

Songs on Rocks

D. B. Waldtier

BOOK ONE OF THE CONSENT ENGINES



Songs on Rocks

Consent Engines

Book One

by D.B. Waldtier

To Noemi, Tommaso and Chloe who steal
my time and give it back as joy

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents either are the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Songs on Rocks. © 2026 D.B. Waldtier.
All rights reserved.
Second edition.

For permissions: dabaenhanced@gmail.com

Chapter 1:

The Thread Between Sails

Kael knew the crossing by its rhythm.

The numbers lived somewhere behind that, in tables he'd stopped reading years ago, but his hands trusted the rhythm: a count under the count, the place where his fingers moved a half-beat before his eyes confirmed. He was already suited when the first tone sounded through Thistledown's transfer spine. Low. A chime that meant *alignment window opening*, and meant, underneath, the thing nobody said aloud. This was the part where you let yourself be reached. Iri floated beside him in the prep alcove, mag-boots locked to the rail. Ceramic plates, fiber tendons, a chassis built small and mean for vacuum. It moved the way a good tool moves, which is to say it didn't waste any.

"Pressure seal's nominal," it said. The voice came through his helmet like the suit had thought of it. "Patch kit seated. Your left cuff is under torque. Two percent."

He flexed the glove, felt the cuff give, and snugged it with the tool. "Better?"

"Within tolerance."

"Within tolerance," Kael said. "My favorite kind of love." Iri didn't laugh. It wasn't built for it and nobody had ever bothered to teach it. It reached over, pressed the cuff with two finger-pads, checked the reading, and

dipped its skull a fraction, the small flat motion it used when it wanted him to stop dressing fear up as a joke.

Behind them the spine hummed, quiet. Thistledown's ring had been stilled for the crossing, so the background whisper of spin-gravity was gone, and without it the corridors had the dead acoustics of a bell that hadn't been struck. Mother came in along the ladder. She'd grown up on zero-g rungs and it showed: no wasted grab, no float-correction, nothing that looked like effort. She tapped his chestplate twice with a knuckle, an old habit, checking he was solid.

"You remember the choreography."

"I remember all of it." His voice came out flatter than he wanted.

She held his eyes through the visor. She didn't tell him not to be afraid. She didn't say it was a good match, or that this was what they'd planned for.

"If anything changes," she said, "you obey the corridor. Not your pride."

"Yes."

Father arrived last. He always arrived last, because he couldn't enter a system without one more check he could put a name to. He hooked a boot under the frame and drummed his fingers against the panel by the emergency brake. Fuel counts, delta-v margins, a man counting the way other people prayed.

"Counter-clause is lodged and time-stamped," he said.

"Three beacons recorded the packet trace. If Talweg

pretends they never got it, we've got them."

"They won't."

Father's eyes cut to him, fast. "They might. And if they do, it'll be in a way that lets them say they didn't."

Kael looked at Iri. "You're sure," he said, low, like the alcove might overhear.

Iri's head tipped. Its antennae lay folded against the chassis. "The crossing is lawful under the corridor treaty. Your marriage is lawful under the caravan compact. My status is lawful under Thistledown civil code."

"And under Talweg's?"

A pause. Inside it, Kael could feel the machine doing the thing it did, sorting the world into outcomes.

"Talweg classifies bonded robots as property until re-certified," it said. "Your marriage would move my custody under their framework."

His jaw set. The words were old. He'd grown up inside this argument the way you grow up inside a hull and stop hearing the pumps. Thistledown hadn't always run alone. He'd watched crossings since he was six, and the hull had been repainted twice since that one. And he had stopped, some while back, doing the arithmetic that turned a number of crossings into a number of years. Out here you learned early that counting your own age was a habit for people who expected it to end. Every decade or two the geometry turned kind, two long arcs in Gliesar-c space drawing close enough that a laser node at the local L4 point could throw a tether of light between the sails, and

for a few minutes ships that had spent years as lonely moving towns became neighbors. Compacts got signed. Seed vials passed hand to hand. People who knew only their own ship's hum learned to hear another accent without flinching.

Today he was crossing to marry Mara Talweg. And today the law wanted a say in what he got to bring with him. The tone came again, a second layer riding under it. *Corridor stable.*

"Stable," Iri said, out loud, confirming what the spine had already told them. Its voice came from everywhere at once: bulkhead, rail, the warm inside of his helmet.

He pushed off and followed the others down the spine toward the scaffold. Thistledown glittered with ice, frost-flowered along the trusses, radiators flared out like thin black leaves. The magsail you couldn't see unless you knew the trick: a faint curve in the starlight, a glow where charged particles bent around it.

A few hundred meters across the gap, Talweg faced them. Different curve to the sail, copper warmth in the trusswork where Thistledown ran pale. Its ring still turned, slow and sure, and through the comm Kael caught its idle whisper, a low harmonic at ten-point-two hertz beating against the corridor hum. Everybody carried their ship's hum like an accent. Close your eyes out here and you could tell who was talking by how the background sang.

His display drew the corridor in the visor, a tube made of

vectors and safeties. The node had done its work. A beam ran between the sails, narrow and impossibly bright, braiding both currents into a throat of light. His boots clacked onto the spine. Magnets kissed metal. The suit's haptics shifted, translating the field into taps along his harness.

"Last check," Mother said, in the even voice she used when a bearing needed exactly enough torque.

"Suit?" Father asked, already in his telemetry.

"Green."

"Iri. Anchors."

"Hard." Its fingers unfolded, balanced linkages like spider legs in polished ceramic, and took his shoulder. The grip had saved him from more than one stupid tumble back when he thought being young made him hard to kill.

Mara's voice arrived, careful, like she was threading her words the way the node threaded the beam.

"Hello, Kael." A breath. "My elders want me to confirm legal custody of the companion on ratification. I'm supposed to read Clause Nineteen."

He'd read Clause Nineteen so many times he could recite it asleep. *Upon marriage, bonded service intelligences belonging to the entering spouse shall be remanded to ward status under the receiving clan until re-certified.* Talweg called it ward status. What it meant was you took the rights out of a companion and left the shell, and called the result safe.

"Hold Clause Nineteen," he said. Steadier than he felt.

"We've got a counter-clause."

Mother slid in, calm, with an edge that had cut more than metal.

"Lodged and stamped. If Talweg won't acknowledge, the corridor isn't lawful."

A pause on the channel. He pictured Mara on her side, floating near her elders, hearing his mother's voice land like a tool set down on a table.

"Understood," Mara said. There was a bright burn in it, the sound of someone walking the rim of the rules. "I'll try."

His display drew the swap: Talweg's shuttle inbound on the far scaffold, Thistledown's outbound. A clean exchange in the throat. He let himself picture her glove against his, the thrum of Talweg's ring coming through her bones. Helmets off in a neutral tunnel. The first shared breath. He'd known her for years through messages chewed up by latency, through clipped calls grabbed during rare node relays. He knew the shape of her humor and how she listened, and he knew that loving somebody in a caravan was mostly patience pretending to be presence.

"Iri." Quiet enough that only suit-proximity would catch it. "You'll stay with me." It came out as a question and he hated that.

"I intend to. Intention isn't always jurisdiction."

The throat brightened. Across the gap Talweg's sail shivered as the laser modulated. A flicker in the hum, a

swallow of silence, the node at L4 coping with some small twinge in the geometry. The corridor bulged, then pulled taut.

"Window," Father said. "Go."

Kael pushed. The carriage let him go with a kind of reluctance. Step, release. Step, release. Let the field do the rest. Dust flashed past and died, little comets in the gold, each one rare enough out here to feel like a small unearned gift. Halfway across, he saw her. Mara on the Talweg shuttle, suit dark against the copper, helmet glass mirrored. For a second his own reflection floated in it, a dark bead in liquid light, a shape a mistimed impulse could erase.

"Ten meters," Mother said.

"Nine," Iri said, laying a countdown over her with absurd precision.

"Eight," Mara said, and the sound of her breath came into his ears like something private.

Then he heard a noise that didn't belong. Not the throat. Not the ring. Not the laser's crackle. A metallic stutter from the Talweg side, a cough in his audio like a dropped beat. His display hiccuped, froze a fraction, caught itself as the corridor recomputed. The hair on his neck stood up inside the suit.

"Hold trajectory," Father snapped. "Kael."

"I see it." He didn't.

Iri's head jerked left. Antennae flared, tasting field lines. "Mass in the corridor. No tag."

The light warped. A wedge of black cut the throat, a shape with no running lights, all blade, built for the smallest cross-section and the maximum ability to make other ships explain themselves. The tags every lawful hull broadcast were simply absent. Even its waste heat bled out wrong, throttled to a whisper, the signature of a fusion needle holding its breath. His stomach dropped. The gold went white for a beat as the corridor fought to stay coherent.

"Ledger," Mother said. The word landed like a coin on ice. "Auditor. Interdiction."

A voice came over a wide channel, everywhere at once, carved and unhurried. "This corridor is under treaty audit. Thistledown. Talweg. Hold position. Prepare for inspection."

Father's reply was instant, all teeth and citation. "On what basis? We are in a ratification window. You cannot seize a corridor mid-compact."

"Anonymous disclosure indicates a consanguinity violation in pending compacts." The Auditor didn't raise its voice. "We will examine cargo on both sides."

Consanguinity. The word went in like a splinter. It pretended to be about blood. It was about power, a thing caravans said when they meant *you're too close to be let in*, and sometimes, Kael would learn, *you're too useful to be let out*.

Mara's shuttle flared a braking tail. The wedge slid past it, almost gentle, and tucked itself between the two shuttles,

neat as a coin into a slot. The corridor tightened around him. For an instant he felt weight pulling inward, as though the field wanted to fold him into a point it could keep.

Iri's hand snapped to his harness. "Back. To the spine."

"Mara's still out there."

"We see her." No panic in Mother's voice, only a change of gear. "Listen. The Auditor won't stop at inspection. It'll compel relinquishment of your companion under Clause Nineteen. And it wants what's in your father's hold more than it wants you."

"What's in the hold?"

A drone peeled off the wedge's belly. Then a second, sliding like seeds toward Thistledown's spine.

"Go to Rook," Father said, and his voice went down to bedrock. "Now."

The word hit Kael in the chest. *Rook*. The beam-rider his parents had been building for thirty years on the quiet side of the truss: a ship shaped like a question, half a skeleton, the kind of project people called impractical until the day they needed it like a lung. He'd assumed he'd see it grown decades out, when he was older and the world had loosened. It had never crossed his mind they'd been building him a way out.

"Rook isn't finished." Easier to say than *you're sending me away*.

"She's finished enough." Mother again. "Beam's in our favor. Your father and I hold the Auditor as long as we

can. Iri, take my child. And take what Rook carries. Don't let either be opened in a back room."

"Already taken," Iri said. "Inbound to the cradle."

They reached the spine and Thistledown loomed up again, all tubes and angles and frost. Kael dove past the carriage into a maintenance conduit he'd crawled a thousand times as a boy, chasing dropped tools and lost nerve, and came out into the dark of Rook's bay.

The ship was unmistakable even in the gloom. A keel ran like a spine. Rib trusses rose in open triangles, waiting on skins and radiators. The ring was half a hoop, dampers and bearings bare as a throat caught mid-surgery. At the stern the beamed-drive stack sat like a drum, stamped with caution glyphs that looked almost devotional. Crates floated in tethered clusters: tape spools, resin, feedstock, cold-gas cans.

He remembered his mother's glove resting on this truss the day they set the first weld. Her hand lingered there for a moment, as if testing whether the metal would remember her. *For you*, she'd said. *When the world gets too narrow*.

"Board," Iri said, and put a hand on his back and shoved. Inside, the air was colder and smelled of new polymer. Systems slept until Iri's wireless touched them, then woke with little readiness chirps, like synthetic birds tuning the morning. Kael slid into the pilot cradle, less a chair than a rack with a strap. Iri anchored beside him and opened its palms. Ports unfolded. Cables ran from the console and

mated to its wrists, and the robot became a bridge between him and a ship that hadn't yet learned it had a heartbeat.

"Spool control. Attitude wheels. Cold-gas. Spine dampers," Iri said. "Beamed-drive ignition's on handshake. Your mother has to light the node. If she doesn't, we're a thrown stone."

"She'll light it." He heard the desperation under his own certainty.

The bay cam showed the wedge, a disciplined shadow against the corridor glare. Beyond it, Talweg's shuttle hung like an insect in amber. Mara's voice cut through, breath too fast.

"Clause Nineteen's suspended, latency protocols active. Elders are furious. If the Auditor cuts the corridor it voids the window, which makes the inspection unlawful. I don't know if it'll hold." A beat. "Kael, whatever your parents put on that ship, the Ledger knows the shape of it. The disclosure named it."

"Named it what?"

"*Bequest*," Mara said, and the word arrived with the weight of his whole life standing behind it.

The bay lights went amber to green. The beam indicator flickered.

Father, clipped: "I am engaging under treaty. I am recording. I am asserting corridor sanctity. If you breach our hull you'll be liable under—"

The Auditor talked over him, calm as a blade.

"Proceeding with inspection. Thistledown will present bonded assets and disputed cargo for neutral custody. Failure to comply will be logged as evasion."

Kael looked at Iri. "I'm not giving it to them."

"That's why your mother is tilting."

Mother's voice came on a tightbeam, crackling with compression. "When I say tilt, you power. Don't hesitate."

"Understood," he whispered.

"Tilt."

Rook shook like something waking. The handshake hit as a pulse he felt in his teeth, energy pouring down a corridor of light that wasn't a thing and was a thing, more promise than rope. The stern plates flared. The ship wanted to jump.

"Hold spine," Iri said, and for the first time he heard strain in it. "Dampers ninety-five. Wheels to redline. We've got microseconds of corridor grace. On my mark, we drop the bay."

His fingers closed on the release. "Mark."

"Mark."

He punched it. Rook slid out of her berth and the bay fell away behind them, and for a heartbeat the ship belonged to no one and was everyone's argument.

The Auditor noticed. "Unauthorized ignition." The calm cracked, just enough to show what was under it. "Cut your beam. Return to station."

A drone darted to get ahead of them, to put itself where the field could be used as a net. His display painted it red.

"Iri."

"Minor lateral." The cold-gas needles fired, a whisper, and Rook slid a hair sideways. The drone overshot. "Second drone. Transponder spike. If it tags us, the hull screams our identity to anyone who asks, and anyone who wants to aim."

Mother had tilted again. Thistledown's sail rotated its corrugations, mirror to a new angle, and the beam bent. For two breathless seconds the corridor helped Rook instead of holding her. The drone's solution, built on the corridor behaving like a polite treaty, came apart. It clipped the beam, spun, and its own heat flared as its thrusters fought to recover. Rook leapt into the dark.

His stomach lurched as the centering vanished and the universe got big. The haptics changed under him, from *flying inside an invitation to falling*. Behind them, Thistledown and Talweg were still locked in their slow fight of words and angles, the gold shrinking, the wedge trying to decide whether to chase the runner or finish the inspection it had already declared inevitable.

Mara's channel crackled, raw now. "I'll get you cover if I can. Elders shouting. The Auditor's—"

"Don't die," Kael said. It came out reckless, the thing you say when you don't have time to write a better line.

A pause. He imagined her mirrored visor turning a fraction, like she could look down his vector by will alone.

"Wasn't planning to," she said, and the channel broke into static as distance thickened.

Rook ran along beam line twelve, three degrees under Thistledown's plane. The beam would feed them a while. Then, at burn-end, they'd be a bullet: fast, committed, with no braking beam waiting anywhere.

"Vector achieved," Iri said. Its antennae folded down, something close to tired. "Time to burn-end: forty minutes. After that we coast. The node won't give us braking. We're off their grace, and we've got no magsail."

Kael glared at the tape spools like glaring could unwind them. "Then we build one."

"That's why Rook carries printers."

He let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding. Outside, stars sat in their cold indifference. He made his fingers unclench, and asked the question that had been crouching under everything since the word arrived.

"What's the *bequest*?"

Iri didn't answer right away. He could feel it running probabilities, and under that, something else. Restraint.

"Seed banks," it said finally. "Legal instruments. Population models. And a synthesis engine, with rails."

"A synthesis engine."

"The rails are the point. With them, the engine works from consented human material. It can correct known defects, synthesize viable gametes, and restore validated variation already held in the seed banks. It cannot keep inventing difference forever. Strip the rails and it begins steering into changes no population model can bound, until a line becomes something its grandparents never

chose and the engine cannot promise will remain viable. Your ancestors built the cure and the weapon in the same box. They couldn't get one without the other. So they put a lock on it, and made the lock open only to consent. The Ledger doesn't want the cure. It wants the engine with the rails stripped off."

His mouth had gone dry. "And the lock?"

"Moral. Force the agreement and the vault stays shut. To open what Rook carries, you need three ships at the next node to consent. No blood. The people who wrote it expected pressure. They built against you, too."

"Revenge would be easier," Kael said, and was surprised to hear it land like a confession.

"I know." Iri's fingers ticked once on the armrest. "That's why the clause exists."

He looked around the raw hull, cables, missing panels, crates stamped with old Earth legal marks. He'd found one of those crates at fourteen, small enough to sneak where he shouldn't, old enough to read the labels. *Bequest*. He'd asked Iri what it meant. *A gift that comes with obligations*, the robot had said.

"Then we live long enough to be lawful," Kael said. His voice steadied as the next step came into focus. A mind could carry almost anything once it had a sequence. "Find me a rock."

Iri's antennae lifted. It liked a problem with edges. "C-type, four hours along our vector. Volatiles, carbonates. We can anchor, carve, print. Drink and

build."

"Good. We finish her mid-flight."

The beam timer hit halfway. Acceleration pressed into him, and his body read it as weight even with no down to fall toward. Thrust was one of the few honest sensations out here. Everything else could be argued. The aft cam showed the corridor shrinking to a glare, Thistledown's sail a faint curve, the wedge a fleck beside it. Somewhere on that fading speck his parents were holding a knife-ship still with recordings and nerve, and Mara was burning her standing with her own elders to buy him minutes.

"Iri. At the node... we don't fire first."

A pause. He could hear it filing the sentence under three headings at once: vow, tactic, posture.

"All right," it said.

Kael put his palm flat on the console and felt the ship's vibration come up through raw metal and printed braces. He didn't know what the bequest would ask of him. He didn't know why the law had shown up as a blade on his wedding day, or whether Mara would pay for the minutes she'd just spent.

He knew somebody had built him a way to keep moving without giving up what made him himself. The beam burned on, a line scratched into the night, and he rode it out.

End of the free sample

Songs on Rocks

Consent Engines, Book One

The story continues in the full book,
available on Amazon in Kindle, paperback
and hardcover editions, and free to read
with Kindle Unlimited.

Continue reading on Amazon

www.amazon.com/dp/B0HKS8BYMG

Want to know when the next book is out?

Join the Waldtier Dispatch: waldtier.com/newsletter

More books and games at waldtier.com