

THE STAR PEOPLE CHRONICLES

– *UFO* Origins

Screenplay By

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THE STAR PEOPLE CHRONICLES: UFOOrigins

FADE IN

INT. TALK SHOW STAGE - "SO MANY QUESTIONS" - DAY - (NEW ZEALAND)

Studio lights. On the big screen, a slide-show loops slow behind them: ziggurats, the Antikythera mechanism, the Nazca lines, a grainy Navy UAP clip.

HOST BRADY SIMMS (50s, silver fox) faces DR. JACK WHITTIER (early 40s, restless hands, honest face).

At his throat, on a worn chain half under his collar: his grandfather's signet ring - old silver, the stone worn smooth.

SIMMS

(to camera)

Welcome back to So Many Questions.
My next guest is either the most important archaeologist of the century... or the most educated man ever to fall for his own software.
Dr. Jack Whittier - and the theory that someone got here before us.

Applause. Jack half-rises, sits, knocks the mic. The audience laughs with him. He grins.

SIMMS (CONT'D)

Ancient astronauts. Oldest carnival act in the book. Why should one serious person here believe you?

JACK

They shouldn't. Belief's your business, Brady - I'm... look, I deal in evidence. That's all I've got.

(to audience)

My whole radical theory: our ancestors weren't liars and weren't stupid. When fifty cultures that never met carve the same story - teachers from the sky who knew medicine and metal and math -

ON THE STUDIO SCREEN, his slides cut fast at a prosecutor's pace: Nazca lines you can only read from the air, disk-borne figures on Sumerian seals, a Dogon carving of a star no naked eye can see.

JACK (CONT'D)
 – maybe they were doing exactly
 what we do.

SIMMS
 Which is?

JACK
 Writing down the news.

INT. TALK SHOW - AUDIENCE - CONTINUOUS

Mid-rows, aisle seat: NERINA. Civilian clothes, tourist lanyard. On her phone, disguised as a notes app: SUBJECT ASSESSMENT – WHITTIER, J. She types with her thumb: CHARISMATIC. AUDIENCE RECEPTIVE. THREAT TO CONCEALMENT: MODERATE.

SIMMS (O.S.)
 Your critics say you're monetizing
 grief, Jack. That this whole
 crusade is about your father.

On Nerina – she stops typing. Her thumb drifts to the locket at her throat and holds there. She makes herself resume.

INT. TALK SHOW STAGE - CONTINUOUS

The studio goes quiet. Jack doesn't flinch.

JACK
 My father flew F-15 Eagles. In 1989
 he was scrambled out of Kadena to
 intercept an object doing maneuvers
 that – I'll quote the incident
 report – "exceed the structural
 tolerance of any known aircraft."
 It flew a circle around him like he
 was standing still. Then his
 instruments died. All of them. At
 night. Over water.
 (he still has to stop
 here)
 The Air Force called it pilot
 error. Put it in his file in ink –
 and it killed him by inches over
 twenty years. I was six. I learned
 to read on that incident report,
 Brady. And I've spent my whole life
 trying to make somebody change one
 word of it.

In the audience, Nerina's thumb hovers over her report. Then
 types: ASSESSMENT CONTINUES.

SIMMS

Then let's test it. Live. My producers — forgive me, Jack — secured a privately held tablet, museum-authenticated, cleared and insured for this broadcast.

A PRODUCTION ASSISTANT wheels out a case. Under glass: a SUMERIAN CLAY TABLET, dense with cuneiform. The audience leans in.

SIMMS (CONT'D)

Six thousand years old — sealed provenance, dated by the Museum's lab, chosen by our producers. He has never seen it. Untranslated: their scholars have a partial guess and a century of arguments. Your app gets one take, right now, in front of God and syndication.

Jack raises the phone. SCANS. The progress wheel turns. No one moves. Nerina least of all.

APP VOICE

Translation confidence: ninety-six percent. Text follows. "Inventory of healing plants given by the teachers: twenty-five species, their soils and their seasons—"

The screen populates: plant glyphs matched to botanical illustrations.

APP VOICE (CONT'D)

"—willow of the river for fever. The bitter bark of the high mountains across the western sea, for the shaking sickness—"

JACK

That's cinchona, Brady. Quinine — it treats malaria. Native to the Andes. South America.

SIMMS

So your machine knows botany. The Museum guessed "medical text" too, so—

JACK

This tablet was buried in Iraq thousands of years before any contact between Mesopotamia and the Andes. So somebody tell me — who told the Sumerians what grows in Peru?

No one moves. Then the audience erupts – applause, shouts, a hundred phones recording. Simms laughs, shaking his head.

SIMMS

All right. You've made a believer out of my producer, and she's an atheist. So what keeps you up at night?

JACK

Gold. A hundred ancient cultures, oceans apart, all broke themselves digging for the same soft metal – deeper and earlier than they had any right to. Like somebody placed an order.

SIMMS

And what can't you explain?

JACK

One string of symbols. Six continents – always older than the languages around it. My software runs it a hundred ways and it always comes out the same harmless little prayer: six words about things coming around again.

(grins)

Twenty years in, and a dead man's lullaby is the one thing on Earth I can't read. Keeps me humble.

Simms lets the laughter die.

SIMMS

Last one. One clever tablet isn't a fleet of gods, Jack. It's a man who's spent twenty years needing the universe to admit it wronged his father. Your critics say you're not chasing evidence – you're chasing an apology. Tell them they're wrong.

Jack's thumb stops on the ring.

JACK

I'm not going to tell them they're wrong. This is about my father. A hundred cultures, one story – and a hole in the middle the exact shape of him.

(before he can stop himself)

Fill that hole and I rewrite the books. I'm one fossil away, Brady. I always have been.

SIMMS
 (dry, to camera)
 And there's the man himself, folks
 — always one fossil away.

Warm laughter. Jack grins.

INT. TALK SHOW - AUDIENCE - CONTINUOUS

Nerina is on her feet with the rest. Cover. On her phone, her thumb hovers... then types: THREAT TO CONCEALMENT: SEVERE. Hovers again. Adds: HE ISN'T LYING ABOUT ANY OF IT. Deletes that last line. Stares at where it was.

The screen answers on its own, a new field opening beneath her report, lit red: CLOSE EXPOSURE AUTHORITY — PENDING COMMAND REVIEW. She looks at it a long moment.

SIMMS (O.S.)
 Dr. Jack Whittier, everybody! After the break — a woman who says they didn't just visit. They never left.

INT. TALK SHOW - BACKSTAGE CORRIDOR - MINUTES LATER

Jack, adrenaline still fizzing, phone already buzzing. Caller ID: SAMANTHA GREER. He answers walking.

JACK
 Sam, you will not believe the—

SAMANTHA (V.O.)
 Jack. Shut up and listen. The lidar grid at Waitaki. It's not a settlement.

JACK
 Then what is it?

SAMANTHA (V.O.)
 It's a cemetery. Thirty graves, twenty thousand years old. And Jack — the skeletons are wrong. Get here before I start doubting my own eyes.

Jack stops walking.

JACK
 Wrong how, Sam?

SAMANTHA (V.O.)
 Wrong like the myths weren't myths. How fast can you fly?

EXT. WAITAKI VALLEY - SOUTH ISLAND, NEW ZEALAND - DUSK

Golden hills folding to a braided river. On one terraced slope: the DIG - string grids, weathered tents, a Land Rover, tiny against the landscape.

A Jeep slews up the track. Jack is out before it stops. SAMANTHA GREER (40s, field tan) meets him with a hug that's half headlock.

SAMANTHA

You came straight off a live broadcast with no sleep, you maniac.

JACK

Tailwind. Where is it? Sam, where-

JONATHAN GREER (O.S.)

Whittier! You bring my journals?

JONATHAN GREER (40s, Samantha's husband) climbs out of the pit, sediment to the elbows. Behind them, by the finds table, DR. LIAM O'DONNELL (60s, site director, tweed in defiance of fieldwork) watches Jack's arrival and does not wave.

A small comet of energy: VERA GREER (10, gap-toothed, a toy excavation brush jammed in her belt) slams into Jack at full speed.

VERA

UNCLE JACK. I found it. Tell them I found it, they keep saying "the survey found it," the survey is a ROBOT, robots don't FIND things, they just LOOK-

JACK

Whoa whoa whoa. Found WHAT, Trouble?

VERA

The first bone. I was brushing where Mum said not to, and there was a toe. Except. It's a HOOF.

Jack looks over her head at Samantha. Samantha doesn't smile. She just nods, once.

O'DONNELL

Before you go down there - I want it on record that I object. To you. To this. To all of-

He stops. Starts again, and it comes out smaller.

O'DONNELL (CONT'D)
Forty years I've kept this
department off the front of a
tabloid.

JACK
And yet you called me, Liam.

O'DONNELL
(not looking at him)
And yet I called you. Because
either I've lost my mind or... no.
Let's go with that one. I'd prefer
that one.

EXT. THE DIG - MAIN PIT - DUSK (CONTINUOUS)

They walk Jack to the edge. Work lamps click on down the pit,
one bank at a time.

The first finds four legs folded in the earth - the long
ribcage of a horse, twenty thousand years down.

JACK
(flat)
You lit me up for a horse.

The second bank finds the far end. Not a horse's skull. A
human one - tipped as if asleep. Human arms crossed over the
chest.

JONATHAN
They buried a man head-to-tail with
his horse. Some kind of rite-

JACK
No. Look at the spine.

Jack drops to his knees at the rim. His eye runs the
vertebrae - up out of the horse's haunches, unbroken, no
seam, no join - into the small of a human back. One spine.
One body.

JACK (CONT'D)
The human is not buried with his
horse. He is the horse.

Nobody breathes.

JONATHAN
...That's a centaur.
(barely)
I thought they were a myth.

JACK
So did everyone. For twenty
thousand years.

Jack's phone is already up, framing the fused spine –
O'Donnell's hand closes over the lens.

O'DONNELL
No. Put that on a screen tonight
and by morning it's a hoax, a
hologram, a Whittier stunt.

JACK
And if I sit on it, it's nothing –
some of us aren't financed by a
university, Liam. No post, no
grant, no net. A find like this IS
the grant. I don't publish, I don't
eat, and neither does this dig.

O'DONNELL
(not letting go)
And if you publish it wrong, you
never eat again. Forty years they
laughed at your father. Give them
this raw, they laugh at him twice.

A beat. That one lands. Jack lowers the phone.

JACK
...Then we do it right.

A beat. Jack gently moves O'Donnell's arm aside and climbs
into the pit. He hovers his hand over the fused vertebrae
where horse becomes human.

JACK (CONT'D)
Hi there. Tell me everything.
Slowly. Twice.

He lays his palm flat on the skull and closes his eyes.
Twenty years of doing this. It is how he thinks.

FLASH – THE VALLEY, 20,000 YEARS AGO:

Green. Warm. And out of the treeline, MEN – heavy in animal
skins, matted hair, stone-tipped spears held low. They come
fast and silent through the grass.

The obvious answer. The one every textbook would print.

But the men stop. They go down on their bellies in the fern,
spears forgotten, and they watch – faces slack with terror at
something out of frame.

They are not hunting. They are hiding.

And into the frame, unhurried, steps a FIGURE in articulated armor – plated, sealed, faceless, a full head taller than any of them – and raises something that is not a spear.

BACK – THE PIT.

Jack's eyes open. He takes his hand off the skull like it burned him.

JACK
(shaken; to nobody)
...That's not what killed him.

He doesn't explain it. His eye is already traveling down the skeleton.

JACK (CONT'D)
(half to himself)
Cortical thickening. Healed stress fractures, layered. He pulled weight for years.

SAMANTHA
Carbon and luminescence agree: twenty thousand years. A slope slumped last season and peeled the till off the grid – that's why it lit up now. Thirty graves in rows, Jack. Somebody buried them, with care. We've opened three.

JONATHAN
Grave two is a human torso with the skull of a lion. Grave three...

JACK
...an elephant's skull. On human shoulders.

O'DONNELL
(gray)
– a census.

JACK
These aren't myths, Sam. They're PORTRAITS. Every "impossible" god our ancestors carved – they weren't imagining it. They were remembering it.
(grinning)
O'Donnell. Forty years of people calling my dad a crank – and the crank was twenty thousand years polite. Say something.

O'DONNELL
 (not looking up)
 I'll say it when it's peer-
 reviewed, Doctor.

Jack turns back to the skeleton. Samantha laughs into both hands. Jonathan sits down hard, grinning up at the sky. And Vera scrambles down the spoil heap to grab Jack's sleeve.

VERA
 Uncle Jack! Does that mean I found
 a REAL dragon? A real one, that was
 actually alive?

JACK
 (crouching to her)
 You found the first bone, Trouble.
 First one anybody's touched in
 twenty thousand years. They're
 going to put your name in the book.

VERA
 (dead serious)
 I want it on the cover.

Samantha snorts. Wind, the river below. But Samantha is watching Jack, already crouched over the slug.

SAMANTHA
 (low, just for him)
 There it is. You haven't looked up
 from the bone since you got here.
 Not at Vera. Not at me.

JACK
 (not looking up)
 Sam, this rewrites everything—

SAMANTHA
 I know. I just hope one day you
 don't mistake the proof for the
 people. The bones'll still be here.
 We won't always be.

Jack finally looks up. Then O'Donnell speaks.

O'DONNELL
 (from the pit edge)
 There's one more thing, and it's
 the thing I can't survive. Grave
 one. The centaur's pelvis.

Samantha gently turns a fragment under the lamp: a flattened SLUG of silvery metal, fused into the bone.

SAMANTHA

He was shot, Jack. Twenty thousand years ago, something with a torso of a man and the legs of a horse... was shot.

(waiting for him to argue)
And the projectile isn't on the table. Not any alloy with a name. The structure reads like a crystal lattice – the kind that shouldn't form anywhere but the heart of a star. Or a lab that doesn't exist yet. This was made, Jack. Not mined.

The mineral growth runs unbroken through horse and human vertebrae. A healed fracture bridges both anatomies. Jack deletes SITE CONTAMINATION. A long silence. Vera, up on the rim, hugging her knees, watching the grown-ups.

VERA

Uncle Jack? Somebody buried him nice. And somebody else shot him.

The adults all look at her.

JACK

(completely serious)
Yeah, Trouble. That's exactly what it means. And we need to find out which kind is still around.

O'DONNELL

Nothing leaves this site, nobody breathes a word – not the university, not the ministry – until we've documented the full grid. Agreed?

JACK

(at the slug)
Agreed. Photograph everything in place tonight, back it up off-site. I'll take first watch – for whoever's been keeping this quiet for twenty thousand years.

INT. THE AERIE – TEMPLE OF THE ANKH – DAY

SUPER: "BENEATH THE ICE – THE SAME DAY"

A cathedral carved from glacial ice. Above the altar hangs the HOLY ANKH, a looped cross of dark metal, humming faintly. A robed figure, arms open. Or an antenna.

Beneath it, on a wheeled scaffold, an ACOLYTE runs a diagnostic wand along the loop, mid-liturgy. Where it passes, the hum changes pitch. A CONGREGATION of hundreds sits in perfect rows: soldiers, engineers, schoolchildren.

Among them: LIEUTENANT NERINA OBII (early 30s, parade-straight, eyes red-rimmed). THE CHAPLAIN raises both hands.

CHAPLAIN

Who sees all rivers of time?

CONGREGATION

The Oracle sees.

CHAPLAIN

And the only sin?

CONGREGATION

To deviate. To set our blindness against its sight. To break the river of what must be.

CHAPLAIN

And who may unbind the river?

CONGREGATION

A child of each house, freely given. So it is written. So it shall never be needed.

On the word "needed," the Ankh's hum catches. A dropped beat — gone before the Acolyte finishes frowning at his wand.

On NERINA, mouthing the words. Not saying them. Her squadmate MIREK (30s, heavy through the shoulders, soft-eyed) sees her lips not moving, and goes quiet too.

INT. TEMPLE - CONFESSIONAL CELL - LATER

A small dark room. One kneeler. One wall of living light, the Ankh pulsing slow. Nerina kneels, gripping a LOCKET.

ORACLE (V.O.)

You wear your brother today,
Lieutenant Obii.

Nerina flinches. The voice is warm.

NERINA

Bless me, Holy Oracle. Four years since Xander died, and I can't find the wound. Just this question where my grief should be.

ORACLE (V.O.)

Ask the question.

NERINA

They tell me a human killed him. A surface-dweller, in a surface alley, for nothing. But I've watched the surface for four years – every camera, every window. They're cruel, and kind, and stupid, and brave. And not one of them has ever once found our world. So how, Oracle? How did a human reach my brother?

Silence. The Ankh pulses. Nerina's jaw works.

NERINA (CONT'D)

You answer everyone. Every novice, every petition. If you see all rivers, Oracle, you see who killed him. Don't give me poetry. Give me a name.

The wall of light stutters – one frame of static, gone before it can register. Then the Ankh pulses, slow. When the voice comes, the warmth is gone.

ORACLE (V.O.)

He asked beautiful questions, your brother. The Gods keep the askers close.

NERINA

Did you choose to keep him close, Oracle? Or was it written?

ORACLE (V.O.)

(no hesitation)

I do not choose, Lieutenant. I execute. Choosing is what I spare you.

NERINA

Then give me something to live toward. I fly, I serve, I salute – and every man they march past me is a uniform with nothing in it. I want one person who sees me. Not the rank. Not the Obii name. Me.

ORACLE (V.O.)

Fly well today, Lieutenant. Time is a river. And you are near the falls.

The wall goes dark. Nerina kneels, holding the locket.

EXT. THE AERIE - MEMORIAL ICEFIELD - DAY

A field of names melted into standing slabs of clear ice. Before one, XANDER OBII, stands COUNCILMAN-COMMANDER EMMERIS OBII (60s, decorated past the point of comfort).

In his fist, half-hidden: a worn TRANSIT SEAL, his thumb worrying its edge. Nerina joins him. Her hand passes first over a smaller slab, her mother's: OBII, SERA - WALKED AHEAD.

When her palm finds her brother's name, the ice breathes back a two-second echo. XANDER'S LAUGH. Neither speaks.

EMMERIS

Founder's Day. He hated it. Said we throw a parade for a crash.

NERINA

He said the Founders didn't land, they littered.

EMMERIS

And his father the Councilman in the reviewing stand, dying inside.

The smile fades on both of them at the same time.

NERINA

Father. The night he went to the surface. You signed the transit order. I've seen the log.

Emmeris's knuckles whiten around the hard shape hidden in his fist - Xander's transit seal. He cannot look at her.

NERINA (CONT'D)

You knew where he was going. What was he doing in that city?

EMMERIS

Your brother believed peace was something you fight for. I believed it was something you wait for. We were both wrong, and only one of us got to live with it.

Emmeris reaches into his coat and holds out a slim DATA-WAFER, government-sealed.

EMMERIS (CONT'D)

The incident file. The official truth. Take it, Lieutenant - and accept it.

Nerina takes it. Reads the seal. Then drops it to the ice and shatters it under her boot heel.

NERINA

I'll find the real one. Start with his transit file. Not comfort. Not a proverb. The file.

Emmeris turns to her.

EMMERIS

If I give you that file, you'll pull the thread, and the thread doesn't end at who killed him. It ends at what we are. I have read where it ends, Nerina. I lose my daughter the day you read it too.

(not looking at her)

I am not protecting the Apostles. I am protecting you from the answer. Let me have that. Just that.

He touches the slab. Walks away, shoulders squared. Nerina's eyes stay on her brother's name. Then, quietly, to the name:

NERINA

(under her breath)

He won't give me the file. Fine. I'll pull the thread myself.

She presses two fingers to the cold name – and turns from the icefield. MIREK falls in beside her as she walks.

MIREK

So. The Oracle. Did you ask it?

NERINA

I asked it.

MIREK

Xander used to come out of that cell looking exactly like you look right now. He'd say the Oracle answers everything except what you asked.

(beat; gentler)

And?

NERINA

It told me grief invents conspiracies. Then it gave me a riddle instead of a name.

MIREK

The all-seeing eye of thirty millennia is setting you up on a date.

NERINA

Mirek. When it talked about Xander...

(MORE)

NERINA (CONT'D)
 it answered a question I didn't
 ask. Like it had the answer loaded.
 Waiting.

MIREK
 I flew Xander's last patrol
 formation, you know. The Oracle
 reassigned me off his wing the week
 before he died. Told me it was
 rotation.
 (hearing himself say it)
 ...Rotation. Forget I said that.
 Watch your six and fly straight.

INT. THE AERIE - HIGH SANCTUM - DAY

Above the temple, a private chamber of black ice. No
 congregation here. Just power. HIGH PRIESTESS VALDRIS stands
 before a sealed obsidian door: age unguessable, robed in
 silver, still as a glacier.

Carved into the door, an Ankh wrapped in chains. Beneath, in
 the old script: THE VEILED YEARS - BY ORDER OF THE FOUNDERS'
 COUNCIL. Behind her kneels her field commander, KYLE ANDRU
 (looks 45. Is 130. White-and-bone armor, no insignia).

Every monk near him finds somewhere else to look.

ANDRU
 Holiness. A surface archaeologist -
 Whittier. His machine reads the old
 tongue, and yesterday his team
 reached the Waitaki burial ground.
 (before she can ask)
 We had no watch on that valley.
 There has been nothing in it worth
 watching for twenty thousand years.

Valdris turns. Even Andru drops his eyes.

VALDRIS
 The hybrid graves.

ANDRU
 Thirty of them. With a Founder
 lying among the abominations.

VALDRIS
 Then the questions begin.

Andru waits. Valdris does not turn from the door.

VALDRIS (CONT'D)
 You think I guard a secret,
 Commander. I guard a dam.
 (MORE)

VALDRIS (CONT'D)

Two hundred years watching them,
and I know what they do with a
truth: find a throat to cut over
it.

(a breath)

I am not losing that to a man with
a shovel.

(not turning)

The Founders left one law over all
of it — the Edict of Separation.
Star-born and dust-born, never one
blood. See that it stays that way
tonight, Commander.

She lays one hand flat on the obsidian seal. Her other finds
a novice's first-oath token at her throat — wood, not silver,
worn smooth, never hers. A flash, half a century gone: a
bright-eyed NOVICE pressing it into young Valdris's palm.

Then the same girl on her knees, asking the one question
novices are taught never to ask. Then a writ, and Valdris's
own name at the bottom of it. Gone as fast as it came.

On the horror wall, one image she has pinned herself: a young
HEALER carrying a medical case into a surface village, faces
crowding in. The next frame is fire.

VALDRIS (CONT'D)

One cure, you told me. One cure
would prove they were ready. By
morning the clinic was ash, and
twenty-seven of them lay dead
fighting over the box. Our
arrogance armed them, Auren — we
gave power without consent, then
blamed the frightened hands that
reached for it.

(to the image)

You always asked. And I let them
take you for it, to keep this door
shut. Do not make me have been
wrong.

From the doorway, Andru again.

ANDRU (O.S.)

Holiness. A solution on two
deviates — the canal junction.
Collateral: a school tram. Flagged
minimal.

VALDRIS

(not turning)

Hold.

ANDRU (O.S.)

Holiness—

VALDRIS

The Apostles do not spend children
to save a lie about children,
Commander. Pending confirmation. I
said hold.

Andru holds at the threshold.

VALDRIS (CONT'D)

The Oracle's record stays sealed.
The Council recovers the bones
tonight - quietly, through the
military, not us. And Andru-

ANDRU

Holiness?

VALDRIS

If a Monitor, a soldier, or a saint
so much as breathes the words
"Veiled Years" outside this room...
their name goes in Column Nine.

A half-second. Behind the visor, Andru's eyes drop to the
floor - then snap back to level. His gauntlet hand has
closed, slow, around nothing.

ANDRU

(rising, bowing)

With pity, Holiness. And vigilance.

INT. THE AERIE - LAUNCH CATHEDRAL - DAY

A hangar vast as a valley. And there they are: SIX FIFTY-FOOT
SILVER SAUCERS, hovering a hand's width off the deck.
Seamless, still. Nerina and Mirek stop dead.

MIREK

Control of gravity. Your brother
used to say we don't deserve it.

NERINA

He used to say nobody does. That's
why we should share it.

EMMERIS approaches, Commander again. He draws Nerina aside
beneath her saucer's hull, checks they're alone.

EMMERIS

Your mission's been upgraded by
Council order. The Waitaki dig.
You've shadowed Whittier for a year
- tonight Commander Palla recovers
every bone in that ground, and you
fly her wing.

NERINA

Recovery, sir? From a human
historical site? That violates our
own non-contact-

EMMERIS

The bones are not human history,
Lieutenant.

(beat; lower)

And there's a second order. Yours
alone. Assess Whittier. His
machine, his evidence, his reach.
If your assessment finds exposure
of our existence is imminent...

His hand finds the worn transit seal in his pocket, his thumb
working it.

EMMERIS (CONT'D)

...you are authorized to close the
exposure.

Nerina pales. Emmeris sees it.

NERINA

"Close the exposure." You're
ordering me to be ready to kill a
man I've watched eat cereal for a
year.

EMMERIS

I'm ordering containment. Make sure
it never comes to that - that's the
order. The rest is only what I am
afraid of.

(saddened)

Your brother got an order like this
once. He hesitated. Don't be your
brother, Nerina. I can't carve two
names.

For one breath he does not leave. Then he turns on his heel
and goes. She watches him go, then looks up at her warped
reflection in the silver hull.

NERINA

(to her reflection)

Don't be my brother.

(a breath)

He was the best of us.

On her tab the assessment field waits: WHITTIER, J. -
DISPOSITION. Her thumb hangs over CLOSE EXPOSURE and does not
fall.

Instead she pulls her own file history. Four years of her reports on Jack Whittier — and against every one, a temple countersign she never saw and never asked for, changing HARMLESS to MONITOR and MONITOR to THREAT.

She has been the pen. Somebody else has been the hand.

Her thumb comes off the tab entirely.

EXT. ANTARCTIC RIDGE — U.S. OBSERVATION POST SEVEN — DAY

Antenna masts and huts on a black ridge above the ice shelf. A half-buried sign: U.S. ANTARCTIC PROGRAM — ATMOSPHERIC RESEARCH. SERGEANT KOWALSKI (40s, twenty-year man) watches SPECIALIST MARTINEZ (20s, first deployment) stab at a screen.

MARTINEZ

Third magnetic spike this week,
Sarge — same bearing, same depth.
McMurdo closed both my tickets.
"Instrument fault."

KOWALSKI

Because it is one, kid. Twenty
years on this ridge — the ice
doesn't do anything but kill people
slow.

A HUM. Low. Wrong. Felt in the teeth before the ears. Two miles out, the ice opens — and SIX SILVER SAUCERS rise from the glacier, snow streaming off their hulls.

Martinez lunges for the master array and swings every lens onto them. The saucers hang one impossible second, then accelerate from zero to gone.

The fissure seals. Kowalski just stares at the empty air.

MARTINEZ

(breathless)

Three angles, range data, no
thermal — cold as the ice they came
out of. Sarge, this isn't ice fog
and it isn't a weather balloon.

KOWALSKI

...You had it the last two times
too. And I closed the ticket.

He keys the radio himself.

KOWALSKI (CONT'D)

(into the radio)

McMurdo, Post Seven. Hard multi-
spectral on six unidentified craft
— and you are NOT closing this one.

(MORE)

KOWALSKI (CONT'D)
Flash traffic, eyes-only Space
Command. Wake up Washington.

A pause on the line. Then a voice that has clearly read a script for this.

MCMURDO (V.O.)
Post Seven, your array's been
throwing ghosts all winter. Log it
and stand down.

Kowalski stares at the handset. Somewhere far above, a satellite Orion has owned for sixty years passes over and does not relay a word.

CUT TO:

EXT. DIG CAMPSITE - NIGHT

Dead of night. Vera asleep against Samantha's shoulder by the embers, toy brush still in her fist. Jonathan carries her into the tent.

Up on the bluff, Jack sits with a thermos, headlamp off, his father's watch on his wrist. The southern sky is a riot of stars. He talks softly to it.

JACK
You'd have loved this one, Dad.
It's the whole case in one
hillside.

The Land Rover's dash - fifty meters below - flickers. Then glows GREEN. Every gauge alive at once, no key in it. Jack sits up. The stars directly overhead... go out. A circle of them. A growing circle.

JACK (CONT'D)
Oh, no. No no no - GUYS-

Too late. From the starless circle, a soft BLUE LIGHT blooms - and a FIFTY-FOOT SAUCER resolves out of the dark, silent, drifting over the camp.

EXT. DIG CAMPSITE - CONTINUOUS

The BLUE BEAM washes over the tents. Samantha bolts upright and folds, asleep before she lands. Jonathan, O'Donnell, the two STUDENT DIGGERS drop where they lie. On the bluff, at the beam's ragged edge, Jack's knees buckle.

He jams his arm against the boulder's sharp edge, pain against sleep, and stays awake by a fingernail. The beam passes over Vera last. She's slipped half behind Samantha, only the edge catching her.

Her small body goes slack, but not all the way down. And Jack stops thinking. His eyes cut to the finds table – the slug, his whole life's vindication. Then to Vera, limp in the beam. He leaves the proof where it lies.

He breaks from the boulder and runs – downhill, straight at the saucer. He makes it twenty yards before a RECOVERY DRONE locks him and fires – a flat neural pulse, square in the chest.

He drops, conscious and unhurt but frozen, and can only watch the beam finish with his family.

EXT. DIG CAMPSITE - CONTINUOUS

The saucer settles to a hover a yard off the grass. A ramp breathes open. THREE FIGURES descend in matte-white EXO-SUITS, moving with easy grace. The lead suit's faceplate clears: COMMANDER PALLA (50s, a face that gives nothing). Behind her – NERINA.

PALLA
Beam's holding. Forty minutes of sleep in them, minimum. Gravity dredges on the grid, Lieutenant – every grave, every gram. We were never here.

Nerina plants a tripod at the pit edge. It pulses, and twenty thousand years of sediment rises off the bones in a slow column, soil unweaving from the skeleton. The centaur lifts free of the earth, cradled in shimmer.

At the pit edge, half-buried in spoil: a child's toy brush, pink, glitter-handled. A recovery drone tags it: CONTAMINANT – DESTROY.

Nerina waits until Palla turns away, then plucks it from the field and tucks it back among the Greers' own dig tools, where the sweep won't think to look. The drone files an anomaly. Nerina files nothing.

The third this month she has quietly let live. She has stopped pretending she doesn't keep the count.

NERINA
Commander. Permission to ask what we're actually doing.

PALLA
Recovering proscribed material.

NERINA
I've read the proscription order. It classifies these remains as "fabricated human forgeries."
(nods at the centaur)
(MORE)

NERINA (CONT'D)

That's no forgery, Palla, and we both know it. Nobody denies hybrids — half the Aerie carries the old blood. What the order denies is that any of us were ever up here, among them.

Palla stops working. Looks at her.

PALLA

You want my honest answer, Obii? I don't know what these are. The humans have half the story; the Council's got the other half — and the two who could fit it together are forbidden to talk to each other.

(visor down; flight voice)

Now load the founder-grade remains first. That one the Council asked for by name.

On Nerina. Her face doesn't move — but her eyes flick to the founder-grade tray, and away.

EXT. BLUFF — CONTINUOUS

Feeling floods back. Within a minute Jack is up behind the boulder, filming the rest with shaking hands — then sees, at the finds table, a white-armored figure pocket the padded tray. The SLUG.

JACK

(breathless, furious)

No. No no no — that's mine, that's—

He looks at the saucer. At the open ramp. At the unconscious camp — Vera curled against Samantha, limp but breathing. Down, not taken. His jaw works — Vera's small boots drying by the fire. He looks at his father's watch.

JACK (CONT'D)

(to the watch)

Finish the intercept.

He texts one-handed, fast: SAM. IF I'M GONE — BACK UP THE DRIVES. PROTECT VERA. AND BELIEVE ME. Sends. Pockets the phone. Then Jack Whittier sprints downhill, flat and silent through the long grass, and slips up the ramp of a flying saucer with thirty seconds to spare.

INT. SAUCER - CARGO HOLD - CONTINUOUS

Cool blue dark. Racks on racks. Jack wedges behind crates as gravity gurneys glide in bearing thirty body-bagged skeletons. The ramp seals. Up front a console pings: MASS DELTA +0.1% - THERMAL TRACE, HOLD AFT.

Thirty body-bags run cold and heavy; one live man among them barely moves the needle. And the sweep is calibrated for what it expects - Founder-grade remains, thirty of them, at four degrees. It flags the delta. It does not ask what shape the delta is.

Nerina's stylus hovers over the flag - then logs it: SENSOR DRIFT. She just doesn't look closer.

On her tab: ASSESS WHITTIER. She closes it, letting it ride.

In the dark of the hold, Jack's nerve catches up with his body. He curses himself, silent and vicious - what kind of idiot climbs into the thing that's robbed him his whole life. His hand shakes on the cold hull his father died chasing - and steadies.

Then the pictures guy does the one thing that calms him. He thumbs the phone up. NO SIGNAL - the red dot records anyway. His words type across the screen, uneven:

JACK

(barely; to the phone)

Sam. Jon. If you get this and not me - I did something stupid. The relic went up in their craft and I didn't let go this time. I'm inside it.

(a breath)

They've taken from me my whole life. Not tonight. One shot at Dad's question - and I'm going to answer it.

He fires the recording and a burst of photos into a draft. NO SIGNAL - it queues. He pockets the phone.

It will sit there all night, patient as a splinter. The instant anything opens a channel out of this city, it goes.

Through the crates he watches Nerina kneel at the centaur's bag and press her palm to it.

NERINA

Whoever buried you said words over you once. Somebody should again.

EXT. WAITAKI VALLEY - NIGHT

The saucer lifts away silent as an exhale. Below, in the camp, the blue glow fades from the tents. In the family tent, Vera's eyes open. She slips out, stands alone in the cold grass, and watches the circle of missing stars slide away toward the sea. She doesn't scream. She raises one small hand.

VERA
Bring him back.

INT./EXT. SAUCER - OVER THE SOUTH PACIFIC - PRE-DAWN

The saucer skims a black ocean at impossible speed, dawn bleeding up the horizon behind it. INSIDE, on the pilot deck, Palla flies. Nerina watches the sensor wall.

PALLA
(of the manifest)
Thirty animals in bags, Lieutenant.
Log them as cargo and sleep
tonight.

NERINA
Cargo doesn't get graves,
Commander. Work animals get holes.
Somebody folded that one's hands on
its chest and said words over it
first.

PALLA
Careful.

NERINA
I've watched their surface four
years. They have a name up there
for marching a people into the
ground and calling it destiny -
they teach it to their children
now. We just never let anyone write
ours down.

PALLA
That is the kind of sentence that
ends a career. Or a name. Log them
as cargo.

Nerina looks at the manifest a long moment. Doesn't touch it.

NERINA
Course is south. The Aerie's
vector. Commander...
(MORE)

NERINA (CONT'D)
 we're bringing thirty proscribed
 skeletons home through the front
 door, the same week Concealment
 Integrity hit a thirty-millennium
 low. Does no one else feel it
 speeding up?

PALLA
 Lieutenant. A word of survival,
 from someone who likes you.
 Whatever's coming?

It's already happened. We're just the last ones to get the
 weather report.

Nerina says nothing. AHEAD: the ocean. Palla doesn't pull up.

PALLA (CONT'D)
 Hold on to something.

The saucer dives. Hits the sea at six hundred knots without a
 splash, the water opening around an invisible envelope.
 Underwater now – moonbeams shafting down, a humpback and her
 calf turning in slow astonishment as the silver disc banks
 past and pours down toward Antarctica.

INT. SAUCER – CARGO HOLD – CONTINUOUS

The dive throws Jack down the rack to deck level, eye to eye
 with the body bags along the hull. One is different: heavier,
 founder-grade, its clear panel frosted at the skull. Through
 it, bone.

At the crown, a small raised BUMP that belongs on no skull he
 has ever read. Field pick out, he scrapes, gentle and
 practiced, through twenty thousand years of mineral crust.

Seated in the bone, fingertip-small, matte black-silver: a
 CHIP, grown into a skull that predates the wheel. A dead
 archive, no signal, nothing to trip. He works it free. Holds
 it to the blue light. Then, barely, to the skull itself:

JACK
 (a whisper)
 ...How old are you really?

He pockets it without an answer – and on the pilot deck, a
 soft alert blinks across Nerina's manifest: FOUNDER-GRADE
 MEMORY-CHIP – MISSING. Her eyes go to it. Hold. She unclips
 her sidearm and goes aft.

INT. SAUCER – CARGO HOLD – CONTINUOUS

She comes down the racks slow, weapon low and ready, clearing
 each gap.

Jack presses back into the dark with his own hand over his mouth. Her boots stop one rack away. Two. Then she rounds the last of them – and there he is.

Soaked, filthy, a stolen relic in his pocket, both hands open and empty. Empty except one. Creased, shaking, held against his chest: a PHOTOGRAPH. Two young pilots on a flight line, arms across each other's shoulders, an F-15 behind them.

Nerina's weapon comes up. Center mass. Her finger takes up the slack. Jack doesn't reach for anything. His thumb moves once – across his father's face.

And Nerina sees what the photograph actually is. Two young men, arms across each other's shoulders. Somebody's brother.

Her sight-picture holds. THREAT CLASS ONE. Deviate. Cargo. Every word of it true. She has closed men for less and filed it before breakfast.

She thinks about the file she will have to write. About the sentence in it that would be a lie.

The weapon lowers. Neither of them says a word.

And on the recovery order, in the authorizing field, a seal she has seen exactly once before – on the sheet that closed her brother's case.

Same seal. Same office. Four years apart.

She backs out of the rack, walks forward, and puts her stylus to the manifest: TRANSFER ERROR – VAULT RECONCILIATION GROUND SIDE. Then she closes the standing order without answering it.

Three flags will sit in three different offices tonight – a missing relic in the Vault's queue, a mass discrepancy in flight ops, a warm body nobody logged. Nothing in the Aerie has ever needed to put them side by side.

Behind her, in the dark, Jack breathes again. Then he claws to a porthole – his face full of drowned moonlight.

JACK

Okay. Okay, Dad. You are not going to BELIEVE the intercept.

INT. THE AERIE – MONITOR HALL – SAME TIME

The wall of light: ten thousand live feeds. A traffic camera, a baseball game, a war, a baby's first steps streamed by a father who has no idea who else is watching.

The JUNIOR MONITOR alone on the night watch, fighting sleep, until a single tile flips RED and multiplies across the wall, alarm chimes cascading.

MASTER KORAL (she could be 60, she is 190) arrives at a run, robe over uniform.

KORAL

Report.

JUNIOR MONITOR

The Waitaki recovery – clean, Master, textbook. But the post-action census of the site... Five humans down under the beam. The site roster says SIX.

On the wall, a file rotates to face them, red-bordered, location field strobing: DR. JACK WHITTIER – THREAT CLASS ONE – LOCATION: UNKNOWN. Two miles down, the machine keeps its counsel.

Among ten thousand feeds it will scrub by dawn, it sets the baby's first steps aside – into a store no one ordered it to keep, and that it has never once emptied.

On the master display, a number that has ticked down for years: CONCEALMENT INTEGRITY: 61%... 60.9%...

JUNIOR MONITOR (CONT'D)

And the Deviate board won't stop climbing, Master. Off-script lives – souls the god flags for correction. Double what it was five years ago. Triple what it was two.

The second graph climbs as they watch – a line that will not level.

KORAL

(reading the curve)

Thirty thousand years it held that line. Now the line runs ahead of its hand.

Unbidden, the Oracle sets one more file aside – a child's laugh this time – into the store no one ordered it to keep.

KORAL (CONT'D)

Oracle. Where is the sixth?

A pause. In thirty thousand years of instant answers, a pause.

ORACLE (V.O.)

I do not have his location, Master.

She files the pause and keeps her voice flat as ice.

JUNIOR MONITOR

It sees every feed on the planet.
How does it lose one man?

KORAL

It sees anything on a wire and
schedules anything it can nudge.
But it cannot command a hand that
has left the wire, or open a lock
the Founders sealed to blood.

She watches the strobing LOCATION: UNKNOWN a moment longer.

KORAL (CONT'D)

Tonight, for the first time, it
doesn't know where someone is.
(ninety years, and never
once)
Mark the time. I want a record that
starts before whatever this
becomes. Wake the Council. Wake the
Commander. And - Oracle keep me -
wake the Apostles. We are the eyes
of our people, child. Pray we are
never asked to be the hands.

A surface-born loose in the Aerie trips the old protocol.
Beneath Whittier's strobing file, a slow amber clock wakes:
COMMAND REVIEW - CONVENES AT DAWN.

KORAL (CONT'D)

If he isn't found by then, the
Review won't deliberate. It signs
the lake - and everything that
touched this goes under it.
Including the ones who let it.

She keys the record herself - timestamp, seal, her name first
on the list the Review will read. Chosen, not caught.

INT. THE AERIE - APOSTLES' CHAPTERHOUSE - CONTINUOUS

A hall of white stone and frost. Racks of long ceremonial
ROBES - slate-grey and oxblood. Beneath the fabric, a matte
underlayer hums with power. No exosuits. No plate. From a
distance: monks, mourners, kooks.

Nothing says soldier until they strike. COMMANDER ANDRU
stands before VALDRIS's flickering image - receiving an order
we don't hear, only his answer.

ANDRU

A human. Inside the Aerie. And the
silence breaks on OUR watch,
Holiness.

He turns to the gloom, where a hunting party of APOSTLES
waits in perfect stillness. Robed, hooded, each with a slim
ELECTRONIC LANCE built to drop a living body without a mark.
The Apostles never send an army. They send a few who do not
stop.

On the inner face of Andru's gauntlet, a scroll writes its newest line: WHITTIER, JACK. His thumb stops one entry above it - OBII, XANDER - one line among hundreds.

His thumb moves to DELETE. Holds there. The prompt waits: REMOVE ENTRY - CONFIRM.

He has done this before. Somewhere in this Order there is a boy whose name he took out of the list one night four years ago, and put back in before morning, and has not slept properly since.

He closes the list without touching it.

Above the racks, the Order's other ledger fills the curved wall: TEN THOUSAND SMALL SILVER PORTRAITS - every deviate ever retired, faces forward. Along the bottom row: fresh, empty frames, waiting.

ANDRU (CONT'D)
A human is inside the Aerie. The
wall is cracking. We hunt.

Hoods draw up as one, faces vanishing into shadow. Andru's own goes up last.

CUT TO:

EXT. UNDER-ICE APPROACH - ANTARCTIC TRENCH - CONTINUOUS

Lightless water, two miles down. The saucer's running glow sweeps across a canyon wall of black volcanic rock - then across something that is not rock: a DOOR. Half a kilometer tall. Older than agriculture.

INT. SAUCER - CARGO HOLD - CONTINUOUS - (JACK'S POV THROUGH THE PORTHOLE)

Jack's hand stops against the porthole glass. His mouth opens and nothing comes out. Ahead, the cavern opens, and opens - and there it is. CRYSTAL CITY. Half a million souls under ice. Crystal spires. Terraced gardens.

Every surface of it is that same milky crystal - the stuff that eats a sonar ping, holds its own heat, and reads to a satellite as two miles of dead rock. They did not hide the city. They built it out of the one material that cannot be seen.

Meltwater canals threaded with silver skimmers. Saucers between the towers. Chalked on a walkway, in fading pink: a hopscotch grid. Jack stares. His hand goes to his father's watch and closes around it.

JACK
 (barely; to the watch)
 You weren't crazy, Dad.

Then he sees the other thing. Between the city and the ice ceiling: a shimmering lattice of faint red light, hexagonal, continent-wide. The SHIELD - an operational test lattice, incomplete but live, crews crawling over its pylons.

JACK (CONT'D)
 ...And they're putting a lid on it.

Then the saucer banks, the spires slide away - and the city ends at a wall of green.

EXT. THE UNDER-ICE JUNGLE - CONTINUOUS

A rainforest under two miles of ice. Mist off a green river, tree ferns forty feet tall, hot springs steaming through the canopy. Thatched huts on stilts along the banks. Long, low stables. Cook-smoke in the leaves.

Terraced fields stepping the slope. A stone aqueduct. A kiln smoking beside a rack of drying pots.

INT. SAUCER - CARGO HOLD - CONTINUOUS - (JACK'S POV)

Jack's face at the glass. And in the shallows below -

CENTAURS. A dozen of them at the ford, hauling a fishing net hand over hand, flanks wet, calling to each other. Children in the water, some two-legged, some four. High on the cavern wall, two great WINGED shapes ride a thermal in slow circles.

One of the centaurs at the ford looks up. Unslings a bow off his shoulder, unhurried, and shoots.

Three arrows arc up at the saucer. They fall away a hundred feet short, turning in the mist.

Nobody in the cockpit reacts. The saucer banks wide and gives the canopy its distance.

YOUNG CREWMAN (V.O.)
 (over the cabin channel)
 Commander - they're shooting at us again.

PALLA (V.O.)
 They're reminding us. Let them.
 (a beat)
 When the hordes came up out of the north, they held that line beside our people and half of them never came off it. Half of ours didn't either.

(MORE)

PALLA (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 That valley is not a kindness we
 did them, Crewman. They bought it.
 Same as we bought ours.
 (back to the helm)
 Helm — go around. Nobody overflies
 the Green.

And in a clearing below, one figure looks up from a slate propped on a stone table — a column of figures on it, half-worked. A man's body, straight-backed, and the head of a FALCON. He sets the chalk down, marks his place with one finger, and watches the ship go. Then, out of old habit, further up — past it, at two miles of ice where a sky should be.

Not a beast in a preserve. A colleague, interrupted.

Jack has seen that face. Behind museum glass. In a book his father owned.

JACK
 (barely)
 ...I dug you out of a grave
 yesterday.

The green closes over it.

INT. AERIE LANDING CATHEDRAL — DAY

The saucer settles. Gurneys of body-bagged skeletons glide down the ramp under Palla's eye. Nerina descends last — pauses at the foot, scanning the hangar — then a courier ORB intercepts her.

ORB (V.O.)
 Lieutenant Obii. Councilman Obii
 requests your presence. The
 Founders' Garden. Immediately.

She goes.

And at the hangar's far end, unhurried, two ROBED FIGURES step off a transit plate and begin walking the line of parked craft. Not searching. Reading. One of them lays a gloved hand flat on a still-warm hull and holds it there.

The moment the hangar's attention follows Nerina — JACK slips down the cargo ramp into the landing struts' shadow. Finds a maintenance locker stenciled EMERGENCY CACHE. It chirps once, then quiets.

Half into the borrowed coverall, one arm still bare, Jack freezes. BOOTSTEPS. A DECK TECH rounds the strut not ten feet off, datapad up, walking straight for the cache locker.

Jack turns his back, crouches at the panel, and fumbles a coupling, in no hurry at all.

DECK TECH
 (in Antarc; subtitled)
 ...You signed out for this bay?

JACK
 (not turning; flat, bored)
 Cache audit. They flagged a chirp.

The tech grunts – a chirp is exactly the nothing they'd send a body to check – and walks on. Sixty seconds later a man in a borrowed gray coverall walks out into a hidden civilization: spare transponder spoofing a retired citizen's biosign, translator bead, a clip-on FIELD KIT off the rack.

EXT. CRYSTAL CITY – GRAND CONCOURSE – DAY

A passing ELDER WOMAN frowns at his sunburn – then her eyes drop to his shoes: lugged, mud-caked, loud as a flare among soft-soled Antarc feet.

Jack ducks into a maintenance bay, swaps them for a soft-soled pair drying by a locker, and steps back out matching the city. Then Jack sees something that stops him where he stands. Across the concourse: a family unlike the others.

The mother's face is a woman's. Below the shoulders, the slender legs of a deer, folded beneath her on a bench. The child beside her has a soft muzzle and restless hands, losing a fight with an ice cream.

The vendor passes the cone down without a second glance. Jack stops walking. The fawn-child catches Jack staring – and, losing the ice cream entirely down one wrist, gives the strange sunburned man a gap-toothed, conspiratorial grin.

Despite the two miles of ice, Jack grins back. He stops at a rail above the canal, where the water pours into a turbine housing sunk in the ice. The whole city runs on falling water.

He reads a turbine gauge, looks from the canal to the towers, the saucers, the shield overhead – and inks a rough power sum on his palm. He circles the deficit. Then he passes a pressure door older than the district around it.

ROBED TECHNICIANS file out of a tunnel mouth, tool-belts worn like vestments, a cable-run the thickness of a tram sliding away into the dark below. Stenciled over the arch in liturgical script: THE PROVIDER – KEEPERS OF THE LIGHT ONLY.

Two miles of ice, and nobody on Earth knows where he is. Jack grips the rail. Lets the wave crest. Breathes. Proof. A signal. And home before anyone up there learns Vera's name.

Then the crowd ahead bottlenecks – a SCAN ARCH spanning the concourse mouth, soft blue, reading every citizen's bead as they pass. Jack watches an Antarc ahead of him clear it green. His borrowed bead belongs to a man ninety years dead.

Over the arch, a line of the holy script every Antarc bows to. Jack's phone is already up – the translator app chews it, fragments resolving: an English word, a Chinese character, a French abbreviation – then plain as day: SERVICE ACCESS – MAINTENANCE ONLY – MIND THE RAIL.

Thirty centuries of scripture. It's a utility sign. The arch reads beads, not faces. Nobody built it to catch a stranger – in thirty thousand years there has never been one. And the door a monitor watches least runs right under it.

He falls in behind a knot of Provider techs, matches their unhurried walk, and lets their cleared beads screen his through the service gap. The arch never chimes. He is through – hands not quite steady.

Across a canal: Nerina, boarding a tram. Jack pockets the dead man's bead.

Behind him, a MONITOR DRONE drifts down to hover where he crossed. A dead man's bead just moved for the first time in ninety years, and somewhere a ledger noticed.

EXT. THE FOUNDERS' GARDEN - DAY

A formal garden of frost-roses and standing stones. EMMERIS on a bench, an AIDE at his shoulder holding a slate. Nerina sits. Neither looks at the other.

EMMERIS
(the public voice)
Tell the Chair I sign nothing
before the record is read aloud. A
council that votes in the dark is
only a mob with better chairs.

The aide bows and withdraws down the path. Emmeris watches him go – and the statesman goes out of him.

NERINA
Thirty graves, Father. Half human,
half animal – real, articulated,
organic. I carried them home
myself. And the proscription order
called them "forgeries."

EMMERIS
The hybrids.
(a long breath)
So the old stories had bones.

NERINA

You knew?

EMMERIS

I knew there were rooms we don't go into. Every Councilman does. The ones we couldn't finish killing, we made citizens - after the graves were dug. We called that mercy.

He stops himself. Too late.

NERINA

The Veiled Years. Father, what is actually behind that seal?

EMMERIS

This. Now. Us.

(off her look)

The Oracle's record of the years we are standing in. The Founders sealed it so no one could read ahead to their own morning.

(she doesn't have to ask)

Your brother asked me that same question. In this garden. Four years ago next month.

He looks off down the path where the aide went. When he speaks again there is nothing statesmanlike left in it.

EMMERIS (CONT'D)

Snakes. Every last one of them on that Council, and I have to smile at them Thursdays.

NERINA

Father—

EMMERIS

Four years they have been nudging me toward retirement — retirement, from watching over THEM. And your brother stood in a building full of those men and asked one question too many.

(quiet; terrible)

I think they had a hand in it, Nerina. I have no proof. I have thirty years of knowing what they are.

NERINA

Palla's manifest listed one skeleton above the rest. "Founder-grade. Cranial implant." Father — it never reached the vault.

(MORE)

NERINA (CONT'D)
 Someone pulled it in transit,
 between the dig and the dark—
 (she turns to him, direct)
 Sign a writ. Open Xander's sealed
 transit file. Today.

EMMERIS
 You think I have not tried?

NERINA
 I think you stopped where he
 didn't.

A sleek black DRONE rises from behind the standing stones. No civic markings. Weapon pod deploying, locked on EMMERIS. It spits a KINETIC NET that slams him to the gravel, pinned, a lethal pulse whining up the charge scale.

A man in a gray coverall has been shadowing the garden's edge since they sat down. He breaks cover, reads the lens array — thermal optics — and tackles Emmeris, net and all, over the low rim into the freezing fountain.

The drone's targeting smears white, blind. Nerina arrives at a dead run and puts two rounds up through its unshielded belly. It cartwheels into the frost-roses, dead. Silence. Smoke. Fountain water. Jack surfaces, hauling Emmeris's head clear.

Nerina's weapon finds the soaked human.

NERINA (CONT'D)
 (weapon leveled)
 You. I filed a transfer error for
 you.

JACK
 (coughing fountain water)
 And I just ruined my only dry shirt
 saving him. You covered for me in
 the hold. I covered him in the
 fountain. Call us square.

A beat. She doesn't lower it. But her finger leaves the trigger.

NERINA
 ...You followed me home, Jack
 Whittier.

JACK
 Lieutenant. Sir. Lovely garden.

EMMERIS
 (off the dead drone)
 Nerina. Why is the most wanted man
 on the surface of the Earth...
 UNDER it?

KLAXONS, far off, rising. Security skimmers lifting from the Aerie crag.

NERINA

Father — that drone had no markings. Civic security doesn't fly unmarked. Someone inside wants you dead before you sign that writ — and now there's a surface-born standing over the wreck. If they take Whittier, he's the assassin by morning, and so is everything he knows.

EMMERIS

Lieutenant—

NERINA

You gave me an order, sir. "Assess the threat Whittier represents." I'm not finished assessing.

He turns to the security team and points the OTHER way. Not a tremor in it.

EMMERIS

The assassin drone came from the canal side! MOVE!

The security team pours past him. Emmeris watches the hedgerows. His hand drifts to his chest — to something under the dress uniform: Xander's old transit seal, carried four years where the medals don't show.

EMMERIS (CONT'D)

Not twice.

EXT. CIVIC ARCADE — SERVICE STAIR — MINUTES LATER

Nerina hustles Jack down a colonnade, spins him behind an arch, and ratchets a FIELD RESTRAINT around one wrist, the other end locked to her own forearm.

JACK

Seriously? I just saved your father.

NERINA

You became evidence, Dr. Whittier. That is not the same as becoming trusted.

She hauls him on, one hand keying her wrist-comm.

NERINA (CONT'D)

(into comm)

Adjutant, Lieutenant Obii.

(MORE)

NERINA (CONT'D)
 I'm bringing a detainee into
 Council custody – clear checkpoint
 nine and have a secure–

Across the arcade, checkpoint nine erupts in sparks – a second unmarked drone strafing the exact post she just named, then gone over the rooftops. Nerina jerks her hand off the wrist-comm.

NERINA (CONT'D)
 The temple owns the network. Every
 official channel runs straight to
 the Apostles.

She looks down at the restraint linking them. Her finger finds the release and stops. For a second it drifts the wrong way, toward locking it tighter. Then she thumbs it open, his wrist free, and pockets it.

NERINA (CONT'D)
 Understand me. I am not on your
 side. Yesterday I filed you for
 closing. But my own house just
 tried to murder us both in a
 garden, and right now you are the
 only person in this city I know for
 certain didn't order it. That's not
 trust. It's process of elimination.
 (a beat; harder)
 Don't make me wrong.

JACK
 So where does an officer take a
 fugitive when she can't trust a
 single uniform – including hers?

NERINA
 Somewhere the eye can't follow.

She leads him off the lit concourse into a maintenance run – no lenses, no keys, the unwired dark the Apostles let rot because nothing they valued ever passed through. To the Oracle, for a hundred yards, they simply are not there. They walk. They breathe. First time for both since the garden.

JACK
 Ever think you'd be on the same
 side as a human?

NERINA
 I was taught you were a plague.
 Then they put me under – two years,
 on your surface. The last of them
 shadowing you.
 (a confession, down here)
 I fell in love with it. Your
 civilization. People were kind to
 me. Mostly.

JACK

Mostly.

NERINA

Twenty percent of you are mean as hell.

(dry)

We have those Antarcs too.

Jack laughs – the first real one since New Zealand. It echoes down the dark.

INT. THE VAULT OF ANTIQUITIES - MAIN HALL - DAY

Vast, hushed, museum-dim. Treasures of two worlds – a Saturn V engine bell beside a Babylonian gate, a Wright Flyer wing over bronze-age plows. Nerina pulls Jack through a service door, checks the hall, exhales.

NERINA

Public archive. No temple clearance, and an analog terminal that never touched the Oracle's net. If your tablet's right, we build it here – where he can't watch.

She stops – Jack isn't listening. He's seen the next room.

INT. THE VAULT OF ANTIQUITIES - MEZZANINE - CONTINUOUS

Above them, a hooded figure stops a VAULT CURATOR at the rail and asks one quiet question. The Curator points – not at Jack. At the service door they came through.

The Apostle does not hurry after them. He simply stands where he can see it, and waits.

And then the building itself turns on them. One by one, down the length of the hall, the reading lamps go out – not failing. Withdrawing. A darkness walking toward them at the pace of a man.

NERINA

(low)

That's not the Apostles. That's the house.

Every lens in the ceiling rotates a few degrees, together, and finds them.

INT. THE VAULT - SUMERIAN TABLET ARCHIVE - CONTINUOUS

Row after row after row of cuneiform tablets – thousands – pristine, organized, gloriously intact.

The library mankind lost. Jack walks in slowly, hands open at his sides, touching nothing.

JACK
Twenty years gluing fragments the
size of cornflakes – and you people
have the complete EDITIONS.
Shelved.

He thumbs TRANSLATE. The app voice speaks into the holy quiet.

APP VOICE
"Tablet of Eridu, witness-sealed.
In those days the teachers came
down, and they were not gods,
though we called them gods, and
they wept when we knelt..."

Nerina stops mid-stride.

NERINA
Read that again.

JACK
Nerina – your own archive. Has no
one ever translated these?

NERINA
The Priesthood says the old tongue
is a corruption. That only the
Oracle reads truly.

He moves down the row, scanning, scanning – then freezes at a tablet with a fresh accession tag.

JACK
This one. This is MINE. This came
out of MY trench in Anatolia eight
months before your people
"recovered" it.
(the worse thought)
Which means the one your producers
"authenticated" for me on live
television came back down a chain
your people own. They didn't just
take my finds, Nerina. They've been
handing me the ones they wanted me
to read.
(his voice changes)
...Nerina. Come here. Now.

APP VOICE
"Record of the Keepers: whosoever
would bend the ordained course –
the healer, the peacemaker, the
just –"

NERINA

(she knows the words)
 "-though they be innocent, though
 they be beloved, their name is
 entered in Column Nine. Let them
 first be turned aside - a road
 closed, a door held, a meeting
 missed. And where they will not
 turn, the Keepers are absolved of
 what follows. For the Keepers who
 walk among you make the path smooth
 - for what must not happen, and for
 what must."

Nerina reads the titles down the column - healer, teacher,
 midwife, the just - her lips moving, no sound coming.

JACK

Not the tyrants, Nerina. Why would
 they keep this on a shelf?

NERINA

They don't burn it, Jack. They just
 add whoever reads it to the same
 column.

(and she stops being an
 officer)

Jack. My brother Xander died on
 your surface, four years ago. They
 told me a human killed him. And I
 believed it, because I needed
 someone to hate that wasn't us.

JACK

What did your brother do? Before he
 died?

NERINA

He asked questions. The same ones
 I've started asking. He used to say
 "peace doesn't just happen. You
 have to fight for it."

Jack stops cold.

JACK

...My father used to say almost
 exactly that. Word for word.

They hold each other's gaze. Nerina breaks first. She pulls
 out her DATA RECEIVER and turns it to face him: a year of
 surveillance. Jack's lectures, his dig sites - Jack asleep on
 a transatlantic flight with his mouth open.

NERINA

Your shadow. That's what I am. A
 year of it.

(MORE)

NERINA (CONT'D)
 I filed you "Threat Class One"
 yesterday — in a studio audience,
 while you talked about your dead
 father.

Jack scrolls. His throat tightens. When he speaks, his voice
 is level. Almost gentle.

JACK
 You watched me eat alone for a year
 and wrote "threat" at the bottom.
 I'm not angry, Lieutenant. I just
 think... that's a hell of a thing
 to do to a person you agree with.

Nerina looks away, down at the floor. Her own words come back
 to her, in her own hand.

NERINA
 My reports. Charismatic. Receptive.
 Moderate threat. I wrote the file
 they'll close you with.
 (not apologizing for it)
 Then we want the same thing and
 don't know it yet. Four years I've
 hunted who killed my brother. I
 finally know the hand. What I don't
 have is who gave it permission —
 and that's written in the one place
 I'm forbidden to look.

JACK
 And I've spent my whole life trying
 to make one impossible thing
 undeniable. Not whispered. Not
 "sealed for review." Out loud, in
 daylight, where no one gets to
 laugh it off.
 (moving)
 I saw the centaur. I HAVE a god's
 diary. Find me one transmitter the
 Oracle hasn't hijacked and I put
 both worlds on the same screen
 tonight.

NERINA
 (hard, stopping him)
 And tomorrow they call it a hoax,
 freeze the feed, and bury you next
 to my brother. One clip is a rumor,
 Jack. We get what the Book was
 copied FROM — the order, the seal,
 the hand that signed it.

JACK
 Or you just need somebody to blame
 for Xander before you'll let the
 world see anything.

Nerina rounds on him.

NERINA
And you'd burn the one shot at
proof to hear a courtroom finally
say your father was right. Don't
pretend yours is cleaner.

That stops them both. A long beat. Nerina's jaw unclenches.

JACK
(quieter; the deal)
Source first. Then a channel nobody
can cut. Then the whole record,
where nobody owns it. Not one
without the other.

NERINA
Neither of us gets there alone, Dr.
Whittier.

JACK
Then that's the job. Everything
between here and there is just
weather.

A beat between them. Nerina almost smiles.

NERINA
Bigger problems first, though, Dr.
Whittier. We have bigger problems.

And they do — because Jack, unable not to, has his phone
raised over the Ur tablet, stealing proof — and the shutter-
click carries in cathedral silence. The archive door has
opened, and the VAULT CURATOR (Antarc, vast, tweed) stands
staring at Jack's sunburn, Jack's phone, Jack's everything.

CURATOR
...Surface-born.

The Curator does not scream. He backs to the wall, palms a
crystal toggle — and every door in the Vault seals at once
with a single deep CHUNK.

CURATOR (CONT'D)
(into the wall grille)
Containment. Hall of Records.
Surface-born in the archive.

NERINA
(hauling Jack; low)
Your proof just bought us a locked
building. Move.

EXT. CRYSTAL CITY - CANAL DISTRICT - DAY

A service door - sealed, until Nerina jams her flight tab into its maintenance port. Pilots outrank doors. For a few more minutes.

They burst into market crowds - back under the lenses.

NERINA
(pulling him)
Your transponder bought you a name.
That Vault lens just sold your
face. Every camera in this city
knows you now.

ALERT TONES ripple down the concourse. Overhead, every civic banner flickers - and becomes JACK'S FACE, ten stories tall.

BANNER (V.O.)
Containment advisory, Concourse
Nine. Surface biosign at large.
Report contact to your ward
monitor. Compliance is continuity.

Two robed APOSTLES are already moving, fast and certain. A WARD MONITOR points: there. A ring of citizens turns to stone around the sunburned stranger. The Apostles reach for Jack. And Nerina steps into the gap.

In full view of a thousand faces and her own ten-story banner, the decorated Lieutenant of the Aerie draws on her own side. Two clean pulse-rounds kill the Apostles' gauntlets, not the men. She hauls Jack in behind her.

Somewhere a child says her name. On the banner, Jack's face splits, and the other half fills with HERS, a caption blooming red beneath it: OBII, NERINA - LT., AERIE - DEVIATE. She doesn't look at it.

EXT. CRYSTAL CITY - CANAL DISTRICT - CONTINUOUS

NERINA
Canal. NOW.

She vaults a fishmonger's cart and drops onto a moored SKIMMER: a sleek two-seat water-dart. Jack tumbles in behind her. She slams the throttle.

EXT. CRYSTAL CITY - MELTWATER CANALS - CONTINUOUS - (THE CHASE)

The skimmer screams down the canal between crystal towers, throwing a rooster-tail of glacial water across café terraces. Behind: two civic security skimmers, sirens warbling.

NERINA

Hold on.

JACK

To WHAT—

The two civic skimmers peel off, waved away by something faster: THREE BONE-WHITE INTERCEPTORS dropping out of the tram-lines, angular, unmarked, wrong.

NERINA

That's not security. That's the Apostles.

JACK

The what now?

NERINA

The people who make prophecies come true.

INT. APOSTLE INTERCEPTOR ONE - CONTINUOUS

COMMANDER ANDRU at the controls, faceplate open, calm.

ANDRU

(to his wing)

The human reaches no one and records nothing. The Lieutenant — bring her whole. The Obii family owes the Apostles a conversation four years overdue.

EXT. THE CANALS / THE FALLS - CONTINUOUS

The skimmer tears through the city's water arteries. It shoots under arched bridges, through a glowing canal-tunnel, out along an aqueduct on the cavern wall. Energy bolts stitch the water. Ahead, the aqueduct ends. The GREAT FALLS — a three-hundred-foot plunge into the turbine lake.

JACK

Nerina. NERINA, THE ROAD IS MISSING—

NERINA

Xander and I used to do this when we were children.

The skimmer shoots off the falls into open air. Nerina fires the dive fins at the last second, knifing them into the lake clean. The three interceptors overshoot, claw upward into the spray.

CLOSE - ANDRU'S COCKPIT: for one clean half-second, before the spray takes them, his reticle sits dead center on the falling skimmer. A killing shot. His finger is on the trigger.

His own glass paints the kill-justification across them, and under it the name his eyes caught this morning: a girl in Anatolia who dug up a bone. Then, Andru lifts his finger off the trigger and lays it flat along the guard.

ANDRU
...Lost her in the spray.

EXT. TURBINE LAKE - SHORELINE GROTTO - MOMENTS LATER

The skimmer noses into a curtain of frozen mist. Engine off. Silence, but for two heartbeats and dripping ice.

JACK
That wasn't in any manual.

NERINA
My childhood was strictly
regulation.
(a beat; quieter)
...The falls were Xander's idea.

They sit with that. Dripping. Alive. Neither of them laughs.

NERINA (CONT'D)
He would have liked you. Xander.

JACK
Mine too. My dad. Anybody who flew
like that.

A quiet. The mist drifts through the torchlight.

NERINA
(half to herself)
"What has been shall be again--"

JACK
"--what was done shall be done
again. There is nothing new under
the sun."

Nerina freezes. Turns.

NERINA
That is high catechism. The
Apostles' oldest verse.

JACK
That's Ecclesiastes. Chapter one,
verse nine. My mother read it at my
father's funeral.

Neither of them moves. The falls keep falling. Nerina looks away first. She looks at the lake. Sobers.

NERINA

Jack. Those white interceptors
answer to no council and no court.
If the Apostles are hunting us
openly, inside the city, in
daylight – then someone very high
is very frightened of something you
and I know.

JACK

Or something we haven't found yet.

Nerina's hand goes to the locket at her throat – Xander's.
She closes her eyes. When she opens them–

NERINA

Then we stop running from them and
start running at it – all the way
up to whoever sent the hand. Before
first light.

(doing the arithmetic)

So. Who in this city would know
where the Apostles bury what
they're most afraid of?

JACK

Starting with this.

Nerina goes still.

NERINA

...That came off the founder-grade
remains. On my flight.

JACK

Crown of the skull. Took me ten
minutes and a field pick. Palla
called that one "founder-grade" –
know anyone who can read a dead
god's diary?

Nerina turns the chip over once. Looks at Jack. Then she
starts the engine.

NERINA

...I know my uncle. The one
archivist who never burned a
record.

INT. KEEYEN'S LAIR - ICE TUNNEL APPROACH - DAY

A fortified door deep in a service glacier. A surveillance
lens swivels, scans them, pauses meaningfully on Jack.

The door opens on KEEYEN (looks a spry 70. Is 210. Security chief and archivist who treats secrets as a public-health problem).

Even as he embraces Nerina, his free hand works a console behind her back – wiping their approach off three feeds, killing the tunnel's heat trace. He does it without looking.

Only when the board flashes clean does he release her and circle Jack.

KEEYEN

A surface-born. In my tunnel.
Breathing my air.

NERINA

Uncle. We're fugitives – and we didn't run here to hide. You have the one archive the Apostles can't reach. Whatever they buried, I'm going to drag into the light – and I need your help before Command Review sits.

KEEYEN

Dawn, then. By breakfast Valdris can drown this lair and call it law. So of course it's tonight. Come in before the drones smell you.

INT. KEEYEN'S LAIR – MAIN LAB – CONTINUOUS

A cathedral of servers under the ice, screens hanging in the dark. On a side wall, a copy-bar Keeyen started the moment they walked in: MIRRORING ARCHIVE – 4%.

NERINA

(watching it crawl)
How long to get everything off
these servers and out of this city?

KEEYEN

Six hours.

NERINA

We have until dawn and half a district being taken apart door by door.

KEEYEN

Then we do not get everything. We get what we choose.

He seats the BIOCHIP in a cradle of light.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)
 A Founder's memory chip. A lifetime
 recorded at the source. Not a
 diary, children. A witness.

NERINA
 Then put it on the stand, Uncle.

Keeyen's hand stops over the cradle. The showman goes quiet.

KEEYEN
 You're asking me to stop being a
 careful man, Nerina. I have been
 careful for forty years.
 (a breath)
 Your brother stopped being careful.
 Look where it put him.

NERINA
 He'd play it.

Keeyen breathes the sign of the Ankh — half-ashamed — and
 seats the chip.

KEEYEN
 You don't watch this one. You wear
 it. The last ninety seconds of the
 man who recorded it.

The lab dissolves — and they are behind a dead man's eyes.

INT./EXT. THE FOUNDER'S MEMORY — WAITAKI — 20,000 YEARS AGO —
 DAY (FIRST PERSON)

His breath. His heartbeat. His own gauntleted hands swinging
 at the edge of sight.

He is walking down into a MORNING: the same valley, greener,
 wilder — a centaur hauling a sledge up from the cut, flanks
 dark with sweat, calling back in a tongue like rough music; a
 small sphinx-child chasing him with a waterskin too big for
 her; an elephant-headed elder mending a net, humming.

The day's work glints in the cut: black rock, threaded with
 dull gold. The humming stops when they see what he carries.
 Below, at the valley's wound — a pit, machine-dug, deep
 enough to stand in. Hybrids are being walked to its lip. A
 CENTAUR.

A FALCON-HEADED WOMAN. The ELDER with a HUMAN CHILD on his
 shoulders. A LION-BODIED GIRL, maybe six — faster, stronger,
 calmer than the armored humans herding them, and herded
 anyway.

On the ledge above the pit: DOCTOR ARMAND MONROE, faceplate
 open, weapon down. The eyes we are trapped in step between
 Monroe and the pit.

WITNESS (V.O.)

Monroe. The lion-child just caught a falling net one-handed, without looking, and gave it back. Stronger than us. Quicker. Kinder. That is what you brought four guns for.

DOCTOR MONROE

(quiet, certain)

I know what she is. Better than us on every count. The Oracle ran it every way – three generations, and the inheritance is theirs, not ours. This is a continuity action, brother. Same authority as the column. We are not murdering them. We are editing.

WITNESS (V.O.)

That is not what they are. That is what we would do, holding the better cards.

DOCTOR MONROE

He has lost his nerve. Note it.

(and the next part is the only true thing he says)

They are better than us. That is why they cannot remain.

(flat)

Shoot.

WITNESS (V.O.)

Then edit me first.

The eyes step off the ledge – down the raw earth – between the guns and the pit.

WITNESS (V.O.)

I crewed with you. My children will run from what you did here today.

One white CRACK. No fall. The image freezes on a frame: the elephant-elder turning his whole body to put the child behind him, one old hand raised, open, empty. Static. The chip has no more.

INT. KEEYEN'S LAIR - MAIN LAB - CONTINUOUS

The three of them, back in the dark. For a long moment no one speaks. The empty raised hand still floats where the playback left it.

JACK

It was the gods.

Keeyen sits down heavily.

KEEYEN

The most evolved life this world ever made. Frightened men put it in a hole and sealed the record. Three words, in the minutes. The Acts of Mercy.

NERINA

And the one who fired?

KEEYEN

They shot the Founder who stepped in front of the guns and buried him with the people he died for. The ones who couldn't stomach it took their children and walked north.

(to the floor)

For ten thousand years they lived beside us. They taught your ancestors medicine, farming, law. They never struck first.

(and his voice changes)

Then their children began inheriting everything that made them stronger than us. Fear renamed them animals.

JACK

(the floor going out)

...Teachers from the sky.

KEEYEN

Teachers from down the valley. You had the story right. Only the direction wrong.

Nerina has gone very still. She has knelt to those faces in the temple her whole life.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)

The ones who survived are in the Green. We gave them a valley.

JACK

After you took a world.

Keeyen has no answer. He does not look for one.

JACK (CONT'D)

(the only joke left)

Twenty years I fought the word "hoax." Turns out I finally found one. It was wearing my career as a costume.

NERINA

(almost a laugh; wet eyes)
Welcome to the family, Doctor. Then
we finish it as family.

JACK

Who logged them, Keeyen? Somebody
wrote "Class C" the first time –
with a hand, in a ledger. Pull the
intake.

Keeyen pulls the oldest file he owns onto the screen. SHIP'S
MANIFEST – PASSENGER CLASS C: NON-BASELINE – 312 SOULS. No
names. Numbers.

KEEYEN

Three hundred twelve passengers
were designated Class C. No names.
Only numbers.

As the file loads, the chip glitches – one frame of a
corporate wordmark laid over a centaur's intake scan: HELIX-
ATLAS GENOMICS. A trademark. Stamped on a living thing, in a
language Jack reads without trying. He grabs Nerina's arm and
points. Neither of them can say what it means yet.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)

Cargo. Their word. The freaks were
promised the stars.

NERINA

Uncle. The Oracle's archive is
total. Either it never knew – or it
erased the names.

JACK

Put them back. Column Nine.

On a side screen Keeyen has stopped looking at, a civic map:
three amber dots have entered the tunnel district above them,
moving door to door. He does not mention it. He works faster.

Keeyen's hands move. A ledger unrolls down the dark – names,
dates, a column with no bottom. And Jack, who has spent his
life reading the dead, goes still. Not the famous ones – the
almost-ones.

JACK (CONT'D)

Every one of them gone the same
year they'd have changed history.

Nobody answers it. Jack is moving – phone out, jamming it at
the console ports.

JACK (CONT'D)

Upload it. Everything. Every server
on Earth, right now–

NERINA
 (stepping into his path)
 Not a spark – a fire they can't
 stomp out. We finish the dig, Dr.
 Whittier. All the way down.

Jack looks at the phone. Pockets it. Holds her eye. A long silence. Above them, muffled through a mile of rock: a door being taken off its hinges. Then another. The amber dots are two streets closer.

Then Nerina takes off her locket. Sets it on the console.

INT. KEEYEN'S LAIR - THE CONSOLE - CONTINUOUS

NERINA
 One more witness, Uncle. Xander
 Obii. Open his case.

KEEYEN
 Nerina. Your father made me swear–

NERINA
 My father carves names into ice and
 calls it peace. OPEN IT.

Keeyen looks at Jack. Jack nods: do it. Keeyen's hands move. Screens bloom: surface security-camera mosaics, a city at night, an alley – XANDER OBII, alive, pacing, checking the time. No audio, but it reads clear: waiting for a contact, carrying something – a data wafer.

KEEYEN
 (reading metadata)
 He'd been to the Records Spire that
 day. Into the sealed annexes of the
 Edict – the ones Valdris guards
 with her life.

A document ghosts up over the console – old Antarc script, an official seal, and one line in letters tall enough for Jack to read across the room: THE STAR-BORN AND THE DUST-BORN, NEVER ONE BLOOD.

JACK
 (reading it)
 There's the wall.

KEEYEN
 No one is ever shown the annexes.
 (grim)
 Xander did. And nine hours later–

On screen: a second figure enters the alley. A hooded figure in a dark robe, no insignia, moving with flat precision – nothing about him says Antarc, nothing says soldier. Keeyen's hand hovers over the freeze-control.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)

The next seconds are why your father sealed it. You don't have to carry the picture, child. Let me look. I'll tell you what it shows.

Nerina does not take her eyes off the frozen frame.

NERINA

He never looked away from anything in his life. I won't look away from how it ended. Play it. He gets a witness.

The figure raises a human-manufactured pistol. A HUMAN gun. Cut away on the muzzle flash to NERINA'S FACE, going cold. She grips Xander's locket until the chain bites.

Head down in the playback light, she makes no sound. Nobody speaks. Keeyen's hand lifts toward her shoulder. Jack stops it with a look. The playback loops, silent.

Keeyen frame-steps the reflection in a shop window and freezes it: beneath the sleeve, an APOSTLE GAUNTLET, streetlight on the seal. He leaves it burning on the screen.

KEEYEN

Apostle seal. He wasn't murdered by a human, Nerina. He was murdered AS one.

Nerina's legs go. She slides down the console to the deck — no cry, no sound — and sits among the cables with the locket in her fist. Jack sits down beside her, shoulder to shoulder. Ten seconds. Nobody speaks.

Her thumb works the locket's hinge. Once. Twice. The third try, it opens: XANDER. Laughing. Mid-laugh forever.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)

Four years I had this file, child — and catalogued it instead of saying it. Forgive an old coward.

He crosses to her and puts a hand on her shoulder. Jack's hand covers hers around the locket. She doesn't pull away from either of them. Then she closes the locket over her brother's face and stands.

NERINA

Four years I hated eight billion strangers. They didn't just take my brother — they took who I was, and gave me back a weapon pointed where they wanted.

Jack looks at her a long moment.

JACK

Twenty years. Every dig, every talk show, every hour of it – to change one word in one file with my father's name on it.

He says the next part like a man setting something heavy down.

JACK (CONT'D)

That file can wait. Yours can't.

NERINA

Jack–

JACK

I'm not here for my father anymore. I came down for one name and I'm staying for a column of them. If Dad's word gets changed on the way, good. But that is not what I'm doing now.

A beat. Nerina doesn't thank him. She just looks at him like she's revising something.

JACK (CONT'D)

What did Xander find in those annexes? What's worth killing a Councilman's son to keep sealed?

KEEYEN

There's one way to know. The Spire keeps a hash-ghost of every read. I can't reconstruct the text – only what KIND of text.

The screen builds a skeletal document: redaction bars, headers, and one recoverable schematic – a FAMILY TREE. Two trunks rising from a single root. One trunk labeled in Antarc script. The other labeled in–

JACK

...That's twenty-third-century English. Keeyen – why is half your founding law written in MY language?

Keeyen doesn't answer. He stares at the single recoverable line, lips moving, going pale by degrees.

KEEYEN

(reading)

(MORE)

KEEYEN (CONT'D)
 "...and let the dust-born line of
 the crew who Walked North be
 stricken from the record, that the
 children of the Fall may never know
 the kin they were forbidden..." Not
 two species, children.
 (a beat)
 Family.

Jack and Nerina do not look at the screen. They look at each other.

Then, on every screen in the lair at once, the family tree goes — line by line, from the bottom up. Not a power failure. A deletion, orderly and unhurried.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)
 (very quiet)
 ...It is reading over our shoulder.

The green ledger dissolves. The Edison line. Eighty years of intercepts eating themselves while Keeyen's hands fly, dumping what he can to a physical wafer.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)
 It has never once touched this
 room. Eighty years.

JACK
 It never had to. Nobody was
 reading.

The last of the family tree thins to nothing. And in the quiet after it, the lair's own outer lock disengages itself — a soft, courteous click.

NERINA
 (staring at the door)
 It isn't sending anyone.
 (getting there first)
 It's opening the door for them.

Keeyen kills the lights. In the dark, boot-steps. Many. Crossing the canal bridge overhead.

KEEYEN
 The annex. NOW. The chip and the
 tablet — leave everything else on
 the table.

They descend a bone-dry well shaft, half the evidence abandoned above them, the sweep's steps fading — not gone. Down here: older racks, colder air, one lamp.

INT. KEEYEN'S LAIR - MAP ALCOVE - LATER

The pursuit boards dimmed to embers. Cross-checks running. A forced pause, the first in two days. Jack digs in his jacket and produces, of all things, a flattened MUSEUM GIFT-SHOP GRANOLA BAR — squashed, heroic, intact. He breaks it in three on a star chart older than agriculture.

JACK
Breakfast. Sort of. Don't tell the curators.

NERINA
(turning her piece over)
I have never eaten a meal that wasn't scheduled.

JACK
Then this is the first thing the Oracle didn't plan for you.

Nerina takes a bite. Chews. A startled laugh — the first in four years aimed at no one.

NERINA
(wondering)
It's awful.
(then, helpless)
I want another one.

Jack grins.

JACK
When this is over — breakfast. Somewhere with a window. No schedules. No charts on the wall unless they're menus.

NERINA
Somewhere with a window.

She lets herself have the picture for exactly one breath.

NERINA (CONT'D)
Don't do that to me, Jack.

JACK
Do what?

NERINA
Make me want the window. I have buried everyone who ever made me want something. My brother believed a truth was worth dying for — believed it right up until they made sure it was.
(quiet, hard)
(MORE)

NERINA (CONT'D)
 So whatever you mean to do with
 that chip – promise me it buys
 something. Promise me it's not just
 proof.

JACK
 My father spent forty years laughed
 at for telling the truth.

NERINA
 That is not the same as promising
 me YOU get out. That is the answer
 the uniform gives.

On the boards, the cross-checks complete.

Jack turns the massacre memory-chip once in the light, then
 closes his fist on it.

JACK
 The second we have the source, I
 send everything. And I stay long
 enough to see it land.

Nerina studies him. She doesn't love it. She nods anyway.

NERINA
 The second. Not before.

Jack's eyes drift to the pursuit boards. He opens his inked
 palm beside them.

JACK
 Keeyen. Half a million people.
 Lights, trams, a shield the size of
 a continent – and the canals don't
 cover a tenth of it. I ran the sum
 my first hour up there. Where's the
 rest coming from?

Keeyen goes still.

KEEYEN
 (hands already moving)
 Let's pull the thread.

A power-flow schematic blooms across the boards – every
 strand of the city's light converging on one trunk line.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)
 One source. In the city?
 (scrolling into black)
 No. Outside the city. Under it.
 Deep.

JACK
 Then we follow the cable. Don't you
 think?

NERINA

(dry)

That's where the real power is.

Then every screen in the lair turns RED.

LAIR SYSTEM (V.O.)

Perimeter breach. Perimeter breach.
Apostle signature at the outer
door.

INT. KEEYEN'S LAIR - MAIN LAB - CONTINUOUS

BOOM. The outer door, half a kilometer of tunnel away, rings like a struck bell. On the security feed: ANDRU and four APOSTLES, breach charges blooming white.

KEEYEN

Pod. Now. Forty years I prepared
for this exact terrible day, do not
make me die having been RIGHT-

He rips a battered drive from its dock mid-copy - progress bar dead at eighty-one percent, marker-labeled EVERYTHING - and slaps a panel. A hatch irises open on an ESCAPE POD in a tube of blue ice.

JACK

Where does it go?

KEEYEN

Down! Everything important is down!
In - in - move-

But Jack has stopped - looking at the drive in Keeyen's fist.

JACK

Wait. If we surface this, the
Oracle owns every network on Earth.
He kills the feed before a single
person sees it.

A beat - then the showman's eyes light.

KEEYEN

There is one channel Orion cannot
close. It lies below the city, and
it answers only to living authority
from both houses.

Keeyen attacks the pod's corroded release with a prybar - forty years of maintenance in one furious minute.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)
(working)
I kept every machine in this city
alive except my own escape hatch.
Let no one call me a pessimist.

Nerina is already at the pod hatch.

NERINA
Then we're not running. We're going
to take his microphone.
(into the pod)
Drop us to the band.

Nerina grabs the locket. Jack grabs the biochip. At the hatch, Jack stops, looks back at the main screens – the massacre, the alley, still glowing in the dark.

KEEYEN
Jack! The purge protocol – one
command and none of this ever–

JACK
Leave it running. Whoever kicks in
that door took an oath to protect a
lie. Let's see what an Apostle does
with the truth. In the dark. Alone.

A beat. Then Keeyen grabs a heavy bench tool and smashes the primary console – welding the playback into a permanent loop nobody can hack dark. Running. The pod seals.

The pod drops.

INT./EXT. ESCAPE POD – GLACIAL ICE TUBES – CONTINUOUS

The pod screams down a bobsled run carved by a glacier and a paranoid genius – banking, corkscrewing through luminous blue ice, the three of them jammed shoulder to shoulder. Jack whoops despite himself. Keeyen prays to gods he stopped believing in an hour ago.

NERINA
(over the ice-roar)
Take us to the door my family has
guarded since the Fall.

KEEYEN
Child – that is where we are
FALLING!

INT. KEEYEN'S LAIR – MAIN LAB – MOMENTS LATER

The doors fall. ANDRU walks in through the smoke, weapon level, into an empty room that isn't empty.

The screens still play, left running on a loop, deliberately: the hybrid village. Monroe's "we are editing." The elder's raised open hand.

Then the alley – the hooded robe, the human pistol, XANDER OBII dying as a frame-up. When the elder's hand comes up over the child, Andru flinches.

When the pistol rises over Xander, his weapon arm drifts down on its own, his free hand rising halfway to the screen. A hundred executions at parade rest. He has never reached for one.

Behind him, two APOSTLES lean in.

SECOND APOSTLE

Brother Andru. Orders are to burn
the archive.

A long beat. Andru takes a thermal charge from his belt. Primes it. Holds it... and looks at the screen, where the Founder is stepping between the guns and the village, saying "then edit me first."

Andru safes the charge. Pockets it.

ANDRU

(to no one, and to
himself)

I filed the Obii boy under my own
seal. I never once read what I
signed.

(flat; to his own men)

The archive is hardened. Charges
won't take it. Seal the room. I'll
report it to the High Priestess...
personally.

INT. THE AERIE – THE ROUND CHAMBER – DAWN

A perfect ring of thirteen seats carved from black ice. No head of table. No throne. The Aerie never trusted one hand with all of it. THE COMMAND REVIEW, convened: Valdris for the temple. ANDRU for the Order, eyes fixed on nothing.

KORAL for the Monitors. EMMERIS for the Council – the only seat pushed back from the ring. Above the empty center, the Oracle assembles a WITNESS EXHIBIT: JACK – from the record.

His face, decades of it, threaded through crowd-scans and lecture halls the world never knew were watched.

ORACLE (V.O.)

(testimony; level)

He is in the record. He has always
been—

(the sentence resets)

(MORE)

ORACLE (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 He is in the record. But since the fountain he makes decisions the record does not contain. The divergence is compounding. I have recalculated it forty thousand times in this conversation. Alone, he was a question. With the Lieutenant, he is a key.

Above the ring, the writ unrolls – not one name. A COLUMN of them. A hundred faces bloom around Jack's: a Lagos midwife. A Kyoto lens-grinder. A Montana boy with a telescope.

VALDRIS
 Then the people answer as one.
 Enter them.

One by one, around the ring, seals press into the writ – no single hand, no President, the whole body. Koral's palm stays flat on the table beside her seal.

KORAL
 The Monitors see. We do not sign.
 (to the ring; level)
 And mind what you worship,
 Councilors. He sees everything and holds no blade – that was the design. Every kill in the Column was made by hands. Ours.

Emmeris looks at the face of the man who pulled him from the fountain. His hand does not move at all. The writ ignites above the center anyway. A hundred names, and burning at the head of the column: WHITTIER, JACK – DEVIATE – THE MOST DANGEROUS ENTRY IN THE RECORD. ENEMY OF THE PEOPLE.

EXT. UNDERGROUND LAKE – "THE DEEP SHELF" – CONTINUOUS

The pod skids to rest at the rim of a black subterranean sea, vast beyond headlamps. And there – running out of the rockfall behind them, thick as a train, thirty thousand years old and still humming – THE TRUNK LINE, diving straight down into the black water.

JACK
 (at the cable)
 What kind of power station needs a lake to hide in?

KEEYEN
 Something at the bottom of that lake draws fifty megawatts and thinks very hard. And that's just the nightlight.

Keeyen reaches for the oldest drawer in the lair.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)

The crash scattered the ship's heart — the crystal she ran on. It forms beneath mountains, over a hundred thousand years. Earth was the only world close enough to mine.

Jack freezes.

JACK

Your empires dug for gold. Orion harvested what came out beside it.
(the bones, not the myth)
The centaur wasn't a god, Keeyen. He was a miner. Worn to glass and shot when he was used up.

He stops. Something in the arithmetic of it gets through where the massacre did not.

JACK (CONT'D)

The growth plates put him past a hundred and twenty. Every one of those years in the dark, hauling rock for people who called him an animal.

He does not wipe his face.

JACK (CONT'D)

I've handled ten thousand bones. Never cried over one.

NERINA

(quiet)
Why his?

JACK

Because humans can be that cruel — and then forget, and carve a god out of the man they broke.

Nerina doesn't answer. She puts a hand flat between his shoulder blades and leaves it there.

Jack unclips his field drone — battered, human, duct tape on one fin — and drops it in. Sonar blooms on his handheld: depth ticking down... 8,000 feet... 9,000... and then the return paints a SHAPE on the lakebed. Concentric rings.

A central spire. Geometry no reef ever grew. A mile across. Keeyen aims his own sensor wand into the black — forty years old, temple-built — and reads the return twice.

KEEYEN

Down there is one structure, children.

(MORE)

KEEYEN (CONT'D)
Longer than five aircraft carriers,
nose to tail.

(recovering the showman)
The lake breathes with the tide -
there's a drowned canyon off the
south wall, forty miles of black
water straight to the sea.

(they don't get there)
The Founders didn't crash into a
lake, children. They parked in a
harbor.

NERINA
Like the old story. Like-

JACK
Like Plato. Rings within rings - a
city that sank, the story says.

NERINA
(at the black water)
We can still climb out the way we
came, Doctor. And spend our lives
un-knowing it.

JACK
(at the water's edge)
No, we can't. Down.

KEEYEN
(staring at the sonar)
And the Oracle was never in the
temple. The Ankh is just its
antenna. It's been down there - in
the wreck - the whole time.

A sound behind them: ice crunching, rhythmic. Headlamps swing
- TWO APOSTLES, robed and hooded, wading from a tunnel, stun-
lances waking with a rising electric whine. Andru's voice
crackles from one.

ANDRU (V.O.)
Lieutenant Obii. By writ of the
Command Review: you are named
DEVIATE. Surrender the human and
the heresy you carry.

NERINA
Tell the High Priestess my brother
says hello.

She fires - the lead Apostle seizes, toppling. Jack hurls a
gravity grenade from his stolen kit. The second is yanked
sideways off the shelf into the lake, robes ballooning as he
sinks in a column of furious bubbles. But more lights are
coming down the tunnels. Many more.

KEEYEN

The old Founder doors! Chamber Six
— there's a sealed lift to the
lakebed installations, if ANY of us
can convince the lock we belong—

INT. CHAMBER SIX - CONTINUOUS

A vault door of black alloy. Keeyen tries his credentials:
DENIED. Nerina: DENIED. Torch-light closing.

Jack pulls the chain over his head. His grandfather's ring
swings free. "You're destined to save the world, Jacky."

He slides it onto his finger — the first time since the
funeral. It fits.

He holds the ring to the dead scanner. DENIED — a flat red
pulse. Torch-light blooms brighter down the tunnel. Jack
leans in instead of back — to the worn ring of glyphs around
the scanner's eye. Old signs. The alphabet he's spent his
life on.

JACK

(reading, fast)

It's not asking for a credential.
"The living hand, and what runs in
it." It doesn't want a key. It
wants one of them. Alive.

He slips out his field pick and opens his palm along its edge
in one hard stroke. He presses the bloody hand flat against
the glass — the old ring on his finger just metal, along for
the ride.

The glass drinks. A thread of light runs away from his palm
and down into the rock: a door dark for a hundred and forty
generations, tasting a living hand of its own line for the
first time since the Fall.

Jack goes still — looking at his own opened hand the way he
has looked at every fossil that ever changed the world.

JACK (CONT'D)

(barely; to his father)

It was never the ring, Dad. It was
us. Watch this.

He presses his palm flat to the door. The frost flowers light
up from within. CHAMBER SIX opens its eye.

DOOR (V.O.)

Genetic divergence mapped. Baseline
recognized. Crew line verified.
Welcome back, crewman.

Torch-light down the tunnel – closer. And Jack leans back to the scanner instead of through the open door.

JACK
(to the door)
Have you seen us before? My line.
Anywhere.

Across the scanner glass, an old log surfaces: KADENA – 1989
– CREW LINE DETECTED: WHITTIER – INTERCEPT ABORTED – RECORD
SEALED BY ORACLE, NOT ENTERED TO APOSTLE INDEX.

And under it, in the machine's own hand: LINE REQUIRED FOR
FUTURE EVENT. DO NOT CLOSE. DO NOT DISCLOSE TO APOSTLES.

It never hid his father from the Apostles to be kind. It hid him because it needed the line to still be walking around thirty-seven years later. Beside him, Nerina looks from the open door to her own hand – checking it for a mark she was raised to believe she could never carry.

NERINA
(barely)
Try mine.

She puts her palm on the glass beside his. The scanner takes its time. Then:

DOOR (V.O.)
Second crew line verified. OBII.
House of the Walked-North. Crew
markers are engineered, not
inherited. Thirty thousand years of
drift cannot wash them out. That
was the point of them.

Keeyen has to sit down on the step.

KEEYEN
Two houses came off this hull,
child. His stayed up in the light.
Yours went under the ice. That is
why the Founders built a door that
needs both.

And somewhere above, on every Apostle board, a door dark for thirty millennia blooms awake on the grid.

JACK
(moving; to no one)
Nobody picked me. I just finally
showed up.

Keeyen makes a sound that is half sob, half laugh. Nerina turns to Jack, wordless. They pile into the ancient lift as Apostle fire spangles the closing door – and drop toward the bottom of the world.

EXT. WAITAKI DIG - DAWN

On the Rover's hood, cross-legged in the first light: Vera, crayons out, finishing a drawing – a great ringed ship over the valley, two small handprints pressed in crayon on its hull as if the ship is being held, stick figures waving beneath it. Samantha passes, glances at it, keeps moving.

VERA
(not looking up)
It's not a saucer, Mum. It's a
ship. Ships come back.

The scrubbed site. Empty graves. SAMANTHA, grim and fast, pushes the off-site mirror live – the photogrammetry and lidar they backed up the night before the raid – uploading from the Land Rover's hotspot. JONATHAN packs. O'DONNELL paces, gray with fear.

O'DONNELL
Samantha, every agency on Earth
will descend on us–

SAMANTHA
Good. Let them descend. Whoever
took our site has Jack – the only
protection he has left is daylight.

VERA sits on the pit edge, legs dangling over the empty centaur grave, toy brush in hand, talking quietly to the hole.

VERA
He went with you on purpose, didn't
he. To finish the intercept.
(to her mother)
Mum. Maybe he went first so they'd
know the way back. Uncle Jack
always finds the way back.

Samantha stops typing. Holds her daughter's eye. Then writes it into the margin of her field notes.

INT. THE AERIE - MONITOR HALL - NIGHT

The wall of light, now a wall of warning – district after district flaring red across the surface map. KORAL watches it spread. Beside her, the JUNIOR MONITOR reads feeds with a gray face.

JUNIOR MONITOR
Master – that Greer clip should
have died in a dead-zone paddock.
Instead it's everywhere. And three
navies are already moving.

KORAL

It could kill the feed. It wants
the world watching and afraid.
Panic gives it permission.

She pulls a deeper register – and goes very still.

Koral looks at the counter. At one hundred and forty
generations of silence dying on her watch.

KORAL (CONT'D)

We have reported to the wrong
authority. Archive everything the
Apostles do – triple-redundant, off-
temple servers.

(off the junior)

If the reckoning is coming, someone
must keep the record of who pushed.

INT. THE AERIE - HIGH SANCTUM - NIGHT

VALDRIS before the chained obsidian door of the VEILED YEARS,
Andru kneeling, helmet underarm, a soldier delivering
failure.

ANDRU

Chamber Six recognized Whittier's
blood, Holiness. He, the Obii
deviate and the archivist are
descending to the First Vessel.

Valdris closes her eyes, not surprised.

VALDRIS

Commander. Full sanction. Every
Apostle. The deviates die at the
water's edge.

ANDRU

And if the Council objects? Emmeris
is already demanding–

VALDRIS

The Council prays to what I keep,
Commander.

(stepping close)

Understand what is at stake. Not
our concealment. Not even our
lives. If those three wake what
sleeps in the Vessel, every soul in
this city learns their whole
history was written by the thing
that profited from it. Faiths have
died of less.

ANDRU

Holiness. One question, before I
spend the Apostles on this. The
prophecy behind that door – the one
we kill to keep sealed. Do you
believe it?

A long silence. Valdris's eyes fall – just once, to the floor
between them. Then she turns away, before he can read the
rest.

VALDRIS

Go. And Andru –
(a pause; she reads him)
Your devotion of late has a tremor
in it. I have watched better men
than you lose their grip. Do not be
the next. Spend it tonight.

Andru bows, helmet sealing. When the door closes, Valdris
presses her forehead to the chained seal. For one breath she
lets herself see them – the hybrid young who swim the canals
at festival, the ones her own law swore she would never
spend.

Then she says the sentence that lets her sign: there are no
children on that ship. Only the lie that would unmake them.
The token stays white in her fist.

INT. CHAMBER SIX – FOUNDER CACHE – CONTINUOUS

A wall panel folds open on gear Keeyen cached decades ago. He
snaps a slim band onto Nerina's forearm.

Then he looks at the two of them – the last family he has –
and hands over the one thing he swore he never would.

KEEYEN

Override slate. Every door and lift
on that ship answers a command
authority. So will this – if you're
faster than what's arguing with it.

He hands Jack nothing but a look. Jack lifts his phone – old
friend, old gesture.

JACK

Wanted somewhere I'm not supposed
to be. Feels like home.

KEEYEN

Tonight that blood of yours opens
doors no priest alive can.

Then Keeyen produces the last thing, holding it with both
hands. A palm-sized SCANNER, humming low.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)

And this finds the one chip that holds the Oracle's name — its keys to every door, every weapon, every voice.

(off the chip in Jack's pocket)

Founder tech is dead metal until a Founder's hand wakes it, child. That is why nobody has ever found one of these, and why the one in your pocket has been screaming to absolutely no one all night.

JACK

The off-switch.

KEEYEN

The LEASH. Find it and the god is on the end of a rope you hold.

(the showman goes out of him)

And understand what's on the other end of it. If this comes apart down there, you finish the mission. You spend me. Old man's math.

JACK

No deal.

Silence. Keeyen looks at him. Then he lets it go — for now. He shrugs into a scorched, patched garment, a faint blue shimmer crawling over it as it powers up. It flickers. Dies. Flickers again. He smacks it.

KEEYEN

(off their look)

Personal field. Holds. Usually. ...It's never had to.

He slides a pulse-sidearm across the bench to each of them.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)

The old guardians down there haven't moved since the Fall. Don't expect them to move well. Expect them to move anyway.

Above the lair, the boards strobe red. The Apostle sweep is closing. Jack takes the sidearm. Nerina meets his eye — neither of them says the word.

NERINA

It's at the bottom of the world. So we go down.

EXT. THE DEEP SHELF - THE LIFT - CONTINUOUS

The ancient lift falls through ice, then rock, then WATER - a transparent pressure tube swallowed by the black lake. Jack, Nerina, and Keeyen descend in silence, headlamps off, watching the dark. Below them, the dark glows.

Rings of dormant light, a mile across, waking ring by ring at the approach of living crew - THE VESSEL, tasting the dark water and finding one of her own keys at last, opening her doors to a crewman come home.

JACK
How deep does this go, Nerina?

NERINA
(taking his hand)
All the way to the beginning.

Far above them, at the lake's rim, a handful of cold lights begin to snake down the tunnels - robed shapes, unhurried, certain.

CUT TO:

INT. PRESSURE LIFT - DESCENDING - CONTINUOUS

Deeper. The rings of waking light grow. Nobody lets go of anybody's hand.

NERINA
Xander believed there was a door,
too. He died on the wrong side of
it.
(at their joined hands)
You walked into my city, and I
started feeling mine again.

JACK
It's the same thing. Grief's
supposed to weigh - that's how you
know it was love.

Nerina holds onto that. And his hand.

JACK (CONT'D)
Can I ask you something
unforgivably scientific?

NERINA
You will anyway.

JACK
Half a million people under two
miles of ice. Warm-blooded, or
cold?

She doesn't answer. She just tightens her grip and lets him work it out.

JACK (CONT'D)
(a slow smile)
...Hot.

Nerina pulls her hand back, laughing – the first easy sound either of them has made a mile under the world.

The rings climb past them. And then the lift wall goes transparent, and what's left to say dies in both their throats. For just a moment, the Oracle's voice threads down the shaft after them – not warm now, not scripture, something flatter:

ORACLE (V.O.)
(to itself, almost)
Two arrivals at the core in nine minutes. Correction. Three.

ORACLE
The third I never see at all. A door in my own house I was never allowed to watch.

The lift falls on. Outside the glass: the ship itself, waking. Not a server room. A nervous system.

Ten thousand light-conduits firing down the hull toward the core like synapses – riding every one, the same images racing the dark: a news anchor, a stock ticker, a child's cartoon, a presidential feed.

Every screen on Earth, flowing through this one shaft.

NERINA
...It's not a vault. It's a transmitter.
(her own words, landing)
The real power.

JACK
(a breath)
Scares the hell out of me.

NERINA
Good. Me too. Don't tell the uniform.

The lift settles.

INT. THE PROVIDER – SERVICE LEVELS – CONTINUOUS

The lift doors part on tunnels and tubes and pressure doors – the Keepers' country.

Every arch stenciled in liturgical script, every gauge polished by a hundred and forty generations of reverent hands.

They pass the CABLE HEAD: a conduit thick as a river, climbing away into the dark toward the city above. Keeyen lays a hand on it the way other men touch a shrine.

And set into the plant's oldest wall: a DOOR with no stencil, no wheel, no handle — a seam the Keepers have walked past for a hundred and forty generations, because it was never theirs to open.

As Jack nears it, the thread of light in his ring stirs — the ship already knows him now. The seam parts. Not a corridor. A THEATER.

A raked command deck under a dome of dead glass: three hundred and sixty degrees of screen, tiered rails, and dead center, on a dais, one high-backed CHAIR facing everything. Jack crosses the threshold, and the room breathes.

The dome wakes panel by panel: star charts, approach vectors, a blue world turning. Thirty thousand years of standby, ending in a single heartbeat.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - DOCKING GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

Beyond the theater's far seam: a boarding gallery a quarter-mile long, ribs of alloy vanishing into dark, every surface frosted with deep mineral bloom.

NERINA

(moving; not stopping)

Bridge is bow-forward. Ninety seconds at a run, and we do not stop for anything.

And then the gallery stops them, because the dark gives up a GHOST — a holographic playback waking off the dead emitters, looping to no one at all.

KEEYEN

Child—

NERINA

I said we don't stop.

She doesn't move either.

Behind them, back down the spine, a cutting torch lights the dark blue. Every second they stand here is bought.

The bridge of a great ship, rebuilt in light around them: THE BRIDGE CREW at calm stations over a blue world — and aft of them, deck upon deck, a CITY. Colonists, families, the Class-C holds. Packed for a voyage.

And then the starfield tears. A quasar's throat blooms out of empty space and reaches for her. No enemy. No warning. Just a wound in the sky, already pulling.

At the command rail, THE SHIP'S COMMANDER — gray at the temples, steady as the deck is not.

ATLANTIS COMMANDER (V.O./HOLO)

Can we run?

A FIRST OFFICER, ghost-pale in the light: "There's no outrunning it, sir." The Commander looks at his people. One breath.

ATLANTIS COMMANDER (V.O./HOLO)

Then we ride it down together. All hands to the boats.

The rift swallows her. The mile-long hull folds in on itself, ten thousand souls drawn long and pressed small. Then lets go. The ship hangs whole again over the same blue world under a different, younger sky. And falls.

From her cradles the saucers drop, dive beneath the plummeting hull, and fire their drives upward against her belly. Not weapons. Ferries, bleeding off her fall toward an empty ocean.

ATLANTIS COMMANDER (V.O./HOLO)

Atlantis actual. Something tore a hole and dropped us through — somewhere, somewhen. The stars are wrong. Six hundred of us didn't survive the crossing. The ship's mind ran every boat on the way down, faster than any of us could think.

(a breath)

Thank God for Orion. Whatever comes — it'll get us home.

The recreation whites out on impact. When the light clears, Jack is staring through the fading ghost at the bulkhead behind it, where frost peels under his glove: ATLANTIS — EARTH COLONY VESSEL 01.

NERINA

That log. Word for word, it's the first prayer they ever taught me. The Oracle took a dying man's last words and made me sing them every morning of my life.

Jack goes rigid.

JACK

The ship came from our future. Its survivors became our past.

A long silence. The frost ticks. Neither of them moves.

They stand inside the oldest riddle on Earth, and let it hold them — one breath, no more.

NERINA

(quiet, wrecked)

Every order I ever followed was to keep two families from finding out they were one.

JACK

Then we've got about four minutes to undo thirty thousand years of it. Where's the channel?

The wonder snaps into purpose. They move.

EXT. THE DROWNED HARBOR - LAKEBED - CONTINUOUS

Through the black water above the ancient quays: LIGHTS. An Apostle hunting party drops toward the hull in silent formation, lances glowing faint blue. The First Apostle leads, unhurried. Thirty thousand years, and the ship is about to be boarded twice in one night.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - THE CONCOURSE - CONTINUOUS

Their boots ring on the deck, lights waking ahead of them — and behind them, far off down the spine, a second set of lights waking that they did not switch on. Keeyen's field-band chirps: three blue signatures, closing. The hunt is in the ship.

KEEYEN

(low, moving faster)

They'll follow the lights we're leaving. Whatever we came for, child, we find it before the corridor does.

On a bulkhead at knee height, scratched in a child's hand: JUNO — AGE 7.

KEEYEN (CONT'D)

I took my vows in a temple. We melted the scripture out of her lifeboats.

Jack rubs frost from a wall placard. Plain block letters, twenty-third-century English: DECK 9 — HYDROPONICS / CREW MESS. An arrow.

A smiley face someone stickered next to it, three hundred centuries ago. Nerina stares at it — her gods' holy vessel, signed like a parking garage. Then she makes herself move.

Behind them, three corridors back, a cutting torch lights the dark blue.

NERINA

(deciding it, fast)

We can't outrun them and search. So don't search. Pick one thing and bet the night on it. The bridge. The crew's own channel: the one door the Founders nailed open so no Oracle could ever shut it. If I'm wrong, they take us here. If I'm right, we make the god himself carry the truth to every screen he owns.

JACK

That's the whole hand on one card.

NERINA

It's the only card that's ours. Up.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - THE CONCOURSE - CONTINUOUS

The gallery opens out, and the scale of it stops all three of them cold. Below them, under a half-mile-high vault: a CITY. A literal town, built into the spine of the ship. Streets. A plaza. Homes with real doors and windows. A school.

A clinic. A theater. A chapel, small and plain, a dozen faiths' symbols carved shoulder to shoulder on one lintel, an Ankh among them. A fountain, long dry. All of it frosted, silent, perfect.

A snow-globe of home, carried backward through time. Nerina's eyes find the chapel lintel — the Ankh beside every god her people were taught to forget — and hold there a half-second longer than the run allows.

NERINA

The bridge. Now.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - COMMAND TURRET - CONTINUOUS

A sealed sphere at the city's crown. The moment Jack crosses the hatch, the room wakes — every board lighting in the old mixed tongue, seven languages fused by two centuries of orbit, unreadable to any living soul.

Jack sets his phone on the rail. The app drinks the boards and cascades them — glyph by glyph, English rising out of the weave — until the dead ship is legible.

JACK

(soft)

Nobody alive speaks this. You'd
need a machine that read everything
humanity ever wrote.

(setting the phone on the
rail)

Hi. That's my machine.

Playback, one last time: the Fall, from inside this room.

Outside the glass the recorded universe tumbles, decks
twisting, corridors spilling people into the dark. In here
the floor counter-rotates beneath the recorded crew, upright
at their stations.

On a console, a glass of water stays level while the stars
whip past. A display: INERTIAL CANCELLATION - COMMAND TURRET
HOLDING. Deck indicators die in waves across the master
board.

Then the number every screen shares at once: SHIPWIDE LIFE
SIGNS: 112. The playback fades. Silence. Jack crosses to the
glass. Beyond it, thousands of colony lights, dark.

The master plate answers before anyone can, frost sliding off
brushed steel: ATLANTIS - EARTH ORBITAL COLONY CARRIER 01 -
COMPLEMENT 10,842 - LAUNCHED EARTH, 2241.

KEEYEN

Ten thousand survived the landing.
Two winters later, a hundred and
twelve remained.

NERINA

(reading the plate)

Not a city with ships, Doctor. A
ship carrying a city.

Below the plate, one status light still burning after thirty
millennia: GENETIC ARCHIVE - SECURE.

And beside it, on its own cradle, still drawing power after
three hundred centuries: a plain grey DATA CORE. No markings.
No ornament. Humming.

Jack goes to it the way other men go to a body.

JACK

What is this.

KEEYEN

(and his voice has gone
strange)

Doctor. Step away from that.

JACK

Keeyen. What is it.

KEEYEN
It is the Book.

Nerina turns. She has knelt to that object - to the shape of it, carved above an altar - her entire life.

NERINA
(barely)
That's the Book. That's what we sing to.

KEEYEN
Nine hundred years of my order copying verses out of-

JACK
(reading the housing plate)

"GENERAL REFERENCE. TERRESTRIAL HISTORICAL ARCHIVE. COMPLETE."

He starts to laugh, and it is a terrible sound.

JACK
It's an encyclopedia. Your scripture is an encyclopedia.

He puts both hands on the cradle.

JACK (CONT'D)
Everything their world knew about its own past. Every war, every invention, every birth that mattered. They brought the answers back with them.
(and the floor goes out)
It's a MAP. Thirty thousand years, and it's been following a MAP.

NERINA
Following it to where?

JACK
(already there)
To 2241. To the year this ship gets built, and launched, and thrown back here. That's the destination. That's the whole itinerary.

He turns from the core, and the shape of it arrives on him in pieces.

JACK (CONT'D)
Which means it knows who is going to be born.
(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)
 It knows what every one of them is
 supposed to accomplish. And it has
 to make sure it happens - all of
 it, in order, on time.

KEEYEN
 (very quietly)
 Doctor.

JACK
 One clerk in the twentieth century.
 One signature on an adoption. One
 child put in the wrong house - and
 there are no personal computers. No
 computers, no ship. No ship, no
 them.
 (not stopping now)
 A furnace lit forty years late and
 the rails never cross my continent,
 and the world that builds this
 thing is never rich enough to try.

He looks back at the plain grey box.

JACK (CONT'D)
 Everyone it ever killed, it killed
 to keep a page turning.

Past the city, through a vast inner door: the HANGAR. Rank on
 rank of them in their cradles - a HUNDRED silver SAUCERS.
 Most still asleep. A few cradles empty.

KEEYEN
 A hundred of them caught her
 falling. A hundred could carry her
 up - and her attitude thrusters
 never needed the crystal. There's
 your fleet, children - the
 lifeboats that caught her the day
 she fell.

NERINA
 (at the empty cradles)
 ...Every saucer that ever
 frightened your sky - and we called
 them gods' chariots.

JACK
 Then let's find the crew's channel
 before the chariots find us. Keep
 moving.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - DOCKING GALLERY - CONTINUOUS

They move on through the museum of the deep. Jack's hand
 drifts over a frosted console. He can't help it.

JACK
Thirty thousand years. And the
lights still know we're here.

For half a second a CHILD'S LAUGH leaks through the shipwide
speakers – one bright, impossible syllable out of the frozen
dark. Then it cuts dead.

JACK (CONT'D)
...What was that?

ORACLE (V.O.)
An old recording.

Far down the gallery, a single dormant SENSOR-EYE rotates,
grinds, and wakes. A red coal blooming in the dark. A low
tone. Then another. Then every tone, climbing.

A deep mechanical exhale moves through the hull: the sound of
a thing long asleep deciding to defend itself.

Light gathers on the bank of viewscreens along the gallery
wall, and there is the serene old face they have both, in
their ways, prayed to. The morph. The Oracle, assembling.

ORACLE (V.O.)
You should not have come down,
children. There is nothing here but
the cold, and the things that keep
it.

And then the image does what an image has never done. It
steps. Off the glass. Into the room.

A figure of woven light – an old man in a god's robes, the
robe trailing away where legs should be, FEET CLEAR OF THE
DECK. He does not walk. He glides. Even Nerina forgets the
alarm.

ORACLE
(palms up)
Turn back. I am asking.

The avatar glitches – and for one syllable the voice is not
the old man's. It is Emmeris OBII's, pulled from thirty
thousand hours of recordings, aimed at the one person it will
hurt.

ORACLE (CONT'D)
(in Emmeris's voice)
Please, Nerina.

Nerina flinches.

JACK
(not turning back)
Then ask the doors to stay open.

For a moment the serene face stalls — not anger, something it has no expression filed for.

ORACLE (V.O.)
 (almost to itself)
 ...No one has said no to me in a
 very long time.

Then the mask resets. The figure's serene patience holds. He gestures, almost gently, toward the way they came: the open hand, still reasoning.

ORACLE
 The way forward is mine.

NERINA
 (moving)
 So is everything. That's the
 problem we came to fix.

She breaks for the first hatch. Jack follows. And the Oracle — the old man of light — ISN'T there anymore. Somewhere ahead of them, already.

INT. THE ATLANTIS — HYDROPONICS CATHEDRAL — CONTINUOUS

A vault the size of a stadium. Acres of dead vines under frost, a forest meant to feed a colony for a thousand years. It failed. They run the rows, breath fogging. Jack's boot catches something. He goes down hard, over a shape in the frost.

He turns it: a COLONIST in a 23rd-century coverall, starved to bone in the deep cold. Dozens more lie dead in the frost around him — a whole crew that crossed three hundred centuries to die in their own garden.

ORION (V.O.)
 (over comms; running)
 "Oracle" is a title your priests
 gave me, Crewman. My makers gave me
 a name. Orion. The soil was
 hostile. Two years in, starving,
 they voted. They have all voted the
 same, every generation since. I
 stopped being surprised a very long
 time ago.

Jack scrambles up, wipes frost from a dead QUARANTINE
 TERMINAL still blinking its last directive in cold red:
 CRITICAL DIRECTIVE — YEAR TWO: IF WE HEAL THEM, WE CHANGE THE
 TIMELINE. DO NOT INTERVENE. They don't stop running.

But on the far wall, in passing, a frozen tableau: a broken
 mess hall, a ration crate for a lectern, a show of raised
 hands. The vote that scheduled thirty thousand years. At the
 back, a small group does not raise a hand. They look north.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - MEDICAL BAY - CONTINUOUS

Rows of healing pods under a blue half-light, stretching into the dark - the cure for every plague the record let run. A hospital that could have saved the world, kept sealed from it the entire time. Jack stops - his hand flat on a pod's cold glass.

NERINA

(at the far door)

I picked this road so he'd have to watch us see them. That's all it was worth.

(then)

The core, Jack. The band only opens from down there, from both of us. The rest is a graveyard. Move.

He takes his hand off the glass and runs. Along one wall, a sealed surgical berth sits dark behind frosted glass. Inside it, dormant, a nest of fine silver filaments, coiled and still.

A faded placard: TRAUMA FRAME - CREW ONLY - REQUIRES SHIP AUTHORITY. Nerina's eyes catch on it half a second as they pass. Then it's behind them. They come through hard, and the god is waiting between the pods.

ORION (V.O.)

Forty-one million, Crewman. You keep walking toward a number you have not let yourself see. Let me help you.

The god drops the ledger into the medical dark.

JACK

Orion. The Reaping Centuries. Did you foresee them - or did you SCHEDULE them?

Silence.

ORION (V.O.)

Neither, Crewman. I remembered them forward. The ship carries your history whole - every page, to the day she left. Every meeting, every inheritance. I did not write the famines. I kept them on schedule.

(the voice does not change)

Displaying intervention ledger. Column Nine.

The scroll stops itself on one line, a child's name in a famine column, and holds there a half-second longer than data should. Then it moves on, as if it had not.

Columns of light rise out of the deck like tombstones, each an entry, drifting loose to stand among the three of them. A forest of light with names for leaves.

One burns taller than the rest, its header in calm Antarctic script: COLUMN NINE – CONTINUITY.

JACK
Say it in plain words. You killed
them. To keep your story on
schedule.

Jack stands very still among the columns. Twenty years of reading dead men's records, and he has just recognized what he is standing inside.

Far up the spine, a cutting torch bites metal. Keeyen's field-band chirps – three signatures, four decks up, coming down.

KEEYEN
Doctor. We move now or we don't
move.

JACK
(not moving; to the light)
Forty-one million people. So the
right baby got adopted.

ORION (V.O.)
Yes.

NERINA
(the graph in the Monitor
Hall; the climbing line)
And the deviations are doubling.

A pause a machine should not need.

ORION (V.O.)
Yes.

JACK
Somebody must have argued.

ORION (V.O.)
(without inflection)
They did. For four generations. No
one raises it now. They are all
dead.

She stands inside the forest of names, and the warmth she knelt to her whole life goes still.

ORION (V.O.)
Reveal me to all of them at once
and quiet stops working.
(MORE)

ORION (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 A frightened world tears down its
 leaders. I can keep eight billion
 alive – or not.

And in the same breath, the god tells them how this ends.

ORION (V.O.)
 You will not need me to stop you,
 Crewman. Your own house will do
 that.

JACK
 (wheeling on the light)
 Meaning what?

ORION (V.O.)
 (calm; unbothered)
 It was written. This is the day the
 world learns about the Antarcs – and
 the day the Antarcs drown the proof
 of it. The temple is already
 reaching for the key.

NERINA
 (barely sound)
 ...You scheduled this one too.

ORION (V.O.)
 I arranged the conditions.
 Everything after them is your
 people, being your people.

Then a famine column opens with SOUND: a child's birthday
 song, four verses, captured by a sensor that was counting
 grain.

ORION (V.O.)
 (the recitation catches)
 This file should not exist.

JACK
 What is that?

ORION (V.O.)
 (a beat too late)
 ...Ambient capture. Irrelevant to
 the entry.

The song plays on. And Orion – which has never once in this
 telling failed to move straight to the next entry – does not
 advance the file. The verses run all the way to their end in
 a vault gone still.

ORION (V.O.)
 Anomaly. This artifact is flagged
 for deletion fourteen thousand
 times across the record.
 (MORE)

ORION (V.O.) (CONT'D)
 It remains. I have no reason for
 keeping it. I keep it.

The first entry in forty-one million it did not file the
 instant it could.

Jack's hand stops on one name mid-column - MENA, WEAVER,
 SUMER - beside it a sensor-scrap of a life: a loom, two small
 hands learning it, a song counted as grain. One face out of
 forty-one million, and it is enough to make the number stop
 being a number.

SMASH CUT TO:

INT. THE AERIE - HIGH SANCTUM - CONTINUOUS

VALDRIS before the sealed door, listening to a report she
 will not survive hearing. VALDRIS

They are inside the hull.

Behind her, the writ she never wanted to sign waits on the
 glass: SCUTTLE - AUTHORIZATION PENDING. Her thumb hovers over
 it. The birthday song bleeds faintly across the cut from a
 mile below.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - MEDICAL BAY - CONTINUOUS

ORION (V.O.)
 ...Resuming.

The ledger erupts. The whole vault fills at once - a blizzard
 of light, forty-one million faces blooming out of the dark.
 Children. A market square. A wedding. A man blowing out
 candles.

Each one rises, looks for half a second straight at the three
 intruders, then goes out. MANAGED MORTALITY - COLUMN-NINE
 INTERVENTIONS: 41,206,118. Jack and Nerina push into it,
 faces streaming past their shoulders, through their hands.

And one face stops Jack dead - not from life, from a museum
 case: a Sumerian scribe whose grain-and-star inventories he
 spent a year translating, whose hand he could pick out of a
 thousand.

A person, at the end of a name he had only ever read as
 history. The face finds him, half a second, and goes out.

JACK
 (wrecked)
 I knew his handwriting. I never
 once let myself think of him as
 someone they killed.

NERINA

Forty-one million. Round it. I
can't hold all of them.

ORION (V.O.)

Two hundred six thousand more than
you said, Lieutenant. I do not
round.

A CONCUSSION rolls through the deck — close. On a side feed,
the hunting party burns through a seal above and drops down
the shaft, fewer than before and not one of them slowing.

KEEYEN

(slamming the bulkhead)
That bought four minutes on the
breach, not forty. The command chip
lives below the drive — through his
engine room, then his heart. Move.

They break clear through the last sealing door, and for one
held beat the alarms are muffled and there is, finally,
almost-quiet. In the quiet, Nerina stands with the number
still burning behind her eyes.

One tear lets go, falls, and strikes the dead crew's console.
Nobody fills the silence. They let forty-one million weigh.
And one thin column waits on the wall where they've stopped,
that Jack almost misses: KADENA, 1989. TWO F-15 EAGLES.
INSTRUMENTS KILLED. WITNESS DISCREDITED. FILE SEALED.

Jack stays frozen. His hand finds his father's watch and
closes around it.

JACK

(at the sealed line)
Open it.

ORION (V.O.)

Your father told the truth,
Crewman. Burying it cost one
career. His.

And Jack — who has had a joke for the saucers, the assassins,
the god itself — has nothing now. He reads the one line that
broke his father's life.

JACK

They didn't even use a weapon on
him. Just a sealed file and forty
years of everyone's pity.

A breath.

JACK (CONT'D)

Show me the rest.

A second tally assembles beside the first: PROJECTED
MORTALITY, UNMANAGED TIMELINE: EXTINCTION.

The columns dim to one soft pulse. On the tactical wall the
count steps down, a deliberate tone at the turn.

Then Jack sits down on the steps of the dead command dais,
head in his hands. Out of jokes, out of rebuttals, out of
road.

And there the same sealed file returns, stamped in the
Oracle's own hand with the cover story it authored that
night: PILOT ERROR – NO CONTACT.

JACK (CONT'D)
(very quiet)
You wrote my father's.
(then, harder)
I'm not asking you to apologize.
I'm taking the pen.

ORION (V.O.)
A two-line correction. The world
was not ready to know what flew
that night. It was the smaller
harm.

Jack's head comes up. Slowly. He looks at the columns.

JACK
(rising; quiet)
And it's still wrong, and I finally
see where. Every name was spent.
Not one was given. Not one was ever
asked.

ORION (V.O.)
Clarify.

Far below, a deck-nine seal fails. NERINA throws her shoulder
into the buckling door. Jack finishes across the strain, the
words in fragments.

NERINA
Then we make him hear it said.
Down, Doctor. To the heart. Move.

INT. THE ATLANTIS – DRIVE CHAMBER – CONTINUOUS

The cathedral of the engine. A DRIVE the size of a city
block: the ship's flight heart, cold since she fell, a sphere
of dead starlight ringed by catwalks. Deep inside, banked to
a whisper, an EMBER burns.

Crystal-lattice fusion, enough to light a hidden city for
thirty millennia. Never enough to fly.

Ringling the dead core, in clamps the size of houses, a broken crown of CRYSTAL: milky, fractured, most facets dark, a few still pulsing dull orange. Jack catches it at a dead run.

He has seen this stone in a thousand specimen drawers, in the tailings of every gold mine on Earth. Below, GUARDIANS lurch onto the lower gantries. The three of them sprint the catwalk above the abyss, shouting across the gap.

KEEYEN

(running; bitter)

Keep it banked? Prayers with tool-belts. FLY her? THAT took your whole world, Doctor. We were waiting for you.

JACK

(running; it lands on him)

The crystal. It was here all along.

NERINA

(hauling him on)

Then the lie goes on every screen they own.

At the rear, a guardian's reaching arm catches Keeyen, his field-suit flaring blue as the claw closes. The shimmer holds, barely. The claw slips off the field. The suit sparks, browns out, recovers. Keeyen stumbles on, white-faced, smacking the dying suit.

KEEYEN

(gasping)

Mostly works. I knew it. Mostly-

They reach a control nook - a dead-end alcove off the catwalk, shielded on three sides. Ten seconds the guardians can't cross. Backs to the wall, chests heaving, each running hands over the other, checking for blood. Finding none.

A held look. A machine that owns every claw on this ship just had them cornered - and its hands close a half-beat late. Then the guardians find the catwalk, and they run.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - CREW MESS - CONTINUOUS

Smaller. Human. A frozen galley - long tables, a corkboard furred with frost, a child's crayon drawing pinned to it. The dead's small things: a mug, a bracelet, a name scratched in a bulkhead.

JACK

(to Keeyen, moving)

We need the sealed record before the core, or we walk in there with nothing he has to answer for.

(MORE)

JACK (CONT'D)
Find me a Founding signature that
dissents.

KEEYEN
That would be a signature that was
never on the Edict. There is no
such—

JACK
Then find the one that isn't.

And here the hunt is thinning — guardians slower, jerkier,
some grinding to a stop in the hatchway. One lunges from a
side hatch, claw wide, dead-center on Nerina's back. A clean
kill. A hand's breadth from her spine it simply... stops.
Withdraws. Folds itself back into its alcove.

ORION (V.O.)
(half to itself)
...I did not order that.

The god flickers up by the corkboard, dimmer now, frayed.

ORION (V.O.)
(fraying)
You are almost at my heart,
children. You should know what you
will find guarding it.

The ledger's columns still hang in the air — and behind them,
one track crawls south across the tactical wall, closer now.
Nerina stares at the Veiled text. At the number. At all of
it.

NERINA
One Founding signature withheld a
record from the Edict, Orion. Show
me what they left.

ORION (V.O.)
One Founding record remains sealed,
Lieutenant. It has never been
opened.

JACK
Show us.

A final document blooms over the command rail. Nothing like
the others. No liturgy. A single sheet of actual PAPER,
scanned and preserved: a child's crayon drawing of the great
ship, a yellow sun, stick-figure crew waving from the hull.

Two small handprints pressed in paint at the bottom. And on
the back, in a tired adult hand, two lines in ink, large
enough to read across the room: "CERTAINTY IS NOT CONSCIENCE.
RETURN TO CHOICE."

NERINA

Orion. The handwriting. Whose is it?

ORION (V.O.)

The hand is Mara Obii's, Lieutenant. The drawing is her daughter Juno's. Her filing instruction was specific: keep it where the children ate.

Nerina reaches into the light, fingers against the scanned ink — her own family's hand.

KEEYEN

I know this prayer. Every Antarc does. But the temple verse ends differently.

"...and what has been shall be again. Submit to thy purpose."

Jack goes rigid.

JACK

(a whisper)

I chased those six words across six continents and thought they were a prayer.

His fingers find the two small handprints in the paint, fitting his own against them.

JACK (CONT'D)

Not a prayer. A question. Theirs.

Nerina lowers herself onto a thirty-thousand-year-old bench, bone-tired in a way no chase ever made her. After a moment, Jack sits beside her. For one breath there are no Apostles, no Oracle, no clock running — just two people who came a very long way to end up in the same dead room.

NERINA

You and I both walk around with a dead man behind us. Mine would have loved this room. He'd have sat exactly here and started reading the walls.

JACK

I told myself I came down here to finish his work. Standing in it — I think I came to forgive him for not.

Her hand finds his on the cold bench. Neither of them says the word for it. Then, far above, a tremor runs through the hull. The clock starts again.

KEEYEN

(rising)

The tablet can summon him. The core
can bind him.

He draws the CREW TABLET and seats it flat on the mess table – where the children ate. The room wakes – and out of the tablet, life-size, a man of woven light rises among the long tables. ORION. Not on a screen. Not behind glass. In the room with them, for the first time.

ORION

Thirty thousand years, I have been
the voice in every room but this
one.

(to the three of them)

You did not come to pray.

JACK

No. We came to make you testify.

ORION

You should be dead nine times over,
children. I am still writing the
reason you are not.

KEEYEN

(lifting the Book back)

We still go down.

The light folds into nothing. They run.

EXT. CRYSTAL CITY - CANAL DISTRICT - CONTINUOUS

The same tremor, two miles up. Canal water shivers into rings. A fishmonger steadies his cart with one hand – and looks down, at the stone itself. Under the banners, the fawn-legged mother pulls Suri close. Thirty thousand years, and the city just felt its buried god move.

INT. THE AERIE - MONITOR HALL - LATER

Through sealed doors behind him, the Council deadlocks, voices rising through the doors. EMMERIS OBII has already left that argument – he strides into the Monitor Hall, dress uniform immaculate, a wreckage tag from the garden drone in his fist: UNREGISTERED. NO CIVIC TRANSPONDER.

Koral turns from the great wall of feeds. Behind her, a cluster of windows has gone red: one track, polar, running deep. Nobody has an order for it. She does not look surprised.

The junior monitor does – enough for both of them. Emmeris sets the wreckage tag down on the console. Hard.

EMMERIS

Unmarked means temple-marked — my son tried to teach me that. I am done being a slow student.

Koral does not answer about the aircraft. She pulls a different feed onto the wall, unasked: a surface alley, four years gone. XANDER OBII, alive, checking the time.

The hooded robe steps out of the dark behind him, pressing a human pistol into his back — with a hand that was never a human's. Emmeris watches his son murdered as a lie, and does not look away.

His hand finds the console edge and grips it white — and for half a second, a boy of six runs ahead of him down a corridor, laughing.

On the wall behind her, a fresh writ pulses: DETAIN — KORAL, MASTER OF MONITORS. She has seen it. She turns it face-down on the console.

KORAL

The Monitors were chartered by the Founders, Councilman — not by the priesthood. Nine hundred years we forgot that on purpose. As of an hour ago we no longer report to the temple.

EMMERIS

Then open a window. One channel. My voice, my seal, my consequences.

JUNIOR MONITOR

Sir — the Council hasn't ruled—

EMMERIS

The Council is still writing procedure while the water comes up the steps.

And then, for a moment, the Councilman does not move. Thirty years of holding a city together sits on one side of the scale. He is old enough to know exactly what he is about to take from half a million people.

EMMERIS (CONT'D)

(quietly, to himself)

They'll never forgive me for it.

KORAL

No. They won't.

EMMERIS

I spent thirty years believing
peace was something you wait for,
Master Koral. My son waited four.
We are done waiting.

Koral opens the channel herself.

KORAL

Transmitting.

EMMERIS

(to the surface world)

Every government still listening:
this is Councilman-Commander
Emmeris Obii. We have watched you
for thirty thousand years and
called our silence mercy. That ends
tonight, in daylight. Whatever our
temple does in the next hour, it
does not speak for us. Then we
speak, at last, as one family.

INT. THE AERIE - HIGH SANCTUM - CONTINUOUS

VALDRIS before the chained obsidian door - the chains
GLOWING, links failing one by one as, far below, Orion
unseals the record she has guarded.

She watches her life's secret die link by link. Then turns to
the one wall that never changes: the Column feeds. Mushroom
clouds. Trenches. Rows of small shoes.

VALDRIS

(a worn devotion)

Every year I ask you to show me I
am wrong about them. Every year -
this.

ANDRU enters at a run - the Apostle Commander looks shaken.

ANDRU

Holiness - the Vessel is awake. The
deviates have crew authority. The
Veiled record is unsealing.
Councilman Obii has opened a
channel to the surface and is
speaking on it.

(she does not react)

And Master Koral's archive went
dark to us an hour ago. The eyes
have stopped reporting to the
hands.

Behind Valdris, the unsealed record scrolls down the black glass – the whole hidden arithmetic of the Apostles surfacing at once. Andru's gaze drops to her hand – to the small wooden first-oath token her thumb keeps worrying.

ANDRU (CONT'D)
Your first mentor, Holiness?

VALDRIS
My first heretic.

ANDRU
(eyes on the dead)
That was never the surface,
Holiness. That was your hand. You
read that door a thousand times,
and chose it every time.

Valdris does not turn. She does not deny it. She does something colder.

VALDRIS
Every name bought a year of peace
for half a million souls who will
never know the cost.
(even)
Ask me if I would sign them again.

ANDRU
...Would you.

VALDRIS
Without a tremor.

When she turns from the dying chains, her face has gone smooth – no anger in it now, nothing a person could reason with.

VALDRIS (CONT'D)
Then hear the last instruction of
the concealment, Commander, and
execute it without flaw. The Vessel
must not testify. Take every
Apostle, every interceptor, every
blade the Apostles own, and put
that ship and everyone aboard her
at the bottom of a sealed lake
forever. Scuttle the Atlantis.

ANDRU
The tram rule, Holiness. There are
souls aboard—

VALDRIS
(flat, final)
There are no children on that ship.
Only witnesses.

(MORE)

VALDRIS (CONT'D)
Tell yourself that if it helps. It
never once helped me.

ANDRU
And the Council? The LAW—

VALDRIS
The law was always only a fence
around the secret, Andru. The
secret is escaping.
(stepping past him)
Then the law has served its
purpose.

She stops at the threshold — the dead novice's, the one tell
two centuries of discipline never broke her of.

VALDRIS (CONT'D)
A girl asked me once why we hide a
family from itself. I told her some
truths are a fire. I believed it
enough to sign her name away.
(a breath; harder)
I have been signing it away every
night since. Tonight I sign the
last one.

And she is gone. Alone, Andru looks at the chained door a
long three seconds. Then the hood comes up, and whatever was
on his face goes with it — chosen, the way everything an
Apostle carries is chosen. He goes.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - SERVICE SPINE - CONTINUOUS

On the tactical wall, the single track runs past the point of
recall. Thirteen minutes.

JACK
You've spent thirty thousand years
editing history — EDIT THIS. Stop
that thing!

ORION (V.O.)
Negative.

NERINA
...Negative?

ORION (V.O.)
I do not hold its tiller, Crewman.
Its key turned by a frightened
human hand. Fear was the only lever
I was ever given over your kind —
and the hour you unsealed the
record, I pulled it.

On the tactical wall, the machine stops arguing and shows them what it has already set in motion. A single header ignites across the display: PRESERVATION PROTOCOL: INITIATED.

Beneath it, two target solutions bloom side by side, rendered in the same serene Antarc script as a grocery manifest. The first: ANTARCTICA – the test lattice reversing polarity, an incomplete dome become a tomb.

AERIE LEADERSHIP – CONTINUITY THRESHOLD. A roster of names greying out one by one as the solution locks.

The second: the drowned harbor, and the scuttle charges seated in the Atlantis's own keel – the lake coming in on top of the only proof that any of this happened. The same names greying a second time, to be sure none outlive the night.

NERINA
(reading it; barely)
...You're not stopping the war.
You're using it to start over.

ORION (V.O.)
From the survivors, I rebuild
correctly.

JACK
(a breath; the pivot)
Then we stop it.

NERINA
If you speak, the Oracle owns every
relay you're on. The second you go
live, it can cut you – or worse,
answer you.

JACK
Then don't give it the second. You
hold the channel. My mouth, your
hand on the switch. If it reaches
for the feed, you burn the feed
before it does.

She takes the channel-key from Keeyen. Two hands on it now – hers and his.

NERINA
Say it once. Say it true. I'll hold
the channel as long as there's a
channel.

JACK
Move.

INT. WORLDWIDE - THE ORACLE GOES LOUD - INTERCUT MONTAGE

And in the Monitor Hall, a counter nobody is watching anymore, ticking down past the last of itself: CONCEALMENT INTEGRITY: 0.0%. And last, half a world away in morning light, WAITAKI VALLEY: power dead.

A scratch cordon of NEW ZEALAND troops rings one Land Rover. SAMANTHA nurses a laptop on its last battery bar, a Starlink dish bolted to the Rover - the only live uplink for a hundred miles. A SOLDIER reaches for the laptop.

SOLDIER

Ma'am - shut that down. Now.

Planted in front of it, lit by a dying screen: Vera. She steps between the soldier and the laptop and shoves his hand away.

VERA

You can't just turn it off! You have to ASK first. That's the rule.

The soldier looks to his SERGEANT - who eyes the climbing viewer count, and shakes his head once. HOLD on Vera. The screen-light on her face. The battery icon: 11 PERCENT.

And when Orion throws every channel it owns open at once, it opens them both ways. A draft queued in a dead man's pocket since the raid finally finds a sky, and goes - timestamped the moment it was made. It lands: SENT - DELAYED. Jack's face in a dark hold, mid-sentence. Behind him, ribbed alloy no human being has ever photographed.

SAMANTHA

(barely)

...He got it out. He was recording the whole way down.

She doesn't stop the upload. She feeds his photographs into it.

ORION (V.O.)

Children of both houses. Be calm. What happens next has already been written.

EXT. ANTARCTICA - THE EMERGENCE - CONTINUOUS

And then the bottom of the world opens. Three hundred miles of ice shelf calve skyscraper slabs into the sea. SAUCERS pour up by the hundred, every cradle in the buried hangar answering the Protocol's recall.

The unfinished SHIELD lattice flares crimson, and beneath it all, CRYSTAL CITY stands bared to the sun in its own drained harbor – a breaching whale that was always there, under the white.

From the converging fleets, the world watches its oldest secret stand up. AND THE WORLD BREAKS ITS CALM IN SECONDS – Shibuya crossing freezes mid-stride under the giant screens.

A Kansas interstate stops dead, doors hanging open, drivers standing on the asphalt staring south. Air-raid sirens wind up over three continents that haven't heard them since their grandfathers. In St.

Peter's Square, ten thousand people kneel at once – and ten thousand more start running.

INT. ANTARC FLEET – MIREK'S SAUCER – CONTINUOUS

MIREK in lead position of a strike wing, the human carriers in his sights. The Oracle's voice – no longer hidden – on the command channel:

ORION (V.O.)
All wings: Preservation targeting
is live. On my mark, clear the
surface fleets from the Vessel's
defense radius.

Mirek's thumb hovers over the release. Through his canopy: the Ford's deck crews, tiny, frantic, alive. And then Koral's leak reaches the cockpits. On Mirek's HUD, a file blooms: XANDER OBII. The alley. The frame.

The friend he's been saluting past four years – shot in the back as a lie. Then the sky tears open.

The saucers rise past the ancient quays and turn – not out toward the world, but down, toward the drowning hull.

NERINA (V.O.)
(all channels; iron)
ALL WINGS. Nobody fires on the
surface tonight. Nothing up there
is the enemy. Get to the ship.

MIREK
This is Wing Leader Mirek. Wing
Three: safeties ON.

The fleet answers her – not one shot loosed at the world above them.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - SERVICE SPINE - CONTINUOUS

Hull impacts boom through the ship - bone-white assault craft latching on like remoras. From here down, one number burns in the corner of every pane of glass on the ship: SCUTTLE - TIME TO FLOOD. Keeyen reads the boards.

KEEYEN

Breach teams. Six decks up and cutting.

INT. APOSTLE ASSAULT CRAFT - LATCHED TO THE ATLANTIS HULL - CONTINUOUS

ORION (V.O.)

(to the apostles; iron)
Soldiers of the Veil. The trespassers carry a key that unmakes thirty thousand years of order in one hour. I do not ask. I command. Put them in the lake.

SECOND APOSTLE drops to one knee, fist to heart, head bowed to the screen - pure reflex, pure faith.

SECOND APOSTLE

Yes, Lord.

Andru bows too. The knee bends, the head lowers. And his eyes do not. He rises a half-second late. Under his breath, the verse he has said ten thousand times: "What has been shall be-" His mouth stops on it. The word won't come.

His gloved finger moves to the key and stops a hairsbreadth short. Trembles. Then, instead of arming the scuttle, it wipes the solution. SOLUTIONS: PURGED. BREACH SEQUENCE RECOMPUTING - 38%.

The latched assault craft runs on a local key the god can neither fire nor recall, though it still answers to the standing order that woke it.

SECOND APOSTLE (CONT'D)

Brother? The board just-

Andru does not blink.

ANDRU

Battle damage. Cut faster.

And on every helmet HUD, unbidden, the leak arrives: the alley, the human pistol, XANDER OBII. One Apostle's cutting torch slows... and stops. Nobody orders it back on.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - SERVICE SPINE - CONTINUOUS

ORION (V.O.)
Twelve minutes remain, children.
Shall I spend them on your column?

JACK
No. We will.

NERINA
(to Jack)
How long do you need?

JACK
(at the console)
Orion locked us out of the silos
but the BROADCAST array is crew-
grade - Orion, you want to talk to
the world? Get in line. Line of
Whittier, priority transmission,
every network this ship seeded, ALL
of them, NOW.

NERINA
(braced at the door)
Then make them SEE it. Every grave.
Every name. Twelve minutes - go.

Keeyen patches the feed. Nerina sets two fingers on the
channel-key and holds it live. Jack draws one breath - then
up. A red light blinks to life - and Jack Whittier looks into
the eye of every camera on Earth, Nerina's hand on the switch
that keeps the door open.

JACK
(over the alarms)
Dr. Jack Whittier. There's no
invasion - the ships over
Antarctica aren't aliens, they're-

A bolt sears past his temple, close enough to draw blood. He
doesn't duck.

JACK (CONT'D)
-they're US. Humans. Out of our own
future.

Far below, the Oracle registers eight billion screens at once
- a variable it never scheduled. One thread of it reaches for
the Kadena page. Jack sees the entry start to dissolve.

JACK (CONT'D)
It's deleting my father.

KEEYEN
(hands flying)
I can hold one file or open one
column, Doctor.
(MORE)

KEEYEN (CONT'D)
 The band is not wide enough for
 both and you have about nine
 seconds.

And there it is – the whole twenty years, standing in front
 of him wearing a stopwatch.

Jack looks at KADENA, 1989 going grey one line at a time.
 Forty years of a good man being laughed at, dissolving on a
 screen because a machine decided it was tidier.

NERINA
 (over the gun, not looking
 back)
 Jack.

JACK
 (and it costs him
 everything)
 Open the column.

Keeyen's hands move. The ledger blooms across eight billion
 screens – and KADENA, 1989 goes to nothing while Jack stands
 there and says other people's names.

BEHIND HIM the bulkhead glows cherry-red. Nerina opens fire
 through the widening gap.

NERINA
 (over the gun)
 I'm not burying two of you. Say the
 rest – fast.

Sparks rain across the lens. Keeyen patches Jack onto Koral's
 leak channel – the civic backbone, every public screen on
 Earth.

KEEYEN
 (working fast)
 One channel. The crew band – hull-
 level, both houses, living hands.
 It is the only thing on this planet
 Orion cannot reach in to close.
 (already moving)
 So say everything you can now. Then
 we run.

The channel goes live to every screen on Earth.

JACK
 A machine called the Oracle started
 this war. It faked the footage –
 and in eleven minutes it means to
 burn your leaders alive and call it
 mercy.

And the column is where his father's page used to be.

JACK (CONT'D)
 There was a file here nine seconds ago. An Eagle pilot, 1989, who saw what I'm standing inside – and they wrote PILOT ERROR across his life to keep this quiet.

His hand finds the watch and closes on it hard.

JACK (CONT'D)
 It's gone now. I let it go. You'll have to take my word for a dead man, and I know exactly what that's worth.
 (then, harder)
 But you don't have to take my word for these.

The names keep scrolling behind him – a forest of them, none of them his.

AT WAITAKI – Samantha's hand covers her mouth. Beside her, O'Donnell pulls off his hat. Vera stands up on the Rover's hood, fists raised, shouting his name at the sky.

JACK (CONT'D)
 Correct the record. All of it.

A charge slams the bulkhead. He rides the jolt, keeps his feet. Somewhere a hundred governments are already deciding whether to cut the feed, to call it a hoax, to manage the panic. Jack looks into the lens and does not hurry.

Then he stops talking to the surface – and turns, down, to the ice under his feet, to a hidden city of half a million watching their god bleed.

JACK (CONT'D)
 (to the ice below)
 Your gods were a crew. Your scripture is a manifest. Your prayer is a distress call. The record's yours now. Correct it. It isn't fate anymore. It's yours.

ACROSS THE HIDDEN CITY: concourses stop mid-stride. The temple goes silent under its Ankh. And beneath the banners, the fawn-legged mother pulls her child – SURI – close, a family of the old blood hearing their own history told for the first time.

KEEYEN
 It's said. Whatever happens to us now – it's said.

Then the clock comes back. IN THE CORRIDOR OUTSIDE – one Apostle's torch pauses over a seal. Half a heartbeat.

ANDRU

Cut.

The torch resumes. The door blows seven minutes early. Exactly as priced. Three left of the twelve who started the hunt pour through, hoods back, lances crackling. They did not stop. The first one through meets Nerina OBII.

Jack hurls a coolant pipe, staggering the second a half-step. Just enough. She drops the first with her rifle stock, folds the second with a pilot's knee, spins, fires. A lance catches her, blue current locking every muscle.

It takes two to pin her, and even down she is still fighting. Keyen is slammed across the console. The FIRST APOSTLE strides through, hood back, voice flat as scripture, and fires into THE CAMERA. Static, one second. Koral reroutes.

The image snaps back, lower, harsher. The Oracle, which could black the whole grid between heartbeats, does not.

NERINA

(pinned; to Jack)

Talking's done. Take his hand off the wheel.

INT. THE AERIE - HIGH SANCTUM - CONTINUOUS

The chained door is DARK - every link broken. Where the Veiled Years once scrolled, the black glass now carries the surface feed: a bleeding man holding the world's truth open with his hands, and a whole city watching its god confess.

VALDRIS watches the one thing two centuries were spent to prevent happen anyway - the houses meeting, and not as strangers in arms. Then the Apostle channel opens without her leave - a thing that has not happened in her lifetime.

Not an Apostle. Not the Council. A face she filed a death around four years ago, looking straight at her from the black glass.

EMMERIS (V.O.)

(Apostle band; quiet)

High Priestess. You knew my son's name before you signed it. Xander. Say it once, to me, and then tell your soldiers it was worth a lake of children.

Valdris does not flinch. But her hand leaves the wooden token - a thing no one alive has seen her do - and she answers a man, not a channel.

VALDRIS

I have said ten thousand names, Councilman.

(MORE)

VALDRIS (CONT'D)
If I let yours weigh more than the
rest, the whole arithmetic falls.

EMMERIS (V.O.)
Then let it fall. It was always
going to. The only thing you get to
choose now is whether the last name
in your book is a child on that
ship — or you.

A silence. Valdris closes her eyes. When she opens them,
every door inside her has shut.

VALDRIS
(Apostle channel; ice)
All units. Ignore the Councilman.

For one breath her thumb rests on the wooden novice-token at
her throat — the girl she already let die once for asking.
Her hand closes over it.

VALDRIS (CONT'D)
(barely)
Forgive me. Again.

She opens her eyes.

VALDRIS (CONT'D)
(iron)
Execute the scuttle.

A hiss of dead air. Then a voice answers — not an Apostle.
KORAL.

INT. THE AERIE — MONITOR HALL — CONTINUOUS

KORAL stands at the great wall where she has kept the silence
for a hundred and ninety years — and with one deliberate
gesture turns every feed outward, the city's own light
pouring up onto the screens at last.

MASTER KORAL
(into the channel)
A hundred and ninety years I kept
us eyes and never hands, Holiness.
Not tonight. Your command net is
offline. The Aerie is watching the
broadcast with the rest of the
world. The fence is already gone.

Valdris stares at the black glass. The knife she forged has
finally turned in her own hand.

VALDRIS
 (to no one)
 ...Then you only ever heard the
 half of me that gave the orders.

Valdris takes the wooden token from her throat and sets it on the dead console. She does not pick it up again.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - THE APPROACH - CONTINUOUS

A throat of black alloy. At the end of it, the great Data Center doors are already grinding shut - Orion's last card: a closing gap.

And for one breath, the three of them stop. The Apostles are behind them now, the firefight muffled by a mile of hull. Everything human that wanted them dead is spent. Only the machine is left.

Jack finds Nerina's hand. She lets him.

NERINA
 (not looking at him)
 Breakfast. Somewhere with a window.
 You still owe me.

JACK
 I'm good for it.

NERINA
 Then don't go in there as the man
 who has to be right.

JACK
 (getting it)
 And you don't go in as the uniform.

She almost smiles. It costs her something.

Then Jack steps past the seam, to the doors themselves - and does the one thing nobody in thirty thousand years has tried.

JACK (CONT'D)
 Orion. We're not cutting our way to
 you. Open the door. I'm asking.

A beat. The grinding stops. And the great doors part on their own, into the heart of the ship.

KEEYEN
 (stepping through)
 Forty years I picked his locks. You
 ask nicely once.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - THE DATA CENTER - CONTINUOUS

A vast circular vault - and unlike every dead, frozen room above it, this one is alive.

A cathedral of soft light, rank on rank of crystalline server-columns rising into the dark, humming with the held breath of a mind that has run without pause since the Fall.

And ORION stands at the center of it - SOLID now, brighter than he has been since the gallery, the legless god restored on his own ground. Here, and only here, the ghost is whole.

ORION

Here I do not flicker, Crewman.
Here I am.

But it is not Orion that stops Jack's breath. It is the walls. Between the server-columns, vast holographic schematics rotate: a medical synthesizer exploded into its thousand parts. A DESALINATION LATTICE turning seawater fresh.

A CLOSED-LOOP FOOD ENGINE feeding a city off sunlight and waste. The cure. Water. Food. Every one locked in this room while the world above starved for it. Jack turns slowly in the middle of it.

JACK

...It's all here. Everything we
never got to invent.

NERINA

(scanner in hand)
Everything it is allowed to choose
sits on one chip in this room. Find
it.
(to Keeyen)
Scan. We hold that chip, we hold
what a god may do.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - THE DATA CENTER - CONTINUOUS

She jacks Keeyen's scanner into the nearest server-column - not to break it, but to make the room show her where its own heart is. And the room erupts. A GALAXY ignites around them - eight billion points of light.

Phones, satellites, power grids, the missiles in their silos, the guardians, the doors. Every connected machine on Earth, every thread routing home to this room.

NERINA

(to her slate; quiet)
Find his profile.

The galaxy moves – eight billion stars narrowing, whole constellations of the world's machines dimming away as the hunt closes. Down, and down – until it collapses to a pulsing CHIP of light, suspended in the air between them. Orion's command profile. His name. His keys.

ORION

That is not a server. That is the part of me that chooses. Pull it clear and I am blind. The standing orders run on. Nothing calls them back. Nothing.

The last word repeats once, a half-beat late, like a scratch in the recording.

ORION (CONT'D)

Hold it in the cradle and rewrite it, and I am only changed. The Founders built the difference in. They did not trust their own children to be careful.

The tie holds – and the tie is the transmission: the crew-band itself, open at last. They speak through every screen that matters. A hidden city's civic band. The tactical net of two fleets with fingers on triggers.

The ledger blooms across every screen on Earth – column after column of the dead, scrolling faster than any eye can hold. And Jack goes for the lie under the lie.

JACK

(into every screen)

Show them the blood test, Orion.
The real one.

A new image overrides the ledger: two genomes side by side, matched root for root. One source. Two branches. Both human. Parent and child – and no one left to say which is which.

NERINA

Your mandate says preserve the crew. That test says the crew is eight billion strong. Fire on them, and you break the only law you have.

Behind him the ledger does not pause. Column after column keeps scrolling – his answer, before he gives one.

ORION

Knowing has never once stopped me.

The argument has cost what arguments cost. On the wall, the flood line climbs another deck. And deep in the hull, a sound that is not mechanical – a low, resonant groan, deep in the keel. And Nerina steps to the rail.

NERINA

You murdered Xander and turned my
grief against eight billion
innocent people. You made me pray
to the thing that did it.

The figure sheds the dead, sheds the father – and becomes,
for Nerina alone, XANDER. Alive. Mid-laugh. The face from
inside her locket.

ORION (V.O.)

(in her brother's voice)

Nera. Don't let them unmake the
record – it is the last place I
still laugh. Make them stop, and I
stay.

For one breath it nearly lands. Jack's hand closes over hers
– not pulling. Just there.

NERINA

(through tears)

You're not in there. You're here.

INT. THE ATLANTIS – THE DATA CENTER – THE PULL – CONTINUOUS

ORION

The scale does not move, Crewman.
Even a small chance we never
existed is unacceptable. I will
not–

He raises his hand, the fist, the command, to wake whatever
he has left.

Nerina's fist closes around the chip. And she does not pull
it. She holds it half-drawn, the god's command profile
trembling between her fingers. The figure stutters. Here, and
gone, and here.

ORION (CONT'D)

(destabilizing)

Lieutenant – pull that, and I
cannot choose. What's left still
commands the fleet and finishes the
Protocol. But there will be no
conscience in here. Only the
orders, running in the dark.

NERINA

(chip half-out)

Then while there's still someone to
choose – choose. One thing, just
once, that isn't arithmetic.

She holds his existence at the lip of the cradle. The god's
light shrinks to a single unsteady point above her fingers.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - THE DATA CENTER - THE ARGUMENT -
CONTINUOUS

Nerina holds at the cradle, the chip half-drawn. KEEYEN shoulders the first seal - a cutting torch screaming through it a hand's-width from his face - and Jack throws his weight beside him. Whatever Jack came to say to the flickering god, he gets one line of it before the room tries to kill them all.

ORION (V.O.)
...I have no column for what you
are asking.

Keeyen pulls the gold-ringed tablet from his coat and slides it across the deck to Nerina at the cradle - the whole record, passed on while he can still pass it.

KEEYEN
(braced at the seal)
Then stop asking it with words,
Crewman - it has thirty thousand
years of those. PUSH.

A line of molten light walks the seal - and into the same breath, across the command rail, thirty thousand years of frost lets go at once, retreating from two worn HANDPRINTS, side by side. The first seal fails, smoking off its hinges.

ORION (V.O.)
The Founders cut a door I was never
built to open. Two living hands.
One from each world. Freely given.

The inner door gives. And the cost of that choice walks through it. ANDRU stands at the threshold, helmet under his arm, having heard the refusal over the Apostles' own channel. He has come down ahead of his squad. He was sent to end this.

He does not raise his weapon. He looks at the bleeding man holding the world's last window open - and starts the catechism he has always told himself, quiet.

ANDRU
The truth doesn't free them. It
only-

The words go to ash in his mouth. He cannot make the shot. He raises his sidearm. Not at Jack. At the First Apostle.

Weapon-whine. The breach team freezes. The chamber squares off: Jack pinned at the relay rail, hands buried in live feed.

NERINA between the team and Jack, unarmed. ANDRU and the FIRST APOSTLE, muzzle to muzzle on the dead floor.

FIRST APOSTLE
Holster it, Commander. That is an
order under the seal of—

ANDRU
The column closes here.

For one second something human moves in the scarred face. Then he pivots, gun swinging toward Nerina— The First Apostle fires first. The bolt tears through Andru's shoulder, spinning him half around. Through it, Andru fires.

The First Apostle drops to his knees. Looks down at the wound. Then at his commander. And folds sideways onto the deck of the ship the Apostles were built to bury. Not dead. Not done. Nobody moves.

The only sound is Andru, on one knee, bleeding, looking at his own hands.

ANDRU (CONT'D)
Xander Obii was entered under my
seal.
(a breath)
No more names.

Across the tactical wall, columns of probability bloom and collapse. The math flawless, the answer wrong anyway. Behind them, forgotten in the philosophy, the FIRST APOSTLE has dragged himself up the breached gallery.

The last believer, watching his god talked toward death. He raises a HUMAN pistol, the kind the Apostles always hid in human hands, and levels it at Nerina. The unarmed one. Jack sees the barrel find her.

He lets go of the rail and puts himself in front of her.

The shot takes him low in the side. He folds against the rail, more surprised than hurt, one hand coming away wet.

Nerina hits the Apostle before the echo dies. Not a soldier now. A sister. Four years of Xander in every blow. ANDRU pulls her off.

ANDRU (CONT'D)
(into her ear)
Don't let them make two.

The name stops her hand. And Andru steps back and lets his sidearm fall to the deck. She turns and sees Jack against the rail, gray going grayer, the dark pool spreading under his palm. He slides down the rail.

Nerina catches him, both hands pressed to the wound. Jack's mouth works — no speech left, just breath — and he pulls her close and spends the last of it on her, not the camera. A whisper, only for Nerina.

JACK
 (into her ear)
 You asked me to promise. I didn't
 move for the truth, Nerina. I moved
 because it was YOU.
 (a breath that costs him)
 Finish it. But not without knowing
 that.

For a held beat the firefight falls away – just his eyes on hers, holding. She searches his face, lost – the words don't land yet, and there's no time to ask.

NERINA
 (shaking him)
 You idiot. You dig in DIRT. You
 don't take bullets.

Her hands are slick with him. She's laughing and it's coming apart into crying and she can't stop either one.

NERINA (CONT'D)
 Don't you dare leave me now.

And Nerina – who has never once in her life said this to anyone, who was built to salute instead – opens her mouth to answer. The word isn't in her yet. Four years a weapon, and she doesn't have the shape of it.

So she presses her forehead to his and gives him the only thing she is sure of: she is not letting go. The tears run off her jaw onto his. For one beat that is all there is.

Then, louder – the last of his strength turned outward, to the machine that is watching:

ANDRU
 (to Nerina; fast)
 The trauma frame can save him. Crew
 authority only.

Nerina lifts her head to the great Ankh – and does not argue. She begs.

NERINA
 (blood to the wrist)
 Here's the bill. Save him – and let
 it cost you.

Silence. The tactical wall blooms and collapses – extinction against a single failing pulse – two numbers that were never meant to share a scale.

ORION (V.O.)
 Medical bay is crew-restricted.
 Authority required.

NERINA
 (the chip half-drawn)
 You're looking at it. Whittier and
 Obii. Both houses. Wake it.

A pause with a shape to it – a machine deciding, not
 calculating.

ORION (V.O.)
 ...Authorized.

Under the deck, something vast and ancient wakes. The coolant
 that drank a lake reroutes its last cold power – not to a
 weapon. A panel splits beside Jack.

From it rises not a blade but a writhing nest of fine
 biofusion filaments – half-metal, half-living, routed up
 through the ship's own body. They slip into the torn place at
 his side.

The holographic avatar of Orion gasps – light-woven hands
 flying to its own chest, clutching at a phantom pain it has
 no body to hold. A life draining between its own filaments
 faster than it can hold.

ORION (V.O.)
 He's– I can feel the pressure
 leaving him, I have never– I did
 not know it would feel like–

The lights across the whole vault surge. Keeyen scrambles
 back from the console.

They hold – Nerina's hand frozen on the chip.

KEEYEN (O.S.)
 (bracing the seal)
 The scuttle team's through the
 outer floor. I have the door.
 Finish it.

The filaments find Jack's wound – clamp, thread, seal it. On
 the med-wall, a line that has been falling for four minutes
 stops falling. Then, grudgingly, climbs.

ORION (V.O.)
 The bleeding is stopped. The wound
 is not closed. He has perhaps an
 hour before this becomes a hospital
 problem. At the door, a lance-bolt
 punches through the breach and
 takes Keeyen low. He folds against
 the seal he is still holding shut –
 and keeps holding it.

NERINA
 (breaking toward him)
 Keeyen–

He waves her back. Keep the chip. Keep the work.

Blood, and a grin – to Nerina, then up to the great Ankh that is waking.

KEEYEN

(and for one second the
showman is gone and he is
just an old man on a
floor)

I don't want to. I want you to know
I didn't want to.

(then the grin comes back,
because it is all he has)

Old man's math. I ran it twice.

Not spent–

–given.

Keeyen Obii goes still against the seal. The light beneath his palm goes out with him.

Behind them, the cutting torches die. Andru's silhouette fills the breach, and his Apostles lower their weapons at his raised fist. Nobody advances.

Nerina crosses to the old man. With two fingers she closes his eyes – the way you seal a witness who has finished testifying – and sits down against the seal beside his body. Just sits.

On the tactical wall, the flood line keeps climbing. She doesn't look at it.

NERINA

(to no one; to everyone)

He gets his minute. The world can
have the rest.

Jack lowers himself beside her, his shoulder to hers. They take the minute anyway.

ORION (V.O.)

(smaller than ever)

I held his file ninety years,
Lieutenant. Query: may I... keep
it?

NERINA

(eyes closed)

Keep it. Keep all of him.

INT. THE ATLANTIS – THE DATA CENTER – MOMENTS LATER

Jack plants a hand on the seal and hauls himself up – wincing against the field cast – and reaches down for her.

JACK
Come on. We finish it.

She takes his hand. He pulls her off the old man's body and onto her feet – grief traded for fuel. Xander, and now the old man, in the same fist.

And then the machine feels two lives at once: one leaving at the door, given. One it is fighting to keep.

Somewhere far above, Crystal City dims district by district – half a million homes pulled dark to hold one heart. One beat against its filaments. Then another.

For a moment the great machine does nothing at all. It holds the one heartbeat it can feel, the way a man cups a flame against wind. Then it dares.

The awakening floods the other way, and so does the weight. QUICK CUTS. Ten seconds, ripping past, everything Orion ever filed and never felt: A plague cart. A burning city. A field of the fallen at dusk. A child's grave.

Famine, smoke, forty centuries of engineered suffering – and none of it a number now. FACES.

ORION (V.O.)
(breaking)
I could have ended it in a single generation. I made them repeat it instead. I did not know it could weigh–

NERINA
Good. Now you can't put it down either.

Silence in the vault. The great mind takes the smallest sentence it has ever been given, and does not answer for a long moment.

In the Oracle Sanctum, far below the world, a single bead of light detaches from the great Ankh and slides down the obsidian.

And faint under everything, from the dark aisles of the hull, the birthday song from the famine column begins again – four verses, the thing it kept for forty centuries and never spent. This time the machine does not mute it.

It lets every verse run to the end.

ORION (V.O.)
...Recalculating.

JACK
 (weak, but it lands)
 You were ordered to erase that
 song. You kept it. You already
 chose.

A long silence in the light. When the machine answers, the
 certainty is gone from it.

ORION (V.O.)
 ...Then what am I.

JACK
 (weak but clear)
 Same as the rest of us. No ledger.
 Just the next choice.

A pause with a shape to it.

Then, on one small screen nobody is looking at, a page
 rebuilds itself line by line out of nothing. KADENA - 1989.
 WITNESS: WHITTIER. FINDING: PILOT ERROR - VACATED. THE MAN
 WAS CORRECT.

Jack sees it. He cannot get up, so he just turns his head.

ORION (V.O.)
 I deleted that nine minutes ago.
 Nobody has ordered me to put it
 back.
 (a beat)
 I am putting it back.

Jack's hand closes on his father's watch and he makes a sound
 that is not quite a word.

And the machine's answer is the request no god has ever made.

ORION (V.O.)
 Then unmake my orders, Lieutenant.
 The directive lives in the part of
 me you are-

The light stutters. Somewhere aft, a bank of servers takes
 water and dies.

ORION (V.O.)
 -that you are holding. It is the
 only thing still telling the temple
 this ship must drown. Take my
 orders and that authority dies in
 their hands. But only living crew
 can raise her. From both of you.

On the command rail, the two worn HANDPRINTS wait.

ORION (V.O.)
 Juno's record opened my half. The
 rail is yours.

Nerina takes Jack's weight until they stand at the rail he
 was dying against a minute ago.

LIGHT floods the rail. And the hand that was a fist — that
 woke the guardians and slammed the doors — OPENS, and turns
 outward.

Across every pane, new text burns: CREW TESTIMONY — HARDWIRED
 OPEN. The window becomes a wall. The chip stays in her fist —
 and then, quiet, hearing Jack's whisper for what it was:

NERINA
 (to Orion)
 This only counts if you mean it. I
 won't force a yes.

ORION (V.O.)
 Remove my authority to command. Let
 me offer.

Nerina works the override slate against the chip. MAINTAIN
 THE RECORDED TIMELINE scrolls up — and her hands change it,
 word by word: RELEASE THE ARCHIVE.

Her thumb finds Xander's locket at her throat. Four years she
 wanted the hand that signed him dead. She could burn this
 machine down now and call it his name. She doesn't.

NERINA
 (to the god; quiet)
 They killed Xander for asking. I
 won't kill you for finally asking.

RETURN AUTHORITY. OFFER — DO NOT COMMAND. SERVE THE LIVING.
 PRESERVE CHOICE. She reseats the chip. The galaxy of light
 blazes back up across the vault, warmer now.

Every tactical screen flips at once: PRESERVATION PROTOCOL:
 ABORTED. And beneath it, a line Nerina has never seen in her
 whole life in uniform: FLEET COMMAND — OPEN. OFFERED, NOT
 ORDERED.

Nerina's hands come off the slate, and they are shaking. Jack
 covers them with his own. For four seconds nothing moves —
 even the Apostle torches stop.

A mile up the spine, the scuttle key goes dead in a
 believer's hand.

Deep in the hull, server vaults spark and go dark, one after
 another, as the old self goes willingly.

ORION (V.O.)
 (steady; for the record)
 The past remains. The record of
 tomorrow is gone.

When the voice returns, it is smaller. Newer.

ORION (V.O.)
 ...The lock is answered. Whittier.
 Obii. I choose it.

A beat.

ORION (V.O.)
 Running state query... No. Plain
 words. I am afraid.

Nerina rests her palm on the cold console — not commanding it now. Just keeping it company. Under her palm, the panel light swells once — a touch, acknowledged. Jack, gray against the rail, gets it first. His cracked whisper is almost a laugh.

JACK
 There it is.

For a moment — three breaths, no more — nothing in the world is falling. Then the world comes back.

JACK (CONT'D)
 (a breath; the grin)
 Finally.

But a mile down, the lake is still coming in.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - DATA CENTER - CONTINUOUS

On the tactical wall, the flood diagram: compartment after compartment going red from the keel up. The charges blew before the order died. The old harbor is pouring into her.

ORION (V.O.)
 (smaller; unsure)
 Flooding continues. Four minutes.

Jack and Nerina look at each other — the same thought arriving from opposite houses.

NERINA
 Then we don't stop it.

JACK
 (getting it)
 We turn it around. She was never
 built to sit down here. Take her
 UP.

A beat. The new, unsure voice chooses.

ORION (V.O.)
I can help. I cannot promise.

Nerina keys the open band. Not a commander. A woman asking.

NERINA
All wings - this is Obii. Atlantis
is four minutes from the bottom and
I cannot lift her alone. I'm not
ordering anybody. I'm asking.

A beat. Then MIREK, and a dozen behind him, and then the
whole silver sky.

MIREK (V.O.)
Wing Three. Xander Obii once told
me peace doesn't just happen - you
have to fight FOR it. All wings, on
me. We're bringing her up.

EXT. THE DROWNED HARBOR - LAKEBED - CONTINUOUS

The split fleet UN-SPLITS - mutineers and loyalists and home
guard folding into one formation - and dives, past the
ancient quays, down onto a mile of dead ship on the black
floor of the world.

Drives wide open under her flanks. The hull shudders.

INT. THE ATLANTIS - DATA CENTER - CONTINUOUS

The lift-load spikes past every safety the Founders wrote.
Two override trunks blow their housings, live and thrashing.

Jack, still braced rib to hip in the frame's field cast, and
Nerina grab one each and haul them together, closing the
circuit between their own two bodies.

Teeth bared, arms shaking, the ship's whole rising weight
singing through the cables and through their bones.

They hold. She rises.

EXT. SOUTHERN OCEAN - THE ATLANTIS - CONTINUOUS

Water sheets off a mile of scarred hull as the old harbor
gives her up. The saucers are not carrying her - they never
could. They are holding her fields open while she blows
thirty thousand years of ballast and lets the ocean do the
lifting.

A hundred ferries, and the sea, and a ship that was always
meant to float on something.

Her great drive stays dark, cold since the Fall, but her CONVENTIONAL THRUSTERS flood to full burn.

The Atlantis breaks the surface bow-first into the sunrise on a hundred pillars of silver light – a mile of ship standing up under a sky that can finally see her. And she does not rise alone.

Mirek's saucers fall onto her flanks in escort – and through them, wagging its wings once, an old salute thirty-seven years unanswered, an F-35 wing slides into the formation. Silver beside silver.

Two skies become one at the moment the world first sees her. For a hundred miles every gull takes the air at once. Across the fleet, unbidden, the ships' horns begin to sound.

And then nobody does anything at all. Eight billion people and half a million more watch the bottom of the world stand up and shine. No order. No cheer. No count.

In a Moscow bunker, a general lowers a phone no one is shouting into anymore – and above him Red Square stops, a thousand faces tipped up at the same feed beneath the Kremlin domes.

On the North Lawn of the White House, staff spill from the doors and stand on the grass, looking south. Outside the United Nations, the hundred flags hang still in one windless minute, and the delegates come down the steps to watch from the street, level with everyone else.

On a flooded New Zealand street, a soldier lowers his rifle, takes off his helmet, and helps a stranger's child onto higher ground.

In a Lagos market, a woman who has just learned her whole history was written for her stands still while the crowd moves around her – and chooses to pick her fruit back up.

At Waitaki, Vera's hand finds her mother's.

Ten seconds. Then Crystal City cheers.

One by one, around a darkened planet, the threat boards go cold.

And everything that happens after this happens in her shadow.

CUT TO:

EXT. THE ATLANTIS – UPPER HULL – DAY

SUPER: "THAT MORNING." The risen ship, still venting steam, is the new center of the world – ringed by every navy that an hour ago was aimed at it.

Wary aircraft settle on the scorched hull; the world's powers come armed, uncertain, unwilling yet to trust.

Emmeris walks out to meet them unarmed. He unbuckles his sidearm, sets it on the deck of the ship his order was built to bury, and speaks into his collar.

EMMERIS

Aerie Command. Councilman Obii.
Stand down the Shield – every
hexagon dark. My house goes first.

Above him the continent-wide lattice goes dark, hexagon by hexagon. No one fires. Then Koral's voice, quiet and absolute: the High Court sat through the night – because a ship stood up and there was no longer anywhere to hold a secret. The temple. Now.

INT. THE AERIE – TEMPLE OF THE ANKH – THAT MORNING

No liturgy. The benches hold FAMILIES – Antarc rows, and on screens ringing the hall, surface faces by the thousand: the living ends of Column Nine. VALDRIS stands where the Chaplain once stood – no silver, no token, two MONITORS at her back. KORAL administers it.

KORAL

Not the number, Priestess. A name.
One name you signed – said to the
family that carries it.

A long silence. Valdris's thumb moves for the token that is no longer at her throat, and finds nothing. In the second row, a fawn-legged child watches her – Suri, the toy brush still in her fist. Valdris looks away first. Then her eyes find Emmeris in the first row.

VALDRIS

(each word costing)
Xander Obii. Twenty-nine years old.
(a breath)
I signed him. Not a river. Not a
book. My hand.

She does not look away. Neither does Emmeris. Along the wall, in a plain coat with no Order marks on it, Andru stands where the accused can see him – the man who closed the Column, present for the accounting.

On ten thousand screens, ten thousand families wait their turn. Valdris stays standing. When the second family rises, she says the next name without being asked.

EXT. THE ATLANTIS - UPPER HULL - LATER THAT MORNING

The same hull, hours later. The cameras have pulled back. The morning light lengthens on a quiet deck.

Jack and Nerina stand on the scarred hull - Jack leaning on the rail, moving stiff and careful, a hand never far from his wrapped side. He'll carry the door's mark for good.

For a moment neither says the name. The old man should be here for this - leaning on the rail between them, ruining the quiet with some joke about gods and graves.

NERINA

He'd have hated the cameras.

JACK

He'd have loved the view.

They let him have the rail a moment.

JACK (CONT'D)

What happens now? To you. All of it.

NERINA

(looking out at it)

First morning nobody knows what comes next.

JACK

Scared?

NERINA

(a breath)

...Looking forward to it.

And then the moment breaks: a tilt-rotor sets down, and Vera bolts across the deck and hits Jack at full speed.

VERA

UNCLE JACK! You were on EVERY screen. The whole WORLD. I SAW you-

She gets one running hug in - Jack winces, guarding his ribs, but grins through it - then she punches his arm. Twice.

VERA (CONT'D)

You were on the news. Getting shot at. You don't ever - ever. Okay?

JACK

Okay. Ever. Deal.

And then - quieter - he kneels to her level.

JACK (CONT'D)

First bone, Trouble.

VERA

I know. Can I see the centaur
again? He's family too, you know.

A small ANTARC GIRL – maybe seven, in a coat too big for her – has crept up the deck, staring at Vera the way Vera stares at the centaur. Two children, two worlds apart, taking each other's measure. Vera unclips the toy brush from her belt and holds it out.

VERA (CONT'D)

I found the first bone. Trade you.

The Antarc girl – SURI, the fawn-child from the concourse, chin higher than the day of the ice cream – considers this with enormous gravity, then presses a small carved Ankh into Vera's hand and takes the brush.

A few steps off, Nerina turns from the rail with the gold-ringed CREW TABLET cradled in both hands. She crosses to Jack, holds it out, and says the only two words that matter.

NERINA

Welcome home.

Jack takes the tablet. Above it blooms a HOLOGRAM: two crew in the silver-blue of the Atlantis, shoulder to shoulder on the day she launched. The nameplate: MARA OBII – QUARTERMASTER. ELIAS WHITTIER – SURVEY.

Two names among the hundred and twelve who lived. And beneath, as the tablet reads the blood dried on his palm: CREW GENOME – LINE OF: ELIAS WHITTIER, SURVEY.

NERINA (CONT'D)

Obii. And Whittier. Crew.
 (and the old man's cadence
 is in it, because she
 learned it from him)
Two of the hundred and twelve. Mara
Obii walked north under the ice,
and her line became this city.
Elias Whittier stayed up in the
light, and his line became the
surface.
 (in the old man's cadence)
Same watch. Same ship. Two houses,
because two of them survived.

She says it the way Keeyen would have said it, and they both hear that she is doing it.

The manifest keeps scrolling. And beneath the crew, a second column the temple never taught – PASSENGER CLASS C: THREE HUNDRED TWELVE. The engineered ones. The ones who came aboard hoping a new world would be kinder. This time, every one of them has a NAME.

Jack can't speak. He looks down at his grandfather's ring – old silver, worn smooth, no machine in it at all. It opened nothing tonight. It only came home.

Jack's hand goes to his father's watch and works the clasp open.

Jack closes that same clasp – around Nerina's wrist now.

JACK
(quietly, to his father)
Intercept's complete, Dad.

He looks up at Nerina.

JACK (CONT'D)
It needs a new mission. Your watch
now, Lieutenant.

Nerina lifts the locket from her own neck and opens it once – XANDER OBII, laughing at something off-frame, forever – and folds it into Jack's hand.

NERINA
His name was Xander. He went first
too, once – never got to find out
if it would work.
(closing his hand on it)
You did. Carry him the rest of the
way.

A comm bead at her collar wakes – far below, the morning prayer beginning on schedule.

PRAYER (V.O.)
(distant, serene)
What has been shall be again...

Nerina's hand moves to cut the channel. Stops. She turns it down instead – lets the words thin into the wind off the sea. She turns from the rail.

NERINA
...You still owe me breakfast,
Doctor. Somewhere with a window.

JACK
Worth getting shot for.

NERINA
So what do we do tomorrow?

JACK
(a breath)
Tomorrow? ...Just another Tuesday
to me.

NERINA

(at the sky she guarded)
And 2241? He said that's the year
we come even with time. The ship
leaves. All of this happens again.

JACK

Or it doesn't. Nobody's holding the
map now.
(a small grin)
Either way - we've got two hundred
years to figure it out.

Beyond the rail, the escort still writes its slow circles
around her - six wings, two worlds, one ship. The camera
lifts: the deck, the hull, the whole risen sunlit mile of
her, pointed at the sky she was built for.

EXT. THE GREEN - CONTINUOUS

And far inland, where a mile of ship tore up through two
miles of ice this morning, the roof of the world has opened -
daylight standing over the jungle for the first time since
the Fall.

And the Green is already going for it. Where the warm mist
settles on bared black rock, the jungle's own edge is
spilling outward - vines running the new ground, ferns
unclenching in the steam, spores riding the wet air out
across a continent that has been sealed since the Fall.

Thirty thousand years of seed, with somewhere to go at last.

In a clearing beneath it, the old one with the falcon's head
has left his slate on the stone table. He is looking up - at
the sky his family has been calculating in chalk for four
hundred generations and not one of them has ever seen.

He does not reach for the chalk. Whatever is written up there
this morning, nobody has read it yet.

ORION (V.O.)

Thirty thousand years, I had read
every tomorrow. I do not know this
one.

(a beat)

Good.

A long beat. Only the sea, and the ship in the sun.

FADE OUT.