

CONSENT ENGINES • BOOK TWO

REDSHIFT VOWS

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Consent Engines

Book Two

by D.B. Waldtier

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

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Chapter 1:

The Quiet Between Pings

Ari Sev was waiting when the scrubber coughed.

The Communications Array ran at four degrees. His breath smoked above the console. Server racks blinked in blue rows, patient and judgmental. Somewhere behind the wall, a condenser missed one beat and caught itself on the next.

Ari heard it. He always heard it.

He slid the maintenance drawer open and pulled the filter trap free. Gray lint. Skin dust. A bead of condensate trembling on the rim. He wiped the trap, reseated it, and waited for the scrubber to find its rhythm again.

Above the console, an old poster curled away from the bulkhead. Two cartoon hands under a faucet. Block letters: WASH. LOOP CLEAN. EAT FIRST, THEN DECIDE. Sialla Standard. Greta Annex compliant. The corner had been taped down so many times that the tape had become part of the message.

The scrubber settled. The room breathed.

Longevity aboard the Sev caravan sounded like a filter trap cleaned before sleep, a poster nobody was allowed to remove, air dosed with quiet medicine so cells remembered their work.

On the console, the queue refreshed.

One file rose to the top and pulsed blue.

A maintenance ticket blinked under it, lower priority but uglier.

ARRAY CONDENSATE TRAP,
MANUAL CONFIRMATION OVERDUE.

Ari stared at the marriage packet. Then at the trap ticket. He opened the trap ticket first.

There was no reason to. The array would survive another hour. The proposal would not spoil. But his hands knew the order his fear preferred: latch, seal, wipe, confirm. He pulled a thin brush from the drawer and cleaned the sensor groove until the amber fault cleared.

A log box opened.

TECHNICIAN STATEMENT REQUIRED.

He typed: *Trap cleaned. No biological growth. Operator wasting time.*

The system accepted it.

A physical backup cylinder dropped into the hopper with a small metal clack. Ari took it out, wrote the ticket number on the label, and slid it into the archive sleeve beside hundreds of identical little admissions that somebody, on some shift, had touched the machine with hands instead of trusting a green light.

Lyra's voice came down from the catwalk above, unhurried. "You are filing sarcasm in a maintenance log again."

"The future deserves context."

"The future will know you were frightened of a blue light."

He closed the ticket. The proposal kept pulsing. Still there. Patient as a creditor.

He almost opened Kiva's old message again instead.

The one with the lathe sparks. The one where she asked whether love changed across ten light-years, then laughed because the question sounded too large for a woman with grease on her cheek.

He knew the rest by memory. Kiva would look off-camera, listen to someone shout about coolant, then say, *answer later, little brother. The machine is on fire in a boring way.*

He did not play it.

Kiva was three decks up and probably asleep. He could have climbed the ladder and asked her in person, which was precisely why he didn't: the question was too large for a corridor, and he was not ready to hear a real answer. Ari closed her file and left himself with the blue light.

At one hundred and eighty-nine, his face remained young while his memory grew crowded. The file pulsed because somebody had put his name in a field, and schedules had teeth.

A metallic footstep rang on the catwalk grating above him.

He didn't turn. "You're walking heavy on purpose, Lyra."

"I am distributing my weight to announce my presence,"

Lyra corrected. Her voice was synthesized, perfect and crisp, set to a neutral calming alto. "If I wanted to surprise you, you wouldn't hear me until I was

recalibrating your spine."

She descended the spiral stair. She was a Class-9 Companion Frame: a bipedal machine of white ceramic composite and high-tensile polymer, built with the aesthetic restraint of a surgical instrument. Her face was a smooth geometry of laminate, expressive only through the micro-servos around her optical sensors. She had been his tutor when he was ten, his guardian when he was fifty, and his companion for the last eighty years. She was beautiful the way a balanced equation is beautiful.

She stopped beside his chair, internal gyros whirring as she steadied herself against the spin. "You are supposed to be sleeping."

"I am. I'm asleep in my bunk. This is a hologram."

Her head tilted two degrees left, the gesture her designers had coded for amusement. "You're staring at the backlog again."

"I'm checking telemetry."

"No," Lyra said. "You're arranging the room around not opening one file."

Her optical sensors dilated as she read his biometrics, heart rate, pupil response, skin temperature. "You'll avoid it all day," she said gently.

He wanted to say the old rule had made a mistake with him. Seventh children left. Everybody knew that. A seventh child learned the weight of a family by being loved inside it, then carried that weight through a docking collar into another ship.

His mother had once made him pack a transfer bag when he was twelve, just to prove he knew the inventory. Two shirts. Sealant gloves. Family starter culture in a thumb-sized vial. He had cried over the vial, not the shirts. Sera had not comforted him. She had checked the bag, found the vial wrapped badly, and made him wrap it again.

Now the bag was real.

"Ari." She set her hand on his shoulder. The palm was warm, heated by her core to mimic human output. A comfort he had known his whole life. "It's a Three-Ring seal. Sev Fleet, Cantor Fleet, and the Weigh Station Authority. You don't need to open it to know what it is. You only need to open it to know *when*."

He leaned back until his head rested against her laminate hip. "Or *if*."

"The schedule matters. The compact matters."

He wanted to argue that being the seventh and last child of Sera and Dael Sev should exempt him, that the gravity of his family ought to hold him here forever. But the old exchange road had survived the necessity that created it. Centuries ago the caravans of the Court unlocked the Bequest, a synthesis engine. It ended the necessity of forced marriages on the grounds of genetics. But marriage had never moved genes alone. It moved labor, tools, names, obligations and access to another household's future. The law had separated household from offspring and made the exchange voluntary. It had

not made refusal cheap.

The Sev caravan was poor in everything except patience. The old road was still the road it knew how to afford, and Cantor was a powerful and rich family.

"I know," Ari said.

The hydraulic door at the far end cycled open, and Sera Sev did not walk in so much as arrive, the way weather arrives. Even at four hundred years old his mother moved with the aggressive stability of someone who had once braced a collapsing bulkhead with her own back. Her hair was white, cropped close to a scalp scarred by centuries of EVA work; her hands were stained dark with reactor grease that no Sialla scrub would ever fully lift.

"Seventh," she said.

"Mother."

Her eyes went straight to the blue pulse on the console and did not pretend otherwise. "You want me to hold your hand while you decrypt it?"

"If I don't open it, we stay like this. In the quiet."

She leaned against the console, shoulder brushing Lyra's arm. There was no tension between the woman and the machine.

Lyra was as much a part of the ship as the life support. "If you don't open it," Sera said, "we move from the quiet to the workshop. We lay out the thermal templates for the new drive coil. Then we eat those terrible high-density biscuits because your father is trying to prove a point about flour rationing."

"There is protein jelly," Lyra offered.

"No," said Sera. "Jelly is for hull sealant. Food shall be food."

Ari let out a breath he hadn't known he was holding, and pressed his thumb to the biometric scanner.

Identity confirmed: Ari Sev.

The file unspooled. Three voices waited inside it. The first was governmental and automated: a Weigh Station registrar reciting rendezvous coordinates and a docking window. The second was Dael's, recorded six months earlier, offering unsolicited advice about wedding toasts.

The third voice was new.

"Ari," the woman said. "I'm told the custom is to be formal here. I can do formal. But I've also read all your repair logs from the coil incident of '84, you were the one who noticed the thermal drift in the magnetic containment before it cascaded. So I thought we'd start there. Thank you for your competence."

Sera raised an eyebrow. Lyra went perfectly still, diverting processing power to the speaker.

The woman's face appeared in projection.

She was striking in the way of something you would not want to fall from. Dark hair buzzed to the scalp, skin the color of deep-space shielding, eyes that looked like they took problems apart for sport. Behind her, a laboratory of micro-centrifuges and hydroponic tanks.

"I'm Nalen Oure. Cantor Fleet. I know you know the rules, but I'll speak them, because it's how two strangers

become a 'we.' We don't meet alone until after the formalities. We don't treat marriage as permission to reproduce. If we ever discuss a child, the Viability Engine may certify a combination and the Bequest Synthesis Engine may make it, but every contributor signs separately. The models do not consent for us. And we don't pretend there's no light-lag." She tapped a stylus against her chin. "If you need to back out, you may invoke the clause we all signed at the last Lacunae review, the clause that says no one is a resource. I voted for it. I'd vote for it again."

The message ended on a stream of navigation data: Weigh Station S-74, approach vector, and the frequency of a millisecond pulsar used to synchronize their clocks across the gulf.

Sera studied the frozen image. "A good voice," she decided. "She sounds like she knows how to weld."

"She's a geneticist," Ari said.

"Same thing. Different metal."

Lyra's hand moved to the back of his neck and squeezed, gently. "We have two months of ship-time before the rendezvous. Time to practice the exchange ceremony. Time to learn to say 'Nalen' without looking like you're swallowing a bolt."

"You think I'm a child."

"I think you are frightened," Lyra said. "Also late. Those are different problems. We should not solve them with the same face."

He was still turning that over when the Array did something it almost never did during night cycle.

It pinged.

Not the soft chime of an inbound letter. A handshake request, the formal, insistent knock of one navigation computer asking another to confirm the time. Then another. Then a third, the interval between them shrinking.

Lyra's eyes unfocused as she interfaced with the mesh. "S-74's master clock is requesting confirmation handshakes from our nav computer. It's pinging us every thirty seconds. Now every twenty."

"A glitch?" Ari said. "S-74 is old. Maybe their emitters are drifting."

"The signals are valid. Authenticated." She paused, and the pause was longer than her processing required, which meant she was choosing how to say it. "But each request asks us to adjust our internal clock slightly backward. They're trying to sync us to a coordinate time that runs slower than our proper time."

If a station could trick a caravan into syncing to a slower clock, it could move the rendezvous window without anyone signing anything. It could make the caravan arrive "late" by the station's books even when it was exactly on time by its own, and force it to burn expensive reaction mass to catch up, or pay to hold a slot it had already paid for.

Ari had learned the conversion table as a child. Sera had

put three tokens on the table: fuel, time, and a paper cutout of a person. "Spend two," she had said. He had spent fuel and time. She had taken the paper person away. "Wrong," she had said. "The person is never the currency."

A station could charge. It could cheat, if you were careless. But a station that reached into your clock and spent your options without asking had picked up the paper cutout.

That was not trade.

"Why us?" Ari asked. "We pay our docking fees. We're nobody."

A new voice answered from the ladder well, dry, cracked, climbing. "Because somebody expects us to pay rather than argue."

Elder Mar pulled herself onto the deck. She was the oldest human aboard, nearly five hundred, kept going by stubbornness and very expensive organ printing, and she looked like a tree root that had learned to wear a jumpsuit.

She held her dented steel mug the way a judge holds a gavel.

"I won't ask if you opened the letter," Mar said. "I came to tell you what your mother is too busy ignoring. S-74 has been pinging our clock for an hour. I've seen glitches born of overheated gold trace, and glitches born of plain incompetence. This one smells like math."

"Time theft," Sera said. She used the words like a curse.

"If they desynchronize us," Mar went on, "they can make us late to anything written in station time. Berths. Fuel contracts. Customs windows. Witness slots. A caravan that thinks it missed a deadline does not audit the clock. It pays for the next opening and thanks the clerk who found it." She took a long, unbothered sip from the mug. "Somebody at that station has found a way to sell people back the minutes they stole."

Ari looked at the blue pulse, then at the cascade of handshake requests scrolling past, each one a small polite lie about what time it was.

"Hold steady," Lyra said quietly, the old diaspora phrase carved on a thousand rocks between here and the Court worlds.

"I'm holding," Ari said, which was the answer the phrase asked for. He didn't feel like he was holding. He felt like a clock somebody had reached inside.

Mar drained her mug and turned for the ladder. "Tell your mother I said the word *shims* in a tone that means she should check the coil supports." She descended without waiting to see if anyone obeyed.

Sera was already moving. "Lyra, pull the raw handshake logs. I want to see the timestamps before anyone smooths them." She paused at the door and looked back at her son, and for one unguarded instant the engineer gave way to the mother. "Open the second voice when you're ready, Seventh. Not before. A thief doesn't get to decide when you become a story."

The door cycled shut behind her.

Ari sat in the amber dark with the machine he loved and a proposal from a woman he had met for the length of one recorded message, while a station four light-minutes away gently, patiently, tried to alter the caravan's clock for reasons none of them yet knew. He reached out and reopened Nalen's message. He froze it on her face, the sharp eyes, the laboratory behind her, the stylus paused mid-thought.

"Do you think they're doing it to Cantor too?" he asked.

Lyra's head tilted two degrees. "That is the first useful question you have asked."

On the console, the handshake requests kept coming, counting down to a deadline no one in the room had agreed to.

End of the free sample

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