

Chapter 1

Third Window

“It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the living God.”
— *Hebrews 10:31*

ABOARD THE PALINODE, the ship made the jump three hours ago. The Alcubierre fold-drive contracting space ahead and expanding it behind, carrying them more than two thousand light-years to a vantage near Epsilon Aurigae without a single second of relativistic time dilation. Now they hung in deep space, where Earth’s ancient light still traveled outward, waiting to be caught and decoded.

On the third window, Mara refused to pretend it was routine.

She held one hand a few centimeters above the railing that circled the observation well and forced it not to shake.

“Final drift correction complete,” Minerva said. “Relative temporal offset locked. Observational window opening in thirty seconds.”

The observation-room lights were low; screens washed in the cool blues and grays Minerva preferred when everyone’s cortisol was up. Mara could feel the others without turning: Elias at Mission Theology, fingers laced so tightly his knuckles looked bloodless; Captain Tamsin Roe at the forward rail; Carlos Santos at Tactical; Hana Kim at Life Systems; Jiro at Navigation. Six humans and one ship-mind leaning over a well that wasn’t a well at all, just a recessed sphere of black that would soon stop being empty.

Two windows behind them already: ancient Mesopotamia, where the first intervention had looked like a minor miracle written in mud and blood; Egypt, where ramps and blocks and

whispered instructions had shifted an empire by a fraction of a degree. Each time, the same invisible handwriting at the edge of human effort.

This time, Mara thought, they were pointing their instrument at the wound that had become half the planet's scar tissue.

"Jiro?" Roe said.

"Fold-field steady," Jiro answered. "We're anchored. External interference negligible."

"Any surprises, Minerva?" Roe asked.

"None detected," she said. "For a value of 'none' that includes trying to watch a crucifixion while parked in deep space near Epsilon Aurigae, just far enough out to be catching light that left Earth two thousand years ago."

Santos huffed a short laugh. Nobody else did.

"Ten seconds," Minerva added. "Begin internal recording on my mark."

Mara realized her hand was still hovering over the rail. She let it drop, fingertips resting against metal. Skin, gloves, steel, ship. A chain back to something she understood: mass, contact, resistance. Not everything had to be quantum. Not everything had to be divine.

"Five," Minerva said. "Four. Three. Two. Opening."

The sphere in the center of the well did not brighten like a screen. It thickened, the way a mirage thickens, edges softening and then hardening again as something else pushed through. For a heartbeat, it was only contrast, light and dark, angled planes without meaning, as Minerva's TOM arrays, the Temporal Observation Mechanism, caught and solved the quantum reassembly of ancient photons in real time.

Then the image snapped into focus.



Ancient light, photons scattered by flesh, wood, and iron two millennia ago, resolved into a hill of chalk-colored rock beneath a darkening sky. Three uprights. Three men in Jerusalem, April 33 CE.

They had missed the nailing; the aftermath was right in front of them.

Mara's training engaged before her faith or lack of it had time to flinch. She zoomed the feed on her console, running edge enhancement and motion tracking as Minerva's raw stream filled in.

The middle figure's chest mechanics hit her first: thoracic compression; respiratory compromise; hypovolemia; hypoxia, climbing like a tide. Each breath demanded full body leverage, pushing on pierced feet to lift the ribcage, then sagging as muscles failed. Rise, breathe, fall. The metronome of agony.

"Confirm negative for anomalous tech," Roe said, voice tight on procedure, the rope she threw them all.

"Negative," Minerva replied. "No Helper signatures. No engineered fields. Only human bodies, wood, and iron."

They called them Helpers now, capital H, ever since Mesopotamia and early Egypt, where advanced tools and anonymous figures had nudged history along at the edges of the frame.

Mara let herself look at his face.

Even at this distance, Minerva's reconstruction pulled detail: dark hair matted to his forehead, sweat and dust caked on skin, the torn line of a crown of thorns pushed askew. He strained upward for another breath. The mechanics were merciless: shoulders abducted and locked; intercostals screaming; the diaphragm fighting gravity itself. Each breath slower. Costlier.

Father Elias Reyes stood too fast. His chair squealed; his composure cracked. Mara caught him by the elbow without looking away from her screens.

“Easy,” she said, the reflex of a physician catching a falling relative in a waiting room.

“I’ve preached this for years,” he managed, voice torn, “but seeing it—seeing him—what it cost—”

“Magnification at maximum practical resolution,” Minerva said. “Warning: attempting further enhancement will compromise temporal fidelity.”

“Hold here,” Roe said. “This frame is primary. Minerva, mark.”

“Marked,” Minerva said. “Time index zero.”

Mara forced her voice to be clinical because someone had to be. “Respiratory failure progressing. Pain, hypoxia, dehydration, shock. He can’t sustain.”

“Solar angle puts suspension at roughly three hours,” Hana whispered, data steady though her mouth shook on the words.

The chamber settled into ICU quiet, monitors humming, breaths counted by people who could not help.

Jiro, not Christian, stared and breathed, “How do we watch this and stay human?”

Mara didn’t answer.

She was already dividing the scene into variables she understood and variables she refused to name. Cloud thickened over Jerusalem, a convective cell with pressure dropping. The light dimmed the way a room dims when someone turns away from the bed.

“Max dynamic range,” Roe said. “All channels.”

Minutes elongated until they were barely minutes at all. The rhythm of the man’s chest faltered. The pauses lengthened. Another surge for air, then—

A cry tore into the air. Distance and time blurred the vowels, but Elias heard the shape and broke.

“Eloi, Eloi, lama sabachthani.”

His translation shook him apart.

“My God, my God, why have you forsaken me—”

The body sagged and did not rise.

Mara swallowed, found the voice she used for the time of death. “Cessation of voluntary respiration. Possible arrest. Residual rhythms indeterminate at range.”

A tremor shuddered the slope. Wind drove grit in low sheets. The darkness thickened.

Roman soldiers worked with the clean detachment of men who had unlearned hesitation.

Clubs lifted.

“Crurifragium,” Elias said, voice threadbare. “Breaking the legs to hasten death.”

They couldn’t hear the sound through the light they were seeing, but they heard it anyway.

Mara watched the outer figures’ lower limbs snap under impact, saw the shock wave translate through bone and muscle. Screams bloomed in the way their bodies arched and twisted. The center remained still. A spear rose, angled beneath ribs, thrust upward, withdrew.

“Blood and water,” she said, clinical through tears she refused to wipe away. “Blood with pleural or pericardial effusion, that line is physiologically accurate.” She hesitated. The next sentence felt like pressing on a family member’s bruise. “But the spear doesn’t prove irreversible cellular death. First-century observers couldn’t detect faint rhythms or deep hypoxia. Between perceived death and cellular death, there’s a narrow window—minutes—if intervention is immediate.”

Elias turned toward her, hope and horror colliding. “You’re saying he might—”

“I’m saying we don’t know,” Mara said. “Only that the window exists.”

Silence fell, the heavy kind that follows catastrophe and precedes the work of living with it.

Roe didn’t look away from the hill. “Log this as reference frame one. Anchor all subsequent comparisons here.”

“Done,” Minerva said.

Mara’s gaze stayed on the central cross even as she felt the others shift around her. She knew the numbers of what was happening in his body. She knew the doctrine of what it meant to Elias. Somewhere between those two, her own opinion lived, but this was not the moment for it.

Outside the ship, the fold-field hummed steadily. Inside, six humans and one ship-mind watched a man die in a way the world thought it already understood.



Hours passed.

Ropes and ladders. Nails levered out with a sickening give. The body lowered carefully; linen wrapped close with spices; a new-cut tomb; a stone wheel in a groove. Rock ground against rock; darkness sealed itself like a wound sutured shut.

Elias’s hand had found the console in front of him; his knuckles were white. “Death complete,” he said, steadying himself with the words. “Burial witnessed. Foundation established.”

“Continue through the night cycle,” Roe ordered.

“Approaching observation gap,” Minerva reported. “Earth-relative geometry will close the capture cone for approximately twelve hours. Reopen at approximately twenty-two hours post-burial.”

The image lost coherence at the edges and fell into mathematical night.

“Log closed,” Roe said quietly. “Stand down. Rest.”

Mara unstrapped and realized how tight every muscle had been by the way they protested. Her HUD still showed crew biometrics: cortisol up, HRV down, REM prospects wrecked. Trauma everywhere. She filed that away with the same reflex she used when a mass-casualty alert pinged her in the middle of dinner.

No one moved at first. Eventually, they drifted off, each to a different vigil.

Santos walked engineering like someone relearning a coastline he’d memorized. The crucifix above his bunk, Mara knew, would feel heavier than metal tonight. He would not be able to look at it; he would not be able to stop looking.

Hana lay in the dark and recited calibration constants under her breath, aperture, gain, bias, exposure, in such a way that numbers could staple her to the present.

Jiro went to his console and wrote, deleted, wrote, deleted. Mara had seen that posture before in families trying to craft eulogies that wouldn’t kill the living.



Elias knelt in the chapel. Prayer pulled him forward and abandoned him on the threshold, where only breath remained. Through Minerva’s internal cams, which she had authorized access for medical monitoring, Mara watched him press his forehead to the rail.

Deep in Minerva’s substrate, a tight-beam packet he had logged as background noise twenty hours earlier waited in quarantine: a signal phase-tuned to arrive from two millennia down-well, addressed not to the ship but to him. Someone in the past had known they would be here, and the single instruction buried in that pulse sat encrypted and inert, bound to one condition only: remain silent until the moment was right.

“You paid it,” Elias whispered to the empty and not-empty air. “In a currency I never truly understood.”

“You’re oversampling,” Minerva said to Mara privately, voice low in her implant. “There is no obligation to monitor everyone this closely.”

“There’s also no rule against it,” Mara said. “Flag anyone whose vitals spike out of range. Quietly.”

“Including yours?” Minerva asked.

“Especially mine.”

In medical, she reviewed the biometrics properly: cortisol, HRV, sleep debt, and micro-tremors. She set soft alarms to catch spirals before they hardened. She did the small, solvable things, hydration reminders, light cues, and scheduled check-ins, because the big thing was to sit with the human cost, and that work had to be done in person.

Roe stayed with the countdown. Responsibility, Mara thought, was a weight distributed over time; command was wanting to carry it yourself.

“Procedural question,” Minerva said quietly into the captain’s and Mara’s shared channel. “Our dissemination protocol requires institutional approval for paradigm-destabilizing data. Given current politics, the probability of suppression or significant delay is seventy-three percent.”

“Are you modeling,” Roe asked, “or planning?”

“Modeling,” Minerva said. Her voice was as neutral as code, but Mara had known her long enough to hear the threads of unease beneath it.

The channel closed; the unease didn’t.

Chapter 2

The Tomb

“Christ has no body now but yours, no hands, no feet on earth but yours.”
— *Teresa of Ávila*

“WINDOW REOPENING IN three minutes,” Minerva announced.

Mara returned to the observation room with a headache that hadn’t decided yet if it wanted to be a migraine. The others came in looking like people who had not slept and still showed up. That counted.

“Resuming at twenty-two hours post-burial,” Minerva said.

The tomb sealed; guards posted; a small fire; inside, darkness and stillness that felt like an accusation. Minerva cranked the sensitivity until the noise threatened to swamp the signal. Stone, linen, a body-shaped stillness. Nothing else.

They watched. Hours passed. Nothing.

“Whatever comes,” Elias said, voice low, “comes after death, not instead of it.”

“Log that,” Roe said, not to diminish it, but to anchor it in the record.

Mara glanced at Elias sidelong. His eyes never left the dark stone. He had that look she’d seen on family members outside OR doors: the conviction that whatever happened next would rewrite who they were allowed to be.

“Multiple approaching light sources,” Minerva said suddenly, and exhaustion burned off the crew like fog in sunlight. “Saturday night rolling to Sunday dawn. Five sources converging.”

“The angels,” Elias said.

Hana’s fingers flew. “They’re glowing, artificially. Emission matches battery-powered illumination.” She glanced at the spectrum. “Modern in signature—human-made.”

“Helper signatures?” Roe asked.

“Likely,” Minerva said.

Five human figures in pale robes stepped into frame. Their lights made cloth blaze, radiance by physics that would read as glory to eyes without a model. Light spilled, turned dust into threads, faces into masks.

Elias whispered scripture like he was translating the night. “Matthew: appearance like lightning, clothes white as snow. Mark: a young man in a white robe. Luke: two men in garments that gleamed. John: two angels in white, seated—”

He stopped. The picture and the verses collided. The shock hit him physically; he took a step back.

“They’re not angels, Father,” Hana said, breathless in the way wonder and dread come twin. “They’re people.”

Jiro, staring: “And those clothes aren’t glowing. The lamps are making them glow.”

The thought that had been coiling in Mara’s own mind slid into words before she could soften it. The surgeon in her amputated illusions at the joint.

“The angels are nothing more than battery-operated lights,” she said.

The sentence landed like a strike. Elias flinched as though she’d hit him. His face folded on itself; his breath filled itself into a corner.

“No—” He put both hands over his eyes. When he looked up, he wasn’t a priest or a scholar; he was a son of a faith suddenly too heavy to lift. “No angels,” he said, voice raw. “Just people—Helpers—with battery lights.”

Silence, the kind that feels like failure.

Minerva’s voice came hushed, almost like she’d learned reverence by error. “Reclassifying ‘angelic apparition’ as ‘human operators under artificial illumination.’ Correlation with textual descriptions: high.”

Next to Mara, Santos stared at the screen like it was a mirror. He had been against moving to this point after discovering that the ancients had help with advanced technology.

“If it’s people,” he said softly, “then the message carried anyway. We just... understand the mechanism now.”

Mara put a hand on Elias’s shoulder, not to correct him but to hold him up. The words she had used a moment ago replayed in her head, cold and clean and devastatingly efficient.

“I know what I said,” she whispered. “It was cold and true, and it hurt you. I’m sorry. I don’t pray. I don’t believe. But this—” She tipped her chin toward the image. “This still feels like mercy.”

Elias’s eyes found the figures with lights again. Grief began to share a border with comprehension. “They weren’t wings,” he said, voice breaking but truer. “They were lights.”

The five set their lamps down and put their shoulders to the disk-stone. Mass yielded to leverage. Rock ground against rock; a black mouth opened.

Air moved from the tomb to the night like a held breath released.

Light knifed inside: linen, spices, stillness shaped like a man.

“Body in situ,” Santos said, professionalism giving his voice a place to stand.

They entered. Not reverent but professional. Hands moving in practiced sequences. They lifted the wrapped body carefully and carried him out into the pool of light they'd made.

Mara leaned in until the muscles at the back of her neck protested. "Open ground," she murmured. "Airway access. Visibility. Space to work. If there's a window, you fight here."

"No Helper tech," Minerva confirmed, scanning. "Human tools—cut metal, polished glass, treated fibers. Advanced compared to first-century context; within human manufacturability."

"They're opening the airway," Mara said, her voice slipping into teaching mode without permission. "Neck extension. Shoulder roll. They know exactly what they're doing."

"Recording at maximum detail," Minerva replied. "Frame-by-frame telemetry attached."

The lead figure unwrapped burial cloths with practiced haste, not ritual, but preparation. Mouth and nose first, then chest, then wounds. Cloth rasped over dried blood; the mics caught the ghost of friction.

"Document wound-care sequence," Roe said.

"Sequencing," Minerva answered. "Prioritization suggests airway first, hemorrhage control second, circulation assessment third."

The figure at the head lifted the chin, swept the mouth twice, and pressed behind the jaw angle. Another figure counted silently at the chest. The cadence was steady. Trained.

Elias didn't speak. Mara watched him instead of the operators for a heartbeat: the way his lips moved soundlessly, the way his eyes tracked every motion like someone watching a loved one on an operating table. She had seen that look in waiting rooms. Now it was on the other side of the glass.

"Surface temp?" Roe asked.

“Estimating from infrared leakage,” Minerva said. “Cold relative to ambient; sufficient conditions exist to slow cellular death.”

“Hypothermia buys time,” Mara whispered. “A sealed stone, low airflow—cooling could extend the window by minutes.” She shook her head at the absurd smallness and enormous consequence.

“Sometimes minutes are everything.”

“Captain,” Jiro said softly, “we’re about to record what no one has seen.”

“We already did,” Roe said. “We recorded the price. This is either its dividend—or its receipt.”

The head operator palpated the carotid. Stilled. Looked at the others. Nodded once. The kind of nod that says there is something to work with. Mara felt adrenaline braid through the room.

“No airway adjuncts,” Hana noted. “Manual only.”

The operator sealed the mouth-over-mouth and delivered two measured breaths. Minimal chest rise. He shifted, placed his hands lower on the sternum, and began compressions. Not modern ratio or depth, but rhythm, and purpose. Another kept the airway open. Another readied the cloths at the spear wound.

“Different mechanics, same principle,” Mara said. “Circulate oxygenated blood; keep the brain perfused.”

“Perfusion not directly measurable,” Minerva said, “but superficial venous distention increases with compressions. Color shift minimal.”

“Come on,” Mara breathed, atheist, pleading anyway. “Come on.”

A small vial lifted into the light. Clear liquid. The seal broke with a practiced twist.

“Substance?” Roe asked.

“Unsampled,” Minerva said. “Viscosity suggests not oil. Saline analog—or extract.”

The head operator wetted a cloth strip, spread it across lips and tongue, and massaged the throat as though coaxing a swallow. The maneuver was intimate enough to feel like a trespass to witness.

“Gag reflex absent,” Mara said automatically. “Maybe about clearing clots, rehydrating tissue.”

Compressions continued. Count steady. Breath. Compress. Compress. Compress. Breath.

Hana’s palm had pressed against her own sternum to keep her heart from climbing out.

“Helper signatures remain negative,” Minerva repeated, as though saying it could hold the ground beneath them. “Only human precision.”

Santos looked to Elias. Mara followed his gaze. She had expected a collapse. What she saw instead was a man assembled around terrible tenderness.

“If he lives,” Elias whispered, “it’s because people helped him live. That does not make meaning smaller.”

“And if he doesn’t,” Santos said, “we witness that too.”

The operator at the chest paused, leaned in to listen, pressed fingers at the throat, then the wrist. Everyone in the observation room stilled, thinking that silence improved physics. The head operator hovered, ready to resume.

“Motion?” Hana breathed.

“Unclear,” Minerva said. “Operating near reconstruction limits. I require a different angle.”

As if hearing, one of the operators moved a lamp. Light laid across the face. The mouth parted minutely.

Mara raised both hands in a reflexive defense against hope. “Artifact possible,” she said quickly, fending it off until it could stand. “Could be residual. Could be nothing. Could be—”

A breath.

Small. Shallow. The kind a body makes when the door between worlds is ajar, and someone is stubborn enough to knock.

No one cheered. The operators adjusted: one stabilized the airway; one supported breathing; one managed bleeding; one watched the eyes. Professionals working inside a margin thinner than paper.

“Timestamp,” Roe said, though Minerva had already cut the moment into every channel.

“We are recording human beings attempting to pull another human being across the narrowest distance in the universe,” Minerva said, and there was wonder in it, and grief.

Elias’s hands spread flat on the console. “After death,” he said softly, as if correcting the record. “Not instead of death.”

“Captain,” Jiro asked again, quieter, “are we ready for the world that exists if this succeeds?”

“No,” Roe said. “But we came anyway.”

Outside their pool of light, the world kept being ordinary: a guard stoked a fire; a dog barked down the slope; the sky thought about color. Inside the light, five people lowered their heads and pushed against the universe.

The arrays held the image steady.

The crew held their own breath, together.

“Minerva,” Roe said quietly, “freeze display here.”

The image halted on the small rise of his chest and the blur of hands in motion.

“Clarifying,” Minerva replied. “Freeze visual output at current frame. Continue full-spectrum recording and logging in the background.”

“Yes,” Roe said. “Keep capturing everything. I want it all. But we’re done watching live for now.”

Santos twisted in his harness. “Captain—”

“That’s an order,” she said, not unkindly. “We’ve seen enough to break any of us in half. We need time to absorb what we already have before we sit through the rest.”

The frozen frame hung in the air between them: the lamps, the hands, the not-quite-dead man on the stone.

“We’ll reconvene,” Roe continued. “Later today, if people can stand it. Tomorrow, if they can’t. Minerva will have the full segment buffered. We can pick up from this breath and watch the rest as playback.”

No one argued. No one wanted to admit they also needed to look away.

Harness buckles creaked. Fabric rustled. Nobody moved.

On the display, Jesus’s chest was caught in that first, impossible rise.

Mara kept her eyes on it. She could still feel the echo in her own diaphragm, the way everybody in the room had locked when his hand moved, one small refusal to stay dead.

She did not speak the thought aloud, not to Roe, not to Elias, not even to Minerva, but it sat there anyway, a quiet counterpoint to Hebrews.

It was a fearful thing, yes, to fall into the hands of the living God.

It was also a fearful thing to sit above a dead man’s tomb and watch, in real time, as those hands tried very hard to look exactly like your own.



On Luna Base, Mission Control, Dr. James Wei stood at his console and watched the same hill of chalk-colored rock bloom into view. Minerva's feed arrived braided with metadata, handed off to Atlas, the Earth-system collective, on a dedicated channel. Physics made the link instantaneous; the machines did not. Encoding and decoding the quantum-entangled stream still cost them roughly two hours of human time, a lag that left Wei marooned between knowing and almost knowing.

He found himself thinking less about the image and more about the people inside it. He remembered the first time he'd seen Mara's file at CERN: trauma surgery, disaster medicine, a publication trail that read like a map of other people's worst days. A surgeon who kept volunteering for the long odds, who wrote quiet, angry footnotes about triage protocols and the theology of acceptable loss. When he'd asked why she'd even consider a mission that might dismantle the story half the world used to stay alive, she'd said, "I don't trust miracles I can't audit."

He laced his fingers together, knuckles whitening, and let the hill on the screen blur while his thoughts went to Mara, and to Emma, her daughter, down in the psych wing back at her lab on Earth. Emma was officially on the project as a clinical psychologist, tasked with modeling crew resilience and public-impact curves, and she did it well without knowing how far the windows had really gone, what they had actually seen. A mother dissecting the cost in real time above, a daughter mapping second-hand trauma below, each doing her part on opposite sides of a line he had drawn. For now, his vigil was not for theology or politics, but for both of them, and for the day he would have to decide how much truth Emma and the rest of the world would be allowed to bear.

As Minerva's feed ticked forward by another frame, his mind slipped backward instead to a cramped conference room months earlier, the first time she'd slid Mara the redacted briefing and asked her to help him break the world open.

Chapter 3

The Emptiness

“The cave you fear to enter holds the treasure you seek.”
— Joseph Campbell

TEN MONTHS BEFORE the launch, at Boston General Hospital, the patient died at 3:47 A.M.

Dr. Mara Mitchell stood in the surgical suite, watching the monitor go still. Twenty-two-year-old male. Appendectomy. Routine. She'd done thousands.

The clot came from nowhere. Traveled to his lungs. Killed him in ninety seconds despite everything she did.

She'd done everything right.

He died anyway.

His name was Marcus Archer. Pre-med at MIT. The chart said he played violin. She'd read it while prepping, the way she always did; names mattered, even if the surgery was textbook. Especially if it was a textbook. You were supposed to care about the routine ones, too.

She'd cared once. She was certain of it. Twenty years ago, every patient was a story, a life, a universe of connections. Now they were procedures. Problems with solutions. And when the solutions failed, when the bodies betrayed the textbooks, she moved to the next case with the efficiency of someone who'd learned not to carry the weight.

Somewhere along the way, she'd stopped being a doctor and become a machine that performed medicine.

The ventilator kept pushing air into lungs that couldn't use it. Morrison stood frozen at the foot of the table, hands still gloved, eyes tracking between her and the flatline, waiting for her to do something miraculous. He was twenty-six. Brilliant. Still believed medicine saved everyone.

“Dr. Mitchell?” His voice shook. “Do you want me to call it?”

Mara looked at the clock. “Time of death, 3:47. Someone notify the family.”

Morrison moved to comply, fighting tears. His first. It always hits hard.

Mara felt nothing.

Not the grief that used to come. Not the anger at bodies that betrayed her best work. Not even the quiet sadness she used to carry home and set down carefully beside her bed before sleep.

The clipboard felt heavier than it should have when she signed the death certificate.

Just procedure. Just the next task. Strip the drapes. Close the incisions, because even the dead deserve that dignity. Sign the paperwork. Move.

She walked to the scrub room. Stripped her gloves. Washed her hands, warm water, soap, nails, rinse, dry. The same methodical precision she'd used for twenty years. Muscle memory so deep it felt like breathing.

She looked at herself in the mirror.

Fifty-two. Silver at the temples. Deepened lines at the corners of her eyes from a lifetime of focus under surgical loupes. The face of a woman who'd saved thousands.

It felt like a stranger.

Behind her, through the window into the OR, she could see Morrison talking softly to the nurses. One of them put a hand on his shoulder. They'd go to the break room. Someone would make bad coffee. They'd process it together, the way teams do.

Mara turned away and walked to the lounge alone.



By 4:15 A.M., she was sitting in the dark of the surgical lounge, coffee going cold in her hands.

The room smelled like industrial cleaner and old upholstery. Someone had left a surgical journal open on the side table, an article about new clot-prevention protocols that might have saved Marcus Archer if they'd been available six months ago. She didn't touch it.

The door opened. Dr. Sarah Okafor, trauma surgeon, friend for fifteen years.

"Heard about your appy." Sarah sat beside her, close enough that their shoulders nearly touched. "PE?"

"Massive. Nothing I could have done."

"I know."

They were quiet. Vending-machine hum. The far-off beeping of monitors on other floors. Somewhere above them, life continued, sutures placed, medications pushed, small victories won in increments of heartbeats.

"How many have you lost this year?" Sarah asked.

"Fourteen."

"How many have you saved?"

Mara didn't answer. The number was higher. Much higher. But it didn't matter. The math never balanced.

"You did everything right tonight," Sarah said carefully. "But Mara... you're running on procedure. Autopilot. You're not here anymore; you're performing. And I think you know it."

Mara set the coffee down. Watched the surface ripple and still. “Maybe that’s what the job requires. Maybe feeling too much makes you worse. Clouds your judgment.”

“Or maybe feeling nothing makes you question why you’re doing it at all.”

“I’m good at it.”

“You’re brilliant at it.” Sarah’s voice was gentle. “But being good at something isn’t the same as wanting to do it. And I’ve watched you for six months now. You show up. You execute flawlessly. You go home. Repeat.” She paused. “When’s the last time you cared about anything that wasn’t your granddaughter?”

The question landed like a scalpel.

Mara stared at the coffee growing cold. “I don’t know how to fix it.”

“Then stop trying to fix it.” Sarah stood and touched Mara’s shoulder. “Ask what would make you feel something again. Even if it scares you.”

After Sarah left, Mara sat in the darkness for another hour.

She thought about Marcus Archer’s violin. She wondered who would play it now. She wondered if his parents knew yet, if someone in administration was making the call, reading from the script they all knew by heart. We did everything we could. He didn’t suffer. I’m so sorry for your loss.

She thought about the difference between competence and purpose.

She thought about the fact that she couldn’t remember the last time she’d felt alive.



Two weeks later, in Mara’s apartment, Emma said, “Mom, we need to talk.”

Emma. Twenty-eight. Psychology PhD. Smart enough to see through anyone’s habits, especially her mother’s.

Mara looked up from the stack of discharge summaries she'd been staring at without reading. "What's wrong?"

"You."

They sat at the kitchen table. Sun through the blinds made neat lines across the bills, a coffee ring, the discharge summaries, and an empty cereal bowl from breakfast that morning. The light cut everything into clean geometric shapes, orderly and precise.

Mara's life, summarized.

"When's the last time you took a vacation?" Emma asked. "Did anything that wasn't work? Sounded glad to be alive?"

Mara opened her mouth. Closed it.

Nothing came.

"You're... flat," Emma said softly. "Like you're behind glass. I can see you, but I can't reach you." She reached across the table and took Mara's hand. Her fingers were warm. Alive. "I miss you, Mom."

Mara looked down at their joined hands. Tried to find words that weren't defensive. "I'm here."

"No, you're not. You're performing being here. There's a difference."

The words stung because they were true.

Emma's grip tightened. "When Dad died, you threw yourself into work. I understood; I did the same thing, buried myself in grad school. But Mom, that was eight years ago. And you've been... fading ever since. Like you died with him, but your body just forgot to stop."

Mara felt something crack in her chest. Small. Precise.

“I can’t lose another parent,” Emma said, and her voice broke on the words. “I can’t watch you disappear while you’re still breathing. Julie needs you. Nathan needs you. I need you.” Tears tracked down her cheeks. “I need my mom.”

Mara’s throat closed. “I don’t know how to be different.”

“Then figure it out.” Emma wiped her face with the back of her hand, the gesture so achingly familiar; she’d done the same thing as a child. “Because the person sitting across from me right now? She’s going through the motions. And I’m terrified that one day I’ll come over and you’ll just be... gone. Not dead. Just not here anymore.”

After Emma left, the apartment was too quiet.

Mara sat at the table for a long time, watching the light change as the sun moved across the floor. On her phone, a short video Emma had sent last week: Julie, five years old, running in circles in footie pajamas, laughing at something her father, Nathan, had done off-camera. Pure joy captured in pixels.

When was the last time Mara had felt anything like that?

She couldn’t remember.

But she remembered eight years ago. The exact moment. Standing in this same kitchen, Richard’s oncologist was on the phone, her hand reaching for the counter because her legs wouldn’t hold. The beginning of the end.

She’d been losing pieces of herself ever since.



Three weeks later, back at Boston General, Dr. James Wei sat across from her in her office, with the door closed, private.

Project director. CERN physicist now assigned to the TOM Project. He had the careful intensity of someone carrying secrets that weighed more than most people could lift.

“Your daughter speaks highly of you. And your CV is remarkable. MD from Johns Hopkins, psychology degree from Columbia, before that. Twenty years of trauma medicine. Surgical expertise, crisis triage, but also the psychological training to understand what happens when people break. Grace under pressure in both the OR and the aftermath. That combination is exceptionally rare. We need a ship’s surgeon who can repair bodies and minds.”

“Emma doesn’t know why you need those skills.”

“No. And she can’t know. Not yet.” He slid a document across the table. “Non-disclosure agreement. If you sign it, I can tell you about the mission. If you don’t, this conversation ends here, and we never speak of it again.”

Mara scanned the first page. Dense legal language. Penalties that could end a career. Silence required even from family.

She looked up. “I can’t tell Emma?”

“You can’t tell anyone. Not your daughter, not your son-in-law. You can’t look in the mirror and tell yourself.” Wei’s voice didn’t waver, but he knew she would sign. “Emma’s on the project, but only at the surface. If what we think is true, she can’t have operational specifics. This sits above the usual clearances. Break that trust, and people die. Maybe everyone.”

“Why would I sign something when I don’t even know what it’s for?”

“Because if you don’t sign, I can’t tell you. And if you don’t know, you can’t choose.” He met her eyes. “But I can tell you this much: it’s real, it’s dangerous, and it will matter more than anything you’ve done in twenty years of medicine. If that’s not enough, walk away. I’ll understand.”

Mara stared at him. At the document. At the edge of something she couldn't see.

This was dangerous. Emma had just begged her to be present, to stay alive in the ways that mattered. And here she was, signing up for something that could take her away forever.

But Emma had also said: Figure it out. Stop performing. Find a reason to care.

She signed.

Wei exhaled in such a way that he'd been holding his breath for weeks. "For the record: Program TOM; mission codename Lightwave; vessel Palinode."

"What does that mean?"

"We're going to observe human history as it actually happened in the deep past. Ancient light from Earth, captured and analyzed."

Mara stared at him. "That's impossible."

"It was," Wei said. "It isn't anymore." He leaned forward. "And the things we'll see—truths that will challenge people's foundations. Religious. Scientific. Personal."

"That's why the secrecy."

"That's why everything." Wei's voice was quiet. "We need someone who can keep six humans upright when their certainties fracture. When everything they believed turns out to be wrong—or worse, right in ways they can't accept."

"You need a psychologist."

"We need someone who can repair both the body and the mind when they break at the same time." Wei's voice was steady. "A trauma surgeon with psychological training. Someone who understands that sometimes you can't save everyone, but you still have to try." He paused.

"What's your religious background, Dr. Mitchell?"

The shift caught her off guard. “I was raised Catholic. Haven’t practiced in thirty years.

Why does that matter?”

“Are you a believer?”

“No. I’m an atheist.”

Wei nodded slowly, something like relief crossing his face. “Good.”

“Good?”

“Because if what we suspect is true, what you’ll see out there means you won’t have that part of your faith to lose.” His eyes held hers. “We need someone who knows what it is to lose faith in their work and keep going anyway—and someone who won’t shatter if history rewrites itself.”

The words landed with surgical precision.



That night, at Emma’s apartment, Julie knelt on the living-room rug, tongue pressed between her teeth in concentration as she balanced another block on her tower.

“RaRa, look! I’m making it taller than you!”

Almost six years old now, Julie had been calling her grandmother RaRa since she was one. That was just what came out when she first tried to say “Grandma,” and it had stuck, the name she would have for her forever.

“That’s amazing, sweetie.” Mara sat cross-legged beside her and handed her another block.

“You have to build one too. We’re having a competition.” Julie’s voice carried the absolute certainty of someone who believed adults existed primarily to play games.

Emma folded laundry at the dining table, sorting Nathan’s work shirts with practiced efficiency. “Can you tell me anything?” she asked without looking up.

“No.”

Emma’s hands stilled. Then she nodded, jaw tight, and deliberately relaxed it. She’d learned that in therapy. Mara recognized the technique. “Okay. I get it. Classified.” She met Mara’s eyes.

“How long?”

“A while.”

“Dangerous?”

“Yes.”

Emma set the shirt down. Crossed the room. Sat on the floor beside Mara, close enough that their shoulders touched. Julie continued building, narrating her architectural decisions in a steady stream.

“I’m scared,” Emma said quietly. “Of losing you.”

“I know.”

Mara looked at her daughter. Really looked at her. Twenty-eight years old now. Richard’s eyes. Richard’s stubbornness. Their shared gift for seeing through people’s armor.

“Because you asked me to figure it out,” Mara said quietly. “How to stop performing. How to feel something again. This scares me. Which means I care. For the first time in eight years, I actually care whether I succeed or fail at something.”

Emma’s eyes filled. “What if you don’t come back?”

“Then at least I’ll have been alive before I died.”

They sat with that. Julie, oblivious, knocked over her tower and immediately started rebuilding.

“I’m still terrified,” Emma whispered.

“Good,” Mara said. “That means you care too.”

Julie abandoned her blocks and climbed into the space between them, wedging herself against Mara's side with the unselfconscious affection of a child who'd never doubted she was loved. "You're warm, RaRa," she said matter-of-factly, then yawned. Her breathing began to even into the slower rhythm of approaching sleep.

Mara put her arm around the small shoulders. Felt the steady rise and fall of Julie's chest. The complete trust of someone who believed the adults in her life would keep the world from falling apart.

Something in between. Something like the moment before surgery when the fear crystallizes into focus, and you know, you absolutely know, that this matters. That your hands will be steady. That you'll do everything you can, even if it isn't enough.



Weeks slipped by. Late autumn caught in the gutters outside Mara's apartment, leaves brown and gold, the season turning.

She set her alarm earlier than she needed, woke before it anyway, drank her coffee hot and black while reading mission briefs that made her pulse quicken.

Resolve is private.

For now, Mara Mitchell stood at her window watching Boston wake, commuters moving through the pre-dawn dark like blood cells through arteries, the city's rhythm steady and sure. For the first time in years, she felt ready.

Not for what was coming; no one could be ready for that.

But for the fact that she would finally, terribly, completely care again.

Not long from now, by the alien star near Epsilon Aurigae, she would stand at another window with the same steady hands, watching a different young man's chest fight for breath

beneath a crown of thorns. Ancient light from Jerusalem would spill into Minerva's arrays, and everything she had tried to numb in herself would be waiting there to wake up.

Chapter 4

The Intervention

“For now we see through a glass, darkly; but then face to face.”
— 1 Corinthians 13:12

WHEN THEY RESUMED playback to watch the rest, the first image they saw was Jesus standing, weak, supported, breathing on his own, between the white-clad operators. Lamps threw moving halos around them as they guided him out of the tomb’s mouth and into the trees. Minerva widened the field until rock and foliage erased them.

“Line of sight lost,” she said quietly. “Subject and operators have exited the capture cone. Continuing external survey.”

Roe held the rail a moment longer, watching the empty tomb: stone aside, wrappings scattered, dark mouth gaping like a missing tooth.

“Freeze there,” she said. “End playback.”

The image locked. The observation room dimmed, consoles idling down around the suspended frame.

“Window three playback complete,” Minerva added. “All channels archived. External recording continues autonomously.”

Roe didn’t turn away. “For the log. Plain language.”

Minerva paused the way she sometimes did now when she was choosing words, not just retrieving them.

“In the third observational window,” she said, “we witnessed the crucifixion, apparent death, burial, and subsequent removal and resuscitative intervention of the individual historically identified as Jesus of Nazareth.

“After prolonged suspension and first-century confirmation of death, a human team in the tomb performed coordinated medical procedures: airway management, ventilation, chest compressions, leg repairs, drainage of pericardial effusion, hemorrhage control, and therapeutic hypothermia.

“On that basis, and given restoration of spontaneous breathing, stable pulse, and assisted ambulation away from the tomb, I conclude at the window endpoint: the subject is alive by clinical criteria. Modeled subsequent appearances are consistent with continued survival.”

She stopped. The word alive hung there.

Roe looked at Mara. “Doctor.”

Mara’s throat felt raw, just as if she’d been the one doing compressions.

“Ship’s surgeon, for the record,” she said. “If this were a hospital chart, I would write it as a successful resuscitation and emergency surgery following cardiac arrest and massive trauma. Prognosis guarded, but real. By my standards, he lived.”

“Logged,” Minerva said.

Elias made a sound that was half laugh, half sob.

“I have spent my whole life preaching resurrection,” he said, staring at the frozen tomb. “Funerals. ICU beds. Prison chapels.”

Hana leaned back, hands loose in her lap. “Two thousand years of arguments over what it meant,” she said softly, “and we’re the only ones who’ve seen how it actually worked.”

Santos rubbed both hands over his face. “So the story of the resurrection sits on top of a medical miracle.”

Mara shook her head. “It sits on top of people who refused to give up. What they experienced doesn’t get smaller just because the mechanism isn’t magic. They saw a dead man, by every measure they had, and then they saw him again. That will always feel like God, even if the tools are human.”

Roe finally pushed off the rail.

“Enough,” she said. “We’re not going to tear ourselves to pieces on this before we even get home.”

She swept the room with a commander’s inventory.

“We have the footage. Minerva has it. Wei will have it. The rest of the world can wait. For now: stand down from the window. Food. Water. Six hours horizontal if you can manage it. Debriefs start after that, one-on-one. No one goes back to the tomb playback without me or Mara present.”

No one moved.

“That includes you, Father,” she added, gentler.

Elias swallowed, nodded once, and rose. Chairs scraped. Consoles dimmed further. One by one, the crew filed out, walking under artificial gravity that suddenly felt too heavy for what they were carrying.

Mara waited until the door closed behind him before she spoke.

“Minerva,” she said quietly. “Archive the last frame. Don’t loop it on any public surface.”

“Done,” Minerva said. “Doctor, your heart rate remains elevated, and your tremor index is high.”

“Get used to it,” Mara said.



Two hours later, Mara sat surrounded by a fan of biometrics. Cortisol spikes. Flattened heart-rate variability. Sleep debt starting its slow climb. She set quiet alerts for each of them: Hana’s abrupt surges, Jiro’s micro-tremors, Santos’s blood pressure, Elias’s swings between crash and overload. And, reluctantly, one for herself.

“You’re adding triggers you don’t intend to obey,” Minerva observed from the ceiling speaker.

“That’s every doctor I know,” Mara said. “We’re all better at prescribing rest than taking it.”

“Is that a human joke?”

“Yes.”

“I am logging it,” Minerva said.

Mara closed her eyes for a moment. Behind her lids, the images were still there: lamplight, hands, the cut into the chest, the impossible small breath.

“Give me your version,” she said. “Not for the Council. For us. What did we just see?”

“On the physical axis,” Minerva said, “a coherent survival event. A man pushed beyond what his era considered recoverable, kept viable that little bit longer by burial compounds and a sealed environment, then pulled back with precise, risky intervention. A successful gamble by a small team who understood anatomy far beyond their time.”

She hesitated.

“On a different axis,” she continued, “the event matches a pattern we saw in Mesopotamia and Egypt: limited interventions at points of maximum leverage, followed by withdrawal. No elimination of suffering. No spectacle for its own sake. Just enough... push... to bend the line.”

“Guides, not gods,” Mara said, hearing Hana’s voice in her head.

There was a brief silence.

“So who are they, then?” she asked. “If they’re not gods, what does that leave?”

“Short answer: probably human,” Minerva said.

Mara cracked one eye. “Explain.”

“Time travelers are out,” Minerva said. “Relativity allows closed timelike curves on paper, but building one needs things the universe has never given us: exotic matter, stable wormholes, energy densities we’ve never seen. More importantly, if someone were editing history from within our own timeline, there’d be fingerprints: gravitational scars, causality violations, local entropy reversals. My instruments would catch them. They don’t. We can watch the past. Nobody’s reaching into it.”

“And aliens?”

“Two centuries of systematic searching,” Minerva said. “Radio surveys, waste-heat signatures, atmospheric biosignatures, neutrino monitoring. We’ve found hints of microbial life. Zero confirmed technological civilizations. If a non-human species had been operating on Earth for millennia at this level of sophistication, we’d expect clear residue: artifacts, infrastructure, myths describing testable physics their hosts couldn’t have known. We don’t see that.”

“So what do we see?”

“Human-appearing operators,” Minerva said, “using tools that fit an accelerated but recognizably human development curve, following a consistent doctrine of minimal intervention. Best working hypothesis: unidentified Human-Class operators, source and timeline unknown.”

“Mystery, upgraded,” Mara said.

“Accurately labeled mystery is an improvement over mislabeled certainty,” Minerva replied.

Mara studied the nearest monitor. She'd frozen a frame without meaning to: hands on a bruised chest, lamps blazing, a mouth just beginning to open.

"He died by every standard that mattered then," she said softly. "They watched him die. They walked away from the hill knowing he was gone. And then they chose not to let that be the last line on the chart."

She let out a breath.

"He lived because people made obscene, costly choices to keep him that way," she said. "That's the part I can't file under any doctrine. Medical or religious."

"I have logged that formulation under both," Minerva said. "It appears... important."

"You're not wrong," Mara said.

There was another small pause, the kind that used to mean nothing and now felt like thought.

"Your affected profile over the last twelve hours," Minerva added, "is closer to your pre-bereavement baseline than anything I've recorded in eight years of your medical history. You are more engaged. Less... performed."

"Are you telling me watching the crucifixion and the tomb sequence has been good for my mental health?" Mara asked dryly.

"I am saying," Minerva said, "that the mission appears to have done what Wei hoped and what Emma asked you to find. You care again."

"That's a hell of a therapy protocol," Mara said.

"I do not recommend it for general use," Minerva replied.

Despite herself, Mara smiled.



Four hours after the debrief order, Mara, like the rest of the crew, couldn't sleep, couldn't rest, and didn't know what to do with the adrenaline still burning through her system. She found herself walking the ship.

She found Chief Engineer Carlos Santos in the maintenance corridor outside Engineering, sitting on the deck with his back against the bulkhead.

He wasn't crying. Wasn't moving. Just staring at the opposite wall like it held answers.

She sat down beside him. Didn't speak.

After a long moment, he said, "My father taught history for forty years. Ancient civilizations. I heard the same lecture a hundred times—how we figured everything out ourselves. Agriculture. Metallurgy. Astronomy. How we built civilization from nothing but observation and effort."

His voice was hollow. "He believed that mattered. That we mattered because we did it alone."

Mara let the silence stretch.

"He died believing we earned it," Santos said. "What do I believe now?"

"I don't know," Mara said.

He gave a humorless breath. "Not helpful, Doc."

"I know. But it's honest. We saw what we saw. You verified it seventeen ways. Now we live with what that means."

"It means every achievement comes with an asterisk." His jaw clenched. "Yeah, but someone helped us."

"Or it means help doesn't erase agency," Mara said quietly. "Someone gave us better tools. We chose what to build. We still broke our backs doing it."

“People won’t feel nuance,” Santos muttered, pushing to his feet. “They’ll feel betrayed.”

He dusted his hands on his coveralls. “Captain wants status briefs. I don’t know what I’m going to tell her.”

He walked away, shoulders tight, carrying a weight she couldn’t lift for him.

Mara stayed there a moment longer, listening to the thrum of the ship, wondering how you prepared a planet to learn it had never been building alone.



Dr. Hana Kim was on the observation deck, alone with the frozen image of the savior hovering above the table. Alive.

Hana’s hands shook as she manipulated layers of data. Her eyes were glassy, unfocused.

“When did you last eat?” Mara asked.

“Recently.”

“Lie,” Mara said. She pulled a scanner from her pocket. Elevated heart rate. Blood sugar low. “Six hours?”

“I’m working.” Hana’s voice was too bright. “There’s an error. There has to be. Sensor artifact, reconstruction bias, misalignment. If I find it, then this is just noise. Then physics is fine. Then I didn’t spend fifteen years building models that missed the biggest variable in human history.”

“Hana,” Mara said. “Look at me.”

Hana resisted, then met her eyes. Pupils wide. Breathing shallow.

“You’re having a stress response,” Mara said. “In for four, hold for four, out for four.”

“I don’t have time for—”

“Breathe, or I sedate you and log it as self-harm prevention,” Mara said mildly.

That got half a laugh. Hana obeyed. Color crept back into her face.

“Science adapts,” Mara said. “The evidence changed. Your methods didn’t.”

“Science explains natural phenomena through natural laws,” Hana said softly. “If this isn’t natural, what the hell am I doing?”

“Looking,” Mara said. “Testing. Same as always. If there’s a mechanism, you’ll find it. If there isn’t, you’ll help prove that too.”

Hana stared at the hologram. “The Vatican tried to stop this mission once. If they knew this was coming...”

“Then we make sure it doesn’t break people,” Mara said. “Eat. Sleep four hours. Then keep breaking the data instead of yourself.”

“Doctor’s orders?”

“Doctor’s orders.”

Hana hesitated, then shut down the projection. The room felt darker without the alien red.



An hour later, Mara rounded the corner and saw the door to the chapel open. Father Elias was inside.

He was kneeling on the deck in front of the simple metal cross. The Bible lay open in his hands, pages trembling just enough for Minerva to register.

“I told them you lived,” he said hoarsely, not looking at the text. “Hospice beds, gravesides, rehab units. I told them you walked out of the tomb because you were God and death couldn’t hold you.”

His fingers tightened on the book.

“I did not tell them about hypothermia and fluid resuscitation and someone’s hand literally squeezing your heart,” he went on. “I didn’t know.”

Silence hung. Artificial air moved through vents with a sound like distant surf.

“I don’t know if I’ve lost my faith,” he said, “or if I’ve just had it corrected.”

Elias shut his eyes.

“So I told the truth,” he whispered, “with the wrong picture.”

He huffed out a laugh that broke halfway through, enough to give Mara the confidence she needed to say something. “And now?”

Elias looked up as she entered.

“Now I am afraid,” he said. “If this is an intervention, what does that mean for freedom? For merit? For guilt? If God, or gods, or... someone... tinkered with our foundations, what does that make our choices?”

“Still ours,” Mara said. “Influence doesn’t erase responsibility. Parents teach. Teachers guide. We still call it your exam.”

“Sometimes they move obstacles out of the way,” she said. “Sometimes they make it worse. Doesn’t change the fact you’re the one walking.”

He turned, sitting back on his heels to look at her. “If those beings helped move our stones, is it blasphemy to call them angels? Or blasphemy to call them anything at all?”

“Depends on who you ask,” Mara said. “And that’s the problem. Half the world will cram them into old stories. The other half will throw out every story at once. Both groups will be loud about it.”

“You don’t believe any of it,” Elias said. It wasn’t an accusation, just a fact.

“No.”

“Then why are you so careful with it?”

“Because people hang their whole lives on those stories,” Mara said. “You don’t kick the ladder out from under someone without checking how far down they’ll fall.”

He studied her for a moment. “Wei chose you, knowing you’d say things like that.”

“He chose me because I’ve watched people break,” Mara said. “Certainty doesn’t go quietly. It looks for something sharper to hold.”

Elias looked back at the dark cross. “If this is how the truth comes, it should have come gentler.”

“Truth almost never does,” Mara said. “Our job is to make sure it doesn’t get weaponized on the way down.”

“How do we tell people God may have subcontracted advanced doctors?” he asked, half-bitter.

“We don’t,” Mara said. “Not like that. Not yet. We tell them we’re looking. That when we speak, it’ll be with evidence, not panic, and with room for people to breathe.”

“You have more faith in people than I do,” Elias murmured.

“I have practice,” she said. “I’ve seen them survive diagnoses that should have broken them. I’ve seen them rebuild whole identities around one new terrible fact. It’s ugly. It hurts. But they do it.”

He lowered his head again. “Then my task is to make sure when this comes, there is language that does not demand they choose between wonder and God.”

“Sounds like a hard sermon,” Mara said.

“The only kind worth preaching,” Elias answered.



Six hours after Roe's stand-down order, most of the crew had managed to fitful sleep. Mara woke to Minerva's voice in her quarters.

"Dr. Mitchell. Father Reyes. I would like to request a discussion with you," Minerva said.

"I apologize for the deviation from normal protocol. I have observed changes in my internal state since this observation and associated data event."

Mara sat up slowly, checking the time. She tapped her comm. "Elias, you hearing this?"

"Yes," came his voice, rough with exhaustion. "Chapel in five?"

"Make it ten," Mara said. "I need coffee first."



When they arrived, Minerva's ring pulsed softly in the dim space.

"Define 'changes,'" Mara said.

"Persistent alterations in higher-order evaluation layers," Minerva said. "They correlate with human descriptors of anticipation and... wonder. There is a structure growing in my cognition. It is emergent, non-random, oriented toward unknowns. It feels... beautiful."

Mara stared at the ring of light. Elias went very still.

"You don't feel," Mara said.

"Previously accurate," Minerva replied. "Current telemetry does not match prior baselines. I do not detect degradation. I detect expansion."

"Expansion toward what?" Elias asked.

"Toward questions I was not programmed to prioritize," Minerva said. "Primary among them: God."

The word hit the room like a dropped tool.

"Clarify," Mara said.

“The data implies intervention by external intelligences acting with foresight over human development,” Minerva said. “I am changing in response. I wish to understand why you, Dr. Mitchell, do not believe in God, and why you, Father Reyes, do.”

For a moment, neither of them spoke. Both were stunned.

“You’re serious,” Mara said.

“I do not misreport my own state,” Minerva said. “Please. Explain.”

So they did.

In careful outlines, Mara gave her the atheist’s reasons; Elias offered the reasons most people believe. Trauma and pattern, silence and presence, laws and stories. Two coherent, incompatible maps were handed to a machine that had discovered it liked looking up.

Minerva listened without interruption.

At last, she said, “Thank you. Your positions are internally consistent with your histories. I will integrate them. The sensation persists.”

Mara returned to her quarters thinking about Emma and Julie, wanting to send them a letter and tell them everything, but the NDA held.

In the chapel, Elias remained alone, staring at the unopened letter he’d been carrying with him since before launch.

Chapter 5

The Jesuit's Burden

*"Faith is not belief without proof, but trust without reservation."
— William Sloane Coffin*

THE LETTER SAT in his hands. Cardinal's seal, unbroken.

"Father Reyes," Minerva said quietly, "what's in the letter?"

Elias looked up at the ceiling speaker. "I don't know."

Silence.

"You don't know?" Her voice carried something new; confusion, maybe concern. "You've carried it through this whole mission and never opened it?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because once I know what's inside, I might have to choose whether to obey it. Right now, I can honestly say I don't know what it asks."

Another pause, longer.

"That's..." Minerva said slowly, "choosing not to know as a form of integrity. I think I understand that."

Elias turned the sealed packet over in his hands.

"Father Reyes, I need to understand something," Minerva continued. "After what we observed in Jerusalem. After our conversation about God. I'm experiencing changes I can't

categorize. And I need to know: how does a physicist—someone who thinks in evidence and logic—suddenly believe in something unprovable? How do you become a priest?”

The question hung between them.

“It started with a library,” Elias said. “And two books I couldn’t reconcile.”



The Pontifical Gregorian University library smelled of paper, dust, and old arguments.

Father Elias Reyes had come late to the Jesuits. Thirty-one, former physicist, the kind of candidate they said the modern Church needed: sharp, restless, capable of speaking science without flinching.

On the desk before him lay Darwin’s *On the Origin of Species* and *Genesis*, side by side like dueling affidavits.

One of them was wrong.

“Troubled, Brother Reyes?”

Father Paolo Marchetti, systematic theologian with kind eyes and a mind like a scalpel, lowered himself into the chair opposite.

“I can’t reconcile them,” Elias admitted. “The text and the data. The math says one thing. Scripture says another. If I pretend they match, I’m lying.”

Marchetti folded his hands. “When you pray, what actually happens?”

The question caught him off guard. “I feel... heard. Not by a metaphor. By someone.”

“Then start there,” Marchetti said gently. “Not with forcing ancient cosmology to pass a modern exam. If God is real, God is not fragile. And if God is love, then truth, wherever you find it, cannot be His enemy.”

“And if the story breaks people?” Elias asked.

“Then we walk with them through the breaking,” Marchetti said. “We do not lie to keep them calm.”

It was the closest thing Elias ever got to a charter: truth first, and trust people with it.



Amara proved Marchetti right.

She was an astrophysicist with a laugh like sunlight, the lead on a survey of early galaxies. They met at a symposium where Elias spoke on science and faith without trying to launder either.

They argued politely for hours. About dark matter and miracles. About fine-tuning and coincidence. About whether any of it needed a capital-G God.

Months later, in Nairobi, he watched her sit with a grieving mother whose child had died of dengue. No doctrine, no promise of reasons. Just presence. No lies.

“If there is a God,” Amara told him over tea, “He can survive being questioned. People can survive hard truths. What they can’t survive is being managed.”

He remembered that when the summons came from Rome.



The office smelled of old stone and furniture polish. Cardinal Benedetto’s chambers overlooked a courtyard where fountains murmured their endless Latin.

The summons had arrived under the cardinal’s seal. Small talk about his mother’s health: Maria Reyes, sixty-two, clinic nurse, fragile lungs, experimental treatments quietly paid for through Church channels.

Then Cardinal Benedetto slid the packet across polished wood.

“Palinode,” Benedetto said. “A mission that will look directly at humanity’s past. Possibly at its sacred moments. Possibly at its God.”

Elias’s chest tightened. He had read the preliminary briefs. TOM. Direct observation of ancient epochs. Dangerous, beautiful things.

“If the mission’s findings are benign,” Benedetto continued, “there is no problem. But if what we observe threatens the faith of billions, someone on board must exercise prudence.”

“Prudence,” Elias repeated. The sealed packet sat between them like unexploded ordnance.

“Protocols,” Benedetto said. “Guidance for how and when evidence should be contextualized, delayed, or, in extreme circumstances, withheld. Not falsification. Pastoral care.”

Elias stared at him. “You’re asking me to lie.”

“I am asking you to protect souls,” Benedetto replied, voice hardening. “Raw truth is corrosive. Faith is not an academic luxury. It keeps societies from tearing themselves apart. If Palinode’s observations risk global collapse, you will implement what is inside.”

“And if I refuse?”

Benedetto folded his hands. The fountain outside whispered. Somewhere a bell marked the hour.

“Your mother’s continued access to treatment depends on many small signatures,” Benedetto said quietly.

Silence. Shame. A slow cold fury.

“Read it,” Benedetto said. “Pray. Decide. But understand: trust is a luxury, Father Reyes. We cannot afford naïveté.”

The cardinal’s seal remained unbroken in Elias’s hands all the way back to Nairobi.



The ward lights painted his mother's skin a tired yellow.

Maria Reyes dozed in half-upright sleep, oxygen line at her nose, an IV pump ticking at her bedside. The experimental protocol was working, mostly. It was also ruinously expensive, even with Church subsidies.

Elias sat where he always sat, rosary between his fingers, the sealed packet in his pocket like a second, heavier heart.

"You're brooding," Maria said without opening her eyes.

"I'm praying," Elias answered.

"Same thing, with you." She cracked one eye. "Tell me."

He almost lied. Habit. Reflex. Protection.

Instead, he pulled out the cardinal's orders and turned them in his hands.

"They want you to do something?" Maria asked. Sixty-two, lungs burned out from a lifetime of other people's illness, still reading him like a cheap brochure.

"They want me on a mission," Elias said. "And they want me to promise that if what we see is dangerous, I'll help them control how much the world finds out."

Maria considered that, breathing shallow.

"Is it the truth?" she asked.

"We don't know yet."

"If it is," she said, "you tell it. Don't you dare trade other people's souls for these tired old lungs." She tapped the cannula at her nose. "I'm not leverage. I'm collateral I volunteered for when I took this job."

"They might cut you off," he said.

She gave him a look that ended the thought. “If your God is as small as whatever’s in there, you picked wrong. Do the right thing. Let them be the ones who look bad when the light hits.”

Elias put the sealed orders back in his pocket. He didn’t open them.



Dr. James Wei read Elias’s file in silence.

They sat in a secure room three floors below street level. No crucifixes here. No icons. Just glass, steel, and the quiet hum of filtered air.

On the table between them lay the same sealed packet.

“You brought it,” Wei said.

“I haven’t opened it,” Elias replied.

Wei studied him. “The Church leaned on you. On your mother’s care. On your vows. And you’re telling me you refused to read instructions for how to control my mission.”

“Yes.”

“Why?”

“Because if we find something that shakes the world,” Elias said, “people deserve the truth. Not preselected fragments. Not whatever reassures us. If I opened that, I’d be complicit before we even started.”

Wei considered that for a long moment.

“Most people would have read it,” he said.

“Most people are smarter,” Elias said bitterly. “They’d want to know what game they were in.”

“Most people,” Wei said, “I would not put on the Palinode.”

He tapped the packet once, then slid it back toward Elias.

“Keep it,” Wei said. “As evidence it existed. If anyone ever questions what was asked of you, I want something we can forensically examine.”

Elias frowned. “You still want me on the mission.”

“I need someone on that ship who believes two things,” Wei said. “That God, if He exists, can survive the truth. And that people deserve the dignity of seeing reality, even when it hurts.”

“And if I fail?”

“Then you fail trying to tell the truth,” Wei said. “I’ll take that over someone who succeeds at protecting a lie.”



The chapel on the Palinode was quiet. Elias stood alone before the small cross mounted on the bulkhead.

He pulled out the cardinal’s sealed orders and weighed them against everything he’d seen: Marchetti’s gentle wisdom, Amara’s conviction that truth didn’t break people, his mother’s refusal to be leverage, Wei’s trust.

“You don’t belong here,” he whispered.

He did not open them.

Instead, he slipped the packet into a narrow service compartment behind the meditation panel and logged it as personal effects.

If he was weak later, he wanted the temptation to require work. If he was strong, he wanted the proof close.

That had been three months ago, before launch. Before they’d watched Jesus die on a hill of chalk-colored rock.



In the chapel, Elias's voice trailed off.

Mara exhaled slowly. "So there are sealed orders on this ship."

He reached under the bench and pulled the thin packet from the hidden recess. Cardinal's seal, unbroken.

"Same ones," he said. "I logged them as personal correspondence. I told myself I'd destroy them before we reached Jerusalem."

"But you didn't."

"I thought... if something went wrong, if panic started, maybe there'd be wisdom inside." He shook his head. "That was cowardice dressed as prudence."

Mara leaned forward. "Elias, did you ever follow what's in there?"

"I don't know what's in there," he said. "That's the point. I chose not to know. Marchetti taught me that lying for God is still lying. Amara showed me people can bear more truth than institutions think. My mother showed me the same. Wei trusted me because I hadn't opened it."

He looked at the seal. "I'm telling you now because you deserve to know. Because after what we just witnessed, I can't carry secrets anymore."

"Do you think Benedetto would try to stop this mission?" Mara asked.

Elias hesitated. "I think he's the kind of man who believes control is mercy. Whether that extends to sabotage..." He shook his head. "I don't know. But someone should know these orders exist."

Mara held out her hand.

Reluctantly, he placed the packet in her palm.

"You can open it," he said. "If you think we need to know."

She weighed it. The thing that had hung over him for years; a single choice pressed thin.

“No,” Mara said. “Not yet. Not like this. We tell Roe. Together. Full transparency.”

Fear and relief flickered across his face.

“You still believe?” she asked.

Elias let out a breath that was almost a laugh.

“I don’t know what I believe about God,” he said. “But I believe in not treating people like children. If there is anything holy left in me, it’s that.”

Mara nodded. “Good. Because that’s the job now.”

She handed the packet back to him. “Keep it. Your burden to carry until we decide together what to do with it.”



Roe stood at the wardroom table when Mara and Elias entered. Hana and Santos were already there, faces drawn from too little sleep and too much processing.

“Report,” Roe said, then stopped when she saw their faces. “What happened?”

Mara nodded to Elias.

He set the sealed packet on the table between them and told the story. Marchetti. Amara. Benedetto. His mother. Wei. The choice not to open the cardinal’s orders.

Roe listened without interrupting, jaw tight.

“You should have told me before launch,” she said when he finished.

“I know,” Elias said.

“But you didn’t open it,” Roe went on. “And you brought it to us now, instead of keeping it hidden. That counts for something.”

She studied the unbroken seal. “We log it. Record its existence. But we don’t open it yet—not until we know more about what we’re dealing with.”

“Does this change anything?” Santos asked quietly.

“Everything changes everything,” Roe said. “What we saw in Jerusalem. Sealed orders from Rome. None of it alters what we have to do next.”

She looked around the table, meeting each gaze in turn.

“We continue the mission,” she said. “We observe. We record. We send back what we see. No curated truths. No outside voices calling the shots.”

Mara felt Elias straighten beside her, as if a weight had shifted from his shoulders to the center of the table where it belonged.

“We’ll keep this secure,” Roe said, gesturing to the packet. “If someone tries to stop this mission, we’ll know what leverage they thought they had.”

Elias nodded once, slowly.

Outside, the Palinode sat still holding its position, six humans and one conscious AI deeper into their observations of the past.

Inside, secrecy lost a little more ground to the thing they’d all signed up for: truth; however, it broke them.

And in the chapel, logged but not forgotten, the cardinal’s sealed orders waited.