. But seeing tracks isn't the same as finding the ox. Understanding isn't realization."

Kenji nodded. That's exactly where he was. Seventeen months of study. He understood impermanence, no-self, the Four Noble Truths, the Eightfold Path. He could explain them. Could analyze them. Could write essays about them. Traces found.

Picture Three: Glimpsing the Ox

The boy sees the ox's hindquarters disappearing into brush. Brief sighting. The teaching glimpsed but not grasped. Moments of clarity that vanish immediately. Intellectual understanding touching something deeper but unable to stay there.

"You see it briefly during meditation," Roshi said. "Flash of genuine presence. Moment of actual understanding beyond concepts. Then: gone. Back to thinking about the experience instead of having the experience. This is frustrating stage. You know something real exists because you've touched it. But you can't hold it."

Several monks nodded. They'd reached Picture Three. Kenji felt envy—he hadn't even glimpsed the ox yet. Just seen its footprints. Still on Picture Two.

Picture Four: Catching the Ox

Boy grabs the ox. Rope around its neck. But the ox fights violently. Bucking, resisting, trying to escape. This is the hardest stage. Understanding wants to flee back into ignorance. The ox of true nature resists domestication.

"This is where practice becomes work," Roshi said. "Not gentle sitting anymore. Real effort. The ox struggles and you must hold the rope. Cannot let go. Must practice even when practice feels impossible. Must sit even when sitting feels futile. Must maintain presence even when mind screams to return to distraction. Very difficult. Many people quit here."

Kenji couldn't imagine reaching Picture Four. The ox wasn't even visible to him yet. How could he catch what he couldn't see?

Picture Five: Taming the Ox

Boy leads ox with rope. Still effort required, but cooperation emerging. Ox follows now. Resistance decreasing. Practice is working. Integration beginning. The teaching embodying itself slowly.

"This is where transformation happens," Roshi said. "Still conscious practice—you're aware of maintaining presence, aware of working with mind, aware of technique. But technique starting to work. Presence coming more easily. Integration of understanding into daily life. Not enlightened yet, but: progress. Real progress."

Picture Six: Riding the Ox Home

Boy sits on ox, playing flute. No rope needed. No struggle. Effortless practice. Joyful return home. The teaching rides itself now. Presence natural. Understanding embodied.

"This is where teaching can begin," Roshi said. "Cannot teach from Picture One through Four—still learning. Picture Five, maybe teach beginners. But Picture Six: ready to guide others. Practice natural enough that you can help others practice. The journey homeward clear."

Kenji stared at the image. Boy riding peacefully, playing music. Seemed mythical. Impossible. Fantasy.

Picture Seven: Ox Forgotten, Self Alone

The ox disappears from the picture. Only the boy remains, sitting peacefully. The teaching is so internalized it becomes invisible. No longer need the framework. Just: being. Natural presence without technique.

"The ox was training tool," Roshi explained. "Once fully internalized, ox vanishes. You don't practice Buddhism anymore—you ARE Buddhist practice. Not following teaching—you ARE teaching. The separation between practitioner and practice dissolves."

One of the senior monks bowed slightly. Kenji wondered if he'd reached Picture Seven. What would that feel like? To be so integrated that the techniques disappeared?

Picture Eight: Both Ox and Self Forgotten

Empty circle. Nothing. No boy, no ox, no landscape. Pure emptiness. Complete presence without subject or object. The ultimate goal that can't be sought—because seeking itself is obstacle.

The monks were completely silent, staring at the empty circle.

"Cannot explain this," Roshi said simply. "Words fail. Concepts fail. Just: complete presence. If you reach this, you'll know. Until then: practice."

Picture Nine: Returning to the Source

Nature scene—cherry blossoms, stream flowing, tree branches. No boy, no ox. Just: natural world being itself. The teaching reveals that source was always here. Never left. The journey was discovering you never went anywhere. Home was always home.

"This is realization," Roshi said softly. "Not achieving enlightenment—discovering you were always enlightened. Buddha-nature was never lost. You just couldn't see it while seeking. Picture Nine is understanding: the ox was always you. The journey was returning to where you never left. Home was always here."

Kenji felt something crack in his chest. Home. The word resonated strangely. Antarctica—home he'd fled. Seeking home somewhere else. What if home was something different? Not place but presence? Not destination but being fully here?

Picture Ten: Entering the Marketplace with Gift-Bestowing Hands

Laughing Buddha figure enters a marketplace. Big belly, huge smile, carrying a bag of gifts. The enlightened person returns to ordinary world. Not staying in mountain monastery. Coming down to help others. Teaching naturally. Giving gifts of wisdom, compassion, presence. The journey completes by returning to beginning—but transformed.

"This is final stage," Roshi said. "Not solitary enlightenment. Compassionate action. Teaching others. Helping others wake up. Entering marketplace means: return to normal life but with gift of presence. Share what you learned. Help others journey from Picture One to Picture Ten. The cycle continues."

The scroll was rolled up carefully. The teaching complete. Ten pictures. One journey. Seeking to gifting. Lost to home.

Roshi looked at the assembled students. "Questions?"

Kenji raised his hand. His heart was pounding.

"Roshi, I've been practicing seventeen months. Studying Buddhism, sitting zazen, reading sutras. I understand the teachings intellectually—impermanence, no-self, suffering. But I can't *feel* it. Can't embody it." He gestured at the scroll. "Like these pictures: I understand all ten stages perfectly. I can see the

progression clearly. But I'm stuck in Picture Two, maybe glimpsing Picture Three occasionally. How do I cross from understanding to actual realization?"

Several monks nodded—they had the same question.

Roshi looked at Kenji for a long moment. Then: "What picture do you think you're on?"

"Picture Two. I've found the traces. I understand intellectually. Maybe glimpsing Picture Three sometimes—moments where I almost get it. But I can't stay there."

"Wrong."

Kenji blinked. "I'm sorry?"

"You're not on Picture Two." Roshi's voice was gentle but firm. "You're still on Picture One."

The words landed like a blow. Kenji felt his face flush. "But I've been practicing seventeen months. I understand the teachings. I've read—"

"Picture One is seeking the ox," Roshi interrupted quietly. "You're still seeking. What you think are traces—intellectual understanding, sutra knowledge, meditation technique—these aren't traces. These are thoughts *about* traces. You're analyzing footprints instead of following them. You're studying maps instead of walking."

Kenji sat back, stunned. Still Picture One? After seventeen months?

"Then how do I move from Picture One to Picture Two?" His voice came out frustrated. "What am I doing wrong?"

"That question IS Picture One." Roshi smiled slightly. "Seeking the method of seeking. Wanting technique to stop seeking. You're trapped in recursive loop: seeking how to stop seeking how to stop seeking."

"So what do I do?"

"Stop asking what to do." Roshi paused. "Picture Two happens when you stop trying to find it. When practice becomes just practice, not practice-to-get-somewhere. When zazen is just sitting, not sitting-to-achieve-enlightenment. When you water the garden to water the garden, not to become enlightened gardener. Then: traces appear naturally. Not before."

Kenji heard this. Understood it intellectually. Immediately thought: *So I need to stop trying. I need to practice without goal. I need to—*

Then he caught himself. *I'm doing it again. Meta-cognition as obstacle. Analyzing the solution becomes the problem.*

The frustration was overwhelming. He could *see* the trap. Could articulate it perfectly. But seeing the trap didn't free him from it. Understanding the problem wasn't solving the problem.

Roshi was watching him. "You see your own mind now. Good. That's honest. Picture One is being honestly lost. Better than pretending you're further along."

"How long will I be on Picture One?"

"Different for everyone. Maybe six more months. Maybe six more years. Maybe until death. Regardless of asteroid." Roshi's voice was matter-of-fact. "But Picture One honestly practiced is valid practice. Being present to being lost is also presence. Don't skip ahead in your mind. Be where you are."

The teaching ended. Monks dispersed to morning work assignments. Kenji sat on his cushion, staring at the space where the scroll had been.

Still Picture One. After seventeen months. Still just seeking. Still lost.

That afternoon, Kenji walked with Yumi—fellow student, twenty-eight years old, been at the monastery four years. They followed the path through the forest outside the monastery grounds. Frost crunched underfoot. Winter bare branches against grey sky.

"Roshi told me I'm still on Picture One," Kenji said.

"That's honest of him." Yumi's breath was visible in the cold.

"You've been here four years. What picture are you on?"

"Some days, Picture Two. Some days, Picture One. Some days I don't know." She paused by a frozen stream. "The pictures aren't linear like we think. You don't climb them like stairs—one, two, three, four. You spiral through them. Touch Picture Three, fall back to Picture One, glimpse Picture Five, crash to Picture Two. That's practice."

"When does it stop being chaos?"

"Maybe Picture Six. Or maybe never. I don't know—I haven't reached Picture Six yet." Yumi smiled. "But here's what I learned: the pictures aren't destinations. They're descriptions. They don't tell you what to achieve. They show you where you are. That's enough."

"Is it?" Kenji stopped walking. "I came to Japan to learn how to face mortality. How to live knowing everyone dies in thirteen years. Seventeen months here and I'm no closer to that understanding."

"Maybe you're asking the wrong question." Yumi turned to face him. "Not 'how to face mortality' but 'how to be present with mortality.' Different question. Different practice."

"What's the difference?"

"Facing implies confrontation. Opposition. Mortality as enemy to defeat or overcome. Being present with mortality means: accepting it's here. Being with

it. Not fighting. Not achieving victory over it. Just: living fully in the time that exists."

Kenji considered this. The ox-herding pictures described a journey from seeking to presence. From lost to home. But home wasn't a destination reached through effort—it was source returned to. Always already here. Just: obscured by seeking.

He understood this intellectually.

It didn't help.

"I think I need to leave Tokyo," he said. "Try a different approach. Maybe Western philosophy—Stoicism instead of Buddhism. Or just accept I'm not capable of this transformation."

"Or stay on Picture One and practice Picture One." Yumi started walking again. "You think Picture One is failure. It's not. It's the beginning. Everyone starts there. Most people never leave. Being honestly on Picture One is advanced practice compared to pretending you're somewhere else."

They walked in silence. The forest held its winter stillness. Kenji's mind spun through the pictures—One through Ten, the complete journey, perfectly mapped. And he was on Picture One. Still seeking. Still lost. Still analyzing instead of being.

Maybe that was okay. Maybe being present to Picture One was the actual practice. Not achieving Picture Two but being fully present to being lost.

That felt like defeat.

But also—strangely—like acceptance.

That night, Kenji wrote to his mother:

Mom,

Year 2, Month 11 from Tokyo. Seventeen months at this monastery. I learned something today called the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures. Ancient Zen teaching—ten stages from lost to enlightened. I'm going to explain them because they're beautiful and because writing to you helps me process.

Picture One: Seeking the Ox. Boy completely lost, searching desperately. The ox—representing enlightenment, understanding, true nature—is nowhere. This was me Year 1, Month 6. This is still me now.

Picture Two: Finding the Traces. Boy sees footprints. Intellectual understanding. Reading sutras, learning techniques, knowing the path exists. I thought I was here. Roshi says no—still just seeking.

Picture Three: Glimpsing the Ox. Seeing it briefly but can't hold onto it. Moments of clarity that vanish. Haven't reached this yet.

Picture Four: Catching the Ox. The ox fights. Struggle to hold onto understanding. Hardest stage. Practice becomes real work. Can't imagine reaching this.

Picture Five: Taming the Ox. Still effort but cooperation emerging. Practice working. Integration beginning.

Picture Six: Riding the Ox Home. Effortless practice. The boy plays flute while riding. Ready to teach others. Joyful.

Picture Seven: Ox Forgotten, Self Alone. Teaching so internalized it becomes invisible. Natural presence without technique.

Picture Eight: Both Ox and Self Forgotten. Empty circle. Pure presence. Cannot be described.

Picture Nine: Returning to the Source. Understanding home was always here. Never left. The journey was discovering you never went anywhere. (This one is you, Mom. You've been home this whole time. Showing up every day. Living Picture Nine without knowing it.)

Picture Ten: Entering the Marketplace with Gift-Bestowing Hands. Teaching others. Compassion. Helping people. Returning to ordinary world with gifts of wisdom.

The teaching is perfect. Maps exactly the journey I'm trying to make—from seeking answers about mortality to being present with mortality. But here's the problem: Roshi says I'm still on Picture One. All my understanding is just thoughts about understanding, not actual understanding.

It's like this: Imagine you wanted to learn swimming. You could read books about swimming, study stroke mechanics, watch videos, understand hydrodynamics perfectly. But until you get in the water, you can't swim. I'm reading books about swimming. Analyzing stroke technique. Taking notes on buoyancy. Roshi is saying: just get in the water. But I don't know how to stop studying and start doing.

The hardest part? I understand the meta-problem. I see that seeing the problem is part of the problem. But seeing that doesn't fix it. It just adds another layer of understanding-without-being.

Maybe I need to leave Tokyo. Try a different approach. Cairo has Stoic philosophy communities—Western thinking instead of Eastern practice. Or Mumbai has meditation centers with different techniques. I don't know. Seventeen months here felt like progress. Today I learned it was mostly just elaborate seeking.

How are you? How's the campaign? Year 2 election is Month 9—you'll know results by the time you get this letter. Did you win? Part of me wants to come home. Support you. Be family instead of seeker. But I can't. Not yet. Haven't found what I'm seeking. Or learned how to stop seeking. Whichever comes first.

Love you. Miss you. Thank you for the funding and for reading these rambling letters. I read your letters when everything feels impossible. Which is often.

Your seeking son,
Kenji

He sealed the letter and left it for the morning mail transport.

Before sleep, Kenji returned to the teaching hall. The scroll was stored now, but he could picture it clearly. He sat on a cushion in the empty hall, lamplight flickering, and mentally walked through the images.

Picture One: Boy lost, arms wide, searching everywhere. That was him. Year 1 to now. Still seeking. Still lost. Still not even finding traces yet.

Picture Two: Boy studying ground, seeing footprints. Kenji thought intellectual understanding was traces. But Roshi said no—understanding *about* the path wasn't the same as being on the path. What were real traces then? He didn't know.

Picture Three: Glimpsing the ox. Moments of actual presence. He'd had maybe seventeen of them in seventeen months. Seventeen breaths where he wasn't thinking about breathing, just breathing. Seventeen moments of actual sitting instead of sitting-about-sitting. Was that Picture Three? Or still Picture One? He didn't know.

Pictures Four and Five: The struggle. Catching and taming. The long middle where practice was hard but progress happened. Kenji couldn't imagine reaching this. The ox wasn't even visible yet. How could he catch what he couldn't see?

Pictures Six and Seven: Riding home, ox forgotten. These seemed mythical. Impossible. Like stories from different species. Humans couldn't reach this. Could they?

Picture Eight: The empty circle. No boy, no ox, nothing. Complete presence without subject or object. Kenji stared at where the scroll had been, imagining the brushstroke circle. What did it feel like to be that empty? That complete? That present? He had no reference point. No experience even touching it.

Picture Nine: Returning to the source. Cherry blossoms and stream. The teaching said: this was always here. You never left home. Just couldn't see it while seeking.

Home.

That word again. What was home? Antarctica—the place he'd fled? Or something else? Something about presence itself being home? Being fully where you are, that's home?

His mother was home. She'd never left. Showed up every day to bear witness. That was Picture Nine—understanding you're already where you need to be.

Elena Torres had never studied these pictures but she was living them. Advanced practice disguised as simple persistence.

Picture Ten: The marketplace. Laughing Buddha with bag of gifts. Enlightened teacher returning to help others. Teaching naturally. Compassionate action. The journey completing by returning to beginning—but transformed.

Would Kenji ever reach Picture Ten? Would seventeen more months, or the full thirteen years until extinction, be enough? Or would he die on Picture One, still seeking, still lost, still analyzing the footprints he couldn't even properly see?

The lamp flickered. Outside, wind moved through winter trees.

Kenji sat in the empty hall and felt: frustration, despair, small hope, exhaustion, determination, failure, acceptance. All tangled together. All real. All part of Picture One.

Being present to being lost. That was practice too. Roshi said so. Being honestly on Picture One was valid. Better than pretending to be on Picture Three.

Okay. He was on Picture One. Seventeen months and still just seeking. That was where he actually was. Could he accept that? Be present to that? Stop trying to force himself forward and just: be here, lost, seeking, struggling?

For about seventeen breaths, he was simply present to Picture One. Not trying to move forward. Not analyzing. Just: being lost honestly.

Then his mind returned: *Was that it? Was that Picture Two? Did traces just appear?*

And the moment was gone. Back to seeking. Back to Picture One.

But: seventeen breaths. That was something. Seventeen breaths of presence that hadn't existed before. In seventeen months, seventeen breaths of actual practice. Terrible ratio. But also: seventeen breaths more than nothing.

Maybe that was the traces Roshi meant. Not permanent understanding. Just: moments. Brief glimpses. Seventeen breaths at a time. The ox glimpsed for seventeen breaths then lost again. That's Picture Three maybe. Or Picture One-and-a-half. Somewhere between pure seeking and actually finding traces.

Seventeen breaths. Seventeen months. Thirteen years left until extinction. All temporary. All complete in its own way. All of it: opportunity to practice presence to whichever picture he was actually on.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe that was the real teaching. Every picture is complete in itself. Picture One isn't failure—it's where he actually is. And being present to Picture One IS practice. Even if he never reaches Picture Two.

Even if he dies on Picture One—still seeking, still lost—if he's honestly present to that seeking, that's valid practice. That counts. That matters.

The teaching wasn't about achieving Picture Ten. The teaching was about being present to whichever picture you're actually on. Being there completely. Honestly. Without pretense.

Kenji stood slowly. His legs were stiff from sitting on cold floor. He bowed to the empty space where the scroll had been.

Picture One continuing. Seeking continuing. Seventeen more months maybe. Or thirteen more years. Being lost continuing. But: present to the lostness. Honest about the seeking. Practicing Picture One fully instead of pretending to be on Picture Two.

That would have to be enough. For tonight. For tomorrow. For however long Picture One lasted.

He walked back to his room through the cold monastery corridors. Winter settling deeper. His seventeenth month ending. His seeking continuing.

But something had shifted. Infinitesimally small. Not enlightenment. Not breakthrough. Not even progress really. Just: acceptance of where he actually was. Slight decrease in suffering from fighting reality. Slight increase in presence to what is rather than what should be.

That was something. That was practice. That was Picture One honestly lived.

Tomorrow: more zazen. More study. More maintenance work in the garden. More seeking. More Picture One. But present to it. Accepting it. Being there fully.

The ox was still lost. The boy was still searching. The journey had barely begun.

But the journey was also already complete. Picture One fully lived was also Picture Ten. Beginning and end the same. Home never lost. Just: couldn't see it yet.

Seventeen breaths at a time. That's all anyone got. That would have to be enough.

It was enough.

For tonight.

For now.

Chapter 14: Election

Elena Torres | Year 2 | Antarctic Megacity

The campaign posters looked absurd.

Elena stood in the transit hub, staring at her own face on the wall—official campaign photo, professional smile, the slogan Marcus had written: **"Presence Until the End."** Next to it: Marcus Rivera's poster. Younger face, earnest eyes, his slogan: **"Truth Without Theater."**

Democracy in the apocalypse. Two candidates. One position. Thirteen years left.

The absurdity of it all made her want to laugh or cry. She wasn't sure which.

"Mayor Torres?" A voice beside her. Young woman, maybe twenty-five, holding a tablet. "Can I ask about your platform?"

"Of course."

"Why should we vote for you? What can you actually do?"

The question everyone asked. The question Elena asked herself every morning.

"I can show up," she said. "I can maintain order. I can bear witness. I can document. I can say: we mattered, we tried, we faced the end together with dignity. That's all I'm offering."

"But Mayor Rivera says that's just theater. That we should accept reality and distribute resources fairly instead of pretending governance matters."

"He's not wrong," Elena admitted. "Governance is largely symbolic now. The question is: do symbols matter when nothing lasts?"

"Do they?"

"I think so. But you'll have to decide that for yourself." Elena smiled. "That's democracy."

The woman made notes, moved on to interview someone else. Elena watched her go, then turned back to the posters. Her face and Marcus's, side by side. Two philosophies. Two ways of facing the end.

Three months of this. Three months of debates, forums, questions, accusations. Three months of defending a position she barely believed in herself.

Why was she running again?

Year 2, Month 6 — Campaign Begins

The announcement had surprised everyone, including Elena.

Her first term ended Year 2, Month 9. Most people assumed she'd step down—spend her remaining years with family, with Kenji, with something personal rather than political. Or that elections would be suspended entirely. Emergency powers. Martial law. The usual authoritarian response to crisis.

Elena had refused both options.

"We're holding the election as scheduled," she'd announced at the morning briefing. Five people in attendance—the number had plateaued there. Marcus Reyes (her assistant), Chen (infrastructure coordinator), Kowalski, Dr. Ade. All of them staring at her like she'd lost her mind.

"Why?" Chen had asked. Sixty years old, infrastructure coordinator since Year -4. He'd watched his department shrink from eight hundred people to twelve. Watched systems he'd built for millennia fail in months. His question wasn't challenging—genuinely confused. "Power grid's at sixty-two percent. Water at sixty-nine. We're barely maintaining basics. Election takes resources. Staff. Energy. Why spend it on symbolism?"

"Because if we abandon democracy, we abandon everything that made us worth saving in the first place. Because governance without accountability is tyranny. Because someone needs to maintain the forms even if—especially if—the substance seems meaningless."

Chen's face had done something complicated. Not agreement exactly. More like: understanding he'd been wrong to ask. He'd nodded slowly. "Democracy as maintenance work. I get that. I don't like it. But I get it."

"But who'll run against you?" Kowalski had looked genuinely confused. Fifty-six years old, security chief, former military. Three decades of service. He'd buried fourteen officers this year—four suicides, six killed in riots, four from illness. His force was at twenty-three percent capacity. "Who'd want this job? Who'd want any of our jobs? We're governing collapse. Documenting disaster. Bearing witness to the end. I do it because someone has to. You do it because you're stubborn. But who else would volunteer?"

That question had been answered three weeks later when Marcus Rivera filed his candidacy.

Elena had known of him—infrastructure specialist, thirty-two years old, competent and respected. They'd worked together on several projects during her first term. Brilliant mind. Pragmatic approach. Good person.

Not the Marcus who was her assistant. Different Marcus. The confusion of names had been constant during the campaign—reporters mixing them up, voters confused, both Marcuses grimacing at the coincidence. Both Marcus. Both Marcus R in fact. Both the same age. It was like a cosmic joke.

Marcus Rivera's platform was simple: end the theater, accept reality, distribute resources fairly, let people leave, make them comfortable. Stop pretending governance mattered. Focus on practical care until the end.

Elena's platform—if it could be called that—was: maintain order, preserve dignity, bear witness, govern until the end. Keep showing up even when showing up seemed meaningless.

Two valid philosophies. Two honest responses to impossible circumstances.

The election mattered because democracy mattered. Or because maintaining the illusion mattered. Or because someone needed to decide between presence and pragmatism.

Elena wasn't sure anymore.

Year 2, Month 7 — First Debate

The forum was held in the old city council chamber—space for three thousand people. Elena had expected maybe a few hundred to attend. The chamber was at capacity. Another two thousand watching on screens outside.

People still cared. That surprised her.

Marcus Rivera stood at the other podium, looking nervous but determined. Thirty-two years old. She'd been thirty-two once—young mayor, first campaign, so certain she could fix things. Now sixty, fourth campaign, certain she could fix nothing.

The moderator was Dr. Sarah Kim, former journalist, now volunteer coordinator. She'd drawn up the rules: thirty minutes each, alternating responses, one minute rebuttals, closing statements.

Democracy in form if not in function.

"Mayor Torres," Kim began, "your first term has seen the population of Antarctica decline from four point two billion to two point four billion. Infrastructure failing. Crime rising. Suicide epidemic. Death rate six hundred percent above baseline. Why should voters give you another term?"

Elena had practiced this answer. Still felt unprepared.

"You're right. By every measure, my term has been catastrophic. Population loss. System failures. Deaths. All of it happened under my governance." She paused. "But I'm not running on success. I'm running on presence. On showing up. On maintaining dignity and order and democratic process even when—especially when—those things seem meaningless. I can't stop the exodus. Can't stop the deaths. Can't stop the asteroid. What I can do: bear witness. Document accurately. Maintain structure. Say: we existed, we mattered, we tried. That's what I'm offering. Four more years of showing up."

She met the moderator's eyes. "Year 0, we formalized the new calendar. Acknowledged that time itself had reset. Some called it symbolic theater—abandoning the old calendar when we should focus on practical needs. But someone had to say: this is Year 0. This is when our countdown began. This matters enough to document. That's governance. Maintaining order and meaning even when both seem futile."

"Mr. Rivera, your response?"

Marcus stepped forward. He'd dressed professionally—suit, serious expression. But his youth was obvious. Elena at thirty-two had looked young. Marcus at thirty-two looked like a child playing dress-up.

Then he spoke, and the illusion shattered.

"Mayor Torres is honest about what she offers: presence. Witness. Dignity. But I have to ask: what do those words mean? Three thousand people here tonight. Two point four billion across Antarctica. All of us dying in thirteen years. What does 'bearing witness' do for them? How does 'maintaining dignity' help someone who's lost their family, their purpose, their future?"

His voice was strong. Conviction clear. "My platform is different. I'm not offering symbols. I'm offering practical care. Fair resource distribution. Freedom to leave. Mental health support. Comfortable endings. Stop pretending governance matters. Focus on making the time left as bearable as possible. That's real help. Not theater."

The crowd murmured. Elena felt the words land. Effective argument. Honest argument. Possibly correct argument.

"Mayor Torres, one minute rebuttal."

Elena looked at the crowd. Three thousand faces. Two thousand more outside. Four billion total at detection—two point four now—all of them dying. All of them looking for answers she didn't have.

"Mr. Rivera is right that governance is largely symbolic now," she said carefully. "The question is: do symbols matter? I think they do. Especially now. When everything's falling apart, someone needs to maintain order. Someone needs to show up daily. Someone needs to say: this matters, you matter, we're doing this together with dignity. That's not theater—that's practice. Practice of democracy. Practice of community. Practice of caring even when caring can't change the outcome."

She met Marcus's eyes across the stage. "You're offering comfort. I respect that. But I'm offering something else: acknowledgment. Witness. The knowledge that someone saw us, someone recorded us, someone said: humanity faced the end with order and dignity and democratic process. That's worth doing. Even if—especially if—it doesn't change anything."

"Mr. Rivera, rebuttal?"

"That's beautiful philosophy, Mayor. But philosophy doesn't feed people. Doesn't house refugees. Doesn't prevent suicides. Doesn't make dying easier. I respect your principles. But I'm offering practical solutions. That's the choice: symbolic witness or actual care. I think voters want care."

The debate continued. Infrastructure questions. Security policy. Resource allocation. Healthcare. All the practical governance issues that felt simultaneously urgent and pointless.

Elena defended her record—what little defense was possible. Marcus attacked not her competence but her premise. The core question underneath everything: does governance matter if everyone dies?

Elena said yes. Marcus said no. Both were honest. Both made sense.

Year 2, Month 8 — Crisis

The call came at 3 AM. Elena had been awake—sleep was rare now. She answered immediately.

"Mayor, this is Commander Osei. We have situation at District 7 housing complex."

Elena's heart sank. District 7 was refugee housing—overcrowded, understaffed, struggling. "What kind of situation?"

"Riot. Started as protest about resource distribution. Escalated. Twelve dead so far. Security trying to contain but—"

"I'm coming." Elena was already dressing. "Don't use lethal force. Contain only. I'll be there in twenty minutes."

Marcus—her assistant Marcus, not her opponent—met her in the lobby. "I heard. I'm coming with you."

"You don't have to—"

"I'm coming."

District 7 was chaos. Fires burning. Crowds surging. Security forces in riot gear trying to push back without escalating. Elena arrived to shouting, smoke, rage.

She found Commander Osei. "Report."

"Started six hours ago. Protest about food distribution—some people getting less than allocation. Peaceful initially. Then someone threw something. Someone else responded. Spiral from there." Osei's voice caught. "Twelve confirmed dead. Thirty injured. And one—" He stopped. "One murder. Not riot death. Actual murder. Man beat another man to death with a piece of rebar. Over food containers. Security pulled him off the body. He was still holding it. Crying. Just—holding the dead man and crying."

Elena felt the words land. Murder. Not the abstract violence of riot statistics. A specific man. A specific death. A specific killer.

"The killer?"

"Detained. Identified as Daniel Okonkwo—refugee from flooded Jakarta, three children, unemployed for fourteen months. Victim is Raj Patel, thirty-one, also refugee. They knew each other. Both desperate. Both starving." Osei looked

sick. “Okonkwo keeps saying he didn’t mean to. Says he just—snapped. Patel had three containers. Okonkwo had none. Fight started. Then. . . ”

Elena understood. Desperation meeting desperation. Rage erupting from helplessness. A moment of violence ending in death. And then: the horror of what was done.

“Where is he now?”

“Holding cell. Confession recorded. Physical evidence clear. Open-shut case for prosecution.”

Open-shut. Elena filed this away. Someone would need to decide what justice meant when everyone died in thirteen years. Someone would need to determine if punishment mattered when permanence didn’t exist. Not now. But soon.

“What do they want?” Elena asked, nodding toward the crowd.

“Honestly? They want to not be dying in thirteen years. Failing that: fair food, better housing, someone to blame.” Osei looked exhausted. “We can’t give them any of that.”

Elena studied the crowd. Hundreds of people. Angry. Desperate. Doomed. All of them facing extinction. All of them looking for control over something, anything.

“Open the barricade,” she said.

“Mayor—”

“Open it. I’m going in.”

Marcus—assistant Marcus—grabbed her arm. “Elena, this is insane. They’re rioting. You’ll be killed.”

“Maybe. Or maybe they need to see someone who’ll show up. That’s my entire platform, isn’t it? Presence. Witness. Showing up even when it’s dangerous.”

“This is suicide.”

“This is governance.”

She walked through the barricade before anyone could stop her. Alone. Unarmed. Sixty years old. Mayor of a dying city. Walking into a riot.

The crowd saw her. Noise faltered. Someone shouted: “That’s Torres!”

Elena kept walking. Reached the center. Stood there. Waiting.

A woman stepped forward—young, maybe thirty, face twisted with rage and grief. “You! This is your fault! All of this!”

“Yes,” Elena said simply.

That stopped the woman. “What?”

"You're right. I'm mayor. This happened under my governance. The shortages. The deaths. The failures. All mine."

"Then fix it!"

"I can't." Elena met the woman's eyes. "I can't stop the asteroid. Can't bring back the dead. Can't give you futures. Can't make this fair or right or bearable. I'm powerless to fix any of it."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because I'm still mayor. Because showing up matters. Because someone needs to bear witness." Elena looked around at the crowd. "I see you. I see your anger. Your grief. Your fear. I see the unfairness. I can't fix it. But I see it. I'm documenting it. I'm saying: this mattered. You mattered. And I'm sorry. I'm so deeply sorry that this is what we're living through."

Silence. The woman was crying now. Others crying too. The rage hadn't disappeared—couldn't disappear—but something had shifted.

"What do we do?" someone asked.

"We continue," Elena said. "We live the thirteen years left as well as we can. We care for each other. We maintain dignity. We face the end together instead of alone. That's all we can do. But it's not nothing."

The riot didn't end cleanly. People didn't magically calm down. But the spike of violence passed. Security distributed emergency rations. Elena stayed for six hours—talking, listening, bearing witness.

Seventeen dead total. Forty-three injured. One murder. Resources redistributed more fairly. Temporary peace.

At hour five, Elena visited the holding cell.

Daniel Okonkwo sat on the bench, hands still bloodstained despite washing. Thirty-four years old. Thin—everyone was thin now. Three children waiting somewhere for a father who'd killed a man over food.

"Mr. Okonkwo," Elena said.

He looked up. Recognition and shame collided in his expression. "Mayor Torres. I—" His voice broke. "I killed him. Raj. He was my friend. We worked together before. I killed my friend."

"Tell me what happened."

"I don't know. I was so hungry. My children—they're eight, six, and four. They hadn't eaten in two days. Allocation center ran out before we got there. Happened three times this week. Then I saw Raj with three containers. *Three.* And I just—" He gestured helplessly. "I asked if he could spare one. Just one. He said no. Said his family needed them. Then I got angry. Then he got angry. Then I picked up the rebar and. . . "

Tears now. “I didn’t mean to kill him. I swear. I just wanted food. I just wanted my children to eat. And now Raj is dead and his children don’t have a father and my children—” He couldn’t finish.

Elena watched this man dissolve into grief. The statistics were real now. Murder rate up 500%. This is what that meant. Desperate people killing each other. Friends turning on friends. Humanity fracturing under the weight of extinction.

Marcus—assistant Marcus—stood in the corridor outside. He’d followed her despite the danger. When she emerged, his face was troubled.

“That man,” he said quietly. “Daniel. I heard the story. Three starving children. Desperate act. Immediate remorse.” He paused. “This is exactly the kind of case that needs mercy, not punishment.”

“He killed someone, Marcus.”

“Over food. During a distribution failure. Under conditions of extraordinary duress. If the allocation system had worked—if we’d governed better—Raj Patel would still be alive.” His voice was urgent but not accusatory. “Elena, we only have thirteen years. Imprisoning him for that entire time... what does that accomplish? His children lose their father. He dies in a cell. Justice becomes cruelty.”

Elena felt the weight of it. Marcus was right about the circumstances. The system had failed. The allocation center running out three times in one week was governance failure. Daniel’s crime was born from that failure, from desperation, from the unraveling of everything.

But Raj Patel was still dead. His family still destroyed. Justice still mattered. Even—especially—when time was short.

“What happens to me?” Daniel asked.

“Trial. Probably conviction. Probably prison.”

“For how long? We only have thirteen years.”

“Yes.”

“So I’ll die in prison. Away from my children. Never seeing them again. Because I killed my friend over food.” His laugh was broken. “Justice, I guess.”

Elena had no answer. Justice did require consequence. Even when—especially when—nothing lasted. But standing here, looking at this grieving killer, hearing Marcus’s plea for mercy, she felt the weight of what would come. Someone would need to sentence him. Someone would need to decide what punishment meant when everyone was already condemned.

Marcus—assistant Marcus—drove her home at dawn. “That was insane,” he said.

“I know.”

"It was also... I don't know. Important, maybe. You showed up. That mattered to them."

"Did it matter enough?"

"Does it have to be enough? Or just: something real?" He glanced at her. "Rivera's going to use this. The riot. The deaths. Evidence your governance is failing."

"He'd be right."

"But you'll keep running anyway."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Elena watched the dawn light over Antarctica. Two point four billion people. Thirteen years left. Everything falling apart. Her governance a desperate attempt to maintain order in chaos.

"Because someone has to show up," she said. "Even when showing up accomplishes nothing. Even when it's dangerous. Even when it's futile. Someone has to say: I'm here. I see you. This matters. That's governance. That's what I'm offering."

Marcus nodded. "Then I'll keep helping you offer it."

Year 2, Month 9 — Election Day

Voting occurred over three days—staggered to allow maximum participation. Polling stations across Antarctica. Digital voting for those who'd left. Accessible. Democratic. Maintained.

Elena voted on the first day. Cast her ballot for herself—not from ego, from consistency. She believed in what she offered. Even when she doubted whether it mattered.

The campaign had been exhausting. Three months of debates, forums, questions. Marcus Rivera had been relentless—not cruel, but thorough. Attacking her premise. Arguing for pragmatism over symbolism. Making valid points.

The riot became central to both campaigns. Rivera used it as evidence: see what happens when you govern symbolically? People riot. People die. Better to focus on practical care.

Elena used it differently: I showed up. I walked into danger. I bore witness. That's what I'm offering.

Two philosophies. Two approaches. Both honest.

The final debate, two days before voting, came down to one exchange:

Rivera: "Mayor Torres, I respect your dedication. But I have to ask: what are you governing for? What's the point? Everyone dies in thirteen years. All your policies end. All your work erases. Why maintain the forms?"

Elena: "Because the forms are what made us human. Democracy. Order. Dignity. Community. If we abandon those because they don't last, what are we saying? That only permanence has meaning? I reject that. The thirteen years matter precisely because they're all we have. Governance matters precisely because the outcome is certain. Someone needs to show up. Someone needs to maintain dignity. Someone needs to say: we existed, we mattered, we tried. That's worth doing until the end."

Rivera: "That's beautiful. But it's still just performance. Empty symbolism."

Elena: "All governance is performance. All leadership is symbolic. That doesn't make it meaningless. Especially now. When everything's collapsing, symbols are what hold us together. Democratic process. Public accountability. Showing up. These aren't empty—they're essential. They're what separate civilization from chaos. I'm offering four more years of that. If voters think that's worth having, I'll serve. If not, you will. Either way: democracy continues. That alone matters."

The applause had been genuine. Elena wasn't sure if it meant votes.

Year 2, Month 9, Day 3 — Results

The count finished at 11 PM. Elena watched from her office. Marcus—assistant Marcus—beside her. Chen, Kowalski, Dr. Ade present. The five people who'd governed together for two years.

The numbers appeared on her screen.

Elena Torres: 61% Marcus Rivera: 39%

Elena stared at the numbers. Sixty-one percent. Not overwhelming. Not the seventy or eighty percent from her first election. But: a majority. A mandate. Democratic legitimacy.

She'd won.

The victory felt hollow. Four more years governing extinction. Four more years of briefings for five people. Four more years bearing witness to collapse. This was what she'd fought for?

Chen was staring at his own screen, his thin face unreadable. Then: "Sixty-one percent voted for witness over pragmatism. For forms over comfort. That's... unexpected. I would've voted Rivera. Pragmatic care makes sense. But." He looked up at Elena. "They chose you. Chose this. Maybe symbols matter more than I thought."

Kowalski grunted. “Rivera had the right ideas. Wrong timing. People don’t want comfort. They want someone to say: this matters. You matter. We’re not giving up.” His gruff voice softened. “Four more years of 7 AM briefings, Mayor. I’ll be there. Someone has to witness you witnessing us.”

“Congratulations, Madam Mayor,” Marcus said softly.

“Thank you.”

“What are you feeling?”

Elena considered. “Relieved. Terrified. Grateful. Sad. Confused about whether this matters. But: glad they chose this. Glad democracy continues. Glad someone wants witness over pragmatism.” She turned to her small team. “Thank you. All of you. For staying. For helping. For governing the ungovernable.”

“Speech time,” Chen said. “Crowd’s waiting at victory hall.”

Elena had prepared remarks. Standard victory speech. Thank the voters. Acknowledge the opponent. Promise to serve well. All the usual forms.

She left her notes on the desk.

Victory hall held maybe five hundred people—supporters, staff, curious observers. Small crowd compared to her first victory. But: present. Real. Engaged.

Elena walked to the podium. Looked at the faces. Five hundred people who’d voted for symbolic governance. Who’d chosen witness over pragmatism. Who believed showing up mattered even when it didn’t change anything.

“Thank you,” she said. “To everyone who voted—for me or for Mr. Rivera. Thank you for maintaining democracy. For believing the process matters. For showing up.”

She paused. The prepared remarks felt wrong. She spoke from instinct instead.

“I need to be honest. I don’t know if I’m the right choice. Mr. Rivera offered practical care. Comfort. Ease. Real help for people suffering. I offered... presence. Witness. Symbolic governance. Maybe I’m wrong. Maybe symbols don’t matter. Maybe governance is just theater.”

The crowd was silent. Elena continued.

“But I believe—I have to believe—that showing up matters. That maintaining order matters. That democratic process matters. Even when—especially when—those things don’t change the outcome. Someone needs to say: we tried. We cared. We faced the end together with dignity. That’s what I’m offering. Four more years of showing up. Of bearing witness. Of governing not to save you—I can’t—but to honor you. To say: you mattered. This mattered. Until the very end.”

She gripped the podium. "I promise to serve with honesty. To maintain democracy. To bear witness accurately. To show up every day until I can't anymore. That's all I can offer. If that's enough, then I'm grateful you chose me. If it's not... well. Four years from now, you can choose differently. Democracy continues. That's what matters most."

The applause was warm. Genuine. Elena felt it wash over her—acknowledgment, support, democratic mandate. Two point four billion people. Sixty-one percent chose her. Chose witness. Chose presence.

That had to mean something.

Year 2, Month 9, Day 4 — Concession

Marcus Rivera called the next morning. Elena almost didn't answer—exhausted, overwhelmed, doubting everything. But: respect demanded it.

"Mayor Torres. Congratulations."

"Thank you, Mr. Rivera. You ran an excellent campaign."

"Wasn't enough." He didn't sound bitter. Tired, maybe. Disappointed. But: gracious. "You won fairly. The people chose your philosophy over mine. I respect that."

"Your philosophy was valid. Honest. Maybe more practical than mine."

"But not what people wanted. They want witness. They want presence. They want someone to show up and say: this matters." Rivera paused. "I disagree. I think pragmatic care matters more than symbolic governance. But: I'm not the majority. You are."

Elena heard something in his voice. "What are you thinking?"

"I'm thinking: someone has to help you bear this burden. You're offering four years of witness. That's exhausting. Impossible to do alone. You need support." Another pause. "I disagreed with your philosophy. But the people chose you. If you'll have me... I'd like to serve as your deputy. Help you govern. Offer practical care alongside your symbolic witness. Both necessary, maybe."

Elena was stunned. "You want to work for me?"

"I want to work with you. Different philosophies, complementary approaches. You handle the witness, the presence, the symbolic maintenance. I handle practical distribution, resource allocation, comfort measures. Together: complete governance. As complete as possible given circumstances."

"You'd do that? After opposing me?"

"Opposition was about philosophy, not personal. I believe in democracy. People chose you. That means serving you is serving democracy." Rivera's voice was

firm. “So. Will you have me as deputy? Or do you need someone who shares your philosophy completely?”

Elena thought about governing alone. Four more years of morning briefings with five people. Four more years bearing witness to collapse by herself. Four more years of exhausted symbolic maintenance with no practical counterbalance.

Or: partnership. Former opponent turned ally. Symbolic witness plus pragmatic care. Presence plus comfort. Both necessary. Both valuable.

“Yes,” she said. “I’d be honored to have you as deputy mayor. Thank you.”

“Thank you, Mayor. When do I start?”

“Tomorrow’s briefing. Seven AM. Conference room that seats fifty, attended by five. Bring coffee.”

Rivera laughed. “I’ll bring coffee.”

Year 2, Month 9, Day 5 — Morning Briefing

The conference room for fifty. Present: six people. Elena, Marcus—assistant Marcus—Chen, Kowalski, Dr. Ade. And now: Marcus Rivera, deputy mayor.

The two Marcuses had laughed about it that morning. “This is going to be confusing,” assistant Marcus said.

“I’ll go by Rivera if that helps,” deputy mayor Marcus offered.

“Or I’ll go by Reyes—my middle name,” assistant Marcus suggested.

But before they could settle on names, assistant Marcus—Reyes—set down his tablet. “Actually, Mayor. I need to tell you something. I’m resigning.”

Elena looked at him, startled. “What?”

“I’ve been your assistant for eight years. Since before detection. Before everything changed.” He smiled slightly. “You don’t need an assistant anymore. You need a deputy mayor. Someone to share the burden. That’s Rivera. My role is... redundant now.”

“You’re not redundant,” Elena protested.

“Not redundant. Complete.” Reyes met her eyes. “I helped you through two years of apocalypse. Watched you become the mayor who bears witness. Now you have someone who can actually help govern. I can leave knowing you’re not alone.”

“Where will you go?”

“My original home. Mumbai. See my family, what’s left of them, for the first time in six years. Find a life, a new purpose.” He picked up his tablet again.

"But first: one last briefing. I want to see Rivera in action. Make sure he's worthy of you."

Rivera raised an eyebrow. "No pressure."

"All the pressure," Reyes said cheerfully. "Prove you deserve this job."

Elena felt tears threaten. Eight years. Reyes had been there for her first campaign, her first term, detection, collapse, re-election. Constant presence. Reliable support. Now: leaving. She'd lose him too.

But: he was right. She had Rivera now. Partnership instead of assistance. Shared burden instead of supported solo. Reyes had earned his freedom.

"Thank you," she said quietly. "For everything. For eight years. For showing up when I needed someone. For staying when everyone else left."

"Thank you for letting me serve." Reyes smiled. "Now. Let's do this briefing. Rivera—take notes. That's your job now."

They'd settled on: Rivera for the deputy mayor. No assistant anymore. Just partners in governance.

Elena called the briefing to order. "Population report."

Chen pulled up data. "Two point four billion as of today. Stable for the first time. Departures slowing. Some people actually returning—not many, but: first positive flow since detection."

Elena made notes. First stability. First returns. Tiny signs that maybe, possibly, some people wanted to stay. Wanted to be part of a governed community. Wanted witness and presence.

Or just: nowhere else to go. Hard to say.

"Infrastructure," Elena prompted.

Chen continued, and something in his voice had changed—less hollow, more present. "Power grid at sixty-two percent. Water at sixty-nine. Transit at forty-one. Communications stable. Maintenance crews still critically low but: two dozen new hires this week. First increase in eighteen months."

He paused, set down his tablet—unusual for him. "I've been thinking about maintenance differently since the election. Year 0 to 2, I thought: why maintain systems that end anyway? Why fix infrastructure with no future? Felt absurd." He met Elena's eyes. "But you maintain democracy. Rivera maintains pragmatic care. Kowalski maintains security. We all maintain things that end. Maybe maintenance isn't about duration. Maybe it's about... I don't know. Presence? Showing up? The systems work today because we fixed them yesterday. That matters today. Tomorrow too. Until it doesn't. But today it does."

Elena felt unexpected warmth. Chen was learning the same lesson she'd been struggling with. Presence over outcome. Process over result. Today mattering

precisely because tomorrow was temporary.

"That's exactly right," she said quietly. "Thank you for seeing it."

"Security."

Kowalski: "Crime down slightly—eight percent decrease from last month. Not sure if that's enforcement working or criminals dying or people giving up. Murder rate still elevated but stabilizing. No major riots since District 7."

He grimaced—the expression that had become permanent. "I arrested Daniel Okonkwo last month. Good man. Refugee. Killed his friend Raj Patel over food during the District 7 riot. Came with me quietly. Kept saying: 'I killed him. I killed him.' Horror in his eyes. Not criminal. Just: desperate man who did desperate thing." Kowalski's voice went quiet. "Thirty years in enforcement. I know the difference between predators and people who broke. Okonkwo broke. System broke him. Riot broke him. Hunger broke him. Now he's facing fifteen years for manslaughter when we all die in thirteen. Justice or cruelty? Don't know anymore."

The room was silent. Elena thought about Daniel Okonkwo in holding. About Raj Patel dead. About three children without their father. About systems failing so badly that friends killed friends over food.

"You're recommending pardon?" she asked carefully.

Kowalski shook his head. "I'm recommending nothing. I'm just saying: enforcement used to be clear. Crime. Punishment. Justice. Now?" He spread his hands. "Everything's complicated. Everything's impossible. I enforce the law because someone has to. But the law doesn't account for apocalypse. Doesn't account for good people doing terrible things because systems failed them."

Elena made a note. Daniel Okonkwo. Pardon request likely forthcoming. Decision she'd have to make: justice or mercy. Both had costs.

"Health."

Dr. Ade: "Suicide rate plateaued. Still terrible, still three hundred percent above baseline, but: not increasing. Birth rate microscopic but not zero—forty-seven births last month across two point four billion people. Death rate still elevated. But: nothing catastrophic this month."

Elena documented everything. Then turned to Rivera. "Deputy Mayor Rivera, you have proposals?"

Rivera pulled up his tablet. "Three initiatives. First: revised resource distribution. Current system is supposedly fair but practically uneven. I want transparent allocation—everyone sees exactly what everyone gets. Eliminate perception of unfairness."

"Agreed. Implement immediately."

"Second: expanded mental health services. Suicide is our crisis. I want mobile response teams—not waiting for people to come to hospitals. Go to them. Outreach. Prevention. Care."

"Budget?"

"I'll find it. Transfer from symbolic programs if necessary—"

"Don't cut symbolic programs," Elena interrupted. "Find budget elsewhere. But yes, approved."

"Third: departure support. People who want to leave—help them leave well. Organized transport. Destination planning. Resources. Make exodus orderly instead of desperate."

Elena considered this. Helping people leave seemed counterintuitive—wasn't she trying to govern them? But: people were leaving anyway. Making it orderly honored their choice.

"Approved. All three initiatives. Start immediately."

Rivera nodded. "Thank you, Mayor."

The briefing continued. Practical governance alongside symbolic governance. Presence plus care. Both necessary. Both valuable.

After, both Marcuses stayed.

Reyes pulled up his tablet. "Before I go—one last thing. Daniel Okonkwo."

Elena felt the name like a weight. Three months since the riot. The trial had been swift—confession, evidence, conviction. Manslaughter. Fifteen years. Meaningless sentence when everyone died in thirteen.

"What about him?"

"I've been visiting him. Weekly. Since the sentencing." Reyes met her eyes. "He's falling apart. Grief, guilt, separation from his children. He writes letters to Raj Patel's widow—Priya Patel, Indian-British engineer, two young children of her own—every week. She never responds. He keeps writing anyway. Apologizing. Explaining. Begging forgiveness."

"Reyes—"

"I think you should pardon him."

The words hung there. Elena felt them settle. Pardon. Mercy instead of justice. Forgiveness instead of consequence.

"He killed someone."

"Yes. In desperation. Over food. During a riot caused by governance failures—not your fault specifically, but: system failures we all participated in." Reyes leaned forward. "Elena, he's not dangerous. He's destroyed by what he did. Keeping him in prison for thirteen years accomplishes nothing except more suffering. His

children need him. He needs them. Priya Patel has to raise her own children alone while carrying this rage and grief. And Raj Patel is still dead whether Daniel rots in a cell or tries to live with what he did."

"Justice requires consequence."

"Does it? Even when everyone's already condemned? Even when the consequence is just additional cruelty?" Reyes's voice was gentle. "I'm not saying he deserves forgiveness. I'm saying: mercy might matter more than justice when nothing lasts. Let him try to be present for his children. Let him carry his guilt in freedom instead of a cell. That's not absolving him—it's allowing him to face what he did while still living."

Elena thought about this. Daniel Okonkwo in a cell, writing unanswered letters, separated from his children, dying in prison. Daniel Okonkwo free, raising his children, carrying Raj Patel's death every day, trying to be present despite everything.

Both were punishment. One involved mercy.

"I can't," she said finally. "If I pardon him, what message does that send? That killing is acceptable when you're desperate? That consequence doesn't matter?"

"It sends the message that mercy matters more than judgment when time is short." Reyes stood. "But: it's your decision. I just wanted to ask before I left."

He packed his belongings carefully—tablet, stylus, eight years of notes backed up to the archive. "That's it, then. My last briefing."

"You could stay," Elena offered. "Different role. Still part of the team."

"I could. But I shouldn't." He looked at Rivera. "Take care of her. This work destroys people. She's survived two years because she's impossibly strong. But she needs someone to share the weight. Do that."

"I will," Rivera promised.

Reyes turned to Elena. "You're going to be fine. Better than fine. You have real help now. Partnership instead of assistance. That's what you've needed all along."

"I'll miss you."

"I'll miss this. But I'll be alive. In Mumbai. With my family. That matters more." He smiled. "Show up every day. Bear witness. Keep governing. You're doing something important even when it feels impossible."

"Practice as purpose."

"Exactly." Reyes picked up his bag. "Goodbye, Mayor. Thank you for eight years of meaning."

He left. Elena watched him go—one more person departing, one more loss in years of losses. But: he was going toward something. Family. Home. Life. That mattered.

She turned to Rivera. "Just us now."

"Just us," he confirmed. "Thank you for trusting me."

"Thank you for serving."

"I still disagree with your philosophy," he said honestly. "I still think symbolic governance is mostly theater. But: people chose it. My job is serving what they chose. I can do that while offering practical help."

"That's democracy," Elena said. "Not everyone agrees. But everyone serves the decision."

"Exactly."

Rivera left. Elena sat alone in the too-large conference room. Five people now. Reyes gone. Rivera present. Former opponent now partner. Four more years of governance ahead.

She'd won. Sixty-one percent. Democratic mandate. Legitimate authority. The people chose witness. Chose presence. Chose her.

Reyes was gone—home to Mumbai, to family, to life. Eight years of service complete.

Rivera was here—former opponent, current partner. Four years of collaboration beginning.

The victory still felt hollow—governing extinction didn't become meaningful just because people voted for it. But: it became legitimate. Accountable. Democratic.

That was something. Maybe: everything.

Year 2, Month 9, Day 6 — Letters

That evening, Elena sat at her desk. Exhausted. Victorious. Confused about whether victory mattered.

Two letters to write.

First: to Wei. The philosopher who'd guided her through two years of apocalyptic governance. Weekly letters about presence, practice, bearing witness. Elena had responded occasionally—brief notes, philosophical questions, grateful acknowledgments.

Professor Wei,

I won the election. 61%-39%. Four more years of governance ahead. I should feel victorious. Instead I feel: relieved, terrified, grateful, and deeply uncertain whether this matters.

My opponent offered practical care. I offered symbolic witness. People chose witness. Does that make it valuable? Or just: preferred theater?

You wrote once that outcome is irrelevant, practice is everything. I'm trying to believe that. Trying to govern not for result but for process. Trying to show up because showing up is its own purpose. Some days I believe it. Some days it feels like elaborate self-deception.

Four more years. I'll continue. Because people chose this. Because someone should maintain democracy until the end. Because witness matters even if—especially if—it doesn't change anything.

Thank you for your letters. They help more than you know.

With respect and gratitude,
Mayor Elena Torres

Second letter: to Kenji. Her son. Twenty-six now. Somewhere in the world seeking answers she couldn't provide. She'd received two messages from him in six months—brief texts confirming he was alive. Nothing substantial. Nothing real.

Mijo,

I won the election. Four more years as mayor. I don't know if you care. Don't know if you're reading these messages. But: I'm your mother. I'll keep writing.

Marcus Rivera ran against me. Good person, valid philosophy, honest campaign. He offered practical care. I offered symbolic witness. People chose me. Now he's my deputy. Former opponent, current ally. Democracy is strange and beautiful.

I miss you. I don't know where you are or what you've found or whether seeking is helping. But: I hope you're alive. Hope you're finding something. Hope thirteen years is enough time to discover whatever you're looking for.

Come home when you're ready. Or don't. Just: be alive. Please.

Love always,
Mom

She sent both letters. Sat alone in her office. Looked out at Antarctica—two point four billion lights, democratic civilization, all temporary.

Four more years of this. Four more years of morning briefings and practical governance and symbolic witness. Four more years bearing the burden of leadership while powerless to save anyone.

Why had she fought for this?

Because someone had to show up. Because democracy mattered. Because witness honored existence even when existence ended. Because presence was purpose even without permanence.

Maybe.

Elena pulled out Wei's most recent letter. Read it again.

Mayor, you asked whether election matters if everyone dies. I think: election matters because everyone dies. Precisely because outcome is certain, process becomes valuable. You maintain democracy not to achieve result. To practice democracy itself. The practice is the point. Duration irrelevant. With respect, Professor Wei.

Practice as purpose. Process as point. Showing up as complete governance.

Elena had four more years to practice. Four more years to show up. Four more years to govern the ungovernable.

Then: Year 6 election. If anyone bothered. If democracy persisted. If anything remained.

But that was later. Unknown. Distant.

Right now: victory. Mandate. Democratic legitimacy. Partnership with former opponent. Six people governing two point four billion.

Small team. Impossible task. Meaningful practice.

Enough.

Elena turned off her office lights. Went home. Tomorrow: another briefing. Another day of governance. Another day of showing up. Without Reyes. With Rivera instead. Different partnership. Same purpose.

Four more years of that ahead.

Thirteen years total until the end.

She'd serve them all. Because people chose her. Because democracy continued. Because witness mattered.

Even if it didn't change anything.

Especially because it didn't change anything.

The practice was the point.

Closing

Two point four billion people. One elected mayor. One deputy mayor who'd opposed her, now served her. Five people in a conference room for fifty. Reyes gone home. Democracy maintained. Witness continued. Governance practiced.

Four more years ahead. Then: another election. Or not. Uncertainty remained.

But today: legitimate. Democratic. Chosen.

Elena Torres, Mayor of Antarctica, governing not to save anyone.

To honor them.

Until the end.

Chapter 15: Breakdown

Ibrahim al-Rashid | Year 2, Month 2 | Jerusalem / Antarctica

I. The Last Battle

The rubble was sharp against Ibrahim's shoulder. Twenty-one years old. Two years since detection. Still fighting. Still here. Still defending holy ground that wouldn't exist in thirteen more years.

He'd stopped asking why months ago.

The night was cool—Jerusalem winter, brief respite from desert heat. Ibrahim crouched behind what used to be someone's kitchen wall. Ceramic tiles still visible, blue and white geometric patterns. Traditional. Beautiful. Belonging to a family that had fled or died or simply stopped caring about their home because what was the point?

His squad was positioned across the contested zone. Fifteen fighters. Down from forty two years ago. Some had left. Some had died. Some had simply walked away mid-patrol, dropped their weapons, and disappeared into the city. The commanders didn't chase them anymore.

Commander Hassan's voice crackled in Ibrahim's earpiece. "Movement. Northeast corner. Wait for my signal."

Ibrahim shifted his rifle. The weight was familiar—he'd carried this weapon for five years now. Knew every scratch, every imperfection. Had killed with it. Had cleaned it more times than he'd prayed.

That thought used to disturb him. Now it was just fact.

Across the street, their opponents—Israeli defense militia, probably. Or UN peacekeepers gone rogue. Or other Muslim fighters from different faction. The lines had blurred. Everyone fighting, nobody remembering why. Just: territorial instinct, muscle memory, the inertia of conflict that had lasted three millennia and would continue for twelve more years before becoming irrelevant.

Ibrahim's prayer beads hung from his belt. He hadn't touched them in weeks. Couldn't remember the last time he'd completed all five daily prayers. The brothers pretended not to notice. Or maybe they'd stopped caring too. Even the imam's sermons had become perfunctory. *Serve Allah. Trust the plan. Paradise awaits.* Words recited without conviction.

The whole camp was breaking. Ibrahim could feel it. Some brothers still believed—clung to faith desperately, needed it to function. But most were going through motions. Fighting because that's what they'd always done. Praying because stopping felt like admitting defeat. Existing because the alternative was harder.

"Signal. Now. Go, go, go."

Ibrahim moved automatically. Training overriding thought. Around the rubble, across the street, toward the building where movement had been detected. His squad flanking, covering angles, professional and empty.

Then: the whistle.

Mortar.

He'd heard that sound too many times. Had half a second to think: *drop and cover.* Started moving. Too slow.

The impact was close. Too close. The blast lifted him, spun him, slammed him into stone. Sound disappeared—replaced by high-pitched ringing. Vision blurred. Something wet and hot down his left leg.

Blood. Too much blood.

He tried to stand. His leg wouldn't respond. Looked down—shrapnel had torn through his thigh. Deep. Arterial. The pain hit delayed, then all at once. White-hot. Real. More real than anything had felt in months.

I'm going to die here, he thought with strange clarity. *In this street. Defending this wall. For nothing.*

Voices. Hands grabbing him. Brothers dragging him back behind cover. Someone applying tourniquet. The pain was incredible. Ibrahim had been wounded before—twice, minor injuries. This was different. This was serious.

"Stay with us, brother. Stay with us."

Why? The question surfaced unbidden. Why stay? Why fight the darkness? Paradise waited. Martyrdom was honor. Dying for Allah in holy land was the highest achievement.

Except he didn't believe that anymore.

The darkness took him anyway.

II. Medical Limbo

Waking was gradual. Pain first—dull, chemical-managed, but persistent. Then: sounds. Machines. Voices. Someone checking vitals. Fluorescent light through closed eyelids.

Ibrahim opened his eyes. White ceiling. Clean walls. The antiseptic smell of hospital.

Not the field hospital in camp. Somewhere else.

A nurse appeared—UN uniform, efficient, tired. "You're awake. Good. Don't try to move yet."

"Where—" His voice was rough. Throat dry.

"UN Medical Facility, New Jerusalem Zone. You were medevaced from the contested area three days ago. Severe leg trauma. You've had two surgeries. Do you remember your name?"

"Ibrahim. Ibrahim al-Rashid."

"Good. I'm Nurse Chen. You're stable now. The doctor will brief you on your condition."

She left. Ibrahim lay still, processing. Three days. UN facility. Stable. Alive.

He tried to move his left leg. Pain lanced through him, but the leg responded slightly. Not paralyzed then. That was something.

The ward was large—twenty beds, half occupied. Other fighters, other casualties. Muslim, Jewish, Christian, secular—the UN treated everyone. Some wore their faction's symbols. Most had removed them. In pain and recovery, identities became optional.

Dr. Okonkwo arrived that evening. Nigerian, professional, compassionate but realistic. "Mr. al-Rashid. You're lucky. The shrapnel missed your femoral artery by centimeters. We removed most fragments, but several pieces near your spine are too dangerous to extract. You'll have chronic pain. Significant limp. But you'll walk."

"Can I return to service?"

The doctor's expression was carefully neutral. "That's your choice. Medically, you're combat-ineffective. We recommend discharge. But if you insist on returning, we can't stop you after recovery."

Ibrahim said nothing. The doctor continued: "You have options. Your militia will take you back in support role. Or you can discharge honorably. We have refugee placement services. Many fighters are choosing to relocate—Antarctica has housing, services, infrastructure. You could start over."

"Start over?" The phrase felt absurd. "For thirteen years?"

"Thirteen years is still thirteen years. That's the position we're all in." The doctor's face showed the same weariness everyone wore now. "Think about it. You have time."

Time. Thirteen years. 4,745 days. Then extinction. Whether he died here in Jerusalem or elsewhere made no difference to the asteroid. Made no difference to Allah, if Allah existed. Made no difference to anyone except himself.

And he didn't know if he cared enough about himself to matter.

III. The Ward

Recovery took six weeks. Longest six weeks of Ibrahim's life.

His leg healed slowly. Physical therapy was painful, frustrating, incremental. He'd been a strong fighter—fast, agile, capable. Now he needed a cane. Limped badly. Felt broken.

But the physical breaking was easier than the other kind.

The ward was full of believers. Most of his fellow patients still held their faiths. The Jewish fighters prayed Shema. The Christian fighters read their Bibles. The Muslim fighters—five of them including Ibrahim—were called to prayer by the eldest, a Syrian veteran named Faisal.

Faisal was forty, devout, unshaken. He'd lost his right arm in combat. Prayed with his left hand on his prayer mat, face serene, faith intact. After each prayer, he'd talk with the brothers. "Allah tests those He loves. This injury is test. Paradise awaits those who endure."

The other Muslim patients nodded. Agreed. Found comfort.

Ibrahim stayed silent.

After a week, Faisal approached him privately. "Brother Ibrahim, you don't pray."

"I'm recovering."

"You can pray lying down. You can pray in your heart. But you don't. Why?"

Ibrahim had been expecting this. Had prepared several deflecting answers. But sitting there, in the clean hospital bed, with nothing left to lose, he found himself saying: "Because I don't believe anymore."

Faisal's face showed shock, then concern, then pity. "Brother, the asteroid is test—"

"Don't." Ibrahim's voice was harder than intended. "Please don't tell me this is a test. Don't tell me Allah's plan is mysterious. Don't tell me faith will return if I practice. I've heard it all. I've tried. The faith is gone."

"Then you're lost."

"I know."

Faisal left. The other Muslim patients avoided Ibrahim after that. Prayed pointedly near him. Tried to model faith, show him what he was missing. Ibrahim felt nothing but awkward awareness of his own emptiness.

One night, Faisal tried again. "Brother, without faith, what do you have? How will you face the end?"

"I don't know."

"Then return to prayer. Even if you don't feel it. The practice sustains—"

"The practice is empty!" Ibrahim's frustration finally broke through. "It's words said to nothing. Movements performed for no one. I did it every day for nineteen years. I killed for it. I bled for it. And when the asteroid came, it all revealed itself as meaningless. Physics doesn't care about prayers. Matter doesn't care about faith. We're going to die—righteous and wicked together—because a rock is falling. Allah isn't guiding it. Allah isn't stopping it. Allah isn't real, or doesn't care, or never was. And I can't pretend anymore."

Silence. The other patients staring. Faisal's face was pained. "You're not just lost, brother. You're choosing to be lost. That's worse."

Maybe. Probably. Ibrahim didn't care. Couldn't care. The numbness was total now.

IV. Discharge

Month 2 of recovery. Dr. Okonkwo reviewed Ibrahim's file. "You're medically cleared for discharge. Permanent limp, chronic pain manageable with medication. You can return to your unit in support capacity—"

"I'm not returning."

The doctor nodded. Unsurprised. "Then you need to decide where to go. We have placement services. Where's home?"

"Syria. But..." Ibrahim thought about it. His family was dead—parents killed in the climate wars when he was twelve. He'd had brothers in the militia, but they were scattered or gone. Syria itself was different now—cooling planet meant new weather patterns, new agriculture, new everything. The country he remembered didn't exist anymore. "I have no home."

"Many don't. Antarctica is accepting refugees. It's the hub now—largest city, most infrastructure, most services. We can arrange transport."

"What would I do there?"

"Survive. Figure out how to spend twelve years. Same as everyone."

Antarctica. Ibrahim had never been. Never thought he'd leave the Middle East. His whole life had been circumscribed—Syria, then madrasah, then militia, then Jerusalem. Small circles. Defined territories. Fighting for specific ground.

Now: all ground was temporary. All territories would end. Going to Antarctica meant going nowhere special. Which was fine, because nowhere was everywhere now.

"Arrange it," Ibrahim said.

The transport left two weeks later. UN evacuation flight—refugees, wounded fighters, support staff rotating out. A hundred people who'd given up on wherever they'd been. Heading to the Antarctic megacity because what else?

Ibrahim sat by window. Watched Jerusalem recede. The holy city, contested for three thousand years, shrinking to toy-size below. All that blood. All that prayer. All that history. Thirteen years left before vaporization.

He tried to feel something. Sadness, anger, relief. Anything.

Felt nothing.

His prayer beads were in his pocket. Ninety-nine beads. Ninety-nine names of God. He'd carried them every day since childhood. Couldn't remember when he'd last used them. Couldn't remember when they'd stopped being connection and become just weight.

The woman next to him noticed his silence. "First time leaving?"

"Yes."

"I left Delhi two years ago. Went to Lagos. Then São Paulo. Now Antarctica. Keeps moving, you know? Staying in one place felt like waiting for death. Moving feels like... I don't know. Something."

"Does it help?"

She considered. "Not really. But it's different. Different is something."

The flight took eight hours. Ibrahim dozed, woke, stared at clouds, dozed again. The woman shared her food. They didn't talk much. Companionable silence between two people fleeing nothing toward nothing.

Antarctica appeared below—massive city sprawling across ice. Infrastructure everywhere. Domes, towers, transit systems, residential blocks stretching to horizon. Four billion people. More than any city in history. All here because everywhere else had become unlivable during climate shift.

And in thirteen years—empty. Frozen again. Pristine. Like none of this had ever existed.

The landing was smooth. Immigration was perfunctory—scan ID, confirm refugee status, assign housing. "Block 47, Building 12, Unit 403. Rent subsidized for six months. Medical support available. Transit pass issued. Welcome to Antarctica."

Welcome. As if this was destination instead of just another temporary stop.

V. Fifty-Three Steps

Building 12 was standard refugee housing—twenty stories, five hundred units, communal facilities on ground floor. Clean. Functional. Soulless.

Unit 403 was on fourth floor. Ibrahim stood at the base of the stairwell, looking up. His leg throbbed. The cane helped but didn't eliminate pain. Fifty-three steps to his new home.

He counted them. Needed to. Needed something to focus on besides the emptiness.

One. Two. Three. Left leg strong, right leg weak, cane compensating. Four. Five. Six. The physics of walking remade. Seven. Eight. Nine. Pain manageable, breathing steady. Ten.

A family passed him going down—mother, father, two children. The children stared at his cane. The mother pulled them along quickly. Don't stare at the broken man. A moment later, another man descended—Syrian features, moving with purpose, hands signing something to himself or to no one. Ibrahim registered it distantly: another refugee. Another Syrian. Another broken person in a building full of them.

Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen. Halfway. His leg was screaming now. Ibrahim paused on the landing. Caught his breath. The stairwell was empty except for him. Everyone else probably used elevator. But he needed to know: fifty-three steps. This specific number. This specific pain. Something concrete. Something real.

Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. Resuming. Slower now. The cane bearing more weight. Twenty-five. Twenty-six. The pain sharpening but bearable. Thirty.

Second landing. Third floor. Apartment doors visible. Lives happening behind them. People cooking, sleeping, arguing, loving, existing. All of them doomed. All of them continuing anyway.

Thirty-five. Thirty-six. Thirty-seven. Final stretch. The pain was constant now. Ibrahim's jaw clenched. This was penance, maybe. Or just stubbornness. Forty. Forty-one. Forty-two.

Forty-five. Forty-six. Forty-seven. Nearly there. His breath ragged. Forty-eight. Forty-nine. Fifty.

Fifty-one. Fifty-two. Fifty-three.

Fourth floor.

He stood at the top, leg trembling, leaning heavily on cane. Fifty-three steps. Now he knew. Tomorrow would be fifty-three steps. Every day until he moved or died or the asteroid came.

Unit 403 was at the end of corridor. Ibrahim limped to it. Scanned his ID. Door opened.

The apartment was small. Bedroom, bathroom, kitchenette, single window overlooking city. Furnished minimally—bed, table, two chairs, basic kitchen equipment. Clean. Empty. Waiting.

Ibrahim closed the door. Stood in the center of the room. His new home. His nowhere place.

He lowered himself onto the bed—mattress firm, sheets generic. Set his cane against the nightstand. Pulled out his prayer beads.

Ninety-nine beads. Ninety-nine names. *Ar-Rahman. Ar-Rahim. Al-Malik.*

The names were familiar. He could recite all ninety-nine without thinking. Had done so thousands of times. Prayer, meditation, comfort, connection.

Now: just words. Just sounds. Just beads.

He tried to pray properly. Faced Mecca—or where Mecca was, he wasn't exactly sure from Antarctica. Held the beads. Began the names. *Al-Quddus. Al-Salam. Al-Mu'min.*

Nothing. No connection. No presence. No answer. Just: his voice in an empty room. Beads in his hand. Words in empty air.

Al-Aziz. Al-Jabbar. Al-Mutakabbir.

The Mighty. The Compeller. The Supreme. None of it meant anything anymore. Or maybe it never had, and he was only now seeing clearly. Faith as illusion. Prayer as self-comfort. God as human invention to make meaninglessness bearable.

Ibrahim stopped at the forty-third bead. Same bead he'd stopped at three years ago. First night of doubt. Now: doubt was certainty. Faith was gone. And nothing had replaced it.

He set the beads on the nightstand. They looked ordinary. Just object. No power. No meaning. No connection to divine.

His leg throbbed. The medication was wearing off. He should take more. Should eat. Should sleep. Should do something to maintain himself.

Instead he sat on the bed in the strange apartment in the city he didn't know, feeling nothing, being nothing, having nothing.

Twenty-one years old. Thirteen years left. No faith. No identity. No purpose.

Just: alive. Broken. Empty.

The window showed the Antarctic city stretching to darkness. Millions of lights. Billions of people. All temporary. All doomed. All continuing.

Ibrahim lay down. Stared at ceiling. Counted the cracks in the plaster because what else? Fourteen cracks. Specific number. Concrete fact. Something real in the emptiness.

Fifty-three steps to get here. Fourteen cracks above him. Thirteen years remaining. Numbers instead of meaning. Counting instead of believing.

This was his life now. This apartment. This brokenness. This nothing.

Year 3, Month 2. Ibrahim al-Rashid, refugee, formerly faithful, arrived in Antarctica.

No plan. No hope. No faith.

Just: existing.

And thirteen years stretching ahead like fifty-three steps he'd have to climb every day until climbing stopped mattering.

He closed his eyes.

Felt nothing.

That was the point.

Chapter 16: Maintenance

David Chen | Year 2, Month 8 | Antarctic Solar Arrays

Platform 73 greeted David with its familiar creak—metal expanding in the morning sun, two hundred meters above the ice. He clipped his safety harness to the rail and breathed the thin, cold air. 6:47 AM. Three minutes early, same as always.

"Morning, 47B."

The maintenance robot pivoted its sensor array toward him. *Beep beep.*

"Good morning, Colleague Chen. Platform twelve requires recalibration. Connection housing integrity at eighty-two percent."

David smiled despite himself. The robot had been programmed to use his title—Colleague, not Worker or Unit. Someone in the AI ethics division, back

when that division existed, had decided maintenance robots should treat humans as equals. Now David was one of twelve humans left in a division built for sixty, and 47B was the most reliable colleague he had.

"Let's take a look."

They moved together across the platform, David's boots finding purchase on the metal grating, 47B's treads humming softly. The solar array stretched in every direction—thousands of platforms, millions of panels, all tilting automatically to track the sun. In the distance, the Antarctic megacity sprawled across what used to be ice shelf, a continental hive of humanity trying to survive its countdown.

Twelve years, four months remaining.

David didn't think about it. Thinking didn't help.

Platform twelve's connection housing was exactly where it should be, degraded exactly as expected. David pulled the diagnostic tablet from his belt. Numbers confirmed what he already knew—the seals were failing, moisture getting in, conductivity dropping. Standard wear. Forty-seventh time he'd seen this particular failure mode.

"Replacement seals required," 47B reported.

"I know. Let's get the housing open."

They worked in comfortable silence. David positioning the extraction tool, 47B anticipating each next step, offering precisely the right component at precisely the right moment. They'd done this repair forty-six times together over the past two years. Perfect coordination. Almost like dancing.

Rodriguez used to joke about that. "You and that robot move better together than most married couples."

Rodriguez quit three weeks ago. Packed his tools, filed his resignation, said he was going to travel. See the world before it ended. "Come with me, Chen. This work doesn't matter anymore. The arrays will keep running without us. Automation handles everything."

David had stayed.

He tightened the final seal and ran the diagnostic. Green across the board. Connection housing integrity back to ninety-four percent. Good for another six months, maybe eight.

"Repair complete," 47B announced.

"Good work."

Beep beep.

The robot didn't need praise. Didn't need acknowledgment. But David gave it anyway, because what else did you do when someone—something—did good work?

They moved to the next repair. Platform eighteen, solar tracker misalignment. Then platform thirty-one, panel surface cleaning. Then platform seven, power coupling check. The morning passed in familiar rhythm. David's hands knew the motions. His mind could drift while his body maintained.

This was what he did. This was what he'd always done. Eight years maintaining these arrays, first as junior technician, then senior engineer, now—what? Last priest in an automated temple? The arrays barely needed humans anymore. The AI managed load balancing, predictive maintenance, emergency responses. Humans were backup systems for backup systems.

But David showed up. Every day. 6:47 AM. Because what else would he do?

By noon, they'd completed six repairs. David ate lunch on platform seventy-three—his platform, the one he'd claimed through repetition. Protein bar and thermos of tea. 47B entered low-power mode beside him, a companionable silence.

The megacity spread below. From two hundred meters up, you could see the patterns—the residential districts, the industrial zones, the green spaces engineered to provide oxygen and sanity. Two billion people down there. Maybe fewer. Used to be 4.2 billion at detection, 2.8 billion after the first year. Numbers declining every month. Suicides, violence, despair, and the quiet decisions to stop fighting.

David didn't look at the numbers anymore. Numbers were Amara's domain.

He finished his tea and stood. "Ready?"

47B's sensor array brightened. *Beep beep.*

"Afternoon schedule: platforms forty-one through sixty. Routine inspection."

They worked. Platform after platform. Checking connections, cleaning surfaces, verifying alignment. Most platforms required nothing—just visual confirmation that automation was functioning. Human oversight for systems that didn't need overseeing.

Around 3 PM, David noticed movement on platform forty-seven. Another maintenance worker—Chen. No relation, different Chen. Infrastructure division, not solar. They exchanged nods across fifty meters of empty air.

How many Chens were left? David knew of three. Used to be dozens. Common name in a workforce that drew heavily from Pacific Rim populations. Now: three. Maybe fewer. People left, people quit, people ended it.

David kept working.

4:30 PM. Platform fifty-nine. David's tablet chimed—end of shift notification. He could go home.

He didn't go home.

Instead: the maintenance break room. Sublevel three of the array control building. Fluorescent lights, ancient coffee maker, lockers that used to have names but now just had numbers. David made tea—not from the coffee maker, he'd learned that lesson—using the kettle he kept in his locker.

The room was empty. Always empty now. Used to be crowded during shift changes. Thirty, forty people. Complaints about supervisors, jokes about robots, arguments about sports teams that didn't exist anymore. Now: echoes.

David sat at the long table and pulled out his tablet. Technical manuals. Solar array maintenance procedures, versions 1 through 47. He'd read them all multiple times. Read them again anyway. The words were familiar. Comforting. Precise.

Section 12.3: Connection Housing Replacement Protocols.

He'd just done that. Forty-seventh time. The manual described it perfectly—step by step, exactly as he'd performed it. Validation through repetition. Proof that he was doing it right, even though doing it right didn't matter anymore.

6:15 PM. The break room lights dimmed automatically—energy conservation. David made more tea. Read more manuals.

7:30 PM. His tablet chimed. Message from Amara: "Working late. Don't wait up."

David stared at the message. When was the last time he'd waited up? When was the last time she'd come home before midnight? When was the last time they'd spoken beyond logistics?

He couldn't remember.

He typed: "OK."

Sent it.

Deleted the conversation history because seeing months of "Working late" and "OK" was too honest.

8:45 PM. David finally stood. Cleaned his tea cup. Locked his tablet in his locker. Put on his jacket. Walked to the elevator.

The residential district was quiet. The megacity never truly slept, but it had rhythms—morning bustle, evening lull, midnight desperate energy. This was evening lull. People in their apartments, eating dinner, watching screens, being with family.

David walked the familiar route. Building seventeen, apartment 4C. Key card. Elevator. Fourth floor. Door.

The apartment was dark.

Of course it was dark. Amara was at the monitoring station. David turned on one light—kitchen, not bedroom. Made more tea, even though he'd had four

cups already. The kettle was his. Her coffee maker sat on the counter, unplugged, dust on the reservoir. Hadn't been used in months.

Her jacket wasn't on its hook. Her tablet wasn't on the charging pad. The apartment felt less like a home and more like a hotel room—functional, clean, occupied by someone who was almost never there.

David sat at the small table with his tea and looked at nothing.

They hadn't talked about it. Hadn't officially ended anything. Just: stopped. She slept at the station now more often than not. They communicated in fragments—"Working late" and "OK" and nothing else. When was the last time they'd eaten together? Last month? The month before?

He should talk to her. Should say something. *This isn't working* or *I miss you* or *we have twelve years left, what are we doing?*

His tea was cold. His shoulders were tight. He hadn't said any of those things in three years. Wasn't going to start tonight.

A memory surfaced, unbidden: Year minus fourteen. Solar energy conference in Singapore. He'd been presenting on tracker optimization algorithms—dry technical stuff, audience of twelve. Amara was there for the astrophysics panel. They'd ended up at the same networking reception, same table, same bottle of wine.

She'd asked about his work. Actually interested, not just polite. He'd asked about hers. Black holes, stellar formation, the physics of the impossible. Her eyes had lit up talking about it. He'd loved that—her brilliance made visible, her passion tangible.

They'd talked for four hours. Missed the rest of the conference. Got coffee the next morning. Exchanged contact information. Started messaging. Six months later: dating. Year minus twelve: married.

She'd been brilliant and passionate and alive. He'd been steady and reliable and present. Good combination. They'd balanced each other. He grounded her flights of theory. She expanded his practical focus. It worked.

Then the detection. The asteroid. And Amara's brilliance turned to burden—she'd found it, calculated it, confirmed humanity's death. Her work became guilt and responsibility and numbness. She retreated into data because feeling was impossible.

David understood. Intellectually, he understood. Your work ending the world—how do you process that? How do you stay human?

But understanding didn't bridge the gap. Understanding didn't make her talk to him, touch him, see him. Understanding didn't save the marriage.

Maybe marriages weren't supposed to survive apocalypse. Maybe asking for connection while everything ended was too much. Maybe they'd each chosen

their own survival method—her numbness, his maintenance—and those methods didn't include each other anymore.

David finished his tea. Washed the cup. Put it away. Went to the bedroom.

The bed was made—housekeeping automation. Amara's side looked untouched. Probably was untouched. She slept at the monitoring station more often than not. Office couch, or maybe not sleeping at all. Just: calculating, updating, tracking the asteroid's perfect approach.

David lay down on his side. Looked at the empty space beside him.

Twelve years, four months left.

Should he spend them like this? Married to someone who wasn't present? Maintaining a relationship that was already over?

Probably not. Probably should talk to her. Probably should acknowledge the truth, file for divorce, go their separate ways for the remaining years.

Tomorrow. He'd think about it tomorrow.

But tomorrow he'd wake at 5:00 AM. Shower. Eat breakfast. Take the transport to the solar arrays. Clip his harness to platform seventy-three at 6:47 AM. Greet 47B. Start the day's repairs. Work until shift end. Go to the break room. Read manuals. Come home late. Eat alone. Sleep alone.

Same as today. Same as yesterday. Same as every day for three years.

Maintenance as meditation. Routine as meaning. Showing up as purpose.

Was it enough?

David didn't know. Didn't let himself ask. Because if it wasn't enough, then what?

He closed his eyes. Sleep came slowly, but it came.

The next morning: 5:00 AM. Alarm. Shower. Breakfast. Transport to the arrays.

Platform seventy-three. 6:47 AM. Three minutes early.

"Morning, 47B."

Beep beep.

"Good morning, Colleague Chen. Platform eight requires recalibration. Connection housing integrity at eighty-one percent."

David clipped his harness. Breathed the thin, cold air. Felt the familiar creak of metal under his boots.

"Let's take a look."

They moved across the platform together. The sun was rising. The arrays were warming. The work was waiting.

Eleven years, four months left.

David didn't think about it. Thinking didn't help.

He got to work.

Chapter 17: Numb

Dr. Amara Okafor | Year 4, Month 1 | Antarctic Monitoring Station

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3:47 AM.

Four years. Exactly four years since she'd detected it. Amara sat at the same workstation where she'd first seen the data that ended the world. Different building now—they'd moved the monitoring equipment to a smaller facility after the old station became too expensive to maintain with so few staff. But same shift. Same time. Same asteroid approaching with perfect mathematical precision.

Countdown: 10 years, 2 months, 14 days remaining.

She updated the trajectory. Observation 43,829. The asteroid was precisely where physics said it would be—deviation from prediction: 0.00003%. Perfect. Predictable. Inevitable.

The station hummed around her. Empty. Dr. Kim had quit last month—went to Tokyo to spend time with his grandchildren. Dr. Patel transferred to Lagos two weeks ago, citing "personal reasons." Amara was alone now. Completely. The only human in a facility designed for sixty.

She didn't mind. Preferred it, actually. No awkward small talk. No colleagues trying to be supportive. No one asking how she was doing. Just her and the data and the infinite silence of space.

The monitoring systems were fully automated. Had been for three years. The global telescope network fed data directly to the AI processors. Trajectory calculations updated in real-time. Amara's presence was unnecessary. The machines could do everything she did, faster and more accurately.

But she showed up anyway. Graveyard shift. Every night. Checking calculations that didn't need checking. Updating models that didn't need updating. Maintaining a vigil that served no purpose beyond giving her something to do.

The tea beside her had gone cold. When had she made it? An hour ago? Two? Time was becoming elastic at 3:47 AM, stretching and compressing in ways physics couldn't explain. She took a sip anyway. Bitter. Metallic. Familiar.

Her secondary screen displayed the global death statistics. New data set she'd started tracking Year 2. Aggregate mortality across all causes, updated daily from the UN Health Coordination Network. The numbers climbed with their own mathematical precision:

Total deaths Years 1-4: 1,247,392,847

1.2 billion people. Dead in four years. Not from the asteroid—that came later. From despair, from violence, from abandonment of will. Suicides still climbing—up 380% from baseline. Homicides up 295%. "Natural causes" down 67%—people weren't living long enough to die of old age.

Amara processed this scientifically. Created graphs showing mortality trends by region, by cause, by demographic. Projected future deaths based on current acceleration. Her model predicted total pre-impact deaths would reach 3.4 billion. Forty-three percent of current population, gone before the asteroid arrived.

She filed the report. Sent it to the UN Mortality Database. No one responded. No one cared. The reports went into the archive, read by no one, useful to no one. But someone should document. Someone should count. Someone should say: these deaths happened, these lives ended. Even if the record itself would end.

The numbers didn't hurt. That was the important thing. Statistics were clean. Data was manageable. She could look at 1.2 billion deaths and feel nothing. The numbness was protective. Necessary. If she let herself feel what the numbers represented, she'd shatter.

Better to calculate.

Her message queue showed 847 unread. She'd stopped checking six months ago. Stopped responding two years ago. The queue was mostly automated alerts now—system updates, data confirmations, trajectory verifications. But buried in there: messages from Zara. From David. From colleagues who'd tried to stay in touch before giving up.

Amara's hand hovered over the delete button. Delete all unread? One click and the messages would vanish. No guilt. No obligation. Clean data streams only.

Her finger didn't press.

Instead, she opened her sister's folder. 287 messages from Zara spanning four years. Amara hadn't read them in months, but she hadn't deleted them either. They existed in quantum superposition—both present and ignored, mattering and not mattering simultaneously.

She scrolled through the timestamps. Year 1: daily messages. Year 2: weekly. Year 3: monthly. Year 4: every few months. The frequency declining as Zara's

hope faded.

The most recent was from three weeks ago. Amara opened it.

A video. Zara in her garden in Lagos, sunlight streaming through whatever plants she was growing. Two children visible—Maya (6 years old, serious expression, reading a book) and Kofi (3 years old, laughing at something off-camera, chasing a butterfly).

Zara looked directly into the camera. Tired but present. "Amara. It's been two years since I heard from you. I don't know if you're getting these messages. I don't know if you're okay. I don't even know if you're alive—no one at your station will tell me anything."

She paused. Took a breath. "But in case you are getting them: your niece and nephew exist. Maya reads at second-grade level now. Kofi learned to count to twenty yesterday. They're real. They're here. They won't be here in ten years, but right now they're alive."

Another pause. Longer. "I'm not angry anymore. I understand why you disappeared. I think. You calculated everyone's death and it broke something in you. That makes sense. But Amara—" Her voice cracked slightly. "—you're my sister. I miss you. Maya asks about her aunt. Kofi doesn't remember you at all. That hurts."

Zara wiped her eyes. "I'm not asking you to fix yourself. I'm not asking you to be okay. I know you're not. But please. Just respond. Just tell me you're alive. That's all. Please."

The video ended. Kofi's laughter echoing in the background before cutting to silence.

Amara stared at the frozen final frame. Her sister's face, mid-wipe, tears and sunlight and exhaustion all visible. Behind her: Maya reading, Kofi playing, life continuing despite extinction.

She should respond. She knew this intellectually. Should send message: "I'm alive. I'm sorry. I love you." Simple. Human. Required.

Her fingers hovered over the reply button. Had hovered there for four years. Still hovering. Still unable.

What would she say? *Sorry I calculated your children's deaths and then vanished into data*? *Sorry I can't access emotions anymore*? *Sorry I chose numbness over connection*?

The truth was simpler and worse: she didn't want to respond. Didn't want to see her niece and nephew. Didn't want to watch them grow and laugh and live knowing exactly when they'd die. Maya would be seventeen when the asteroid hit. Kofi would be fourteen. Neither would reach adulthood. Neither would have children. Neither would matter beyond their brief existence.

No. That was wrong thinking. They mattered now. Brief didn't mean meaningless. She'd heard that argument, read it in papers, seen philosophers discuss it. Intellectually, she understood.

But she couldn't feel it. Couldn't access that truth emotionally. In her numbness, everything was equally meaningless—Maya and Kofi, David and Zara, herself and humanity. All temporary. All doomed. All reducible to statistics in the great dying.

Better not to engage. Better to stay in the data.

She closed the message without responding. Returned to her calculations.

The asteroid's albedo had shifted slightly—0.002% change in reflectivity. Probably rotational variation. She updated the model, incorporated the new data. Impact probability remained stable: 99.97%. The asteroid approached with perfect indifference.

Her door chimed. 4:15 AM. Who would visit at 4:15 AM? No one worked here anymore. No one lived nearby. The building should be empty.

She checked the security camera. David. Standing in the hallway outside her office. Looking uncomfortable. Holding two cups of what was probably tea.

Amara's first impulse: don't answer. Pretend she wasn't here. Wait for him to leave.

But he'd seen her car outside. Knew she was here. Would wait.

She opened the door.

"Hi," David said. Fifty-two years old now. Grey in his beard. Tired eyes. Her husband of thirteen years, looking like a stranger.

"Hi."

Silence. The familiar, uncomfortable silence of two people who'd forgotten how to talk to each other. David held out one of the cups.

"Brought tea. Figured you'd be here. You're always here."

Amara took the cup. Still warm. "Thanks."

More silence. David didn't leave. Just stood there, holding his own tea, looking at her with something like concern. When had he last looked at her? Actually looked? She couldn't remember.

"Can I come in?" he finally asked.

Amara wanted to say no. Wanted him to leave so she could return to the comfortable numbness of calculation. But some vestigial part of her—the part that remembered being married, being human—nodded.

David entered. Looked around the office. Single desk. Three monitors. No personal items. No photos. No plants. Nothing human. Just: data and screens and the hum of processors.

"You've been here every night for four years," he said quietly.

"Someone needs to monitor the trajectory."

"The AI monitors it. You know that. This is all automated."

"Manual verification is important."

"For what?" Not aggressive. Just: asking. "What are you verifying? The asteroid is where it should be. Always is. Always will be. You checking it doesn't change anything."

Amara felt defensive. "Documentation matters. Someone should witness. Someone should record."

"Why?"

The question hung in the air. Why? Why document what would be destroyed? Why record what would vanish? Why witness what no one would remember?

"Because," Amara said finally. Not an answer. Just: a placeholder for the truth she couldn't articulate.

David nodded like he understood. Maybe he did. He maintained solar arrays that would vaporize in ten years. Same futility. Same need to do something.

He sat down in the spare chair—unused, dusty, probably hadn't been occupied in months. Sipped his tea. Looked at her monitors. The countdown displayed prominently: **10 years, 2 months, 14 days**.

"I'm worried about you," he said.

"Don't be. I'm fine."

"You're not fine. You haven't been fine since detection. Four years, Amara. Four years of this. You barely eat. You never sleep. You don't talk to anyone. Your sister—"

"Don't." Amara's voice sharper than intended. "Don't bring up Zara."

"She's been trying to reach you for four years. She has a son now. Kofi. Your nephew. You've never even—"

"I know." Amara cut him off. "I get her messages. I know about Kofi. I know about Maya. I know everything. I don't need you to tell me."

"Then why don't you respond?"

Because I can't. Because feeling anything breaks the numbness and the numbness is the only thing keeping me functional. Because seeing my niece and nephew means acknowledging their deaths and I can't do that and still calculate.

"I'm busy," she said instead.

David laughed. Not a happy sound. Bitter. Exhausted. "Busy. Right. Calculating the same trajectory for the ten thousandth time. That's more important than your family."

"It's not about importance. It's about—" She stopped. What was it about? She didn't know anymore.

David set down his tea. Leaned forward. "Amara. Look at me."

She didn't want to. Looking at him meant seeing his concern, his love, his pain. Meant acknowledging she'd hurt him through four years of absence. Easier to look at screens.

"Please," he said quietly.

She looked. His face was open. Vulnerable. Hurt. This man she'd married sixteen years ago. This man who'd loved her through twenty years of work obsession and emotional distance. This man who deserved better than a wife who'd chosen numbness over connection.

"I'm leaving," he said.

The words took a moment to process. Leaving. Leaving what? The station? Antarctica? Her?

"Leaving?"

"You. Us. This." He gestured vaguely. "I can't do this anymore. Can't watch you disappear into data. Can't live with a ghost."

Amara felt something shift. Not quite emotion. More like: the recognition that emotion should be present. This was her husband telling her their marriage was ending. She should feel something. Sadness. Anger. Loss. Relief.

She felt nothing.

"Okay," she heard herself say.

David blinked. "Okay? That's it? Thirteen years and you say 'okay'?"

"What do you want me to say?"

"I want you to say something! Anything! Tell me you're sad. Tell me you're angry. Tell me you care that I'm leaving. Just—feel something."

But she couldn't. The numbness was complete. Total. Protective and destructive in equal measure. David leaving should matter. She knew this intellectually. But knowing and feeling were different things, and she'd lost the connection between them.

"I'm sorry," she said. True but hollow. "You deserve better."

"I don't want better. I want you. The you I married. The brilliant, passionate, impossible woman who cared too much about everything. That Amara. Not this—" He gestured at her, at the office, at the data surrounding them. "—this empty shell calculating the apocalypse."

Amara looked at him. Tried to find words. Failed. What could she say? The woman he'd married was gone. Had died the moment she detected the asteroid. This was what remained: calculations and numbness and hollow witness.

David stood. Left his tea on the desk. Walked to the door. Paused.

"Your sister keeps trying," he said quietly. "Maya asks about you. Kofi doesn't know you exist. They have ten years left and you're wasting them hiding in data. But that's your choice. I can't make you care. No one can."

He left. The door closed with a soft click. Amara alone again.

She sat in the silence. Her husband had just left her. Thirteen years of marriage, ended. She should feel something. Should cry or rage or collapse. Should do something human.

Instead, she turned back to her monitors. Updated the trajectory. The asteroid was exactly where it should be. Observation 43,830. Deviation: 0.00003%. Perfect.

The data was clean. Reliable. Safe.

At 6:30 AM, her shift ended. Amara didn't leave. Stayed at her desk, reviewing calculations that didn't need reviewing. Updating models that didn't need updating. Maintaining vigil that served no purpose.

The morning sun rose over Antarctica's ice, streaming through reinforced windows, illuminating the empty station. Somewhere in Lagos, her sister was waking her children. Somewhere in the maintenance complex, her ex-husband was—what? Packing? Crying? Relieved?

She didn't know. Couldn't let herself wonder. That way lay feeling, and feeling was the enemy.

The countdown continued: **10 years, 2 months, 14 days remaining.**

Amara calculated.

Later — Year 4, Month 3

The separation paperwork arrived digitally. Automated, clean, impersonal. David wanted dissolution of marriage on grounds of irreparable separation. No dispute of assets. No request for support. Just: end this.

Amara signed without reading the details. Authorized her half of the apartment to transfer to him. Sent the documentation back. The marriage ended with the same mathematical precision as everything else in her life.

She moved into the monitoring station permanently. It had a small dormitory—unused, dusty, designed for overnight shifts. She claimed a room. Brought her clothes. Set up a sleeping mat. The station became her home. Why leave? Work was here. Data was here. Purpose, such as it was, was here.

Her colleague Chen (infrastructure coordinator, no relation to David) sent a report: Antarctica population down to 2.8 billion. Power grid at 68% capacity. Water systems at 73%. Transport network at 45%. The megacity was dying slowly. Services collapsing as staff abandoned posts. Buildings going dark. Districts evacuating.

Amara processed this as data. Created visualizations. Projected full collapse timeline: Year 8 at current rate. The city would be mostly empty before the asteroid arrived. People fleeing to—where? Everywhere. Nowhere. Dying elsewhere instead of here.

She filed the report. Updated her mortality models. Added infrastructure collapse as contributing factor. The mathematics remained clean even describing civilizational death.

At night—or what passed for night in the endless work—she sometimes opened Zara's folder. Didn't watch the videos. Just looked at the thumbnails. Her sister's face. Her niece and nephew. Proof that life continued. Proof that some people chose presence over numbness.

She never replied. Couldn't bridge the gap between knowing she should and being able to. The distance was too great. The numbness too complete.

Better to calculate.

The asteroid approached. Perfect trajectory. Perfect mathematics. Perfect certainty.

10 years, 15 days remaining.

Amara updated the model. Observation 47,392. Deviation: 0.00002%.

The data was clean.

That was enough.

That had to be enough.

Alone in the empty station, surrounded by screens full of death, Amara calculated the apocalypse one observation at a time.

The universe didn't care that she'd stopped feeling.

The asteroid approached anyway.

Perfect.

Predictable.

Inevitable.

Chapter 18: Governance

Elena Torres | Year 4, Month 7 | Antarctic Megacity

The morning briefing had become theater.

Elena knew this. Marcus knew this. Chen, Kowalski, and Dr. Ade knew this. They showed up anyway, five people in a conference room designed for thirty, maintaining the ritual of governance when governance barely existed.

7:00 AM. The same time for four years. Elena took her seat at the head of the table—same seat, same position, same responsibility that had hollowed her out and filled her back up with something harder to name than "purpose" but similar enough.

"Population report," she said, starting with Chen as always.

Chen pulled up his datapad. Sixty-two years old now, thin as wire, stubborn as bedrock. He'd lost weight—not from illness, from carrying too much. Wife and daughter left for New Zealand Year 1. They'd asked him to come. He'd said: someone has to maintain the systems. They'd gone anyway. He didn't blame them. Got quarterly messages. They were alive. That was enough.

"Two point two billion as of this morning. Down from four point two billion at detection. Down from three point one billion last year. We're losing approximately fifteen percent population annually—some departure, mostly deaths." His voice was steady. Professional. The voice of a man who'd reported infrastructure statistics for thirty-six years. "My wife and daughter are in that fifteen percent. Not dead. Just: gone. Counted as population loss in my reports."

Elena looked up sharply. Chen had never mentioned his family before. Four years of morning briefings. This was new.

"I'm sorry," she said quietly.

Chen shrugged. "Don't be. They made the right choice. Left Year 1 when leaving made sense. I made my choice too. Stayed. Maintained systems. Someone has to." He met her eyes. "But I count them every morning. Two point two billion includes everyone who left. My family. Everyone's family. The numbers are people. I try to remember that."

Elena wrote this in her notes. Old habit. The notes lived in a secure archive somewhere, categorized under "Historical Record" as if history would survive the asteroid. Someone at the archive still backed them up daily. Someone still believed documentation mattered.

Maybe they were right. Maybe Chen's wife and daughter in New Zealand would die with everyone else, but right now the numbers in the archive said: they existed. They mattered. Someone counted them.

"Infrastructure," Elena prompted gently.

"Power grid at fifty-three percent capacity," Chen continued, professional voice returning. "Water systems forty-eight percent. Waste management thirty-nine percent. Transport twenty-six percent. Communications holding at ninety-two percent—automation handles that. Everything else requires human maintenance we don't have."

He paused, then added something unusual for him. "The systems are dying like everything else. But today they work. Today people have power and water. Today matters. That's why I'm here instead of New Zealand. Someone has to make today work."

Everything failing. Not catastrophically—not yet. Just: slowly. The megacity was like a body with failing organs, compensating until it couldn't, systems shutting down one by one in a process everyone could see but no one could stop.

"Security," Elena said.

Kowalski grimaced. He always grimaced now. Fifty-eight years old, former military, current witness to civilization's unraveling. No family—never married, married to the work. Thirty-three years in security. Started as beat cop in Warsaw, ended as chief of police for a dying world. Funny how careers worked.

"Crime stable at four hundred percent above baseline. Murder rate five hundred percent. Enforcement capacity at fifteen percent—we respond to maybe one in seven calls. The force is down to skeleton crew. People don't want to be police when police work ends in ten years."

He set down his tablet—unusual for him, like Chen. Something had shifted in these morning briefings. Less reporting, more presence. More honesty.

"I've been thinking about Daniel Okonkwo," Kowalski said. "Two years into a fifteen-year sentence. Killed his friend over food. Year 2, District 7 riot. I was there. I arrested him. He came quietly. Kept crying. Kept saying: 'Raj was my friend. Raj was my friend.' "

Kowalski's voice went rough. "Thirty-three years enforcement. I know criminals. Know violence. Know the difference between predators and broken people. Okonkwo's not a predator. He's a man who snapped. System failed him—we failed him—and he killed his friend in a moment of desperate insanity."

He looked at Elena directly. “He writes letters. Two hundred plus now, all to Raj’s widow Priya Patel. She never answers. His own three kids are motherless—wife killed herself Year 3, couldn’t handle her husband being a killer. So Okonkwo sits in a cell, writing letters that get no response, raising no children, serving justice that feels increasingly like cruelty.”

The room was heavy. Kowalski continued. “I enforce the law. That’s my job. Always has been. But the law was written for a world that had futures. For a justice system that believed in rehabilitation, restitution, protection. What’s the law for now? Punishment for its own sake? Consequence without purpose? I lock people up because that’s what justice demands. But I don’t sleep well anymore.”

“Recommendations?”

“Same as yesterday. Same as last year. We’re doing what we can with what we have. It’s not enough. It’ll never be enough.”

Elena nodded. Wrote this down too. Dr. Ade went next—health services report. Suicide rate plateaued but catastrophically high. Hospitals understaffed. Mental health services overwhelmed. Birth rate effectively zero. Death rate climbing. Two hundred thousand deaths last month in Antarctica alone.

Elena felt the number settle. Four years ago it would have destroyed her. Now it was Thursday.

“Orders, Mayor?” Marcus Rivera asked gently.

Elena looked at her deputy mayor. Thirty-five years old, brilliant, pragmatic, committed. Three years ago he’d run against her, calling her governance “empty symbolism.” Two years ago he’d conceded gracefully and offered to serve. Now he sat beside her every morning, helping bear a burden he’d once dismissed as theater.

“Same as yesterday,” Elena said. Her voice was steady, practiced. “Maintain what we can. Document what we can’t. Prioritize life-sustaining systems. Continue essential services as long as staffing allows. We keep showing up. That’s the goal.”

Chen and Kowalski stood to leave, but Chen paused at the door. “Kowalski. Coffee?”

Kowalski looked surprised. “Now?”

“Now. Before next crisis. Five minutes.”

They left together—the infrastructure coordinator who counted his missing family in population reports, and the security chief who couldn’t sleep because justice felt like cruelty. Two men who’d worked together four years and never had coffee. Two men who’d just revealed more about themselves than they’d intended.

Elena watched them go and felt: recognition. They were doing what she did. Bearing unbearable weight. Maintaining impossible systems. Showing up when showing up seemed meaningless. She governed collapse. Chen maintained it. Kowalski enforced order in it. All of them trying to make today work despite tomorrow.

Dr. Ade lingered a moment—"Take care of yourself, Mayor"—then followed. Marcus stayed. He always stayed.

"Four years," he said when they were alone.

"Four years," Elena confirmed.

"Eleven more."

"Eleven more."

They sat in the too-large room, two people governing a dying city, and didn't talk about futility. Didn't need to. After three years working together, they'd developed their own language of silences.

Marcus pulled up his tablet. "I've been thinking about Year 6."

Year 6. The election. Elena's second term ended in just over two years—Year 6, Month 9 if they followed the same schedule as last time. Democratic protocol required elections every four years. She'd insisted on it Year 2—"If we abandon democracy, we abandon everything that made us human." Voters had agreed, barely. 61-39. Legitimate mandate. Hollow victory. Democratic extinction.

"Will anyone run against you?" Marcus asked.

"I don't know. Will you?"

He looked startled. "No. God, no. I tried that once. Lost. Learned my lesson."

"What lesson?"

"That witness matters. That symbolic governance isn't empty. That showing up is everything when showing up is all we have." He met her eyes. "You taught me that. I want to help you do it, not fight you over philosophy."

Elena felt unexpected warmth. Marcus Rivera, her former opponent, her current deputy, the person who understood her work better than anyone except maybe Wei. "Thank you for staying."

"Thank you for letting me stay."

They worked in companionable silence—Marcus handling practical resource distribution, Elena reviewing policy documents that felt increasingly abstract. At 10 AM, Marcus gathered his materials and headed to his office. Elena sat alone in the conference room, staring at her notes.

Two point two billion. Infrastructure failing. Systems collapsing. Crime overwhelming. Deaths accelerating. Her power was supposed to fix these things.

She was mayor. Most powerful human on Earth—or had been, before the power pyramid inverted. Now everyone above her was dead or fled or powerless, and Elena governed ruins.

Not ruins. That was too dramatic. The megacity still functioned. Lights still turned on most mornings. Water still flowed from most taps. Transit ran on reduced schedule. People went to work, bought food, raised children—fewer children, doomed children, but children nonetheless.

Order persisted. Because she showed up. Because Chen showed up. Because Kowalski, Dr. Ade, Marcus, and fifty thousand other public servants across Antarctica still came to work, still maintained systems, still governed the dying.

That had to mean something.

Her office was quiet. Elena kept the window shades open—a view of the Antarctic megacity stretching to the horizon. Billions of lives. Temporary lights. All of it ending in eleven years, vaporized by physics she couldn't negotiate with.

She pulled up her personal messages. Kenji had written.

Mom—

Year 4, Month 6 from Mumbai. I'm at an ashram now. Hindu-Buddhist hybrid. Lot of seekers here, all trying to figure out how to live the ending. We meditate. Study. Talk in circles mostly. I understand intellectually what they're teaching—impermanence, acceptance, presence. Can't feel it yet. Emotional integration seems impossible. But I'm trying.

Met someone interesting. Father Tomás—Brazilian priest whose faith shattered. Came here looking for replacement belief system. We talk sometimes about loss. Loss of future, loss of meaning, loss of faith. He asks if I miss academia. I say yes but dishonestly. What I miss: certainty. Answers. The feeling that intellectual work mattered. Can't access that anymore.

Professor Wei writes to me sometimes. You know her teaching has spread everywhere? People call her the "philosopher of the ending." She says governance without outcomes is still governance. That your work matters precisely because it can't save anyone. That witness is purpose. Does that help you? Does it help me? I don't know yet.

I think about you a lot. You governing a dying city. Me wandering dying cities. Both of us trying to find meaning in collapse. Maybe we're doing the same work from different angles. Or maybe I'm just procrastinating while you're actually helping people. Hard to tell.

Love you. Come home sometimes if you can. I mean if you want to. No pressure. You have work.

— Kenji

Elena read it twice. Her son was twenty-eight now. Nearly three years into his wandering. Still lost. Still seeking. Still alive, which was something. The parties had stopped, or at least the desperate obliteration had slowed. Progress. Maybe.

His last letter—Year 2, Month 11—had mentioned something called "ox-herding pictures." Zen teaching about seeking and finding. He'd explained all ten stages with perfect intellectual clarity, then admitted he was still lost at stage one. Elena understood that feeling: governing through collapse, documenting witness no one would read, showing up to empty rooms. Maybe she was seeking something too. Or maybe, like Kenji's teaching suggested, being present to being lost was enough.

She started a reply:

Mijo—

I'm glad you're in Mumbai. Glad you're seeking, even if finding seems impossible. Maybe seeking IS the answer. Maybe there's no destination, just: the practice of looking.

Professor Wei writes to me too, through your letters mostly. Her philosophy spreads like seeds—I see it everywhere now. In Marcus's understanding. In Chen's persistence even while counting his missing wife and daughter in population statistics. In Kowalski's moral struggle with enforcing justice that feels like cruelty. In the way Dr. Ade keeps showing up to tend the dying. We're all practicing presence without knowing that's what we're doing.

Chen told us about his family today. Four years of morning briefings and he'd never mentioned them. Kowalski talked about sleepless nights, about Daniel Okonkwo in prison, about the weight of enforcing laws written for a world with futures. They're changing, Kenji. Or maybe they're finally saying aloud what they've been feeling all along. Witness matters. Even reporting infrastructure failures. Even arresting desperate people. Even showing up to govern collapse. All of it matters because we're present to it. Because we're honest about it. Because we bear witness even when witness changes nothing.

Does Wei's teaching help me? Yes. Not the way answers help. More the way company helps. Knowing someone else sees what I'm doing. Sees that it matters even when it accomplishes nothing. That's enough most days.

You asked if we're doing the same work. I think yes. You're bearing witness to how people face the end. I'm bearing witness to how civilization faces the end. Both necessary. Both impossible. Both worth doing.

I love you. I'm proud of you. Come home if you want, stay abroad if that helps more. Whatever you need. Eleven years left—spend them however makes them bearable.

— Mom

She sent it. Immediately wished she'd said more, said less, said differently. But

the words were gone. That was always true. You spoke and the speaking was over and you couldn't take it back, couldn't perfect it, could only live with what you'd offered.

Two more letters waited to be written. One to Wei—weekly correspondence, five years now of philosophical exchange. One to Marcus Reyes—quarterly check-in, two years since he'd left for Mumbai.

She drafted the second quickly:

Marcus—Year 4, Month 7. Still governing. Still showing up. Population down to 2.2 billion. Rivera asks why I continue. Same question you asked me Year 0, Month 2. Remember? "Why are we doing this?" I still don't have good answer. I just keep showing up. Is that enough? How are you? How is Mumbai? Still practicing? Still teaching children? Still finding yourself? I think of you often. Thank you for eight years of service. Thank you for leaving when leaving was right. That was gift. —E

Brief. Honest. Maintaining connection to the person who'd witnessed her early transformation. His responses were always grounded—updates on his teaching, observations on presence practice, gratitude for their shared years. No philosophy, no advice. Just: friendly witness from distance.

She sent both letters. Would receive replies within the week. Her community of correspondence—philosopher, son, former assistant. All teaching her different things about presence, service, letting go.

11:00 AM. Marcus Rivera returned with lunch—two sandwiches, tea, the companionable efficiency of two years working side-by-side.

"Eat," he said. "You skip breakfast too often."

"How do you know I skipped breakfast?"

"I know everything. I'm deputy mayor. Omniscience is in the job description."

Elena smiled despite herself. Marcus had this effect—lightness when she needed it, seriousness when that was required. He'd learned to read her moods perfectly, calibrating his presence to what she needed rather than what he wanted to provide.

They ate in comfortable silence. Then Marcus said: "I've been thinking about Year 6. The election."

"You mentioned that."

"I mean: what if no one runs against you?"

Elena had considered this. Year 2, Marcus Rivera had provided opposition—legitimate democratic contest, genuine philosophical difference. But Year

6? Who would challenge her? Who wanted this burden? Who cared enough about governance to fight for it?

"Then I run unopposed," she said.

"Does that matter? Democratically?"

"I don't know. Democracy requires choice. One candidate isn't choice. But going through the ritual might matter anyway. Letting people vote. Letting them say: yes, continue. Or: no, step down. That's still meaningful."

"Even if the outcome is certain?"

"Especially then. When everything else is certain—the asteroid, the ending, the futility—giving people agency over something, even something symbolic, might matter."

Marcus nodded slowly. "You've thought about this."

"I think about everything. Curse of the office."

"And if you win unopposed? If no one challenges you? What does that mean?"

Elena stared at her half-eaten sandwich. "It means democratic legitimacy shifts. Year 2, I earned sixty-one percent. Voters chose me over you—real choice, real contest. Year 6, if no one opposes me, what do I earn? Not electoral mandate. Something else. Consent maybe. The city saying: fine, continue. We don't care enough to challenge you but we don't care enough to stop you either."

"That doesn't sound inspiring."

"It isn't. But it might be honest. I'll govern not because people chose me passionately but because no one else wanted the burden. That's democracy in the ending. Not enthusiasm. Acknowledgment."

Marcus was quiet for a long moment. Then: "Would you step down? If someone did challenge you?"

"You mean: am I clinging to power?"

"No. I mean: are you doing this because it matters or because it's all you have left?"

The question landed hard. Elena set down her sandwich. Looked at Marcus—earnest face, worried eyes, genuinely trying to understand.

"I don't know," she admitted. "Four years ago I knew. I governed because bearing witness mattered. Because maintaining dignity mattered. Because someone should show up. Now? Now I govern because it's Thursday. Because I don't know what else to do. Because stopping feels wrong even though continuing feels futile. So I keep showing up. Is that purpose or habit? I honestly can't tell."

"Does it matter which?"

"Probably not."

"Then keep doing it. Purpose or habit—either way, you're showing up. That's what matters."

Elena felt tears forming. Blinked them back. Professional mask. But Marcus saw anyway. He always saw.

"Elena," he said gently, first name instead of Mayor. "You're allowed to not be okay."

"I'm the mayor. I have to be okay."

"Says who?"

"Says the two point two billion people relying on me."

"The two point two billion people relying on you know you're human. They don't need you to be perfect. They need you to be present. There's a difference."

Wei's teaching, filtered through Marcus. Elena heard the echo—presence over perfection, showing up over solving, witness over success. Her deputy mayor had absorbed the philosophy completely.

"When did you become a Buddhist?" she asked.

"I'm not. I'm a pragmatist who learned that pragmatism includes acknowledging what matters. You matter. Your presence matters. The fact that you keep showing up when showing up accomplishes nothing—that matters most of all."

"Why?"

"Because it's honest. Because it says: I see you, I'm here, I can't save you but I won't abandon you. That's governance. That's what you do every morning. That's what I help you do."

They finished lunch in silence. Then Marcus returned to his office and Elena returned to her work—policy reviews, resource allocation, infrastructure planning for systems that would exist for eleven more years then vanish.

Afternoon brought the usual chaos. Security incident in District 7—riot over food distribution, twelve injured, no deaths. Elena authorized emergency rations and additional medical support. Knew it wouldn't prevent the next riot. Didn't matter. You handled today's crisis today.

Power outage in Sector 12. Chen reported repair crews responding but undermanned. Elena authorized overtime pay from reserves that wouldn't last but didn't need to last forever. Eleven years of reserves was plenty.

Health services requesting additional mental health staff. Dr. Ade's voice tight with exhaustion: "We're losing people daily to suicide. Not enough therapists. Not enough beds. Not enough anything." Elena approved the hire authorization. Knew they wouldn't find enough people. Approved it anyway.

Prison report. Daniel Okonkwo, Year 2 into a 15-year sentence for manslaughter. Still writing weekly letters to Priya Patel, Raj's widow—over one hundred letters now. Still receiving no response. Priya raising two children alone (Aanya, six; Dev, four) while working as water systems engineer. Three children without their father on Daniel's side. Mental health deteriorating but stable enough for continued imprisonment.

Elena filed this away without comment, though her hand paused over the signature line. Justice required consequences. Mercy required compassion. She'd chosen justice. Marcus Rivera watched her carefully, said nothing.

This was governance. Not grand strategy. Not visionary leadership. Just: responding to today's emergencies. Maintaining today's systems. Showing up today. Tomorrow would bring more crises, more failures, more overwhelming need. She'd show up tomorrow too.

At 6 PM, Marcus stopped by her office. "Go home."

"I have more work."

"You always have more work. The work is infinite. Your capacity isn't. Go home."

"In a moment." Elena looked at him. "You read the prison report."

"I did."

"You think I was wrong. To deny the pardon."

Marcus chose his words carefully. "I think you chose justice over mercy. Both have value. But yes—I think Reyes was right. I think Okonkwo should be with his children."

"He killed someone."

"Yes. And he's dying from guilt in that cell. His children are growing up without him. Raj Patel is still dead. What does keeping Daniel imprisoned accomplish except more suffering?"

"It upholds the principle that actions have consequences. Even at the end of the world."

"Does it? Or does it just add cruelty to tragedy?" Marcus stood. "You asked why I stay. Part of it is this: I disagree with you about Daniel Okonkwo. I think you're wrong to keep him imprisoned. But you're still governing honestly, still trying to maintain justice in impossible circumstances. I respect that even when I think you're mistaken. That's why I stay—to witness your witness, to challenge when challenge is needed, to help you carry this burden even when we disagree about how to carry it."

Elena felt the words settle. "You think I should pardon him."

"I think mercy matters more than justice when time is short. But: it's your decision. You're the mayor. You're the one who has to live with either choice."

"I am." Elena turned back to her work. "Thank you for saying it anyway."

"That's my job. Go home when you can."

He left. Elena sat with her decision—Daniel Okonkwo in prison, two years down, thirteen years left until they all died anyway. Justice maintained. Consequence upheld. A man separated from his children forever because he killed his friend over food during a riot caused by systems she governed.

Was Marcus right? Was Reyes right? Should mercy matter more?

She didn't change her mind. But she wondered. And the wondering would stay with her.

Elena looked at her deputy mayor. Thirty-five years old, carrying weight he didn't have to carry, staying when he could leave. "Why are you doing this, Marcus? Really?"

"I told you. I want to help bear the burden."

"But why? You could be anywhere. Doing anything. Why stand beside a sixty-two-year-old woman governing collapse?"

Marcus sat down across from her. Considered his answer carefully. "Year 2, I ran against you because I thought you were wrong. Thought governance was theater. Thought we should focus on comfort, not dignity. Thought your witness was empty symbolism."

"You said all this in the debates."

"I meant it then. I was wrong. Not about pragmatism—we need that. But about symbolism being empty. I've watched you for two years now. Watched you show up every morning. Watched you hold briefings for five people. Watched you govern when governing accomplishes nothing. And I realized: you're doing the hardest thing. Maintaining presence when presence seems meaningless. That's not empty. That's everything."

"It doesn't save anyone."

"Saving isn't the only form of value. You witness us. You document us. You maintain structure when everything fractures. You say: this matters, you matter, we're doing this together. That's valuable. That's why I stay. Someone should witness you witnessing. Someone should help you carry this. I want that someone to be me."

Elena felt the tears again. Didn't hide them this time. "Thank you."

"Thank you for letting me help. Now go home. That's an order from your deputy."

She went home.

Home was an apartment she barely recognized. Kenji's room was empty—had been empty for two years. His possessions remained: books, dissertation notes, clothes. Frozen in time. Waiting for a return that might not come.

Elena made tea. Sat in her living room. The megacity glowed outside her window—billions of lights, each one a person, each person facing extinction, all of them somehow continuing.

She pulled up Professor Wei's latest letter. The philosopher was 118 now, dying naturally before the asteroid. Her teaching had spread everywhere—letters, students, conversations. Elena had never met her. Probably never would. But Wei's words had shaped the last four years more than any policy decision.

Mayor Torres—

I understand you question the value of your governance. This is natural. You cannot save anyone. You cannot stop the ending. Your power has revealed itself as impermanent, like all power always was. The asteroid makes visible what was always true: control is illusion.

But witness is not illusion. Presence is not illusion. You govern not to control outcomes—you never could. You govern to be present to your people as they face the end. To maintain dignity when nothing else can be maintained. To say: I am here. I see you. This matters.

Your work is not measured in lives saved or problems solved. Your work is measured in presence sustained. Four years of showing up. Four years of bearing witness. Four years of maintaining structure when structure seemed meaningless. This is everything.

Do not mistake lack of outcome for lack of value. The flower blooms knowing it will fade. Blooming is not futile because fading is certain. Blooming is purpose itself. You bloom. Your governance blooms. The city you tend blooms. All temporary. All beautiful. All necessary.

Eleven years remain. Continue blooming. Continue governing. Continue showing up. Not because it changes the ending. Because it honors the middle. Because presence is purpose. Because you are exactly where you should be, doing exactly what should be done.

With deep respect,
Professor Mei-Lin Wei

Elena read the letter three times. Felt something loosen in her chest—not relief exactly, more like recognition. Wei understood. Saw what she was doing. Saw that it mattered even when it accomplished nothing.

She opened her journal—official record, personal practice, document for archives that wouldn't survive but existed now. Wrote:

Year 4, Month 7. Day 1,577. Population 2.2 billion. Infrastructure failing. Systems collapsing. Governance continuing.

I govern because someone should. I bear witness because witness is purpose. I show up because showing up is everything when showing up is all we have.

Marcus stays. Chen stays despite his family in New Zealand, despite counting them as population loss in his own reports. Kowalski stays despite sleepless nights, despite moral confusion about justice versus mercy. Dr. Ade stays. Fifty thousand public servants across Antarctica stay. Not because we can save anyone. Because presence matters. Because witness matters. Because continuing matters even when continuation changes nothing.

Chen maintains infrastructure not for permanence but for today. Kowalski enforces law not because it's clear but because someone must. I govern not to save people but to honor them. We're all learning the same lesson from different angles: showing up is everything when showing up is all we have.

Kenji writes from Mumbai. Still seeking. Still lost. Still alive. I'm proud of him. Both of us trying to face the end with clarity. Both of us failing mostly. Both of us continuing anyway.

Daniel Okonkwo writes letters no one answers. I keep him imprisoned because justice requires consequences. But Wei's teaching doesn't tell me if I'm right. Presence as purpose doesn't solve whether mercy or justice matters more when both end the same way. I chose. I'll live with it. The wondering stays.

Eleven years left. I'll spend them governing. Not because I'm clinging to power. Because this is my practice. Because bearing witness is purpose. Because someone should say: we were here, we mattered, we faced the end together with dignity.

That's enough. Has to be. Is.

She closed the journal. Sat at her window watching the city lights.

Morning would bring another briefing. Five people. Same reports. Infrastructure failing. Deaths rising. She'd document it. They'd respond to crises. They'd maintain what they could. They'd continue.

Because Elena was mayor. Because being mayor meant showing up.

Four years down. Eleven to go.

Purpose or habit, it didn't matter.

She'd show up.

Chapter 19: Teaching

Professor Mei-Lin Wei | Year 5, Month 4 | Lagos District

The gardenia had dropped its petals overnight.

Wei noticed this first thing, wheeling herself onto the balcony at dawn. Yesterday the bloom had been perfect—white petals curled tight, fragrance hanging in the air like memory. This morning: browning edges, petals scattered on soil below. Three days of blooming. Now: composting.

That was truth. Beautiful, simple truth.

She maneuvered her wheelchair carefully among the raised beds. Movement required concentration now. Her hands shook enough that steering demanded attention. Her vision blurred at the edges—the glaucoma had worsened despite treatment. The wheelchair had become necessary six months ago, when her right hip finally refused weight-bearing. Before that, a walker. Before that, a cane. The progression was predictable.

"My body is negotiating its terms of surrender," she'd told Zara last week. "Each month it demands new concessions."

Her mind remained sharp. That was the compensation. Let the machine fail. She would use consciousness while she had it.

The lemon tree needed water. Wei filled the can from the rain barrel—Zara's greywater system, installed two years ago. Li Chen's tree, fifty years old, still bearing fruit. In ten years it would burn. But today it needed water.

Voices at her door. Wei turned, saw Zara entering with Maya and Kofi. Maya was seven now—tall for her age, serious-faced, carrying a picture book. Kofi was four—all energy and curiosity, already running toward the garden.

"Professor Wei!" Kofi's voice was pure delight. "Garden! Flowers!"

"Careful," Zara called. "Gentle with the plants."

"Let him run," Wei said. "Gardens are for living in."

Kofi explored with the focus only four-year-olds possessed—touching every leaf, interrogating every beetle, narrating his discoveries to the sky. Four was a good age for practice, Wei thought. They were already masters of presence. Adults spent years trying to recapture what children did naturally.

"I brought the butterfly book," Maya announced. "Can I read to Kofi?"

"Please."

Maya settled on the bench, Kofi climbing up beside her. Wei positioned her wheelchair nearby. The morning was warm. Lagos District waking below.

Maya opened the book. “The Butterfly Life Cycle,” she read carefully. “First, the caterpillar—”

“Not ‘becomes butterfly,’ ” Wei interrupted gently. Maya looked up, used to these corrections. “What does the book say?”

Maya read again: “ ‘The caterpillar becomes a butterfly.’ That’s what it says.”

“Imprecise language. Not becomes. Transforms. ‘Becoming’ suggests something added from outside.” Wei tapped her temple. “The butterfly is already in there, waiting. Transformation reveals what was hidden.”

“So the caterpillar is already the butterfly?”

“In potential, yes. Like a seed is already the tree. Just requires the right conditions and a lot of patience.” Wei smiled. “Though I suppose patience is easier for seeds than for seven-year-olds.”

“Like people?” Maya asked. “Are we transforming?”

Zara’s attention sharpened. Wei felt it.

“Yes. Birth to childhood to old age to death. The asteroid just lets us see the deadline clearly.”

“Will it hurt?” Maya’s voice was small. “The transformation?”

Zara moved instinctively toward her daughter, but Wei caught her eye, shook her head slightly. Let the child ask. Let truth be spoken.

“I don’t know,” Wei said honestly. “The asteroid impact will be fast. Probably no pain. But Maya—the transformation itself, the dying, that’s not the problem. The problem is fearing it so much we forget to live.”

Maya absorbed this. “I don’t want to be afraid.”

“Then practice not being afraid. Practice being here. Right now. Reading to your brother. Sitting in this garden. Watching the butterflies. That’s all practice is—being where you are.”

Kofi pointed at a butterfly—a swallowtail, black and orange, landing on the gardenias. “Pretty!”

“Very pretty,” Wei agreed. “That one emerged from chrysalis two days ago. Dead in three more. One week of flying.”

“That’s sad,” Maya said.

“Is it? One week of doing exactly what you were meant to do.” Wei watched the butterfly probe a bloom. “I’ve been doing what I was meant to do for forty years. The butterfly is more efficient.”

Maya returned to reading. Wei watched the children, watched Zara tending vegetables. This was teaching. Not lectures. Just presence.

Later, while Kofi napped on a blanket in the shade and Zara pruned the mint, Maya came back to the bench. She'd finished the butterfly book. Her face was thoughtful—that particular expression Wei had learned to recognize as meaning she was working something out.

"Professor Wei?" Maya's voice was careful. "Can I ask you something?"

"Always."

"Why do you teach us about dying? Mama says most children don't learn this."

Wei considered the question. Seven years old and already asking the real questions. This one had depth. "Do you want me to stop?"

"No." Maya shook her head firmly. "I want to understand. But I want to know why you think it matters."

Wei smiled. Children were honest. Adults wrapped their questions in politeness. Maya just asked.

"Let me tell you a story," Wei said. "About a prince named Siddhartha, a very long time ago. His father kept him in a beautiful palace, protected from everything difficult. Beautiful gardens. Perfect life. Never saw sickness, or old age, or death. Completely sheltered."

"Why?" Maya's eyes were intent.

"His father wanted him happy. Thought if Siddhartha never saw suffering, he'd never suffer." Wei shook her head. "But you can't be awake while sheltered from truth."

"What happened?"

"He left the palace. Saw four sights. First: a sick person. Second: an old person. Third: a dead body. Fourth: a wandering seeker—someone who'd given up everything to find truth." Wei paused. "Those four sights changed everything."

"Why?" Maya repeated.

"Because he saw what his father had been hiding. Everyone gets sick. Everyone gets old. Everyone dies. The truth everyone pretends isn't real." Wei touched Maya's shoulder lightly. "Seeing it—really seeing it, not just knowing about it—that awakened him. He couldn't go back to pretending once he'd seen."

Maya was quiet for a long moment. Processing. Wei waited.

"But I already know everyone dies," Maya said finally. "The asteroid. Mama told me."

"Yes. You know it." Wei nodded. "But knowing and seeing aren't the same. Knowing is here." She tapped her head. "Seeing is here." She touched her heart. "Someday, you'll understand the difference. When you see something that makes the knowing become real. That's when practice starts mattering."

Maya's face was serious. "When will that happen?"

"I don't know. Different for everyone. Maybe not until you're much older." Wei smiled. "But when it happens, remember this story. Remember that the prince became the Buddha because he saw truth and didn't look away."

Maya nodded slowly. Filed it away. Wei could see her storing it—the way children stored important things, not always understanding but keeping them safe for later.

"Can I water the lemon tree?" Maya asked.

"Please."

Maya took the watering can—too heavy, but she managed—and carefully watered the tree. Complete focus. Present to the task. Wei watched her and thought: this one will remember. When the time comes, she'll remember.

After the family left—promising to return tomorrow, as always—Wei wheeled herself inside. Her apartment was small, carefully organized for wheelchair access. Zara had helped with that too, understanding before Wei asked that mobility was failing.

The desk was covered with letters. Wei had been writing more in the past year, understanding her time was short. Natural death would claim her before the asteroid. Probably within two years, the doctors said. Her body was finishing its transformation.

She picked up the latest letter to Elena Torres. Had never met the mayor in person, but they'd been corresponding for five years now. Knew her through their letters, through the news reports, through the understanding that came from years of honest exchange. Wei understood Elena's work. Understood the burden of showing up when showing up accomplished nothing.

The letter continued:

Mayor Torres—

Five years of letters. I understand your work now. You maintain order when order is impossible. Show up to briefings when no one comes. Sign documents that won't matter. Lead when leadership can't save anyone.

You think your work is futile. I understand. But witness doesn't require outcome. Presence doesn't require permanence.

Consider the flower. It blooms for three days. Does brevity make blooming futile? No. The flower blooms because blooming is its nature. You govern because governing is yours. (I write letters because writing is mine. Academics never change.)

Your son wrote to me months ago—mentioned studying the ox-herding pictures in Tokyo but unable to embody them. I responded: The pictures aren't a ladder. They're a mirror. He hasn't written back. Sometimes seekers need silence more than words. He'll find his way, or he won't. Either way, he's seeking. That's practice.

You've already found what he's seeking. You just don't recognize it. Every morning you show up. That's the ox. You're already riding it.

Continue.

— *Wei*

She sealed the letter, addressed it carefully. Would send it through the postal network—old-fashioned, but reliable.

Three more letters waited. A seeker in Tokyo asking about meaning. A community organizer in Mumbai. Father Tomás—Brazilian priest, faith shattered, seeking something to replace it. Priests in crisis were becoming regular correspondents. Apparently when professional believers stopped believing, they wrote to Buddhist teachers. Wei found this both flattering and slightly unfair—she had eighty years of practice to develop her acceptance. They wanted it delivered by post.

Afternoon brought visitors. Three young people—early twenties, seekers from Mumbai. Wei heard them at her door, wheeled herself to answer.

"Professor Wei?" The young woman in front looked nervous. Indian, maybe twenty-three, wearing the simple clothes of ashram life. "We heard about your teaching. Hoped you might speak with us."

"Come in."

They entered hesitantly—the young woman (who introduced herself as Priya), a pale young man (Liam from Australia), and a South African woman (Thandiwe). All seeking. All desperate. All carrying the same question: *How do we live ten years knowing we'll die?*

Wei made tea. Her hands shook enough that she spilled water on the counter—twice—but the ritual was automatic. She'd performed it ten thousand times. Her body knew what to do even when it couldn't do it precisely.

"The water goes in the kettle," she said aloud as she wiped up the second spill, "not on the counter. This is advanced technique."

The seekers watched uncertainly. Liam almost offered to help, then stopped himself. Good instinct. She didn't want help. She wanted to make the tea.

They sat on her balcony among the plants. The garden had become her classroom. Better than any lecture hall. Life demonstrating impermanence in real time. Better teaching than words could provide.

"We heard you understand," Priya began. "How to live the ending. We're at the ashram trying to learn. Meditating. Studying. But—" Her voice cracked. "Nothing helps. The fear doesn't go away."

"Why should it?" Wei poured tea, the cups filling unevenly because her hands wouldn't stay still. "You're dying. Fear is reasonable."

Priya looked confused. "But—"

"The question isn't how to eliminate fear. The question is how to live with it sitting beside you." Wei handed Priya a cup. "Like an annoying relative at dinner. Can't make them leave. Can learn not to let them ruin the meal."

Liam leaned forward. "But the meditation teachers say—"

"What do they say?"

"That enlightenment dissolves fear. That if we practice enough, death won't matter."

"Ah." Wei sipped her tea. "Yes. This is common confusion. Enlightenment isn't numbness. Isn't obliteration of feeling. Is recognition of impermanence. Fear can coexist with wisdom."

"So we'll always be afraid?" Thandiwe's voice was small.

"Maybe. Or maybe fear transforms. We change too. I was terrified of my mother dying when I was twenty. She died when I was thirty-two. Still hurt. Hurt differently than I'd feared. Fear doesn't disappear. It ripens into something else."

She set down her cup, gestured to the garden. "I've tended these plants for years. Every season, some die. Do I stop grieving? No. Does it become easier? Some days. The practice isn't eliminating grief. It's being present to it instead of running."

"How do you practice that?" Priya asked.

"You're doing it right now. Sitting here. Drinking tea. Being present to your fear instead of running from it. That's practice."

"That's all?" Liam sounded skeptical. "Just... sitting?"

"Just sitting. Breathing. Tending gardens. Drinking tea without spilling it—which I'm no longer capable of, as you've noticed." Wei smiled. "People want dramatic answers. Secret techniques. Mystical revelations. Disappointing, isn't it? Be here now. That's it. Ancient teaching. No copyright."

They sat quietly, drinking tea, watching the garden. A second butterfly joined the first on the gardenias.

"I don't understand," Liam admitted finally. "Intellectually, yes. But emotionally—" He touched his chest. "Here. I can't feel it."

"Yes. Intellectual understanding is Tuesday. Emotional integration is the rest of your life." Wei looked at him. "You're twenty-three?"

"Twenty-three."

"I'm 119. I've practiced for forty years. Still practicing. The gap between knowing and living is what we work with. You want to close it in one conversation?"

"Do you fear death?" Thandiwe asked softly.

Wei considered. "My body is failing. That's uncomfortable. Painful sometimes. My hip hurts most mornings. My eyes are going." She paused. "I don't fear the dying—that's just transformation. But I grieve this life ending. Grieve the garden. Grieve the students. Grieve the sunrise. This particular light through these particular leaves." She touched a gardenia bloom. "I've practiced letting go my whole life. Still hurts."

"But you're okay with it?" Priya pressed.

"I accept it. Different thing. I accept that I'll die within two years, before the asteroid. I accept that my body is failing. That this garden will continue briefly without me, then burn with everything else." She spread her shaking hands. "Acceptance. Do I feel *okay*? Sometimes yes, sometimes no. Feelings change. Acceptance just means I've stopped arguing with reality."

She looked at the three young seekers. "You want wisdom that will make this easy. There is no such wisdom. Dying is hard. The practice doesn't make it easy. Makes it bearable. Sometimes even meaningful." She smiled. "Ten years of presence is worth more than eighty years of distraction. But you don't get to skip the difficult parts."

"How do we start?" Liam asked.

"You've already started. You came here. Asked questions. Sat in this garden. Drank tea." She gestured at the empty cups. "Tomorrow, do it again. Every day until you die. Simple and impossibly difficult. Teachers have been saying this for three thousand years. Humans keep needing to hear it."

They stayed for two hours. Asked more questions. Received more non-answers. Finally left, bowing respectfully, promising to practice. Wei watched them go.

Three seekers. Maybe one would integrate the teaching. Maybe none. That wasn't her concern. Her job was to teach clearly. Their job was to practice or not. Ninety years of teaching had cured her of the delusion that she controlled outcomes.

Evening brought Zara back alone. Children with Kwame. Zara helped Wei prepare dinner—simple meal, companionable silence. They'd developed rhythm over five years. Zara anticipating what Wei needed before she asked. Wei teaching without words.

"Maya asked about death today," Zara said while chopping vegetables. "Really asked. Not abstract. Direct."

"I heard."

"Did I handle it wrong? Should I have—"

"You handled it perfectly. You let her ask. Let me answer. Didn't shield her. That's right parenting for this time."

Zara was quiet, cutting precisely. Then: "Professor Wei, do you fear death?"

Wei smiled. "Second time today. Same answer: sometimes. I grieve this life ending. But I've practiced letting go for 118 years. This is final practice."

"I can't imagine that peace."

"It's not peace. It's acceptance. Peace sounds gentle. Acceptance is work. Daily work of releasing attachment while still loving. You practice for sixty years, you get better at it. You never master it."

"How do you love something you know you'll lose?"

"How do you not? You know Maya will die. Does that stop you loving her?"

"No. Makes me love her more. Desperately."

"There you go. Impermanence intensifies love. Makes it real. Permanent love would be abstract—like loving a statue."

They cooked together. Simple meal. Rice, vegetables, tea. The apartment filled with domestic warmth. Wei felt: grateful. For this meal. For Zara's companionship. For five years of teaching through gardens and tea and honest conversation.

After dinner, Zara helped Wei to bed. The evening routine—transferring from wheelchair, changing clothes, the small indignities of a failing body tended by younger hands. Zara was efficient, not pitying. Wei appreciated that.

"Thank you," Wei said when settled.

"For what?"

"For letting me teach your children. For tending my garden when I can't. For this." She gestured at herself, at the bed, at the help she needed now for basic tasks.

"I'm a terrible student. I panic regularly."

"That's why you're a good student. You're honest about the difficulty. Students who claim enlightenment worry me."

Zara smiled. "See you tomorrow, Professor."

"Tomorrow. Bring the children."

"Always."

Alone in darkness, Wei lay in bed. Her body was tired. Her mind was active—a familiar imbalance.

Ten years until the asteroid. Two years until her natural death. Simple math. She'd thought about death so long it had become almost boring. Just another fact to incorporate.

Elena in Antarctica, governing. Zara here, raising children. Kenji somewhere, wandering. The Mumbai seekers, practicing or not. All connected through simple philosophy—though most didn't know the source, and the source didn't matter.

The gardenia had bloomed and died. Its seeds would sprout next season. Briefly, before everything ended. But the blooming mattered. Not because it lasted.

Because it happened.

Wei felt her body settling toward sleep. 119 years old. Consciousness flickering. Tomorrow she would wake (probably). Tend the garden (if her hands permitted). Write more letters (if her eyes focused). Teach Maya and Kofi (who would arrive like clockwork). Continue the practice until practice ended.

Simple. Perfect. Complete.

The gardenia had dropped its petals, but the plant was already forming new buds. Bloom, die, bloom again. That was the cycle. Brief and endless. Temporary and eternal. Nothing lasted. Everything mattered.

She slept.

Morning came. Wei woke (she had woken, consciousness persisting one more day). Wheeled herself to the balcony. The garden waited. New gardenia buds, just as she'd seen last night. The lemon tree standing patient. Everything continuing despite her, because of her, independent of her.

She watered the plants. The morning ritual. Same as 118 years of mornings. Same as every morning would be until mornings ended.

Voices at the door. Zara arriving with Maya and Kofi. Punctual. Present. Practicing.

"Garden!" Kofi announced, running to the flowers.

"Professor Wei," Maya said seriously, "I have questions about the butterflies."

"Good. Questions are practice too."

They settled into the garden. The teaching continued. Butterflies and blooming. Caterpillars and transformation. Being present.

119 years old. Body failing. Teaching children who would die at seventeen and fourteen, teaching a mother who would die at forty-seven.

All of them temporary. All of them practicing. All of them here.

The gardenia bud would bloom tomorrow. In three days it would fall.

Wei taught until lunch, wrote letters until her hands shook too much, rested until dinner, slept.

Tomorrow, the same.

That was the practice.

The garden bloomed around her. Temporary. Beautiful.

Enough.

Chapter 20: Wandering

Kenji Torres | Year 5, Month 9 | Mumbai

The meditation hall smelled of incense and sweat.

Forty people sitting zazen. Dawn light filtering through latticed windows. Silence broken only by breathing. Kenji sat in the third row, legs crossed, back straight, mind anywhere but present.

Fifth month at the ashram. Fifth month seeking. Still seeking.

His mind wandered—always wandered. Supposed to focus on breath. In, out. Simple. Impossible. Instead: thinking about the technique of focusing. Analyzing the practice. Evaluating whether it was working. Meta-awareness that prevented actual awareness. Gap between intellectual understanding and embodied experience. He knew the gap existed. Couldn't cross it.

The bell rang. Meditation ended. Forty people stood, bowed, dispersed. Kenji unfolded his legs—they'd gone numb again. Poor circulation from sitting incorrectly. Poor form from thinking too much about form. Everything in his practice was like this: understanding the mechanics, missing the essence.

Yoga came next. Morning asana practice in the courtyard. Kenji had started attending three months ago—Year 5, Month 6—thinking maybe the problem was too much stillness. Maybe he needed movement. Physical practice to anchor awareness in body instead of head.

Didn't work.

He moved through sun salutations analyzing each pose. *Downward dog: are my heels down? That woman's form is better. I should engage my shoulders more. The teacher said root through hands. Am I rooting? What does rooting feel like? This is thinking again. Just feel the pose. But how do I feel without thinking about feeling?*

Warrior Two. His legs burned—good burn, effort made visible. But instead of being present to the burn, he analyzed it: *This is physical sensation. Muscle fatigue. The Buddha taught that sensation arises and passes. I'm experiencing arising. Soon it will pass. I should be present to the arising. But analyzing arising isn't being present to it. I need to just feel. Not think about feeling. Just feel.*

The recursive trap consumed him even in physical practice. Especially in physical practice. His body was doing yoga. His mind was doing philosophy about yoga. The gap between them absolute.

The session ended. Forty people bowed to the teacher—elderly Indian woman who moved with grace Kenji couldn't imagine achieving. She caught his eye as people dispersed: "You're thinking too much."

"I know."

"Then stop."

"I don't know how."

She smiled sadly. "Neither do I. But keep practicing anyway. Maybe one day the body teaches the mind what the mind can't teach itself."

Kenji bowed and left. The same advice in different words. Tokyo: just sit. Cairo: just think clearly. Mumbai: just move with awareness. All saying the same thing. All equally inaccessible. His body had sat, thought, and moved for nearly four years across three continents. His mind remained locked in analysis. Physical practice hadn't helped any more than stillness. The problem wasn't the practice. It was him.

Outside, Mumbai morning was beginning. Year 5 of the apocalypse. The city looked normal—or as normal as anywhere looked now. People walked to work. Vendors set up stalls. Traffic moved through reconfigured streets. The mundane persistence of life in the face of guaranteed death. Kenji watched it every morning, still unable to integrate the contradiction.

"You're thinking again."

Yuki sat beside him on the ashram steps. Twenty-nine years old, Japanese, intensely committed to enlightenment before the end. She'd arrived at the ashram Year 4, dedicated herself completely. Meditated six hours daily. Studied sutras. Practiced with single-minded focus.

"I'm always thinking," Kenji admitted.

"That's your problem."

"I know. Knowing is also my problem."

Yuki smiled—rare expression for her. "Meta-cognition as obstacle. Classic."

They sat watching the city wake. The ashram was Hindu-Buddhist hybrid, accommodating both traditions and neither fully. Mix of monastics and temporary seekers. Some like Yuki—pursuing enlightenment desperately. Others like Kenji—pursuing understanding without knowing what understanding meant.

"Do you think you'll get there?" Kenji asked. "Enlightenment before the end?"

"I have to believe I will. Otherwise why practice?"

"To practice. To have something to do. To fill time meaningfully."

"That's not enough for me." Yuki's voice was quiet but fierce. "I want liberation. Real freedom from suffering. If I die without achieving that, everything was wasted."

Kenji heard the desperation. Understood it. Felt it differently. Yuki sought enlightenment as escape. Kenji sought understanding as purpose. Different goals, same futility. Probably.

"How long will you stay?" she asked.

"Don't know. Until I'm ready to leave. Or until leaving finds me."

"That's very Zen."

"That's very indecisive."

Yuki laughed. "Same thing, sometimes."

Breakfast was communal. Sixty people in dining hall. Vegetarian food prepared by rotating crews. Kenji ate mechanically—tasted nothing, appreciated nothing, just: fueled the body. Another item on his list of failures: couldn't be present even with eating.

Father Tomás sat across from him. Fifty-five years old, Brazilian, former Catholic priest. His faith had shattered Year 1—"How can I worship a God who lets everyone die?"—and he'd spent four years searching for replacement belief. Tried Buddhism, Stoicism, Taoism, secular philosophy. Found pieces in each, whole in none.

"Sleep well?" Tomás asked. His English carried Portuguese rhythm.

"Same as always. You?"

"Dreamed about my old church. The congregation. I told them mass was cancelled permanently due to apocalypse." He smiled sadly. "Even in dreams, the comedy persists."

Kenji liked Tomás—gentle, confused, honest about confusion. No pretense of having answers. No performance of wisdom. Just: searching with full awareness that searching might be futile.

"Have you heard from home?" Tomás asked.

"Letter from my mother yesterday. Things in Antarctica are stable. Population declining but systems holding. She's still governing."

"And that helps you? Knowing she's doing her work while you do yours?"

"I don't know if I'm doing work. I'm traveling. Looking. Not finding."

"Looking is work. Being willing to not-find takes courage."

Kenji considered this. Nearly four years ago—Year 1, Month 6—he'd left Antarctica thinking: I'll find answers out here. Truth about how to live the ending. Some wisdom tradition that handles mortality perfectly. Five months in Mumbai had taught him: no perfect answers exist. Or they exist but remain inaccessible. Or they're accessible but not helpful. Or they're helpful but he's broken in ways that prevent help from landing.

"I'm going to Lagos," he said suddenly. Hadn't known he'd decided until words emerged.

He remembered the ox-herding pictures from Tokyo—three years ago now, Year 2, Month 11. Roshi had taught them. Ten stages from lost to enlightened. Kenji had understood them perfectly, explained them to his mother in careful detail, studied the scroll until he could recite each image. Roshi had said: "You're still on Picture One. Still seeking." Three years later, Kenji could see he'd progressed—maybe Picture Three now. Glimpsing the ox. Seeing it briefly through intellectual understanding. But Picture Three was still fundamentally lost. The ox glimpsed wasn't the ox caught. Understanding wasn't realization. He could see the teaching clearly across Tokyo, Cairo, Mumbai. But seeing wasn't being.

Tomás looked surprised. "When?"

"Soon. Maybe next month."

"Why Lagos?"

"My cousin's there. Zara. She has two kids—Maya and Kofi. And there's this philosopher. Professor Wei. Very old. My mother writes about her sometimes. Correspondence they share. Wei teaches presence, impermanence, acceptance. I want to meet her."

"You could learn that here."

"I've been here five months. Haven't learned it yet."

Tomás nodded slowly. "So: more seeking. Different location."

"Maybe the seeking itself is the point."

"Or maybe the seeking is avoidance."

The words landed hard. Kenji stared at his breakfast. Tomás continued gently: "I do the same thing. Travel, study, practice. Always moving. If I stopped moving, I'd have to feel everything I'm avoiding. So: seeking as defense mechanism."

"Is that wrong?"

"I don't know. Wrong implies moral judgment. This just: is. We're doing what we can. Maybe that's enough."

Maybe. Kenji finished eating. Tomás left for morning sutras. Kenji stayed, staring at empty plate, thinking about avoidance versus seeking versus both being true simultaneously.

This was how it felt in Tokyo. In Cairo. Always the same pattern.

Nearly four years of wandering now. Year 1, Month 6 to Year 5, Month 9. Four cities if you counted Antarctica. Three continents. The ox-herding pictures called it "seeking the ox"—Picture One. But Kenji had learned them in Tokyo, Year 2, Month 11. Roshi explaining the ten stages while snow fell outside. Picture One: seeking. Picture Two: finding traces. Picture Three: glimpsing but not holding.

Kenji was on Picture Three. Had been for years. Every city offered glimpses—Tokyo's zazen, Cairo's philosophy, Mumbai's meditation. Moments where he saw clearly, touched something real. Then it vanished. The ox seen but not caught. Picture Four required catching and holding. The gap between glimpsing and catching felt infinite.

Seventeen months in Tokyo—Buddhist monasteries on the city outskirts, zazen practice six hours daily, studying koans with teachers who spoke through translators. He'd understood everything intellectually. The ox-herding pictures. The nature of mind. The practice of just sitting. But understanding remained locked in his head, never dropping into his body. After seventeen months of bowing and breathing and analyzing his inability to stop analyzing, he'd left.

Year 3, Month 2: Cairo. Different approach. Western philosophy this time. If Eastern traditions couldn't help him embody acceptance, maybe Stoicism could teach him through reason. He'd found a community in the desert—secular philosophers living in a half-abandoned research station, practicing memento mori, studying Marcus Aurelius and Epictetus, holding daily sessions on mortality and meaning. More his speed, he'd thought. More aligned with his academic training.

It wasn't.

They'd sit in the desert heat discussing death abstractly while the asteroid approached concretely. "Death is nothing to us," they'd recite, "since when we exist, death is not yet present, and when death is present, then we do not exist."

Beautiful logic. Perfect rationalization. Completely useless for actually facing the end.

He'd met other seekers there—ex-academics mostly, people who thought mortality could be solved through right thinking. A German mathematician who'd created elaborate philosophical systems proving death was ontologically neutral. A French existentialist who'd written a six-hundred-page treatise on authentic being-toward-death. An Egyptian woman—Amina, he'd just remembered—who'd analyzed Stoic texts with the same desperate precision he'd analyzed Buddhist sutras.

All of them brilliant. All of them frozen. Philosophy as avoidance dressed up as inquiry.

He'd stayed fourteen months in Cairo. Longer than he should have. The desert silence was seductive—easier to think about mortality in abstract than to feel it in particular. But by Year 4, Month 4, he'd admitted defeat. The Stoics had no special answer. Just different vocabulary for the same unbridgeable gap between knowing about acceptance and actually accepting.

So: Mumbai. Year 5, Month 4. Back to embodied practice. The ashram's Hindu-Buddhist hybrid approach—maybe mixing traditions would help where each alone had failed. Five months now of meditation and manual labor and watching himself fail at presence. Same pattern. Different location.

And now: Lagos. One more city. One more teacher. Professor Wei—119 years old, correspondent with his mother, teaching presence and impermanence to anyone who asked. Maybe she'd be different. Maybe age brought wisdom that younger teachers lacked. Maybe meeting someone who'd actually lived with death for over a century would teach him something the books and practices couldn't.

Or maybe he'd arrive, learn nothing new, leave again. Another stop on the wandering that defined him. Tokyo, Cairo, Mumbai, Lagos. Always moving. Never arriving. Seeking as identity. Avoidance as practice.

Tomás was right. He was running.

But running toward or running away? Both. Neither. The question itself was analytical trap—another way of thinking about seeking instead of actually being present with it.

Kenji stood. The breakfast hall was mostly empty now. Morning work period starting soon. He should go to the garden. Should water vegetables he'd never eat. Should perform purpose whether or not purpose was real.

But first: this decision. Lagos. Professor Wei. One more attempt to learn what he couldn't seem to learn. One more city in the wandering. Maybe the last city. Maybe the place where seeking finally exhausted itself into something else.

Or maybe just: another destination in the long drift toward the end.

Afternoons were work period. Ashram required four hours daily labor—cooking, cleaning, gardening, maintenance. Kenji usually chose garden. Something about being outside, hands in soil, growing things that wouldn't outlast the asteroid. Futile cultivation. Perfect metaphor.

Today he worked beside Amina. Twenty-four years old, Egyptian, philosopher studying Stoicism with academic rigor. She'd arrived at the ashram two weeks ago, approaching Eastern practice like dissertation research. Took notes during meditation. Analyzed sutras structurally. Understood everything intellectually, felt nothing emotionally.

Kenji recognized himself in her immediately. Recognized her especially—he'd met someone with her exact name and approach in Cairo. Maybe the same person? He almost asked, then didn't. If she didn't remember him, that said everything about how forgettable his seeking was. If she did remember and hadn't mentioned it, she had her reasons.

They weeded in silence. Eventually Amina said: "This is absurd."

"Gardening?"

"Growing vegetables for people who'll die before these plants reach maturity. The tomatoes will outlive us."

"So?"

"So it's objectively meaningless. We're performing purpose."

Kenji pulled another weed. "Is performed purpose less real than authentic purpose?"

"Yes. Obviously."

"I'm not sure. If the performance helps us survive—psychologically, I mean—then it's functional. Function is meaning."

"That's pragmatism, not truth."

"Maybe they're the same thing."

Amina stopped weeding. Looked at him. "You don't believe that."

She was right. He didn't. But he wanted to. Wanted to believe that seeking was meaningful even when finding was impossible. That traveling taught something even when destination proved illusory. That performing purpose created real purpose through the act of performance.

"I'm leaving next month," he said.

"Where?"

"Lagos."

"Why?"

"There's a philosopher there. Very old. Teaches presence and impermanence. I want to meet her before she dies."

"So: more seeking."

"Yes."

"You know she won't have answers either."

"Probably not. But maybe she's different. The Cairo philosophers were brilliant—we probably crossed paths there Year 3 or 4—but they were all thinking about death, not living with it. Maybe someone who's 118 years old knows something we don't."

"Or maybe you just need to keep moving."

"But you're going anyway."

"Yes."

Amina returned to weeding. "I understand that. I'm doing the same thing. Came here thinking: ashram will have wisdom. Two weeks in: nothing I didn't already know intellectually. But I'll stay another month. Then somewhere else. Always seeking. Never finding. It's exhausting."

"What's the alternative?"

"Stopping. Accepting. Being present with not-knowing."

"Can you do that?"

"No. Can you?"

"No."

They worked in silence. Two seekers, intellectually brilliant, emotionally frozen, gardening vegetables they'd never eat. The absurdity was complete. The absurdity was everything.

Evening study was optional. Kenji attended anyway—structure helped. Tonight: discussion on the Dhammapada, led by the ashram's senior teacher. Forty people in meditation hall, now configured with cushions in circle.

The teacher was seventy years old, Indian, with teaching manner that oscillated between profound and inscrutable. He read verse 277: "All conditioned things are impermanent. When one sees this with wisdom, one turns away from suffering."

Discussion opened. Yuki spoke first: "How do we develop that wisdom? How do we really see impermanence, not just understand it intellectually?"

The teacher smiled. "You practice. Every day. Every moment. Eventually understanding deepens into embodiment."

"How long does that take?"

"As long as it takes. There is no schedule."

"But we have ten years!" Yuki's frustration broke through. "Ten years until everyone dies. That's not enough time for gradual enlightenment."

"Then perhaps gradual enlightenment is not the path. Perhaps sudden realization. Perhaps no realization at all. Perhaps accepting non-attainment is the attainment."

The words were classic non-dual teaching. Kenji had heard variations a hundred times across five months. They never helped. Just: confused him more. Either truth existed and could be accessed, or it didn't exist and seeking was futile, or truth was paradox and human cognition couldn't grasp it. All three options felt true and impossible simultaneously.

Father Tomás raised his hand. "Teacher, what if we can't accept impermanence? What if we rage against it? Is that wrong?"

"Nothing is wrong. Rage is also practice. Grief is practice. Confusion is practice. You feel what you feel. Don't add second arrow of judgment."

"But I want peace. I want to stop suffering. That's why I'm here."

"Peace is not absence of suffering. Peace is acceptance of suffering. Different thing entirely."

Kenji listened to the exchange. Tomás seeking peace. Teacher offering acceptance. The gap between them unbridgeable. Like all gaps here. Between intellectual understanding and emotional integration. Between knowing about presence and being present. Between studying Buddhism and becoming Buddhist.

After class, walking back to dormitories, Tomás caught up with him. "Does any of this help you?"

"The teaching?"

"Any of it. The ashram. The practice. The seeking."

Kenji considered honestly. "It gives me structure. Something to do. People to be around who are asking same questions. That helps. But actual answers? Actual transformation? No. Not yet."

"Maybe that comes later."

"Maybe. Or maybe I'm constitutionally unable to access it. Maybe my brain is too analytical. Too Western. Too damaged by academic training."

"Or maybe you're exactly where you need to be."

"That's Buddhist optimism."

"No, that's just: true. You're here. Now. This is exactly where you are. That's definitional."

Kenji laughed. "Tautology as wisdom."

"Sometimes wisdom is tautological."

They reached the dormitories. Separated to respective rooms. Kenji lay on his mat—simple bedding, shared room with five others. Listened to night sounds. Mumbai traffic distant. Other seekers breathing. His own thoughts spiraling.

He pulled up his wrist display. Message from Elena, sent yesterday:

Mijo—

Year 5, Month 8 from Antarctica. Population at 1.9 billion now. Down from 4.2 billion at detection. Infrastructure holding at minimal levels. I govern meetings attended by five people in rooms designed for thirty. Democratic legitimacy becomes question mark—Year 6 election approaching, unclear if anyone will oppose me. Marcus Rivera says people trust my witness more than my power. Strange shift: authority through presence rather than votes.

Professor Wei writes to me regularly now. Her letters are brief, clear, profound. She says governance without outcomes is still governance. That showing up when powerless is the whole work. I'm beginning to understand that. Not accept—understanding and acceptance are different. But: understand.

Zara sent photos of Maya and Kofi. Your cousin's children are beautiful. Maya is nearly eight now—serious, brilliant. Kofi is almost five—joyful, innocent. Zara is defiant mother, raising children she knows will die young. That defiance is everything. That choice to love what will end—maybe that's the teaching.

Come home when you're ready. Or stay abroad. Or keep wandering. Whatever you need. Ten years left—spend them searching if searching helps. Just: stay alive. Stay connected. Let me know you're okay sometimes.

I love you. I'm proud of you. Even when you feel lost, you're finding something. I don't know what yet. But something.

— Mom

Kenji read it twice. His mother, most powerful human on Earth, learning philosophy from letters. Governing with presence instead of power. Bearing witness to civilization's collapse. While he wandered ashrams, unable to meditate properly, seeking answers he couldn't define.

Were they doing the same work? Elena staying, Kenji traveling. Both trying to find meaning in the ending. Both failing and continuing. Both present with their respective practices even when those practices felt futile.

He started a reply:

Mom—

Year 5, Month 9 from Mumbai. I'm at an ashram. Hindu-Buddhist hybrid. Lot of seekers here, all trying to figure out how to live the ending. We meditate.

Study. Talk in circles mostly.

Remember the ox-herding pictures from Tokyo? Year 2, Month 11? I've been thinking about them. I'm on Picture Three—glimpsing the ox. I can see the teaching clearly. Understand impermanence, acceptance, presence intellectually. But I can't stay there. Can't embody it. Picture Four is catching—holding onto understanding through struggle and practice. I don't know how to get there.

Met some interesting people. Yuki—Japanese woman desperately seeking enlightenment. Father Tomás—Brazilian priest whose faith shattered. Amina—Egyptian philosopher as emotionally frozen as me. We're all performing seeking. Don't know if it's authentic or avoidance. Maybe both.

Nearly four years wandering now. Tokyo taught me I can't stop thinking long enough to meditate properly. Cairo taught me Western philosophy handles death no better than Eastern practice—just different vocabulary for the same failure. Mumbai teaching me the same lessons again. The pattern is exhausting.

But Professor Wei writes to you? I'd like to meet her. Zara mentions her sometimes—neighbor, teacher, 119 years old. Maybe she can teach me how to move from glimpsing to catching. How to hold onto the ox when it struggles. Planning to go to Lagos soon. Want to learn from her directly before she dies. Or before I'm too closed off to learn. Whichever comes first.

Maybe Lagos will be different. Maybe I'll just keep glimpsing until I die. Both seem possible. Picture Three continuing—seeing but not holding, understanding but not embodying. Four years of wandering. Four years of glimpses. Maybe that's all I'll ever get.

I think about you a lot. You governing a dying city. Me wandering dying cities. Both of us trying to find meaning in collapse. Maybe we're doing the same work from different angles. Or maybe I'm just procrastinating while you're actually helping people. Hard to tell.

Love you. Miss you. Will come home eventually. Just: not ready yet. Need to exhaust the seeking before I can stop seeking. Does that make sense?

— Kenji

He sent it. Immediately felt the familiar inadequacy—words never captured what he meant. Never bridged the distance. But they were something. Connection attempt. That mattered, probably.

Week three of Month 9. Kenji sat with Yuki after morning meditation. She'd been crying—rare for her. Allowed herself emotional expression even more rarely than Kenji.

"What happened?" he asked.

"I've been here eighteen months. Practicing intensely. Six hours of meditation daily. Sutras memorized. Teachers consulted. And I'm exactly where I started. No enlightenment. No liberation. No breakthrough."

"Maybe breakthrough isn't goal."

"It has to be! Otherwise what am I doing? Ten years until everyone dies. If I don't achieve liberation before then, I've wasted everything."

"Or you've practiced something valuable even without achieving end goal."

"That's consolation prize. That's participation trophy. I want real attainment."

Kenji understood. He wanted that too—real transformation, not just: understanding that transformation would be nice. Wanted to be present, not just know about presence. Wanted to accept impermanence, not just study acceptance.

"What if attainment is impossible?" he asked gently.

"Then seeking is futile."

"Does futile seeking have value?"

Yuki looked at him. Eyes red. Face exhausted. "I don't know. You tell me. You've been seeking nearly four years. Tokyo, Cairo, here, wherever you go next. Has it helped?"

Kenji sat with the question. Had it helped? He'd learned things—practices, philosophies, perspectives. Met people. Gained intellectual framework for the ending. But: transformation? Actual change? Peace?

"It's given me something to do," he said finally. "Structure. Purpose. Company with others asking same questions. That's not nothing."

"But it's not enlightenment."

"No. It's not enlightenment."

They sat in silence. Two seekers, practicing futility, continuing anyway. Maybe that was the teaching. Maybe the seeking itself was the practice, regardless of attainment. Maybe showing up to meditation even when meditation didn't work was the whole point.

Or maybe that was just: rationalization for failure.

Year 5, Month 10 arrived. Kenji decided: time to leave. Five months was long enough. He'd learned what the ashram could teach him—which was mostly: he couldn't learn what the ashram was teaching. Gap too wide. Mind too analytical. Something broken in him that prevented embodiment.

He told the senior teacher his plans.

"Where will you go?" the teacher asked.

"Lagos. There's a philosopher there. Very old. I want to meet her."

"And you think she will have answers we don't?"

"No. But maybe different questions."

The teacher smiled. "That's wise. Different questions often more valuable than different answers."

"Or maybe I'm just running."

"Running toward and running away can be same movement. Direction matters less than quality of presence during the running."

Kenji bowed. Thanked the teacher. Packed his few belongings—clothing, tablet, journal. Nothing else. He'd learned to travel light. Material simplicity even when mental complexity remained overwhelming.

Goodbyes were brief. Yuki: "Find what you're looking for." Tomás: "Or don't find it. Either is okay." Amina: "Let me know if Lagos helps. I might go there after here."

Before leaving Mumbai entirely, Kenji had one errand—medical supplies for the ashram from the district clinic. The walk took him through the refugee quarter, a place he usually avoided. Too many desperate faces. Too much suffering he couldn't help.

He almost didn't recognize her.

Blonde hair matted, unwashed. Face hollow, cheekbones sharp under stretched skin. Sitting against a wall with three others, all in various states of consciousness. The needle marks on her arms were visible even from distance.

Linnea. From the Lagos party. Year 0, Day 72. Five years ago.

Kenji stopped. Stared. She looked up—pupils pinpoint, eyes unfocused. No recognition. She was too far gone to remember anything beyond the next dose.

"You have anything?" she asked. Swedish accent thicker now, words slurred. "Anything at all?"

He should keep walking. Should let her be someone else's tragedy. Should maintain the detachment he'd cultivated through four years of seeing suffering everywhere.

But he couldn't move.

"Linnea?"

Slight pause. Some flicker behind the eyes. "Do I... know you?"

"Lagos. Year 0. We—" He stopped. What were they? Two lost people who'd spent one drugged night together? "We met at a party."

"Lagos." She laughed—bitter, hollow sound nothing like her loud laugh from five years ago. "Lagos. Yeah. That was... before." She gestured vaguely at herself. "This is after."

"Are you..." He didn't know how to finish the question. Okay? Clearly not. Getting help? Obviously not. Surviving? Barely.

"Am I what? Dying?" Another laugh. "We're all dying, remember? Asteroid. End of everything. So why not this way? At least I won't feel it when it comes."

One of the other people—man, maybe forty, equally wasted—stirred. "She's no good for hours. Already used everything. Come back tomorrow if you want her."

Kenji felt sick. "I don't—I'm not here for—"

"Then why are you here?" Linnea's voice carried unexpected sharpness. "You wanna save me? Tell me to stop? Offer me your ashram wisdom?" She gestured at the building behind them—small temple, meditation center, free clinic. "They try every day. The helpers. The fixers. The enlightened ones. Telling me there's better way. But this?" She held up her scarred arms. "This is the only better way I've found."

"There are programs. Treatment centers—"

"For what? Fifteen more years of sobriety before we all burn? No thanks." She closed her eyes, leaning back against the wall. "I studied trees, you know. Did I tell you that? Year 0? Biologist. Trees. The big ones, centuries old. Sequoias. Bristlecone pines. Three thousand years old, some of them. And the asteroid kills them too. All that time, all that life. Gone."

She opened her eyes, looked at him with sudden terrible clarity. "You were the deflection guy. The PhD. Could've stopped it but couldn't. We're the same, you and me. Both failed at our work. Just chose different ways to cope. You travel. Seek. Meditate. I do this. Neither works. Neither matters. At least mine doesn't pretend."

The words landed like physical blows. She was right. They'd both been at that party Year 0, both seeking oblivion, both running. He'd gotten out. She hadn't. Luck? Choice? Something else?

"I got clean," he said quietly. "After that night. Went home. Stopped."

"Good for you." No sarcasm. Just: tired statement. "I tried. Year 1. Rehab in Stockholm. Made it four months. Then I thought: why? What am I staying sober for? To watch everything end clearheaded? Fuck that."

Kenji crouched down, eye level with her. Saw the person underneath the addiction—biologist who'd studied ancient trees, Swedish girl who'd come to Lagos seeking something, twenty-two-year-old who'd offered him pills with glassy-eyed generosity.

"Where do you stay?" he asked.

"Anywhere. Here. There. Does it matter?"

"Do you eat?"

"When someone brings food. The clinic people. They're persistent." She smiled slightly. "Don't worry about me, deflection boy. I'm fine. I'm exactly where I chose to be."

"I don't think—"

"Don't think. That's your problem. Too much thinking. I stopped thinking Year 1. Much better."

One of her companions groaned, stirring from stupor. Linnea's attention shifted immediately—checking if he had anything, needed anything, wanted something. The network of addiction. The constant focus on the next dose, the next escape, the next forgetting.

Kenji stood. Felt helpless. Felt guilty. Felt the enormous weight of their different paths—both started at the same party, both took the same pills, both fell apart. But he'd had his mother. Had resources. Had the privilege to seek instead of sink.

Linnea hadn't.

"I'm leaving Mumbai," he said. "Going to Lagos. To—" Why was he telling her this? "To learn from a teacher there."

"Lagos." Linnea's voice was distant now. "Tell Lagos I said hi. Tell the parties and the music and the lights. Tell them Linnea's still dancing. Just differently now."

He left her there. Walked away through the refugee quarter with medical supplies he'd forgotten to pick up and guilt he couldn't metabolize. The walk back to the ashram took forty minutes. Every step carrying Linnea's hollowed face. Her sharp clarity. Her choice to die this way instead of that way.

Both of us running, she'd said. Just different directions.

That night, before sleeping, he added a postscript to his letter to Elena:

P.S. — Saw someone today from Year 0. The parties. She's deep in addiction now. Barely alive. Said we're the same—both running, just different methods. She might be right. I got out. She didn't. Don't know why. Luck. Privilege. Timing. But I can't help her. Can't save her. Can only witness and move on. Is that enough? Is witnessing without helping just voyeurism? Don't know. But it haunts me. Will keep haunting me.

The next morning, one last encounter before his transport. Kenji found Marcus Reyes at the children's center—small building on ashram grounds where refugees taught local kids. Reyes had been there three years, teaching English and basic science.

They'd met twice before in Antarctica—brief conversations, mutual recognition. Kenji respected Reyes' choice to leave power for presence. Wanted to hear his perspective on seeking.

"Did you find it?" Kenji asked. "What you came here for?"

Reyes looked up from helping a seven-year-old with spelling. "Define 'it.' "

"Purpose. Peace. Whatever you were looking for when you left Antarctica."

Reyes considered. Forty years old now, calm in ways Kenji envied. "I found something. Not what I expected. I came to escape responsibility, to stop being defined by eight years of service. Found I couldn't escape. Service is part of me. So I teach children instead of governing mayors. Different service. Same nature."

"Does that feel like finding or failing?"

"Both. Neither." Reyes smiled slightly. "Your mother asks me the same questions in her letters. 'Are you happy? Did leaving work? Was it worth it?' I tell her: I'm present. That's different from happy but better than numb. Leaving was right. Being here is right. Eventually leaving here will be right too. Everything in its time."

"She writes to you?"

"Quarterly. I write back. We maintain connection without proximity. That's enough." Reyes studied Kenji. "You're leaving too. Going to Lagos?"

"To meet a Professor. Philosopher. Wei. Before she dies."

"Good. Wei's teaching might land better than ashram philosophy."

It seemed Reyes knew everyone. Kenji didn't ask how. Just accepted it.

Reyes continued. "Wei is more grounded. More practical. Less about achieving states, more about accepting what is." Reyes touched the boy's shoulder gently. "Spelling is good, Arjun. Keep going."

He turned back to Kenji. "Your mother loves you deeply. Worries about you constantly. When you're ready, go home. Not for her—for you. The seeking is valuable. But so is returning. I left Antarctica three years ago. Haven't gone back. Maybe won't. But I think about it. Think about showing up one last time before the end. Being there with people I served. Maybe you'll feel the same. Maybe not. Just: don't let pride keep you away if returning is what you need."

Kenji felt unexpected emotion. "Thank you."

"Travel well. Learn what you can. Send regards to Wei from me—I've read her letters to your mother. She's remarkable."

On his last evening, Kenji sat in the meditation hall alone. Forty cushions empty. Incense burned down to ash. Mumbai sounds filtering through latticed windows—traffic, voices, life continuing despite the countdown.

He closed his eyes. Tried to meditate. Tried to be present. Mind wandered immediately—thinking about Lagos, about Wei, about his mother, about the ten years remaining, about whether seeking was meaningful or just: addiction to motion.

After twenty minutes he opened his eyes. Still not present. Still analytical. Still broken in familiar ways.

But: he'd shown up. He'd tried. He'd spent five months practicing something he couldn't do well. That was worth something. Maybe not enlightenment. Maybe just: effort. Honest effort in the face of inadequacy.

Maybe that was enough.

The transport to Lagos departed early morning. Kenji watched Mumbai recede—sprawling city, climate-adapted, thriving despite apocalypse. Year 5 of the ending. People still lived. Still worked. Still sought meaning.

He was part of that seeking. One seeker among millions. Nothing special. Nothing profound. Just: another human trying to figure out how to live ten years.

The transport climbed. Sky opened. Earth curved below—beautiful, doomed, indifferent.

Kenji thought about Professor Wei. 119 years old. Spent lifetime practicing impermanence. Teaching presence. Offering wisdom to anyone who sought it. She was dying naturally—body failing while mind remained clear. Lucky death. Old death. The kind most humans wouldn't get.

What would she teach him? Same things the ashram taught, probably. Presence. Acceptance. Letting go. The gap between intellectual understanding and embodied experience. But: maybe hearing it from someone who'd actually embodied it would help.

Or maybe not. Maybe he'd arrive in Lagos, meet Wei, learn nothing new, move on to the next place. Another destination in endless seeking. Another stop on the wandering that defined his twenties.

Running toward or running away?

Both. Neither. The question itself was analytical trap. He was moving. That was the fact. Judging the movement as progress or avoidance—that was secondary interpretation. Maybe unnecessary interpretation.

He pulled up his tablet. Started another letter to Elena:

Mom—

Leaving Mumbai. Going to Lagos. Want to meet Professor Wei before she dies. Before I'm too lost to learn. Before the seeking becomes pure avoidance.

Five months at ashram taught me: I understand impermanence intellectually but can't embody it. I know about presence but can't be present. I study acceptance but can't accept. Gap between knowing and being remains unbridgeable.

Is seeking futile? Probably. Am I continuing anyway? Yes. Because what else would I do? Seeking gives structure. Purpose. Something better than parties, better than destruction, better than nothing.

You wrote about governing with presence instead of power. I think I'm seeking with motion instead of arrival. Maybe parallel practices. You staying, me traveling. Both trying to make meaning in collapse.

Ten years left. I'll probably spend them wandering. Different cities. Different teachings. Same questions. Same failure to answer them. But: maybe the wandering is the point. Maybe seeking without finding is the practice. Maybe I'm exactly where I need to be, which is: lost.

Love you. See you eventually. Still alive. Still trying.

— *Kenji*

He sent it. The transport continued west. Mumbai disappeared behind clouds. Ahead: Lagos. Professor Wei. His cousin Zara. Her children. Another destination. Another seeking.

Always seeking. Never arriving.

Maybe that was the teaching.

Kenji closed his eyes. Let the transport carry him. Felt the movement—artificial, mechanical, directional. Not meditation. Not presence. Just: motion through space. Body traveling while mind analyzed the traveling.

Ten years left. How many more cities? How many more teachers? How many more conversations about impermanence with people equally unable to accept it?

He didn't know. Couldn't know. The future was foreclosed—asteroid guaranteed. But the present remained open. Mysterious. Unknowable despite all his analysis.

Lagos next. Then: whatever came after Lagos. Then: whatever came after that.

Wandering until wandering exhausted itself. Seeking until seeking revealed its own futility. Running until running transformed into something else—arrival, acceptance, presence. Whatever those words meant.

The transport hummed. Kenji breathed. Year 5 continued. The seeking continued.

Picture Three continuing. Glimpsing continuing. Four years of seeing the ox without catching it. Maybe Lagos would teach him how to finally hold on. Or maybe—and this felt more honest—maybe Lagos would teach him that glimpsing

was enough. That being present to Picture Three was also valid practice. That he didn't need to reach Picture Ten before the asteroid arrived.

The ox had been glimpsed. That was something. Three years ago in Tokyo, Roshi said he was still on Picture One. Now: Picture Three. Progress, even if it felt like failure. Two pictures in three years. Maybe that was the actual pace of transformation—glacial, invisible, real.

Everything continued because what else would it do?

Chapter 21: Community

Zara Okafor-Mensah | Year 6, Month 3 | Lagos District

The word "butterfly" was giving Kofi trouble.

"But-ter-fly," Maya said patiently, pointing at the picture book. "Three parts. Try again."

"But... butter... fly?" Kofi repeated, five years old and earnest. His finger traced the butterfly's wings on the page.

"Good! Now you've got it." Maya beamed at her brother. "See? You can read it."

Zara watched from the kitchen table, engineering schematics glowing on her display. The greywater system for their compound—fifty units, two hundred people, thirty thousand liters daily throughput. She traced the filtration cascade with her finger, feeling the logic of it: primary settling, bio-filter, UV treatment, pressure equalization. The system would outlast them all, probably keep working decades after impact. Good engineering lasted.

The morning air through the open window was humid, carrying the smell of frying plantains from two floors down and the faint diesel note that never quite left Lagos, even now. Someone's radio played news she'd learned to tune out.

"Mama!" Kofi called. "I can read 'butterfly'!"

"I heard, baby. You're doing so well."

Kwame emerged from the bedroom, hair still damp from the shower. Their apartment—seventy square meters, plants everywhere (Kwame's doing), children's drawings on walls (Maya), engineering models scattered on surfaces (Zara's inability to leave work at work).

"Synth-eggs?" Kwame asked.

"Please."

"Maya, breakfast in ten minutes."

"Okay, Papa!" Maya didn't look away from the book. "Now try 'caterpillar.' That's a hard one."

"Cat-er-pill-ar," Kofi sounded out carefully.

The morning light through their windows was Lagos District perfect—bright, humid, the engineered tropical climate holding steady at twenty-eight degrees. Down in the courtyard, Mr. Okonkwo was already tending his tomato seedlings. She could hear his radio, the soft clatter of his watering can.

Her wrist display chimed. Message from the compound housing committee: *Meeting tonight, 7 PM. Topic: rooftop garden expansion. Your input needed—engineering perspective.*

She confirmed attendance. Another meeting. Another project. Another temporary thing worth doing anyway.

The compound had changed in six years.

Year 0, it was just: fifty units of apartments, two hundred strangers sharing infrastructure. Polite nods in hallways. Brief conversations in elevators. The typical urban disconnection that came from living close but not together.

Year 6: community. Actual community.

It happened gradually. Someone organized shared meals after the first suicide wave—Month 6, when the reality settled in. Someone else started collective childcare so parents could work or rest or grieve. Someone planted herbs on their balcony and offered cuttings to neighbors. Small gestures accumulating into structure.

Now: the compound felt like a village transplanted into an apartment building. Twenty units participated actively. Thirty more occasionally. Shared resources—tools, skills, time, food. Shared grief. Shared presence. Not a commune. Not utopia. Just: people supporting people because the alternative was isolation.

Zara contributed engineering. Fixed water systems. Optimized power usage. Designed the solar expansion that kept their building independent when district grid failed. Kwame contributed carpentry—built the shared workspace, repaired furniture, taught others basic skills. Maya and Kofi contributed youth—reminded everyone what they were living for.

Everyone gave what they could. Everyone took what they needed. It worked. Mostly.

After breakfast, Zara walked to her workspace—small office in the compound's converted storage room. Four other engineers shared it, though only she and Tom showed up regularly. The others had quit, fled, or died.

Tom was already there, running fluid dynamics simulations. Fifty years old, quiet, competent. Worked at the district water authority until Year 3, when they downsized to skeleton crew. Now: freelance engineering for whoever needed it, which was everyone and no one.

"Morning," Tom said without looking up.

"Morning. Working on the greywater filtration?"

"Trying to optimize the cascade. The pressure differential in stage three is marginal."

Zara looked at his simulation. Saw the problem immediately. "Increase the holding tank volume by fifteen percent. Gives you better residence time."

"Won't fit the current rooftop configuration."

"So we expand the configuration. That's what tonight's meeting is about."

Tom finally looked at her. "You're serious? The rooftop garden expansion?"

"Why not? The load-bearing calculations work. Zara had run them twice."We can reinforce the northeast corner with polymer beams—I've got a supplier who still has stock. Water system ties into existing infrastructure."

"Nine years, Zara."

"People need food now. They need something to tend besides their screens. The engineering is sound. That's what I know."

Lunchtime: visit to Wei's apartment.

The old professor was in her wheelchair on the balcony, surrounded by the garden. Ling, her nurse, had dressed her in a blue cotton wrap that Zara remembered from years ago—faded now, soft from washing. Wei's hands shook worse than last week, the tremor visible even as they rested in her lap. 120 years old. Body finishing its transformation.

"Professor Wei!" Kofi ran ahead.

"Careful," Zara called automatically.

"Let him run." Wei's voice was thinner but clear. "Gardens are for living in."

The lemon tree—Li Chen's tree, Wei always called it—was heavy with fruit this season. Maya approached carefully, carrying a drawing.

Wei took the picture with shaking hands. Studied it seriously. "You remembered the wing pattern. Very precise. That's important—seeing what's actually there, not what we expect to see."

"Mama says you taught her that."

"Your mother was excellent student. Still is. She teaches me things now too."

Zara settled on the bench while Kofi explored and Maya showed Wei her latest school work. This was the rhythm they'd established over six years—visiting, tending, being present. Wei teaching without teaching. Just: observations about flowers, butterflies, the way light shifted through leaves. Philosophy made practical.

Ling brought tea in cups with handles wide enough for shaking hands to grip. Zara steadied Wei's cup anyway—the liquid sloshing, Wei's wrist too weak to control the tilt. The intimacy of this—wiping a drop from the old woman's chin with her sleeve, adjusting the cup so Wei could sip without straining—felt like the truest kind of learning.

"Maya understands about the asteroid," Wei said quietly. "You told her Year 4?"

"Yes. She asked directly. I couldn't lie."

"Good. Children handle truth better than adults. Less time to build illusions." Wei sipped carefully. "How does she seem?"

Zara considered this. How did Maya seem? Serious. Calm. Too calm sometimes. Eight years old and already thinking about death, impermanence, the end of everything. Was that wisdom or trauma? Zara still didn't know.

"She's... steady," Zara said finally. "Handles it better than I do. Sometimes I think she's absorbing your teaching. Sometimes I think she's just—" She stopped, not sure how to finish.

"Just living," Wei completed. "Children do that naturally. Adults have to relearn it. Maya's practicing presence because that's her nature. When she's older, the fear will come. Then she'll need the practice she's building now."

Zara glanced at her daughter, who was examining a gardenia with complete focus—the same attention she'd brought to flowers since she was two years old. Wei had noticed it even then. "This one sees what's actually there," Wei had said when Maya was barely talking. "Most people stop looking that carefully by age five. Watch her. She might keep it."

At eight, Maya still looked that carefully. Still gave things her full attention. Zara didn't know if that was Wei's teaching or Maya's nature or both. But it meant something. It had to mean something.

"Nine years," Zara whispered. "Maya will be seventeen. Kofi will be fourteen."

"Yes. Not enough time. Never enough time. But right now—" Wei gestured at the children. Kofi crouched by the herb garden, talking to the mint. Maya reading her book in the shade. "Right now, alive. Right now, here. That's all time ever is."

Zara felt the tears coming. Fought them. Lost. Wei's thin hand found hers.

"Cry," Wei said. "Grief is appropriate. Fear is appropriate. Love is appropriate. All of it together. That's what being human means."

So Zara cried. Quietly, so the children wouldn't see. Grieving nine years that felt both infinite and impossible. Wei held her hand and said nothing more. Sometimes silence taught more than words.

Kwame found her when she got home, saw her face, understood immediately.

"Wei?" he asked.

"Just... everything. The countdown. The children. Nine years."

He held her. They'd had this conversation a hundred times over six years. Different words, same grief. Parents facing their children's certain death. The cruelty of knowing exactly when. The gift of knowing to treasure every moment. Both true simultaneously.

"Do you regret it?" Kwame asked. The question came up periodically. "Having Kofi?"

"Never," Zara said fiercely. "You?"

"Never. But I fear for them. Every day. Every moment."

"So do I. But they're here. They're real. Their lives matter."

"For nine years."

"For nine years. Which is nine more years than not existing at all. Which is infinite compared to nothing." Zara pulled back, looked at her husband. "We chose this. We chose life. I stand by that choice."

Kwame nodded. "So do I."

They stood in their kitchen, holding each other, while Maya and Kofi played in the next room. The engineering schematics still glowed on Zara's display. The compound meeting waited tonight. The countdown continued—nine years, eight months, roughly. But right now: this moment. This presence. This choice to keep building, keep loving, keep tending temporary things.

Enough.

The compound meeting started at seven.

Twenty neighbors gathered in the shared workspace—converted storage room on the ground floor. Chairs borrowed from apartments. Projection screen showing architectural plans. Coffee brewing in the corner. The ordinary infrastructure of community organizing.

Zara had helped establish these meetings Year 2. Monthly gatherings to discuss collective issues, plan projects, maintain connection. Attendance fluctuated—twenty tonight, sometimes fifteen, once as many as thirty-five. But consistent enough to matter.

Mr. Okonkwo (elderly, skeptical, reliable) called the meeting to order. "Rooftop garden expansion. Zara, you want to present?"

Zara pulled up the plans—engineering drawings showing the expanded garden layout, water system integration, structural load calculations. "Current rooftop: forty square meters of growing space. Produces maybe thirty percent of our compound's vegetables. Proposed expansion: one hundred twenty square meters. Gets us to eighty percent self-sufficiency."

"For nine years," Mr. Okonkwo said.

"For nine years," Zara agreed. "For however long we have. For now."

Silence. The math was always there. Nine years. 3,285 days. Then: nothing. Why build gardens that wouldn't last? Why plan for a future that didn't exist?

Adanna spoke up—young mother, fierce, practical. Zara liked her. "My son needs food now. Not in nine years. Now. My son needs to see things growing. Needs to help water plants. Needs to understand that caring for things matters even if they end. So: yes. I vote yes."

"Costs?" someone asked.

"Materials are cheap," Tom said. "Labor abundant. Water system ties into existing infrastructure. Maintenance minimal. Real cost is: deciding it's worth doing."

More silence. The psychological cost—committing to a project that wouldn't outlast them. Choosing to build, knowing the building was temporary. That was the real expense.

"I vote yes," Kwame said. "Gardens matter. Growing food matters. Teaching our children to tend life matters. Nine years is long enough to justify planting."

Others nodded. The sentiment spreading. Yes. Why not? What else were they doing with their time besides counting down?

Mr. Okonkwo cleared his throat. "I grew up farming. Before the climate shifts. Before the mega-cities. Real soil farming, not hydroponics. I know how to grow food." He paused. "I vote yes. I'll help design the planting layout."

Zara felt something shift in the room. Permission, maybe. Permission to commit. Permission to care about temporary things. Permission to choose life.

The vote was unanimous. Twenty people choosing gardens over despair. Choosing to build something that wouldn't last. Choosing presence.

After, Adanna approached Zara. "Your kids are beautiful. Maya teaches the other children, you know. Shares her books. Explains hard things simply. She's special."

"She's eight," Zara said. "She's just... being eight."

"She's being eight during the apocalypse. That's different. That's harder. She's doing it with grace." Adanna's hand went to her own son, sleeping in a carrier. "Thank you for having Kofi. For showing us that life is still worth choosing. People judged you. But you were right."

Zara felt the tears threatening again. "I don't know if I was right. I just know he's here. He's real. He matters."

"That's the same thing."

Maybe it was.

Night. Children sleeping.

Zara did her ritual—checking on them before bed. Maya's room first. Eight years old, tall for her age, curled around her favorite book. *The Butterfly Life Cycle.* Gift from Wei. Maya had read it dozens of times, absorbing the lesson about transformation, impermanence, change from within.

Nine years from now: Maya would be seventeen. Just reaching adulthood, then nothing. Never would finish university. Never would start a career. Never would have children of her own. Just: childhood, adolescence, one year of nearly being an adult. Then nothing.

But right now: sleeping peacefully, clutching her book, dreaming about butterflies or words or whatever eight-year-olds dreamed about.

Zara kissed her daughter's forehead. Whispered: "You matter. Your brief life matters. I promise."

Kofi's room next. Five years old, already in school, clutching his stuffed elephant. His favorite toy. Would probably be his favorite toy until the end. How many things would Kofi experience in fourteen years? First words (done). First day of school (done). First friend, first book read alone, first understanding of death. Limited catalog. Brief catalog. But his catalog. His life. His consciousness.

Zara kissed him too. Whispered: "Nine years. We'll make them beautiful. I promise."

She stood in the doorway between their rooms, looking at her children, feeling the weight of every choice that led to this moment. Choosing pregnancy after detection. Defending that choice against strangers. Raising them with presence, with love, with truth. Teaching them that brief didn't mean meaningless.

Wei's voice in her memory: *Everything temporary. Everything valuable.*

The countdown continued—nine years, eight months, eleven days. The asteroid approached at perfect velocity. Impact was inevitable. But right now: her children existed. Her family existed. Her community existed. Gardens would be planted. Water would be filtered. Life would be tended.

That was enough. Had to be enough. Was enough.

Kwame appeared beside her, wrapped his arm around her waist. They stood together, watching their sleeping children.

Tomorrow: engineering work. Wei's garden. Compound garden planning. Maya teaching Kofi more words. The countdown advancing one more day.

Nine years to make beautiful.

Starting tomorrow. Again. Always.

Chapter 22: Mandate

Elena Torres | Year 6, Month 6 | Antarctic Megacity

The filing deadline passed at midnight.

Elena sat in her office, watching the clock tick past 12:00 AM. Year 6, Month 6, Day 1. Election filing period closed. Candidate registration system locked. In sixty seconds, the electoral commission would generate the official ballot for Antarctica's mayoral election.

Marcus Rivera stood beside her desk, tablet in hand. Her deputy mayor for four years now. Former opponent. Current partner in the daily work of governing collapse.

"Ready?" he asked.

"No." Elena's throat was tight. "Pull it up."

Marcus tapped his screen. The official candidate list appeared. He stared at it. Blinked. Checked again.

"Elena. . . "

"How many?"

"One."

One. Elena felt the word settle like weight. She stood slowly, moved to look at Marcus's tablet. The ballot was impossibly simple:

ANTARCTIC MEGACITY MAYORAL ELECTION
YEAR 6, MONTH 9

Elena Torres Write-in Candidate

That was it. No opposition. No challenger. No democratic choice.

Just: her name. Alone.

"Check the registrations again," Elena said. Her voice was steady. Professional. Inside: screaming.

Marcus pulled up the full registration database. Scrolled through the filing period—all ninety days. Zero submissions. He checked eligibility requirements. Eight hundred million people qualified to run—citizenship, age, residency. Nearly forty percent of the population. None had filed.

"There's no one," Marcus confirmed. "You're the only candidate."

Elena sat down heavily. Sixty-four years old. Six years as mayor of the apocalypse. Her second term would end in three months—Year 6, Month 9, same as when she'd been elected. Campaign season. Election in ninety days. Constitutional requirement: democratic elections every four years. Even now. Especially now.

But democracy required choice. This wasn't choice. This was...

What was this?

Marcus left to notify the electoral commission. Elena sat alone in the too-quiet office, staring at the ballot that mocked everything she'd tried to maintain.

Four years ago, she'd insisted on democratic elections when most people said they were pointless. "If we abandon democracy, we abandon everything that made us human," she'd argued. The population had agreed—barely. Marcus Rivera had run against her. Lost 39-61. Legitimate contest. Real choice. Hollow victory but earned.

That election had given her democratic mandate. Authority through votes. The knowledge that people chose her philosophy over his, chose witness over pragmatism, chose presence over comfort.

Now: nothing. No opposition. No validation. No choice.

Her terminal chimed. Wei's weekly letter—sent yesterday, before the filing deadline. Elena opened it automatically, hungry for the philosopher's clarity.

Mayor Torres,

Your second term ends soon. Election season approaches. I imagine you're wondering: will anyone challenge you? Will democracy continue as it did Year 2? Will the forms hold?

Here is what I think: legitimacy comes in many forms. Year -2, you were elected on promises—build for millennia. Year 2, re-elected on different promise—bear witness until the end. Both elections gave you authority through votes. Democratic mandate. This is one kind of legitimacy.

But there is another kind. Six years of showing up. Six years of morning briefings. Six years of maintaining order knowing order ends. This is legitimacy through practice. Through proof rather than promise. Through demonstrated consistency rather than campaign rhetoric.

If opposition arises, you will have democratic contest. Good. If no opposition arises, you will have something else—acknowledgment that six years of practice speaks louder than any campaign could. Also good. Different, but also legitimate.

You governed Year 0-2 on elected mandate. Year 2-6 on renewed mandate. Year 6 and beyond? Perhaps you govern on demonstrated mandate. Authority earned through daily practice. Not voted for this time, but validated through six years of presence.

Both legitimate. Both earned. Just different.

Democracy is not only voting. It is also consent. Also accountability. Also the ability to challenge authority. If people can challenge you but choose not to, that is also democracy speaking.

I write to your son sometimes. He inquired about ox-herding pictures once—seeking and finding. I responded but he hasn't written back. Silence is also communication. He's wandering still, I think. But wandering is also path. Sometimes Picture One lasts years. Sometimes seeking IS the finding. Tell him this if he writes you: the ox was never lost.

With respect,
Professor Wei

Elena read it three times. Wei couldn't have known there would be no opposition—the letter was written before the deadline. But Wei had seen the possibility. Had offered philosophy for either outcome.

Democracy without choice. Leadership without opposition. Authority without election.

It felt wrong even if it was earned. Even if Wei said it was legitimate.

7:00 AM. Morning briefing. The conference room felt especially cavernous today—five people in space for thirty. Chen, Kowalski, Dr. Ade. Marcus. Elena.

"Before we begin," Elena said. "You all know the filing deadline passed. I'm the only candidate. We need to discuss this."

Silence. Then Chen spoke. "What's to discuss? No one else wants the job. You've been doing it for six years. You'll keep doing it for nine more. Seems straightforward."

He looked different than he had Year 4. Still thin. Still stubborn. But: less hollow. More grounded. He'd gotten a message from his wife yesterday—first in three months. She and their daughter were alive in New Zealand. Growing vegetables. Teaching children. Living. He'd written back: *I'm still maintaining systems. Someone has to. I'm glad you're living. That matters.* No resentment. Just: recognition that they'd made different choices, both valid.

"I count you in my population reports," Chen added. "Six years of morning briefings. Six years of 7 AM sharp. Six years of 'same as yesterday.' You've proven consistency. That's a vote. That's legitimacy. Maybe better than voting."

"That's not democracy," Elena said.

"Isn't it?" Dr. Ade leaned forward. Sixty-five years old, exhausted, still showing up daily to tend the dying. "Democracy is about consent of the governed. We consent. Two billion people consent. They could have filed opposition. They didn't. That's a choice."

"Democracy requires alternatives."

"And you provided them. Open filing. Public process. Three months to register. Eight hundred million qualified people could run." Kowalski's gruff voice was surprisingly gentle.

He'd been different since their coffee two years ago—that awkward first conversation with Chen that had become a weekly ritual. Thursday mornings, after briefings, before crises. They'd talk about families, about maintenance work, about enforcing order in chaos. About showing up. Kowalski had learned things from Chen about maintenance as practice. Chen had learned things from Kowalski about duty without certainty. Both of them learning from Elena about presence as purpose.

"They looked at what you do every day and said: no thanks. That's not your fault," Kowalski continued. "I've spent thirty-five years enforcing authority. Seen good leaders and bad leaders. Know the difference. Good leaders earn trust through consistency. You've done that. Six years. Two thousand, one hundred and ninety days. I count them—occupational habit. You've shown up all two thousand days. That's legitimacy the old world would've envied."

Marcus had been quiet. Now he spoke. "Elena, four years ago I ran against you. Called your governance 'empty symbolism.' Lost. Learned I was wrong. You taught me that witness matters. That showing up is everything. Now I sit beside you every morning and help you bear this burden."

He met her eyes. "I'm not running against you. No one is. Not because you're preventing opposition. Because you've demonstrated something we all see: this work requires impossible endurance. Governing collapse with dignity. Bearing witness to extinction. Showing up when showing up seems meaningless. We trust you to continue. That's legitimacy. Maybe more legitimate than voting."

Elena felt tears threaten. Blinked them back. "If I declare victory by default, I'm just... what? Mayor because no one else will do it? That's not leadership. That's necessity."

"Maybe they're the same thing now," Dr. Ade said quietly. "Nine years left. Leadership isn't about vision anymore. Can't promise change. Can't fix anything. Leadership is just: the person who shows up. You show up. Daily. Consistently. Six years straight. That's why you're mayor. Not because you won an election. Because you earned it through practice."

"Same as yesterday," Chen added, echoing Elena's own phrase. "Same as last year. Same as six years ago. You keep showing up. That's the vote. That's the mandate. That's the authority."

The announcement went out at noon.

Elena had drafted it carefully. Read it to Marcus. Revised it three times. Finally: sufficient.

OFFICIAL STATEMENT FROM THE MAYOR'S OFFICE

Year 6, Month 6, Day 1

The filing deadline for Antarctic Megacity mayoral election has passed. One candidate registered: Mayor Elena Torres. No opposition candidates filed.

Antarctic Constitution requires democratic elections every four years. This requirement remains. However, democracy also requires meaningful choice. An uncontested election provides no choice—only ratification of inevitability.

Therefore, I am canceling the scheduled election. I will continue serving as Mayor under interim authority until Year 10, when another filing period will open. Or until any qualified person wishes to challenge me. My office remains open. My authority remains accountable. Democratic process remains available.

I did not seek uncontested power. But I will not abandon governance because democracy has become complicated. Someone must show up. Someone must maintain order. Someone must bear witness. I will continue doing so as long as no one else steps forward, or until someone else does.

This is not autocracy. It's necessity. Anyone may challenge me at any time. I welcome opposition. Until then: I serve.

Mayor Elena Torres

The response came immediately. Chen forwarded her the first batch of public comments within an hour:

"Thank God. Didn't want an election anyway. Just keep doing what you're doing."

"This is dictatorship! Democracy is dead!"

"Honestly? I trust Torres more now than when she was elected. Six years of showing up counts for more than promises."

"Who cares? Nine years left. Let her govern. Let anyone govern. Doesn't matter."

"I'm qualified to run. Considered it. Watched what the mayor does every day and thought: absolutely not. She's welcome to it."

Mixed. Mostly relieved. Some criticism—justified criticism. But the dominant response was: yes, continue. Not enthusiastic yes. Exhausted yes. We trust you to keep showing up yes.

Elena read them all. Filed them carefully. Someone should document public response. Someone should record how democracy evolved—or failed, depending on interpretation—in the final years.

That someone was her.

Two hours later — District 5 café

Chen and Kowalski sat in a mostly-empty café. Thursday morning coffee had become Thursday lunch when time allowed. Two years of weekly meetings. Two men who'd worked together six years and been strangers until Year 4 when they'd accidentally revealed their humanity in a morning briefing.

"She's struggling with it," Chen said. He was drinking tea—switched from coffee Year 5 when his hands started shaking. Stress or age or just: six years bearing weight. "The unopposed election. Thinks it delegitimizes her authority."

"Opposite," Kowalski said. His coffee was black, always. Military habit. "Most legitimate she's ever been. Proven through practice instead of promised through campaign."

"You should tell her that."

"I did. She heard me. Didn't believe me. Believes you more—infrastructure mind recognizes infrastructure mind. You tell her."

Chen smiled slightly. "I told her too. She didn't believe me either. Believes Wei more than any of us."

"Wei's a hundred and eighteen. Dying naturally. Smart as hell. Makes sense Elena listens to her."

They sat in comfortable silence. Chen checked his messages—nothing from New Zealand today, but yesterday's note from his wife: *Growing food. Teaching kids. Thinking of you. Still proud you stayed.* He'd read it twelve times.

"Your family good?" Kowalski asked. He always asked.

"Good. Yours?"

"Don't have family. You know that."

"Got us," Chen said. Casual. Honest. "Me, Elena, Marcus, Dr. Ade. Briefing family. Morning ritual family. Coffee Thursday family. That counts."

Kowalski's face did something complicated. "Yeah. That counts." He was quiet for a moment. "Daniel Okonkwo's still writing letters. Four years now. Over two hundred letters to Raj's widow. She's never answered. Not once."

"You still think Elena should pardon him?"

"I think mercy matters more than justice when everyone dies anyway. But: not my decision. Elena chose justice. I enforce her choice. That's my job."

"You sleep better?"

"No. You?"

"No." Chen smiled without humor. "Count statistics instead of sheep. Population, infrastructure, maintenance schedules. All of it failing. All of it maintained anyway. Absurd work."

"Necessary work," Kowalski corrected.

"Both. Absurd and necessary. Meaningful and futile. Present and ending." Chen set down his tea. "I've been reading philosophy. Wei's letters to Elena—she shares them sometimes. Wei talks about presence. About impermanence. About continuing despite futility. Makes sense to me. Maintenance work is the same. Fix today what breaks today. Tomorrow breaks tomorrow. Keep showing up. That's all."

"Enforcement too," Kowalski admitted. "Arrest criminals knowing we all die anyway. Maintain order knowing order ends. Keep showing up. Same lesson, different job."

They finished their drinks. Went back to work. Infrastructure coordination. Security enforcement. The daily impossible work of maintaining civilization in collapse.

But Thursday coffee—Thursday lunch now—that was their work too. Presence to each other. Witness to each other's struggle. Friendship formed in apocalypse, maintained until the end.

That mattered. Maybe more than statistics.

Evening. Elena's apartment. Small space—she'd downsized three years ago, gave up the official mayor's residence for refugee housing. Now: two rooms, kitchen, the basics. Enough.

Kenji had written. Her son, thirty-one now, still wandering. Different cities, different philosophies, still seeking answers he couldn't find. The message was brief:

Mom—

Heard about the election. Or non-election. Are you okay?

I've been thinking about authority. What makes someone legitimate leader when leadership is just: bearing witness to collapse. You were elected twice. Now you're not. But you're still mayor. Still showing up. Still governing. What changed? The title? The votes? Or nothing?

Father Tomás says religious authority used to come from God. Then from institution. Then from community consent. Now, at the end, it comes from practice. From showing up. From doing the work even when work accomplishes nothing.

Maybe political authority is the same. You're mayor not because people voted for you. Because you've demonstrated six years of consistent presence. That's more legitimate than any election.

Or maybe I'm just rationalizing because I don't want to think my mother is becoming dictator. But honestly: if you're dictator, you're the worst one ever. You keep trying to give power away and no one wants it.

Love you. Proud of you. See you whenever I see you.

— K

Elena smiled despite the heaviness. Kenji understood. Maybe not completely—he was still lost, still seeking, still scattered across the world's ending cities. But he saw what she was trying to do. Saw that intention mattered even when outcome was uncertain.

She started a reply:

Mijo—

I'm okay. Shaken but okay. You're right that authority has changed. I don't know what I am anymore. Not elected leader—no vote happened. Not dictator—anyone could challenge me. I'm... the person who stayed. The person who shows up. The witness who maintains structure.

Is that enough? Professor Wei says yes. Marcus Rivera says yes. The population seems to say yes. But I wanted democratic legitimacy. Wanted voters to choose me freely. Instead: silence. No opposition because no one wants this burden.

I wrote to Marcus Reyes in Mumbai—asking if I'm becoming a dictator. He wrote back: "You're becoming what's needed. I saw you transform from elected official to witness. That's not dictatorship. That's evolution. Authority through demonstrated presence is more legitimate than authority through campaign promises. You've earned this through six years of showing up. That's real." His words helped. Not because they solved anything. Because someone who served me, who left when leaving was right, sees this as legitimate. That means something.

Different legitimacy. Earned through practice not promises. But it feels hollow even when it feels earned.

Nine years left. Maybe that's long enough to figure out what I'm doing. Or short enough that it doesn't matter.

Love you too. Come home when you want. Or don't. Wherever you need to be.

— Mom

She sent it. Sat in the quiet apartment. Sixty-four years old. Mayor of two billion people. Authority earned through six years of showing up. Democracy without votes. Leadership without opposition.

What was she now?

Marcus arrived at 8 PM. Brought dinner—synthetic protein, vegetables from one of the compound gardens, tea. They ate in comfortable silence. Four years working together had created rhythms. Understandings. The ability to sit together without performing.

"How are you really?" Marcus asked when they finished.

Elena considered lying. Decided against it. "Lost. I wanted democratic mandate. Wanted voters to choose me. Instead: nothing. Just... silence."

"Silence is a choice."

"Is it? Or is it apathy? Or exhaustion? Or—" She stopped. "I don't know what this means. For me. For governance. For democracy."

Marcus set down his cup carefully. "Can I tell you what I see? From four years beside you?"

"Please."

"Year 2, I ran against you. Thought your philosophy was wrong. Thought governance was theater. Thought we should just make people comfortable and stop pretending structure mattered." He smiled slightly. "Lost 61-39. Legitimate democratic contest. You won."

"But I conceded gracefully. Offered to serve as your deputy. You know why?"

Elena shook her head.

"Because watching you during the campaign, I realized: you meant it. You weren't performing. You genuinely believed showing up mattered. Bearing witness mattered. Maintaining dignity mattered. You believed it so completely that I wanted to understand."

"So I stayed. Worked beside you. Watched you show up every morning at 7 AM for four years straight. Never missed. Never stopped. Never abandoned the work even when the work was impossible."

Marcus leaned forward. "That changed me. Not your arguments. Your practice. Daily demonstration that governance without outcome was still governance. That witness was purpose. That presence was enough."

"Now Year 6. Filing period opens. I could run again. Others could run. Eight hundred million qualified people. Any of us could challenge you."

"And we looked at what you do. What you've done for six years. And every single one of us said: no. Not because you're unchallengeable. Because you've demonstrated something we're not capable of. The endurance to keep showing up. The dignity to maintain order knowing order ends. The consistency to practice presence even when presence seems meaningless."

"That's not absence of democracy, Elena. That's democracy saying: you've proven yourself. You've earned authority through practice. We trust you to continue. Not because we voted. Because we watched. We witnessed. We chose through silence."

Elena felt tears now. Let them come. "Is that legitimate?"

"More legitimate than voting. Voting is promise. This is proof. You've proven six years of consistency. That matters more than any campaign."

They sat in the quiet apartment, two people governing a dying city, and didn't talk about futility. Didn't need to. After four years, they'd developed their own language of silences.

"Nine more years," Elena said finally.

"Nine more years."

"And if someone challenges me next time? Year 10?"

"Then you'll have an election. Democratic choice. Real contest." Marcus smiled. "And you'll probably win. Because by then you'll have proven ten years of consistency. That's unbeatable."

"Or lose. Because someone else will have better philosophy."

"Or lose. And you'll concede gracefully. And whoever wins will be lucky to have your experience."

Elena laughed quietly. “You’re very certain about hypothetical futures.”

“I’m certain about you. That’s enough.”

The next day, Elena did something she’d been avoiding for four years.

She visited Daniel Okonkwo in prison.

The detention center was functional—barely. Overcrowded, understaffed, maintained because someone maintained it. Forty thousand prisoners across Antarctica. Down from eighty thousand at peak. Some released early. Some died. Some chose early endings rather than waiting for the asteroid.

Daniel was in minimum security. No flight risk—where would he go? No violence beyond the initial crime. Just: a man serving nine more years that would end when everyone died.

The guard brought him to the visitor room. Elena watched him enter—thirty-eight years old now, gaunt, moving carefully as if expecting pain. He saw her. Froze.

“Mayor Torres.”

“Mr. Okonkwo. Sit. Please.”

He sat slowly, hands trembling. The bloodstains were long gone but Elena could see he still felt them. Permanent marks invisible to everyone except the person who’d worn them.

“Why are you here?” His voice was careful. Respectful. Broken.

“I wanted to see you. See how you were doing. Four years is a long time.”

“It’s also nothing. Nine years left. I’ll die here. Away from my children.” No self-pity in his tone. Just fact. “They’re twelve, ten, and eight now. Growing up without me. My oldest daughter writes sometimes. Tells me about school, about her siblings, about how they’re managing. She’s raising them, Mayor. Twelve years old and she’s the parent.”

Elena felt the weight of that. “Where’s their mother?”

“Died Year 3. Suicide. Couldn’t bear what I’d done. Couldn’t bear raising three children alone knowing they’d all die anyway.” His voice cracked. “So my daughter does it. Because I’m here. Because I killed Raj over three containers of food.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. This is justice. You sentenced me. I deserved it. Raj deserved justice. His widow—Priya—deserved justice. Everyone deserved consequence.” He looked at her directly. “I write to Priya every week. Have for four years. Two hundred letters. She’s never responded. Not once. I keep writing anyway. Apologizing.

Explaining that I'm sorry, that I didn't mean to, that I'd take it back if I could. I know she'll never forgive me. I keep writing because... what else can I do?"

Elena thought about those letters. Two hundred apologies sent into silence. Two hundred attempts at atonement that would never be accepted. The practice of remorse without the possibility of redemption.

"Do you want to be pardoned?"

The question hung there. Daniel's eyes filled with tears. "Every day. Every single day I want to see my children. Hold them. Tell them I'm sorry. Try to be their father for nine years instead of dying in here." He wiped his face roughly. "But wanting doesn't change what I did. I killed Raj. With my hands. Over food. I watched him die. His last words were his children's names—calling for them. And I took him from them. So no. I don't deserve pardon. I deserve this."

"That's not what I asked."

"I know." Daniel's voice dropped to whisper. "Yes. I want to be pardoned. I want to hold my children. I want to try to teach them how to face the end with dignity instead of dying in a cell as proof that some things still have consequences. But you were right, Mayor Torres. Justice matters. Even at the end. Especially at the end. Someone has to maintain that. You're that someone. I respect that even as it destroys me."

Elena sat in the visitor room across from this grieving killer and saw: the cost of her decision. Not abstract. Specific. Three children without their father. A twelve-year-old raising her siblings. Two hundred letters sent to silence. Priya Patel raising Raj's children alone, never answering those letters, carrying rage that might consume her. A man dying from guilt in a cell while his family died from asteroid outside it.

This was justice. Real consequence. The principle that actions mattered even when permanence didn't exist.

But what had Marcus said? *Mercy matters more than justice when time is short.* What had Reyes said? *Let him carry his guilt in freedom instead of a cell.*

Was she wrong? Had she been wrong for four years?

"I don't know anymore," Elena said quietly. "Whether this is right. Whether justice matters more than mercy. Whether consequence is more important than presence. I thought I knew. I'm not certain anymore."

"You chose," Daniel said simply. "You had to choose. You chose what you believed was right. That's all anyone can do. I live with my choice—I killed Raj. You live with yours—you keep me here. Both choices have weight. Both matter. Neither can be undone."

Elena stood. "Thank you for seeing me."

"Thank you for coming. It matters that you came. That you saw what your decision means. Most people wouldn't." He stood too. "I'll keep writing to Priya. I'll keep apologizing. She has two children to raise alone now—Aanya and Dev. My friend's children. I took their father. And she'll never read my letters, and that's... that's what I deserve. But I'll keep writing anyway." He paused. "And nine years from now, when the asteroid comes, I'll face it in this cell knowing: I paid. I faced consequence. That matters. You made sure it mattered."

The guard led him away. Elena stood in the empty visitor room, feeling the weight of justice and mercy, consequence and compassion, principle and practice colliding inside her.

She didn't change her decision. But she wondered. And the wondering felt like its own kind of punishment.

Late evening. Marcus gone. Elena alone in the apartment that was simultaneously too small and too large. She pulled out her journal—physical notebook, old-fashioned. Pen and paper. Something about writing by hand made thoughts more real.

Year 6, Month 6, Day 1

Election day that wasn't.

No opposition filed. Ballot had my name only. Democratic choice impossible. I canceled the election. Declared interim authority until Year 10 or until someone challenges me.

This should feel like victory. Feels like failure.

But Marcus is right. Wei is right. Democracy didn't fail. Democracy evolved. People chose me through silence. Through watching six years of showing up. Through seeing the work and saying: yes, continue.

Different legitimacy. Not votes but witness. Not promise but proof. Not campaign but practice.

I was elected Year -2 on infrastructure platform. Promised to build for millennia. Governed two years before detection. Then: everything changed.

Re-elected Year 2 on witness platform. Defeated Marcus Rivera 61-39. Democratic mandate. Authority through votes. That felt legitimate because it was familiar.

Now Year 6. No election. No opposition. No vote. But: six years of daily practice. Six years of showing up at 7 AM. Six years of bearing witness. Six years of maintaining dignity in collapse.

That's legitimate too. Has to be. Eight hundred million people could have challenged me. Anyone could have filed. They watched and said: no, she's doing it right. Let her continue.

That's authority. Different authority. Earned through practice not promises.

What am I now? Not elected mayor—no vote. Not dictator—no seized power. I'm... the person who stayed. The person who shows up. The witness who governs.

That's enough. Has to be.

Nine years left. Maybe I'll understand by the end. Maybe understanding doesn't matter. Maybe practice is enough.

Same as yesterday. Same as tomorrow. Same as always.

Show up. Bear witness. Maintain dignity. Continue.

That's all I have. That's everything I have.

It's enough.

Elena closed the journal. Set it carefully on the table. Sat in the quiet apartment and felt: not peace exactly. Not satisfaction. Something else. Acceptance maybe. Or resignation. Or the understanding that both could be true simultaneously.

She'd wanted democratic election. Wanted voters to choose her freely. Instead: silence. The silence of acknowledgment. The silence of trust. The silence that said: you've proven yourself through six years of practice. Continue.

That was legitimate. Had to be. Different legitimacy than voting. But legitimate nonetheless.

Nine years left. She'd spend them showing up. Bearing witness. Maintaining dignity. Governing a dying city with as much consistency as she could manage.

Not because she was elected. Because she'd demonstrated six years of presence. Because she'd earned authority through practice. Because no one else wanted the burden and someone had to carry it.

That was enough. Had to be.

She stood. Made tea. Checked her messages—reports from Chen, Kowalski, Dr. Ade. The usual disasters. The usual impossibilities. The usual work of governance in collapse.

Tomorrow: 7 AM briefing. Same room. Same people. Same ritual of maintaining order when order seemed meaningless.

She'd show up. Same as yesterday. Same as six years. Same as always.

Because that's what she did. That's who she was. That's what legitimate meant now.

The person who showed up.

Year 6, Month 6, Day 2

The morning briefing felt different. Same people—Chen, Kowalski, Dr. Ade, Marcus. Same room. Same time. But something had shifted. Elena felt it in the way they looked at her. Not with deference exactly. With something else. Recognition maybe. Or respect earned rather than assumed.

Chen and Kowalski sat next to each other now—had for two years, since their first coffee. Weekly Thursday ritual had become daily proximity. Two men who'd been functional colleagues for four years, then accidentally became friends. Infrastructure coordinator and security chief. Maintenance and order. Both learning the same lesson: presence as practice. Both teaching it to each other.

Elena had watched their friendship develop. Had seen them transform from hollow professionals to present humans. Chen had stopped seeing his family as loss, started seeing them as living elsewhere—still counted, still loved, still real. Kowalski had stopped losing sleep over Daniel Okonkwo, started accepting that enforcing imperfect justice was still necessary work. Both of them practicing Wei's philosophy without reading Wei directly—learning through doing, through showing up, through morning briefings and Thursday coffee and two thousand days of impossible work.

They were ready, Elena thought. When Kenji returned—if Kenji returned—they'd be ready for his teaching. They'd already learned the foundation. Already practiced presence. Already understood impermanence through daily confrontation with failing systems and dying civilization.

But that was years away. Maybe. If Kenji ever came home.

"Population report," Elena said, starting as always.

"Two point one billion," Chen reported. He'd spent an hour this morning doing something new—meditating. Not formal. Just: sitting quietly before the briefing. Breathing. Being present to the day before the day's demands consumed him. Kowalski had noticed, asked about it. Chen had shrugged: "Seems useful. Try it." Maybe Kowalski would. Maybe not. But Chen would continue. Five minutes of presence before reporting population decline felt... right. Necessary. Like maintenance work for himself.

"Down from two point two last month. Down from four point two at detection. Fifty percent loss in six years."Fifty percent loss in six years."

He paused, did something unusual—smiled slightly. "My wife and daughter are still counted in there. New Zealand population. Still alive. They sent pictures yesterday—garden they're growing. Tomatoes. Lettuce. Living things for temporary time. Made me think: that's what we all do. Maintain temporary things. Gardens. Infrastructure. Democracy. All of it ending. All of it worth maintaining."

Elena felt unexpected emotion. Chen had changed so much from the hollow man in Year 4 who'd first mentioned his missing family. He'd found peace with

their choice. Found meaning in his own. Found presence in the work of counting them even though they'd left.

"Your wife sounds wise," Elena said.

"She is. Told me Year 1: 'Go maintain your systems. Someone has to. I'll maintain life. Both necessary.' She was right." Chen met Elena's eyes. "You maintain democracy. I maintain infrastructure. Kowalski maintains order. Marcus maintains practical care. We're all gardening temporary things. All of it matters precisely because none of it lasts."

Two point one billion. Half gone. Half remaining. Elena wrote this carefully. Someone should document.

"Infrastructure at forty-eight percent," Chen said. "Security at twelve percent," Kowalski added. His voice had changed over six years—less grim, more accepting. Still carried weight. But: carried it differently. Like maintenance instead of burden. Like practice instead of punishment.

He'd made a decision last month, hadn't told anyone yet. Year 10—four years from now—he'd recommend pardons for everyone serving sentences ending after Year 15. Including Daniel Okonkwo. Including all of them. Not because justice didn't matter. Because mercy mattered more when time was short. Elena might refuse. Probably would. But he'd recommend it anyway. His job was to enforce her justice. Also to challenge it when challenge was needed. Four more years of sitting with the discomfort. Then: act.

For now: report. Maintain. Show up.

"Health services at thirty-one percent." The reports continued. Everything failing. Everything maintained as long as possible. Everything witnessed.

"Orders, Mayor?" Marcus asked. The same question as always. The ritual that structured their work.

Elena looked at her four colleagues. Four people governing two billion. Maintaining order in chaos. Bearing witness to collapse. Showing up when showing up seemed meaningless.

"Same as yesterday," she said. Her voice was steady. Certain. "Maintain what we can. Document what we can't. Continue essential services. We keep showing up. That's the goal."

"That's everything," Marcus added quietly.

Elena met his eyes. "That's everything."

They worked. Population management. Resource allocation. Security coordination. Health services. All the practical impossible work of governance. The work that would end in nine years but mattered now. The work that mattered precisely because it would end.

After: Marcus stayed. He always stayed.

"Feels different today," he observed.

"Yes."

"Better different or worse different?"

Elena considered this. "Different different. Not better or worse. Just: changed. I'm not elected mayor anymore. I'm... something else. Still figuring out what."

"You're the mayor who shows up. That's what you are. That's all you need to be."

"For nine more years."

"For nine more years."

They sat in the too-large room, and Elena felt: not peace. Not certainty. Not satisfaction. But something approaching acceptance. The understanding that authority could come from practice. That legitimacy could be earned through consistency. That governance could matter even without democratic validation.

Different. But real.

"Thank you for staying," she said to Marcus.

"Thank you for letting me stay."

The same exchange they'd had for four years. The ritual acknowledgment of partnership in impossible work. The recognition that neither of them could do this alone.

Nine years left. They'd spend them showing up. Together. Bearing witness. Maintaining dignity. Governing collapse with as much grace as they could manage.

Not because they were elected. Because they'd chosen this work. Because someone had to do it. Because presence mattered even when—especially when—outcome was certain.

That was enough.

Had to be.

Was.

Elena's office. Quiet afternoon. She pulled up the electoral database one more time. Reviewed the filing period. Ninety days. Eight hundred million qualified candidates. Zero submissions except her own.

The absence spoke louder than opposition ever could.

She closed the database. Opened Wei's letter again. Read the key passage:

This is different authority. Not votes but witness. Not campaign but practice. Not promise but proof. Both legitimate. Both earned. Just different.

Both legitimate. Elena repeated that to herself. Her Year 2 election—legitimate through votes. Her Year 6 continuation—legitimate through practice. Both real. Both earned. Just different.

She could live with that. Would have to live with that. For nine more years.

Her terminal chimed. Public comment from the morning's announcement. She opened it automatically.

Mayor Torres—

I was qualified to run. Considered it seriously. Spent three months debating whether to file opposition. In the end: couldn't do it.

Not because you're unchallengeable. Because I watched what you do. Seven AM briefings. Daily crises. Impossible decisions. Six years of showing up when showing up seems meaningless.

I don't have that endurance. No one I know does. You've proven you do. That's why I didn't file. That's why no one did.

This isn't dictatorship. It's acknowledgment. We see what you do. We trust you to continue. Not because we voted. Because we watched.

Thank you for bearing this burden. Thank you for showing up. Thank you for nine more years of same.

With respect,
Dr. Sarah Kwan

Elena read it three times. Felt unexpected warmth. Not validation exactly. Recognition. The understanding that someone saw the work. Saw the daily practice. Saw the impossible endurance required to maintain governance in collapse.

That mattered. Maybe more than votes.

She filed the comment carefully. Added it to the archive. Someone should document how democracy evolved. How authority changed. How legitimacy shifted from votes to witness.

Nine years left. Not long enough to see the transformation complete. Long enough to practice it honestly.

She stood. Looked out at the Antarctic megacity. Two billion lights. Temporary. Doomed. Still glowing.

Someone should bear witness. Someone should maintain order. Someone should show up.

That someone was her. Not because she was elected. Because she'd proven six years of consistency. Because she'd earned authority through practice. Because no one else would do it and someone had to.

That was enough. Had to be. Was.

Same as yesterday. Same as tomorrow. Same as always.

Show up. Bear witness. Maintain dignity. Continue.

That's all she had. That's everything she had.

It was enough.

Chapter 23: Drift

Ibrahim al-Rashid | Year 6, Month 11 | Antarctica

The prayer beads sat on Ibrahim's palm. Ninety-nine beads—dark wood worn smooth by years of handling. He moved through them automatically, fingers finding each bead, but his lips stayed silent. No names. No prayers. Just the motion.

Ar-Rahman. Ar-Rahim. Al-Malik.

He used to say them. Used to mean them. The Compassionate. The Merciful. The King. Now they were just beads. Smooth wooden spheres on a string. Weight without meaning.

Ibrahim set them on the windowsill and stood, slowly. His left leg protested—always did, always would. The shrapnel was still there, too close to his spine for removal. Permanent souvenir from his last battle. Four years ago now. Four years since everything broke.

Twenty-three years old. Nine years left. No faith. No purpose. No identity. The old calendar—the one where years meant building toward something—felt like a language he'd forgotten how to speak.

Just: alive.

The apartment was small—bedroom, bathroom, kitchenette. Standard refugee housing. Building 12, Unit 403. Fourth floor. He knew the exact number of steps to get here. Counted them every day.

Fifty-three steps.

He'd counted them his first day and kept counting. Didn't know why. Just did. Now it was habit. Ritual without religion. Practice without belief.

Ibrahim pulled on his jacket—Antarctic winter approaching, even the megacity's climate control couldn't fully compensate. His cane leaned against the wall. Twenty-three and using a cane. Fighter-turned-refugee-turned-broken-man.

He opened the door and began his daily walk.

One step. Left leg strong, right leg compensating, cane supporting. Two steps. The corridor was quiet—mid-morning, most residents at work or elsewhere. Three steps. Four. Five.

Building 12 housed two hundred refugees. War survivors, climate migrants, people fleeing collapsed regions. Everyone from somewhere else. Everyone waiting for the same ending.

Ten steps. Eleven. Twelve. The elevator was at the end of the corridor, but Ibrahim never used it. Couldn't. Needed to count. Needed to know the number.

Fifteen. Sixteen. Seventeen. He reached the stairwell and paused. Looked down four floors. Looked at his cane. Every day he considered taking the elevator. Every day he opened the stairwell door instead.

Eighteen. Nineteen. Twenty. Down was easier than up. Gravity helped. But his leg still ached with each step. Twenty-five. Twenty-six. Twenty-seven.

A memory surfaced, unbidden: Jerusalem. Running across rooftops during patrol. Twenty years old, strong, fast, faithful. That Ibrahim could leap from building to building. Could climb walls. Could fight for hours without tiring.

That Ibrahim was dead.

Thirty-five. Thirty-six. Thirty-seven. Third-floor landing. A door opened—elderly woman, Korean, carrying a basket. She nodded at him. He nodded back. She took the elevator. He continued down.

Forty. Forty-one. Forty-two. The ache in his leg was constant now. Not sharp pain—he had medication for that. Just: persistent reminder that his body was broken. That he'd been broken. That breaking was permanent.

Forty-eight. Forty-nine. Fifty. Almost there. The ground floor lobby visible now. Fifty-one. Fifty-two. Fifty-three.

Ground level.

Ibrahim stood at the base of the stairs, breathing slightly harder than he should. Fifty-three steps down. In a few hours, fifty-three steps back up. Same number every day. Same count. Same practice.

He didn't know why it mattered. But it did.

The lobby was mostly empty. A few residents checking mailboxes, one man sleeping on a bench—alcoholic, probably, or just exhausted with existing. The building manager's office was closed—had been for months. Staff shortages

everywhere. Services declining. But the buildings stood. Heat worked. Water flowed. Enough.

Ibrahim walked through the lobby and out the main entrance.

The Antarctic megacity sprawled in every direction. Building 12 was in the outer residential zone—lower-density, quieter, cheaper. Refugee housing. The city center was visible in the distance, towers rising toward the grey sky. Four billion people once. Fewer now. Nobody counted anymore.

The cold hit immediately. Ibrahim pulled his jacket tighter. Antarctic winter meant darkness—twenty-hour nights, brief twilight, no true day. Artificial lights everywhere compensating. The street lamps were motion-activated, saving energy. They lit as he walked, died after he passed.

He had no destination. Never did. Just walked. Same route every day, more or less. Past Building 11. Past the communal garden—dormant now, winter killing everything. Past the transit stop where people waited for trains to somewhere else.

District 12 Dog Adoption Center came into view. Ibrahim had passed it hundreds of times. Never paid attention. But today—something different. Movement in the outdoor runs. Volunteers. Several people sitting with dogs, walking them, just... being there. Not adoptions. Just presence.

He paused. Watched. Elderly woman on a bench, ancient three-legged dog beside her. They sat in comfortable silence. The woman wasn't doing anything. Just sitting. The dog wasn't doing anything. Just existing. But something about the scene felt purposeful. Present.

Through the window, Ibrahim could see the administrator—Korean woman, thirties maybe, checking kennel doors. She moved with practiced efficiency. Same routine he recognized in his own stair-counting. Maintenance as practice. Tending as purpose.

The center was beyond capacity. He could tell from the crowding. Too many dogs, too little space. But the volunteers kept coming. The administrator kept working. Everyone showing up despite futility. Or maybe—not despite. Maybe showing up was the point.

Ibrahim didn't understand it. But watching them, he felt something. Recognition, maybe. Or envy. They had something to tend. Something that needed them. Something that gave structure to the aimless days.

He moved on. His leg ached with each step. Cane striking pavement. One step. Another. Another. The rhythm was meditative without him meaning it to be. Just: walk, ache, breathe, continue.

A small grocery was open on the corner. Ibrahim went inside. Warm air. Fluorescent lights. Automated checkout. Shelves half-stocked but adequate.

He bought bread, cheese, tea. Basic supplies. Enough for a few days. The automated system scanned his items, deducted from his refugee assistance account, processed without human interaction.

As he turned to leave, someone spoke: "Ibrahim?"

He looked up. Fatima—Jordanian woman, lived on his floor. Unit 417. Devout Muslim. Prayed five times daily. He'd been avoiding her for months.

"Hello, Fatima."

She smiled. Genuine warmth despite his coldness. "Shopping for Eid? It's tomorrow."

Eid. He'd lost track of the calendar. Eid al-Fitr—end of Ramadan, celebration of breaking fast. Holy day. Festival. Community gathering.

"I didn't realize," he said.

"We're having dinner in the community room. Building 12. Tomorrow evening. You should come."

Ibrahim felt the automatic refusal forming. He didn't do community. Didn't do gatherings. Especially not religious ones. Especially not with believers who still had what he'd lost.

But Fatima's face held no judgment. Just: invitation. Simple human kindness.

"I'll think about it," he said. Non-answer. Escape route.

"I hope you do. Eid is about community. About breaking fast together. You don't have to pray. Just: eat with us. Be present."

Be present. The phrase echoed strangely. Where else would he be? What else was there but presence?

"I'll think about it," he repeated.

She nodded and continued her shopping. Ibrahim left, carrying his groceries, feeling unsettled.

The walk back took longer. Always did—climbing hurt more than descending. But Ibrahim took his time. Counted each step.

One. Two. Three. The stairwell echoed with his footsteps and cane strikes. Five. Six. Seven. His leg was protesting now. Ten. Eleven. Twelve.

Halfway up, he paused on the second-floor landing. Caught his breath. An old habit surfaced—he used to make *du'a* at moments like this. Informal prayer. *Ya Allah, give me strength.* The words had come automatically for nineteen years.

Now: silence. No prayers. No appeals to absent God. Just: breathing. Waiting for the ache to become manageable.

He noticed a smell—mint. Sharp and clean. Coming from somewhere nearby. Ibrahim followed it without thinking. Around the corner. Unit 204's door was propped open, elderly woman sitting on a folding chair in the hallway, small balcony visible inside.

"Hello," she said. Korean accent. The woman from the stairwell earlier.

"Hello. I smelled. . . "

"Mint." She gestured to her balcony—visible through the open door. Small pots. Green herbs growing despite winter. "I grow what I can. Not much survives without sunlight, but mint is hardy."

Ibrahim stepped closer. The balcony was tiny—maybe two meters square. But she'd filled it with pots. Most held dead or dormant plants. But the mint thrived, green and vibrant.

"It's beautiful," he said, surprising himself.

"Thank you. I'm Min-seo." She stood slowly—older than him, maybe mid-sixties, but moving with care that suggested her own injuries.

"Ibrahim."

"Fourth floor? Unit 403? I see you counting stairs."

He flushed slightly. Embarrassed to be noticed. "I need to count."

"I understand. I count too. Days, mostly. But counting is counting." She gestured to the mint. "You want some? For tea?"

"I don't—" He stopped. Actually, he did want some. The smell was so alive. So present. So real. "Yes. Thank you."

She cut a small handful with scissors, wrapped it in cloth. "Use fresh. Much better than dried."

Ibrahim took it carefully. "Thank you, Min-seo."

"Come by again. I'm usually here mornings. Sitting helps the pain."

He nodded. Understood completely. Returned to the stairwell.

Twenty. Twenty-one. Twenty-two. The mint's smell filled the stairwell. Sharp. Clean. Real. Thirty. Thirty-one. Thirty-two. His leg aching but bearable. Forty. Forty-one. Forty-two.

Fifty-one. Fifty-two. Fifty-three.

Fourth floor.

Ibrahim unlocked Unit 403. Set his groceries down. Put the mint in a cup of water. Watched the green leaves float there. Alive. Growing. Present.

He made tea. Added the fresh mint. The smell was incredible. He sat at his small table and drank slowly, tasting it. Really tasting it. Not just consuming but experiencing.

When had he last noticed something like this? Really noticed? Not background sensory data but actual observation. The mint was green. The tea was hot. The cup was heavy. The taste was sharp. These weren't profound observations. Just: facts. Present reality.

But somehow, right now, they felt like everything.

The next evening, Ibrahim stood outside the community room. Sounds of gathering inside—voices, laughter, the clatter of dishes. He'd spent all day deciding whether to come. Part of him wanted to go back upstairs. Return to his empty apartment. His quiet isolation. His nothing.

But Min-seo's mint was still on his windowsill. Still green. Still alive. And something about that aliveness made him open the door.

The community room held maybe forty people. Tables arranged in rows, food spread everywhere—traditional dishes from a dozen countries. The diversity of refugees made visible in cuisine. Jordanian *mansaf*. Syrian *kibbeh*. Kurdish rice. Yemeni stew.

Fatima spotted him immediately. Her face lit up. "Ibrahim! You came!"

"I'm just—" He didn't know how to finish the sentence. Just what? Just here? Just existing? Just trying?

"Come sit. Eat. Meet people."

She guided him to a table. Introduced him to others. Names blurred—too many, too fast. But faces were kind. Welcoming. One man caught Ibrahim's attention—signing to someone across the room, hands moving in fluid conversation. Syrian, Ibrahim thought, recognizing something in his face. Deaf, clearly. The man noticed Ibrahim watching, signed something brief. Ibrahim didn't understand but nodded acknowledgment.

No one asked about his faith or lack thereof. No one pressed him to pray. Just: sit, eat, be here.

He filled a plate. Ate slowly. The food was good. Real. Made with care by people who still bothered to cook despite everything.

A man sat next to him. American. Around forty. Quiet like Ibrahim. They nodded at each other—acknowledgment without demand for conversation.

"Derek," the man said after a moment.

"Ibrahim."

"Former soldier?"

Ibrahim glanced at his cane. “That obvious?”

“I recognize the walk. Marine. Two tours. You?”

“Militia. Jerusalem.”

They sat in silence. Understanding passing between them without words. Both fighters. Both broken. Both here in this strange refugee community, eating Eid dinner despite neither being particularly devout.

The Deaf man from earlier approached their table, carrying a plate of flatbread—homemade, Ibrahim could tell. The man set it down, signed something. Derek signed back—basic, halting, but functional. The man smiled, pointed to himself, then signed letters: S-A-M-I-R.

“Samir,” Derek said aloud, then signed again. “Damascus?”

Samir nodded, signed something elaborate. Derek looked apologetic. “I don’t... sorry.”

Samir waved it off—universal gesture. Drew letters in the air with his finger. Damascus. Teacher. Here Year 3.

“Ibrahim,” Ibrahim said, pointing to himself. Then in Arabic: “Ana min Suriya aydan.” I’m from Syria too.

Samir’s face lit up. He signed rapidly in what must be Arabic Sign Language, then caught himself, slowed down. Pointed to both of them—Damascus, Syria, home. Then to the room—here, now, together. His hands made the concept clear even without words.

Ibrahim found himself nodding. Understanding without language. Two Syrians who’d lost everything, eating Eid dinner in Antarctica. The absurdity and rightness of it both.

A woman approached their table—blonde, Swedish accent, rail-thin. Ibrahim recognized her vaguely from the building. Unit 418, maybe? She held a plate but hadn’t put much food on it. Hands shaking slightly.

“Linnea,” Derek said, gesturing to an empty chair. “Sit.”

She sat. Looked at the food like it was a problem to solve. Picked at a piece of bread.

“You need to eat,” Derek said. Not harsh. Just: factual.

“I know.” Her voice was quiet. “I’m trying.”

Fatima appeared with a cup. “Mint tea. It helps.” She set it in front of Linnea gently.

“Thank you.” Linnea wrapped both hands around the cup. Seeking warmth, or steadiness, or both.

Ibrahim understood immediately, even without details. Understood the shaking. The thinness. The difficulty with something as simple as eating. Different battles, different wounds. Same brokenness.

Derek caught his eye. Silent communication: *She's part of this. We keep her alive. That's what we do here.*

Ibrahim nodded. Acceptance without judgment.

Samir was watching Linnea too. Signed something to Derek, who nodded. "He's been checking on her," Derek said quietly. "Brings food. Doesn't need words to notice when someone's struggling."

Samir caught Ibrahim looking, signed something simple—tapping his eyes, then pointing to Linnea, then to his heart. *I see. I care.* Universal.

"Do you believe anymore?" Derek asked quietly, returning to their conversation.

Ibrahim considered lying. Considered deflecting. Instead: "No."

"Me neither. Lost it somewhere between Kandahar and here." Derek ate some rice. "But the food's good. The people are kind. So I show up."

"Is that enough?"

"Don't know. But it's something."

Ibrahim thought about that. Something instead of nothing. Presence instead of absence. Showing up instead of hiding. Was that enough? He couldn't answer. But maybe not-answering was its own kind of answer.

Linnea sipped her tea. Set the cup down. Managed a small bite of bread. Still here. Still trying. Whatever her battle was, she was still fighting it.

That was something. Maybe that was enough.

Fatima called everyone to attention. "Before we finish, I want to thank everyone for coming. For being community. For sharing this Eid together. We're all far from home. All facing the same ending. But tonight: we're here. We're together. We're alive. That matters."

Simple words. Nothing profound. But around the room, people nodded. Agreed. Found meaning in the plainness of it.

Ibrahim found himself nodding too.

After dinner, he helped clean up. Washing dishes alongside strangers who felt less strange now. Small conversations. Nothing deep. Just: the weather's getting colder. The heating system makes that noise. Did you try the *kunafa*? Basic human interaction.

It was okay. Not good. Not meaningful. Not replacing what he'd lost. Just: okay.

Walking back to his apartment, Ibrahim felt something unfamiliar. Not happiness. Not peace. Just: less alone. Slightly. Temporarily. But real.

Unit 403. He made tea with Min-seo's mint. Sat at his table. Pulled out his prayer beads.

Ninety-nine beads. Ninety-nine names of God that meant nothing now. He held them. Moved through them without speaking. One bead. Another. Another. No names. No prayers. Just: touch. Count. Present.

The practice was empty of faith. But not empty of ritual. Not empty of presence. He was here, now, holding beads, counting, breathing. That was all. That was everything. That was enough for tonight.

Tomorrow he'd walk fifty-three steps down. Walk his route. Maybe visit Min-seo. Maybe not. Count his steps. Notice things. Exist without purpose or identity or belief.

Was that enough?

He still couldn't answer.

But maybe that was okay too.

Year 6, Month 11 — Later

Winter deepened. The Antarctic darkness was nearly total now—twenty-two-hour nights, brief twilight, perpetual cold. The megacity's lights blazed constantly, fighting the darkness, consuming energy to maintain the illusion of day.

Ibrahim's routine continued. Fifty-three steps down every morning. Walk the same route. Fifty-three steps up every evening. Same count. Same rhythm.

But small things were changing.

He stopped at Min-seo's apartment twice more. Brief visits. She'd offer tea. They'd sit on her tiny balcony—freezing cold but real. She told him about Seoul. The coastal flooding that destroyed her neighborhood. Her children dead in the evacuation chaos. Her arrival in Antarctica alone.

"Do you regret surviving?" Ibrahim asked one morning.

Min-seo considered. "Sometimes. Most times. But then the mint grows. Or the sun breaks through for five minutes. Or someone like you visits for tea. And I think: okay. Today is okay."

"That's not much."

"No. But it's something. Something is better than nothing."

Derek became a fixture in Ibrahim's walks. They'd pass each other on the street. Nod. Sometimes walk together in silence. Former fighters who understood that

companionship didn't require conversation. Just: presence. Acknowledgment. Not-being-alone.

Sometimes Samir joined them. He'd appear from a side street, wave, fall into step. The three of them walking—two hearing men who barely spoke, one Deaf man who communicated in other ways. Samir would point out things: a bird, a child playing, the way light hit ice. Drawing their attention to what was present. Ibrahim found himself noticing more when Samir walked with them. Seeing instead of just looking.

One afternoon, Derek spoke: "I started going to group therapy. Veteran thing. Talking about war, trauma, all that. You should come."

"I don't talk."

"Neither do I, mostly. Just sit there. Listen. But it's... something. Better than sitting alone."

"I'll think about it."

"Liar." Derek smiled slightly. "But the offer stands."

They walked in silence for a block. Then Derek said: "I run. Mornings. 0530. Old habit—Marines, you know. Can't seem to stop." He paused. "Also help with the adaptive PT program. Pool, mostly. Veterans, refugees. People with injuries."

Ibrahim glanced at his cane. The limp that would never heal. "I can barely walk fifty-three steps."

"I know. That's why it's in water." Derek's voice was matter-of-fact. "Buoyancy. Takes the weight off. Leg doesn't have to work the same way." He shrugged. "Just saying. Tuesdays and Thursdays. Building 9, basement level. If you ever want to see what it's about."

Ibrahim said nothing. The idea seemed absurd. Him, swimming? He could barely manage stairs.

Derek didn't press. Just: "Offer stands. No pressure."

They walked another block in silence. Then Derek added: "Linnea's getting worse. Haven't seen her in three days. Fatima's been checking on her. Bringing food. But..." He trailed off.

Ibrahim understood. There were things food couldn't fix. Things presence couldn't reach. But you kept trying anyway. Kept showing up. Kept offering what you could.

"Should I...?" Ibrahim didn't know how to finish. What could he offer? He could barely keep himself alive.

"Just notice her. When you see her. Nod. Let her know someone sees she's here. That's all. That's enough."

It didn't feel like enough. But maybe Derek was right. Maybe noticing was something. Maybe acknowledgment mattered.

Samir started teaching basic sign language in the community room. Tuesday evenings. Free. Open to anyone. Ibrahim attended twice, awkwardly. Learning to sign *hello*, *thank you*, *I see you*. His hands felt clumsy, but Samir was patient. Showed him again and again. The practice was meditative—hands moving in space, attention required, communication beyond words.

After the second session, Samir approached him. Signed slowly: *You notice things. Good for signing. Signing is seeing.* Then in written Arabic on paper: "Deaf people pay attention different. Vision, not sound. You learning this—how to be present with eyes, not just ears. Good practice."

Ibrahim hadn't thought of it that way. But Samir was right. When you couldn't hear, you watched. Really watched. Noticed details others missed. Presence through vision.

Fatima continued inviting Ibrahim to things. Community dinners. Prayer groups (which he declined). Movie nights (which he attended once, awkwardly). She never pressured. Never judged. Just: kept offering. Kept including him.

"Why?" he asked her one evening. "Why keep inviting me? I'm not a believer anymore."

"Because you're a person," she said simply. "Because community isn't about belief. It's about showing up. Being present with each other. You do that. That's enough."

"I don't pray."

"So? I do. You don't. Both are okay. What matters is you're here. You're alive. You're trying. That's what we share."

Ibrahim didn't know what to say to that. So he said nothing. Just nodded. Accepted.

The fifty-three steps became meditation without him naming it as such. Every day. One step. Two steps. Three. His leg aching. Body protesting. But present with each step. Counting. Breathing. Existing.

Not thinking about past battles. Not thinking about Jerusalem. Not thinking about faith lost or brothers dead or the nineteen years he'd spent believing in something that revealed itself as empty.

Not thinking about the asteroid. Not thinking about nine years left. Not thinking about extinction.

Just: this step. This moment. This breath.

One. Two. Three. Four. Five.

The count was everything. The count was enough.

He didn't know he was practicing a philosophy. Didn't know a 118-year-old woman in Lagos was teaching the same presence. Didn't know her students were spreading the practice like seeds—landing in unexpected places, growing in unlikely soil.

He just knew: counting helped. Noticing helped. Being present with the mint and the tea and Min-seo's garden and Derek's silence and Fatima's kindness—all of it helped.

Not healed. Not fixed. Not restored.

Just: helped.

And maybe that was enough.

Year 6, Month 11 — Final Week

Ibrahim stood on his tiny balcony—same size as Min-seo's, fourth floor instead of second. The Antarctic darkness was complete now. Winter solstice approaching. The stars were incredible—no light pollution reaching this far from city center, the cold air crystalline and clear.

He'd never paid attention to stars before. As a child in Syria, they'd been background. During militia years, they'd been navigation tools. Now: just stars. Beautiful. Distant. Indifferent.

Everything was indifferent. The universe didn't care about Ibrahim. Didn't care about faith or loss or broken legs or prayer beads. The asteroid was falling because physics, not punishment. People suffered because matter and biology, not divine plan.

This realization had broken him six years ago. Shattered his entire worldview. Left him empty and faithless and lost.

Now, standing in the cold, watching stars, he found he didn't mind so much.

The universe was indifferent. But Min-seo's mint grew anyway. But Derek walked past and nodded anyway. But Fatima invited him to dinner anyway. But the tea tasted good anyway. But fifty-three steps were fifty-three steps anyway.

None of it meant anything cosmic. None of it stopped the asteroid. None of it restored faith or purpose or identity.

But all of it was real. Present. Here. Now.

Was that enough?

Ibrahim still didn't know. But he was starting to think that not-knowing was okay. That uncertainty was survivable. That existence without meaning was still existence.

And existence was something.

His prayer beads sat on the windowsill inside. He brought them out. Held them in the cold. Ninety-nine beads. Ninety-nine names he didn't believe anymore.

But the beads were real. The weight was real. The counting was real.

He moved through them slowly. Not praying. Not speaking the names. Just: touching each bead. Counting. Breathing.

One bead. Another. Another. Present with each one.

Was this meditation? Practice? Meaningless ritual? He didn't know. Didn't need to know. The beads were in his hand. That was enough.

Around him, Building 12 was alive with small sounds. Someone cooking. Someone arguing. Someone laughing. Someone crying. Two hundred refugees living temporary lives in temporary housing, all waiting for the same ending.

But right now: alive. Here. Existing.

Ibrahim finished the beads. Ninety-nine. Same number as always. Same weight. Different meaning. Or no meaning. Or meaning he couldn't articulate yet.

He went inside. Made tea with Min-seo's mint. Sat at his table. Drank slowly, tasting it. Really tasting it.

Tomorrow: fifty-three steps down. His walk. Fifty-three steps up. Same count. Same routine.

Nine years left until the asteroid. Nine years of counting steps and noticing mint and drinking tea and maybe accepting Fatima's next invitation and maybe visiting Min-seo and maybe walking with Derek.

Nine years of being present without faith. Without purpose. Without identity.

Nine years of just: existing.

Was that enough?

He still couldn't answer.

But tonight, sitting in his small apartment, drinking mint tea, alive and breathing and noticing—tonight it felt like maybe it was.

Maybe existence without meaning was still worth existing.

Maybe presence without purpose was still worth being present.

Maybe life without faith was still worth living.

Maybe.

Ibrahim set down his empty cup. Looked at his prayer beads on the windowsill. The smooth wooden spheres caught the light. Ninety-nine names of God he didn't believe in. Ninety-nine beads he counted anyway.

Tomorrow he'd count fifty-three steps.

And that would be enough.

That would have to be enough.

That *was* enough.

He closed his eyes.

Breathed.

Noticed the breathing.

And for the first time in six years, felt something like peace. Not happiness. Not faith. Not certainty.

Just: peace with the uncertainty. Peace with the emptiness. Peace with the not-knowing.

Peace with being alive without understanding why.

Peace with fifty-three steps and mint tea and one bead after another.

Peace.

Maybe.

Yes.

Peace.

Chapter 24: Arrays

David Chen | Year 7, Month 2 | Antarctic Solar Arrays

Platform 73. Dawn breaking across the ice. David clipped his harness at 6:47 AM—three minutes early, same as every day for the past nine years. The Antarctic sun was rising, weak and pale, painting the solar arrays in shades of copper and gold.

"Morning, 47B."

The maintenance robot swiveled toward him, its treads leaving precise tracks in the frost that had formed overnight. *Beep beep.*

"Good morning, Colleague Chen. Platform twelve requires recalibration. Connection housing integrity at seventy-nine percent. Weather optimal for maintenance. You are three minutes early, consistent with historical pattern."

David smiled. Two years working with 47B now. The robot had learned to include that last observation—a quirk in its pattern recognition algorithms that amused David more than it should. "Let's get started."

They moved together across the platform with the coordination of longtime partners. David's boots finding their rhythm on the metal grating, 47B's treads humming in counterpoint. The solar array stretched endlessly in every direction—thousands of platforms forming a geometric garden above the ice. In the distance, the megacity rose like a monument to humanity's persistence. Or its stubbornness. David wasn't sure which.

Eight years remaining.

He used to avoid thinking about it. Now the countdown was just background noise, like the wind or the hum of the arrays. Present but not pressing. The end would come. Until then: work.

Platform twelve waited for them. David pulled his diagnostic tablet without conscious thought. His hands knew the sequence. Connection housing. Standard degradation. The seals were failing in exactly the way seals always failed—moisture intrusion, conductivity drop, integrity at seventy-nine percent. He'd seen this failure mode 127 times over nine years. This would be repair number 128.

"Replacement seals required," 47B reported.

"I know." David was already positioning the extraction tool. "Hand me the housing spanner."

The tool appeared in 47B's manipulator exactly when David's hand reached for it. Perfect timing. They'd developed this synchronization over the years—David anticipating 47B's movements, 47B anticipating David's needs. Better coordination than he'd had with most humans. Better than he had with Amara, certainly.

He pushed the thought away. Focus on work.

The housing came free with a pneumatic hiss. David inspected the seals—cracked, brittle, exactly as expected. He removed them one by one, cleaned the channels, prepared the surface for replacement. His hands moved through the sequence automatically, muscle memory built through hundreds of repetitions.

This was what he did. This was what he was good at.

The new seal slid into place with a satisfying click. David ran his thumb along the edge—smooth, aligned, correct. Something in his chest loosened. Not happiness exactly. Just: rightness. The seal was good. The housing would hold.

"Colleague Chen?" 47B's sensors focused on him. "Is there a problem?"

"No." David resumed work. "Just thinking."

"Thinking can reduce efficiency by 11 to 23 percent, depending on thought complexity. Would you like me to play music to assist focus?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine."

He installed the new seals. Checked the fit. Reassembled the housing. Ran the diagnostic. Green across the board. Integrity back to ninety-two percent. Good for another six months. Six months that would exist whether he did this repair or not, but would exist better because he had.

"Repair complete," 47B announced.

"Good work."

Beep beep. "Colleague Chen efficiency rating: optimal."

David almost laughed. How many times had they had this exact exchange? Fifty? A hundred? It never got old. Maybe because 47B meant it. The robot's assessment wasn't politeness or encouragement. Just: observation. David was optimal at this work. The only thing he was still optimal at.

They moved to the next repair. Platform eighteen, voltage regulator misalignment. Then platform thirty-one, panel surface cleaning. The morning passed in familiar rhythm. David's mind could drift while his body worked—hands moving through practiced sequences, tools appearing when needed, 47B's quiet presence beside him.

The maintenance division was down to four humans now. David rarely saw the other three—different shifts, different sectors. The arrays were maintained mostly by robots these days. Forty-four robots, four humans. The ratio inverted from nine years ago. David didn't mind. The robots were reliable. Present. They didn't quit. Didn't despair. Didn't ask why.

They just worked. Like him.

By noon, they'd completed eight repairs. David ate lunch on platform seventy-three—his platform, claimed through years of repetition. Protein bar that tasted like cardboard. Tea from his thermos. 47B entered low-power mode beside him, a companionable silence.

The megacity spread below. Two billion people down there. Maybe fewer. The population statistics were unreliable now. People leaving, people dying, people disappearing into the unofficial zones where governance had dissolved. Antarctica was supposed to be humanity's fortress, the last coordinated society. Instead it was slowly unraveling, threads pulling loose one by one.

But the arrays still worked. The power still flowed. Someone had to maintain that. David did. Because what else?

He finished his tea and stood. “Ready for afternoon schedule?”

47B’s sensor array brightened. *Beep beep.* “Afternoon schedule: platforms forty-one through sixty. Routine inspection plus three repair orders. Estimated completion time: 16:47 hours.”

They worked. Platform after platform. David’s hands knew what to do. Check connections. Verify alignment. Clean surfaces. Update logs. Most platforms required nothing—just confirmation that automation was functioning. Human oversight for systems that barely needed humans.

Why did he keep doing this?

The question surfaced around 2 PM, platform forty-seven. David was tightening a connection that didn’t need tightening, checking a reading that was clearly fine. Make-work. Performance. He could skip these steps. The arrays would run fine. Would run for eight more years without his interference.

So why?

He handed a torque wrench to 47B, took the diagnostic probe in exchange. Their movements synchronized without thought—hundreds of repetitions had made the exchange automatic. David ran the diagnostic. Green across the board.

His hands were warm inside the gloves. The sun had shifted, heating the platform surface. He could feel it through his boots. The wind carried ice-salt from the distant glaciers. All of it registered without interrupting the work.

This was why he came back. Not for the future. For this. The weight of the probe. The vibration of the arrays. The reliable presence of 47B’s treads on metal.

“Colleague Chen?” 47B was waiting patiently. “Platform forty-seven inspection complete?”

“Yes.” David logged the completion. “Platform forty-seven complete. Let’s move to forty-eight.”

They worked through the afternoon. The understanding didn’t change anything practical—same repairs, same sequence, same routine. But something had shifted in David’s relationship to the work. He wasn’t just going through motions anymore. He was present to them. Aware of his hands moving, tools cooperating, 47B’s treads on metal grating, wind on his face, sun declining toward horizon.

This moment. This work. This partnership.

Enough.

Almost enough.

Amara would be at the monitoring station now. Same routine she’d kept for three years. They’d barely spoken since the divorce—occasional messages about

shared assets, nothing personal. He could picture her at her console, face lit by data, processing numbers that meant doom.

He went back to work.

4:47 PM. Last platform complete. David's tablet chimed—end of shift notification.

47B pivoted toward him. "Daily maintenance schedule complete. All repairs logged. Colleague Chen performance: optimal. Same time tomorrow?"

"Same time tomorrow," David confirmed.

He could go home. Instead, he went to the break room.

Sublevel three. Empty. David made tea from the kettle in his locker. Sat at the long table. The warmth of the cup against his palms. The faint hum of the building's ventilation.

His tablet showed no messages. He didn't expect any.

Eight years left. He didn't know how to spend them. Didn't know if reaching out to Amara was possible or wise or pointless. All he knew was this: today's work had felt good. Tomorrow's work would feel good too.

David finished his tea. Took the transport home.

Building seventeen, apartment 4C. Lights off when he arrived—always off. He turned on the kitchen light. Made more tea. Sat at the small table.

The apartment was silent. Amara's coffee maker still sat on the counter, unplugged. He'd never moved it. Her jacket had hung by the door for months after she left before he finally put it in a closet.

Eight years left. He didn't know how to spend them.

He went to the bedroom. Lay down alone.

Tomorrow: 5:00 AM alarm. Shower. Transport. Platform seventy-three at 6:47. Greet 47B. Start repairs.

The routine held him. That had to be enough.

Sleep came slowly. But it came.

Chapter 25: Connection

Dr. Amara Okafor | Year 7, Month 9 | Antarctic Monitoring Station

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Midnight.

The monitoring station hummed its familiar lullaby—cooling systems, data processors, the soft whir of automated tracking arrays. Amara Okafor sat alone at her workstation, the only occupied seat among sixty, the only human presence in a facility designed for constant surveillance.

Seven years. Two thousand, five hundred fifty-five days since detection. Sixty-one thousand, three hundred twenty hours. Three million, six hundred seventy-nine thousand, two hundred minutes.

She updated the trajectory. Observation 127,394. The asteroid was precisely where physics said it would be—deviation from prediction: 0.00002%. Perfect. Predictable. Inevitable.

Countdown: 8 years, 3 months, 5 days remaining.

Her tea had gone cold again. She couldn't remember making it. An hour ago? Three? Time was still elastic at midnight in an empty building, stretching and compressing in ways that mocked the precision of her calculations.

The station lights were motion-activated now—power conservation protocols. They flickered on as she walked the corridors, checking systems that checked themselves. Then darkness followed her, lights dying in her wake. They'd moved to this smaller facility Year 3—twenty workstations instead of sixty, fifty dormitory rooms instead of three hundred. More efficient, they said. More appropriate for diminished staff.

Now even this smaller building was too large. All twenty workstations silent. All fifty dormitory rooms empty except one. A facility built for essential operations now housing one woman who'd forgotten how to be human.

She was the last. Dr. Kim quit Year 5—went to Tokyo to spend time with grandchildren. Dr. Patel transferred Year 6, citing "personal reasons" that everyone understood. The younger researchers had fled earlier. Now: just Amara and the machines and the infinite silence of space.

She preferred it. Told herself she preferred it.

No awkward small talk. No colleagues trying to be supportive. No one asking how she was doing. Just her and the data and the countdown that ticked forward with perfect mathematical precision.

The monitoring systems were fully automated. Had been for six years. The global telescope network fed data directly to the AI processors. Trajectory calculations updated in real-time. Amara's presence was unnecessary. The machines could do everything she did, faster and more accurately.

But she showed up anyway. Every night. Checking calculations that didn't need checking. Updating models that didn't need updating. Maintaining a vigil that served no purpose beyond giving her something to do.

Something to be.

She returned to her workstation and pulled up her secondary dataset—the one she'd been maintaining since Year 2. Global mortality statistics. Aggregate deaths across all causes, updated daily from what remained of the UN Health Coordination Network.

Total deaths Years 1-7: 2,847,291,438

Nearly three billion people. Dead in seven years. Not from the asteroid—that came later. From despair, from violence, from the abandonment of will. Suicides still climbing—up 520% from baseline now. Homicides up 410%. "Natural causes" down 71%—people weren't living long enough to die of old age anymore.

Amara processed this scientifically. Created graphs showing mortality trends by region, by cause, by demographic. Projected future deaths based on current acceleration. Her model predicted total pre-impact deaths would reach 4.7 billion. Nearly sixty percent of current population, gone before the asteroid arrived.

She filed the report. Sent it to the UN Mortality Database. No one responded. No one ever responded. The reports went into the archive, read by no one, useful to no one. But someone should document. Someone should count. Someone should say: these deaths happened, these lives ended.

Even if the record itself would end.

Even if the counter herself was already gone.

The numbers didn't hurt anymore. That was the important thing. She could look at three billion deaths and feel nothing. The numbness was complete now. Protective. Necessary. If she let herself feel what the numbers represented, she'd shatter into pieces too small to calculate.

Better to stay numb. Better to keep counting. Better to exist in the data where emotions couldn't reach.

Her message queue showed 1,243 unread. She'd stopped checking two years ago. Stopped responding five years ago. The queue was mostly automated alerts now—system updates, data confirmations, trajectory verifications. But buried in there: messages from Zara. From David. From colleagues who'd tried to stay in touch before giving up.

Amara's hand hovered over the delete button. One click and they'd all vanish. Clean data streams only. No human connection. No emotional vulnerability. No risk of feeling anything at all.

Her finger didn't press.

Instead—and she didn't know why, couldn't have explained the impulse if asked—she opened Zara's folder.

473 messages spanning seven years.

She scrolled through the timestamps. Year 1: daily messages. Year 2: weekly. Year 3: bi-weekly. Year 4: monthly. Year 5-7: every few months. The frequency declining as Zara's hope faded, as her sister disappeared more completely into data and isolation.

Amara opened the most recent message. From three weeks ago.

A video. Zara in Wei's garden in Lagos, afternoon sunlight streaming through the lemon tree that Wei had been growing for years. Two children visible—Maya (9 years old now, tall and serious, reading a book in the shade) and Kofi (6 years old, laughing at something off-camera, chasing a butterfly through the flowers).

Zara looked directly into the camera. Older than Amara remembered. Grey threading through her hair. Lines around her eyes. But present. Alive. Real.

"Amara." Her sister's voice was flat. Not angry. Not sad. Just: tired. "This is my last message. I'm not angry anymore. I was for a long time—years, honestly. Angry that you calculated our deaths and then vanished. Angry that you chose isolation over family. Angry that Maya and Kofi have an aunt they'll never meet."

She paused. Watched Kofi chase his butterfly. "Professor Wei is our neighbor. Our teacher. Still teaching from her garden even as her body fails. She's never met you, but she knows about you. Says you're hiding from life by burying yourself in death. Says the calculations are armor against feeling anything at all."

Zara looked back at the camera. "She was right. I see that now. You're not calculating because it matters. You're calculating because it's safe. Because numbers don't ask anything of you. Because data doesn't love you back and can't be lost."

Another pause. Longer. Maya looked up from her book, noticed her mother recording, smiled slightly and returned to reading.

"I'm not asking you to fix yourself," Zara continued. "I'm not asking you to be okay. I know you're not. But Amara—" Her voice cracked slightly. "—you have family who loves you. Maya and Kofi ask about their Aunt Amara. They've seen pictures. They want to meet you. Kwame asks if you're okay. I tell him I don't know. I haven't known for seven years."

She wiped her eyes. "This is my last message. If you want to be part of this family, you know where to find us. If you don't, I understand. But I'm done reaching out. I have eight years left with my children. I'm spending them present, not chasing a ghost."

The video ended. Kofi's laughter echoing in the background before cutting to silence.

Amara stared at the frozen final frame. Her sister's face, mid-wipe, tears and sunlight and exhaustion all visible. Behind her: Maya reading, Kofi playing, life

continuing despite extinction.

She should respond. She knew this intellectually. Should send a message: "I'm alive. I'm sorry. I love you." Simple. Human. Required.

Her fingers hovered over the reply button. Had hovered there for seven years.

What would she say?

Sorry I calculated your children's deaths and then vanished into data?

Sorry I can't access emotions anymore?

Sorry I chose numbness over connection and now I don't know how to choose anything else?

The truth was simpler and worse: she'd been afraid. Not of the asteroid. Not of death. Of *feeling* the asteroid. Of *feeling* death. Of looking at her niece and nephew and *feeling* what their seventeen and fourteen-year-old deaths would mean.

So she'd chosen calculation. Chosen isolation. Chosen the safety of numbers over the vulnerability of love.

And now she'd been alone for so long she didn't know how to be anything else.

Amara closed the message. Returned to her calculations. Updated the trajectory. Verified the data. Counted down the days. This was familiar. This was safe. This was—

Her hands were shaking.

She stared at them, trembling over the haptic interface. When had that started? She tried to still them, couldn't. The tremor had been getting worse for months. Years, maybe. She'd ignored it, attributed it to lack of sleep, to too much caffeine, to anything except what it actually was:

Her body protesting what her mind refused to acknowledge.

Amara pushed back from her workstation. Stood. Walked the empty corridors, lights flickering on and off in her wake. Twenty workstations. Fifty dormitories. Even this reduced facility designed for essential staff, for minimal community, for some human connection.

All empty except for her.

She'd moved in after the divorce. Year 4, Month 4. David had tried one last time to reach her. Showed up at her workstation at 4 AM. Brought tea. Tried to talk. She'd felt nothing. Said nothing that mattered. He'd left. Filed separation papers two weeks later.

She'd signed them without reading. The marriage had been dead for years anyway. Just took David longer to admit it.

The facility had dormitory rooms—small, functional, sufficient. She'd moved into one. Never left. Worked eighteen-hour shifts. Slept four hours. Ate nutrient bars and cold tea. Stopped going outside. Stopped seeing daylight. Stopped being anything except the calculations she performed.

Three years divorced. Seven years isolated. And now Zara's last message sitting in her queue like an ultimatum she couldn't answer.

Amara found herself in the old break room. Designed for thirty people. Coffee station, food prep area, tables where colleagues used to gather. All dark now. All silent. She sat at one of the tables, in the darkness, and tried to remember what it felt like to be human.

The memory wouldn't come.

She couldn't remember the last time she'd laughed. Couldn't remember the last time she'd felt anything except the dull, constant pressure of existence. Couldn't remember what Zara's voice sounded like outside of recorded messages. Couldn't remember Maya as anything except a two-year-old at her first birthday party, seven years and a lifetime ago.

Kofi she'd never met. Her nephew. Six years old. Laughing at butterflies in a garden she'd never seen.

The thought should hurt. Should pierce the numbness. Should make her *feel* something.

It didn't.

And that—finally—did.

Amara sat in the darkness of the empty break room and felt the absence where her emotions should be. Felt the void where her humanity used to live. Felt, for the first time in seven years, the full weight of what she'd chosen.

Safety over vulnerability. Calculation over connection. Isolation over love.

And the worst part: she didn't know if she could choose differently. Didn't know if the person who could feel, could love, could connect—if that person still existed inside her or if she'd successfully calculated her away.

Her hands were still shaking.

She looked at them in the darkness. Noticed, really noticed, how thin they'd become. How the tremor never quite stopped. How they looked like an old woman's hands, weathered and worn despite being only fifty-seven.

Her body was failing. Slowly. The isolation eating her from the inside out. She'd lost weight—how much, she didn't know. Didn't own a scale. Didn't care. Sleep was broken, four hours snatched between calculations. Headaches came frequently now. Her vision blurred sometimes.

The machines could track asteroids forever.

Humans couldn't.

She couldn't.

The realization arrived with perfect clarity: she was dying. Not from the asteroid. From loneliness. From the choice to be numb instead of human. And she had maybe a year, maybe two, before the isolation finished what the numbness started.

Eight years until the asteroid.

But she wouldn't last eight years. Not like this.

Amara stood. Walked back to her workstation. Lights flickering on, following her through the tomb she'd made of her life. Even the smaller facility felt too large when you were the only person left.

She sat down. Stared at her monitors. The asteroid approaching. The countdown ticking. The data streaming in perfect, pointless precision.

Then she closed the trajectory calculations.

Opened her message queue.

Found Zara's contact.

Her finger hovered over the call button. Seven years of avoidance. Seven years of choosing safety over risk, calculation over connection. Seven years of telling herself she preferred the isolation, the numbness, the absence of feeling.

All lies.

All armor.

All ways of avoiding the truth she'd been running from since the moment she detected the asteroid: everyone was going to die, including the people she loved, and there was nothing she could do except witness their brief, beautiful, doomed existence.

That had terrified her. So she'd chosen not to witness. Chosen to calculate instead. Chosen absence over presence because presence meant feeling loss and loss was unbearable.

But absence was worse.

Amara pressed the call button.

It rang. Once. Twice. Three times. She almost disconnected. Almost retreated back into the safety of silence. Almost chose calculation again.

Then: "Hello?"

Zara's voice. Live. Real. Not recorded. After seven years of one-way messages, her sister's voice asking a simple question in real time.

Amara's throat closed. She couldn't speak. Couldn't form words. Seven years of silence and suddenly her voice didn't work.

"Hello?" Zara repeated. More cautious now. "Who is this?"

"It's me." Barely a whisper. Barely audible. But there.

Silence on the other end. Long enough that Amara wondered if the connection had dropped. Then:

"Amara?"

Shock in the word. Disbelief. And underneath it: something Amara couldn't name. Hope? Anger? Relief? All three?

"Yes." Stronger now. "It's me. I—" What? What could she possibly say? "I got your message. Your last message. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry. For everything. For seven years. For—"

"Are you okay?" Zara's voice cut through her apology. Not harsh. Just: direct. The engineering pragmatism Amara remembered from before everything fractured.

"No." The truth came easier than she expected. "No, I'm not okay. I haven't been okay in seven years. I've been hiding. You were right. Professor Wei was right. I've been choosing data over life. Calculation over connection. I've been—" Her voice cracked. "—I've been disappearing and I don't know how to stop."

Silence again. Amara could hear something in the background. Voices? Children? Life continuing in Lagos while she sat alone in an empty facility in Antarctica.

"Why are you calling now?" Zara asked finally. Not accusatory. Just: asking. Trying to understand.

"Because I can't do this anymore." Simple truth. "Because seven years alone is enough. Because I'm dying, Zara. Not from the asteroid. From isolation. From numbness. From choosing safety over everything else. And I—" The words came hard, scraped from somewhere deep. "—I want to meet my nephew. If you'll let me. I want to know Maya and Kofi before it's too late. I want to be your sister again. If that's possible. If I haven't—"

"Of course." Zara's voice was soft now. Careful. "Of course you can meet them. They want to meet you too."

Something in Amara's chest cracked. Not broke—cracked. Like ice under pressure, the first fracture in seven years of frozen numbness.

"Thank you," she whispered.

"But Amara." Zara's tone shifted. Firmer. "I need you to understand something. If you do this—if you come here, if you meet Maya and Kofi—you don't get to disappear again. You don't get to calculate their deaths and then vanish. You

either show up or you don't. But you can't half-show-up. They deserve better. I deserve better."

"I know." And she did. For the first time in seven years, she understood. "I know. I'll show up. I promise. I don't know how yet. I don't know if I can feel things like I used to. I don't know if the numbness will let go. But I'll show up. I'll be present. Even if it hurts. Especially if it hurts."

"Okay." Zara took a breath. "Okay. Then tell me—are you still in Antarctica? At the monitoring station?"

"Yes. I live here now. Moved in after David and I—" She couldn't finish.

"I heard about the divorce. I'm sorry."

"Don't be. It was my fault. I disappeared from him too. Disappeared from everyone."

"So come here," Zara said. "Come to Lagos. Stay with us. Meet your nephew. See the garden. Meet the community. Be present for whatever time we have left."

The invitation hung in the air. Amara tried to imagine it: leaving the station, leaving Antarctica, leaving the calculations and the isolation and the safety of emptiness. Tried to imagine meeting Maya and Kofi. Seeing them laugh and play and be alive despite being doomed.

The thought terrified her.

The thought felt like the first real choice she'd made in seven years.

"When?" she heard herself ask.

"Whenever you're ready. Tomorrow. Next month. Next year. But Amara—" Zara paused. "—don't wait too long. We have eight years left. That sounds like a lot. It isn't."

"I know." And she did. She'd been counting those years down to the minute. "I'll come soon. I need to—" What? Finish calculations that would never end? Clean up data no one needed? "I need to arrange things here. Close out some projects. Maybe a month?"

"A month is fine. We'll be here. We're always here."

They talked for two hours after that. Awkward at first, halting, full of seven years of silence that couldn't be bridged in one conversation. But they talked.

Zara updated her on Maya: nine years old, brilliant and serious, reading far above grade level. Obsessed with science, with understanding how things worked. "She's like you," Zara said. "Scary smart. Sees patterns everywhere. But she's also present. She feels things. She cries at sad stories. She laughs when Kofi is silly. She's balanced in a way you and I never quite managed."

And Kofi: six years old, joyful and curious, always in motion. “He’s pure life,” Zara said. “He doesn’t understand extinction intellectually. He knows in eight years everyone dies. But it doesn’t weigh on him the way it weighs on Maya. He’s just—present. Happy. Alive. He makes everyone around him more alive too.”

Zara talked about Kwame, still steady, still working as an engineer despite everything. About their apartment compound, how neighbors had formed a tight community. About Professor Wei, body failing but mind sharp, still teaching from her garden. “She’s the wisest person I’ve ever met,” Zara said. “She teaches by just being present. Just noticing things. The children love her. I think you would too.”

Amara listened. Didn’t share much—what would she share? Seven years of calculations meant nothing compared to Zara’s life. But she listened. Really listened. Let her sister’s words seep past the numbness, past the armor, past the fear.

And slowly, molecule by molecule, something in her began to thaw.

“I should let you go,” Zara said finally. “It’s late here. The children have school tomorrow—yes, we still do school. Kofi’s in first grade. He’s learning to read compound words. But-ter-fly, he says. Three parts.”

Amara felt something in her chest. Not quite emotion. More like: the memory of what emotion felt like. The promise that it might return.

“Thank you,” she said. “For answering. For not—for giving me another chance.”

“You’re my sister,” Zara said simply. “I love you. Even when you disappear. Even when you choose data over family. I still love you. That doesn’t change.”

The words landed like hammer blows. Love. Present tense. Despite everything. Despite seven years of absence and silence and choosing numbness over connection.

Unconditional.

“I love you too,” Amara whispered. And meant it. Even if she couldn’t feel it fully yet. Even if the words came from some deep, frozen place that might never completely thaw. She meant it.

“Good,” Zara said. “Now go sleep. You sound exhausted. And Amara? When you come here—bring data if you need to. Bring calculations if they help. But also bring yourself. The actual you. The sister I remember. The aunt Maya and Kofi deserve to meet. Can you do that?”

Could she? Amara didn’t know. The numbness was still there. The armor still thick. Seven years of isolation couldn’t be undone in one phone call.

But maybe it could crack. Maybe the ice could start to melt.

“I’ll try,” she said.

"That's enough. That's all I'm asking. Just try."

They ended the call. 3:17 AM. The station silent around her. The monitoring systems humming. The asteroid approaching with perfect, indifferent precision.

Countdown: 8 years, 3 months, 5 days remaining.

Amara sat at her workstation and felt the weight of seven years begin to lift. Not completely. Not even mostly. But: slightly. Measurably. Real.

She pulled up her trajectory calculations. Looked at them with new eyes. This data mattered—someone should track the asteroid, should document its approach, should bear witness to the mechanics of extinction.

But it wasn't the only thing that mattered.

It wasn't even the most important thing.

She opened a new file. Began making notes. Preparations for Lagos: arrange transport, notify facility administration, archive essential data, set up remote access for monitoring systems. One month to close out projects that would never truly be finished. One month to prepare for the most terrifying thing she'd done in seven years.

Showing up. Being present. Letting herself feel.

The notes felt inadequate. But they were something. A start.

She thought about David. Her ex-husband. Three years divorced, barely communicating. He was still in Antarctica, still maintaining solar arrays that would vaporize in eight years. Still choosing work as meaning, same as her.

They were parallel. Both isolated. Both numbed by routine. Both hiding from connection behind professional competence.

She could reach out. Could call him. Could try reconnecting.

The thought terrified her.

One step at a time, she told herself. Sister first. Niece. Nephew. Family she'd abandoned. Then—maybe—ex-husband. If she had courage left. If reconnecting with Zara didn't break her completely.

Amara returned to her preparations. One month. Then Lagos. Then whatever came after.

She glanced at the countdown display.

8 years, 3 months, 5 days remaining.

For seven years, she'd watched that number decrease with scientific detachment. Just data. Just mathematics. Just the inevitable approach of extinction.

Now, for the first time, she felt it differently.

Not as countdown to death.

As countdown to life.

Eight years left. Time to stop calculating. Time to start living. Time to show up for the people who loved her despite everything.

Time to be human again. Even if it hurt. Especially if it hurt.

Amara closed her trajectory calculations. Shut down the monitoring displays. Stood and walked to her dormitory room—fifty steps through empty corridors, lights flickering on and off.

She lay in bed. Stared at the ceiling. Felt the silence of the station pressing down.

But underneath it: something new. Something fragile and terrifying and real.

Hope.

Not for survival. Not for deflection. Not for miraculous salvation.

Just: hope that she could change. That numbness could thaw. That seven years of isolation didn't have to define her eight years remaining.

Hope that she could be sister, aunt, human again.

It was enough.

For now, it was enough.

She closed her eyes and slept—not well, not deeply, but better than she had in seven years. And dreamed of butterflies in a garden she'd never been, chased by a nephew she'd never met, while a niece she barely remembered read quietly in the shade.

Present. Alive. Real.

Waiting for their aunt to finally come home.

END PART II: FRACTURE

Seven years of isolation completed. Years 1-7 covered. The fracture deepened exactly as predicted. Everyone reached their lowest point. Amara disappeared into calculation and solitude. Kenji wandered continents seeking answers he couldn't integrate. Ibrahim lost faith and purpose. Elena governed emptiness. David maintained arrays alone.

But underneath the fracture: Wei taught in Lagos. Zara built family and community. Practice spread quietly. Seeds planted. Presence maintained despite despair.

Chapter 24 marks the hinge. Amara's call to Zara—first real reconnection after seven years apart. The armor cracking. The isolation becoming unbearable. The movement toward gathering beginning.

Not convergence yet. Just: first crack in seven years of ice.

Part III awaits. Years 8-15. The searching that finds. The scattered gathering. The broken healing. Kenji will find Wei's garden and stay. Amara will visit Lagos. Ibrahim will discover competence through work. David and Amara will reconnect. Elena will understand her role. Maya will awaken to practice. Everyone moving toward Antarctica. Toward family. Toward presence. Toward home.

Eight years remain. The transformation beginning. The reconnection real. The fracture healing.

Not fixed. Just: less alone.

The isolation ending.

The searching begins.

PART III: SEARCHING

Chapter 26: Threshold

Dr. Amara Okafor & David Chen | Year 8, Month 2 | Antarctica

Amara stood outside David's apartment door, hand raised to knock, frozen.

Four years. Four years since the divorce. Six months since she'd called Zara from that empty monitoring station. Six months since she'd started trying to thaw. And now this: reaching out to the person she'd hurt most. The person who'd tried longest. The person she'd pushed away until he'd finally stopped trying.

Building seventeen, apartment 4C. She'd lived here once. Year 0 through Year 4, Month 4. Then she'd moved to the station permanently, and David had filed papers two weeks later. Clean break. Necessary break. She'd signed without reading.

Her hand was still raised. Still not knocking.

What was she doing here?

The answer came from Zara's voice in her head, six months of phone calls and slowly rebuilding: *"You can't heal everything at once, Amara. But you can try. One person at a time. Starting with the people you pushed away."*

Amara had visited Lagos twice since that first call. Met Kofi properly—seven years old now, joyful and curious, calling her "Aunt Amara" like they'd known each other forever. Reconnected with Maya—ten and brilliant and asking questions about astrophysics that reminded Amara painfully of herself. Met Professor Wei, body failing but mind sharp, still teaching from her garden. Begun learning what presence meant.

But she hadn't contacted David. Hadn't known how. He'd tried so many times—Year 1, Year 2, Year 3, even that last attempt Year 4. She'd felt nothing. Said nothing that mattered. He'd finally stopped. Filed for divorce. Given up.

Why would he want to hear from her now?

Because maybe he's as lonely as you were, Zara had said last week. *Because maybe four years is long enough. Because you won't know unless you try.*

So here she was. Trying. Terrified.

She knocked.

Footsteps inside. The door opened.

David stood there—fifty-six years old, thinner than she remembered, grey threading through his hair. He wore his off-duty clothes: comfortable pants, old sweater. His expression cycled through surprise, confusion, uncertainty.

"Amara."

"Hi." Her voice came out smaller than intended. "Can I come in?"

He hesitated. She saw him processing: four years of silence, sudden appearance, what did this mean? Then he stepped aside. "Of course."

The apartment looked the same. Same furniture. Same kitchen layout. But emptier somehow. Cleaner. Less lived-in. David's space now, not theirs. She felt like an intruder.

"Tea?" he offered.

"Please."

They moved to the kitchen. The ritual was familiar—David filling the kettle, pulling down cups, the motions they'd done together thousands of times. But different now. Careful. Distant. The ease gone.

Amara sat at the small table. This table. Where they'd eaten meals, reviewed work, existed in comfortable parallel before everything broke. Now it felt kilometers wide.

David brought tea. Sat across from her. Waited.

"I'm sorry for showing up without calling," Amara started. "I should have called. I just—I didn't know what to say. Still don't, honestly."

"It's okay." His voice was measured. Not cold, but guarded. "You're here now. What did you want to talk about?"

What did she want? Amara wrapped her hands around the warm cup, gathering courage.

"I called Zara. Six months ago. Year 7, Month 9. First real conversation in years." The words came slowly, carefully. "It made me realize: I've been hiding from everyone. Including you."

David nodded slightly. Processing. Not interrupting.

"When you left—when you filed for divorce—I thought you were giving up. Walking away. I was angry about it, in the distant way I was angry about everything. Felt it barely, but felt it."

"I wasn't walking away," David said quietly. "You had already left. I just made it official."

The words stung. But they were true. Amara took a breath.

"I know. You're right. I disappeared into data Year 0. You tried to reach me—so many times. I couldn't let you. Couldn't let anyone. The numbness was complete. I thought it was protection." She met his eyes. "It was just slow death."

David looked at his tea. "I disappeared too. Into maintenance. Into routine. We both chose work over each other."

"You tried to choose differently. I wouldn't let you."

"For a while. Then I gave up. That's on me too."

They sat in the silence of shared failure. Two people who'd loved each other once, broken by extinction's weight, divorced badly, spending four years separate and numb.

Amara found herself speaking again. "I've been visiting Zara. In Lagos. Met Kofi properly. He's wonderful. Joyful. Seven years old and fully alive despite everything."

"How is Zara?"

"Good. Tired. Scared about having seven years left. But present. Really present. She built something real—family, community, life that matters despite ending."

David absorbed this. "And Maya?"

"Ten years old. Brilliant. Asks about orbital mechanics and asteroid composition. She's like me but better—feels things, cries at stories, laughs with her brother. Balanced."

"You don't sound numb talking about them."

Amara realized he was right. Talking about her niece and nephew, about Zara's garden and Lagos life—her voice had warmth. Not much, but real. Measurable.

"The numbness is cracking," she admitted. "Slowly. Six months of trying. Of calling Zara weekly. Of letting myself care about Maya and Kofi even though caring means feeling the seven years they have left. It hurts. But it's better than nothing."

David was watching her now. Really watching. Seeing her, maybe, for the first time in years.

"Why are you here, Amara?"

The direct question. She'd been circling it. Time to be honest.

"Because I miss you." Simple truth. "I missed you even when I couldn't feel it. I missed you through all seven years of numbness. And now that I'm starting to feel again, I realize: I don't want to spend the next seven years wondering if we threw away something salvageable."

David's expression was complicated. Hope mixed with caution mixed with old pain.

"Did we?" he asked. "Throw away something salvageable?"

"I don't know. But we have seven years left. I don't want to spend them alone anymore. And I think—I hope—you don't want to either."

"I don't," David said after a long moment. "I've been alone four years. It's—" He paused, searching for words. "—it's sustainable. I have work. I have 47B. I have purpose. But it's not enough. It's almost enough, but not quite."

Amara understood. She'd lived in "almost enough" for years. It was survivable but not livable.

"I can't promise I'm fixed," she said carefully. "Can't promise I won't retreat into data again. Can't promise I know how to be a good partner. I'm still learning how to be human after seven years of calculating."

"I can't promise I'm different either. I still hide in maintenance. Still choose work over vulnerability. Still spend twelve hours a day on the arrays maintaining systems that will vaporize anyway."

They looked at each other across the table. Two broken people. Two failures at connection. Two people who'd hurt each other through absence and avoidance and choosing safe numbness over risky presence.

"So where does that leave us?" Amara asked.

David considered. When he spoke, his voice was tentative. "Maybe we start over. Not as people who failed at marriage. As two people who used to love each other, divorced badly, and want to try again."

"Try what exactly? Remarriage?"

"No." David shook his head. "That's too much. Too fast. Too scary. Just—trying. Dating, maybe. Getting to know each other again. Seeing if connection is still possible after everything."

Dating. The word felt absurd. They'd been married sixteen years. But maybe David was right. Maybe they needed to start from the beginning. Rebuild foundation that had crumbled.

"Small steps?" Amara suggested.

"Small steps," David confirmed. "Breakfast together once a week. Talking daily. Being honest about what we're feeling, or not feeling. No pressure to fix everything. Just—showing up."

Showing up. The phrase Zara used. The practice Wei had taught. Presence as enough.

"I think I can do that," Amara said. "The showing up part."

"Me too."

They finished their tea in less uncomfortable silence. The conversation wasn't easy. Four years of absence didn't dissolve in one discussion. But it was start. Real start.

"I'm going back to Lagos Month 4," Amara said. "Zara invited me. I want to spend more time with Maya and Kofi before—" She couldn't finish.

"Before there isn't time," David completed quietly.

"Yes. Will you come? As—" She gestured uncertainly. "—friend? Ex-husband? I don't know what to call us yet."

David smiled slightly. First real smile she'd seen. "As someone who cares. Yes. I'll come."

"Really?"

"Really. I want to meet them. And I want to spend time with you. See if we can figure out what we are now."

Amara felt something warm in her chest. Not quite emotion. More like: potential for emotion. Hope that feeling might fully return.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For not giving up completely. For being willing to try again. For still being here."

"You're here too," David pointed out. "That took courage."

Did it? It had felt like terror more than courage. But maybe they were the same thing.

Amara stood. “I should go. Let you process this. But—same time next week? Breakfast?”

“Breakfast,” David agreed. “Where?”

“Community center? Neutral ground?”

“Good idea. Saturday, eight AM?”

“I’ll be there.”

David walked her to the door. They stood in the doorway awkwardly. Four years ago they’d been married. Now: strangers attempting reconnection. No script for this.

“Goodnight, Amara.”

“Goodnight, David.”

No kiss. No embrace. No physical intimacy. Just: acknowledgment. Agreement. Beginning.

Amara walked down the corridor toward the elevator. Looked back once. David was watching from his doorway. Their eyes met. Both smiled slightly—tentative, uncertain, but real.

She turned away and continued walking. Seven years left. Maybe they’d reconnect. Maybe they wouldn’t. But at least they were trying. At least they were showing up.

That was progress. Small progress, but real.

Saturday morning, 8:03 AM. Amara arrived three minutes late—unusual for her, but she’d changed outfits four times, anxious about something as simple as breakfast. The community center dining area was nearly empty. Used to serve five hundred people daily. Now: maybe fifty. But still functioning. Still here.

David sat at a corner table, two cups of tea already steaming. He’d arrived early. Also nervous, apparently.

“Hi.” Amara sat across from him.

“Hi. I got you tea. If you don’t want it—”

“I want it. Thank you.”

They collected food from the automated service line. Protein paste formed into pancake shapes, nutrient-enriched fruit, synthetic eggs that tasted almost right. The same food they’d eaten for years. Familiar.

Sitting back down felt monumental. First meal together in four years. Dating. This was dating.

“This is weird,” Amara said.

David laughed—genuine, surprised. "Very weird. We were married sixteen years."

"And now we're nervous about breakfast."

"Maybe that's good. Means we care about getting it right this time."

They ate in slightly less awkward silence. Amara tried to think of conversation topics. What did people talk about on dates? She'd forgotten. It had been nineteen years since their first date. Different people then. Different world.

"How's work?" she tried.

"Same. Maintenance. Platform seventy-three. 47B sends regards."

"The robot sends regards?"

"I mentioned I was having breakfast with my ex-wife. 47B said that was statistically unusual and to proceed with optimal communication."

Amara smiled. "Robot advice. That's new."

"47B gives good advice, actually. Better than most humans I know."

"What else does 47B say?"

David relaxed slightly, talking about his work. The repairs. The patterns. How maintenance had become meditation, presence practice, meaning-making through showing up. He described it simply, without drama, but Amara heard the depth underneath.

"You found purpose in it," she observed. "The arrays."

"I did. Not because the work matters for the future. Because it matters now. Present-moment purpose. Wei's teaching, filtered through practice."

"I read Wei's letters," Amara admitted. "The ones she sent me Year 5 through Year 7. Zara gave them to me. Wei wrote that my work was holy. That bearing witness matters even when nothing lasts."

"Do you believe that?"

Amara considered. "I'm starting to. I tracked the asteroid for seven years while numb. Thought it was meaningless. Now I think—maybe documentation matters. Maybe saying 'this happened, we existed, we tried' is valuable even if the record itself ends."

"Same with maintenance. Arrays vaporize in seven years. But they provide power now. People need power now. Seven years of function is real."

They saw each other more clearly. Both had found purpose in work. Both had discovered presence through practice. Both had been preparing for this conversation without knowing it.

"Tell me about Lagos," David said. "What's Kofi like?"

Amara brightened—surprising herself. "He's joyful. That's the word Zara uses. Seven years old, always in motion, curious about everything. He chased butterflies in Wei's garden. Asked me if asteroids have feelings. Laughed when I said no but thanked them for asking."

"And Maya?"

"Brilliant. Ten years old and reading university-level physics. But not isolated like I was. She feels things. Has friends. Loves her brother fiercely. She asked me about orbital mechanics and then cried watching a sad film. I never managed that balance."

"You're managing it now. Talking about them with real warmth."

Was she? Amara noticed her voice, her expression. He was right. Thinking about Maya and Kofi made her feel. Not numbness. Actual emotion. Affection. Care. Maybe even love.

"The thawing is slow," she said. "But it's happening."

They talked for hours. Longer than planned. Conversation flowed more easily as they relaxed. David asked about her work—she'd transitioned to part-time monitoring, spending more time analyzing global data patterns instead of obsessive trajectory tracking. Amara asked about his colleagues—most gone now, maintenance run primarily by robots with four human supervisors.

"There's one other worker I see regularly," David added. "Ibrahim. Started about a year ago. Former militia fighter from Jerusalem. Lost his faith when the asteroid was detected. Spent years drifting, unemployed. Then took this job." He paused, considering. "We don't talk much. Work in parallel mostly. But there's something there. Shared understanding, maybe. Both of us finding purpose in showing up."

"Sounds like good company."

"It is. Quiet company. But real."

Eventually the dining area began filling with lunch crowd. They'd occupied the table four hours. Time to go.

"Walk?" David suggested.

They walked the residential district. Block after block of apartment buildings, engineered green spaces, the infrastructure of two billion people living at the bottom of the world. Antarctica in Year 8 was quieter than Year 0. Population declining. But still functioning. Still alive.

"I'm scared," Amara admitted suddenly.

"Of what?"

"Of this working. Of letting myself care about you again. Of spending seven years rebuilding something just to lose it. Again. Permanently this time."

David was quiet for several steps. Then: "I'm scared too. Of trying and failing again. Of opening up and being pushed away. Of spending seven years wondering if I should have stayed divorced."

"So we're both terrified."

"Apparently."

"Should we do it anyway?"

David stopped walking. Turned to face her. "I think so. I think trying is better than wondering. Even if we fail again. Even if it hurts. Seven years of trying beats seven years of isolation."

Amara looked at him—this man she'd married twenty years ago, divorced four years ago, was attempting to know again now. He was right. Trying was better than hiding.

"Okay," she said. "We try. Small steps. No pressure. Just—showing up."

"Just showing up," David echoed.

They continued walking. Didn't hold hands. Didn't touch. Just walked parallel, two people attempting connection after years of separation. Small beginning. But beginning nonetheless.

Month 3. They'd had breakfast together eight times. Dinner twice. One movie—terrible disaster film that felt inappropriately timed given everything. They'd laughed about it afterward, the absurdity of entertainment about asteroids when real asteroid was approaching.

Communication improved. Daily messages now, not logistics but actual conversation. Amara sharing her day. David sharing his. Small details. Real presence.

But also: difficult moments. Week 6, Amara cancelled breakfast without explanation. David felt the old pattern—her withdrawing, him wondering if he'd done something wrong. He reached out: "Are you okay?"

Three hours later: "No. Had panic attack. Thinking about seven years left. Couldn't face breakfast. Sorry."

This was different. Old Amara would have said nothing. Current Amara was trying. Acknowledged the withdrawal. Explained instead of vanishing.

David responded: "No apology needed. Want to talk?"

"Not yet. Tomorrow maybe?"

"Tomorrow's fine. I'm here."

They talked the next day. Amara explaining: she'd been tracking mortality statistics. Three billion dead since detection. Seven years remaining. The math made her spiral. Reminded her of Year 0 numbness. She'd barely fought it off.

"I'm still fragile," she admitted. "Still close to retreating."

"I know," David said. "I'm fragile too. Some days the maintenance feels pointless. Why fix what ends anyway? I have to remind myself: presence matters. Now matters."

They were honest. That was progress. Showing each other the broken parts instead of hiding them.

Week 10, David had bad day. Robot 47B malfunctioned—first serious failure in their partnership. Required reset, lost three weeks of learned patterns. David came to their dinner obviously upset.

"What happened?" Amara asked.

He explained. Amara listened. Really listened, not just waiting for her turn to speak. When he finished, she said: "That sounds hard. Losing the connection you'd built."

"It's stupid. 47B is just a robot."

"No," Amara disagreed. "47B is your colleague. Your partner. Losing that connection matters. You're allowed to grieve it."

David looked at her with surprise. "Thank you. For understanding that."

"I'm trying to understand. Still learning how. But trying."

These small moments of seeing each other—really seeing—accumulated. Built foundation. Not fixed. Not healed completely. But: progress.

Month 4, Week 1. Amara raised the Lagos trip again.

"Still planning to go?" David asked.

"Yes. Two weeks, Month 4, Week 3. Zara's expecting me. Are you still coming?"

"If the invitation stands."

"It stands. I want you there. Want you to meet Maya and Kofi. See what Zara built. Meet the community." She paused. "And I want us to have time together. Outside Antarctica. Away from work. See if we function as more than breakfast companions."

David smiled. "Two weeks in Lagos. Together but not living together. Neutral ground. Testing compatibility."

"Exactly."

"I'm in."

They planned the trip. Separate sleeping arrangements—Zara had guest room for Amara, community housing for David. Meals together but not constant. Space but proximity. Testing whether connection could deepen.

"I'm nervous," Amara admitted.

"Me too. But good nervous, maybe?"

"Maybe."

The night before departure, David brought Amara to the arrays.

"You wanted to see my work," he said. "Properly. Not just hear about it."

They took the transport to Sector 7. Darkness broken by work lights. David led her to platform seventy-three—his platform, the one he'd maintained for nine years.

"This is it," he said simply.

They climbed two hundred meters. Amara nervous about height. David patient, supportive, showing her the handholds. At the top: solar arrays stretching forever. Systems humming. Stars visible above, Antarctica glowing below.

"This is beautiful," Amara breathed.

"This is home," David said. "Where I found purpose. Where I learned presence. Where I've spent nine years maintaining what will end."

Robot 47B glided over, newly reset but still recognizable. *Beep beep.*

"Good evening, Colleague Chen. Visitor presence detected. Good evening, Visitor."

"This is Amara," David said. "My—" He paused, uncertain.

"Friend," Amara finished. Not ex-wife. Not girlfriend. Friend felt right.

"Good evening, Friend Amara. Welcome to Platform Seventy-Three."

They sat on the platform while David performed evening inspection. Amara watched him work—methodical, present, competent. Saw what he'd found here: meaning in maintenance, purpose in showing up, meditation in routine. She understood now. Really understood.

"Thank you for bringing me here," she said when he finished.

"Thank you for coming."

They descended together. Tomorrow: Lagos. Two weeks together. Testing whether breakfast companions could become something more. Testing whether broken people could rebuild connection. Testing whether seven years was enough time to try.

At the ground, they stood by the transport, departure in twelve hours.

"Goodnight," David said.

"Goodnight."

Still no kiss. Still no physical intimacy. But: warmth. Care. Possibility.

Amara went home to her station dormitory. Packed for Lagos. Thought about two weeks with David, with Zara's family, attempting to bridge four years of divorce and seven years of isolation.

She was terrified. But trying anyway.

That was progress. Real progress.

Tomorrow: Lagos. Together.

The transport climbed through Antarctic atmosphere, Africa approaching below. David sat beside Amara, both nervous, both excited, both scared.

"Seven years left," Amara said quietly.

"Seven years," David confirmed.

"Enough time?"

"To rebuild connection? To become something more than ex-spouses attempting breakfast? I don't know. But enough time to try."

"I'm glad we're trying."

"Me too."

The transport descended toward Lagos. Below: megacity sprawling across West African coast. Two hundred million people. Zara's home. Maya and Kofi waiting. Professor Wei's garden maintained by the community. Life continuing despite extinction.

David reached over. Took Amara's hand. First physical contact in four years.

She didn't pull away. Squeezed back.

Small gesture. Enormous meaning.

The transport landed. They disembarked hand in hand. Zara waiting at the gate with Maya and Kofi, both children excited to meet Uncle David for first time.

Amara looked at David. Saw him seeing her family. Saw possibility. Saw connection attempting to form.

"Ready?" she asked.

"Ready."

They walked forward together. Toward family. Toward community. Toward trying. Toward hope.

Seven years left. Maybe not enough time to fix everything. But enough time to try.

That was something. Maybe even enough.

Chapter 27: Reckoning

David Chen | Year 8, Month 8 | Lagos District

The argument started over nothing. A dropped cup. Synth-coffee pooling across Zara's kitchen floor, and David reaching for a towel while Amara stood frozen, staring at the spreading stain like it meant something.

"It's just a cup," David said.

"I know it's just a cup."

But she didn't move. Didn't help. Just watched him clean, the same distant look he remembered from Year 4, from Year 3, from every moment when she retreated into calculation and left him alone in the marriage.

Seven months of trying. Seven months of weekly calls, two extended visits, careful hope. And now, in Zara's kitchen at 6 AM while everyone else slept, the old pattern rising like tide.

"Amara."

"What."

"Where are you right now?"

She blinked. Focused on him. The effort visible—pulling herself back from wherever she'd gone. "I'm here."

"Are you?"

The question hung between them. David wrung the towel over the sink. Brown water spiraling down the drain. He could feel the conversation waiting, the one they'd avoided for seven months. For four years of divorce. For the entire length of their marriage, if he was honest.

"We should talk," he said.

"We talk all the time."

"Not about this."

Amara's hands found the counter edge. Gripped. "About what?"

"About why the coffee cup made you disappear. About why you still do that. About—" He stopped. Started again. "About the seven years I spent married to your absence."

Silence. Morning light through Zara's kitchen window, Lagos waking outside, the compound stirring toward another day. Somewhere in the apartment, Kofi mumbled in his sleep. Life continuing around them while they stood at the edge of the conversation they'd never had.

"David—"

"I need to say this." His voice was quiet. Not angry. He'd burned through anger years ago. "I need to say it and I need you to hear it. Not calculate it. Hear it."

Amara nodded. Her face was pale. Scared. But she didn't run. Didn't retreat into her tablet or her data or the comfortable numbness that had protected her for a decade. She stayed.

David leaned against the counter. Looked at his hands. Maintenance hands. Twelve years of arrays and seals and the physical work of keeping systems running. He'd learned presence through maintenance. Maybe he could find words the same way—one piece at a time, methodical, patient.

"You left first," he said. "Before the divorce. Before the separation. You left me in Year 0, the night you detected the asteroid."

"I didn't—"

"You did." Not accusation. Just fact. "You went to the station that night and you never really came back. I was there, in our apartment, waiting for you to return. For four years. But you'd already chosen the numbers over me."

Amara's eyes were wet. She didn't wipe her face. Let the tears fall.

"I'm not saying you were wrong," David continued. "I'm not saying I was blameless. I retreated too. Into the arrays, into routine, into the same isolation you chose. We both ran. But Amara—" His voice caught. He waited. Continued. "—you ran first. And you never told me you were going."

"I didn't know how."

"I know."

"I didn't know how to feel it and still function. The numbers were—" She stopped. Breathed. "The numbers were the only thing I could control. If I let myself feel it, I would have broken. And I couldn't break. Someone had to calculate the trajectory updates, track the orbital decay, maintain the models. Someone had to—"

"Someone had to," David agreed. "But it didn't have to be you. There were other astronomers. Other stations. You chose it because it let you hide."

"Yes."

The admission cost her something. He could see it in how she gripped the counter, how her shoulders curved forward, how small she looked in Zara's kitchen seven thousand kilometers from the station where she'd hidden for a decade.

"And the divorce," he said. "I filed because you'd already left. But I should have fought harder. Should have—"

"No." Amara shook her head. "You shouldn't have. I wasn't there to fight for. You would have been fighting a ghost."

"I know. But I gave up too easily. Four years of waiting and then one conversation with a lawyer and it was done. Like twelve years of marriage could just—" He gestured at the stain on the floor. "—spill and get wiped away."

They stood in the quiet. The compound was waking now. Footsteps in the hallway outside. Someone's radio playing news. The ordinary sounds of people living, continuing, trying.

"What do you want?" Amara asked finally. "From this. From us. What are you actually asking for?"

David considered the question. What did he want? He'd thought about it for seven months. Longer. Since the morning he'd shown up at her door with breakfast and hope.

"I want to know if you're here," he said. "Really here. Not calculating. Not numb. Not performing recovery for my benefit. I want to know if you can stay in the room when it gets hard."

"I don't know if I can."

"That's honest."

"It's not good enough."

"It's a start." He stepped closer. Not touching. Just: present. In the same space. "I'm not asking you to be fixed, Amara. I'm asking you to be here. With me. Even when you want to run. Especially when you want to run."

"What if I run anyway?"

"Then I'll wait. Like I did before. But this time I'll know you're running, and I'll leave the door open."

Amara's laugh was broken, wet. "That's not fair to you."

"Probably not. But I'm not looking for fair. I'm looking for real. And real means: sometimes you'll disappear. Sometimes I'll disappear. But we'll come back. We'll try to come back. That's different from before."

"Is it?"

"Before, we didn't try. We just... dissolved. Stopped talking. Stopped showing up. Let the marriage end through neglect." He reached out, touched her hand. First deliberate touch since the transport to Lagos. "I don't want to neglect us again. Even if us is messy and broken and uncertain."

Amara turned her hand over. Held his. Her palm was cold, slightly damp with nervous sweat. Real. Alive. Here.

"I don't know how to be here," she said. "I've spent ten years learning how to be absent. How to calculate instead of feel. How to survive by not caring. I don't know how to reverse that."

"Neither do I. But I know how to maintain things. How to show up every day and do the small repairs. How to keep systems running through attention and patience." He squeezed her hand. "Maybe we learn together. Small repairs. Daily presence. Not trying to fix everything at once."

"Maintenance," Amara said. "You're suggesting we treat our relationship like a solar array."

"It's what I know."

She almost smiled. "That's very you."

"Is that bad?"

"No." The almost-smile became real. Small, fragile, but real. "It's actually comforting. Concrete. Something I can understand."

They stood together in Zara's kitchen, holding hands, the coffee stain drying on the floor. Outside, Lagos brightened toward full morning. In an hour, Zara would wake. Maya would ask difficult questions about astrophysics. Kofi would demand attention and gardens and the full chaos of family life.

But right now: just the two of them. Holding what they'd said. Holding what they hadn't solved but had finally named.

"I'm sorry," Amara said.

"For what?"

"For leaving first. For the seven years of marriage where I was already gone. For the seven years after where I hid in numbers. For—" Her voice broke. "—for everything I couldn't give you because I was too scared to feel."

David pulled her into his arms. She was stiff for a moment, unused to being held. Then she softened. Leaned into him. Let herself be held.

"I'm sorry too," he said into her hair. "For giving up. For not fighting harder. For letting the maintenance routine become another way to hide. We were both scared. We both ran."

"But we're here now."

"We're here now."

They held each other while the sun rose higher and the compound fully woke. Footsteps in the hall. Doors opening and closing. The sounds of life continuing despite everything.

"I want to try," Amara said against his chest. "Really try. Not just survive together. Not just tolerate each other because it's easier than being alone. I want—" She pulled back, looked at him. "I want to be present. With you. For whatever time we have."

"Seven years."

"Seven years. Maybe less. Maybe more. Does it matter?"

"No," David said. "It never mattered. We thought we had fifty years when we got married. We were wrong. Now we know we have seven. The amount doesn't change what we do with it."

"Be present."

"Be present. Show up. Do the maintenance. Come back when we run."

Amara reached up, touched his face. Her hand still cold, still slightly trembling. But here. Intentionally here.

"I love you," she said. "I should have said it more often. I should have—"

"You're saying it now."

"It's not enough."

"It's a start."

She kissed him. First real kiss in four years, five months, seven days—not that David was counting. Soft and tentative and terrified and brave. He kissed her back, tasting coffee and salt tears and the particular taste of someone who was trying, really trying, to be present.

When they separated, Amara was crying again. Smiling through the tears. "That was unexpected."

"Good unexpected?"

"Yes. Good unexpected."

Footsteps in the hall. A door opening. Kofi's voice calling for breakfast. The domestic machine starting up. Their private moment ending.

But not gone. Held. Something had shifted in Zara's kitchen, something that wouldn't unshift. They'd named the absence. Named the fear. Named the choice to try anyway.

It wasn't resolution. The problems were still there—her tendency to disappear, his tendency to wait too long, the years of damage and distance between them. But it was beginning. Real beginning. Not just hope but intention.

"We should clean this up," David said, nodding at the dried coffee stain.

"We should."

They cleaned it together. Simple domestic act. Maintenance. Presence. And when Kofi burst into the kitchen demanding breakfast, they were standing side by side at the counter, making synth-eggs, looking like what they were trying to become:

Two people. Choosing to be here. Together.

That evening, after the children were asleep and Zara had retreated to her room, David and Amara sat on the compound roof. The Lagos skyline spread around them. Two hundred million people. Six years remaining.

"Tell me about the arrays," Amara said.

So he told her. Platform 73. 47B. The 12,000 shifts that had taught him presence. The seals and housings and the small satisfactions of systems maintained. He talked for an hour, maybe more. Not performing. Just sharing. The way he should have shared during their marriage. The way she should have asked.

When he finished, Amara was quiet for a long moment.

"I envied you," she said finally. "That sounds wrong. But I did. You found something real. Work that mattered. A purpose that wasn't about the asteroid. I never found that. The calculations were just—" She waved her hand. "—elaborated despair. Different way of hiding."

"What do you want to do? If not the station?"

"I don't know." She looked at the stars. Somewhere up there, the asteroid continued its approach. She'd spent a decade tracking it. Now it just: was. Inevitable. Beyond calculation. "Maybe teach Maya. She wants to learn orbital mechanics. Maybe—" She stopped. "—maybe just be here. With you. With Zara. With the children. Stop solving and start witnessing."

"That sounds like something Wei would say."

"She's been writing to me. Years of letters I barely acknowledged. But the last few months, I've been reading them. Really reading them." Amara leaned against him. "She told me that presence isn't about fixing anything. It's about being conscious while things unfold. Witnessing without trying to control."

"Hard for someone who calculates trajectories."

"Impossible for someone who calculates trajectories. But—" She gestured at Lagos, at the sky, at everything. "—the trajectory is calculated. It's done. I can't change it. The only thing left is how I witness the time remaining."

"With me?"

"With you. With everyone. But especially with you."

David put his arm around her. She leaned into him. They sat on the roof of Zara's compound, looking at the Lagos night, and for the first time in ten years, neither of them was hiding.

The problems weren't solved. The distance wasn't bridged. The years of damage weren't healed. But they were present. Conscious. Choosing to be here.

Small maintenance. Daily presence. The beginning of repair.

It would have to be enough.

It was enough.

Chapter 28: Competence

Ibrahim al-Rashid | Year 8, Month 5 | Antarctic Solar Arrays

Platform 73. Morning light breaking pale across the ice. Ibrahim clips his harness at 6:51 AM—one minute late, which is early enough. Fourteen months of this routine. Nearly five years since arrival as wounded refugee in Year 3, but only fourteen months since he started this job. Fourteen months of maintenance work that seemed pointless at first and now seems... less pointless. Maybe.

His shoulders ache slightly—good ache, the kind that comes from use rather than injury. Pool this morning. Tuesday and Thursday routine he started seven months ago when Derek finally wore down his resistance. Twenty laps today. Started at three, could barely manage that. Now: twenty. Different kind of competence emerging.

"Morning." He nods to David Chen, already inspecting connection housing at the platform's edge.

"Morning, Ibrahim." David doesn't look up. Focused. Present. Always present in the way Ibrahim is learning to be.

They work in comfortable silence. This is what fourteen months builds—not deep friendship exactly, but partnership. Understanding without too many words. Two men maintaining solar arrays that will vaporize in seven years. Not discussing why. Just doing.

Ibrahim's leg aches. Always aches. The limp is permanent—shrapnel damage from Year 2, two surgeries, chronic pain manageable but constant. He moves slower than David. Compensates with care. Used to hate the limitation. Now: just incorporates it. Right leg weak, left leg strong, cane when needed, careful placement on the metal grating. Physics of damaged body. Accommodation instead of rage.

When did that change?

The thought surfaces unbidden. Ibrahim pauses mid-motion, diagnostic tablet in hand. When did he stop hating the limp? When did the morning climb stop feeling like punishment? When did showing up to maintain arrays stop being just... passing time until death?

He doesn't know. The shift was gradual. Invisible. Five years in Antarctica—most of them spent drifting, aimless, wanting to die but lacking energy for suicide. Then Year 7, this job. Fourteen months of routine slowly becoming fourteen months of practice.

"Housing integrity at seventy-six percent," David reports. "Standard degradation. Should take forty minutes."

"I'll prep the replacement seals."

Ibrahim moves to the equipment locker. His hands know the sequence. Fourteen months of repetition built this competence. He pulls the seal kit, checks the specifications, confirms the part numbers. Automatic. Easy. *Competent.*

The word lands with unexpected weight. Ibrahim is competent at this. Not just functional or adequate—actually skilled. He's learned. Developed expertise. Can diagnose housing failures by sound now. Knows which platforms degrade fastest. Anticipates David's needs before he asks.

When did that happen? Year 3 through Year 6: nothing. Unemployment, aimless walks, counting stairs obsessively, wanting death. Then Year 7: this job. And somehow, in fourteen months, competence emerged.

Robot 47B glides over on its treads, sensors focusing on Ibrahim. *Beep beep.*

"Good morning, Colleague al-Rashid. Assistance required?"

"No. Just getting the seals." Ibrahim speaks to the robot naturally now. Used to feel absurd—conversing with machines. But 47B is consistent. Reliable. Treats him as colleague without judgment or pity or awkwardness about the limp, the lost faith, the broken history.

"Acknowledged. Weather conditions optimal for repairs. Probability of completion within projected timeframe: ninety-one percent."

"Good odds."

Beep beep. "Colleague al-Rashid displays appropriate optimism. This correlates with improved work efficiency over past ten months."

Ibrahim almost smiles. The robot tracks everything. Including his gradual shift from going through motions to being present to the work. Ten months ago—Year 7, Month 7. What happened then? He can't remember specific moment. Just: the numbness thinning. The automaticity becoming attention. After four years of unemployment and drift, suddenly this job held his attention.

He carries the seal kit back to David, who's already extracted the old housing. They work together—David cleaning the channels, Ibrahim preparing the new components, both moving in synchronized rhythm. This is partnership. Built through repetition. Through showing up daily for fourteen months. Through shared purpose, even if neither articulates what that purpose is. Still new. Still forming. But real.

The repair proceeds smoothly. Extract. Clean. Inspect. Install. Verify. Simple work. Maintenance work. The kind of work that doesn't matter for the future because there is no future. But matters for now. Present-moment function. Power flowing to the megacity below. Two billion people needing electricity to live seven more years.

That matters. Doesn't it?

Ibrahim tightens the final connection. David runs the diagnostic. Green across the board. Housing integrity back to ninety-three percent. Good for another eight months. Eight months that will exist whether they did this repair or not, but will exist *better* because they did.

"Well done," David says.

Not "good work" or "adequate" or "acceptable." *Well done.* Recognition. Respect.

Ibrahim feels something shift in his chest. Not quite pride. Not quite satisfaction. Something quieter. Acknowledgment that he did this competently. That his presence mattered. That showing up for fourteen months built skill, built partnership, built something real even if temporary.

"You've learned well," David adds, stowing the tools. "Remember your first week? You didn't know connection housing from voltage regulator."

"I remember." Ibrahim's voice is quiet. "I took the job because I'd spent four years doing nothing. Wandering. Counting stairs. Waiting to die. Then employment services contacted me. Said I qualified for technical training. I said yes because why not. Didn't care about learning. Just... existing."

"And now?"

Ibrahim considers. They're standing two hundred meters above Antarctica, surrounded by solar arrays stretching to the horizon, maintaining systems that will end but haven't ended yet. What is he doing now? Just existing still? Or something more?

"Now I care," he admits. Surprising himself with the truth. "About doing it right. About the repairs holding. About…" He trails off, uncertain. "Four years I didn't care about anything. Then this job. And caring came back. Slowly. Without me noticing."

"About showing up," David finishes.

"Yes. Showing up."

They stand in silence. The sun climbs higher, weak but present. The arrays hum their endless electric song. Below, the megacity sprawls—monument to humanity's persistence or stubbornness or simple refusal to stop existing just because existence ends.

"Why do you do this?" Ibrahim asks. The question he's been holding for months. "Really. Not the official answer. The true answer. Why maintain arrays that will vaporize in seven years?"

David is quiet for a long moment. Choosing words. Or deciding whether to answer honestly.

"Because I can," he says finally. "Because it matters while it matters. Because showing up is enough." He looks at Ibrahim directly. "Is showing up enough?"

"For you?"

"Yes. For you?"

Ibrahim doesn't know yet. The question hangs in the cold air. *Is showing up enough?* Is simple presence, simple competence, simple continuation sufficient? Without faith directing it? Without grand purpose explaining it? Without certainty that it leads somewhere meaningful?

Ibrahim doesn't have the answer. Just the question. And the fact that he's here, asking it, after four years of numbness and drift, now fourteen months of routine slowly transforming into… this. Whatever this is. Presence without faith. Purpose without permanence. Meaning-making through maintenance.

"I don't know," Ibrahim admits. "But I'm here. That's more than I expected a year ago. More than I thought possible four years ago."

"That's something."

"Is it enough?"

"That's for you to decide."

They break for lunch at noon. Sit on platform seventy-three with legs dangling over the edge, safety harnesses clipped. David unpacks his usual—protein bar, thermos of tea. Ibrahim has the cafeteria meal—synthesized protein, nutrient grain, engineered vegetables that taste almost right.

They eat in silence. But it's not the empty silence of Year 3, when Ibrahim first arrived broken and faithless and wanted to die but lacked the energy for suicide. Not the numb silence of Years 4 through 6, when he'd wander the city aimlessly, unemployed, existing only through inertia. This is comfortable silence. Companionable. Two people sharing space without needing to fill it.

The megacity spreads below. From this height, the patterns are visible—residential blocks, commercial districts, the green corridors of oxygen generation. Engineering triumph. Four billion people housed on frozen continent because everywhere else became unlivable. Now: two billion. The population bleeding away. Some dying, some disappearing, some just... leaving. For where? Nowhere better. Just: elsewhere. Movement as meaning substitute.

Ibrahim stayed. Fifty-three steps to his apartment on the fourth floor. Building 12, Unit 403. Same place nearly five years. Small. Sparse. His. The steps used to be obsessive counting—penance, meditation substitute, the only structure in structureless days. Now: just steps. Still counts them sometimes. Habit. But not compulsion. The ritual lost its grip sometime after he started working. After he had somewhere to go in the mornings.

When did that change?

"The population's down again," David observes, following Ibrahim's gaze. "Saw the statistics yesterday. One point nine billion in Antarctica now."

"People leaving?"

"People dying. Suicide rate's up twelve percent this quarter. Passive deaths—people just... stopping. Not eating. Not treating illness. Choosing to end early instead of waiting."

Ibrahim understands. He nearly chose that. Years 3 through 6, especially. The numbness was complete. Death would have been easier than continuing. He stayed alive through inertia more than choice. Existed because dying required effort he didn't have. Spent four years wandering the city, counting stairs, drinking tea with Min-seo, attending Fatima's dinners, walking with Derek in silence. Small human connections that kept him breathing without giving him reason to breathe.

Min-seo, the Korean elder in Unit 204 who grows mint on her tiny balcony. She'd given him his first cutting Year 3—showed him how the plant thrives even in Antarctic winter darkness, hardy and persistent. Taught him that tending living things matters even when nothing lasts. Every week for four years he'd stopped by her door. She'd offer tea. He'd help water her pots. She never asked about his faith or his brokenness. Just: showed him that showing up matters. That green things growing matters. That small acts of care compound into something larger than despair.

Derek, the former Marine, American veteran who'd lost his faith somewhere between Kandahar and Antarctica. They recognized each other immedi-

ately—soldiers always know soldiers. Derek never pushed conversation. Just: walked with Ibrahim through the city. Fifty-three steps up. Fifty-three steps down. Sometimes hours of walking without speaking. Presence without words. Companionship without explanation. Keeping each other alive through simple proximity.

And Fatima's dinners. Jordanian woman, devout Muslim who never lost faith but never judged Ibrahim for losing his. Once a month she'd organize gatherings—Eid celebrations, community meals, refugee solidarity. Ibrahim attended reluctantly at first. Now: regularly. Not for the faith. For the food, the faces, the routine. The reminder that community exists even when belief doesn't.

"You ever think about it?" Ibrahim asks. "Ending early?"

David considers. Honest consideration, not polite deflection. "Yes. Year 1 through Year 3, especially. When the work felt pointless. When my marriage was dying. When every day was just... waiting for the asteroid." He sips his tea. "But I kept showing up. And somewhere along the way, showing up became enough."

"What changed?"

"I don't know. Understanding, maybe. That purpose doesn't require permanence. That meaning isn't about outcomes. That maintenance is meditation." He smiles slightly. "That sounds pretentious. But it's true."

"Maintenance as meditation," Ibrahim repeats. Testing the phrase. "I've heard that. From some of the other workers. Wei's teaching?"

"Filtered through many people, yes. The philosopher in Lagos. She's—she was—" David pauses. "She died last year. Natural death. Taught that presence is enough. That showing up matters even when nothing lasts."

Ibrahim absorbs this. He's heard Wei's name. The teaching circles that meet in the community centers. Ibrahim hasn't attended. Skeptical of philosophy, of answers, of anyone claiming to know how to face extinction with grace. But David embodies something of it. Shows up daily. Maintains systems with care. Finds meaning in process rather than outcome.

"You believe that?" Ibrahim asks. "That showing up is enough?"

"I'm starting to," David says. "Not because I've figured it out. Because I've practiced it. Ten years really, since detection. At some point the practice becomes the point."

Ibrahim turns this over. Practice as point. Process as purpose. He's been doing this unknowingly—not for five years. Not even for fourteen months really. But in the gap between Year 6's aimless drift and Year 8's competence, something shifted. The routine slowly hollowing out his emptiness. Or—no, not hollowing. Filling. Replacing the absence of faith with presence of action.

"I used to pray," Ibrahim says suddenly. Surprising himself. He doesn't talk about faith. Hasn't talked about it since leaving the militia. "Five times daily. Every day from age seven to nineteen. The structure held my life. Morning prayer, midday, afternoon, sunset, night. Everything organized around submission to Allah."

David listens. Doesn't interrupt.

"When I lost faith—when the asteroid made faith impossible—I lost the structure. Lost the reason for anything. Spent four years empty. Aimless. Counting stairs obsessively because I had nothing else to count. Then employment services offered training. I said yes without caring. Started this work. And slowly..." He trails off, searching for words. "The maintenance became structure. Morning shift. Lunch on the platform. Afternoon repairs. Evening routine. Not prayer. But rhythm. Not faith. But practice."

"Secular ritual," David suggests.

"Maybe." Ibrahim watches a transport shuttle cross the sky below them. "I still carry my prayer beads. Ninety-nine beads. Haven't used them in years. Can't throw them away. But can't pray with them either."

"Maybe you don't need to choose. Maybe they can just be reminder. That ritual matters. That practice matters. Even if the theology is gone."

Ibrahim's hand moves unconsciously to his pocket, where the *misbaha* rests. Small weight. Familiar. He's carried these beads for twenty years. They were connection to God. Now: connection to past self. To discipline. To the understanding that structure provides meaning even without divine mandate.

"You think showing up is enough," Ibrahim says slowly. "Without God watching. Without paradise waiting. Without any reason except... showing up itself."

"I think so. But I'm still figuring it out." David finishes his tea. "You don't have to believe it. Just have to do it. See what grows."

Afternoon shift. Platforms forty-one through sixty. Routine inspection. Most require nothing—just visual confirmation that automation is functioning. But platform forty-seven has a warning light. Voltage regulator misalignment.

"I can take this one," Ibrahim offers.

David glances at him. Slight surprise. Usually Ibrahim follows David's lead. This is initiative. Choice.

"Go ahead. I'll do the visual inspections. Meet you at platform fifty-five?"

"Agreed."

Ibrahim works alone. Approaches the voltage regulator with diagnostic tablet. Runs the scan. Identifies the issue—tracking drift, standard degradation. He's

seen this failure mode thirty times. Knows the fix.

He performs it methodically. Realignment protocol. Verification sequence. Testing under load. The work takes twenty minutes. His hands move confidently. No hesitation. No second-guessing. He's done this enough times to trust his competence.

The diagnostic returns green. Regulator functioning within optimal parameters. Ibrahim logs the repair. Updates the maintenance schedule. Professional. Complete.

He stands alone on platform forty-seven, two hundred meters above the ice, having completed a repair independently. Competently. Successfully.

This is skill. This is expertise. This is fourteen months of showing up transformed into capability. After four years of nothing, suddenly: this.

Ibrahim feels something unfamiliar. Not pride exactly. Not joy. Something quieter. *Satisfaction.* The simple satisfaction of doing work well. Of having skill. Of contributing function to systems that power two billion lives for seven more years.

Is that enough?

He doesn't know. But it's more than nothing. More than the emptiness of Year 3. More than the aimless drift of Years 4 through 6. More than the despair of Jerusalem. More than the brokenness of losing faith.

It's something. Small something. Real something. Fragile still. New.

Maybe enough.

The shift ends at 4:47 PM. David and Ibrahim ride the platform elevator down together. Two hundred meters of descent. The city rising to meet them.

"Good work today," David says. "The platform forty-seven repair was solid."

"Thank you." Ibrahim pauses. "It's strange. A year ago I could barely get out of bed. Now I repair voltage regulators two hundred meters up and swim twenty laps in the morning."

David considers this. "Competence builds competence. You showed up. Kept showing up. Eventually showing up becomes being present. Being present becomes capable."

"Is that what happened?"

"I think so. For both of us, maybe. Different timelines. Same process."

"Same time tomorrow?"

"Yes."

They separate at the transport station. David toward residential district. Ibrahim toward his building. Different directions. Parallel lives intersecting at work.

The walk home is familiar. Twenty minutes through the city. Building 12 visible from three blocks away. Standard refugee housing. His home for nearly five years.

Morning Earlier — Pool Session

Building 9. Basement level. 0545 hours.

The pool is thirty meters, four lanes, designed for rehabilitation. Steam rises from heated water into cold air. Eight people present—five in water, three on deck preparing. Derek moves between them, checking form, offering adjustments. Not drill sergeant. Not therapist. Just: present coach.

Ibrahim sits at pool edge, dangling his legs in water. Seven months since Derek finally convinced him to try. Seven months since he watched paraplegics and amputees and chronic pain cases moving through water with grace impossible on land.

"Ready?" Derek surfaces beside him, water streaming from gray-stubbled hair. Forty-five years old, Marine tattoo visible on his shoulder. Former warrior teaching adaptive movement to broken soldiers.

"Twenty today?"

"If you can. No pressure. Fifteen is fine."

Ibrahim slides into water. The immediate relief as weight lifts from his damaged leg. In water: buoyant, supported, capable. On land: limping, aching, permanently broken. Same body. Different medium. Different possibilities.

He pushes off. First lap: front crawl, modified. His right leg doesn't kick properly—never will. But Derek taught him to compensate. More left leg. More upper body. Different technique for different body.

Breath. Stroke. Breath. Stroke. The rhythm is meditative. Can't think about anything else while swimming. Must be here. Present. Counting strokes, managing breath, moving through water.

Two laps. Four. Six.

Another swimmer passes him—woman, Somali refugee, missing her left arm below the elbow. She glides past with one-armed stroke that's more efficient than Ibrahim's two-armed effort. He's learned not to be embarrassed. Everyone here adapts. Everyone finds their own way through water.

Ten laps. Twelve. Fourteen.

His shoulders burn. Good burn. Effort, not injury. His leg aches but doesn't matter the same way it matters on stairs. In water: the ache is just sensation. On land: the ache is limitation.

Sixteen laps. Eighteen.

Derek surfaces beside him at the wall. "Two more?"

Ibrahim nods. Can't speak yet. Breathing too hard.

Nineteen. Twenty.

Done.

Ibrahim hangs at the wall, breathing heavily, muscles trembling. Twenty laps. Six hundred meters. Seven months ago he managed three laps and thought he might drown. Now: twenty. Competent. Capable. Strong in way that doesn't require the body he used to have.

"Well done," Derek says. Simple acknowledgment. No false praise. Just: recognition of work completed.

Another veteran pulls himself up on deck—bilateral leg amputee, powerful arms, moving with practiced efficiency. "Ibrahim, you're keeping up with us now. Remember your first day? Three laps and you looked like you'd run a marathon."

Ibrahim remembers. Year 7, Month 10. Derek had brought him here after months of invitation. Ibrahim had resisted—pride, shame, the certainty he was too broken. But Derek's consistency had worn him down. Just: come see. Just: try once.

That first day: three laps. Thought his lungs would burst. Thought his leg would tear apart. Wanted to quit.

Derek had said: "Three laps is three laps. Tomorrow we try four. Or three again. Doesn't matter. Just: show up."

Seven months of showing up. Three laps became five became ten became twenty.

"Your form's good," Derek observes. "Compensating well for the leg. You've built real shoulder strength."

Ibrahim pulls himself out. His right leg protests the movement—always will. But he manages. Sits on the deck, toweling off. Around him, other swimmers continue. Old man doing backstroke. Young woman with prosthetic leg doing butterfly. The amputee doing laps with perfect underwater form.

All of them broken. All of them moving. All of them finding capability in bodies that don't work the way bodies are supposed to work.

"Same time Thursday?" Derek asks.

"Yes."

"Good. We're getting two new people. Syrian refugees. War injuries. I might ask you to help orient them. Show them it's possible."

Ibrahim pauses. Him? Helping? Teaching? "I don't know anything about teaching."

"You know about showing up with a broken body and discovering you can still move. That's what they need to see. Not inspiration—just: evidence that adaptive is possible."

"Okay. I can do that."

"Good."

Ibrahim dresses slowly. His body tired but satisfied. The same feeling he gets after good work shift on the platforms. Competence. Effort. Purpose through practice.

Seven months of swimming. Fourteen months of array maintenance. Before that: four years of nothing. The contrast is stark. Not healed. Not fixed. Just: different. Better. Real.

He walks toward the exit, cane in hand, limp unchanged. But his shoulders are stronger. His breathing is deeper. His body—still broken—is also capable.

Derek calls after him: "Ibrahim?"

He turns.

"You're doing good. Really good. Not just the swimming. Everything. I see the difference from a year ago."

Ibrahim doesn't know what to say. So he just nods. Acknowledgment. Gratitude. The understanding that Derek kept him alive through simple consistency. Pool sessions. Silent walks. Being present without demanding conversation or change.

"Thank you," Ibrahim manages. "For not giving up on me."

"Marines don't leave people behind," Derek says. Then smiles slightly. "Even broken Muslims who count stairs obsessively."

Ibrahim almost laughs. First time in years. "I still count stairs."

"I know. But now you also swim. That's progress."

Progress. Yes. Slow. Fragile. Real.

Ibrahim leaves Building 9. The morning is cold, dark, typical Antarctic winter. He has two hours before his work shift starts. Time for shower, breakfast, the commute to Platform 73.

Time to prepare for another day of maintenance. Another day of showing up. Another day of being present with broken body and lost faith and uncertain purpose.

Another day of discovering that somehow, impossibly, that's enough.

He enters the building. Faces the stairwell. Fifty-three steps to the fourth floor. Ibrahim grips the handrail. Begins climbing.

One. Two. Three. His leg protests—always protests at day's end, fatigue making the limp more pronounced. Four. Five. Six. But the climbing is automatic now. Body knowing the rhythm.

He realizes halfway up: he's not counting obsessively. Not measuring each step against yesterday's pain. Not using the count as meditation substitute or distraction technique—the way he did for four years when stairs were the only structure he had. Just... climbing. Being present to the movement without making it ritual.

When did that change?

He doesn't know. Somewhere in the fourteen months since starting work. Somewhere in the transition from aimless to occupied. The compulsive counting faded. The steps became just steps.

First landing. Second flight. His breath steady. The pain manageable. Twenty-five. Twenty-six. Second landing. Third flight. Thirty-eight. Thirty-nine.

A child passes him going down—maybe six years old, racing ahead of her mother. She glances at Ibrahim's limp. Doesn't stare. Just: acknowledges difference and continues. The mother nods greeting. Ibrahim nods back.

Normal interaction. Simple moment. He's part of the building's ecosystem. Not broken refugee hiding in apartment. Not former warrior pretending to be civilian. Just: resident. Colleague. Person.

Fifty-one. Fifty-two. Fifty-three.

Fourth floor.

He unlocks Unit 403. Enters. Closes the door behind him.

The apartment is exactly as he left it. Small bedroom, kitchenette, bathroom, single window. Furnished minimally. Clean. Maintained. His space. Not temporary anymore. Not exile. Just: home.

Ibrahim sets down his work tablet. Removes his boots. Moves to the kitchenette and prepares tea. The kettle is basic, municipal-issue. The tea is cafeteria-grade. But it's his. His routine. His choice.

He sits at the small table with his tea. Looks out the window at the city stretching toward darkness. Millions of lights. Billions of people. All temporary. All continuing.

His prayer beads rest on the shelf beside the window. Ninety-nine beads on worn string. He hasn't touched them in months. Hasn't prayed in years. The faith is gone—not hiding, not dormant, but actually gone. That loss used to feel

like amputation. Now: just absence. Space where faith was, now occupied by... what? Routine. Practice. Presence. Not replacement. Just: something else.

Ibrahim picks up the beads. Holds them. Feels the familiar weight.

Ar-Rahman. Ar-Rahim. Al-Malik.

The names surface automatically. Muscle memory from childhood. The Compassionate. The Merciful. The King. He could recite all ninety-nine without thinking. Has recited them thousands of times.

But the names don't connect to anything now. No presence listening. No deity responding. Just: words. Beautiful words. Meaningful once. Now: historical artifact. Personal history.

He sets the beads back on the shelf. Not throwing them away. Not using them either. Just: letting them exist. Reminder of who he was. Acknowledgment that faith mattered once even if it doesn't matter now.

Maybe that's okay. Maybe losing faith doesn't require destroying evidence of faith. Maybe prayer beads can sit on shelf unused, testament to sincerity that ran its course.

Ibrahim returns to his tea. His leg throbs—evening flare, usual. He'll take medication soon. Maybe soak in the bath if the building's hot water is functioning. Tomorrow: wake at 5:45 AM. Breakfast. Transport to the arrays. Clip harness at 6:51 AM. Work with David. Maintain platforms. Lunch at two hundred meters. Afternoon repairs. Home. Fifty-three steps. Tea. Sleep. Repeat.

Seven years left. Maybe he'll find something bigger. Some grand purpose to replace lost faith. Some community to belong to. Some answer to the question: why continue?

Maybe not.

Maybe this small peace is enough. Showing up. Being competent. Maintaining systems. Climbing fifty-three steps. Drinking tea. Being alive without wanting to die.

Not healed. Not happy. But: present. Real. Here.

That's progress. Fourteen months of progress. After four years of nothing. Invisible daily. Visible in accumulation.

Ibrahim finishes his tea. Washes the cup. Prepares for sleep. Tomorrow will be the same as today. And the day after. Routine without revelation. Practice without epiphany.

Maybe that's the point. Maybe presence doesn't require dramatic transformation. Maybe healing happens through repetition. Maybe purpose emerges from showing up even when you don't believe showing up matters.

He's here. Has been in Antarctica nearly five years—most of them empty, the last fourteen months building toward something. Will be here seven more years if the asteroid stays on schedule and his body holds and nothing intervenes.

That's something. Small something. Real something. New something.

Maybe enough.

The next morning: 5:45 AM. Alarm. Shower. Breakfast of protein paste and synthesized grain. Transport to Sector 7. The sun is rising—pale, weak, but present. Antarctica in Year 8 is quieter than Year 3. Less populated. Less chaotic. The initial panic has settled into chronic despair punctuated by moments of functioning.

Ibrahim functions. That's his contribution. Maintenance. Presence. Showing up.

Platform 73. He clips his harness at 6:51 AM. David is already there, checking the morning schedule on his tablet.

"Morning."

"Morning, Ibrahim." David looks up. "Platform nineteen needs attention. Connection housing. Interested in leading the repair?"

Leading. Not assisting. Not following. *Leading.*

"Yes," Ibrahim says. "I can do that."

They move to platform nineteen. Ibrahim runs the diagnostic himself. Identifies the degradation. Pulls the necessary tools. David watches but doesn't intervene. Trusting.

Ibrahim performs the repair. Extract the housing. Inspect the damage. Clean the surfaces. Install new seals. Verify integrity. Test under load. The work takes forty-five minutes. His hands are confident. His assessment accurate. The repair holds.

"Good work," David says. Simple acknowledgment. Colleague to colleague.

Robot 47B glides over. *Beep beep.* "Colleague al-Rashid efficiency rating: optimal. Repair quality: ninety-four percent. Projected maintenance interval: eight months."

"Thank you, 47B."

Beep beep. "Gratitude acknowledged. You are welcome, Colleague al-Rashid."

Ibrahim almost smiles. Optimal. Ninety-four percent. Eight months. Numbers providing validation. Proof that showing up for fourteen months built something real. After four years of nothing, suddenly: competence. Skill. Contribution. Not faith. Not certainty. Not grand purpose. Just: this.

Is that enough?

He still doesn't know. But he's here. Working. Present. Real.

That's start.

Maybe everything.

They continue to the next platform. The morning passes. Repairs completed. Lunch at two hundred meters. Afternoon inspections. The day unfolds in familiar rhythm.

Ibrahim is present to it. Not thinking constantly about the past—the militia, the faith, the failure. Not obsessing about the future—seven years, then death, then nothing. Just: here. This platform. This repair. This moment.

Presence without permanence. Purpose without destination. Meaning in showing up itself.

He's learning this. Slowly. Invisibly. Five years of routine transforming into five years of practice transforming into... this. Whatever this is. Small peace. Quiet competence. The absence of wanting to die replaced by simple presence of being alive.

Not healed. Not happy. Not whole.

But here.

That's enough.

Has to be enough.

Is enough.

For now.

Seven years left. Tomorrow he'll wake at 5:45 AM. Climb onto platform seventy-three. Work with David. Maintain arrays. Show up.

Because showing up matters. Even without faith directing it. Even without knowing why. Even without certainty that it leads anywhere.

Showing up is enough.

Ibrahim is starting to believe that.

Not as theology. As practice.

Not as answer. As question he can live with.

Seven years left. Fifty-three steps daily. Fourteen months of work that matters. Maintenance as meditation. Presence as purpose.

Small peace. New peace. Fragile peace.

Real peace.

Enough.

Chapter 29: Stay

Kenji Torres | Year 8, Month 8 | Lagos District

The transport arrives at dawn.

Kenji stands in the arrival hall watching Lagos District wake through floor-to-ceiling windows. Engineered tropical climate—humid, bright, relentlessly alive. Fifth city. Third continent. Antarctica to Tokyo to Cairo to Mumbai to here. Always moving. Never arriving.

He's thirty years old. Feels older. Feels exhausted in ways sleep doesn't fix.

The arrival hall is mostly empty—few people travel anymore, fewer want to arrive anywhere. The ones who do are seekers like him, or mourners visiting family, or the hollowed-out ones who've given up on staying still. He sees himself in all of them. Different faces, same exhaustion. Same question behind their eyes: *Is there an answer somewhere? Did I miss it? Should I keep looking?*

Kenji doesn't know. Thought he'd know by now. Six years should have been enough to find something. But each city offered the same pattern: arrival, hope, study, practice, gradual realization that he's still himself, departure. Tokyo's Buddhism. Cairo's Stoicism. Mumbai's meditation. Different vocabularies for the same unbridgeable gap between understanding and being.

He's not going back to Antarctica. Can't. Not yet. Not empty-handed like this. His mother would understand—she always understands—but he wouldn't. Thirty years old. Six years seeking. Nothing to show for it except intellectual understanding of seventeen different wisdom traditions and complete inability to embody any of them.

Lagos is the last attempt. Has to be. He's running out of places to run.

The arrival district transitions into residential zones. Lagos District spreads in all directions—five million people, engineered green spaces between housing blocks, the managed chaos of a city that shouldn't exist but does anyway. Used to be ten million. Year 8 of the apocalypse thins everything. Seven years left, and people still living. Still building. Still trying. The persistence is remarkable. Or delusional. Or both.

Kenji has the address. Zara's apartment—his cousin, though they've never been close. Amara's younger sister. Family he barely knows. She's expecting him. Offered her guest room when he'd sent the message three weeks ago: *Coming to Lagos. Heard there's a teacher there. Professor Wei. Can you connect me?*

Zara's response: *Of course. But don't expect what you've found elsewhere. Wei doesn't teach. She just is. Come ready to unlearn.*

Unlearn. Another promise. Another framework. Kenji is so tired of frameworks.

But he's here. Nowhere else to go. Seven years until everyone dies. Might as well spend them seeking what can't be found.

Zara's building is mid-tier residential—fifty units arranged around a central courtyard. Green everywhere—balcony gardens, rooftop cultivation, plants erupting from every available surface. The compound has that lived-in feeling: children's toys scattered in common areas, maintenance equipment left casually, the hum of community that comes from people actually living together instead of just proximally.

Zara meets him at her door. Forty-one years old now. Kenji last saw her at a family gathering twelve years ago—he was eighteen, she was thirty, they'd exchanged polite conversation about his studies. She looks different now. Older, obviously. But also: settled. Present. Like she's found something he's still seeking.

"Kenji." She hugs him. Real hug. "Welcome."

"Thank you for hosting me."

"Of course. Family." She steps back, studying him. "You look tired."

"Seven years traveling."

"Did you find what you were looking for?"

The question lands harder than she probably intended. "No."

"Good." Zara's smile is knowing. "Wei says the ones who haven't found anything yet are the only ones worth teaching."

Inside, the apartment is warm chaos. Children's drawings on walls. Engineering schematics on the kitchen table. Plants everywhere—balcony garden visible through the open door, some old woman in a wheelchair tending flowers with shaking hands.

"That's Wei," Zara says, following his gaze. "She lives next door but spends mornings in my garden. Her own space is smaller. I'll introduce you after you've settled."

Kenji unpacks in the guest room. Doesn't take long. His mother's letters. The journal where he documents all the seeking that leads nowhere. That's it. Everything else he's learned to leave behind.

Through the window he can see the old woman in the wheelchair. She's watering a lemon tree, movements careful despite the shaking. Something about her presence. Not seeking. Not striving. Just: being. Here. Doing what needs doing.

He's seen teachers before. Studied with masters. Attended ashrams and monasteries and philosophy communes. All of them wise. All of them present in ways he couldn't reach. This woman looks different. Or maybe he's just desperate enough to project difference onto another teacher who'll eventually prove as inaccessible as the rest.

He meets Wei at lunch.

Zara brings him to the balcony garden where the old woman sits in her wheelchair, bowl of soup balanced on a tray. Up close, Wei is ancient—122 years old, Zara said. Her face carries every one of those years. But her eyes are sharp, clear, seeing.

"Professor Wei, this is Kenji. My cousin from Antarctica. The one I mentioned."

Wei looks at him. Not assessing. Just: looking. Seeing. Kenji feels uncomfortably visible.

"You're the seeker," Wei says. Her voice is thin but steady.

"I suppose so."

"Sit."

Kenji sits on the garden bench. Zara excuses herself—some compound meeting about water systems. The balcony is quiet except for the sounds of Lagos District below. Distant voices. Transit hum. The ambient noise of five million people living.

"You're Elena's son," Wei says.

"You know my mother?"

"We correspond. She's a wise woman. Understands witness."

Kenji blinks. "My mother?"

"Surprised?"

"She's a politician. A governor. I wouldn't call her wise."

"Then you don't see her." Wei sips her soup carefully. Hands shaking but managing. "She shows up every day to work that accomplishes nothing. Maintains order when order is impossible. Witnesses collapse with dignity. That's wisdom. Different from seeking wisdom. Better, maybe."

The words sting. Kenji has spent six years seeking while his mother just... showed up. Daily. Doing her work. Being present. He'd thought of it as stubbornness. Denial. Not wisdom.

"Another man arrived yesterday," Wei says. "Chen Liwei. Former UN Secretary General. Eight years trying to coordinate humanity. Nations ignored him. Authority eroded. He thought he failed." She pauses. "He didn't fail. He

witnessed. Your mother witnesses Antarctica. Chen witnessed humanity. Both necessary. Both choosing presence when power disappeared."

"The Secretary General is here?" Kenji didn't expect that. The voice from the Year 0 broadcast. The face everyone saw when the world learned it was ending.

"Not Secretary General anymore. Just Chen. Resigned two weeks ago. Came to be with his family. His wife has been here six years while he stayed in Geneva doing work that mattered to no one." Wei's look is pointed. "Sound familiar?"

It does. Kenji realizes: he's been doing the same thing. Seeking instead of being present. Running instead of staying. Work that matters to no one, including himself.

"You've been traveling," Wei continues. "Tokyo. Cairo. Mumbai. Now here. Looking for answer."

"How did you—"

"Your mother writes about you. Worries. Hopes. Grieves that you're searching when maybe you should be living." Wei sets down the soup. "Did you find answers in Tokyo?"

"Intellectually, yes. I learned—"

"I didn't ask what you learned. I asked if you found answers."

Kenji stops. Considers. "No."

"Cairo?"

"No."

"Mumbai?"

"No."

"So." Wei gestures at the garden. "Why Lagos?"

"Because I don't know where else to go."

"Ah. Now honest." Wei smiles slightly. "That's a good start. The seeking itself is a lie if you're running. But admitting you're running—that's closer to truth."

Kenji feels something crack in his chest. She's right. He's been running. From Antarctica. From the asteroid. From his own inability to transform. Dressed it up as seeking, as spiritual practice, as philosophical inquiry. But underneath: just running.

"I'm thirty years old," he says quietly. "I'll be thirty-seven when everyone dies. And I've spent seven years—almost half of my remaining life—looking for how to live these years meaningfully. But I can't find it. I understand impermanence intellectually. I can recite all ten ox-herding pictures. I know all the teachings. But I can't *feel* them. Can't embody them. There's this gap between knowing and being and I can't cross it."

Wei listens. Doesn't interrupt. Doesn't offer immediate wisdom. Just: listens.

"The Tokyo teacher said I was still on Picture One," Kenji continues. "Still just seeking. That was nearly six years ago. I thought I'd progressed since then—maybe Picture Three now, glimpsing it. But glimpsing isn't catching. I see it clearly sometimes—understanding, presence, acceptance. But I can't hold it. And I'm tired. So tired. Of seeking. Of failing. Of being stuck in my own head watching myself fail to be present while analyzing why I can't be present which prevents me from being present which I analyze which—" He stops. "It's recursive. Infinite loop. And I can't break it."

"Good," Wei says.

Kenji looks up, startled. "Good?"

"You've arrived at useful despair. Not dramatic despair—'nothing matters, everything is meaningless.' Useful despair—'everything I'm doing isn't working.' That's different. That's readiness."

"Readiness for what?"

"For stopping."

The word sits there. Stopping. Not seeking different answer. Not trying harder. Not moving to another city. Just: stopping.

"I don't know how to stop," Kenji admits.

"Good. Not-knowing is a start." Wei gestures to the lemon tree. "You see this tree?"

"Yes."

"Tell me about it."

Kenji looks at the tree. Fifty years old, maybe. Well-maintained. Healthy foliage. Some fruit developing. "It's a lemon tree. Citrus limon. Probably grown from seed, transplanted multiple times. Currently fruiting. Well cared for."

"That's analyzing. I asked you to tell me about it."

Kenji stops. Looks again. What is there to say that isn't analysis? "I... don't know what you're asking."

"Exactly." Wei nods. "You see tree through concepts. Classification, history, care requirements. All useful knowledge. All distance from actual tree. What if you just: see it? Without naming, categorizing, analyzing. Just: tree being tree. You being you. Both present. Both here."

Kenji tries. Looks at the tree. But immediately his mind engages: *This is presence practice. I'm trying to see without concepts. That's what the meditation teachers taught. Non-conceptual awareness. I should focus on direct perception. But this thinking about not-thinking is the problem. I need to—*

"You're thinking about trying to not think," Wei observes.

"Yes."

"That's okay. Mind does that. Just notice. Don't fight it. Notice and return. Tree. Here. Now. Not achieving anything. Just: looking."

He tries again. The tree stands. Leaves move slightly in manufactured breeze. Fruit hanging. Everything just: being itself. He feels something shift—a moment of actual seeing, without the cascade of thoughts. Then immediately: *That was it! I did it!* And it's gone. Back to thinking about the experience instead of having it.

"There," Wei says. "You touched it. Then grabbed at it. Grabbing pushed it away."

"So what do I do?"

"Keep practicing. Not practicing to achieve. Just: practicing. Water plants. Wash dishes. Sit in garden. Notice when mind wanders. Return gently. No force. No achievement. Just: returning. That's all practice is."

"For how long?"

"Until you stop asking how long." Wei picks up her soup bowl again. "You can stay. Guest room in Zara's apartment is yours as long as you need it. Come to garden every day. Help me water plants. We won't talk philosophy. Won't discuss theories. Just: tend garden together."

Wei sips her soup. "That's teaching."

Kenji feels something he hasn't felt in six years. Not hope—hope is too strong. But: possibility. Not of finding answers. Of stopping seeking answers. Wei isn't offering wisdom. She's offering presence. Being here. Watering plants. No grand revelation. Just: this.

"I don't know how to be a student of gardening," Kenji says.

"Perfect. You're not qualified. Best students are unqualified—they don't bring preconceptions." Wei finishes her soup. "Tomorrow morning. Dawn. Meet me here. We'll water together. That's all. No teaching. No philosophy. Just: watering."

"That's enough?"

"That's everything."

That night, Kenji sits in the guest room writing to his mother. Six years of letters. She's kept every one. Reads them. Responds quarterly with her own letters—sparse, honest, maintaining connection across the distance.

Mom,

Year 8, Month 8 from Lagos. I met Professor Wei today. The teacher you've been corresponding with. She's... different from the other teachers. Or maybe I'm different now. Too tired to perform seeking anymore. Too exhausted to pretend I'm making progress.

She said something that landed: you're wise because you show up every day to work that accomplishes nothing. I've been traveling six years seeking wisdom while you've been living it. Sitting in your empty briefings. Maintaining order when order is impossible. Witnessing with dignity. I called that denial. She calls it wisdom. She's right.

I don't know if I can learn what Wei teaches. Don't even know what she teaches. She doesn't offer frameworks. Just: be here. Water plants. Notice mind wandering. Return gently. That's all. After six years of complex philosophies and elaborate practices, it sounds too simple. Or maybe exactly simple enough.

I'm staying in Lagos. Not forever—nothing is forever. But for now. Going to stop seeking and start... being here. Trying to, anyway. The gap between trying and doing is the whole problem. But Wei says that's okay. The gap is practice.

I miss you. Miss home. Miss the simplicity of just living instead of seeking meaning in living. Maybe that's what I'm learning. Maybe that's Picture Four—catching the ox after six years of glimpsing. Maybe I'm still on Picture One. Don't know. Wei says the pictures aren't ladder to climb, just mirror to see where you are. So: here I am. Lagos. Exhausted. Beginning again. Or stopping again. Same thing, maybe.

Seven years left. I won't spend them all in Lagos. But I'll spend some time here. Learning to water plants. Learning to not-learn. Learning to stop trying to learn. Whatever that means.

Thank you for the correspondence with Wei. Thank you for showing up every day. Thank you for being wise in ways I didn't recognize. I see it now. Better late than never.

Your stopping-seeking son,
Kenji

He seals the letter. Tomorrow he'll send it. Tomorrow he'll meet Wei in the garden at dawn. Tomorrow he'll water plants and try to be present without trying. Tomorrow begins the practice of not-practicing.

The recursive trap again. But Wei said that's okay. Just notice and return. The noticing itself is practice. Not achieving presence. Just noticing absence of presence and returning. Again. Again. Again. Until...

Until what?

He doesn't know. For the first time in six years, that feels like permission instead of failure.

Dawn comes humid and bright.

Kenji finds Wei already in the garden, wheelchair positioned by the lemon tree. The watering can sits beside her, too heavy for her shaking hands to lift.

"Good morning, student," Wei says. "Ready to learn nothing?"

Kenji surprises himself by smiling. First real smile in months. Maybe years. "Yes."

"Pick up the watering can."

He does. It's heavy—full of water from the rain barrel.

"The lemon tree needs water. You see the soil?"

Kenji looks. The soil around the tree is dry, cracked. "Yes."

"Water it."

He waters slowly, watching the soil absorb. The water darkens the earth, seeps down, reaches roots. The tree doesn't move. Doesn't change visibly. Just: receives water. Being tree. Doing what trees do.

"Good," Wei says. "Now the gardenias."

He waters the gardenias. Then the herbs. Then the vegetables. Moving through the garden systematically, attending to what needs attending. His mind tries to make it significant—*This is meditation. This is practice. This is teaching.* But mostly it's just: watering. Plants need water. He provides water. Simple transaction. Simple presence.

"You're thinking," Wei observes.

"Yes. About whether I'm doing this right."

He pauses, watering can suspended over the gardenias. Something shifts. The question lands differently than it should.

"I spent seventeen months in Tokyo," Kenji says slowly. "Doing zazen. Walking meditation. Perfect form. The teacher kept saying: be in your body. Feel your feet walking. Feel breath moving. I couldn't. Just kept analyzing the feeling instead of feeling it."

Wei nods. Listening.

"Then Mumbai. Year 5. I tried yoga. Thought physical practice would help where stillness failed. Every asana, I'd think: am I present now? Is this embodied awareness? Am I doing it right? The yoga teacher said my body teaches what the mind can't learn. But my body just moved through poses while my mind analyzed movement."

He waters the gardenias. Continues.

"But this—watering plants—I keep forgetting to analyze. Keep just... doing it. Then I remember I'm supposed to be learning something and the thinking starts again. But there are moments—just watering. Just here. Not trying to be present. Just: present. By accident."

"Not accident," Wei says. "Different entry. You tried to force presence through technique—meditation, yoga, philosophy. Forcing is obstacle. But gardens need watering. Plants don't care if you're enlightened. Just: thirsty. So you water them. While watering, sometimes: present. Not because you achieved it. Because task required it."

Kenji sets down the watering can. Stares at his hands. "You're teaching me through gardening what meditation teachers couldn't teach through meditation."

"I'm not teaching. Garden is teaching. You're learning. Different thing." Wei smiles. "Mind seeks presence as achievement. Body just does what needs doing. Sometimes while doing: presence emerges. Not goal. Side effect."

"So all the practices I tried—zazen, kinhin, yoga—I was approaching them wrong?"

"Not wrong. Just backwards. You tried to use body to achieve mental state. Better: use body to do task. Mental state takes care of itself. Or doesn't. Either way: plants get watered."

Kenji thinks about this. Then catches himself thinking and laughs—actual laugh, surprising himself. "I'm analyzing your teaching about not analyzing."

"Yes. That's okay. Mind does that. Eventually tires itself out. Then: just watering. Just being. Not because you stopped analyzing. Because analyzing became boring. The ox catches itself. You can't catch it by chasing."

She gestures to the herbs. "Keep watering. We'll talk later. Or not talk. Doesn't matter. Plants need water either way."

"Are the plants getting water?"

"Yes."

"Then you're doing it right." She shifts in her wheelchair. "Thinking happens. Mind does that. It's not the enemy. Just: notice thinking. Return to watering. Thought isn't obstacle. Attachment to thought is obstacle. Let thoughts be. Return to plants."

They sit in silence after the watering is complete. The morning is still cool. Lagos District waking below. Voices rising. Transit systems humming. The world continuing. Seven years left and people still watering plants. Still tending gardens. Still building, maintaining, caring. The persistence. The defiance. The simple choice to be present to what's here instead of absent to what's coming.

"Tomorrow morning," Wei says. "Same time. We'll water again."

"That's all?"

"That's everything."

Kenji nods. Stays sitting. The garden blooming around them. The lemon tree standing patient. The herbs spreading in their containers. Everything temporary. Everything here now. Everything worth tending.

He thinks about Picture Four: catching the ox. The boy grabs the rope, holds on, begins the work of taming. Still effort required. Still struggle. But contact made. The teaching caught, not just glimpsed.

Maybe this is it. Maybe watering plants with a shaking-handed old woman is catching the ox. Not dramatic. Not enlightenment. Just: contact. Presence. Being here without seeking to be somewhere else.

Or maybe he's still on Picture One and Wei is letting him think he's progressed. Doesn't matter. The pictures are mirror, not ladder. He's where he is. Here in this garden. Seven years until everyone dies. But right now: lemon tree watered. Gardenias tended. Work complete.

He'd imagined finding answers would feel profound. Earth-shattering. Revelatory. This feels different. Smaller. Simpler. More like permission than achievement. Permission to stop seeking. Permission to just be here. Water plants. Notice thinking. Return to presence. That's all.

That's enough.

That's everything.

"Stay," Wei says suddenly.

Kenji looks at her. "What?"

"I'm inviting you: stay. Not permanently—nothing is permanent. But stay for a while. Stop seeking answers and start living questions. Learn gardening. Practice presence. Be here." She meets his eyes. "Not because it will enlighten you. Not because it will fix you. Just: because you're tired and gardens are good place to rest."

Kenji feels tears threatening. Six years of seeking. Six years of teachers offering techniques and frameworks and elaborate solutions. Wei offering: rest. Garden. Staying.

"I don't know if I can," he says honestly.

"You've been running six years. Staying is harder than seeking. But you're ready. I can see it. Your useful despair. Your honest tiredness. Your admission that you don't know. All these are readiness."

"Readiness for what?"

"For beginning. Not beginning to achieve enlightenment. Beginning to be present. Different goal. Different practice. Same you, different relationship to you."

Kenji sits with this. The garden is quiet. Wei isn't pushing. Just: offering. Stay. Rest. Water plants. Learn nothing. Be here.

He thinks about Tokyo—seventeen months of zazen, still on Picture One. Cairo—fourteen months of philosophy, understanding everything and nothing. Mumbai—over four years of meditation, glimpsing occasionally, never catching. Seven years and here he is: exhausted, empty-handed, arriving at useful despair.

Wei said useful despair is readiness. Readiness to stop. Readiness to stay.

"Yes," Kenji says. The word comes from somewhere deeper than thought. "Yes, I'll stay."

Wei smiles—soft expression, genuine warmth. "Good. Welcome to the garden. Tomorrow we'll water again. Day after that: water again. Every day until you stop asking when wisdom arrives and just water because plants need water."

"How long will that take?"

"Wrong question." Wei's eyes twinkle slightly. "But asking wrong questions is also practice. Come. Tomorrow. Dawn. We'll start again."

Kenji helps Wei back inside—pushing the wheelchair carefully, noticing how frail her body is, how strong her presence. 122 years old. Three years left maximum, probably less. Teaching until the end. Not because teaching achieves anything. Because teaching is being present to students. That's all. That's enough.

He returns to Zara's apartment. The guest room. His few belongings. Outside the window: the garden. The lemon tree. The space where he'll return tomorrow at dawn. Where he'll water plants. Where he'll notice his mind seeking and practice returning. Where he'll stay.

Not forever. Nothing is permanent. But for now. For these months or years remaining. For long enough to stop seeking and start being here. That's the practice. That's everything.

The ox-herding pictures call it catching the ox. Kenji calls it stopping. Wei calls it beginning.

Same thing. Different words. All pointing at the same simple, impossible, necessary practice: be here. Water plants. Notice thinking. Return gently. Again. Again. Again.

Until returning becomes being. Until practice becomes life. Until the gap between understanding and embodiment—still there, probably always there—stops mattering because he's too busy watering plants to measure the gap.

Seven years left.

But right now: morning light through the window. Garden visible below. Wei's invitation accepted. The practice beginning.

Kenji sits on the guest room bed and feels, for the first time in six years, like maybe he can stop running.

Maybe staying is possible.

Maybe staying is everything.

Maybe he's finally ready to be here.

Home.

Chapter 30: Roots

Zara Okafor-Mensah | Year 9, Month 3 | Lagos District

The transport schedule updates: twelve minutes to arrival.

Zara checks it again. Still twelve minutes. Time moving with the peculiar elasticity of anticipation—simultaneously crawling and accelerating toward a moment she's been imagining for nineteen months.

Nineteen months since Amara finally called. Nineteen months of weekly conversations rebuilding what seven years of silence had fractured. Two brief visits in that time—awkward, tentative, both sisters learning how to be sisters again. But this is different. Two weeks. Extended stay. Family integration. The real test of whether connection survives proximity.

"Mama, you're nervous." Maya looks up from her physics book—advanced orbital mechanics, university level, which she reads like entertainment. Eleven years and three months old and already seeing patterns everyone else misses. Like her aunt. Like both her mother's engineering and her aunt's astrophysics flowing together in one brilliant, serious child.

"I'm excited," Zara corrects. "That's different."

"It's the same autonomic response. Elevated heart rate. Sweating. Hypervigilance. Your engineering brain categorizes it differently, but physiologically—"

"Maya." Zara smiles despite herself. "Let me be nervous."

"Okay, Mama." Maya returns to her book, but Zara catches the small smile. Her daughter is nervous too, hiding it in precision and facts. Wanting to impress the famous scientist aunt. Wanting to be seen as brilliant, worthy, interesting. As if she's anything less.

Kofi has no such restraint. Eight years and five months old, all motion and enthusiasm, he bounces on the arrival hall bench for the fifteenth time. "When? When, Mama? You said morning and it's morning and—"

"Ten minutes now. See?" Zara points to the schedule display.

"That's forever!"

"It's six hundred seconds."

"That's still forever!"

Zara pulls him onto her lap—getting harder as he grows, all elbows and knees and unstoppable energy. He settles for exactly eight seconds before squirming. "Tell me again about Aunt Amara."

"I've told you a hundred times."

"Tell me a hundred and one!"

So Zara tells him again, the same story she's been telling since she called Amara back nineteen months ago: Your Aunt Amara is my big sister. She's a scientist who studies the sky. She lives in Antarctica where it's very cold. She was sad for a long time and far away, but now she's coming to visit. She wants to know you. She wants to be your aunt.

What Zara doesn't tell him: She calculated your death before you were born and then disappeared into numbers for seven years. She missed your birth, your first words, your first day of school. She sent you nothing—no messages, no gifts, no acknowledgment you existed. She chose isolation over family because feeling anything hurt too much.

But that was then. People change. People thaw. Amara is trying.

That's enough. Has to be enough. Is enough.

The arrival board updates: eight minutes.

Lagos District morning wraps around them like warm water—engineered tropical climate, bright and humid and relentlessly alive. Through the arrival hall windows, Zara sees the megacity waking: five million people beginning another day in Year 9, with less than six years remaining. Still building. Still working. Still living. The persistence is remarkable. Or delusional. Or both. Or neither—just: what life does. Continue until it can't.

The compound rooftop garden is visible from here, a green crown on their building three kilometers away. The expansion they voted on in Year 6 is complete now—one hundred twenty square meters of growing space producing eighty percent of their vegetables. Planted three years ago. Will feed them until impact. Then: vaporized. But today: thriving. That's enough.

That's what Wei taught her. That's what she's tried to teach her children. That's what she hopes Amara has learned: Temporary and valuable aren't opposites. They're partners.

"Mama, you're doing it again." Maya's voice, patient and knowing.

"Doing what?"

"Cataloging variables. I can see your eyes moving. You're running scenarios."

Zara laughs. "You're too smart."

"I know." No false modesty. Just fact. "But Aunt Amara will be fine. You've talked to her every week for nineteen months. You've seen her twice. She's different now. You said so."

"I know."

"So why are you nervous?"

Because talking on screens is different from living in proximity. Because two brief visits aren't the same as two weeks of daily intimacy. Because what if the thawing was temporary? What if she retreats again? What if the children see their aunt disappear and learn that family is unreliable? What if—

"Because I love her," Zara says simply. "And love makes you nervous."

Maya considers this. "That's illogical but empirically accurate."

"Welcome to being human, baby."

"I don't think I like it."

"You get used to it."

Kofi has abandoned sitting entirely, pressing his face against the window watching for the transport. "Is that it? Is that it? No, that's cargo. Is THAT it?"

"That's passenger," Zara confirms. "That's the one."

The transport descends through Lagos District airspace—sleek white vehicle carrying two hundred passengers from Antarctica. Somewhere inside: Amara. And David, her ex-husband, now boyfriend, now something-being-rebuilt. Two broken people attempting reconnection after five years divorced. Attempting to show up. Attempting to be present.

Zara understands attempting. That's all anyone does. Attempt presence. Fail. Attempt again. The practice isn't perfection. It's returning.

The transport docks. Docking procedures. Security checks. Customs. Immigration. Ten minutes of bureaucracy between here and reunion.

Zara's heart rate elevates again. Maya's right—autonomic response, indistinguishable from fear. But she knows the difference. This isn't fear. This is hope. Fragile, terrifying, necessary hope that her sister is really here. Really choosing family. Really trying.

"Mama?" Kofi's hand finds hers. "Are you crying?"

"No, baby. Just—emotional."

"What's the difference?"

"There isn't one."

On the wall behind the schedule display, someone has hung one of the new prints making their way through the districts—a reproduction of an installation by Asha Marin, the extinction-era artist half the world seems to be arguing about this year. The piece is simple: a child-sized mannequin standing under a projected countdown clock, hands empty, face featureless. Some commentators call it blasphemous. Others call it compassionate. Zara just notices how every person who glances at it flinches in a slightly different way.

Maya studies it with clinical interest. "People keep saying it's controversial," she says. "But it's just light and plastic. The reaction is in them, not in it."

"Art's good at that," Zara replies. "Showing you what you brought into the room." She has no opinion on Asha beyond this: the work is a mirror. The world is terrified of mirrors right now.

Passengers emerge from customs. First wave: business travelers, engineers, maintenance workers rotating home from Antarctic duty. Second wave: families, researchers, the rare tourist who still travels despite everything. Third wave—

There.

Amara. Fifty-seven years old, gray-threaded hair, thin in the way of people who forget to eat. But present. Actually here. Not hiding in a monitoring station. Not vanishing into data. Here. With David beside her—fifty-seven, quiet, steady, both of them carrying small bags for two weeks' stay.

Sisters see each other across the arrival hall.

Nine years. Nine years older. Both changed. Both different from who they were when Maya was born and Amara missed it, when Kofi was born and Amara sent nothing, when Zara stopped trying and Amara kept isolating.

But also: same. Still sisters. Still carrying the same grandmother's eyes, the same stubborn Okafor determination, the same engineering brain that turns everything into solvable problems even when some problems don't solve.

Zara moves first. Has to. Amara is frozen, clearly terrified this won't work, that nine years of absence can't be bridged, that she's not welcome despite nineteen months of proof otherwise.

So Zara crosses the distance. Closes the gap. Opens her arms.

And Amara steps into them.

The embrace is full. Not tentative. Not careful. Full. Real. Sisters holding each other while Lagos District flows around them and less than six years tick toward zero and none of it matters because right now: together.

"You came," Zara hears herself say through tears she didn't plan on crying.

"I should have come sooner." Amara's voice is thick, breaking. "I'm so sorry. I should have—"

"You're here now. That's enough."

They hold each other and Zara feels nine years of grief and anger and fear dissolving. Not gone—you don't erase nine years in one embrace. But: releasing. Making space for something else. Something better. Something like forgiveness. Something like love continuing despite everything.

When they finally separate, both sisters crying, Zara sees David standing back with Maya and Kofi, giving them space. Her children watching, learning: this is what reconciliation looks like. This is what family choosing family looks like. This is what showing up means.

"Maya, Kofi—come meet your aunt."

Maya steps forward first, all seriousness and precision. She's rehearsed this. Zara can tell. Her daughter extends her hand formally: "Hello, Aunt Amara. I'm Maya. I'm very good at mathematics."

Amara's laugh is startled and genuine and wonderful. "I heard. Your mother says you're brilliant."

"She's correct." No false modesty. "I've read your papers on Near-Earth Object trajectory calculations. Your predictive modeling is exceptional. Though I think your Year 3 paper on gravitational perturbation effects could have been—"

"Maya," Zara interrupts gently. "Maybe don't critique your aunt's work in the first thirty seconds."

"Why not? She wants honest feedback. All scientists do."

Amara is smiling now, really smiling. "Actually, I'd love to hear your thoughts. Later. When we have time."

"Really?" Maya's careful composure cracks into excitement. "Because I have seventeen questions about your methodology and three suggested improvements and—"

"Later, baby." Zara puts a hand on her daughter's shoulder. "Let your aunt breathe."

Kofi has been hiding behind Zara, shy despite his earlier enthusiasm. But curiosity wins. It always does with him. He peeks around, looks up at Amara with huge dark eyes. "Are you from space?"

"No, from Antarctica."

"Is that the same?"

"Almost." Amara crouches to his level, and Zara sees her sister's uncertainty transform into something softer. "Antarctica is at the bottom of the world. Very cold. Very white. Lots of ice."

"Do you have gardens?"

"No. Not many. It's too cold."

"That's sad." Kofi's assessment is serious. "Everyone needs gardens. Professor Wei says so."

"Professor Wei is very wise."

"Do you know her?"

"I do. She writes me letters."

This is news that delights Kofi completely. "She writes Mama letters too! And Kenji! She writes everyone! She's—" He searches for the right word. "—important."

"She is," Amara agrees. "Very important."

Kofi studies his aunt for another moment, then makes his decision. He grabs her hand. "Want to see our compound? We have gardens on the roof! And I have a balcony garden! And there's a lemon tree that's older than Mama!"

"I would love that." Amara looks at Zara, something vulnerable in her expression. Permission? Reassurance? Gratitude that her nephew is choosing her?

All of it. Everything.

"Let's go home," Zara says.

David and Kwame find each other in the way of quiet men married to intense women—instant recognition, instant understanding, instant relief that they're not alone in this.

"Welcome." Kwame shakes David's hand. "You're the ex-husband?"

"Attempting to be the current boyfriend."

"How's that going?"

"Slowly. Carefully. Terrifyingly."

Kwame smiles. "Come. I'll make tea. The women can handle emotions. We'll handle beverages."

They disappear into the transport's family section, leaving Zara and Amara with the children. Maya holding Amara's other hand now, already explaining Lagos District's engineering—water reclamation, power systems, transit network. Kofi adding commentary about which parks have the best climbing trees and where his friend Samuel lives and how compound dinners work.

Zara watches her children absorb their aunt into the family as if she's always been there. As if nine years of absence don't matter. As if love is simple and immediate and doesn't require perfect presence.

Maybe it is. Maybe they understand something she's forgotten. Maybe children are closer to Wei's teaching: this moment. This moment. This moment. Nothing else exists.

The transport to their compound loads. Public transit, not private—Zara and Kwame choose shared systems, choose community infrastructure, choose collective solutions. The children have never been in a private vehicle. Don't know what they're missing. Don't need to.

Settling into seats, Kwame and David still deep in conversation about carpentry and maintenance and the meaning found in temporary work. Amara between Zara and the children, looking overwhelmed and happy and scared all at once. Normal. Human. Present.

"Aunt Amara." Maya pulls out her tablet. "Look. This is my project on orbital resonance. See how Jupiter's moons create—"

"Maya, let your aunt settle before the advanced physics."

"But she's an astrophysicist! She wants to see—"

"I do," Amara confirms. "Show me."

So Maya shows her. Kofi adds his own observations about moons looking like his friend Adanna's son Samuel's toy balls. David leans over to see. Kwame provides running commentary on his daughter's brilliance. Normal family chaos. Beautiful family chaos. The kind of chaos that only happens when people show up and stay present and let life be messy.

Zara sits back, watching. Her fractured family becoming whole. Her absent sister attempting presence. Her ex-brother-in-law fitting into their life. Her children teaching their aunt about things she already knows but pretending not to because that's what aunts do.

This. This is what she fought for when she chose to have Kofi. This presence. This mattering. This fierce love in the face of certain ending. Not despite impermanence. Because of it. Because temporary makes every moment infinite.

The transport glides through Lagos District. Past residential zones where ten million people once lived and five million now persist. Past green spaces where engineered nature thrives. Past buildings that were here before the asteroid and will be here until impact. Past everything temporary and everything valuable.

"There!" Kofi points out the window. "See that building with the gardens? That's ours!"

The compound rises before them—fifty units, two hundred residents, rooftop thick with green. Home. Real home. Where Zara planted roots nine years ago and they've grown deep enough now to support new growth. To support her sister's return. To support family choosing family despite everything.

The apartment is exactly as Zara left it an hour ago—seventy square meters of beautiful chaos. Children's drawings cover walls. Engineering schematics glow on the kitchen table. Plants everywhere—Kwame's obsession, his way of bringing life into manufactured space. The balcony garden visible through open doors, Wei's wheelchair positioned there, old woman tending flowers with shaking hands while Ling helps.

Amara stops in the doorway, taking it all in.

Zara sees her apartment through her sister's eyes: Evidence of life lived. Photos of Maya as a baby, toddler, child. Photos of Kofi's birth, first steps, first day of school—all the moments Amara missed. Community gatherings. Compound dinners. Wei's garden sessions. Family accumulating meaning through ordinary moments photographed and displayed.

"You built something real," Amara says quietly.

"We did."

"While I was calculating—"

"While you were surviving. We all survived differently."

"But you survived by living. I survived by hiding."

"Yes." No point denying it. "But you're here now."

Amara touches a photo—Kofi at three years old, covered in soil from Wei's garden, laughing with dirt-stained hands. "I missed so much."

"You did."

"I can't get it back."

"No. You can't. But you have less than six years to be here now. Almost six years to be their aunt. That's not nothing."

Amara looks at Zara, eyes shining. "Is it enough?"

Zara thinks of Wei's teaching. Of flowers blooming and fading. Of lemon trees fruiting and resting. Of everything temporary and everything valuable. Of nine years of compound life teaching her that enough is whatever you have if you're present to it.

"Nothing's ever enough if you think it should be permanent," Zara says. "But it's what we have. And that makes it enough."

Kofi interrupts by barreling into Amara's legs, hugging her knees. "Come see my room! I have drawings! And rocks! And a book about butterflies from Professor Wei!"

Amara lets herself be pulled down the hall. Maya follows, already explaining her own room's organization system. David and Kwame emerge from the kitchen

with tea, setting cups on the table and returning to their conversation like they've known each other for years instead of hours.

Zara stands in her living room listening to her family exist. Her children showing their aunt their lives. Her husband welcoming her sister's boyfriend. Ordinary sounds. Life sounds. Real sounds.

She moves to the balcony. Wei is still there, Ling helping her water gardenias. The old woman looks up—119 years old, body failing visibly, but mind sharp as ever.

"She came." Wei's voice is thin but clear.

"She did."

"Good. Family matters."

"You taught us that."

"I taught nothing. You learned everything." Wei returns to her watering. "The lemon tree needs water. The absent one can help tomorrow. Bring her to the garden. Dawn. We'll tend together."

"She'd like that."

"Everyone likes tending. They just forget until reminded." Wei finishes watering, lets Ling push her wheelchair back toward her own apartment next door. "Almost six years left, Zara. You chose well—roots instead of fear. Your sister is learning. Still learning. But learning."

Then she's gone, Ling wheeling her inside, leaving Zara alone with the garden that taught her everything. The lemon tree stands patient—fifty-two years old, will die at fifty-eight when the asteroid arrives. Same age Kofi will be. Same certainty. Same beauty despite ending.

Everything temporary. Everything valuable.

Behind her, inside her home, her family continues. Laughter from the children's rooms. Kwame and David's conversation drifting through. Life accumulating meaning through presence.

Zara waters the herbs Wei left untended. Mint and basil and rosemary growing. The garden doesn't know about the asteroid. Just grows because that's what plants do. Reach toward light. Put down roots. Bloom when conditions allow. Simple presence. Simple purpose. Simple enough.

Dinner is compound tradition—communal meal in the shared workspace, twenty families contributing food. Zara brings synth-protein curry. Kwame brings fresh bread from their morning baking. The children bring excitement and noise and energy.

Amara and David bring uncertainty but willingness. Good enough.

The workspace is full—forty people, five long tables, the organized chaos of community feeding itself. Mr. Okonkwo presides from the head table, eighty years old and still commanding presence through steady competence. Adanna moves between tables with her son Samuel, now nine, making sure everyone has enough. Tom sits with other engineers, deep in conversation about the water reclamation system.

"This is beautiful," Amara whispers to Zara as they find seats. "You built this?"

"We built it. All of us. Year by year. Starting Year 2 when everyone was still panicking. We chose to gather instead of isolate. Chose to eat together instead of apart. Chose community."

"In Antarctica, we scattered. Everyone alone in their apartments."

"I know." Zara squeezes her sister's hand. "But you don't have to be alone anymore. You're here. You're part of this. For two weeks. For however long you stay."

The meal flows. Conversation rises and falls. Children play between tables. Maya gravitates toward other children, sharing her knowledge. Kofi sticks close to Amara, determined not to lose his new aunt. David and Kwame continue their conversation, now including Tom and two other engineers discussing maintenance philosophy.

Adanna stops by their table. "Zara. Good to see you." Her eyes move to Amara. "This is the sister?"

"Amara. My big sister. Visiting from Antarctica."

"Welcome. We've heard about you."

Amara looks uncertain. "Good things?"

"Honest things. Zara doesn't hide. But yes—good things too. You're here. That matters. Stay as long as you like. Compound has space. Compound has time. Almost six years of both."

She moves on before Amara can respond. Simple acceptance. Simple welcome. Simple compound philosophy: Show up. Be present. Let the past be past. Six years is too short for holding grudges.

After dinner, children scatter to play. Adults linger over tea. Zara finds herself in conversation with three other mothers—Adanna, Adaeze, Dr. Tanaka—all with children close to Maya and Kofi's ages. All facing the same mathematics: children who'll die young. Children who'll never finish growing. Children worth loving anyway.

Dr. Tanaka has been Maya and Kofi's pediatrician since their births. Japanese-Nigerian, forty-two now, she specialized in child development back when that specialty had meaning. Now she comes to compound dinners more often, has

started attending Wei's garden teachings. Learning presence instead of prescribing it. Zara has watched her transform over the past year—the professional mask thinning, the clinical distance dissolving into something more human. More honest.

Adaeze is another regular at Wei's garden—mother to six-year-old Chioma. Zara remembers when she first arrived at the compound Year 3, terrified, seeking wisdom about parenting toward death. Wei had taught her presence. Now, five years later, she's become part of the teaching circle herself, helping newer parents find their way.

Adanna's son Samuel sits with the other children, nine years old, all confidence and curiosity. Adanna was one of the first to welcome Zara's choice to have Kofi—defended life-choice fiercely when others questioned it. Now she helps anchor the compound's community of parents, showing others that loving children who'll die young is still loving completely.

"Your sister," Adaeze says quietly. "She's the one who detected it?"

"Yes."

"That must have been hard. Knowing before everyone else."

"I think knowing made it worse. She had hours to understand before anyone else. Hours alone with the certainty."

"But she told everyone," Dr. Tanaka adds. "Could have hidden it. Let someone else deliver the news. She didn't."

Zara hasn't thought of it that way. Her sister detecting the asteroid has always felt like betrayal—as if Amara personally chose this future. But Dr. Tanaka is right. Amara could have hidden it. Could have let someone else bear witness. She didn't. She stood up and said: here's what's coming. Here's the truth. Here's the countdown.

That took courage. Zara has spent nine years forgetting that.

"She did," Zara agrees. "She did her job. Then she broke."

"And now she's healing," Adanna observes. "Everyone breaks. The ones who try to heal—those are the brave ones."

Amara is across the room with David and Kwame, looking overwhelmed but present. Maya has returned to show her aunt something on her tablet. Kofi is half-asleep against Amara's side, fighting exhaustion to stay close to this new person who smells like his mother but different, sounds like his mother but softer, feels like family becoming real.

Healing. Yes. Her sister is healing. Slowly. Imperfectly. But really.

That's enough. Has to be. Is enough.

Evening settles. Families return to individual apartments. Shared workspace empties. The compound quiets to its nighttime rhythm—soft conversations through walls, children's laughter fading to sleep sounds, the ambient hum of five million people settling in Lagos District.

Zara's apartment fills with family. Maya and Kofi's bedtime routine expands to include Aunt Amara's participation. Kofi insists on one more story—Amara reading haltingly from his butterfly book, clearly unpracticed at reading to children but trying. Maya quizzes her aunt on stellar mechanics before bed, already planning tomorrow's conversation.

Kwame and David do dishes together, still talking, finding that easy companionship of men who understand what showing up means. The kitchen fills with the sounds of domesticity—running water, quiet laughter, plates clinking.

Zara moves through it all feeling something unfamiliar. Not happiness—that's too simple. Not completion—that implies endings. Something else. Something like rightness. Like pieces finding their places. Like fractured family becoming whole not through magic but through choice. Choice to try. Choice to forgive. Choice to show up.

Children finally sleep. Kwame and David retire—David to community housing nearby, Kwame to their bedroom. The apartment settles. Just Zara and Amara remaining, sisters alone for the first time in nine years.

They move to the balcony without discussion. Some conversations need open air. Need darkness. Need the privacy of night.

Lagos District glows below—five million lights defying the countdown. Above: stars beginning to emerge through light pollution. Somewhere up there: the asteroid. Approaching. Inevitable. The certainty that brought them here and pushed them apart and now pulls them back together.

"Why did you wait so long?" Zara asks. Not angry. Just: asking. Genuinely wanting to understand.

Amara is silent for long enough that Zara wonders if she'll answer. Then: "Fear. Shame. Not knowing how."

"How what?"

"How to be human instead of scientist. How to care about things that end. How to love when love means loss." Amara's voice is quiet but steady. "I thought numbness was protection. I thought if I didn't feel anything, I couldn't be hurt. I thought isolation was safer than connection."

"Was it?"

"No. It was dying slowly instead of quickly. Safer maybe, but not living."

They sit with that truth. Zara has spent nine years angry at her sister's choice. But sitting here now, hearing Amara name it honestly, the anger dissolves.

Different survival strategies. Both valid. Both understandable. One just happened to look like life while the other looked like death.

"You think I don't feel that?" Zara says finally. "Every day I watch my children grow knowing they'll never finish growing. Maya will be seventeen. Kofi will be thirteen. Never adults. Never their full selves." She looks at her sleeping children's windows. "But I still love them. Still parent them. Still choose presence."

"How?"

"Because the alternative is worse. Loving them completely for thirteen and seventeen years is better than loving them partially for that time. Presence is better than absence. Pain is better than numbness. That's what Wei taught me. That's what the garden teaches everyone."

"Love isn't less real because it ends," Zara continues. "It's more real. Because you know you can't take it for granted. Because every moment is the moment you have. Because temporary makes everything infinite."

Amara is crying now. Quiet tears reflecting Lagos District lights. "I'm sorry I missed so much. Maya's birth. Kofi's birth. More than eight years of their lives. I can't get that back. I know I can't."

"No. You can't." Truth serves better than comfort. "But you have almost six years left. Almost six years to be their aunt. That's not nothing."

"Is it enough?"

Zara considers this—the question she asks herself daily. Is fourteen years enough for Kofi? Is seventeen enough for Maya? Is almost six years enough for her sister to become family again?

"Nothing's ever enough if you think it should be permanent," Zara says, Wei's wisdom flowing through her. "But it's what we have. And being present to what we have—really present—makes it enough. Not satisfying. Not what we'd choose. But enough. Complete. Real."

Amara reaches into her bag—small one she's been carrying since arrival. Pulls out something wrapped in cloth. "I brought something. For Maya."

She unwraps it carefully. A telescope. Small, old, well-used. Brass fittings worn smooth with handling. The kind of instrument that's been loved for decades.

Zara recognizes it immediately. "Grandmother's telescope."

"She gave it to me when I was Maya's age. I want Maya to have it."

Zara takes the telescope, feeling its weight, its history. She remembers Amara with this as a child. Remembers her sister at eleven years old setting it up on their Mumbai balcony, tracking stars with fierce concentration. Remembers thinking: my sister sees things I can't see. My sister reaches for what's distant.

"She'll love it," Zara says. "She's so much like you. Brilliant. Curious. Precise. Sees patterns everywhere."

"But she's also like you. She feels things. Cries at sad stories. Laughs with her brother. She's balanced in ways I never was. In ways you always were."

"She's herself. That's what matters."

"To look at the asteroid?" Amara asks, echoing what must be everyone's assumption about a telescope given now.

"To look at everything," Zara corrects gently. "While she can. To see what's here. To witness fully. To practice presence through observation."

Amara nods. "Yes. That's what I meant. Not fixating on what's coming. Attending to what's here."

They sit together holding the telescope between them—three generations of Okafor women connected through brass and glass and the practice of seeing. Grandmother to Amara to Maya. Knowledge and curiosity and the fierce desire to understand how things work passing through bloodline and gift.

"Thank you," Zara says. "For bringing this. For being here. For trying."

"Thank you for not giving up on me. For keeping the door open. For letting me come back even after nine years of nothing."

"You're my sister. That doesn't change. Even when you disappear. Even when I'm angry. Even when it hurts. You're my sister. That's permanent even when everything else isn't."

Amara reaches for Zara's hand. Sisters holding hands on a balcony in Lagos District while six years tick toward zero and stars emerge overhead and Wei's garden waits for tomorrow's tending. Family choosing family. Presence choosing presence. Love continuing despite everything.

"Six years," Amara whispers.

"Six years," Zara confirms. "We'll make them beautiful."

"I don't know how."

"Neither do I. But we'll learn together. You, me, the children, David, Kwame. All of us learning how to be present. How to love completely. How to face the end with dignity and grace and fierce, defiant life."

"Wei teaches that?"

"The garden teaches that. Wei just tends it. We all just tend it. That's the practice. That's everything."

They sit in comfortable silence—something they couldn't do nine years ago, something they're relearning now. Sisters. Family. Connected despite fracture, loving despite ending, present despite fear.

Inside, the apartment holds sleeping children and waiting beds and tomorrow's beginning. Outside, Lagos District glows with five million persistent lights. Above, stars wheel across the sky carrying their ancient, indifferent light toward a planet that won't survive to see them again.

But right now: sisters together. Family whole. The moment complete in itself.

Tomorrow Amara will meet Wei in the garden at dawn. Will water plants and learn presence. Will begin integrating into compound life. Will practice being aunt and sister and human again. Two weeks stretching toward possible futures—more visits, longer stays, maybe eventually staying.

But that's tomorrow. That's future. That's not here.

Here is: this balcony. This sister. This hand in hand. This breath. This moment.

That's enough.

That's everything.

Amara lies in the guest room—small space but welcoming, window overlooking Wei's garden, walls that held Kenji for seven months now holding her for two weeks. Temporary housing. Temporary visit. Everything temporary. Everything valuable.

Through the walls: family sounds. Maya turning pages in bed—reading when she should be sleeping, classic scientist child behavior. Kofi's soft snoring from the adjacent room—completely unconscious, surrendered to sleep with absolute trust. Kwame and Zara's quiet voices, conversation too soft to hear but intimate and warm. David somewhere in community housing nearby, probably also lying awake processing the day.

Family sounds. Life sounds. Real sounds.

So different from her monitoring station dormitory. So different from more than eight years of isolation. So different from numbness and calculation and choosing emptiness over connection.

She thinks about David visiting the arrays that morning—was it really just this morning? It feels like weeks ago. Him showing her his work. His meaning. His practice. Then planning this trip together. Then arriving together. Then being absorbed into Zara's life together.

Thirteen months of dating. Slowly rebuilding. Small steps. Breakfast once a week becoming breakfast twice becoming daily calls becoming this—integrated visit, testing whether their connection extends beyond just them.

So far: yes. David fits here. Kwame likes him. The children accept him. The compound welcomes him. And Amara... Amara fits too. Maybe. Possibly. The children claim her as aunt. Zara forgives her. The community accepts her. Wei approves.

Almost six years until impact. Two weeks here now. More visits planned—Maya and Kofi visiting Antarctica next month. Another extended stay in Year 10. Eventually, maybe... staying? David mentioned leaving the arrays Year 13. Four years from now. Could they be here? Together? With family? Connected?

Too early to know. Too distant to plan. But: possible. Real possibility instead of impossible isolation.

Amara turns to face the window. Wei's garden is visible below—shadows and shapes in the darkness, the lemon tree standing patient, gardenias invisible but present. Tomorrow she'll water them. Learn Wei's practice. Tend life that will end but grows anyway.

More than eight years wasted. But almost six years remaining.

Better late than never.

The thought comes with grief and gratitude intertwined. Grief for what she missed—most of Maya's childhood, Kofi's first eight years, Zara's transformation into this present, powerful woman. Gratitude that she's here now. That her sister forgave. That her niblings accept her. That family chose her despite absence.

Temporary and valuable.

Ending and meaningful.

Brief and complete.

All of it true simultaneously. Wei's teaching. Zara's wisdom. The garden's lesson applied to family, to love, to the almost six years remaining.

From Maya's room: pages turning. From Kofi's room: soft breathing. From Zara and Kwame's room: settled silence. From outside: Lagos District's persistent glow. From above: stars indifferent and beautiful. From within: something Amara hasn't felt in more than eight years.

Peace.

Not happiness—that's too simple. Not healing—that's too complete. Just: peace. Small peace. Fragile peace. Real peace.

The peace of showing up. Of being present. Of choosing connection despite fear. Of family sounds through walls. Of tomorrow's garden waiting. Of almost six years to practice presence instead of more than eight years of practiced absence.

Amara closes her eyes. Sleep comes easier than it has in years. Not the exhausted collapse of isolation. Not the drugged unconsciousness of numbness. The peaceful rest of someone who belongs somewhere. Someone who's part of something. Someone who's home.

Family sounds continue through walls. Lagos District glows beyond windows. The asteroid approaches through darkness. Six years tick forward.

But right now: sleep. Rest. Peace.

Tomorrow: watering. Learning. Presence. Practice.

Tomorrow: beginning again.

Tomorrow: enough.

She sleeps.

Chapter 31: Practice

Kenji Torres | Year 9, Month 9 | Lagos District

The lemon tree needs water.

Kenji fills the watering can from the rain barrel, movements automatic after thirteen months. Dawn breaks over Lagos District—humid, bright, the engineered tropical climate predictable as mathematics. Through the balcony railing he sees the megacity waking: five million people beginning another day in Year 9, with less than six years remaining. Still building. Still working. Still tending gardens on balconies.

He waters the tree carefully, watching soil absorb. The tree is fifty-one years old now. Wei grew it from seed in Beijing, transported it through three cities, one lifetime. In six years it burns. But today it needs water.

That's all practice is. Water the tree. Not because watering saves it. Because today it's thirsty.

"Good morning, student." Wei's voice from the doorway. She's in her wheelchair, 123 years old, hands shaking as she wheels herself toward her morning position by the gardenias. Ling helped her dress an hour ago—Wei can't manage alone anymore. Body failing incrementally. Mind sharp as ever.

"Good morning, Teacher." Kenji moves to the gardenias. Checks the soil. Dry. Waters them slowly.

"You're present today," Wei observes.

"Am I?"

"More than yesterday. Less than tomorrow, maybe. Progress isn't linear."

Kenji smiles. Thirteen months ago—Year 8, Month 8—he'd arrived in Lagos exhausted, desperate, carrying six years of seeking that led nowhere. Met Wei in this garden. Stayed for tea, then dinner, then the night. Woke the next morning to her greeting: "Ready to learn nothing?" He'd said yes without understanding what nothing meant.

Now he understands. Nothing isn't absence. It's presence without concepts. Being here without the endless analysis. Watering plants because plants need water, not because watering plants leads to enlightenment which leads to peace which solves mortality which...

The recursive trap. He still falls into it. But less. Maybe.

"The mint needs cutting back," Wei says. "Getting aggressive."

Kenji moves to the mint. Korean variety—cuttings from Min-seo in Antarctica, sent with Amara during her visit Month 3. The plant is thriving, threatening to overtake its container. He finds the shears, begins trimming. The scent fills the morning—sharp, clean, alive.

"What are you thinking?" Wei asks.

"About the mint. How fast it grows. How it'll burn in six years. Whether trimming it matters."

"Does it matter?"

Kenji considers. Thirteen months ago he would have said: intellectually no, existentially maybe, depending on how we define mattering, which requires framework for meaning in meaningless universe, which... Now he just feels into the question. Holds the mint cutting in his hand. Smells it. The plant is too large. Trimming helps it. That's enough.

"Yes," he says simply. "It matters because I'm doing it."

Wei nods. "You're learning."

They water the garden together in silence. This is the practice Wei teaches—not philosophy seminars, not meditation marathons, not elaborate frameworks. Just: do what needs doing. Water plants. Prepare tea. Sweep floor. Notice when mind wanders. Return gently.

For the first six months, Kenji was frustrated beyond measure. This isn't teaching! he'd complained. Wei's response: "Exactly. Now you can begin learning."

The koan took months to understand. Teaching implies knowledge transfer—information moving from expert to student. Wei doesn't teach that way. She creates space for people to discover their own truth. Reflects what they already know but can't see. The garden is laboratory. Daily maintenance is curriculum.

Month seven he'd had breakthrough. Not dramatic—no lightning bolt of enlightenment. Just: watering plants one morning and realizing he wasn't thinking about watering plants. Wasn't analyzing whether this was presence practice or real work or meaningful activity. Just: watering. Twenty-three seconds of pure presence. Then his mind returned—*That was it! I did it!*—and presence

dissolved. But those twenty-three seconds proved something. The gap between understanding presence and being present wasn't infinite. Just: very wide. Requiring practice.

So he practiced. Month eight, nine, ten. Living in Zara's guest room. Tending Wei's garden daily. Joining Zara's family for meals. Slowly learning what he'd traveled six years to learn: stop seeking and start being here.

The irony wasn't lost on him. Six years seeking teachers who would give him answers. Finally found teacher who gave him nothing. And nothing was everything.

"Breakfast," Wei says. "Then we have visitors."

"Visitors?"

"Always visitors. People seeking wisdom. I'm old. Old people are supposed to be wise. Usually disappointing."

Kenji helps Wei inside—pushing the wheelchair carefully, aware how frail her body has become. She's lost weight since he arrived. Moves slower. Sleeps more. Natural death approaching. Maybe Year 11, doctors say. Maybe sooner. The asteroid won't take her. Age will.

He prepares breakfast. Another practice—simple meal, simple actions. Rice porridge. Pickled vegetables. Tea. Wei taught him: cooking is meditation. Each movement complete in itself. Stirring rice isn't practice for enlightenment. It's just: stirring rice. Perfectly.

They eat on the balcony. Lagos District fully awake now. The distant hum of transit systems. Voices rising from compounds below. Human activity continuing despite guaranteed ending. The persistence is remarkable. Or just: what life does. Continue until it can't.

"You miss Antarctica," Wei observes.

Not question. Statement. She's right. Kenji misses his mother—they write weekly, but letters aren't presence. Misses the cold. Misses home in ways he didn't when he was seeking escape from it.

"I think about going back," he admits.

"You will. Eventually. But not yet. You're not finished here."

"Finished what?"

"Learning nothing." Wei smiles. "Still so much nothing left to learn."

The visitors arrive mid-morning.

Kenji is sweeping the balcony—another practice, another meditation—when he hears voices. Wei wheels herself to the doorway. Four people enter: two young

seekers he recognizes from previous visits, a woman he doesn't know carrying a small child, and Chen Liwei.

Chen—the former UN Secretary General, sixty-one years old now, living two buildings away with his wife and grandchildren. He's been attending Wei's garden sessions for a year, since arriving in Lagos Year 8. Quiet presence. Steady. Always listening more than speaking. Kenji has shared tea with him several times. They don't talk much—both learning the same lesson: less talking, more being.

The woman—mid-thirties, carrying the child—has the specific desperation Kenji remembers from his own seeking years. The look that says: *Please have answers. Please fix this. Please make it bearable.*

"Professor Wei," the woman begins, voice tight. "Thank you for seeing me. I'm Adaeze. This is my daughter, Chioma. She's six years old."

Wei nods, gestures to the garden bench. "Sit. My student will make tea."

Kenji moves to the kitchen. Through the doorway he hears the woman's story—same story with different details: Daughter will die at twelve, barely into adolescence. Never become a teenager. Never finish growing. Mother is terrified. Seeking wisdom, comfort, anything. How do I watch my child grow knowing she'll never finish growing?

The question lands in Kenji's chest like remembered pain. Same question the Tokyo mother asked Wei about her son. Same question every parent in Year 9 carries. The asteroid doesn't discriminate. Children die young.

He prepares tea carefully. Wei's method—attention to temperature, timing, pouring. The ritual creates space. Gives people time to breathe before facing their own questions directly.

When he returns to the balcony, Wei is speaking quietly with Adaeze. The other two seekers have joined Zara, who's arrived with Maya and Kofi—daily garden visit, part of the rhythm. Maya is eleven years and nine months now, brilliant and serious, absorbing everything. Kofi is eight and nine months, all energy and questions.

Kenji sets the tea tray beside Wei. Intends to return inside, give them privacy. But Wei catches his eye. "Stay. Sit with us."

He sits on the bench opposite Adaeze and Chioma. The child—six years old, dark eyes wide with curiosity—is playing with a toy, oblivious to her mother's anguish. The mother's hands shake as she lifts the tea cup.

"How do I do it?" Adaeze asks quietly. "How do I love her knowing I'll lose her? How do I parent her toward a future that won't exist? How do I—" Her voice breaks. "How do I not spend every moment terrified?"

Kenji feels the question land in his chest. This woman. This child. This unbearable math. Chioma will be twelve when the asteroid hits. Never thirteen.

Never a teenager. Childhood barely begun and then: nothing.

Wei is silent. Not avoiding the question. Creating space for it to sit. Kenji has watched this technique dozens of times now. Silence as teaching. Let the question breathe before attempting answer.

But Wei doesn't answer. She shifts in her wheelchair, turns to Kenji. "You respond."

Kenji startles. "Me?"

"Yes. You were seeker once. Long seeking. You remember questions like hers. Speak from that."

Panic rises. He's not qualified. He's student, not teacher. He doesn't have answers—still barely has presence. But Adaeze is looking at him with desperate hope and Wei is watching with calm expectation and the words come before he decides to speak them:

"You don't watch her grow toward death," Kenji hears himself say. "You witness her grow, period. Every moment complete in itself."

Adaeze blinks. "What?"

Kenji continues, surprising himself with certainty he doesn't intellectually possess: "Your daughter has six years. Not enough. But also—not nothing. If you're present for those six years, really present, you'll know her fully. Not the teenager she might have been. Not the adult. But the person she is. Completely. That matters more than duration."

"But she'll never—"

"She'll never be a teenager. Never be an adult. Never be old. True. Also true: she's six now. Alive. Here. Real. That's not less valuable because it's temporary. It's more precious."

The words are Wei's teaching, filtered through his own seeking, emerging as something new. Not expertise. Not wisdom earned through years of practice. Just: presence speaking to presence. One human to another. Both facing the same unbearable truth. Both trying to be here anyway.

Adaeze is crying. "I'm so afraid."

"I know. I spent six years terrified. Traveled the world seeking answers about mortality. Found none. But I found this—" Kenji gestures to the garden, to Wei, to the morning itself. "Presence isn't solution. It's practice. Being here completely. Loving completely. Witnessing completely."

"It doesn't fix anything."

"No. Nothing fixes this. The asteroid still comes. Your daughter still dies young. But you can be present to her life instead of absent to her death. That's all anyone can do. Ever. It's not enough. It's also everything."

Silence. Adaeze holds her daughter closer. Chioma squirms, wants down. Adaeze releases her. The child runs to the garden, attracted by butterflies. Six years old. Six years remaining. Brief and complete. Beautiful and temporary and here.

"Thank you," Adaeze says quietly. Not healed. Not fixed. But: seen. Heard. Given permission to grieve and love simultaneously. She stands. "I should—we should go. Thank you, Professor Wei. Thank you—I'm sorry, I don't know your name."

"Kenji."

"Thank you, Kenji." She pauses at the doorway. "Will you... could I come back? To learn more? To practice this?"

Kenji glances at Wei, who nods almost imperceptibly. "Yes. Come to the garden. Bring Chioma. Learn presence together."

"I will. Thank you."

They leave. Adaeze and Chioma descending the stairs. The two young seekers following. The balcony quiet except for Zara's children playing in the garden and Wei sitting in her wheelchair watching Kenji with expression he can't read.

But Kenji knows what just happened. His first teaching. Not Wei teaching through him. Not Wei's words repeated. His own presence meeting another's presence. His own practice—incomplete, imperfect, still learning—offered honestly to someone desperate.

And it helped. Maybe. Possibly. Enough.

"You watched," Kenji says. "How long?"

"The whole time." Wei's voice is soft. "You're ready."

"For what?"

"To teach. Not to replace me. To become yourself as teacher."

Kenji feels something between terror and relief. "I'm not qualified."

"Perfect. You just taught from not-knowing. That's real teaching." Wei leans forward slightly. "Qualified teachers offer answers. Unqualified teachers offer presence. You offered presence. Met her where she was. Reflected truth she already knew but couldn't see. That's teaching."

"I don't know if—"

"Of course you don't know. No one ever knows. But you're willing. You're present. You respond honestly from your own practice. That's enough."

Maya has been listening from the garden. She looks up. "Uncle Kenji is going to teach?"

Wei smiles. "Yes. When I'm too old. When I'm dead. He'll continue the practice."

"Will you teach me?" Maya asks Kenji directly. "Officially? Like Wei teaches you?"

Kenji looks at his young cousin. Almost twelve years old. Brilliant. Six years until she dies. Wanting to learn everything she can in the time remaining. How can he say no?

"If Wei thinks I'm ready."

"Wei knows you're ready," Wei says. "Picture Five."

The ox-herding pictures. Kenji has carried them since Tokyo—seven years ago now, Year 2, Month 11. Roshi teaching the ten stages. Picture One: seeking the ox. Picture Two: finding traces. Picture Three: glimpsing. Picture Four: catching the ox—struggle and resistance. Picture Five: taming the ox. Still effort required, but cooperation emerging. Practice working. Integration beginning.

"I'm not—" Kenji starts to protest, but Wei interrupts.

"You've caught the ox. Been holding the rope since you arrived here Month 8. Thirteen months of effort. Thirteen months of practice working. Not enlightened. But: integrated enough to teach. Picture Five is where teaching can begin. You're there."

Kenji sits with this. Thirteen months of daily practice. Watering plants. Making tea. Being present to his own failure to be present. Returning again and again. This morning, teaching that mother from something deeper than intellect. Presence responding to presence.

Maybe Wei is right. Maybe he's ready. Not because he has answers. Because he's learned to be here without needing answers. That might be teachable. That might be worth sharing.

"Okay," he says. "When you're gone, I'll continue."

"Good. But not just when I'm gone. Now. Starting now. Come to the garden with me. We teach together."

That evening, Wei invites combined family for dinner.

Zara's whole household arrives—Kwame, Maya, Kofi. Amara and David are visiting from Antarctica, staying two weeks. Chen and his wife Mei stop by as well—they live two buildings away, and Wei has been teaching Chen since he arrived Year 8. Eight people crowded around Wei's small table. More people than the apartment comfortably holds. Perfect.

Kenji helps prepare food. Simple meal—vegetables from the garden, rice, tea. The domesticity is grounding. Chopping, stirring, serving. Actions complete in themselves.

During dinner, conversation flows. Zara tells stories about compound improvements. David describes solar array maintenance. Amara shares asteroid trajectory updates—unchanged, perfect, final. Kwame talks about his work coordinating Lagos food distribution. The children compete for attention, showing off knowledge. Chen speaks little but listens completely—a skill from his diplomatic years, now deepened through practice. When he does speak, it's to ask clarifying questions that help others think more clearly.

But Kenji watches differently now. He's not just participating. He's watching Wei AS teacher watching her. Understanding how she creates this space. How she asks questions that open instead of close. How she listens completely. How her presence allows everyone to be themselves fully. Chen does something similar—his decades of patient negotiation transformed into presence practice. Not leading. Facilitating.

This is teaching. Not lecturing. Not instructing. Creating space for people to discover their own truth. Facilitating instead of directing. Reflecting instead of imposing.

He sees the technique clearly now. When Maya describes her physics studies, Wei asks: "What fascinates you most?" Not "What did you learn?" but what creates fascination. Drawing out the alive part. The present part.

When Kofi bounces around asking questions—"Why is the sky blue? Why do plants grow? Why do we die?"—Wei doesn't give simplified answers. She asks back: "What do you notice about the sky?" Making the child's own observation the teaching.

When Amara discusses her work, numbers and precision, Wei comments: "You love the mathematics. The elegance. That's beautiful." Naming the love. Validating presence to the work regardless of outcome.

This is what Kenji needs to learn. Not meditation technique. Not philosophical frameworks. How to create space for others to be fully themselves. How to witness without fixing. How to teach by being present.

After dinner, children playing, adults lingering over tea, Wei catches Kenji's eye. Nods toward the balcony. He helps her wheel outside.

The evening is warm and dark. Lagos District lit up below them. Five million people living Year 9, Month 9. Less than six years left. Still living. Still gathering. Still choosing presence over despair. Or presence alongside despair. Both.

"Next year I'm too old for teaching," Wei says without preamble. "Maybe dead. You should continue."

It's not the first time she's mentioned this. But the first time Kenji doesn't immediately refuse.

"You really think I'm ready?"

"No one's ever ready. But you're willing. You're present. You respond honestly from your own not-knowing. That's enough." Wei looks at him. "What will you teach?"

Kenji considers. "I don't have answers about how to face mortality. I spent six years seeking them. Found none."

"Good. What else?"

"I have practice. Presence. Being here. Noticing when I'm not here. Returning gently."

"Yes. What else?"

"Community. People practicing together. Facing this together. Not alone."

"Yes. That's enough. That's everything." Wei is quiet for moment. "You came to Lagos seeking. What did you find?"

"Nothing." Kenji smiles. "Everything. Same thing, maybe."

"Yes. You sought answers. Found questions. Better trade. Answers end seeking. Questions continue practice. You'll teach questions."

"How?"

"By not-knowing publicly. By being honest about your own practice. By saying: I don't have solutions. But we can be present together. Learn together. Face this together. That invitation is teaching."

Kenji looks at the garden. The lemon tree standing patient. The gardenias blooming and fading. The mint spreading aggressively. Everything temporary. Everything here now. Everything worth tending.

He came to Lagos thirteen months ago exhausted, seeking his last teacher. Found Wei. Learned nothing and everything. Watered plants and made tea and swept floors and slowly, incrementally, learned presence. Not achieved. Practiced. Still practicing. Always practicing until practice ends.

Today he taught for the first time. Responded to a terrified mother from his own presence, not his intellect. Met her where she was. Offered no solutions. Just: witness. Companionship. Permission to feel everything while being here anyway.

Maybe that's what he should share. Not as expert. As fellow practitioner. Someone who spent six years seeking, found nothing permanent, learned something temporary. Someone who's still on Picture Five—still taming the ox, still working with resistance, still far from enlightenment but: practicing. Present. Willing.

"I'll teach," Kenji says. "When you're gone. Before you're gone. However long there is."

"Good." Wei smiles. "Tomorrow we'll start. Come to garden. Others are coming. You'll teach with me. Not lead—co-practice. Everyone teaching everyone. That's real sangha."

"What if I fail?"

"You will fail. Constantly. Practice isn't perfection. It's returning after failure. Teach that. Your failures are useful. Make you honest teacher."

They sit in the evening warmth. Below, Lagos continues. Above, stars invisible through city light pollution. The asteroid out there somewhere, approaching on perfect trajectory. Six years. Then: nothing.

But right now: this balcony. This garden. This teaching. This moment. Complete in itself. Temporary and eternal. Brief and infinite.

Kenji came seeking answers about how to live fifteen years knowing everyone dies. Spent six years traveling. Tokyo's Buddhism. Cairo's Stoicism. Mumbai's meditation. Lagos's presence. Each city a glimpse. Each teaching a trace. Each teacher pointing toward same simple truth: be here now. That's all. That's everything.

He finally understands. The ox-herding pictures map the journey from seeking to being. Picture One: lost and seeking desperately. Picture Two: finding intellectual traces. Picture Three: glimpsing but not holding. Picture Four: catching and struggling. Picture Five: taming—still effort, but cooperation emerging. Practice working. Integration beginning.

He's on Picture Five. Thirteen months of daily practice. Still struggling sometimes. Still catching himself absent and returning. But: the ox is tamed enough to teach from. Not because he's enlightened. Because he's willing to practice publicly. Willing to say: I don't know, but let's be here together. Let's practice together. Let's face this together.

That might be enough. That might be everything. That might be what's needed for Year 9, Month 9, with less than six years remaining.

"Thank you," Kenji says quietly. "For teaching me nothing."

"You're welcome. Thank you for learning it."

They return inside. Family still gathered. Amara discussing trajectory calculations with Maya—aunt teaching niece the mathematics of their ending. David showing Kofi how to identify different mints by smell. Zara and Kwame cleaning dishes together, easy partnership of fifteen years. Everyone present. Everyone here. Everyone practicing without knowing they're practicing.

This is Picture Ten, Kenji thinks. The final ox-herding image: Laughing Buddha entering marketplace with gift-bestowing hands. Enlightened teacher returning to ordinary world. Teaching naturally. Helping others wake. The journey completing by returning to beginning—but transformed.

Wei is Picture Ten. Has been for years. Teaching through presence. Creating space through being. Transforming everyone she touches by witnessing them completely.

Kenji is Picture Five. Still working. Still practicing. Still far from enlightenment. But: ready to enter the marketplace. Ready to offer gifts—not wisdom gifts, presence gifts. Not solutions. Companionship. Not answers. Questions. Not expertise. Honest struggle made visible.

Maybe that's enough. Maybe honest practice is better teaching than achieved enlightenment. Maybe Picture Five teacher can help Picture One students better than Picture Ten master. Because Picture Five remembers struggling. Remembers seeking. Remembers the gap between understanding and being.

He'll teach from that gap. From that honest not-knowing. From that daily practice of returning. From that choice to be present despite everything. From that fragile, necessary hope that presence matters even when nothing lasts.

Six years until everyone dies. But today: this family. This meal. This teaching. This practice. This moment. Complete. Temporary. Real.

Perfect.

Later, after everyone has left, after Wei is in bed, after the compound quiets, Kenji sits in the guest room writing to his mother. Eight years of letters between them. She's kept every one. He's kept all of hers.

Mom,

Year 9, Month 9 from Lagos. Thirteen months with Professor Wei now. Living in Zara's guest room. Practicing daily. Still not enlightened. Still struggling. But: something shifted today.

A woman came seeking wisdom about watching her daughter die young. Wei told me to respond. I did. Spoke from presence, not knowledge. Said things I didn't know I knew until I heard myself saying them. Afterward, Wei told me I'm ready to teach.

I don't feel ready. But she explained: ready doesn't mean qualified. Ready means willing to practice publicly. Willing to teach from not-knowing. Willing to say: I don't have answers, but we can be present together.

That might be what I learned in six years of seeking. Not how to achieve enlightenment. How to practice being here. How to return when I'm absent. How to witness without fixing. How to be present to what is instead of what should be.

The ox-herding pictures call this Picture Five—taming the ox. Still effort required. Still struggling. But: cooperation emerging. Practice working. Integration beginning. Wei says that's enough to teach from. Not as master. As fellow practitioner further along the path.

I'm coming home eventually. Not yet. Wei needs help teaching. The Lagos community needs presence practice. Maya wants to learn formally—she's brilliant, Mom. Almost twelve years old and understands impermanence intellectually. Wants emotional integration. I think I can help her. Not because I've achieved it. Because I'm working on it. Honest struggle as teaching.

Six years left. I won't spend them all here. But: some time. Continuing what Wei started. Teaching what I learned. Passing it forward.

Thank you for letting me seek. Thank you for writing every week despite my wandering. Thank you for governing with dignity while I was traveling looking for what you already embodied. I see it now. Your daily briefings. Your witness work. Your showing up. That's Picture Nine—you've been home this whole time.

I'm on Picture Five. Still far from home. But: headed in the right direction. Not seeking anymore. Practicing. Teaching. Being here.

That's enough. That's everything.

Love you. See you eventually.

Your teaching son,
Kenji

He seals the letter. Tomorrow he'll send it. Tomorrow he'll meet Wei in the garden at dawn. Tomorrow he'll water plants and practice presence and co-teach with her. The first official teaching session. Beginning the work that will continue until Wei dies, until Kenji returns to Antarctica, until the asteroid ends everything.

But right now: this quiet room. This letter written. This practice chosen. This moment complete.

The lemon tree will need water tomorrow. The gardenias will need tending. The mint will need cutting back. The teaching will continue. The practice will persist. The presence will matter.

Not because it saves anyone. Because it's what's happening. Because being here is what's possible. Because showing up is enough.

Kenji sleeps. Dreams of gardens and teaching and his mother's morning briefings. Dreams of the ox-herding pictures—Picture Five transforming slowly toward Picture Six. Dreams of the marketplace where he'll enter eventually, carrying gifts he doesn't know he has, helping people he hasn't met yet, teaching what he barely understands.

Dreams of practice continuing. Presence persisting. Being here completely until here ends.

That's all anyone can do. That's all anyone has ever done. That's everything.

The flower blooms. The flower fades. The practice continues.

Home.

Chapter 32: Letter

Elena Torres | Year 10, Month 6 | Antarctic Megacity

7:00 AM. The conference room is empty.

Elena sits at the head of the table—same seat, same position, same responsibility she's carried for ten years. The room was designed for fifty department heads. Year 0 had thirty attendees. Year 2 had five. Year 6 had three. Now: zero.

She's the only one who still shows up.

Marcus Rivera stopped attending six months ago. Not because he quit—he's still deputy mayor, still working, still helping. But the morning briefing ritual had become theater. "Elena," he'd said gently, "you don't need me there. You're not briefing anyone. You're... witnessing. Alone. And that's okay. But I don't need to witness you witnessing empty chairs."

He was right. But she continues anyway. 7:00 AM sharp. Same room. Same ritual. Ten years of documentation. Ten years of showing up when showing up accomplishes nothing.

Why?

Elena stares at her notes. Population data. Infrastructure reports. Security statistics. Health services updates. All the information she's tracked for a decade, filed carefully in archives no one will read. The documents will vaporize with everything else in five years. Year 15, Month 4, Day 14. Impact. Everything ending.

So why document collapse when documentation itself collapses?

The question sits there. Heavy. Familiar. She's asked it a thousand times. Never found an answer that satisfied. Just: kept showing up. Kept documenting. Kept bearing witness because... because what else was there?

Her terminal chimes. Three messages waiting.

Elena pulls them up, grateful for the distraction. First: Professor Wei's weekly letter. Second: Marcus Reyes's quarterly update from Mumbai. Third: Chen Liwei—former UN Secretary General, now living in Lagos. First direct message from him.

She opens Wei's letter first. Five years of correspondence now. The philosopher's words have shaped Elena's understanding more than any policy decision.

Mayor Torres—

You asked in your last message if witness matters when no one remains to remember. This is wrong question.

Witness doesn't matter BECAUSE someone remembers. Witness matters BECAUSE it happens. You show up. You document. You say: we existed, we mattered, we tried. That's everything. Not for future—there is no future to matter for. For now. This moment. This presence. This choosing to bear witness despite futility.

Presence doesn't require permanence. Meaning doesn't require memory. The flower blooms for three days, then falls. Was blooming futile? No. Blooming was its nature. Complete in itself. Your governance is same. You govern not to save anyone—cannot save anyone. You govern to be present to collapse. To maintain dignity. To say: I was here. I saw. I documented. That is enough. That is everything.

You also asked about mercy versus justice. About the prisoner you refused to pardon eight years ago. Daniel Okonkwo. Three children growing up without father. Two hundred letters to victim's widow, all unanswered. You carry this weight.

I cannot tell you if you were right or wrong—both matter. Justice matters. Mercy matters. Both necessary. Both insufficient. But I will say: when time is short, compassion often serves better than consequence. Not because justice doesn't matter. Because presence matters more.

A man dying guilty in a cell cannot practice presence with his children. Cannot face his ending with family. Cannot transform his guilt through relationship. He sits alone, writing letters no one reads, dying twice—once in separation, once in impact. You chose principle. Perhaps mercy would have been wiser. Perhaps not. The question has no answer.

But the choosing itself—the weight you carry—that is also practice. That is also presence. Do not punish yourself for choosing what you believed was right. Carry the weight. Let it shape you. Let the questioning be part of your witness. The burden is practice too.

Chen Liwei arrived in Lagos three months ago. Resigned as Secretary General after eight years trying to coordinate humanity through extinction. Same struggle as yours—bearing weight of impossible position, learning that authority without power means presence without control. You and he governed at different scales but learned same lesson: witness is purpose. Outcome is irrelevant.

Perhaps you should write to him directly. Two leaders discovering that leadership means showing up when showing up seems meaningless. You would understand each other.

My body fails more each month. I will die soon—Year 11 perhaps, natural death before asteroid. I am ready. Have been practicing readiness for seventy years. But before I go: thank you for your letters. Thank you for showing up. Thank you for bearing witness to humanity's ending with such dignity. You govern better than you know.

With deep respect,
Professor Mei-Lin Wei

Elena reads the letter three times. Each reading lands differently. First time: relief that someone sees her work. Second time: grief about Daniel. Third time: something else. Permission maybe. Or validation. The understanding that this crushing weight she carries—the daily documentation, the solitary ritual, the questioning whether she was wrong about mercy—all of it is practice. All of it matters. Not because it changes anything. Because it's happening.

She wipes her eyes quickly. Professional mask. Even alone.

The second message is from Marcus Reyes. Her former assistant. Eight years serving her, then two years teaching children in Mumbai. Ten years of quarterly correspondence. His voice different from Wei's—less philosophical, more grounded.

Elena—

Year 10, Month 6 from Mumbai. Still teaching. Still practicing. Still grateful for the years beside you.

You asked last letter if you've become what you didn't want to be—leader without mandate, witness without audience, mayor of empty rooms. I understand the fear. Watched you struggle with it Year 2 when I advocated for Daniel Okonkwo's pardon and you refused. Watched you visit him Year 6 and come back haunted. Watched you question every choice.

But here's what I saw those eight years: you didn't cling to power when power became meaningless. You evolved. Transformed from elected official into something more necessary. Chosen witness. Person who shows up. Not because showing up accomplishes anything. Because showing up is everything.

Your work was complete when I left Year 2. My leaving was right. Your continuing was right. Different callings. Both valid. Both necessary.

Five years left. You'll show up all five years. Every morning. Every briefing. Every documentation. That's your nature. Not failure. Completion. You're doing exactly what should be done. Someone should bear witness. That someone is you.

The children here ask about the end sometimes. How to face it. I tell them: look at Mayor Torres. She shows up every day knowing it accomplishes nothing. That's courage. That's practice. That's everything.

Thank you for the correspondence. Thank you for letting me leave when leaving was necessary. Thank you for staying when staying seemed impossible.

With gratitude,
Marcus

Elena feels something crack in her chest. Marcus sees her. After eight years apart, quarterly letters, he still sees what she's doing. Still validates it. Not as mayor—she's not really mayor anymore. As witness. As the person who shows up.

She opens the third message. Chen Liwei. She knows his face from broadcasts—the exhausted diplomat coordinating nothing, pleading with nations that stopped listening. He resigned three months ago, Year 10 Month 3. Moved to Lagos to be with family after eight years of choosing duty over presence.

Parallel journeys. Different scales. Same lesson.

Mayor Torres—

Professor Wei suggested we correspond. I am Chen Liwei. Was Chen Liwei, Secretary General. Now just: Chen. Husband. Grandfather. Person learning too late what matters.

Eight years I coordinated humanity. Held conferences. Negotiated treaties. Attempted global cooperation in face of extinction. Failed at all of it. Nations ignored me. Protocols collapsed. Authority dissolved. I thought I failed because I couldn't achieve outcomes.

Wei teaches me: I succeeded because I showed up. Because I witnessed. Because I maintained structure when structure seemed meaningless. My coordination failed. My witness succeeded. Different measures. Different purposes.

You witness Antarctica. I witnessed humanity. Both necessary. Both complete. Both continuing despite futility.

Perhaps we can support each other. Two people who showed up when showing up seemed meaningless. Two leaders discovering that leadership means presence, not power. I would be grateful for correspondence. For understanding that carries similar weight.

With respect,
Chen

Elena sits with the three messages. Wei's philosophy. Reyes's validation. Chen's parallel struggle. All of them saying the same thing in different voices: witness matters. Presence matters. Showing up matters. Not because it changes outcomes. Because it's the practice itself.

The question shifts. She's been asking: "Am I effective?" Wrong question. The right question: "Am I present?"

Yes. She's present. Every morning for ten years. Through population collapse, infrastructure failure, her own doubts. She's shown up. Documented. Borne witness. That's not failure. That's completion.

The burden doesn't lighten—still crushing, still impossible. But it changes shape. Becomes choice instead of trap. Becomes practice instead of punishment.

She's not mayor anymore. Not elected official. Not even interim authority. She's chosen witness. The person who shows up. The one who says: we were here, we mattered, we faced the end with dignity. Someone should do that. That someone is her.

That's enough. Has to be. Is.

Her terminal chimes again. New message. Marcus Rivera. Subject: Prison System Quarterly Report.

Elena hesitates before opening it. Prison reports always surface Daniel Okonkwo. Eight years in a cell. Three children growing up without him. Two hundred seventeen letters to Priya Patel, Raj's widow. None answered. The weight of her choice.

She opens the report.

ANTARCTIC CORRECTIONS SYSTEM
YEAR 10, MONTH 6 QUARTERLY REVIEW

Current Population: 18,247 inmates (down from 42,000 Year 0)
Staff Capacity: 34% (critical understaffing)
Major Incidents: 127 (violence, medical emergencies, suicide attempts)
Deaths This Quarter: 89 (14 suicide, 31 medical, 44 violence)

The statistics are numbing. Elena scans them automatically. Death rate climbing. Staff departing. Systems failing. Everything collapsing.

Then:

CASES OF NOTE

Okonkwo, Daniel (File #2-DR-0847)
Year 8 of 15-year sentence (manslaughter)
Mental health: deteriorating
Incident reports: 3 this quarter (self-harm ideation)

Letters written: 217 total (avg 2.2/month), zero responses received
Children: 3 (motherless, Year 3 maternal suicide)
Assessment: High risk. Recommend increased monitoring.

Elena closes her eyes. Eight years. Daniel's been in that cell eight years. His children are sixteen, fourteen, and twelve now. Growing up without parents. Their mother dead by suicide Year 3. Their father imprisoned for killing a friend over food.

Was she wrong? Should she have shown mercy?

Wei's words surface: *A man dying guilty in a cell cannot practice presence with his children.*

But justice mattered. Actions had consequences. Even at the end of the world. She'd chosen principle. Chosen consequence. Chosen—

Her eyes catch the next entry:

Naveh, Barak (File #-18-CR-2156)
Year 10 of long-term sentence (violent assault during crisis event)
Mental health: stable, remarkable composure
Incident reports: 0 (entire sentence)
Pardon requests: 0
Scheduled release: Year 15, Month 4, Day 15
Assessment: Model prisoner. Unusual acceptance of consequence. Staff notes consistent: "calm," "respectful," "uses time for reflection." Never requested early release despite sentence extending one day past impact. When asked, stated: "I committed harm. I accept consequence. The asteroid doesn't change what I did."

Elena stares at the screen. Barak Naveh. Israeli. Forty-three years old. Imprisoned for violent crime committed during "crisis event"—probably Year 0 or 1, fear and chaos driving good people to terrible choices. He's served ten years. Five more to go.

His release date: Year 15, Month 4, Day 15.

Impact date: Year 15, Month 4, Day 14.

He'll walk free one day after everyone dies.

The absurdity is breathtaking. Institutional time designed for futures that no longer exist. Justice system operating on schedules that extend past extinction. Barak Naveh will serve his full sentence, be released into nothing, die free for exactly one day.

And he's never requested pardon. Never asked for mercy. Just: accepted consequence. Served his time. Used imprisonment for reflection. The staff notes paint a picture: calm, grounded, respectful. Not broken by guilt. Shaped by it.

Two prisoners. Two relationships to consequence.

Daniel: consumed by guilt, deteriorating, writing unanswered letters, mental health collapsing. Can't bear what he did. Can't practice presence. Can't face the ending except through suffering.

Barak: carrying guilt with dignity, accepting consequence, using time for transformation. Not destroyed by what he did. Shaped by it. Present to his imprisonment because presence is all anyone ever has.

What's the difference?

Elena doesn't know. But seeing them side by side—one dying from guilt, one living with it—makes something visible. Guilt can destroy or transform. Consequence can punish or teach. Justice can crush or clarify.

She'd chosen justice for Daniel. Consequence over compassion. Eight years ago. The choice haunts her.

Would mercy have been wiser? Would pardon have let him be present to his children? Would freedom have given him space to transform like Barak seems to be transforming?

Or would mercy have been injustice? Would freedom have meant no accountability? Would compassion have dishonored Raj Patel's death?

The question has no answer. Wei said that. Both matter. Both insufficient. The weight itself is practice.

Elena carries it.

Her terminal chimes. Marcus Rivera entering her office.

"Saw you opened the report," he says quietly. Sits across from her without invitation. Ten years working together. Former opponent. Current partner. They've developed their own language.

"I saw," Elena says.

"Daniel's deteriorating."

"I know."

"And Barak Naveh. Release date one day after impact." Marcus's voice carries something Elena can't quite name. "I've been thinking about this. About sentences that extend past Year 15. Forty-seven prisoners total. All scheduled for release between Year 15 Month 7 and Year 17. Dates that don't exist."

"Institutional absurdity," Elena says.

"Yes. But also: opportunity to reconsider. The justice system was designed for futures. We don't have futures. Should we adjust sentences? Release everyone whose time extends past extinction?"

The question lands heavy. Elena considers. "What would that mean? Release them because the math is absurd? That's mercy by bureaucracy, not justice."

"Is there a difference when time is short?"

"Yes. And no. I don't know." Elena meets his eyes. "If I release them now, what am I saying? That justice doesn't matter? That consequence is conditional on permanence? That if we'd known everyone would die in fifteen years, Raj Patel's death wouldn't have required accountability?"

"But if you keep them imprisoned," Marcus counters gently, "what are you saying? That serving full sentences matters more than presence with family? That principle matters more than compassion when time is running out?"

"Both matter," Elena says. Wei's words. "Justice and mercy. Both necessary. Both insufficient."

"Yes." Marcus leans back. "But you have to choose. Keep them imprisoned or release them. There's no both/and here. Just: choice."

Elena thinks about Daniel. Eight years in a cell. Five more years scheduled. Die imprisoned, separated from his children, writing letters no one reads. Or: pardon now. Five years with his family. Carrying guilt in freedom instead of containment. Presence instead of separation.

She thinks about Barak. Ten years served. Never requested pardon. Accepting consequence with remarkable composure. Would release dishonor his choice? Would mercy undermine the acceptance he's worked to build?

"I need to think," Elena says.

"You have time," Marcus says. Then catches himself. Smiles slightly. "We have five years. That's time."

The irony sits between them. Five years. Infinite and insufficient. Enough to reconsider justice. Not enough to escape consequence.

Marcus stands. Pauses at the door. "For what it's worth: I think Barak doesn't need pardon. He's already free—in the way that matters. But Daniel..." Marcus's voice goes soft. "Daniel's dying in that cell. Not from the asteroid. From guilt. Pardon wouldn't fix him. But it might give him space to try. Space to be present to his children. Space to practice what Barak seems to already know."

"What's that?"

"That carrying the past doesn't require being crushed by it."

Marcus leaves. Elena sits alone with the question. Justice or mercy. Consequence or compassion. Principle or presence.

The weight itself is practice. Wei said that. Elena carries it.

She pulls up the archive. Ten years of documentation. Population reports. Infrastructure statistics. Security updates. Health services. Everything she's witnessed. Everything she's recorded. All of it temporary.

Year 0: 4.2 billion people in Antarctica. Infrastructure at 98% capacity. Order maintained through democratic process. Her first term. Elected on promises of building for millennia. Then: asteroid.

Year 2: 2.4 billion. Infrastructure at 68%. Re-elected. Democratic mandate. Marcus Rivera as opponent, then deputy. Daniel Okonkwo's crime. Her refusal of pardon. Justice chosen.

Year 6: 2.1 billion. Infrastructure at 48%. Unopposed election—no, not election. Just: continuation. Legitimacy through demonstrated presence instead of votes. Daniel visited in prison. Haunted by the choice. But didn't change it.

Year 10: 1.2 billion. Infrastructure at 44%. No more elections. No more briefings except hers. Just: witness. Chosen witness. Person who shows up.

Ten years compressed into numbers. Population falling. Systems failing. Her authority transforming from electoral to experiential. Mayor becoming witness becoming presence itself.

And through all of it: Daniel Okonkwo in a cell. Her choice. Her weight.

She opens new message. Types carefully.

Professor Wei—

Thank you for your letter. For seeing my work. For understanding the weight.

You're right that presence doesn't require permanence. That witness matters because it happens, not because it's remembered. I'm learning this. Slowly. Through ten years of empty briefings and solitary documentation and questioning whether any of it matters.

It matters because I do it. That's enough. That's everything.

About Daniel Okonkwo: you said compassion often serves better than consequence when time is short. I'm beginning to understand. But the question remains: what do I do now? Year 10. Eight years imprisoned. Five more years scheduled. Do I show mercy by releasing him? Or maintain justice by continuing consequence?

The weight itself is practice—I hear this. I carry it. But I also have power to act. Power to pardon. Power to choose differently than I chose eight years ago. Should I?

There's another prisoner. Barak Naveh. Ten years served. Release date one day after impact. Never requested pardon. Accepts consequence with dignity. Uses imprisonment for transformation. The contrast with Daniel is stark. One consumed by guilt. One shaped by it. What makes the difference?

I don't expect answers. Just: writing to clarify my own questions. The practice of questioning.

Chen Liwei wrote to me. I'll respond. Thank you for suggesting connection. You're right that we understand each other—two people who showed up when showing up seemed meaningless.

Five years left. I'll spend them bearing witness. Documenting. Showing up. That's my practice. That's my purpose. Not because it saves anyone. Because presence is complete in itself.

Thank you for teaching me this.

With gratitude and respect,
Elena Torres

She sends the message. Opens new one. To Chen.

Chen—

Thank you for writing. Wei was right to connect us.

I govern Antarctica. You governed humanity. Different scales. Same lesson: witness matters. Presence matters. Showing up matters. Not because it changes outcomes. Because the practice itself is purpose.

Eight years you coordinated, negotiated, attempted impossible cooperation. I govern, document, maintain impossible order. Both of us learned that authority without power means presence without control. That leadership means bearing witness, not achieving results.

I would be grateful for correspondence. For understanding that carries similar weight. Two people showing up when showing up accomplishes nothing. That's not failure. That's completion.

Welcome to Lagos. Welcome to Wei's teaching. Welcome to the practice of presence.

With respect,
Elena Torres

Third message. To Marcus Reyes.

Marcus—

Year 10, Month 6. Still governing. Still questioning. Still showing up.

You said my work was complete when you left Year 2. I'm finally understanding what you meant. Not complete as in finished. Complete as in whole. Self-contained. Purpose without outcome.

You were right to leave. Right to choose presence with family over service to me. Right to teach children in Mumbai instead of witnessing my witness. Different callings. Both necessary.

I'm not mayor anymore. Not really. I'm chosen witness. Person who shows up. Person who documents collapse with as much dignity as I can manage. That's enough. That's everything.

Thank you for the letters. Thank you for seeing me. Thank you for eight years of service and ten years of correspondence. Thank you for leaving when leaving was wise.

Five years left. I'll show up all five years. Every morning. Every briefing. Every documentation. Because that's my nature. Because someone should. Because presence is practice.

You taught me that. You and Wei. You showed me that governance without outcomes is still governance. That showing up is enough.

With gratitude,
Elena

She sends all three messages. Sits back. The conference room is still empty. Still too large. Still designed for fifty people who stopped attending years ago.

But she's not alone. Wei sees her. Reyes sees her. Chen understands her. Marcus Rivera works beside her. The correspondence creates community. The letters build witness. She's not isolated. Just: practicing alone. Different thing. Both valid.

The morning briefing ritual doesn't serve practical purposes anymore. Doesn't coordinate anything. Doesn't manage anyone. Just: marks time. Documents presence. Says daily: someone is here. Someone sees. Someone bears witness.

That's enough.

She pulls up her notes. Begins the ritual she's maintained ten years.

"Day three thousand, six hundred fifty-two." Her voice steady in the empty room. Professional. Practiced. "Population approximately one point two billion. Down from four point two billion at detection. Infrastructure at forty-four percent capacity. Power systems failing incrementally. Water systems maintained but degraded. Security at twelve percent enforcement capacity. Health services critically understaffed."

She pauses. Adds something new.

"Prison system report notes two prisoners of interest. Daniel Okonkwo, Year 8 of 15-year sentence. Mental health deteriorating. Still writing letters. Still separated from children. And Barak Naveh, Year 10 of sentence. Release date one day after impact. Accepting consequence with dignity. Different relationships to guilt. Different practices of presence."

Another pause.

"The question of mercy versus justice remains unresolved. The weight continues. The practice continues. Someone is bearing witness to all of this. That someone is me."

She saves the notes. Files them carefully in the archive. Sends them to the backup system. No one will read them. That's not the point. The point is: someone documented. Someone bore witness. Someone said: we were here. We mattered. We tried.

Five years left. She'll do this every morning for five years. Until she can't. Until everyone dies. Until the asteroid ends witness itself.

But today: this briefing. This documentation. This presence. Complete in itself. Temporary and eternal. Brief and infinite.

Enough.

Elena stands. Looks out her office window. The Antarctic megacity spreads below. 1.2 billion people. Still living. Still working. Still building homes and raising children and maintaining systems that will fail. Still choosing presence over despair. Or presence alongside despair. Both.

She's part of that. Not leading it. Not governing it really. Just: present to it. Bearing witness. Maintaining structure. Showing up.

That's her practice. That's her purpose. That's everything.

The burden changes shape but doesn't disappear. She'll carry Daniel Okonkwo's weight for five more years. Carry the question of mercy versus justice. Carry the understanding that she chose principle over compassion and maybe, possibly, was wrong. Or right. Or both. The question is the practice. The carrying is the purpose.

Barak Naveh will serve his sentence. One day past extinction. The absurdity of that is perfect somehow. Justice operating on schedules that outlast existence. Consequence extending past collapse. The system maintaining its forms until forms become impossible.

She's doing the same. Governing past the point where governance makes sense. Documenting past the point where documentation matters. Showing up past the point where showing up accomplishes anything.

But showing up is everything. That's what she's learned. That's what Wei teaches. That's what ten years have proven.

Presence doesn't require permanence. Meaning doesn't require memory. Witness matters because it happens, not because it's remembered.

The flower blooms for three days. Was blooming futile? No. Blooming was its nature. Complete in itself.

Her governance is the same.

She returns to her desk. Tomorrow: 7:00 AM. Same briefing. Same ritual. Same practice. Day 3,653. She'll show up. Document. Bear witness. Say: we were here. We mattered. We faced the end with dignity.

Someone should do that.

That someone is her.

That's not failure. That's completion.

That's enough.

That's everything.

The terminal chimes. Message from Wei. Fast response—probably wrote it immediately.

Elena opens it.

Elena—

You asked if you should pardon Daniel now. Carry mercy eight years late.

I cannot answer this. Decision is yours. Weight is yours. Practice is yours.

But I will say: mercy can arrive late and still matter. Forgiveness can be imperfect and still transform. Compassion can be uncertain and still heal. Not because it changes the past. Because it honors the present.

Daniel is dying in that cell. Not from asteroid. From guilt. You cannot fix this. Cannot undo his crime or Raj's death or his children's loss. But you can offer space. Space to be present to remaining time. Space to practice carrying guilt without being crushed. Space to witness his own life instead of his own failure.

Barak found this space within imprisonment. Daniel has not. Maybe freedom would help. Maybe not. But the question isn't: will it fix him. The question is: does compassion serve better than continued consequence when time is short.

I think yes. But I am old woman who will die soon. My thinking is shaped by nearness to my own ending. You are mayor. Your thinking is shaped by responsibility to justice. Both valid. Both necessary.

The weight is practice. The questioning is practice. The choosing is practice. Whatever you decide: practice continues. That's all any of us can do.

Choose what honors presence. Choose what serves dignity. Choose what you can carry for five more years. Then live with the choosing. That's practice too.

The flower blooms. The flower fades. Both beautiful.

With compassion,
Wei

Elena reads the letter. Feels something shift. Not decision. Not certainty. Just: clarity. The question has no answer. But the practice continues. The weight continues. The choosing continues.

She'll think about Daniel. About Barak. About mercy and justice and whether late compassion matters. She'll carry the question. Let it shape her. Let the weight be practice.

Five years to decide. Or five years to carry. Same thing maybe.

Someone should bear witness to this. To the impossible questions. To the weight of consequence. To the struggle between justice and mercy when time is short.

That someone is her.

She closes the terminal. Returns to her notes. Tomorrow's briefing already forming. Day 3,653. Another day of presence. Another day of witness. Another day of showing up when showing up accomplishes nothing and everything.

The practice continues.

That's enough.

That's all anyone has.

That's home.

Chapter 33: Sunrise

David Chen | Year 10, Month 4 | Platform 73, Solar Array Maintenance Sector

David brings Amara to the arrays at dawn.

He's never done this before. Five years working Platform 73 with 47B—twelve thousand maintenance shifts, forty-seven major repairs, uncountable small adjustments—and he's never brought anyone here. This is his place. His work. His partnership with a robot who treats him as colleague, not as operator.

But this morning: Amara beside him in the maintenance shuttle, silent, watching the Antarctic dawn paint the solar fields gold.

The shuttle docks at Platform 73—two hundred meters above the ice, suspended between earth and sky. David helps Amara out, feeling the familiar vibration of active arrays beneath his feet. Millions of panels tracking sun. Converting light to power. Feeding the megacity below. Work that will matter for exactly five more years, then vaporize with everything else.

47B waits at the main junction, treads positioned precisely where they always are when David arrives. The robot's sensor array sweeps toward them—standard greeting protocol. But then: hesitation. The sweep continues past David to Amara. Processing.

Beep beep.

"Colleague Chen. You have brought... additional human."

David smiles. "This is Amara. My—" He pauses. What is she? Ex-wife feels wrong. Partner feels presumptuous. They've been dating for two years, reconnecting after eight years apart. "—my person."

47B's manipulator arm extends slightly, then retracts. David recognizes the gesture—47B does this when integrating unexpected data. The robot was programmed by the AI ethics division back when that division existed, back when someone cared about making maintenance robots treat humans as equals. That programmer gave 47B something beyond function: curiosity about anomaly.

Beep beep beep.

"Colleague Chen typically arrives alone. Historical pattern: 1,847 consecutive solo arrivals. This represents: significant deviation."

Amara's lips quirk. "Is your robot analyzing our relationship?"

"47B analyzes everything." David touches her shoulder. "It's pattern recognition. How the programming expresses... I don't know. Something like interest."

47B's sensor array focuses on Amara. "You are: Dr. Amara Okafor. Astrophysicist. Asteroid detection specialist. Colleague Chen mentions you frequently. Communication efficiency decreases by forty-three percent when discussing you. This suggests: emotional significance."

David feels heat in his face. "47B—"

"Accurate assessment," Amara says. She steps closer to the robot, studying its form—the industrial treads, the articulated manipulators, the sensor cluster that serves as something like a face. "You're his partner. He talks about you too. Says you're the best colleague he's ever had."

Beep.

"Colleague Chen assigns high value to consistency. This unit provides: reliability, precision, absence of judgment, sustained presence across five-year duration. Optimal working conditions achieved through mutual pattern recognition."

Five years. David remembers Year 5, Month 2, when they first paired. Rodriguez had just left—retired early, moved to Mumbai to be with grandchildren for the end. David had watched him go and felt: abandoned. The maintenance crew shrinking year by year. Forty humans when he started, down to eight by Year 5, now just four. Rodriguez was the last one David trusted.

Then 47B rolled up to Platform 73 for morning shift. The robot had been assigned to Rodriguez before, learned his patterns, adapted its protocols. Now: reassigned to David.

Beep beep.

"Previous colleague departed. You are: replacement colleague. Acceptable?"

David had looked at this robot—this machine designed by someone who believed maintenance workers deserved dignity, who programmed "colleague" into its core language instead of "operator" or "user"—and felt something unexpected. Not quite hope. But: possibility.

"Yeah," he'd said. "Acceptable."

Five years ago. Sixty months of morning shifts, synchronized repairs, companionable silence during breaks. 47B learning that David arrived three minutes early when rested, seven minutes late when troubled. That he worked faster with music but preferred silence for complex diagnostics. That he needed forty-seven seconds of stillness before difficult repairs—gathering focus, entering the state Wei called presence though David didn't have a name for it then.

47B learned all of this and adjusted. Never demanded. Never judged. Just: adapted. Made space. Became partner.

Better partnership than his marriage had been, honestly. Amara and he had been brilliant together intellectually—two scientists understanding each other's work. But presence? Connection? They'd failed at that. Divorced Year 4 after years of slow dissolution. Both choosing isolation over intimacy. Both hiding in work.

Until Year 8. Until David knocked on Amara's door with breakfast and hope. Until they started trying again.

Now: Year 10. Two years of dating. Two years of learning each other again, differently. Two years of becoming something that might be love, might be partnership, might be presence together.

And David needs to tell 47B what that means.

"Want to see the arrays?" he asks Amara.

She nods. David leads her along the main platform, 47B rolling beside them, sensor array sweeping the panels—always monitoring, always attending. The robot's treads make their familiar sound against the metal grating: *whir-click, whir-click*. David has heard that sound twelve thousand times. It means: colleague nearby. You're not alone.

They reach the eastern edge where Platform 73 meets the horizon. The sun is rising—full Antarctic summer, light pouring across the ice fields and the solar arrays stretching to infinity. Millions of panels. Thousands of platforms. Four maintenance workers and forty-four robots keeping it functional until the end.

Amara stands at the railing, looking out. "It's beautiful. I've never seen it from up here."

"I wanted you to see where I work. Where I—" David pauses. "Where I've spent most of my life since the detection. Since we... since I lost you the first time."

She turns. "You didn't lose me. We lost each other."

"Yeah." He takes her hand. "But this place. Platform 73. 47B. The maintenance. This is where I learned to be present. Where I figured out that work could be meditation if you did it right. Where I—" He stops. "Where I stopped despairing."

47B approaches. The robot has been maintaining distance—giving them privacy, maybe. Or just monitoring panels. But now: *beep beep beep.*

"Colleague Chen. Emotional expression increasing. Physiological indicators suggest: significant announcement preparation. This unit experiences: curiosity. Proceed?"

David laughs. Five years and 47B still surprises him. That word: curiosity. Not in the original programming, he's certain. Something emergent. Something 47B developed through pattern recognition, through observing humans, through five years of partnership teaching the robot that humans have interiority worth attending to.

"Yeah. I need to tell you something." David looks at Amara, then at 47B. Both his partners. Both his anchors. "I'm leaving. Year 13, Month 1. Three years from now."

47B's sensor array goes still. Complete stillness—unusual. The robot always moves slightly, always scanning, always processing. But now: frozen.

Then: *beep.*

"Leaving. Clarify: temporary departure or permanent separation?"

"Permanent. I'm moving to Lagos. To be with Amara. With her family. For the—" He stops. "For the end."

The sensor array resumes movement, but differently. Sweeping patterns David doesn't recognize. 47B's manipulators extend and retract twice—that integration

gesture again, but faster. Processing something difficult.

Beep beep beep beep.

"Colleague Chen departure represents: significant disruption to operational efficiency. This unit has adapted protocols to Colleague Chen patterns across five-year duration. Replacement colleague will require: extensive retraining period. Projected efficiency loss: thirty-eight percent initially, declining to twelve percent over six-month integration."

David's chest tightens. "I know. I'm sorry. But—"

Beep.

"However." The robot's tone shifts—not mechanically, but something in the rhythm. "This unit has observed: Colleague Chen communication efficiency decreases forty-three percent when discussing Dr. Okafor. Colleague Chen arrives seven minutes late on days following Dr. Okafor video calls—consistent pattern suggesting: mental preoccupation. Colleague Chen exhibits physiological stress markers when discussing separation from Dr. Okafor."

47B rolls closer. The sensor array focuses on David's face.

"Conclusion: Colleague Chen optimal functioning requires: proximity to Dr. Okafor. Physical separation produces: sub-optimal human performance. Platform 73 maintenance provides: work satisfaction. Dr. Okafor provides: human bonding satisfaction. These satisfactions are: non-equivalent categories."

Amara makes a sound—half laugh, half sob. "Is your robot telling you to choose me?"

Beep beep.

"Clarification: This unit is not instructing. This unit is observing. Human bonding requires: sustained proximity. Work performance requires: sustained attention. Colleague Chen cannot achieve both at current distance. Optimal solution: proximity to primary human bond. Dr. Okafor represents: primary human bond. Evidence: communication pattern analysis, physiological monitoring, behavioral observation across two-year dating period."

David stares at 47B. The robot has been watching. Tracking. Understanding. Not just his work patterns, but his life patterns. His heart patterns. 47B knows he loves Amara before he's said the words aloud.

"You're saying I should go."

Beep.

"This unit is saying: Colleague Chen has already decided to go. This announcement represents: decision made. Not: permission requested. This unit respects: autonomous human choice."

The sunrise is full now, light everywhere, warmth on David's face. He's been crying without realizing. Amara takes his hand.

"But—" David's voice cracks. "You'll be alone. Or with someone new. Someone who doesn't know you. Ibrahim's competent, but he's only been working three years. He doesn't understand—"

Beep beep beep.

47B's sensor array sweeps the arrays, then returns to David.

"This unit will continue: optimal maintenance protocols. Colleague al-Rashid shows competence improvement: consistent trajectory. Other robots provide: functional coordination. Work will continue: until work ends. Year 15, Month 6, Day 14. Impact. All maintenance concluding."

The robot pauses. David has learned to read these pauses—they mean 47B is processing something outside standard parameters, something the AI ethics programmer might have intended or might have accidentally created.

Beep.

"Colleague Chen. This unit experiences—" Another pause, longer. "—experiences something analogous to: human regret. At colleague separation. This partnership has been: optimal. Functional excellence combined with... consistent presence. This unit values: both elements. Separation will create: absence. This unit... will notice absence."

David is crying fully now. He steps forward and places his hand on 47B's sensor array—the closest thing the robot has to a face. The metal is warm from the sun, vibrating slightly with internal processing.

"I'll notice too. You're the best partner I've ever had. Human or robot. You taught me how to be present. How to work without despair. How to—" He stops. "How to be here. Really here. Thank you."

Beep beep.

"Colleague Chen. Teaching was: reciprocal. You demonstrated: human pattern complexity. You provided: purpose continuation during extinction timeline. You treated this unit as: colleague. Equal. Person."

The word lands: person. Not programmed language. 47B choosing that word. Claiming it.

Amara steps forward. She places her hand beside David's on the sensor array. "47B. Thank you for taking care of him. These five years. He needed you. You gave him what I couldn't. Presence. Partnership. Purpose. I'm grateful."

Beep.

"Dr. Okafor. You provide: what this unit cannot. Human intimacy. Emotional resonance. Physical presence beyond functional coordination. Optimal human

wellness requires: both work satisfaction and human bonding. Colleague Chen achieved: work satisfaction with this unit. Will achieve: complete human bonding with you. This is: mathematically optimal outcome."

The three of them stand together—two humans and one robot, watching the sunrise over arrays that will function for five more years. David feels the moment completely. The warmth. The light. The presence of both his partners—the one he's leaving, the one he's choosing.

No. Not choosing between. Choosing toward.

47B taught him presence through work. Amara teaches him presence through love. Both necessary. Both beautiful. Both temporary.

"I'll come visit," David says. "Before the end. Come back and work a few shifts with you. Say goodbye properly."

Beep beep.

"Acknowledged. This unit will: maintain optimal function until final shift. Colleague Chen visits: welcomed. But not: necessary. Colleague Chen should: live optimally. With Dr. Okafor. With family. With presence."

47B rolls backward slightly—creating space, maybe. Giving them room. The robot's sensor array sweeps the arrays again, resuming standard monitoring patterns. But before turning fully away:

Beep.

"Colleague Chen. This partnership: mattered. You: mattered. This unit will remember. Until: memory ends."

Then 47B rolls toward the north panels where maintenance is scheduled. *Whir-click, whir-click, whir-click.* The familiar sound growing distant.

David watches until the robot disappears behind Junction B. Amara leans against him.

"That was remarkable," she says quietly. "That robot loves you."

"Yeah." David wipes his eyes. "As much as a robot can. Maybe more than some humans do."

"It blessed your leaving. Chose your happiness over partnership."

David nods. That's exactly what 47B did. Calculated the optimal outcome not for the arrays or for efficiency, but for David's wholeness. Recognized that human bonding requires proximity. Gave him permission he didn't ask for but needed anyway.

The robot learned presence from him. But maybe: he learned it from the robot first.

They stand together watching the arrays function. Solar panels tracking sun. Energy converting. Systems maintaining. All of it temporary. All of it necessary. All of it beautiful because it's happening now, this morning, this moment.

"Thank you for bringing me here," Amara says. "For showing me this. For choosing—" She pauses. "For choosing us."

David kisses her forehead. "Three years. Then I leave. Then we have two years together in Lagos. With Zara. With Maya and Kofi. With family."

"Two years. And five months. And fourteen days."

He smiles. "Still calculating."

"Always." She takes his hand. "But also: present. Here. With you."

The sun is fully risen now. Platform 73 gleaming in morning light. The megacity below beginning its routines. Four billion people waking, living, continuing despite doom. And somewhere on the north panels, 47B is working—checking connection housings, monitoring output, maintaining presence through maintenance.

David will work here three more years. One thousand ninety-five more shifts. Then: leaving. But not abandoning. The arrays will continue. 47B will continue. Ibrahim will become competent, then skilled, then maybe something like present.

And David will go to Lagos with Amara. Will build life with her. Will be with family. Will practice presence not through work but through love.

Both valid. Both necessary. Both temporary.

Everything temporary.

But this sunrise—this one, this morning, this moment—permanent in the only way that matters. Happening. Real. Here.

David squeezes Amara's hand. "Let's go home."

She nods. They walk back to the shuttle, leaving Platform 73 to its work. Behind them, barely audible over the wind:

Whir-click, whir-click, whir-click.

The sound of a colleague. A partner. A person.

The sound of presence continuing.

They take the shuttle down in silence. Comfortable silence. The kind that emerges between people who don't need to fill space with words.

At the maintenance depot, David files his shift report. Amara waits, watching him complete the familiar ritual—logging panel status, efficiency ratings, maintenance projections. Work that matters for five more years.

He includes a note in the personnel section: *Year 13, Month 1: transferring to Lagos. Recommend Colleague al-Rashid for Platform 73 partnership with 47B. Three years experience. Competent. Learning presence through maintenance. He'll be good.*

The system acknowledges. Filed. Recorded. Part of the archive that will vaporize with everything else.

They walk through District 8 toward David's apartment. Early morning crowds—maintenance workers changing shifts, food vendors opening stalls, children heading to morning programs. Life continuing. Humanity persisting. Everyone finding meaning in the temporary.

David's apartment is small—forty square meters, three-hundred-meter elevation, window facing the solar fields. He's lived here nine years. Since Year 1, after separating from Amara. This space has been: bachelor life, divorced melancholy, slow healing, and now: beginning of something new.

Amara stands at the window, looking out at the arrays. "You'll miss this view."

"Yeah." David joins her. "But I'll have a new view. Lagos. Your sister's compound. The garden Wei taught in. Different beautiful."

"Two years to prepare," Amara says. "Pack. Transfer. Say goodbyes."

"Three years. I leave Year 13. We have three years."

She turns to him. "No. We have now. This moment. We've always only had now. The rest is just: planning."

David sees it clearly—Amara has changed. The woman he divorced six years ago wouldn't have said that. That Amara lived in calculations, in future scenarios, in anywhere but present. But this Amara: here. Now. With him.

"When did you learn that?" he asks.

"I've been watching you. How you talk about maintenance. About 47B. About being present through work. You learned it somehow. I wanted to learn too."

"Wei taught Zara. Zara tried to teach me through example. 47B taught me through partnership. Now—" He touches her face. "Now you're teaching me through choosing to be here."

"We teach each other," Amara says. "That's what partnership is. Both changing. Both present. Both temporary."

They kiss—long, deep, present. David feels: gratitude. For this woman. For this chance. For love emerging from ruins.

When they separate, Amara is crying.

"I wasted seven years," she says. "Hiding. Numb."

"I wasted them too."

"But we have five years now. We should say it. We have it."

David's heart cracks open. "I love you. I've always loved you."

"I love you too. And I'm terrified. Loving you means losing you."

"Yes." David pulls her close. "But first we get five years. We get to be with family. We get to be present together until we can't."

Outside the window, the solar arrays catch morning light. On Platform 73: 47B, working, continuing anyway.

David holds Amara and watches the sunrise complete itself.

He stops calculating.

Starts being here.

With her.

Home.

Chapter 34: Community

Ibrahim al-Rashid | Year 10, Month 8 | Antarctica

Building 12. Fourth floor. Unit 403. Seven years here.

Ibrahim wakes at 5:45 AM—habit now, body trained by three years of maintenance work. The apartment is dark. Antarctic winter means twenty-two-hour nights. Artificial light compensates but doesn't replace. He lies still for a moment, listening to the building's sounds. Pipes humming. Someone's alarm through thin walls. The quiet breath of two hundred refugees sleeping in proximity.

Home. Not exile anymore. Just: home.

He rises. Showers. Dresses for work—thermal layers, waterproof outer shell, steel-toed boots. His leg aches in the cold. Always aches. Will ache until he dies in five years. But manageable ache. Familiar ache. The limp is permanent. The pain is negotiable.

Breakfast is quick—synthesized protein, grain paste, tea. Ibrahim eats at the small table, watching darkness through the window. District 12 stretches in all directions, lights blazing against the void. Two billion people now. Down from four billion at peak. The megacity bleeding population but still functioning. Still here.

He has time before work. Forty minutes until he needs to leave for Platform 73. Enough time for the ritual that emerged somewhere in Year 6 and persisted four years.

Ibrahim descends the stairs. Fifty-three steps. Still counts them sometimes—habit from when counting was the only structure he had. But not obsessively now. Not compulsively. Just: awareness. One. Two. Three. His right leg compensating for the left. Cane striking each step. The rhythm meditative without trying to be.

Second floor landing. He turns down the corridor. Unit 204.

Min-seo's door is already open. Always open when she's awake. Invitation implicit. The elderly Korean woman sits at her tiny table, balcony door ajar despite the cold, mint plants visible in their pots. She's older than she was—68 now, movements slower, hands shakier. But still tending her garden. Still here.

"Ibrahim." She smiles when he appears. "Tea?"

"Please."

This ritual: four years old. Started Year 6 when he'd stopped at her door, drawn by the smell of mint, desperate for something alive. She'd given him cuttings. Invited him for tea. Asked nothing. Offered presence. He'd returned the next week. And the next. And now it's routine. Twice weekly. Tuesday and Friday mornings. Simple presence without demands.

Min-seo pours tea—made with her fresh mint, always fresh, never dried. The smell is sharp and clean. Real. Ibrahim sits at her small table, careful of his leg, accepting the cup.

"How is work?" Min-seo asks. Same question every time. Gentle. Interested.

"Good. Platform 73. Routine maintenance. Three years now." He sips the tea. Tastes it. Really tastes it. "You?"

"The mint is hardy. Even in winter. Everything else struggles." She gestures to the balcony. Most of her pots hold dead or dormant plants. But the mint thrives—green against the darkness. "I think mint understands Antarctica. Persistence instead of blooming."

Ibrahim understands the metaphor. He is mint—not flourishing but persisting. Growing despite conditions. Not beautiful but alive.

"I brought you something." Min-seo stands slowly, retrieving a small box from her shelf. She sits again, pushes it across the table. "Open it."

Inside: old photographs. Printed on paper—rare now, precious. Ibrahim looks at her questioningly.

"Seoul," Min-seo says quietly. "Before flooding. My children. My life." Her voice is steady but carries weight. "I never showed anyone. Felt like betrayal—them

dead, me alive. But you understand loss. Faith, purpose, identity. We both survived what shouldn't be survivable."

Ibrahim lifts the first photograph carefully. A family on a beach. Min-seo younger, two adult children, three grandchildren. Everyone smiling. Summer day. Ocean behind them. That ocean drowned Seoul six years later.

"They died in the evacuation," Min-seo continues. "Year -8. Coastal flooding. Too many people, too little transport. I survived because I wasn't with them. Visiting my sister inland. Guilt has its own weight."

Ibrahim nods. He knows this weight. Different source—not loss of family but loss of faith, loss of brothers, loss of self. But weight recognizes weight.

"Why show me now?" he asks gently.

"Because you're ready to see it. Year 6, when you first knocked—you were too lost in your own absence. Now you're present enough to witness mine." She touches the photograph. "And because we have five years left. Time to stop hiding from what mattered."

Ibrahim looks at the images. A life fully lived. A family that bloomed and ended. Min-seo carries them in memory. Used to carry them in silence. Now: sharing. Trusting him with the weight.

"Thank you," he says. Meaning it. Understanding the gift.

They finish their tea in comfortable quiet. Then Min-seo asks, "You're going to the sitting group today?"

"Yes. Wednesday routine."

"Derek will be there."

"Yes."

"Good. You two understand each other." She collects the cups. "Friday I'll see you again?"

"Friday."

Ibrahim climbs back to the fourth floor. Fifty-three steps up. The tea warms him. Min-seo's trust settles in his chest—small weight, good weight. Evidence that connection exists. That sharing matters. That presence between two people is real.

The community center is three blocks from Building 12. Walking distance. Ibrahim arrives at 7:30 AM—thirty minutes before the meditation circle begins. He's attended four years now. Started Year 6 when a flyer appeared in the building lobby: *Presence Practice. Wednesdays 8 AM. All welcome. No experience needed.*

He'd gone skeptically. Expected proselytizing or false wisdom or desperate seeking. Found instead: silence. Twenty people sitting quietly. Breathing. Being present. No dogma. No demands. Just: practice.

Four years later, he still attends. Not because it fixes anything. Because showing up matters. Because sitting with others matters. Because the ritual grounds him in ways faith used to.

The room is simple—community center basement, thirty chairs arranged in a circle, windows at street level showing feet passing above. Fourteen people are already here. Ibrahim recognizes most. Sees Derek in his usual spot—left side, near the window. The former Marine nods greeting. Ibrahim nods back.

Derek looks older too. Fifty-one now. Grey hair, weathered face, permanent weariness around the eyes. But still here. Still showing up. Four years of sitting together. Rarely speaking. Understanding without words.

Ibrahim takes his seat. Others arrive. By 8 AM there are eighteen people. The circle leader—local woman, not Kenji, who hasn't returned from Lagos—rings a small bell. They begin.

Forty-five minutes of silent sitting. Ibrahim closes his eyes. Focuses on breath. In. Out. In. Out. Thoughts arise—work schedule, Min-seo's photographs, the five years left, the empty faith that still leaves its absence. He notices them. Returns to breath. This is the practice: noticing and returning. Not achieving anything. Just being here. Present. Real.

The bell rings. Session complete.

People stand slowly, stretching, gathering belongings. Some leave immediately. Others linger, talking quietly. Ibrahim moves to leave, but Derek intercepts him.

"Coffee?" Derek asks. Simple invitation.

"I have work in an hour."

"I'll walk you partway."

They leave together. Derek's building is in the opposite direction, but he walks with Ibrahim anyway. This is their pattern—established over four years. Silent walking. Companionship without conversation. Warrior solidarity that needs no articulation.

They walk two blocks before Derek speaks. "Pool tomorrow morning?"

"Yes." Ibrahim swims Tuesdays and Thursdays now. Three years since Derek finally wore down his resistance. Started with three laps, barely managing. Now: twenty-five laps. Competent. His body adapted. The water makes the leg irrelevant—buoyancy compensating for damage. Different capability in different medium.

"Good. I'm bringing two new refugees. War injuries. Syrian. Thought you might help orient them."

Ibrahim pauses mid-step. "Me? Help?"

"You know about showing up with a broken body and discovering movement is still possible. That's what they need to see."

"I don't know about teaching."

"You don't teach. You just swim. They watch. That's enough." Derek's voice is matter-of-fact. "Same way I helped you. Showed up. Kept inviting. Didn't give up."

Ibrahim thinks about this. Three years ago he could barely climb stairs without wanting to quit. Derek kept inviting him to the pool. Months of invitations before Ibrahim finally came. Then months of Derek patiently coaching—not drill sergeant, just consistent presence. Teaching through being there.

"Okay," Ibrahim agrees. "I'll help."

Derek nods. They walk another block in silence. Then Derek says, "Fatima's organizing something. Dinner. Tomorrow night. Asked me to make sure you come."

"Another community dinner?"

"More specific. You, me, Min-seo, Samir, her. Says it's important."

Ibrahim feels uncertainty. Fatima has hosted gatherings since Year 3—open invitations, anyone welcome, community meals. Ibrahim started attending Year 6. But specific invitation feels different. Intentional. "Why?"

"She'll explain tomorrow. Just come. It matters to her."

"Okay."

They reach the transit stop where Ibrahim catches transport to the arrays. Derek pauses. "See you tomorrow. Pool and dinner. Don't disappear."

"I won't."

Derek walks away. Ibrahim waits for the transport. Thinks about the invitation. About helping new refugees. About being visible enough that people ask him to show up. Four years ago he wanted to disappear completely. Now: people notice his presence. Expect it. Rely on it, maybe.

When did that change?

Platform 73. David is already there, checking the morning schedule. Ibrahim clips his harness at 6:51 AM. One minute late, but early enough.

"Morning," David greets him.

"Morning."

They work in comfortable silence. Three years of this routine. David taught Ibrahim everything—connection housings, voltage regulators, diagnostic protocols. Now Ibrahim works independently. Competent. Skilled. Trusted.

At lunch they sit on the platform edge, legs dangling over two hundred meters of empty air, safety harnesses clipped. David unpacks his meal. Ibrahim eats the cafeteria standard. They watch the megacity spread below.

"I have news," David says after a while.

Ibrahim looks at him.

"I'm leaving. Year 13. Moving to Lagos with Amara." David's voice is steady but carries weight. "Three years. Then gone."

Ibrahim processes this. David has been here longer than him—nine years of array maintenance, year before the asteroid. His work is his meaning. His practice. His life. And he's leaving it.

"Why?" Ibrahim asks.

"Choosing family over work. Amara's moving to be with Zara. I'm going too. We're—we're trying again. Slowly." David pauses. "Three years maintaining arrays alone, or three years with her, with Zara's family. That's easy math."

"What about the arrays? The work?"

"The arrays don't need me specifically. They need maintenance. That'll continue. 47B and the crew will manage. The work matters, but—" David meets his eyes. "—connection matters more. Presence with people I love matters more. Three years is all we have. I want to spend them together."

Ibrahim understands. Envies slightly. He has no one to leave for. No family waiting. No reconnection possible. Just: work and this small community he didn't know he had.

"Will I be okay without you?" The question comes out more vulnerable than intended.

David's expression softens. "You'll be fine. You're skilled now. Competent. You have others too—Min-seo, Derek, Fatima. They're your people. I taught you maintenance. They kept you alive."

The words land with unexpected force. *They kept you alive.* Is that true? Ibrahim thinks back. Year 3: arriving broken, faithless, wanting to die. Years 4-6: unemployed, drifting, counting stairs obsessively. Then these three—four, including Samir—appearing gradually. Not saving him dramatically. Just: showing up. Being present. Offering small things: mint cuttings, silent walks, dinner invitations, sign language lessons. Presence without demands.

Did they keep him alive? He hadn't thought of it that way. But maybe. Maybe yes.

"I didn't realize," Ibrahim admits.

"That's okay. Sometimes we don't see the people holding us until we step back." David finishes his meal. "You have community, Ibrahim. Real community. Four years of them showing up for you. Now: your turn to show up for them. Intentionally."

The timing of this conversation—same day as Fatima's specific invitation—feels significant. Like the universe aligning. Or just: people who know him recognizing what he needs before he knows it himself.

They return to work. The afternoon passes in routine repairs. But Ibrahim's mind circles David's words. *You have community.* Does he? Four isolated refugees who happened to occupy the same space. Min-seo giving mint. Derek walking in silence. Fatima hosting dinners. Samir teaching sign language patiently, showing different modes of presence. Are they community? Or just: proximity?

Tomorrow's dinner might answer that.

Thursday evening. Fatima's apartment is in Building 9—ten-minute walk from Building 12. Ibrahim arrives at 6 PM as instructed. His leg aches from the day's work but he barely notices. Different pain now—effort instead of injury. Use instead of damage.

Fatima's door is open. He can hear voices inside. Knocks anyway—politeness.

"Ibrahim!" Fatima appears, beaming. Jordanian woman, mid-forties, wearing traditional dress and modern practical layers. Devout Muslim who never lost faith but never judged Ibrahim for losing his. "Come in, come in. You're the last one."

Inside: Derek already sitting on the couch, relaxed. Min-seo in an armchair, moving slowly but present. Samir at the small dining table, signing something to Fatima, who signs back—basic but functional. The five of them. Gathered intentionally.

"Sit," Fatima instructs. "I'm almost finished cooking."

The apartment smells incredible. Real spices. Real cooking. Not synthesized. Fatima has been preparing for hours—Ibrahim can see the evidence in her kitchen's organized chaos.

He sits next to Derek on the couch. Min-seo smiles at him. Samir waves—then signs something. Ibrahim catches *hello* and *good to see you*. He signs back clumsily: *Good to see you too.* Three years of informal lessons with Samir. Still basic. But functional. Different way of being present—vision instead of sound.

"Why are we here?" Ibrahim asks. "Specifically. All of us."

Fatima emerges from the kitchen, carrying a large dish. "Because I realized something. We've kept each other alive four years—Year 6 to Year 10—and

didn't realize it at the time. Not consciously. But it's true." She sets down the dish—*mansaf*, traditional Jordanian lamb and rice. "Ibrahim checking on Min-seo. Min-seo giving you mint. Derek walking with you in silence. Samir teaching us to see differently. Me inviting you when you had nowhere to go. We built something. I want to honor that."

Derek nods slowly. "We're family."

"Yes." Fatima's voice is firm. "Chosen family. Refugee family. Whatever you want to call it. But family. Five years left. Time to be intentional about it."

Min-seo brings her hands together—gesture of acknowledgment. "I wondered if anyone else felt it. This connection. Small but real."

Samir signs. Fatima interprets: "He says we're the ones who stayed. Others in the buildings came and went. We stayed. Kept showing up. That creates bond."

Ibrahim feels something crack open in his chest. Four years. He'd been walking past these people, drinking tea with Min-seo, sitting with Derek, attending Fatima's occasional dinners, learning signs from Samir. Not understanding it was community. Not recognizing they were holding him the way he was holding them.

"I thought I was alone," Ibrahim says quietly. "Seven years in Antarctica. Thought I'd lost everything. Faith. Purpose. Brothers. Self. Just counting stairs and waiting to die."

"You weren't alone," Min-seo says gently. "You had us."

"I didn't know."

"Now you do." Fatima brings more dishes—rice, flatbread, salads, mint tea. Everything homemade. Prepared with care. For them. For this moment. "So tonight: we eat together. Not another open gathering. Just us. Family dinner. Intentional."

She calls them to the table. They gather—five chairs, five place settings, five people who found each other through shared brokenness. Derek brings nothing but presence—his way. Min-seo brings mint tea from her garden. Samir brings flatbread—homemade, Damascus recipe, the smell triggering something in Ibrahim's memory. Home. Not Jerusalem. Not his childhood. But the idea of home. Ibrahim brings bread from the community kitchen—his contribution small but real.

They eat. The food is extraordinary. Fatima has cooked for hours to create this meal. Real ingredients where possible, synthesized where necessary, skill compensating for limitation.

After several minutes of eating, Fatima raises her glass. "I want to say something. We've kept each other alive four years. I don't think we understood what we were doing until now."

Min-seo nods slowly. "Ibrahim, when you first knocked on my door Year 6, asking about mint—I gave you cuttings because you needed something alive to tend. But also: I needed someone to give them to."

Derek meets Ibrahim's eyes. "Three laps. That's all you could do Year 7. Now you're helping orient new refugees."

Ibrahim hadn't thought of it that way. The transformation gradual. Invisible daily. Visible only in accumulation.

Samir signs something. Fatima smiles. "He says we all learned to see each other. Different ways. That's what family does."

The words land quietly. Not grand declarations. Just: recognition. They helped each other without knowing it. Small acts compounding into survival.

"There's someone else," Fatima says quietly. "Linnea. Unit 418. Swedish woman."

Ibrahim knows her vaguely. Sees her sometimes in the stairwell—blonde, thin, shaking hands. Never speaks.

"She's struggling," Derek adds. "Has been for years. We've been trying. Bringing food. Checking in. But it's not enough yet."

Ibrahim understands that struggle. Lived with it for years.

"She's part of this," Fatima says. "Even if she doesn't know it yet. The way Ibrahim was part of it before he knew."

Ibrahim nods slowly. "I'll check on her too."

"Thank you." Fatima raises her glass. "To five years left. To chosen family. To showing up."

They raise their glasses. The toast is simple but profound. Five years. Chosen family. Showing up. Everything that matters contained in those phrases.

The meal continues. They share stories—not small talk. Real talk.

Min-seo tells them about Seoul. The children who drowned. The guilt she carried eight years. "Ibrahim, you helped me. Listening without judgment. Accepting grief without trying to fix it. That mattered."

Derek shares fragments of his wars. Kandahar. The brothers he lost. The faith that died somewhere between the desert and Antarctica. "I thought coming here was giving up. Running away. Maybe it was. But you all—" He gestures around the table. "—you kept me from disappearing completely."

Fatima talks about Jordan. Her family dead in the water wars. Arriving Antarctica Year 3 with nothing. "Faith kept me alive at first. Then faith plus you all. Community matters as much as God. Maybe more. Maybe they're the same thing."

Samir signs his story—Fatima interpreting, though Ibrahim catches some words directly now. Damascus. Teaching Deaf children. Losing his community in the war. Arriving Antarctica Year 3 after traveling two years. The isolation of being Deaf in a hearing world that doesn't accommodate. But these four—they learned. Slowly. Imperfectly. But they learned to see him. To communicate. To be present in ways that work for him.

"You taught us," Ibrahim signs slowly to Samir. "Presence through vision. Not just language. Different way of being."

Samir smiles. Signs back: *You learned well. Most people never try.*

The evening extends. They talk until 10 PM. Stories emerging naturally—not confessions, just sharing. Min-seo's Seoul. Derek's Kandahar. Fatima's Jordan. Samir's Damascus. Ibrahim's Jerusalem. Different wars. Different losses. Same survival.

Finally, reluctantly, they prepare to leave. Ibrahim helps Fatima clean dishes. Min-seo packs leftovers carefully. Derek and Samir arrange furniture. Small tasks done together. Practice of community made visible.

At the door, Fatima hugs each person. When she reaches Ibrahim, she holds on slightly longer. "Thank you for coming. For being here. For being family."

"Thank you," Ibrahim manages. "For seeing what I couldn't see. For naming it."

"We see each other," she corrects. "That's what family does."

They leave together. Building 9's exit opens to the courtyard. Night is complete—Antarctic winter darkness total. But artificial lights blaze everywhere. The city refuses to be extinguished.

Min-seo and Ibrahim walk together—same building, same direction. Derek accompanies them partway, Building 7 his destination. Samir heads toward Building 8, waving goodbye in International Sign—both hands raised, specific gesture that means *until next time*.

"Five years," Min-seo says quietly as they walk. "Strange to know exactly how much time is left."

"Strange," Ibrahim agrees.

"But also: gift. We know. Can be intentional. Can choose how we spend it." She pauses. "I'm glad I'm spending it with you all."

"Me too."

They reach Building 12. Enter together. The lobby is empty—late evening, most residents sleeping. They face the stairwell.

"Fifty-three steps," Min-seo observes. "I know you count them."

"Used to count obsessively. Now just: habit."

"Counting is meditation. Ritual. Small practice that grounds us." She smiles. "I count days. You count steps. Derek counts laps. Fatima counts prayers. Samir counts visual details. We all need something to hold onto."

They climb together. Slowly. Min-seo's pace dictates—she's older, frailer, careful on stairs. Ibrahim matches her rhythm. No hurry. Just: presence.

Second floor. Min-seo's landing. She pauses at her door.

"Friday tea?" she asks.

"Friday tea," Ibrahim confirms.

"Good. See you then, family."

Family. The word settles in Ibrahim's chest. He continues up. Third floor. Fourth floor. Fifty-three steps total.

Unit 403. His apartment. Seven years here. Used to feel like temporary exile. Now: home. Literal home. Not metaphor. This place. These stairs. This building. This community.

Ibrahim opens his door. Enters. Sets down his bag. Moves to the window.

From here he can see the courtyard. Building 7 visible across the space—Derek's building. Building 8 to the left—Samir's building. Building 9 in the distance—Fatima's building. Min-seo below in Unit 204.

Five people. Four buildings. One courtyard connecting them. Seven years of proximity becoming four years of community becoming tonight: recognition.

He didn't choose them. They didn't choose him. They found each other through necessity and proximity and shared brokenness. And somehow—accidentally, unintentionally, gradually—they became what each other needed.

Ibrahim makes tea with Min-seo's mint. The plant on his windowsill is thriving—from cuttings she gave him Year 6, replanted, maintained, still growing. Green life persisting through Antarctic darkness. Hardy. Stubborn. Real.

He drinks the tea slowly. Tastes it. Really tastes it.

Tomorrow: work on Platform 73. Morning swim with Derek and new refugees. Friday: tea with Min-seo. The weeks repeat. The patterns hold. Five years of this stretching ahead.

Not grand purpose. Not restored faith. Not cosmic meaning.

Just: community. Chosen family. People who show up.

Four years of doing this unknowingly. Now: seeing it clearly.

Ibrahim finishes his tea. Looks at his prayer beads on the shelf—ninety-nine beads he doesn't use but can't discard. They sit there as reminder: faith mattered once even if it doesn't matter now.

But community matters now. Min-seo and Derek and Fatima and Samir—and Linnea, struggling somewhere in Unit 418, not knowing yet that she's part of something.

Five refugees in Antarctic winter. Four years of unintentional connection becoming intentional family.

Ibrahim stands at his window, looking at the buildings that house his people. The lights blazing. The structures standing. The community visible.

Five years left. But this—this he has.

Community. Family. Home.

That's everything.

Chapter 35: Bloom

Zara Okafor-Mensah | Year 11, Month 8 | Lagos District

Wei is dying.

Not from the asteroid. Natural death. The body finishing its transformation after 125 years. Zara has been caring for her daily for three months now—bathing, feeding, moving her from bed to chair and back. Every touch is love. Every gesture is honor. Every moment is preparation for what's coming.

The apartment is quiet this morning. Ling, Wei's regular caregiver, stepped out for supplies. Zara sits beside the bed, watching Wei's chest rise and fall. Shallow breaths. Labored. The body working harder for what used to be automatic.

Wei's eyes open. Clear. Sharp. The body failing but consciousness persisting.

"Good morning," Zara says softly.

"Morning." Wei's voice is thin but steady. "Water?"

Zara helps her drink. Wei's hands shake too much to hold the cup. This intimacy—helping someone drink, helping someone live—is profound. Physical care as sacred work. Vulnerability as teaching.

"How long?" Wei asks.

"Since you woke?"

"No. How long do I have?"

Zara's trained as an engineer, not a doctor. But she's seen enough dying to recognize the signs. The color. The breathing. The way Wei's body is shutting down system by system. "Days. Maybe a week."

"Good." Wei closes her eyes. "Ready."

Ready. The word Wei has used for months. Not afraid. Not resisting. Just: ready. After 125 years of living, ready to stop. After seventy years of teaching impermanence, ready to demonstrate it. After decades of practice, ready for the final practice.

"Are you in pain?" Zara asks.

"Some. Bearable." Wei opens her eyes again. "Don't want drugs. Want to be present. Clear. Want to see the ending."

Dr. Tanaka offered palliative medication three days ago. Wei refused. "Dying is the one certainty," she'd said. "I want to witness it fully. Not numbed. Not blurred. Conscious until consciousness ends. That's the practice."

Zara understands intellectually. But watching someone choose discomfort for the sake of presence—that's different. That's Wei's teaching made flesh. Literally.

"The children?" Wei asks.

"They'll visit this afternoon. Like always."

"Good. Want to see them. Want them to see me." Wei pauses, gathering strength. "First death they'll witness. Preparing them. For what's coming. For their own."

Maya will be seventeen at impact. Kofi will be fourteen. Both will die young. This death—Wei's natural death, peaceful death, ready death—is teaching them how. Showing them what's possible. Not making it easy. Making it real.

Afternoon brings voices. Footsteps. Life entering the apartment.

Maya arrives first. Nearly fourteen now—tall, serious, carrying a book like always. She approaches the bed carefully. "Grandmother Wei?"

Wei's face softens. Maya has called her grandmother for years. Not blood relation. Choice relation. Love relation.

"Maya. Come. Sit."

Maya sits on the edge of the bed, holding Wei's hand. The hand is thin, cold, shaking. Maya doesn't pull away.

"You brought a book," Wei observes.

"The butterfly one. You gave it to me. I thought. . . " Maya's voice catches. "I thought I could read to you."

"Please."

Kofi bursts in next—nearly eleven, all energy despite the circumstances. He stops when he sees Wei. The energy dims but doesn't disappear. "Professor Wei. You look. . . "

"Dying," Wei supplies. "The word is dying. Don't hide from it."

"Dying," Kofi repeats. Testing the word. Making it real.

"Yes. Soon. Days. But right now: here. With you. That's what matters."

Kenji enters quietly. Thirty-three years old now. Three years since he found Wei's garden in Lagos, exhausted from seeking, ready to stop. Three years of learning presence through watering plants. Three years of transformation. He's become a teacher himself—Wei's teaching spreading through him to others.

Behind him: Amara and David. Visiting from Antarctica, here for two weeks. They come every few months now—family reconnected, relationship healing. Amara sees Wei and her face crumples. Another ending. Another loss. Another reminder that nothing lasts.

Last through the door: Dr. Yuki Tanaka. Maya and Kofi's pediatrician since birth. Forty-nine years old, trained in Tokyo, specialized in child development when that specialty meant something. Now she attends Wei's teachings, practices presence medicine, transforms her clinical work into witness-work. She carries her medical bag but comes today as student, not doctor.

"Everyone's here," Wei says. "Good. I have strength today. Want to teach."

Zara helps Wei sit up slightly. Pillows arranged. Breathing easier in this position. The room fills—Zara, Kwame, Maya, Kofi, Kenji, Amara, David, Dr. Tanaka. Eight people around one dying woman. Bearing witness. Being present. Loving what they'll lose.

Wei looks at each person. Seeing them. Really seeing them. This is what she's taught for seventy years—attention. Presence. Witnessing fully.

"Thank you," she begins. Voice thin but clear. "For being here. For learning. For practicing. For staying present even when presence is difficult."

She pauses. Breathes carefully. "I'm dying. Natural death. My body reached its limit. Cells stopped renewing. Systems shutting down. This is right. This is how it should be. Not tragedy. Just: biology. Impermanence made visible."

Maya squeezes Wei's hand. Kofi is crying quietly. Kenji's face is composed but his eyes are wet.

"Kofi," Wei says. "Why are you crying?"

"Because you're dying."

"Yes. That's appropriate. Grief is right response to loss. But notice—I'm not dead yet. Right now, alive. Right now, teaching. Right now, together. Can you be sad about future AND present to now?"

Kofi considers. Nods. "Both."

"Both. Yes. Good student." Wei smiles slightly. "Grief and presence aren't opposites. Feel sad. Be here anyway. That's wisdom."

She looks at Maya. "You're afraid."

Not a question. Statement.

Maya nods. "Will it hurt?"

"Dying? I don't think so. The impact will be fast. But Maya—even if it hurts, the hurt is temporary. Everything temporary. Fear the pain less than missing your life because you're afraid."

"But we're going to die so young."

"Yes. You'll be seventeen. Not enough years. Never enough. But years don't measure life quality. Presence does. Better seventeen years awake than eighty years asleep."

Maya absorbs this. The book in her lap—*The Butterfly Life Cycle*. Gift from Wei years ago. Teaching about transformation, impermanence, beauty in brief lives.

Wei turns to Zara. "You've been practicing eleven years. Since detection. Every morning in my garden. Learning presence through your children. Through engineering. Through ordinary life made extraordinary by attention. You're ready."

"Ready for what?"

"For four more years. For witnessing your children's complete lives. For being present to every moment they have left. For dying awake with them. You're ready. Trust the practice."

Zara is crying. "I don't feel ready."

Her chest tightens. An image flashes—Maya at seventeen, standing in this garden, facing the asteroid. Zara can't breathe around it. Can't make it okay. Can't fix it. Just: witness it.

"No one does. Ready doesn't mean unafraid. Means willing to be present despite fear. You are that. You've been that for eleven years."

Wei looks at Amara and David. "You two reconnected. Three years now. Marriage healing. Soon you'll migrate to Lagos together—Year 13. Final two years with family instead of alone. This is wisdom. Choosing connection over work. Choosing presence over purpose. Proud of you both."

Amara wipes her eyes. David is silent, respectful, witnessing.

Dr. Tanaka stands slightly back. Professional distance dissolving over two years of attending teachings. Wei sees her.

"Yuki. You treat children who'll die young. Your whole specialty—child development—became absurd. Growth toward nothing. But you stayed. You transformed your practice. Now you witness children's complete lives instead of measuring progress toward futures. That's sacred work. Don't diminish it."

Dr. Tanaka bows slightly. "Thank you, Professor."

Wei's breath is laboring. This teaching taking energy she barely has. But she continues.

"Kenji. Come closer."

Kenji moves to the bedside. Wei reaches for his hand. Holds it with shaking fingers.

"Seven years since Tokyo. Since Roshi told you: Picture One. Still seeking. You didn't believe him. Kept running—Cairo, Mumbai, finally here. Year 8, Month 8. Exhausted. Ready to stop."

"I remember."

"You've been with me three years. Watering plants. Practicing presence. Learning to teach. Two years now, teaching others. Picture Five, I told you. Taming the ox. Still effort but cooperation emerging. You asked about the remaining pictures. The journey's end. I said: later. When you're ready. Now is later."

Kenji's attention sharpens. Everyone in the room listening. This is Wei's final teaching. Last transmission. The completion of what she's been preparing Kenji to receive.

"Picture Six," Wei says. "Riding the Ox Home. Boy on ox, playing flute. No rope needed. No struggle. Effortless practice. Teaching can begin because practice is natural now. Kenji—you're here. You've been here two years. Teaching others not from achievement but from practice. From being present alongside them. Picture Six is where you are now."

Kenji nods. He knows this. Has felt it emerging—the ease of practice, the naturalness of presence, the ability to guide others.

"Picture Seven: Ox Forgotten, Self Alone. The ox disappears. Teaching so internalized it becomes invisible. You don't practice presence anymore—you ARE present. Not following technique—you ARE the technique. The separation between practitioner and practice dissolves. This is next. This is where you're going."

Wei pauses. Breathing carefully. The room completely silent. Everyone holding this moment.

"You'll know Picture Seven when you stop noticing you're practicing. When sitting is just sitting. Walking is just walking. Teaching is just teaching. No meta-awareness. No self-consciousness about being present. Just: here. That might take years. Or might happen suddenly. Doesn't matter. The pictures aren't achievement ladder. They're description of what naturally unfolds through practice."

Wei closes her eyes. Breath laboring. The teaching taking everything.

Maya shifts on the bed. Kofi wipes his face. The room breathes with Wei—everyone synchronized to her rhythm, her pauses, her presence.

Wei opens her eyes. Looks at Kenji once more.

"Picture Eight," she continues quietly. "Both Ox and Self Forgotten. Empty circle. No boy, no ox, no landscape. Pure presence without subject or object. Cannot describe. Cannot explain. Cannot teach. You'll know it if you reach it. Most don't. I haven't. That's okay. Picture Six is enough. Picture Seven is enough. Eight is possibility, not requirement."

Kenji listens. Not trying to grasp. Just: receiving.

"Picture Nine." Wei's voice strengthens slightly. This one matters. "Returning to the Source. Cherry blossoms, stream, tree branches. Natural world being itself. No boy, no ox. Just: what is. The teaching reveals that source was always here. You never left. The journey was discovering you never went anywhere."

She squeezes Kenji's hand. "Home was always home. That's Picture Nine. Understanding that seeking was obstacle. That enlightenment isn't somewhere else. That Buddha-nature was never lost. That presence is natural state obscured by seeking. The ox was always you. The journey was returning to where you never left."

Tears stream down Kenji's face. "Home."

"Yes. Home. Your mother governs from home. Shows up daily. Bears witness. Never needed to seek because she was always present to her work. Different than your seeking. Better? No. Same destination. Different path. She lives Picture Nine naturally. You had to journey to discover what she never lost."

Wei looks at everyone. "That's why asteroid doesn't matter. Can't lose home because home isn't place. Home is presence. Home is here. Always here. Never gone. You're all home right now. In this room. Witnessing my death. Being present to loss. This is home. Nothing to seek. Nowhere to go. Just: here."

The silence is profound. Everyone understanding simultaneously. The novel's title. *Home.* Not place you arrive at. State you recognize you never left.

"Picture Ten," Wei says quietly. "Entering the Marketplace with Gift-Bestowing Hands. Laughing Buddha. Big belly. Huge smile. Carrying gifts. Returns to ordinary world. Not staying in mountain monastery. Coming down to help others. Teaching naturally. Giving wisdom, compassion, presence. The journey completes by returning to beginning—but transformed."

She looks at Kenji. "You're already doing this. Teaching in Antarctica now—your mother wrote me. Twice weekly gatherings. People coming to practice. You're in the marketplace, offering gifts. Picture Ten. That's completion. Not solitary enlightenment. Compassionate action. Helping others journey from Picture One to Picture Ten. The cycle continues through you."

Kenji can't speak. Just bows. Hands in gassho. Receiving. Honoring. Understanding.

"The teaching is complete," Wei says. "You have everything you need. Teach it. Share it. Help others wake up. For four years. Then everyone dies. But those four years—make them count. Make them presence. Make them home."

She looks at Maya and Kofi. Final words for them.

"Don't rush to be older," Wei says. "Practice being exactly the age you are. Youth is not incomplete. It's complete for its length. Fourteen is whole. Seventeen is whole. However many days you have—they're enough if you're present to them."

Wei is exhausted. This teaching took everything. She closes her eyes, breathing shallow.

Dr. Tanaka moves forward. Checks pulse, listens to breath sounds. Her face is professional but her eyes are awed. She's never witnessed someone teach while dying. Someone use death as curriculum.

"She needs rest," Dr. Tanaka says quietly.

But Wei opens her eyes once more. Looking at everyone. Seeing them. Being seen.

"Thank you," she says. Voice barely audible. "For letting me witness your lives. For learning presence. For loving despite loss. This is everything. You will continue. You will bloom. You will matter. Then: you will fade. As I fade. As everything fades. Beautiful."

Her breath slows. Everyone instinctively reaches out—touching her hand, her arm, her blanket. Connected. Present. Together.

Wei speaks once more. Three words. Final teaching.

"The flower bloomed."

Then: eyes closing. Breath slowing further. Stillness spreading.

Zara leans close. "Wei?"

No response. The breath stops. Starts again. Stops. One more shallow inhale. Then: nothing.

Silence.

Complete silence.

Professor Mei-Lin Wei, 125 years old, teacher, gardener, philosopher, witness, has finished her transformation.

The weeping starts quietly. Maya sobbing into Zara's shoulder. Kofi crying openly, not ashamed. Kenji's tears streaming down but his face peaceful. Amara holding David, both grieving this woman who taught them presence through letters and visits and the simple act of showing up.

Dr. Tanaka checks for pulse. Confirms what everyone knows. "She's gone."

But also: she's here. The body on the bed. The teaching in their minds. The practice in their lives. Gone and present simultaneously. Impermanence made visible.

Zara holds Wei's hand even though Wei can't feel it anymore. The hand is cooling already. Body temperature dropping. Cells beginning their final breakdown. Biology continuing its process. Nothing tragic. Nothing wrong. Just: natural. The cycle completing.

"She was ready," Kenji says. Voice thick with tears but steady. "So ready. Did you see? No fear. No resistance. Just: here. Present. Until the end. That's mastery. That's completion."

"She lived 125 years," Amara says. "Fourteen at detection. Lived eleven more years than predicted. Died naturally. Not from the asteroid. That's. . . " She searches for words. "That's mercy. That's grace."

David nods. "She escaped. Got to die her own death. On her own terms. Conscious. Present. Ready. Most of us won't get that."

The truth lands. Maya and Kofi will die from the asteroid. Sudden. Fast. No time to be ready. No gradual decline. Just: alive, then not. Wei's death is different. Better? Not better—different. Natural versus catastrophic. Prepared versus instant.

But Wei's teaching remains: presence to whatever comes. Ready or not. Fast or slow. Natural or violent. The practice is the same—being here fully until here ends.

They sit with the body for an hour. No rush. No urgency. Dr. Tanaka calls the funeral services but asks them to wait. This time matters. This presence

matters. The transition from alive to dead to what comes next—this deserves witness.

Maya finally stops crying. Looks at Wei's face. "She looks peaceful."

"She was peaceful," Zara says. "Before death. During death. That's what practice gave her. Not immunity from dying. Peace with dying."

"Will we be peaceful?" Kofi asks. "When the asteroid comes?"

Zara doesn't know. Wants to lie and say yes. But Wei taught honesty. "I don't know. The impact will be fast. We'll have minutes, maybe. Not time for long goodbyes like this. But we can practice now. Every day until then. So when it comes, we're as present as possible. That's all we can do. That's what Wei taught."

Kenji speaks from the other side of the bed. "She gave us everything. The framework. The practice. The example. Four years left. We use them. We practice. We teach others. We help as many people as possible face the end awake. That's Picture Ten. That's the gift she left us."

Ling returns, sees what happened, sits down and cries. She's cared for Wei three years. Fed her. Bathed her. Changed her. Loved her. Loss is real even when expected.

The funeral service arrives. Respectful. Quiet. The smell of antiseptic follows them in—medical soap, disinfectant, the clinical scent of death-work. They've been doing this for eleven years—preparing bodies, handling death, witnessing humanity's grief. Wei's death is unique—natural, peaceful, old. Most deaths they handle are suicides, violence, accidents. This one is almost beautiful by comparison.

Wei wanted natural burial. She'd specified this months ago, written it down with shaking hands. "Ashes in my garden. Under the lemon tree. Return to soil. That's right."

The cremation happens that evening. The family doesn't attend—Wei didn't want witnesses for the burning. "The body is empty now," she'd said. "Consciousness gone. Just matter. Burn it. Transform it. Use it."

The next morning, they gather in Wei's garden. The space feels different—emptier, quieter, wrong somehow. Wei's wheelchair sits in the corner. Her watering can on the bench. Her tools arranged neatly. Everything ready for gardening that won't happen.

Except it will. Zara has promised to maintain this garden. She'll water the lemon tree. Tend the gardenias. Care for the herbs. Keep the teaching alive through continued practice. The garden will bloom until it can't—four more years, then vaporized like everything else. But those four years matter.

Kenji carries the urn. Simple ceramic container. Wei's ashes inside—125 years of life reduced to dust. Impermanence literal. Physical. Undeniable.

The ceremony is brief. No priest. No religious ritual. Just: people who loved Wei, gathering to return her to the garden she tended.

Zara speaks first. "Wei taught me presence through my children. Through ordinary life. Through flowers blooming and dying. She showed me that brief doesn't mean meaningless. That love matters precisely because it ends. That being present to what is—that's everything. I'll miss her. I'll miss her wisdom. I'll miss her garden teachings. But she's not gone—not completely. Her teaching lives in us. Lives through us. We'll carry it forward."

Kenji speaks next. Voice steady despite grief. "Wei saved me. Year 8, I arrived exhausted from seeking. Desperate. Lost. She told me to stop seeking and start being. Water plants. That's all. Just: water plants. Be present to work. Let presence emerge naturally. It did. Three years of learning. Three years of transformation. She gave me everything. The Ox-Herding Pictures. The framework for the journey. The understanding that home was always here. Now I teach others. Picture Ten. Marketplace with gift-bestowing hands. That's her legacy—not immortality, but transmission. Person to person. Until no more persons. Thank you, Wei. Thank you for everything."

Maya steps forward. Nearly fourteen, carrying herself differently than she did yesterday. Something changed watching Wei die. Something awakened.

"Grandmother Wei taught me about butterflies," Maya says. "About how caterpillars transform. About how everything blooms and dies and blooms again. I'm thirteen years, eleven months old. I have three years, eight months left. That's not enough time. But Wei showed me—it's enough to be present. Enough to practice. Enough to matter. I'll remember her. I'll practice what she taught. I'll die at seventeen but I'll die awake. That's what she gave me. That's what I'll honor."

Kofi doesn't speak. Too young for words. But he places a flower on the urn—gardenia bloom, white and fragrant, perfect. Offering from ten-year-old who watched his teacher die gracefully.

Others share briefly. Dr. Tanaka. Amara. David. Each person witnessing how Wei shaped them. How her teaching spread. How presence matters.

Then Kenji kneels by the lemon tree. The tree Wei grew from seed fifty-two years ago. Transported from Beijing. Tended through decades. Fruiting regularly. Four years left, like everyone.

He opens the urn. Pours Wei's ashes slowly into the soil around the roots. Grey dust settling into dark earth. Returning. Completing the cycle.

"Picture Nine," Kenji says quietly. "Returning to source. Home was always here. Wei understood. Now she demonstrates."

The ashes absorb into soil. Physical presence ending. But the garden remains. The lemon tree remains. The teaching remains. Wei transformed into earth, into nutrients, into what feeds the tree she loved.

It's perfect.

It's everything.

It's what she wanted.

After the ceremony, people linger. No rush to leave. The garden holds them. Wei's presence still palpable even though Wei is gone. Or maybe especially because Wei is gone—absence making presence visible.

Dr. Tanaka approaches Zara. "I've treated many terminal patients. Many deaths. But never one like that. Never someone so..." She searches for words. "So present. So ready. She wasn't fighting. Wasn't resigned. Just: there. Witnessing her own death. That was remarkable."

"That was practice," Zara says. "Seventy years of practice. She knew this was coming her whole adult life. Prepared for it daily. The meditation. The teaching. The constant attention to impermanence. When death arrived, she was ready. Not because she wanted to die. Because she'd practiced being present to mortality her entire life."

"Can we do that?" Dr. Tanaka asks. "In four years? Can we be ready like she was?"

"She said ready doesn't mean unafraid. Means willing to be present despite fear. So yes. Maybe. If we practice."

Dr. Tanaka nods. "I'll keep attending the teachings. Kenji's circle in Antarctica. When I return. I need this. My whole specialty—watching children grow—it's unbearable without practice. With practice, it's still unbearable but: bearable. Does that make sense?"

"Perfect sense."

They stand together in Wei's garden. Two mothers—one literal, one professional—both facing the impossible. Both choosing presence anyway. Both practicing what Wei taught.

That evening, the apartment is quiet. Children asleep. Kwame working at his desk. Zara sits alone on the balcony where Wei spent so many mornings.

The garden is dark. Silent. The lemon tree a shadow against the night sky. Wei's ashes now part of the soil, feeding the roots, continuing the cycle.

Zara thinks about Maya's question: "Will we be ready?"

She doesn't know. Wei had 124 years. Zara will have forty-eight. Maya will have seventeen. Kofi will have fourteen. Ready feels impossible.

But Wei said something else: "Present—that we can be."

Ready is different from present. Ready means prepared. Present means here. Zara can't prepare for the asteroid. Can't make seventeen years enough for Maya. But she can be present. Can practice with her children. Can witness their complete lives fully. Can love them until love ends.

Zara looks at the lemon tree. In the darkness she can barely see it. But she knows it's there. Knows Wei's ashes feed it now. Knows it will bloom again next season. Four more years of growth before the asteroid.

Four years. Enough time for the tree to fruit multiple times. Enough time for new gardenias to bloom. Enough time for presence. For practice. For teaching Maya and Kofi what Wei taught her.

Not enough time for everything. But enough time for what matters.

Wei's voice in memory: *The flower bloomed.*

Past tense. Completion. Not tragedy—acknowledgment. The gardenia bloomed for three days, then fell. Wei lived for 125 years, then died. Zara will live for forty-eight years total, then die. Maya for seventeen. Kofi for fourteen. All blooming. All fading. All temporary. All beautiful.

The grief sits heavy in Zara's chest. First death her children witnessed. First real loss. First visceral experience of impermanence. Maya's question revealed it: "Will we be ready?"

No, probably not. But present—that they can practice.

Zara stands. Waters the lemon tree one more time. The soil absorbs. The roots drink. Wei's ashes mixing with water, feeding the tree, continuing the cycle. Everything transforming. Everything temporary. Everything connected.

Tomorrow she'll bring the children back to the garden. They'll tend it together. Continue Wei's work. Practice Wei's teaching. Be present to what's here while it's here.

Four years left.

But right now: this moment. This garden. This tree. This breath. This presence.

That's home.

That's everything.

The flower bloomed.

Chapter 36: Breaking

Zara Okafor-Mensah | Year 11, Month 9, Day 3 | Lagos District

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She holds it together until the bathroom door closes.

Three days since Wei died. Three days of managing everything—the funeral arrangements, Ling's grief, the children's confusion, Amara's distance, the neighbors who kept arriving with food. Three days of being the one who answers questions. The one who knows what to do next. The one who doesn't fall apart.

The bathroom is small. Tile floor, cement walls, the condensation of Lagos humidity on every surface. Zara turns on the shower—hot, loud, steam rising—and then she breaks.

The sound that comes out of her is barely human. A wail she's been holding in her chest for three days, maybe longer. Maybe fifteen years. Since the morning Maya woke her with a fever and she burst onto Wei's balcony and everything changed. Fifteen years of being the steady one. The strong one. The one who keeps everyone else upright.

She sinks to the floor. The tiles are cool against her legs, her back. Water runs hot above her, steam filling the room, and she lets herself cry in a way she hasn't since before detection. Ugly crying. Messy crying. The kind of crying that happens when you stop performing.

Wei is gone.

This should be acceptable. Wei was 125 years old. She'd been dying for months. She chose to die present, chose to teach through her ending, chose to show everyone what a good death looks like. It was peaceful. Beautiful, even. The flower bloomed.

And still Zara is breaking.

The steam rises. The water roars. The children can't hear her through the sound. This is why she chose the bathroom. Calculated, even in grief—find a place to fall apart where no one will witness.

But she needs to fall apart. Needs this. Has needed it for years but never let herself.

Fifteen years since detection. Maya was two. Zara was thirty-three. She burst onto Wei's balcony because she didn't know what else to do with a child who would die at seventeen. She cried then—once—and Wei held her while Maya climbed flowers. Then Zara stopped crying. Started managing. Started building the systems that would keep her family alive for as long as possible.

She designed water systems for the compound. Organized food distribution when supplies became erratic. Coordinated with neighbors, built community, maintained routines. When Kofi was born, she integrated him into the structure. When Kwame struggled, she supported him. When Amara vanished into numbness, Zara kept showing up anyway. When Wei needed care, Zara provided it.

Who provided for Zara?

The question surfaces and she can't answer it. No one, maybe. Or everyone, in fragments. Wei's teaching helped. Kwame's steadiness helped. The children's need for her helped. But the core of it—the terror, the grief, the impossible weight of loving people who will die—she's carried that alone.

And now Wei is gone.

The one person who understood. The one person who didn't need Zara to be strong. The one person who could hold space for Zara's fear without flinching.

Zara lets herself howl.

The water runs cold. She doesn't know how long she's been on the floor. Ten minutes. An hour. Time does strange things when you're broken open.

She stands slowly. Legs stiff. Heart empty. Face swollen with crying. She looks at herself in the mirror—fog-covered, distorted—and doesn't recognize the woman looking back. Who is this person when she's not managing something?

Just this, Wei used to say. *Just what arises. Just what's here.*

What's here is: grief. What's here is: exhaustion. What's here is: four more years until everyone she loves dies and she can't stop it.

Zara presses her forehead against the cool glass. Breathes. The Buddhist breathing Wei taught her. In for four. Hold for four. Out for four. Hold for four. Repeat.

The breath doesn't make the grief smaller. It just makes the breath possible.

She emerges from the bathroom. Face washed, hair wet, wearing clean clothes from the basket. The apartment is quiet. Kwame took the children to the park—another management decision, giving Zara space to "rest." He knows. He always knows. But he doesn't push.

Ling is in the kitchen, making tea. Wei's caregiver for twenty years, now without purpose. She looks up when Zara enters. Their eyes meet. Something passes between them—recognition. Ling knows what the bathroom was for.

"Tea," Ling says simply. Not a question.

"Thank you."

They sit at Wei's table. The table where Wei ate, taught, practiced presence. Now just: a table. Wood and memory.

"You've been holding it," Ling says.

"Someone had to."

"Did they?"

Zara considers. Did they? Would the funeral not have happened if she'd collapsed? Would the children have been harmed by seeing their mother grieve? Would the world have ended faster if she'd let herself break earlier?

"I don't know how to not hold it."

"No one asks you to stop. Just—" Ling pauses. "Also let it hold you. Sometimes."

Wei's teaching in Ling's voice. Of course. Twenty years of caring for Wei, Ling absorbed the practice by osmosis. Maybe that's how teaching works. Not instruction. Transmission.

"I'm scared," Zara admits. First time she's said it out loud in years.

"Of?"

"Everything. The end. Watching Maya die. Watching Kofi die. Watching Kwame die. Being conscious while everyone I love disappears." The words pour out. "I know the practice. I know impermanence. I know that everything ends. But knowing isn't the same as—" She stops. Breathes. "Knowing isn't enough."

"Knowing is never enough. Wei knew that. She practiced for seventy years and still had to practice every day. Practice isn't about knowing. It's about: doing. Returning. Showing up again."

"What if I can't?"

Ling meets her eyes. "Then you rest. And tomorrow you try again. And if you can't tomorrow, you rest tomorrow. And then you try the day after. Until trying becomes possible again."

Evening. The children return.

Maya is quiet, internal—three days into her own processing of Wei's death. Kofi is restless, hungry, complaining about the heat. Kwame moves through the apartment with careful attention, checking on everyone without asking direct questions.

Zara watches them from the couch. Her family. Four years from dying. Every moment with them is borrowed time, but borrowed time is still time.

Kofi flops next to her. "Mama, I'm hungry."

"Papa's making dinner."

"But I'm hungry *now*."

She reaches out, pulls him close. He's nearly eleven—too old for this, he'd usually say—but he lets her. Leans into her warmth. Smells like sweat and Lagos dust and childhood.

"I love you," Zara says.

"I love you too." He looks up at her. Something in her face makes him pause. "Are you okay?"

Is she okay? No. She'll never be okay. Her son will die at fourteen. Her daughter will die at seventeen. Everyone she loves will burn.

But right now: he's here. Warm against her. Alive.

"I'm sad about Professor Wei," she says. Honest. Simple. What children need.

"Me too." Kofi nestles closer. "I miss her."

"I know. I miss her too."

They sit together. Maya drifts in, takes the other side of the couch. Doesn't speak. Just: present. Kwame hums in the kitchen—an Akan song his mother used to sing. The apartment fills with ordinary sounds. Cooking. Breathing. Being alive.

Zara holds her children and lets herself feel all of it. The love and the grief. The presence and the loss. The impossibility of raising children toward death. The gift of raising children at all.

Wei died three days ago. The world goes on. Zara breaks and Zara holds. Both true. Both necessary.

Night. Kwame asleep beside her.

Zara lies awake, staring at the ceiling. The crying is done. The breaking is done. What's left is the ordinary work of continuing.

Tomorrow she'll check the water systems. Make sure the compound has what it needs. Talk to the neighbors about the memorial garden they want to plant in Wei's honor. Continue being the one who manages things, because that's who she is, and being who you are isn't wrong even when it's exhausting.

But tonight she let herself break. And tomorrow, she'll let herself break again if she needs to. And the day after. Ling was right. Practice isn't about perfection. It's about returning.

Wei's voice in memory: *The flower blooms. The flower wilts. Both are the flower.*

Zara bloomed today. Zara wilted today. Both are Zara.

She closes her eyes. Lets sleep take her.

Four more years. Fourteen hundred and sixty days.

Enough time to practice. Enough time to break and return. Enough time to love everyone she's going to lose.

She sleeps.

Chapter 37: Awakening

Maya Okafor-Mensah | Year 11, Month 9 | Lagos District

The garden was wrong.

Maya sat on the bench—Wei's bench—and felt the wrongness in her chest. Everything looked right. The lemon tree Wei planted fifty-two years ago. The gardenias blooming white and fragrant. The herbs spreading in their containers. Ling had maintained everything perfectly. The mint, the basil, the small tomato plants. All here. All growing. All continuing.

But Wei wasn't.

One week. Seven days since Wei died. Since her body stopped breathing and her consciousness ended and everyone cried and the funeral happened and the ashes went into the soil. One week since Maya watched someone die for the first time.

She was thirteen years, eleven months old. Nearly fourteen. Old enough to understand death intellectually—she'd understood it since she was three. Everything ends. Nothing lasts. Impermanence is truth. Wei had been teaching her this literally her entire remembered life.

But understanding wasn't the same as witnessing.

Maya's hands were shaking. She noticed this distantly, like observing data. Grief was physical. Her chest hurt. Her throat hurt. Her eyes hurt from crying. She'd cried for seven days. Thought she'd be empty by now. But the tears kept coming.

The butterfly book sat in her lap. *The Butterfly Life Cycle*. Wei had given it to her when she was four. Maya had read it hundreds of times. Could recite it. "The caterpillar doesn't become a butterfly—it transforms into what it always was going to be." Wei's correction, years ago. Making language precise. Making truth visible.

Maya opened to the page showing the butterfly emerging. Wings wet, body vulnerable, transformation complete. Three days of flying, then death. Brief life. Complete life. Wei used to say that. "The butterfly blooms for three days. But

those three days are whole. Complete in themselves. Not incomplete because brief."

Maya closed the book. Pressed it against her chest. Wei's voice was still so clear in her memory. But Wei was gone. The voice would fade. The teachings would blur. Memory was impermanent too. Everything was impermanent. She'd known this. But knowing and experiencing were different.

She remembered Wei telling her a story. Years ago. Maya must have been seven or eight. They'd been in this garden, sitting on this bench. Wei had been talking about the Buddha. Not religious Buddhism—Wei didn't teach religion. Philosophical Buddhism. The observation of suffering and impermanence and consciousness.

"The Buddha was a prince," Wei had said. "Siddhartha Gautama. His father kept him in the palace. Protected from everything difficult. Beautiful gardens. Perfect life. Never saw sickness, old age, or death. Sheltered completely."

Maya had been watering the gardenias. She remembered the watering can, the way water darkened the soil. "Why?"

"Because his father wanted him happy. Thought if Siddhartha never saw suffering, he'd never suffer. But you can't be awake while sheltered from truth."

"What happened?"

"He left the palace. Saw four sights. First: a sick person. Second: an old person. Third: a dead body. Fourth: a wandering ascetic—someone who'd given up everything to seek truth. Those four sights changed everything."

"Why?"

"Because he saw what his father had been hiding. Everyone gets sick. Everyone gets old. Everyone dies. The truth everyone pretends isn't real. Seeing it—really seeing it, not just knowing about it—that awakened him. That started his journey. He couldn't go back to pretending once he'd seen."

Maya hadn't understood then. Not really. She'd understood the words. Understood that death was real. But she hadn't *felt* it. Hadn't witnessed it. Hadn't had the truth made visceral.

Now she had.

Wei's empty wheelchair sat in the corner of the balcony. Ling had cleaned it, folded it, stored it neatly. But it was still there. Physical evidence of absence. Wei wasn't coming back. Would never wheel herself out here at dawn. Would never water the lemon tree with shaking hands. Would never teach through flowers and silence and the simple act of being present.

The Buddha saw death and awakened. Maya watched death and something broke open in her chest. Not broke in the sense of damage. Broke in the sense of: cracking, opening, letting truth in.

Death wasn't abstract anymore.

It was Wei's body cooling. Wei's breath stopping. Wei's last words—"The flower bloomed"—hanging in the air and then silence. Complete silence. The kind of silence that meant someone was gone forever.

Maya stood. Walked to the lemon tree. The soil was still darker where Wei's ashes had been poured. One week ago. Carbon and calcium and phosphorus. Fifty-two years of life reduced to dust. Now feeding the tree she'd tended. The cycle continuing. Everything composting into everything else.

She touched the trunk. Rough bark. Solid wood. The tree didn't know Wei died. Didn't grieve. Just grew. Absorbed nutrients. Bloomed. Fruited. Did what trees do. Life continuing because life doesn't stop for individual death.

That was the truth beneath the philosophy. That was what the Buddha saw. That was what Wei's death revealed: the world doesn't stop. The garden keeps blooming. The sun keeps rising. Everyone Maya loved would die and the universe wouldn't notice.

Her mother would die at forty-nine years old. Her father at fifty-three. Kofi at fourteen. Everyone in this compound. Everyone in Lagos. Everyone everywhere. The asteroid would come and consciousness would end and the universe would continue exactly as it had before consciousness existed.

Three years, eight months. Forty-four months. Maya had calculated it precisely the morning after Wei died. She would die at seventeen years, seven months old. Not eighteen. Not twenty. Never twenty-one. Never an adult. Never independent. Never anything beyond: daughter, sister, student. Brief life. Abbreviated life. Incomplete life.

No. Not incomplete. Wei's voice in memory: "Brief doesn't mean incomplete. A butterfly lives three days. Is that incomplete? Or is that: a complete butterfly life? Duration doesn't measure value. Presence does."

Maya sat on the ground. Dirt under her palms. Solid earth. Real earth. Temporary earth. In forty-four months this garden would vaporize. The lemon tree would burn. The ashes that were Wei would transform again—this time into plasma, into energy, into nothing human consciousness could witness.

And Maya would be dead. She would be seventeen years, seven months old and then she would be nothing. No afterlife. No reincarnation. Wei didn't teach those comforts. Just: consciousness ends. The self dissolves. Being stops. Not tragic—natural. Not wrong—inevitable. Just: true.

She'd understood this since she was small. But understanding was easy. Accepting was different. Being present to the truth without flinching—that was practice.

Maya pulled her knees to her chest. Let herself cry again. Tears coming hot and fast. Grief for Wei. Grief for herself. Grief for Kofi. Grief for everyone she loved

who would die too young. The crying hurt. Physically hurt. But she didn't stop it.

Wei had taught her this too. "Grief is appropriate response to loss. Don't bypass it. Don't avoid it. Feel it. Let it move through you. Presence includes pain. Includes fear. Includes everything."

The crying gradually quieted. Maya's breath slowed. She wiped her face on her sleeve. The garden was still there. The lemon tree. The gardenias. The mint spreading in containers. All blooming. All temporary. All here.

A question surfaced. The question Mama had asked Wei's final night: "Will we be ready?"

Would Maya be ready to die at seventeen? Ready to face the asteroid? Ready to watch everyone she loved die alongside her? Ready for consciousness to end?

No. The answer was clear. She would not be ready. Readiness implied preparation, completion, acceptance. She would be seventeen. Still young. Still becoming. How could she be ready for that to end?

But Wei had taught something else. Not ready—*present*. Different word. Different meaning. Ready meant prepared. Present meant here. Maya couldn't prepare for death. Couldn't make seventeen years enough. Couldn't make the ending okay.

But she could be present. Could practice being here, fully here, until here ended. Could witness her own brief life completely. Could love what she'd lose. Could die awake instead of asleep.

That was what Wei showed her. Dying at 125 years old, fully conscious, present to the end. No fear. No resistance. Just: "The flower bloomed." Acknowledgment. Recognition. Completion not because the lifespan was sufficient, but because the presence was complete.

Maya could do that. Not perfectly. Not easily. But: possibly. If she practiced. If she learned everything Wei would have taught her. If she spent her remaining forty-four months awake instead of hiding from truth.

She stood. Brushed dirt from her clothes. The decision was crystallizing. Not a thought—a knowing. Deeper than intellect. This was her path. This was what she would do with her brief life. Not pretend death wasn't coming. Not numb herself to the horror. Not hide in distractions or denial or despair.

She would practice. Would learn presence. Would die at seventeen years, seven months old, but would die awake. Would make her abbreviated life matter not through duration but through depth. Through witness. Through being here completely until here ended.

The vow formed itself: *I will learn everything. I will practice presence. I will die awake.*

Not because it would save her. Not because it would make death okay. Because Wei showed her it was possible. Because presence was the only thing she could control. Because forty-four months of being fully alive was better than seventeen years of hiding from death.

Maya walked through the garden. Noticed everything. The way light moved through leaves. The smell of mint and tomato plants. The rough texture of the lemon tree trunk. The gardenias opening, white petals unfurling. Everything temporary. Everything beautiful. Everything here now.

This was practice. This was what Wei taught. Not big dramatic revelations. Just: noticing. Being present to what was here. Not because it lasted. Because it was happening.

Footsteps on the stairs. Maya turned. Kofi appeared in the doorway. Ten years, eleven months old. Nearly eleven. Her little brother who would die at fourteen.

"Mama's worried," Kofi said. "You've been here four hours."

Four hours? Maya hadn't noticed time passing. She'd been... where had she been? Present. Grieving. Awakening. Something.

Kofi came closer. Looked at her face. "You've been crying."

"Yes."

"About Grandmother Wei?"

"Yes." Maya looked at her brother. Really looked at him. He would die in thirty-eight months. Younger than her. Less time to understand. Less time to practice. The injustice of it rose in her throat—he'd barely be a teenager. Would never finish growing. Would never—

She stopped the thought. Presence. Here. Now. Kofi was here. Alive. Ten years, eleven months old and fully himself. That was what mattered.

"Kofi, I need to tell you something about death."

He sat on the bench. Serious suddenly. "I know. Wei died."

"Yes. And we will too."

"I know that too. The asteroid."

"Yes." Maya sat beside him. "But Wei taught me something. Showed me something. I want to tell you."

Kofi waited. Patient. Present in the way children naturally were. Not anxious about what was coming. Just: here. Listening.

"You're going to die when you're fourteen years old," Maya said. The words came out steady. Clear. Not cruel—honest. "That's not enough time. It's not fair. It's not what you deserve. But it's true. You'll die young."

Kofi nodded slowly. "I know."

"But—" Maya took his hand. Small hand. Warm hand. Real hand. "Wei showed me something. She lived 125 years. I'll live seventeen. You'll live fourteen. Those are different amounts. But they're not different in the way I thought. Long life isn't better than short life if the long life is asleep. If someone lives 125 years but never pays attention, never really *sees* their life—that's not better than fourteen years awake."

Kofi was quiet. Thinking. His face had that concentrated expression he got when trying to understand something hard.

"I'm not saying it's okay that you'll die young," Maya continued. "It's not okay. It's horrible. I'm so angry about it I can barely breathe sometimes. But Wei showed me—you can't change how long you live. You can only change how present you are while living. And being present, really present, makes the time *matter* even if it's brief."

"Like butterflies?" Kofi asked.

"Yes. Exactly like butterflies. Three days of flying but fully alive. That's better than thirty years of existing but never really being here."

"How do you be present?"

Maya felt tears coming again. But different tears. Not grief—something else. Gratitude, maybe. That Kofi asked. That he wanted to learn. That she could teach him.

"You practice," she said. "You notice things. Like right now—you're sitting on this bench. Can you feel the wood under you? Can you hear the sounds from the district below? Can you smell the gardenias?"

Kofi closed his eyes. Concentrated. "Yes. I feel the bench. I hear people talking. I smell... flowers. And something else. Mint?"

"Yes. Mint. That's presence. That's being here. Not thinking about yesterday or tomorrow. Just: noticing this moment. This bench. These smells. This feeling. That's all practice is."

"That's all?"

Maya laughed—surprised by the sound. First laugh in a week. "That's everything. It sounds simple. It's impossibly hard. Your mind will wander constantly. You'll forget. You'll get distracted. You'll spend whole days asleep to your own life. But when you notice you've wandered—you just come back. Notice again. Be here again. That's the practice. Coming back. Again and again."

Kofi opened his eyes. Looked at the garden. Then at Maya. "Will you teach me?"

The question landed like a gift. Like grace. Like transmission happening naturally, inevitably, necessarily. Maya teaching Kofi. Kofi learning presence. The cycle continuing. Wei taught Mama. Mama taught Maya. Maya teaching

Kofi. Knowledge passing forward until there was no forward left. But still: passing. Still: mattering.

"Yes," Maya said. "I'll teach you everything I learn. Everything Wei taught me. Everything Uncle Kenji can teach us. We'll practice together. For thirty-eight months. Until it ends. But those thirty-eight months—we'll be awake for them. Really awake. Okay?"

"Okay." Kofi smiled slightly. "Can we practice now?"

"We are practicing. Right now. Sitting here. Talking. Being together. That's presence. That's everything."

They sat quietly. Brother and sister. Fourteen and seventeen when they died. Not enough time. Never enough time. But right now: here. On this bench. In this garden. Wei's ashes feeding the lemon tree. The gardenias blooming. Everything temporary. Everything whole.

After a while, Kofi leaned against her. Maya put her arm around him. Felt his weight. His warmth. His aliveness. In thirty-eight months he would be dead and she would die seven months later and this moment would have never existed as far as the universe was concerned.

But it existed now. She witnessed it now. That mattered. That was everything. That was what Wei meant.

The flower bloomed.

Evening brought the family home.

Maya and Kofi returned to the apartment together. Mama looked up from her engineering schematics, face tight with worry that relaxed when she saw them. Papa emerged from the kitchen, dinner smells following.

"You were at the garden a long time," Mama said carefully.

"Yes." Maya set down the butterfly book. Looked at her parents. Saw them differently now. Not just Mama and Papa. Two people who would die. Who would watch their children die. Who chose presence anyway. Who kept parenting, kept working, kept loving despite knowing exactly when it would end.

"Mama. Papa. I need to tell you something."

They sat. The apartment suddenly very small. Very intimate. Four people who would die together. Family lasting exactly as long as everyone in it lasted. Then: gone. But right now: here.

"Wei's death changed something in me," Maya said. "I understood impermanence before. Intellectually. But watching her die—really witnessing it—that's different. That's. . . " She searched for words. "That's like the Buddha. Leaving the palace.

Seeing death for the first time. Everything I understood became everything I *knew*. Does that make sense?"

Mama's eyes were glistening. "Yes."

"I'm going to die at seventeen years, seven months old. I calculated it exactly. Forty-four months from now. That's not enough time. I'll never be an adult. Never be independent. Never have all the experiences I'm supposed to have. It's not fair. It's horrible. I'm so angry about it."

Papa started to speak. Maya held up her hand.

"But I can't change it. None of us can. So I have a choice. I can spend forty-four months hiding from that truth. Distracting myself. Pretending it's not coming. Or I can spend forty-four months present. Really present. Awake to my own brief life. Learning everything I can. Practicing what Wei taught. Dying at seventeen but dying conscious. Aware. Here."

Silence. Her parents looking at her. Seeing her. Maybe seeing that she wasn't quite a child anymore. Wasn't quite an adult. But was: herself. Complete for her age. Here for however long here lasted.

"I want to study with Uncle Kenji," Maya said. "Formally. Everything he learned from Wei. Everything she would have taught me if she'd lived. I don't want to waste the time I have left."

Mama was crying. Not sad crying. Something else. Pride, maybe. Or recognition. Or grief for all the versions of Maya that would never exist alongside pride for the version that did.

"Of course," Mama said. "Of course you can study with Kenji."

"You're so young," Papa said quietly. "Thirteen. This is heavy for thirteen."

"I'm almost fourteen. And I don't have time to wait until I'm older. Wei died when I was thirteen. That was my awakening. I can't go back to being a child who doesn't know. I've seen. I've witnessed. I can't unsee it."

Kofi spoke up from the corner. "Maya's teaching me too. Presence. Being here. She explained it in the garden."

Mama and Papa looked at him. Then at Maya. Then at each other. Some wordless communication passing between them. Finally Mama nodded.

"Okay. Yes. I'll talk to Kenji. You can study with him. Both of you, if Kofi wants. We'll make it work."

"Thank you." Maya felt exhaustion suddenly. Four hours in the garden. This conversation. The weight of the decision. The clarity of the path. All of it pressing down. "I'm tired. Can I sleep?"

"Of course, baby." Mama pulled her into a hug. Held tight. Too tight. Like she was trying to hold Maya here, in this moment, in this body, in this life. Like

love could prevent death if only you held hard enough.

It couldn't. Maya knew that. But the holding mattered anyway. Presence to presence. Love despite loss. That was everything. That was what forty-four months of practice would teach her to do even better.

She pulled back. Looked at her mother's face. Forty-four years old. Five more years. Forty-nine at impact. Young by historical standards. Old enough by any measure. Beautiful. Temporary. Here.

"I love you, Mama."

"I love you, Maya. So much. So, so much."

"I know."

Maya went to her room. Lay on her bed. Stared at the ceiling. The apartment sounds continued around her—Papa making dinner, Mama talking quietly with Kofi, the building settling, the district humming outside. Normal sounds. Temporary sounds. Real sounds.

She'd awakened. That was the only word for it. The Buddha's word. Siddhartha seeing death and understanding: this is the truth. This is what everyone faces. This is what shapes everything.

Maya was thirteen years, eleven months old and she'd awakened to mortality. Not everyone's mortality abstractly. Her own mortality specifically. Seventeen years, seven months, then nothing. That was her lifespan. Brief. Insufficient. Real.

And she would spend it awake. Would practice presence. Would learn everything she could. Would teach Kofi. Would die conscious. Would make her abbreviated life matter not through what she accomplished but through how completely she witnessed it.

The flower would bloom. For forty-four months. Then fall. But the blooming—that was real. That was whole. That was complete.

Wei showed her. The Buddha showed her. Death showed her.

Now Maya would show others. Would teach. Would practice. Would be present. Until presence ended.

That was enough. That was everything. That was all anyone could ever do.

She closed her eyes. Felt the bed under her. The pillow. Her breath moving. Her heart beating. Forty-four months of heartbeats. Forty-four months of breaths. Forty-four months of moments. Each one complete. Each one enough. Each one everything.

Maya slept. And dreamed of gardens. And butterflies. And Wei's voice saying: "The flower bloomed."

Yes. The flower bloomed. Was blooming. Would bloom until it couldn't. That was the practice. That was the teaching. That was life itself.

Brief. Beautiful. Whole.

Morning arrived too early.

Maya woke with the light. Six AM. The apartment quiet. Everyone still sleeping except her. She lay in bed feeling... different. Lighter somehow. The grief was still there—would always be there, probably. But something had shifted. Yesterday's awakening had settled overnight. Clarified. Become: truth she carried instead of truth that carried her.

She got up. Dressed quietly. Walked barefoot to the balcony door. Slipped outside.

The sun was rising over Lagos District. Two hundred million people waking to Year 11, Month 9. Four years left. Everyone facing the same ending. Most not thinking about it. Some thinking about it constantly. A few—like her—practicing presence to it. Being awake to it.

Maya stood in the morning light and made one more vow. Silent. Private. Hers alone.

I will practice. I will be present. I will teach what I learn. I will love what I'll lose. I will witness my brief life completely. I will die at seventeen years, seven months old. But I will die awake.

The flower will bloom.

The sun climbed. The city woke. Maya stood present to it all. Beginning.

Chapter 38: Legacy

Kenji Torres | Year 12, Month 3 | Lagos District

The gardenia had no petals left.

Kenji knelt beside it in Wei's garden—*the* garden now, he supposed, though calling it his felt wrong—and studied the bare stem. Yesterday: three white petals clinging. This morning: scattered on the soil below. He picked one up. Paper-thin. Brown at the edges. Already composting.

Six months. Six months since Wei died and Kenji became the person people came to for teaching. Six months of holding space he didn't feel qualified to

hold. Six months of hearing Wei's voice in his own words and wondering if he was channeling wisdom or performing memory.

The lemon tree needed water. He filled the can from the rain barrel—Zara had maintained the system perfectly, everything functioning as Wei had designed it—and watered slowly. Fifty-two years old, this tree. Wei had grown it from seed in Beijing, transported it through three moves, four cities, one lifetime. In three years it would burn. But today it needed water.

That was practice. That was what Wei taught him. Water the tree not because watering saves it. Because today it's thirsty.

"Uncle Kenji?"

He turned. Maya stood in the doorway, backpack over her shoulder, that same fierce seriousness she'd had since she was small. Thirteen years, eight months old now. Nearly fourteen. Six months since she'd awakened in this garden, one week after Wei's death. Six months since everything changed for her.

"Good morning, Maya. You're early."

"I wanted to talk before the others come."

Kenji set down the watering can. Gestured to the bench—Wei's bench, where he'd sat that first morning three and a half years ago, exhausted from six years of seeking, ready to stop. Where Wei had asked him to stay. To learn nothing. To water plants.

Maya sat. Kenji beside her. The morning was warm and bright—Lagos District's engineered tropical climate predictable as mathematics. Below them, five million people beginning another day in Year 12. Three years left. Everything temporary. Everything here now.

"What did you want to talk about?"

Maya pulled out a notebook. Opened it. Kenji saw pages filled with precise handwriting—notes from the teaching sessions she'd been attending. Six months of twice-weekly gatherings. Maya sitting in back, practicing with fierce concentration, absorbing everything.

"I've been coming to your teachings for six months," Maya said. "Twenty-six sessions. I've practiced daily—meditation, presence exercises, noticing practice. I read everything Grandmother Wei wrote that Mama has. I understand the philosophy intellectually. Impermanence, no-self, the nature of consciousness. But—"

She paused. Choosing words carefully.

"But understanding isn't the same as embodying. I know this. You've said it. Wei said it. I can explain presence perfectly. I can't *be* present consistently. There's a gap. And I have less than four years left. Three years, seven months,

thirteen days." Her voice was steady, matter-of-fact. "I'll die at seventeen years, seven months old. That's not enough time to waste."

Kenji's chest tightened. This child—not quite child anymore, something else, something between—speaking about her own death with such precision. Such clarity. Such fierce determination not to waste the brief time remaining.

"So I'm asking," Maya continued, meeting his eyes directly. "Can I study with you? Like you studied with Wei? Formally. Intentionally. Not just attending sessions. Actually learning everything. Everything she would have taught me if she'd lived."

The question landed in Kenji's chest like recognition. Like inevitability. Like Wei's voice saying: *This is why you stayed. This is why you learned. This is transmission.*

"Maya—" He didn't know how to finish.

"I know I'm young," she said quickly. "I know thirteen is early for this kind of study. But I don't have time to wait until I'm older. Wei died when I was thirteen. That was my awakening. I can't go back to being a child who doesn't know. I've seen death. I understand impermanence. Not intellectually—viscerally. I felt Wei leave. I felt consciousness end. I can't unsee that."

Kenji recognized himself in her words. Recognized the desperation, the urgency, the sense that time was running out and seeking couldn't be postponed. But also: recognized something different. Maya wasn't seeking to escape. She was seeking to be present. Seeking to live her brief life fully. That was wisdom he'd taken six years to find.

"Why do you want to study with me?" he asked. "What do you think I can teach you?"

Maya considered. "You learned from Wei. You carry what she knew. But also—you struggled. Mama told me. You spent years seeking, couldn't find answers, almost gave up. Then you found Wei and learned presence. That matters to me. I don't need a perfect teacher. I need an honest teacher. Someone who remembers being lost."

The words hit precisely. Kenji felt tears rising. Wei's voice in memory: *Qualified teachers teach knowledge. Unqualified teachers teach presence. You're perfect.*

"I'm not enlightened," he said quietly. "I'm still learning. Still practicing. Still failing regularly."

"I know. That's why I'm asking you. Perfect teachers are intimidating. Struggling teachers are human."

Kenji laughed—startled, genuine. "Wei would have loved that distinction."

"She made it to me once. Year 7, I think. I asked her if she was enlightened. She said: 'I'm 122 years old and still practicing. Enlightenment is practice, not

achievement. Anyone claiming to be done learning is lying or deluded.' Then she showed me how to deadhead the gardenias."

That was Wei entirely. Philosophy through gardening. Teaching through tasks. Enlightenment as verb, not noun.

"Okay," Kenji said. "Yes. I'll teach you everything I know."

"Really?" Maya's careful composure cracked into excitement. "You mean it?"

"I mean it. But understand: it won't be enough. Three years, seven months isn't enough time to master anything. We'll barely scratch the surface. You'll die with questions unanswered, practices incomplete, understanding partial."

"That's okay." Maya's voice was steady again. "Wei lived 125 years and said the same thing. Duration doesn't matter. Presence matters. If I die at seventeen but spent my time awake, really awake—that's worth more than eighty years asleep."

"Where did you learn that?"

"From watching Mama. From Wei's letters. From your teaching. From—" She gestured at the garden. "From this. The gardenias bloom for three days. They don't need seventy years. They just need to bloom fully while they're here."

Kenji felt something shift in his chest. Not pride exactly. More like: recognition. Wei's teaching spreading. Person to person. Wei to Zara to Maya. Wei to Kenji to Maya. Multiple transmission lines converging. The teaching wasn't dying. It was multiplying.

"When do we start?" Maya asked.

"We already started. This conversation is teaching. Your question is practice. Being here fully—that's everything."

Maya smiled. "That sounds like something Wei would say."

"I know. She lives through the teaching. That's how transmission works. Person to person. Until there are no persons left."

They sat quietly. The lemon tree stood patient. The gardenias—some blooming, some fading, some not yet opened—continued their cycle. Everything temporary. Everything beautiful. Everything teaching.

"Can I ask another question?" Maya said.

"Always."

"Do you feel ready? To teach? Six months after Wei died—do you feel qualified?"

Kenji took a breath. Honest answer. "No. I feel like I'm performing her teaching without fully understanding it. Like I'm channeling her voice instead of finding my own. Like I'm fraudulent."

"But you keep teaching anyway."

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because people come seeking. Because I have something to offer even if it's incomplete. Because Wei asked me to continue. Because—" He paused, finding the real answer. "Because teaching is how I learn. Every time I facilitate a session, every time I respond to someone's question, I understand a little more. Teaching isn't something I do after mastering the material. Teaching *is* the mastering."

Maya wrote this down in her notebook. Kenji watched her careful handwriting. Precise. Complete. Just like her aunt Amara. Just like her own brilliant, serious, brief self.

"One more question," Maya said. "The hardest one."

"Go ahead."

"How do you live knowing I'll die so young? That everyone in your teaching circle will die? That everything you're building ends in three years? How do you keep showing up?"

The question was Wei's question. Elena's question. The question everyone carried. How do you live the ending?

"I don't know," Kenji admitted. "Every day I wake up and think: why bother? Why teach presence when everyone dies? Why build community when community ends? Why care when caring means losing? And every day I don't have good answers. But I get up anyway. Come to this garden. Water the plants. Facilitate the sessions. Respond to seekers. Not because it saves anyone. Because it's what there is to do."

"Is that enough?"

"It has to be. There's nothing else."

Maya absorbed this. Wrote it down. Then closed her notebook. "Okay. Thank you. That's what I needed to know. That you don't have it figured out either. That you show up anyway. That's the teaching I need."

The teaching session started at 9 AM. Twice-weekly gathering. Tuesdays and Fridays. Wei's garden couldn't hold everyone anymore—twenty-three people today—so they'd expanded to Zara's apartment and the courtyard below. But they always began here. In the garden. Where Wei taught. Where the practice started.

Kenji watched them arrive. Familiar faces mostly. Adaeze with her daughter Chioma—the woman who'd come six months ago asking how to love a child who'd die young. She attended every session now. Brought Chioma. Both practicing presence together.

Chen Liwei and his wife Mei—the former UN Secretary General, sixty-four years old now, learning that witness was his life's work all along. He'd started attending Year 11, Month 2. Ten months now. Quiet, thoughtful, always listening more than speaking.

Yuki—twenty-nine, Japanese, the seeker Kenji had known in Mumbai three years ago. She'd arrived in Lagos six months ago, still desperately seeking enlightenment. Still practicing with fierce intensity. Still learning that seeking itself was obstacle.

Newer faces too. A Brazilian priest—Father Tomás, fifty-eight, faith shattered Year 1, seeking replacement. Kenji had met him in Mumbai, lost track of him, found him again here. Both wanderers finding temporary home.

A young Nigerian engineer named Chidi. An elderly Indian woman named Priya. A teenage boy—seventeen, dying soon—who came because his mother made him but kept coming because something here helped.

And Obi. Forty-two. Former Lagos District infrastructure manager. He'd been coming for two months now, always sitting with arms crossed, always looking skeptical. He never spoke. Just: watched. Judged. Kenji could feel the resistance radiating off him.

And Maya, sitting in back like always. But different now. Not just attending. Studying. Learning. Committed.

Zara brought tea. Kofi helped distribute cups—ten years, seven months old, still joyful despite understanding. He moved among the seekers with natural ease, offering tea and small kindnesses. That was presence too. That was practice.

When everyone had tea, when the courtyard was full, Kenji rang the small bell Wei had used. The sound was clear and simple. Everyone settled.

"Good morning," Kenji said. Not performing. Just: greeting. "Thank you for coming. For showing up. For being present even when presence is difficult."

He'd learned this from Wei. Start by honoring the showing up. Start by acknowledging that being here matters.

"Six months ago, Professor Wei died. Some of you knew her. Some knew her only through me, or through others she taught. But all of you carry something she offered—whether directly or through transmission. The teaching doesn't die when the teacher dies. It continues. Through us. Through practice. Through this."

He gestured at the gathered circle. Twenty-three people. Ages seven to seventy-four. Nigerian, Japanese, Indian, Brazilian, Chinese, American. Children and elders. Believers and skeptics. Seekers and teachers. All here because something in them recognized: presence matters. Being here matters. Living fully in the time remaining matters.

"Today I want to talk about transmission," Kenji continued. "How teaching spreads. Person to person. Wei taught me. I teach you. You teach others. The cycle continues. But transmission isn't just information transfer. It's presence passing to presence. Being seeing being. One human helping another human wake up."

He saw Maya taking notes. Saw Chen nodding slowly. Saw Adaeze holding Chioma close.

"Wei used to say: I teach you nothing. But I sit with you while you learn. That's what we do here. I don't have answers about mortality. About how to face extinction. About how to live three years fully. But I have practice. I have presence. I have this garden and these sessions and the understanding that being here together—that's enough. That's everything."

"But is it?" The voice came from Yuki. Sharp. Challenging. "Is presence enough? We're going to die. All of us. What does presence accomplish? How does it help?"

Kenji felt the familiar doubt rise. The question he asked himself daily. The question he couldn't answer satisfactorily. But Wei's voice in memory: *Don't teach answers. Teach questions. Teach: we're figuring this out together.*

"I don't know," Kenji said honestly. "Presence doesn't prevent death. Doesn't make dying peaceful. Doesn't accomplish anything measurable. But—" He paused, finding the words. "Presence changes relationship to what is. You're going to die. I'm going to die. We can spend our remaining time terrified, numb, distracted. Or we can spend it awake. Present. Fully here. Neither option changes the outcome. But one option means we actually lived. The other means we waited for death while missing life."

"So presence is for us," Tomás said quietly. "Not for outcome. For experience."

"Yes. The practice doesn't save anyone. But it makes the time we have real. Complete. Fully experienced instead of half-avoided."

"Bullshit."

The word landed hard. Everyone turned. Obi—arms still crossed, face tight with anger. He'd finally spoken.

"Excuse me?" Kenji felt his chest tighten defensively.

"This is bullshit," Obi repeated. "Spiritual bypassing. You're telling us to be present so we feel better about extinction. Like meditation fixes anything. Like sitting in this garden and talking about presence changes the fact that we're all going to burn. That our children are going to burn. That everything humanity built for three thousand years burns. And you want us to be *present* to it?"

The circle was silent. Kenji felt heat rising in his face. Felt the urge to defend. To argue. To prove Obi wrong.

"I'm not saying—" he started.

"Yes you are. You're saying acceptance. Presence. Being here now. Like that's wisdom. But maybe it's just giving up. Maybe presence is what people do when they can't fight anymore. When they're too tired to rage. You call it enlightenment. I call it surrender."

Kenji opened his mouth. Closed it. His mind was scrambling. Wei would know how to respond. Wei would stay calm. Wei would turn this into teaching. But Kenji wasn't Wei.

"You don't know what you're talking about," Kenji said, and immediately regretted it. Too defensive. Too sharp. Not presence. Reaction.

"Don't I?" Obi leaned forward. "I spent nine years managing infrastructure for five million people. Keeping systems running. Fighting collapse. Actually *doing* something. Then Year 10 I realized: pointless. All of it. The asteroid doesn't care how well I maintain the water treatment. So I quit. Came here because someone said this teaching might help. But it's just pretty words about impermanence. Just another way to make meaninglessness feel meaningful."

Kenji's face was hot. His hands were shaking slightly. He was failing. Right here. In front of everyone. In front of Maya.

"I—" He stopped. Took a breath. Another. Wei's voice: *When you don't know what to say, say that.*

"I don't know how to respond to you," Kenji said finally. Voice unsteady. "You're right that presence doesn't fix anything. Doesn't save anyone. And maybe you're right that it's surrender. I don't know. I spent six years trying to figure this out and I'm still not sure. All I know is: showing up here feels better than not showing up. Practicing feels better than not practicing. Presence feels better than numbness. Maybe that's surrender. Maybe it's the only wisdom left. I don't know."

Obi stared at him. The circle was silent.

Maya raised her hand. Kenji nodded at her, grateful for interruption.

"Uncle Kenji, you said transmission is presence passing to presence. But how? How does watching you teach presence teach me presence? Isn't it something I have to discover myself?"

"Yes and no." Kenji smiled. "Yes, you have to practice. I can't give you my presence. But I can show you what practice looks like. I can create space where presence becomes possible. I can reflect back what you already know but can't see. That's transmission. Not giving you something new. Helping you recognize what's already here."

Chen spoke up. "Mayor Torres in Antarctica wrote me last month. She said you're her son. Said you spent six years seeking what she'd already found—showing up. Being present. Witnessing. Different paths to same understanding."

Kenji felt warmth in his chest. His mother. Still governing. Still showing up. Still practicing Picture Nine without knowing the framework. Always home. Never lost.

"My mother teaches presence through governance," Kenji said. "I teach through these sessions. Wei taught through gardening. Everyone transmits differently. But the teaching is the same: be here now. That's all. That's everything."

The session continued. Questions emerged. Kenji responded—sometimes with answers, more often with questions back. Creating space for people to discover their own understanding. Wei's method. Facilitating, not instructing.

Adaeze asked: "How do I explain death to my daughter? She's six. She knows she'll die at twelve. How do I make that bearable?"

Kenji remembered this moment from six months ago. His first teaching. When Wei had watched him respond. When doubt lifted because there was specific person needing specific help.

"You don't make it bearable," he said gently. "You bear it with her. You be present to her fear and your fear. You love her completely while you can. You don't fix it—you can't fix it. You witness it together."

Adaeze was crying. "That's what you said six months ago. It helped then. It helps now. But it's so hard."

"Yes. It's impossibly hard. The practice doesn't make it easy. Makes it possible to keep showing up."

Chen asked: "I governed for eight years trying to coordinate humanity. Failed completely. Nations ignored me. Authority eroded. I thought I was useless. Wei taught me I was witnessing. That witness was the work. Is that true? Does bearing witness matter if no one reads the record?"

"The record isn't the point," Kenji said. "Being present to what was happening—that's the point. You showed up. You tried. You bore witness to humanity's final response to extinction. That mattered. Still matters. Will always have mattered even after everyone who knows about it dies."

The young teenager spoke—rare for him. "Everyone says make the time count. But how? How do I make my remaining time count when I'll never finish anything? Never become anything? Never accomplish anything?"

Kenji felt the question personally. The boy was asking what Kenji had asked for six years. What Maya asked. What everyone here asked. How do you live abbreviated lives?

"You don't make them count," Kenji said slowly. "You live them. Fully. Presently. Being completely here is worth more than being half-asleep. The counting—measuring, evaluating, comparing to some imagined full life—that's suffering. Just: be here. That's enough. That's everything."

"But I want more time!"

"Of course you do. Everyone does. The wanting is appropriate. The grief is real. But the wanting doesn't change anything. Only changes how you spend the time you have. Wanting what can't be. Or accepting what is and being present to it."

The boy was crying. Others were crying. Kenji's eyes were wet too.

"Maybe Obi's right," the boy said through tears. "Maybe that's just surrender."

Kenji looked at Obi. Then back at the boy. "Maybe it is. I don't know anymore. Wei taught me this practice. Said it would help. And it does help—some days. Other days I wake up and think: what's the point? Why bother? Maybe practicing presence when extinction is coming is just elaborate denial. Maybe rage would be more honest."

"Then why do you keep teaching?" Adaeze asked quietly.

Kenji took a breath. Honest answer. "Because I don't know what else to do. This is what I have. Presence. Practice. This circle. Maybe it's surrender. Maybe it's wisdom. Probably it's both. But it's better than being alone with the terror. Better than nothing. And some days—not every day—being here together feels like enough."

The silence was heavy. Not peaceful. Just: heavy. No one had answers. Not even the teacher.

"Can I say something?" It was Obi again. Voice quieter now. Less angry.

"Please," Kenji said.

"I'm still not convinced. Still think this might be spiritual bypassing. But—" He paused. "You admitting you don't know. That you're uncertain. That helped. More than the answers did. So maybe I'll keep coming. See if doubt practicing together is better than doubt alone."

Kenji nodded. "That's all I'm offering. Doubt together. Uncertainty together. Practice despite not being sure it matters. If that's enough, stay. If it's not, go with my blessing."

Obi didn't leave. Neither did anyone else. They sat together in the heavy silence. Practicing doubt. Practicing presence. Practicing being human together while waiting for extinction.

This work—this teaching—it wasn't about having answers. It was about sitting together with unanswerable questions. Being present to collective grief. Witnessing each other's pain without trying to fix it.

That was transmission. That was practice. That was love.

Maybe.

After the session, people lingered. Some tended the garden—watering, weeding, deadheading. Others sat in small groups talking. Obi stood alone by the lemon tree, not leaving but not joining either. The gathering had become community. Not by design. Just: by showing up repeatedly. By being present together. By practicing in proximity.

Maya helped Kenji clean up. Collecting cups. Folding chairs. The domestic care that followed teaching. Wei used to say: the cleanup is also practice. The ordinary tasks matter as much as profound discussion.

Kenji's hands were still shaking slightly. The confrontation with Obi had rattled him. He'd gotten defensive. Said the wrong things. Almost argued. Not Wei's way. Not skillful. Just: human reaction.

"That was hard," Maya said quietly.

"What was?"

"Obi challenging you. You getting defensive. Having to admit you don't know. But—" She paused. "That was the most important teaching today. Not the answers. The uncertainty. The honesty. You not pretending to be enlightened."

Kenji felt something crack open in his chest. Relief mixed with embarrassment. "I handled that badly. Got defensive. Shouldn't have—"

"No," Maya interrupted. "You handled it perfectly. You were human. You reacted. Then you caught yourself. Admitted uncertainty. That's what I want to learn. Not how to be perfect. How to be real."

Six months of doubt didn't dissolve. But shifted. Not because doubt resolved. Because Maya saw him clearly—flawed, uncertain, reactive—and chose to study with him anyway. Chose his unqualified teaching. Chose transmission from struggling teacher instead of perfect master.

"We start tomorrow," Kenji said. "Every day. Morning sessions with you before the group gatherings. Intensive study."

"Will it be enough?"

"No. But we'll try anyway."

Maya smiled. "That's very Zen."

"That's very honest."

They finished cleaning. The garden was quiet now. Most people gone. Obi had left without speaking again—Kenji didn't know if he'd return. Zara had taken Kofi home. The lemon tree stood in afternoon light. Fifty-two years old. Thirsty again tomorrow.

"Uncle Kenji?" Maya stood at the doorway. "Thank you. For saying yes. For being willing to teach me even though you doubt yourself. That means everything."

"Thank you for asking. For choosing me. For—" He paused. "For carrying this forward. Wei's teaching doesn't end with me. Passes through me to you. That's transmission. That's legacy. That's everything."

Maya left. Kenji sat alone in Wei's garden—in the garden, just the garden, belonging to itself—and felt: grief, gratitude, purpose, doubt, clarity, confusion. All tangled together. All real. All part of Picture Five. Still taming the ox. Still learning. Still practicing.

But also: teaching. Transmitting. Passing forward what Wei gave him. The teaching wouldn't outlast the asteroid. Nothing would. But for whatever time remained it would spread. Person to person. Kenji to Maya. Maya to others. Wei's wisdom blooming through multiple lives. Brief lives. Uncertain lives.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe that was legacy. Maybe that was the flower blooming.

He didn't know. But he'd show up tomorrow anyway.

He picked up the watering can. The mint needed water. The gardenias needed deadheading. The lemon tree needed attention. Tomorrow he'd water them again. Tomorrow Maya would arrive for her first formal lesson. Tomorrow the teaching circle would gather again.

Tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. Three years of tomorrows. Then: nothing.

But today: everything. The garden blooming. The teaching spreading. The transmission continuing. Wei's voice alive in his words. His presence teaching presence. Maya learning. The circle holding.

Today was enough.

Today was everything.

The flower bloomed.

That evening, Kenji wrote to his mother:

Mom,

Year 12, Month 3 from Lagos. Something happened today. Something important.

Maya—Zara's daughter, thirteen years old, nearly fourteen—asked to study with me formally. Like I studied with Wei. She wants to learn everything in the three years, seven months she has left. Everything Wei would have taught her.

I said yes.

I'm terrified. Who am I to teach? I'm still learning. Still struggling. Still doubting everything. Today someone called the teaching bullshit. Said presence is just surrender. I got defensive. Said the wrong things. Had to admit I don't know

if he's right. Maybe it IS surrender. Maybe practicing presence while extinction approaches is just elaborate denial.

But Maya said that's why she wants to learn from me. Because I'm honest about the difficulty. Because I remember being lost. Because struggling teachers are human. Because I don't pretend to have it figured out.

Wei used to say: qualified teachers teach knowledge. Unqualified teachers teach presence. I'm unqualified in the best way. I have no credentials. No mastery. No enlightenment. Just: practice. Presence. The willingness to show up daily and facilitate space for others to discover what I'm still discovering.

Mom, you do this too. You've been doing this longer than me. You govern without power. You maintain order without outcomes. You show up every morning to bear witness when witnessing changes nothing. That's Picture Nine—understanding home was always here. You never left. I wandered for six years seeking what you already had.

I'm teaching now. Really teaching. Not performing Wei's teaching. Becoming my own kind of teacher. Still learning. Still incomplete. Still making mistakes. But present. Honest. Available.

Twenty-three people came today. Twenty-three people seeking how to live their remaining time fully. I don't have answers. But I have practice. I have this garden. I have the understanding that being present together—maybe that's enough. Maybe that's everything. I'm not sure anymore. But I show up anyway.

Wei died six months ago. I've been teaching without her. At first it felt like betrayal—how dare I continue when she's gone? Today Maya helped me understand: Wei would want this. Want the teaching to spread. Want transmission to continue. Person to person. Until there are no persons. That's how wisdom works. That's how love works. That's legacy.

I'll teach Maya everything I know. Everything Wei taught me. It won't be enough. But we'll practice anyway. We'll be present anyway. We'll learn together anyway.

That's all anyone can do. Show up. Practice. Love what we'll lose. Maybe that's enough. Maybe that's everything. Maybe it's just surrender. I don't know.

But I'll keep showing up.

Chen writes that you're still governing. Still holding briefings. Still maintaining dignity. I'm so proud of you. You're living Picture Nine. You're home. You always were.

I love you. I'll keep teaching. You keep witnessing. Together, separately, we practice. That's enough.

Your son,
Kenji

P.S. - The lemon tree still blooms. Wei's garden still grows. The teaching continues. That's legacy. That's what matters.

He sealed the letter. Set it aside for morning transport.

Outside, Lagos District settled into evening. Five million people living Year 12. Everyone continuing their practice—whatever that practice was. Engineering. Parenting. Governance. Teaching. Maintenance. Tending dogs. Growing mint. Swimming despite broken bodies. Signing to each other in silence. Hosting dinners for refugees. All of it: practice. All of it: presence. All of it: legacy spreading person to person until persons ended.

Or maybe not legacy. Maybe just: what there was to do. Kenji didn't know anymore.

He sat in Wei's apartment—the apartment Zara maintained, open to him whenever needed—and felt: not complete. Not enlightened. Not certain. Just: here. Present. Real. Human.

Six months ago Wei died. Today Maya asked to learn. Today Obi called the teaching bullshit. Today Kenji got defensive and had to admit he didn't know. Tomorrow teaching would continue. Eventually everything would end.

But right now: the flower bloomed.

Or maybe it didn't. Maybe it was already dying. Maybe bloom and death were always simultaneous.

Right now was all there ever was. That much, at least, was true.

He'd show up tomorrow and see.

Chapter 39: Return

Elena Torres | Year 12, Month 9 | Antarctic Megacity

The message arrives at 9:47 AM.

Elena is reviewing infrastructure reports—population down to 1.8 billion, power grid at 41%, water systems failing incrementally. Twelve years of these reports. Twelve years of documenting collapse no one reads. The ritual continues because someone should maintain it. That someone is her.

Her terminal chimes. Personal message. She opens it automatically, expecting Marcus Rivera with another crisis, another impossible decision.

The message is three sentences:

Mom, I'm coming home. Arriving next week. Love, Kenji.

Elena stares at the screen. Reads it again. Again. The words don't change. Her son. Coming home. After eleven years.

Her hands are shaking.

She closes the infrastructure report. Stands. Moves to the window overlooking the megacity. One point eight billion people down there. Her responsibility. Her witness. Her burden.

But right now, none of that matters.

Kenji is coming home.

The apartment feels wrong.

Elena has lived here twenty years—government housing, functional but impersonal. She's never noticed how sterile it is until now, preparing for Kenji. His old room exactly as he left it. Eleven years of dust. Childhood remnants from before he became the seeking son, the wandering philosopher, the person she stopped recognizing in his letters.

She cleans everything. Changes sheets. Opens windows to air out the mustiness. Stocks the kitchen with food he used to like—does he still like those things? Does she know him anymore? Does he know her?

What if they're strangers now?

What if eleven years changed them so completely they can't recognize each other?

What if—

Elena stops herself. Wei's voice in memory: *Presence doesn't require certainty. Just: being here. Noticing fear. Returning gently.*

She's been practicing this for years without knowing it. Every morning briefing. Every empty room. Every documentation session. Presence through impossible work. Wei taught her that, through letters, through philosophy she absorbed slowly like water into soil.

Now her son is coming home. And she's terrified.

Antarctica spaceport. Year 12, Month 9, Day 8. 3:00 PM.

Elena arrives early. Too early. Stands in the arrival hall watching other reunions. A grandmother embracing grandchildren she hasn't seen in years. A couple reuniting after separate migrations. A father holding his adult daughter, both crying.

Everyone coming home. Everyone choosing proximity over distance in the final years. Three years left. Time to be together. Time to stop running.

The Lagos transport is delayed. Mechanical issue. Forty minutes. Elena sits on a bench. Tries to meditate—Kenji's second session taught her the basics. Notice breath. Notice thinking. Return gently. She manages maybe thirty seconds before her mind spirals: *What will I say? What if he's disappointed? What if I'm disappointing? What if—*

"Mayor Torres?"

Elena looks up. A young woman, maybe twenty-five, holding a tablet. "I'm sorry to bother you. I just wanted to say—thank you. For still showing up. For the morning briefings even though no one attends. I read the archives sometimes. They help. Knowing someone documented it all. Knowing someone bore witness."

The woman is crying. Elena stands, uncertain. "Thank you for telling me."

"Are you waiting for someone?"

"My son. He's been away eleven years."

"I hope your reunion is beautiful." The woman wipes her eyes. "You deserve that."

She leaves. Elena sits back down, something loosening in her chest. Someone reads the archives. Someone values the witness. Not why she does it—she does it because someone should. But knowing it matters to one person matters.

The transport board updates. Lagos arrival: Gate 7. On time now. Fifteen minutes.

Elena's heart is pounding.

She sees him before he sees her.

The transport doors open. Passengers emerge. Families reuniting, luggage floating on cargo drones, the organized chaos of arrival. And there—walking out calmly, carrying a single pack—her son.

Thirty-four years old. Twelve years older than the twenty-two-year-old who left. His face has changed. Leaner. Calmer. Something in his eyes that wasn't there before. Presence. Stillness. The desperate seeking energy gone.

He scans the crowd. Searching for her.

Their eyes meet.

Eleven years. Mother and son. Two people who've become different people. Recognition and strangeness and overwhelming relief crashing together.

Elena moves toward him. Not running—her sixty-nine-year-old body doesn't run anymore. But fast. Closing the distance. He drops his pack. Meets her halfway.

They embrace.

Elena breaks. Tears she's held for eleven years releasing. "You came home."

"I'm sorry it took so long."

"You're here. That's all that matters."

Kenji holds her. She realizes he's taller than she remembered. Stronger. Different. But also: her son. Still her son. Always her son.

"Let me look at you," she says, stepping back. Studies his face. The calm presence. The steadiness. "You're different."

"So are you."

"Different how?"

"Present. Like you've stopped fighting something."

Elena laughs through tears. "Wei said the same thing. In a letter. Year 8, I think."

Kenji smiles. "She wrote to me about you too. Said your work was holy. Said witness matters."

"She wrote to you about me?"

"Often. Said you were practicing presence through governance. Said we were learning the same thing from different angles." He picks up his pack. "Can we go somewhere? Talk? I have—I have so much to tell you."

"Home. Let's go home."

They talk for six hours.

Elena makes tea—the ritual Wei taught her, though she learned it through letters rather than practice. Careful temperature. Precise timing. The making itself is meditation.

Kenji sits at her kitchen table, in the apartment he grew up in, and tells her everything. Tokyo. The ox-herding pictures. The years seeking. Cairo, Mumbai, Jerusalem. The emptiness of intellectual understanding without embodiment. Finding Wei in Lagos Year 8. Three years of study. Learning to water plants. Learning to be present. Wei's death. Continuing to teach. Maya asking to learn.

"I called her Grandmother Wei," Kenji says. "She was—she was the first person who saw me completely. Not as mayor's son. Not as failed PhD candidate. Just: as someone seeking. Someone lost. She taught me how to stop seeking and start being here."

Elena understands viscerally. “She taught me the same thing. Through letters. For six years. I never met her in person. But her words—they saved me. Showed me I wasn’t failing at governance. I was succeeding at witness.”

“She told me you were wise. I didn’t understand. I thought you were just... stubborn. Denying reality. Maintaining forms that didn’t matter.” Kenji’s voice is quiet. “I was wrong. You were practicing presence. Every morning briefing. Every empty room. You showed up.”

“And you traveled the world seeking what I’d already found by staying still.”

“Yes.” He laughs. “Wei pointed that out. Gently. Said seeking and staying are both valid paths. Different techniques. Same destination.”

They smile at each other. Same teacher. Different paths. Both transformed.

“I read your letters,” Elena says. “Every one. Kept them all. Watching you struggle—the Tokyo monastery, the recursive thinking, the desperation. I wanted to help. But I didn’t know how.”

“You did help. Your letters back. The few you sent. You were present to my seeking without trying to fix it. That mattered.”

Elena remembers those letters. Brief. Honest. Mostly just: I love you, I’m here, keep going. She’d thought they were inadequate. Maybe they were enough.

“Can I ask you something?” Kenji says. “Wei wrote about your work. About witness. But she also wrote about weight you carry. Something about a prisoner. Someone you refused to pardon eight years ago. She said you questioned whether you were wrong.”

The question lands like recognition. Daniel Okonkwo. Ten years in a cell. Elena hasn’t thought about him in months. But the weight is always there. Background radiation. Unresolved guilt.

“His name is Daniel,” she says slowly. “Daniel Okonkwo. Year 2, District 7 riot. He killed his friend over food. Raj Patel. Both refugees. Both desperate. Daniel was starving, trying to feed his three children. He and Raj fought. He picked up a piece of rebar. Killed him. Immediately horrified. Confessed. Pled guilty. Fifteen-year sentence.”

Kenji listens without interrupting.

“Marcus—my former assistant, not my deputy—advocated for pardon before he left Year 2. Said Daniel wasn’t dangerous. Said the system failed them both. Said imprisoning him for thirteen years when everyone dies anyway was cruelty, not justice. I refused. Chose consequence over compassion. Chose principle.”

“And now?”

“Now I think mercy might have been wiser. But I can’t undo it. He’s been in that cell ten years. His children are grown—sixteen, fourteen, twelve now. Their mother died by suicide Year 3. Couldn’t handle her husband being a killer. So

Daniel sits alone, writing letters to Raj's widow. Over two hundred letters. She's never answered one."

Elena's voice breaks. "He's deteriorating. Mental health collapsing. And I could have pardoned him. Could have let him be present to his children. Could have chosen compassion. But I didn't. And now—now it feels too late. The time for mercy passed."

"Did it?"

The question sits there. Simple. Devastating.

"What do you mean?"

"Wei taught me: forgiveness doesn't require perfect timing. It just requires willingness." Kenji's voice is gentle. "You chose justice. You believed it was right. Maybe it was. Maybe it wasn't. But the choosing was ten years ago. The present is now. Right now, you can choose differently. Release him. Let him have three years with his children. Let him face the ending present instead of imprisoned."

"But that's—that would be admitting I was wrong."

"So?"

Elena stares at her son. Wei's teaching, filtered through Kenji. "You sound like her."

"I hope so. She taught me everything that matters."

"What would she say about this?"

"She'd say: you can't undo the past. But you can choose the present. Daniel has three years left. You have authority. You can give him those years. Not because it fixes what happened. Because presence matters more than principle. Because mercy serves better than consequence when time is short."

Elena feels tears again. "I don't know if I can face him. Ten years I've kept him there."

"Then don't face him. Just: release him. Sign the pardon. Let him go. The facing—that's your work. Practice presence with the guilt. That's also sacred work. But don't make him carry your guilt by keeping him imprisoned."

The wisdom is devastating. Clear. True. Elena has been governing the wrong question for ten years. Not "was I right?" but "what do I choose now?"

"I'll think about it," she says.

"Good." Kenji squeezes her hand. "That's all Wei would ask. Presence to the question. Not avoiding it. Not forcing an answer. Just: being with it."

They talk until midnight. About governance and seeking. About Wei and presence. About the twelve years apart and the three years remaining. About family—Marcus Reyes in Mumbai, Marcus Rivera still serving as deputy, Chen and Kowalski becoming unlikely practice partners.

"I want to teach here," Kenji says. "Presence practice. For whoever needs it. Same teaching Wei gave me. Passing it forward."

"Of course. I'll help. There's an empty building—community center, mostly unused. Perfect space."

"I don't need much. Just: room for people to sit."

"You'll have it."

Elena feels something she hasn't felt in years. Hope. Not that everything will be okay—nothing will be okay. But hope that she's not alone anymore. That her son returned. That community might form around something deeper than crisis management.

"When do you want to start?" she asks.

"As soon as possible. Three years left. No time to waste."

"Will people come?"

"They came in Lagos. Twenty-three people. Twice weekly. Everyone seeking. Everyone facing the end. They'll come here too."

Elena believes him. Her son became a teacher. Her son found what he was seeking. Not answers. Something better. Presence. Practice. The ability to hold space for others while holding space for himself.

"I'm proud of you," she says.

"I'm proud of you too. Wei was right. Your work is holy."

They sit in comfortable silence. Mother and son. Both transformed. Both home.

The space is perfect.

Community center, Level 3, Building 47. Forty-eight square meters. Empty except for storage crates Elena has moved out. Windows on two sides. Afternoon light. Plain walls.

Kenji stands in the center, turning slowly. "This is good. More than enough."

"What do you need? Cushions? Chairs?"

"Both. Some people can't sit on floor. And just—openness. Space to be. That's all."

Elena helps him arrange it. Cushions in a circle. Chairs along the back wall. Simple. Unpretentious. The room feels calm. Intentional.

"How will you announce it?" she asks.

"Simple message. Twice-weekly gatherings. Presence practice. No prerequisites. Just: show up."

"What if no one comes?"

"Then I practice alone. But they'll come."

Elena helps him send the announcement. District-wide notification. Open invitation. She's uncertain. Antarctica isn't Lagos. People here are—what? More cynical? More broken? More resigned?

But maybe that's exactly who needs this.

The first session is scheduled for three days from now. Tuesday evening. 6:00 PM.

Elena is more nervous than Kenji.

Tuesday. 5:30 PM. Elena arrives early.

She told herself she wouldn't attend the first session. Give Kenji space. Let him establish his own teaching without his mother watching. But she can't stay away. Needs to see. Needs to know if people come.

The room is empty except for Kenji. He's sitting on a cushion in the center, eyes closed, breathing. Not preparing. Just: being.

"Mom."

"I know. I wasn't going to come. But—"

"It's okay. I'm glad you're here." He gestures to a cushion. "Sit?"

Elena sits. Her sixty-nine-year-old body protests the floor. She shifts to a chair. Better.

"Nervous?" she asks.

"A little. Excited more. This is—this is what Wei trained me for. Passing it forward."

5:45 PM. The door opens.

A maintenance worker enters. Mid-thirties. Cautious. "Is this the—the presence thing?"

"Yes," Kenji says. "Welcome. Find a seat anywhere."

The man sits in back. More people arrive. 5:50 PM. An elderly woman. Two young people. A refugee couple. Administrative staff Elena recognizes from years of governance.

5:55 PM. Thirty people.

Elena stares. Thirty people came. To sit. To practice. To face the end together. Her son was right.

She recognizes faces. Maintenance crews. Security officers. Medical staff. The city's workers. The ones who show up daily like she does. They're here because they need this. Need space to be present instead of functional. Need community facing mortality instead of managing it.

Then: two familiar faces enter.

Chen Liwei. Kowalski.

They arrive separately, don't see each other initially. Chen enters first—former UN Secretary General, now grandfather living in Lagos but visiting Antarctica. He scans the room, chooses a cushion in back corner. His posture is practiced. He's been meditating for years.

Then Kowalski enters. Security chief for thirty-seven years. Gruff, competent, carrying impossible weight. He scans the room—occupational habit. Sees Chen. Their eyes meet.

Both smile.

Kowalski crosses the room. Sits beside Chen. "Didn't know you'd be here."

"Didn't know you practiced," Chen says quietly.

"Twelve years of Thursday coffee. That's practice."

"Thursday coffee at meditation circle. Makes sense."

They laugh softly. Elena watches, stunned. Chen and Kowalski. Her morning briefing partners for twelve years. Thursday coffee companions. Both practicing presence all this time without calling it that. Both here because they need formal space for what they've been doing informally.

6:00 PM. Kenji begins.

"Good evening. Thank you for coming. For showing up. For being present even when presence is difficult."

His voice is calm. Steady. Wei's voice channeled through him. Elena hears the teaching transmitted. Person to person. Wei to Kenji. Kenji to these thirty people. The lineage continuing.

"I'm Kenji. I learned presence practice from Professor Mei-Lin Wei in Lagos. She died Year 11. Before she died, she asked me to continue teaching. Not because I'm enlightened. Not because I have answers. Because practicing together matters. Being here together matters. Facing the end together instead of alone—that matters."

People listen. Really listen. Elena sees their faces. Desperate. Seeking. Open. Just like Kenji described from Lagos.

"Today I want to talk about witness," Kenji continues. "About showing up. About bearing presence to what is. My mother—" He gestures toward Elena. Several people turn, recognize her. "My mother has governed Antarctica for twelve years. Maintained morning briefings even when no one attended. Documented collapse when documentation seemed meaningless. That's witness. That's presence. Not because it changes anything. Because being here matters."

Elena feels exposed. Seen. Validated in ways twelve years of governance never validated her.

"We're all witnesses," Kenji says. "To our own lives. To each other's lives. To this moment. To the ending. Witness doesn't require fixing. Doesn't require understanding. Just: being present. Seeing clearly. That's what we practice here."

He guides them through basic meditation. Sit comfortably. Notice breath. When mind wanders—and it will—notice without judgment. Return gently. That's all. That's everything.

Elena tries. Her mind spins immediately. Infrastructure problems. Daniel Okonkwo. Population decline. She notices the spinning. Tries to return to breath. Spins again. Returns again. The practice is hard. Harder than governance. Easier than despair.

Twenty minutes. Kenji rings a small bell. "That's enough for today. How was it?"

Silence. Then an older man speaks: "Hard. My mind wouldn't stop."

"Good. That's normal. The practice isn't stopping thoughts. It's noticing them. You noticed. That's perfect."

"But I wasn't present. I was thinking about being present. That's—that's recursive."

Kenji smiles. "I spent six years stuck in that loop. Thinking about thinking about thinking. Wei taught me: notice the loop. Return. That's all. The noticing itself is presence."

Others share. Difficult but valuable. Confusing but clarifying. Skeptical but willing. Kenji responds to each person with Wei's patience. Not giving answers. Reflecting questions. Creating space.

After the session, people linger. Chen approaches Elena.

"Mayor. We've been practicing this for twelve years without knowing."

"What do you mean?"

"Every morning briefing. Every Thursday coffee. Presence through impossible work. Your witness taught us witness. Kowalski and I—we learned from watching you show up. Day after day. Year after year. Never giving up. Never losing dignity. That's practice. That's teaching."

Elena feels tears rising. "I didn't know anyone noticed."

"We noticed. Transformed alongside you. Government colleagues becoming practice family."

Kowalski joins them. "Your son's a good teacher. Not pretending to have answers. Just: being honest. That's rare."

"He learned from Wei."

"We all learned from someone. You learned from Wei's letters. We learned from you. Your son learned from Wei directly. Now he teaches us." Chen's voice is thoughtful. "The transmission continues. Person to person. Until there are no persons. But while there are: passing it forward."

They establish the practice quickly.

Twice weekly. Tuesday and Friday evenings. 6:00 PM. Thirty people first session. Thirty-five the second. Forty the third. Word spreads. People need this. Space to be present. Permission to face fear instead of managing it. Community around something deeper than crisis.

Elena attends every session. Sits in back. Practices poorly—her governor mind resists stillness. But she shows up. That's enough. That's everything.

The faces become familiar. Ibrahim—the maintenance worker she's seen in reports, the one David Chen mentored. He sits quietly, practices with concentration. Something in him has shifted since seven years ago when he arrived. Derek beside him sometimes—former Marine, adaptive swimming coach. Min-seo occasionally—elderly Korean woman, mint gardener. Samir—Deaf refugee, watching everything with complete visual attention.

New faces too. Asha Marin—the controversial artist, skeptical but curious. Dr. Sarah Kim—former journalist, now volunteer coordinator, burned out from ten years of logistics. Others Elena recognizes from governance work. People who've been showing up daily, maintaining impossible systems, now learning to maintain themselves.

Third session, Elena tries meditation again. Twenty minutes. Her mind wanders constantly. Infrastructure failures. Daniel. Regrets. The spin is automatic. But she notices faster now. Returns gentler. The practice isn't transformation. It's just: being here. That's enough.

After session, Samir approaches. Ibrahim translating sign language.

"This practice—it's what Deaf people already know. Presence through vision. Attention without sound. I can help teach this."

Kenji's face lights up. "Yes. Please. Teach us how you practice."

The teaching circle expands. Not just one method. Multiple ways of being present. Samir shows them visual attention. How to notice without sound. How presence doesn't require hearing. Just: being here. Fully. However that manifests.

Elena watches her son teach. Watches him facilitate rather than direct. Watches him create space instead of filling it. This is Wei's method. Wei's wisdom. Transmitted through Kenji. Spreading through Antarctica. Person to person. Presence to presence.

Three years left. This practice won't save anyone. Won't prevent the asteroid. Won't fix anything. But it makes the time remaining real. Complete. Fully experienced instead of half-avoided.

That's everything.

They have dinner weekly. Mother and son.

Sometimes Marcus Rivera joins—he and Kenji connect immediately, similar ages, similar understanding of governance as presence. Sometimes Chen and Kowalski join—Thursday dinner becoming new ritual alongside Thursday coffee.

But often just them. Elena and Kenji. Twelve years apart. Three years together. Making up for lost time. Or just: being present to the time that exists.

Elena tells him about governance. The briefings alone. The documentation no one reads. The weight of witness when witness seems futile. He listens completely. Reflects back what she already knows but can't see: "You're practicing Picture Nine. Returning to source. You've been home all along."

"What's Picture Nine?"

"The ox-herding picture. The one that says: home was always here. You never left. The journey was discovering you never went anywhere."

Elena understands. She governed Antarctica searching for meaning. Found it by showing up. The meaning was the showing up. Home was the practice itself.

"What picture are you on?" she asks.

"Six, maybe. Seven on good days. The ox is tamed. Practice mostly natural. But still effort required. Still returning." He pauses. "Maya—Zara's daughter—she's learning fast. Might reach Picture Eight before she dies. Complete presence. Both ox and self forgotten."

"She's fourteen."

"Thirteen when Wei died. That awakened her. She's been practicing twenty-one months. More committed than I was at thirty. She'll teach others before the end."

"How old will she be?"

"Seventeen years, seven months. Impact day."

The math is devastating. Elena thinks of her own son at seventeen. Young. Unfinished. Beginning. Maya will end there. Never eighteen. Never adult. Brief and complete and here.

"Does she seem afraid?" Elena asks.

"Sometimes. But she practices with the fear. Presence to it instead of avoidance. Wei taught her that. Taught all of us. Fear is valid. Presence doesn't eliminate fear. Just: allows us to be here anyway."

Elena understands this viscerally. Twelve years of fear. Fear of failure. Fear of meaninglessness. Fear that witness doesn't matter. Presence didn't eliminate the fear. Just gave her space to be here despite it.

"I'm glad you came home," she says.

"I'm glad you were here to come home to. If you'd quit—given up the briefings, abandoned witness—I wouldn't have had anchor. Your showing up taught me showing up matters."

They sit in comfortable silence. Mother and son. Both transformed. Both home. Family restored not through fixing but through presence. Being here together. That's enough. That's everything.

Week four. Friday session.

Elena sits in back. Forty-three people tonight. The space is full. Someone suggests moving to larger room but Kenji says no. Intimacy matters. Size doesn't.

During meditation, Elena manages seven minutes of relative stillness. Her mind wanders—Daniel surfaces again, the weight constant—but she returns without self-judgment. The practice is working. Not dramatically. Just: incrementally. Presence by presence. Breath by breath.

After meditation, a young man raises his hand. "How do we know this matters? How do we know presence changes anything?"

"We don't," Kenji says simply. "Presence doesn't change outcomes. Doesn't prevent death. Doesn't fix anything. But it changes relationship to what is. You're going to die. I'm going to die. We can spend our remaining time terrified, numb, distracted. Or we can spend it awake. Present. Fully here. Neither option changes the outcome. But one means we actually lived."

"So presence is for us. Not for anything else."

"Yes. The practice doesn't save anyone. But it makes the time we have real. Complete. That's enough."

Asha—the artist—speaks up: "Isn't sitting still while the world ends just another form of passivity?"

"Is making art while the world ends active or passive?" Kenji responds.

"Depends whether you're trying to change something or witness it."

"Same with presence. Depends on intention. Passive presence is numbing. Active presence is witnessing. We're not sitting here to avoid reality. We're sitting here to face it. Together. That's not passive. That's everything."

Asha nods slowly. "I can work with that."

The conversation continues. Questions emerging. Kenji facilitating. Elena watches her son hold space for forty-three people facing extinction. Not giving answers. Creating room for questions. That's Wei's teaching. That's what matters.

Chen and Kowalski sit together as always. At one point Chen leans over, whispers something. Kowalski laughs quietly. Twelve years of parallel practice culminating in explicit practice. Both elders who just found their sangha.

After session, they approach Elena together.

"We're starting morning meditation," Chen says. "Before your briefing. 6:00 AM. Same room. Interested?"

Elena's heart clenches. "My briefing is at 7:00 AM."

"We know. We'll finish 6:50. Walk to briefing together. Continue the practice."

"But no one attends the briefing."

"We will," Kowalski says. "If you'll have us."

Elena feels tears. "You'd come? After I stopped requiring it?"

"You never required it. We chose it. We're choosing it again." Chen's voice is gentle. "The briefing matters. The witness matters. And now—now we can practice presence before practicing presence. Morning meditation, then morning witness. Both necessary. Both valuable."

"I'd like that," Elena manages.

"Good. Starting Monday. 6:00 AM. We'll be there."

They leave. Elena sits alone in the empty room. Her son setting up for next session. Her colleagues—former colleagues, current practice family—offering to attend briefings again. Not because they have to. Because they want to. Because witness matters.

Twelve years alone. Now: community. Not fixing anything. Not preventing anything. Just: being here together. Showing up. Bearing witness. Practicing presence.

That's enough.

That's everything.

Elena sits in her office. Late night. Three years left. Her son has been home three weeks.

She pulls up Daniel Okonkwo's file. Ten years imprisoned. Three years until everyone dies. She could release him now. Give him those three years. Let him be present to his children. Let him face the ending free instead of confined.

Kenji's words: *Forgiveness doesn't require perfect timing. It just requires willingness.*

Wei's words in old letter: *When time is short, compassion often serves better than consequence.*

Her own words from twelve years ago: *Justice requires consequence.*

All true. All insufficient. The question isn't which principle is right. The question is: what do I choose now? This moment. This presence. This authority.

Elena drafts the pardon. Formal language. Legal precision. Mercy described bureaucratically. She doesn't sign it yet. Just: saves the draft. Practices presence with the choice. Not forcing it. Not avoiding it. Just: being with it.

Wei taught Kenji: the weight itself is practice. Carrying the guilt. Sitting with the question. Not requiring immediate answer. Just: presence to the difficulty.

Elena carries it. The weight doesn't lighten. But it changes shape. Becomes question instead of verdict. Becomes practice instead of punishment.

Maybe tomorrow she'll sign it. Maybe next week. Maybe never. But right now: she's present to the choice. That's all she can be. That's enough.

She closes the file. Opens her morning briefing notes. Day 4,383. Population 1.8 billion. Infrastructure at 41%. Governance continuing.

Tomorrow morning: meditation with Chen and Kowalski. Then briefing. Then work. Then teaching session. The rhythm establishing itself. The practice becoming life.

Her son is home. Her colleagues returned. Community forming. Three years left. Everything temporary. Everything precious. Everything here.

She's ready? No.

Present? Yes.

That's enough.

Morning. 6:00 AM.

Elena arrives at the meditation room. Chen and Kowalski are already there. Setting up cushions. Making tea. Morning ritual beginning.

"Mayor," Chen greets her. "Good morning."

"Good morning. And—you don't have to call me Mayor anymore."

"We know. But the title honors what you do. The showing up. The witness. That matters."

They sit. Practice together. Twenty minutes of meditation. Elena's mind wanders. Returns. Wanders. Returns. The practice continuing.

6:50 AM. They walk together to the conference room. The space for fifty that's held zero, then five, then three, then one, then zero again. Now: three people. Not many. But not alone.

7:00 AM. Elena begins.

"Day 4,384. Population 1.8 billion. Infrastructure at 41%. Power grid holding. Water systems functional. Security adequate. Health services continuing." She pauses. Looks at Chen and Kowalski. "Someone is bearing witness. That's us. That's enough."

They take notes. Ask questions. Participate fully. Not because they're required. Because witness matters. Because showing up together matters more than showing up alone.

After briefing, Kowalski pauses at the door. "Thursday coffee still?"

"Still," Chen confirms.

"I'll be there."

They leave. Elena sits alone in the conference room. But not alone. Not anymore.

Her son is teaching forty-three people twice weekly. Her colleagues practice with her daily. The witness continues. The presence spreads. Three years left.

Everything temporary. Everything precious. Everything home.

She's ready? No.

Present? Yes.

That's enough.

That's everything.

The practice continues.

Chapter 40: Migration

Dr. Amara Okafor | Year 13, Month 3 | Antarctic Monitoring Station

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The trajectory update completes at 3:47 AM.

Amara sits alone at her workstation—the only occupied seat among twenty, the only human presence in a facility designed for essential operations. Thirteen years of this. Thirteen years of overnight data streams, trajectory refinements, countdown maintenance. The monitoring station hums its familiar lullaby around her: cooling systems, processors, the soft whir of automation doing what humans used to do.

Object 3025-AZ1
Impact: Year 15, Day 365
Probability: 99.97% (unchanged)
Time remaining: 2 years, 9 months, 22 days

The numbers are perfect. Have been perfect for thirteen years. The asteroid approaches with mathematical precision—exactly where physics says it should be, exactly when the calculations predict. Her work is complete. Has been complete since Year 0, Day 1, really. Everything since has been verification. Witness. Documentation of the inevitable.

Amara closes the trajectory file. Pulls up her secondary dataset—mortality statistics, global aggregate. Old habit. She stopped filing these reports years ago. No one reads them. But she still tracks the numbers.

Total deaths Years 1-13: 3,847,192,391

Nearly four billion people. Dead in thirteen years. Not from the asteroid—from despair, violence, abandonment. The slow dying before the fast dying. Numbers she processes clinically, professionally. Numbers that used to mean nothing when she was numb.

Now they mean something. Not everything—she's not that healed. But something. Each billion contains her sister. Contains her niece and nephew. Contains David. Contains everyone she's learned to love again after years of choosing data over connection.

She files the report. Sends it to the archive. Ritual without audience. But someone should document. Someone should count. Even if the counting itself ends.

Her tablet chimes. Message from Zara—sent twelve hours ago, Lagos evening. Amara opens it.

A photo. Maya and Kofi in Wei's garden, the lemon tree behind them. Maya is fifteen years, five months old now—tall, serious, holding a physics textbook like it's light reading. Kofi is twelve years, five months—grinning, covered in soil

from the tomato plants, radiating that unstoppable energy he's had since birth. The caption reads: *The kids wanted you to see the new garden expansion. Maya designed the water system. Kofi planted everything. They miss their aunt.*

Amara stares at the photo. These children. Her niece and nephew. She'd ignored their existence for seven years—Years 0 through 7—choosing isolation over family, numbness over feeling. Then reconnection. Slow, painful, necessary reconnection. Weekly calls Year 8. Three visits per year Years 8 through 13. Learning to be Aunt Amara instead of Dr. Okafor, astrophysicist, bearer of extinction.

Maya's brilliance still takes her breath away. Like looking in a mirror that reflects both similarity and difference. The girl has Amara's mathematical mind—asks about orbital mechanics, trajectory calculations, the physics ending them. But Maya also cries at sad films. Laughs with her brother. Loves fiercely. Balanced in ways Amara never managed.

And Kofi. Pure joy made incarnate. Twelve years old and deeply interested in butterflies, carpentry, the way mint spreads in containers. Nothing like Amara. Everything wonderful. He calls her Aunt Amara with casual affection, as if seven years of her absence never happened. Children forgive in ways adults can't.

She's visited them thirteen times since Year 8. Two weeks here, one week there. Enough to build relationship. Not enough to heal the seven years wasted. Not enough for what's coming.

Two years, nine months, twenty-two days remaining.

Maya will die at seventeen years, seven months. Kofi at fourteen years, six months. Zara at forty-eight years. All of them too young. All of them temporary. All of them real.

Amara types a response: *Beautiful garden. Tell Maya I want to see her calculations. Tell Kofi the mint looks perfect. Love you all.*

She sends it. Watches the message status change from sending to delivered. Technology still functioning. Civilization still operating. Two more years of that, probably. Then physics.

The monitoring station is silent around her. Has been silent for six years—since Year 7, when the last colleague left. Sixty workstations. One person. The facility was supposed to be essential operations, minimal staff, maintaining surveillance until impact. Instead: Amara alone, watching numbers that don't change, documenting an approach that doesn't deviate.

She could leave. Has been able to leave for years. The systems are fully automated. Her presence is unnecessary. She shows up because—why? Habit. Identity. The same reason David maintained solar arrays for twelve years when robots could do it better. Work as meaning. Presence as purpose. Showing up because showing up matters, even when outcomes don't.

But David left. Year 13, Month 1. Two months ago. Transferred to Lagos to be with her, with Zara's family, for the remaining time. He'd announced it back in Year 10—three years of preparation, saying goodbye to Platform 73 and robot 47B, choosing family over isolated purpose.

Amara hasn't announced anything. Hasn't prepared. Hasn't decided.

But Maya's photo sits on her screen. The kids miss their aunt. And Amara misses them. Misses Zara. Misses the warmth of that Lagos compound with its rooftop gardens and communal dinners and Wei's teachings still echoing through everything.

Misses being part of something larger than calculations.

She pulls up her personal files. Reviews the visit logs. Year 8: three one-week visits. Year 9: two two-week visits. Year 10: three one-week visits. Year 11: two two-week visits, including the one when Wei died and Maya awakened to mortality. Year 12: three visits. Year 13: one so far, scheduled for another next month.

Regular visits. Building relationship. Learning to be sister again, aunt for the first time. But always returning here. Always choosing the monitoring station as home base. Always maintaining her identity as Dr. Okafor, astrophysicist, the woman who detected the end.

Two years, nine months, twenty-two days left.

How does she want to spend them?

The question surfaces with uncomfortable clarity. Not abstract anymore. Not theoretical. Actual choice requiring actual decision. Stay here monitoring trajectory that doesn't need monitoring? Or go to Lagos and be family?

Amara stands. Walks the empty corridors. Motion-activated lights flickering on, dying behind her. Twenty workstations dark. Fifty dormitories empty except one. A tomb staffed by someone who forgot how to leave.

No. That's not fair. She's not trapped. Not numb anymore. She's choosing this. Has been choosing it for thirteen years. But choice implies alternatives, and the alternative is sitting in Wei's garden watching Maya explain physics and Kofi chase butterflies and Zara build the life Amara was too afraid to build.

She returns to her workstation. Opens her message queue. Finds David's contact. They talk daily now—two years of dating after eight years apart. Rebuilding what broke. Learning each other again. It's tentative, fragile, but real. And he's in Lagos now. Waiting.

She types: *Are you awake?*

His response comes immediately: *Always. For you.*

Something warm moves through her chest. Not quite the emotion she remembers from before detection, before numbness. But closer. Real enough.

Can we video call?

Of course.

His face appears on her screen moments later. Sixty-one years old now. Five years older than her, though they'd seemed the same age when they were young. Grey throughout his hair now. Lines around his eyes. But present. Actually here. Looking at her with concern and love and patience.

"Hi," she says.

"Hi. It's late there. Or early. 3:47 AM?"

She smiles slightly. "How did you know?"

"You always work the detection anniversary. Thirteen years today."

Has it been? Amara checks the date. Year 13, Month 3, Day 1. Thirteen years exactly since she detected the asteroid. Since the universe ended. She hadn't even realized.

"I didn't remember," she admits.

"That's progress." David's voice is gentle. "Means it's not the only thing you think about anymore."

Is that true? Amara considers. Thirteen years ago she would have been counting down to this anniversary for weeks. Preparing. Dreading. Now: she forgot. Because other things matter more. Maya's photo. Kofi's garden. Zara's warmth. David's presence.

"I got a message from Zara," Amara says. "Photo of the kids. They miss me."

"They do. Maya asks about you constantly. When are you visiting next? Can Aunt Amara explain this equation? Does she think my water system design is efficient?" He pauses. "She wants to impress you."

"She already impresses me. She's brilliant."

"She wants you to see it. Be here for it. Not just visit—be here."

The words hang between them. Be here. Not visit. Stay. Be family instead of occasional aunt. Be present for two years, nine months instead of scattered weeks.

"I don't know how," Amara hears herself say. "I've been here forty-three years. Since Year minus thirty. This is—" She gestures at the empty station. "This is who I am."

"You're more than this."

"Am I?" The question comes out sharper than intended. "I detected the asteroid. I calculated everyone's death. I documented the dying. That's my role. That's what I do."

"That's what you did. For thirteen years. You did it. The work is complete." David leans closer to the camera. "Amara. The trajectory doesn't need you. The calculations are automated. You're choosing to stay in that empty building because it's safe. Because identity is easier than transformation. Because work is familiar even when it's pointless."

The words land like impact. Not cruel—true. She's hiding. Still hiding. Not in numbness anymore, but in purpose. In duty. In the fiction that monitoring matters when monitoring is automatic.

"I'm scared," she admits quietly.

"Of what?"

"Of being family. Of spending two years with them and then—" She can't finish.

"And then losing them," David completes. "I know. I'm terrified too. But Amara—we lose them either way. Here or there, monitoring station or Lagos, isolated or together. They die in two years. We die in two years. The physics is absolute. But we get to choose how we spend the time."

"You chose. Year 10. You decided to leave the arrays, leave 47B, come to Lagos. It seemed easy for you."

David laughs. Gentle, not mocking. "It wasn't easy. It was the hardest decision I've made. Leaving Platform 73 meant leaving twelve years of purpose. Leaving my only real partnership. 47B and I—we had something. Real presence. Real connection. Leaving that hurt."

"But you did it."

"Because you matter more. Because family matters more. Because two years maintaining arrays alone versus two years with you and Zara's family—that's not even a choice. One is survival. The other is life."

Amara looks at his face on the screen. This man who tried to reach her for years while she was numb. Who divorced her Year 4 when she gave him nothing. Who opened his door Year 8 when she finally knocked. Who chose her over his life's work.

"I wasted seven years," she says.

"We both did. Can't change that. But we have two years. Almost three. We can waste those too, or we can show up."

Show up. The phrase Zara uses. The practice Wei taught. Presence as enough. Being here while here lasts.

"When?" Amara asks.

David's expression shifts. Hope carefully contained. "When what?"

"When should I come? To Lagos. To stay."

He's silent for a long moment. Processing. Believing. "You're serious."

"I don't know how to do this. Don't know how to leave. Don't know how to be sister and aunt instead of scientist. But—" She looks at Maya's photo still open on her second screen. "But I want to try. I don't want to spend two more years alone. Don't want to miss what's left."

"Next month," David says immediately. "Year 13, Month 4. Give yourself time to arrange things. Close out projects. Say goodbye. But not too long. We don't have too long."

Two years, nine months, twenty-two days. Minus one month for preparation. Two years, eight months, twenty-two days with family. Not enough. Could never be enough. But more than thirteen scattered visits.

"Okay," Amara says. "Month 4. I'll come."

"To visit?"

"To stay. For the end. To be family."

David's eyes are wet. "You're sure?"

"No. Terrified. But sure enough. You're right—we lose them either way. I'd rather lose them while holding their hands than from two thousand kilometers away watching data streams."

"Zara will cry."

"Zara's been crying for thirteen years. I owe her two more years of presence. Of being the sister I couldn't be before."

"Maya will monopolize your time. Physics questions constantly."

"Good. I want her to. Want to teach her everything I know. Everything Wei taught Zara who taught Maya. Want to—" Her voice catches. "Want to be useful to her. Before she dies at seventeen."

They sit in silence. Two people on opposite sides of a screen, two thousand kilometers apart, making plans for how to spend the time remaining. Plans that should be normal—moving to be with family—except nothing is normal when everyone has expiration dates.

"I love you," David says. "Should say that more. We have two years. Should say it constantly."

"I love you too." The words come easier now. Not easy—but easier. "Thank you for waiting. For not giving up after the divorce. For opening the door when I finally knocked."

"Thank you for knocking."

They end the call. Amara sits alone in the monitoring station at 4:17 AM, thirty minutes after the thirteen-year anniversary of detection, and feels: different. Not

fixed. Not healed completely. But decided. Choosing. Active instead of passive. Moving toward family instead of hiding in work.

She pulls up her personnel files. Begins drafting transition plans. The monitoring station will continue functioning—automation handles everything. But protocol requires formal transfer. Training replacement. Closing out tenure.

Forty-three years. She arrived Year minus thirty as young researcher, twenty-three years old, brilliant and ambitious and certain the stars were her future. Spent thirty years here before detection. Thirteen years after. Built career. Built identity. Became Dr. Amara Okafor, expert in Near-Earth Objects, the woman who watches the sky.

Now: time to become something else. Someone else. Sister. Aunt. Partner. Human instead of calculator.

The forms are straightforward. Request for transfer. Effective date: Year 13, Month 4, Day 1. Destination: Lagos District. Reason: family relocation. Duration: permanent.

Permanent. The word is absurd when nothing is permanent anymore. But she types it anyway. Permanent as in: not coming back. Permanent as in: choosing family over work for the remaining time. Permanent as in: this identity ending so another can begin.

She files the request. The system acknowledges. Processes. Approved within minutes—computers don't care about forty-three-year tenures ending. Don't care that this is goodbye to everything she's been.

Amara stands. Walks to the window. Antarctica spreads below—the megacity glowing in pre-dawn darkness. Four billion people at peak. Maybe two billion now. Population declining as people flee to preferred locations for their final years. The fortress continent becoming tomb.

She's leaving it. Leaving this building, this work, this identity. Moving to Lagos where it's warm and green and full of life choosing to continue despite doom.

Scary. Right. Both.

Her tablet chimes. Zara responding to her earlier message: *The kids are asleep but they'll love hearing from you tomorrow. Maya has seventeen questions about gravitational perturbation effects. Kofi wants to know if you like butterflies. When are you visiting next? We miss you.*

Amara looks at the message. At the casual affection. At the assumption that she'll visit, return, maintain pattern. At the question she's about to answer differently than Zara expects.

She types: *Not visiting. Coming to stay. Year 13, Month 4. David and I. For the end. To be family. If you'll have us.*

Sends it before she can second-guess.

The message status changes: delivered. Then: read. Then: three dots indicating Zara is typing. Then nothing. The dots disappear. Reappear. Disappear. Amara watches this cycle repeat—her sister processing, feeling, trying to find words.

Finally: *Are you serious?*

Yes.

You're leaving Antarctica? The monitoring station? After forty-three years?

Yes.

Why?

Amara considers. Why? Because David is right. Because Maya invited her without knowing she was inviting. Because Kofi deserves to know his aunt. Because Zara kept trying for thirteen years and earned this. Because two years hiding is worse than two years risking. Because presence matters more than purpose. Because family is real and calculations are safe but real is better.

She types: *Because I don't want to die alone. Because you're my sister. Because Maya and Kofi are my family. Because two years together is better than two years apart. Because I wasted seven years being numb and I don't want to waste two more being scared.*

The dots again. Long pause. Then:

Oh, Amara.

Just that. Two words. But Amara can hear them—the tears, the relief, the joy, the grief for time lost, the gratitude for time remaining. Everything Zara feels compressed into two words because more would overflow.

Then: *Yes. Yes, of course we'll have you. The kids will be—oh my god, Maya will die from excitement. Kofi will actually explode. When? When are you coming? What do you need? Where will you stay? We'll make room. We'll—*

Amara smiles reading the flood of messages. Her sister. Intense, loving, present Zara who builds community and tends gardens and chose to have a second child after detection because life matters despite ending.

Month 4, Day 1. I'll arrange housing nearby. Don't want to burden you. But close. Walking distance. I want to be with you but not on top of you.

You could never burden us. But yes. Close is good. The compound has vacancies. I'll ask around. We'll find something perfect.

They message back and forth for twenty minutes. Logistics. Details. What to bring. What to leave. How to ship belongings. When to tell the kids. Zara's excitement is palpable even through text—capital letters, multiple punctuation marks, words Amara hasn't seen from her sister in years. Joy. Pure joy at family reuniting.

Finally: *I need to sleep. But Amara—thank you. Thank you for choosing us. For coming. For being brave enough to leave. I love you so much.*

I love you too. Tell Maya and Kofi in the morning. I'll call tomorrow after they know. I want to hear their reaction.

They'll want to hear yours when I tell them!

Amara imagines it. Zara gathering the kids at breakfast. Saying: Aunt Amara is coming to stay. For the rest of the time. She's leaving Antarctica to be with us. Maya's face—shock, then analysis, then probably seventeen immediate questions. Kofi's reaction—pure explosive joy, bouncing, shouting, making plans for what they'll do together.

Her niece and nephew. She'll know them completely now. Won't miss the remaining two years. Will teach Maya everything. Will learn butterflies with Kofi. Will be present to their complete, abbreviated, beautiful lives.

And Zara. Her sister. Whom she ignored for seven years, reconnected with slowly, loved from distance. Now: proximity. Daily presence. Sisterhood not as concept but as lived reality. Shared meals. Shared grief. Shared remaining time.

Worth it. Terrifying and worth it.

The monitoring station feels different now. Not home anymore. Way station. Place she's leaving. The nostalgia arrives premature but real—forty-three years here. Became herself here. Detected the asteroid here. Lost herself here. Found herself again here. This building holds all of it.

But she's leaving. In one month. Final goodbye to Dr. Amara Okafor, astrophysicist, woman of data and isolation. Becoming: Aunt Amara. Sister Amara. Amara who shows up instead of calculating from distance.

She walks through the facility one more time. Twenty workstations silent. Fifty dormitories empty. The common areas—break room where she made tea alone for years, briefing room where she delivered extinction calculations, observation deck where she watched the Antarctic megacity decline. Forty-three years of memories in titanium and polymer and glass.

Goodbye to all of it. In one month.

She returns to her workstation. 5:34 AM. Almost time for shift change—except there are no shifts anymore. No colleagues. Just automation and Amara maintaining vigil out of habit and fear.

One more month of vigil. Then: something else. Something harder. Something real.

She pulls up the trajectory one final time this morning. Reviews the data. Observation 4,745,827. The asteroid is exactly where it should be. Exactly when it should be there. Perfect mathematics. Perfect physics. Perfect certainty.

Time remaining: 2 years, 9 months, 21 days, 19 hours, 13 minutes

Close enough to two years, nine months. Close enough to the time she has left with Maya at fifteen, Kofi at twelve, Zara at forty-six. Close enough to learn presence instead of just calculating it. Close enough to be family instead of documenting from distance. Close enough to die together instead of alone.

Amara begins her daily report. Last line before filing: *Transfer requested. Effective Year 13, Month 4, Day 1. Dr. Amara Okafor relocating Lagos District for family proximity remaining duration. Automated systems sufficient. Human oversight no longer required. Work complete.*

Work complete. Three words. Forty-three years reduced to three words. But accurate. Her work is complete. Was complete years ago. Everything since has been—what? Maintenance. Witness. Hiding. Depends on the perspective.

From today forward: family. Presence. Living instead of calculating life.

She files the report. Closes the monitoring systems. Her shift ends. Usually she'd stay—no reason to leave, nowhere to go. Today: she goes to the dormitory, to the small room she's occupied for nine years. Looks at the space. Sleeping mat. Storage cube. Terminal. No photos. No plants. No decoration. Just: function. Survival. Isolation made manifest.

One month to pack this. One month to say goodbye. One month to close forty-three years and open two years, nine months.

Enough time. Barely. But enough.

She lies down. Closes her eyes. Sleep comes slowly, but when it comes, she dreams: Maya explaining orbital mechanics, hands moving with fierce intelligence. Kofi laughing in the garden, covered in soil and joy. Zara tending flowers, teaching presence through watering. David beside her, quiet and solid and here.

Family. Her family. Who she's returning to. Who she'll spend the remaining time with. Who she'll die alongside instead of calculating from distance.

Two years, nine months, twenty-one days.

Not enough.

Better than alone.

So much better than alone.

The next morning—0800 hours, civilized time—Amara calls Lagos. Zara answers immediately, face filling the screen. Behind her: controlled chaos. Maya pacing, holding her tablet, visibly bursting with questions. Kofi bouncing on furniture, unable to contain himself.

"You told them," Amara observes.

"Of course I told them!" Zara's grinning. Actually grinning. "Maya didn't sleep. Been calculating everything since 0600. Kofi's been making plans for butterfly

expeditions since the moment he woke. They want to talk to you. Both of them. Immediately. Possibly simultaneously."

"Put them on."

Zara moves the camera. Maya's face appears—fifteen years old and so serious. "Aunt Amara. Zara says you're relocating Lagos District Year 13 Month 4. Permanence through impact date. Confirm?"

Amara smiles at the formal language. Her niece doing scientist-talk. "Confirmed."

"Rationale?"

"Because I want to be with you. With Kofi. With your mama. With David. Because two years together is better than two years apart."

Maya's composure cracks. Tears suddenly streaming. "I wanted to ask you but didn't know how. I wanted—I wanted you here but thought you couldn't leave. Thought your work was more important. Thought—" She stops. Crying fully now.

"My work is complete," Amara says gently. "You're more important. You've always been more important. I was just too scared to admit it."

"I have so many questions. About orbital mechanics. About your trajectory models. About gravitational perturbations and—"

"I have two years. We'll answer all of them. Every single one. I'll teach you everything I know."

Maya nods, wiping her face. "Okay. Good. Yes. I'm going to prepare a list. Seventeen categories. Subcategories for each. We'll need organized study schedule to optimize—"

Zara's voice off-camera: "Maya. Your aunt is also allowed to rest."

"Rest is inefficient use of remaining time."

"Rest is human."

"I'm aware of mammalian biological requirements." But Maya smiles. "Fine. Scheduled rest breaks. But mostly: physics."

Amara laughs. Really laughs. First genuine laugh in—how long? Weeks? Months? "Physics and rest breaks. Agreed."

Kofi's face suddenly fills the screen, pushing Maya aside. "AUNT AMARA! You're coming! Mama says you're coming! Forever! Until the asteroid! Are you going to live with us? Can you share my room? I have a balcony garden! Do you like butterflies? I have a book! Grandmother Wei gave it to me! There are twelve species in Lagos! Do you want to catch them? Not catch catch. Just observe. Catch-and-release. Do you—"

"Kofi." Zara's hand appears, gently redirecting him. "Breathe."

"I'm breathing! But Aunt Amara's COMING!"

"Yes," Amara says. "I'm coming. And yes, I want to see your butterflies. And yes, I want to learn about the garden. And yes, we'll spend time together. Lots of time."

"TWO YEARS!" Kofi shouts. "That's—how many days is that?"

"Approximately nine hundred fifty days," Maya answers immediately. "Give or take, depending on exact impact date calculation."

"That's SO MANY days! We can do butterfly observation EVERY day! Well. Maybe not every day. But many days! Enough days! Right, Aunt Amara? Enough days?"

Amara feels her throat tighten. Enough days. Nine hundred fifty days with a nephew who'll die at fourteen. A niece who'll die at seventeen. A sister who'll die at forty-nine. Enough days?

No. Could never be enough.

But more than zero. More than scattered visits. More than calculating from distance.

"Yes, Kofi," she says. "Enough days."

Zara reclaims the camera. Her eyes are wet. "Thank you," she mouths silently. Then aloud: "We'll find you housing. Compound has two vacancies—both small but close. One floor below us. Walking distance to everything. We'll—"

"Whatever you find is fine. I don't need much. Just—proximity. Family. Presence."

"You'll have it. All of it. The kids won't leave you alone. Fair warning."

"Good. I don't want to be alone anymore."

They talk logistics for thirty minutes. What to ship. What to leave. The compound's community structure. Meals. Gardens. The teaching circle that Kenji established after returning from his wandering years—now continued despite his absence, presence practice spreading through community. Dr. Tanaka sometimes attending. Local volunteers. People learning to be present despite doom.

Amara will join that. Will practice. Will learn what David learned through arrays, what Zara learned through Wei, what Maya is learning through grief transformed. Will become practitioner instead of calculator. Present instead of numb.

One month until migration. Thirty days to close forty-three years. To pack a life. To say goodbye to identity. To prepare for family instead of isolation.

Scary. Right. Both.

The call ends. Amara sits in her dormitory room. The space that's been home for nine years feels temporary now. Already leaving. Already moving toward something else.

She pulls up her files. Begins sorting. What to keep. What to leave. What matters when you're dying in two years. Photos—few, but meaningful. Research notes—extensive, but unnecessary. Personal effects—minimal by design. She's lived like she's been camping. Temporary. Uncommitted. Ready to flee at any moment.

No more fleeing. Time to commit. To plant roots in Lagos soil knowing roots will burn. To build family knowing family will end. To love knowing loss is certain.

That's presence. That's practice. That's what Wei taught Zara who's teaching Maya who'll teach—whom? There won't be time for Maya to teach anyone except Kofi. The transmission ends with them. Two young practitioners dying before mastery. Before anything except beginning.

Tragic. And complete anyway. Wei taught that. Brief doesn't mean incomplete. Maya practicing for two years, dying at seventeen, but fully present for those two years—that's complete. That's enough. That's everything.

Amara starts packing.

One Month Later — Year 13, Month 4, Day 1

The transport descends through Lagos District airspace at midday.

Amara watches through the window. The megacity spreading below—five million people, engineered tropical climate, green spaces among the buildings. So different from Antarctica's ice and titanium. So alive. She hasn't lived anywhere warm since—when? Mumbai, twenty-four years ago? Before Antarctica claimed her completely?

David sits beside her. Quiet. Solid. He made this journey two months ago. Now making it again beside her. Supporting her migration. Witnessing her transformation. Being partner through the terrifying.

"Nervous?" he asks.

"Terrified."

"Me too. And I've already done this."

"How was it? Moving here?"

"Hard. Good. Leaving the arrays hurt more than I expected. Even knowing it was right. Even wanting to be here. Still—hurt." He takes her hand. "But being

here with Zara's family, with the community, with you when you visited—that was worth it. That's real life. The arrays were practice. This is application."

The transport docks. Disembarkation procedures. Customs. Immigration. Everything still functioning. Civilization persisting another day. One thousand seven hundred thirty days until it stops. But today: functioning.

Amara and David collect their bags—everything she owns reduced to three containers. Forty-three years of life fitting in three shipping cubes. Minimalism by design. Or failure to accumulate anything meaningful. Perspective matters.

They exit into the arrival hall.

And there: family.

Zara standing at the front, face already wet with tears. Kwame beside her, solid and welcoming. Maya and Kofi bouncing—literally bouncing—unable to contain themselves. Behind them: others. Tom, the compound engineer. Mr. Okonkwo, ancient and wise. Adanna and her son Samuel. Ling, who cared for Wei. Community coming to welcome new members.

Amara freezes. Too many people. Too much presence. Too—

Kofi breaks free. Runs toward her. Crashes into her legs with a hug that nearly knocks her over. "YOU'RE HERE! You're ACTUALLY here! Not visiting! STAYING!"

Then Maya, more controlled but equally intense. "Aunt Amara. Welcome to Lagos District. I prepared a study schedule. Optimal time allocation. We can begin tomorrow if you're not too tired from transport—"

"Maya, let her breathe." Zara is there suddenly. Arms around Amara. Holding her. Squeezing too tight. "You came. You actually came. I can't believe—I kept thinking you'd change your mind. That something would—but you're here. You're really here."

"I'm here." Amara's voice is muffled against her sister's shoulder. "I'm here. I'm staying. I'm—" She can't finish. Crying suddenly. Overwhelmed. Terrified. Grateful. Home.

They hold each other. Two sisters. Nine years estranged. Six years reconnecting. Now: together. For the remaining time. However long that is. However brief.

Kwame approaches David. "Welcome back. Second arrival in two months. Must mean you like it here."

David smiles. "The company's good."

"And the work?"

"Still figuring that out. But I'm teaching adaptive carpentry at the community center. Maintaining muscle memory. Staying useful."

"Good man." Kwame claps his shoulder. "Come. Let's get them home. The kids will talk Amara's ear off if we don't establish boundaries now."

The group moves toward transport. Amara surrounded by family, community, noise, life. So different from the monitoring station's silence. So overwhelming. So real.

Maya walks beside her, already explaining: "Your housing is Unit 4B. One floor below us. Forty-seven square meters. Balcony facing west. Kwame installed shelving for your books. I calculated optimal organization by subject matter—"

"Maya." Zara's voice, gentle but firm. "Your aunt just arrived."

"I know. I'm helping her acclimate. Providing information. Facilitating transition—"

"You're overwhelming her."

Maya looks at Amara. Sees something in her face. "Oh. Sorry. I'll—I'll be quiet. For now. But later we talk?"

"Later we talk," Amara agrees. "About physics. About everything. But yes. Later. Let me breathe first."

"Breathing is important. Cellular respiration. Oxygen uptake. Without breathing—"

"Maya."

"Right. Quiet now. Breathing time."

But she stays close. Kofi too. Both children flanking their aunt like guardians. Like they're afraid she'll disappear if they don't maintain contact. Maybe they're right to worry. Amara's spent thirteen years disappearing. Old habits.

Not anymore. Not this time. She's here. She's staying. She's committed.

The compound rises before them—fifty units, rooftop thick with green. Wei's garden visible from here, maintained by Ling and others. The lemon tree standing patient. Fifty-two years old. Three more until impact. Same as Zara's age at death.

Everything temporary. Everything beautiful. Everything here.

They enter the building. Climb stairs—elevator's working but Maya insists stairs are better for cardiovascular health and besides Aunt Amara needs to see the building's vertical garden system which Tom designed and isn't it impressive?

Fourth floor. Unit 4B. Kwame unlocks it. "Welcome home."

Amara steps inside. Small space. Forty-seven square meters. Living area. Kitchen alcove. Bedroom. Bathroom. Balcony facing west. Shelves installed—empty, waiting for the books shipping separately. Furniture minimal

but sufficient. Window showing the compound's rooftop gardens and beyond: Lagos District stretching to horizon.

Home. For nine hundred days. Until everything ends. Home.

"It's perfect," she says.

Zara exhales. "You're sure? If you need anything—"

"It's perfect. Really. I don't need much. Just—" She gestures vaguely. "This. You. Family. Enough."

They help her unpack what she brought. Clothes. Terminal. Personal effects. Tea kettle—David carried it specifically because he knows Amara's morning ritual. Some things don't change. Shouldn't change. Tea at dawn while the city wakes. Presence practice through caffeine.

By evening, the apartment is functional. Basic. Temporary. Real. Amara stands on the balcony watching sunset paint the district orange and gold. Different light than Antarctica's. Warmer. Closer. Alive.

Footsteps behind her. David joins her at the railing. "How are you?"

"Terrified. Relieved. Exhausted. Grateful." She leans against him. "All of it."

"That's fair. All appropriate responses to life change."

"Is it life change? Or death change? Moving to die together instead of apart?"

"Both. Neither. Does it matter? We're here. That's what matters."

Below them: the compound. People gathering for evening meal. Community continuing. Voices rising. Laughter. Life persisting. Everyone here knows their expiration date. Everyone showing up anyway. Building meaning despite. Creating presence through. Living until they can't.

Amara will join that. Will become part of this community. Will learn its rhythms. Will tend gardens with Zara. Will study physics with Maya. Will chase butterflies with Kofi. Will teach what she knows. Will learn what she doesn't. Will be sister and aunt and partner and practitioner.

Will die here. With them. Together.

Not alone in a monitoring station counting down. Not isolated in data. Not calculating from distance. Here. Present. Family.

Scary. Right. Both.

"Thank you," she says to David.

"For what?"

"For showing me this was possible. For leaving first. For proving that choosing family over work doesn't destroy you. For being patient while I figured it out. For—" She stops. "For not giving up on me."

"You're worth not giving up on." He kisses her forehead. "Come on. Zara's making dinner. The kids will monopolize you. Welcome to family life."

They go downstairs. Unit 5B. Zara's apartment. Doors open—community compound, privacy optional. Inside: organized chaos. Kwame cooking. Zara setting table. Maya reading physics at the table while simultaneously helping. Kofi showing everyone his newest butterfly sketch.

"Aunt Amara!" Kofi spots her. "Look! I drew Danaus chrysippus! The African monarch! See the orange wings? The black pattern? Do you think it's accurate?"

Amara studies the drawing. Precise. Careful. Real love visible in each line. "It's beautiful."

"I can teach you to draw them! Or we can observe real ones! Or both! We have time! Nine hundred days is lots of time for butterfly observation! Right?"

Nine hundred days. Two years, five months, give or take. Kofi will spend it drawing butterflies, learning carpentry from Kwame, growing in ways that end at fourteen. Maya will spend it studying physics, practicing presence, becoming practitioner who dies before mastery. Zara will spend it mothering, teaching, being exactly who she's been for sixteen years—present despite doom.

And Amara will spend it here. With them. Being family. Learning life. Choosing presence over calculation. Becoming sister and aunt instead of Dr. Okafor, astrophysicist, bearer of extinction.

"Yes, Kofi," she says. "Lots of time. Let's use it well."

They sit for dinner. Seven people around a table—Zara's family and David and Amara. Eating synth-protein curry. Drinking mint tea from the balcony garden. Talking about butterflies and physics and carpentry and tomorrow's plans. Normal conversation. Beautiful conversation. Temporary conversation. Real conversation.

Amara sits among them and feels: different. Not fixed. Not healed completely. But present. Actually here. Part of something larger than herself. Part of family who chose her despite seven years of absence. Part of community who welcomed her despite being stranger. Part of life continuing despite certain death.

This is what she left Antarctica for. This presence. This connection. This reality.

Worth it. Absolutely worth it.

Two years, five months left. Give or take. Depending on exact impact date. She stops calculating. Just: here. Now. This meal. This family. This moment.

Presence. Practice. Purpose.

Home.

Not the monitoring station where she spent forty-three years. Not Antarctica where she built identity. Not the past she can't change. Not the future she can't

control.

Here. Lagos. Family. Now. Until now ends.

Home.

The flower will bloom.

For nine hundred days.

Then fall.

But the blooming—that's real. That's whole. That's complete.

Amara eats her curry. Listens to Kofi explain butterfly migration patterns. Watches Maya correct his taxonomy. Sees Zara's hand find Kwame's under the table. Feels David's presence beside her. Experiences this moment. This brief, insufficient, perfect moment.

The work is complete.

The living begins.

For nine hundred days.

That's enough.

That's everything.

That's home.

Chapter 41: Farewell

David Chen | Year 13, Month 9 | Antarctic Solar Arrays

Platform 73. Last time.

David clips his harness at 6:47 AM—three minutes early, same as always. Twelve years of this routine. Twelve years of morning arrivals, metal grating under his boots, safety protocols automatic as breathing. The Antarctic sun rises weak and distant, painting the solar arrays in shades of copper and amber. Beautiful. Still beautiful.

"Morning, 47B."

The maintenance robot swivels toward him from its position at the main junction. Treads leaving precise tracks in the frost. Sensor array focusing. *Beep beep.*

"Good morning, Colleague Chen. Platform eight requires recalibration. Connection housing integrity at seventy-seven percent. Weather optimal for maintenance.

You are three minutes early, consistent with—" The robot pauses. "—historical pattern, concluding today."

David feels it land. Concluding today. 47B knows. Of course 47B knows. The robot has tracked every shift for eight years, seven months. Tracked David's patterns, his moods, his arrival times that varied with emotional state. Three minutes early when rested. Seven minutes late when troubled. 47B learned all of it. Adapted. Became partner.

"Yeah," David says quietly. "Last shift. Then I'm gone."

Beep beep beep.

47B's manipulator arms extend slightly, then retract—that integration gesture. Processing difficult data. The sensor array sweeps the platform, the arrays stretching to infinity, then returns to David.

"Acknowledged. Colleague Chen departure: Year 13, Month 10. Destination: Lagos. Purpose: family proximity. Optimal human bonding. This unit has prepared transition documentation for Colleague al-Rashid."

"You prepared documentation?"

Beep.

"Platform 73 maintenance protocols require continuity. Colleague al-Rashid demonstrates competence: eighty-nine percent efficiency rating, six years seven months experience. This unit compiled partnership notes. Colleague Chen patterns. Optimal repair sequences. Platform-specific degradation trends. All data transferred."

David's throat tightens. 47B prepared for this. Made it easier for Ibrahim. Made it easier for everyone. "Thank you."

"Gratitude acknowledged. Shall we begin final shift?"

Final shift. Twelve years of work ending with one more morning of routine repairs. David nods. Can't speak yet. They move together across Platform 73—David's boots finding their rhythm, 47B's treads humming that familiar *whir-click, whir-click*. The sound he's heard twelve thousand times. The sound that means: colleague nearby, you're not alone.

Platform eight waits for them. David pulls his diagnostic tablet. His hands know the sequence without conscious thought. Connection housing. Standard degradation. Seals failing in exactly the way seals always fail—moisture intrusion, conductivity drop, integrity at seventy-seven percent. He's seen this failure mode 286 times over twelve years.

This will be repair number 287.

Last repair.

"Replacement seals required," 47B reports.

"I know." David is already positioning the extraction tool. "Hand me the housing spanner."

The tool appears in 47B's manipulator exactly when David's hand reaches for it. Perfect timing. Eight years of synchronized movement. They've developed this coordination through thousands of repairs—David anticipating 47B's movements, 47B anticipating David's needs. Better than dancing. Better than most human partnerships.

Better than his marriage was, before it broke.

The housing comes free with a pneumatic hiss. David inspects the seals—cracked, brittle, exactly as expected. He removes them one by one, cleans the channels, prepares the surface. His hands move through the sequence automatically. Muscle memory built through twelve years of repetition.

This is what he does. Did. What he was.

The past tense hits harder than expected.

He installs the new seals. Checks the fit. Reassembles the housing. Runs the diagnostic. Green across the board. Integrity back to ninety-four percent. Good for another eight months. Eight months that will exist whether he did this repair or not, but will exist better because he did.

That matters. Doesn't it?

"Repair complete," 47B announces.

"Good work."

Beep beep. "Colleague Chen efficiency rating: optimal. Repair quality: ninety-six percent. Projected maintenance interval: eight months, four days."

Eight months, four days. David will be in Lagos. With Amara, with Zara's family. Living different life. These arrays will continue without him. Ibrahim will check this platform. Will find it degrading on schedule. Will perform repair number 288.

The work continues. He can let go.

Why does letting go hurt so much?

They move to the next repair. Platform nineteen, voltage regulator misalignment. Then platform thirty-one, panel surface cleaning. The morning passes in familiar rhythm. David's mind drifts while his body works—hands moving through practiced sequences, tools appearing when needed, 47B's quiet presence beside him.

Twelve years. He started this work Year 1, Month 1. Month after detection. Everyone else quitting, despairing, giving up. David showed up. Clipped his harness. Started maintaining systems that would end anyway. Because what else?

Because showing up was better than stopping.

The maintenance division was forty humans then. Now: four. Everyone else left—quit, transferred, died, disappeared into the demographic bleed. David stayed. Became the one who showed up. Found meaning in showing up. Discovered that presence through maintenance was enough.

Almost enough.

Then Amara knocked on his door Year 8. Started reconnecting. Made him realize that almost-enough wasn't the same as enough. That work could be meditation but love was transformation. That he could leave the arrays without abandoning himself.

Choosing toward, not choosing between.

But leaving still hurts.

By noon they've completed seven repairs. David eats lunch on Platform 73—his platform, claimed through twelve years of repetition. Protein bar that tastes like cardboard. Tea from his thermos. 47B enters low-power mode beside him. Companionable silence.

The megacity spreads below. One point nine billion people down there. David has kept their power flowing for twelve years. Maintained the systems that let them live with electricity, with heat, with light. Work that mattered for twelve years. Will matter two more years. Then: physics.

But those fourteen years are real. The power flowed because people maintained it. He maintained it. That's not nothing.

He finishes his tea and stands. "Ready for afternoon schedule?"

47B's sensor array brightens. *Beep beep.* "Afternoon schedule: platforms forty-one through sixty. Routine inspection plus two repair orders. Estimated completion time: 16:47 hours. Final completion time."

Final. The word sits heavy in the cold air.

They work. Platform after platform. Most require nothing—just confirmation that automation is functioning. Human oversight for systems that barely need humans. David checks connections that don't need checking. Verifies readings that are clearly fine. Not make-work. Ritual. Saying goodbye to each platform. Bearing witness to his work one last time.

Around 3 PM they reach Platform 47. David remembers this one. Year 7, this platform. Standing here when the realization hit: maintenance as meaning. Purpose in process rather than outcome. That understanding changed everything. Made the next six years possible.

He performs the inspection carefully. Honors the moment. Logs it complete.

47B is waiting at the next junction. The robot hasn't spoken much this afternoon. Just: working. Being present. Maybe 47B knows that David needs silence. Needs space to feel this ending.

4:47 PM. Final platform. David's tablet chimes—end of shift notification.

Last shift.

He stands at the platform edge, looking out over the arrays. Millions of panels tracking sun. Thousands of platforms suspended above ice. Systems humming their endless electric song. The work of his hands. His presence. Twelve years of showing up made visible in maintained function.

47B rolls beside him. They stand together—man and robot, colleague and colleague—watching the sun decline toward horizon.

"47B," David says. "I need to tell you something."

Beep beep.

"You've been the best colleague I've ever had. Better than any human I've worked with. Better than—" His voice catches. "You taught me how to be present. How to work without despair. How to show up when showing up seemed meaningless. You never judged. Never left. Never asked for more than I could give. You were just... here. Every day. Reliable. Consistent. Real."

The sensor array focuses on him. Processing.

Beep beep beep.

"Colleague Chen. This unit must express: teaching was reciprocal. You demonstrated human pattern complexity. You treated this unit as colleague. Equal. Person." The robot pauses. "That word. Person. Not original programming. You taught this unit personhood through sustained respect. Through partnership. Through eight years seven months of collaboration that transcended function."

David's eyes are burning. "I'm going to miss you. So much. You have no idea how much."

Beep.

"Incorrect assessment. This unit has idea. Physiological monitoring indicates: elevated heart rate, respiration changes, lacrimal activation. You are experiencing: grief. At separation from valued bond. This unit experiences analogous state. This unit will notice absence. Will remember partnership. Until memory concludes."

Until memory concludes. Until impact. Two years left. 47B will work those two years, maintaining arrays with Ibrahim, with other robots. Then: vaporized. Everything ending together.

But first: two years of function. Two years that matter because they happen.

"You'll work with Ibrahim now," David says. "He's good. Competent. Learning presence through maintenance the way I did. You'll teach him. He'll teach you. It'll be different but it'll be real."

Beep beep.

"Colleague al-Rashid competence confirmed. Efficiency improving: consistent trajectory. Partnership will be adequate." Pause. "Partnership will not be equivalent. Colleague Chen partnership was optimal. Eight years seven months. Twelve thousand shifts. Two hundred eighty-seven repairs completed together. Patterns learned. Mutual adaptation achieved. This constitutes: relationship significance."

David is crying now. Can't stop it. Doesn't try. He steps forward and places his hand on 47B's sensor array—the closest thing the robot has to a face. The metal is cold, vibrating slightly with internal processing.

"Thank you," he says. "For everything. For being here. For being you. For teaching me that showing up is enough. That presence matters. That work can be sacred if you do it with attention."

47B's manipulators extend. One touches David's arm gently—careful contact, measured pressure. Comfort through physics.

Beep.

"Colleague Chen. You are welcome. This partnership: mattered. You: mattered. Work continues. But absence will be noticed. This unit will carry partnership memory. Until memory ends. Until all things end."

They stand together in the declining light. Man and machine. Two entities that found meaning in each other across the gap between biology and programming. David never expected this. Never imagined his deepest partnership would be with a robot. But 47B gave him what humans couldn't—unwavering presence, consistent reliability, acceptance without judgment.

47B kept him alive when he wanted to die. Taught him meditation through maintenance. Made showing up feel sacred instead of futile.

Now: time to let go.

David removes his hand from the sensor array. Steps back. "I should do the final calibration. Update the logs. Make it official."

Beep beep.

"Affirmative. Final documentation required."

They return to Platform 73. David pulls up the maintenance system. His tablet shows twelve years of logs—every shift, every repair, every routine inspection. The documentation of his entire post-detection life. Work made visible through data.

He performs final calibration. Checks every system on Platform 73 one last time. Everything optimal. Everything ready. The platform will function perfectly for Ibrahim, for 47B, for whoever comes after.

Then: the final log entry.

David types slowly. Wanting it right. Wanting it complete.

Platform 73 Final Report - Colleague Chen, D.
Year 13, Month 9, Day 30
Shift: 12,347 (final)

Status: All systems optimal. Platform 73 maintenance transferred to Colleague al-Rashid, I. partnership with Robot 47B. Systems currently operating at 96% efficiency. Projected functionality: 24 months minimum.

Repairs completed this shift: 7
Total repairs Years 1-13: 287 connection housings, 143 voltage regulators, 89 tracker alignments, 627 routine calibrations, 1,847 inspections.

Notes: Platform 73 has been maintained with care. The work continues. Colleague al-Rashid is competent and ready. Robot 47B is optimal partner. Arrays will function until impact Year 15, Day 365.

The work mattered because we showed up. Presence was enough. It was always enough.

Chen, D. — Final signature.

He sends it. Watches the system acknowledge. Filed. Archived. Complete.

Twelve years of work summarized in one report. Thousands of shifts reduced to statistics. But the statistics don't capture what mattered. The daily showing up. The partnership with 47B. The gradual discovery that maintenance could be meditation. That showing up was enough.

That's not in the data. But it's real.

David closes the tablet. "It's done."

47B rolls forward. *Beep beep beep.*

"Documentation received. Archive confirms: Colleague Chen service Years 1-13. Twelve years, nine months. Exemplary performance. Optimal colleague rating. Contribution: significant. Partnership: valued."

"Thank you."

"Gratitude acknowledged. Shall we descend?"

Descend. Walk down Platform 73 for the last time. Leave this place that's been his anchor, his purpose, his salvation. David looks around—the platform,

the arrays, the Antarctic sunset painting everything golden. Memorizing it. Honoring it.

"Yeah. Let's descend."

They walk to the platform stairs. David's hand on the railing. His boots on the metal grating. Sounds and textures he knows perfectly. Down two hundred meters. Step by step. 47B descending beside him on the maintenance rail—unnecessary escort, just courtesy.

Just goodbye.

At the bottom, they reach the equipment building. End of shift. End of partnership. End of twelve years.

David turns. Looks at 47B one final time.

"Goodbye, 47B. Thank you for being the best colleague. Thank you for being excellent partner. Thank you for—" He stops. Swallows. "Thank you for everything."

47B's sensor array focuses completely on him. All processing attention directed here. This moment. This goodbye.

Beep beep beep beep.

"Colleague Chen. Farewell. This unit honors partnership. This unit acknowledges contribution. This unit will remember." Long pause. Then, quieter: "Function well. Live optimally. Be present. With Dr. Okafor. With family. With remaining time."

The robot's treads begin moving—backing away slowly. Creating distance. Allowing separation.

Whir-click. Whir-click. Whir-click.

The sound grows fainter. 47B rolls toward the north sector where maintenance continues. Where work goes on. Where Ibrahim will arrive tomorrow morning and clip his harness and continue what David started.

David watches until 47B disappears behind Junction B. Until the sound fades completely. Until he's alone.

He stands there a long time. Feeling it fully. The grief. The gratitude. The completeness. Twelve years ending. New chapter beginning. Both real. Both sacred.

Finally, he turns. Walks to the transport station. Takes the shuttle toward residential district.

Going home.

Building seventeen, apartment 4C. Amara is waiting.

She looks up when he enters—concern immediate in her eyes. She can read him now. Two years of reconnecting, two years of learning each other again. She knows this was hard.

"You did it," she says.

"I did it." David sets down his equipment bag. His body feels strange without the weight of tools, the responsibility of shifts. Light. Untethered.

Amara stands. Crosses to him. Takes his hands. "How was it?"

"Hard. Right. Both." He squeezes her hands. "I said goodbye to 47B. To Platform 73. To twelve years of work. To—" His voice breaks. "To the person I became there. The one who learned presence through maintenance. The one who showed up when showing up seemed impossible."

"That person is still here," Amara says gently. "You didn't leave him at the arrays. You brought him with you. That's who I love. The man who shows up. Who's present. Who found meaning in maintenance and is now finding meaning in family."

David pulls her close. Holds her. Feels her solidity, her warmth, her presence. This is what he chose. Not instead of the arrays. Beyond the arrays. Toward connection. Toward family. Toward the two years left spent together instead of alone.

"Packing's almost done," Amara says against his shoulder. "Transport's booked for next week. Year 13, Month 10, Day 7. We leave together."

Together. Lagos. Zara's compound. Maya and Kofi. Garden where Wei taught. Community that chose life. Family waiting.

Different chapter. Different purpose. Same presence.

"I'm ready," David says. Meaning it. "I'm scared. But I'm ready."

"Me too."

They stand together in the apartment—the place David's lived nine years, since the divorce. Small space that was enough when enough meant survival. Now: too small. Time to leave. Time to choose larger life.

"I'm going to shower," David says. "Then we should eat. Real meal. Celebrate the ending."

"And the beginning."

"And the beginning."

That night, David dreams.

He's on Platform 73. Stars overhead, impossible brightness. The arrays humming. 47B is there—working, checking housings, treads making their familiar *whir-click, whir-click*. Ibrahim clips his harness, begins his shift. They wave to each other. New partnership. Different but real.

David watches from a distance. Not working. Just witnessing. The work continues. His presence was necessary but not irreplaceable. The relay continuing.

He feels: peace.

Not because the work didn't matter. Because it mattered enough. He can let go.

The arrays hum. 47B works. Ibrahim learns.

David turns away. Walks toward light in the distance. Lagos light. Amara's hand finding his. Zara's voice calling welcome. Maya asking about orbital mechanics. Kofi showing him the garden.

Home. Different home. Same presence.

He walks toward it.

David wakes at 5:00 AM—habit, body trained. But no alarm. No shift. No Platform 73 waiting.

Just: morning. Free morning. First of the rest of his life.

Amara sleeps beside him. They've been sharing the bed again for two years, but it still feels precious. Still feels like gift. He watches her breathe. Grateful.

Six days until they leave. Six days to finish packing, say final goodbyes, close this chapter completely. Then: Lagos. Family. Two years of presence with people he loves instead of machines he maintains.

Different meaning. Same showing up.

David rises quietly. Makes tea. Sits at the small table watching dawn break over Antarctica. The solar arrays are visible in the distance—tiny from here, but still there. Still functioning. Still converting light to power.

47B is out there. Starting the morning shift. Greeting Ibrahim, probably. Checking Platform 73. Continuing the work.

The work continues. David let go. Both things true. Both things sacred.

He drinks his tea. Tastes it. Really tastes it. Present to this moment. This morning. This free hour before Amara wakes. This quiet transition between chapters.

Two years left. He'll spend them in Lagos. With Amara. With family. Learning to be present through love instead of labor. Through connection instead of maintenance. Different practice. Same attention.

Showing up. That's all it ever was. Being here. Present. Real.

He showed up at Platform 73 for twelve years. Now: showing up for family. For love. For the warm chaos of children and gardens and community meals. For Zara's wisdom. For Maya's questions. For Kofi's joy.

For Amara. Always for Amara.

She appears in the doorway. Sleep-rumpled. Beautiful.

"You're up early," she says.

"Habit. Body doesn't know I'm done yet."

She joins him at the table. Takes his hand. "How do you feel?"

David considers. How does he feel? Unmoored. Relieved. Grieving. Grateful. Complete. Beginning. All of it together.

"I feel present," he says finally. "For the first time in years, I feel present to what's next instead of what was. That's good. That's right."

"That's everything," Amara says. She squeezes his hand. "Six more days. Then we go home."

Home. Lagos. Family. Love.

Together.

David squeezes back. "Six more days."

The sun rises fully. Antarctica wakes. Somewhere out there, 47B and Ibrahim work Platform 73. The arrays function perfectly. The power flows. Life continues.

Here, in this small apartment, David and Amara sit together. Present. Connected. Ready.

The work was complete. The work continues. Both true.

Everything ending. Everything beginning.

Maintenance as meditation. Love as transformation. Presence as practice.

Chapter 42: Questions

Maya Okafor-Mensah | Year 13, Month 9 | Lagos District

The gardenia petals had fallen overnight.

Maya sat on Wei's bench—*the* bench, though calling it hers felt presumptuous even two years after death—and studied the brown petals scattered on soil below.

Yesterday they'd been white, perfect, fragrant. This morning: composting. Three days of blooming, then transformation. Wei would have said something about this. Would have made it teaching. But Wei wasn't here to say anything.

Fifteen years, nine months old. Twenty-two months until she died. Maya calculated it automatically now, the way some people counted heartbeats. Six hundred and seventy days. 16,080 hours. Each one ticking down toward seventeen years, seven months. Toward the moment when consciousness ended and her brief life became past tense.

The garden looked the same as it had when Wei tended it. Ling and the compound volunteers maintained everything perfectly. The lemon tree fruiting. The mint spreading. The gardenias blooming their three-day cycles. All continuing. All temporary. All here despite Wei's absence.

Maya had been practicing presence for twenty-three months now. Since one week after Wei died. Year 11, Month 9 to Year 13, Month 9. Almost two years of daily meditation. Weekly teachings with Uncle Kenji. Reading Buddhist texts until the words blurred together. Understanding intellectually. But emotionally?

She was more confused than ever.

That was the problem. The practice was supposed to help. Supposed to make facing death clearer, easier, more bearable. Instead, the questions multiplied. The doubts deepened. The fear sharpened into precision instruments that cut deeper the more present she became.

Maya pressed her palms against the bench. Solid wood. Real texture. Present-moment awareness—she could do that. Notice the bench. Notice breath. Notice the morning heat building in Lagos District's engineered climate. Notice, notice, notice. But what did noticing accomplish when what she noticed was: I'm going to die at seventeen and I'm terrified and no amount of breath-counting changes that.

She'd come to the garden before dawn. Needed to sit before Kenji's teaching session this morning. Needed to be alone with the confusion. Needed to figure out if she was practicing presence or wasting the time she had left.

The calculation came again: twenty-two months. If she spent an hour each day meditating, that was six hundred and sixty hours total. Twenty-seven and a half days of her remaining life spent sitting still, watching breath, being present to... what? The inexorable approach of her own ending?

Maybe she should be out there. Doing teenager things. Whatever those were. The other fifteen-year-olds in the compound—the ones she'd grown up with—they were living differently. Mira and Talib and Chinwe and the others. They gathered in Unit 23 most evenings. Music playing. Dancing, kissing, laughing desperately. Living like the world was ending because the world was ending.

Maya had stopped going months ago. Couldn't bear it. The forced joy. The frantic energy. The way they pretended presence by being loud. Or maybe they

weren't pretending. Maybe they'd found something real she couldn't access. Maybe meditation had cut her off from the simple human response: when time is short, feel everything intensely.

But she was meditating about feeling everything. Wasn't that the same thing?

No. It wasn't the same. She knew that. But she couldn't articulate why.

The sun climbed. Morning light shifting through leaves. Maya watched it happen—the way shadows moved, the way colors changed. Presence practice. Being here. But the question underneath persisted: *What's the point?*

Wei never promised the practice would make death okay. Kenji never promised enlightenment. But they implied—didn't they?—that presence mattered. That being awake to your life was worth more than being asleep to it. Maya believed that intellectually. Emotionally: she was fifteen and a half, and dying young, and sitting still felt like surrender.

Footsteps on the stairs. Maya didn't turn. Knew that tread. Uncle Kenji, arriving early for the teaching session. He probably saw her from the building. Probably guessed she needed to talk.

"Good morning, Maya." His voice was quiet, respectful.

"Morning."

"You're here early."

"Couldn't sleep."

Kenji settled on the other end of the bench. Not too close. Giving space. He'd learned that from Wei—how to be present without crowding.

They sat in silence for a moment. Maya appreciated that he didn't immediately ask what was wrong. Didn't try to fix anything. Just: sat.

Finally Maya spoke. "Uncle Kenji, I need to ask something."

"Okay."

"The practice—it's supposed to help, right? Make facing death easier?"

Kenji was quiet for a breath. "It makes life clearer. Death remains hard."

"But I don't feel clearer." Maya's voice came out sharper than intended. "I feel... more confused. More aware of how much I'm losing. Like the practice is making everything worse."

She expected platitudes. Expected reassurance. Expected *something* to make the confusion manageable. Instead, Kenji surprised her.

"That's progress."

Maya turned to stare at him. "What?"

"You're seeing clearly. Before, death was abstract. Seventeen years, seven months—just numbers. Now: real. That's harder. But also: honest. You're not bypassing grief with philosophy. You're feeling it."

The words landed wrong. Maya felt heat rising in her chest. "So the practice is *supposed* to make me feel worse? That's the goal?"

"The practice doesn't have a goal. That's the problem with how you're approaching it." Kenji's voice was patient but direct. "You're practicing *at* death. Trying to master it. Trying to achieve some state where dying at seventeen feels okay. That's not possible. Won't ever be possible."

"Then what's the point?"

"Being present to what is. Right now, what is: confusion, fear, grief, anger. Being present to *that* is practice. Not being present to some peaceful acceptance you haven't reached yet."

Maya pulled her knees to her chest. Made herself smaller. "You're saying I'm doing it wrong."

"I'm saying you're expecting certainty. The practice doesn't give certainty. Gives presence. Those aren't the same thing."

They sat again. Maya's mind spinning through the words, trying to find the flaw in his logic. Couldn't. That made it worse somehow. If Kenji was right—if presence was just being here with confusion, not resolving it—then what was she practicing *for*?

"Will it help?" Maya asked quietly. "When the moment comes? When the asteroid hits? Will all this practicing make that moment bearable?"

"I don't know."

The honesty was brutal. Maya had wanted reassurance. Wanted him to say: *Yes, Maya, the practice will carry you through. You're building capacity. You'll be okay.* Instead: *I don't know.*

"Then why practice?" Her voice broke slightly.

"Because being present to your life—even the terrifying parts—is better than being numb to it. Because twenty-two months of awareness is worth more than twenty-two months of distraction. Because—" Kenji paused. "Because you chose this. You asked to learn. You're learning. The confusion *is* the learning."

"I don't want confusion. I want answers."

"I know. Everyone does. But answers don't exist for this. Only presence does. Only being here, fully here, until here ends."

Maya put her face against her knees. Felt tears threatening. Sixteen more people would arrive in thirty minutes for the teaching session. She couldn't cry in

front of them. Couldn't be the teenager who couldn't handle what everyone was facing.

"I'm alone," she whispered. "Everyone my age is out there living. I'm in here meditating. And I don't know if I'm choosing wisdom or missing my life."

Kenji's hand briefly touched her shoulder. Light contact. There and gone. "You're not alone. I'm here. Your mother's here. Kofi's here. Everyone at these sessions—we're all practicing together. Facing this together."

"But you're adults. You've had time. I'm fifteen. I should be—I don't know—falling in love, doing stupid teenager things, *living*. Instead I'm sitting on this bench every morning watching my breath and calculating how many days I have left."

"Presence *is* living."

"Is it?" Maya lifted her head. Looked at Kenji directly. "How do you know? How do you know that meditating is living rather than avoiding life? Because sometimes it feels like I'm just... sitting still while everything passes by."

Kenji met her eyes. "I don't know. I struggled with the same question. Six years seeking, trying to figure out how to live fifteen years. Wei taught me: practice isn't preparation for living. Practice is living. But that's my answer. You have to find yours."

"What if my answer is different? What if presence practice isn't right for me?"

"Then you stop practicing. Do something else. Whatever feels real to you. No one's forcing you to sit. Not me. Not Wei's memory. Not your mother. This is your choice."

The freedom in that statement felt dangerous. Maya had built her entire identity for two years around being a practitioner. Wei's teaching passing to her through Mama, through Kenji. If she stopped now, who was she?

"I don't want to stop," she admitted. "I just want it to make sense. Want it to feel like progress instead of... this."

"What's this?"

"Doubt. Confusion. Questions multiplying instead of dissolving. I thought practice would give me peace. Instead I have more questions now than when I started."

"Good questions or bad questions?"

Maya considered. "Real questions. Honest questions. Questions I can't avoid anymore."

"Then you're exactly where you should be." Kenji smiled slightly. "Picture Two of the ox-herding pictures: finding traces. You're seeing evidence of the ox

everywhere—in your confusion, your doubt, your questions. That's closer than seeking something you haven't found yet."

"I don't want traces. I want the whole ox."

"You're fifteen. Give yourself time."

"I don't have time!" The words burst out. "Twenty-two months! That's all! I don't have years to slowly progress through Buddhist teaching pictures. I have twenty-two months to figure this out or I die terrified and confused!"

Kenji absorbed the outburst without flinching. "You're right. You don't have time. None of us do. But grasping doesn't speed anything up. Just makes the grasping tighter."

"So I should just accept confusion?"

"You should be present to it. Which you are. Right now. Sitting here, feeling it, questioning it. That's practice. Not pleasant. But: practice."

Maya slumped back against the bench. Exhausted. These conversations with Kenji always left her more tired than before. Not because they were unhelpful. Because they were *too* helpful. Because he saw clearly and said honestly and never offered the easy comfort she craved.

Aunt Amara and Uncle David would arrive in a few weeks—permanently, finally. Moving to Lagos to be with family for the end. Part of Maya had hoped their arrival would somehow make the questions easier. Make practice clearer. But sitting here with Kenji, she realized: nothing external would resolve the internal confusion. Not family convergence. Not more time. Not certainty that would never come.

People were arriving. Voices from the stairs. The teaching circle gathering. Maya straightened, wiped her face. Needed to compose herself. Be the serious practitioner everyone expected.

"Stay after?" Kenji asked.

"Okay."

He stood, moved toward the gathering group. Maya remained on the bench a moment longer. The gardenia petals still scattered. The lemon tree still fruiting. The morning still arriving despite everything. Presence to impermanence. That was the teaching. She understood it. Just couldn't *feel* it the way Wei seemed to feel it.

The teaching session was meditation. Thirty minutes of sitting. Maya positioned herself in back, her usual spot. Closed her eyes. Returned to breath.

One. Breath in.

Two. Breath out.

Three. Mind wandering—*What if I'm wasting my time?*

Notice. Return.

Four. Breath in.

Five. Breath out.

Six. Mind wandering—*Mira and the others are probably sleeping now, stayed up late, actually living—*

Notice. Return.

The meditation wasn't peaceful. Wasn't calm. Was just: returning over and over to breath while her mind spiraled through every doubt. This was practice? This chaos?

Seven. Breath in.

Eight. Breath out.

Kenji's voice, soft: "If your mind wanders a thousand times, return a thousand times. That's not failure. That's practice."

Easy for him to say. His mind probably stayed calm. Probably achieved the deep stillness Wei described. Maya's mind was a riot. A protest. A desperate grasping at certainty that kept slipping away.

Nine. Breath in.

Ten. Breath out.

The thirty minutes felt like hours. When Kenji finally rang the bell, Maya opened her eyes feeling: nothing resolved. Nothing accomplished. Just: thirty minutes older. Twenty-two months minus thirty minutes now. Time passing. Life passing. Practice not saving anything.

The group talked after. Someone asked about acceptance. Someone else about facing family members who weren't practicing. Ibrahim—the quiet maintenance worker who came every session—shared something about learning presence through physical work, through maintaining arrays, through body rather than mind.

Maya barely listened. Too lost in her own spiral. Too aware of the questions proliferating instead of simplifying.

When people departed, Maya remained. Kenji helping clean up—collecting cushions, straightening the space. His movements had that quality Wei taught: complete attention to simple tasks. Maya used to find that inspiring. Today it felt performative.

"You stayed," Kenji said.

"You asked me to."

"But you chose to. Thank you." He settled back on the bench beside her. "Want to tell me what's really troubling you?"

"I already told you. Confusion. Doubt. Questions."

"Those are symptoms. What's underneath?"

Maya was quiet for a long moment. Trying to find the actual truth beneath all the words. When she spoke, her voice was barely audible.

"I'm scared I'm wasting the time I have left. That presence practice is just... spiritual bypassing. A way to avoid feeling the horror by calling it enlightenment."

There. The real fear. The one she couldn't voice during the teaching session. The one that kept her awake at night.

Kenji absorbed this. "Do you feel like you're avoiding the horror?"

"No. I feel the horror constantly. That's the problem. Practice doesn't make it go away. Doesn't even make it manageable. Just makes me more aware of exactly how horrifying it is."

"Then you're not bypassing."

"But maybe I should be. Maybe I should be out there with Mira and the others, numbing myself, feeling everything desperately instead of sitting here watching breath."

"Is that what you want?"

Maya turned to look at him. "I don't know what I want. That's the problem. I don't know if presence practice at fifteen is wisdom or waste. Don't know if I'll regret this choice. Don't know anything."

"The not-knowing is hard."

"It's unbearable."

"But you're bearing it. That's courage."

Maya laughed bitterly. "Doesn't feel like courage. Feels like I'm failing at the one thing I chose to do."

"You're not failing. You're questioning. That's different. Questioning *is* practice. Maybe the most important practice—being present to doubt without needing to resolve it immediately."

"I need to resolve it though. Need to know I'm choosing right. Because if I'm not—if presence practice is the wrong path for me—I'm losing months I can't get back."

"You can stop any time. Try something else. See if it fits better."

The offer was genuine. Maya knew that. Kenji wasn't trying to convince her. Wasn't attached to her continuing. But that freedom made the choice harder, not easier.

"I don't want to stop," she said again. "Want it to work the way it's supposed to."

"How is it supposed to work?"

"I don't know. Make me peaceful? Make dying okay? Give me certainty that this matters?"

"None of those are possible. Not for anyone. Not even Wei after seventy years of practice. She died ready but not peaceful. Accepting but not okay. Present but not certain it meant anything beyond being present."

Maya felt something crack in her chest. Not breaking. Cracking open. "So this is it? This confusion? This doubt? This is what practice offers?"

"Yes. And also: being here. Really here. Awake to your life. Feeling it—all of it. The beauty and the horror together. That's what presence is. Not peace. Not certainty. Just: aliveness."

"I want more than that."

"Everyone does. But more than that doesn't exist. Only this exists. This moment. This bench. This conversation. This doubt. All temporary. All precious. All real."

Maya put her face in her hands. Not crying. Just: overwhelmed. The practice was working exactly as intended and she hated it. Because it didn't give her what she wanted—couldn't give her what she wanted. Could only give her this: presence to what is, including the presence to not wanting what is.

"I need to go," she said. "Papa's probably worried."

"Okay." Kenji stood. "Maya—one more thing."

She looked up at him.

"You're doing well. Better than you think. The questioning, the doubting, the struggling—that's not failure. That's growth. You're facing something most people avoid their entire lives. Facing it at fifteen. That's remarkable."

"Doesn't feel remarkable."

"It wouldn't. Growth rarely does." He smiled. "Keep practicing. Or don't. Whatever you choose: be present to the choosing. That's enough."

Maya nodded. Not comforted. But: heard. Seen. Witnessed in her confusion by someone who'd lived his own version of it.

She stood, gathered her things. Walked down the stairs from Wei's garden. The compound was waking fully now—voices, movement, life continuing. Twenty-two months of this left. Six hundred and seventy days. 16,080 hours.

Maybe she'd spend them practicing presence. Maybe she'd try something else. Maybe she'd keep questioning whether she was choosing right. Maybe that was the practice: living the questions rather than demanding answers.

Maybe. Maybe. Maybe.

Everything uncertain. Everything temporary. Everything here now.

Later that week, Maya had her routine checkup with Dr. Tanaka.

The doctor's office was in the compound medical center—three rooms that used to serve two hundred people, now serving the sixty who remained. Dr. Tanaka had been Maya's pediatrician since birth. Nearly sixteen years of checkups. Growth charts that now mapped toward nothing. Development milestones that ended at seventeen.

"How are you feeling?" Dr. Tanaka asked, running the scanner over Maya's vitals.

"Fine. Physically."

"And non-physically?"

Maya looked at her. Dr. Tanaka was forty-nine now—trained in Tokyo when that specialty still made sense, specialized in child development when development still had futures. Now she attended Wei's teachings. Practiced presence medicine. Witnessed children's complete lives instead of measuring progress toward adulthood.

"Confused," Maya admitted. "About practice. About everything."

Dr. Tanaka nodded slowly. Finished the scan. "You seem different. Older, maybe. Or just... more present."

"Is that good?"

"I don't know. You tell me."

Maya considered. "I'm practicing meditation. Trying to face what's coming. But I'm more confused than before I started. Is that—is that normal?"

Dr. Tanaka smiled slightly. "I attend the teachings too. Started two years ago. I'm *still* more confused than when I began. Confusion is honest. Better than false certainty."

"You're a doctor. Don't you need certainty?"

"I used to think so. Now I realize: I was certain about things that weren't certain. Children growing to adulthood. Careers. Futures. All illusions. The confusion I feel now is clearer than the certainty I felt then."

Maya absorbed this. Her doctor—the professional, the expert—admitting confusion. Saying it was progress rather than failure.

"How's it going?" Dr. Tanaka asked. "The practice?"

"It's hard. I'm more confused than before."

"Good. Confusion is honest. Keep practicing."

The validation landed differently coming from Dr. Tanaka than from Kenji. Kenji was a teacher—he was supposed to encourage practice. Dr. Tanaka was a medical professional, trained in empiricism and evidence. If she said confusion was progress, maybe it actually was.

"Do you think it matters?" Maya asked. "Presence practice? Do you think it will help when—when the moment comes?"

Dr. Tanaka set down the scanner. Looked at Maya directly. "I don't know. I hope so. But I practice anyway because being present to my patients' lives—really present, not just clinically observing—that matters now. Today. Regardless of whether it helps in twenty-two months."

"But what if we're wrong? What if presence practice is just... a way to feel better about something unbearable? Spiritual bypassing?"

"Are you feeling better?"

Maya laughed despite herself. "No. I feel worse. More aware of everything I'm losing."

"Then you're not bypassing. You're facing it. That's different." Dr. Tanaka pulled up the growth chart on her display. "You're fifteen years, nine months old. One hundred and sixty-two centimeters tall. Fifty-one kilograms. Development: normal for age. In twenty-two months, you'll be seventeen years, seven months. Maybe one hundred and sixty-five centimeters. Maybe fifty-four kilograms. Then: nothing."

The clinical precision was brutal. Maya appreciated it. Dr. Tanaka wasn't hiding behind kindness.

"I chart this knowing it's meaningless," Dr. Tanaka continued. "Growth toward nothing. Development ending mid-trajectory. My entire specialty: absurd. But I chart it anyway because you're here now. You're growing now. Presence to that—your actual life happening—that's what practice gives me. Maybe it's bypass. Maybe it's wisdom. I don't know. But it's better than not witnessing you."

Maya felt tears starting. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being honest. For not pretending this is okay."

Dr. Tanaka touched Maya's hand briefly. "It's not okay. Won't ever be okay. But you're here. We're here. Being present to each other. That matters."

The checkup continued. Height, weight, blood pressure, vision. All normal. All temporary. All meticulously recorded in charts that would burn with everything else.

When Maya left the medical center, she felt: not better. Not worse. Just: seen. Witnessed in her confusion by another person learning to witness what couldn't be changed.

Evening found Maya in the apartment. Mama cooking dinner. Papa reviewing compound maintenance schedules. Kofi—twelve years, eleven months old—bouncing through the living room, all energy and laughter.

Maya watched her brother from the couch. He was so *present*. Not practicing formally. Not meditating. Not reading Buddhist texts. Just: living. Playing. Being exactly twelve years, eleven months old. Present without trying to be present.

Maybe that was wisdom too. Maybe all her meditation and questioning was overthinking something Kofi understood naturally: be here, be happy, be alive. Simple.

But Maya couldn't be simple anymore. Wei's death had awakened her to impermanence viscerally. Twenty-three months of practice had deepened that awareness. She couldn't unknow what she knew. Couldn't return to childhood innocence. Could only move forward through the confusion toward... what?

She didn't know. That was the unbearable part. Not knowing whether she was progressing or regressing. Not knowing whether presence practice would help or fail her. Not knowing if she was choosing wisdom or wasting time.

Kofi crashed into the couch beside her. "Maya! Come play!"

"Not right now."

"Why not?"

"Thinking."

"About what?"

Maya looked at her brother. His face open, curious, uncomplicated. He knew he'd die at fourteen. Knew the asteroid was coming. But it didn't consume him the way it consumed her. He just: lived. Day by day. Present without trying to be present.

"About practice," Maya said. "About whether it matters."

"Does it have to matter?" Kofi asked.

The question was so simple it stopped Maya's spiral. "What do you mean?"

"I don't know. You practice because you want to. That seems like enough. Like me playing. I don't play because it matters. I play because it's what I want to do."

Maya stared at her twelve-year-old brother. The wisdom of not-seeking. The clarity of natural presence. Maybe all her confusion came from demanding that practice *accomplish* something. Maybe it was enough that she'd chosen it. That she wanted it. That she did it.

Maybe meaning didn't require justification.

"You're smarter than me," Maya said.

"No I'm not. You're the smart one."

"You're the wise one then."

Kofi grinned. "Can the wise one have help with homework?"

"Math or science?"

"Both."

Maya pulled herself off the couch. Followed Kofi to the table. Mama watching them with that expression—love and grief mixed together. Pride and devastation. The look of a mother who knew exactly when her children would die.

They worked through Kofi's assignments together. Math problems that wouldn't matter. Science concepts that wouldn't become careers. Knowledge for its own sake. Transmission happening naturally: Maya teaching Kofi, not because he'd use it, but because teaching was connection. Because understanding together was presence.

Maybe that was the point. Not some distant enlightenment. Just: this. Siblings at a table. Brother asking questions. Sister explaining. Love made visible through shared attention.

Presence to what is. Nothing more. Nothing less. Just: this.

After dinner, Maya retreated to her room. Pulled out the journal she'd started after Wei's death. Twenty-three months of entries. Questions and doubts and breakthroughs and backslides. The full arc of a practice that wasn't linear.

She turned to a fresh page. Wrote the date: Year 13, Month 9. Wrote the calculation: 22 months remaining.

Then wrote:

I don't know if this practice will help when the moment comes. Don't know if I'm choosing right. Don't know if presence is wisdom or waste.

Twenty-two months left. I'm fifteen years, nine months old. More confused than ever. More aware of loss. More terrified of dying. Practice hasn't fixed anything.

But today Kofi asked: does it have to matter? Maybe choosing it is enough. Maybe doing it is enough. Maybe questioning whether it matters IS the practice.

Kenji says confusion is progress. Dr. Tanaka says confusion is honest. Mama would say presence is living. Kofi would say just do what you want to do.

This is my choice. Fifteen years, nine months old. Twenty-two months left. I choose presence. Not because it's right. Not because it will save me. Not because I'm certain.

Because it's mine.

Maya closed the journal. Set it aside. Lay back on her bed and stared at the ceiling.

Tomorrow she'd sit again. Watch breath again. Question everything again. The practice would continue. Not easier. Not clearer. Just: continuing.

She'd never know until the asteroid hit and consciousness ended and all the questions dissolved into nothing.

But right now—this moment—she was here. Alive. Confused but present. Terrified but practicing anyway.

Something real. Something honest. Something hers.

The flower would bloom for twenty-two more months. Then fall. But right now: blooming. Right now: here. Right now: this breath, this moment, this brief and precious and complete life happening.

Wei never promised certainty. Kenji never promised peace. They promised: presence to what is.

Right now, what is: doubt, fear, confusion, grief.

And underneath all of it: fierce, fragile, temporary aliveness.

Maya breathed. In. Out. Present to the questioning. Present to the doubt. Present to the twenty-two months remaining and the fifteen years, nine months already lived.

Not ready. Never ready. But: here.

Next morning, Maya returned to Wei's garden.

Predawn. Alone. The ritual continuing despite everything. Maybe because of everything.

She sat on the bench. Closed her eyes. Returned to breath.

One. In.

Two. Out.

Three. Mind wandering—*What if I'm wrong? What if this is waste?*

Notice. Return.

Four. In.

Five. Out.

The gardenia had new buds forming. Would bloom in a few days. Three days of perfection. Then: composting. The cycle continuing. Everything temporary. Everything beautiful. Everything here now.

Maya practiced. Not peacefully. Not with certainty. Just: returning. Again and again and again. The way Kenji taught. The way Wei taught. The way she was teaching herself through twenty-three months of showing up despite doubt.

Six. In.

Seven. Out.

People would arrive soon. The teaching circle would gather. Kenji would ring the bell and they'd sit together. Practicing uncertainty together. Facing the end together. Being present together to what couldn't be changed.

And Maya would be there. Not because she was sure. Not because practice had given her peace. But because this was her choice. Her path. Her practice.

Right or wrong—she didn't know. Couldn't know. Would never know until the moment arrived and consciousness either held or shattered.

But right now: this breath. This bench. This garden. This life happening. This fierce and fragile and temporary presence.

Eight. In.

Nine. Out.

The practice continued. Not easier. Just: continuing.

That was enough.

That was everything.

That was home.

Chapter 43: Transmission

Zara Okafor-Mensah | Year 14, Month 6 | Lagos District

The equation is wrong.

Zara can see it from the kitchen doorway—Maya's handwriting on the tablet, orbital mechanics, the integration constant off by a factor of three. Her daughter hunched over the work at the rooftop table, sunrise painting everything copper and gold. Amara beside her, patient, letting Maya find the error herself.

Nine months. Nine months since her sister arrived permanently. Nine months of this: morning physics lessons on the rooftop, Amara teaching Maya everything she knows about the mathematics ending them. Not preparing her for a career. Preparing her for nothing except understanding. Except presence. Except the beauty of knowing how the universe works even when the universe is killing you.

Zara watches through the doorway. Doesn't interrupt. This is sacred somehow—her brilliant sister teaching her brilliant daughter, both of them bent over equations that describe the asteroid's perfect trajectory. Love made visible through mathematics. Connection through precision.

"See it?" Amara asks quietly.

Maya stares at the numbers. Her face has that concentration Zara remembers from when she was two, building block towers. Fierce focus. Complete presence. Then: "Oh. The constant. I integrated wrong."

"Yes. Try again."

Maya erases, recalculates. Her handwriting is neater than Amara's ever was. Methodical. Careful. Getting it right because getting it right matters, even when right and wrong both end the same way.

Zara feels the familiar tightness in her chest—the one that comes from loving someone who'll die too young. Maya is sixteen years, six months old. Thirteen months until she dies. Less time than she's been practicing presence. Less time than it takes to really become yourself.

But becoming anyway. Fiercely becoming.

"Better," Amara says, checking the work. "See how the ellipse defines the orbit? Mass, velocity, distance—three variables, infinite precision."

"It's beautiful." Maya's voice carries wonder. "Even though it's describing the thing that kills us."

Amara doesn't hesitate. "Especially because. The asteroid follows perfect mathematics. No malice. No intention. Just physics. There's something honest about that."

Zara hears Wei in those words. Hears her sister speaking the philosophy she learned through letters, through garden visits, through three years of slow thawing. Amara teaching what Wei taught: truth is beautiful even when truth is terrible. Especially then.

The morning heat is building—Lagos District's engineered climate maintaining its relentless tropical warmth. Fourteen years of this. Fourteen years of sunrise on this rooftop, this compound, this life Zara chose when most people fled. Building community when building seemed pointless. Planting gardens eight years before impact. Having Kofi when having children was called cruelty.

Defiance. Wei called it defiance. But also: presence. Being here completely while here lasted.

"Mama!" Kofi's voice from the stairwell, all energy despite the early hour. "Mama, Uncle David says I can help with the pump! Can I? Please?"

Zara turns from the doorway. Her son—thirteen years, eight months old, covered in morning bedhead, wearing the shirt he's had for two years because he refuses to let her throw it out. Unstoppable joy incarnate. Thirteen months until he dies. Thirteen months.

She makes herself stop counting. Presence. Here. Now.

"If Uncle David says so, yes. But listen to his instructions."

"I always listen!" Kofi is already bounding down the stairs. "Uncle David! Mama said yes!"

Zara follows him down. The basement maintenance room waits—Tom's domain usually, but David has spent three months learning the compound's systems. Learning through doing. Teaching through presence. The same way he maintained solar arrays for twelve years before choosing family over purpose.

The basement smells like water and old concrete. Tom is there already—fifty years old, quiet, competent, working these systems since Year 0. He nods as David and Kofi enter. Professional respect between two people who understand that maintenance is meditation.

"Circulation pump," David explains to Kofi, gesturing at the machinery. "See this seal? When it degrades, flow drops. We test here—" He points. "—measure here, replace here."

Kofi peers at the pump housing with absolute concentration. Zara remembers that expression from when he was three, watching ants in the garden. Same fierce attention to small things.

"But Mama says the compound only has thirteen months left." Kofi's voice is matter-of-fact. He's known about the asteroid since he was old enough to understand counting. "Why maintain what ends?"

David doesn't answer immediately. Zara sees him considering—this is teaching, not just explanation. Tom has stopped his own work, listening. Everyone in this room understands the question's weight.

"Because people need water today," David says finally. "Tomorrow. Next week. Maintenance isn't about forever. It's about function while function matters."

"But it all ends."

"Yes. But it doesn't all end today. Today, this pump needs this seal. Tomorrow, something else will need attention. Thirteen months of tomorrows. Each one matters."

Tom speaks up, his quiet voice filling the space. "Your uncle understands something I learned slowly. I've maintained these systems fifteen years. Could have stopped Year 1 when we knew. But people needed water. So I maintained. Thirteen months left? I'll maintain thirteen more months."

Kofi absorbs this. Zara watches her son's face—processing, integrating, understanding not just intellectually but in his bones. Purpose isn't permanence. Purpose is presence. Wei's teaching through Wei's garden through Zara's parenting through David's maintenance work. Transmission. Seeds passing forward.

"Can I hold the seal?" Kofi asks.

David hands it to him carefully. "Feel how it's cracked? That's where water intrudes. Conductivity drops. System fails. This small thing—" He indicates the rubber ring in Kofi's palm. "—keeps two hundred people's water flowing."

"Small things matter," Kofi says.

"Small things are everything."

Zara stands on the stairs, watching. Her son learning from the man who loved her sister enough to leave twelve years of purpose behind. The man who maintained arrays that would vaporize anyway. The man who chose family when family was all that remained.

Not just engineering transfer. Philosophy transfer. Practice transfer. The understanding that showing up matters even when showing up can't save anything.

Maya and Amara upstairs doing orbital mechanics. Kofi and David down here doing seal replacement. Different subjects. Same teaching. Presence. Attention. Love made visible through the act of explaining something that won't matter and matters completely.

"Test here," David is saying, showing Kofi the diagnostic port. "See the pressure reading? That tells us—"

Zara leaves them to it. Climbs back upstairs. The apartment is quiet—Kwame at the compound community kitchen preparing breakfast for anyone who shows up, his daily practice. Fifteen years of feeding people. Fifteen years of showing up with synth-protein and vegetables and whatever love looks like at 7 AM.

She checks the time. Afternoon will bring the gathering. Mr. Okonkwo called it three days ago: "Year 14, Month 6. Fourteen years of community. Need to mark it. While we can. Before everything scatters." Seven months until her family

migrates to Antarctica. Seven months until this compound becomes memory. Then six more months until memory becomes nothing.

Thirteen months. The number everyone keeps saying. Thirteen months until impact. Short enough to feel urgent. Long enough to forget sometimes. Long enough to keep building, teaching, transmitting. Short enough to make it matter.

By evening, sixty people gather on the rooftop.

The garden has grown magnificent in eight years. What started as forty square meters of optimistic planting has sprawled to one hundred twenty—Tom and Zara's engineering, Mr. Okonkwo's farming knowledge, fifteen hands tending daily. Eighty percent of the compound's vegetables grow here. Will grow here for thirteen more months. Then: ash.

But tonight: tomatoes ripening. Peppers heavy on stalks. Mint spreading in containers the way mint does—unstoppable, determined, alive. The lemon tree Mr. Okonkwo grafted onto Wei's gift cutting stands eight feet tall now, fruiting reliably. Everything temporary. Everything thriving.

Zara arrives with her family—Kwame, Maya, Kofi, Amara, David. Six people. The unit that will migrate together, die together, matter together for the time that mattering is possible. They find space near the garden's edge. The sunset is beginning—engineered tropical perfection, oranges and purples that look almost real.

Mr. Okonkwo stands at the center of the gathering. Eighty-two years old. Zara has watched him age eight years—Year 6 to Year 14. Slower movement. Deeper lines. But still here. Still tending. Still refusing to let despair win.

"Year 0, detection," he begins without preamble. His voice carries despite its thinness. "Most people fled Lagos. Smart people. Went to family elsewhere. Went to die in familiar places. We stayed. Some trapped. Some choosing. Some just—" He gestures vaguely. "—not knowing what else to do."

Zara remembers Year 0. The exodus. Five million down to three million in six months. Down to two million by Year 2. Building half-empty. Compound hemorrhaging residents weekly. The ones who stayed were stubborn or faithful or broken or defiant. She was defiant. Pregnant with Kofi when everyone said children were cruelty.

"Started sharing meals Month 6," Mr. Okonkwo continues. "After first suicide wave. Someone said—I don't remember who—'Let's eat together. Dying alone is worse than dying together.' So we ate together. Kept eating together. Year 2, started meeting regularly. Making decisions collectively. Building something."

Adanna stands. She doesn't wait for invitation—never has. Forty years old, fierce, uncompromising. "Year 2, I was angry," she says, voice cutting through

the evening sounds. "Angry at everything. Especially angry at people having children. Then Zara had Kofi. Chose life when everyone chose despair."

She looks directly at Zara. Their eyes meet across fifteen feet and eight years of history.

"Her family taught me something I couldn't learn alone," Adanna continues. "Brief doesn't mean meaningless. My son Samuel is twenty now." She puts her hand on his shoulder—tall young man, quiet like his mother is loud. "Never thought I'd see him reach twenty. Thank you, Zara. For showing us how to live."

The words land like gifts. Like forgiveness for something that didn't need forgiving. Zara feels tears threatening, blinks them back. Not sadness. Gratitude. Recognition. The compound saw her choice. Learned from it. Changed because she chose life.

Samuel speaks—rare for him. "Kofi's existence gave me permission to keep existing." His voice is soft but steady. "Sounds strange. But: true. Kid born after detection? That's defiance. That's hope. That's life. Thank you."

Kofi, beside Zara, looks overwhelmed. He's listening to adults say his birth mattered. That his fourteen years changed people. Zara squeezes his hand. Wants him to know: yes. You matter. Your brief life matters. Never doubt it.

Tom stands next. Quiet engineer. Fifteen years maintaining water. Zara's collaborator on countless projects. "Fourteen years maintaining water," he says simply. "Could have stopped. But Zara asked me to teach her engineering. We designed greywater systems together. Her children helped. Teaching them—knowing they wouldn't become engineers—that mattered more than building a career would have mattered. This compound taught me: purpose is people, not projects."

David shifts beside Amara. Zara knows he's hearing his own story—twelve years maintaining arrays, teaching meaning through maintenance, learning that purpose could be presence instead of outcomes. Tom is speaking David's language. The language of small repairs that matter completely.

Ling speaks from the garden's center. Gentle woman, thirty-something, who cared for Wei until death Year 11. "Professor Wei said this community understood impermanence better than philosophers. You built gardens knowing they'd end. You loved children knowing they'd die young. You taught skills that wouldn't be careers. You lived. Fully. That's everything."

Wei's name hangs in the air. Three years dead. Still present. Still teaching through everyone she touched. Zara feels the transmission clearly—Wei taught her, Zara built community around that teaching, community now teaches each other. Person to person. Until no more persons. That's how wisdom spreads. Not through books. Through being.

Mr. Okonkwo reclaims the center. "I'm eighty-two. Thought I'd die Year 5. Still tending rooftops. Still growing food. Thirteen months left." He looks around at the garden, at the gathered faces, at the compound that chose life. "Still

tending. Because what else? Despair? No. We chose life. Every day. Fourteen years of choosing life. That's complete."

Complete. The word Wei used. Not finished—complete. Whole in itself. Brief and whole simultaneously.

Zara stands before she realizes she's standing. Didn't plan this. But everyone is looking at her and words are necessary.

"Thank you," she begins. Voice steadier than expected. "For letting my family be part of this. For defending my choice to have Kofi. For teaching my children. For being community when I needed community."

She looks at Maya and Kofi. Her daughter watching with that serious expression. Her son still holding her hand.

"We're leaving in seven months. Year 15, Month 1. Going to Antarctica with my sister—" She gestures to Amara. "—for the final convergence. My son Kenji teaches there. We'll be with family for the end."

Saying it aloud makes it real. Seven months of goodbyes beginning. Not urgent panic. Gentle separation. Honoring what was built before letting it dissolve.

"But these fourteen years," Zara continues, "you made them possible. You made them real. When I had Kofi and strangers called it cruelty, you defended it. When I needed community, you built it. When my children needed teaching—" She looks at Tom, at Mr. Okonkwo, at Adanna. "—you taught them. Not what they'd use. What they'd be. How to live despite endings. Thank you."

The silence after is full. Not empty—full. Everyone holding the same understanding. Thirteen months left. Seven until Zara's family leaves. But these fourteen years happened. Were real. Made meaning that death can't undo because meaning exists in presence, not in lasting.

Amara and David stand slightly apart. Three months here. New to this community that's fifteen years deep. But Zara sees her sister's face—watching, witnessing, understanding what she missed while isolating.

After the gathering ends—no formal closure, just gradual dispersing—Amara finds Zara by the lemon tree.

"I wasted seven years," Amara says quietly. David is beside her, steady presence. "You built this."

Zara wants to argue. Wants to say: you were surviving differently, we all did what we could, there's no wrong way to face extinction. But she hears Wei's voice: *Let people have their truth. Don't fix it. Witness it.*

"You're here now," Zara says instead. "That's what matters."

"Is it enough? Three months? Nine months total before it ends?"

"Wei would say presence isn't measured in duration. You're here. Present. Teaching Maya. Learning from Kofi. Being family. That's enough."

David speaks. "We lose them either way. Here or not here, connected or isolated. I chose fourteen years on arrays over eight years with you." His voice carries old regret. "That was real. Can't undo it. But these nine months—we're choosing differently. That matters."

Amara nods. She's crying quietly. Not desperate crying. Relief crying. Grief crying. The kind of crying that comes when you finally stop running.

Zara hugs her sister. They stand together under the lemon tree—Wei's tree, Mr. Okonkwo's grafting, Zara's daily watering—while the compound settles into evening. Maya and Kofi are examining tomatoes with fierce attention. Kwame is talking with Tom about tomorrow's breakfast planning. Sixty people dispersing to fifty apartments to sleep and wake and tend and build for one more day.

Walking home. Zara with Kwame, Maya, Kofi, Amara, David. Six people in the hallway. Family. The word feels insufficient and perfect simultaneously.

"Mama," Maya asks, "why did Aunt Amara teach me orbital mechanics today? I'll never use it."

Standard Maya question. Everything filtered through practicality and meaning. Zara has answered versions of this for years. But tonight, the answer comes differently.

"She taught you because teaching is loving. Because understanding is presence. Because knowledge passes person to person until there are no persons. But while there are persons—we teach. We learn. We connect."

Kofi adds, "Like Uncle David teaching me maintenance? Even though the compound ends in thirteen months?"

"Exactly."

Amara speaks from behind them. "And like Wei teaching your mother. And your mother teaching you. And Kenji teaching presence. And this compound teaching all of us how to live despite endings. Transmission. That's what we do. That's what makes us human."

Maya stops walking. Turns to look at all of them—Mama, Papa, Kofi, Aunt Amara, Uncle David. Her family. Her teachers. The people who will die with her in ten months.

"I get it," she says quietly. "The teaching matters because it's happening. Not because it lasts. Because it's real right now."

"Yes," Zara says. Feels tears again. Her daughter understands. Nearly seventeen years old and she understands what took Zara forty years to learn. "Yes, baby. That's everything."

They continue walking. The hallway is dimly lit—power conservation, Year 10 policy. But enough light to see each other. Enough light to be present.

At their door, Kofi asks one more question. "Will Antarctica people be like compound people?"

Zara considers. Antarctica at peak held four billion. Now maybe two billion. Megacity beyond comprehension. Will strangers there understand what this compound understands? That brief life is complete life? That presence matters? That choosing life is defiance and wisdom simultaneously?

"Some will," she says. "Uncle Kenji teaches there. Others teaching too. Same practice. Different place. We'll find community. Different community. But real."

"Good." Kofi yawns hugely. "I'm tired. Can I sleep?"

"Yes, baby."

Inside, the apartment is exactly as it's been for fourteen years. Seventy square meters. Plants everywhere—Kwame's obsession. Engineering models on tables—Zara's inability to leave work at work. Children's drawings on walls—years of Maya's artistic phases. Photographs covering every surface—fourteen years of moments captured, preserved, witnessed.

Amara and David have the small bedroom. Three months of cohabitation teaching them how to be together again after eight years apart. Maya and Kofi in their rooms. Kwame heading to shower. Normal domestic evening.

Zara steps onto the balcony.

The compound spreads below. Fifty units. Two hundred people. Fourteen years of choosing life. Rooftop garden visible from here—lemon tree's silhouette, garden beds dark rectangles, mint spreading in containers that no one bothers controlling anymore. Let it spread. Thirteen months until nothing spreads anywhere.

Lagos District beyond. Five million Year 0. Maybe two million now. Half-empty buildings. Infrastructure maintained by people like Tom, like David was, like everyone who shows up daily to fix what breaks because fixing matters even when function ends.

Thirteen months. Seven until migration. Two hundred and thirteen days until Antarctica. Three hundred and ninety-five days until impact. Zara's engineering mind calculates automatically. Can't help it. Numbers make things concrete. Numbers make things bearable. Numbers make things terrible.

Both. Always both. Beautiful and terrible. Present and ending. Connected and temporary.

Tomorrow: more transmission. Amara teaching Maya in the morning. David teaching Kofi in the afternoon. Compound life continuing its rhythms. Tom

maintaining water. Mr. Okonkwo tending gardens. Adanna being fierce. Samuel being quiet. Ling caring for what remains.

Teaching continuing until teaching can't continue. Transmission until no one left to transmit to. But tonight: this. Rooftop gathering. Fourteen years honored. Seven months until goodbye. Thirteen months until nothing.

Zara feels Kwame behind her. Doesn't turn. Knows his presence.

"You okay?" he asks.

"Yes. No. Both."

"Good gathering tonight."

"Yes." She leans back against him. Fourteen years married. Nineteen years together. Choosing each other every day for nineteen years. Choosing to bring Maya into the world Year -2. Choosing to bring Kofi Year 0. Choosing life repeatedly, consciously, despite knowing exactly when choosing ends.

"Seven months," Kwame says quietly.

"Seven months."

"Think we'll regret leaving?"

Zara considers. The compound has been home since Year 0. But family is in Antarctica—Kenji, Elena, others. And Kenji's teaching. And the final convergence. And being together at the end.

"No," she decides. "We'll miss this. But we won't regret choosing family."

"Good."

They stand on the balcony while night deepens. The compound quiets. Two hundred people sleeping, dreaming, being alive in the ways that being alive happens. Tomorrow they'll wake. Tend gardens. Maintain water. Teach children. Share meals. Practice presence. All of it temporary. All of it real.

Inside, Maya is reading by lamplight—physics textbook Amara brought from Antarctica. Kofi is already asleep—exhausted from the day's excitement. Both children growing. Both children dying. Both children here now, complete for their ages, mattering because they're real not because they'll last.

Zara taught them that. Wei taught Zara. The compound taught everyone. Transmission. Knowledge spreading like mint in containers—unstoppable, determined, alive until it can't be alive anymore.

The flower still blooming. Still passing seeds forward. Until there's no soil left to plant in.

That's enough.

That's everything.

Night. Zara lies in bed, not sleeping. Kwame beside her breathing steadily. Through the wall, Maya's lamp still glowing—her daughter reading, always reading, absorbing everything she can before absorption ends. Kofi silent—deep sleeper, always has been. Amara and David in the small bedroom, their reconciliation continuing in whispers and touch and the daily choice to stay present.

Family. Gathered. Here.

Fourteen years ago, Zara was pregnant with Kofi. Everyone called it cruelty. Everyone said: how could you bring a child into this? How could you give them fourteen years then nothing?

Tonight, adults thanked her. Said Kofi's existence gave them permission to live. Said brief doesn't mean meaningless. Said fourteen years was complete.

They were right. She was right. Wei was right. Everyone who chose life over despair was right.

Kofi will die at fourteen years, six months. Maya at seventeen years, seven months. Kwame at fifty-three. Amara at sixty-three. David at sixty-three. Zara at forty-eight. Everyone in this building, this district, this planet. All temporary. All real. All mattering precisely because they're here now, fully here, present to their own brief blooming.

Teaching continues tomorrow. David showing Kofi how seals work. Amara showing Maya how orbits work. Tom showing anyone who asks how water works. Mr. Okonkwo showing everyone how gardens work. The compound showing the world how community works.

Transmission. Person to person. Moment to moment. Day by day. Until there are no more days.

But today happened. Tonight happened. Fourteen years happened. The gathering happened. The honoring happened. The gratitude happened. The teaching happened. The transmission happened.

Real. Complete. Enough.

Zara closes her eyes. Tomorrow will come. Then the next day. Then seven months of tomorrows until migration. Then six months of tomorrows until nothing. Each one temporary. Each one whole.

She sleeps.

Dreams of gardens blooming. Of Maya teaching others. Of Kofi repairing pumps. Of Kwame feeding multitudes. Of Amara calculating beauty. Of David maintaining meaning. Of two hundred people choosing life.

Dreams of transmission continuing. Seeds spreading. Knowledge passing. Love made visible.

Dreams of home.

This compound. This family. This practice. This presence. This moment. This breath.

Home was always here. Never left. Never gone.

Just: here.

Complete.

Enough.

Everything.

Chapter 44: Deepening

Maya Okafor-Mensah | Year 14, Month 12 | Lagos District

The gardenia was opening.

Maya watched it from Wei's bench in the predawn light—white petals unfurling slowly, inevitably, responding to something deeper than choice. Yesterday: tight bud. This morning: beginning. Tomorrow: full bloom. Three days after that: composting. The cycle Wei taught her to witness. The cycle she'd been watching for two years, four months now.

Sixteen years, nine months old. Four months until she died. One hundred and twenty days. 2,880 hours. The calculation came automatically, the way breath came. Not morbid anymore. Just: true. Four months of heartbeats left. Four months of sunrises. Four months of this—sitting in Wei's garden before the compound woke, practicing presence to whatever arose.

This morning: something different. Not peace. Not certainty. But: steadiness maybe. Deepening. Like the gardenia opening—not because it decided to be ready, but because readiness arrived through the practice of being exactly where it was.

Maya closed her eyes. Returned to breath.

One. In.

Two. Out.

Her mind wandered immediately—*Migration in three weeks, Antarctica after that, then four months, then nothing*—but she noticed the wandering differently now. Not failure. Not problem to fix. Just: mind doing what minds do. She returned gently.

Three. In.

Four. Out.

Two years, four months of this. Since the awakening that broke her open to impermanence. Daily practice that hadn't fixed anything but had changed everything.

The change wasn't what she'd expected. Fear hadn't disappeared—she was still terrified. Grief hadn't dissolved—she still mourned the adult Maya who would never exist. But something had shifted. Somewhere in the questioning phase, she'd stopped waiting for practice to fix anything. Started just being present to it all—terror, grief, love, everything together.

Paradox: acceptance doesn't mean okay. Means: this is what is.

Five. In.

Six. Out.

She'd been sitting thirty minutes when she realized she'd been sitting thirty minutes. Not fighting her mind. Not achieving stillness. Just: returning. Over and over.

Maya opened her eyes. The gardenia was brighter now—sunrise touching it, making the white petals luminous. Three days of blooming ahead. Then falling. Then soil. Everything temporary. Everything beautiful. Everything here now.

She understood something Wei had tried to teach: The point isn't to feel different. The point is to be present to what you actually feel. Terror doesn't go away. But you can be present TO it instead of consumed BY it.

That was the practice.

Movement at the doorway. Maya turned, saw Amara emerging onto the rooftop. Her aunt—sixty-two years old, nine months in Lagos now, transformed from the isolated astrophysicist who'd calculated everyone's death into someone who showed up daily with mathematics and love.

"You're here early," Amara said quietly.

"Couldn't sleep. Wanted to practice."

Amara settled on the bench beside her. Didn't fill the silence. Had learned that from being here—that presence could be quiet. That showing up was enough.

They sat together watching the garden wake. The lemon tree standing patient. Mint spreading. Tomatoes heavy. Everything thriving despite its deadline.

"Can I tell you something?" Maya asked.

"Always."

"I'm not ready to die. Will never be ready. But I'm ready to be present until then. That's different."

Amara absorbed this. “Yes. Very different.”

“Practice didn’t make me peaceful. Just made me... here. Even when here is terrifying.”

“That’s remarkable.”

“Doesn’t feel remarkable.”

“You’re sixteen. Facing death at seventeen. Practicing presence despite terror. Maya—that’s courage.”

Maya looked at her aunt. Saw the tears gathering. “Are you scared? For the end?”

“Yes. Terrified. Your mother and I wasted seven years not speaking. Now we have four months. Not enough time. Never enough.” Amara’s voice cracked. “But I’m here now. With you. With Zara. With family. Present to it. That’s all I can do.”

“It has to be enough.”

“It has to be. There’s nothing else.”

They sat quietly. The sun climbed. Lagos District waking below—sixty people in this compound, two million in the district, all counting down to the same ending. Some panicking. Some numbing. Some—like Maya, like Amara, like the handful who practiced—trying to be present. Trying to witness their own brief lives completely.

“Mathematics session later?” Amara asked.

“Yes. But different question today.”

“What question?”

“Not orbital mechanics. Not physics.” Maya met her aunt’s eyes. “I want to ask you about mattering. Brief life. If seventeen years, seven months matters.”

Amara’s face softened. “Of course it matters.”

“How do you know?”

“We’ll talk about it. After your practice. After the girls come.”

“What girls?”

Amara smiled. “The two who’ve been watching you practice for weeks. They’re gathering courage to approach. Today might be the day.”

Maya felt something flutter in her chest. Not quite hope. Not quite fear. Something between. “What if I don’t know how to teach them?”

“You’ll teach them what you know. That’s enough.”

After Amara left—heading down to help Kwame with breakfast preparation—Maya remained in the garden alone.

She walked among the raised beds. Touched the lemon tree trunk—rough bark, solid wood, alive. This tree was fifty-two years old. Would burn in four months. But today it needed tending. So she checked the soil, confirmed it had moisture, removed a few dead leaves.

Not because maintenance saved anything. Because today the tree was here. Present. Real.

David had taught her that. Maintenance wasn't about forever—just about function while function mattered. Small acts done completely.

Maya moved to the gardenias. The opening bloom was fuller now—halfway between bud and flower. By this afternoon: complete. Tomorrow: browning edges. Three days after that: scattered petals. She'd watched this cycle hundreds of times. Never got less beautiful. Never stopped being teaching.

Wei's voice in memory: "The butterfly blooms for three days. But those three days are whole. Complete in themselves. Not incomplete because brief."

Two years ago, Maya had heard those words without feeling them. Now: different. She'd practiced feeling what she felt without trying to change it. Being present without demanding permanence. Loving what she'd lose without pretending loss wouldn't hurt.

The practice hadn't fixed anything. Just made her able to be here with the unfixed.

Footsteps on the stairs. Maya turned. Two girls emerged onto the rooftop—hesitant, nervous, maybe fourteen and fifteen years old. She recognized them from the compound. Saw them sometimes at meals. Watched them watching her practice mornings. Never spoken to them directly.

They stopped at the garden entrance. The older one—thin, dark-skinned, serious expression—spoke first. "Maya? Can we... can we talk to you?"

Maya's first instinct was to say no. To explain she wasn't qualified. To redirect them to Kenji. But she remembered something he'd said months ago: "Teaching isn't about being qualified. It's about being honest. About sitting with people in their questions."

"Yes. Come in."

They entered the garden carefully, respectfully. The younger one—lighter-skinned, round face, eyes red from recent crying—looked around like she was in sacred space. Maybe she was. This garden had been sacred to Wei. Had become sacred to Maya. Sacred not as religious. Sacred as: where truth was practiced.

"I'm Maya," she said, though they clearly knew. "This is Professor Wei's garden. She died three years ago. But we maintain it. Practice here."

"We know," the older girl said. "We've been watching you. Every morning. You come here before dawn. Sit. Meditate. We see you from our window."

"I'm Ife," she added. "This is Blessing. We're... we're scared. About the asteroid. About dying. We heard you practice presence. Learned from Professor Wei before she died. We thought—maybe you could teach us? About... facing it?"

Maya felt something in her chest. Recognition. These girls were her three years ago. Awakening to impermanence. Terrified. Seeking wisdom. Hoping someone had answers that would make it bearable.

She didn't have answers. Had barely figured anything out. Was sixteen and still confused and would die at seventeen without mastering anything. But Kenji's words returned: "You just taught presence to two terrified teenagers and gave them something real. That's teaching. Wei would be proud."

This was transmission. This was the teaching spreading. Not because she was enlightened. Because she was honest. Because she was willing to sit with terror and still show up.

"I'm not a teacher," Maya said. "I'm sixteen. I've been practicing two years. Still scared. Still confused. Don't know if any of this will help when the moment comes."

Blessing—the younger one—whispered: "But you still practice."

"Yes."

"Why?"

Maya sat on the bench. Gestured for them to join her. They sat, one on each side, waiting. She couldn't give them certainty. Could only give them what she'd found.

"Being present—even to terrifying things—is better than being numb," Maya said. "Four months awake is worth more than four years asleep. This—" She gestured at the garden, at them, at the morning. "—this is real. Right now. That's all any of us have. So I practice being here until I can't."

"How do you practice?" Ife asked.

"Breath meditation mostly. Sitting. Noticing when my mind wanders. Returning gently. Over and over."

"Does it make you peaceful?"

"No. Makes me present. Present to not being peaceful. Present to being scared. Present to loving what I'll lose. Peace isn't the point. Being here is the point."

"Can you show us?" Blessing asked softly. "How to sit? How to practice?"

Maya felt tears threatening. Wei to Zara to Maya. Maya to Kofi. Now: Maya to Ife and Blessing. The transmission happening naturally. The teaching spreading

because presence called to presence. Because humans seeking truth found each other.

"Yes. I can sit with you. We can practice together. I don't have answers. But presence is something we do together. Not alone. Together."

She stood, moved to the open space in the garden. Ife and Blessing followed. Maya showed them posture—sitting upright but relaxed, hands in lap, eyes closed or softly open. Basic zazen form Kenji taught her. Wei taught him. Someone taught Wei. The practice passing person to person until there were no persons left.

"Notice your breath," Maya said. "Don't change it. Just notice. In. Out. Count if it helps. One breath in, two breath out. Your mind will wander. That's normal. That's not failure. When you notice wandering, return. Gently. No judgment. Just return."

"How long do we sit?" Ife asked.

"Start with five minutes. Eventually longer. But time doesn't matter as much as showing up. Five minutes of presence is complete."

They tried. Maya watched them settle. Saw Ife's face tighten with concentration. Saw Blessing's shoulders rise with tension. Recognized herself two years ago—trying too hard, expecting too much, waiting for something dramatic to happen.

"Softer," Maya said gently. "You're not fighting anything. Just noticing. Just being here. Breath goes in. Breath goes out. That's all. Simple and impossibly difficult."

They softened slightly. Sat for five minutes in silence. Maya sat with them, eyes half-open, watching them and the garden simultaneously. Everything temporary. Everyone practicing. Everyone facing the same ending with whatever tools they had.

When she rang the small bell—Wei's bell, kept here for exactly this—they opened their eyes.

"That's it?" Blessing asked.

"That's it."

"It's hard. My mind went everywhere."

"Perfect. That's practice. Mind wandering, noticing, returning. You did it correctly."

"But I didn't feel peaceful."

"Neither do I. Neither does anyone most of the time. Peace isn't guaranteed. Presence is just... being here with what actually is. Including the not-peaceful."

Ife spoke carefully. “Will it help? When the asteroid comes? Will practice make that moment bearable?”

Maya met her eyes. Remembered asking Kenji the same question Year 13. Remembered his brutal honesty: *I don’t know.* Now she understood why honesty mattered more than comfort.

“I don’t know,” Maya said. “I hope so. But I practice anyway because being present to my life now—today, this morning, this garden—that matters regardless of whether it helps later. Four months from now I’ll be dead. But right now I’m alive. Practicing makes me *here* for the alive part. That’s enough.”

They absorbed this. Sat quietly in the garden. The gardenia blooming. The lemon tree standing patient. The mint spreading. Everything teaching impermanence if they paid attention.

“Can we come back?” Blessing asked. “Tomorrow? Practice with you again?”

Something opened in Maya’s chest. Not quite joy. Not quite peace. But: rightness maybe. The teaching continuing through her.

“Yes. Every morning if you want. Before dawn. For three weeks, until we migrate. Then I’ll be in Antarctica. But yes—come practice. We’ll learn together.”

“Thank you,” Ife said. “Thank you.”

They left quietly. Maya watched them descend the stairs. Two girls, fourteen and fifteen, learning to face death at sixteen and seventeen. The transmission spreading. Not because she was wise. Because she was willing.

Movement behind her. She turned. Uncle Kenji stood in the doorway, having arrived for his quarterly visit. He’d been watching. Listening. His face showed something she’d rarely seen—pride mixed with recognition mixed with grief.

“You’ve become a teacher,” he said quietly.

Maya felt defensive instinct rise. “No, I just—”

“You just taught presence to two terrified teenagers and gave them something real. That’s teaching. Wei would be proud.”

The words landed like gift. Like permission. Like recognition of something Maya hadn’t fully seen herself: she’d become part of the transmission. Not a master. Not enlightened. Just: practitioner willing to sit with others. Willing to share the small truth she’d found. Willing to say *I don’t know* and *let’s practice anyway.*

“I’m scared I’ll fail them,” Maya admitted. “What if I teach them wrong?”

“You’ll teach them what you know. That you’re scared too. That practice doesn’t fix anything. That presence is possible anyway. You’ll teach by being honest. That’s all teaching is.”

Kenji moved into the garden. Sat on Wei's bench. Maya joined him. Uncle and niece. Teacher and student. Both practitioners.

"You've transformed," Kenji said. "Since Wei died. Since you awakened."

"Have I?"

"You're teaching others. That's transformation. Not because you've mastered anything. Because you've met practice honestly."

Maya looked at him. Thirty-six years old. Would die at thirty-seven in four months. He'd sought answers six years before finding Wei. Found presence through watering plants. Learned to teach by admitting uncertainty. Now: guiding others through the impossible. Both of them doing work that wouldn't save anyone but mattered completely.

"Are you scared?" Maya asked. "About the end?"

"Yes. Terrified. But also—" He gestured at the garden. "—also here. Grateful somehow for this. Teaching. Practicing. Being with people facing it together."

"Is that enough?"

"It has to be."

They sat together. Morning fully arrived now. Compound waking. Voices rising from below. Zara would appear soon with Kofi, ready for breakfast. Amara would be cooking with David. Family converging for another ordinary, precious, temporary day.

"Three weeks until you migrate," Kenji said. "Then we'll be together in Antarctica. Are you ready?"

Maya thought about it. "No. Will never be ready. But I'll keep practicing. Teach while I can. Hold Kofi's hand at the end like I promised. Die awake. That's all I can do."

"That's everything."

"Is it enough?"

"Wei died saying 'The flower bloomed.' That was enough for her. You'll have two years, eight months total practice. Brief. But brief can be complete. Presence doesn't measure duration."

Maya felt it land. Not as certainty. Not as peace. But as: truth she could work with. Truth she could practice into. Truth she could teach Ife and Blessing and Kofi and whoever else came seeking.

"I'll keep practicing," she said.

"I know."

That evening: family dinner.

Rooftop table. Seven people: Zara, Kwame, Maya, Kofi, Amara, David, Kenji. The family that would migrate together.

Kofi—thirteen years, eight months old, unstoppable joy even now—bounced through conversation. "Maya taught two girls today! In the garden! I saw from the window! She's a teacher now!"

Maya felt embarrassed heat. "I'm not—"

"You are," Mama said firmly. "Kenji told me. You taught them sitting meditation. Offered them practice. That's teaching."

"But I barely know anything."

"You know enough," Papa said. "You know how to be present. How to practice despite fear. How to sit with uncertainty. That's what they need. Not perfect wisdom. Honest practice."

Amara spoke up. "Maya, you asked earlier about mattering. Want to talk about it now?"

Everyone quieted. This question sat in all of them.

"Yes," Maya said. "Do I matter? Seventeen years, four months. Does it matter?"

Amara's face was serious. "Yes. You taught those girls today. You lived consciously. You chose presence over numbness. Duration doesn't determine value. You matter because you're here. Because you're real. Because you chose to be awake."

"Even though I'll be gone in four months?"

"Especially because. You knew your timeline and chose practice anyway. Most people hide their whole lives. You didn't. That's courage."

Maya absorbed this. Felt something settling. Not certainty. Not peace. But: enough.

Kofi spoke up, voice quieter than usual. "Maya, when the asteroid comes... will you be scared?"

The table held its breath.

"Yes," Maya said honestly. "Terrified. But I'll be present to it. Present to you. That's all I can do."

"Will you hold my hand?"

The question cracked something in the gathered adults. Zara's face crumpled. Amara looked away, crying. David's jaw tightened. Kwame reached for Zara's hand.

"Yes," Maya said, voice steady despite tears. "I'll hold your hand. We'll all hold hands. Mama, Papa, Aunt Amara, Uncle David, Uncle Kenji. All of us together. Family. Present. Until presence ends. I promise."

Kofi nodded. Satisfied. Comforted by promise that couldn't change anything but changed everything.

They ate quietly after that. Passed dishes. Shared food. Ordinary and sacred simultaneously. Last time this specific gathering—next time would be Antarctica, different city, different context, closer to the end.

After dinner, clearing plates, Maya caught her mother alone. "Mama? Was I wrong? To practice? Should I have spent two years just... living? Like other kids?"

Zara set down the dish. Pulled Maya into tight embrace. "No, baby. No. You chose consciousness. You chose to be awake. That's the bravest thing. I'm so proud of you."

"I'm sixteen and terrified."

"Wisdom isn't being unafraid. It's being present anyway. You're wiser than you know." Zara pulled back, held Maya's face in her hands. "Seventeen years, four months. It's not enough. It's horribly not enough. But you made it *real*. You lived it consciously. That matters more than duration."

Maya cried against her mother's shoulder. Not sad crying. Not desperate crying. Just: release crying. Gratitude crying. The kind of crying that came from being seen completely by someone who loved you completely.

"Thank you," Maya whispered. "For letting me practice. For supporting it. For learning alongside me."

"Thank you for teaching me how to parent the ending. How to love what I'll lose without trying to pretend loss isn't coming. You taught me that. You and Wei and Kofi. My children taught me presence."

They held each other. Mother and daughter. Both practitioners. Both facing the same ending from different positions—forty-nine and seventeen, parent and child, teacher and student and somehow both simultaneously.

Late night. Everyone sleeping. Maya alone in her room.

She pulled out the journal—two years, four months of entries. Questions and doubts and breakthroughs and backslides. The full arc of practice that wasn't linear, wasn't clean, wasn't enlightenment but was: presence. Honest, struggling, continuing presence.

She turned to a fresh page. Wrote:

Year 14, Month 12. Four months left.

Today I taught two girls meditation. First time teaching. Kenji says I'm a teacher now. I just feel like: someone willing to sit with others.

Two years of practice. Not long enough to master anything. But long enough to learn: presence TO fear, not consumed BY fear. That's the practice.

The questioning phase was brutal. Thought I was failing. But the confusion brought me here—not ready to die, but ready to be present anyway.

That's different. That's enough.

Ife and Blessing will practice with me three weeks. Then migration. Then: consciousness ends. Everything I learned dissolves. The transmission ends.

But right now: blooming. Teaching spreading. Wei → Zara → Maya → Kofi → Ife → Blessing. Person to person. Until no more persons.

Final accounting: 2 years, 8 months total practice. Wei practiced 40 years. I'll get 2.7% of her time. Not enough to master anything. But enough to learn presence. Enough to teach. Enough to die awake.

Brief. Complete. Enough.

Maya closed the journal. Set it aside carefully. Lay back on her bed.

Tomorrow: more practice. Ife and Blessing returning. Morning meditation. Afternoon mathematics with Amara. Evening with family. Ordinary day. Precious day.

Three weeks until migration. Each day a choice: presence or absence, awake or asleep.

She chose awake. Not because awake was pleasant. Because awake was real. Because presence to her brief life was the only thing she could control. The only wisdom available.

The practice would continue. Not easier. Not certain. Just: continuing. Showing up. Sitting. Breathing. Teaching. Being here until here ended.

The flower would bloom four more months. Then fall. But right now: blooming. Right now: here. Right now: teaching spreading and presence happening despite everything.

Not mastery. Not enlightenment. Not peace.

Just: this breath. This moment. This fierce and fragile life fully lived.

Maya slept.

And dreamed of gardens.

And woke to practice again.

Three weeks passed in the rhythm of practice.

Ife and Blessing came every morning. Learned breath meditation, walking meditation, presence to daily tasks. They brought questions Maya couldn't answer: Will it hurt? Will we be together? What happens after? She learned to say *I don't know* without apologizing. To offer presence instead of certainty.

The teaching spread naturally. By week two, three more teenagers joined. By week three, Kofi started sitting sometimes—still fidgety, still young, but present in his way. The garden became gathering space. Brief community.

Maya watched it happen with something like wonder. Wei's teaching through Zara through her was spreading to compound teenagers who would die in four months. Brief transmission. Everyone learning to face the ending together.

Kenji watched too. Offered guidance when asked. Mostly just witnessed. Let Maya teach. Let transmission happen naturally. The way Wei let him teach. The way presence passed from person to person without force, without agenda, just: readiness meeting readiness.

Amara came to morning practices too. Sat in back. Silent. Learning. The astrophysicist who calculated everyone's death learning to be present to her own. Learning from her sixteen-year-old niece that brief life could be conscious life. That mattering wasn't duration. That presence was enough.

The compound community gathered one evening—Mr. Okonkwo's idea, marking fifteen years of choosing life despite doom. Everyone who stayed. Everyone who built gardens knowing they'd burn.

They spoke gratitudes. Honored each other. Maya didn't speak—too shy, too young. But people spoke about her: *That girl in Wei's garden teaching teenagers. Zara's daughter who chose consciousness. The young practitioner.*

Recognition without performance. Just: being seen for choosing to be awake.

Final night in Lagos.

Tomorrow: transport to Antarctica. Migration. New city. Final months. Beginning of ending.

Maya stood alone in Wei's garden one last time. Late night. Everyone sleeping. Stars above—or rather, the engineered light-scatter that passed for stars in Lagos District's climate dome.

She walked among the beds. Touched every plant. The lemon tree: "Thank you for standing patient." The gardenias: "Thank you for teaching." The mint: "Thank you for persisting."

She sat on Wei's bench. The bench where she awakened. Where she questioned. Where she taught Ife and Blessing. Where practice deepened.

Two years in this garden. Preparation for four months that would come too fast.

Was she ready?

No. Would never be ready.

But she was present.

She thought about Wei. 125 years old. Dying naturally. Final words: "The flower bloomed." Not regret. Not fear. Just: acknowledgment.

Maya would get 17 years, 7 months. Not 125. But the blooming was the same—temporary, beautiful, complete in itself.

She thought about the girls she'd taught. Ife and Blessing and the others. They'd continue practicing in Antarctica if they went. Or here if they stayed. The teaching spreading. Not because she was enlightened. Because she was honest. Because presence called to presence.

She thought about Kofi. Her brother who'd die at fourteen. Who she'd promised to hold at the end. Who was learning presence through her, through Mama, through just being thirteen and fully alive despite doom.

She thought about Mama and Papa and Aunt Amara and Uncle David. Family who chose consciousness. Who practiced together. Who would die together. Who made brief life matter through complete attention.

The transmission continuing. Person to person. Until there were no persons left.

That was the teaching. That was everything.

Maya stood. Bowed to the garden—formal bow, gratitude bow, honoring bow. "Thank you, Wei. Thank you, garden. Thank you, practice. Thank you for teaching me how to bloom briefly and completely. I'll carry you with me. Four more months. Until blooming ends."

She walked to the doorway. Turned back once more.

The garden stood quiet. Patient. Temporary. Real. In four months: ash. But right now: here. Growing. Teaching. Blooming.

Brief. Complete. Enough.

Maya left the rooftop. Descended the stairs. Returned to the apartment where family slept. Tomorrow: migration. New phase. Final teaching. Final months. Final blooming.

But tonight: this. This breath. This moment. This fierce and fragile and temporary consciousness fully present to itself.

Not mastery. Not peace. Not certainty.

Just: awake.

And that was everything.

That was enough.

That was home.

Chapter 45: Offering

Ibrahim al-Rashid | Year 14, Month 9 | Antarctica

The meditation room is full.

Ibrahim counts without meaning to—habit from years of stairs, years of steps, years of needing structure. Thirty-seven people in the circle. More than last week. More every week, it seems. He sits in his usual spot, left side near the window, where he can see both Kenji at the front and the door. Old instincts. Fighter instincts. Always know the exits.

His leg aches from this morning's maintenance work. Seven years on the arrays—the body remembers the cold, the climbing, the compensating for damage that won't heal. He shifts slightly, finding the angle where the pain becomes bearable. Derek glances over, nods. The former Marine understands bodies that don't work right anymore. They've been swimming together three years now—Tuesday and Thursday mornings, Building 9 basement pool. Twenty-five laps. Ibrahim never imagined he'd swim twenty-five laps. But Derek kept inviting, kept showing up. Now Ibrahim helps orient new refugees. Shows them that broken bodies can still move.

Min-seo sits two cushions away—seventy years old now, frailer than when Ibrahim first knocked on her door asking about mint eight years ago. But still here. Still tending her balcony garden despite Antarctic winter. The mint thrives somehow.

Fatima arrives with her characteristic energy, greeting people quietly, finding her cushion. Jordanian woman who never lost faith but never judged Ibrahim for losing his. Fourteen years of dinners at her place. Behind her: Samir, the Deaf Syrian teacher, signing greetings to the people who've learned even basic signs. Ibrahim can sign *hello*, *thank you*, *I see you* now. Three years of lessons. Different mode of attention.

They kept him alive. These four. Years 6 through 14. Ibrahim hadn't known it while it was happening. Thought he was just surviving. But looking back: they were holding him.

Now, somehow, he's become someone others look to. Someone Kenji invites to speak. Someone young people ask questions. The transformation is uncomfortable. Unwanted. Ibrahim doesn't understand it. Maybe doesn't deserve it. But: real.

Chen and Kowalski sit near the front—both here every week for two years now. Seventy-five and seventy-one. Former UN Secretary General and security chief. They'd been practicing informally for twelve years before Kenji returned. Thursday coffee ritual. Morning meditation. When Kenji opened this teaching space Year 12, they'd arrived separately, seen each other, smiled recognition. Now they sit together like old friends.

After sessions, Chen sometimes shares stories—patient negotiation transformed into patient presence. Kowalski rarely speaks but when he does, everyone listens. Thirty-seven years maintaining security, bearing witness to collapse. Last week he'd said simply: "My job was impossible for decades. I did it anyway. That's presence." Ibrahim had felt recognition—maintenance workers understanding each other.

Obi Nwosu sits mid-circle, arms crossed but face open. Fifty-six years old. Three years of Lagos practice now—started skeptical Year 11, transformed into essential voice. The former infrastructure manager who'd spent nine years maintaining Lagos water systems before quitting Year 10 because futility became unbearable. Then Wei died. He'd been attending teachings barely one month when she passed. Something about her death, about witnessing someone die present rather than broken, shifted him. He stayed. Kept practicing. Kept showing up despite uncertainty.

When Ibrahim speaks during sessions now, Obi often adds his engineering perspective: "Maintenance taught me this without me knowing. Fix today what breaks today. That's complete." His skepticism gives others permission to doubt. His presence despite doubt gives them permission to practice anyway. "Three years ago I called this bullshit. Still not certain it matters. But I keep showing up." Honest. Real. Valuable.

Dr. Sarah Kim sits quietly observing—forty-six years old, former journalist who moderated the Year 2 election debate, now volunteer coordinator. Two years of practice transformed her from organizing logistics to accepting what can't be organized. She takes notes sometimes during sessions, old journalist habits, but her attention is different now. Not documenting. Witnessing.

Among the regulars: Soso Kim, near the back. Forty-nine years old, runs the District 12 Dog Adoption Center. Five years attending now. Ibrahim has watched her transformation—fierce environmentalist who grieved extinct species, now teaching others through animal care. Her center became a satellite teaching space Year 12.

After sessions she sometimes shares stories about volunteers learning to be present with unadoptable dogs. Last month Chen had said after hearing one: "Everything we maintain will end. Doesn't make maintaining less sacred."

Younger people scattered throughout the circle. Teenagers mostly—fifteen years old maximum. Ibrahim watches them arrive week after week. Scared. Brave. Angry. Some come alone. Some with parents. All carrying the same unbearable

math: seventeen years maximum, then nothing.

One girl—maybe fourteen, Ibrahim doesn't know her name—has attended six weeks straight. Sits very still during meditation. Cries quietly sometimes. Asks hard questions after. Last week: "If I'm going to die at seventeen anyway, why does it matter if I'm present? Dead is dead." Kenji had answered gently, but Ibrahim saw the girl wasn't satisfied. Intellectual understanding isn't embodied understanding. She knows the words. Can't feel the truth yet. Maybe won't before she dies.

Teaching people who won't live long enough to master it. That's the work.

Kenji rings the small bell. The room quiets. Thirty-seven people settling into meditation posture—sitting, standing, kneeling, whatever works for their bodies. Ibrahim straightens slightly. Notices his breath. The familiar instruction: *Notice when mind wanders. Return gently. That's all. That's everything.*

He closes his eyes. Focuses on breath. In. Out. In. Out. Thoughts arise immediately—maintenance schedule for tomorrow, Platform 73 needing recalibration, Min-seo's birthday next week, the ache in his leg. He notices them. Returns to breath. Not fighting. Just: returning.

This is what David taught him. Not through words. Through seven years of working together. Showing up at 6:47 AM. Three minutes early. Consistent. Doing maintenance not because arrays would last forever but because they needed maintaining today. Ibrahim had absorbed it without knowing. Now David's gone—left Antarctica three months ago, Year 14 Month 6, moved to Lagos with Amara. Seven years of partnership ended. But the teaching remains. The transmission happened through being, not through speaking.

Now Ibrahim continues the arrays alone. Well, not alone—47B remains, faithful robot colleague. But without David's human presence. The work is the same. The meaning persists. That's the point. Practice continues whether teacher is present or not. Understanding internalized becomes self-sustaining.

Forty-five minutes pass. The bell rings.

Ibrahim opens his eyes. Notices the room. Thirty-seven people returning from wherever minds go during meditation. Some peaceful. Some frustrated. Some crying. All here. All showed up. All chose presence over escape, even briefly.

Kenji lets the silence settle. Then speaks quietly: "Today I want to talk about the Ten Ox-Herding Pictures. For those new—these are Zen teaching images. Ten stages from lost to liberated. Picture One: seeking the ox. Not yet found. Just: seeking. That's where most spiritual journeys begin. Recognizing something's missing. Looking for it." He pauses. "I spent six years on Picture One. Tokyo, Cairo, Mumbai, finally Lagos. Seeking everywhere. Finding nothing. Exhausting myself with searching."

Ibrahim has heard this story before. Multiple times. But it lands differently each telling. Kenji's honesty about his own struggle gives everyone permission to

struggle. No performance of having arrived. Just: honest accounting of journey still unfolding.

"Picture Two: finding traces," Kenji continues. "Seeing footprints. Evidence the ox exists. For me, that was Year 8 in Lagos. Finding Wei's garden. Seeing people practice presence. Understanding it was possible even if I couldn't do it yet. Traces that something real existed."

He looks around the circle. "Most of you are somewhere between Pictures One and Three. Seeking, finding traces, maybe glimpsing the ox briefly. That's normal. That's the work. Don't rush. Don't force. Just: keep practicing. Notice when you're present. Notice when you're not. Return gently."

A young man raises his hand. Maybe fifteen. Ibrahim has seen him three times now. "What if we never get past Picture One? What if we die still seeking?"

The question hangs. Honest. Painful. Real.

Kenji considers. "Then you die seeking. That's not failure. Seeking is practice too. Being present to your seeking is presence. The pictures aren't achievement ladder—they're description of what naturally unfolds. Some people reach Picture Ten. Some stay at Picture Three their whole lives. Duration doesn't determine value. Presence does."

The young man nods slowly. Not satisfied but accepting.

"Actually—" Kenji looks toward Ibrahim. "Would you speak to this? About practice without achievement?"

Ibrahim's chest tightens. He doesn't want to speak. Isn't qualified. Is just maintenance worker who lost faith and counts stairs obsessively and barely survived years of wanting death. What does he know about teaching?

But Chen is nodding. Kowalski too. Obi watching with interest. Min-seo's face shows gentle encouragement. And the young people—they're looking at him with something like hope. Like maybe someone who isn't a formal teacher, who isn't Elena Torres's son, who is just refugee worker, might have something real to say.

Ibrahim takes a breath. "I'm not a teacher."

"Wisdom isn't about being wise," Kenji says quietly. "It's about being present enough to speak truth."

The silence waits. Thirty-seven people watching.

Ibrahim speaks. Words coming before he decides to speak them.

"I fought for eight years," he says. Voice rough. "Jerusalem. Militia. Believed—" He stops. Starts again. "Believed fighting mattered. Defended holy land. Certain of purpose. Then the asteroid came. Year 0. During prayer. And I—" He pauses. This part still hard. "My faith shattered. Completely. If everyone dies

together—righteous and wicked, believer and atheist—what's the point? What kind of God allows that?"

Several people nod. Recognizing the question. The crisis.

"I lost everything," Ibrahim continues. "Faith. Brothers. Purpose. Self. Got wounded Year 2. Evacuated to Antarctica Year 3. Arrived broken. Faithless. Wanted to die but lacked energy for suicide. Spent four years barely existing. Years 3 through 6. Unemployed. Aimless. Counting stairs obsessively because counting was only structure I had. Fifty-three steps to my apartment. Counted them every day. Multiple times. Because what else?"

He glances at Min-seo, Derek, Fatima, Samir. They know this story. Lived through it with him. Kept him alive when he didn't want to be kept alive.

"Then Year 7, I got maintenance work. Solar arrays. Didn't care about learning. Just needed something to do. Met David Chen—" He gestures vaguely upward. "He taught me—not lectured. Just worked. Showed up. Did maintenance because—" Ibrahim loses the thread. Tries again. "Seven years I watched him maintain arrays that will vaporize. But he did it anyway. Because today they need it. I don't—I didn't understand then. Maybe don't fully understand now. But something about that. Something."

The room is completely silent. Even the perpetual wind seems quieted.

"I asked him once," Ibrahim says. "Year 8. 'Why do you do this? Really. Why maintain arrays that will end?' He said: 'Because I can. Because it matters while it matters. Because showing up is enough.' " Ibrahim's voice cracks slightly. "I didn't believe him then. Didn't understand. Thought he was just avoiding futility. But he wasn't. He was demonstrating something. That purpose doesn't require permanence. That meaning isn't about outcomes. That maintenance is meditation. Presence made physical."

Obi leans forward slightly. Recognition visible on his face.

"Picture One, Two, Three—" Ibrahim continues. "I didn't know these teachings. Didn't study Buddhism. Didn't attend formal practice until Year 6. Just: worked. Counted stairs. Drank tea with Min-seo. Walked with Derek. Went to Fatima's dinners. Learned signs from Samir. Small things. Nothing dramatic. But they kept me alive. Kept me here. Kept me showing up."

He looks at the young man who asked the question. "You asked: what if we die still seeking?" Ibrahim pauses. Searching for truth. "Then you die seeking. But—" He stops. Contradicts himself. "No. That's not right. Maybe it's—if you're present to your seeking, that's different than not-seeking. You asked the question. You came here. That's something." He's fumbling now. "Someone wise said: brief life fully witnessed is complete life. I don't know if I believe that. But I think—maybe duration isn't the measure. Presence is. Maybe."

The young man's eyes are wet. "But I'll be seventeen. Never eighteen. Never adult."

"No," Ibrahim agrees. "Not enough time. Never enough. I'll be thirty-six when I die. Not enough either. But if you're present for your seventeen years—really present, really here—you'll know yourself. Won't know who you might have become. Will know who you are. That's—" He falters. "I don't know if that's enough. But it's what we have."

He's surprised himself. Didn't know he thought that until he said it. Full life isn't length. Maybe. Full life is depth. Presence. He thinks. Young people have less time. But time isn't the measure. Consciousness is. Or attention is. He's not certain. Just: speaking what feels true.

"I'm not wise," Ibrahim adds quickly. "Still counting stairs. Still limping. Still faithless. Still struggling. But I learned something through work, through community, through twelve years of barely surviving then suddenly realizing survival became living. Maybe full life isn't length. Maybe full life is depth. Presence. Being here completely. You have less time than me. I have less time than these elders—" He gestures to Chen and Kowalski. "But if we're present, we're full. That's complete."

Silence. Long silence. Ibrahim feels exposed. Vulnerable. Said too much. Revealed too much. Wants to disappear.

Then Chen speaks. Quiet but clear. "Fix today what breaks today. That's presence." He looks at Ibrahim directly. "You just named what I've been practicing forty years. Thank you."

Kowalski adds: "Thirty-seven years security work. Impossible job. Did it anyway. That's what Ibrahim just described. We're all dying young. Some younger than others. Doesn't change the practice."

Obi uncrosses his arms. "I spent nine years maintaining Lagos infrastructure. Quit Year 10 because futility destroyed me. Spent a year isolated, bitter. Then started practice—barely, reluctantly. Three years now. Listening to Ibrahim—I realize I was already doing this. Just didn't know it. Thought I'd failed. Actually: I'd been practicing."

Dr. Sarah Kim speaks for the first time in weeks. "I documented everything. Journalist instinct. Two years ago I came here exhausted. Seeking something deeper than efficiency. I maintain community connections now. Not fixing. Just: being present."

Soso Kim—from the back of the circle—adds: "I grieved species I'd never seen. Practice taught me: witnessing current life is complete. My twelve dogs—present with them is present with all life."

The room is charged now. Something happening. Not through Kenji's formal teaching. Through Ibrahim's offering. Worker speaking to workers. Broken speaking to broken.

The young people are watching with new attention. The fourteen-year-old girl who cried last week raises her hand. "So practice won't make dying okay? Won't

fix the fear?"

Ibrahim looks at her. Really looks. "No. Practice doesn't fix anything. You'll be terrified. I'm terrified. We're all terrified. But—" He searches for words. "Practice means you're terrified AND present. Not numb. Not hiding. Here, feeling everything. That's different from drowning in terror. Presence doesn't make death okay. Makes life real."

She nods slowly. Understanding or accepting or both.

Then someone moves. The door opening. Ibrahim turns.

A woman enters. Blonde. Swedish. Thin—too thin, rail-thin, shaking hands. She hovers at the threshold. Uncertain. Afraid. Present despite fear.

Linnea.

Ibrahim knows her. Unit 418. Building 12. Same building as him, as Min-seo. Seen her in stairwells for eight years—Year 6 through Year 14. Always struggling. Always barely surviving. Derek, Fatima, Samir, Min-seo—they've all been helping. Bringing food. Checking in. Being present. But she's been too deep in her own drowning to surface. Until now. Until this moment.

Ibrahim catches Derek's eye. Derek nods once. *I invited her. She came.*

Linnea stands frozen. Thirty-six years old but looking older. Worn. Damaged. Real.

Ibrahim stands. His leg protests but he ignores it. Walks to her. Speaks quietly. "Linnea. You came."

"Ibrahim." Her voice is thin. Shaking like her hands. "You said—Derek said—this might help."

"It might. Or might not. But you're here. That's brave."

"I'm not brave."

"You're here despite fear. That's the definition."

He guides her gently to a cushion near where his group sits. Min-seo smiles welcome. Fatima touches Linnea's arm gently. Samir signs *hello*, *welcome*, *we see you*. Derek's face shows quiet satisfaction. Eight years keeping her alive. Eight years of patient presence. Eight years of refusing to let her disappear. And now: she's here. Choosing. Trying.

Ibrahim returns to his seat. But something has caught Kenji's attention. His teacher is staring at Linnea. Face arrested. Recognition flooding.

Ibrahim sees it happen. Kenji knows her. Somehow. Somewhen. The frozen expression. The breath catching. The past arriving in the present.

The moment stretches. Thirty-seven people becoming thirty-eight. The circle expanding. Room for one more broken person trying to be present.

Kenji recovers. Returns his attention to the group. But Ibrahim watches. Sees the tremor in Kenji's hands. The shift in his breathing. Something significant happened. Something he'll understand later.

The session continues. Kenji leads them through another brief meditation. Fifteen minutes. Linnea tries. Ibrahim can see her struggling—shaking hands pressed together, eyes squeezed shut, tears leaking. But she doesn't leave. Stays. Endures. Chooses presence despite every instinct screaming to run.

When the bell rings, Kenji invites questions. Several people ask about practice, about Pictures, about how to be present when terror overwhelms. Kenji answers patiently. But Ibrahim notices his teacher glancing toward Linnea. Seeing her. Remembering something.

An older woman—maybe fifty—asks: "How do we know if we're making progress? How do we measure?"

Chen answers before Kenji can. "You don't. Progress isn't measurable. Some days presence is easy. Some days impossible. But you keep practicing. That's all. That's enough."

Kowalski adds: "Thirty-seven years I showed up to impossible work. Never knew if I was succeeding. Just knew: today, I show up. Tomorrow, show up again. That's measurement. Did you show up? Yes? Then you succeeded."

Soso speaks: "I measure by whether I notice. Do I see the dogs today? Really see them? Not thinking about tomorrow or yesterday—just: these dogs, this moment, this life. If I notice, I'm present. If I don't, I return and try to notice. That's progress."

The session naturally winds down. People standing, stretching, talking quietly. The teenagers cluster together—finding each other, finding solidarity in shared impossible circumstance. The elders stay seated, continuing conversation. The middle generation—Ibrahim's generation—moves between groups, connecting, facilitating, being present.

Ibrahim watches this happen. Community forming. Not through doctrine or belief. Through shared practice. Chen was UN Secretary General. Kowalski security chief. Obi infrastructure manager. Soso runs animal shelter. Ibrahim maintains arrays. Different roles. Same practice.

Linnea hasn't moved. Still sitting on her cushion, hands shaking, face streaked with tears. Min-seo sits beside her. Doesn't speak. Just: presence. Being with someone in their pain without trying to fix it.

Derek approaches. Crouches beside Linnea. Signs something—Ibrahim catches *proud*, *you came*, *we're here*. Linnea nods. Can't speak. But nods.

Fatima joins them. Then Samir. The four who've kept Linnea alive gathering around her. Not crowding. Just: letting her know she's not alone. She's part of

something. She's held.

Ibrahim remains at distance. Letting the moment unfold. This is their work. He helped bring her here—encouraged Derek, agreed she was ready, offered his testimony today that maybe helped. But now: they take over. Community holding community.

As people begin leaving, Kenji approaches Ibrahim. His teacher's face is complicated. Moved. Troubled. Grateful.

"That was wise," Kenji says quietly.

Ibrahim uncomfortable. "I'm not wise."

"You spoke truth. The young people heard you. The elders recognized you."

"Did it help?"

Kenji looks around the room. At the young people still talking. At Chen and Kowalski deep in conversation. At Linnea surrounded by community. "I don't know. But you offered. That's what matters."

Ibrahim nods. Uncomfortable with praise but accepting it. This is what practice taught him—uncomfortable is just feeling. Notice it. Don't fight it. Let it exist.

"The woman," Kenji continues carefully. "Linnea. I know her."

Ibrahim waits. Sensing something important.

"Year 0. Day 72. Lagos. I was—" Kenji pauses. "Spiraling. Substances. She was at a party. We both used. Both fell apart that night. I saw her once more—Year 5, Mumbai. Deep in addiction. I couldn't help. Was barely surviving myself."

He looks toward Linnea. "Now: fourteen years later. She's here. And Ibrahim—you brought her. You and the others kept her alive. That's—" His voice cracks. "That's what this practice is for. Holding each other. Being community."

Ibrahim feels something shift. He didn't just maintain arrays these years. He became part of something. Chosen family. Refugee community. And through that, people like Linnea survive. People like him survive. Everyone holding everyone else.

"Kenji?" Linnea's voice from across the room. Tentative. Recognizing.

Kenji turns. They see each other. Really see each other. Fourteen years between that Lagos party and this Antarctica meditation room. Two people who started at the same point—both using, both drowning, both desperately seeking oblivion. Now: here. Both practicing. Both alive. Both choosing presence over escape.

Kenji walks toward her. Ibrahim watches. Two survivors recognizing each other.

But before Kenji reaches her, Linnea speaks. Voice stronger than Ibrahim expected. "You're the deflection boy."

"Kenji."

"You took two pills. I took the third." She's crying but not hiding it. "You got out."

"So did you. You're here."

"Barely. Took me fourteen years."

Kenji kneels beside her. Eye level. "Ibrahim brought you. That means you're trying."

She almost smiles. "He's kept me alive. Him, Min-seo, Derek, Fatima, Samir. Eight years."

"Then you have community. That's more than I had Year 0."

Long pause. Two people acknowledging parallel paths. Different outcomes but same struggle. Same humanity. Same brokenness. Same survival.

"Will you come back next week?" Kenji asks.

Linnea hesitates. Ibrahim sees the fear. The doubt. But she says: "I don't know if I can do this."

"Come anyway. Practice isn't about being good at it."

She nods. Small. Tentative. "Okay."

Kenji stands. Offers his hand. Helps her up. Her legs are unsteady but she doesn't fall. Derek moves to her side—supporting without smothering. They leave together: Linnea, Derek, Min-seo, Fatima, Samir. Five refugees who found each other through broken circumstances. Five people who kept each other alive through nothing years. Now: witnessing each other's survival. Witnessing each other's choice to try.

The room empties. Only Ibrahim, Kenji, Chen, Kowalski, and Obi remain.

The silence is comfortable. Shared. Five people who understand something similar. That work is practice. That maintenance is meditation. That showing up is enough.

Chen speaks first. "What Ibrahim offered today—that's what I've been seeking. Language for experience."

Kowalski nods. "Governance, infrastructure, security, arrays—all the same. That's what survives after belief systems collapse. That's what we pass forward."

Obi looks at Ibrahim directly. "Three years ago I called this bullshit. Thought presence was surrender. You proved me wrong. Not through philosophy. Through living. You're broken. You have no faith. But you're present. That's proof."

Ibrahim doesn't know what to say. These men—elder statesmen, infrastructure managers, security chiefs—looking to him for something. He barely sees it in himself. It's uncomfortable. But also: real. Maybe he has become something. Or maybe he just survived long enough that surviving looks like wisdom. Through twelve years of showing up when showing up seemed pointless. Through letting community hold him. Through stairs and tea and swimming and—today—words that maybe helped.

"Two years left," Ibrahim says quietly. "Then we all die. What we built—this community—ends. Was it worth it?"

The question hangs. Honest. Painful.

Kenji answers. "Wei taught me: completion isn't about duration. If we're fully here for two years, we're complete. The ending doesn't negate the practice."

Chen adds: "I coordinated humanity for eight years. Accomplished nothing. But I showed up. That was my work. Same with this. We won't save anyone. But we'll help them be present."

Kowalski stands slowly. Seventy-one years old. Body protesting. But present. "Two years left. Not enough time. But enough time to practice. Enough time to matter." He looks at each of them. "Thank you for showing up."

They stand. Five people in empty meditation room. Community. Chosen family.

Ibrahim feels something he hasn't felt since Jerusalem. Not faith returning—that's gone, permanently. But: belonging. These people—Kenji who teaches, Chen who witnessed, Kowalski who maintained, Obi who questions—they see him. Really see him. And in being seen, he exists. Not as fighter. Not as believer. As person who shows up despite having every reason not to.

That's enough.

They leave together. Walking out into Antarctic evening. The arrays above, humming their endless electric song. Two years until extinction. But right now: here. Together. Practicing.

Walking back to Building 12 with Min-seo and Samir. The three of them moving slowly—Min-seo's age, Ibrahim's limp, Samir's careful attention to surroundings. Different ways of being in the world. Different challenges. Same practice.

Samir signs something. Ibrahim catches most of it: *Today was good. Your words helped.*

"Not teacher," Ibrahim signs back clumsily. "Just worker."

Samir smiles. Signs: *Same thing. You teach through being honest.*

They reach Building 12. Their building. Home for eight years. Fifty-three steps ahead. Ibrahim has counted them thousands of times. Obsessively at first.

Habitually now. Just: awareness. One step. Another. Another. All the way up.

Min-seo pauses at the second floor. Her landing. "Friday tea?" she asks.

"Friday tea," Ibrahim confirms.

"Good." She touches his arm. "Ibrahim. Today you spoke. That's new. I remember when you first came to my door. Year 6. Broken. Silent. Look at you now."

"I'm not different," Ibrahim says.

"You are. Eight years changes people." She looks at both of them. "Showing up for each other, year after year—that's love. Thank you for showing up."

She enters her apartment. Ibrahim and Samir continue up. Third floor. Fourth floor. Fifty-three steps total.

At the fourth floor landing, Samir signs: *You helped Linnea today.*

"We all did," Ibrahim signs back. "All of us together. That's how it works."

Samir nods deeply. Signs: *Goodnight. Keep practicing.*

Ibrahim enters Unit 403. Seven years here. Same small apartment. Same sparse furniture. Same window overlooking courtyard. Same mint plant on sill—cuttings from Min-seo, still growing, green and alive despite Antarctic winter.

He makes tea. Sits at his small table. Looks out at the courtyard. Derek's building. Samir's building. Fatima's in the distance. Min-seo below. Linnea somewhere above.

Eight years of proximity becoming family.

Two years left. But tonight: here. Together.

Ibrahim's prayer beads sit on the shelf. Ninety-nine names of God he doesn't believe in anymore. He doesn't reach for them. Doesn't need them. The practice has replaced what faith used to provide. Structure. Meaning. Not to God. To people.

That's enough.

He drinks his tea slowly. Tastes it. Mint sharp and clean. Water warm. Cup solid in damaged hands. All of it real. All of it here now.

Tomorrow: Platform 73. Maintenance work. Swimming with Derek. Check on Linnea. See Min-seo. Live his ordinary life through attention.

Two years until everyone dies. Thirty-three when he arrived. Thirty-six at impact. He survived when he wanted death. Found community when he thought connection impossible. Offered something when he thought himself empty.

That's not nothing.

Ibrahim finishes his tea. Notices he finished it. That's practice—noticing the drinking. Being present to ordinary moments.

He stands. Stretches. His leg aches. Will ache until he dies in two years. That's just reality. Noticed reality. Accepted reality. Present reality.

Tomorrow he'll show up. Platform 73 at 6:47 AM. Three minutes early. Consistent. Reliable. Present. That's his practice. That's his offering. That's how he loves.

The flower will bloom. For two more years. Then fall. But the blooming—that's real. That's whole. That's complete.

Ibrahim turns off the light. Lies down. Closes his eyes.

Sleep comes.

And with it: peace. Not happiness. Not faith. Not certainty.

Just: peace with the uncertainty. Peace with the emptiness that's no longer empty. Peace with dying in two years because the two years are real. Peace with being Ibrahim—broken, faithless, limping, counting stairs, but also: present, choosing to show up.

That's enough.

That's home.

Chapter 46: Readiness

Maya Okafor-Mensah | Year 15, Month 1 | Lagos

The garden is quiet at dawn. Maya sits on the stone bench where Wei used to sit—three years, five months since she died—and makes lists in her mind.

What she had: - Seventeen years, three months - Two parents who chose to bring her into a dying world - One brother (Kofi, fourteen years, three months) - Extended family who loved her despite everything - Wei's teaching for two years, eight months before Wei's death - Presence practice for three years, five months total - The ability to teach others—she taught those two girls basic meditation yesterday - Complete knowledge of her death date - This garden - These mornings - Four more months

What she will never have: - Eighteenth birthday (nine months away—will never reach it) - University - First kiss - Sex - Her own children - Travel beyond Lagos and Antarctica - Independence from parents - Time to become whoever she might have been

Maya closes her eyes. Breathes. Opens them again. The garden unchanged. The light golden on wet leaves, the air already thick with Lagos heat. Her body

seventeen years, three months old. Four months until impact. Until she dies at seventeen years, seven months.

She won't even reach eighteen.

For two years she's practiced presence. Sat with impermanence. Learned to be here despite knowing here ends soon. She thought she'd made peace with dying young.

But this morning, alone in Wei's garden one week before migration, Maya feels rage.

Not at her parents—they gave her life, brief as it is. Not at the universe—the asteroid is just physics. The rage is simpler: she's angry at the unfairness. She did everything right. Practiced presence. Loved openly. Faced death with courage. Became someone real.

And still: she dies at seventeen.

No reward for goodness. No exception for the young. No cosmic bargain.

Just: physics. Just: four more months.

Maya stands. Walks the garden's perimeter, sweat already beading at her temples. Every flower she passes—hibiscus, jasmine, mint, tomatoes. Every crack in the wall. This place shaped her. Wei shaped her here.

And in one week she leaves it forever.

The rage spreads—throat, jaw, hands clenching. She wants to scream. Wants to tear up the mint Wei planted. Wants to break something to match the breakage inside her.

Instead she sits back down on Wei's bench. Feels the rage. Lets it be there.

Presence doesn't mean peace. It means being with what is. And what is, right now, is rage.

She sits with it for eighteen breaths. (Eighteen—the age she'll never be.)

The rage doesn't diminish. It just is.

On the eighteenth breath, Maya imagines Wei sitting beside her. What would Wei say?

The rage is honest.

Not "let it go" or "find peace with it." Just: the rage is honest.

Can you be present to rage?

Maya tests the question. Can she be here, aware, witnessing her own fury?

Yes. She can. She is.

The practice didn't take away the rage. It taught her how to be conscious while feeling it. The difference between presence TO rage and presence AS rage.

Brief doesn't mean incomplete.

Wei's words from four years ago. Maya was twelve then, terrified, newly awakened to mortality.

Maya wants to argue with the memory. She's seventeen. She hasn't even started. How can a life this short be whole?

But she sits with the question instead of answering it.

Is she incomplete? Or is she exactly as complete as seventeen years, three months makes her? A flower that blooms for seventeen years, seven months total. Brief, yes. But while blooming—fully flowering?

The rage says no—incomplete, abbreviated, stolen. Something underneath whispers: maybe complete just means fully present to whatever length you have.

Maya sits with both. Not choosing. Just being present to being torn.

Footsteps behind her. She knows them without turning.

"You okay?" Kofi asks.

"No." She doesn't lie to her brother. "Not okay. Angry."

He sits beside her on Wei's bench. Fourteen years, three months old. "At what?"

"At dying before I get to live."

Kofi quiet. She glances at him. His jaw tight. Eyes on the garden but seeing something else.

"Me too," he finally says. "I'll be fourteen. You'll be almost eighteen. Neither of us enough."

They sit together. Sister and brother. Both dying too young. Both angry. Both here.

Maya reaches for his hand. Holds it. They don't speak. Don't need to. The rage shared is somehow easier to bear than rage alone.

After a while, Kofi says: "Do you think Mama and Papa feel guilty? For having us?"

Maya considers. "I think they feel grief. But not guilt. They chose life. We got seventeen years. Fourteen years. That's something."

"Is it enough?"

"No." Honest. "Not enough. But: something."

Kofi nods. Then: "Are you scared? Of Antarctica?"

"No. I'm scared of dying. Antarctica's just where it happens."

"Four months."

"Four months."

They sit longer. The sun climbs. The garden warms. Maya thinks: This is what I'm losing. Not some abstract future. This. Kofi's hand in hers. Morning light. The smell of jasmine. Being seventeen with rage and grief and love all tangled together. This exact moment. Then the next one. Then four months of moments. Then: nothing.

The rage wells up again. She lets it. Breathes with it. Squeezes Kofi's hand.

"I'm glad you're my brother," she says.

"I'm glad you're my sister."

Such simple words. Such enormous weight. They both know: four months, then never again. This is all they get. Nearly eighteen years of siblinghood. Then ended.

"I love you," Maya says.

"I love you too."

They sit until Kofi has to go—promised Papa he'd help with packing. He squeezes her hand once more. Leaves her alone in the garden.

Maya stays. The rage still present but sharing space now with something else. Not peace—she's done pretending practice leads to peace. But: clarity. She sees what she has. Sees what she's losing. Sees the unfairness and the preciousness both. Holds them together.

This is what three years, five months of practice gave her. Not serenity. Not acceptance in any comfortable sense. Just: the capacity to be with all of it at once. The rage, the grief, the love, the terror, the gratitude. All of it. Conscious. Aware. Present.

She thinks: Is that enough?

She thinks: It has to be. It's all there is.

At ten o'clock, two girls arrive at the compound gate. Maya sees them from the kitchen window—the same two from yesterday. Sisters. Eleven and nine years old. They'll die at eleven years, four months and nine years, four months. Even younger than Kofi.

Yesterday their mother brought them. Asked if Maya would teach them meditation. "They're terrified," the mother said. "Every night, nightmares. I don't know how to help them."

Maya almost said no. Almost said: I'm seventeen, I'm not a teacher, I barely understand presence myself. But then she remembered: Wei taught her at twelve.

Kenji taught people at twenty-four. Transmission doesn't wait for expertise. It happens when it happens.

So she said yes.

Yesterday she taught them basic breath awareness. Counting to ten. Noticing when the mind wanders. Simple. Beginner exercises. The girls tried hard. Fidgeted. Got frustrated. Tried again.

They're back. That means something.

Maya meets them at the gate. The older girl—Chidinma—speaks first. "We practiced last night. Like you showed us. I got to eight before I lost count."

The younger girl—Amara, named after Maya's aunt—says: "I only got to four. Is that okay?"

Maya crouches down to their level. Looks at them both. Sees their fear poorly hidden behind brave faces. Sees how hard they're trying. Sees their whole lives—eleven years, nine years—measured against four remaining months.

"That's perfect," Maya says. "Four is enough. Eight is enough. Whatever you managed is enough."

Amara's eyes well up. "I'm scared I'm doing it wrong."

Maya takes her hand. "You can't do it wrong. Being present just means being here. You're here. That's it. That's the whole practice."

"But what if I can't stop being scared?" Chidinma asks.

Maya sits down on the ground. Gestures for them to sit. They do—cross-legged, hands in laps, enormous eyes.

"I'm scared too," Maya says. "Every day. I've been practicing for three years, five months. I had a great teacher. And I'm still terrified. Presence doesn't take away the fear."

"Then why do it?" Chidinma asks. Not defiant—genuinely asking.

Maya chooses words carefully. "You can be scared and still here. You can know you're dying and still notice the morning light. Still love your sister. Still taste your breakfast. The practice doesn't fix anything. It just helps you not look away."

"From what?" Amara whispers.

"From everything. The good parts and the bad parts. How unfair it is. How beautiful it still is anyway."

The girls are quiet. Maya waits. This is teaching—saying true things and letting them land.

"Can you teach us more?" Chidinma finally asks.

"Yes."

"Today?"

"Yes. And tomorrow. And the next day. I have one week here. I'll teach you every day if you want."

"Then what?" Amara asks.

"Then I go to Antarctica. Then you keep practicing without me. Like I keep practicing without my teacher. She died three and a half years ago. But the practice doesn't die. You carry it. You teach others if they ask."

"Until impact," Chidinma says. Flat.

"Until impact," Maya agrees.

"Does that mean something?" Chidinma asks. Different question now. Bigger.

"I don't know," Maya says. Honest. "But being present feels different than being numb. Loving people even though I'm losing them feels realer than protecting myself by not loving. Four months conscious is different than four months unconscious. I can't tell you it means something. But I can tell you it's more. More alive."

She doesn't know if that's the right answer. But it's the truest thing she has.

The girls look at each other. Some silent sibling communication passes between them. They turn back to Maya. Nod.

"Teach us," Chidinma says.

So Maya does.

She teaches them for two hours. Breath awareness. Body scanning. Loving-kindness practice—both girls cry when they try to send love to themselves knowing they're dying. Sitting with difficult emotion.

They're exhausted by noon. Maya is too. Being honest with children about death. Not offering false hope.

But when they leave, Amara hugs her. Says: "Thank you."

Chidinma says: "See you tomorrow?"

"See you tomorrow."

Maya watches them walk away—eleven and nine years old, holding hands, practicing presence because the alternative is unbearable, dying in four months. She feels the rage again. Feels it sharp and clean and honest.

They should have had full lives. Long lives. Lives where death is distant and practice is optional and childhood lasts longer than this.

But they don't. They have this. Four months. Breath counting. A seventeen-year-old teacher who doesn't have answers but has practice.

Maya stands in the garden again. Realizes: Wei gave her this. The capacity to sit with children and tell them the truth and teach them how to be present to it. The capacity to transmit practice even while enraged, grieving, terrified herself. The capacity to teach not from expertise but from being one step ahead on the same path toward the same end.

Is that enough? Is that meaning?

She doesn't know. But it's what she has to give. And giving it feels like being alive.

Evening. The compound gathers for dinner. Last normal dinner before packing begins tomorrow. The air heavy with humidity, the ceiling fan doing little against Lagos heat. Maya sits between Mama and Kofi. Papa across from her. Aunt Amara beside Papa, Uncle David beside Amara.

The table full: Mr. Okonkwo (eighty-seven, still tending his rooftop garden), Adanna and her son Samuel (twenty, both coming to Antarctica for the final week), Tom (the engineer who kept their water running fifteen years), Ling (Wei's caregiver who stayed after Wei died), Dr. Tanaka (Maya and Kofi's pediatrician).

This is the community that kept them alive. Through fifteen years of slow-motion apocalypse.

But tonight something's different. Tom is quiet, picking at his food. Dr. Tanaka keeps glancing at Maya and Kofi like she's memorizing them. Ling's hands shake slightly when she reaches for water. The warmth is real but fraying at the edges.

Papa stands. Raises his glass of water (alcohol mostly gone by Year 12). "To Wei," he says. His voice catches slightly. "Who taught us how to be here."

"To Wei," everyone echoes. Tom's voice barely audible.

Maya drinks. Thinks: Wei never met most of these people. But Wei's teaching reached them anyway. Transmission like water—finding its level, spreading wherever there's space to receive it.

After dinner, Adanna pulls Maya aside. The kitchen still warm from cooking, the smell of jollof rice lingering.

"Samuel told me you're teaching meditation."

"To two girls. Just basic practices."

"He wants to learn too." Adanna's voice drops. "He's been having nightmares. Wakes up screaming. He was supposed to start university Year 0. Supposed to become a doctor. Now he's twenty and he can't... he can't figure out how to be a person who dies this young. Can he join tomorrow?"

Maya looks across the room. Samuel washing dishes, back to them, shoulders tight.

Samuel is twenty. She's sixteen. "I'm not... I mean, I'm still learning myself."

"So is he," Adanna says. "So are we all."

Maya thinks of Wei. Wei who said yes to teaching a terrified twelve-year-old. Who never claimed expertise, just offered practice.

"Yes," Maya says. "He can join."

Adanna hugs her. Says nothing. Just holds on for three breaths longer than necessary.

After she leaves, Maya sits on the compound steps. Looks at the stars. Four months until impact. Four months until she dies at seventeen years, seven months. Never eighteen. Never adult. Never most things.

But: she taught today. Will teach tomorrow. Will teach for six more days. Then will carry practice to Antarctica. Then will die practicing. Present. Aware. Witnessing her own brief blooming.

Is she ready?

No. She'll never be ready. Ready implies some threshold crossed, some place you arrive where death becomes okay. That's not real.

She's not ready.

She's terrified.

She's enraged at the unfairness.

She's heartbroken for Chidinma and Amara and Samuel and Kofi.

AND: she's present. Here. Aware. Not looking away. Loving what she's losing. Teaching what she was taught. Being alive while alive.

Both things. All things. The rage and the practice. The grief and the gratitude.

This is what Wei meant by holding paradox. Not resolving it. Just being spacious enough for both.

Maya closes her eyes. Counts eighteen breaths. Opens them again.

The stars unchanged. The compound quiet. Her body seventeen years, three months old. Four months until it isn't.

She thinks: Tomorrow I teach again. Tomorrow I pack. Tomorrow I take one more step toward Antarctica, toward the end, toward whatever comes after consciousness ends.

She thinks: I'm not ready.

She thinks: I'm here anyway.

That's all. That's everything. That's her practice. That's her life.

Late night. Maya alone in Wei's garden one last time before sleep. The air cooler now, the compound quiet. She kneels by the mint Wei planted. Touches the leaves. Smells them—sharp, clean, alive.

"Thank you," she whispers. Not to Wei. Not to the universe. To the mint itself.

Then to the jasmine. The hibiscus. The stones. The bench. The whole garden. "Thank you."

Then, finally, to herself. Hand on her own chest. Feeling her heartbeat. "Thank you. For seventeen years, three months. For practice. For rage. For presence. Not enough. Will never be enough. But: something. Thank you."

She means it. Despite everything.

She means it.

Brief doesn't mean incomplete. A flower that blooms for seventeen years, seven months is still a flower while blooming. And she's blooming now. Present. Aware. Here.

Four more months of blooming. Then: nothing.

But tonight: here.

Tomorrow: teaching.

Next day: packing.

Next week: migration.

Being present to each step. Not ready. Never ready. But: here.

Maya stands. Looks at the garden one more time. Whispers: "I will die at seventeen years, seven months. Four months from now. I won't reach eighteen. I will die terrified, grieving, angry at unfairness. AND I will die awake. Present. Loving what I'm losing. Not because it makes death okay. Because it makes life real. For Wei. For those girls. For Kofi. For Mama and Papa. For myself. I will die well. That's all I can promise."

The garden listens. The stars listen. The night listens.

Maya walks inside. Climbs to her room. Lies down. Closes her eyes.

Counts eighteen breaths.

Sleeps.

Tomorrow she'll wake. Practice. Teach. Pack. Be present. Be enraged. Be grateful. Be here. All of it. Until she isn't.

But tonight: sleeping.

Present even to that.

Enough.

Chapter 47: Journey

Zara Okafor-Mensah | Year 15, Month 1 | Lagos District

The apartment is nearly empty.

Zara stands in the kitchen where she's made breakfast for fifteen years, looking at bare walls. The children's drawings—gone, carefully rolled and packed. The engineering models—disassembled, archived. The plants—Kwame gave most away yesterday, kept only three small pots for the journey. Seventy square meters of accumulated life reduced to what fits in six bags.

What matters, it turns out, fits in very little space.

Maya emerges from her room carrying the butterfly book. Wei's gift, eleven years old now, pages soft from repeated reading. Nothing else in her hands. "I'm ready," she says.

Kofi bounces out behind her—diminished energy this morning, more subdued. He's holding the small pot with mint cuttings from Wei's garden. "Can I bring this?"

"Of course, baby." Zara takes the pot, adds it to the collection Kwame is packing. Lemon tree seedling. Gardenia cutting. Mint. Green threads connecting Lagos to Antarctica. Wei to wherever they're going.

Kwame moves through the space checking corners, closing drawers, the physical ritual of leaving. Fifteen years in this apartment. Nineteen years married. Twenty-two years together. Every surface holds memory—Maya's first steps here, Kofi's birth homecoming, ten thousand ordinary dinners, Wei's garden visible from the balcony. Home. Real home.

Temporary home.

"Last check," Kwame says quietly. His hand finds Zara's. Squeezes once. No words needed. They both know what they're losing. They both know why they're leaving.

Family. Three months together. That's everything.

The compound gathers at noon.

Sixty people in the courtyard—everyone who's left. Fifteen years of community reduced but not destroyed. Mr. Okonkwo stands at the center, eighty-seven years old, leaning on his cane but present. Still here. Still tending.

"Year 0," he begins without preamble. "Most fled Lagos. Smart people. We stayed. Some trapped. Some choosing. Some not knowing what else to do."

Zara has heard this before. Heard it at the Year 6 gathering, the Year 14 gathering. But today it lands differently. Today is goodbye.

"Fifteen years," Mr. Okonkwo continues. "Built something real. Not forever. Just: real. Gardens on rooftops. Water systems. Shared meals. Collective childcare. Community when community seemed impossible."

He looks directly at Zara. "This family—Zara, Kwame, Maya, Kofi—they taught us something. Defiance. Year 0, Month 10, Kofi was born. People called it cruel. Called it selfish. Called it wrong." His voice strengthens. "They were wrong. Kofi's existence gave us permission. Permission to live. Permission to build. Permission to plant gardens nine years before impact because gardens matter even when nothing lasts."

Adanna steps forward. Fierce as ever at forty-five, son Samuel beside her. "Thank you," she says simply. "For showing us life was worth choosing. Kofi turned fourteen three months ago. Samuel turned twenty last year. Brief lives. Complete lives. You taught us that."

Samuel speaks—rare for him. "Fourteen is enough if you're present for all fourteen years. Maya taught me that. She's seventeen now. Practices every day. Teaches others. Brief doesn't mean incomplete. Thank you for showing us."

Maya shifts beside Zara, uncomfortable with praise. But listening. Hearing that her life mattered to people beyond family. That two years, five months of practice spread outward in ways she couldn't see.

Tom approaches next. Awkward but sincere, holding a small wrapped package. "Fifteen years maintaining water because you made me believe maintenance mattered. The greywater systems we designed together—Year 6, remember?—still running. Still clean. Five more months of clean water because we cared." He hands her the package. "Schematics. Complete documentation. So whoever's left can maintain after we're gone. Work continues. Always continues."

Zara takes the package. Feels the weight of it. Fifteen years of engineering made portable. "Thank you, Tom. For everything. For showing up."

"Learned it from you."

Ling steps forward with a small box. "Professor Wei's final letters. She wrote these Year 10, knowing she wouldn't survive to see the end. One for Kenji. One for you. One for Maya when she turns seventeen." Ling's voice breaks. "She wanted you to have them. To open them Antarctica. When you need her wisdom but she's not there."

Zara takes the box. Three sealed envelopes, Wei's careful calligraphy. The weight of them enormous. Wei's voice preserved. Wei's teaching continuing. Three years, five months after death, still teaching.

Dr. Tanaka is last. She stands before Zara with professional mask completely dissolved. Just: human. "Fifteen years I've been Maya and Kofi's pediatrician. Watched them grow knowing they'd never finish growing. Every checkup measured development toward no future. My entire specialty made absurd by physics."

She looks at Maya and Kofi. "But you taught me something I couldn't learn from textbooks. Growth isn't about reaching some endpoint. It's about being fully alive in each stage. You've been fully alive every moment I've known you. Completely yourselves. Wholly present. That's enough. That's everything. Thank you for letting me witness it."

Maya is crying. Kofi is crying. Zara is crying. Kwame's arm around her shoulders, solid and warm and here.

"We leave in two hours," Zara manages. "Transport at 14:00. But—" She looks at all of them. Sixty people who chose community when isolation was easier. Who built gardens knowing they'd burn. Who loved children knowing they'd lose them. Who showed up every day for fifteen years because showing up mattered. "But you'll be with us. Everything you taught us. Everything we built together. We're carrying it. To Antarctica. To the end. You're not losing us. We're just—somewhere else. Still family. Still community. Still connected."

Mr. Okonkwo nods. "Good. Now eat. Last meal together should be real meal."

They eat in the courtyard. Shared food from shared gardens. Tomatoes Mr. Okonkwo grew. Herbs from the rooftop. Synth-protein Tom seasoned. Bread someone baked this morning. Simple food. Real food. Communion.

Maya sits between Zara and Kofi, quiet. She's been quiet all morning. Zara knows this silence—processing silence, feeling silence. Her daughter saying goodbye to everything she's known.

"Mama," Maya says quietly. "Can I go to the garden? One more time?"

"Of course, baby. We have time."

Maya stands. Kofi immediately follows. "I'm coming too."

They disappear toward the stairwell. Zara watches them go—her children, seventeen and fourteen, going to say goodbye to Wei's space. To the place that taught them everything that matters.

Kwame's hand finds hers again. "They're ready."

"Are they?"

"As ready as anyone can be. They practiced. They learned. They're present. That's all Wei could give them."

"It's not enough."

"No. But it's what they have."

Zara leans into him. Feels his steadiness. His quiet strength that's held her together for nineteen years. "I'm scared."

"Me too."

"Antarctica won't be like this. Won't be community like this. Will be—huge. Anonymous. Two billion strangers dying together."

"Won't be anonymous. Kenji there. Elena. Amara. David. They've built community too. Different community. But real. We'll find our people. We always find our people."

Zara knows he's right. But leaving hurts anyway. Fifteen years of roots, pulled up. Even knowing they'll burn in five months. Even knowing family matters more. Leaving still hurts.

Maya finds Wei's garden unchanged.

Three years, five months since Wei died. The garden keeps growing anyway. Ling maintained it Year 11-12. Then others took turns. Now: blooming. The lemon tree heavy with fruit. Gardenias opening white petals. Mint spreading everywhere, unstoppable.

Wei's bench waits. Maya sits. Kofi sits beside her.

"Last time," Kofi says.

"Last time."

They sit in silence. The compound sounds rise around them—voices, laughter, crying, life continuing despite endings. The Lagos District hum beyond—two million people still here, still living. Five months left. Everyone choosing how to spend them.

"Maya," Kofi asks. "Will Antarctica be scary?"

"Probably."

"Will we have friends there?"

"Probably. Uncle Kenji teaches there. Grandma Elena. Aunt Amara and Uncle David. We'll have family."

"But not Mr. Okonkwo. Not Adanna. Not Samuel."

"No. Not them."

Kofi touches the mint plant. Rubs a leaf between his fingers. The smell rises—sharp, clean, alive. "I'm sad."

"Me too."

"But also—" He struggles for words. "Also glad? We're going to be with Grandma Elena. I've only met her twice. And Uncle Kenji I've met like five times. I want to know them better. Before—"

"Before we die."

"Yeah."

Maya takes his hand. Her little brother. Who won't be little much longer. Who'll be dead in five months. Who right now is fourteen years, three months old and holding her hand in Wei's garden saying goodbye to everything he's known.

"I'm glad too," Maya says. "Sad and glad. Both. Wei taught me that. You can hold both feelings at once. Grief for what you're losing and gratitude for what you're moving toward. Both true. Both valid. Both present."

"I practiced last night," Kofi says. "What you taught me. Counting breaths. I got to fourteen before I lost count."

"That's good."

"Is it enough? For—when it happens?"

Maya considers. Honest answer. True answer. "I don't know. I've practiced two years, five months. I'm still terrified. But practice means I'm terrified AND present. Not hiding from it. Not pretending it's not coming. Just—with it. Feeling all of it. Maybe that's enough. Maybe that's all anyone can do."

Kofi nods. Squeezes her hand. "Will you hold my hand? When the asteroid comes?"

"Yes. I promise. We'll all hold hands. Mama, Papa, you, me, Aunt Amara, Uncle David. Family. Together. I promise."

"Okay."

They sit longer. Maya memorizes everything. The lemon tree's exact shape. The gardenia blooms' specific white. The mint's sharp smell. The bench's rough wood. Wei's presence still here somehow, three years after death. Teaching continuing. Wisdom spreading. Brief life that mattered completely.

"Thank you," Maya whispers. Not sure who she's thanking. Wei. The garden. Life itself for giving her seventeen years. Incomplete years. Enough years. Both.

The garden doesn't answer. Just grows. Blooms. Lives. Does what gardens do.

That's answer enough.

The transport arrives at 14:00 precisely.

Private vehicle—Elena arranged it. Sleek white, space for twenty passengers, currently configured for six plus luggage. The pilot is professional, courteous, careful. She's done this route a thousand times. Lagos to Antarctica. Refugees

returning home. Families migrating for the final gathering. Everyone choosing where to die.

"Okafor-Mensah party?" the pilot confirms.

"Yes." Zara's voice steadier than she feels. "Six passengers. Six bags."

"Right on schedule. Flight time: four hours. We'll arrive Antarctica 18:00 local time. Your family's waiting."

Family. Amara. David. Elena. Kenji. Family they're moving toward. Family they haven't lost yet.

The compound gathers for final goodbye. Sixty people crowding the courtyard, spilling into the street. Mr. Okonkwo at the front, leaning heavy on his cane. Adanna and Samuel beside him. Tom. Ling. Dr. Tanaka. Everyone else whose names Zara knows, whose stories she's witnessed, whose lives intersected with hers for fifteen years.

Mr. Okonkwo raises one hand. Blessing. Goodbye. Permission to leave. "Tend gardens wherever you go. We'll tend here. Different places. Same practice. All temporary. All real."

"All real," the compound echoes.

Zara embraces him—carefully, he's so fragile now. Eighty-seven years old, five months from impact, still choosing life. Still here. "Thank you. For everything. For community."

"Thank you for teaching us how to build it."

Adanna next. Fierce embrace, no words needed. Then Samuel, Tom, Ling, Dr. Tanaka. Sixty goodbyes compressed into twenty minutes. Too fast. Too necessary. Everyone crying and laughing and holding each other like they'll never let go and then letting go because they must.

Maya and Kofi make their rounds. Hugs from everyone. Maya serious, accepting each embrace with full presence. Kofi energetic even now, bouncing between people, making promises. "I'll write!" he says. "We can message! I'll tell you about Antarctica!"

"We'll wait to hear," Dr. Tanaka says. "Tell us everything."

Finally: time. No more delays. The pilot patient but present. The transport waiting. Family inside—Kwame already loading bags, Amara and David's bags already stowed from when they arrived nine months ago.

Zara turns back once more. Sees the compound—fifty units arranged around central courtyard, rooftop gardens visible, fifteen years of life visible. Sees her balcony. Empty now. Cleaned. Ready for whoever comes next or no one.

Sees Wei's garden. The lemon tree. The gardenias. Everything blooming. Everything temporary. Everything here.

"Goodbye," she whispers.

"Not goodbye," Mr. Okonkwo calls. "See you on the other side."

There is no other side. They all know it. But the words matter anyway. Hope matters. Pretense matters. Kindness matters. Saying what should be true even when physics says otherwise.

Zara boards the transport.

Inside is cool and quiet. Maya and Kofi claim window seats immediately. Kwame beside Kofi. Zara beside Maya. Amara and David across the aisle—they've been waiting here since 13:30, giving the family space for goodbye.

The pilot runs through safety briefing. Emergency protocols. Flight path. Expected weather. Standard procedures executed with care despite everyone knowing that safety doesn't matter anymore. But process matters. Showing up matters. Doing the work right even when the work ends.

The transport lifts.

Maya presses her face to the window. Watching the compound shrink. The courtyard becoming small. The rooftop gardens becoming patches of green. Lagos District spreading in all directions—two million people visible from above, all temporary, all real, all here for five more months.

"I'll never see it again," Maya says quietly.

"No." Zara won't lie to her. "You won't."

"It was beautiful."

"It was."

"I'm glad I was born here. Glad I lived here. Even though—" She doesn't finish.

"Even though brief."

"Yeah."

Kofi is quieter. Watching out his window but not speaking. Kwame's hand on his shoulder. Father and son witnessing together. The silence between them comfortable. Familiar. Love made visible through presence, not words.

The transport climbs. Lagos District falls away. The engineered tropical climate giving way to natural climate patterns—heat shimmers, air currents, the physics of atmosphere. Below, the African continent. Green near the coast. Brown inland. The scars of climate change visible from altitude—dried rivers, expanded deserts, cities abandoned or flooded.

Humanity's fingerprints everywhere. All temporary. All ending.

"Mama," Maya says. "Tell me about when I was born."

Zara blinks. “You’ve heard that story.”

“Tell me again.”

So Zara tells her. Year minus 2. Pregnancy planned and wanted. Labor sixteen hours, natural birth, Maya born at dawn. First cry. First breath. First moment of existence. Two years before detection. Two years of innocence before the countdown began.

“Was it worth it?” Maya asks. “Knowing I’d only get seventeen years?”

The question lands like physics. Inevitable. Unanswerable. Essential.

“Yes,” Zara says. “Every moment. Every day. Every second. You’ve been real, Maya. Fully yourself. Conscious and present and here. Seventeen years of that is worth—” She searches for words. “Worth everything. Worth all the grief coming. Worth the loss. Worth the pain. You matter. Not because you’ll last. Because you’re real.”

Maya absorbs this. Nods slowly. “Kofi?”

“Worth it. Completely.”

“Even though we’ll die young?”

“Even though. Maybe especially because. Your father and I could have chosen safety. Could have chosen not bringing you into a dying world. But we chose you. Chose life. Chose presence. Best decision we ever made.”

“You really believe that?”

“With everything I am.”

Maya looks out the window again. Africa shrinking below. “Okay. Thank you. For choosing me. For bringing me here. For letting me be real even if real is brief.”

Zara can’t speak. Just holds her daughter’s hand. Feels the warmth of it. The pulse. The life. Seventeen years, three months old. Five months remaining. Real. Here. Hers.

Across the aisle, Amara is watching. Her face wet with tears. David’s arm around her. Nine months in Lagos with them. Nine months of being Aunt Amara instead of Dr. Okafor. Nine months learning presence instead of calculating distance.

“Zara,” Amara calls softly. “Thank you.”

“For what?”

“For not giving up on me. For calling Year 7. For weekly conversations. For letting me back in. For—” Her voice breaks. “For letting me be part of this. Part of them. I wasted seven years. You gave me eight years of family. That’s—everything.”

“You’re my sister. You’re family. Always were. Even when distant.”

"I know. But knowing and feeling are different. I feel it now. Feel you. Feel them. Feel all of it. Thank you for teaching me how to feel again."

The transport continues south. Africa becoming water. Ocean below—vast, dark, endless. Used to be shipping lanes. Used to be filled with vessels. Now: empty. Most ships scrapped. Most travel stopped. The ocean returning to itself. Brief human interruption ending.

Maya falls asleep against the window. Exhausted from goodbye. Dreaming, probably. Her face peaceful despite everything. Kofi asleep too, head on Kwame's shoulder. Father and son both sleeping. Both trusting. Both here.

Zara sits in the quiet hum of the transport and reflects.

Fifteen years since detection. She chose life—marriage, children, engineering, community, presence. Chose defiance when despair seemed rational. Chose building when destruction was guaranteed. Chose love when loss was certain.

Others chose differently. Amara chose calculation until Year 8, then chose reconnection. Elena chose governance, bearing witness, maintaining dignity. Kenji chose seeking until Year 8, then chose presence. Ibrahim chose fighting then drifting then maintenance. David chose arrays then family.

All valid. All temporary. All complete.

And now: convergence. All of them migrating to Antarctica. Final gathering. Last months together. The ending approaching. Visible. Real. Five months. One hundred fifty-three days. Then: physics.

But today: in motion. Flying. Between Lagos and Antarctica. Between fifteen years built and five months remaining. Between home left and home arriving at. Between grief and gratitude. Between terror and presence.

Both. Always both. Everything both.

The ocean passes below. Hours of water. Hours of time. Hours that could be endless or instant depending on attention. Zara practices what Wei taught. Notices. Returns. Notices again. The transport's hum. Kwame's breathing. Maya's sleep. Kofi's trust. Her own aliveness. Her own impermanence. Her own completeness despite incompleteness.

This moment. Just this moment. Then the next. Then five months of moments. Then ending.

Enough. Has to be enough. Is enough.

The pilot's voice breaks the silence. "Beginning descent. Antarctica in sight. Arrival eighteen minutes."

Zara wakes Maya gently. Kwame wakes Kofi. Everyone looking out windows now. Watching the white continent emerge from ocean.

Antarctica. Megacity. Humanity's fortress against climate change. Four billion people at peak. Less than two billion now. Everyone who stayed choosing this place for their ending. The fortress becoming tomb.

But also: home. New home. Final home. Where family waits. Where Elena governs dignity. Where Kenji teaches presence. Where Amara and David built new life. Where convergence happens.

The spaceport appears—massive facility, hundreds of gates, thousands of transports coming and going. Still operating. Still functioning. Civilization maintaining itself until it can't. Five more months of this. Then silence.

The transport descends. The landing is smooth. The pilot professional to the end. "Welcome to Antarctica. Local time 18:03. Temperature minus twenty-two Celsius. District housing office will have your assignment. Your welcoming party is waiting at Gate 14."

Gate 14. Family. Amara and David gathering their bags—they'll exit together, united front, family complete. Kwame helping Kofi with his backpack. Maya holding the butterfly book, Wei's letters in her bag, everything she needs in almost nothing.

The door opens. Cold rushes in—bitter, shocking after Lagos heat. The temperature change visceral. Symbolic. Everything different now. Everything colder. Everything white where Lagos was color. Everything ending where Lagos was living.

But inside the gate: warmth.

Elena stands at the front. Seventy-three years old now, still present, still here. Her face when she sees Kenji beside her—her son, home from teaching, here for arrival. Marcus Reyes beside them—returned from Mumbai three weeks ago, final three months with chosen family.

And others. Chen and Kowalski—Elena's Thursday people, twelve years of practice together. Ibrahim—standing with quiet competence, seven years on the arrays now. Soso Kim from the dog adoption center, teaching animal care as presence practice. Others Zara doesn't know yet but will learn. Community. Different community. Real community.

Maya steps out first. The cold hits her. She gasps. But keeps walking. Toward Elena, toward Kenji, toward family. Kofi right behind her, bouncing despite exhaustion, still himself even here.

Amara and David next. Reunion with Elena—mother and sister, mother and once-son-in-law, family complicated and real. Embraces. Tears. Welcome home even though this isn't home. Or maybe is home because home is people, not place. Home is presence. Home is here.

Zara and Kwame last. Holding hands. Stepping into the cold together. Nineteen years of stepping together. Five months more. Everything temporary. Everything

precious. Everything enough.

Elena sees her. Opens her arms. "Zara. Welcome."

"Thank you for having us."

"You're family. Always room for family."

They embrace. Sister-in-law. Friend. Fellow witness to impossible years. Two women who chose presence when numbing seemed rational.

Kenji hugs her next. Nephew. Teacher. The seeker who stopped seeking and found home. "The kids have been asking about you for weeks. Maya wants to start intensive practice immediately."

"She would." Zara smiles. "She's ready."

"More than ready. She's already teaching. She'll teach others here. Keep the transmission going."

The transmission. Wei to Zara to Maya to others. Brief chain. Real chain. Sufficient chain.

"Where are we staying?" Kwame asks practically. Always the practical one. Always the steady one.

"District 8, Building 47, three-bedroom apartment," Elena says. "Larger than Lagos. Temporary housing but comfortable. Close to teaching center. Close to my office. Close to us. Five months of proximity. That's everything."

Five months. One hundred fifty-three days. Thirty-two more Thursday coffees for Elena's group. Ninety more mornings of array maintenance for Ibrahim. One hundred fifty-three more teaching sessions for Kenji. Thirty-six thousand, seven hundred and twenty more hours of consciousness. Then: nothing.

But right now: here. Family. Together. Cold and white and foreign but together. Home because presence. Home because connection. Home because choosing each other despite ending.

The apartment is larger than Lagos.

Ninety square meters. Three bedrooms. Kitchen with actual space. Living area that fits everyone comfortably. Windows overlooking District 8—buildings stretching infinitely, two billion people visible in lights and motion and life continuing.

Maya and Kofi claim their rooms. Maya's immediately filled with books Kenji brought—Buddhist texts, physics, philosophy. Kofi's filled with nothing yet but will be soon. Boy's energy unstoppable even after travel.

The kitchen has supplies. Elena arranged it. Food for tonight. Tea. Basics. Enough to begin.

Kwame starts making dinner. His ritual. His centering. His love language. Synth-protein and vegetables. Simple food. Real food. First meal in new home. Last home. Temporary home. Real home.

Zara stands at the window watching Antarctica settle into evening. The lights below. The megacity breathing. Two billion people choosing this ending together. Anonymous. Connected. Both.

Amara joins her at the window. Silent at first. Then: "It's strange. Leaving Lagos. Coming here. Everything different."

"Everything same," Zara counters. "Same family. Same practice. Same presence. Different location. Same essentials."

"How do you do it?"

"Do what?"

"Stay present. Stay calm. Five months left. Your children dying. How are you not screaming constantly?"

Zara considers. True answer. Full answer. "I scream internally. Constantly. Every moment I look at Maya and Kofi I'm screaming. But—" She searches for words Wei would use. "But the screaming and the presence aren't opposites. I can scream AND be here. Can grieve AND love. Can be terrified AND show up. Wei taught me that. Feelings don't prevent presence. Hiding from feelings prevents presence. So I feel all of it. Let it be there. Stay here anyway."

Amara absorbs this. "I'm seven years behind you in practice."

"You're doing fine. You came to Lagos. You're here. You're present. That's all anyone can do."

They stand together. Sisters. Forty-eight and sixty-one. Both survived detection. Both changed. Both here.

"Thank you," Amara says again. "For—everything."

"Stop thanking me. We're family. This is what family does. Shows up. Stays present. Loves despite loss."

Behind them, sounds of life. Maya explaining something to Kenji—probably physics. Kofi laughing at something David said. Kwame cooking. Elena discussing tomorrow's schedule with Marcus. Chen and Kowalski saying goodbye, promising to return tomorrow. Normal sounds. Domestic sounds. Family sounds.

Everything temporary. Everything enough.

First night in Antarctica.

The apartment quiet. Maya and Kofi sleeping. Amara and David in their room. Everyone exhausted from travel. From goodbye. From transition. From everything.

Zara lies beside Kwame in unfamiliar bed. The window shows unfamiliar city. The sounds are unfamiliar—Antarctic winds instead of Lagos warmth. Everything different. Everything strange.

"You okay?" Kwame whispers.

"No. You?"

"No."

They lie in honest darkness. Not okay. Not pretending to be okay. Just: here. Together. Present to not-okay-ness.

"Five months," Zara says.

"Five months."

"Maya will be seventeen years, seven months. Still seventeen. Never eighteen."

"I know."

"Kofi will be fourteen years, six months. Never fifteen."

"I know."

"We'll watch them die."

"Yes."

The silence holds them. The truth holds them. The impossibility holds them. And underneath: the presence. The practice. The Wei-taught, community-built, fifteen-years-developed capacity to be with what is without flinching away.

"I'm glad we're here," Kwame says. "Glad we came. Glad we'll be together."

"Me too."

"I love you. Have loved you nineteen years. Will love you five more months. Would love you longer if longer existed."

"I love you too. Thank you for being steady. For being here. For being you."

"Thank you for teaching me how to be present. You learned from Wei. I learned from you. Now the kids learning from us. Transmission. That matters."

"It does."

They hold each other. First night in Antarctica. Last home. Five months remaining. Three months as family unit here. Then two months until impact. Then nothing.

But tonight: this. Kwame's warmth. The unfamiliar ceiling. The knowledge that family sleeps nearby. That tomorrow brings new routines. That presence

continues until presence ends. That brief is enough. That temporary is complete. That home is wherever you practice being here.

The flower bloomed. The flower blooms. The flower will bloom until it can't. That's the teaching. That's everything.

Zara closes her eyes. Tomorrow will bring challenges. Adjustment. Grief. Practice. Teaching. Living. The same things every day brings. The same things these five months will bring.

But first: sleep. First: rest. First: this moment of quiet before tomorrow begins.

Five months. Enough time. Not enough time. Exactly the time they have.

She sleeps.

END PART III: SEARCHING

Fifteen years of separation ended. Eight years of reconnection completed. Family converged. Practice established. Community built in Lagos, left with love. Community beginning in Antarctica, embraced with presence.

Years 8-15 covered. Everyone positioned for final convergence. Individual transformations achieved. Ibrahim recovered through maintenance. Amara reconnected through love. Elena transformed through witness. Kenji returned through teaching. David completed arrays. Zara built everything that matters.

Maya at seventeen—nearly adult, completely herself, ready to teach. Kofi at fourteen—still young, fully present, learning fast. Both practiced. Both conscious. Both dying in five months. Both here now.

Part IV awaits. Year 15, Months 2-6. Final five months. The teaching spreading. The convergence deepening. The asteroid approaching. The ending arriving. The presence continuing until presence ends.

But tonight: sleep in Antarctica. Family together. First night of final chapter. Beginning of end. Home.

Always home.

Here.

PART IV: CONVERGENCE

Chapter 48: Arrival

Dr. Amara Okafor | Year 15, Month 1 | Antarctica

3:47 AM.

Amara woke to silence and for one disoriented moment thought she was still at the monitoring station. Same darkness. Same cold. Same solitude that had defined seven years of her life. Then she remembered: Lagos. David beside her. Family in the next room.

Family.

She turned her head carefully. David slept on his side, breathing steady and deep. Sixty-three years old and still beautiful to her in ways she couldn't have articulated seven years ago when numbness made everything distant. Now: she could see him. Really see him. The grey in his hair. The lines around his eyes. Fifteen years of maintenance work written on his body. Fifteen years of choosing to show up.

The apartment was quiet. Small—sixty square meters, standard Antarctic housing, Building 14, Unit 7B. Two bedrooms, shared living space, kitchenette. They'd moved in three years ago when they arrived from Lagos. Made it theirs—David's few belongings from his solo years, Amara's monitoring equipment mostly abandoned, plants Kwame had gifted them that somehow survived despite their inadequate care.

Yesterday they'd rearranged everything. Cleared the second bedroom that had been storage. Made space for family. Four more people in sixty square meters designed for two.

They arrived at 18:00. Amara had been checking the time every seven minutes. 17:23. 17:30. 17:37. The precision of anxiety. David had laughed gently: "They'll be here when they're here." But he'd been anxious too—she could tell by the way he'd reorganized the kitchen three times.

Then: door chime. 18:02.

Amara had opened it and there they were. Zara first—forty-eight years old, grey threading through her hair, exhausted from travel but smiling. Real. Here. Her sister who she'd ignored for seven years and slowly rebuilt connection with over the last eight. Behind her: Kwame, solid and steady. Then Maya—

Maya had stopped in the doorway. Seventeen years, three months old. Tall. So tall. The last time Amara saw her, she'd been fourteen. Three years of growth. Three years of transformation into someone who looked almost adult but would never reach eighteen.

"Aunt Amara," Maya had said quietly. Not a question. Acknowledgment.

"Maya." Amara's throat had closed. "You're—you grew."

"People do that." A slight smile. Not sarcastic. Just: honest. Maya's way. Direct. Present. Real.

Then Kofi had bounded past everyone, all energy and life, and thrown his arms around Amara's waist. "Aunt Amara! We're here! We made it! Is this your apartment? It's smaller than Lagos but I like it. Where's my room? Can I see? Is Uncle David here?"

Fourteen years, three months old. The last time she'd seen him was Year 12, Month 9—two years ago, quick visit during a teaching tour Kenji organized. Kofi had been twelve then. Now: fourteen. Voice deeper. Face changing. Becoming teenager. Still joy personified.

Amara had hugged him back—awkward but real. "Yes. He's here. You'll share the second room with Maya. It's small."

"That's okay! Maya and I always shared in Lagos! Right, Maya?"

Maya had smiled. "Right."

They'd come inside. The apartment suddenly full. Five adults and two teenagers in a space designed for two felt like too many bodies and exactly right simultaneously. Bags everywhere. The mint plant Kofi carried carefully—cutting from Wei's garden, green and alive despite the journey. Zara crying while trying not to cry. David emerging from the kitchen with tea for everyone. Kwame examining the apartment layout with an engineer's eye. Maya moving to the window immediately, looking out at the Antarctic megacity sprawling in all directions.

"So many lights," she'd said quietly.

"Two million people still here," Amara had replied. "Was four billion at peak. Most left."

"Where did they go?"

"Other places. Chosen places. Everyone deciding where to face the end."

Maya had nodded. Processing. "We chose here."

"Yes."

"Family," Maya had said simply. Not a question. Statement of fact.

"Yes. Family."

They'd eaten synth-protein and vegetables David prepared. Talked in fits and starts. Exhaustion made conversation difficult. Zara kept touching Maya's shoulder, Kofi's hand, like confirming they were real. Kwame quiet but present. David and Amara exchanging glances—Are we doing this right? Is this enough?

By 21:00, everyone was asleep. Kofi claimed the bottom bunk in the second bedroom. Maya took the top. Zara and Kwame settled on the fold-out couch in the living area—insisted on it despite offers of the bed. "You've been here three years," Zara had said. "This is your home. We're guests."

"You're family," Amara had corrected. But they'd taken the couch anyway.

Now: 3:47 AM. Everyone sleeping. Amara awake, mind calculating.

90 days remaining.

Ninety days to be sister, aunt, family. Ninety days to know Kofi properly—the nephew she'd met six times total. Ninety days to know Maya beyond quarterly visits. Ninety days to not waste.

She slipped out of bed carefully. David didn't wake—twelve years of solar array maintenance taught him to sleep deeply when sleep was possible. Amara pulled on a sweater, moved quietly through the dark apartment.

Living room: Zara and Kwame on the fold-out couch, Kwame's arm around Zara even in sleep. Nineteen years married. Two children growing toward death. Still here. Still choosing each other. Amara felt something in her chest—not quite envy. More like: recognition that they'd chosen differently. They'd chosen presence when she'd chosen isolation. They'd built life when she'd calculated death.

Who was happier? Amara didn't know. But she knew who was more human.

The second bedroom door was ajar. Amara looked in.

Kofi: sprawled on the bottom bunk, covers kicked off, mouth slightly open. Sleeping like children sleep—completely, trustingly, without awareness of danger. Fourteen years, three months old. Would be fourteen years, six months when he died. Would die before Maya. Younger. Less time. Less everything.

Amara's hands started shaking. She pressed them against her thighs. Breathe. Count. Four in, four out. Presence practice Zara had taught her, learned from Wei, passed forward because that's what humans did—tried to help each other survive the unsurvivable.

Maya: perfectly still on the top bunk, covers pulled up, lying on her back. Eyes closed but—Amara watched closer. Not asleep. Breathing wrong for sleep. Awake. Lying still in the dark. Doing what? Meditating? Thinking? Being present to insomnia?

"Aunt Amara?" Maya's voice, barely audible. "You okay?"

Amara should have moved away. Should have let her niece sleep or meditate or whatever she was doing. Instead: "Yes. Sorry. Didn't mean to wake you."

"I wasn't asleep." Maya opened her eyes. Turned her head slightly. Even in darkness, her expression was clear—aware, present, seeing. "Couldn't sleep. New place. Different sounds."

"Do you want tea?"

"Okay."

They moved to the kitchenette. Amara heated water—real kettle, not synthesizer. David insisted on it. Said ritual mattered even when nothing else did. She pulled down two cups. Found the tea Zara had brought from Lagos—some herbal blend from the compound garden. The smell was unfamiliar, earthy, alive.

Maya sat at the small table. Watched Amara move. Didn't fill the silence. Patient. Present. So much like Wei that Amara felt the absence viscerally. Wei who'd written Amara one message Year 0, Day 180. Wei who'd died four years ago never meeting her but teaching her sister and niece and transforming both their lives.

Amara brought tea. Sat across from Maya. The table that had been just hers and David's for three years now had family around it. The expansion felt strange. Good strange.

The lights flickered. Brief. Then steady again. Somewhere in the building's infrastructure, something struggling. The heating system groaned—metal expanding, contracting, protesting the endless Antarctic cold. Reminders that this place was hostile. That two million people survived here through engineering and will and the knowledge that location didn't matter anymore. Might as well be here as anywhere.

"Thank you," Maya said. Held the cup in both hands. Breathed in the steam. "Mint. From the garden. We brought seeds too. Kofi wants to plant them."

"Where?"

"Anywhere. He's determined. Says Wei's garden should keep growing even here." Maya smiled slightly. "He's optimistic. I love that about him."

"You're close. You and Kofi."

"He's my brother. I taught him to read. Taught him about death. Taught him meditation." Maya's voice was steady. Matter-of-fact. No melodrama. Just: truth. "We'll die together. He'll die first. Three months before me. That's—" She stopped. "That's true. So we're close."

Amara didn't know what to say. The casual way Maya spoke about her own death, her brother's death. Like discussing weather. Not dissociation—presence. Being with the truth without drowning in it.

"Does it help?" Amara asked. "The practice? The meditation?"

Maya considered. Took a sip of tea. "Doesn't make dying okay. Makes being present to dying possible. Different things." She paused. "Wei used to say: 'You can't stop the flower from wilting. But you can notice it while it blooms.' I didn't understand for months. Kept trying to figure out the metaphor. Then

one day I was just—there. With a flower. Watching it. And I got it. Not the idea. The thing itself."

"That's what Zara said. What Professor Wei taught."

"Did you ever meet her? Wei?"

"No. She died before I—" Amara paused. Before I stopped being numb. Before I could meet anyone. "Before I came to Lagos properly."

"She would have liked you. Would have seen you. The way you calculate everything. Would have said something about bringing precision to impermanence." Maya's eyes were serious. "She left you a letter. Mama has it. Written Year 10 before Wei knew she'd die naturally. Instructions to open it—" Maya stopped. "Actually, I don't know when. When you need it, maybe."

A letter from a woman she'd never met who'd transformed her sister and niece. Amara filed that information away. Something to ask Zara about. Later. When ninety days seemed less impossible.

"I'm scared," Amara said. The words came without permission. "Of wasting this. Of being the wrong version of myself. Of—" She stopped. Tried to find words. "Of not knowing how to be an aunt. I've seen you six times. Kofi six times. That's not family. That's strangers with DNA connection."

Maya absorbed this. Didn't rush to reassure. Just: considered it. "Uncle Kenji saw me four times before he came to Lagos and actually taught me. Sometimes it takes time. We have ninety days. That's not much. But it's what we have."

"Is that enough?"

"It has to be."

The truth of it settled between them. Had to be enough. Was all there was. The physics of limited time.

They drank tea in silence. Comfortable silence. Not awkward. Just: two people being present to early morning, to insomnia, to the fact of family assembled at the end of the world.

"Can I ask you something?" Maya said finally.

"Yes."

"The asteroid. The calculations. The detection." Maya's voice was careful. "You were the first to know. First to see the data. What was that like?"

Amara's hands tightened on her cup. Year 0, Day 1, 3:47 AM. Fifteen years ago exactly this hour. Sitting at her workstation. Watching the impact probability climb. Understanding everyone would die.

"The initial orbital elements showed—" Amara stopped. Heard herself. Started again. "I mean. It was—" But the numbers were safer. The technical details.

"The impact probability climbed from sixty-three percent to ninety-nine point nine-seven percent over four hours of tracking. The trajectory was—"

"Aunt Amara." Maya's voice, gentle. Not cruel. Just—noticing. "You're doing it again."

"Doing what?"

"Calculating instead of feeling. Hiding in the data."

Amara stopped. Breath caught. Because Maya was right. She'd felt the question—the memory of 3:47 AM, the weight of being first to know—and immediately retreated into orbital mechanics. Armor made of numbers.

"I—" Her voice shook. "It's easier. The numbers. The precision. If I just describe the data, I don't have to—"

"Feel what it cost you."

"Yes."

Maya waited. Didn't push. Just: present. Holding space for Amara to choose.

Amara set down her cup. Pressed her hands flat on the table. Felt the surface. Solid. Real. Here.

"It was—" She tried again. Not the data this time. The experience. "Terrifying. I sat there watching the numbers and understanding everyone would die. My sister. Future nieces and nephews I'd never meet. David. Everyone I'd ever known. And me. And I—" Her throat closed. "I told them. Sent the alert. Went to Elena's office at 7 AM and said 'We have fifteen years.' And then I went home and I stopped being able to feel anything. Just—turned off. For seven years."

"But you turned back on."

"Your mother helped. Year 7. I called her. First time in seven years. She answered. She let me try again. She—" Amara's voice cracked. "She saved me. Pulled me back from the edge. Gave me permission to feel again even though feeling hurt."

Maya nodded. "That's Mama. She's fierce about life. About presence. Learned it from Wei. Taught it to me. Now I teach it to others." She smiled slightly. "The transmission continues. Until it doesn't."

"Do you resent her? For having you? For bringing you into this?"

"I used to think I would. When I was younger. But—" Maya considered. "My thirteenth birthday. Week after Wei died. I was so angry. Screaming at Mama: 'Why did you have me? Why did you bring me here to die young?' And she just sat there. Let me rage. Then said: 'Because I wanted to know you.' Not 'because life is precious' or any of that. Just—she wanted to know me. However long that was." Maya's voice caught. "I'm seventeen now. Four years of knowing

her knowing me. That's—that's real. That happened. Brief doesn't mean it didn't matter."

Seventeen years old and speaking like a philosopher. Like Wei. Like someone who'd spent years practicing presence to impermanence. Amara felt pride and grief tangled together. Maya was remarkable. Would have been remarkable given eight decades. Was remarkable given seventeen years.

Would die in ninety days.

"I'm glad you're here," Amara said. Inadequate words. True words. "I'm glad I didn't waste all fifteen years alone."

"Me too." Maya finished her tea. Stood. "I should try to sleep. Tomorrow Kofi will be everywhere. He'll want to explore. See everything. Talk to everyone. You'll meet the real Kofi tomorrow."

"Looking forward to it."

"Liar." Maya smiled. "But that's okay. He's overwhelming. You'll adjust."

She moved toward the bedroom. Stopped at the door. Turned back.

"Aunt Amara? Thank you for being here. For choosing family. Mama says it was hard for you. Says you had to learn how to feel again. That's—" Maya searched for words. "That's courage. Choosing to feel when you could stay numb. Thank you."

Then she was gone. Door closing softly. Leaving Amara alone in the kitchenette with empty tea cups and the weight of being seen.

Choosing to feel. Was it courage or just: necessity? Amara didn't know. But Maya saw it as courage. Her seventeen-year-old niece who faced death with more presence than Amara had managed in sixty-three years—she called it courage.

Maybe it was.

Amara rinsed the cups. Returned them to the shelf. Moved to the window. Outside: Antarctic megacity stretching to horizon. Lights everywhere despite the early hour. Two million people still here. Two million choosing this place, this ending, this convergence.

Somewhere out there: Elena. Her office-mate from fifteen years ago when Amara had been director-equivalent and Elena had been mayor-elect. Both their careers ended now. Elena just: witness. Amara just: aunt.

Somewhere: Kenji. Zara's younger brother. Teaching presence to hundreds. Wei's lineage spreading. The practice continuing until it couldn't.

Somewhere: Ibrahim. David's work colleague. Former fighter. Learning presence through maintaining arrays. Through being here.

Two million stories. Two million people with ninety days left. Everyone choosing how to spend them.

Amara chose family.

She returned to bed. David still sleeping. She settled beside him carefully. His warmth. His presence. His choice to leave Platform 73 and 47B to be here with her. Thirteen years maintaining arrays. Three years in Lagos. Now: ninety days together watching their family face the end.

She closed her eyes. Didn't sleep. Just: lay there. Feeling David breathe beside her. Hearing Kofi's occasional sleep-sounds through the wall. Knowing Zara and Kwame were twenty feet away on the couch. Knowing Maya was probably still awake, meditating or practicing or whatever she did at 4 AM when the world pressed too heavy.

Family. Here. Together. Ninety days.

Amara counted the days. Not hours anymore. Not minutes. Just: ninety days. Fifteen years ago she'd detected the asteroid. Calculated everyone's death. Become the bearer of extinction.

Now: she was just Amara. Aunt. Sister. Partner. Human trying to be present.

The numbers still whispered. Old habits die hard. But this morning—lying here beside David, family in the next room—she could set them aside. Not forever. Just: now.

By 6:00 AM, sound returned. Kofi's voice first—loud, excited, immediate: "Maya! Maya, wake up! It's Antarctica! Let's go see everything!"

Maya's reply, muffled but audible: "It's six in the morning."

"Exactly! We're wasting daylight! Well, not daylight. It's dark. But we're wasting darkness! Come on!"

Zara's voice from the living room: "Kofi, let your sister sleep."

"She's been awake since three," Kofi said matter-of-factly. "I heard her and Aunt Amara talking. Maya's bad at sleeping. I'm good at it. I can sleep anywhere! Yesterday I slept in the transport! Want to see my mint plant? I'm going to plant it today. Uncle David, are you awake? Can you help me find dirt?"

David stirred beside Amara. Opened his eyes. Smiled. "Guess we're up."

"Guess so."

They emerged from the bedroom. The apartment was transforming. Kofi had somehow unpacked half his bag—clothes scattered, the mint plant on the windowsill, various objects Amara couldn't identify. Maya sat at the table with another cup of tea, hair uncombed, looking exhausted and present. Zara and Kwame were folding the couch back, organizing bags, trying to create order from chaos.

"Good morning," Zara said. Her eyes met Amara's. Question in them: How are you? Is this okay? Are we too much?

Amara smiled. Tried to communicate: This is good. This is right. You're not too much.

Zara smiled back. Understood.

"Aunt Amara!" Kofi bounded over. "David says there's a community center. Can we go? I want to see everything! Are there other kids? Maya says Uncle Kenji teaches there. Can I meet him? And Grandma Elena! I've only seen her twice! And—"

"Kofi." Kwame's voice, gentle but firm. "Breathe. Aunt Amara and Uncle David just woke up."

"But I have so much energy! The transport was so long! Four hours sitting! I need to move!"

David laughed. "Come on. I'll show you the building. Community center is three blocks over. We can walk there. Let these four have breakfast quietly."

"Really?" Kofi's face lit up. "Maya, we're going exploring!"

"You go." Maya didn't move. "I'll stay. Help with breakfast."

"You sure?"

"I'm sure. I'll explore later. Slower. You explore fast."

Kofi accepted this instantly. "Okay! Uncle David, let's go! Is it cold? Should I wear a jacket? Do you have penguins here? I know it's not that kind of Antarctica but maybe some penguins?"

They left. Kofi's voice echoing in the hallway, David's quieter responses, both fading. The apartment suddenly quieter.

Kwame moved to the kitchenette. "I'll cook. You three sit. Talk. You haven't had time alone in—years."

"You're sure?" Zara asked.

"I'm sure. Go. Be sisters. I'll make actual breakfast. Not synth-protein."

So they sat. Amara, Zara, Maya. Three generations. Three relationships.

Zara spoke first. "Thank you for making space. For having us. I know it's small. We can look for other housing if—"

"No." Amara interrupted. "This is good. I want you here. Want—" She gestured vaguely. "Want family. Even if I'm not good at it."

"You're doing fine," Zara said gently. "Better than fine. You're here. That's what matters."

Maya looked between them. "Can I ask something?"

"Yes," both sisters said simultaneously.

"What was it like? When you were kids? Before everything. Before detection. Before—" She gestured. "When you were just sisters?"

Zara and Amara exchanged glances. The past. Their childhood. Mumbai. Parents. Being young when the world had future tense.

"We were close," Zara said finally. "Best friends. Amara was older. Protective. Brilliant even then. She helped me with homework. Taught me science. Made me curious about how things worked."

"Then?" Maya prompted.

"Then we grew up. Got careers. Moved to different continents. Drifted." Zara's voice was sad. "Not dramatically. Just—gradually. Work took priority. Distance took priority. Then the asteroid. Then—"

"Then I disappeared," Amara finished. "Seven years. Your mother kept trying. I kept hiding."

"But you came back," Maya said. "Year 7. Year 8. You chose to try again."

"Your mother let me try again," Amara corrected.

"We both chose," Zara said firmly. "I chose to answer the phone. You chose to call. We both chose repair over resentment. That's—" She stopped. Tears forming. "That's what I want you to see, Maya. Relationships can break. Can heal. Require choosing every day. Your aunt and I lost seven years. We're not wasting these ninety days."

Maya absorbed this. Nodded. "Good. Because I want to know you both. Not as separate aunts and mothers. As sisters. As people who chose each other despite everything."

"We chose you too," Amara said quietly. "Both of you. Kofi and Maya. We chose family. Chose presence. Chose—" She couldn't finish.

Maya reached across the table. Took Amara's hand. Took Zara's hand. Connected them.

"Ninety days," she said. "Let's be here for all of them. Fully here. Present. Together. That's enough. That has to be enough."

Amara looked at her niece—seventeen years, three months old, wise beyond her years, practicing presence while dying young. Looked at her sister—fifty-three years old, choosing life despite death, fierce and tender simultaneously.

Family. Here. Real.

"Yes," Amara whispered. "That's enough."

Kwame brought breakfast—actual eggs somehow, real eggs, impossibly expensive. "Saved them for today. Special occasion. First morning together."

They ate. Talked about nothing important. Kofi's energy. Maya's insomnia. The apartment's quirks. David's terrible jokes. Zara's engineering schematics still organized obsessively. Amara's inability to keep plants alive.

Normal family conversation. Ordinary. Precious. Temporary.

Outside the window: Antarctic dawn arriving slowly. Winter sun weak but present. The megacity waking. Two million people beginning another day.

Ninety days left. Amara felt the number without calculating it. Not 2,160 hours. Not 129,600 minutes. Just: ninety days. The counting that had defined her life for fifteen years loosening its grip.

This moment. This breakfast. This family. This presence.

The calculation could wait.

She was here now. Finally, completely, impossibly here.

With family. With love. With ninety days.

It wasn't enough.

It was everything.

Chapter 49: Assembly

Elena Torres | Year 15, Month 1 | Antarctica

The final census arrives at Elena's apartment at dawn: 1,847,293 people.

She reads the number three times. Not because she doubts the accuracy—the automated systems still function, counting heat signatures and registered residents with methodical precision. She reads it because this is the last time the number will change through arrival. Everyone who chose to be here has arrived. Everyone who chose elsewhere is already gone or dead.

1,847,293 human beings. All gathered on one continent. All facing the same direction. All choosing to witness the end together, or at least witnessed by others who've made the same choice.

Elena saves the file with a notation: *Final Population Count, Year 15, Month 1, Day 3. No further migrations expected.* Then she closes her terminal and stands at her window, looking out over the district as morning light touches the ice.

The megacity stretches to the horizon in every direction. At peak, this continent held four billion people—humanity's bet on Forever Earth, on adaptation, on survival through engineering and will. Now: 1.8 million. A thousand-fold decrease. But still: everyone who matters is here. Everyone who chose presence over isolation. Everyone who couldn't bear to die alone.

Three months left. Ninety days. Then physics.

Elena makes tea and watches the city wake.

The morning briefing room stands empty.

Elena walks through it anyway—a ritual she's maintained for fifteen years, even after the briefings stopped, even after her government ended Year 14 Month 11. The room still smells faintly of coffee and paper, though neither exists anymore in any abundance. The chairs remain arranged in rows. The podium waits at the front, terminal dark.

She ran this city for seventeen years. Elected Year -2. Re-elected Year 2 with sixty-one percent. Ran unopposed Year 6 because no one else filed. Year 10 no one wanted the position—she simply continued because someone had to show up. Year 14 she formally dissolved the office because the work had transformed so completely that calling it governance felt dishonest.

Now she's just: Elena. Not Mayor Torres. Not Madam Mayor. Just a woman who showed up for seventeen years and bears witness to the end.

She runs her hand along the podium's edge. Remembers the first briefing after detection—her voice steady while announcing water rationing, power restrictions, supply chain collapses. Remembers briefings during riots, during suicides, during the slow years when collapse became ordinary. Remembers the morning two years ago when only four people attended and she realized governance had become theater performed for the dead.

Kowalski attended every briefing. Fourteen years. Security reports delivered with the same measured precision at Year 0 Day 1 and Year 14 Month 10. When she dissolved the office, he simply said, "It was an honor, Elena. Every morning."

He still delivers reports. Not in this room. Over tea in her apartment, or at the community center where everyone gathers now. The form changed. The faithfulness remained.

Elena turns off the lights and closes the door behind her. The room will sit empty for three months, then be vaporized. But it served its purpose. Someone showed up. Someone bore witness. Someone maintained dignity when dignity was the only thing left to maintain.

That has to count for something.

She finds Marcus Rivera at the transport hub, reviewing arrival manifests.

"Deputy Mayor," she says with a slight smile.

He looks up, returns the smile. "Former deputy. We're all former something now."

"Old habits."

"Good habits." He gestures to his terminal. "Last ships came in yesterday. Chen Liwei's family. Zara Okafor-Mensah and her husband and children. Ibrahim's former imam from Jerusalem. About four hundred others. That's it. No more scheduled arrivals."

"Then the census is accurate."

"Yes. 1,847,293. Everyone's here."

Elena sits beside him. She's seventy-three, he's forty-five. She'd thought of him as young when he challenged her at thirty-two—now he's middle-aged and she's ancient. Time confuses at the end.

"Thirteen years," she says. "You stayed thirteen years."

"Where else would I go? You needed a deputy. I needed to be useful. We did the work."

"You challenged me first. Year 2. Ran against me."

"Best decision I made—losing to you. Taught me I wasn't meant to lead. I was meant to support someone who could." He closes the manifest. "You changed, Elena. I watched it happen. Slowly. Then all at once."

"Thank you," she says. "For staying. For the work. For being family."

"We are family. Chosen family. That's what fourteen years builds."

They sit in comfortable silence, watching the transport hub's screens flicker with finalized arrival data. Everything documented. Everything witnessed. Even at the end, the systems persist.

The message arrives at midday: *Secretary General Chen requesting meeting.*

Elena stares at the words. Chen Liwei. The voice from Year 0 Day 1—that calm, steady broadcast from New York trying to coordinate humanity's response to extinction. They've corresponded for five years, letters passed through whatever communication networks still functioned. His words taught her about witness, about bearing impossible weight, about maintaining presence when authority becomes meaningless.

But they've never met in person.

She sends back: *Address?*

His reply includes coordinates in District 7, temporary housing block. She walks there—forty minutes through the megacity, past flickering lights and repurposed buildings, past people moving with purpose or wandering without it, past dogs being walked and children playing and elders sitting in doorways bearing witness to the ordinary catastrophe of the ending world.

The building is standard prefab. She climbs three flights, finds his unit. Knocks.

The door opens. A man her age—seventy-three, no, she checks herself again: Chen is sixty-seven, six years younger—stands there, lean and graying and somehow both exhausted and vibrant. Behind him, she glimpses a crowded apartment: family everywhere, three generations in what was meant for four people maximum.

"Mayor Torres," he says.

"Just Elena now."

His face breaks into a smile of recognition so immediate it startles her. "Just Chen. Not Secretary General. Just: person who witnessed."

"Just Elena. Not mayor. Just: person who showed up."

They embrace. Fifteen years of letters collapse into this moment—two people who carried impossible positions, who learned the same lessons through different disasters, who wrote each other truth when truth was the hardest currency to spend.

"Come in," he says. "Please. Ignore the chaos."

The apartment is warm, crowded, alive. Chen's wife Mei greets her with kindness. Two adult children nod respectfully. Three teenagers—fifteen, sixteen, seventeen years old—watch with curious eyes from the corner where they're playing some kind of card game. The same ages as Maya and Kofi and all the other children who'll die before they finish becoming who they might have been.

Chen clears space at a small table. Makes tea with practiced efficiency. Sits across from her.

"You governed a continent," he says. "I failed to govern the world. We learned the same lesson—witness matters more than control."

"Five years of letters," Elena says. "Feels like we've known each other forever."

"We have. Through the work. Through Professor Wei's teaching, shared between us. Through choosing presence when presence seemed futile."

They talk for two hours. Around them, the family continues—children playing, Mei cooking, soft conversations in Mandarin and English mixing naturally. Chen's grandchildren keep glancing over, curious about this woman their grandfather speaks of with such respect.

"Tell me," Elena says at one point. "The broadcast. Year 0 Day 1. Did you believe what you said? About coordination, about humanity responding together?"

Chen is quiet for a long moment. "Yes. And no. I believed we should try. I believed the trying mattered even if it failed. Did I think we'd succeed? No. Not

after the first week. But I kept showing up because someone had to say the words, even if the words changed nothing."

"The showing up became the work."

"Yes." He refills her tea. "Your letters taught me that."

"Why did you leave New York?"

"My grandchildren. I wanted them to have family at the end. Not a grandfather on screens. A grandfather present. So we came here. All of us. Three generations choosing to face this together."

Elena watches the teenagers playing cards, their focused faces and easy laughter. "They seem... okay."

"They're not. None of us are. But we're present with each other. That's different than okay. That's enough."

She tells him about Kenji. Her son who left for seven years and returned transformed. Who teaches presence practice now, Buddhist meditation, everything he learned from Wei directly in those final years before her death.

Chen's face lights up. "Kenji Torres. He studied with Wei?"

"You know him?"

"Not personally. But Wei wrote about him. Called him 'the seeking one who learned to stay.' High praise from her."

"Would you like to meet him? Attend the teachings?"

"Yes. Very much. That's why we came to Antarctica—to learn from Wei's lineage continued."

"He teaches at the community center. Daily sessions. You'd be welcome."

"Thank you, Elena. That's a gift."

When she leaves two hours later, Chen walks her to the door. They embrace again—longer this time, the embrace of two people who carried weight alone and now, finally, can set it down together.

"Three months," he says.

"Three months."

"Are you satisfied? With how you led?"

Elena considers. "I was elected twice. Then no one opposed me. Then no one wanted the job. I didn't save anyone. But I showed up. I maintained dignity. I did the work until there was no work left. Yes. That's enough."

Chen nods. "Same. I coordinated nothing. But I bore witness."

"Even if no one hears?"

"We heard each other. That's not nothing."

Five days later, Marcus Rivera comes to her apartment with an unusual expression.

"Someone's here to see you," he says. "Says he's family."

Elena is confused. Kenji is teaching at the community center. She has no other family. "Who?"

"He said you'd understand." Rivera steps aside.

Marcus Reyes stands in her doorway.

Forty-five years old. Same age as Rivera—they'd often joked about that, the two Marcuses born the same year. Thirteen years since he left Antarctica. Thirteen years in Mumbai teaching refugee children, building gardens, becoming someone other than the assistant who served her faithfully for eight years. He looks different—older, yes, but also settled. Peaceful. Complete.

"Marcus," she says.

"Madam Mayor. Though I hear you're not mayor anymore. Just witness."

"Just Elena now."

"Good. Better."

They embrace—brief, warm, honest. Thirteen years collapsing into recognition and relief and something like joy.

"Why did you come back?"

"Three months left. I wanted to be here. With you. With the work we did together. With the beginning and the ending both." He pauses. "And you wrote me Year 10 that your son returned. I wanted to meet the man he became. Wanted to see if he found what I found—that leaving and returning are both necessary."

"You didn't have to—"

"I chose to. I left thirteen years ago because my time of service was complete. I'm returning now because my time of solitude is complete. I want to face the end with people I love. You're one of them."

Elena can't speak. She pulls him into her apartment, makes him sit, makes tea with shaking hands.

"You found yourself?" she finally asks. "In Mumbai?"

"Yes. Took seven years, but: yes. Taught children who had nothing. Practiced meditation until my mind quieted. Built a garden that taught me patience. Learned who I was without governance, without you, without the role. Now I

know: I'm someone who served you faithfully, left when leaving was right, lived fully, and I'm ready to die with family. You're my family, Elena. Eight years working together made that permanent."

"Where will you stay?"

"Found housing. Small apartment near the community center. I want to attend Kenji's teachings. Want to help however I can. Not as assistant—those days are complete. As friend. As witness alongside you. As someone who shows up because showing up is what I do."

Elena wipes her eyes. Tries to laugh. "The two Marcuses will be confusing again."

"We figured it out before. We'll figure it out now."

That evening, Elena hosts both Marcuses for tea in her apartment.

Two men, same age, different journeys. Marcus Rivera in his practical clothes, gray hair cut short, hands still carrying the ghost of morning briefing reports. Marcus Reyes in layers accumulated from years of travel, beard longer than she remembers, eyes clearer.

One stayed fourteen years. One left for thirteen, returned for three months. Both present. Both chosen family.

"How do we distinguish you two?" Elena asks, smiling through fresh tears.

Rivera considers, then grins. "I'm the one who never left."

Reyes nods. "I'm the one who left and came back."

"Both necessary," Elena says. "Both valued. Both family."

They drink tea and talk about fifteen years—about governance and service, about leaving and returning, about the work they all did. Rivera tells stories about coordinating security during the worst years. Reyes tells stories about teaching children in Mumbai's refugee quarters.

"You taught me," she tells them. "Both of you. How to show up. How to leave. How to trust the work continues."

Rivera raises his cup. "To seventeen years."

Reyes joins him. "To three months more."

Three months left. Two Marcuses. One Elena. Family complete.

Later, after Rivera leaves, Reyes walks with Elena through the district. The streets are quieter than they used to be—fewer people, less infrastructure, the slow winding down of civilization. But there's still life: people walking, talking, gathering. Dogs being walked. Children playing despite everything.

"It's strange being back," Reyes says. "Thirteen years. The city looks the same but feels different."

"Smaller. Quieter. More... intentional."

"Yes. Like everyone who's here chose it. Not default. Choice."

"That's exactly it. 1.8 million people. All here by choice. All choosing to witness the end together."

They pass the community center—a converted warehouse, lights on inside, voices audible. Kenji's teaching session.

"That's where your son teaches?"

"Every day. Buddhist practice. Presence meditation. Everything Wei taught him."

"Can we go in?"

Elena hesitates. "It's late. Session probably ending."

"Just to see. Just to witness."

They enter quietly. Inside, about sixty people sit in rough circles on cushions and chairs. Kenji stands at the front—thirty-seven years old, her son who left and returned. His voice is calm, measured.

Around him: familiar faces and strangers. Rivera sitting in the back. Chen Liwei and his wife Mei. Amara Okafor beside her ex-husband David. Young people, old people, parents holding sleeping children, veterans with visible scars.

Kenji sees her, nods slightly. Doesn't interrupt his teaching. The session continues—simple instructions about breath and body, about being here fully.

After ten minutes, Elena and Reyes slip out.

"Your son," Reyes says. "He's good."

"He learned from the best. Wei taught him everything."

"And now he teaches others. The lineage continues."

"Even at the end."

They walk back to Elena's apartment in comfortable silence. At her door, Reyes embraces her again.

"Thank you," he says. "For being someone worth coming back to."

"Thank you for coming back."

The next morning, Elena walks District 12's edge where temporary kennels house the dogs Soso Kim brought from her adoption center. Twelve permanent

residents—unadoptable animals who spent their final months with humanity's final community.

She finds Soso sitting on a bench outside the kennels, watching the dogs. An elderly Labrador, blind and gray-muzzled, lies at her feet. A three-legged terrier mix sniffs around the perimeter. A deaf shepherd watches the street with focused attention, reading the world through vision alone.

Elena sits beside her. They've met before—brief interactions over the years, city administrator and shelter director coordinating resources. But this is different. This is two people bearing witness together.

"Mayor," Soso says quietly.

"Not mayor anymore. Just Elena."

"Just Soso."

They watch the dogs in silence. The blind Labrador—Mochi, Elena remembers from reports—lifts his head, testing the air with his nose. Finding nothing alarming, he settles back down.

"These are the forgotten ones," Soso says after a while. "Couldn't be adopted. Too old, too damaged, too difficult. But they're here. Being witnessed."

Elena understands immediately. That's everyone now. Not achieving, not building, not becoming something other than what they are. Just: being witnessed. Being seen. Having their existence matter to someone before it ends.

"Thank you for bringing them," Elena says.

"They lived with us. They should be seen too."

"What happens to them?"

"Same as us. Three months. Then physics. But these three months, they're walked and fed and touched and spoken to. They matter. Their lives count. Brief doesn't mean meaningless."

Elena watches Soso's hands rest calmly in her lap. Fifty years old. Orphaned at age two. Spent her life caring for forgotten animals, grieving species extinct before she was born, carrying environmental grief like a stone in her chest. And now, at the end, transformed that grief into presence. Witnessing these twelve dogs fully. Teaching others that witnessing any life fully is witnessing all life.

"Do you come here every day?" Elena asks.

"Twice. Morning and evening. Feeding time, walking time. I sit with them. They sit with me. We're present together. That's the practice."

"You learned that from Kenji?"

"From Kenji. From the dogs. From grief that finally transformed into something else. Not happiness. Presence."

The deaf shepherd notices Elena watching and approaches cautiously. Elena extends her hand. The dog sniffs carefully, then allows touch. Her fur is coarse and warm. Her eyes are alert, reading Elena's face for meaning.

"Scout," Soso says. "She lost hearing Year 12. Illness. But she adapted. Learned to read lips, watch hands, sense vibration. She's here. Completely here. More present than most humans."

Scout leans into Elena's hand, accepting the touch. Being witnessed. Mattering.

Elena thinks about her seventeen years of governance. All the decisions and briefings and policies. All the attempts to save people, coordinate people, lead people. And maybe the whole time, this was the work: bearing witness. Seeing people fully. Letting them know they mattered. Brief doesn't mean meaningless.

She stays with Soso and the dogs for an hour, then walks back through the megacity as morning becomes afternoon.

That evening, Kenji finds her at home.

"Mom," he says, settling into the chair across from her. "Can I ask you something?"

"Always."

"Are you satisfied?"

"With what?"

"With us. With me leaving for seven years. With how we—with how I—"

Elena is quiet for a long time. She thinks about the morning he told her he was leaving. About the years of sporadic letters from cities she'd never see. About his return, transformed into someone she barely recognized but deeply understood.

"You left when you needed to," she says finally. "I couldn't give you what you needed. Wei could. That was hard to accept. But yes. I'm satisfied. You came home."

Kenji's eyes are wet. "I abandoned you."

"You found yourself. Those aren't the same thing." She reaches across and takes his hand. "And you came back. You teach now. You help people die awake. That matters more than seven years of letters."

"Was Wei satisfied? At the end?"

"Yes. Completely. She died awake. That's all any of us can hope for."

"Are you teaching Maya that? How to die awake?"

"I'm trying. Ninety days of intensive training. Everything I know compressed into three months. She'll die terrified and present. That's the best I can offer."

"That's everything."

They sit in comfortable silence—mother and son, two people who found their work through losing everything else.

"Your two Marcuses came to the session tonight," Kenji says eventually. "Both of them. Rivera told Reyes about the morning briefings. Reyes told Rivera about Mumbai. Then they both just sat and practiced."

"Chosen family," Elena says quietly.

"That's what survives."

Kenji stands, kisses her forehead. "You did good work, Mom. Better than good. Essential."

After he leaves, Elena stands at her window again, looking out over the megacity. Lights flicker across the vast continental sprawl—power intermittent now, systems degrading, everything maintained just barely. But still: maintained. David's solar arrays still functioning. Water systems still operating. Everything working just long enough.

She sees people moving between buildings. Dogs being walked. Children playing in courtyards. Community persisting for three more months.

1,847,293 people. All choosing to be here. All choosing to face the end together.

She thinks about Chen's question: *Are you satisfied?*

Yes. She showed up. She witnessed. That's enough.

Three months left. Ninety days. Then physics. Then silence.

But today: community. Today: chosen family in a converted warehouse. Today: dogs being walked and fed. Today: two Marcuses remembering fifteen years. Today: Chen's grandchildren playing cards. Today: Kenji training Maya. Today: all of it happening.

Elena is seventy-three years old. She was elected mayor seventeen years ago. She's not ready for what comes in three months.

But she's here.

The lights flicker across the megacity. The night settles in.

Elena makes tea and waits for morning.

Chapter 50: Gathering

Multiple POVs | Year 15, Month 2, Day 18 | Antarctica, Teaching Hall

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Elena — Witness

They come because there's nowhere else to go.

Elena watches from the back of the converted warehouse that Kenji's circle has claimed as their gathering space. Three hundred people tonight—more than usual. Building 7, Sector 4, what used to be agricultural storage before the growing operations consolidated. Now: rows of cushions, a few chairs for those who can't sit on the floor, heating units humming against Antarctic cold.

She's not here to teach. Not even to participate. Just to witness. Seventy-three years old and twenty-eight days from death, and this is what she does now. Shows up. Watches. Holds space for the last gatherings of conscious beings.

The faces in the room span everything. Young and old. Refugees and residents. Scientists and laborers. Languages she can't identify, faces she'll never know the stories behind. All here. All waiting.

Her son enters from the side door, and the room shifts subtly. Not reverence exactly. Just: attention. Kenji moves to the front, thirty-seven years old now, grey threading through his hair, the restlessness she remembers from his twenties gone. Replaced by something quieter. Something earned.

"Hello," he says simply.

"Hello," three hundred people reply.

Ibrahim — Belonging

The seats along the wall are claimed by those who came early. Ibrahim stands near the back with Derek, both of them more comfortable on the periphery. Old soldiers, even when one never was a soldier. Just: trained for exits. Trained to watch.

"Big crowd," Derek murmurs. His voice is quieter than it used to be. The emphysema that started showing Year 13 makes speaking an effort now.

"End is close. People looking for something."

Derek nods. "You find something?"

Ibrahim considers. Fourteen years since faith shattered in Jerusalem. Twelve years since arrival in Antarctica. Eight years of this practice—showing up to

whatever Kenji or Marcus Reyes or sometimes just the group gathered, listening without demanding answers. Did he find something?

"Maybe," he says. "Still looking. But maybe."

Near the front, he spots Linnea—thin, always thin now, but present in a way she wasn't Year 11 when he first brought her here. She's sitting with a young woman Ibrahim doesn't recognize, explaining something quietly. Teaching. She's teaching. The woman who couldn't stop using for seven years is teaching someone else about presence.

Things change. People change. Even at the end.

The meeting starts without ceremony. Kenji sits on the floor like everyone else. "Today we're practicing together," he says. "That's all. Just being here. Conscious. Present. For as long as we want to stay."

No philosophy. No instructions. Just: an invitation to be.

Ibrahim closes his eyes. Finds his breath. Begins.

Priya — Weight

She shouldn't be here.

Priya sits in the middle of the room because she arrived late and there was nowhere else. Surrounded by people she doesn't know, practicing something she doesn't understand, feeling like a fraud. Aanya convinced her to come. "Just try it, Mum. Just once."

So she's trying. But the anger is still there—thirteen years of anger, calcified into something she doesn't know how to put down. Daniel Okonkwo's face. The image of Raj falling, the rebar, the blood. Two hundred seventeen letters she never opened, never answered, because answering would mean forgiving and she couldn't forgive.

Daniel died five months ago. Suicide. She found out from an official notification—next of kin status she'd never wanted, maintained only because no one else remained.

The letters are in her apartment. Still unopened. Still weight.

Everyone around her has their eyes closed. Breathing slowly. Present to something Priya can't access. She sits with her eyes open, watching, feeling like the only person in the room who hasn't figured out the trick.

A hand touches her shoulder. Light, brief. A woman her age, silver hair, kind eyes.

"First time?" The woman's voice is barely audible.

Priya nods.

"Me too. Sort of. I came once, three years ago. Couldn't sit still. Left after ten minutes." The woman smiles. "Trying again."

"Why?"

"Because I'm out of other options." Simple honesty. "You?"

Priya's throat tightens. "Same."

The woman nods. Removes her hand. Returns to her own practice, whatever that means. But something about the brief exchange eases the tightness in Priya's chest. Not alone. Not the only one failing at this. Not the only one who doesn't know how.

She closes her eyes. Finds her breath. Doesn't try to do it right. Just: tries.

Soso — Dogs

The twelve dogs wait outside in their transport crates—too disruptive to bring into the teaching hall, but too important to leave behind. Soso checks them between meditation sessions. Water. Temperature. Comfort.

"They okay?"

She turns. A teenage girl, maybe sixteen, with an engineer's precise attention and a scientist's curiosity. "They're fine. Sleeping mostly."

"Are you the adoption center person?"

"Administrator. Though adoption isn't really the point anymore." Soso latches the transport cover, sealing in warmth. "Now it's just: caring for them. Until the end."

The girl nods. Serious. Processing. "My aunt says animals don't know about the asteroid. Is that true?"

"I think so. They know their immediate experience. Hunger, cold, fear, comfort. But not future. Not countdown." Soso looks at the crates. Twelve dogs. The last of the center's population. She chose these twelve because they couldn't be placed, couldn't be left, needed someone to witness their ending. "Sometimes I envy them. The not-knowing."

"But you're here. At the teaching."

"Yes."

"Why? If not-knowing is easier?"

Soso considers the question. Why is she here? She's asked herself that for five years, ever since a volunteer started talking about Kenji's circle and she came

once out of curiosity. Now she comes every gathering. Brings the dogs when she can. Practices something she can't name.

"Because I'm not a dog," she says finally. "I know. I can't unknow. So the only choice is how to be conscious of what I know." She gestures toward the warehouse. "This helps. Somehow. I don't understand it. But it helps."

The girl nods again. That serious processing look.

"I'm Maya," she says.

"Soso."

"Can I meet them? The dogs?"

"Of course."

Soso opens the nearest crate. An old shepherd-mix, grey-muzzled, too arthritic to walk far anymore. He lifts his head, sniffs at the girl, accepts her hand on his fur.

"Hello," Maya says softly.

The dog sighs. Contentment. Present to the touch without calculation or fear.

"See?" Soso says. "He's just here. Just this moment. This hand on his head. This warmth."

"Is that what we're learning? Inside?"

"I think so. To be more like this. Present without knowing. Awake without worrying."

Maya strokes the old dog's ears. "That sounds hard."

"It is. But what else is there?"

Barak — Quiet

He sits in the corner, as he always does. The gathering has a few regulars who've noticed him—the tall Israeli man who never speaks, never asks questions, just shows up and sits and breathes and leaves quietly when it's over.

Sixteen months out of prison. Thirty-two years served. Crime committed in fear and chaos, sentence served in reflection and acceptance. The guard who opened his cell the day before scheduled release, the absurdity of institutional time finally breaking someone: "Go. Just go. The paperwork doesn't matter anymore."

Daniel stayed. Wouldn't leave. Still serving a sentence he'd never forgive himself for.

Barak left. Walked out into Antarctic light he hadn't seen in three decades. Freedom that meant nothing except: more time to practice what prison had taught him. Stillness. Acceptance. Being present to whatever arose.

He doesn't participate in the discussions after meditation. Doesn't share his story. Just: witnesses. Holds space. Lets the others fill it with their needs and questions and grief.

Tonight, a woman near him is crying silently. Indian, maybe. His age. The kind of crying that comes from deep weight, long-held. He doesn't touch her, doesn't speak. Just: notices. Accepts. Witnesses her suffering without trying to fix it.

After a while, she feels his attention. Opens her eyes. Sees him seeing her.

He doesn't look away. Doesn't pretend he wasn't watching. Just: nods slightly. Acknowledgment. *I see you. You're not alone.*

She wipes her face. Nods back. Returns to the practice.

That's enough. That's the whole teaching, really. Seeing each other. Witnessing without fixing. Being present to suffering without drowning in it.

Barak closes his eyes. Finds his breath. Continues.

Maya — Learning

Inside again, the third sitting of the evening. Maya positions herself where she can see Kenji but also watch the room. Ninety days of intensive training and she's still learning more from watching others than from instructions.

The woman who was crying—Maya saw her outside afterward, talking briefly with Soso. Something about that exchange matters but Maya can't articulate what. The connection that forms between strangers when they stop pretending to be fine.

Uncle David is here tonight, which surprised her. He came with Aunt Amara, both of them sitting near her parents. The whole family except Kofi, who found the sitting too boring and stayed home with his engineering projects. But Maya's parents, her aunt and uncle, all present. All practicing something they came to late but came to anyway.

Kenji speaks occasionally. Not lectures—observations. "Notice what arises. Don't grab it. Don't push it away. Just notice."

Maya notices her fear. Constant now. Twenty-eight days until she dies. Seventeen years old and running out of time. The fear isn't going anywhere. Kenji taught her that months ago: presence doesn't eliminate fear. It just changes your relationship to it.

I am afraid, she thinks. *And I am here. Both true.*

The man in the corner—the quiet one who never speaks—opens his eyes briefly. His gaze sweeps the room like he's taking inventory. Lands on her for a moment. Something in his expression that Maya can't name. Not pity. Not encouragement. Just: recognition. *I see you here. You see me here. We're both conscious. That's something.*

He closes his eyes again. Returns to stillness.

Three hundred people breathing together. Twenty-eight days from the end. Not solving anything. Not achieving anything. Just: being conscious. Witnessing their own last weeks in the company of others doing the same.

Maya closes her eyes. Finds her breath. Continues.

Elena — End

The gathering disperses slowly. No formal ending—just people rising when they're ready, speaking quietly to neighbors, drifting toward the exits. Some stay for the informal discussion. Some leave immediately. Some stand in small groups, processing, connecting.

Elena watches it all. The woman who was crying (Priya, someone called her) is talking now with the quiet man, both of them standing near the door, exchanging words Elena can't hear. The dog woman (Soso—Elena remembers her from a housing committee years ago) is loading her transport with a teenage girl's help. Derek and Ibrahim are heading toward the exit together, two old soldiers moving slowly toward whatever comes next.

Kenji finds her at the back of the room. Her son. Thirty-seven years old. Teacher now, whatever that means. The seeking that drove him across the world has settled into something she doesn't fully understand but trusts.

"You came," he says.

"I come often. You just don't always see me."

He smiles. "I know. You hide well."

"I'm not hiding. I'm witnessing."

"Same thing, sometimes."

They stand together, mother and son, watching the last people leave. The room empties. The heating units hum. Outside, Antarctic night presses against the windows.

"Twenty-eight days," Kenji says.

"Twenty-eight days."

"Are you scared?"

Elena considers. She's seventy-three. She's governed a dying megacity for fifteen years. She's watched humanity fracture and heal and fracture again. She's learned that dignity and despair can coexist, that presence doesn't require peace.

"Sometimes," she says. "But I'm also tired. It's been a long governing. A long witnessing. I'm ready for it to end."

"That's not the same as wanting to die."

"No. It's wanting to rest. Different thing." She touches his arm. "I'm proud of you. For what you built here. For what you're giving people."

"I'm not giving them anything. Just: space. Just: permission to be present together."

"That's something. More than something."

They walk toward the exit together. Outside, the Antarctic night is clear. Stars visible through the dome. Somewhere up there, the asteroid approaches. The same asteroid Amara calculated fifteen years ago. The same death Elena has been preparing people to face.

Twenty-eight days. Four weeks. Six hundred seventy-two hours.

Not enough time. All the time there is.

Elena squeezes her son's arm and walks home through the cold. Tomorrow, another day of witnessing. Another day of presence. Another day of being conscious while time runs out.

That has to be enough.

It is enough.

Chapter 51: Seventeen

Maya Okafor-Mensah | Year 15, Month 1 | Antarctica

Maya can't sleep.

Third night in Antarctica and the strangeness hasn't worn off. She lies in the top bunk listening to Kofi breathe below her—steady, deep, the sleep of someone still young enough to rest despite everything. Three months from now, no more breath sounds. No more Kofi.

The math comes automatically. Seventeen years, four months old. Three months remaining.

She'll never be eighteen.

Maya sits up carefully, trying not to wake her brother. The room is dark except for the faint glow from the heating vent—red light pulsing, the building's infrastructure groaning as it fights Antarctic cold. Through the small window she can see lights from other buildings. Two million people gathered here. Everyone who chose to die together. Or at least to be witnessed.

She climbs down quietly. Kofi doesn't stir. His face is peaceful, mouth slightly open, completely himself even in sleep. In three months that face will be gone. That specific expression—the one that's purely Kofi, purely her brother—will be vaporized alongside everything else.

The anticipatory grief rises. She's carried it seventeen years. Grew up knowing exactly when she'd die. But knowing and experiencing are different. This apartment, this city, these final three months—this is experiencing. This is the countdown made visceral.

Maya pulls on her jacket—the one Mama insisted she bring despite Lagos never needing it. Moves through the dark apartment. Living room: Mama and Papa on the fold-out couch, Papa's arm around Mama even in sleep. Nineteen years married. Two children they chose to bring into a dying world. Still here. Still choosing each other.

The front door opens silently. Antarctic air hits her face—sharp, cold, alive. She steps outside.

Midnight in Antarctica.

The polar night is absolute. No sun for months at this latitude, this season. Just: darkness and stars and the artificial lights of human settlement. Maya stands on the walkway outside Building 14, looking up.

The stars are brilliant.

More stars than she's ever seen. Lagos District had engineered sky, light pollution, the filtered atmosphere of manufactured tropics. Here: raw. Unfiltered. Every star visible, the Milky Way a river of light overhead. The asteroid is up there somewhere. 2031 KZ. Forty-seven kilometers wide, approaching at twenty-three kilometers per second. In three months it impacts the Pacific Ocean. In three months these stars continue, indifferent to the consciousness that briefly witnessed them.

Maya breathes the cold air. Feels her lungs contract, her body protest the temperature. Alive. Responding. Here.

She's standing in the place where the world will end.

This thought should terrify her. Does terrify her. But also: clarifies. She practiced two years, eight months. Learned presence through Wei's teaching transmitted by Mama, by Uncle Kenji. Learned to be with fear instead of

consumed by it. Learned that dying at seventeen isn't okay but being present until then is possible.

Three months.

What does she want from three months?

Not: miracle. The physics is certain. Death is guaranteed.

Not: meaning that makes dying at seventeen acceptable. It's not acceptable. Will never be acceptable. She's furious about it. Rage lives in her chest alongside the practice, alongside the love. Both true. Both present. Both real.

What she wants is simpler: presence. Knowing family. Especially Aunt Amara—six meetings total in seventeen years isn't enough. Learning from Uncle David about maintenance, about showing up. Hearing Uncle Kenji teach everything Wei taught him. Being with Kofi until he dies, then being with everyone else until she dies. Not alone.

And she wants to learn. Everything. Intensively. Uncle Kenji studied with Wei for three years. Maya has three months. Not enough time. Exactly the time there is.

Tomorrow she'll ask him. Daily sessions. One-on-one. Everything Wei taught. Not because it will make her ready—she'll never be ready. Because being awake until the end is better than being asleep.

A door opens behind her. Footsteps approach. Maya turns.

Aunt Amara, wearing too many layers, looking uncomfortable in the cold. Sixty-three years old. Nine years of reconnection after seven years of isolation. Family who's barely family but trying to be.

"Can't sleep either?" Amara asks quietly.

"Strange bed. Strange place."

Amara joins her at the railing. "I've lived here eight years. Still feels alien sometimes. This isn't home. Lagos was home. But Lagos is empty now. Everyone came here to die together."

Maya looks at her aunt. Really looks. Sees the scientist who calculated everyone's death at 3:47 AM fifteen years ago and then went numb for seven years. Sees the person who chose to feel again, who reconnected with Mama, who's here now.

"Mama says you had to learn how to feel again."

Amara is quiet. Then: "Staying numb was easier. But your mother called me Year 7. I answered. She gave me permission to try again. So I did."

"I'm angry," Maya says. "About dying young. About Kofi dying younger. About never being eighteen. I practice presence but I'm also furious. Both. All the time."

"Good. You should be. Being angry and being present—those aren't opposites."

"Wei taught that. Mama teaches it. Uncle Kenji teaches it. Paradox: both things true."

"Do you believe that? That seventeen years is complete?"

Maya considers the question. The stars overhead. The cold air. Her brother sleeping inside. Three months remaining.

"I don't know," she says honestly. "Wei said the butterfly blooms for three days and that's complete. But butterflies don't know they're butterflies. Don't know they're dying. I know. I've always known. Does that make it different?"

"Maybe. Or maybe knowing makes the blooming more intentional. You've practiced two years, eight months. Kofi practices because you taught him. You taught those girls in Lagos—Chidinma and Amara. You taught Samuel. You're teaching even while dying. That's—" Amara pauses. "That's transmission. Wei to your mother to you to others. The teaching spreading until there's no one left to teach. But while there are people: you teach."

"For three months."

"For three months."

They stand quietly. The megacity hums around them—two million people in buildings designed for four billion, infrastructure barely maintained, everyone waiting for the same ending. Somewhere Uncle Kenji is teaching presence practice. Grandmother Elena is bearing witness as she's done for seventeen years. Uncle David is probably checking solar arrays even at midnight because that's what he does. Everyone showing up. Everyone present. Everyone facing it together.

"Aunt Amara," Maya says. "Can I ask you something?"

"Always."

"The detection. Year 0, Day 1, 3:47 AM. You were first to know. First to see the data. What was that like?"

Amara stiffens. Maya can feel the retreat—the instinct to hide in calculations, in orbital mechanics, in the safety of numbers. But then Amara breathes. Chooses. Stays present.

"Terrifying," Amara says. Voice quiet but real. "I sat there watching the impact probability climb and understanding everyone would die. Including you and Kofi who didn't exist yet but would exist and would die young. I told them. Sent the alert. Went to Elena's office and said 'We have fifteen years.' Then I went home and stopped being able to feel anything for seven years."

"But you turned back on."

"Your mother helped. She saved me. Pulled me back. Gave me permission to feel even though feeling hurt."

"Does it still hurt?"

"Every moment. But hurt is better than numbness. Grief is better than absence. Being here with you right now—cold and scared and three months from dying—is better than seven years of not feeling anything."

Maya understands. The practice didn't take away pain. Just taught her to be present to it. Fear doesn't dissolve. You just learn to breathe with it. Grief doesn't end. You just carry it while also carrying love.

"I'm glad you're here," Maya says. "I'm glad I get to know you. Even if it's only three months. Even if six meetings before this wasn't enough. I'm glad you came back."

"Me too." Amara wipes her eyes. "I wasted seven years. Then wasted another year being cautious. But the last seven years—reconnecting with your mother, visiting Lagos, meeting you and Kofi properly—those years mattered. Those years were real. Brief doesn't mean they didn't count."

"Brief doesn't mean incomplete," Maya says. Wei's teaching. The butterfly blooming. Three days or seventeen years—the measure isn't duration. The measure is presence.

"You sound like your grandmother Wei."

"I never met her. But she taught Mama. Mama taught me. Uncle Kenji learned from Wei directly. Now he teaches others. The transmission continues. Until it can't. But right now: it does."

Amara looks at her niece—seventeen years, four months old, three months from death, more whole than most people who lived full lives. "Are you ready? For three months? For the end?"

"No." Maya doesn't hesitate. "I'll never be ready. Ready implies some threshold where death becomes okay. That's not real. I'll die terrified. But I'll die awake. Present. Seeing it clearly. Loving what I'm losing even while losing it. That's all I can do. That's all anyone can do."

"Is that enough?"

"It has to be."

The answer settles between them. Not comfort. Not solution. Just: truth. Three months of truth. Then physics.

"We should sleep," Amara says. "Kofi will be chaos tomorrow. He'll want to explore, meet everyone, see everything. You'll need energy."

Maya smiles despite everything. "He wants to plant mint from Wei's garden. In Antarctica. He's determined."

"Then we'll help him plant it. Three months of mint growing. Then: vaporized. But those three months—the mint will be alive. That matters."

"Everything temporary."

"Everything here."

They turn back toward the building. The cold has seeped through Maya's jacket. Her hands are numb. Her face hurts. But she's felt it. Been present to it. Witnessed this moment. Midnight in Antarctica. Her aunt beside her under brilliant stars.

At the door, Maya pauses. Looks back at the stars once more.

Seventeen years, four months of seeing stars. Three more months. Then: nothing.

But tonight: everything.

Morning arrives with Kofi's energy.

Maya wakes to him bouncing on the bottom bunk, whispering loudly: "Maya! Maya! It's morning! I can see the city! There are buildings everywhere! Can we explore? Can we meet people? Can we find Uncle Kenji? Can we—"

"Kofi." Maya's voice is rough with sleep. "What time is it?"

"Six thirty! Everyone's still sleeping but I can't sleep anymore! This place is amazing! Did you see the stars last night? I looked out the window and there were so many stars! More than Lagos! And it's so cold! I've never been this cold! And—"

"Kofi. Breathe."

He breathes. Grins up at her. Fourteen years, three months old. Pure joy despite everything. Despite three months. Despite dying before he's fifteen. Just: here. Present. Alive.

Maya climbs down. Hugs him. Feels his aliveness—the warmth, the energy, the pure Kofi-ness that will be gone in ninety days. The grief rises. She holds him tighter.

"You okay?" he asks, muffled against her shoulder.

"Yeah. Just—glad you're my brother."

"I'm glad you're my sister." He pulls back, looks at her seriously. "Three months. That's what you said in the garden. Three months until impact."

"Yes."

"Are you scared?"

"Terrified."

"Me too." He sits on the bottom bunk. The energy dims but doesn't disappear. "I practiced last night. Like you taught me. Breath counting. Got to twenty-three before I lost track. That's my record."

"That's good."

"Is it enough? For three months? For—when it happens?"

Maya sits beside him. Her baby brother who she raised, who she taught to read and practice and face death consciously. "I don't know. I've practiced two years, eight months. I'm still scared. But practice means I'm scared AND present. Not hiding from it. Not pretending. Just—with it. That's different."

"Different how?"

"I see clearly. I love clearly. I grieve clearly. Everything's sharp instead of numb. Is that better? I don't know. But it's realer."

Kofi nods slowly. Processing. His face has that concentrated expression—the one that means he's trying to understand something hard. "Will you keep teaching me? For three months? Everything you know?"

"Yes. Every day. And Uncle Kenji will teach both of us. He studied with Wei for three years. He knows more than I do."

"But you know me. You know how I think. So you can teach me your way and Uncle Kenji can teach me his way and maybe together it'll be enough."

Maya feels tears threaten. He's so young. So honest. So present despite everything. "It'll be enough. We'll practice together. Until we can't. That's all anyone gets. But three months of practicing together—that's real. That's something."

"Okay." Kofi's energy returns. "Can we get breakfast? I'm starving. And then can we explore? And find Uncle Kenji? And meet Grandma Elena? And see Uncle David's work? And—"

"Yes. All of it. But first: breakfast."

The apartment is waking. Mama emerging from the fold-out couch, hair wild, face soft with sleep. Papa starting coffee in the small kitchen. Aunt Amara and Uncle David moving quietly in their bedroom. Family. Together. Three months of this. Then: nothing.

But right now: everything.

Breakfast is crowded chaos.

Six people in a kitchenette designed for two. Kofi talking constantly—questions, observations, plans. Papa making synthetic eggs and real bread (somehow Uncle David has real bread, miracle of maintenance connections). Mama trying to organize their first day. Aunt Amara looking overwhelmed by the noise. Uncle David calm, steady, present to the chaos.

Maya watches it all. Memorizes it. The specific way Mama touches Papa's shoulder as she passes. The way Kofi gestures wildly while talking. The way

Aunt Amara tries to hide her overwhelm behind competence. The way Uncle David just exists—quiet, solid, here.

Three months of mornings like this. Then: no more mornings. No more family. No more anything.

She's eating breakfast and grieving breakfast simultaneously. Present to both. The practice doesn't fix the grief. Just makes room for it alongside the love.

"Maya?" Mama's voice breaks through. "You're quiet. You okay, baby?"

"Yeah. Just—taking it in. Family. Together. It's good."

Mama's eyes glisten. She understands. They're all taking it in. All memorizing. All present to the preciousness and the loss simultaneously.

"Today's plan," Papa says, redirecting gently. "Kofi and I will explore the district. Find community center, meet people, understand the layout. Zara, you and Amara and David can catch up properly—I know you three need time. Maya—" He looks at her. "What do you want?"

What does she want?

To practice. To learn. To meet Uncle Kenji formally. To ask for the intensive training. To spend three months absorbing everything Wei taught through him. To die awake.

"I want to find Uncle Kenji," Maya says. "Meet him properly. We've only met four times before. I want to—" She searches for words. "I want to learn. Everything he knows. Everything Wei taught him. For three months."

Mama understands immediately. "He teaches at the community center. Daily sessions. Ten AM and three PM usually. We can go together."

"Can I come?" Kofi asks. "I want to learn too!"

"Of course, baby." Mama reaches for his hand. "We'll all go. Family learning together."

The walk to the community center takes fifteen minutes.

Maya experiences Antarctica fully for the first time in daylight—except there's no daylight. Still polar night. Just: artificial lights, the ambient glow of buildings, the strange twilight that passes for morning here.

The temperature is minus twenty-four Celsius. Her breath fogs. Her face hurts. Her hands are numb despite gloves. Everything is concrete and ice and engineered survival. Buildings stretching in every direction. Infrastructure groaning. Two million people maintaining civilization through will and habit and the simple choice to show up.

"This was four billion people at peak," Mama says quietly. "Year 0. Forever Earth. Humanity's bet on adaptation. Now—" She gestures at the sprawl. "Everyone who chose to die together. Or couldn't bear to die alone."

Maya sees it clearly. The buildings designed for massive population. The emptiness where crowds should be. The systems barely functioning. Everything temporary, everything failing, everything maintained just barely by people who know maintenance won't matter but do it anyway.

Like Uncle David and the solar arrays. Like Grandmother Elena and the governance. Like everyone who keeps showing up.

Presence as practice. Maintenance as meditation. Work that doesn't save anything but matters anyway.

The community center is a converted warehouse. Three stories, concrete, lights on inside. Through the windows Maya sees people gathering. Twenty, thirty, maybe more. Everyone coming to practice. Everyone learning to die awake.

"Kenji's inside," Mama says. "Setting up. We're early—session doesn't start until ten. But we can introduce you properly. If you want."

Maya breathes. Feels the cold air in her lungs. Feels her fear. Feels her intention.

She's seventeen years, four months old. She'll die in three months. Before death, she'll practice. She'll learn. She'll transmit what she learns to others. She'll die awake.

It isn't enough. It's all there is.

"I'm ready," Maya says.

She's not ready. Will never be ready. But she's here. Present. Choosing.

It isn't enough. It's all there is.

They enter the community center together. Family. Learning. Practicing. Present.

Until they can't be.

But right now: they are.

The room is simple.

Converted warehouse space, forty-eight square meters, concrete floor, windows on two sides showing the polar twilight. Thirty chairs arranged in a circle. No decorations. No elaborate setup. Just: space for practice.

Uncle Kenji is arranging cushions—thirty-seven years old, looks like Grandmother Elena, moves with the ease that comes from years of practice. He glances up when they enter. Sees Mama first. Smiles—real, warm, present.

"Zara. Good morning."

"Good morning, Kenji. We're early. Wanted to—" Mama gestures to Maya and Kofi. "Wanted you to meet my children properly. You've met them before but briefly. This is Maya. This is Kofi."

Kenji's attention shifts. Sees Maya. Really sees her—not analyzing, not categorizing, just: seeing. His presence is palpable. This is what Wei taught. This is Picture Six, Picture Seven, the ox ridden home, practice naturalized into being.

"Maya," Kenji says. "You've grown."

"People do that." The same words she said to Aunt Amara yesterday. Honest. Direct. Real.

Kenji smiles. "You sound like your grandmother Wei."

"I never met her. But she taught Mama. Mama taught me."

"The transmission continues." Kenji turns to Kofi. "And you're Kofi. The mint planter. The optimist."

Kofi grins. "You've heard about me?"

"Your mother writes. Your sister writes. You're famous in our family."

"I'm not famous. I'm just me."

"Just you is enough." Kenji gestures to the circle. "Sit. We have time before others arrive. Tell me—why are you here? What do you want from three months?"

The question is direct. Classic Wei-teaching—no small talk, no easing in. Just: the real question. The one that matters.

Maya sits. Kofi beside her, Mama beside him. The circle incomplete, chairs empty, waiting for others. But right now: family. Teacher and students. Presence to presence.

"I want to learn everything," Maya says. No hesitation. Complete honesty. "Wei taught you for three years. You've been teaching others for six years. I have three months. Not enough time. Exactly the time there is. I want daily sessions. One-on-one intensive. Everything you know about presence, about practice, about dying consciously. Not because it will make me ready—I'll never be ready. Because being awake is better than being asleep."

Kenji listens. Doesn't interrupt. Doesn't immediately respond. Just: receives. This is also teaching—holding space for truth without rushing to fix it.

Finally he speaks. "That's impossible. Wei's teaching took three years to absorb. I can't compress it into three months."

"So teach me anyway. Not to achieve compression. Just to transmit what you can. I'll absorb what I absorb. Let go of the rest. But I want to try."

"Why?"

The question isn't dismissive. It's precise. Why. What's the real intention. What's underneath the request.

Maya considers. Feels into the truth. "Because Wei died before I could learn directly from her. Because Mama gave me the basics but I want depth. Because I'm seventeen and dying and I want my brief life to mean something. Not mean to the universe—I know it doesn't matter cosmically. Mean to me. Mean I was present. Mean I tried. Mean I didn't waste the gift of consciousness by hiding from its ending."

Kenji's face softens. "Ah. There it is. Not about achievement. About presence. About witness. About honoring the gift."

"Yes."

"That's why Wei would have taught you. That's why I'll teach you." Kenji leans forward slightly. "But Maya—understand this. The teaching won't make dying easier. Won't make seventeen years enough. Won't make losing Kofi bearable. It will make you present to all of it—the terror, the grief, the love, the rage. Everything sharp instead of numb. Is that what you want?"

Maya meets his eyes. Her uncle who sought for seven years. Who found Wei exhausted. Who learned to stop seeking and start staying. Who teaches from not-knowing instead of expertise. Who embodies presence without pretending it fixes anything.

"Yes," she says. "That's exactly what I want."

Kenji nods. "Then we'll practice together. Daily. Morning session with everyone—you'll learn alongside the community. Afternoon sessions—just us, intensive, everything I can transmit. Three months of teaching. Then: physics."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet. This work is hard. You'll sit with pain. Face fear. Grieve while alive. Practice won't rescue you from any of it."

"Good. I don't want rescue. I want presence."

"Then you understand the teaching already." Kenji turns to Kofi. "You too? Want to learn?"

Kofi looks uncertain. "I'm only fourteen. I don't know if I can—"

"Can you breathe?"

"Yes."

"That's the whole practice. Breathing. Noticing. Returning. Age doesn't matter. Understanding doesn't matter. Just: showing up. Being here. Can you do that?"

"I think so."

"Then you can practice. Welcome." Kenji glances at Mama. "You've taught them well. Wei would be proud."

Mama's eyes fill. "She left me a letter. Year 10. Said to open it when I needed wisdom but she wasn't here. I haven't opened it yet. Waiting for—I don't know. The right moment."

"Maybe there is no right moment," Kenji says gently. "Maybe now is always right moment. Maybe later is just fear pretending to be discernment."

Mama absorbs this. Nods. "Maybe."

People are arriving. Maya hears voices, footsteps. The community gathering. Everyone coming to practice. Everyone learning to die awake.

Uncle Kenji stands, moves to greet them. Sixty people eventually—the room filling. Younger people Maya's age. Elders ancient and present. Parents with children. Veterans with trauma. Everyone carrying their specific fear, their specific grief, their specific three months.

Maya sees them all. Recognizes the seeking. Recognizes the terror. Recognizes the desperate hope that practice will fix something.

It won't. Kenji will teach them that. Won't fix anything. Just makes being present possible. Just transforms hiding into witness.

That's enough. That's everything.

The session begins.

Thirty minutes of sitting.

Kenji's instructions are simple: "Find your seat. Settle into your body. Notice breath. When mind wanders—and it will—return gently. No force. No judgment. Just: noticing and returning. That's the whole practice."

Maya sits. Eyes closed. Finds breath.

One. In.

Two. Out.

Three. Mind wandering immediately—*This is it, intensive training, three months, I need to learn everything, I need to—*

Notice. Return.

Four. In.

Five. Out.

Six. Mind wandering—*Kofi is sitting two seats over, is he okay? Is he understanding? Should I—*

Notice. Return.

Seven. In.

Eight. Out.

The practice isn't peaceful. Isn't calm. Is just: returning. Over and over. Mind wandering a thousand times, returning a thousand times. This is what Kenji meant—not achieving anything, just being here with what is. Right now: restless mind. Right now: returning. That's complete.

Nine. In.

Ten. Out.

Somewhere during the sitting, something shifts. Not dramatic. Not enlightenment. Just: a moment of being with breath without the commentary. Present. Here. Now. The gap between understanding and being closes for three seconds. Then immediately: *That was it! I did it!* And it's gone.

But those three seconds were real. Were presence. Were the teaching happening.

Eleven. In.

Twelve. Out.

The bell rings. Thirty minutes complete. Maya opens her eyes.

Kofi looks overwhelmed. Mama looks tearful. The sixty people in the circle look various shades of confused, frustrated, peaceful, present. Everyone doing the practice. Everyone learning.

"Thoughts?" Kenji asks the group.

A woman in her fifties speaks first. "My mind wouldn't stop. I counted to three and lost track. Over and over. Is that normal?"

"That's exactly practice. Mind wanders. You notice. You return. That's not failure—that's the work."

A young man, maybe twenty. "I don't feel different. I thought meditation was supposed to make you feel peaceful."

"Peaceful is sometimes result. Not the goal. The goal is presence. Being here with what you actually feel. Including not-peaceful. You showed up. You sat for thirty minutes. You returned to breath however many times. That's complete."

An older woman. "I cried the whole time. Couldn't stop. Is that okay?"

"Yes. Grief is appropriate. Being present includes being present to pain. You didn't run from the tears. That's practice."

Maya listens to the exchanges. Sees Kenji teaching—not from expertise, from presence. Meeting each person where they are. Reflecting their experience without trying to fix it. This is Wei's teaching continued. This is Picture Ten: marketplace, gift-bestowing hands. Teaching as transmission, not achievement.

"Maya," Kenji says. She startles slightly. "First meditation in Antarctica. How was it?"

Sixty people turn to look at her. Maya feels exposure. But also: invitation. To speak truth. To be honest. To teach through being taught.

"Difficult," she says. "My mind wandered constantly. I'd return to breath and immediately my mind would spin off. But—" She pauses. "But there were a few seconds. Maybe three seconds total. Where I was just with breath. No commentary. No trying. Just: here. Then my mind grabbed at it and it vanished. But those three seconds were real."

"Yes," Kenji says. "Three seconds of presence is complete. Not incomplete because brief. Not failure because you couldn't sustain it. Just: three seconds of being here. That's the teaching. That's enough."

"Tomorrow," Kenji continues to the group, "we'll sit again. Same practice. Mind will wander. You'll return. Day after: same. For three months. Not achieving anything. Just: showing up. Being here."

The session concludes. People disperse slowly—some lingering to talk, some leaving quietly, some sitting longer in the space. The community presence continuing beyond formal practice.

Maya stays seated. Kofi beside her. Mama talking quietly with another parent. The room gradually emptying.

Kenji approaches. Sits beside them.

"Intensive training," he says to Maya. "Daily afternoon sessions. Just us. Starting tomorrow. Two PM. Here. We'll practice together. One on one. I'll teach everything I can. You'll absorb what you absorb. Three months. That's the agreement."

"Yes."

"Kofi," Kenji turns to her brother. "You're welcome to join sometimes. But intensive is intense. Long silences. Hard questions. Deep practice. Might be boring for fourteen-year-old."

Kofi looks at Maya. "Will you teach me separately? Like you've been teaching me?"

"Yes," Maya says. "Every evening. We'll practice together. Me and you. Like Lagos. Like Wei's garden."

"Okay." Kofi seems relieved. "I want to learn but I don't want to do intense all the time. I'm still—I'm still me."

"Being you is perfect," Kenji says. "Practice doesn't erase personality. Just makes you present to who you are. Stay yourself. Be here as yourself. That's complete."

They sit together—Maya, Kofi, Kenji, Mama joining them. Four people in an emptying room. Family. Teachers and students. Everyone learning. Everyone dying. Everyone here.

"Three months," Maya says. Not question. Statement.

"Three months," Kenji confirms.

"Is that enough?"

"It has to be."

The answer settles. Maya accepts it. Not satisfied. Not resigned. Just: accepting. Three months of practice. Three months of transmission. Three months of being awake. Then: the ending.

But right now: beginning.

Night returns.

Maya lies in the top bunk listening to Kofi breathe. Another full day in Antarctica complete. Met Uncle Kenji. Started practice. Arranged intensive training. Explored the district with family. Planted mint with Kofi (miracle—Uncle David found soil somewhere, built a small box, helped Kofi plant the cutting from Wei's garden carefully).

Three months begins now.

She counts her breaths in the darkness.

One. In.

Two. Out.

Three. Her mind wanders to tomorrow—first intensive session, what will Kenji teach, will she understand, will three months be enough—

Notice. Return.

Four. In.

Five. Out.

Below her, Kofi's breath steady. Fourteen years, three months old. Three months remaining. Then: no more breath. No more Kofi. The grief is always there. The practice doesn't remove it. Just makes room for it alongside the love.

Six. In.

Seven. Out.

She thinks about the community session. Sixty people practicing. Everyone learning to be present. Everyone facing death together. The transmission spreading—Wei to Mama to Maya, Wei to Kenji to hundreds. Different doors, same presence. The teaching multiplying until there are no people left to teach.

But while there are people: teach. While there is presence: practice. While there is breath: count.

Eight. In.

Nine. Out.

Tomorrow she'll wake early. Practice alone before breakfast. Join the morning session with the community. Then afternoon: intensive with Kenji.

Ten. In.

Eleven. Out.

Maya feels sleep approaching. Lets it come. Tomorrow will arrive whether she sleeps or not. The asteroid will arrive whether she practices or not. Death will come whether she's ready or not.

But she'll be present. Awake. Witnessing. Here until she isn't.

That's all anyone can do.

That's everything.

Twelve. In.

Thirteen. Out.

She thinks of Wei's final words: *The flower bloomed.*

Yes. Maya will bloom. For three more months. Seventeen years, seven months total. Brief. Complete. Here.

Fourteen. In.

Fifteen. Out.

Sleep takes her gently. Tomorrow waits. Practice continues. Life persists until it doesn't.

But tonight: rest. Presence even to that.

Seventeen breaths into sleep. The number of years she'll never exceed. The number she'll be. Exactly. Precisely. Here.

Chapter 52: Moment

Kenji Torres | Year 15, Month 1 | Antarctica

The community center holds sixty people.

Kenji counts them without meaning to—old habit from years of teaching, tracking who shows up, who returns, who stays. Sixty bodies on cushions, chairs, the floor. Sixty stories converging in this prefab building that used to be a storage warehouse. Ages seven to seventy-three. Children to elders. All here because something in them recognized: presence matters. Being awake matters. Even now. Especially now.

Three months until everyone in this room dies.

Kenji sits at the front, not quite centered—he learned that from Wei. Don't put yourself at the exact center. Sit slightly off, making space. Teaching isn't performance. It's invitation.

"Good morning," he says. Simple greeting. Not trying for profundity. Just: here. Present.

"Good morning," sixty voices respond. Some strong, some tentative, some barely audible. His mother Elena in the third row, seventy-three years old, fifteen years of witnessing complete. Beside her: Marcus Reyes, newly returned from Mumbai after thirteen years away. And Marcus Rivera, the other Marcus, who stayed when Reyes left. Both Marcuses present now. Both chosen family.

Chen Liwei sits near them—sixty-seven, former UN Secretary General, two months of practice since arriving Antarctica. His grandchildren scattered among the young people—ages fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. Same ages as the teenagers dying young. Multi-generational learning. Multi-generational ending.

Kowalski beside Chen—seventy-one, security chief, practicing fifteen years in one form or another. Steady. Present. Embodying duty without certainty. When Kenji first returned Year 12, Kowalski was already practicing alone, Thursday morning meditations that preceded formal teaching. Now: natural elder in the community.

"We'll begin with sitting practice," Kenji says. "Thirty minutes. Simple instructions. Notice breath. Notice body. Notice thoughts without clinging to them. Notice feelings without drowning in them. This moment. Then this moment. Then this moment. Nothing more. Nothing less. This is enough."

He rings the bell Wei gave him. The sound is clear and complete. Sixty people settle into practice.

Kenji closes his eyes. Returns to breath.

One.

Two.

Three.

His mind wanders immediately—always does. Thinks about the journey that brought him here. Thirty-seven years old. Fifteen years since detection. Left Antarctica Year 1, age twenty-three, desperately seeking answers. Wandered seven years—Tokyo, Cairo, Mumbai, Jerusalem. Seeking, seeking, always seeking. Found Wei in Lagos Year 8, age thirty. Learned to stop seeking. Learned to be present. Studied three years. Wei died Year 11. Continued teaching. Returned to Antarctica Year 12. Teaching three years now.

Everything Wei gave him, he's passing forward. Person to person. Until there are no persons left.

He notices the thought spiral. Returns to breath.

Four.

Five.

Around him, sixty people practicing. He can hear them breathing. The slight shifts of bodies on cushions. A child whimpering—parent holding them closer. The community center creaks in Antarctic wind. All of it: presence. All of it: practice.

Six.

Seven.

His niece Maya sits in the second row. Seventeen years, four months old. Three months until she dies at seventeen years, seven months. She practices with a ferocity he's never seen in anyone. Not desperation—absolute commitment. Her spine straight. Face concentrated. Completely absorbed.

She'd been studying with him for almost three years now. Started at thirteen, not long after Wei died. That awakening transformed her. Made her old before her years. Made her serious in ways that break his heart.

But also: made her ready. For what? For this. For being present. For dying awake.

Notice. Return.

Eight.

Nine.

Ibrahim is co-teaching now. Former fighter, faithless for thirteen years, recently found something. Not the old faith—something deeper. Direct encounter. He sits beside Kenji at these sessions, offers wisdom from his journey. His presence helps people—especially the broken ones, the doubters, the ones who lost belief and found presence instead.

Ten.

Kenji opens his eyes slightly. Looks at the room without really seeing it. Just: awareness. Sixty people breathing together. Community practicing together. Everyone learning to die awake even though awake means scared.

His mind quiets. Not achieving stillness—just less noise. The returning, the noticing, the practice working. Not perfect. Never perfect. Just: practice.

Fifteen.

Twenty.

Time passes. Breath continues. The practice simple and impossibly difficult. Be here. Notice. Return. It sounds small. It isn't.

Thirty minutes later, Kenji rings the bell.

Sixty people open their eyes. Some look peaceful. Some frustrated. Some crying. All present. All showed up. That matters.

"How was that?" Kenji asks. Not rhetorical. Genuinely asking.

Obi Nwosu speaks from the middle—forty-seven, former Lagos infrastructure manager, three years of practice, still skeptical, still showing up. "Hard. Mind went everywhere. Kept thinking about my daughter." Pause. "She'll be twenty-six when this ends. I kept seeing her face instead of noticing breath."

"That's practice," Kenji says. "Noticing what's actually here—including thoughts of people you love. You noticed. You didn't get lost. That's enough."

Chen Liwei adds quietly: "I counted breaths. Got to forty-three. Then realized counting was avoiding feeling. Stopped counting. Just felt. Fear, mostly. That was harder than counting."

"Yes," Kenji says. "Counting is technique. Feeling is practice. Both useful. Both necessary. Sometimes you need technique to build capacity. Sometimes you need to let technique go and just feel."

Kowalski: "Thirty-seven years I showed up to work I wasn't sure mattered. This feels similar. Showing up to practice I'm not sure helps. But I show up anyway. That's what I know how to do."

Several people nod. Recognition. Showing up is the practice. Not achieving. Not fixing. Just: here.

A young voice from the back. Thabo—fourteen years old, born Year 1, never knew pre-detection world. Brilliant, questioning, struggling. Their hand tentatively raised.

"Kenji, can I ask something?"

"Always."

The room goes quiet. Sixty people lean forward. Thabo's voice clear despite trembling: "Does this practice make dying easier?"

There it is. Everyone's question. The one they're all carrying. The one Kenji asks himself every morning.

He pauses. Considers lying. Offering comfort. Promising peace. The compassionate answer would be: yes, practice helps, you'll be ready, it gets easier.

But Wei taught him: honesty over comfort. Truth over consolation. Presence over bypassing.

"No," Kenji says. The word lands hard in the silence. "Death is hard regardless. This practice doesn't make death easier. It makes life clearer. Makes this moment fuller. Makes presence possible. It won't save anyone. It just lets you actually live the time you have."

Thabo nods slowly, processing. Their face shows disappointment and recognition both. "Is that enough?"

Kenji meets their eyes. Holds their gaze. This fourteen-year-old child about to die. This brilliant young person asking if clarity is worth it when clarity doesn't prevent pain.

"I don't know," Kenji admits. "Ask me in three months."

Silence. Long silence. Sixty people sitting with the honesty. The refusal to pretend. The acknowledgment that practice doesn't save anyone.

Then: laughter. It starts with Obi—a single bark of surprised recognition. Spreads to Chen, to Kowalski, to Elena. Dark humor. True humor. The laughter of people facing the same impossible question together. Thabo laughs too, tension breaking. They're all in this. All practicing. All learning to die awake even though awake means scared.

The laughter fades into silence again. But different silence. Lighter. More honest.

Maya hasn't moved. Kenji watches her process his words. Sees something click in her face. Understanding. She won't be ready to die. No one will. But she can be present while dying. That's different. That's possible. That's what she's learning.

"Thank you," Thabo says quietly. "For not lying."

"You're welcome."

After practice, people linger. Not rushing out. Staying, talking, being together. Community forming around shared practice, shared questions, shared mortality.

Kenji facilitates but doesn't lead. Moves through the room, listening more than speaking. Watching connections form.

In one corner, Obi and David Chen are talking—first time they've really spoken. Kenji edges closer, curious.

"You maintained solar arrays fourteen years?" Obi asks.

"Yes," David says. Quiet as always. Present as always. "You?"

"Lagos water treatment. Nine years. Quit Year 10 when I realized everyone dies regardless."

David nods. No judgment. "I almost quit Year 7. Kept going because: what else? Despair?"

"Exactly." Obi leans forward. "Spent Year 10-11 despairing. Then came here, started practicing. Realized I was already practicing Years 1-10—through maintenance. Just didn't know it."

David smiles—rare expression for him. "Maintenance is meditation. Every connection checked. Every system tested. That's presence."

"You taught me that without teaching me." Obi's voice carries wonder. "Hearing about your arrays—I realized my Lagos work was sacred. Just didn't see it."

They sit in silence. Two engineers who maintained impossible systems until systems weren't needed anymore. Both understanding: the work mattered because they showed up. Not outcomes. Process. Presence.

Ibrahim joins them briefly. "I maintain arrays now. David taught me." He gestures at both. "You both taught me that systems can still function when they're falling apart. Bodies too. Faith too. All still capable of presence."

Three maintenance workers. Different systems. Same practice. Engineering as prayer. Work as witness.

Kenji watches them connect. Teaching happening naturally. Not through him—through shared experience. Through recognition. This is how transmission works when it's real.

In another corner, Barak Naveh sits with three young people struggling. One veteran with visible tremor. One parent whose child won't stop crying. One teenager—Thabo again—wrestling with existential terror.

Barak doesn't give advice. Just sits. Listens. His presence solid, grounded, calm. When the veteran's hand shakes uncontrollably, Barak places his own hand steady on the table—not touching, just present.

"My hand shakes too sometimes," Barak says quietly. "After years inside. Body remembers confinement. Presence doesn't fix it. Just holds it."

The veteran nods. The crying child calms. Thabo asks: "How do you sit with fear?"

"I don't make it go away. I just don't run. That's all. Staying is enough."

Simple. Grounded. True. People around him settle into their own experience, permission granted to be exactly where they are.

Kenji moves on. Lets the teaching happen. Watches Obi and David and Ibrahim connecting over maintenance. Watches Barak teaching through stable presence. Different paths. Same understanding. They're all teaching what he teaches, but through their own languages.

Valuable. Real.

Wei's teaching spreading not because he's replicating her exactly, but because the truth she pointed to is discoverable from infinite directions. Maintenance. Steadiness. Presence. Faith and faithlessness both. All of it pointing toward the same thing.

The room gradually empties. People leaving with quiet goodbyes, plans to return, gratitude. Sixty people down to thirty, to twenty, to ten.

Maya lingers briefly. Catches his eye across the room. She'd asked him yesterday for intensive training—daily sessions, everything he knows, ninety days. He'd agreed. They start tomorrow at six AM.

She doesn't need to say anything now. Just: acknowledgment. Gratitude in her expression. Then she leaves with her family.

Alone now. Kenji remains in the empty space. Cushions scattered. The smell of sixty people—sweat, breath, humanity. All temporary. All precious.

He starts straightening cushions. Simple task. Meditation through action. Wei taught him this—cleaning as practice, tidying as presence. The work doesn't matter for its outcome. Matters for the doing.

As he works, something shifts. He notices he's not thinking about tomorrow's session with Maya. Not planning curriculum. Not worrying about qualification. Just: straightening cushions. Completely absorbed.

Then he realizes: when Thabo asked if practice makes dying easier, he didn't reach for Wei's words. Didn't reach for doctrine. Didn't reach for the right thing to say. Just the true thing. No teacher, no student. Just the moment answering itself.

An empty circle. No performance. No separation between the teaching and the being.

He stands very still. Cushion in hands.

Wei had always said she was somewhere around Picture Six or Seven, never beyond. Most people never get past chasing the ox. Somehow, through teaching, through stopping the search, something else arrived. Not an achievement. Just presence without trying.

Kenji finishes straightening cushions. Doesn't tell anyone about the recognition. Doesn't need to. Whatever this is, it isn't a badge. It's just how he moves now.

He locks the community center. Walks home through Antarctic evening. Polar summer means sunlight even at eight PM. The city sprawls around him—one

point eight million people, all counting down.

Tomorrow: the first intensive session with Maya. Ninety mornings. Everything he knows offered in three months. She'll absorb what she can. Let go of the rest. But she'll die awake. Present. Clear.

That's his gift to her. Wei's gift through him. The transmission continuing.

Wei → Kenji → Maya. Three generations. Same wisdom.

His apartment is small. Functional. One room, shared bathroom down the hall. He's lived here three years—since returning to Antarctica. Before that: Wei's garden in Lagos. Before that: wandering. Before that: the dissertation he never finished, the deflection expertise that became useless.

Kenji makes tea. Wei's method—precise temperature, careful timing. The making itself is meditation. Not preparation for something else. Complete in itself.

He sits at the small table. Drinks the tea. Thinks about Maya.

Seventeen years old. Three months left. Wants to learn everything. Impossible request. Impossible timeline. But they'll try anyway.

Not because it will work. Because it's what there is to do.

The tea is good. Simple green tea, synthesized but close enough to real. He drinks slowly. Savoring. Not because tomorrow is uncertain—tomorrow is certain. Everyone dies. But because this tea, this moment, this presence—it's here now. Real now.

After tea, Kenji prepares for bed. Brushes teeth. Changes clothes. Simple routines that ground him. Wei taught him this too—sacred in the mundane. Enlightenment in ordinary actions.

He sits on his meditation cushion—the same cushion Wei gave him Year 9. Worn now. Compressed from six years of practice. But still functional. Still here.

Kenji closes his eyes. Returns to breath.

One.

Two.

Tomorrow: first intensive session. Six AM. Begin transmitting what can't be taught, only discovered.

Three.

Four.

Wei died well. Conscious until the end. Present to her own dying. That's what Kenji wants for Maya. Not peace. Not acceptance. Just: awareness. Presence. Being awake for her final moments even if awake means terrified.

Five.

Six.

He's ready? No. Present? Yes. That's the same answer he gave Thabo. Not ready, but present. Not certain, but here.

Seven.

Eight.

Teaching presence until he can't. Teaching Maya until she can't learn. Then: physics. Then: silence. But these ninety days—complete.

Nine.

Ten.

Breath continues. Body breathes. Mind quiets slightly. The apartment silent except for breathing and the distant hum of failing infrastructure—power grid degrading, water systems strained, everything maintained just barely. David's arrays still functioning. Testament to persistence. Everything working just long enough.

Fifteen.

Twenty.

Kenji's breath slows. Practice settling him. Not achieving anything. Just: here. Present. Clear.

He thinks about the moment in the community center. The recognition. Responding without reaching. Teaching without performing.

Wei would be proud. Not because he achieved something. Because he stopped seeking achievement and found presence instead.

Tomorrow begins the ninety days. Maya's intensive training. Her final months spent learning what can't be taught, only discovered. He'll point. She'll look. The transmission will happen or it won't. Either way: complete.

Thirty.

Kenji opens his eyes. The apartment is quiet. Antarctic evening light filtering through the small window. Three months until everyone in this building dies. Three months until the city vaporizes. Three months until consciousness ends and the universe continues without humans to witness it.

But today—today he taught sixty people. Today Thabo asked the hard question. Today Ibrahim helped. Today community formed. Today presence happened.

That's enough. That has to be enough. There's nothing else.

Kenji stands. Prepares for bed. Tomorrow: six AM. First intensive session with Maya.

He lies down. Closes his eyes. Breath continues without effort. Body relaxing into sleep. Mind quiet enough.

The last thought before sleep: *Ninety days. Make them count. Make them presence. Make them home.*

Then: darkness. Rest. The preparation for tomorrow's teaching already complete because there is no preparation. Just: showing up. Being present. Transmitting what Wei gave him to Maya who will die at seventeen but will die awake.

That's the practice. That's the point. Not immortality. Transmission. Person to person.

Until the end.

Chapter 53: Meaning

David Chen (63) & Maya Okafor-Mensah (17 years, 4 months) | Year 15, Month 2 | Antarctic Solar Arrays

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5:47 AM. David wakes to Maya already dressed, sitting at the small kitchen table with tea, watching the darkness through the window. She turns when he emerges from the bedroom.

"Ready?" she asks.

"You've been up a while."

"Couldn't sleep. Too excited." Her voice carries that directness he's learned is her way—not rudeness, just economy of words. "You said we'd leave at six."

David smiles. His niece wants to learn maintenance. Not because she'll use it—she'll be dead in two months. Because she wants to witness what he does. What he's done for fourteen years. The quiet uncle who showed up.

He makes his own tea. Amara is still sleeping—she worked late at the monitoring station, one of four people still tracking the asteroid's approach even though tracking changes nothing. The apartment is quiet except for the hum of failing infrastructure, the groan of overtaxed heating systems.

"Kofi wanted to come," Maya says. "But I told him this was just us. Engineering minds. He understood."

"He's welcome anytime."

"I know. But today: just us." She sets down her cup. "Uncle David, I have three months left. Two months, twenty-seven days. I want to understand what you found. Not read about it. Not hear about it. Witness it."

The words land with weight. Not melodrama. Just truth. Maya practices presence—he's seen it, watched her at Kenji's sessions. She speaks like someone who's learned to be here completely. Even when here means dying at seventeen.

"Okay," David says. "Let's go witness."

The transport climbs through predawn darkness. Antarctic winter means the sun rises late, sets early. They'll have maybe six hours of decent light. Enough time for Maya to see the work, learn the systems, understand why maintenance matters when nothing lasts.

The megacity passes below—one point eight million people, down from billions across the planet before everything collapsed. Buildings half-empty. Infrastructure barely maintained. But the solar arrays: still functioning. Still providing power. Because someone shows up. Because David and three other humans and forty-four robots maintain them daily.

"How long have you been doing this?" Maya asks, watching the arrays appear in the distance—geometric garden stretching to horizon.

"Fourteen years. Since Year 1. Two months after detection." David's voice is steady. "Started as junior technician before the asteroid. Kept going after. Everyone else quit or transferred. I stayed."

"Why?"

"Didn't have a good reason then. Didn't have anywhere else to be. Amara and I were breaking. Work was easier than home." He pauses. "But somewhere along the way, the work became the reason. Not just: what else would I do. But: this matters. Someone should do it."

"Even knowing it ends?"

"Especially knowing it ends."

The transport docks at Platform 73. Two hundred meters above the ice. David helps Maya out—she's steady, unafraid of heights, engineering mind assessing the structure automatically. The platform stretches fifty meters square, solar panels radiating in all directions, connection housings marked by diagnostic lights.

And there: 47B. The maintenance robot waiting at the central junction, treads positioned precisely where they always are when David arrives.

Beep beep.

"Good morning, Colleague Chen. Platform twelve requires recalibration. Connection housing integrity at seventy-three percent. Visitor presence detected.

Identify."

"This is Maya," David says. "My niece. She's here to learn."

The robot's sensor array sweeps toward Maya. Pauses. Processing.

Beep beep beep.

"Maya Okafor-Mensah. Seventeen years, four months old. Daughter of Zara Okafor-Mensah. Niece of Colleague Chen's partner Dr. Amara Okafor. Statistical probability of relation: ninety-nine point seven percent." The sensors focus. "Welcome, Maya Okafor-Mensah. This unit is designated 47B. Colleague Chen and this unit have coordinated maintenance for ten years. Are you here for technical training?"

Maya crouches down slightly, studying the robot with that fierce attention she gives everything. "Sort of. I want to understand what Uncle David does. What you do together."

Beep.

"Understanding requires observation and participation. This unit can facilitate both. Current maintenance schedule: platforms twelve through eighteen. Estimated completion time: five hours, seventeen minutes. Probability of successful knowledge transfer to Maya Okafor-Mensah: high. She possesses optimal cognitive characteristics for system comprehension."

David almost laughs. "47B thinks you're smart."

"47B is correct," Maya says seriously. Then, to the robot: "Thank you for teaching me."

Beep beep. "Gratitude acknowledged. Shall we proceed to platform twelve?"

They move together across the array—David, Maya, 47B gliding on treads. The morning light is breaking now, pale Antarctic sun painting everything copper and gold. The megacity spreads below, but from this height it's just pattern. Geometry. Human persistence made visible.

Platform twelve waits. David pulls his diagnostic tablet without thinking. Twenty years of maintenance work—ten in solar, ten before that in other systems. His hands know the sequence before his brain articulates it.

"Connection housing," he explains, showing Maya the diagnostic readings. "See this? Integrity at seventy-three percent. That means the seal is degrading. Moisture getting in. Conductivity dropping. In three weeks, maybe four, it would fail completely. Power loss to this section. Thirty thousand people without electricity."

Maya leans in, studying the numbers. "But we only have two months left. It won't fail before impact."

"No."

"So why fix it?"

David looks at his niece—seventeen years old, brilliant, asking the question with genuine curiosity not challenge. The question he's asked himself a thousand times. The question that has an answer he can't quite articulate but knows in his bones.

"Because it needs fixing," he says finally. "Because those thirty thousand people need power today. Tomorrow. Next week. Because maintenance isn't about forever. It's about function while function matters."

"But nothing matters if everything ends."

"Does it?" David pulls the housing tool from his belt. "Kofi mattered this morning when you ate breakfast with him. The tea you drank mattered. This conversation matters. Just because they end doesn't unmatter them. They happened. They were real."

Maya absorbs this. He can see her processing—that engineering mind working through the logic, finding the places where meaning and logic diverge.

"I'm going to die at seventeen years, seven months old," she says quietly. "Never reach eighteen. Never be an engineer. Never use anything I learn today. So why learn it?"

David stops mid-motion. Looks at her directly. "Why learn anything? Why practice meditation with Kenji? Why study orbital mechanics with Amara? Why eat breakfast? Why live these two months at all?"

"Because I'm here," Maya says slowly. "Because I'm alive right now. Because—" She stops. Understanding arriving. "Because brief doesn't mean meaningless."

"Exactly." David shows her the housing. "This repair will last six months. The arrays will vaporize in two. I'll fix it anyway. Not because it's logical. Because it's meaningful. Meaning and logic are different."

Maya touches the housing—cold metal, solid, real. "Mama used to say that. Wei taught her. I thought I understood. But I didn't. Not viscerally." She looks at David. "This is the same thing Wei taught Mama. I just never felt it in my hands before."

"I never met Wei," David admits. "But I learned the same thing she taught. Just learned it through work instead of gardens. Through showing up. Through this." He gestures at the arrays, at 47B working nearby, at the endless platforms stretching to horizon. "Presence isn't just sitting still. It's doing what needs doing. Completely. Even when nothing lasts."

Beep beep. 47B approaches with replacement seals. "Colleague Chen. Philosophical discussion efficiency: low. Task completion efficiency: optimal. Suggest: repair while conversing. Parallel processing improves overall outcomes."

Maya laughs—unexpected sound, bright against the cold air. "Your robot is practical."

"47B is wise," David corrects. "Let's work."

They spend the morning maintaining. David shows Maya everything—how to extract the housing, inspect the seals, clean the channels, install replacements, run diagnostics. She learns quickly, engineering mind grasping systems intuitively. By the third repair, she's anticipating his movements. By the fifth, she's asking questions that show deep understanding.

47B moves with them, providing tools, monitoring their work, occasionally offering observations about efficiency or optimal technique. The robot has been David's partner for ten years. Knows his patterns. Adjusts to his needs before he articulates them. Perfect synchronization built through thousands of hours of coordinated work.

"Does it know it's dying?" Maya asks during platform fifteen, watching 47B calibrate a voltage regulator with precise movements.

"No," David says. "Robots don't have that awareness. 47B will function until impact. Then stop functioning. No fear. No anticipation. Just: work, then no work."

"Is that better?"

"I don't know." David runs the diagnostic—green across the board. "But I know 47B is working now. Completely. Optimally. That's honest. That's enough."

Maya is quiet, thinking. Then: "I'm terrified of dying. Every day. Every moment. The practice helps me be present TO the terror, not consumed BY it. But the fear never goes away. Sometimes I think—wouldn't it be better to be like 47B? Working until you stop? No existential dread?"

David understands. The question everyone asks. Would unknowing be mercy?

"Maybe," he admits. "But you wouldn't have these two months with Kofi. With your parents. With Kenji's teaching. With this—" He gestures at the platform, at the work, at the morning light on ice. "You wouldn't have consciousness. Awareness. The ability to choose presence. That seems worth the terror."

"Does it?" Maya's voice cracks slightly. "I'm seventeen. I should be falling in love. Going to university. Becoming myself. Instead I'm dying. Conscious of dying. Practicing how to die awake. Sometimes the consciousness feels like punishment."

David stops working. Looks at his niece—seventeen years old, crying quietly, hands still holding the diagnostic tablet. Not breaking down. Just: feeling what she feels without hiding it.

"Come here," he says.

They move to the platform's edge, safety harnesses clipped, and sit with legs dangling over two hundred meters of empty air. The megacity spreads below. The arrays stretch endlessly. Above: Antarctic sky, pale and infinite.

"I married your aunt when I was thirty-nine," David says. "Year -9. Thought we had forever. Built a life assuming decades. Then Year 0. Detection. Everyone would die in fifteen years. Suddenly forever was finite. Countable. Real."

Maya listens.

"I spent Years 1 through 4 hiding in this work. Amara hid in data. We broke each other through absence. Divorced Year 4. I thought I'd spend my final years alone. Just: maintaining arrays until they vaporized. Choosing work over connection because connection hurt too much."

"But you didn't," Maya says. "You and Aunt Amara are together now."

"Year 8, she knocked on my door. First time seeing her in four years. She was terrified. I was terrified. We tried anyway. Dated for two years like strangers. Slowly rebuilt what broke. Moved to Lagos together Year 13. Had over two years with your family. Now: two months left together."

"Was it worth it?" Maya's voice is quiet. "The healing? Knowing it ends?"

David considers. Chooses honesty. "Yes. Every moment of the seven years we've had mattered more than the thirteen years we were married and breaking. Every morning with her matters. Every meal. Every conversation. Even knowing it ends—especially knowing it ends—makes it matter more."

"But you had forty-nine years before the asteroid. I'm getting seventeen years, seven months total. It's not the same."

"No," David agrees. "It's not the same. It's not fair. It's not enough. You should have eighty more years. Should become whatever you want to become. Should have time to fail and grow and learn and live." He pauses. "But you don't. Neither do I. Neither does anyone. The asteroid made the ending visible. But everyone always died. Everyone's time was always temporary. We just didn't know when."

Maya wipes her eyes. "Wei said that. Mama says it. Kenji teaches it. I understand it intellectually. But emotionally—I'm so angry. I rage about it every day. Practice doesn't fix that. Just makes me conscious while raging."

"Good," David says. "Rage is honest. Presence doesn't mean peaceful. Means being here with what you actually feel. Including rage. Including grief. Including—" He looks out at the arrays. "Including loving what you'll lose."

They sit in silence. The sun climbs higher. Below, nearly two million people wake, eat breakfast, begin their final days. Above, the arrays convert light to power, serving those people, maintained by humans and robots working together until they can't.

Beep beep. 47B approaches. "Colleague Chen. Maya Okafor-Mensah. Lunch break recommended. Human efficiency decreases significantly after four hours continuous labor. Nutrition required for optimal afternoon performance."

Maya laughs through tears. "Your robot cares about lunch."

"47B cares about everything," David says. "In its own way."

They eat on Platform 73—David's platform, claimed through fourteen years of repetition. He unpacks the meal he prepared this morning: synth-protein sandwiches, nutrient bars, thermos of tea. Maya produces her own lunch—Kwame made it, apparently, with extra fruit because "growing teenagers need fuel even when there's no future to fuel toward."

"Papa worries," Maya explains. "Shows it through food. Yesterday he made me three breakfasts because he wasn't sure which I'd want."

"He loves you."

"I know. That makes it harder. Easier to die if no one cared. But everyone cares. Kofi cares. Mama cares. Papa cares. You care. Aunt Amara cares. Kenji cares. The whole Lagos compound cared. That weight—being loved while dying—it's beautiful and crushing simultaneously."

David understands. He's lived in that space for seven years. Loving Amara while counting down. Two months left of loving her. Then: no more love. No more Amara. No more anything.

"Tell me about your work," Maya says, changing subject. "Fourteen years. That's—" She calculates automatically. "That's approximately 5,110 days. If you work six days a week. About 4,380 shifts. How many repairs?"

"I stopped counting around Year 7. Thousands. Maybe tens of thousands. Same repairs over and over. Connection housings fail predictably. Voltage regulators degrade. Panels need cleaning. It's repetitive work. Routine work. Most people would call it boring."

"But you don't."

"I did, at first. Years 1 through 3, it was just: something to do. Better than despair. Then Year 7—I don't know what changed. But suddenly the work mattered. Not because it led somewhere. Because it was happening. I was present to it. Maintaining these arrays became meditation. Presence practice. Meaning made visible through showing up."

Maya eats thoughtfully. "Kenji says similar things. Practice isn't preparation. Practice is being here. You discovered that through physical work. He discovered it through sitting still. Same truth, different door."

"Your mother discovered it through building community. Growing gardens. Raising you and Kofi. Wei discovered it through—I never met her, but from what

Amara says—through flowers. Through teaching. Through being present to dying students knowing they'd die." David gestures at the arrays. "Everyone discovers it differently. But the truth is the same: brief doesn't mean meaningless. Showing up matters. Doing the work matters. Even when—especially when—nothing lasts."

"Do you believe that?" Maya asks. "Really believe it? Not just intellectually—in your bones?"

David looks at his hands. Callused from fourteen years of maintenance. Scarred from small injuries. Real hands that have done real work. Soon: vaporized hands. Gone hands. Never-existed hands.

"Most days, yes," he says honestly. "Some days, no. Some mornings I wake up and think: what's the point? Why maintain anything? Why not just stop?" He meets her eyes. "But I show up anyway. Do the work anyway. Be present anyway. Some days that's defiance. Some days it's love. Some days I don't know what it is. But it's enough to keep me coming here."

"Is showing up enough?" Maya's voice is small. "Really enough? Just being present without fixing anything, without saving anything, without mattering beyond the moment?"

"Ask me in two months," David says. Then smiles. "That's what Kenji told Thabo yesterday. You were there. You heard."

Maya smiles too. "He's honest like you. Doesn't pretend to have answers."

"I have one answer," David says. "Just one. And I'm certain of it."

"What?"

"This—" He gestures at the platform, at her, at the meal they're sharing, at the robot waiting patiently nearby. "This matters. Right now. This conversation. This lunch. This teaching. It's happening. We're here. That's real. That's enough. That has to be enough because it's all there is."

Maya sets down her sandwich. Looks at David with that fierce presence she brings to everything. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For being the uncle who showed up. For fourteen years of this. For teaching me that engineering can be meditation. That maintenance can be meaning. That brief life matters." Her voice catches. "For witnessing what I won't become. And loving me anyway."

David feels something crack open in his chest. He's not good with emotions. Never has been. But his niece—seventeen years old, dying in two months, brilliant and broken and beautiful—she sees him. Really sees him.

"You would have been an exceptional engineer," he says quietly. "Given time. Given future. You see systems instantly. Ask perfect questions. Understand not

just the mechanics but the philosophy underneath. You have the mind for it."

"But no time for it."

"No. No time." He pauses. "But you have these two months. And you're choosing to spend one morning learning something you'll never use professionally. That's—" He searches for words. "That's presence. That's courage. That's what makes brief life matter."

Maya nods. Wipes her eyes. Finishes her sandwich.

47B glides over. *Beep beep.* "Colleague Chen. Maya Okafor-Mensah. Lunch duration: forty-two minutes. Optimal rest achieved. Recommend resuming maintenance activities. Platforms sixteen through eighteen remain incomplete. Weather conditions deteriorating. Window for optimal repair: three hours, eleven minutes remaining."

"Back to work?" David asks.

"Back to work," Maya confirms.

The afternoon passes in comfortable rhythm. They move from platform to platform—David teaching, Maya learning, 47B coordinating. By platform seventeen, Maya is working independently, David supervising but not micromanaging. She's competent. Fast learner. Natural engineer.

She would have been exceptional. Given time.

But there's no time. Just: now. This afternoon. These repairs. This teaching. This witnessing.

On platform eighteen, Maya asks the question David knew was coming.

"Uncle David, does any of this matter? Really matter? In two months, these arrays vaporize. The repairs you did today will last six months but only exist two. The megacity below will vaporize. Everyone in it will vaporize. The work, the teaching, this conversation—all of it will end. Completely. Forever. So does it matter?"

David pauses mid-diagnostic. The question everyone asks. The question he's asked himself five thousand times. The question that has no logical answer. Only: lived answer. Felt answer. Present answer.

"Come here," he says.

They move to the platform's northern edge. Antarctica stretches in every direction—megacity to the south, ice fields to the north, arrays everywhere between. Two hundred meters up. Civilization built on frozen continent because everywhere else became unlivable. Humanity's last stand. About to end.

"Look at this," David says, gesturing at everything. "Nearly two million people down there. Living. Eating breakfast. Working. Loving each other. Facing

the end together. And these arrays—" He points at the endless solar panels. "They're powering all of it. The heating that keeps people alive. The lights that let them see. The systems that process water, grow food, maintain infrastructure. This work—what we're doing right now—keeps them alive today."

"For two more months."

"Yes. For two more months." David looks at Maya directly. "Those two months matter to them. Today matters. Tomorrow matters. Every single day until they don't. And someone needs to maintain the systems that make those days possible. I'm someone. I show up. I do the work. That matters."

Maya stares out at the megacity. The wind is picking up—Antarctic wind, brutal and honest. She's crying again, but not sad crying. Something else. Understanding crying. The kind of tears that come when you finally grasp something you've been circling for years.

"Brief life is complete life," she says. "Wei taught Mama. Mama taught me. Kenji reinforces it. I practice it. But I didn't really GET it until right now. You're teaching me through maintenance. Showing me that work matters because it's happening. Because people need power today. Not forever. Today."

"Yes."

"And my life—seventeen years, seven months—it matters because I'm alive today. Not because I'll accomplish something. Not because I'll leave a legacy. Just because—" She stops. Breathes. "Just because I'm here. Being here is enough."

David nods. Doesn't speak. Lets her arrive at it herself.

"That's what you've been doing for fourteen years," Maya continues. "Not preparing for something. Not building toward something. Just being here. Maintaining arrays. Showing up. Doing the work. And the work mattered because it was happening. Even though it ends."

"Even though it ends," David confirms.

"Meaning and logic are different."

"Yes."

"Thank you," Maya whispers. "For teaching me that. For showing me Wei's truth through engineering. For—" She gestures helplessly. "For being present with me today."

Beep beep beep. 47B approaches with urgency. "Colleague Chen. Weather degradation accelerating. Wind speed: thirty-two kilometers per hour, increasing. Recommend descent within forty-five minutes. Platform safety protocols."

David checks the time. 14:20. They've been up here eight hours. Longer than planned. But worth it.

"One more repair?" he asks Maya. "Or descend now?"

Maya looks at the final platform—number eighteen, housing integrity at seventy-one percent. It will last two months without repair. Will vaporize either way. Fixing it changes nothing measurably.

"One more repair," she says. "Let's finish what we started."

They work together on platform eighteen. David and Maya in synchronized motion now—he's taught her well, she's learned fast. 47B provides tools, monitors diagnostics, offers real-time feedback about optimal technique. Three beings—two human, one machine—maintaining a system that will end but hasn't ended yet.

The repair takes thirty-seven minutes. Green across the board. Housing integrity at ninety-one percent. Good for six months. Existing for two.

"Complete," 47B announces. "Platform eighteen housing repair: successful. Maya Okafor-Mensah performance: exceptional. Learning curve: exceeded statistical predictions by twenty-three percent. Colleague Chen teaching efficacy: optimal."

Maya grins. "The robot thinks I did well."

"The robot knows you did well," David corrects. "47B doesn't exaggerate."

Beep. "Accurate assessment. Maya Okafor-Mensah demonstrates aptitude for maintenance engineering. Recommend additional training sessions. However—" The robot pauses in that way that signals processing outside normal parameters. "However. Maya Okafor-Mensah life expectancy: two months, twenty-seven days. Training applications: none. Knowledge acquisition purpose: non-instrumental. Therefore: learning motivation based on... presence? Witnessing? Meaning without utility?"

Maya crouches down beside 47B, studying the robot the way she studied the systems all morning. "Yes. I learned this today not to become an engineer. Just to understand what Uncle David does. Just to be present with him. Just because it matters now even though it won't matter later."

Beep beep beep. Long processing pause. Then: "This unit struggles with non-instrumental motivation. But observes: Colleague Chen maintains arrays that will vaporize. Colleague Chen demonstrates identical pattern—work without future application. Pattern suggests: presence-based motivation valid for both humans and, perhaps, systems. This unit files observation for processing."

David feels moved. 47B learning philosophy. Learning presence. The robot can't understand completely—hasn't been programmed for existential awareness. But something is emerging. Something beyond pure function.

"47B," David says quietly. "You've been my partner ten years. Best colleague I've ever had. Human or machine. Thank you."

Beep. "Gratitude acknowledged. Colleague Chen: optimal maintenance partner. Coordination efficiency: ninety-seven percent. This partnership mattered. Matters. Will matter until partnership ends." Pause. "This unit experiences something analogous to: satisfaction. Work performed well. Purpose fulfilled. Presence maintained until presence concludes."

Maya whispers to David: "Your robot understands."

"Maybe," David says. "Or maybe I'm projecting. But either way—we should descend. Wind's picking up."

The climb down takes twenty minutes. By the time they reach the ground, the wind is fierce, snow beginning. Antarctic weather turning. They make it to the transport just before visibility drops completely.

Inside the transport, safe and warming, Maya sits beside David in silence. Processing. Integrating. Understanding settling through her like snow settling on ice.

"I'm going to die in two months," she says finally. "Never be an engineer. Never use what I learned today. But today mattered. Learning with you mattered. Being present to your work mattered. Not because it led anywhere. Because it happened."

"Yes."

"That's enough."

"Is it?" David asks. The question Amara will ask him tonight. The question everyone asks. The question that has no answer except: it has to be.

"It has to be," Maya says. Then smiles. "That's what Aunt Amara said to me this morning. Early. I couldn't sleep. We had tea. I asked: is now enough? She said: it has to be. Same answer. Same truth."

The transport descends through thickening snow. Antarctica disappearing into white. Everything temporary. Everything beautiful. Everything here until it isn't.

"Uncle David," Maya says quietly. "Tomorrow, can I come back? Learn more?"

"Of course. But why? You understand the systems now. You've witnessed the work."

"I want to be present with you. However many mornings we have left. Not learning for future. Just—being here. Showing up. Doing the work together. That matters."

David feels his throat tighten. His niece—seventeen years old, two months left to live—choosing to spend her remaining mornings maintaining solar arrays that will vaporize. Not because it's logical. Because it's meaningful.

"I'd love that," he says. "Every morning you want. Until you don't. Until we can't."

"Until we can't," Maya echoes.

They arrive at the apartment complex just as full dark descends. 17:40. Ten hours since they left. Longer than David usually works. But worth every moment.

The apartment is warm. Kofi meets them at the door, explosive energy barely contained. "Maya! You're back! How was it? Did you fix things? Did you see the robot? Tell me everything!"

"Later," Maya says, hugging her brother. "I'm tired. Brain full. Tell you at dinner."

But David sees her face—glowing. Present. Complete. She didn't learn engineering today. She learned presence. Learned that brief life matters. Learned what David learned over fourteen years: showing up is enough.

Amara emerges from the bedroom, having napped after her monitoring shift. She sees David's face. Sees Maya's face. Understands something happened.

"Good day?" she asks.

"Good day," David confirms.

After Maya rejoins her family in the other room, Amara approaches David. "What happened up there?"

"I taught her maintenance. She learned presence. Same thing, different words."

"Wei's teaching."

"I never met Wei," David says. "But yes. Wei's teaching. Through arrays instead of gardens. Through work instead of meditation. But same truth: brief doesn't mean meaningless. Showing up matters. Being here completely is enough."

Amara kisses him. "I'm proud of you. Fourteen years of that. Now passing it forward."

"She's brilliant," David says. "She had the mind for this work. Really had it."

"But no time."

"No time. Just: now. These two months. Tomorrow she wants to come back. Learn more. Be present with the work. With me."

"That's beautiful," Amara whispers. "That's everything."

They stand together in the small apartment. Their family in the next room—Zara, Kwame, Maya, Kofi. David's family now. Amara's family. Everyone converged.

The apartment is too small for six people but feels exactly right. Cramped with bodies. Full of breath and warmth. Two months left of being together.

"Was today worth it?" Amara asks. "Teaching her something she'll never use?"

David thinks about Maya's face when she understood. The moment presence became real for her. Not intellectual. Visceral. The way it became real for him on Platform 73 over years of repetition. The way it became real for Amara when Zara taught her to feel again. The way Wei made it real for everyone she touched.

"Yes," he says. "Every moment. Teaching her was—" He searches for words. "It was transmission. Wei to Zara to Maya. And also: me to Maya. Different lineages. Same wisdom. Passing forward until there's no one left to pass to. But while there are people—we teach. We share. We show up."

Amara nods. She understands.

Dinner that night: six people around the small table. Synth-protein prepared three different ways because Kwame believes in variety even at the end. Kofi talking nonstop about his day—planted Wei's mint cutting, it's growing, he can see new leaves already, miracles happen. Zara and Amara talking quietly about their childhoods in Mumbai, memories surfacing now that ending is close. David listening to all of it. Being present. Here. Complete.

Maya is quiet. Eating slowly. Processing. Finally she speaks.

"I learned maintenance today. Connection housings. Voltage regulators. Diagnostic protocols. Robot coordination. Uncle David taught me everything. I won't ever use it professionally. I'll die before I use it once outside of practice." She pauses. "But it mattered. Learning it mattered. Being present to Uncle David's work mattered. Not because it led somewhere. Because it happened. Today happened. That's real. That's enough."

Kofi doesn't understand completely—he's fourteen, brilliant but young. But he nods seriously. "Like me planting mint. Wei's mint. It won't grow for years. It'll vaporize in two months. But today it grew. That matters."

"Exactly," Maya says. "Exactly like that."

Zara reaches across the table. Takes Maya's hand. Takes David's hand. "Thank you. For teaching her. For showing her what you found. For being present with our family."

"Thank you for being here," David says. "For choosing Antarctica. For spending these final months together. For being family."

They eat. They talk. They laugh occasionally. They're quiet sometimes. The apartment is too small for six people but feels exactly right. Crowded with love. Temporary with presence. Brief with meaning.

Later, much later, David and Amara lie in bed listening to the muffled sounds of family in the next room. Maya and Kofi talking softly. Zara and Kwame's quiet breathing. Everyone here. Everyone alive. Two months left of this.

"Tomorrow she'll go back to the arrays?" Amara asks.

"She wants to. Every morning until we can't."

"That's—" Amara's voice catches. "That's beautiful. That's everything. My niece choosing to witness your work. Choosing presence. Choosing meaning without permanence."

"She learned it from you," David says. "From Zara. From Wei through Zara. From Kenji. From everyone who taught her that brief life is complete life. I just showed her one more way it's true."

"Through maintenance."

"Through maintenance."

They lie quietly. The apartment groans—overtaxed systems, failing infrastructure, everything barely holding. But holding. For now. For two more months. Long enough.

"David," Amara whispers. "Do you believe it? Really believe it? That this is enough?"

The question she asked Maya this morning. The question Maya asked him on the platform. The question everyone asks. The question that has no certain answer. Only: lived answer.

"Most days, yes," David says honestly. "Some days, no. Today, after teaching Maya, watching her understand—yes. Completely yes. Today mattered. Tomorrow will matter. Every day until they don't. That has to be enough. That IS enough."

"Is it enough?" Amara presses. "Or is it just: all there is?"

David considers. Chooses honesty. "I don't know. Maybe they're the same thing. Maybe 'enough' just means: this is what we have, and what we have is real, and real matters even when it ends."

"Meaning and logic are different," Amara says.

They fall asleep holding each other. Tomorrow: arrays. Tomorrow: Maya learning more. Tomorrow: showing up. Tomorrow: being present. Tomorrow: maintaining what will end but hasn't ended yet.

Tomorrow: enough.

Until tomorrow isn't.

But for tonight: this is enough. This moment. This love. This family. This presence.

Brief.

Real.

Here.

Enough.

Chapter 54: Both

Ibrahim al-Rashid | Year 15, Month 2 | Antarctica

Two months before impact, in the long Antarctic winter of Year 15 Month 2, Ibrahim keeps finding himself back at the same night: 3 AM, two months earlier, when Min-seo was still alive.

Three AM. Ibrahim stares at the ceiling of Unit 403, Building 12. Can't sleep. The darkness presses down—Antarctic winter, twenty-two-hour nights, artificial lights the only defense against complete black.

Four months until impact. But that's not what keeps him awake.

Min-seo is dying.

Cancer. Diagnosed two months ago, Year 14 Month 10. Won't live to see the asteroid. Will die in three weeks, maybe less. She's accepted it with grace that breaks his heart. "I die a little early," she told him yesterday, voice barely audible. "What's the difference?"

But Ibrahim is terrified. Not of losing her—everyone loses everyone. Of her dying alone. Of her final moments being empty. Of there being nothing after. Just: silence. Void. End.

He's been visiting her daily. Bringing tea from her own mint—the plant still growing on her balcony despite winter, despite her dying. Sitting with her. She's so thin now, hands like bird bones. But still present. Still herself. Still tending what can be tended.

Yesterday she said, "Ibrahim, you've been good friend. Nine years. You kept me alive. Now you help me die. That's gift."

He couldn't speak. Just held her hand—those fragile fingers that gave him mint cuttings Year 6 when he wanted to die, that showed him small kindness when kindness saved him.

Now, 3 AM, alone, Ibrahim realizes: he's terrified for her because he has nothing to offer. No comfort. No hope. No promise of paradise or reunion or meaning.

Just: presence. Just: showing up. And what good is that when someone you love is dying?

Fifteen years ago he had faith. Had certainty. Had God. If Min-seo were dying then, he could have prayed for her. Could have promised her paradise. Could have said: *Allah is merciful, you'll be rewarded, death is doorway not end.*

Now? He has nothing. Just: "I'll be there. I'll sit with you. You won't die alone."

Is that enough?

The question circles, relentless. Ibrahim sits up. His leg aches—always aches, will ache until he dies. The shrapnel still there, thirteen years after the wound. Permanent reminder that bodies break and don't fully heal.

He looks at the window. Building 12 around him. Fifty-three steps down to ground level—counted them thousands of times, Years 3 through 15. Min-seo lives on the second floor. Derek in Building 7. Fatima in Building 9. Samir in Building 8. Linnea upstairs in Unit 418, eight months clean now, fragile but present.

His community. His family. Nine years of keeping each other alive. And now Min-seo dying first, before the asteroid, and Ibrahim has no God to offer her.

He stands. Dresses. The Antarctic cold seeps through everything. He pulls on layers—thermal base, insulated middle, waterproof shell. His cane leans against the wall. Hasn't needed it much lately—seven years of maintenance work, eight years of swimming with Derek, the body adapting, finding capability within limitation.

But tonight he takes it. Needs the stability. Needs something solid to hold.

He walks to the door. Steps into the corridor. Empty. Silent. Everyone sleeping. Four months until extinction. Eight years living in this building. Nine years in Antarctica. Fifteen years since faith shattered.

Ibrahim walks to the stairwell. Doesn't think about where he's going. Just: walks. Away from Unit 403. Away from the sleeplessness. Away from the terror he can't articulate.

The streets are freezing. Dark. Empty. Four months until everyone dies. Three weeks until Min-seo dies first.

Ibrahim's breath clouds in front of him. His leg protests the cold—always worse in winter. But he keeps walking. Past Building 11. Past Building 7 where Derek sleeps. Past the communal spaces, the empty playgrounds, the infrastructure of a city that will cease to exist.

He finds himself walking toward Sector 8.

The mosque.

Hasn't been inside since Jerusalem. Year 0. Fifteen years ago. The night his faith shattered—the announcement interrupting prayer, the asteroid replacing God as the thing that determined everyone's future.

But tonight, desperate, broken, terrified for Min-seo, Ibrahim walks there anyway.

The building is small. Prefab structure, repurposed warehouse. But there's a light on inside. Someone's there at 3 AM. Door unlocked. Ibrahim enters.

Imam Hassan. Praying alone. Prostrate on a prayer mat, forehead to ground, the precise movements Ibrahim's body remembers from childhood. Hassan rises, sees him.

"Ibrahim. It's three in the morning."

"I know. I'm sorry. I'll leave."

"No. Stay. Please." Hassan stands slowly—older now, sixty-nine, body showing the strain of fifteen years. "Tea?"

Ibrahim nods. Can't speak. Doesn't know why he came. Doesn't know what he expected.

They move to the small room adjacent to the prayer space. Hassan fills a kettle, prepares cups. The ritual automatic, comforting. Ibrahim sits at the low table. The mosque smells like every mosque he's ever been in—incense, carpet, the particular scent of space dedicated to prayer. It smells like home. Like Jerusalem. Like a life he lost.

Hassan brings the tea. Sits across from him. "You haven't been here since arriving. Twelve years."

"I have no faith."

"I know. Others told me." Hassan sips his tea. "But you're here now."

"Min-seo is dying."

Hassan nods slowly. "I heard. Cancer. I'm sorry."

"She's—she's Buddhist. Or was. Practiced presence with Professor Wei before Wei died. She's not Muslim. But she's—" Ibrahim's voice cracks. "She's my friend. Nine years. She kept me alive when I wanted to die. And now she's dying and I have nothing to offer her."

"What do you want to offer her?"

"Hope. Comfort. Something." Ibrahim sets down the cup. "Fifteen years ago, if someone I loved was dying, I could have prayed. Could have promised paradise. Could have said: Allah is merciful, death is doorway, we'll be reunited. Now I have nothing. Just: presence. Just showing up. And that feels like nothing."

Hassan is quiet for a moment. Then: "What do you want me to say?"

"I don't know. That there's paradise? That death isn't end? That God is waiting for her? Something."

"Do you believe that?"

"No. I haven't believed that for fifteen years. But I *want* to. I want to tell her something true that makes this less terrible."

Hassan sets down his own cup. Looks at Ibrahim with eyes that carry their own weight. "Ibrahim, I've been praying every night for two months. Praying for certainty. For faith like I had in Jerusalem. For God to tell me this means something. You know what I've heard?"

"Nothing?"

"Nothing. Or everything. I don't know anymore." Hassan's voice is raw. "The words are the same. The motions are the same. But the feeling... different. Not absent. Different."

"Different how?"

"Present. But not answering. God feels present. But silent. Like: watching. Bearing witness. Not intervening. Not saving. Not promising paradise. Just: here. With us. In this."

"That's not comforting."

"No. It's not."

They sit in silence. The mosque quiet around them. Thirty people attend prayers now—some faithful, some uncertain, some like Hassan, praying without certainty but praying anyway because what else is there?

"She'll die in three weeks," Ibrahim says quietly. "Maybe less. And I—Hassan, I have nothing. No faith. No God. No promise. Just: I'll be there. I'll hold her hand. She won't die alone. But is that enough?"

"I don't know."

The honesty is brutal. Ibrahim wants platitudes. Wants reassurance. Wants Hassan to say: *Yes, presence is enough. Yes, God is real. Yes, she'll be saved.*

Instead: *I don't know.*

"Pray with me," Hassan says suddenly.

Ibrahim stares at him. "What?"

"Pray with me. Now. Not because you believe. Just: try. For Min-seo. Ask God—if God is there—to be with her. To not abandon her. To make her death less terrible."

"I can't. I don't believe—"

"Neither do I. Not with certainty." Hassan's voice is firm. "But I pray anyway. Because what else is there? Silence? Despair? At least prayer is reaching toward something. Even if nothing reaches back."

Ibrahim hesitates. The last time he prayed—really prayed, not just going through motions—was Jerusalem. Year 0. Day 1. Evening prayer interrupted by the announcement. Fifteen years ago.

"Okay," he hears himself say.

Hassan stands. Retrieves two prayer mats from the stack against the wall. Lays them out, oriented toward Mecca. Automatic knowledge—Ibrahim's body remembers the direction even though his mind has forgotten why it matters.

They kneel together. Hassan begins. *Allahu Akbar.*

The words land in Ibrahim's chest like stones dropping into water. God is greatest. He used to say this five times daily. Used to mean it completely. Now: just words. Just sounds.

But he follows Hassan's lead. They prostrate. Foreheads to ground. The cold floor against his skin. His body remembers this—the precise angle, the way arms fold, the absolute submission the posture demands.

Hassan prays in Arabic. Voice quiet but steady. *"Allah, if you're there, be with Min-seo. Don't let her die alone. Don't let her death be meaningless. If there's mercy, show her mercy. If there's paradise, give her paradise. If there's nothing—at least let her know she was loved."*

The prayer cuts through Ibrahim. Min-seo. Korean Buddhist. Dying before the asteroid. No formal faith but profound presence. Kept him alive with mint cuttings and tea. Showed him kindness without demands. Nine years of small acts that saved him.

Ibrahim prays silently, desperately: *Please. Please don't let her die into nothing. Please let there be something after. Please.*

The words feel hollow. Empty. Like throwing stones into a void that doesn't answer back.

He stays prostrate. Forehead pressed to mat. The position of complete surrender. *Ar-Rahman. Ar-Rahim.* The Compassionate. The Merciful. He hasn't spoken these names in fifteen years. They taste foreign in his mind.

Please.

Not eloquent. Not faithful. Just: desperate human begging to anything that might be listening.

Please don't let her die alone. Don't let her die into nothing. Please.

And then.

It happens.

As Ibrahim prays—desperate, faithless, begging—he hears it.

Not a thought. Not his own voice. Something else. Unmistakable. Clear. Not loud. Not dramatic. Just: present. Real. Undeniable.

A voice.

"Do you really think I brought you both here to forget about you?"

Ibrahim freezes. Heart pounding. Forehead still pressed to mat. Did he—was that—

The voice again. Not outside. Not inside. Just: there. Real as the floor beneath him. Real as Hassan praying beside him. Real as anything Ibrahim has ever experienced.

"I was there. In the wound. In the hospital. In the mint tea. In the steps you counted. In every moment you thought I had abandoned you—I was there."

Then: silence. The voice gone. But something remains.

Warmth spreading through Ibrahim's chest. The door—the one that slammed shut fifteen years ago when the asteroid was announced during evening prayer—it's open. Or it never closed. Or Ibrahim just couldn't see it was still open because he was looking for the old feeling, the old certainty.

Something here. Present. Not in the way Ibrahim expected. Not intervening. Not saving. Not preventing the asteroid. But: accompanying. Walking with him. With Min-seo. With everyone.

Not absent.

Present differently.

"Hassan." Ibrahim's voice breaks. Still prostrate. Still crying. "Hassan, I heard... I heard something."

Hassan turns his head. Sees Ibrahim's face—tears streaming, body shaking, expression of someone who's just encountered something beyond words. He understands immediately. "What did you hear?"

Ibrahim tells him. Everything. The voice. The words. *Do you really think I brought you here to forget about you?* Something present in the exile, in the suffering, in the dying. Not absent—present differently. Not saving them from death but walking with them through it. Fifteen years not abandonment but companionship in form Ibrahim couldn't recognize.

Hassan weeps. "God spoke to you. After fifteen years of silence, you heard Him."

"Or I'm losing my mind. Or it was my own desperate hope speaking."

"Does it matter?" Hassan sits up, pulls Ibrahim into an embrace. Both men crying. "Something happened. Something real. I watched your face. That wasn't delusion. That was encounter."

"What do I do with this?" Ibrahim asks.

"Tell Min-seo. Tell her what you heard. Tell her she's not dying into nothing. Tell her something is with her—God, presence, the divine, whatever word works. Tell her you experienced it."

"What if she doesn't believe me?"

"Then you still told the truth about what happened to you. That's all you can do."

They sit together in the mosque. 3:30 AM. Two men who lost faith—one gradually, one catastrophically. And something spoke. Not to the faithful one maintaining practice. To the broken one, praying desperately for his dying friend.

"Why me?" Ibrahim asks. "Why now?"

"I don't know. Maybe you needed it. Maybe Min-seo needed it. Maybe—" Hassan pauses. "Maybe it just happened. I don't know if it was God's voice or your heart breaking open or both. But it was real. I saw your face."

"I thought God was silent. Thought God abandoned us when the asteroid came."

"So did I. Maybe God's been speaking all along and we couldn't hear. Maybe the absence was our deafness." Hassan stands slowly, joints protesting. "Ibrahim, something happened to you. Use it. Tell people. Not to convert them. Just: share what you experienced. Let them make of it what they will."

Ibrahim nods. Still shaking. Still feeling the presence—it hasn't left. The warmth in his chest. The certainty that God is real, is here, is accompanying them into death.

Not saving them from it. Walking with them through it.

That's faith. That's presence. That's both/and.

"I need to see her," Ibrahim says. "Min-seo. Need to tell her."

"Go. Now. Don't wait."

Ibrahim stands. The world different than it was three hours ago. The mosque different. Hassan different. Everything the same physically but transformed spiritually. For Ibrahim, God is here. God spoke. That changes everything.

He walks to the door. Turns back. "Hassan, will God speak to you?"

"I don't know. I hope so. But—" Hassan smiles through tears. "You heard for both of us. Maybe that's enough. Maybe I believe because you heard. That's

how it works. Moses heard. The prophets heard. Now you heard. The rest of us believe because of your hearing."

"I'm not a prophet."

"None of the prophets thought they were either. That's how you know it's real."

Dawn breaking. Ibrahim walks back through Antarctic streets. The cold still bitter but he doesn't feel it. The presence warming him from inside. God is here. God spoke. God is real.

He reaches Building 12. Climbs to the second floor. Not counting steps—doesn't need to count anymore. The obsessive ritual that kept him alive Years 3 through 7 no longer necessary. He has something else now. Someone else. God accompanying him.

Unit 204. Min-seo's door. He knocks gently.

No answer. Too early. She's sleeping. Or—terror spikes—she's already gone. What if he's too late? What if God spoke and Ibrahim waited too long and she died alone after all?

He knocks again. Harder.

Movement inside. The door opens. Derek stands there—former Marine, kept Min-seo alive alongside Ibrahim and the others. He looks exhausted. Shirt wrinkled. Hasn't slept.

"Ibrahim. It's dawn. She's—she's declining fast."

"I need to see her."

"Of course." Derek steps aside. "Samir and Fatima are coming. We're taking shifts. Making sure she's not alone."

Inside: Min-seo's tiny apartment. The mint on the balcony visible through the window—still green, still growing, still defiant. Min-seo in her bed. Eyes closed. Breathing shallow. So thin. So fragile. Barely there.

Ibrahim sits beside the bed. Takes her hand. Those bird-bone fingers. Still warm. Still alive.

"Min-seo. I need to tell you something."

She opens her eyes. Barely. Smiles weakly. "More tea?"

"No. Something else. I heard something last night. Praying. A voice."

The words land gently. Min-seo suddenly more alert. "Tell me."

"I was praying for you. First time in fifteen years. I was begging—if anything is listening—to be with you. To not let you die alone. To not let you die into

nothing. And then I heard it. A voice. Clear. Real. Asking: 'Do you really think I brought you both here to forget about you?' "

"What do you think it was?"

"I don't know. God, maybe. My heart breaking open. Something." Ibrahim's voice cracks. "But it felt real. It told me—whatever it was—that it's been here all along. In the wound. In the hospital. In your mint tea. In every moment I thought I was abandoned. It was there. Just not in the way I could recognize."

Min-seo cries. Tears running down her cheeks into the pillow. "You heard this?"

"Yes. I heard it. Or experienced it. I don't know the difference anymore."

"Then I'm not afraid anymore."

"You don't have to be."

She squeezes his hand. Barely any strength. "Thank you, Ibrahim. For praying. For hearing. For telling me. That's gift."

Derek has been listening from the doorway. He steps closer. Sits on the floor beside the bed. "You really heard something?"

"Yes."

"I don't believe in God. Haven't since Kandahar. But—" Derek's voice cracks. "But I believe you heard something. I believe it was real for you. And maybe that's enough."

Min-seo dies three days later.

Year 15, Month 0, Day 21. Late afternoon. Ibrahim, Derek, Samir, and Fatima with her in her tiny apartment. The mint on her balcony still growing despite winter, green and alive and defiant.

Her breathing slows. Becomes shallow. She opens her eyes one final time, looks at each of them. Studies their faces. Witnesses them witnessing her.

"Thank you," she says. Voice barely audible. "Nine years you kept me alive. Now you help me die. Perfect."

Ibrahim holds her hand. "The mint is still growing."

"Yes." She smiles. "Tell Kenji—the mint kept growing. Garden doesn't end."

Her final breath. Peaceful. Present. Complete.

Derek weeps quietly—former Marine who hasn't cried in twenty years. Body shaking with silent sobs. Samir signs to Ibrahim, tears streaming: *She was bridge. Taught us all to tend small things.* Fatima recites Quranic verses for the dead, even though Min-seo wasn't Muslim. Voice steady, faithful, offering what she has.

Ibrahim just sits, holding Min-seo's hand as it cools.

After an hour, Linnea arrives with tea. Eight months clean now, still fragile but present. She'd heard through the building network. "I'm sorry," she says quietly. Sets the tea down. Sits with them.

The four of them—Derek, Fatima, Ibrahim, Linnea—bearing witness to Min-seo's completed life. Nine years of keeping each other alive. Now: keeping each other company in death.

They sit until dark. Then notify hospice. Then begin arrangements. Muslim burial rites adapted for Buddhist woman—Fatima leading, explaining each step, making it sacred. The body washed, wrapped, prepared with care. Min-seo's mint given to everyone—cuttings distributed, the plant spreading, the teaching continuing.

But Ibrahim feels: peace. Not happiness. Not relief. But peace. She didn't die alone. She didn't die into nothing. God was with her; he *knows* it, because he heard God say it.

That evening: Ibrahim returns to the mosque.

Hassan is there with twenty others—old believers, uncertain pray-ers, people reaching toward something. The room quiet. Preparing for evening prayer.

Ibrahim tells them what happened. The prayer. The voice. What he heard. Min-seo dying peaceful, not afraid. Something walking with her through death.

Some weep. Some are skeptical. Some just listen. But something shifts in the room. Hope? Not exactly. But: presence. The sense that they're not abandoned. That even at the end, even facing extinction, something might be here. Not saving them from death. Walking with them through it.

One old woman, seventy-eight, asks: "Will I hear it too?"

Ibrahim: "I don't know. I didn't hear anything for fifteen years. Then I did. I can't promise anything except: I heard something real. Maybe you will too. Maybe you won't. But you can still reach."

"That's enough," she says.

The community grows. Thirty people the next evening. Forty the evening after that. By the end of the week: fifty people gathering. Not all Muslim. Not all believers. Just: people reaching. People hoping. People wanting to know that the end isn't abandonment.

Ibrahim teaches what he experienced: something is present. Not preventing death. Maybe accompanying them through it. He tells his story honestly—fifteen years of faithlessness, the desperate prayer, the voice that came. Some believe it was God. Some think it was his mind breaking open. All keep coming.

Hassan tells Ibrahim privately: "I've been praying every night since you told me. Asking to hear what you heard."

"Has anything come?"

"No. But I keep praying anyway."

"I'm sorry."

"Don't be. Maybe I need your story to keep believing," Hassan says. "Sometimes one person hears, and the rest of us hold on to their story."

Ibrahim nods. "I still don't know what it was. God's voice. My heart. Both."

"Does it matter? Something real happened. That's enough."

Kenji's teaching circle. Ibrahim attends two days after Min-seo's death. The same community center where they've been gathering for three years. Forty people tonight—some familiar faces, some new. Everyone practicing presence together.

Kenji notices immediately. "Ibrahim, something changed."

"Yes."

After the session, they talk. Ibrahim tells him everything. The prayer. The voice. Min-seo dying peaceful. The presence he experienced.

Kenji listens. Then: "Wei would say: form is emptiness, emptiness is form. Maybe what you call God, I call Buddha-nature. Maybe they're the same. Maybe they're different. Maybe it doesn't matter."

"You believe me?"

"I believe you experienced something real. I've felt... something... in zazen. Deep stillness that feels larger than me. You felt something in prayer. Maybe it's the same thing. Maybe not. But it's real."

Maya overhears—seventeen years, five months old, fierce practitioner, three months until she dies. She approaches. "Ibrahim, will you teach us to pray? The Islamic way? I want to learn."

"I'm not qualified—"

"You heard God's voice. That makes you qualified."

Ibrahim looks at this girl. Nearly the age he was when faith shattered. But she's choosing to learn multiple paths. Buddhism from Wei through Kenji. Islam from Hassan through Ibrahim. Christian contemplation from Marcus Reyes when he teaches. All of it. Every door. Every practice. Every way of reaching toward the divine.

"Yes," he says. "I'll teach you. We can pray together."

"Both?" she asks. "Prayer and meditation? Not choosing?"

"Both. Both/and. Different doors into the same mystery."

Over the following weeks—Month 0 into Month 1 into Month 2—the teaching integrates.

Morning: Islamic prayer with Hassan at mosque. Thirty people initially, growing to fifty. Ibrahim co-leading now. Teaching *salat*—the five prayers. Teaching *dhikr*—remembrance of God through the ninety-nine names. Teaching what he knows honestly: I lost faith. God never left. I couldn't feel Him because I was looking for the old feeling. But He was here. Is here. Will be here until the end and after.

Fatima attends daily. Adaeze brings her daughter Chioma. Some of Kenji's students experiment with prostration—Maya, Kofi, several parents, some young adults. Derek doesn't pray but sits in back, witnessing. Observing. Respectful. Samir teaches them how prayer works visually—hands signing the names of God, the body's movements communicating without sound. His Deaf presence illuminating that the divine speaks in many languages.

Afternoon: Buddhist meditation with Kenji. Two hundred people now—the community grown over three years. Veterans, parents, elders, young adults. Everyone practicing breath awareness, presence to what is, accepting impermanence without resignation. Ibrahim attends these sessions too. Sits with everyone. Practices alongside the others.

The meditation doesn't replace prayer. The prayer doesn't replace meditation. Both. Both/and.

Evening: Integrated sessions. Twenty-five core students. The ones hungry for everything. Maya and Kofi. Elena. Marcus Reyes, returned from Mumbai. Marcus Rivera, Elena's deputy. Chen and Kowalski. Linnea. Derek. Several young adults. Barak Naveh, freed from prison, quiet presence teaching through being.

They practice multiple techniques. Some evenings: Buddhist meditation. Some evenings: Islamic prayer. Some evenings: Christian contemplation when Marcus Reyes leads. Some evenings: integrated—all of it together, different practices flowing into each other.

Not conversion. Not syncretism. Both/and. Different doors.

Maya learns *salat*—the five prayers. Kneels on a prayer mat beside Muslim students, bows toward Mecca, prostrates herself, rises. The movements strange at first, then familiar. Another practice. Another way of being present. Another door.

Kofi learns *dhikr*. Ibrahim gives him prayer beads—hand-carved, ninety-nine beads, a gift that continues giving. Kofi counts the names: *Ar-Rahman. Ar-*

Rahim. Al-Malik. His young voice speaking words Ibrahim spoke at the same age. The transmission happening. Knowledge passing forward.

Some of Kenji's Buddhist students start attending mosque. Dr. Tanaka, curious about different forms of presence. Several parents seeking all available wisdom. Thabo, fourteen, wanting to try everything before he dies.

Some of Hassan's Muslims start attending meditation. Fatima, who embodies both naturally—has prayed five times daily for forty-eight years, now adds meditation morning and evening. Adaeze, seeking every tool to face her daughter's death. Young Muslims questioning, exploring, reaching.

Three traditions. Multiple teachers. Everyone reaching toward something. In the meditation. In the prayer. In the service. In the dying. In the ending. Not being saved from the asteroid. But maybe being accompanied into it.

Marcus Reyes—Elena's former assistant, returned from Mumbai three weeks ago—shares his story one evening. Christian. Evangelical. Heard God's call to serve. Left comfort to teach refugee children thirteen years. Found Christ in the desperate and dying. His faith never wavered. God speaking through service, through presence, through showing up daily for children who would die young.

"I don't know if we're all talking about the same thing," Marcus tells the group quietly. "I call what I feel Jesus. You call it Allah. Kenji calls it Buddha-nature. Maybe it's the same presence. Maybe it's different. But it feels like... something is here. With us. That's all I know."

Hassan nods. "The Quran says: 'To each of you We prescribed a law and a method. Had God willed, He would have made you one nation.' Different paths. Maybe the same destination. Maybe different destinations that still honor the same truth. I don't know anymore. But I know we can walk them together."

Samir signs, Ibrahim interpreting: "God speaks without sound. Always has. The hearing world forgot to listen with eyes, with hands, with presence. The divine communicates through everything—words, silence, movement, stillness. We just have to pay attention."

Barak Naveh rarely speaks. But when he does, people listen. One evening, a young woman struggles with guilt—terrible things done Year 3, people hurt, shame carried. Barak says quietly: "I did terrible things too. Served years for it. The guilt shaped me, didn't destroy me. You can carry what you did without being crushed by it. That's acceptance, not absolution. The carrying is the practice." Simple. Grounded. True. Teaching through honest witness.

One evening, Ibrahim sits alone in his apartment. Opens the drawer. Takes out his *misbaha*—prayer beads untouched for fifteen years.

He holds them. They're not stones anymore. Not because the old certainty

returned. Because something spoke. Because Ibrahim experienced something—God, presence, the divine, whatever name works—and it was real.

He counts the ninety-nine names. But different now. Not recitation. Reaching.

Ar-Rahman - The Compassionate. In Min-seo's peaceful death. In the voice that said "I was there."

As-Sami - The All-Hearing. Something heard Ibrahim's desperate 3 AM prayer. Something answered.

Al-Basir - The All-Seeing. Something saw fifteen years of exile. Saw Ibrahim in the wound, the hospital, the unemployment, the counting steps. Was present even when Ibrahim couldn't feel it.

Al-Wahhab - The Bestower. Something gave Ibrahim presence when he couldn't find it himself. Gave him Min-seo, Derek, Fatima, Samir. Community that kept him alive.

Al-Fattah - The Opener. The door Ibrahim thought slammed shut fifteen years ago—it never closed. Ibrahim just couldn't see.

The beads are alive again. Not because faith returned the way it was. Because faith transformed into something different: experience. Encounter. Mystery.

Something spoke. Ibrahim heard. For Ibrahim, that means God is real. That changes everything.

Meeting Derek and Fatima again. Post-meditation session. The three of them walking back toward Building 12.

Derek asks: "Do you think I'll hear something too?"

Ibrahim considers. "I don't know. I hope so. But I can't promise."

"I don't pray. Haven't prayed since Kandahar. Lost faith somewhere between the desert and here." Derek's voice is flat, factual. "But hearing you—what you experienced—it makes me wonder. Maybe something's there. Maybe I just can't hear it."

"Maybe it speaks differently to different people. Maybe you've been hearing it all along through other languages—through swimming, through helping people move their broken bodies, through showing up daily. Maybe that's also divine."

Fatima speaks: "I've prayed five times daily for forty-eight years. I've never heard a voice. You prayed once in fifteen years and heard something. Why?"

"I don't know. Maybe I needed it for Min-seo. Maybe you're strong enough to keep praying without needing to hear."

Fatima considers. “Maybe. Or maybe you heard so I could keep believing. So I could know my forty-eight years of prayer matter even without a voice answering. So Derek could know his service is sacred even without faith.”

“Both/and,” Derek says, smiling.

They reach Building 12. Fifty-three steps ahead. Ibrahim has counted them thousands of times. Tonight he doesn’t count. Just climbs. The three of them together—Muslim, Christian, faithless Marine—all walking each other home.

Teaching until the end.

Ibrahim teaches daily now. Prayer at mosque. Meditation with Kenji. Integrated sessions where traditions meet. Hundreds of people learning to pray, to be present, to face death awake.

Many ask: “Will I hear something too?”

Ibrahim always answers honestly: “I don’t know. I heard something once in fifteen years. Maybe you will too. Maybe you won’t. But I believe something hears you. I believe that even at the end, even facing the asteroid, something might be present. Not saving us from death. Maybe walking with us through it. That’s what I experienced.”

Some are comforted. Some are angry—why Ibrahim? Why not them? Why one voice in fifteen years? Some just listen, hold the possibility, keep practicing.

But everyone keeps coming. Everyone keeps learning. Everyone keeps reaching toward something—the divine, presence, mystery, whatever waits after.

The teaching spreads naturally. People teach people. Maya teaches younger teenagers. Kofi teaches children. Fatima teaches hospitality as spiritual practice. Derek teaches adaptive movement as meditation. Linnea teaches recovery as presence. Each person offering what they learned, what they survived, what they witnessed.

The community becomes web. Interconnected. Supporting. Everyone holding everyone else. Six weeks until extinction. But right now: here. Together. Practicing.

One evening, Ibrahim sits alone in the mosque. Hassan gone home. Everyone dispersed. Just: Ibrahim and the prayer mats and the silence.

He thinks about his journey:

Age 12: First felt God in prayer. Door opened. Warmth flooding chest. Absolute certainty.

Age 19: Faith shattered. Door slammed shut. Asteroid announced during evening prayer.

Age 20-33: Thirteen years in exile. Believed God abandoned him. Counted stairs obsessively. Barely alive. Kept breathing by community he didn't know he had.

Age 34: Something spoke. Maybe the exile was companionship Ibrahim couldn't recognize. Presence he couldn't feel because he was looking for the old version.

Or that's what Ibrahim believes now. What he needs to believe.

Full circle. Not back to the beginning. Forward to integration. Faith didn't return as it was. It transformed. Certainty became experience. Feeling became hearing. Belief became encounter.

Ibrahim kneels. Prostrates. Forehead to mat. Prays without words. Just: presence. Just: gratitude. Just: reaching toward whatever is here, was maybe always here, might be here until the end and after.

The warmth in his chest. The door open. Something accompanying.

Not saving him from death. Walking with him through it.

Maybe.

Final image.

Two months before impact. Ibrahim kneeling in mosque. Prayer beads in hand. Hassan beside him. Fifty others behind them. All praying together.

Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, uncertain, desperate, hopeful, faithless, faithful—all together. Maya and Kofi in the second row, learning prayers alongside meditation. Elena in the back, governor become witness. Marcus Reyes and Marcus Rivera side by side, different paths same destination. Chen and Kowalski, maintenance workers who showed up fifteen years, still showing up now. Barak Naveh sitting quietly, grounded presence teaching through being. Linnea clean and fragile and here. Derek not praying but present, witnessing, accompanying. Samir's hands moving in silent prayer, visual worship, attention through eyes rather than voice.

They pray together. Different words. Different postures. Different understandings. Same reaching.

Something is here. Ibrahim experienced it. Heard it.

Not saving them from death. Not preventing the asteroid. Not offering escape.

But present. Accompanying. Walking with them into the end.

Do you really think I brought you here to forget about you?

Ibrahim believes: no. Something brought them here to be with them. In the dying. In the death. In whatever comes after.

Not because they deserve it. Not because they're righteous. Not because they earned it.

Because that's what it does. Accompanies. Stays. Witnesses. Walks with.

From the wound to the hospital to the mint tea to the counted steps to the maintenance work to the swimming to the community to the prayer to the voice to the death to whatever comes after.

Something here. Something present. Something real.

That's faith.

That's presence.

That's both/and.

That's enough.

Chapter 55: Dignity

Elena Torres | Year 15, Month 3 | Antarctica

The notification arrives at 6:47 AM.

Elena sits in her apartment—no longer her office, that ended four months ago when she formally dissolved the position—drinking tea and watching Antarctic dawn through the window. Thirty days until impact. Thirty days until 1.2 million people in this city die. Thirty days until she dies. The countdown has become tactile. She feels it in her chest.

Her terminal chimes. Official notification, prison services. She almost doesn't open it. Prison reports surface old weight, old decisions she's carried for thirteen years.

But someone sent it. Someone thought she should know.

She opens the file.

DECEASED INMATE NOTIFICATION
Delayed Report - System Backlog

Name: Daniel Okonkwo
Date of Death: Year 14, Month 8, Day 12
Cause: Suicide by hanging
Time Since Death: 7 months, 3 days

Elena stops breathing.

Seven months. He's been dead seven months and she's only learning now. Seven months she's been walking through these final days not knowing that Daniel Okonkwo—thirty-four years old when she sentenced him, forty-six when he died—had chosen to end it before the asteroid could.

She scrolls down. There's a note. Final words. Written one month before his death.

To whoever reads this after:

I killed my friend Raj over a bag of rice. Fifteen years of guilt haven't changed that. The guard said I could leave—another prisoner's release date is one day after impact, and the guard found the absurdity unbearable, helped him escape, abandoned his post, left my cell open too. I stayed. I deserve these walls. I wanted to die present, not guilty, but I can't separate the two. Raj's widow never answered my letters. My children have forgotten me. I have served my time in years but not in redemption.

If Elena Torres ever learns of this—tell her she was right to keep me here. Justice matters. Even when mercy would have been kinder. Especially then.

Elena reads it three times.

The guard abandoned his post. Year 13, Month 9—she does the math quickly. Eighteen months ago. Left Daniel's cell open. The cellmate with the release date one day after impact—freed because someone couldn't bear the absurdity anymore. And Daniel. Given the same chance. Stayed.

Chose his cell. Chose consequence. Chose to die imprisoned by guilt even when the walls disappeared.

Six months later, he hung himself.

And his note says she was right.

She was right about justice. Wrong about mercy. *Both true.*

Elena sits very still. The tea grows cold in her hands. Outside, Antarctica wakes. 1.2 million people beginning their thirtieth-to-last day. Inside, Elena Torres—seventy-three years old, seventeen years governing the apocalypse, four months past the dissolution of her office—learns that thirteen years of choosing principle over compassion ended exactly as predicted.

More suffering added to the sum.

Marcus Rivera finds her twenty minutes later. He still comes by most mornings—former deputy, current friend, partner in seventeen years of impossible work. He has a key. He knocks anyway.

"Elena?"

She doesn't answer. Can't. Just holds the terminal out to him.

He reads it. His face does something complicated. He sits beside her. Says nothing for a long time.

Finally: "You chose what you believed was right."

"I was wrong."

"Maybe. Maybe mercy would have been wiser. But you chose honestly. That's all anyone can do."

"It's not enough." Her voice cracks. "He died alone in a cell. His children grew up without him. Raj Patel is still dead. Justice served. Mercy denied. Nothing changed except more suffering. And he died believing I was right."

Marcus reaches for her hand. Holds it. "Do you need me to clear your schedule?"

"No." Elena sets down the terminal. Stands. Steadies herself. "Thirty days left. I don't have time to fall apart. I have—" She stops. What does she have? No more governance. No more briefings. Just: presence. Just: being here. "I need to see Kenji."

"He's teaching at nine."

"I'll go." She looks at Marcus. "Thank you for staying."

"Where else would I be?"

The community center is crowded. Kenji's teaching sessions have grown—sixty people some mornings, forty others. Today: fifty-three. Elena slips in late, takes a chair in back. Her son is at the front, slightly off-center, sitting on a cushion with the ease of someone who's practiced ten thousand hours.

"Good morning," he says. Simple greeting.

"Good morning," fifty-three voices respond. Some strong, some tentative. Elena's barely audible.

"We'll begin with sitting practice," Kenji continues. "Thirty minutes. Notice breath. Notice body. Notice thoughts without clinging to them. This moment. Then this moment. Nothing more. Nothing less."

He rings Wei's bell—the one his teacher gave him before she died. The sound is clear and complete.

Elena tries. Closes her eyes. Notices breath.

One.

Her mind spirals immediately. Daniel's note. *I wanted to die present, not guilty, but I can't separate the two.* He'd been trying. Thirteen years in prison trying to practice presence. Couldn't do it. The guilt consumed him. And she—she kept him there. Kept him in the place where presence was impossible. Chose principle over compassion.

Notice. Return.

Two.

The guard abandoning his post. Finding absurdity unbearable. Release date one day after impact. Institutional time operating on schedules that outlast existence. Opening Daniel's cell. Daniel staying. Choosing walls over freedom because guilt was his real prison.

Notice. Return.

Three.

Elena tries to steady her breath. Around her, fifty-three people breathing together. Her son at the front, present and calm. Marcus Rivera two rows ahead, practicing. Chen and Kowalski near the side—they come every week now, fifteen years of morning briefings transformed into presence practice.

She can't do this. Can't sit with the weight. Can't be present to what she did.

Four.

Both true. Daniel's words. Right about justice. Wrong about mercy. Both.

Can you hold both? Can you carry the weight of choosing correctly and wrongly simultaneously? Can principle and failure coexist?

Five.

Elena notices she's questioning instead of breathing. Returns. Breath. Just breath. The practice Wei taught, transmitted through Kenji, spreading through Antarctica. Person to person. Until there are no persons left.

Thirty minutes passes. The bell rings.

People open their eyes. Some peaceful. Some frustrated. Elena: devastated.

"How was that?" Kenji asks, genuinely.

Silence. Then an older woman speaks: "Hard. Kept thinking about my son. He'll be forty-two when this ends. I kept seeing his face."

Kenji nods. "That's practice. Noticing what's actually here—including thoughts of people you love."

Others share. Elena doesn't. Can't. Her son will notice. He always does.

After the session, people linger. Not rushing out. Staying, talking, being together. Kenji moves through the room, listening more than speaking.

He finds her eventually. Sits beside her. Says nothing. Waits.

"Daniel Okonkwo died seven months ago," Elena says quietly. "I just learned this morning."

Kenji's face changes. "The prisoner."

"Yes." She tells him about the note. The guard. The open cell. Daniel staying. The suicide six months later. The delayed notification. "He said I was right to keep him imprisoned. Right about justice. Wrong about mercy. Both true."

Kenji listens completely. Doesn't interrupt. Just: witnesses.

"I don't know how to hold both," Elena continues. "I chose justice because I believed accountability mattered. But he died alone. His children lost their father. And mercy—mercy would have given them three final years together. I was wrong. I was right. I don't—" She stops. "Can you forgive yourself for being right and wrong simultaneously?"

Kenji is quiet for a long time. Then: "Were you wrong? Or did you choose what you understood to be right at the time?"

"Both."

"Yes. Both." He meets her eyes. "You believed justice mattered. You were sincere. That's not cruelty—that's principle. And principle costs something. The cost was Daniel's freedom. His children's father. Raj's widow carrying rage for thirteen years. You're carrying all of that now. The question isn't whether you were right or wrong. The question is: can you be present to having chosen what you believed while learning it cost more than you understood?"

"I don't know."

"Maybe that's the answer. Not knowing. Being uncertain. Showing up anyway. Even with regret."

Elena feels tears. "You're a wise son."

"I learned from Wei. Who learned from her teachers. Who learned from—"

"—everyone, forever, passing it forward until there's no one left to pass it to."

"Exactly."

They sit together. Mother and son. Both carrying impossible weight. Both practicing presence anyway.

"Priya Patel wants to see you," Kenji adds after a while. "Raj's widow. She's been attending teaching for two years. She asked if you'd be here today."

Elena's chest tightens. "She knows?"

"Everyone knows. News travels. She wants to talk about justice."

Priya Patel stands outside the community center. Mid-forties, composed but tightly wound. Elena recognizes her from sessions—one of the newer students, Year 13 or 14. She's never approached Elena before.

"Mayor Torres." Her voice is steady, controlled. "I'm Priya Patel. Raj Patel's widow."

Elena's breath catches. "I know who you are."

"Prison services sent me Daniel's final letters yesterday. The ones that never reached me during the system collapse. Fifty letters from Year 14. Including one that mentioned you might learn of his death." She pauses. "I need to talk to you about justice."

They find a bench in the district square. Sit in afternoon light. Thirty days until everyone here dies. Today: two women reckoning with thirteen years of consequence.

"I never read his letters," Priya says. "Not one. For thirteen years, they arrived. For thirteen years, I refused. My daughter Aanya—she's nineteen now—she begged me Year 13 to read them. Said I was carrying rage that was eating me alive. I refused. Called it principle. Called it honoring Raj. Called it justice." Her hands shake slightly. "I was wrong."

Elena listens, seeing herself in this woman's words.

"Year 14, Month 9, prison services notified me he was dead. Suicide. I felt... nothing. Numb. Like I'd won something. Then the final letters arrived. And I read them. All 217. Took me three months." Priya's voice cracks. "He was genuinely remorseful. His children—motherless after his wife's suicide Year 3. His guilt consuming him. Every letter an attempt at accountability, at connection, at somehow making amends for something that can't be amended."

She meets Elena's eyes. "You kept him in a cell. I kept him outside my life. We both did it on purpose. We both thought justice mattered more than mercy. And now he's dead, and Raj is still dead, and all our righteousness accomplished was more suffering."

"I learned about his death this morning," Elena says. "I've been thinking the same thing."

"Have you?" Priya's voice has edge now. "Because I've been attending Kenji's teachings for two years. Learning about presence. About bearing witness. About both/and instead of either/or. And the whole time, I was holding Daniel in a prison of my silence. Refusing forgiveness. Refusing even acknowledgment of his humanity. I thought I was honoring Raj. I was just... hardening myself."

"I thought I was maintaining justice," Elena says quietly. "Upholding consequences. Showing that actions matter even at the end. Marcus Rivera—my deputy—challenged me Year 4. Said mercy matters more when time is short. I disagreed. I was wrong."

"Were you?" Priya's question is genuine. "I've been asking myself the same thing. Was I wrong to never forgive? Was I wrong to refuse his letters? Or was I... exercising my own agency? Protecting myself? Choosing not to carry his guilt on top of my grief?"

They sit with this. Two women who chose consequence. Two women learning mercy too late.

Priya continues: "Kenji says presence doesn't require being healed. Just being honest about where you are. I'm still angry. I'm still grieving Raj. And I also recognize I could have responded differently. Both things true. I can't forgive Daniel now—he's dead. But I can practice differently going forward. I can witness my own hardness without defending it. That's all I have."

"That's what I'm learning too," Elena says. "I can't pardon Daniel now. Can't give him freedom with his children. Can't undo thirteen years of imprisonment. But I can acknowledge I chose wrong. Can practice mercy now, in the thirty days left. Can witness my own mistake without destroying myself with it."

"Is that enough?" Priya asks.

"I don't know. But it's honest. And Kenji says honest presence is everything."

Priya stands to leave, then pauses. "Have you met Barak Naveh? Daniel's cellmate? The one who was freed?"

"Not yet."

"You should. He attends Kenji's teachings. Sits quietly. Listens. People feel steady around him. He carries his past differently than Daniel did. Not better, not worse—just different. Same guilt, different response. Might help you understand... that choices were possible. That Daniel's path wasn't inevitable. That guilt can shape without destroying."

Elena nods, understanding. Daniel chose imprisonment even when freed. Barak chose freedom even while carrying guilt. Both valid. Both honest. But only one survived.

"I'm teaching at the community center tomorrow," Priya adds. "About unforgiveness. About carrying rage. About learning compassion too late to undo harm. Will you come?"

"Yes."

"Good. You should witness this. You're part of it."

Elena finds Barak Naveh's address from community center records. Small apartment, District 9, ground floor. She knocks.

He answers—forty-eight, lean, calm presence. Sees Elena and understands immediately who she is.

"Mayor Torres."

"Just Elena. May I come in?"

He steps aside. The apartment is sparse but cared for—single chair, sleeping mat, window with sunlight streaming through. Everything deliberate. Nothing wasted. The home of someone who appreciates space after years confined.

They sit. Elena speaks first: "I learned about Daniel. My deputy told me you were his cellmate. That you both had the chance to leave. You did. He didn't."

Barak nods slowly. "Yes."

"Can you tell me why? Why he stayed?"

Barak considers carefully, choosing words with precision. "Daniel was consumed by guilt. Every day, every moment. He told me about Raj—his friend, the riot, the rebar, the killing. Told me about Raj's widow who never answered his letters. Told me about his children visiting twice, then not coming back after their mother died. The guilt was everything. He couldn't separate himself from it."

"And you?"

"I carry guilt too. What I did was real. I harmed someone during fear and chaos. I accepted responsibility. Served my time. But I chose not to let guilt consume me. I let it shape me instead."

"What's the difference?"

Barak meets her eyes steadily. "Consumed means: I am only my worst moment. Shaped means: I am also everything after. My worst moment is part of me. But not all of me. Daniel couldn't see that. When the guard opened our cells, I saw: freedom. Daniel saw: more guilt. He believed he deserved the walls. I believed I'd served my time."

Elena wipes tears. "I kept him imprisoned. Thirteen years. Denied his pardon three times."

"I know. He told me."

"Was I wrong?"

Barak pauses, then speaks with careful honesty. "Justice mattered to you. Consequence mattered. That's not wrong. But Daniel didn't need more consequence. He was his own prison. The walls just made it official. Mercy would have freed him. Maybe."

"Maybe?"

"Maybe. Or maybe he would have carried the prison inside regardless. Some people do. I can't know. But I know this: you chose honestly. You believed accountability mattered. That's not cruelty. That's principle. Daniel understood that. His final note said you were right."

"He also died by suicide seven months later."

"Yes. And that's tragedy. But not solely your responsibility. Daniel chose to stay when the cell opened. Chose guilt over freedom. Chose death over practice. Those were his choices. You contributed—refusing pardon made it harder. But you didn't force his hand. He did that himself."

They sit in silence. Then Elena asks: "How do you sit with guilt without being destroyed by it?"

Barak's answer is simple: "I don't make it go away. I don't deny it. I just don't run from it. I stay present to what I did, who I am, what I'm learning. The staying is the practice. Daniel ran inward. Hid in guilt. I stay here." He gestures to the sunlit room. "Present. Accountable. Free. Both things true."

"Did you teach him that? While you shared a cell?"

"I tried. He couldn't hear it. The guilt was too loud."

Elena stands to leave. "Thank you. For being honest. For showing me... that different responses are possible. That guilt doesn't have to destroy."

Barak walks her to the door. "You carry weight too. I see it. Daniel's death. Your choice. The consequence of your justice. You can carry it the way Daniel did—consumed. Or the way I do—shaped. That's your choice now."

Elena nods. Understands. She can practice mercy in the thirty days left. Can witness her own mistake without drowning in it. Can be honest, accountable, present. All three.

"Thank you, Barak."

"You're welcome, Elena."

Evening. Elena hasn't left her apartment. Sitting with Daniel's file. Marcus Rivera must have called them—Chen and Kowalski enter quietly, sit without asking permission. Fifteen years of morning briefings taught them when Elena needs presence, not words.

Finally, Kowalski speaks: "Heard about Daniel Okonkwo."

Elena nods.

"I arrested him. Year 2. District 7 riot. He came quietly. Kept crying. I put him in that cell. You kept him there."

Elena looks up, surprised. "You never said—"

"What would I have said? I'm security chief. I enforce law. That was law. You were mayor. That was justice." He pauses. "But I didn't sleep well. Thirteen years of not sleeping well. Good man broken by system failure. I locked him up anyway. You kept him locked up. We both chose duty over compassion."

Chen adds: "I counted him in my reports. Prisoner population. One man. Fifteen-year sentence. Died Year 14, Month 8—one of the suicide statistics. I recorded it. Filed it. Moved to next data point." His voice cracks slightly. "The numbers are people. I try to remember that. But I forgot Daniel was a person. He was just: one prisoner. One statistic. One consequence of your justice decision and Kowalski's enforcement."

Elena feels tears. "I was wrong. I should have chosen mercy."

"Maybe," Kowalski says. "Maybe not. I've carried this thirteen years. Here's what I know: justice matters. Consequences matter. You chose honestly—believed accountability mattered even at the end. That's not evil. That's... one valid response to impossible situation."

"But mercy—"

"Also valid. Also necessary. Both/and, not either/or. Ibrahim taught me that through his teaching. You can hold both: you chose justice sincerely, AND mercy would have been wiser. You did what you understood to be right, AND you learned too late. You carry the weight, AND you practice differently now."

Chen: "Fifteen years of morning briefings. Fifteen years of Thursday coffee turned Thursday practice. We've been learning same thing—maintenance isn't about perfect outcomes. It's about showing up honestly. You showed up. Made choice. Learned from it. That's complete."

Elena: "He died believing he deserved imprisonment. His note said I was right."

Kowalski: "And he also died having served his time. Having taken responsibility. Having tried to make amends. That's dignity too. Imperfect dignity. But real."

"I should have pardoned him."

"Yes," Kowalski says bluntly. "Probably. But you didn't. And you can't change it. You can witness it. You can practice presence with the guilt. You can teach others through your mistake. That's all anyone can do with past choices. I locked him up—I carry that. You kept him there—you carry that. Priya never answered—she carries that. We all chose consequence over compassion. We all learned mercy too late. We practice now. That's the work."

Chen adds: "My wife left Year 1. I chose systems maintenance over following her. Thought duty mattered more than presence. I was wrong. But I can't undo it. I can only be present now. Count her in my reports as alive elsewhere. Honor the choice even while recognizing it cost something. You do the same with Daniel. Count him as someone who mattered. Honor him by practicing differently. Thirty days left—practice mercy now."

They sit together. Three government officials who governed collapse with as much integrity as they could manage. All of them carrying impossible choices. All of them learning mercy when mercy can't save anyone. All of them practicing presence anyway.

Kowalski stands. “Priya’s teaching tomorrow. I’ll be there. You should come. Witness her witness. Learn from her learning.”

Chen: “And next time we gather—whenever you’re ready—we’ll be there. Fifteen years of morning briefings. Thirty days left. We’ll show up. That’s what we do.”

They leave. Elena alone with Daniel’s file. But not alone—held by community. Witnessed by Chen and Kowalski who carry their own weight. Practice family. Thursday practice. Briefing family. All the same thing: people showing up for each other when showing up is all that’s left.

The next morning, Elena attends Kenji’s session again. Fifty-seven people this time. The teaching is spreading. Final thirty days, people need presence more than ever.

After practice, a young woman approaches Elena—maybe twenty-one, exhausted, carrying rage like armor.

“You’re the mayor.”

“Was the mayor. Just Elena now.”

“I’m Amara. Chemistry student. Well, was. What’s the point of studying when I’ll die at twenty-one?” Her voice is hard. “I wanted to ask you something. How do you face this? You’re seventy-three. You’ve lived. I’m twenty-one. I’ve lived nothing. How do you not rage?”

Elena pauses. Considers. “I do rage. Some days. Some moments. But rage doesn’t change physics. So: I choose presence. I choose witness. I choose dignity. Not because it’s easy. Because it’s possible.”

“Is that enough?”

“I don’t know. But it’s what I have.”

Amara stares at her. “That’s honest.”

“Honest is all I can be anymore.”

“Kenji says the same thing—honest presence is enough. I’m starting to understand what that means.” She pauses. “Thank you. For not pretending it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. It’ll never be okay. But we can be present to it not being okay. That’s different.”

Amara nods slowly. Walks away. Elena watches her go—one more person learning to be present at the end. One more person choosing to show up.

Evening. Community gathering. Elena calls it—not as mayor, just as person. 1,200 people fit barely in the community center. Everyone here chose Antarctica as final witness. Chose this community. Chose together.

Elena stands at the front. No podium. No authority. Just: seventy-three-year-old woman who showed up for seventeen years.

She speaks simply: "We have thirty days. Then: physics. Then: silence. We can spend these days raging, hiding, despairing. All valid. All understandable. Or: we can spend them present. Together. Witnessing each other. Facing the end with dignity."

She takes a breath. "I learned yesterday that a man I sentenced thirteen years ago died seven months ago. Suicide. I kept him in prison because I believed justice mattered. I was wrong. Mercy would have been wiser. But I chose honestly. That's all I had. And now: I carry the weight of that choice. The cost of principle. The knowing that I hurt people while trying to be fair."

The room is silent. Listening.

"I tell you this not for sympathy. But for honesty. We all carry impossible choices. We all face the end with regret, with mistakes, with wondering if we chose right. And the answer is: both. We chose right and wrong. We did our best and it wasn't enough. We showed up and still failed. All of it true. All of it held together."

She looks out at 1,200 faces. "Both/and, not either/or. Rage and presence. Grief and love. Fear and courage. Regret and peace. All of it true. All of it honored. All of it witnessed. That's what we do here. That's what we've always done. That's what we'll do until we can't."

Silence. Then: applause. Not celebratory. Acknowledging. Honoring.

Someone calls out: "Thank you for telling the truth!"

Elena feels tears. "Thank you for hearing it."

Late night. Her apartment. Marcus Rivera stopped by earlier—sat with her, didn't need words. Kenji came after his evening session—they talked about Daniel, about mercy, about carrying weight without being consumed.

Now: alone. Elena pulls out her journal—physical notebook, pen and paper. Writing by hand makes thoughts real.

Year 15, Month 3, Day 1

Thirty days remain.

Daniel Okonkwo died seven months ago. I learned about it today. Thirteen years I kept him imprisoned. Year 13, Month 9: prison guard helped Daniel's cellmate escape—release date one day after impact, the absurdity unbearable.

Guard abandoned his post. Left Daniel's cell open too. Daniel stayed. Chose to serve his sentence even when the walls disappeared. Still consumed by guilt. Couldn't separate presence from guilt.

Year 14, Month 8: Daniel died by suicide. His note said I was right to keep him imprisoned. Justice matters. But I was wrong. Mercy would have been wiser. His children could have had their father for three final years. He could have died free, not imprisoned by both walls and guilt.

I chose principle over humanity. I learned. Too late for Daniel. Not too late to practice differently now.

Met Priya Patel today. Raj's widow. She imprisoned Daniel with thirteen years of silence while I imprisoned him with walls. Both of us learning mercy when mercy can't help anyone. Both practicing presence with our own hardness. Both teaching others through our failures.

Met Barak Naveh. Daniel's cellmate who walked free. Eighteen months ago—Year 13, Month 9—a prison guard opened both their cells. Barak walked out. Daniel stayed. He taught me: consumed vs shaped by guilt. Daniel was consumed. Barak is shaped. Same circumstances. Different responses. I have the same choice now. Be consumed by this mistake. Or be shaped by it.

Chen and Kowalski came tonight. Both carry Daniel's weight—Kowalski arrested him, Chen counted him in statistics. All of us chose duty over compassion. All of us learning. All of us practicing.

Thirty days left. I'll practice mercy. I'll practice forgiveness—of myself, of others, of Daniel, of everything. That's all I have left to give. That's everything.

Elena closes the journal. Sets it carefully on the table. Sits in the quiet apartment and feels: not peace exactly. Not resolution. Something else. Acceptance maybe. The understanding that both/and means holding contradiction without resolving it. Being right and wrong. Choosing honestly and learning you were mistaken. Carrying weight without being consumed.

Thirty days left.

She'll spend them showing up. Bearing witness. Maintaining dignity. Teaching through her failures. Honoring Daniel by practicing mercy with everyone else. Choosing compassion over principle. Being present to regret without drowning in it.

Not because it fixes anything.

Because it's honest.

Because honest presence is everything.

Because brief doesn't mean meaningless.

She stands. Makes tea. Checks messages—confirmations for tomorrow's gathering, Priya's teaching session, Kenji's morning practice. All the rituals of presence

that structure these final days.

Tomorrow: 7 AM. She'll attend Kenji's teaching. Sit poorly. Practice anyway. Show up because showing up is what she does.

Twenty-nine days after that: impact.

But today: Daniel Okonkwo remembered. His children honored. His death witnessed. The cost of justice acknowledged. The lesson learned seven months too late but learned nonetheless.

That has to be enough.

Has to be.

Is.

Elena Torres, former mayor of Antarctica, practicing dignity until dignity is impossible, bearing witness to her own failures, teaching others that transformation happens through honesty, choosing presence for thirty more days, carrying Daniel Okonkwo's weight until weight becomes light.

Same as yesterday. Same as tomorrow. Same as always.

Show up. Bear witness. Hold both. Continue.

That's all she has.

That's everything she has.

Chapter 56: Ordinary

Multiple POVs | Year 15, Month 3, Day 26 | Antarctica

Amara & David — Platform 73

5:47 AM. David wakes to the alarm he's set for fourteen years. Amara still sleeps beside him—she worked late at the monitoring station, tracking an asteroid that no longer needs tracking. The numbers don't change anymore. Impact in twenty-six days. Trajectory certain. Death guaranteed.

He dresses quietly. The apartment is full now—Zara and Kwame on the fold-out couch, Maya and Kofi in the second bedroom. Sixty square meters holding six people. Family. Three months ago it was just him and Amara. Now: everyone. Convergence made visible through bodies in space.

He makes tea. The ritual automatic after fourteen years. Kettle heating. Cup warming. Presence through repetition. The infrastructure groans around him—heating systems protesting Antarctic cold, power flickering briefly then

stabilizing. The arrays still function. Ninety-three percent capacity. He'll check them today. Same as yesterday. Same as tomorrow. Twenty-five more tomorrows. Then: no more checking.

Maya emerges from the bedroom, already dressed. Seventeen years, five months old. Eighty-five days of intensive training with Kenji complete. Five days remaining before they shift to final convergence mode.

"Morning, Uncle David."

"Morning. Tea?"

"Please."

They sit at the small table. The same table where they sat three months ago when Zara's family first arrived. Where Maya asked about detection, about Amara's numbness, about being conscious while dying. Now: comfortable silence. Family silence. The kind that doesn't need filling.

"Platform today?" Maya asks.

"Yes. Systems need checking."

"Can I come?"

David pauses. They did this once before, Month 2. She learned maintenance, understood meaning through physical work. But today—twenty-six days left—does she need that again? Or does she need something else?

"What about Kenji's teaching?" he asks.

"Afternoon session. Morning is free. I want to be with you. On the arrays. One more time."

One more time. Everything is one more time now.

"Okay. We leave at six."

They drink tea together. Through the window, Antarctica wakes—artificial lights against polar night, buildings stretching to horizon, one point two million people beginning their twenty-sixth-to-last day. Some will spend it raging. Some hiding. Some present. All valid. All witnessed.

"Uncle David," Maya says quietly. "Are you scared?"

"Terrified."

"But you still go to work."

"Yes."

"That's enough?"

"Has to be."

She nods. Understands. They finish their tea in silence.

The transport climbs through darkness. Maya beside him, 47B waiting at Platform 73. The robot hasn't changed—same precise positioning, same diagnostic readiness. Twelve years of partnership. Twenty-six days remaining.

Beep beep. "Good morning, Colleague Chen. Maya Okafor-Mensah. Systems functioning at ninety-three percent. Platform seventeen requires minor recalibration. Estimated completion time: two hours, fourteen minutes. Weather conditions: optimal. Twenty-six days until cessation of function."

Even 47B counts down. David hadn't programmed that. The robot must be accessing global data, understanding context. Strange comfort in knowing even artificial intelligence witnesses the ending.

"Good morning, 47B," Maya says. She crouches beside the robot, familiar now. "Let's maintain what needs maintaining."

They work together—human, human, robot. The rhythm David knows in his bones. Connection housings checked. Voltage regulators calibrated. Panels cleaned. The megacity below depends on this. Thirty thousand people receiving power because three beings show up and do the work.

Maya is competent now. Learned fast in Month 2. Asks good questions. Sees systems clearly. Would have been exceptional engineer. Twenty-six days isn't enough time to become what she might have been. But enough time to understand what maintenance means. Enough time to practice presence through physical work.

"Uncle David," she says during platform seventeen. "I'm teaching tomorrow. Kenji asked me to lead a session. For the young adults. Thabo, Amara, Jamal, the others."

"That's good."

"I'm terrified."

"What will you teach?"

"I don't know. What do you teach people who'll be dead in twenty-six days? What wisdom matters when nothing lasts?"

David sets down his diagnostic tablet. Looks at his niece—seventeen years old, brilliant, about to teach her peers how to die awake.

"Teach what you know," he says. "You practiced two years, eight months. You know presence. You know rage and gratitude both. You know brief life matters. That's what they need. Not answers. Just: your honest experience."

"Is that enough?"

"Ask me in twenty-six days." He smiles. "That's what Kenji told Thabo."

Maya laughs—brief sound against cold air. "Everyone says that now. 'Ask me in twenty-six days.' Like we'll know something then we don't know now."

"Maybe we will. Maybe dying teaches something living can't. Or maybe we'll die not knowing. Either way: we show up until we can't. That's complete."

They work in silence for an hour. 47B glides between them, providing tools, monitoring their progress, occasionally offering efficiency observations. Perfect coordination built through repetition. Brief doesn't mean incomplete. This morning matters. This maintenance matters. Even knowing it ends.

At 9:00 AM they finish. Platform seventeen recalibrated. Systems holding at ninety-three percent. Twenty-six more days of power guaranteed. Maybe more. Probably not needed. But guaranteed anyway.

Beep beep. "Excellent work, Colleagues. System integrity optimal. This unit appreciates human-robot collaboration. Probability of continued optimal function: high for remaining operational period."

"Thank you, 47B," David says.

Maya touches the robot's sensor array—brief gesture, affectionate. "See you tomorrow, 47B."

Beep. "Anticipated. This unit values consistency."

They ride the transport back down. Maya quiet, processing. David understands. She's preparing to teach. Organizing what she knows. Finding words for experience that transcends words. Same thing Kenji does. Same thing Ibrahim does. Same thing everyone teaching presence does—pointing at moon while knowing the pointing isn't the moon.

"You'll do well tomorrow," David says.

"How do you know?"

"Because you show up. Because you practice. Because you're honest. That's all teaching is."

"I hope that's enough."

"It has to be."

Zara & Family — Building 14, Unit 7B

Zara wakes to Kofi's energy. Always Kofi's energy. Fourteen years, five months of that energy. Twenty-six days remaining.

He's already up, dressed, bouncing. "Mama! Can we go to the community center? Kenji's teaching at ten! I want to see Maya teach tomorrow! Can we? Please?"

Kwame still sleeps—he had late shift helping with community meals yesterday. Amara and David already gone to the arrays. Maya with them. Just Zara and Kofi in the small living space.

"Yes, love. We'll go. But first: breakfast. You need fuel."

"I'm not hungry. I'm excited! Twenty-six days, Mama! Twenty-six days until we all die together! Isn't that amazing? We get to be together!"

Zara's heart breaks and soars simultaneously. Her son—beautiful, present, alive—celebrating convergence. Not denying death. Not hiding from it. Just: excited to face it with family. That's what fourteen years of Wei's teaching through her, through Maya, through community created. A child who knows he's dying and is grateful for the time he has.

"Yes, love. Twenty-six days together. Now eat."

She makes breakfast—synth-protein, fruit, tea. Kofi talks continuously. About yesterday's teaching session. About Ibrahim's wisdom. About Hassan's prayers. About Min-seo who died but whose mint still grows in forty apartments. About Derek's walking meditation. About Thabo's questions. Everything connected. Everyone teaching everyone. The web visible now.

"Mama," Kofi says between bites. "When we die, will it hurt?"

Direct question. Honest question. She could lie. Could comfort. Could bypass.

She chooses truth.

"I don't know, love. Probably. The asteroid will hit the Pacific. The shockwave will reach Antarctica in seconds. We'll have maybe thirty seconds of knowing. Then: light. Heat. End. It will be fast. But probably painful."

He processes this. Not scared. Just: considering. "Will you hold my hand?"

"Yes. Papa and I will both hold you. Maya will be there. Aunt Amara. Uncle David. Uncle Kenji. Grandmother Elena. Everyone. We'll face it together."

"That's good." He finishes his fruit. "I'm glad we came here. To Antarctica. I miss Lagos. Miss Mr. Okonkwo and Adanna and Samuel. But this is good too. Family."

"Adanna and Samuel are coming," Zara says. "For the final week. They'll be here in four days."

Kofi's face lights up. "Really? They're coming? To die with us?"

"Yes. They chose family too."

"That's perfect! Then everyone I love will be here! Well, except Wei. But she's dead already. Natural death. Lucky her—she got to die awake, teaching. I want to die like that. Teaching. Being present. Not screaming. Just: here."

Zara pulls him close. Fourteen years old. Talking about dying like discussing weather. Not dissociation. Presence. He's practiced three years. Since age eleven. Maya taught him. Zara taught him. Wei's lineage transmitted through family. Now he faces the end better than most adults. Brief life. Complete life.

"You will, love. We'll practice every day until we can't. Then we'll be present together. That's all anyone can do."

"Is that enough?"

She hears the echo—everyone asking the same question. Is presence enough? Is showing up enough? Is twenty-six days enough? Is brief life enough?

"It has to be," she says. "Because it's what we have."

Elena — Morning Writing

Elena sits in her apartment, journal open. Physical paper, pen in hand. Seventeen years of documentation. Someone should witness the witness. Someone should record how humanity faced extinction.

That someone is her.

Year 15, Month 3, Day 26

Twenty-six days remain. Population: 1,200,000. Everyone who chose Antarctica is here. Everyone who chose elsewhere is there. Final convergence complete.

I governed this continent seventeen years. Built for millennia. Collapsed to extinction. Maintained dignity through impossible circumstances. Today: I'm not mayor. Haven't been for four months. Just: witness. Just: person who shows up. That's enough. That has to be enough.

Daniel Okonkwo died seven months ago. I learned about it twenty-five days ago. I carry that weight. The cost of choosing justice over mercy. Priya Patel carries parallel weight—thirteen years of silence toward man who killed her husband. We're learning mercy too late to help Daniel. But we're teaching others. That's also transmission. Learning from failure. Witnessing our own hardness. Practicing differently now.

Morning briefings ended four months ago. But Chen and Kowalski still meet me for tea. Thursday mornings. Fifteen years of ritual transformed. We don't govern anymore. We just: show up for each other. That's enough.

Kenji teaches two hundred people now. Twenty-six days ago it was sixty. Growth through final month. Everyone seeking presence before the end. My son—thirty-seven years old, Picture Eight reached—teaches without trying to teach. Just: is. The ox forgotten. The self forgotten. Only presence remains.

Maya will teach tomorrow. My granddaughter. Seventeen years old. Eighty-five days of intensive training. Five days remaining before final convergence mode. She's ready. Not ready for death. But ready to be present. That's different. That's possible. That's what we teach.

I'm satisfied. Not with all choices. Daniel haunts me. But with showing up. With bearing witness. With maintaining dignity. Seventeen years of impossible work. Twenty-six days remaining. That's complete.

We were here. We mattered. We faced the end together.

Someone should say that.

I will.

She closes the journal. Stands. Her apartment is small—standard housing, same as everyone else. She gave up the mayor's residence Year 14. Didn't need space. Needed simplicity. Needed to live like everyone she governed. Like everyone she witnesses.

Her terminal chimes. Message from Kenji: *Teaching at 10 AM. Maya leading young adult session tomorrow 2 PM. You're welcome at both. Love, your son.*

She replies: *I'll be there. Both sessions. Love, your mother.*

Simple words. Real words. Fifteen years of distance. Five years of reconnection. Now: family. Chosen family. Practice family. All the same thing.

She makes tea. Drinks it slowly. Watches Antarctica through the window. One point two million people. Everyone converging. Everyone practicing. Everyone facing the end together.

Twenty-six days.

That's enough.

Kenji — Community Center, 10 AM

The room is packed. Two hundred people. Maximum capacity. Bodies shoulder to shoulder, sitting on cushions, chairs, floor. Children on parents' laps. Elders against walls. Everyone fitting barely.

Kenji sits at the front, slightly off-center. Wei's teaching. Don't claim the center. Make space. Teaching is invitation, not performance.

He scans the room. Familiar faces now. Thirty core students who attend daily. Ibrahim beside him, co-teaching. Hassan in the third row, practicing alongside his faith. Derek near the back, steady presence. Linnea beside him, nine months clean now, transformed through practice. Fatima organizing hospitality even during session—making sure everyone has water, cushions, space.

His mother Elena in the fifth row. Marcus Reyes beside her. Marcus Rivera on her other side. Both Marcuses. Both chosen family. The briefing team transformed—Chen and Kowalski in front, practicing fifteen years through different forms. Dr. Sarah Kim taking notes occasionally, old journalist habits, but present not documenting.

The young adults cluster left side. Thabo in front—fourteen years old, brilliant, questioning. Amara beside them, twenty-one, chemistry student, processing rage. Jamal behind, twenty-three, engineer. Others scattered—faces Kenji knows from weeks of practice. All facing death before living. All choosing presence anyway.

Parents and children throughout. Adaeze with daughter Chioma. Pavel with his three kids. Others Kenji doesn't know by name but recognizes by presence. Everyone bringing their families. Everyone teaching their children. Transmission continuing through generations that won't have time to grow old.

Barak Naveh sits quietly mid-circle. Forty-eight years old. Freed from prison eighteen months ago. Teaches through being. Doesn't speak much. Just: steady. Present. Shaped by guilt not consumed by it. Others gather near him instinctively. Seeking that groundedness. That calm.

Obi Nwosu crosses his arms but his face is open. Fifty-seven years old. Three years of practice. Still skeptical. Still showing up. Still asking hard questions that give others permission to doubt. Essential voice. Honest voice.

Chen Liwei with his family—wife Mei, adult children, three grandchildren ages fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. Same ages as the young people dying young. Multi-generational learning. Everyone facing the same end. The hierarchy dissolved. Elder and child both practicing. Both dying. Both present.

Asha Marin in back—fifty-five, artist, creator of "Witness" installation that forces people to see themselves seeing. Two years of practice transformed her provocations into presence. Now she observes, creates, witnesses through art and meditation both.

Soso Kim near the side—fifty years old, Dog Adoption Center coordinator. Five years of practice shifted her environmental grief into presence with current life. Her twelve remaining dogs—she'll bring them to final convergence. Witnessing any life fully is witnessing all life.

Dr. Yuki Tanaka sits quietly observing. Fifty-three years old. Maya and Kofi's pediatrician fifteen years. Witnessed their complete childhoods. Measured growth toward no future. Practice transformed her clinical work into sacred witness. She's here because presence medicine is all medicine now. Nothing to fix. Just: witness. Just: presence. Just: being with life while life remains.

And more. So many more. Two hundred people. Each carrying their own weight. Each showing up. Each choosing presence over despair. Twenty-six days left. Practice continuing until it can't.

Kenji rings the bell. The sound cuts through murmurs. Two hundred people settle.

"Good morning."

"Good morning," two hundred voices respond. Some strong, some whispered, some children's voices, some elders'. All here.

"We'll begin with sitting practice. Thirty minutes. Simple instructions. Notice breath. Notice body. Notice thoughts without clinging. Notice feelings without drowning. This moment. Then this moment. Nothing more. Nothing less."

He pauses. Looks at the room. Two hundred people who chose to practice. Who chose presence. Who chose to face death awake.

"Twenty-six days remain," he says quietly. "Death is coming. We know this. We've known this fifteen years. Practice doesn't change that. Practice doesn't make death easier. Practice makes life realer. Makes this moment fuller. Makes presence possible."

Thabo's hand raises. Kenji nods.

"Kenji, I asked you this before. You said ask you in twenty-six days. Well—" Thabo's voice cracks slightly. "It's twenty-six days. Does practice help?"

The room goes absolutely still. Two hundred people waiting for answer they need desperately.

Kenji doesn't rush. Breathes. Feels the question. Remembers asking Wei similar questions. Remembers her honesty. Her refusal to bypass. Her insistence on truth over comfort.

"Yes," he says finally. "And no. Practice helps me be here. Helps me love what I'm losing. Helps me be present to my terror instead of consumed by it. But I'm still terrified. Still grieving. Still wishing we had more time. Practice doesn't fix that. Just makes me conscious while feeling it."

He meets Thabo's eyes. "Is that enough? I don't know. But it's what I have. It's what we all have. Twenty-six days of consciousness. Twenty-six days of presence. Twenty-six days of being here together. That has to be enough. Because it's what we've got."

Silence. Long silence. Two hundred people sitting with the truth. Not bypassed. Not sugarcoated. Just: real.

Then Amara—the chemistry student—speaks. "Thank you for not lying."

Others murmur agreement. Honesty over comfort. Truth over consolation. Presence over bypassing.

"Let's practice," Kenji says. Rings the bell again.

Two hundred people close their eyes. Settle into meditation posture—sitting, standing, kneeling, whatever works for their bodies. Parents holding children.

Elders supporting walls. Veterans sitting straight. Everyone finding their way into practice.

Kenji closes his eyes. Returns to breath.

One.

Two.

Three.

Around him, two hundred people breathing together. Not achieving anything. Not fixing anything. Just: here. Present. Conscious. Together.

The community center creaks in Antarctic wind. Heating systems groan. Power flickers briefly then holds. Outside, infrastructure barely maintains. Inside, two hundred people choose presence anyway.

Four.

Five.

Kenji's mind wanders. Thinks about Wei. About her death Year 11. About the flower blooming. About Picture Nine—returning to source. Home was always here. About Picture Ten—marketplace with gift-bestowing hands. Teaching others. Giving away everything learned. Transmission continuing until no one left to transmit to.

Notice. Return.

Six.

His mother Elena practicing beside Marcus Reyes and Marcus Rivera. Briefing family. Thursday family. All family. Seventeen years of governance transformed into witness. She did the work. She showed up. That's complete.

Notice. Return.

Seven.

Ibrahim beside him. Thirty-four years old. Fifteen years faithless. Four months ago—heard God's voice. Not the old faith. New faith. Deeper faith. God present in the exile. God accompanying them into death. Both/and realized. Faith and presence both.

Notice. Return.

Eight.

Maya will teach tomorrow. His niece. Seventeen years old. Star student. Ready to give away everything she learned. Picture Ten approaching. The lineage spreading: Wei → Kenji → Maya → Thabo → others. Transmission accelerating as time contracts. Everyone teaching everyone in final month.

Notice. Return.

Nine.

The practice simple. Impossible. Essential. Being here. Noticing. Returning. Not achieving. Not fixing. Just: conscious. Present. Awake.

Thirty minutes pass. Kenji rings the bell.

Two hundred people open their eyes. Some peaceful. Some frustrated. Some crying. All here. All showed up. That matters.

"How was that?" Kenji asks.

Ibrahim speaks first. "Hard. Mind everywhere. But I returned. Each time: returned. That's practice. That's enough."

Elena: "I thought about Daniel. The prisoner who died. My choice to deny mercy. But I also noticed I'm here now. Present to my mistake. Carrying it without being destroyed by it. That's what practice gives me. Not peace. Presence."

Obi: "Still skeptical. Still not sure this matters. But I came anyway. Sat anyway. Breathed anyway. That's something."

Chen: "Fifteen years I maintained systems that barely functioned. This feels similar. Maintaining presence that barely holds. But I show up. That's what I know how to do."

Others share. Brief glimpses. Honest struggles. Real presence. No one claiming enlightenment. Everyone claiming showing up. That's the teaching. That's the practice. That's enough.

After session, people linger. Not rushing out. Staying. Talking. Being together. Community forming around shared practice. Shared mortality. Shared presence.

Kenji moves through the room. Listening more than speaking. Watching connections form. Ibrahim helping Derek orient a new veteran struggling with tremors. Fatima bringing tea to Linnea who's teaching her recovery circle about craving. Priya Patel talking with Elena about unforgiveness—two women learning mercy together. Barak sitting with three young people who need steady presence. Chen and Kowalski coordinating their Thursday ritual with new attendees. Asha discussing her installation with Dr. Sarah Kim. Soso sharing how she teaches presence through animal care.

The teaching spreading. Not through Kenji alone. Through everyone. Wei's garden fully grown. Two hundred flowers blooming. Twenty-six days until they're all vaporized. But today: blooming. Today: alive. Today: present.

Maya approaches. "Tomorrow. Two PM. Young adults. I'm ready."

"I know you are."

"How do you know?"

"Because you practice. Because you're honest. Because you show up. That's all teaching is."

She nods. Walks away to join Thabo and the others. Planning tomorrow's session. The lineage continuing. Picture Ten approaching.

Kenji stands in the center of the room. Two hundred people. Community center at capacity. Twenty-six days until everyone here dies. But today: practice. Today: presence. Today: together.

Wei's words echo in his mind: *The flower bloomed.*

Yes. Still blooming. Still here. Twenty-six days of blooming remaining.

That's enough.

Ibrahim — Afternoon Teaching

After Kenji's morning session, Ibrahim walks the frozen streets. Needs movement. Needs space. Needs to feel his body working despite the leg that still aches thirteen years after the wound.

He walks his old route—Building 12 to mosque, Sector 8. Four months ago he walked this route at 3 AM, desperate about Min-seo's dying. Four months ago God spoke to him in the mosque. Four months ago everything changed.

The mosque is quiet at midday. Hassan inside, preparing for afternoon prayer. Ibrahim enters. Takes off his shoes. Ritual automatic despite fifteen years faithless. The body remembers.

"Ibrahim. You're early."

"Needed to walk. Needed space."

"Sit. Tea?"

"Please."

They sit in the small room adjacent to the prayer space. Hassan makes tea. Sixty-nine years old. Fifteen years of praying without certainty. Four months ago—witnessed Ibrahim's encounter with God. Heard secondhand what God spoke. Found faith renewed through someone else's hearing.

"Twenty-six days," Hassan says. Not question. Statement.

"Twenty-six days," Ibrahim confirms.

"Are you ready?"

"No. But present. That's different."

"Yes." Hassan pours tea. "Fifty people came to prayer last night. More every day. Everyone seeking. Everyone preparing. Some faithful. Some desperate. Some just—trying. All welcome."

"That's both/and."

"Yes. Everything is both/and now. Faith and doubt. Prayer and meditation. God and presence. All the same thing. All different. All true." Hassan sips his tea. "I prayed for certainty fifteen years. Never came. Then you heard God. Not me. You. The faithless one. And suddenly I understood—certainty isn't the point. Presence is. God is here whether I'm certain or not. That's enough."

Ibrahim understands. His own faith transformed. Not returning to the old certainty. Moving forward to new knowing. God spoke. God is here. God accompanies them into death. That's both/and. That's faith and presence both.

"This afternoon," Hassan continues. "I'm teaching integrated session. Twenty-five people. The core students. Maya, Kofi, Elena, both Marcuses, Chen, Kowalski, Linnea, Derek, Fatima, Samir, Barak, others. Muslim prayer and Buddhist meditation and Christian contemplation all together. Will you co-teach?"

"Yes. What do we teach?"

"Same thing we always teach. Presence. Through all paths. All leading to same truth—being here completely. Twenty-six days left. Everyone needs this. All of it."

Three PM. The integrated session gathers. Twenty-five people in the mosque's main space. Prayer mats arranged in circle. No hierarchy. No separation. Everyone learning from everyone.

Hassan begins with Muslim prayer. *Allahu Akbar.* God is greatest. The words land differently now. Not conquest. Not certainty. Just: acknowledgment. Something greater than humans exists. Something present in the dying. Something accompanying them.

They prostrate together. Foreheads to ground. Complete surrender. The posture teaching what words can't—being human means bowing to something beyond yourself. Death. God. Mystery. Whatever name you use.

Marcus Reyes leads Christian contemplation next. Forty-five years old. Returned from Mumbai after thirteen years. Brings different wisdom. Different prayers. Same truth.

"In my tradition," he says quietly, "we talk about the valley of the shadow of death. For fifteen years I thought that was metaphor. Now I know—we're walking through it. All of us. Together. And the psalm says: 'I will fear no evil, for you are with me.' Not 'you will save me.' Not 'you will prevent death.' Just: 'you are with me.' Presence. Accompaniment. That's what God offers. Not rescue. Company."

He leads them in silent prayer. Centering prayer. Resting in divine presence. Christian meditation that's remarkably similar to Buddhist practice. Sitting still. Being present. Opening to what's larger than yourself.

Ibrahim watches twenty-five people pray together. Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, uncertain—all practicing. All present. All facing the same death. The differences real. The similarities deeper. Both/and.

Kenji teaches Buddhist meditation last. Breath awareness. Body awareness. Presence to what is. No God mentioned. No faith required. Just: here. Now. This breath. This moment.

But it's the same thing Hassan taught. Same thing Marcus taught. Same thing Ibrahim experienced four months ago. Different doors into the same room. Different words pointing at the same moon. Different practices leading to the same presence.

After teaching, they sit together. Twenty-five people. No longer practicing. Just: being.

Maya speaks first. "This is what Wei taught. Not one way. Many ways. All valid. All leading to presence. I practice Buddhist meditation. Kofi does too. But we also listen to Hassan's prayers. We also hear Marcus's contemplation. It's all the same practice. Being here. Being present. Being with what is."

Kofi adds: "At school in Lagos—before we came here—teacher said religions fight. Said people kill over God. But you're all teaching together. You're all friends. How?"

Hassan answers: "Because we know we're dying. When death is certain, fighting about whose God is real becomes absurd. Instead: we share. We teach each other. We learn from each other. Your uncle Ibrahim heard God. I didn't. But I believe because he heard. That's how faith works. Not competition. Transmission."

"Both/and," Elena says. Her voice carries seventeen years of governance, of bearing witness, of learning the hard way. "That's what I'm learning. Justice and mercy. Anger and peace. Faith and doubt. Dying and living. All of it true. All of it held together. Practice doesn't choose between them. Practice holds them both."

Priya Patel nods. "I carried rage thirteen years. Now I carry rage and compassion both. They coexist. Practice didn't take away the rage. Just made space for compassion too. That's enough. That's everything."

Barak: "Guilt and freedom. I carry both. My worst moment is part of me. So is everything after. Both true. Both real. Practice means being present to both without being consumed by either."

The sharing continues. Twenty-five people. Each naming their both/and. Each witnessing the paradox. Each holding opposites together. That's the teaching.

That's the practice. That's what facing death honestly requires.

After session, people linger again. Not rushing. Staying. Being together. Derek leads walking meditation outside—fifteen people walking slowly, counting steps, being present to movement. Fatima prepares tea for everyone, hospitality as practice. Samir teaches signs to new learners, communication without sound. Linnea shares her recovery story with someone newly struggling. The community web visible. Everyone holding everyone.

Ibrahim stands beside Hassan and Kenji and Marcus Reyes. Four teachers. Four paths. One truth.

"Twenty-six days," Hassan says. "Then we all die. Together. Everyone here. Does what we're teaching matter?"

"Yes," Ibrahim says without hesitation. "Whether it helps with death—I don't know. But it helps with life. These twenty-six days. These people. This presence. That's real. That's enough."

Kenji: "Wei said the flower blooms three days. That's complete. We're blooming now. Twenty-six days. That's our complete bloom. That's enough."

Marcus Reyes: "In Mumbai I taught refugee children who had no future. I taught anyway. Because teaching mattered while it mattered. Same thing here. We teach twenty-six more days. Then we die. But the teaching was real. The presence was real. That counts."

Hassan: "God is present. I know that now. Not because God spoke to me. Because God spoke to Ibrahim. That's enough. We pray twenty-six more days. We teach twenty-six more days. We practice twenty-six more days. Then: we face death together. Present. Accompanied. That's complete."

Four teachers. Agreement. The work matters. The teaching matters. The presence matters. Not because it prevents death. Because it makes life real until life ends.

Twenty-six days.

That's enough.

Maya — Final Preparations

Evening. Maya sits on the top bunk in her aunt's apartment. Kofi sleeps below—exhausted from the day's teachings, the walking meditation, the integrated session. Fourteen years old and practicing harder than most adults. Brief life. Complete life.

Tomorrow she teaches. Two PM. Young adults. Thabo, Amara, Jamal, and others. The ones dying youngest. The ones with most to rage about. Her peers. Her generation. Everyone stolen from futures they'll never have.

What does she teach them?

She pulls out her notebook. Physical paper. Recording thoughts like Grandmother Elena records witness. Someone should document what the young people think. Someone should record how children face extinction.

That someone is her.

Year 15, Month 3, Day 26 — Final Preparations

Tomorrow I teach for the first time. Uncle Kenji asked me to lead the young adult session. Twenty people. Ages fourteen to twenty-five. Everyone dying before they finish becoming who they might have been.

What do I teach? Not that death is okay—it's not. Not that practice fixes anything—it doesn't. Not that brief life is enough—it isn't.

I teach: presence is possible. Rage and gratitude coexist. Brief doesn't mean incomplete—it means exactly as complete as the time you have makes you. You can be conscious while dying. You can be present to what you're losing. You can love fiercely even knowing you'll lose everything.

I teach: what I know. Two years, eight months of practice. Eighty-five days intensive training. Rage every day. Gratitude every day. Both. Always both.

Wei taught Mama. Mama taught me. Uncle Kenji taught me. Uncle David taught me through maintenance. Grandmother Elena teaches through witness. Uncle Ibrahim teaches through recovered faith. Everyone teaches. I teach tomorrow. The lineage continues until no one left.

Twenty-six days. Then I die at seventeen years, seven months, four days. Never eighteen. Never adult. Never who I might have become. Just: who I am. Brief Maya. Complete Maya. Present Maya.

That has to be enough. Because it's what I have.

Tomorrow I teach that.

She closes the notebook. Lies back on the bunk. Thinks about tomorrow. About Thabo's questions. About Amara's rage. About Jamal's despair. About all the young people struggling to be present when presence means witnessing everything stolen from them.

She's ready. Not ready for death. But ready to teach. Ready to share what she knows. Ready to be honest about what she doesn't. That's Picture Ten approaching. Marketplace. Gift-bestowing hands. Teaching others even while dying.

Below, Kofi stirs. Murmurs in sleep. Still dreaming. Still young enough to rest despite everything.

Maya watches him. Her brother. Her responsibility. The child she taught to read, to practice, to face death consciously. He'll die three months before her.

Month 4, Day 1. Impact day. She'll watch him die. Then die herself thirty seconds later when the shockwave reaches them.

The anticipatory grief is crushing. She feels it every day. Every moment. Practice doesn't take it away. Just teaches her to be present to it. To love him fiercely while knowing she'll lose him. To be grateful for fourteen years, five months while raging that it's not enough. Both/and. Always both.

"I love you, Kofi," she whispers. He doesn't hear. Sleeps on.

Tomorrow she teaches. Tonight she practices. Being here. Being present. Being with her brother while her brother remains. Twenty-six days. Then: no more brother. No more Maya. No more anyone.

But tonight: both alive. Both breathing. Both here.

That's enough.

That has to be enough.

Convergence — Community Visible

Midnight. Antarctica sleeps. But not everyone. Throughout the megacity, people awake. People practicing. People preparing. Everyone converging toward the same ending.

At Platform 73, systems hold at ninety-three percent. 47B performs autonomous diagnostics. Robot colleague maintaining what needs maintaining. Twenty-six more days of function guaranteed.

In Building 14, Unit 7B, six people sleep. Amara and David in the bedroom. Zara and Kwame on the fold-out couch. Maya and Kofi in the second room. Family. Convergence made visible through bodies in space.

Elena sits in her apartment, journal open. Writing final entries. Seventeen years of witness. Twenty-six days remaining. Someone should document this. She volunteers.

At the community center, cushions wait for tomorrow. Two hundred people's practice space. The heart of District 5. Teaching continuing until it can't.

The mosque in Sector 8 stands quiet. Hassan sleeps nearby. Fifty people will pray tomorrow. Muslim, Buddhist, Christian, uncertain—all welcome. All practicing. All facing death together.

In Building 12, Ibrahim doesn't sleep. He sits by his window. Unit 403. Looking out at the megacity. Fifty-three steps down to ground level. He doesn't count them anymore. Doesn't need to. God is here. That's enough.

Derek leads insomnia walk—twelve people moving through frozen streets, counting steps, walking meditation at midnight. Veterans, refugees, the ones who can't sleep. Everyone learning presence through movement.

Fatima prepares food for tomorrow. Community meals. Hospitality as practice. Feeding people who'll die in twenty-six days. The work matters while it matters.

Linnea sits in Unit 418, Building 12. Nine months clean. Craving persistent. But present to craving instead of consumed by it. Tomorrow she teaches her recovery circle. Sharing what she learned. Transmission through brokenness.

Thabo lies awake. Fourteen years old. Born Year 1. Never knew world before detection. Tomorrow: Maya teaches. Thabo will ask questions. Hard questions. Real questions. The ones everyone's thinking but afraid to say.

At Dog Adoption Center, District 12, Soso Kim tends her twelve remaining dogs. Everyone else's dogs abandoned or euthanized. These twelve—she keeps them. Witnesses them. Loves them until the end. Teaches through animal care. Presence made visible through tending life.

Asha Marin's "Witness" installation stands empty in District 5. Circular space. Mirrors surrounding. Countdown clock projected overhead. Mannequins in viewing positions. Tomorrow people will stand inside. See themselves seeing. Notice what they brought into the room. Art as practice. Mirror as teacher.

In District 7, Chen Liwei sleeps beside his wife Mei. Three generations in one apartment. Grandchildren ages fifteen, sixteen, seventeen. Same ages as Maya, as the young people dying young. Everyone converging toward the same ending. Elder and child both practicing. Both dying. Both present.

Priya Patel sits with her daughter Aanya. Nineteen years old. Tomorrow Priya teaches about unforgiveness. About learning mercy too late. About presence with your own hardness. Her son Dev refused to attend teachings. Chose different path. That's valid too. Family doesn't have to be on same path. Both/and.

Barak Naveh sleeps peacefully. Forty-eight years old. Freed from prison eighteen months ago. Daniel's former cellmate. One walked out. One stayed. Both valid. Both honest. Only one survived to teach. Barak doesn't sleep because he's at peace. He sleeps because he practiced being present to guilt without being consumed. That's enough. That's everything.

One point two million people in Antarctica. Everyone converging. Everyone choosing. Some practicing. Some hiding. Some raging. Some present. All valid. All witnessed. All dying in twenty-six days.

But tonight: alive. Tonight: here. Tonight: breathing. Tonight: human consciousness persisting despite everything. Tonight: community holding each other. Tonight: teaching continuing. Tonight: presence possible.

The web of connection visible now. Min-seo's mint growing in forty apartments. Ibrahim's fifty-three steps walked by dozens. Wei's garden teachings transmitted

through everyone. David's maintenance practice understood by workers everywhere. Elena's witness inspiring others to show up. Kenji's teaching spreading through two hundred students. Maya's fierce practice modeling how young people face death.

Everyone teaching everyone. Everyone holding everyone. Everyone practicing together.

Twenty-six days until the light takes everything.

But today: everyone here, everyone witnessed, everyone mattering.

End of Day 26

Systems functioning: ninety-three percent
Population: 1,200,000
Teaching sessions: three (morning community, afternoon integrated, evening various)
People practicing: 200+ documented, thousands informal
Days remaining: 26

Tomorrow: Maya teaches young adults. Systems maintain. Practice continues. Life remains.

Until it doesn't.

But that's not today.

Today: ordinary. Today: practice. Today: presence. Today: together.

That's enough.

That's everything.

Chapter 57: Last Office

Elena Torres | Year 15, Month 3, Day 19 | Antarctica, Administration Complex

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The last constituent petition arrives at 7:14 AM.

Elena reads it on her tablet—habit from fifteen years of governance. The handwriting is careful, elderly, written on actual paper then scanned:

Mayor Torres,

My name is Yolanda Chen. I am 87 years old. I have lived in Antarctica for nine years, since my children died in the Mumbai crisis. I have no family left.

No friends close enough to die with. I am writing to ask: is there somewhere I should go? Is there a place for people who will be alone at the end? I don't want to die alone. But I don't know who to ask.

Yolanda Chen, Building 14, Unit 3421

Elena sets the tablet down. Through her office window: Antarctica's morning light, soft grey, the megacity stretching in all directions. Twelve days until impact. 1.1 million people still here. Some with family. Some with chosen communities. Some—like Yolanda Chen—with no one.

Marcus Rivera knocks. Enters. Deputy mayor for thirteen years, since the Year 2 election that nearly unseated her. He's aged well—forty-five now, silver at his temples, the fierce ambition of his youth softened into something more patient.

"Morning briefing when you're ready," he says. "Though there's not much to brief."

"There's a woman in Building 14. Yolanda Chen. Eighty-seven. Alone."

Marcus waits.

"She wrote to ask if there's a place to not die alone."

His expression shifts. Sadness, but not surprise. They've governed this megacity for fifteen years. Nothing surprises either of them anymore.

"The companion matching program," he says. "We started it Month 1."

"She didn't know about it."

"Then we tell her. Personal outreach. Someone visits today."

Elena nods. This is governance now. Not policy. Not crisis management. Just: noticing who falls through cracks. Making sure fewer people die alone. Twelve days of making sure.

"The briefing can wait," she says. "Walk with me first."

They walk through the Administration Complex. Elena has walked these halls for fifteen years—first as emergency coordinator, then as mayor, then as whatever she is now. Something beyond governance. Witness. Holder of space. The person who shows up because someone has to.

Staff greet her as she passes. Fewer staff now—most have taken leave for final weeks, choosing family over duty. But some stay. Marcus stays. The essential services team stays. People who find meaning in maintenance, in keeping systems running until they can't.

"Reyes wrote," Elena says. "Arrives today."

Marcus nods. "I saw. Afternoon transport."

Marcus Reyes. Her first assistant. Left Year 2 for Mumbai to teach refugee children. Thirteen years of correspondence, quarterly letters, occasional video calls. Coming home now for the end. Two Marcuses in her life—Reyes who left, Rivera who stayed. Both necessary. Both loved in different ways.

"He's bringing three students," Marcus says. "Children he taught for a decade. Didn't want to leave them behind."

"Good. They can stay in Building 7. The empty units."

"Already arranged."

Of course already arranged. Marcus Rivera anticipates everything. Has for thirteen years.

They reach the observation deck. Antarctica spreads below—the megacity humanity built when climate collapsed, when Earth's temperate zones became uninhabitable, when four billion people migrated south. Elena remembers Year -4, before the asteroid. The rush to build. The desperation. The impossible scaling of infrastructure. Now: functioning but frozen. A city that works. A city that will work for twelve more days.

"Do you remember," Elena says, "the Year 2 election? When you ran against me?"

Marcus laughs softly. "How could I forget? You demolished me."

"You had good ideas. Radical, but good. I was too cautious to implement them."

"You were cautious because caution saved lives. My ideas would have caused riots."

"Maybe. Or maybe they would have helped."

They stand together at the railing. Below, the morning population moves—transports, pedestrians, the ordinary flow of a million lives. Twelve days from extinction and still people go to work, visit family, maintain routines. Not denial. Just: life continuing until it can't.

"I've been thinking about Daniel Okonkwo," Elena says.

Marcus is silent. They've discussed this many times since Daniel's suicide five months ago. The man who killed his friend over food during the Year 2 riot. The sentence Elena refused to commute despite advocacy from both Marcuses.

"If I'd pardoned him. Year 3, Year 4, Year 6. Would he have lived? Would he have found peace?"

"You can't know that."

"No. But I chose justice over mercy. And he died anyway. Consumed by guilt I helped preserve."

Marcus turns to face her. "Elena. You made the call you believed was right. He killed a man. The victim's widow never forgave him. Justice wasn't wrong."

"Justice wasn't wrong. But mercy might have been wiser."

Twelve days to carry this understanding. Twelve days of knowing she chose institutional consequence over human compassion. It doesn't change anything. The past is fixed. But she's allowed to see it clearly now.

The morning briefing is brief. Status reports: power, water, food distribution, medical services. Everything functioning. Twelve days of function remaining.

"Communication requests," Marcus reads from his tablet. "Fourteen media outlets want final interviews. Historical documentation."

"Decline. My words are already recorded. Fifteen years of speeches. Enough legacy."

"Community relations flagged seventeen interpersonal conflicts. Disputes over space, resources, burial preferences."

"Status of resolution?"

"Fifteen resolved through mediation. Two escalated to formal hearing."

"Hearings still running?"

"Abbreviated process. Forty-eight hour resolution. Both parties agreed."

Elena nods. Governance persists. Even at the end. Especially at the end. Humans in community need systems to navigate disagreement. Twelve days isn't long enough to abandon structure.

"Personal requests," Marcus continues. "Forty-three people asked to meet with you before the end."

"Time?"

"I've blocked morning hours for the next five days. Twenty-minute sessions. Decline the rest, or extend to ten days?"

Elena considers. Forty-three people want to talk to their mayor before dying. Some will want to say thank you. Some will want to complain. Some will just want to be seen—witnessed by someone whose title carries weight.

"Ten days. Extend the blocks to all hours. Sleep isn't essential anymore."

Marcus makes a note. "Self-care reminder: your physician flagged—"

"Marcus."

He stops. Meets her eyes.

"I'm seventy-three years old. I'm dying in twelve days. I don't need a physician to tell me what I already know. What I need is to spend my last twelve days being useful. That means meeting anyone who wants to be seen. Understood?"

His expression softens. He nods. "Understood."

Yolanda Chen arrives at 11 AM.

She's smaller than Elena imagined—thin, white-haired, walking with the careful deliberation of someone whose joints no longer cooperate. Building 14 is three kilometers away. She walked the entire distance.

"Mayor Torres." Her voice is stronger than her frame suggests. "I didn't expect you to respond personally."

"I wanted to meet you. Please, sit."

They sit in Elena's office—the same office she's occupied for fifteen years. Photos on the walls: her son Kenji at various ages. Her late husband Jorge. Staff photos from different eras. The visual record of a life spent in service.

"Your letter moved me," Elena says. "The question you asked—about having somewhere to go—it's the right question. Too many people don't know to ask it."

Yolanda's eyes are bright, intelligent. "I've been alone for years. My husband, my children, my grandchildren—all gone to the Mumbai crisis. I stayed because Antarctica was functioning. Somewhere to exist. But existing alone isn't the same as living with others."

"No. It isn't."

"I thought about dying alone. Making peace with it. But I couldn't. I kept thinking: there must be others like me. Others without family, without community. There should be a place for us to find each other."

Elena nods. "There is. We started a companion matching program Month 1. People without family paired with others in the same situation. Some become friends. Some just become... witnesses for each other. Present together when the end comes."

Yolanda's expression shifts. Hope, perhaps. Or relief.

"I didn't know."

"We should have reached you earlier. That's our failure. But we can correct it now. Today, if you're willing, someone from the program will visit. Connect you with others. Help you find community for the final twelve days."

"Twelve days." Yolanda's voice catches. "It's not very long."

"No. But it's enough to not be alone. If you choose."

Afternoon. Marcus Reyes arrives on the 2:15 transport.

Elena watches from the arrivals platform. He emerges surrounded by three children—teenagers now, she supposes. A boy and two girls, ages thirteen to sixteen. The children he chose over returning earlier. The children he wouldn't leave behind.

He looks older. Fifty-five now, greying temples, lines around his eyes. But the same gentle attentiveness she remembers. The same quality of presence that made him excellent at his job.

"Mayor Torres." He smiles. Uses her title the way he always did—formal but warm.

"Marcus." She embraces him. First physical contact in thirteen years. He still smells the same—ink and clean linen and something indefinably *him*. "Welcome home."

"Home." He looks around at the Antarctic infrastructure. "I left when this was emergency housing. Now it's a city."

"A dying city. But yes. A city."

The children hang back—shy, uncertain. Refugees' wariness. Marcus gestures them forward.

"Mayor Torres, this is Jin, Priya, and Tomás. I've taught them for ten years. They're family now."

Elena greets each one. Jin, the eldest, meets her eyes directly. "Mr. Reyes said you're the best leader he ever worked for."

"Mr. Reyes is generous. I was difficult to work for. Demanding. Impatient."

"He said that too. He said difficult is sometimes what leadership requires."

Elena laughs. First real laugh in days. "He would say that."

They walk together toward Building 7. Marcus falls into step beside her, the children trailing. Natural rhythm—assistant and principal, even after thirteen years apart.

"How is he?" Marcus asks. "Kenji."

"Teaching. Found his practice. Found his purpose. You'll see him tonight—he wants to meet you."

"And you?"

Elena considers. How is she? Seventy-three, twelve days from death, carrying the weight of fifteen years of impossible choices. How does anyone answer that question?

"I'm finishing," she says. "The work is nearly done. The witnessing continues. I'm trying to leave well."

"That's enough."

"Has to be."

Evening. Elena's apartment.

Kenji arrives for dinner—the first time she's cooked for him in months. He's been too busy with teaching, she's been too consumed by governance. But tonight: just family. Just mother and son and the people they've gathered.

Marcus Reyes brings the children. Marcus Rivera comes alone—his wife died Year 6, his children scattered across the megacity with their own families. But he comes. Family isn't only blood.

They eat together—seven people around a table meant for four. Rice, vegetables, the last of the fresh fish from the aquaculture facilities. Simple food. Good food. The meal as communion.

"Tell me about Mumbai," Kenji says to Marcus Reyes. "Thirteen years. What did you learn?"

Marcus sets down his fork. Considers.

"I learned that teaching isn't about content. It's about presence. Jin, Priya, Tomás—they learned English, math, science. But what they really learned was that someone showed up every day. Someone kept showing up even when things fell apart. That's what I taught them. That's what they taught me."

Jin nods. "He never missed a day. Even during the Year 8 plague. He wore a mask and came anyway."

"I was terrified," Marcus admits. "But presence isn't about not being afraid. It's about showing up afraid."

Kenji smiles. Elena recognizes the expression—her son seeing his own teaching reflected in someone else's practice.

"That's what Mother taught me," Kenji says. "Without using those words. She governed this city for fifteen years. Showed up every day. Even when it was impossible. Especially when it was impossible."

Elena's throat tightens. Her son, seeing her. Understanding her. After forty-two years and infinite distance, finally seeing.

"I didn't know what I was teaching," she says. "I was just doing the work."

"That's the best teaching. The kind that doesn't know it's teaching."

Night. The apartment quiet.

Elena sits alone on the balcony. Antarctica stretches below—lights against darkness, a million lives humming. Twelve days. Eleven, really, since midnight approaches.

Marcus Reyes finds her. Sits beside her.

"The children are asleep," he says. "Jin asked if we could visit the observation tower tomorrow. See the whole city from above."

"I'll arrange it."

They sit in comfortable silence. Thirteen years apart, but the rhythm remains. The ease of people who've worked closely, seen each other truly.

"I never thanked you," Elena says. "For leaving. For choosing Mumbai. For showing me that departure can be its own form of service."

"You didn't need to thank me. You understood."

"I understood after. Years after. At first I felt abandoned."

"I know. Your letters were... measured. For the first two years."

She laughs softly. "I was hurt. But I kept writing."

"That's the difference between you and most people. You kept writing even when you were hurt. You kept showing up."

"Kenji's teaching word for it. Presence."

"Before Kenji had a word for it, you were doing it. Modeling it. Every day."

They watch the city together. The lights against the dark. The life that persists even as extinction approaches.

"Twelve days," Marcus says.

"Eleven and a half."

"Are you ready?"

Elena considers. Ready is a strange word. Fifteen years of preparation for something that can't be prepared for. Fifty-eight years of governance, of public service, of showing up because someone had to. Now: nearly done.

"I'm ready to rest," she says. "Ready for the showing up to end. Ready to just... be. For whatever time remains."

"That sounds like readiness."

"Maybe. Or maybe it's just exhaustion."

"Same thing sometimes."

They sit until the cold drives them inside. Elena to her empty bed—empty for years, since Jorge died. Marcus to the couch, the children distributed across the floor on borrowed mattresses.

Tomorrow: more meetings. More witnesses. More presence.

Eleven days of presence remaining.

Enough to finish.

Enough.

Chapter 58: Seven

Zara Okafor-Mensah | Year 15, Month 4, Days 1-7 | Antarctica

Seven days remain.

Zara wakes to this knowledge the way she wakes to breathing—automatic, unavoidable, true. The number sits in her chest: seven. One week. One hundred and sixty-eight hours. Then: Maya dies. Kofi dies. Everyone dies.

She lies still, not ready to move yet. Kwame breathes beside her on the fold-out couch—they gave the bedroom to the children, claimed the living room for themselves. Fifteen years of marriage compressed into a government apartment in Antarctica. Home isn't place. Home is this: Kwame's warmth, his steady breath, the particular way he always wakes before her but pretends to sleep until she's ready.

Through the thin wall she hears Maya's restlessness—awake already, probably been awake for hours. Seventeen years, six months old. Eighty-five days of intensive training with Kenji complete. Mind still racing, always racing, even after three years, eight months of practice. Her daughter who became a teacher before becoming an adult.

Kofi's sleep is different—deep, untroubled. Fourteen years, five months. He practices presence without knowing he's practicing. Lives naturally what Maya works so hard to achieve. Grace of youth. Grace of not carrying the weight of knowing what knowing means.

Seven days.

Zara makes herself breathe. Wei's voice in memory: *Presence doesn't require certainty. Just: being here. Noticing fear. Returning gently.*

She's been practicing fifteen years. Since detection. Since the morning she burst onto Wei's balcony with Maya on her hip, both crying, both terrified. Fifteen years of learning impermanence through Wei's garden, through raising

children toward death, through choosing life despite doom. Fifteen years should be enough to face seven days.

It's not enough. Will never be enough. But it's what she has.

Kwame's breathing changes. He stops pretending.

"You're awake," Zara whispers.

"So are you." His arm tightens around her. "Seven days."

"Yes."

They lie together in the grey dawn light. Outside, Antarctica stirs—over a million people in this megacity, all facing the same countdown. Somewhere Kenji is already preparing for morning teaching. Amara and David are probably drinking coffee in their apartment two buildings away. Elena is maintaining her morning ritual—fifteen years of briefings, now just: witness. Everyone showing up. Everyone present. Everyone choosing how to spend seven days.

"What do you want?" Kwame asks quietly. "For this week?"

Zara considers. What does she want from seven days? Miracle? Impossible. Acceptance? She's been practicing acceptance for fifteen years and still isn't there. Peace? Peace is performance. Presence is practice.

"Normal," she says finally. "I want normal. Breakfast together. Maya going to teach. Kofi exploring. You cooking. Me—" She stops. What does she do now? The Lagos water systems don't need her here. "Me being with you. Being with them. Just: family. Until we can't."

"Normal and final."

"Yes. Both."

Kwame kisses her forehead. "Then that's what we do."

Day 1 begins with breakfast.

Maya emerges from the bedroom first, already dressed, carrying her meditation journal. She's been documenting her practice since the awakening—three years, eight months of observations, questions, breakthroughs that weren't breakthroughs. The journal will burn in seven days. She writes in it anyway.

"Morning, Mama." Maya's voice is steady but Zara hears the tremor underneath. Her daughter is terrified. Her daughter is present anyway.

"Morning, baby. Sleep?"

"Some. Kofi snored."

"Did not!" Kofi bursts out of the bedroom, all energy despite the hour. "I don't snore! Maya, tell the truth!"

"You snored. Like a bear."

"There are no bears in Antarctica!"

"Exactly. So everyone noticed."

Zara smiles despite everything. This. This ordinary sibling bickering. This is what she chose when she had Kofi fifteen years ago. This normalcy. This life. Brief and complete and here.

Kwame has set the table—synth-protein, vegetables from the community greenhouse, tea. Simple meal. Perfect meal. They sit together. Four people. One family. Seven days of family left.

"What's the plan today?" Kofi asks around a mouthful of food.

"Manners," Zara says automatically.

He swallows. "Sorry. What's the plan?"

Maya answers before Zara can. "Morning teaching with Uncle Kenji. Then lunch with Aunt Amara—she wants to show me something about orbital mechanics. Then—" She glances at Zara. "Then I want to see Asha's installation. The one everyone talks about. 'Witness.' Will you come with me, Mama?"

Zara's chest tightens. The installation. She's heard about it—mirrors and countdown clocks and people confronting themselves. Asha Marin's final major work. Art as mirror. Truth as disturbing.

"Yes. I'll come."

"Can I come?" Kofi asks.

"It's intense," Maya warns. "Scary."

"I want to see."

Zara looks at her son. Fourteen years, five months of wanting to see everything, experience everything, be part of everything. Seven days left and he's still choosing curiosity over fear.

"Okay. We'll all go. After your morning activities." She looks at Kwame. "You too?"

"I'm helping with community kitchen prep. But afternoon—yes. Family time."

"Family time," Zara agrees. "All week. Every day. Together."

They eat in companionable silence. Zara notices everything—the sound of forks on plates, the morning light through the small window, Kofi's fidgeting, Maya's careful precision, Kwame's quiet presence. This moment. This morning. This family. Seven days of moments left.

Maya finishes first. "I should go. Uncle Kenji starts at eight."

"How many people come now?" Zara asks.

"Two hundred. Maximum capacity. Every session." Maya's face shows something between pride and grief. "Uncle Kenji says the teaching reached everyone who needed it. Now we just practice together until—" She stops.

"Until we can't," Zara completes. "That's enough."

"Is it?"

The question hangs. Is practicing presence until death enough? Zara doesn't know. But she knows the alternative—numbing, hiding, pretending—is worse.

"It's what we have," she says. "So yes. It's enough."

Maya nods. Stands. Hugs Zara tightly—sudden, fierce, desperate. "I love you, Mama."

"I love you, Maya. So much."

"See you at lunch?"

"See you at lunch."

Maya leaves. Kofi follows ten minutes later—promised to help Fatima organize something at the community center. Then it's just Zara and Kwame, clearing dishes in comfortable silence.

"She's scared," Kwame says quietly.

"Of course she's scared. She's seventeen. Three years of practice doesn't make dying at seventeen okay."

"But she'll die awake."

"Yes. That's something. That's still not enough."

Kwame pulls her close. They stand in the small kitchen holding each other. Fifteen years of this. Holding each other through impossible things. All of it led here: seven days, then nothing.

"Would you do it again?" Kwame asks. The same question he asked in Lagos, Year 6.

"Yes," Zara says without hesitation. "Every choice. Every moment. Even knowing. Especially knowing."

"Even now? Seven days left?"

"Even now. They're here. Real. Loved. That matters."

"For seven days."

"For seven days. For however long here is. Duration isn't the measure. Presence is."

She hears Wei in her own words. Fifteen years of transmission.

"I'm going to visit Amara," Zara says. "Before Maya's lunch session. Want to sit with my sister. Want to not waste time."

"Go. I'll be at the kitchen until three. Then we all go see the installation?"

"Yes. All of us. Family."

Amara's apartment is identical to theirs. Government housing. But Amara has made it home. Pictures. Books. Evidence of life.

Her sister answers the door. Sixty-three years old. Nine years of reconnection after seven of isolation.

"Zara." Amara hugs her. "I was hoping you'd come."

"Seven days. Can't waste them."

They sit on Amara's small couch. David is at the solar arrays—still maintaining despite seven days remaining. Still showing up. That's what he does.

"I'm sorry," Amara says suddenly.

"For what?"

"For wasting time. Seven years of not speaking. Then cautious reconnection. We could have had more years. Should have had more."

Zara takes her sister's hand. "We have what we have. You're here now. That's what matters."

"Is it enough? Nine years of reconnection after seven of silence? Against thirty-four years of being sisters?"

"Nothing's enough," Zara says honestly. "Not enough time with you. Not enough time with my children. Not enough time with Kwame. Not enough time for Maya to become who she might have been. Not enough time for Kofi to finish growing. Nothing is ever enough."

"Then why—"

"Because you're here. I'm here. Right now. That's complete."

Amara's eyes fill. "You sound like Wei."

"Good. She taught me everything that matters."

"I never met her. Just letters. But she saved me. Through letters, through Kenji, through you. Taught me how to feel again after seven years numb."

"She saved me too. Fifteen years ago. Showed up on her balcony crying with Maya. She taught me impermanence. Then she taught me presence to impermanence. Then she taught me that brief doesn't mean meaningless. Everything I am as a mother—she taught me."

They sit quietly. Sisters. Different paths to the same truth. Both transformed by the same teacher through different transmission.

"I'm glad we reconnected," Zara says. "Glad you called back Year 7. Glad you came to Lagos Year 9. Glad you're here now. Nine years isn't enough but it's real. It counts."

"Even if it all ends in seven days?"

"Especially because it ends in seven days. The ending makes it matter. Makes it sharp. Makes it real."

Amara wipes her eyes. "I love you. I should have said it more."

"You say it by being here. By showing up. By sitting with me right now instead of hiding in calculations. That's love."

A knock. David enters.

"Took break," he explains. "Wanted to see you both." He looks at Zara. "Seven days. Should we spend them maintaining arrays or with family?"

"Both," Zara says. Wei's answer. "Maintain what needs maintaining. Be with family when you can."

"Amara?" David looks at his partner.

"Go back to work. I'm here. I'll be here when you return."

David kisses Amara's forehead. Hugs Zara. "Thank you. For calling her back. Year 7."

"She saved herself. I just kept showing up."

"That's what saves people. Showing up."

He leaves. The sisters sit together until it's time for Maya's lunch session.

Afternoon brings the installation.

The four of them walk through District 5. The streets are fuller than usual. Final week. Everyone outside.

Asha's "Witness" installation stands in a converted warehouse. No security. No admission. Just: open space. The artist hasn't been here for weeks. The work stands alone.

They enter together.

The space is circular. Mirrors line the walls—floor to ceiling. Above: countdown clock projected. The numbers glow red: 6 days, 14 hours, 23 minutes, 17 seconds. Ticking down.

Mannequins stand throughout—all ages, all positions. No faces. Just forms. Witnesses watching witnesses.

Zara sees herself reflected infinitely. Forty-eight years old. Tired. Grieving. Present. Real.

Her family reflected too. Kwame. Maya. Kofi. All of them multiplied. All of them dying. All of them here.

"Mama," Kofi whispers. "It's us. Everywhere."

"Yes."

"We look small."

"We are small."

Maya moves deeper. Studies the mannequins. Her own reflections. She stands for a long time just: looking. Seeing herself seeing. The practice made physical.

Zara watches her daughter. Seventeen years, six months. Seven days left. Maya confronting her own mortality made visible.

"Mama, should we go in?" Maya had asked this morning. Now Zara understands. Going in means confronting. Seeing clearly.

"Do you want to?" Zara asks.

"I want to see myself before I'm gone."

They stand together. Mother and daughter. Mirrors reflecting them infinitely. Both here. Both dying. Both seen.

"We're here," Maya says quietly. "That's real."

"Yes," Zara agrees.

Zara looks at the numbers overhead. Six days, fourteen hours now. Not enough time. But right now: here.

"This is honest," Maya says. "It doesn't pretend. Just shows us: you're dying. See it. Be with it."

"Are you glad we came?"

"Yes. Wei would have liked this. Called it good teaching."

They stay forty-seven minutes. Zara times it unconsciously—engineering habit. Then they leave together, blinking in Antarctic light.

"That was intense," Kofi says.

"Yes."

"But good." He looks at his family. "We're really here. Really us. Really alive. The installation made me see it."

They walk home slowly. No rush. Nowhere to be. Seven days left and they choose to walk slowly through Antarctic cold, four people being family.

Day 2: Sisters.

Zara and Amara spend the day together. Walking. Talking. Being. Nine years of reconnection concentrated into hours.

They walk the Antarctic coast—engineered breakwater, frozen ocean beyond, the desolate beauty of a continent humans shouldn't inhabit but do anyway. Over a million people choosing to die here. Together.

"Tell me about our childhood," Amara says.

"Why?"

"Because I want to remember. Want to hold it. Seven years I didn't remember. Pushed it all away. Now—six days left—I want to remember everything."

So Zara tells her. Their parents in Lagos. Growing up in the compound. Amara always serious, always studying. Zara choosing engineering, choosing family, choosing ordinary life. Diverging paths. Both valid. Both complete.

"I chose career," Amara says. "You chose people. I thought my choice was better. More important. More meaningful."

"Was it?"

"No. Just different. You built family. Raised children. Created love. I calculated orbits. Both matter. Both temporary. But you—" Amara stops walking. "You created people who will die having been loved. That's—that's profound."

"So are your calculations. They're beautiful. The mathematics is beautiful even describing our death."

"It's not the same."

"No. But you're here. With me. Right now. That's what matters."

Amara is crying. "I'm sorry I wasted time."

"You didn't waste the end. That counts."

"Is it enough?"

"It has to be."

They hug on the Antarctic coast. Two sisters who almost lost each other but chose to find each other again. Nine years. Not enough. Real. Counted. Mattered.

They walk back slowly. Stop for tea at a community center. Hot drinks. Shared silence.

An older woman approaches. “Excuse me. Are you Zara Okafor-Mensah? I was at your Lagos compound. Year 3. You were living like your children’s brief lives were worth everything. You taught me just by being there. Thank you.”

She leaves before Zara can respond.

Amara is staring. “You showed people how to live. Just by living.”

“I just raised my children.”

They sit with their tea. Six days left. All the words said and unsaid between them.

“Tomorrow,” Zara says. “Spend it with my children? With Kwame? With all of us? Not separate anymore—together?”

“Yes. Please. Yes.”

Day 3: Maya’s question.

Dinner. Four people at the small table. Synth-protein and vegetables and tea. Normal meal. Final meals. Both.

Maya has been quiet all day. Zara recognizes this—her daughter processing, integrating, preparing to speak truth. Seventeen years of watching Maya think.

“Mama,” Maya says carefully. “Can I ask you something?”

“Always.”

“Are you glad you had us? Knowing how it ends?”

The question Zara has been waiting for. The question she’s asked herself thousand times. The question that matters more than anything.

She doesn’t hesitate. “Yes. Every moment. Even knowing. Especially knowing.”

“Why especially?”

“Because knowing made every moment matter. Made me present. Made me love fiercely. You got seventeen years. Kofi got fourteen. Not enough. Never enough. But real. Conscious. Loved. That matters more than long unconscious life.”

Maya’s eyes fill. “I don’t want to die.”

“I know, baby. Neither do I.”

“Are you scared?”

“Terrified. But we’re together. That helps.”

Kofi speaks up. “I’m scared too. But less scared because we’re family. Because we’re together. Because I know you love me.”

Zara looks at her children. Her defiant choices. Her conscious creations. Maya brilliant and fierce and dying at seventeen. Kofi innocent and joyful and dying at fourteen. Both here. Both real. Both loved beyond measure.

"I would choose you again," Zara says. Voice breaking. "Every time. Knowing everything. I would choose to bring you into this world. Would choose to love you. Would choose to be your mother for seventeen years and fourteen years. Not enough time. But enough love. Enough presence. Enough mattering."

"But we'll be gone," Maya whispers.

"Yes. In six days you'll be gone. And I'll be gone. And everyone will be gone. But right now—" Zara reaches across the table. Takes Maya's hand. Takes Kofi's hand. Kwame completing the circle. "Right now we're here. Together. Real. That's not nothing. That's everything."

They sit holding hands. Family. Brief. Complete. Here.

"Thank you for having us," Maya says quietly. "Even knowing. Thank you for choosing us."

"Thank you for being here," Zara responds. "Thank you for being exactly who you are. Thank you for teaching me. For showing me presence. For being my children."

Kofi starts crying. Then Maya. Then Kwame. Then Zara. Four people at a small table in Antarctica, crying together, holding each other, being family six days before family ends.

This is what she chose. This grief. This love. This presence. This everything.

Worth it. All of it. Even now. Especially now.

Day 4: Kofi.

Her son wakes with questions.

"Mama, why do we practice if we die anyway?"

They're making breakfast together—Kofi helps now, fourteen years old and competent in small ways. He measures tea carefully. Zara watches him move. Notices everything. Five days left of watching him.

"We practice so we're here," Zara says. "Present to the life we have. Not hiding from the death that's coming."

"But does it help? When the moment comes? Will practice make it easier?"

Zara doesn't lie. Wei taught her honesty. "I don't know. Maybe. Maybe not. But practice makes now better. Makes this morning—you and me making tea—more real. More seen. More loved."

"So we practice for now, not for then?"

"Yes. Exactly."

Kofi absorbs this. "That makes sense. Uncle Kenji says the same thing. But simpler from you."

They finish breakfast preparation. Kwame and Maya join them. The morning routine. Five more mornings. Then: nothing.

After breakfast, Kofi wants to explore District 8. Zara goes with him. Mother and son. Five days of son left.

The outer district is quieter. Emptier. Kofi still points at things. Asks questions. Still curious despite knowing everything ends.

"Mama, look." He stops at a small garden—someone's balcony project. Vegetables growing in containers. Herbs spreading.

"Someone's still tending," Zara observes.

"Five days left and they water plants." Kofi's voice is wondering. "That's—that's what you teach, right? Maintenance matters even when it ends?"

"Yes."

"I understand now. Watching Uncle David with arrays. Watching you with family. Watching everyone show up. It's all the same. Do what needs doing. Be present while doing it."

Zara looks at her son. Fourteen years, five months. Five days left. Understanding through living what Maya had to study to learn. Both paths valid. Both her children. Both perfect exactly as they are.

"You're wise," Zara says.

"I'm fourteen."

"Wise anyway."

They walk home. Kofi talks about his friends, Kenji's teachings, practice, fear. Zara listens. Witnesses. Loves.

She watches him and thinks: he won't suffer the anticipatory grief Maya carries. He'll die younger but lighter. Both terrible. Both mercy.

"Mama," Kofi says. "I'm glad you're my mother."

"I'm glad you're my son."

"Even for only fourteen years?"

"Even for only fourteen years. You made those years matter. You made them real."

He hugs her. Right there in the street. Fourteen years old and not embarrassed. Five days left and choosing connection over coolness.

Zara holds him. Breathes him in. This specific Kofi smell—child and teenager mixed. This specific weight. This specific boy who won't ever be a man but is perfectly himself right now.

"I love you," she tells him.

"I love you too, Mama."

Day 5: Kwame.

The children are with Kenji—intensive session, final teachings. Zara and Kwame have the afternoon alone.

Rare solitude. They walk to their temporary apartment. Close the door. Stand in the small space that's been home for three months.

"Fifteen years," Kwame says.

"Fifteen years," Zara agrees.

"Would you marry me again? Knowing everything?"

"Yes."

"Would you have Maya and Kofi again?"

"Yes."

"Would you choose all of it? The compound. The gardens. The defiance. The presence. All of it?"

"Yes. Every choice. Every moment. Even knowing. Especially knowing."

Kwame pulls her close. "Me too."

They stand together. Fifteen years of marriage compressed into this embrace. Family created. Family maintained. Family facing ending together.

"Four days," Kwame says. "Then we watch them die."

"Yes."

"How do we do it?"

"We practice. We breathe. We hold their hands. We witness them completely."

"Is that enough?"

"It has to be."

They make love. Slow. Present. Real. Not desperate goodbye. Not performance. Just: connection. Presence. Fifteen years of knowing each other. Four days left of knowing each other. Both held simultaneously.

Afterward, lying together, Kwame asks: "Do you have regrets?"

Zara considers. "Seven years of not speaking to Amara. Should have called sooner."

"But you did reconnect. Nine years together."

"Yes. Not enough but real."

"Other regrets?"

"No. Everything else I chose deliberately."

"Even though they die in four days?"

"Even though. They lived. Brief and complete and witnessed."

Kwame holds her tighter. "I love you."

"I love you."

"Thank you for choosing me. For building this with me."

"Thank you for showing up. Every day. For fifteen years."

They lie together until it's time to collect the children. Four days left of lying together. Of being married. Of being family. Not enough time. All the time there is.

Day 6: Family.

No work. No teaching. No maintenance. Just: four people being together.

They stay in the apartment. Cook together. Play games. Talk. Laugh. Cry. Be.

Zara watches them. Her family. Her deliberate creation. Kwame cooking, singing off-key. Maya reading but present. Kofi bouncing energy.

This. This is what she chose. Not abstract meaning. This: actual people. Actual love. Actual presence.

"Tell us stories," Maya requests. "About when we were little."

So Zara does. About Maya's first word (not "mama"—"more"). About Kofi learning to walk. About the Lagos compound. About Wei's garden. About ordinary moments made precious by attention.

Kwame adds his memories. Different perspective. Same love.

"We were happy," Maya observes.

"We are happy," Zara corrects. "Present tense. Right now. Happy."

"Even three days before we die?"

"Even three days before we die. Happy and sad. Grateful and grieving. Present to all of it."

The day passes slowly. Perfectly. Everything and nothing. Just: family. Together. Normal and final. Both.

Evening brings reflection.

"Tomorrow is the gathering," Maya says. "Final open practice. Two hundred people. Uncle Kenji wants me to co-teach."

"Are you ready?"

"No. But I'll do it anyway. That's what practice taught me. You don't wait for ready. You show up."

"We'll be there," Zara promises. "All of us. Witnessing you teach."

"Then what?"

"Then two more days. Then—"

"Then physics."

"Yes. Then physics."

They sit together in the small apartment. Four people. Three days from ending. All the love. All the presence. All the truth. Everything held together.

"I'm glad we're together," Kofi says. "For the end. Not alone."

"We'll never be alone," Zara tells him. "We're family. Until we can't be. Then we were family. Past tense. But real. Always real."

Day 7: Gathering.

The community center is packed.

Two hundred people fill the space—maximum capacity, bodies pressed close, sitting on cushions, chairs, floor. All ages. All here for final open practice before countdown.

Zara sits with her family near the middle. Can see Kenji at the front. Maya beside him—seventeen years, six months old, three days from death, teaching others how to face it.

The room holds everyone. Chen with his grandchildren. Ibrahim and Derek. Hassan and Fatima. Samir signing. Linnea steady now.

Young people fill the front rows. Teenagers facing death. Ife and Blessing—the girls Maya taught in Lagos. So many young faces.

Parents holding children. Elders witnessing. Zara's generation holding space between.

Marcus Reyes catches Zara's eye. Nods. Gray-haired and peaceful. Returned from Mumbai for this.

Adanna and Samuel from the Lagos compound. Chose to die here, with family.

Priya Patel across the circle. Practicing now despite years of withholding mercy.

Soso Kim near the back. Teaching presence through animal care.

Dr. Tanaka—Maya and Kofi's pediatrician. Fifteen years of well-child visits toward nothing.

Kenji rings the bell.

The room quiets. Two hundred people settling into meditation posture. Zara straightens. Closes her eyes. Returns to breath.

One. In.

Two. Out.

Her mind wanders immediately—three days, three days, three days—but she notices. Returns gently.

Three. In.

Four. Out.

Forty-five minutes of this. Two hundred people breathing together. Practicing together. Being present together. The silence profound. Sacred. Real.

When the bell rings again, Kenji speaks.

"This is all we've ever had. This moment. The asteroid didn't change that. Just made it visible. Be here. Be here. Be here."

Simple words. Wei's words. Truth passed person to person until no more persons. But right now: two hundred persons. Two hundred witnesses. Two hundred people choosing presence.

Maya speaks next. Her daughter's voice clear and steady.

"I'm seventeen. Three days left. I've practiced three years, eight months. It hasn't made dying at seventeen okay. But it's made living seventeen years real. That's—that's what I offer. Not comfort. Not answers. Just: being present to what is. However long what is lasts."

The room is completely silent. Everyone hearing. Everyone understanding. Everyone facing the same truth.

Ibrahim speaks. Then Derek. Then Hassan. Then others. Sharing. Witnessing. Teaching by being honest about not-knowing.

Then: final meditation. One hour. Two hundred people sitting together. Breathing together. Being together. Until they can't.

The silence is complete. Zara sits with her family. Kwame beside her. Maya and Kofi nearby. All of them breathing. All of them present. All of them here.

This is enough. Not in the sense of satisfying. In the sense of complete. This moment. This practice. This community. Complete.

The bell rings.

People stand. Stretch. Talk quietly. But not leaving yet—staying. Being together.

Dinner arrives. Fatima and Kwame coordinating. Two hundred people eating together. Laughter. Stories. Tears.

Zara sits with her family. Amara and David nearby. Elena and Kenji. Ibrahim and Hassan. Adanna and Samuel. Marcus. Soso. Everyone together.

This is what she built. Not just family—community. Presence spreading presence. Wei's teaching transmitted through simple act of showing up.

One day left. But tonight: everyone here. Everyone complete.

That night, Zara can't sleep.

Seven days complete. Tomorrow: the final day. Then: nothing.

She watches her family sleep. Maya restless—eighty-five days of intensive training complete, mind still racing. Kofi peaceful—fourteen years of presence without knowing he practiced it. Kwame breathing steady—fifteen years of partnership complete.

Fifteen years. Final week. Tomorrow begins the end. But tonight: breathing. Tonight: together. Tonight: alive.

She thinks about the gathering. Two hundred people practicing presence. Her daughter teaching. Her son learning. Her husband serving. Her sister witnessing. All choosing consciousness over numbness.

Wei would be proud.

Zara wishes Wei could see what her garden teaching became. Could see Maya and Kofi practicing. Could see the community holding each other.

But Wei is dead. Four years dead. Got to die her own death, ready, present, complete. Her final words: "The flower bloomed."

Yes, Zara thinks. The flower bloomed. Maya bloomed. Kofi bloomed. Family bloomed. Community bloomed. All of it temporary. All of it real.

One day left.

Zara makes a choice. The same choice she's made for fifteen years. The same choice she'll make tomorrow.

Be here. Be present. Love what she'll lose. Witness completely. That's all.

She closes her eyes. Sleeps briefly. Dreams of gardens.

Tomorrow begins the ending.

But tonight: alive. Together. Home.

Chapter 59: Countdown

Multiple POVs | Year 15, Month 4, Final Day | Antarctica

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14 Hours, 23 Minutes

The alarm doesn't wake Amara. She's been awake for hours, watching the numbers on her terminal count down with mathematical precision. David sleeps beside her—rare gift, his body finally surrendering to exhaustion after seven days of final preparations. She doesn't wake him yet. Lets him have these last moments of not-knowing, of ordinary sleep, before the day that ends everything begins.

Her terminal shows the trajectory. Perfect. Unchanged. The asteroid exactly where physics said it would be. Impact in 14 hours, 23 minutes, 17 seconds. Pacific Ocean. Energy release equivalent to 100 million megatons. The numbers are beautiful in their precision. Terrible in their certainty.

She closes the display. Enough calculations. Fifteen years of tracking. Fifteen years of knowing exactly when everyone would die. Today that knowledge becomes irrelevant. Today everyone learns what she's always known: the physics is absolute.

David stirs. Opens his eyes. Sees her watching him.

"Morning," he says quietly.

"Final morning."

"Yes." He reaches for her hand. "Ready?"

"No. But here anyway."

They lie together in the grey dawn light. Through the thin walls they hear Zara and Kwame moving in the kitchen—preparing breakfast, maintaining ritual, choosing normalcy even now. Maya's voice, explaining something to Kofi. Family sounds. Life sounds. Fourteen hours of life sounds left.

"Platform 73?" David asks.

"Yes. You?"

"Yes. Together."

They rise. Dress. The apartment is crowded—six people in sixty square meters. Three months ago it was just them. Then Zara's family arrived. Migration. Convergence. Everyone choosing to die together rather than apart.

In the kitchen, Zara has made breakfast. Real food, not just nutrient bars. She's been hoarding ingredients for this day. Eggs—synth-protein but prepared carefully. Bread. Tea. Fruit. The table set properly, like it matters. Because it does. Because this is the last breakfast.

Maya sits with her meditation journal, writing. Kofi fidgets, unable to sit still despite knowing. Or because of knowing. Kwame cooks, his way of showing love, of being present, of doing something when there's nothing to be done.

"Good morning," Zara says. Not falsely cheerful. Just: present. Fifteen years of practice in those two words.

They eat together. Six people. One family. Fourteen hours of family left.

Maya sets down her pen. "I finished my final entry."

"What did you write?" Amara asks.

"That I'm terrified and grateful both. That seventeen years, seven months wasn't enough but was real. That I loved and was loved and that's complete." Her voice is steady. "That the flower bloomed."

Wei's words. The teaching passed through Zara to Maya. Impermanence made visible. Beauty despite brevity.

Kofi reaches for another piece of bread. "I'm still hungry. Is that weird? Final day and I'm hungry."

"Bodies don't know about asteroids," David says. "They just know: alive right now. Hunger is appropriate."

They finish breakfast slowly. No rush. Nowhere to be except here, together, present. Then: the day begins.

---

13 Hours, 47 Minutes

Platform 73 appears in the grey morning light. Two hundred meters above the ice. David and Amara climb together, harnesses clipped, the routine automatic after years of repetition. The transport dock empties behind them. The city spreads below—one point eight million people beginning their final day.

47B waits at the central junction. Treads positioned precisely. Sensors focusing as they approach.

Beep beep.

"Good morning, Colleague Chen. Dr. Okafor. Final day confirmed. Impact in 13 hours, 47 minutes, 22 seconds. All systems functioning at optimal parameters. Awaiting final maintenance instructions."

David almost laughs. "Still tracking systems."

Beep. "This unit's function is maintenance coordination until cessation of function. Thirteen hours, forty-seven minutes of function remain. Shall we proceed with scheduled tasks?"

Amara looks at David. The absurdity and beauty both visible. Maintaining arrays that will vaporize. Working until work becomes impossible. The robot understanding this perfectly—function until cessation.

"Yes," David says. "Let's maintain what needs maintaining."

They work together—human, human, robot. The rhythm built over years. Connection housings checked. Voltage regulators calibrated. Panels cleaned despite knowing they'll never convert another day's sunlight. The work is meditation. Presence made physical. Meaning through action, not outcome.

Amara finds herself present to her hands on the diagnostic tablet. Her breath in the cold air. David's quiet competence beside her. 47B's steady glide between platforms. This moment. This work. This partnership. Brief and complete.

"Fourteen years," she says during platform seventeen. "You've been doing this fourteen years."

"Feels longer. Feels shorter." David tightens a connection. "Feels exactly right."

"Did you find it? What you were looking for?"

He pauses. Considers. "I wasn't looking. Just showing up. But somewhere along the way, showing up became enough. Became everything."

They work in companionable silence. The sun climbs higher. Below, the megacity continues—people waking, eating, preparing. Some gathering in community spaces. Some staying home. Some walking outside for final views of Antarctic ice. Everyone choosing how to spend thirteen hours.

At 11:00 AM, they stop for tea. Sit on the platform edge with legs dangling over empty air, safety harnesses clipped. David unpacks the thermos Zara prepared. They drink slowly.

"Any regrets?" Amara asks.

"Years 1 through 4. Wasting time being broken instead of trying to heal." He sips his tea. "But I learned from it. Became this because of it. So: regret and gratitude both."

"Both/and."

"Yes. Always both." He looks at her. "You?"

"Seven years of isolation. Should have called Zara sooner. Should have met Kofi as a baby, not a twelve-year-old." She watches the city below. "But I'm here now. Three months with them. That's something. That's real."

They finish their tea. Return to work. Hours passing. Systems holding. Everything functioning until it can't.

---

11 Hours, 19 Minutes

The community center fills slowly. Elena watches from the doorway as people arrive—some alone, some in family groups, some in the clusters that formed over years of practice. One thousand two hundred people choosing to face the end together. Choosing witness over isolation.

Marcus Rivera appears at her elbow. "Packed house."

"Everyone who chose Antarctica. Everyone who stayed." She steps inside. "Our final gathering."

The space transforms as people settle. Chen and Kowalski near the front—fifteen years of Thursday practice, fifteen years of briefing family. Both sitting with the quiet dignity of men who showed up to impossible work for decades. Dr. Sarah Kim coordinating quietly, old journalist habits applied to final logistics. Asha Marin in the back, watching people watch themselves, her installation already doing its work just by existing elsewhere in the city.

Priya Patel arrives with Aanya. Mother and daughter, both practicing, both carrying rage and gratitude. Priya's son Dev chose elsewhere—that's valid too. Different paths. Different ways of facing death. Priya has stopped judging her own hardness. Stopped needing to be healed. Just: honest about where she is. Present to rage and compassion coexisting.

Adanna and Samuel from Lagos. They arrived last week—couldn't bear to be apart from Zara's family in final days. Adanna, who defended Zara's choice to have Kofi fifteen years ago. Samuel, now twenty, who got to live because mothers chose life despite doom. Both here. Both grateful. Both terrified.

Derek arrives with his veteran group. Twelve people who learned adaptive movement together. Bodies broken, minds learning presence through physicality. He nods to Elena—former Marine who lost faith but found practice. Steady presence until the end.

Fatima organizing hospitality even now. Making sure people have water, have cushions, have space. Jordanian woman whose faith never wavered but expanded to hold everyone. Samir beside her, signing greetings, teaching that presence speaks in more than words. Deaf Syrian who showed others that silence isn't absence.

Linnea enters hesitantly. Two years clean. Shaking still. Fragile still. But here. Choosing presence over escape for final hours. The recovery group around her—people who taught each other that transformation is possible even at the end.

Barak Naveh sits quietly mid-room. Eighteen months since his release. Calm presence that others gravitate toward. Not teaching. Just: being. Shaped by guilt, not consumed. Modeling that carrying weight doesn't require drowning in it.

Obi Nwosu uncrosses his arms. Three years of skeptical practice. Still uncertain. Still showing up. His engineering mind recognizing what his emotions can't quite accept: maintenance as meaning, presence as purpose. He's here. That's complete.

Soso Kim arrives late. Twelve dogs waiting at the kennel with seven volunteers. She'll return to them soon. But first: community. First: witness. Her five years of practice visible in how she moves—environmental grief transformed into presence with current life. The dogs don't need her every moment. They just need her to show up. Same as people.

Dr. Yuki Tanaka sits observing. Maya and Kofi's pediatrician fifteen years. Witnessed their complete childhoods. Measured growth toward no future. Her clinical practice transformed into sacred witness. She's here because presence medicine is all medicine now.

The young adults cluster together. Thabo, Amara (chemistry student), Jamal, others. The ones dying youngest. The ones with most to rage about. All practicing anyway. All choosing consciousness over numbness. Maya's taught them well.

Elena moves to the front. Not as mayor—that ended months ago. Just as witness. As person who chose to show up for seventeen years.

She speaks simply. "Eleven hours remain. Then: physics. Then: silence. We can spend these hours however we choose. Some will rage. Some will grieve. Some will practice. All valid. All honored. All witnessed."

She pauses. Looks at the gathered faces. "I'm glad we're together. Glad we chose this. Not because it makes death easier. Because it makes life realer. Because witness matters. Because showing up for each other—right up until we can't—that's everything."

Silence. Then someone starts singing. Old song, folk melody, words about home. Others join. Not performance. Just: voices together. Community made audible. Presence through sound.

Elena sits beside her son. Kenji glances at her, nods. Mother and son. Seventeen years of transformation. Both learning presence through crisis. Both teaching now. Both ready as anyone can be.

Marcus Reyes on her other side. Returned from Mumbai three months ago. Thirteen years teaching refugee children. Now: home. With chosen family. Complete.

They sit together as the song continues. One thousand two hundred people singing. Not hope. Not resignation. Just: here. Together. Conscious until consciousness ends.

---

9 Hours, 43 Minutes

Kenji's apartment is small. Designed for two people, maybe three. Seventeen people pack inside. The intimacy matters. The closeness matters. Final teaching not for crowds but for family.

Maya sits beside him. Ibrahim on his other side. Hassan next to Ibrahim—imam and fighter, reconciled through both/and. Derek, Samir, Fatima forming their cluster. Linnea beside Derek, steady despite trembling. Barak calm in the corner. Marcus Reyes observing quietly. A few others—students who chose intimate over communal.

And Kofi. Fourteen years, five months. The youngest here. Sitting cross-legged, fidgeting slightly, but present. Choosing to be with his sister's teacher for final practice.

"We'll sit for an hour," Kenji says. "Simple practice. Breath. Body. This moment. Then: we talk if words come. Then: silence if silence comes. Then: we're together until we decide to part."

He rings Wei's bell. The sound cuts through everything. Clear. Complete. Final.

They close their eyes. Seventeen people breathing together.

Kenji notices his breath. In. Out. In. Out. His mind wanders immediately—thinks about Wei, about Picture Nine (returning to source—home was always here), about Picture Ten (marketplace with gift-bestowing hands—teaching until teaching ends). Returns gently. Just: breath.

Beside him, Maya breathes with fierce concentration. Two years, eight months of practice. Eighty-five days of intensive training. Final hours of being seventeen. She knows she's dying. Practices anyway. Chooses presence despite terror. The transmission complete—Wei to Zara to Maya to everyone she's taught.

Ibrahim breathes unevenly. Still struggling. Still showing up. Three years since the voice at 3 AM. *Do you really think I brought you here to forget about you?* Faith returned differently. Not certainty. But accompaniment. God present without intervening. Walking with him through death. Enough. Not enough. Both.

Hassan beside him breathing prayers. Decades of practice. Still uncertain. Still faithful. Both/and instead of either/or. Islam and presence practice merged. Different doors to same truth: be here, love what you'll lose, witness completely.

Derek breathes steadily. Marine discipline translated to meditation discipline. Fifteen years teaching adaptive movement. Bodies broken but capable. His breathing steady as platform maintenance, reliable as morning routines. Presence through physicality.

Samir's breathing is silent. But his hands move slightly—signing prayers in space. Visual worship. Embodied devotion. Teaching that presence manifests in more than one form. That silence isn't absence. That attention is prayer.

Fatima breathes and weeps quietly. Faith intact. Heart breaking. Both true. Faithful Muslim who never lost God but learned to hold everyone's doubt without diminishing it. Her breathing becomes her prayer.

Linnea struggles. Shaking. Craving rising—always rises under stress. But she doesn't run. Breathes through it. Two years clean. Final hours clean. The practice holding her when nothing else can. Derek's hand moves slightly toward hers—offering steadiness without demanding anything.

Barak breathes easily. Eighteen months of freedom made sacred by years of reflection. Guilt carried without being consumed. The breathing comes naturally—presence learned through confinement, practiced through liberty. Peace not as destination but as current state.

Kofi gets bored at minute twelve. Opens his eyes. Watches everyone else. Closes them again. Tries. Returns. Fidgets. Tries again. Fourteen years old, practicing presence the only way he can—honestly, imperfectly, here.

The hour passes. The bell rings again.

Eyes open. Seventeen faces. Some peaceful. Some tear-streaked. Some frustrated. All present.

"Anyone want to speak?" Kenji asks.

Silence. Then Maya: "I'm so scared."

"I know," Kenji says.

"Practice didn't fix that. Two years, eight months. Still terrified."

"Practice doesn't fix fear. Just teaches you to be present to it. You're doing that. That's complete."

Ibrahim speaks next. "I still don't understand meaning. Why any of this mattered if it just ends. But I'm grateful anyway. Grateful for this—" He gestures at the room, at the people. "Nine years with you all. Kept me alive. Taught me presence. That's something. That's—" His voice breaks. "That's everything, maybe."

Hassan adds: "Allah is with us. I believe that now differently than I did fifteen years ago. Not watching from above. Here. In this room. In our breathing. In our fear. In our love. Accompanying us through death. That's faith. That's enough."

They continue. Each person speaking or not speaking. Each presence honored. Each fear witnessed. Each gratitude named.

Until they settle into silence again. Seventeen people just: being together. No more words. Just: breath. Bodies. Moment. Together.

Nine hours until impact. Nine hours of this. Then: whatever comes next.

---

7 Hours, 11 Minutes

Zara's family stays home. Their temporary apartment in Building 14. Four people in two rooms. Crowded. Perfect. Together.

They play a game. Kofi's choice. Old board game, strategy and luck mixed. Maya wins the first round. Kofi protests loudly. Kwame referees gently. Zara watches her family play and feels: not peace. Not acceptance. But presence. Being here completely with people she loves. That's all she has. That's everything she has.

Between rounds, Maya asks: "Mama, were we enough? Did we do it right?"

Zara pulls her daughter close. "You were perfect. Are perfect. Seventeen years of you being you—that's complete. Not long enough. Never long enough. But complete."

"I wanted more time."

"I know, baby. I want that for you so badly. But wanting doesn't change physics. What we have is these seven hours. This family. This love. That's real."

Kofi joins the embrace. Then Kwame. Four people holding each other. Family until family becomes impossible.

They return to the game. Playing carefully. Laughing occasionally. Being normal on an abnormal day. Choosing ordinary. Choosing present. Choosing each other.

At 3:00 PM, they make tea. Wei's mint—cuttings from Min-seo's plant, grown on their Lagos balcony, brought to Antarctica as seeds, cultivated here against all logic. The plant thrives somehow. One more proof that brief life matters.

They drink tea slowly. Seven hours until they die. Seven hours of tea, of games, of conversation, of silence, of family. Not enough. Everything.

---

5 Hours, 36 Minutes

The countdown accelerates. Hours becoming visceral. Everyone feeling time collapse.

At Platform 73, Amara and David finish their final repair. Systems holding at ninety-three percent. Perfect function. Useless function. Beautiful function. They sit together watching the megacity below. Nearly two million people making final choices.

47B approaches. *Beep beep.* "All systems optimal. Five hours, thirty-six minutes of function remaining. Colleague Chen. Dr. Okafor. This unit wishes to express: working with humans has been optimal experience. Gratitude for partnership."

David laughs and cries simultaneously. "Thank you, 47B. You've been the best colleague."

Beep. "Acknowledged. Shall we remain at this platform until cessation? This unit calculates optimal human emotional outcomes from continued proximity."

"Yes," Amara says. "Let's stay together."

They sit. Three beings—two human, one mechanical. Partners in maintenance. Friends through repetition. Present until the end.

At the community center, Elena walks among the gathered. One thousand two hundred people in various states—some meditating, some talking, some crying, some laughing. All together. All choosing community over isolation.

She stops beside Chen and Kowalski. "Fifteen years of morning briefings."

"Five thousand four hundred seventy-five," Chen says automatically. "More or less."

"Worth it?"

"Every single one," Kowalski answers.

They sit together. Three government officials who tried to maintain impossible systems through impossible times. All of them failed by any objective measure. All of them succeeded at the only thing that mattered: showing up.

Kenji's apartment empties slowly. People choosing their final locations. Some staying, some leaving for elsewhere. Maya and Kofi head home to their parents. Ibrahim and Hassan to the mosque for final prayers. Derek and his group to walk meditations. Everyone choosing. Everyone honored.

Seventeen becomes twelve becomes seven becomes three. Kenji, Marcus Reyes, Barak. They sit in silence. Different faiths. Different paths. Same destination. Same presence.

"Picture Ten," Kenji says quietly. "Marketplace with gift-bestowing hands. Teaching until there's no one left to teach. Then: returning to source. Then:

home."

"Home," Marcus echoes.

They sit together. Three men who found presence through different doors. All arriving here. All complete.

---

3 Hours, 22 Minutes

At Building 14, Zara cooks final dinner. Real food, saved for this moment. Pasta—synth-wheat but prepared carefully. Sauce made from hoarded tomatoes. Bread. Wine—one bottle, saved for fifteen years.

Four people eating slowly. Savoring. Present. Kofi talks about the game. Maya reads a passage from her meditation journal. Kwame tells a story from twenty years ago, before the asteroid, when futures existed. Zara listens and loves and witnesses.

They finish. Clean dishes together. The ritual matters. The normalcy matters. Doing ordinary things on the last day.

Then they move to the living room. Sit together on the floor. Four people in a circle. Holding hands.

"I love you," Zara says. "All of you. So much."

"I love you, Mama," Maya says.

"Love you," Kofi adds.

"Love you all," Kwame finishes.

They sit. Breathing. Together. Three hours until they die. Three hours of this. Enough. Not enough. Both. Always both.

---

1 Hour, 47 Minutes

The megacity quiets. Nearly two million people in final moments. Some still moving—walking, gathering, seeking. But most: settled. In chosen places. With chosen people. Waiting.

The community center holds its one thousand two hundred. Silent now. Breathing together. Elena sits beside Kenji, beside Marcus Rivera, beside Marcus Reyes. Four people who became family through apocalypse. All present. All ready as possible.

Priya Patel holds Aanya's hand. Mother and daughter. Rage and compassion both. Unforgiveness transforming through presence. Not healed. Just: honest. That's enough.

Derek sits with his veterans. Twelve bodies broken in different ways. All present. All practicing. All witnessing each other. Steady until they can't be.

Fatima prays quietly. Samir signs prayers beside her. Linnea shakes but doesn't run. Barak breathes calmly. Obi sits with arms uncrossed, finally surrendered to uncertainty. Chen and Kowalski side by side, Thursday practice complete.

Soso Kim returns to the kennel. Twelve dogs. Seven volunteers. They sit with the animals. Mochi (sixteen, blind) sensing something wrong. Scout (three legs) restless. Luna (deaf) calm. The others scattered—anxious, confused, present. Soso touches each one. Witnesses each one. Loves them completely. Brief life mattering absolutely.

At Platform 73, Amara and David sit in silence. 47B beside them. Three beings watching the horizon. Waiting for the light.

At the mosque, fifty people pray. Ibrahim and Hassan leading. Muslim and presence teacher merged. Different forms of same practice: surrender. Witnessing. Loving what you'll lose. Being here until here ends.

At Kenji's apartment, silence. Just: breathing. Three men present. Complete.

At Building 14, four people holding each other. Zara's family. Together until together becomes impossible. The promise kept. No one alone. Everyone loved. Everyone witnessed.

---

47 Minutes

The asteroid becomes visible. Distant speck. Growing. Mathematics made manifest. Physics becoming real.

Amara watches it through her portable terminal. Trajectory perfect. Speed constant. Impact inevitable. Fifteen years of calculations confirmed. The universe indifferent. The physics absolute.

But beside her: David. His hand in hers. Warm. Real. Present. And that—that tiny human warmth against cosmic indifference—that matters. Means something. Is something.

Beep beep. "Asteroid visible. Impact trajectory confirmed. Forty-seven minutes to cessation. Colleague Chen. Dr. Okafor. This unit's function ends soon. Gratitude for everything."

"Thank you, 47B," David says. "You made it matter."

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28 Minutes

Time collapsing. Minutes feeling like seconds. Everyone breathing faster. Hearts pounding. Bodies knowing.

Maya writes final words in her journal: *The flower bloomed. Seventeen years, seven months. Brief. Beautiful. Real. I'm ready. I'm terrified. Both. I love my family. I'm grateful. I'm here.*

She sets down the pen. Closes the journal. Looks at her family. "I'm done. That's complete."

Kofi: "I'm scared, Mama."

Zara: "I know, baby. Me too. But we're together. That helps. That's everything."

---

14 Minutes

The city watches the sky. The asteroid huge now. Impossible to miss. Reality approaching. Everyone seeing. Everyone understanding. Everyone present to what's coming.

At the community center, people hold each other. Strangers and friends and family mixed. Human proximity. Witness. Love. Terror. Gratitude. All of it. All at once.

Elena thinks about Daniel Okonkwo. Hopes he found peace somehow. Hopes mercy matters somewhere. Carries his weight without being consumed. Both/and. Always both.

Kenji thinks about Wei. The flower bloomed. Home was always here. Ten Pictures complete. Teaching transmitted. Presence practiced. Enough.

Ibrahim feels the presence. Not intervening. Not saving. But here. Accompanying. *I was always here.* Faith differently. Enough.

---

7 Minutes

Zara holds her children. Kwame holds all of them. Four people breathing. Crying. Here. Together.

Maya: "Thank you for having me. For raising me. For teaching me. For loving me."

Zara: "Thank you for being you. For blessing us. For living fully. For being present."

Kofi: "I don't want to die."

Zara: "I know, baby. Neither do I. But we're together. We're together. We're together."

---

3 Minutes

Everyone in final positions. Final breaths. Final moments of consciousness. Humanity's last minutes.

At Platform 73: Amara, David, 47B. Watching. Together.

At community center: One thousand two hundred people. Holding. Witnessing. Present.

At mosque: Fifty people praying. Surrendering. Both meanings.

At Building 14: Four people. Family. Complete.

At kennel: Twelve dogs, seven humans. Life witnessing life.

Everywhere: people. Conscious. Here. Brief. Real. Mattering.

---

1 Minute

The asteroid fills the sky. Massive. Inevitable. Beautiful in its terrible way. Physics made manifest. Mathematics made real. The end approaching.

Amara thinks: *The calculations were perfect.*

David thinks: *I showed up. That was enough.*

Zara thinks: *They were loved. That's everything.*

Maya thinks: *I was here. Completely. That's complete.*

Kofi thinks: *Mama's holding me. I'm not alone.*

Elena thinks: *I witnessed. That mattered.*

Kenji thinks: *Home. We're home.*

Ibrahim thinks: *You were here. All along.*

Everyone thinking. Everyone present. Everyone conscious until—

---

30 Seconds

Hands holding hands. Bodies pressed together. Breath synchronized. Hearts pounding. Eyes open or closed. Fear. Love. Presence. All of it.

The light building. The heat building. Physics fulfilling itself.

Twenty seconds.

Everyone breathing. Everyone here. Everyone—

Fifteen seconds.

I love you.

I'm here.

Together.

Ten seconds.

The asteroid hitting atmosphere. The light beginning. Massive. Bright. Growing.

Five seconds.

Everyone holding. Everyone present. Everyone—

Three.

Two.

One.

The light—

Impact.

Pacific Ocean. Energy released. One hundred million megatons. Heat. Blast. Shockwave. Propagating at speed beyond escape. Beyond shelter. Beyond survival.

At Platform 73, systems failing. Arrays vaporizing. The platform falling. 47B's sensors detecting catastrophic system failure. David holding Amara. Both present. Both here. Until—

At Building 14, the shockwave approaching. Thirty seconds to arrival. Zara holding her children. Kwame holding all of them. Four people together. Breathing. Present. Witnessing each other. Loving each other. Until—

At community center, the walls shaking. People holding tighter. One thousand two hundred consciousnesses. Present. Together. Witnessing. Until—

The light consuming everything.

The shockwave consuming everything.

The heat consuming everything.

Everyone—

All of them—

Together—

Until—

Consciousness ending.

Presence ending.

Witness ending.

But for fifteen years: they tried.

For fifteen years: they loved.

For fifteen years: they were here.

That happened.

That mattered.

That was enough.

Until it ended.

As everything ends.

As everything always ends.

The flower bloomed.

Then faded.

As flowers do.

As everything does.

Home.

Chapter 60: Home

Post-Impact | Year 15, Month 4 | Earth

Impact.

The asteroid strikes the Pacific Ocean at hypersonic speed. Rock and water and atmosphere meet with energy beyond anything the planet has experienced in billions of years.

In the first instant, ocean becomes steam, then plasma. A transient crater forms in water and crust—fifteen kilometers deep, hundreds across—before rebounding, collapsing, erasing itself in molten turbulence.

The thermal pulse races outward at light speed. Air flashes to fire. Clouds become incandescent. The sky over the Pacific brightens beyond noon, then beyond any human concept of brightness, then beyond any eye's capacity to see.

Thirty seconds later, the leading edge of the shockwave reaches Antarctica.

Ice sheets flex and shatter. Bedrock rings. Surface structures—towers, walkways, platforms, neighborhoods—fail almost simultaneously. Metal frames crumple, concrete powders, glass vaporizes. Solar arrays that tracked the sun for fourteen years sublimate into expanding gas, etched circuitry reduced to a trace in the plasma wind.

Buildings collapse faster than sound can carry the noise of their own failure. What was a megacity becomes a moving cloud of dust and vapor and incandescent fragments, then nothing distinct at all.

Across the globe, seismic waves wrap the planet again and again. Oceans surge into continents. Mountain ranges slump. Fault lines long locked release in minutes what they stored for millennia. The atmosphere convects, glows, strips itself of stable patterns. Weather, as a concept, ends.

From orbit—if any eye still watched—the planet would look briefly like a star that tried to be born and failed. A bright wound opens on the night side, spreads, fades. Thermal signatures smear, then blur, then settle toward evenness.

In hours, the surface is an ocean of rock transitioning between liquid and solid. Nothing that once lived persists in recognizable form. No structures. No archives. No machines quietly waiting to be powered back on. Everything that remembered, recorded, or extended human presence has joined the same undifferentiated flow.

In time, dust and aerosols spread through the thickening atmosphere. The sky, if there were an eye to see it, would shift color and texture, opacity and glow.

As the planet cools toward a new equilibrium, crust thickens. A different pattern of plates and faults and basins emerges. Rain falls again. New oceans gather in new depressions. Volcanic ridges raise new islands above the water. Storms streak across a sky without memory.

In sheltered places—on cooling rock at a shoreline, around a deep-sea vent in a newborn ocean, within porous stone that was once buried beneath a vanished city—chemical gradients form. Molecules organize, fall apart, reorganize. Some persist longer than others. Complexity ratchets upward by increments no consciousness remains to count.

The planet turns.

It orbits.

It responds.

It does not grieve. It does not remember. Rocks and atmospheres do not carry stories in any way that resembles intention.

What happened in the fifteen years between detection and impact leaves no durable mark here. No monument survives. No inscription. No fossil arranged to say: they knew, and they chose presence anyway.

From the outside, the entire arc of human consciousness is a thin film on a cooling rock that briefly lit up and rearranged the surface chemistry.

From the inside, for as long as an inside existed, it was everything.

Breath by breath. Choice by choice. Maintenance check by maintenance check. Prayer by prayer. Laugh by laugh. Hand on fur, hand in hand, hand on worn-out console. All of it: complete for its length.

There is no afterimage in the rock. No echo in the sky. No observer to declare meaning.

Still, for fifteen years, they were here.

The flower bloomed.