THE NODAL WOMAN

Book One: Convergence

A Xenobiology Series Novella

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Contents

Chapter One

The Number

The six digits Priya Anand wrote at 03:52 on the night of Session 14 were 271828 — the first digits of *e*, if you rounded wrong, which was the first thing she checked and the last thing that made her feel better about any of it.

She had not told the review board that part. She had told them what the equipment log told them: three clocks, no network, agreement to the hundredth of a second, no manual resync issued. She had not told them that Dr. Okonkwo's notepad, six feet away, in a room with the lights off, held the same six digits in the same order, or that neither of them had spoken a word between 03:41 and 03:53. The board had revoked her clearance for "unauthorized interpretive framing" and reinstated the equipment budget. Somewhere in a filing cabinet in a building she was no longer allowed to enter, a thread called IMPLICATE-7 had been marked closed.

That had been fourteen months ago. Tonight, Priya was thirty-one thousand feet over the Pacific in a middle seat between a sleeping stranger and a fold-down tray table, and she was trying very hard not to look at anything, because looking at things had stopped being safe in the way it used to be safe.

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It had started small. A hallway she hadn't walked yet, known in the muscles of her legs before her eyes confirmed it. A colleague's sentence, finished in her head a half-second before he said it — not the gist, the exact words, including the stammer. She had told herself, for months, that this was pattern recognition doing what pattern recognition does when a mind has spent a decade around the same twenty people: extrapolation, not prophecy. Ordinary. Explainable. Wheeler would have had a diagram for it.

Then, four months ago, she'd been standing in a pharmacy in Utrecht — not her city, not her life, a layover she hadn't planned — and she had known, with the specific, textureless certainty of remembering rather than guessing, that the woman two aisles over was about to drop a glass bottle of aspirin, that it would not break, that she would apologize in Dutch to no one in particular, that the cap would roll under a display of reading glasses and stop against the third leg from the left. All of it happened. In order. On time.

Priya did not call this precognition, even in the privacy of her own skull, because precognition implied a *when* that hadn't arrived yet, and what she felt, increasingly, was that the when had already happened — was always already happening — and she was only, occasionally, standing close enough

to a seam to see through it. That was the distinction she had tried to explain to the board, badly, at 4 a.m., fourteen months and one demotion ago. She was not seeing the future. She was misplacing her position in a landscape that had never been strictly sequential to begin with, and every time it happened, some small percentage of her stopped experiencing time as a line at all — stopped, and did not come back.

She had started keeping a written log of what day it was. Not because she forgot. Because increasingly, she had to check.

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The man in the aisle seat woke somewhere over the dateline and asked her, apropos of nothing, whether she believed in fate.

"No," she said, which was true in every sense that mattered to the conversation he thought he was having.

What she believed in, if belief was even the right verb for something that had stopped requiring her consent, was this: that the future was not a place reality was going, but a place reality already was — the way the far end of a room is already there before you've crossed it — and that almost every human mind, for almost the whole of its life, correctly and healthily behaved as though this were false, because believing it were true, really believing it, in your body, cost something. She had read Bohm's *implicate order* the way other people read scripture: not for the physics, which she couldn't evaluate any better than a layperson, but for the shape of the claim, which matched, uncomfortably well, the shape of what was happening to her.

What she had never told the board — what she had barely let herself think in whole sentences — was that she was starting to be able to find the places where it mattered. Not every seam. Most seams were noise: a dropped bottle, a finished sentence, forgettable, cheap. But some seams had weight to them, a gravity she felt in her sternum before she understood why, and those seams clustered. They were converging. Whatever measure of the world's future was already, in some sense, fixed rather than open, it was narrowing toward something, soon, the way a wide river narrows before a falls — and she was one of an unknown, possibly singular, number of people who could feel the narrowing happen.

She did not have a name for this that she trusted. "Precognition" was wrong. "Intuition" was too small. In her private notes — the ones she kept in a notebook and not a device, on the theory that some things should require ink — she had started calling it *nodal sight*: not the ability to predict a future built from probability and mass behavior, the way the old models of civilizational

forecasting had once promised to do with enough data and a big enough equation, but something narrower and stranger — the ability to feel where the branches of what-might-happen were being pulled, one at a time, cell by cell, into what-will-have-happened. A statistician could tell you the odds across a billion lives. She could only ever feel one convergence at a time, in her own body, like a held breath she hadn't chosen to hold.

The cost, as far as she could tell, was herself. Every convergence she read cost her a little of her hold on sequence — a morning she couldn't place in order, a conversation she remembered having before it happened and then, impossibly, again after. She was becoming, by slow degrees, less a person moving through time than a person the time was moving through. She did not know how many more she could read before there was not enough of her left, in the ordinary sense of a person, to do the reading.

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She felt this one three hours before the plane landed.

It arrived the way they always did now: not as an image, not as words, but as weight, low and specific, behind her sternum, oriented — she had learned to trust this part — toward a place and away from a time. West. Soon. A room she had never stood in, with a smell she recognized before she'd ever have cause to: the particular cold, faintly bleach-sweet air of a Biosafety Level 3 containment corridor, the kind she'd walked exactly once, on a tour, nine years ago, before any of this.

She did not know, yet, whose lab it was, or what was in it, or which of the world's several ongoing arguments about mirror-image biochemistry and synthetic life and the containment protocols nobody could quite agree were strict enough it belonged to. She knew only that it was real, that it was close, and that unlike the aspirin bottle in Utrecht, unlike the six digits on a notepad fourteen months ago, this seam had a second person standing in it with her — faint, at the edge of the pull, unmistakably there. Someone else, somewhere, was also about to be close enough to see through.

She had spent fourteen months believing IMPLICATE-7 was something that had happened to her once, in one room, on one night, and had then, mercifully, closed. Sitting in a middle seat over the widest ocean on Earth, feeling a room she had never seen pull at her chest like a tide going out before a wave nobody else could yet feel coming, Priya Anand understood, with the same textureless certainty that had once told her about an aspirin bottle three seconds before it fell, that it had not closed at all. It had been waiting for her to get close enough to the next one.

She took out her notebook, the one that required ink, and under today's carefully verified date, she wrote down everything she'd felt, in order, while it was still true that things happened in an order at all. Then, because some habits outlast the reasons for them, she checked the date again.

Chapter Two

The Culture

The thing about a mirror cell, Dr. Amara Osei had told the ethics panel eight months ago, is that nothing alive on Earth has ever had to survive it before. Not a virus. Not an immune system built across four billion years of arms races. Not one white blood cell, in one animal, anywhere in the fossil record. Every predator and every prey and every parasite on the planet had been shaped by the same-handed chemistry — left-handed amino acids, right-handed sugars — for the entire span of life's existence, because that was the coin flip biology had made once, early, and never had reason to make twice. A mirror organism would not be poison to that system. It would be invisible to it. It would be the first predator in history born already immune to every defense its prey had ever evolved.

The panel had approved the research anyway, on the grounds that understanding the risk required someone, somewhere, under enough containment, to actually build the smallest possible version of it. Amara had spent the eight months since trying not to be the person who regretted winning that argument.

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Culture Room Two sat behind four separate door interlocks and a pressure differential steep enough to make her ears pop on the way in, and Amara had stopped noticing any of it the way you stop noticing your own heartbeat. What she noticed, at 11:14 on a Tuesday morning, was the number on the growth monitor, because it was wrong in a way that mattered.

Mirror-amino-acid cultures grew slowly. That was the whole safety architecture, really, dressed up in more official language: they grew slowly because nothing in this room had evolved efficient machinery for mirror-chemistry in the first place, and the small enzyme scaffolds Amara's team had built by hand were clumsy, deliberately clumsy, bottlenecked at every step they could bottleneck. Slow was the point. Slow was the whole safety case.

The monitor read a doubling time of forty minutes. Their design target, on a good day, in a rich medium, with every enzyme performing at its theoretical best, was six hours.

Amara read it twice. Then she did the thing she always did when a number looked wrong before she'd let herself think the word *why*, which was check the instrument, not the organism, because in eight months of working with something this new, it had always, every single time, been the instrument.

It was not the instrument. The backup optical reader, on an entirely separate calibration schedule, agreed with the primary to three decimal places.

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She called Dmitri before she called anyone whose title required her to. He was the only other person on the floor who'd understand the number without her having to translate it into a sentence that would trigger a shutdown protocol before she'd had five minutes to think.

"Show me," he said, and then, forty seconds later, standing next to her, looking at the same screen, "Show me again," as though the number might have the decency to be a glitch on second viewing. It wasn't.

"We didn't change the medium," Amara said. "We didn't change the strain. We didn't touch the enzyme scaffold. This is the same culture we split from Monday's stock."

"Then it did something," Dmitri said. "Something we didn't do. Which is the sentence I don't want to be the one who says out loud in the incident report."

Neither of them said the next sentence, the one underneath that one, the one about what it would mean for a system deliberately built to be clumsy and slow to spontaneously find a faster path through its own chemistry — not evolved toward it, across generations and selection pressure, the way everything alive had always done, but simply, in a single tuesday, *arrived* there, the way you arrive somewhere you'd never actually had to travel to at all.

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The first time Amara noticed the clock, she almost didn't notice it — it registered the way a held note registers, as an absence you only clock once it stops. The wall clock in Culture Room Two, the analog one nobody had replaced because nobody had ever had a reason to, had been reading 11:14 for what her own phone insisted was eleven minutes.

"Dmitri."

"I see it."

"It's not broken. Look at the second hand."

The second hand was moving. Steadily, audibly, the small mechanical tick she'd stopped hearing months ago suddenly the loudest thing in the room. It was moving through its circuit and arriving, every sixty seconds, back at a position that read 11:14, as if the minute hand beneath it had simply declined

to participate any further in what the rest of the building agreed was happening.

Amara had spent eight months managing a fear with a name and a shape: containment breach, exposure, a mirror-protein loose in a body with no defenses built for it. She had never built a shelf in her head for a fear with no shape at all — for the possibility that the danger in the room wasn't going to leave through the door, because it wasn't spreading through space the way the safety protocols had spent eight months preparing her to imagine. It was arriving through something none of the four interlocks, none of the pressure differentials, had ever been built to hold a line against.

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She would think about this moment for a long time afterward, turning it over the way you turn over the last ordinary thing you did before you found out it was the last ordinary thing: she reached for her phone to photograph the wall clock, for the incident file, for Dmitri, for herself — and stopped, mid-motion, with a certainty she had no mechanism for and no words she trusted for, that if she looked up from the phone she would not be looking at an empty doorway.

She looked up. The doorway was empty. But for exactly as long as it took her heart to complete one uneven beat, she had known, the way she knew the growth-rate math without having to run it, that something on the other side of that convergence — a word she did not have yet, would not have for another six days — was, at that same moment, three hours behind her on the clock and a continent's width east, doing the same thing: looking up, expecting a door, finding it empty, and not quite believing it.

Chapter Three

The Fourth Interlock

The protocol had a name — Containment Escalation Level 3 — and a binder, and a laminated card taped inside the third interlock that nobody had ever needed to read aloud before, because Level 3 was the level below the level where the building itself stopped being yours to manage. Amara read it aloud anyway, to Dmitri, at 11:52, forty minutes after the clock had gone strange, because saying the steps out loud was the only way she trusted herself not to skip one.

"Isolate the culture. Seal the room. Notify the biosafety officer. Do not, under any circumstance, attempt independent remediation."

"We're not going to attempt independent remediation," Dmitri said, in the tone of a man reassuring himself as much as her.

"I know."

"I just want it said."

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The biosafety officer's name was Reyes, and Reyes had the specific calm of a person who had run this drill eleven times in a decade and needed it to be a drill for the twelfth. She stood at the observation window with a tablet and did not raise her voice once, which Amara found, perversely, more frightening than shouting would have been.

"Walk me through the growth curve again," Reyes said.

Amara walked her through it. Forty minutes, where six hours was the design ceiling. Two independent optical readers in agreement. No change to strain, medium, or scaffold. Reyes did not write any of this down; she had a second tablet doing that automatically, timestamped, admissible, and Amara understood, watching her not write, that this conversation had already stopped being a conversation between two scientists and become something closer to testimony.

"And the clock," Reyes said, not as a question.

"The clock," Amara agreed.

Reyes looked at the analog clock on the wall of Culture Room Two, which had by then resumed ordinary time, unremarked, unrepaired, as though it had merely been resting. "I'm going to need you to not put that in the incident

report," she said. "Not because I don't believe you. Because the moment it's in a written report, this stops being a biocontainment escalation with a Level 3 protocol I know how to run, and becomes something with no protocol at all, run by people who are not in this building. I would like to solve this before that happens. I don't think we have very long."

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By 13:00 the culture's doubling time had dropped to eleven minutes.

By 14:30, the fourth interlock — the one that had never, in the facility's nine-year history, needed to seal on anything other than a scheduled test — sealed on its own, without a manual trigger, without an alarm condition that any log could account for, three seconds, Amara would calculate much later, after the growth monitor crossed a threshold nobody had told it to watch for.

It was Dmitri who said the thing neither of them had let themselves say since 11:14. He said it quietly, looking at the sealed door rather than at her, in the voice of a man handing over something heavy and wanting to be done holding it. "It's not growing faster because something changed the chemistry. It's growing faster because something changed *when* the chemistry gets to happen. Every generation, it's reaching forward and getting there early. Like it's not evolving toward efficient. Like it already knows efficient, from somewhere, and it's just — arriving."

Amara did not have a rebuttal for this. She had spent eight months building a bioethics case around the idea that mirror life would be dangerous the way a new predator is dangerous: through the ordinary, explicable mechanics of chemistry meeting a body with no defenses prepared for it. She had never built a case, because no one had ever asked her to, for what to do if the danger wasn't chemical at all — if the thing loose in Culture Room Two had found a door that had nothing to do with any door the four interlocks had been built to hold.

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At 15:04, Reyes came back to the window with a different tablet and a different posture, and Amara understood before she spoke that whatever the woman's calm had been holding back for the last four hours had just run out of room.

"We have a match," Reyes said.

"A match to what?"

"Fourteen months ago, a facility on another continent filed a closed internal incident under a classification I only have partial access to. Instrumentation desynchronization. Unaccountable timestamp agreement across unconnected devices. It was closed as equipment fault and the file was never escalated." Reyes turned the tablet so Amara could see it, though there was almost nothing on the screen — a case number, a date, and beneath it, six digits Amara didn't recognize and would not, for six more days, understand the significance of. "I don't think it was an equipment fault," Reyes said. "I think we are not the first room this has happened in. And I don't think," she added, in the same level voice she had used all afternoon, the voice that had stopped, sometime in the last hour, being reassuring and become something closer to a countdown, "that we're going to be the last."

Chapter Four

The Call

Priya's phone found a signal somewhere over the Alaskan coast, four hours before landing, and did the thing phones do after a long silence: it delivered everything at once, no order, no mercy. Forty-one emails. A missed call from a number she didn't recognize, then another, then a third, spaced exactly nineteen minutes apart, which was itself the kind of detail she'd stopped being able to see as coincidence.

The voicemail was eleven seconds long. "Dr. Anand, this is Elena Reyes, biosafety office, calling about a case reference IMPLICATE-7. I understand you may have been the point of contact. Please call back at your earliest convenience. This is time-sensitive."

Priya had spent fourteen months believing exactly six people alive knew that name, and that all six of them had signed something promising never to say it out loud again. She listened to the message twice, checked the date on her phone out of habit, and then, for the first time in fourteen months, called a stranger back before she'd finished being afraid of what the stranger would say.

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"You're the one from the review board file," Reyes said, without preamble, the moment the call connected. No hello. Priya found this, of everything that had happened that day, the most reassuring thing yet — a person too busy for social performance was a person who believed the emergency was real.

"I'm the one they revoked," Priya said. "If that's the file you mean."

"It's the file I mean. I need to ask you something and I need you to answer it before you decide whether you trust me, because I don't have time to earn that first. Six digits. Do they mean anything to you beyond the incident report?"

Priya was quiet long enough that Reyes said her name once, checking the line hadn't dropped. "Two, seven, one, eight, two, eight," Priya said finally. "The first six digits of e, if you round the last one wrong. I've never told anyone that part. It wasn't in the report."

"It's not in your report," Reyes agreed. "It's in mine. From four hours ago. From a room you've never been in, on a continent you're not on, from a woman who has never heard your name."

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Priya did not remember agreeing to the video call. She remembered, later, the specific vertigo of watching a face she had never seen — Dr. Amara Osei, the caption read, before Reyes muted herself and let the two of them have the connection — wearing the exact expression Priya suspected she herself had worn in the Utrecht pharmacy: the look of someone doing arithmetic on a number that refused to resolve into anything but true.

"You felt it," Amara said. Not a question either. It seemed, Priya thought, to be a day for people skipping the question mark entirely, as though uncertainty itself had become a kind of luxury nobody present could afford. "Around eleven fourteen, your time zone adjusted. A pull. Westward, or it felt westward to you, I don't know how you'd describe direction for something that isn't spatial. Am I — "

"You're not wrong," Priya said. "I've never had anyone else describe it before. I didn't know it was describable."

"I'm a microbiologist," Amara said, in the tone of someone laying down a weapon before a negotiation. "I don't have a framework for this. I have a framework for what happened in my culture room, and it doesn't include the word *felt*."

"I don't have a framework either," Priya said. "I have a notebook and a demotion and a word I made up because the real words were all wrong. Nodal sight. I don't love it. It's what I've got."

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It was Reyes, unmuting, who said the sentence that turned the call from two frightened women comparing symptoms into something with a shape and a deadline.

"I need both of you to hear this at the same time, because I don't want to be the only person carrying it," Reyes said. "Amara's culture crossed a growth-rate threshold this afternoon that our models say should take longer than the culture has existed. I pulled every closed incident in the biosafety cross-reference system that mentioned unaccountable timestamp synchronization, going back eleven years. There are four. Yours is the earliest. Hers is the most recent. The other two are eight months apart, both flagged and closed the same way — equipment fault, no further action — and both, like yours, involved a facility working with something at the edge of what we currently understand containment to mean. One was a fusion ignition test. One was a quantum error-correction array running longer coherence times than the hardware should physically allow."

"Four," Amara repeated. "In eleven years."

"Four that got flagged and looked similar enough for the system to connect them," Reyes said. "I don't know how many happened and didn't get flagged. I don't know how many are happening right now, this hour, that haven't crossed a threshold anyone's watching for yet. What I know is that the interval between them is shrinking. Eleven years to the second. Eight months to the third. Fourteen months to yours, Dr. Anand. Hours, between yours, Dr. Osei, and this call."

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Priya looked out the window at cloud cover the color of an old bruise and did the thing she had promised herself, fourteen months ago, in front of a review board, she would never do out loud again: she said what she felt, without hedging it in the vocabulary of extrapolation and pattern recognition, without giving anyone in the conversation the exit ramp of assuming she meant something smaller and safer than what she meant.

"It's not slowing down," she said. "Whatever this is. It's not four isolated rooms getting unlucky over a decade. It's the same seam, and the seam is widening, and I think — " she stopped, because the next sentence was the one she had spent fourteen months not letting herself finish even in her own notebook, in ink, alone, " — I think it's counting down to something that involves all of us, not just the rooms it's already visited. I think we're not being warned about isolated accidents. I think we're being shown a rate."

No one on the call disagreed with her. That, more than anything Reyes's tablets had logged that day, was the detail Priya would remember as the moment the ground actually moved: not an alarm, not a klaxon, just two other women, on two other continents, going quiet in the specific way people go quiet when a fear has just stopped being only yours.

Chapter Five

Thirty-One Thousand Feet

It happened while she was still holding the phone.

Priya would spend a long time afterward trying to find the right verb for what came next, the way she'd once spent months trying to find the right noun for what she was, and failing for the same reason both times: the ordinary vocabulary assumed a sequence — first this, then that — and what she experienced had no *then* in it at all. Reyes was mid-sentence. Amara's face was still on the screen, mouth open around a word Priya would never hear her finish. And the pull arrived, not building the way it always built, not a tide going out over minutes, but simply, entirely, *there*, filling her chest like a held breath exhaled at last from the wrong direction.

It was close this time. Not a continent away. Not even a room away. It was here, in the recycled air and dimmed cabin lights of a hundred and eighty people thirty-one thousand feet above an ocean, and for the first time in fourteen months of feeling other people's futures at a comfortable, bearable distance, Priya felt her own.

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"Priya." Amara's voice, small and tinny through the phone speaker, very far away now in every sense that mattered. "Priya, your feed just — you're still there, your video's still connected, but you went somewhere. Your eyes did the thing. What's happening?"

Priya could not have answered in a sentence with a subject and a verb in the order English required. What she could do — the only thing the last fourteen months had actually prepared her for — was notice, without panic, with something closer to the terrible calm of finally being handed the exam she'd been studying for in the dark: the cabin lights were not flickering. They had gone to a brightness that didn't correspond to any setting the aircraft's dimming system offered, a brightness that felt less like electricity and more like the visual equivalent of a held note. Across the aisle, a man's phone screen, powered off, dark, in his pocket, was audibly buzzing with an incoming call that would, when he checked it eleven minutes later, show no record of ever arriving.

And beneath her sternum, the pull was not pointing outward anymore. For the first time since Utrecht, since the aspirin bottle, since the six digits on a notepad, it was not showing her someone else's convergence. It was showing her her own name.

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"Say something," Amara said, and Priya heard, underneath the words, the specific fear of a person watching a screen instead of being able to cross a room. "Anything. I need to know you're — "

"I'm here," Priya said, and her own voice sounded, to her, like it was arriving slightly ahead of when she produced it, a half-syllable of anticipation she had never noticed in her own speech before and would spend the rest of her life, however much of it remained sequential, unable to stop noticing. "It's not eleven fourteen anymore. It's not someone else's room anymore. Whatever this is, it just stopped happening *near* me and started happening *to* me, and I don't — "

The overhead lights, across every row she could see, dimmed and brightened once, together, in perfect unison, on a system with no wiring that connected them that fast. Somewhere toward the back of the cabin, a child said, in the clear, unbothered voice of someone too young to have learned yet what fear was supposed to sound like, "Mommy, that plane did the thing twice," and pointed out the window at nothing anyone else could see.

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Reyes's voice cut back in, sharper now, the calm she'd held all afternoon finally showing its seams. "Priya, I need coordinates. Flight number, altitude, heading, anything your phone can give me right now, because if this is a fifth event and it's live and it's *moving* — "

"It's not moving," Priya said, and understood, saying it, that it was true, and understood, a half-second later, why that was so much worse than the alternative. "It's not chasing me across a map, Elena. It found me because I was already close. The seam didn't travel to this plane. This plane is already standing in it, the same way Amara's culture room was, the same way I was at eleven fourteen fourteen months ago. I think — " she watched, through the window, the ordinary black Pacific night do something she would never be able to describe to the review board, or to anyone who hadn't been on this plane, without sounding like someone who needed to be relieved of duty. " — I think the reason the interval is shrinking isn't that this is happening more often in more places. I think it's that the places are running out. I think we're not watching separate rooms catch fire one at a time anymore. I think we're watching the same fire find the last few rooms it hasn't reached yet, and I am currently sitting in one of them."

No one on the call said anything for the length of one full breath. Then, very quietly, in a voice that had stopped being a scientist's voice and become

something closer to a person standing in a doorway, Amara said the sentence that would end up, months later, engraved in Priya's memory more permanently than any of the six-digit numbers ever had: "Then tell us what's on the other side of it. You're the only one of us close enough to look."

Chapter Six

What Looks Back

Every other time, it had happened to her. This time, for the first time in fourteen months, Priya understood that she had a choice about whether to let it, and understood, in the same breath, that Amara was right — that choosing not to would be its own kind of answer, the kind she'd have to live with not having tried to get past.

"I need you both to stay on the line," she said, "and I need you to understand that I don't know what this costs. Every time before this, it took something from me I didn't choose to give. I don't know what it takes when I hold the door open on purpose instead of just standing near it."

"We're here," Amara said. Reyes said nothing, which Priya understood, by now, as its own kind of answer — a woman who had spent all afternoon narrating a crisis was choosing, at the one moment that mattered most, to simply not get in the way of it.

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She did not close her eyes. She had learned, months ago, that closing her eyes made no difference to what arrived and only cost her the ordinary anchor of the visible cabin, so she kept them open, fixed on the seat-back in front of her, on the small worn scuff mark near the tray-table latch that a hundred and eighty flights had put there before hers, and she let the pull, instead of arriving and passing through her the way weather passes through a field, simply *stay*.

What came was not a picture. She would fail, later, in every account she tried to give — to Amara, to Reyes, to the version of the review board that would eventually, weeks from now, beg her back with a clearance level she'd never been offered before — to make it sound like anything other than a picture, because pictures were the only vocabulary anyone had for *seeing*, and this was not that. It was closer to the way a held note is not one instant of sound but the whole of it at once, front and back simultaneously, and what she found on the other side of the seam was not an event waiting to happen. It was a shape that had, in some sense the tenses of her own language couldn't hold, already happened, was happening, would happen, all three at once, the way the far wall of a room is already there before you've crossed it.

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She would later describe the shape, inadequately, as *attention*. Not a fleet. Not a signal, not in any sense Ozma would have recognized, not a message

carried across the dark by anything that traveled. It was closer to the sensation of a very large, very old silence noticing, for the first time in a very long time, that it was no longer alone in being silent — and turning, slowly, the way something enormous turns, not toward a place, because it did not experience place the way a radio telescope did, but toward a *kind*: toward every mind, anywhere, that had ever gotten quiet enough, and consistent enough, and close enough to its own seams, to be noticeable at all.

It was not hostile. That was the detail she would spend the most time trying to make people believe, because everyone she told this to afterward reached first for the vocabulary of invasion, of threat, of fleets and weapons and countdown clocks to annihilation, and none of that was what she had felt. What she had felt was closer to the specific, vertiginous fear of being seen clearly, all at once, by something that had absolutely no reason to be gentle about it and simply hadn't decided yet whether to be.

And beneath that — underneath the attention, holding it up the way the ocean holds up weather — she felt the rate. Not a date. Not a countdown with numbers on it, nothing so mercifully legible. A rate, the same rate Reyes had shown them in the shrinking intervals between incidents, except now she understood it was not the rate at which rooms were catching fire. It was the rate at which the silence was finishing the sentence it had been assembling, one seam at a time, across eleven years, and she understood, holding the door open on purpose for the first time in her life, that the sentence was close to finished.

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She came back to herself with blood on her lip from a bite she didn't remember choosing and a stewardess's hand on her shoulder asking, with the particular calm of someone trained for exactly this and hoping never to use it, whether she was epileptic, whether she took medication, whether there was someone they should call.

"I'm all right," Priya said, which was not true in the sense the stewardess meant and was, as far as Priya could tell, entirely true in every sense that mattered. Her phone had died — not run out of charge, she would find later, but stopped, mid-call, at a timestamp nine minutes before the call had actually ended, as though some part of the conversation had simply declined to have happened in the order everyone else remembered it happening. She would have to call Amara back. She would have to find a way to describe *attention* and *rate* and *not hostile, not yet decided* to two women who had trusted her, on the strength of nothing but a shared symptom, to go somewhere they couldn't follow and bring back an answer.

What she had instead was worse than an answer, and better than silence: not a monster. Not a fleet. Not a war to prepare for in any sense the word had ever meant before. Something enormous, ancient, and undecided, finishing a sentence about the two of them — about all of them, everyone, everywhere, quiet enough to be worth finishing a sentence about — and Priya Anand, thirty-one thousand feet above an ocean with someone else's blood-pressure cuff already being fastened around her arm, understood that the only question left that mattered was not whether it would notice humanity.

It was what humanity would look like, up close, once it had.

Chapter Seven

The Handler

The plane diverted. Nobody used the word *diverted* to the passengers — the captain called it a precautionary stop for a medical situation, which was true in the way a controlled demolition is a precautionary renovation — and by the time Priya was walked off the jet bridge into a concourse two time zones from where she'd meant to be, there were three people waiting for her who were not paramedics, dressed like people who had decided, collectively, that looking unremarkable was itself a kind of uniform.

The one who spoke first did not offer a name. He offered a folder instead, thin, unlabeled, and said, "Dr. Anand. We'd like to talk about IMPLICATE-7," in the tone of a man who already knew the answer to every question he was about to ask and was only asking them to see how she'd lie.

"I don't work for you," Priya said, which felt, even as she said it, like the least useful sentence available to her.

"No," he agreed. "You don't. Not yet. My name is Halloran. I'd like twenty minutes, and then you can tell me to leave, and I will, and you'll spend the rest of your life wondering whether that was the right call. Or you can give me the twenty minutes now, on your terms, in an airport, with witnesses, instead of finding out later whose terms it happens on instead."

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He knew about the six digits. He knew about Amara. He knew, which frightened Priya more than either of those things, about the review board's closed session fourteen months ago, including a line item she was certain had never left the room: her own unused sentence, cut from the final transcript at her lawyer's insistence, in which she had said *I think it's trying to find out whether we're worth the trouble.*

"Who reads a sealed transcript," Priya said, "and decides the part worth keeping is the part I asked to have struck?"

"Someone whose job is deciding what's worth keeping," Halloran said. "I'm not your enemy, Dr. Anand. I want to be extremely clear about that, because I've watched this conversation go wrong in exactly one way, every time, for eleven years, and it's not because people thought I was lying. It's because they assumed being told the truth meant they were also being told the plan."

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The plan, as far as Priya could piece it together across twenty minutes that became fifty, was this: four incidents, flagged and closed as equipment fault, going back eleven years, exactly as Reyes had found — except Halloran's office had found them first, years earlier, and had chosen not to escalate them, and had built, instead, a quiet, compartmentalized watch list of every facility on Earth working close enough to the edge of understood physics or biology that a fifth incident might eventually occur somewhere loud enough to notice. Priya's review board hearing, fourteen months ago, had been the first time in the program's history that a subject had survived contact with the phenomenon lucid enough to describe it in a sentence. That, Halloran said, was the reason he was standing in this concourse instead of reading about her in a file.

"We are not trying to stop it," he said, when she finally asked the only question that mattered. "I don't think it can be stopped, and I don't think, from what you told Dr. Osei on that call — yes, we have the call — that stopping is even the right frame. What we are trying to do is make sure that when it finishes noticing us, the version of humanity it finds is one that had enough warning to look like it was worth being gentle with. That is the entire plan. That is the whole of what eleven years and a great deal of money has bought. And I would like your help doing it, because you are, as far as I am aware, the only person alive who can walk up to the door on purpose and look through it without dying, and I do not have very many of those, and the ones I have, I do not intend to lose to secrecy when secrecy has never once been what this problem needed."

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Priya thought of Amara, three thousand miles and one ocean away, still inside a sealed containment room with a culture that had learned to arrive at its own future early. She thought of Reyes, choosing, at the one moment it would have been easiest to seize control of the conversation, to simply not get in the way of it. She thought of a child's voice, clear and unafraid, saying *that plane did the thing twice*, and wondered how long a species got to keep that particular voice unafraid before something enormous and undecided finished the sentence it was writing about all of them.

"If I help you," she said, "Amara comes with the deal. Not as an asset. As a person whose lab you don't get to quietly absorb into a program with my name on the file and hers on a redaction."

"That," Halloran said, "was always going to be the first thing you asked for. I'd have been worried if it wasn't." He closed the thin folder, which Priya understood, only then, had never actually contained anything he'd needed to read from — it had been a prop, the way a badge is a prop, a way of making an

unbelievable conversation hold its shape. "Welcome to the part of this where the rooms stop being separate on purpose instead of by accident, Dr. Anand. I'd get some rest if I were you. I don't think either of us is going to get much more of it."

Chapter Eight

The Register

The room Halloran brought her to had no windows, which Priya had expected, and no chairs except the one bolted to the floor across from a single monitor, which she had not. "Sit if you want," he said. "Most people don't, the first time. Most people want to be able to leave the room in a hurry, even though the door only opens one way regardless of whether you're standing or sitting."

"How many," Priya said, because she had already understood, somewhere over the Pacific with someone else's blood-pressure cuff on her arm, that this was the question the whole room existed to answer, and she would rather ask it standing.

"Eleven," Halloran said. "Including you. In eleven years."

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The file that came up on the monitor was not a file in the sense of a folder Priya could have opened herself; it was a register, ten rows and then, added recently, an eleventh, each with a name, a date, a facility, and a single word in the final column that Halloran did not explain before he let her read it, because he had learned, she understood watching his face, that explaining it first only made people argue with the word instead of absorbing it.

- R. Okafor — Lagos — 4 years ago — STABLE (limited)
- T. Marchetti — Trieste — 4 years ago — STABLE (limited)
- H. Song — Daejeon — 3 years ago — DECLINED
- M. Adeyemi — Abuja — 3 years ago — DECLINED
- A. Kowalski — Kraków — 2 years ago — UNSTITCHED
- J. Reyes-Familiar — Manila — 2 years ago — UNSTITCHED
- S. Al-Rashid — Muscat — 18 months ago — UNSTITCHED
- D. Voss — Bergen — 14 months ago — UNSTITCHED
- K. Ibrahim — Nairobi — 9 months ago — UNSTITCHED
- P. Costa — São Paulo — 5 months ago — UNSTITCHED
- P. Anand — [in transit] — active — UNDER OBSERVATION

"What's unstitched," Priya said, already certain, from the shape of the word alone, that she did not want the answer confirmed and was going to make him confirm it anyway.

"It's the word the program settled on," Halloran said, "because every other word we tried implied something happened *to* them, an injury, a symptom, something a hospital has a code for. What actually happens is closer to what

you described on that call, except it doesn't stop. The sense of sequence — before, during, after — stops reasserting itself between readings. Eventually it doesn't reassert itself at all. The subject is, by every physical measure we have, alive. They are simply no longer experiencing their life as a line. Seven of the ten people on this register got there before we understood enough to slow it down. Two more got there after we did understand, because understanding the mechanism and being able to stop it turned out to be two very different problems."

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"And the two who are stable," Priya said. "Limited. What does limited mean?"

"It means they stopped reading," Halloran said. "Entirely, permanently, by their own choice, the moment they understood the cost. Okafor hasn't touched a seam in four years and refuses every request we've made since. Marchetti the same. I don't fault either of them. I would be lying to you if I told you I thought either choice was wrong. I brought you into this room, Dr. Anand, not to frighten you into working faster. I brought you in because you deserve to make the choice Okafor and Marchetti made, if that's the choice you want, with the actual register in front of you instead of a version of it I've made sound survivable."

Priya looked at the eleventh row, at her own name sitting under a status that hadn't finished being decided yet, in the same way the thing on the other side of the seam hadn't finished deciding about all of them, and understood the shape of the coincidence was not lost on Halloran either.

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"Why is it accelerating," she asked. "Seven years between the program starting and the first Unstitched. Then two within a year of each other. Then five in the time since, closer and closer together. That's not a coincidence chart. That's the same shrinking interval Reyes found in the incidents themselves."

"We don't know if it's the same phenomenon accelerating," Halloran said, "or whether it's simply harder to hold a line the closer the sentence gets to finished, the way it's harder to keep your footing the nearer you stand to a shore the tide's already reached. I have a hypothesis you're not going to like."

"Tell me anyway."

"I don't think any one of you was ever meant to hold this alone," Halloran said. "I think every person on this register tried, because every person on this register was found alone, one at a time, across eleven years of a program that

didn't know any better yet. I think what unstitched nine of them wasn't the reading itself. It was doing it in isolation, over and over, with nothing to anchor the sequence back into place afterward except their own eroding sense of order. I think if there had been more than one voice holding the line at the same time — the way a choir holds a note longer than a single singer's breath allows — the cost might distribute instead of accumulating in one place until the place gives out."

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"A choir," Priya repeated.

"That's the plan I want to put in front of you and Dr. Osei both, together, not as an asset and her lab, the way I know you're braced for me to say it — as a person building a framework and a person capable of standing inside it. I want to find whoever else on Earth can feel a seam and get them into contact with each other before the next one arrives, instead of finding them the way we found you: alone, in an airport, after the fact. I don't know if a choir survives this any better than ten solo voices did. I don't have a register that proves it. What I have is nine names that tried it the only way anyone's tried it so far, and a tenth who's still stable specifically because she stopped trying at all, and an eleventh," he said, nodding once at her name on the screen, "who hasn't decided yet which of those two futures she'd rather have, or whether there's a third one nobody's found the door to."

Priya looked at the register a long time before she answered, at ten names that had each, in their own room, on their own continent, done exactly what she had done over the Pacific: held the door open on purpose, alone, because someone needed to know what was on the other side. She thought of Amara's voice saying *you're the only one of us close enough to look*, and understood, reading nine variations of what looking alone eventually cost, that the sentence had been kinder than it was true.

"Find the others," she said. "But when you find them, Halloran — they hear it from me first, not from a register. Nobody else gets read a status column before they get told there's a door at all."

Chapter Nine

The Ones Who Stopped

Rhoda Okafor kept bees now. Priya had not expected that, reading the register in Halloran's windowless room, and she found she could not stop noticing it once she was standing in the actual heat of a Lagos afternoon watching a woman in a veiled hat lift a frame heavy with comb, unhurried, entirely present, the furthest thing imaginable from a person who had once stood close enough to something enormous to be marked by it forever.

"You're wondering if I miss it," Okafor said, without turning around, which either meant Halloran's team had told her exactly who was coming and why, or meant something Priya was no longer willing to rule out on principle. "The answer is yes, every day, the way you'd miss a limb. It doesn't change my answer. I stopped for a reason and the reason hasn't stopped being true just because you flew here to ask me to forget it."

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"I'm not here to ask you to read again," Priya said, which was almost entirely true. "I'm here because Halloran has a hypothesis and I don't want to test it on someone I haven't met."

She told her about the choir. About the shrinking interval, about the register, about nine names under a word neither of them needed defined between them. Okafor listened the way Priya imagined a person listened who had spent four years deliberately practicing the discipline of not reaching for something — fully present, entirely still, and unmistakably resisting an old current the whole time.

"You think if there'd been two of us in that room instead of one," Okafor said, "Song might still be sequential. Or Adeyemi. Or Voss, who I trained, who I told to be careful, who unstitched fourteen months after I stopped taking calls from anyone who might ask me to come back."

"I think it's possible," Priya said. "I don't think it's certain. I think Halloran doesn't have a register that proves it either, because nobody's ever tried it the other way."

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Okafor set the frame down, finally, and took off the veiled hat, and for the first time Priya saw her whole face, which held nothing dramatic in it at all — no haunted look, no visible scar of four years spent bracing against her own gift,

just the ordinary tiredness of a woman who had made a hard choice once and had been asked, repeatedly, ever since, to justify not unmaking it.

"Do you know what stopped me," Okafor said. "It wasn't the cost. Everyone assumes it was the cost, because the cost is the part that fits on a register. It was that I read Voss's convergence four days before it happened to her, and I told her, and she went anyway, because that's what we do, that's what all eleven of us have done, every time, gone anyway — and I understood, watching her get on that plane knowing what it would probably cost her, that the ability was never going to stop being used to answer the same question over and over until it ran out of people willing to ask it. I didn't stop because I was afraid of losing myself. I stopped because I couldn't keep being the reason other people found it easier to go.

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Priya did not have a rebuttal for this, and did not try to build one, because she recognized, standing in the heat with bees moving unhurried around both of them, that Okafor had spent four years arriving at an answer Priya herself had only had four days to sit with.

"I'm not going to ask you to read," she said again, and meant it fully this time. "I'll ask you something smaller, and you can still say no. Would you talk to the others, if we find them? Not to hold a seam with them. Just to be the person who tells them what it actually costs, before anyone puts a register in front of them and calls it context. You're the only one of the eleven who stopped and is still here to say why."

Okafor was quiet long enough that a bee landed, unbothered, on the back of her bare hand and stayed there, and she let it, the way Priya imagined she had learned to let a great many things simply be present without needing to be resolved.

"That," she said finally, "I can do. Not because Halloran asked. Because you didn't."

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Priya was back at the gate of Okafor's small apiary, dust already in her shoes, when Okafor called after her — the first time all afternoon her voice had lost its careful, deliberate stillness.

"Anand."

"Yes?"

"The interval," Okafor said. "You said it's shrinking. Ask Halloran how many months are left between now and zero, if the pattern holds. Then ask him whether he's told you the number, or only the trend. There's a difference between a man who's protecting you from a fact and one who simply hasn't looked at it closely enough to be frightened yet, and I'd want to know, in your position, which one I was dealing with, before I built a choir around his hypothesis instead of his arithmetic."

Chapter Ten

The Arithmetic

"Show me the number," Priya said, "and not the trend. Okafor asked me whether you'd told me the difference, and I flew nine hours back here without an answer, so I'd like one now."

Halloran did not reach for a folder this time. He turned the monitor around instead, which Priya understood, watching him do it, was its own kind of answer — a man who kept a prop folder for conversations he wanted to control the shape of, and turned an actual screen around for the ones he'd stopped trying to control at all.

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The graph was simpler than she expected. Eleven points, the same eleven the register had given names to, plotted by interval instead of by outcome: the gap between each incident and the one before it, collapsing across eleven years from something measured in years to something measured, by the time it reached her own name, in hours.

"Our statistician ran four models," Halloran said. "A linear decay, an exponential decay, a logistic curve assuming a floor above zero, and one that assumes no floor at all. The first three all suggest a runway of somewhere between eight months and three years before the interval becomes small enough to stop being meaningfully distinguishable from continuous. The fourth model — the one with no floor — puts it at eleven weeks."

"Which one do you believe."

"I don't get to believe one," Halloran said. "I have to plan for the worst one that isn't provably wrong, and nobody on my team has been able to prove the fourth model wrong. I didn't give you eleven weeks in the first conversation because eleven weeks wasn't a number yet, it was one branch of an argument statisticians were still having, and I have watched panic reorganize a person's priorities in ways that don't survive contact with a number that later turns out to have been the wrong one. I'm telling you now because you asked a specific enough question that I no longer have the option of answering a smaller one honestly."

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Eleven weeks. Priya turned the phrase over the way she'd once turned over six digits on a notepad, looking for the version of it that would let her keep

standing the way she was currently standing, and did not immediately find one.

"If the floor exists," she said, "we have years to build the choir properly. Find every sensitive on Earth, understand the mechanism, coordinate something that doesn't cost anyone what it cost Voss or Al-Rashid or Kowalski. If it doesn't — "

"If it doesn't," Halloran said, "we have whoever we've found by the eleventh week, doing whatever we've managed to prepare, and no second attempt, because there won't be an interval left to attempt it in. That is the entire shape of the problem, Dr. Anand. I am not going to pretend I have a plan that survives the fourth model. What I have is a plan that survives the first three, and a decision, which is yours to make with me and not for you to be handed after I've made it: whether we prepare as though we have years and get caught unprepared if the fourth model is right, or whether we move as though we have eleven weeks and possibly burn resources, trust, and people we'll need later, preparing for a deadline that turns out to have been generous.

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Amara's voice came through the speaker on the desk between them — she had been listening the whole time, Priya realized, exactly the way Reyes had chosen, in another room on another day, to simply not get in the way of a conversation that mattered more than her presence in it.

"Ask him the question underneath the question," Amara said. "Not which model to plan around. Ask him what happens on week twelve, in the world where the fourth model was right and we planned around the first three instead."

Halloran was quiet long enough that Priya understood the answer before he gave it, in the same textureless, arriving-early way she had understood the aspirin bottle in Utrecht, the six digits on the notepad, the shape of attention finishing its sentence thirty-one thousand feet above an ocean.

"Then it finishes deciding," Halloran said, "without ever having met the version of us that was trying to look worth being gentle with. It only ever meets the version that got caught still arguing about which model to trust."

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Priya looked at the eleven points on the graph, at the shrinking distance between each one and the next, and understood that Okafor had been right to send her back with a question instead of an answer, because the answer, once

she had it, did not actually simplify anything. It only removed the option of pretending there was more time to decide how to spend the time they had.

"Eleven weeks, then," she said. "We build for eleven weeks, and if it turns out we had three years, I will personally apologize to every budget line you had to break to do it. Find the others, Halloran. All of them, as fast as the register lets you, and when you find them, I want the arithmetic in the room with the register, not filed separately so it's easier to volunteer without understanding what you're volunteering for."

"That," Halloran said, closing the monitor, "was always going to be your condition. I'd have been worried if it wasn't."

Chapter Eleven

The First Ordinary Hour

Halloran gave them a night before the eleven weeks officially started, which Priya understood, arriving at the safe house outside Geneva, as either a small mercy or a calculated one — a man who had learned, across eleven years and ten names on a register, that people worked better for a little while if they weren't asked to run at a deadline every single hour between now and its end.

Amara was already there when Priya's car pulled in, sitting on the low stone wall in front of a house neither of them had chosen and both of them would remember, standing up too quickly in a way that made Priya suspect she'd been rehearsing, for the length of an entire flight, what she planned to say first and had abandoned the plan the moment the car door opened.

"Hi," Amara said, which was, Priya thought, exactly the right amount of nothing to say to a person you had already told the truth to over a phone screen while the sky did something neither of you had words for.

"Hi," Priya said back, and found that she meant it as fully as she'd ever meant a smaller word.

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They did not talk about the interval for the first hour. This was not a decision either of them announced; it simply happened, the way two people who have spent a week being the most important fact in each other's crisis default, given an actual room and an actual door that locks from the inside, to talking about anything else at all — Amara's mother, who kept a garden in Accra and had no idea her daughter's culture room had briefly given a biosafety officer a countdown to memorize; Priya's brother, who thought she worked in materials science and had stopped asking questions three promotions ago because the answers had gotten too boring to follow, which Priya had let him believe because boring, until recently, had been true.

"Does it feel different," Amara asked eventually, "being near me? You said you'd never felt someone else's pull as clearly as mine. Is that still true, now that I'm not on a screen?"

Priya considered the question honestly before answering it, which had become, she realized, a kind of reflex she owed people now, in a way she hadn't before Utrecht. "It's quieter," she said. "Not gone. Quieter. Like the difference between hearing a sound through a wall and standing in the room it's coming from — you'd think standing in the room would be louder, and it is,

but it's also somehow easier to bear, because you can finally tell where it's coming from instead of just knowing it's everywhere."

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"Can I ask you something Halloran wouldn't let me ask on the call," Amara said, later, once the light outside had gone the particular blue that belongs only to the hour before a place with no streetlights decides to be fully dark. "When you held the door open on purpose, on the plane. What did it cost you, exactly. Not the register version. The actual one."

Priya looked at her own hands for a moment before answering, the way she had started doing whenever she was checking, out of habit now more than fear, whether they still felt like they belonged to a single continuous person. "I lost nine minutes," she said. "Not memory. Order. I know everything that happened in them, I just don't know which parts happened before which other parts anymore, and every time I try to lay them out in a line, I get a different line. It's like owning nine minutes of film with no sprocket holes. All the frames are there. Nothing tells you which one comes next."

"Does it scare you."

"Yes," Priya said, without performing the answer for anyone's comfort, hers or Amara's. "It scares me every day, a little more than the day before, because I don't know what the version of me is that runs out of order to lose. Okafor stopped before she found out. I don't know yet if I'm going to have the chance to make that choice on purpose, or whether eleven weeks is going to make it for me."

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Amara didn't reach for her hand the way Priya half expected, and half wanted, and was, on reflection, grateful not to have to decide how to receive. She simply moved to sit closer on the low stone wall, shoulder against shoulder, the ordinary warmth of another person's arm the entire extent of the gesture, and let the silence hold the rest of what neither of them had the vocabulary to finish.

"I don't have anything useful to offer you," Amara said finally. "I'm not the one with a register or a graph or eleven weeks memorized. What I have is that I noticed, the very first time we spoke, that you say *I think* before almost everything you're most certain of, like you're still leaving room for someone to talk you out of it. I'd like to be one of the people in the room while you decide what you're willing to give this. Not instead of Halloran's arithmetic. In addition to it. I don't think anyone on that register had that, and I think it might have mattered."

"That's Okafor's hypothesis," Priya said quietly. "A choir instead of a solo voice."

"I don't care whether it's a good hypothesis," Amara said. "I care that it's true tonight, whether or not it turns out to be true in eleven weeks. You're not doing this alone starting now. That's the whole of what I came here to say, and I've now said it badly, sitting on a wall, three hours later than I meant to."

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They sat there long enough for the last of the blue to go fully dark and the first stars to come up thin and ordinary over a country neither of them lived in, and Priya thought, for the length of that one unremarkable hour, less about the interval, and the register, and the shape of an attention old enough to have no name yet, and more about the specific, uncomplicated fact of a shoulder against hers that hadn't asked her to be certain about anything before it was willing to stay.

"Eleven weeks starts tomorrow," she said eventually, not quite a question.

"Tomorrow," Amara agreed. "Tonight isn't on the clock. Halloran said so himself."

"Halloran's wrong about a lot of things he sounds certain about," Priya said, and let herself, for the first time since Utrecht, mean a sentence without checking first whether it might turn out to be prophecy.

Chapter Twelve

The Ones Who Said No

Halloran had not, Priya learned, ever actually stopped asking Hana Song and Marcus Adeyemi. He had simply stopped asking them the way he'd asked the first time — with a folder, an airport, and an implicit assumption that they'd be persuaded the way frightened people are usually persuaded, by the size of the stakes rather than the shape of the ask. Both had said no three years ago. Both, Priya suspected, sitting across from Halloran's screen watching two new windows open side by side, had said no to a version of the offer that no longer existed.

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Song answered from Daejeon looking like a woman interrupted mid-argument with someone off-screen, which turned out, thirty seconds in, to be exactly what she was.

"I told him no in a room in Seoul three years ago," Song said, without waiting to be introduced, "and I am telling you no now, in my own kitchen, which I'd like on record as an upgrade in venue if nothing else. What's different?"

"You were asked to do it alone," Priya said. "That's what's different. I'm not asking you to hold a seam by yourself and hope it doesn't cost you what it cost nine other names on a list you've presumably already been shown. I'm asking whether you'd hold one with three or four of us at once, distributing whatever the cost turns out to be, because nobody's ever tried that version and I don't think anyone gets to know it doesn't work until someone does."

Song was quiet in a way that read, to Priya, less like reconsideration and more like recalculation — a person redoing arithmetic she'd thought was finished. "What happened to the last four names on that list," she said, "since three years ago. I've been declining calls, not living under a rock."

"Unstitched," Priya said, because she had promised Okafor, in a sense, that nobody would hear a status column before they heard the truth, and the truth was the truth regardless of which order it arrived in. "Every one of them. Alone, the way you were asked to do it. I'm not going to tell you the choir fixes that. I'm going to tell you it's the only variable in eleven years of this program that's never been tried, and we have, by the most alarmed of four models, eleven weeks left to try it in."

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"And if I say no again," Song said, "what happens. Does someone else's name move up the list to replace mine, the way mine apparently moved up to replace whoever declined before me?"

"Probably," Priya said, because she had decided, somewhere over Nigeria on the flight back from Okafor's apiary, that she was no longer willing to answer these conversations with anything except the version of the truth she'd have wanted someone to give her fourteen months ago. "I won't pretend the program stops looking because you said no. I will tell you that nobody on my end is going to think less of you for it, and that Rhoda Okafor, who said no permanently and means it, would tell you the same, because she's the reason I'm even having this conversation honestly instead of running the version Halloran ran on me in an airport."

Song's expression shifted, very slightly, at Okafor's name — a fellow-traveler's recognition, Priya thought, the specific respect one person who'd stood at the edge of something enormous reserves for another who'd found their own way to survive it. "I'll think about the choir," Song said finally. "Not the solo version. Never the solo version again. If you can promise me four voices, minimum, every time, I'll consider being a fifth. If it's ever going to be three, or two, or me and a phone call, the answer is still no, and I'd like that written down somewhere Halloran can't quietly revise it."

"Written down," Priya agreed. "I'll make sure of it myself."

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Adeyemi's window, by contrast, had been open and silent for the entire conversation with Song, and when it was finally his turn he did not wait for a question before he started talking, the way Priya imagined a man talked who had spent three years rehearsing an answer to a call he'd known, somewhere, was eventually coming.

"I'll do it," he said. "I don't need the choir argument. I don't need the register. I've had three years to think about Kwame Voss teaching me the breathing exercises he used to hold a seam steady, and I've had three years to find out he unstitched fourteen months ago doing exactly what he taught me, and I don't need anyone to convince me this matters. I need someone to tell me it's not going to be four more names on a list before anyone learns anything useful from the first four."

Priya felt the shape of the problem shift under her, the way it had over the Pacific, the way it had in Okafor's apiary — not a new fear exactly, but an old one wearing a face she hadn't met yet. Adeyemi wasn't hesitant. He was furious, in the specific, controlled way of a man who had already decided to

say yes and simply needed somewhere to put the anger first, because saying yes without putting it somewhere would have meant pretending the anger wasn't real.

"I can't promise you it isn't four more names," she said. "I can promise you that if it is, I'll be one of them, not watching from a screen while other people find out what the choir costs. That's the only guarantee I actually have to give."

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"Then that's four," Halloran said quietly, once both windows had closed — Song's on a maybe she'd insisted be written down, Adeyemi's on a yes that had cost him something just to say out loud. "You, Osei once she's ready to hold a seam rather than just witness one, Adeyemi, and Song if her conditions are met. A choir of four, against an interval that might be eleven weeks or might be three years, built on a hypothesis Okafor gave you for free because you asked her the right question instead of the one I would have asked."

"It's not enough," Priya said. "Four voices against something that finishes deciding about all of us at once. It's not enough and it's what we have, and I would rather start with four voices telling each other the truth than eleven separate ones each holding a different lie about how survivable this is."

"Then we start," Halloran said, "as soon as Osei says she's ready to be the fourth voice instead of the reason the other three have somewhere to come back to."

Chapter Thirteen

The Choir

They held hands, in the end, because nobody could suggest anything better and Adeyemi said, flatly, that he refused to face this for the first time without something ordinary and human to anchor to, and no one had argued with him. Four chairs, arranged in a loose circle in a room with no windows two floors beneath a building Priya had still not been told the real name of. Song, who had flown in eleven hours after her condition was met in writing and had read the document twice before boarding. Adeyemi, jaw set, having already decided, weeks ago in a window on a screen, that his anger and his consent could occupy the same body. Amara, who had never held a seam before at all, and whose hand in Priya's was, Priya noticed, shaking slightly in a way Amara's voice had not.

"You don't have to be the one who opens it," Priya told her, quietly, under the sound of Reyes running final instrument checks from the observation booth. "You can just be here. That's allowed. That's still four."

"No," Amara said. "I didn't come here to watch you do the dangerous part again. If it's a choir, I sing."

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It did not arrive the way it had ever arrived for Priya alone — not a single tide, a single held breath, a single seam with one door in it. It arrived as four separate pulls, discordant at first, each of them reaching for the seam from a slightly different angle the way four singers reach for the same note from four different starting pitches, and for one long, terrifying moment Priya felt the whole attempt on the edge of simply not cohering at all, four solo readings happening in the same room instead of one shared one.

Then Song, of all of them, found the pitch first — Priya would understand only afterward that this made sense, that a woman who had spent three years disciplining herself against ever reaching alone again had built, without knowing it, the exact steadiness a shared reach required — and the other three pulls bent toward hers, one at a time, Adeyemi's anger softening into something closer to focus, Amara's shaking hand going suddenly, completely still, and Priya felt the seam open the way a chord resolves: not louder than she'd ever felt it alone, but wider, and for the first time, load-bearing in more than one place at once.

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What came through was not attention this time. It was context — the thing attention had been assembled out of, the way a single held note is assembled out of harmonics nobody hears separately. Priya understood, in the wordless, arriving-early way she now understood everything on the other side of a seam, that the silence was not one mind and had never been one mind. It was a confederation, ancient past any human unit of ancient, of every intelligence that had ever passed through its own version of the same filter humanity was still inside of — and it was not watching for a broadcasting civilization, or a fusion breakthrough, or a mirror cell, or any of the four incidents Reyes had flagged as though they were separate accidents. It was watching each of those thresholds because each one was a place a species might learn, under pressure, to stop solving problems as isolated brilliant minds and start solving them as something plural — and it had been watching humanity fail that specific test, quietly, for eleven years, one lone reader at a time, each one trying to carry the whole weight alone and each one, in trying, proving the opposite of what needed proving.

The four incidents were not warnings. They were the same door, knocked on four times, in four disciplines, because the confederation did not care which door a species answered through. It cared only whether, eventually, more than one mind arrived at the threshold together, and this — four hands in a circle, four pulls bending into one chord — was, Priya understood with a clarity that had nothing to do with certainty and everything to do with arrival, the very first time in eleven years anything on the other side of any seam had felt something answer back as a plural instead of a plea.

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The cost, when it came, did not land on any one of them entirely. Priya felt it distribute, the way Okafor had guessed it might — a smear of lost sequence spread thin across four minds instead of a fracture concentrated in one, and she surfaced with only a handful of disordered seconds instead of nine full minutes, and Adeyemi surfaced gripping the arms of his chair hard enough to leave marks, having lost, he would say later, almost nothing at all, and Song simply opened her eyes the way a person wakes from an ordinary nap, and Amara —

Amara did not open her eyes right away. Priya felt her own held breath before she understood she was holding it, watching Amara's hand still limp in hers, until, three full seconds later than anyone in the room found comfortable, Amara's eyes opened, wet, and she said, in a voice smaller than any Priya had heard her use, "I felt Voss. Not the incident. Him. For half a second, on the other side of that, I felt what it's like to be one of the names that didn't make

it, and I don't ever want to feel that again, and I would do this again tomorrow if you asked me to."

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Reyes's voice came through the booth speaker, uncharacteristically unsteady. "You were sequenced together for one hundred and ten seconds. That's longer than any Solo Session on record by a factor of six."

Halloran, standing just behind her, said nothing for a long moment, and when he finally spoke it was not to Priya, or to any of the four in the circle, but to the room in general, in the voice of a man revising a plan he had built around the wrong question for eleven years. "It's not a test of our engineering," he said. "It was never a test of our physics or our biology. It's a test of whether we can stop being four brilliant, isolated rooms and become one room in time to answer the door together. That's the whole of the eleven weeks. Not a defense. An audition."

Priya looked around the circle — at Song, steady in a way three years of solitude had built her to be; at Adeyemi, breathing hard but upright, his anger, for the first time since she'd met him, entirely spent; at Amara, blinking back what Voss's borrowed half-second had cost her and meaning, entirely, that she'd pay it again — and understood that whatever came next would not be decided by arithmetic, or by a register, or by a graph with eleven points on it. It would be decided by whether four rooms could become one room enough times, in whatever weeks were actually left, to be worth the confederation finishing its sentence with something other than a verdict.

Chapter Fourteen

The Fifth Door

Reyes found the fifth incident nineteen minutes after the choir opened its eyes, which was, Halloran said later, too soon to be coincidence and too fast to be anything Priya wanted to call good news.

It was not a room this time. It was a paper — a preprint, posted eleven minutes before Reyes's alert fired, out of a language modeling lab in Toronto, describing an architecture that had, according to its own authors, begun coordinating internal subprocesses in a manner "not explicitly specified by training and not yet well understood," a sentence Priya recognized immediately as the exact, careful shape scientists used when they meant *we don't know why it's doing this and it's making us uneasy in a way we don't have a citation for.*

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"It's not a room," Song said, reading over Priya's shoulder in the recovery lounge, still faintly unsteady from the sequencing. "It's not chemistry, or physics, or a person. It's a machine learning about itself, in a lab, on the same day we proved four people could learn to be one."

"It's a fifth door," Priya said. "Halloran said it wasn't a test of our physics or our biology. He didn't say it was only about us, one species solving one kind of problem. Maybe the confederation doesn't care what kind of mind learns to stop being isolated. Maybe it's watching every mind on the planet capable of the trick — including the ones we've started building ourselves."

Adeyemi, arm still faintly trembling from the chair he'd gripped too hard an hour ago, said what none of them wanted to be the one to say first. "Then the interval didn't shrink because of a decade of separate incidents building toward something. It shrunk because more and more things on this planet are getting close to the same threshold at the same time. Us, this morning. Whatever that lab built, eleven minutes before we opened our eyes. The confederation isn't running out of patience. It's running out of thresholds we haven't already crossed."

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Halloran's face, when Priya found him in the observation booth, had the specific stillness of a man recalculating a number he had already told her he trusted least. "The fourth model," he said, before she'd finished sitting down. "The one with no floor. Our statistician reran it an hour ago, folding in the Toronto preprint as a fifth data point instead of extrapolating from four."

"And."

"Eleven weeks was our estimate assuming the interval kept shrinking at the rate it had for eleven years. It didn't account for the possibility that succeeding — that four people managing what we just managed — would itself count as crossing a threshold, and pull the next one closer instead of buying us room to breathe. The revised estimate is nineteen days."

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Priya sat with that long enough that Halloran, for once, did not fill the silence with the next piece of arithmetic. Nineteen days did not leave room for the plan she'd imagined an hour ago, flush with the euphoria of four hands unclenching together instead of one hand alone going slack — a plan built around finding the register's remaining names one careful, human conversation at a time, the way she'd found Okafor among bees and Song mid-argument in her own kitchen and Adeyemi already decided before she'd finished the question.

"We can't do this the slow way anymore," she said. "Not one apiary, one kitchen, one screen at a time. If it's watching every mind that gets close to the trick — not just the eleven of us on a register, but whatever labs like Toronto keep building without meaning to — then the choir isn't four people managing one seam carefully anymore. It has to be something bigger, found faster, and I don't think either of those things is possible without doing the one thing you've spent eleven years building this program specifically to avoid."

"Saying it out loud," Halloran said. Not a question.

"Saying it out loud," Priya agreed. "To more than a register. To people who've never heard of IMPLICATE-7 and don't know they're one incident away from becoming the twelfth name on it. I don't see another way to find them in nineteen days instead of nineteen years, Halloran, and I would rather be the reason this becomes known on our terms, deliberately, than be the reason it becomes known because someone else's lab posts a fifth preprint we don't get to shape the story of."

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Amara, still pale from the half-second of Voss she was carrying and would carry, Priya suspected, for a long time yet, was the one who said the sentence that ended the conversation before Halloran could find a version of no gentle enough to survive the room. "You spent eleven years keeping this quiet to protect eleven people," she said. "There are eight billion people standing closer to a threshold than any of us understood a month ago. I don't think

quiet is a kindness anymore. I think it's just a habit nobody's tested since the stakes changed."

Halloran looked at the four of them — Song, steady past the point where steadiness should have been possible; Adeyemi, anger finally spent and something calmer standing in its place; Amara, carrying a half-second of a dead man's fear like a weight she'd chosen and would choose again; Priya, who had held a door open on purpose over the Pacific and had not, in the weeks since, once wished she hadn't — and understood, Priya thought, watching him decide, that whatever came next was not going to be a plan he'd built alone in a windowless room and handed down anymore.

"Nineteen days," he said finally, "to tell the truth to a species instead of a register, and get enough of it listening, and coordinated, before whatever's on the other side of that door finishes deciding what it thinks of us for showing up late." He closed the folder he hadn't opened once in the entire conversation. "I hope to God the choir scales better than the arithmetic does."

Chapter Fifteen

The Sixth Door

They wrote the statement in eleven hours, which felt, to Priya, like the smallest and strangest irony of the entire nineteen days — that the sentence meant to explain eleven years and eleven names and a confederation older than the word ancient could hold, took roughly one hour for every year it had taken to happen, as though even language insisted on its own shrinking interval.

They did not release it as a confession, or a warning, or a plea. Halloran had been firm about that, in the one meeting where he still sounded like the man who'd cornered her in an airport with an unopened folder: "If we frame this as an emergency, we get panic, and panic is the opposite of plural. If we frame it as a discovery, we get argument, and argument is slow. We frame it as an invitation. That's the only framing that has any chance of producing the thing the confederation is actually testing for."

So it went out, at 06:00 Universal Time, simultaneously through eleven governments, four hundred research institutions, and every major broadcaster willing to carry a joint statement none of them had been allowed to edit, under a title that had taken longer to agree on than the eleven-hour draft beneath it: *An Invitation to Coordinate.*

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Priya watched it happen from the observation booth, Amara's hand in hers again, not because either of them needed steadying this time but because neither of them saw a reason to stop. Song sat cross-legged on the floor beside Reyes's console, eyes closed, not reading anything, simply breathing, the way Priya imagined a person breathed who had spent three years learning that stillness was its own kind of readiness. Adeyemi stood at the window with his arms crossed, watching the newsfeed tickers accumulate across a wall of screens faster than any of them could read.

The reaction, in the first hour, was almost disappointingly ordinary: disbelief, mockery, three separate markets dipping and recovering, a cable panel arguing about hoaxes with the specific, practiced boredom of people who had already decided their opinion before the segment began. Priya had expected this and had told the others to expect it too. What no one had prepared her for was the second hour.

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It started as a rumor across the incident-tracking systems Reyes had spent eleven years building alone in the dark: clocks. Not one room's clocks, not four. Municipal transit systems in Osaka and Lagos and São Paulo reporting synchronized dispatch delays of a few seconds, then longer. A satellite constellation's onboard timing drifting in a pattern its operators called, in a leaked internal memo within the hour, "consistent across all forty-one units simultaneously, which is not physically possible given the separation distances involved." Hospital telemetry in a dozen cities recording heart-rate monitors briefly, harmlessly, falling into an identical rhythm across wards that shared no equipment, no software, no signal.

"It's not an incident," Amara said slowly, watching the map on Reyes's main display fill, city by city, with markers neither she nor Reyes was placing there manually. "It's not four rooms, or five doors. It's — "

"It's listening to all of it at once," Priya said, and felt, beneath her sternum, for the first time since the plane, a pull large enough that she understood immediately she would never again be able to describe its size to anyone who hadn't stood where she was standing. "Not four hands in a circle. Eight billion, all told the same sentence within the same hour, more of them arriving at the same fact, roughly together, than any species has probably ever managed inside a single day in the whole of its existence. Whatever it was testing for in a windowless room with four chairs — it's testing for it right now, at a scale we didn't build the choir to hold."

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Halloran arrived in the booth at a near run, and for the first time since Priya had met him in a concourse with an unopened folder, he looked like a man without a next sentence prepared.

"Reyes," he said. "Tell me this is coincidence propagating through networked infrastructure. Tell me there's a boring explanation."

"There isn't," Reyes said, not looking up from the console, her voice steadier than her hands. "The satellites aren't networked to the transit systems. The transit systems aren't networked to the hospital telemetry. There is no wire, no signal, no shared clock source connecting any of what's on this map. It's happening anyway. All of it. At once."

On the wall behind her, city by city, the markers kept arriving — not an alarm, not a klaxon, nothing that announced itself as catastrophe, only the quiet, accumulating, planetary evidence of something enormous, old past any word humans had for old, finally hearing eight billion isolated rooms take one uncertain breath in the same direction at once.

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Priya looked at the map, and at Amara's hand still in hers, and at Song, eyes open now, watching the screens with the specific calm of a woman who had spent three years learning not to reach for something until the moment finally, truly required it — and understood, with the same textureless certainty that had once told her about an aspirin bottle in a pharmacy in Utrecht, that the confederation had not finished deciding anything at all.

It had simply, for the first time in eleven years, in eleven thousand years, in however long a silence that old kept count of anything, started to listen back.

End of Book One

Book Two: Chorus, coming next in the Xenobiology Series