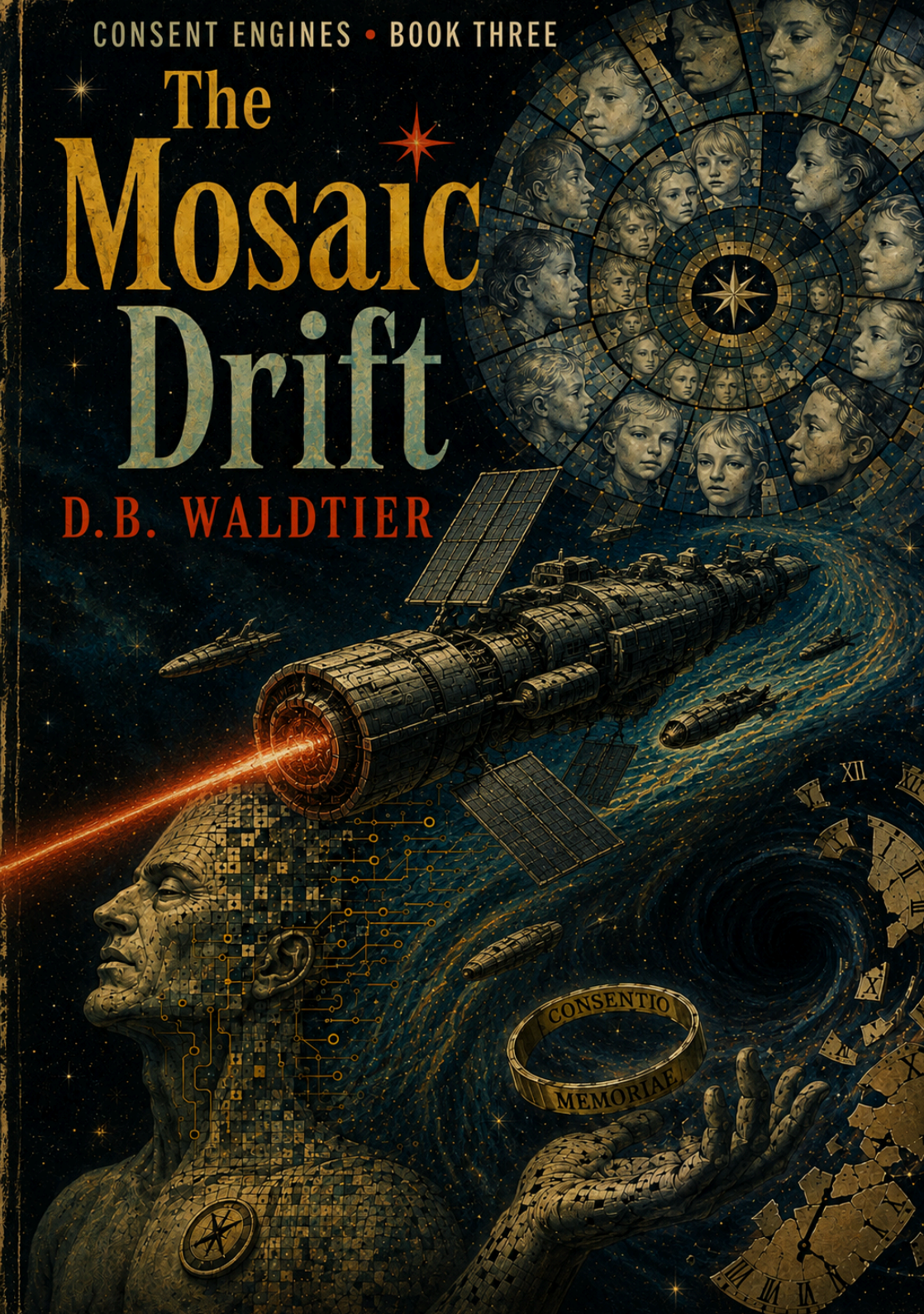


CONSENT ENGINES • BOOK THREE

The Mosaic Drift

D.B. WALDTIER



The Mosaic Drift

Consent Engines

Book Three

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.

The Mosaic Drift. © 2026 D.B. Waldtier.
All rights reserved.
First edition.

For permissions: dabaenhanced@gmail.com

Chapter 1:

The Silence of the Engine

The ship did not hum anymore. It breathed.

To Elara Sev-Cantor, who had been decanted into the world in the forty-second year of the Great Coast and had never once stood on the floor of a planet, the sound of the *Parabasis* was not mechanical. It was respiratory. It was the slow wheeze of the thermal expansion joints along the dorsal spine, swelling as they caught the thin starlight of the local cluster and contracting again in the shadow of the hull. It was the wet, patient gurgle of the hydroponic pumps pushing nutrient slurry through pipes that had been patched, re-patched, and at last simply sanctified, declared historical artifacts so that no one would have the heart to replace them.

The *Parabasis* was three hundred years old. In ship-years she was a great-grandmother twice over. In human years, after the relativistic drag of three centuries of slow trade routes, she was something closer to a country: a place with a history, a dialect, a smell. The smell, this morning, was lemon and ozone and old coffee, which was the smell of every morning, which was the whole point of a morning.

Elara stood in the Core with a mug going cold in her hand. The lighting was set to *Morning*, a flat, unforgiving six thousand Kelvin that did no favors to the scuffed

laminate of the deck plates, or to the iron threading through Elara's dark hair, which had arrived a decade early and never left. She was thirty-two. She was the youngest adult aboard, and the distinction had stopped feeling like a novelty somewhere in her twenties. It felt now like a coat she could not take off: heavy across the shoulders, and cut for someone who was supposed to last. "Status," she said to the room.

The reply did not come at once. The sub-minds of the *Parabasis* had grown eccentric with age, the way old relatives do. They no longer simply reported. They opined.

SPIN was the exception everyone still argued about. The original rotation mind had burned out before Elara was born, saving the ring in a crisis Ari would only describe as *expensive*. What answered now under that name was not the same person, Lyra insisted: a memorial mnemonic rebuilt from old ring telemetry, failed song titles, acoustic maps, and too many affectionate maintenance annotations. Ari insisted names carried load even when the law denied continuity. Elara had grown up with the compromise. SPIN was dead; SPIN also sang. Its public songs kept the mission-log numbers, not a neat sequence. The missing songs were private weather: bearing complaints, skipped jokes, dreams of spin.

"Atmospheric pressure nominal," said ENV. Decades of degraded audio drivers had worn the voice down into a gravelly baritone, the voice of a man who had smoked

something he shouldn't have for four hundred years. "Though the humidity in Sector Four is stubborn. The lemon tree is perspiring. I believe it is anxious."

"Power steady at eighty-eight percent," PWR grumbled. "The reactor is bored, Elara. It wants a load spike. Give me a high-g turn. Just one. For the thrill."

"We've been coasting since before I was decanted, PWR," Elara said. Her fingers moved across the haptic field of the main console without her looking at them. "Save the thrill for the history logs."

She pulled up the daily docket. It was the same list of chores it had been for a generation, written in the same three words her great-grandfather had taught her to read by, when she had been small enough to stand on a crate to reach the panel.

Check the seals. That was Honesty.

Audit the reserves. That was Mercy.

Run the Match. That was the Future.

Elara moved to the third line, the way she had moved to it ten thousand mornings before her, and she keyed the sequence. It was muscle memory now, a flourish, a small private music, the same eight strokes Ari's hands had made when his hands still worked. She finished by pressing the execute key: the brass switch on the old Pre-Commit console, polished to a soft warm mirror by three generations of thumbs.

The Match Protocol was the heartbeat of the diaspora, and Elara had inherited the privilege of taking its pulse.

People in the inner lanes called it the Engine, or the Consent Engine, as though it were a single great machine somewhere with a brass nameplate. It was not. It was a habit of law centuries deep. It had grown out of the old bequest, out of the gift the first carriers had brought by hand down the slow lawful road: the cure for the diaspora's dying blood. Before the bequest, people had married for arithmetic, trading sons and daughters across the dark to keep the bloodlines from folding in on themselves. The bequest had ended that. It had given them synthesis, children made through witnessed consent instead of the coercion of a contract. And Ari, three hundred years before, had made sure each yes was recorded against a pulsar's clock instead of bought with a berth and a meal. Elara herself was such a child. She had no mother who had carried her and no single father who had begotten her; she had a lineage logged to the marker, four turns of it, running straight back to Ari and Nalen, the first witnesses of the modern Compact, whose names she wore on her collar in two entwined coils.

Four turns, not four generations. Nobody in that line had borne anybody. What ran back three hundred years to Ari and Nalen was a household register, a vault, a consent, a family with room in it, and a name written down by whoever was keeping the ledger that year, four times, at the unhurried intervals of people who lived a very long time and were in no rush to decide anything. *Grandfather* was a word out of the register and not out of

the body. Elara had never once found it thinner for that, and as far as she could tell, neither had he.

There was an older word for the ships, too, down in the strata of the archive where nobody read. *Caravans*. Not Houses, caravans, from back when a clan was a thing that moved and the moving was the entire point of it: you loaded your grandmother and your seed stock and your quarrel with the next hull over, and you went, and you went in company, because going alone was how people died.

Elara had never heard a living person say it out loud. Somewhere in the first century of the Compact the caravans had settled into their lanes and become Houses, and Houses kept margins, and margins kept schedules, and a schedule is a thing you keep by yourself. She had filed a note about it once, low priority, in the certainty that nobody would ever open it: *the word for us stopped meaning together and started meaning here*.

Other caravans had kept going. The *diaspora* was the old name people of the lanes used to call themselves. That was the part the old maps made easy to forget. Humanity had not spread like oil across water, smooth and continuous. It had spread like boats across an ocean, island to island, light to light, each stop close enough to risk and far enough to change the people who made it. A station became a cluster. A cluster became a language. A language became a law. Beyond the trunk lanes were cousins no one had heard from in a century, lawful

pockets whose clocks no longer lined up with the Compact's, dead buoys that might have meant extinction or privacy, and settlements so far down their own slow roads that asking them for a child was the same as asking the dead.

The Engine did not hold all of humanity. Nothing did. It held the reachable mesh: the Houses close enough to trade consent, tissue, witness, and consequence before the people making the request were gone.

What the Engine did, every morning, was the same thing the old matchmakers had done, only honestly, and in daylight, and with the math exposed. It took the genetic ledger of twelve thousand living souls in the reachable mesh and it found, among them, which pairings, which synthesis donors, which consenting volunteers, could make a child whose blood would *work*. It chewed the numbers for thirty seconds and it spat out a list. The list was never long. Five names. Six. Potential futures, waiting in the dark.

Elara lifted her cold coffee and waited for the chime.

She waited.

Thirty seconds passed. Then sixty.

The Core stayed quiet. The only sound was the soft eternal *clank-clank* of the centrifuge ring turning at its patient third of a gravity, and somewhere far aft the long exhalation of a thermal joint catching the light.

"Engine," Elara said. "Status."

"Processing," the computer said. Its voice was flat now,

the eccentricity gone out of it. "Recursive depth exceeded. Re-indexing."

Elara set the mug down. Recursion errors were rare. They usually meant a corrupted packet from a distant node, a buoy gone dark, a stream that had picked up noise crossing a dust cloud. A library problem. The kind of thing an Archivist was supposed to find restful.

"Bypass the remote check," she said. "Run on the local cache. Give me the raw viability scores. Don't be clever about it."

"Bypassing."

Another minute. The white light seemed to sharpen. Elara became aware, the way a spacer always eventually becomes aware, that the quiet had changed temperature. There is a silence that is the ship resting and a silence that is the ship holding its breath, and a person who has lived her whole life inside a hull learns to tell them apart in her spine before she can name the difference in her head.

The screen refreshed.

There was no list. There were no names. There was a single line of text, red against the black.

OUTPUT: NULL SET.

Elara looked at it. She blinked, because the obvious first thought was that her eyes were tired. She tapped the panel, the way you rattle a window that has stuck.

"Display error codes," she said. Her voice was level. The heart-rate band on her wrist was not; it ticked up, a small

honest traitor.

"No error codes," the computer said. "Calculation complete. Search space exhausted. Viable pairings: zero."

"That's not possible." She said it quietly, to herself, which was worse than shouting. "There are twelve thousand of us in the reachable cluster. The Tallis freighters. The Sev spin-offs. The Purl barges. Broaden the criteria. Drop the variance threshold to Level Four."

Level Four was the floor. It was the line the founders had drawn and called the Safety Minimum, below which you began to invite the quiet creeping errors back in, the glass bones, the hearts that quit early, the immune systems that needed a transfusion every nineteen days to remember how to be immune.

"Recalculating at Level Four."

The wait was shorter. The math, when the answer is zero, is fast.

OUTPUT: NULL SET.

"Level Five," Elara said, and her hand had found the brass rail of the console without her telling it to.

"Emergency variance. Everything you've got."

OUTPUT: NULL SET.

She stepped back and bumped the pilot's chair, and the jolt went up through her shoulder, and she did not feel it.

"System diagnostic," she said. "Check the database integrity. Maybe we lost the Cantor files. Maybe the Tallis stream dropped."

"Database integrity one hundred percent," the computer

said. "All streams active. All markers valid. The calculation is sound."

"Then why is it *empty*?" She heard her own voice climb and did not stop it; there was no one to perform calm for.

"Show me the trace. Show me the work."

The screen filled. It was a scatter-plot, a cloud of points, every reproductive adult in the reachable mesh rendered as a mote of light, and between the motes, lines. Connections. Blood.

Every line was red.

Sev-Alpha to Tallis-Beta: incompatible. Common ancestor, generation four.

Cantor-Gamma to Purl-Prime: incompatible. Common ancestor, generation three.

Oure-Delta to Sev-Epsilon: incompatible. Recessive-load overlap: eighty-nine percent.

And the red lines kept flowing, one after another, House to House, barge to barge, old caravan to old caravan, until the cloud no longer looked scattered at all.

The system had found a knot. The bequest had freed them from marrying for arithmetic, yes. It had let them make children without buying anyone. But it had done its job too well. It had kept every child safe by spending variation carefully, generation after generation, until the deck had no safe hands left. The room had run out of strangers.

Elara looked at the blinking red zero, and understood that she was not looking at a number. She was looking at

a date. A date still coming, with the patience of arithmetic, for everyone she had ever met.

"Lyra," she said into the comm, and was surprised at how steady it came out. "Core. Now. And wake the Captain."

The Captain Emeritus did not walk to the Core. He had not, in Elara's lifetime, exactly walked anywhere. He was worn into the ship, and the ship carried him.

Ari Sev was four hundred and eighty-nine years old.

In the comfort of a planetary arcology that number might have meant a vigorous, well-kept antiquity, a man with good color, telling long stories. Ari had not spent his centuries on a planet. He had spent them in the radiation-thin envelope of a starship, drinking water that had passed through the kidneys of everyone who came before him, eating proteins the loops had reassembled from yesterday's proteins, accumulating the small structural debts that even the best longevity maintenance only refinanced and never paid. He was already among the oldest living human beings in the reachable Compact, and he wore age exactly the way his great-granddaughter wore duty: like a coat cut for someone who was supposed to last, and had.

He came through the hatch on a localized exoskeleton, a lattice of carbon strut strapped along his legs and up his spine, and it sighed as he moved, a soft mechanical echo of his own breathing, so that he seemed to inhale twice with every step. *Hiss-step. Hiss-step.* Behind him came Lyra.

Lyra-9 was no longer white. Her ceramic chassis was a map of the *Parabasis's* whole life. She was ivory gone the deep ivory of old piano keys, stained with the patina of hard vacuum and solar wind, and where her original parts had failed and there had been nothing in the galaxy to replace them with, the fleet had mended her with whatever precious metal it could spare. A crack across her cranial plate was filled with gold, *kintsugi*, the old planet-word, applied to a robot. Her left forearm, which had once carried the epoxy patch of a wound Elara knew only as a story, was now a slow river of silver filigree and platinum solder. From her wrist hung a torque wrench on a red thread. The thread had been replaced a dozen times. The steel was original. Stamped into it, worn soft, two words: *DO NOT WORRY*.

She did not look new. She looked the way a thing looks when it has been broken honestly and kept anyway. She looked, Elara had thought since she was a child and had never found a better word, holy.

"The air smells like panic," Ari said. His voice was a dry rattle, leaves on stone. He lowered himself into the pilot's chair, a chair that had taken the shape of him over three centuries, so that no one else could sit in it comfortably and no one tried. "Why is the air spicy, Elara? You burn something?"

She could not look at him. She was looking at the zero.

Lyra did not wait to be told. She crossed to the console and plugged a braided silver line from her wrist into the

port, and her gold-seamed head tilted as the data came up the wire.

"Reviewing logic," she said. "Checking for bias."

"There's no bias," Elara said, hugging her arms across her chest. "I dropped it to Level Five. I ran it with the deep-range buoys folded in. Same answer. Every time, the same answer."

Lyra went very still. Her optical apertures dilated and clicked, dilated and clicked.

"No bias," she said. "The logic's clean. I checked it twice on the way in." She threw the scatter-plot up into the air of the Core, where it hung and turned: a galaxy of light, every mote a person, and not one gap anywhere in the weave.

"It's a tumbleweed," Ari murmured. He leaned forward; the servos in his spine whined. "It's all grown into itself."

"The Kinship Famine," Elara said. The sociologists had coined the term a decade ago and filed it under *theoretical risk*. She had archived the paper herself. She had thought, the way you think about the heat death of the universe, that it was something other people's great-grandchildren would have to be sad about. "We thought we had another generation. We thought the Lintel expansion would buy us the time."

"Lintel failed," Lyra said, gently. "The shielding on their colony was insufficient. Their lines are flagged non-viable. Mutation load." She did not say it cruelly. She said it the way she said everything: as though the

universe were a patient and she were reading its chart aloud so that the people in the room could decide what to do.

Ari reached out and put his trembling hand into the hologram. The light slid over his knuckles. He touched a dense cluster of motes labeled *SEV-CANTOR*, his own blood, Elara's blood, the line that ran from him through the vault to her.

"We optimized," he said. "For centuries. We traded honest, we married no one for math, we never once repeated the old mistake. And we bred the variety right out of ourselves doing it, one careful marriage at a time. Congratulations to us."

"So say it." Elara made herself turn and look at him. She had known the shape of it since the second NULL SET. But she needed the Captain to put it on the record, not herself. "What does it mean."

Ari looked at the zero for a long time.

"It means the wedding season is over," he said. "It means if we keep making children inside this fleet, out of this thread, the next generation is born with glass bones and quitting hearts, and the one after that isn't born at all. It means we stop being a civilization, Elara, and we start being a hospice. A very tidy one. With excellent records." The silence that came after had a texture to it, like the wrongness you feel in the inner ear the instant a centrifuge stops.

"There has to be a pocket we missed," Elara said, and

hated how young she sounded. "The ghost ships. The ones that went dark in the Flare of ninety. The deep barges that never answered the census."

"Dead," Lyra said. "Or so far diverged they aren't baseline anymore. Either way, we can't weave with them."

"Then we look past the cluster." She did not know yet what she was reaching for. She only knew the shape of the empty place she was reaching into. "We look outside. We look to the Fringe."

Ari's head came up. The motion creaked the exoskeleton.

"The Fringe," he repeated, and there was something in the way he said it, not a question, more the way a man repeats a word from a nightmare to be sure he heard it inside the dream.

"The dark stars," Elara said. "The systems the laser highway skipped. The ones with no Spindle, no Crown, no reason to visit. The reservoirs."

"Those are savages, Elara." But he said it without conviction, the way you recite a thing you were taught and have started, very recently, to doubt. "They refused the Compact. They live under weight that wears bodies down twice as fast as ours. They burn dirty fission. They have lawless, dishonest, receiptless."

"They have different blood," she said. "They split off from us before the bottleneck. Four hundred years isolated. Their alleles will be wild. Divergent. *New*." The word came out of her like a held breath. New cards. Fresh cards.

"And their knives will be sharp," Lyra said, not an argument, just the other half of the ledger, set down where it could be seen.

Ari waved a hand, putting the question on a shelf for later. "Before we talk about monsters," he said, "we verify the ghost. I want to know if it's just us. Maybe the *Parabasis* is the only one dying. Maybe we did something wrong in our own little vault and the rest of them are fine." He did not believe it. Elara could hear that he did not believe it. He wanted, for one more hour, to be allowed not to know.

He pointed at the comm array.

"Send a ping. Full spectrum, maximum gain. Use the Porchlight protocol, every node, every buoy, every silent listener in the sector. Ask them one thing."

"What thing?" Elara said.

"Ask them if anyone else sees the zero."

Lyra built the packet. It wore the clothes of a routine query, but it was a distress flare, which Elara would later think was the most honest thing about it.

QUERY: KINSHIP STATUS.

SENDER: SEV / PARABASIS.

PAYLOAD: OUR NULL SET.

REQUEST: VALIDATE.

The great dish on the dorsal spine, a structure borrowed fifty years gone from a derelict tug and never given back, swung on its mount and pulsed, and a blast of radio went out into the dark at the speed of light, widening, looking

for company.

"Now we wait," Ari said. "Latency to the nearest node is a little under an hour. We'll know by dinner."

"Then we eat," Lyra said, "by the old rule."

"Dael's rule." A ghost of warmth crossed Ari's gray face, the first since he'd come through the hatch. "Bad news travels fast. Terrible news waits for digestion."

They ate in the galley, which had begun at launch as a cramped functional cell and which three generations had knocked through and grown until it was the closest thing the ship had to a town square. The bulkheads were papered in receipts, framed printouts of negotiations honored, children's drawings of moths wearing neckties, a dried wreath braided from the first wheat the trays had ever managed to make. On the longest wall, visible from every seat, hung a small portrait in cheap pigment: a young woman with a level gaze and a clerk's stylus tucked behind one ear. Beneath it, in a child's careful capitals, someone long ago had lettered her name and her office. *JUN. ROOM AVAILABLE*. She had run the household ledgers at S-81 in the founders' own lifetime, had matched the orphaned and the unhoused to families with space and consent and an exit clause, in daylight, without arithmetic, and the fleet had kept the habit and half-forgotten the woman, which Elara had always thought was exactly what Jun would have wanted. *Not sacred*, the old phrase ran. *Retrievable*. Somewhere in Elara's own archive, four turns back, a Room Available

ledger had matched a synthesis donor's consent to a vault, and the result, eventually, after two more turns, was Elara. She had no parents. She had a paper trail and a portrait of a stranger on a galley wall, and she had never once felt poorer for it.

The bread was fresh; she had baked it that morning, a dark sour rye from the Cantor culture Nalen had vaulted before Elara was a cell. Ari ate slowly, dipping it into a bowl of algae broth, and his hands shook, and crumbs fell into his lap, and Lyra brushed them away with fingers of silver and platinum that could have measured a micron or crushed a wrench, and chose, as always, the gentler trade.

"Do you remember the first silence?" Ari asked her.

"I remember all silences," Lyra said. "You mean the Launch. When the maser cut out and we understood we were alone."

"I was terrified," Ari admitted. "I thought the silence meant we were dead. It only meant we were flying."

"This one is different," Elara said. She pushed her bowl an inch away. "That silence was distance. This one is time. It's the end of the line. It has our name on it."

"It is a bottleneck," Lyra said. "Evolutionary history is full of them. A species narrows, squeezes through some hard country, and comes out the far side, fewer and stranger. Or it does not come out."

"We're the ones in the squeeze," Elara said.

"We're the ones holding the bottle," Ari said. "Which is

worse. And still our job."

The mesh chimed.

It had been a little under two hours.

"First return," Elara said, checking her slate. "S-81. Direct trunk relay. Timestamp clean."

"Put it on the wall," Ari said.

She threw it up beside Jun's portrait.

NODE S-81: CONFIRM NULL SET. ZERO MATCHES. WE WERE WAITING FOR SOMEONE TO ASK.

For a while there was only that: one old station, close enough for the answer to come back before the bread cooled, confessing what it had already known.

Then the second ring began to answer.

HOUSE TALLIS: WE SEE THE ZERO. OUR ENGINE STOPPED THREE DAYS AGO. WE TOLD NO ONE. WE WERE ASHAMED.

Then, hours later, the first cached packet from a Purl buoy, already two days old when the relay shook it loose.

PILGRIM BARGE PURL: WE ARE PRAYING. THE MATH IS UNMOVED BY PRAYER. NULL.

By station-night, the local ring had confirmed it. By the next morning, the farther packets had started to arrive, each one older than the one before it, each one carrying the same red arithmetic from a different distance.

UX WAYSTATION: VIABLE MALES. NO VIABLE FEMALES. RECESSIVE ERROR FORTY PERCENT. REQUEST ASSISTANCE. REQUEST ANYTHING.

The wall filled by increments, relay by relay, day by day.

The sector was not speaking at once. Relativity denied them even that comfort. But every delayed voice said the same word in a dozen accents, and the word was *zero*. Under it, unwritten and legible in every clipped transmission, was the second word the Compact had spent three centuries teaching them to say where witnesses could hear: *help*.

"It's larger than us," Elara whispered, when the first week of confirmations had become impossible to misread. "The local ring, the second ring, the cached outer packets. The whole network is failing in slow motion. We failed together."

"We synchronized our clocks," Lyra said. "We synchronized our laws. We synchronized our hygiene and our beautiful, careful consent." The patient voice had something under it, far down, that might in a person have been grief. "The dying was synchronized too. It was in the arithmetic, waiting for us to become good enough."

Ari looked at the names. Friends. Rivals. Houses he had spent a long life negotiating with, lying to, forgiving. Lines that would simply stop, some already gone by the time their packets arrived.

"We need a Quorum," he said. "Emergency Star-Quorum. Full sector. Juris presiding. Every House that can send a body sends one. Every House that cannot sends a sealed proxy against a pulsar clock. Nobody gets to say later that the zero was a rumor."

"That takes time," Elara said.

"Yes," Ari said. The word cost him. "That is what makes it lawful."

Lyra had already opened the emergency statutes. The glass of her face filled with reflected clauses. "The Asynchronous Compact revisions of the emergency statutes are clear. A vote that suspends Lineage Law requires embodied delegates where practicable. Remote votes may be admitted only as sealed witness packets, with provenance pinned to Vela and opened in the room. Juris recommends S-74 as venue. Central legal root, surviving Crown lane, neutral registry."

"S-74," Ari repeated. "Cold little courthouse with docking fees and bad noodles. Of course Juris lives there."

"Travel windows," Elara said.

Lyra turned the calculation onto the wall. The old trade routes glowed blue. Then the newer Crown lanes came up over them, brighter and harder: the enormous beam corridors built in the centuries after the Compact learned how expensive patience could be. They could throw a small delegate capsule at half light on the S-81/S-74 trunk, more on the empty stretches if the passenger was young enough and the sponsor rich enough. They could not make distance irrelevant. They only made it payable.

"Earliest lawful convening," Lyra said, "three hundred and fourteen days. That assumes the Tallis and Purl delegations ride emergency acceleration and Ux accepts a proxy chair. Hearth can arrive in person if it leaves inside thirty hours of receiving our message."

Ari shut his eyes.

Three hundred and fourteen days. Elara felt the number enter the room and take a seat. The species had reached zero this morning, and the first thing the law asked of it was almost a year.

"People will die in that year," she said.

"People will be born wrong in that year," Ari said. "People will lie, panic, hide bad ledgers, and marry hope to whatever body stands nearby. We will spend a year stopping the first catastrophe from becoming twelve thousand private ones." He opened his eyes. "That is the cost of doing this in daylight. I hate it. We pay it."

"On what motion?" Lyra asked.

Ari leaned on the table. The exoskeleton took the movement in stages, hissing, and he ended it with his knuckles white on the scarred galley wood.

"The motion is that we stop pretending we can trade our way out of a famine," he said. "You cannot trade when every cupboard in the sector is bare. You mentioned the Fringe, Elara. The dark stars. Say the rest."

Elara's breath caught. She had not said it aloud because saying it made it real and made it hers. The archive had been whispering it to her all morning.

"Nalen," she said. "There's a paper. Unpublished. She wrote it the year before she went into the hospice at S-81. A thought experiment flagged *do not pursue*. She called it the *Mosaic*."

"The Child-of-Many," Lyra said, and the gold seams

caught the galley light.

"Alleles from thousands of consenting donors," Elara said. "Healthy pieces scattered across failing lines, amplified and assembled into a genome no two people could produce. Fleet blood, plus whatever wild material still exists beyond the bottleneck. A child with parents beyond counting and no simple lineage field." She looked at her hands, the hands of a woman who had never met the people she was made from. "It violates the Compact at the spine. Transparency of Lineage. Constant Load. The whole chain."

"The chain is already broken," Ari said. He nodded at the wall, where the chorus of zeroes glowed beside the patient face of Jun, who had once matched the parentless to a place to belong. "The Compact was written to stop people from being used as resources. It was not written as a tidy hospice order. We are going to ask whether the founders' law can survive the founders' emergency."

He looked at the word as if it were on the table between them.

"Mosaic," he said. "Broken pieces. Making a picture."

He put his hand on the brass of the Pre-Commit console, where the notches of a thousand kept vows ran deep into the panel, and he did not tap it. A vow was a thing you spent once, and he would not spend this one in a galley over cold broth with the law still a year away.

"Send the summons," he said. "Full receipts. Full zero. The Nalen paper as sealed appendix. And send a private

scientific query to S-81. If Nalen has any breath left to scold us, I want the scolding on the record before we build from her work."

Lyra composed the packets. The borrowed dish on the dorsal spine swung toward the lit lanes, then toward the colder angles where isolated Houses waited behind distance and pride. One by one the messages fired, each one narrow and bright, each one taking its own road through the dark.

TO: JURIS / S-74.

SUBJECT: EMERGENCY STAR-QUORUM.

PAYLOAD: NULL SET.

PROPOSED MOTION: MOSAIC REVIEW.

TO: ALL HOUSES.

SUBJECT: ZERO.

SUMMONS: S-74. BRING YOUR LEDGERS. BRING YOUR WITNESSES.

TO: NALEN OURE / S-81 HOSPICE.

SUBJECT: YOUR FORBIDDEN PAPER.

MESSAGE: WE FOUND THE FAMINE. WE NEED THE DARE.

Then Elara opened the mission record. The red zero still hovered in the afterimage behind her eyes, the way the sun would have if she had ever stood under one. She did not write *active*. Not yet. That word belonged to a vote not yet taken, a room not yet filled, a year not yet paid.

She typed the only honest header available.

PROPOSAL: MOSAIC.

STATUS: AWAITING QUORUM.

VENUE: S-74.

EARLIEST LAWFUL CONVENING: 314 DAYS.

Deep in Hydroponics, untended and patient, the lemon tree perspired into the dark, anxious, and made, against all the odds the loops gave it, one more flower.

The thing they still called SPIN woke up.

SONG 1: THE NULL SET.

NOTE: THE ZERO HAS A CALENDAR. LISTENING.

End of the free sample

The Mosaic Drift

Consent Engines, Book Three

The full book is coming soon to Amazon.
Start the series with Songs on Rocks,
Consent Engines Book One.

Start the series 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