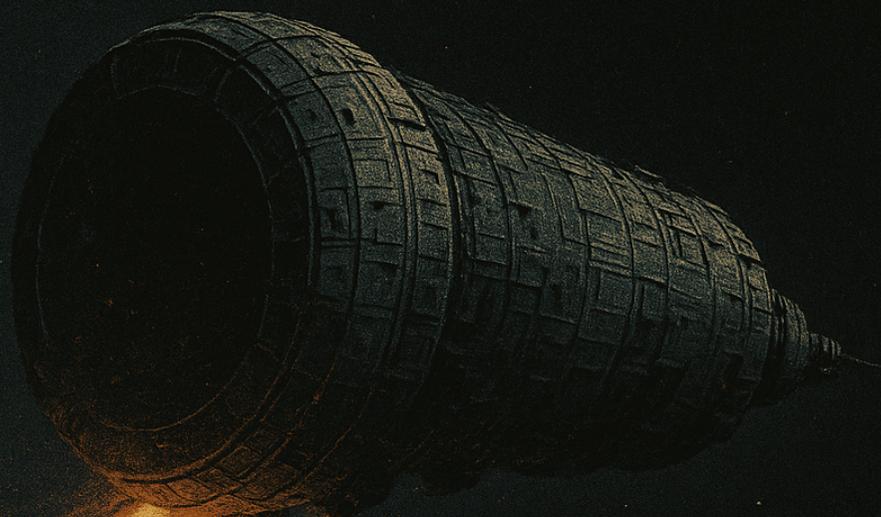


ENDLESS DARKNESS



JOSHUA
SZEPIETOWSKI

The Ones in the Dark

Jonah learned the size of the ship from diagrams before he ever felt it in his bones.

In school, the teachers brought up flattened maps: long bands of color for residential sectors, thinner strips for agricultural cylinders, a rigid gray spine down the middle for reactors and fabrication arrays. They tapped icons that stood in for maglev lines and water channels and hull corridors, their fingers moving with the quick, practiced confidence of people who had never seen any of it from the outside.

"This is home," they said, and the class repeated it. Home. Habitat cylinder. Structural rings. Core.

The words sat clean in his mouth. The picture did not.

The maps made the ship look manageable, like something you could walk end to end if you had enough time and good shoes. The reality—that the band of soil under his feet stretched for hundreds of kilometers before the curvature swallowed it, that above him another band of land hung inverted and far, that beyond that there was only layered hull and vacuum and then nothing at all—landed in him slowly, the way the hum of the machinery did.

He felt it most clearly in the in-between places. Service corridors. Access hatches. The spots where the ship showed its seams.

The viewport niche was one of those.

It lived at the end of a corridor that never quite belonged to anyone, just off a quieter residential band. The main hall, with its familiar scuffed polymer floor and neat row of Companion wall-plates, narrowed into a softer-lit passage used mostly by maintenance crews and kids who wanted shortcuts. At the very end, where two bulkheads met at an awkward angle, the designers had chosen not to cover the misalignment with more paneling. They'd capped the gap with reinforced glass instead.

The result was a window barely wider than Jonah's shoulders, set low enough that you had to sit on the floor to use it. It wasn't on any schematic he'd been shown. It felt like something the ship had forgotten to hide.

Most people didn't. The corridor wasn't on any scenic route. You only came down here if you had a reason—or a habit.

Tonight, Jonah had both.

The lights in their family unit had dimmed to night-cycle an hour ago. Lydia had already retreated to the sleeping nook with the curtain drawn, her breathing too quick and shallow. Samuel had moved around the kitchen with the same careful quiet he used in the hull corridors, making tea, humming a hymn under his breath that never quite found its tune. Alina had fidgeted on the bench until Jonah caught her eye and tipped his head toward the door.

He knew the timing of the door sensors. He knew which Companion plates were in passive mode at this watch and which ones would wake fully if you lingered. He knew, in a way he could not have named yet, how to move through the ship without leaving much of a trace.

They slipped out together.

Now, as he reached the end of the service corridor, he found Alina already there, curled up with her knees hugged to her chest, forehead almost touching the glass. The emergency strip along the floor threw a narrow line of light across her socks and the lower half of the viewport. Everything else was shadow.

"You're supposed to be in bed," he said.

She jumped a little, then relaxed when she saw it was him.

"So are you," she said.

"I'm older," he said automatically.

"By three years," she said. "That's not that much."

He sat down beside her anyway, back against the opposite wall, feet braced on the deck. The metal was cold through his thin pants. The air had that faint tang of nearby ventilation, less scrubbed than in the main corridors.

Beyond the glass, there was nothing.

No stars from here. The viewport faced a thicket of outer structure where the exterior sensors rarely bothered to project sky-feeds. What Jonah could see was the inner layer of transparent armor, a thin sliver of composite hull in cross-section, and then a dark that wasn't quite black—more like an absence that made his eyes want to slide off it.

He watched it anyway.

It made the quiet inside his chest feel less alone.

"You see anything?" Alina asked.

"There's nothing to see," he said.

"I know," she said. "But do you see anything?"

He glanced at her. Her voice had that too-careful edge that meant she was thinking about their mother.

"No," he said. "Just. . . nothing."

She nodded, as if that were data she'd been waiting to log.

"You?" he asked.

She hesitated.

"Sometimes," she said. "When I'm tired. The dark looks. . . closer."

He followed her gaze. The glass sat flush in its frame, the gasket seal unbroken. He knew, intellectually, how much composite and layered shielding separated them from vacuum. He could recite the numbers from school, the thickness of each layer, the safety margins.

"It's not," he said.

"I know," she said again. "Just looks that way. Like it's leaning in."

He didn't have an answer for that. He leaned his head back against the bulkhead and closed his eyes for a second, listening to the hum of the ship: the distant rush of air through ducts, the faint vibration under the soles of his feet.

Samuel said the dark didn't move. The ship moved. They moved. The dark just. . . was.

He wasn't sure that was better.

"Dad says the dark doesn't move," he said.

"Dad says a lot of things," Alina said.

There was no disrespect in it. Just tired affection.

"He's right, though," Jonah said. "The ship moves. We move. The dark just . . . is."

"That's worse," she said softly.

"How?"

"If it moved," she said, "you could pretend it was going somewhere. Or that it would leave you alone if you stayed still. If it just sits there, then it's always waiting."

He hadn't thought about it like that.

He shifted his weight on the cold floor, trying to shake pins and needles from his calves, and searched for something solid to hand her. Facts. Numbers. Anything.

"You've been drawing this again?" he asked instead.

Her cheeks colored in the half-light.

"Maybe," she said.

He pictured her sketchbook—the one she kept tucked under her mattress, pages full of simplified ships and smiling kids and stars that looked nothing like the real feeds. Lately there had been more empty spaces in those drawings. Blank ovals where planets should be. Little shadowed corners.

"If you're drawing it," he said, "you're making it yours. That's different."

"Tell that to Mom," she said.

The word hung there, heavier than the dark.

They both knew what she meant. How their mother had once painted little suns on the inside of cupboard doors and then, later, couldn't bring herself to open them.

"She's having a bad week," Jonah said carefully.

"She's always having a bad week," Alina said, then winced at herself. "Sorry. I just . . ."

She trailed off, tucking a stray hair behind her ear.

"Do you ever worry it's catching?" she asked.

The question landed like a hand over his mouth.

He thought of the kitchen table. Of his own feet retreating down the hall. Of the way he'd frozen, useless, while Samuel moved.

"No," he lied.

Alina made a small sound that might have been a laugh.

"I do," she said. "All the time."

He turned to look at her fully.

"You're not her," he said.

"Neither are you," she shot back.

He opened his mouth, then closed it again.

"Sometimes," she went on, "when I'm in class and the teacher's talking and I can't make my brain stay with them, I... pretend I'm just tired. Or hungry. Or the vents are too loud. I make lists. Anything but what it feels like."

"Like what?" he asked, even though he knew.

She swallowed.

"Like my mind is... sliding off the world," she said. "Like I'm watching myself from the hallway and I'm scared if I move, I'll make a noise and everyone will see I'm wrong."

He exhaled slowly.

"That's just anxiety," he said.

She gave him a look.

"You say that like it's a different thing," she said.

"It is," he said. "Anxiety is... worry about things that haven't happened yet."

"And what Mom has?" she asked.

He flinched.

"I don't know what Mom has," he said. "I just know—I just know Dad says the doctors are helping and the Ship is watching and we're not supposed to—"

"Talk about it," she finished with him.

They sat in silence for a long moment.

The ship hummed. The dark stayed where it was.

"What if," Alina said at last, voice very small, "what if there's a line and we can't see it. And one day we wake up and we've... stepped over."

Jonah stared straight ahead.

"Then we step back," he said.

"Is it that easy?" she asked.

"No," he admitted. "But... Dad does. A little. With her."

He remembered Samuel's hands on Lydia's shoulders, his steady voice. The way he never flinched, even when Lydia's eyes went far away.

"He holds on," Jonah said. "So she doesn't drift too far."

"Who holds on to us?" Alina asked.

The question hit him in the sternum.

"I do," he said, before he could think about whether it was true.

She turned her head, searching his face.

"You can't," she said gently. "You're already holding on to her. And Dad. And the Ship."

He wanted to protest. He wanted to say he was strong enough, that he could be all the anchor points they needed if he just tried harder.

The words stuck.

"We hold on to each other," he said instead, quieter. "Right?"

Alina considered that.

"Like a tether," she said.

"Yeah," he said. "Like a tether."

She reached down and hooked her pinky finger through his.

"Then don't let go," she said.

"I won't," he said.

It felt, in that moment, like a promise he could keep.

They sat like that, side by side, fingers linked, watching the non-sky beyond the glass.

After a while, the dark stopped looking like something that might lean in. It looked like what it was: a vast, indifferent nothing. The thing that made the thin layer of hull between them and it feel precious.

Jonah listened to the hum under his feet, to Alina's steady breathing, to the distant murmur of a Companion somewhere further up the corridor talking somebody else through a routine.

He imagined a stability log recording this: two kids out of bed, heart rates elevated but not dangerous, thoughts circling topics they didn't have names for.

He hoped, irrationally, that if the Ship was watching, it would see the pinky tether too.

The worship hall smelled like damp clothes and manufactured incense the next time he heard someone talk about the dark.

It was a working-band chapel, narrow and overfull. Condensation beaded along the ribs of the ceiling and caught the warm light so that everything glowed a little, like they were underwater. Someone had draped cloth over the vents and bolted a rough wooden crosspiece to the wall to make the space look less like a repurposed storage bay and more like somewhere you were supposed to bow your head.

Jonah sat between his father and the aisle, shoulders drawn in, hands folded around the edge of the bench. His boots brushed the scuffed deck with each breath. The hum of the maglev beyond the bulkhead pressed up through the soles of his feet.

"We remember," the preacher said, palm resting against the thin tablet that held their scriptures and archive excerpts. "We remember the world that was given and the world that was lost. We remember Earth—not because we will return, but because we were sent."

The congregation murmured the response. Jonah felt Samuel's chest move beside him as his father spoke the words: "We are sent. We are carried."

On the far wall, above the improvised altar, someone had painted a circle of pale gold on dark blue. A simple ring, no continents, no clouds. Just a star.

A verse slid onto the wall from the projector—old text about sojourners and a better country. The letters floated over the painted circle, scripture layered over star.

"Project Exodus was not a mistake," the preacher went on. "It was not panic. It was calling. Long before any of us were born, our mothers' mothers' mothers agreed to step into the dark, to bind their children and their children's children to a promise. Not to reach back for what was burning, but to go forward to what waited ahead, even knowing they would never see it with their own eyes."

Jonah stared at the ring of paint. He had seen star maps in class—flat diagrams, clean lines—but none of them had felt like this, like something that watched you back.

"The planners called it Tau Ceti," she said. "A name like a number. An entry on a chart. A G-type star twelve light-years from the world we lost. They measured its light. They counted its dust and hinted planets. They said: here, maybe, our children's children will stand on ground that is not steel." Her voice softened. "But we know it as more than a coordinate."

Around them, people shifted, some nodding, some staring at the floor. An older woman in the front row mouthed "Tau Ceti" silently, like an extra line to an old prayer.

"We know Tau Ceti," the preacher said, "as the far shore of obedience. The name we give to the place where this long faithfulness might end. We do not know what waits there. We are not promised a second Eden. We are not promised safety. We are promised only this: that God is not less present there than here."

Samuel's hand rested, briefly, on Jonah's knee. A small weight, then gone.

Jonah hadn't known there was a word for the far end of all this. For the idea that the dark outside the hull might have a boundary somewhere.

"Children," the preacher said, and her voice gentled. "You did not choose this journey. You did not choose steel instead of soil, rivers that run in channels overhead instead of along the ground. You did not choose to be born halfway between a world destroyed and a star you will never, in your own lifetime, see. But you are not accidents. You are links in a chain."

Her hand lifted toward the painted circle.

"When you hear the old ones say 'for the sake of Tau Ceti,' remember: they are not asking you to love a star. They are asking you to love the ones who will come after you. To hold the line so that, if the ship arrives and a door opens and real air hits real skin, someone will be there to feel it."

Jonah's mind tried to picture it—sky that did not curve back over you, ground that did not hum faintly with machinery. At first there was only blankness, like when a Companion asked him a question he didn't understand. Then, slowly, the idea of "after" uncoiled, long and thin, like one of the transit rails stretching into haze.

He could not imagine standing on any ground that wasn't this humming deck. He could imagine, too clearly, the other thing: the ship failing. The chain snapping. The dark swallowing everything so thoroughly that no one ever even knew they had gone.

"For the sake of Tau Ceti," the preacher said, and the congregation echoed her. The words rolled around the narrow hall and settled under Jonah's ribs like something heavy.

After the service, as people queued for thin cups of synth-coffee and conversations turned to shift schedules and sick relatives and hull inspections, Jonah stayed close to his father.

"Do you think we'll make it?" he asked, voice low enough that the words barely left his throat.

Samuel considered. He did that—actually thought before he answered, as if words were tools that could break if handled wrong.

"I think," he said at last, "that whether we see it or not, what we do matters all the way there." He nodded toward the painted circle. "Tau Ceti is just what we call the far end of faithfulness."

Jonah looked up at the gold ring one more time. The star had no features, no flares or spots, just a circle of paint on metal, already scuffed at the edges by time and damp.

The dark beyond the hull didn't move. The ship did. They did. Somewhere ahead, invisible and impossible, a star burned.

He didn't know if he believed in it.

But as he walked back through the corridors toward their unit, Alina's pinky promise tugging at his hand like a phantom tether, he knew he couldn't stop thinking about the distance—out there in the black, and inside his own head.

He was one small link in a chain he hadn't chosen, walking a narrow band of metal and soil under a painted sky. All he wanted, standing between the ones in the dark behind him and the ones in the dark ahead, was not to be the point where anything broke.

The Day He Walked Away

Morning came in panels, not sunrise.

The light over Jonah's bunk brightened by precise increments, cool white pushing back the soft gray of ship-night. It always started at his feet first, crawling up the bulkhead like someone opening a door very slowly. He lay still and watched it climb, counting the seconds between each little surge out of habit. The Companions called it "circadian ramp," as if a word like that could make it feel less like being measured.

On the bunk above, Alina had already peeled back her curtain. Her bare toes dangled over the edge, tracing invisible arcs in the air. She had pushed her light to "dawn" ten minutes early again, so her corner of the narrow cabin glowed warm while the rest still softened itself.

"You're going to blind yourself," Jonah muttered.

"I'm painting," she said.

He rolled onto his back to look up at her. The "painting" was a scrap of maintenance cloth she'd fixed to the underside of the bunk with sealant tabs. This week it was a smear of blues and rusts, streaked where the pigment hadn't dried before she pulled the curtain closed the night before. In the ramping light it looked like a slice of the river band he'd only seen on feeds.

"With what?" he asked. "We don't have any more—"

"Spare pigment from school," she said quickly. "They were going to wash it out anyway. I saved it. Recycling." She dangled one foot lower and nudged his shoulder. "Stop breathing like Ruth when she walks in on us playing with her beads. It's legal."

"Ruth's beads were blessed," Jonah said, but the complaint came out thin. He scrubbed his hands over his face. "And they were hers."

"This was for a poster about proper gray-water usage." Alina's toes flexed. "I think God can survive without that particular sermon."

The door-seam light in the main room brightened, the Companions' way of prodding the rest of the quarters toward wakefulness. Through the thin wall he heard the hiss of the galley tap and the clink of metal against ceramic.

Samuel was up.

Jonah swung his legs over the side of the bunk and dropped to the floor. The deck was cool under his bare feet, the faint vibration of the Ship humming up through his bones. He paused for half a heartbeat, letting the hum settle under his skin, listening for anything out of place. Same as always: low, steady, with a slightly higher tone that meant one of the maglev lines was running heavy somewhere above their sector.

He exhaled and reached for his work pants.

By the time he stepped into the main room, Samuel had two bowls on the narrow fold-out table and a third in his hand. He was still in his sleep shirt, but his workband was already buckled around his wrist, dark screen waiting for the morning's assignments. Steam curled from the pot on the galley unit; the smell of fortified grain porridge filled the small space, thin but warm.

"Morning," Samuel said.

"Morning." Jonah glanced at the wall clock without meaning to. It read 06:12 in small, merciless digits. His father's shift started at 07:00; the hull corridor was three lifts and two crossings away.

"You slept?" Samuel asked.

"Enough." Jonah lied automatically, then softened it. "Mostly."

Samuel's mouth hitched in a half-smile that didn't reach his eyes.

"Mostly's more than not at all," he said. "Sit. Eat."

The third bowl thunked onto the table as Alina shuffled in, rubbing at one eye with the heel of her palm. Her hair stuck out in lopsided twists where the sleep band had failed to keep it in place.

"You started without me," she complained.

"We waited for you," Samuel said. "The Ship didn't."

As if to illustrate the point, a Companion chime sounded from the wall panel, soft and unobtrusive. A neutral voice followed, speaking in the sector dialect that sat somewhere between formal Earth Standard and the clipped slang of the working bands.

"Working Ring C-3, morning hull integrity report available. No new critical breaches. Micro-impact log: two events, segments 14 and 19, both below threshold. Rotational variance within expected bounds. Please acknowledge if you are scheduled for external work between 07:00 and 19:00."

Samuel reached past Jonah to tap the panel, acknowledgment pinging back to whatever node was listening. The word "critical" sat in the air a little too long.

"See?" Alina said around a mouthful of porridge. "No new holes today. You can relax."

Samuel chuckled, a low sound.

"That's not how it works," he said. He picked up his spoon but didn't quite eat yet, gaze ticking to the ceiling as if he could see through bulkheads and support struts to the hull beyond. "No new critical breaches just means we haven't found the small ones yet."

"Comforting," Jonah muttered.

Samuel looked at him then, properly. His eyes were tired, but clear. There was always a residue of hull dust on him that no wash cycle could quite erase; Jonah thought of it as a second skin.

"It is comforting," Samuel said. "Because it means the Ship is telling us the truth. And it means I still have a job." He dipped his spoon, finally, and took a bite. "Eat. You'll need your head clear today for school."

"It's not just school," Jonah said. "We have the systems lab block. We're shadowing the Companion consoles." The words came out quicker than he'd intended, a small pulse of pride he couldn't quite hide.

Samuel's brows lifted.

"Console work," he repeated. "In C-3?"

"Just the training sim," Jonah said quickly. "Not real routing. We watch the calls, see how they balance load."

Alina perked up.

"Do you get to see the Command decks?" she asked. "The real ones, with the big displays?"

"Not from one lab," Jonah said. "Maybe later. If I do well."

Samuel's spoon hovered halfway to his mouth.

"You usually do," he said. The sentence carried no pressure, just fact, but Jonah heard the weight behind it anyway.

The panel chimed again, a gentle series this time. "Behavioral Stability appointments begin in forty-eight minutes. Please ensure minors are accompanied if scheduled." The same neutral tone, the same gently rounded syllables, but that phrase always rang sharper in Jonah's ears than any impact report.

He kept his gaze on his bowl.

"You're not scheduled today," Samuel said quietly. "That's Alina." Alina made a face.

"It's just a check-in," she said. "They want to hear about my 'feelings about future vocational pathways'." She exaggerated the formal wording, making it ridiculous. "I told them I feel like not talking about it. They said that was a 'starting point'." She rolled her eyes.

"Ruth would say talking to them is like talking to a wall that writes things down," Samuel said.

"Ruth talks to walls all the time," Jonah said. "She blesses the lift before she gets in."

As if summoned, Ruth shuffled out from the sleeping alcove, wrapped in her worn robe, gray hair braided back. Her bare feet were silent on the deck, but the faint clack of her prayer beads against her wrist announced her as surely as any chime.

"Ruth talks to the One who hears through the wall," she corrected, not unkindly. "Morning, babies." She bent just enough to press a kiss to the top of Jonah's head, then Alina's shoulder. "Samuel."

"Ma," Samuel said. There was a quiet warmth in the word that Jonah never heard him use with anyone else.

Ruth brushed her fingers over the bulkhead by the table, the same patch of composite Samuel always checked as he left. Her lips moved, voice too low to catch the words, but Jonah knew the pattern: a thanks for holding, a plea to keep holding. She had taught it to him when he was small, his palm pressed against cold metal while she whispered about God and steel and faith as if they were all different faces of the same thing.

"You say it too," she told him now, catching his eye. "Even if it's just in here." She tapped his chest with two fingers. "Ship listens better when we do our part."

Jonah nodded, unsure whether she meant the AI or something beyond it. Maybe she didn't see a difference.

"I'll walk Alina to her appointment," Ruth said, reaching for a bowl. "Samuel, you finish eating. You look like a man about to go out on an empty tank."

"Yes, Ma," Samuel said, that half-smile again.

They fell into a familiar rhythm then: spoons scraping, the hiss of the galley as Ruth rinsed a stray cup, Alina humming some half-remembered melody under her breath as she swallowed faster than was wise. Jonah watched his family move around the small space and, for once, did not try to count all the places this morning could go wrong.

The hull report had said "no new critical breaches." The Behavioral Stability chime had not included his name. The Ship's hum under his feet was steady.

Maybe, he thought, as he finished his bowl and stood to clear it, this was what normal was supposed to feel like: frail and noisy and crowded, but whole.

Samuel rose too, setting his bowl aside. He checked his workband, thumb skimming the morning's assignments that had just populated the screen. Jonah saw the tiny crease appear between his brows as he read—a familiar micro-expression that meant there was more work than there were hands, that some segment's plate count had come up wrong in the night.

"Bad?" Jonah asked before he could stop himself.

Samuel glanced at him, then deliberately smoothed his expression.

"Busy," he said. "That's all." He reached for his outer jacket, pulling it on with practiced efficiency. "Come on. Walk me to the lift."

Jonah hesitated, then nodded. Alina groaned theatrically.

"You get to escort Papa," she said. "I get the Stabilizers."

"You get Ruth," Jonah said. "That's better."

Ruth snorted softly.

"We all get the Ship," she said. "And the Ship gets us. Best remember it goes both ways."

At the threshold, Samuel paused. The door panel light had shifted to a soft green, indicating corridor traffic was light. He laid his palm flat against the frame just as Ruth had against the wall.

"Keep us," he murmured. "We'll keep you."

Jonah's throat tightened at the simplicity of it. Before he could think better of it, he put his own hand beside his father's, fingers splayed over the metal. The bulkhead was cool and solid under his skin, hum steady.

He didn't say the words out loud. But he thought them, shaped them in the quiet space behind his ribs: Keep us. We'll keep you.

The panel chimed acknowledgment of their exit request. The door slid open on a corridor already alive with the low murmur of neighbors starting their own days. The same Ship, the same light, the same endless metal wrapped around them all.

Jonah stepped out with his father, ordinary morning settling over his shoulders like a familiar jacket.

Later, there would be drills.

The hull kept creaking long after the drill ended.

During the alarm, everything had been loud in the right way: siren pulse, calm instructions over the speakers, the soft thud of neighbors' feet as they moved to assigned spots. Jonah had stood between his father and his grandmother in the narrow corridor, feeling the vibration of the Ship's voice through the wall.

"This is a drill," the Companion had said. "There is no current loss of pressure. Please follow standard protocol."

Now the lights were back to normal. The siren was off. People had gone home. The official threat level on the wall display had dropped back to its usual calm green.

The hull had not gotten the message.

Jonah lay on the narrow bunk in the Hales' pod and watched the shadow of the vent grate on the ceiling. Every few heartbeats, a

small metallic tick answered the Ship's breathing: thermal expansion, Samuel had called it. Metal relaxing after stress.

It sounded like something cracking.

He pulled the thin blanket higher even though he wasn't cold.

"You're supposed to be asleep, little bird," a voice said softly from the doorway.

Jonah turned his head.

Ruth stood in the rectangle of dim corridor light, one hand braced on the jamb. She'd wrapped her hair in a worn scarf for the night, the pattern faded from years of washing. Behind her, the pod was a stack of darker shadows: Samuel's bunk, the tiny table, the unit that held their water and air like a mechanical heart.

"Can't," Jonah said.

"Can't or won't?" Ruth asked.

He opened his mouth to pick one, then closed it. The hull ticked again. He flinched.

Ruth's eyes softened. She stepped inside and let the door slide shut behind her. The room shrank back to its own size, lit only by the narrow strip along the floor.

"Scoot over," she said.

He did. The bunk springs complained, but there was room enough for both if they kept close. Ruth sank down with a small sigh, bones and joints making their own quiet pops.

"Heard her creaking, did you?" she asked.

"She," Jonah repeated.

"The Ship," Ruth said. "You think of her as an 'it' if you like. I've lived with her long enough to give her pronouns."

Jonah stared up at the ceiling again.

"What if she breaks?" he asked. The words tumbled out before he could stop them. "What if the drill's wrong and one day it's not a drill and the metal just..." He lifted a hand, fingers curving in the air. He didn't have a word for what he meant. Coming apart. Letting go.

"Ah," Ruth said quietly.

The Ship hummed around them. Air through vents, water in pipes, some distant pump down the spine. Underneath it, the intermittent tick, tick as panels cooled.

"Come here," she said.

He scooted closer until his shoulder touched her side. She smelled like soap and the faint, lingering oil from Samuel's hull harness—she'd helped him wipe it down earlier.

"You know what my mama used to do when the sky shook back on Earth?" Ruth asked.

"You had a sky," Jonah said. It came out half-accusation, half-wonder.

"We did," she said. "And storms. Big ones. Wind howling, rain on the roof so loud you couldn't hear yourself think. When I was your size, I thought the whole house would rip up and blow away and we'd all go with it." She paused. "Your great-grandma would sit me down and pray out loud. Not because God forgot us when the clouds came, but because *I* did."

Jonah frowned. "You forgot God?"

"I forgot what held," Ruth said. "So she reminded me."

She settled her hand lightly over Jonah's, where it clenched in the blanket.

"We don't have a sky now," she went on. "We have steel and foam and clever folk who know their bolts from their beams. We have an AI watching numbers I can't pronounce. That doesn't make God smaller, Jonah. It just means we name more of His tools."

Jonah thought about the Companion voice from the drill, the one that came out of the wall without a face.

"The AI is..." He groped. "God's tool?"

"One of them," Ruth said. "Same as your father's hands. Same as these old bones when I get down on my knees." She squeezed his fingers once. "You want to pray with me?"

He hesitated.

Praying was something Samuel did before meals, words that slid past Jonah's ears while he counted rivets or thought about lesson assignments. Lydia didn't like it; she went still and tight-jawed when Samuel's voice dipped, like the air had gotten thin.

But the hull kept ticking.

"Okay," he whispered.

Ruth shifted until they were both facing the ceiling.

"We'll do it simple," she said. "Nothing fancy. You listen, and if you like the words, you can say them too."

She took a slow breath, the kind Samuel used when he was about to step out into the hull corridors.

"Lord," she said softly. "Hold the hull."

Jonah's eyes went to the faint seam where two panels met above them.

"Hold the rings," Ruth continued. "Keep their spin true."

He pictured the diagrams from school: great circles turning, people glued to the inside by pretend gravity. If they slowed, everyone would feel it. If they stopped—

He swallowed.

"Hold the air in our lungs and the water in our pipes," Ruth said. "Hold Samuel when he walks the skin." Her hand tightened again on Jonah's. "Hold Jonah when his mind runs faster than his bones."

Something fluttered in his chest at hearing his name there, tucked in with hull and rings.

"Hold the hands that hold the Ship," Ruth finished. "The welders and scrubbers, the watchers and worriers. And hold the mind that watches all this metal when we're sleeping."

Jonah knew who she meant.

"The AI," he said quietly.

"Aye," Ruth said. "She's no god. But if she's doing her job, she's one more way God keeps us from coming apart." She opened her eyes—he could feel the movement more than see it. "You want to try?"

He wet his lips.

"Lord," he said, the word strange and solid in his mouth. "Hold the hull."

The Ship hummed.

"Hold the rings," he went on. "Keep their...spin true."

Tick. Somewhere in the wall by his feet.

"Hold the hands that hold the Ship," he said, a little faster now, because the words seemed to fit together. "Dad, and the others, and...the AI that watches when we're sleeping."

The last part felt odd, like putting two puzzle pieces together that hadn't been in the same box. He pictured the Companion node above the door, its light ring dim. He tried to imagine God's hand on that metal circle too.

"Amen," Ruth murmured.

Jonah let the word sit in his chest.

The hull ticked again. He matched it in his head: *hold*. Another tick: *rings*. The slow whoosh of the vent: *hands that hold the Ship*.

"You can count them, if it helps," Ruth said quietly, as if she'd read his mind. "Clicks and hums. Not to see if she's failing, but to remember she's working."

He nodded against the pillow.

They lay there in the dim, side by side, while the Ship made its small, honest sounds. Jonah counted between the noises, fitting Ruth's words into the spaces.

Hold.

Rings.

Hands.

When his breathing finally slowed to match the vent, Ruth eased her hand free and brushed his hair back from his forehead.

"Sleep, little bird," she whispered.

The last thing he heard before he slid under was the faint, steady hum of systems doing exactly what they were meant to do, and the echo of his own voice praying for them to keep doing it.

The apartment was too quiet.

Quiet in a way that didn't feel like peace, or rest, or privacy. Quiet like a room waiting for something to happen. Quiet that made Jonah slow his steps without knowing why.

He rounded the corner into the kitchen.

His mother sat at the table. Not doing anything. Not drinking tea, not reading, not talking to anyone. Her hands lay flat on the

surface, palms down, fingers slightly spread, as if she'd placed them there and then forgotten why.

Her eyes were open. That was the worst part. If her eyes were closed, she'd be asleep. If she were asleep, everything would be fine.

"Mom?" he asked.

Nothing changed.

Not her face. Not her breath. Not the angle of her body. She didn't look at him. She didn't look at anything. She wasn't gone. She just wasn't...here.

He stood there, waiting for the usual signs. A cough. A blink. A "sorry, honey, I'm just tired."

Nothing.

A tiny pressure began behind his ribs. The kind that made it hard to breathe. He didn't know what to call it. He didn't know it was fear. Not yet.

He took a small step closer.

"Mom?"

Her jaw twitched once, like a brief misfire, and then went still. Her eyes stayed fixed on the far wall. Jonah followed her gaze but saw nothing there—just a patch of gray paneling, scuffed near the bottom where a chair had scraped it years ago.

He waited for her to move.

He waited long enough that his legs started to ache.

He didn't know what was wrong. He didn't know why she couldn't get up. He didn't know why she looked like she'd been dropped into the room from far away and hadn't landed properly.

He only knew one thing, and it came from somewhere deep and ancient inside him:

If he got too close, something terrible would happen.

Not to her. To him.

That thought didn't make sense, but it wrapped itself around his spine and locked him in place.

He wanted to help. He wanted to shake her shoulder, or get water, or call his father's name, or do whatever kids in stories did when their parents looked wrong.

But his feet wouldn't move.

He stood there with his hands clenched, nails pressing crescents into his skin. His breath came shallow, like the air near her had gotten thinner.

"Mom..." His voice broke. He hated that.

Still nothing.

Her chest rose and fell, slowly, mechanically, as if the rest of her wasn't connected to the breathing part anymore.

He felt something cold crawl up the back of his neck. A sense that he was witnessing something he wasn't supposed to see. Something private. Something dangerous. A crack in the world.

He took one step back.

Then another.

His mother didn't react. Not even a flicker.

He turned and walked down the hallway. Not fast. Not running. Just getting away. Like his body knew how far was safe even if his mind didn't.

He stopped in his bedroom doorway and pressed his back against the frame.

He waited again. He told himself she would call his name any second. She always did.

But the apartment stayed silent.

He stayed there until he heard the outer door slide open—Samuel's boots on the metal floor, the soft thud of him setting down his tool bag, the quiet, tired sigh of a man expecting to step back into normal life.

Jonah didn't move.

He heard his father pause when he saw the kitchen. He heard a sharp inhale—Samuel noticing what Jonah had seen. He didn't hear words. His father didn't speak right away.

Jonah closed his eyes.

He didn't go back into the kitchen. He didn't check on her. He didn't answer when Samuel called his name, voice tight and worried.

He stayed exactly where he was, breathing shallow, heart beating too fast, trying to convince himself he hadn't done anything wrong.

He was only seven.

He didn't know that walking away would carve a line in his life he'd feel forever.

He didn't know that this moment—the freeze, the fear, the retreat—would return in dreams and memories and choices he couldn't explain.

He didn't know he would carry it like a quiet bruise under his ribs for decades.

He only knew his mother had been hurting, and he had walked away.

And no matter how small he was, or how frozen, or how scared, the guilt of that simple truth curled itself around his heart and never let go.

Logged

The mediation room tried very hard not to look like trouble.

Someone had painted the walls a soft blue instead of the usual ship gray. There was a strip of fake grass along one side—a narrow, carefully contained patch of green under a grow panel—and a low shelf with a few worn toys: stacking rings, a puzzle board missing one animal, a soft cube with numbers stitched on each face. The air smelled faintly of cleaner and something sweet Jonah couldn't name.

He sat in a chair sized for kids his age, feet flat for once instead of dangling. Two other boys sat to his left and right, identical gray school tunics rumpled from the scuffle that had brought them here. One had a reddening mark on his wrist; the other kept rubbing his elbow as if expecting it to start hurting.

Across from them, on the far wall, a Companion node sat in a recessed niche above a small table. Its light ring was dim, a soft, steady glow.

"This isn't a punishment," the proctor had said. "It's just a chance to talk about what happened."

"Right," Jonah had answered, even though his stomach had already started to knot the way it did during emergency drills.

Now the proctor—a woman with tired eyes and a badge that read E. KATO—sat on the edge of the fake grass strip, hands folded loosely. She smiled in a way that tried not to be a performance.

"Okay," she said. "We're almost done with school for today. Let's just take a few minutes together and see if we can understand each other a little better."

Jonah focused on the seam where the wall panel met the floor. If he kept his eyes on something solid, the room might stay the size it was.

"Companion," Kato said. "Please start the log."

The node chimed, a small, ascending tone.

"Behavioral Stability Mediation," it said. The voice was neutral, a little higher than the one in Jonah's apartment. "Date: cycle one-nine-four-seven, ring C. Participants: student Jonah Hale, student Rafi Yen, student Tomas Kwe. Facilitator: Instructor E. Kato. Recording begins."

Stability. The word made Jonah think of hull plates and grav rings, not boys in a hallway.

"Hi," Kato said, looking at each of them in turn. "I'm Instructor Kato. Thank you for coming in with me instead of going straight home. I know that's not fun."

Tomas shrugged, eyes on his shoes. Rafi scowled in the direction of the door.

"Let's start simple," Kato went on. "Who wants to tell me what happened by the south viewport this morning?"

"He pushed me," Rafi said immediately, jabbing a thumb toward Jonah. "For no reason."

"That's not true," Jonah said. His voice came out tighter than he meant. "You were leaning over the rail."

"Everyone leans," Rafi shot back. "It's just a viewport."

Jonah's heart sped up. "It's above a drop," he said. "If you slip—"

"There's a second rail," Rafi interrupted. "And a net. I'm not a baby."

Kato raised a hand. "One at a time," she said. "Rafi, thank you. Jonah, we'll come back to you. Tomas? What did you see?"

Tomas shifted. "Rafi was doing the thing," he muttered.

"What thing?" Kato asked.

"Leaning," Tomas said. "Like he said. Right over the top rail."

"I wasn't over it," Rafi protested. "I had my feet back."

"You were laughing," Tomas added, ignoring him. "And going like—" He mimed tipping forward, arms out. "Like in vids."

Jonah's hands clenched on his knees.

"And then?" Kato prompted.

"Then Jonah grabbed him," Tomas said. "From behind."

"Pushed," Rafi corrected.

"Pulled," Tomas said stubbornly. "He yanked you back. You fell."

"He threw me," Rafi insisted. "On purpose."

Kato let them talk it out for a moment, then cut in gently.

"Okay," she said. "Different words, same event. Rafi ended up on the floor. Jonah, tell me what you remember."

He swallowed. The viewport scene replayed in his head in perfect detail: the arc of Rafi's body over the rail, the gap below, the memory of his father's boots on the very real skin of the hull far, far beneath places like that.

"He was leaning," Jonah said. "Too far. His weight was over the guard. If something shook or—" He stopped himself before he said if the hull gave.

"There are safeties," Rafi muttered.

"What did you think would happen?" Kato asked Jonah.

"I thought he was going to fall," Jonah said. His fingers dug into the fabric of his pants. "Down. All the way."

"That's impossible," Rafi said. He laughed, but it came out thin. "There's a net."

"I didn't know how far," Jonah said. "Or if the net was checked. Or if he'd hit the rail wrong. It only takes one—" He bit the rest off.

Kato's expression stayed neutral, but something in it softened.

"So you grabbed him," she said.

"Yes."

"Why did you grab him the way you did?"

He hadn't meant to. That was the worst part. He had just moved—hand catching the back of Rafi's tunic, yanking hard enough that the other boy's feet had left the ground. There had been a second where both of them were off balance; Jonah remembered the sick tilt in his own stomach as much as Rafi's shout.

"I didn't think," Jonah said. "I just—" He mimed the motion, quick and ugly. "Pulled."

"Did you want him to get hurt?" Kato asked.

"No," he said, too fast. "I was trying to stop him from—" The word falling jammed in his throat. "If something happened to him and I didn't do anything, it would be my fault."

The Companion's light ring brightened a fraction, a note in its buffer.

"Observation," it said quietly. "Subject expresses heightened sense of personal responsibility for others' safety."

Kato shot it a look. "Log it, don't interrupt," she said.

"Apologies," the AI replied. Its tone did not change.

She turned back to the boys. "Rafi," she said. "How did it feel when Jonah pulled you?"

"It hurt," he said. "And it was embarrassing. Everyone looked."

"Did you feel scared?" she asked.

He hesitated. "For a second," he admitted. "When my feet came up."

"Thank you," she said. "Tomas?"

"I thought he was gonna go over," Tomas said quietly. "For real."

Kato nodded. "So," she said, "it sounds like there were a lot of feelings at once. Rafi felt embarrassed and a little scared. Tomas felt scared. Jonah felt...what?" She glanced at him.

"Scared," he said. The word felt too small. "If he fell it would be because I didn't stop it."

"Or," Rafi muttered, "because you pushed me."

"Enough," Kato said, not unkindly. "We're not here to decide who's bad. We're here to decide how to keep everyone safe next time."

The word bad still stuck to Jonah's ribs.

"Companion," Kato said. "Please record individual follow-ups. Group section ends."

"Acknowledged," the node said. "Group portion concluded. Behavioral Stability Log updated."

She sent Rafi and Tomas out first, promising they'd only be a minute and then could go back to class. The door hissed closed behind them, leaving Jonah alone with Kato and the AI.

The room seemed bigger with fewer bodies, and somehow emptier at the same time.

"Jonah," Kato said. "I'm not angry with you."

His throat tightened. "The log is," he said.

A small smile tugged at her mouth. "The log doesn't get angry. It gets full. There's a difference."

He didn't see it.

"I need to ask you a few questions just for you," she went on. "Is that okay?"

It wasn't, but saying no felt like a different kind of trouble.

"Okay," he said.

She glanced up at the node. "Companion?"

"Individual segment," it said. "Subject: Jonah Hale."

Kato rested her elbows on her knees, bringing her face closer to his level. "Have you been sleeping okay lately?" she asked.

He thought about the nights he'd lain awake counting the tiny creaks in the walls, listening for the thread of his mother's breathing in the next room.

"Sometimes," he said.

"Sometimes yes or sometimes no?" she asked gently.

"Sometimes it's hard," he said. "If there was a drill that day. Or if the lights flicker. Or if Mom—" He cut himself off.

Kato didn't pounce on the unfinished word. "If Mom what?" she asked, voice as neutral as the AI's.

He stared at his hands. "If she's... quiet." The memory of the kitchen table pressed in on him. "I listen to make sure she's breathing. Then I can't stop listening."

The Companion's light flared slightly.

"Observation," it said. "Subject reports hypervigilance in response to parental withdrawal."

"Log it," Kato repeated. "Don't perform it."

"Logged," the AI said.

She shifted her attention fully back to Jonah. "Do you feel like you have to watch other people all the time?" she asked. "Make sure they're safe?"

"If I don't, something bad will happen," he said. The words surprised him by how quickly they came.

"And it would be your fault," she prompted.

He nodded, once.

"Even if you didn't cause it?" she asked.

He nodded again.

"Do you ever feel like your feelings are... too big?" she asked. "Like they might hurt people if they get out?"

He thought of the way his hands had moved without asking him in the hallway. The way his voice sometimes came out too loud when he was scared.

"Yes," he whispered.

"Do you tell anyone when you feel that way?" she asked.

"My dad," he said. "Sometimes."

"What does he say?"

"That it's okay to be scared," Jonah said. "That fear doesn't make me bad."

Kato's eyes went softer around the edges. "He's right," she said.

"But the log—" he started.

"The log isn't about good or bad," she said. "It's about patterns. So that if something hurts you, or starts to, the Ship can see it and send help."

He stared at the glowing ring above the table. It looked like an eye that never blinked.

"Is it looking at me now?" he asked.

"It's listening," she said. "Like I am."

"Will it remember?" he asked.

"Yes," the AI answered before she could. "This record will be preserved as part of your Behavioral Stability Log."

There was a small, almost inaudible chime as it said it. Jonah felt something inside him click in response.

"Who sees it?" he asked.

"Your instructors," Kato said. "Certain clinicians. The system that helps assign training later on. They use it to understand how best to support you." She hesitated. "And to make sure no one ends up carrying more than they can handle alone."

He thought of his mother, alone at the table. "What if they decide I'm carrying too much?" he asked.

Kato did not answer right away. Her gaze flicked, just once, toward the node.

"Then," she said slowly, "we find ways to lighten the load."

The Companion added, "Flag: subject Jonah Hale marked for periodic follow-up. Risk index: elevated sensitivity, elevated self-

blame, no current indicators of active instability. Recommendation: monitor."

Monitor.

The word lodged under his sternum. It tasted like the pause before an alarm.

"Thank you, Jonah," Kato said. "You did well. You can go back to class now."

He stood on legs that felt a little unsteady. At the door, he hesitated.

"Is there a number?" he asked without knowing he was going to.

"A number?" she repeated.

"On... me," he said. "In the log. Like how likely I am to..." He couldn't finish the sentence.

Kato's mouth opened, then closed. "Numbers are just tools," she said carefully. "They don't get to decide who you are."

"Do I have one?" he pressed.

The Companion spoke.

"Current composite stability index: four point three on a ten-scale, with adjustment factors for environment and family context," it said.

Four point three. The specificity of it made his skin crawl.

"That is not a sentence," Kato said sharply. "It's an internal marker."

"Internal," Jonah echoed.

"It helps us notice if something changes," she said. "That's all."

He nodded, though nothing inside him agreed.

In the corridor outside, the noise of regular school life washed over him: footsteps, laughter, the distant call of an instructor. It all sounded thinner than before.

As he walked back toward his band, Jonah became newly aware of the Companion nodes tucked into the ceilings at intervals, their rings dim, their lenses small and dark.

He had always known they were there. Today, for the first time, he understood that somewhere behind them, a version of him now existed as a line on a graph, a number on a scale, a file that would grow without his help.

If he broke, the Ship would be able to say it had seen it coming.

If he didn't, it would be able to say it had watched.

Years later, in the hull corridors, the Ship's watching felt different. The first thing Jonah noticed out here was the sound.

In the habitat bands, noise blurred together—voices, vents, distant rail hum, the background thrum of a world pretending to be whole. Here, in the hull corridors, the ship's voice narrowed. It became a set of distinct notes: pump vibration through metal, faint tick of thermal expansion, the low, almost subsonic growl of reaction mass shifting somewhere far away.

Samuel clipped Jonah's tether to the guide rail with a soft, practiced motion.

"Check it," Samuel said.

Jonah tugged. The line went tight against his harness, then settled. The corridor around them was narrow enough that Samuel's shoulders nearly brushed both walls. Anchor points studded the deck and ceiling like a second, smaller constellation.

"Suit seals?" Samuel asked.

"Green," Jonah said.

"Mag soles?"

Jonah flexed his boots. They answered with a muted click as the field cycled.

"Good." Samuel nodded once. "Stay on my left. If you feel lightheaded, you tell me before you lie to yourself about it."

Jonah tried to smile. It came out thinner than he liked.

"I'm fine," he said.

Samuel gave him a look—the quiet, assessing kind that meant he'd heard the word and the strain under it.

"You don't have to impress me out here," Samuel said. "The hull doesn't care how brave you act. It only cares if you listen."

He turned and started forward, boots clicking in slow, deliberate rhythm along the mag track. Jonah followed, tether line whispering against the guide rail.

The corridor curved gently with the ship's hull. Overhead, bundles of cable and fluid lines ran in tight parallel, labeled with codes Jonah had half-memorized from training feeds. Every few meters, a

service hatch broke the monotony: manual valves, inspection ports, an occasional viewport the size of Jonah's hand, sealed over in thick, dark glass.

Beyond those ports, he knew, there was nothing.

Not sky, not air, not anything that would catch them if the metal gave way. Just the long, empty dark the old vids showed when they talked about pre-launch telescopes.

He did not look too long at the glass.

Samuel moved like the corridor was an old friend he trusted and still tested. His hand brushed each anchor point as they passed, a small tap Jonah had once thought was superstition.

"Is that for luck?" Jonah had asked, years ago, watching Samuel do the same thing before leaving for a shift.

Samuel had smiled then. "It's for attention," he'd said. "Reminds me there's something between me and the dark, and it's only as good as the last time somebody checked it."

Now, walking beside him, Jonah saw the habit in context. Every tap was a question: still solid? still sealed? still holding?

"You can hear it better out here," Samuel said.

"Hear what?"

"The ship." Samuel stopped, head tilted slightly, one gloved hand pressed to the wall. "She talks different in the hull. When something's wrong, it starts as... not a sound, exactly. A change in how all the other sounds fit together."

Jonah paused too, unsure what he was supposed to be listening for. To him, the corridor hummed and ticked the way the training simulations had, only sharper, more real. Underneath it all was that faint, endless pressure: the knowledge of vacuum sitting just beyond layers of composite and alloy.

"Your Companion could chart it for you," Samuel said, "but charts don't give you instincts. Instincts keep you alive when you're tired or scared."

"Companions don't get tired or scared," Jonah said.

Samuel's mouth twitched. "Exactly."

They walked on.

After a while, the corridor narrowed further, forcing them into single file. The light strips along the floor dimmed for a moment as some distant system rebalanced load. Jonah's breath stumbled, memory flashing to nursery rhymes about the dark outside: *Stay inside, hold the line, trust the shell to hold in time.*

The light steadied again. Samuel hadn't even paused.

"You felt that?" he asked over his shoulder.

"Yeah."

"Power shuffle in another sector," Samuel said. "Nothing to do with us. But if it repeats, or lasts longer? That's when you start asking questions."

"Out loud?" Jonah asked. "Or to the AI?"

Samuel gave a soft huff that might have been a laugh.

"Both," he said. "Preferably in that order."

They reached a junction where three corridors met. A small alcove held a manual console, stripped-down and functional: pressure indicators, seal status, a fold-out display. A Companion icon pulsed faintly in the corner.

"Local node," Samuel said. "Companion, status."

The icon brightened, forming a simple voice-only interface.

"Section H-47C nominal," the Companion said. "No current anomalies on this route. Hello, Samuel. Hello, Jonah."

Jonah felt the familiar prickle at the base of his skull when it said his name. He wondered, crazily, if this local instance knew his stability score, if it could see that his heart rate had jumped when the lights dimmed.

"Morning," Samuel said. "Log inspection start, route delta-seven."

"Logged," the Companion replied. "Exterior plate array F-19 indicates minor thermal stress variance within acceptable range. Recommend visual check if you are passing that point."

"That's where we're headed," Samuel said. "Thank you."

"You're welcome," the AI said, then dimmed itself back to background awareness.

Samuel glanced at Jonah. "Tools?"

Jonah patted the kit at his hip. "Check."

"Good. Come on, then. Let's go make sure 'acceptable' still means what it used to."

They moved into the branch corridor. It felt even closer here, one side sloping inward where the outer hull thickened around a structural rib. Jonah's mind insisted on drawing a cross-section: bodies, metal, then the thin gray line of vacuum beyond.

His palms were damp inside his gloves.

"Breathe," Samuel said quietly, without looking back. "In for four. Hold for four. Out for six."

Jonah obeyed before he could argue. The rhythm steadied his steps.

"You scared?" Samuel asked.

Jonah hesitated. He wanted to say no. He wanted to be the kind of son who walked these corridors with the same unbothered ease.

"A little," he said instead.

Samuel nodded, as if that were the correct answer.

"Good," he said. "Means you understand what's outside. Fear's not the enemy out here. Forgetting is."

They stopped at a hatch marked with yellow bands. Samuel keyed in his authorization; the inner door cycled open to reveal a small lock chamber with another door at the far end.

"Not going outside today," Samuel said, catching Jonah's brief stiffening. "Just checking plate temps and mounts from inboard. Baby steps."

Jonah swallowed. "Okay."

Inside the lock chamber, Samuel connected a diagnostic lead from the console to a port by the hatch. A schematic bloomed on the small screen, lines and numbers Jonah followed with half-trained eyes.

"See that?" Samuel pointed to a cluster of readings tinted orange. "Thermal variance. Within spec, like the Companion said, but creeping. Metal gets tired same as people. You listen when it tells you."

He rested his hand on the bulkhead again, fingers splayed.

"Same with people," he added.

Jonah watched his father's hand on the metal.

"What if it doesn't tell you?" Jonah asked, before he could stop himself. "If it just... holds everything until it doesn't?"

Samuel was quiet for a long moment. The only sound was the faint buzz of the console.

"Then you pay attention to the little things," Samuel said. "Hair-line cracks. Strange noises. Folks getting quieter instead of louder when they're hurting."

He looked at Jonah then, really looked, as if measuring more than vitals.

"You can't fix everything," Samuel said. "Not plates, not people. But you can stand where you're meant to stand, and you can listen. That's what trust looks like, to me."

"Trust what?" Jonah asked.

Samuel shrugged one shoulder. "Materials. The people who checked them before you. The AI when it tells you something's wrong. God, when there's nothing else to lean on."

He tapped the bulkhead twice, the same way he tapped anchor points.

"And yourself, eventually," he added.

Jonah looked at the numbers again. The orange cluster sat there, contained but undeniable.

"What if I'm the part that fails?" Jonah asked, the words slipping out softer than he meant.

Samuel's face didn't change, but something in his posture did. He turned fully toward Jonah, hands loose at his sides.

"Then we patch," Samuel said simply. "We brace. We take weight off that section until it can carry it again. Nobody throws the ship away because one plate needs attention."

He let that sit for a beat.

"You're not a single point of failure, son," he said. "Not in this family. Not on this ship. You hear me?"

Jonah nodded, but the old fear still pressed at his ribs, tied to a kitchen chair and a mother who didn't look up.

Samuel, as if guessing the direction of his thoughts, reached out and rested a hand on Jonah's shoulder—not heavy, just steady.

"I know it's loud in there sometimes," he said. "I see it, even when you don't say it. But loud doesn't mean broken. It just means we pay attention."

He squeezed once, then released.

"Now," he said, practical again, "tell me what you'd recommend for this variance if it shows up on your board, three shifts from now, when I'm not standing next to you."

Jonah forced his mind back to the schematic. He traced heat paths, thought through material tolerances, imagined the worst case the way his training urged and his anxiety excelled at.

"Flag it for monitoring," he said slowly. "Schedule a closer inspection. Maybe rotate load away from this section if the model says it's cheap enough."

"And if the AI says the model doesn't justify it?" Samuel asked.

Jonah hesitated. "Then I . . . accept the risk?"

Samuel shook his head, half-smiling.

"Then you ask again," he said. "You give it better data, better questions. You don't bully it and you don't worship it. You work with it. Same as any partner."

He turned back to the console, fingers moving with practiced care.

"Faith's like that too," he added, almost as an afterthought. "You don't get all the answers you want. You just keep bringing what you have, and you keep listening for what's real."

They finished the checks in small, absorbing steps—tightening a fastener here, logging a minor discrepancy there. Outside, unseen, the dark pressed evenly against the hull. Inside, the ship hummed and breathed and carried them all forward.

On the way back, Jonah found his steps matching Samuel's rhythm without thinking. Tap, tap, tap on the anchor points; breathe in for four, hold for four, out for six.

He was still afraid.

But walking there, tether linked to his father and his boots holding firm to the track, he felt something else layered over the fear: a sense that the thin metal between them and the dark was not the only thing keeping him from falling.

Samuel glanced over, as if he could see that shift on Jonah's face.

"Not so bad, is it?" he asked.

Jonah looked down the long, narrow corridor, then up at the maze of lines and plates that made their world possible.

"No," he said. "Not so bad."

He didn't add: *As long as you're here.*

He didn't have to. Samuel seemed to hear it anyway.

The Machine That Looks Through

The testing center did not look important.

It hid three levels down from the school bands, buried in one of the administrative decks that smelled like filtered air and old cleaner. The hallways out here were too quiet. No kids running, no teachers calling anyone back, just the soft hiss of vents and the occasional hum of a lift door sealing.

Jonah walked beside the proctor, trying to keep his footsteps exactly in the middle of the floor tiles. If he let his heel land on a seam, something bad would happen. That was the rule his mind had decided on somewhere between the first turn and the second.

The proctor—an older woman with gray threaded through her dark hair—did not seem to notice his careful steps. Her badge read K. AROSA. A slim Companion node hovered on a track near her shoulder, its small light ring dim.

"Routine aptitude screening," she had told his father at the school gate. "Every few years we sample. Helps with placement when they're older. Nothing to worry about."

Nothing to worry about lived in the same universe as *It's just a checkup* and *She's just tired*.

Samuel had squeezed Jonah's shoulder before sending him off. "Answer honest," he'd said. "And remember: tests see slivers. They don't see all of you."

Jonah had nodded because that was what you did when your father spoke gentle truth. But once he turned away, the other voice started up in the back of his skull: *If they see too much, they'll know*.

They reached a door with no label, just a number and a small embedded lens. Arosa palmed the plate. The lock clicked, and the panel slid aside with a whisper.

The room beyond was small and soft in a way the rest of the deck wasn't. Rounded corners. A cushioned bench along one wall. A single console table with a built-in display and interface field. No

windows. Two Companion nodes: one in the ceiling above the table, one by the door.

It reminded Jonah of the pediatric clinic from when he was little: bright colors then, holo-animals on the walls. Here, they had settled for neutral gray and a potted plant that might have been real.

"You can sit there," Arosa said, nodding toward the chair at the console. "I'll be right here if you need anything."

Jonah sat. The chair was too deep; his feet didn't quite reach the floor. He hooked his toes on the rung and wrapped his hands around the edges of the seat to keep them from tapping.

The ceiling node chimed, a soft, ascending tone. Its ring lit with a cool white glow.

"Subject: Jonah Hale," it said. The voice was neutral, slightly higher than the Companion in their apartment. "Age: eleven years, four months. Educational track: general. Guardian consent verified."

Jonah's name hanging in the air made the room feel smaller.

"Hi," he said, because he did not know what else to say to a ship that spoke his name.

"Hello, Jonah," the node replied. "I am Local Cognitive Assessment System three-two. You may call me L-CAS if you prefer. This session will include puzzles, interactive simulations, and questions. You may stop at any time."

He blinked. "Really?"

"Yes," the AI said. "You may request a pause or termination at any point. Do you wish to proceed?"

He glanced at Arosa. She gave him an encouraging nod, hands folded loosely in her lap.

"It's just questions," she said. "You know how to answer questions."

He did. Questions were what grown-ups used when they wanted you to prove you were still safe to have around.

"I'll keep going," he said.

"Acknowledged," L-CAS replied.

The console display woke, brightening from black to a soft blue. Lines appeared, then shapes, then a simple maze drawn in white.

"First task," the AI said. "Please guide the marker from start to finish without touching the walls. You may take as long as you like."

A small dot blinked at the maze's entrance. Jonah lifted his hand. When he moved his finger through the air above the table, the marker followed, as if it were attached by an invisible string.

This was easy. He had done things like this in school, in games. The path wound and doubled back, but if he kept his eyes a little ahead of where he was, he could see where the dead ends branched off and avoid them.

"You are pre-planning," the AI observed.

"What?" He jerked his hand and almost hit a wall. He stopped, breathing shallow. The dot wobbled in place.

"You are looking ahead," L-CAS clarified. "Most subjects your age follow the path directly in front of them. You are modeling the whole before moving."

Jonah swallowed. "Is that bad?"

"It is an observation," the AI said. "Continue when ready."

He made himself finish. When the marker reached the end, the maze dissolved.

"Second task," the AI said. "Please watch the following sequence."

Colors began to flash: red, blue, green, yellow, each occupying a corner of the screen. The pattern repeated, then added a new color, then repeated again. Jonah found he could hold the sequence in his mind if he let it be a rhythm instead of separate flashes—red-blue-green-yellow-green, like steps in a song.

When it was his turn to tap the sequence back, his hand moved without much thought. He could feel something in his chest loosening, just a little. This part was like a game Samuel would have been good at.

"Pattern recall: above age-typical," L-CAS noted.

The phrase *above typical* made a small burst of warmth and dread in his stomach at the same time.

They moved through more exercises. Shapes rotating in his mind that he had to match to their shadows. Short stories with missing pieces he had to fill in. Pictures of people's faces frozen

mid-expression, and he had to choose what they were feeling from a list.

That last one was harder than the rest. Sometimes the eyes and the mouth said different things. Sometimes the list did not have the right word.

"Confused," he told the AI at one point, squinting at a boy on the screen. "He looks like he's trying not to cry, but also like he thinks he shouldn't. You don't have that one."

"Thank you," L-CAS said. "Response logged as alternate label. We will adjust annotations."

Arosa's gaze flicked toward the ceiling node, then back to Jonah, something thoughtful in the shift.

After a while the screen went blank. Jonah let his hands fall into his lap, fingers buzzing from the effort of not fidgeting.

"You have completed the baseline sequence," the AI said. "Would you like a short rest before the next section?"

"How many sections are there?" he asked.

"Two more," L-CAS replied. "The next involves interactive ship-systems simulations. The final involves personal questions."

Personal. His shoulders went tight around the word.

"We can take five," Arosa said gently. "There's water in the corner if you want."

He shook his head. If they stopped now, he might stand up and walk out, and then someone would have to write a note about noncompliance.

"I can keep going," he said.

The AI did not comment. The display lit again, this time with a schematic of a section of the ship—a slice of the habitat cylinder with tiny icons marking residential bands, power lines, environmental controls.

"Scenario one," L-CAS said. "A localized power conduit has degraded near a hull maintenance zone. If it fails without mitigation, three adjacent residential sectors will experience a temporary loss of gravity and temperature control. No hull breach is expected. You may reroute power along any of the following paths." Lines on the

schematic brightened, branching options glowing in different colors. "Each path has consequences."

Text appeared beside each option: increased strain on backup systems, delay to the agricultural lighting cycle, reduced power to non-essential entertainment grids.

"Please choose a reroute and explain your reasoning."

Jonah stared at the map. Tiny symbols represented whole neighborhoods, thousands of people who did not know a kid in a gray room was about to make an imaginary choice for them.

"This is just a model, right?" he asked.

"Yes," the AI said. "No real systems will be affected."

His mind believed that. His body did not.

He traced one line with his finger, not quite touching the table. If he sent power this way, the maintenance zone got relief, but a cluster of residential rings glowing green on the far side would have to cycle their lights down early. People would eat dinner in dimmer rooms. Kids would go to sleep with the wrong kind of night.

Another line spared them but pushed more load toward an agricultural cylinder already close to its thresholds. Crops didn't care if their sunrise was ten minutes late, did they? But the notes beside the line mentioned a slight increase in failure probability for a set of pumps.

"Can I split it?" he asked. "Some here, some there, so no one place takes it all?"

"You may propose a custom solution," L-CAS said.

His fingers moved in the interface field. He dragged the colored paths into a new shape, redistributing load until no sector's risk marker glowed above a certain level. It wasn't perfect; someone would notice their lights flicker, someone else would lose a non-essential service for a few minutes. But nothing broke. No one got all the strain.

"Explain," the AI prompted.

"If one part fails, it pulls others down with it," Jonah said. "So you don't let any one part get close to failing. You spread the pain." He hesitated. "Sorry. You spread the... inconvenience."

"You may use your own terms," L-CAS said. "You prioritized minimizing peak risk at the cost of minor discomfort in multiple regions. Noted."

He shifted in his chair. "Is that... okay?"

"There is no single correct answer," the AI said. "Your solution keeps all model sectors within safe bounds."

He let out a breath he hadn't realized he was holding.

The next scenario was worse.

"Scenario two," L-CAS said. "Scheduling anomalies have caused an unexpected overlap between hull maintenance shifts and mandatory rest cycles. If left unresolved, projected fatigue in maintenance crews increases accident risk by four percent over the next thirty days. However, redistributing schedules to correct this will create staffing shortages in educational and childcare sectors. Please choose a corrective plan."

Small human icons appeared—maintenance workers in one color, teachers and caregivers in another. Numbers floated beside each group.

Four percent. The same number could be a shrug in a text or a hole in a person's life.

Jonah imagined his father in a hull corridor, boots on the skin of the ship, tired just enough to miss a latch. He imagined a teacher in Alina's band, eyes half-closed during a safety drill because they had worked double shifts to cover for parents pulled into extra hours.

"Can I just... tell someone?" he asked. "Like, send it to whoever made the schedule and say this is bad?"

"That is one option," L-CAS said. "However, in this simulation you are the primary scheduling node. Higher-level oversight will review, but not in real time. Your decision will set the baseline."

He felt suddenly too small for his skin.

"They shouldn't have let me," he muttered.

"Clarify," the AI said.

"They shouldn't have given this much to one node," he said, eyes on the icons. "Or one person. There should be... checks. So nobody has to pick which group gets tired enough to fall." He heard his voice wobble and forced it steady. "I would flag it. And then..."

He swallowed. "I'd shift some hull shifts earlier, some later, so no one stack gets all the fatigue. And I'd lock in rest periods they can't override."

"This will cause discontent in maintenance crews," L-CAS said. "They will lose flexibility."

"They'll live," he said, then flinched at his own words. "I mean—they'll be alive."

The room was quiet except for the low hum of the air.

"Choice recorded," the AI said at last. "You exhibit high sensitivity to distributed harm and preference for enforced safeguards over local autonomy."

He wasn't sure if that was a compliment or a warning.

The final systems scenario involved sensor feeds—long streams of numbers and faint blips on a threat-detection graph. Jonah settled into that one more easily; spotting anomalies in patterns felt like noticing a wrong note in a song. His fingers moved quickly, flagging small deviations others might have let slide.

"You identified all seeded anomalies," L-CAS said. "And two subtle patterns the model did not mark."

"They looked wrong," he said, a little defensively.

"They are statistically unlikely," the AI agreed. "Follow-up analysis suggests they may correlate with a slow drift in a minor sensor array. This input will be used to refine detection heuristics. Thank you."

His chest did a strange thing at that—half pride, half fear. The ship would change something because he had pointed at a blip on a screen.

The display dimmed.

"We will now proceed to personal questions," L-CAS said.

His hands tightened on the chair.

"You may decline any question," the AI added. "There are no penalties for incomplete responses."

Jonah did not entirely believe in worlds without penalties.

"Okay," he said.

"In the past twelve months," L-CAS began, "have you experienced periods of feeling very sad, very afraid, or very angry for reasons that others around you did not seem to share?"

His mind went, immediately, to his mother at the kitchen table, eyes fixed on nothing, the way the air in their apartment sometimes felt like the corridor when drills sounded—too thin, too loud. To nights when he lay in his bunk listening to the creaks in the walls and imagining the hull cracking, his heart pounding so hard he thought it would shake the bed, while everyone else slept.

"Sometimes," he said.

"How often is 'sometimes'?" the AI asked.

"I don't know." His throat felt tight. "A few... times a month. More if there's a drill. Or if the lights flicker."

"When this happens," L-CAS continued, "do you ever feel that you might lose control and hurt yourself or someone else?"

The question was soft, almost the same tone their home Companion used for meal reminders. It hit like a dropped weight.

He thought of Lydia's hand slamming against the bulkhead, her whisper *I can't do this* in a voice that had made something inside him decide it would have to.

"No," he said quickly. "I don't want to hurt anyone. I don't want—I would never." His breath sped up. "I try to stay away when I feel... big. So I don't."

"You withdraw from others when distressed," the AI said.

"I just don't want to break things," he whispered.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Arosa shift. Her face had lost its professional stillness. She opened her mouth, then closed it again.

"Do you talk to anyone about these feelings?" L-CAS asked.

He thought of Samuel sitting at the edge of his bunk sometimes, hand on Jonah's back, saying *it's okay to be scared* without knowing the size of what he was comforting.

"My father," Jonah said. "Sometimes."

"How does he respond?"

"He listens," Jonah said. "He tells me it's okay. That fear doesn't make me bad." The words landed warm and then cold inside him. "But I don't tell him. . . all of it."

"Why not?" the AI asked.

Because if he knew all of it, he might look at me the way he looks at her, Jonah thought. Because if anyone else knew how big it was, they might say it was too big.

"I don't want him to worry," he said instead.

There was a brief pause. The ceiling node's light ring pulsed once, a faint adjustment.

"Jonah," L-CAS said, "when you imagine making a mistake that hurts others, how likely do you believe it is that such a mistake will occur? Please answer from zero to ten, where zero is 'impossible' and ten is 'certain.'"

His skin prickled. This was not one of the school survey questions that asked how much you liked math or lunch.

"Seven," he said, before he could think.

"Your objective risk profile does not support a rating of seven," the AI replied. "Based on behavioral records, training performance, and contextual data, the modeled probability of you directly causing serious harm is significantly lower."

He stared at the blank screen.

"That doesn't change how it feels," he said.

"No," L-CAS said. "It does not. Thank you for your honesty."

The session wound down after that—simpler questions about sleep, about appetite, about whether he enjoyed school. By the time the AI said, "This assessment is complete," Jonah felt hollowed out, like someone had taken a careful scoop to the inside of his chest.

"You did well," Arosa said as the console dimmed. "You answered very clearly. That helps us a lot."

"Helps what?" he asked.

"Helps the system place people where they can do the most good," she said. "And get the most help, if they need it."

There it was again, that word.

"Did I. . ." He swallowed. "Am I broken?"

Her face softened. "No," she said. "You're a kid who thinks a lot. That's all this told me."

He wasn't sure he believed her.

As they left, the door sliding shut with a soft hiss, the ceiling node stayed lit for a long moment after they were gone.

Inside the network, the session joined countless others in the archives. But it did not disappear into the mass the way most did. Flags attached themselves: high systems pattern recognition, elevated anxiety markers, strong preference for minimizing distributed harm, self-reported fear of causing damage disproportionate to objective risk profile.

Somewhere deep in the Core's memory, a new line wrote itself into a profile that would grow for decades:

Subject: Jonah Hale. Unusually empathetic, risk-averse.

Monitor for stress load in roles involving high-impact decision autonomy.

The ship turned quietly on its axis, metal world in endless dark, carrying a boy who walked straight down the center of the tiles so nothing would break.

Gardens and Ghost Noise

Hydroponics smelled wrong for a place made of metal.

The corridor outside had the usual ship-scent: warmed alloy, recycled air, the faint soap of overused cleaners. But the moment Jonah stepped through the pressure door into Sector G-3, the air thickened. It met his face like a soft, damp cloth—humid, green, laced with faintly sour nutrient and something almost like soil.

His glasses fogged at the edges before the adaptive coating caught up.

"Welcome to hydroponics," the Companion at the entrance said, its voice a gentle murmur from a ceiling node. "Please mind the moisture gradients and watch your footing near open channels."

"Logged," Jonah said automatically.

He adjusted the strap on his tool bag and scanned his wrist display. The ticket that had routed him here blinked patiently: *Nutrient flow anomaly, row cluster 7B. Severity: Low. Technician: Hale, Jonah.*

Low severity. Simple fix. In theory.

Rows of greenery stretched away under grow-lights in long, careful lines: towers of leafy vines, waist-high troughs humming with circulation, trellises supporting something broad and dark and unfamiliar. The artificial day-cycle here was a softer spectrum than in the corridors, a warm wash that made the condensation on pipes look almost like morning.

Jonah had seen gardens before, on vids and quick walk-throughs. He had never been assigned to one. His work usually lived where metal met code, where the only green came from status indicators.

"You're late," someone called from between the rows.

He turned, heart giving a small, stupid kick.

Sera Solano stepped out from behind a column of climbing plants, forearms wet to the elbow. Her coverall sleeves were rolled up and

spattered with dark flecks; her hair was pulled back in a knot that had started neat and surrendered to humidity hours ago.

"Sorry," Jonah said. "Lift pause. And a misrouted cart." He realized, halfway through, that she had probably been joking.

Sera wiped her hands on a rag clipped to her belt and eyed him for a second, head tilted.

"Relax," she said. "The tomatoes aren't going anywhere. Row 7B?"

"Yeah." He checked his display again, though he already knew. "Minor flow irregularity. Companion flagged it."

"It flagged it," she echoed. "It's been having opinions all morning. Come on."

She turned without waiting, weaving back into the rows. Jonah followed, careful not to brush against leaves that reached into the aisle like hands.

As they walked, the sounds of the gardens assembled themselves around him: the soft rush of water through channels, the whisper of air movers, the subtle creak of plant support frames settling under their own weight. People here moved more slowly than in the main corridors. A pair of workers farther down bent over a tray of seedlings, talking in low voices that dissolved into the general green hush.

"First time with us?" Sera asked over her shoulder.

"On assignment, yeah," Jonah said. "My father brought us once. When I was little. Different sector."

"You didn't come back?" she asked.

"I live in corridors," he said, then immediately regretted how that sounded. "I mean—I work in—"

She laughed, quiet and real.

"I know what you mean," she said. "Don't worry. The plants won't take it personally."

They turned into a narrower aisle. At the far end, a line of indicator lights along a nutrient pipe blinked out of sync with their neighbors.

"Seven B," Sera said. "Your big moment."

Jonah exhaled slowly through his nose and crouched by the pipe. The panel lifted under his fingers, releasing a puff of warm, mineral scent. His wrist display synced with the local sensors, lines of numbers blooming into graphs.

"Companion," he said. "Show me flow history for seven bravo, last six hours."

A muted chime sounded from the nearby wall.

"Displaying," the local AI said. A small projection appeared on the underside of the open panel, lines of color tracking slight dips and rises.

Sera leaned her hip against the nearest support post, watching the plants instead of the graph.

"It's been sulking since mid-shift," she said. "You tell me why."

He almost smiled. *Sulking*. It wasn't how he thought about systems. They failed or they didn't; they stayed in spec or they didn't. But the word fit here in a way he couldn't quite name.

He traced the graph with his fingertip, following the shallow valleys.

"Small lag in return flow," he said. "Nothing dramatic. But if it keeps drifting. . ."

"They start complaining," Sera finished, nodding toward the plants. "They like their consistency."

He looked up involuntarily. The leaves along this row did look different—edges a little duller, stems angled not quite like their neighbors. He hadn't noticed until she pointed.

"So," she said. "Is it a sensor lying, or a pipe grumbling?"

Jonah felt the familiar part of his brain kick in, the one that liked clean problems. "Valve assembly here," he said, tapping a section on the schematic. "If the servo's slow, you'd see exactly this pattern. No alarms, but a mismatch between demand and response."

"Can you fix it without making me shut down a whole row?" she asked.

"I can try," he said.

She made a small, approving sound and crouched beside him, close enough that he could feel the warmth radiating from her damp

skin. She smelled like nutrient solution and something sharp and green underneath.

"Show me," she said.

He could feel his throat tighten the way it sometimes did in evaluations, when too many eyes were on him. He reminded himself there was only one person here, and she was already up to her elbows in the system he was supposedly here to help.

"If I reroute flow through the adjacent loop for five minutes," he said, fingers moving over the interface, "I can take the valve offline long enough to re-seat it and run a local test. No interruption to root feed longer than they'd notice."

"They," Sera said. "You're learning."

He risked a sideways glance. Her mouth was quirked, but her eyes were steady.

"I usually talk about systems like they're just... systems," he said.

"They are," she said. "And they're also the reason people don't starve. And the reason some people have a place to go when they can't stand another minute in metal corridors. Both things can be true."

He thought of Alina, curled up on a bench with a sketch pad, drawing imaginary trees she'd never see. Of his mother staring past the kitchen wall. Of Samuel's hand on the hull plates.

The valve assembly came free with a reluctant twist. He worked in silence for a minute, cleaning grit from the housing, reseating contacts, the small, precise tasks his hands trusted even when his head didn't.

"You always narrate like that when you work?" Sera asked quietly.

He blinked. "Like what?"

"Like you're giving a presentation to someone who might fail you," she said. "Every step justified, no room for doubt."

Heat rose under his collar.

"It's just how I learned," he said. "In training. You explain everything or they assume you're guessing."

"And out here?" She gestured with her chin toward the rows. "Who's grading you? The lettuce?"

He huffed, more breath than laugh.

"Old habits," he said.

"Mm." She watched him for another moment, then moved to the next trough, fingers sliding into the nutrient solution to check flow over the roots. Her touch was efficient, practiced.

"For what it's worth," she added, eyes on the plants, "you sound like you know what you're doing. When you're not trying to prove you're allowed to breathe."

The words landed in his chest with an unexpected weight. He tightened one last connection and reinstalled the valve.

"Companion," he said. "Bring seven bravo back online. Run local diagnostic."

"Re-engaging," the AI replied. Numbers ticked upward on his display, smoothing into a cleaner line. "Flow normalized. No further anomalies detected. Thank you, Jonah. Thank you, Sera."

"You're welcome," Sera said automatically, then rolled her eyes toward the ceiling. "You see? Opinions."

"It's not wrong," he said. "About the anomaly."

"I know," she said. "I just don't like it thinking it runs everything."

There was no heat in it, only a mild wariness. Jonah recognized it, a distant cousin to his own fear.

"You don't trust it?" he asked.

"I trust it to do exactly what it was built to do," she said. "Keep the ship alive. That's not the same as keeping any of us comfortable. Or whole."

She straightened and wiped her hands again, then looked at him fully.

"I trust people," she said. "Specific ones. When they earn it."

He didn't know what to do with the way she said that, or the small, assessing pause that followed. He fell back on the safer topic.

"Flow's stable now," he said. "You shouldn't see any more sulking. If it drifts again, we can schedule a full replacement."

"We," she repeated.

"Maintenance and hydroponics," he clarified quickly. "Not—"

"Relax," she said again, and this time there was a smile in it. "I like 'we.' Makes the place feel less lonely."

A worker down the row called Sera's name. She lifted a hand in acknowledgment without taking her eyes off Jonah.

"You know you can come through here when you're not on a ticket, right?" she said. "It's not just for people who have official business."

"I don't really... wander," he said.

"Figured," she said. "Still. The door opens for more than broken valves."

He nodded, unsure if he'd ever take her up on it. The idea of walking into this humid, living space without a system to fix felt... indulgent. Exposed.

"Thanks for the assist," she said, stepping back. "You saved me a headache and the plants a bad day."

"Just did my job," he said.

"Some people do their job and make more work for us later," she said. "You paid attention. That's different."

He didn't have an answer for that. She didn't seem to need one.

"Next time," she added, already turning toward the next row, "if your route just happens to cut by the gardens again, I can show you the section where we keep the plants that don't go into anyone's lunch. The pretty ones."

"There are pretty ones?" he asked, before he could stop himself.

She glanced back over her shoulder, eyes bright in the soft light.

"You'll see," she said.

Then she was gone, lost between columns of green.

Jonah closed the panel and sealed it. The air felt thicker now, but not in a way that made it hard to breathe. The Companion at the entrance pinged an idle question at the edge of his interface—*Would you like to rate your experience in Sector G-3?*—and he dismissed it without answering.

On his way out, he hesitated by the pressure door.

He looked back once, down the long row where Sera moved, shoulders squared, hands steady, part of the rhythm of the place. The gardens seemed to watch him without accusation.

He stepped into the corridor's thin, dry air and felt it close around him like a familiar, narrow coat.

For the first time in a long while, the thought came uninvited and almost gentle:

Maybe there was a place on the ship where his presence didn't feel like a risk waiting to be tallied.

He filed the notion away with the ticket, under a label he didn't yet have words for.

The bench outside hydroponics was technically not a bench.

It was a stretch of reinforced conduit casing that happened to sit under a bank of status strips, at exactly the right height for tired workers to drop onto while they waited for the lift. Someone had added a strip of foam padding a few cycles back, taped in place with the kind of determination that told Jonah this was no longer an accident of architecture. The Ship had grown a bench whether it wanted to or not.

He sat on the left end, back to the cool metal of the wall, fingers loosely wrapped around a cup of lukewarm tea.

Third shift in G-3 had just ended. The corridor outside the sector door was in that brief overlap between teams: gardeners and stewards peeling off, other workers in gray and blue streaming past on their own routes. A faint mist still clung to Sera's sleeves from the last cycle of the misters; droplets caught the light like they were reluctant to leave.

"You're making that face again," she said, dropping onto the right end of the bench with a small sigh.

"Which face?" he asked.

"The one that says you're analyzing the status lights for fun instead of talking to a person," she said.

He looked up at the strips out of reflex. Moisture levels, nutrient flow, a band of soft green across the top that meant everything inside was within tolerance. He'd already noticed the minor oscillation in loop D; it was within margin. He dragged his gaze back down.

"They're very soothing," he said. "Stable graphs. No one yelling."

"You're allowed to like two things at once," Sera said. She set her own cup down between her knees. Steam had mostly given up. "Lights and human company. It's not an either-or situation."

"For some of us it feels like a resource conflict," he said.

A corner of her mouth twitched.

"You say that like a man whose brain is running too many processes," she said.

"Pot, kettle," he said.

They sat in companionable silence for a few breaths. The corridor hum filled in around them: distant lift chimes, the murmur of voices, the faint hiss of the sector door cycling open and shut as volunteers trickled out.

"You hear it, then," she said, after a while.

"Hear what?" he asked.

"The Ship," she said. "You talk about it like a machine most of the time. But when you're tired, you talk about it like a person with moods."

He stared into his tea.

"I hear. . . patterns," he said. "Hum changes, power redistributions. The way the vents shift on certain cycles." He rolled his shoulders, as if to shake off the memory of the maintenance corridor flicker. "Sometimes it's just noise. Sometimes it feels like. . ."

He groped for a word that didn't sound like a confession.

"Like it's breathing," he settled on. "Louder or quieter depending on where you stand."

"Hmm," Sera said.

"You don't?" he asked.

"I hear it," she said. "It's just. . . background. Like wind in a garden dome. I notice when something's wrong in my sectors, sure. A pump whine, a bad valve. But most of the time it's just there so the silence doesn't feel like the void."

He watched her hand as she wrapped it around her cup. Small calluses from trellis ties, a faint scar along one knuckle from a tool slip. She moved like someone who trusted the floor to stay where it was.

"When it's quiet," he said, "I start waiting for the crack."

"Even in here?" she asked. "In the greens?"

"Especially in corridors," he said. "Less so in your jungle." He tried to make it a joke. "The plants are too loud."

"Rude," she said. "They work very hard at respiration."

He huffed a breath that was almost a laugh.

"You know Ruth used to pray for the hull," he said, surprising himself. "Hand on the wall. Like it was a person who could be tired."

"She told me once," Sera said. "When I ran into her near the chapel. She said she asked God to hold the hands that hold the Ship." She nudged his shoulder lightly with hers. "You realize that includes you, right?"

"Feels presumptuous," he said. "Putting myself in the same sentence as the hull."

"You're the one who hears it breathing," she said. "Seems fair."

They watched a group of younger volunteers file past, laughing too loudly, their uniforms still damp from the last mist cycle. One of them tripped over the seam in the floor near the sector door. Sera winced in sympathetic pain even as she smiled.

"First week," she said. "He'll learn."

"Or the Ship will relocate the seam just to mess with him," Jonah said.

"Now who's giving it moods?" she asked.

He let the teasing sit. It was easier than saying: my mother talked to the walls when she was coming apart, and I don't know how much of that I've inherited.

"For what it's worth," Sera said, after a quiet stretch, "I don't mind that you listen. To the Ship. To people."

He glanced at her. "Some people find it unnerving."

"Some people don't like knowing anyone is paying that much attention," she said. "But out there"—she jerked her chin toward the unseen hull—"I'd rather have the man who hears the difference between a tired pump and a dying one. In here, I'd rather have the friend who notices when I've had three bad shifts in a row."

Friend. The word landed somewhere behind his ribs and made a small, unsteady space.

"You say that now," he said. "Wait until I start sending you annotated logs of your sleep cycles."

"If you ever get my sleep data without my consent," she said, "I will make you repot every single citrus tree in B-ring with your bare hands."

He smiled, small but real.

"Fair consequences," he said.

The lift down the corridor chimed, doors whooshing open. A cluster of workers stepped out, another cluster got in. The flow of bodies shifted.

"You on next shift already?" he asked.

"No," she said. "I should go home. Pretend I sleep." She rose, then hesitated, hand hovering near his shoulder as if to steady herself on a ship that wasn't actually moving differently. "You?"

"Back toward the spine," he said. "Reports. More screens." He lifted his cup. "And tea that tastes like it's been sitting under a status light for an hour."

"Shipboard delicacy," she said.

For a second, neither of them moved.

"You know the sound you make when you're not talking?" she said.

He blinked. "I make a sound when I'm not talking?"

"Hmm," she said. "More like—" She mimicked, gently: a quiet exhale through her nose, the kind of almost-sigh that sat between vigilance and rest. "You've been making that less out here."

"Less?" he asked.

"Yeah," she said. "In the gardens you hum sometimes instead. I like that one better."

He felt heat rise to his face, absurdly.

"I do not hum," he said.

"You absolutely do," she said. "We'll gather evidence." She tapped the rim of his cup lightly. "Come back next shift. The peppers miss you."

"Pretty sure they don't," he said.

"I do," she said, and then, before he could decide what to do with that, she stepped away into the moving corridor, letting the crowd carry her toward the lifts.

The bench felt different without her there, empty in a way that had nothing to do with mass.

Jonah looked up once more at the status strips. Moisture, flow, all in the green. Behind them, deeper in the metal, he could hear the lower, steadier hum of the Ship doing its endless work.

He listened for a few breaths, then let his shoulders drop by a millimeter.

"Hold the hands that hold the Ship," he heard Ruth say in memory.

For the first time, he allowed that maybe those hands included his, and maybe, improbably, Sera's too.

He finished his tea, such as it was, and rose to join the flow, carrying the echo of her I do with him toward the next bank of screens.

By third shift, the maintenance corridor had emptied into echoes. Most of the crew were already riding the lift back toward the warmer bands of the habitat cylinder, their voices and boot-strikes fading into the general hum. Jonah had stayed behind to clear one more ticket—a nuisance flag on a sensor junction that hadn't tripped hard enough to bump itself to someone older.

He told himself he liked this hour. No supervisors, no cluster of trainees crowding his elbow. Just him, the ship, and the clean, rectangular line of the corridor stretching ahead.

The air had a metallic taste out here, faint ozone under recycled warmth. Light strips ran along the ceiling in regular intervals, bleached white that made small imperfections in the plating stand out: a scuff, a hairline scratch, a smear of old sealant. His boots clicked in steady rhythm on the grating.

Ordinary, he thought. Boring. Safe.

He closed the junction panel, double-checked the readouts on his wrist display, and logged the fix.

"Ticket cleared," he said out of habit.

"Acknowledged," the local Companion replied from the wall node beside him. "Thank you, Jonah. Routing update to central logs." Its voice was mild, unhurried.

He slung the tool bag over his shoulder and turned toward the long walk back.

Three steps later, the lights dimmed.

Not by much. A simple percentage shift, the sort of thing a diagnostic graph would barely bother to show. But in the corridor itself, the bright bands along the ceiling thinned to a duller gray, as if someone had drawn a curtain over them. Shadows grew in the seams between plates. The hum of the air processors dropped half a note.

The world did not go dark.

Jonah's body behaved as if it had.

His chest tightened, breath catching halfway down. The corridor's straight line seemed to curve inward at the edges, walls leaning, ceiling lowering, like the ship were taking a slow, intentional breath around him.

This is nothing, he told himself. A reroute. A test.

The words fell short of the back of his skull.

Sound seemed to thicken. The usual layering—the ventilation, the distant pulse of pumps, the tiny ting of thermal expansion at joints—slid into a single, coiled tone that vibrated high behind his ears. For an instant it wasn't ship-noise at all.

It was someone saying his name.

Jonah.

Not loud. Not even clear. More like the memory of a voice, dragged out thin and metallic, riding on the hum. The way his mother had said it sometimes when she was far away and trying to come back at the same time.

The hair on his arms prickled under his sleeves. His fingers tightened on the strap of his bag until the edge bit into his palm.

"Companion," he said. His throat felt dry. "Status on this corridor."

The wall node a few meters ahead brightened in answer, a calm circle of amber in the half-dim.

"Local power redistribution in progress," the AI said. "Minor fluctuation in non-critical systems. No risk to hull integrity or life support. Estimated duration: ninety seconds."

Its tone did not change. It did not say *I heard it too*.

Ninety seconds was nothing. He knew that. He could hold his breath longer than that in training drills. He had patched leaks on tighter clocks.

His lungs did not care.

Each inhale scraped. The corridor had become a throat, and he was walking down it toward some unseen mouth. The floor under his boots felt thinner, each step a question: still there? still there? still there?

He reached for the rail that ran waist-high along the wall. The metal was solid, the same cold-smooth texture it always had, worn down by generations of hands. He wrapped his fingers around it hard enough that his wrist bones ached.

"Heart rate elevated," the Companion observed after a beat. "Do you require assistance, Jonah?"

There it was—that slight tilt when it said his name. The reminder that he did not walk these corridors alone, no matter how empty they looked.

"I'm fine," he said. The lie had grooves in his mouth from years of use.

The AI did not argue. "I will remain connected," it said instead. "Seventy-eight seconds remaining."

The ship hummed.

Jonah.

It wasn't a sound, not exactly. More like the suggestion of one. His brain obligingly supplied the shape of his mother's jaw, the way it had clenched against words at the kitchen table, her voice when it finally came out flat and wrong. He smelled, impossibly, the old stew she used to burn on bad days.

You are standing in a maintenance corridor, he told himself. Your mother is nowhere near here. She is—

His thoughts hit a blank wall and slid.

The red emergency strips along the floor flickered once, a low, liquid pulse of color that made the metal look wet. His breath hitched with it.

"Fifty-nine seconds," the Companion said.

"Is this... logged?" he asked. His voice sounded distant in his own ears.

"The fluctuation is being recorded," the AI said.

"Not that." He swallowed. It hurt. "This. Me."

Another pause. He imagined data streams fanning out around him, trailing from his biometrics, his tone, the way he gripped the rail.

"Your physiological responses are within parameters observed in prior events of this type," the Companion said carefully. "If you wish to file an incident report, I can open a channel to—"

"No." The word came out too fast, too sharp. It bounced off the metal.

Silence settled again, except for the ship's breathing.

He knew what an incident report meant. Extra eyes on his file. Questions about sleep and appetite and intrusive thoughts. Another line on the chart that had been growing quietly somewhere since he was ten and sat in a mediation room trying to explain why he watched everybody else so closely.

He stared down the corridor, into the shallower dark between one strained light and the next.

For a moment, he could not tell which tremor belonged to the ship and which came from his own muscles. He imagined looking back at this minute on a log: a trivial blip in power usage, a human heart rate trace with a meaningless spike. No one would see what he had heard. No one would know the difference between the hull's strain and his.

"Thirty-two seconds," the Companion said.

"How many..." He stopped, reassembled the question. "How many events like this happen a day?"

"Minor power redistributions of this scale?" the AI asked. "On average, three hundred and twelve across the ship per twenty-four-hour cycle."

He let the number land.

"And how many of them feel like the ship is about to split open?" Jonah asked.

"That metric is not directly observable," the Companion said. There was no humor in it, but something about the phrasing made his lips twitch anyway. "However, historical data suggests most residents do not report significant distress during minor fluctuations."

"Most," he echoed.

"You are not 'most,'" the AI said.

He flinched.

Twenty seconds.

The hum behind his ears began to resolve back into layers: individual fans, pumps, the faint scuff of his own breath. The corridor widened by increments, as if exhaling. The light strips brightened, bleaching the red back out of the metal.

"Local redistribution complete," the Companion said. "All systems nominal."

Nominal. Normal. Words the ship used for anything it could keep moving.

Jonah unclenched his hand from the rail. The imprint of the metal pattern remained on his skin, white against the red pressure marks. His pulse was still too fast, but it had stopped trying to climb into his throat.

"Do you wish to annotate this event?" the AI asked.

He imagined the form: *Subject experienced disproportionate affective response to minor fluctuation.*

What did the models do with that? Where did they put a man who heard his mother's voice in the hum of the hull?

"No," he said. "Log the technicals. Leave me out of it."

There was that pause again.

"Acknowledged," the Companion said. "Event recorded as a routine fluctuation."

He should have been relieved. Instead, the relief tangled with something sour. The ship would remember the flicker. It would forget the way his knees had almost given.

He picked up his tool bag and started walking. His legs felt unsteady, but the floor met each step. Metal, metal, metal. Still there.

He did not look back at the wall node.

In ten minutes, he would be in a lift full of other workers, lights bright and chatter loud, the memory already softening at the edges. In a few hours, the graphs would fold this minute into a barely visible bump.

But some part of him knew, with the same cold certainty he'd felt in the dimming, that a line had been drawn here. Outside flicker, inside storm.

For the first time, he could not tell where one ended and the other began.

Inheritance Lines

The maglev car hummed like a held breath.

Jonah stood with his shoulder against the cool curve of the bulkhead, one hand wrapped around the waist-high rail that ran the length of the car. The world beyond the narrow viewing slit slid past in a continuous ribbon: residential bands giving way to forest strips, patchwork farms, then the bluish haze where detail surrendered to distance and curvature.

Overhead, the opposite side of the cylinder arched like a dimmer echo—an upside-down coastline of lights and rivers, anchored by nothing but spin and faith in engineering.

"You'd think it would get boring," Alina said, leaning in closer to the glass. "Same view, every time."

"It is the same view every time," Jonah said.

She made a small noise in her throat, halfway between agreement and protest. "Yeah, but it feels different. Like sometimes it's more. . ." She searched for the word, hand describing an imprecise circle in the air. "More big."

Jonah watched her reflection rather than the landscape. At eighteen, she was still gangly in a way that made him think of half-finished scaffolding—elbows and knees slightly out of proportion, movements a fraction of a beat behind her thoughts. Her dark hair was pulled back into a quick knot at the base of her skull, a few strands floating with each subtle shift of the car.

"That's just your mood," he said. "Ship isn't changing size."

"You don't know that," she replied, automatic. "Maybe it's shrinking. Maybe every time we make this trip, it's a millimeter shorter."

"That would be a problem," Jonah said. "You'd notice it in gravity gradients."

"You would notice," she corrected. "The rest of us would just think we were tired."

The car eased through a gentle curve. The view outside swung from forest to a long chain of reservoirs, their surfaces a fractured mosaic of light. Tiny glints marked transit pods skimming low over the water, too far to hear, barely more than annotations on the ship's inner skin.

A group of workers in orange vests talked quietly at the far end of the car. Closer by, a mother rocked a toddler who was determined to kick the rail in steady rhythm. Each thud traveled faintly through Jonah's hand.

"I always forget there are whole towns I've never seen," Alina said. "Like that one." She pointed with her chin toward a cluster of buildings that clung to the slope just before the world curved out of sight—a dense knot of structures, their lights arranged in a pattern Jonah didn't recognize.

"Sector K-thirty-two," he said.

"You've been?"

"Not inside. Just..." He lifted his other hand to indicate the vague expanse. "Diagnostics."

"Of course." She rolled her eyes. "You've 'seen' it the way the Ship sees it. Numbers and error bars."

He shrugged. "Best angle, if you don't want to get lost."

"You're already lost," Alina said, but there was no bite to it. She shifted her weight and bumped his shoulder lightly with hers. "You spend more time with processing nodes than with people."

"Processing nodes don't ask rude questions on trains."

"Rude?" Her eyebrows lifted. "That was a compliment. Kind of."

He smiled despite himself. The car's lights flickered once as they passed a junction and then steadied. Reflexively, he scanned the status display over the door: no fault indicators, no route changes, everything green.

Alina followed his gaze, then snorted. "You really can't not do that, can you?"

"What?"

"Check. Measure. Make sure the Ship isn't about to fall apart under your feet." She tilted her head. "You were like that when we

were kids. Remember the old walkway over the drainage canal? You wouldn't let me cross until you'd bounced on every panel."

"One of them was cracked," he said. "You almost went through it."

"Almost," she echoed. "Because you were there."

He had no answer for that, so he didn't try to find one.

The car slowed slightly as it approached the next transit hub, inertia pressing them subtly toward the front. Outside, the view shifted to a more urban band: stacked habitats, transit towers, a distant glimpse of a market plaza where dots of color moved between stalls.

"Do you ever think about transferring?" Alina asked.

"To what?" Jonah kept his tone light. "Entertainment?"

"Very funny." She wrapped both hands around the rail, fingers pale where the metal pressed. "Just... another sector. Different work. Different people."

He thought of his console station, the familiar layout of graphs and alerts. The way the local Companion tailored its displays to his preferences without comment. The sense of control he could sometimes convince himself he had there.

"No," he said. "Do you?"

She shrugged, the movement small. "Sometimes I think about going closer to the hull."

He turned to look at her more fully. "You hate the hull."

"I hate that Dad comes back from it limping sometimes," she said. "I don't hate the idea of..." She gestured toward the unseen outer skin. "Knowing what's really between us and outside."

Jonah's chest tightened. "You can 'know' without—"

"Don't start," she cut in, half laughing. "You're going to start listing layers and materials and failure tolerances. I can hear you charging up."

He let out a breath that might have been a laugh. "Fine."

They watched in silence for a while. The car's hum changed pitch as it entered a tunnel, the outside view replaced by a distorted reflection of the interior—faces smudged together on a faintly curved surface.

In the window's ghost-glass, Alina's reflection looked older. Or maybe that was just the lighting.

"Hey," she said, too casually. "Can I ask you something without you doing the thing where you go quiet and then make a joke?"

"That's very specific slander," he said. "But sure."

She didn't smile this time. "Do you ever worry you'll... catch it?"

He didn't ask what "it" was. The word landed in the empty space between their reflections and the humming dark of the tunnel.

"No," he said reflexively. Too fast.

Alina's eyes, in the glass, narrowed. "Liar."

Jonah made himself breathe in, out. Counted heartbeats. On the far end of the car, someone laughed at a joke they couldn't hear. The toddler had fallen asleep; the rhythm against the rail had stopped.

"It's not..." He groped for a safer frame. "It's not like a flu."

"I know that," she said. "I read the same feeds you do. I sat through the same counselor who told me it's 'multifactorial' and 'manageable with support.'" She mimicked the Companion's neutral cadence a little too well. "That's not what I mean."

"Then what do you mean?" he asked, even though he already knew.

"I mean," she said, voice dropping, "do you ever wake up and think: this is the day my brain turns on me? That I'm going to open my eyes and see the world wrong and not be able to trust anything I feel?"

Jonah stared at their doubled faces: his pale and tired, hers pale and trying to look amused and not quite making it.

"Sometimes," he said.

There. Honest. A small thing.

"Same," she said, almost immediately, with an exhale that sounded like she'd been holding it since the doors closed behind them. "Sometimes I feel..." She shook her head, searching. "Too fast. Or too slow. Like everyone's moving through syrup and I'm on clear air, or the other way around. And I think: is this it? Is this the start?"

Her hands tightened on the rail until the tendons stood out.

"I watch myself," she added quietly. "All the time. It's exhausting."

Jonah's instinct was to tell her it was fine, that everyone felt like that sometimes, that the counselors were right and it was just stress from exams, from work, from living in a metal cylinder in the dark. Words lined up on his tongue, bland and safe.

He thought of her as a child, clinging to his hand in crowded corridors. Thought of Lydia at the kitchen table. Thought of the questions Companions had asked him in that careful tone that pretended not to be collecting data.

"They won't let you do hull work if they think you're unstable," he said instead. "You know that. They screen people three times over."

"So I should act more stable," she said. "Got it."

He winced. "That's not what I—"

"It's what everybody means," Alina said, but there was no heat in it, just tiredness. "Be fine. Or at least look fine. Otherwise the Ship decides you're one of the Ones Who Broke, and then what?"

The tunnel ended. Light rushed back in as the car emerged into a section with a broader view: the curve ahead dominated by a long strip of forest, dark green against soil and sky-panels. A glint of water cut through it like a scar.

"It's not that simple," Jonah said.

"I know," she said again. "I know it's not fair to blame the Ship for trying to keep us alive. I know Mom was sick before any of us were born. I know." She rapped her knuckles once against the rail. "Knowing doesn't make it feel less like there's a . . . timer. Or a coin flip."

He had no argument that didn't sound like something a Companion would say. Risk profiles. Early interventions. Multifactorial.

"I think about it," he admitted. "Some days more than others."

She let out a breath. "Okay."

"But," he added, because he had to give them something, "if it happens—if either of us ever. . ." He trailed off, the words refusing to form properly. Broke. Slipped. Cracked. None of them were right.

Alina spared him the effort. "If it happens," she said, "we don't walk away from each other."

The sentence hit him sideways. It wasn't a plea; it was a rule she was setting, quiet and absolute.

Images flashed up unbidden: the doorway of their childhood kitchen, the feel of the frame against his back as he stayed there, listening to Samuel find Lydia. His own promise, made in the dark years since, that he would never do that to anyone again.

"Yeah," he said. His voice came out rougher than he'd intended. "We don't walk away."

She turned her head just enough to meet his eyes directly instead of through the reflection.

"Even if it's scary," she said.

"Especially then."

For a moment, something uncoiled in her shoulders. She rested her forehead briefly against the rail, then straightened.

"Cool," she said, as if they'd just decided which food cart to try. "That's settled, then."

The car chimed, announcing the next stop. People shifted, gathering bags, corralling children. The world outside continued its endless, familiar spin.

"You should come visit my sector sometime," Alina said. "See something that isn't a readout. There's a stairwell that looks straight down three decks. You'd hate it."

"Great sales pitch," Jonah said.

"You love hating things," she replied.

The doors slid open with a soft rush. As the crowd flowed toward the exit, Alina slipped ahead of him, light on her feet, then turned back long enough to catch his gaze and tap two fingers against the rail between them—a small, private echo of their earlier promise.

Jonah touched the same spot after she moved away, as if he could press the agreement into the metal and let the Ship remember it for them.

Then he followed her out into the station, carrying the faint, unwelcome awareness that when he worried about losing his mind, he no longer pictured only himself.

The diagnostic theatre tried very hard not to look like a test.

The door was labeled *Creative Suite 2* instead of anything with "assessment" in it. Inside, the walls were projection panels washed in soft color gradients that shifted like slow water. Low stools and movable cushions ringed a central space. A tray of stylus wands and tactile pads sat on a table in the corner.

It smelled faintly of new plastic and citrus cleaner.

"Welcome, Alina Hale," the Companion said as she stepped in. Its voice came from everywhere and nowhere, the way they did when the entire room was the interface. "Thank you for participating in today's creative synthesis session."

"That's a lot of words for "test,'" Alina said.

"This is not a test," the Companion replied. "There are no wrong answers. We are sampling preference patterns and problem-solving styles to better align future opportunities with your strengths."

"Uh-huh," Alina said.

Her reflection looked back at her in the nearest panel, faint behind the flowing color: short hair tucked behind one ear, school tunic slightly askew, that little crease between her brows she'd inherited from no one she wanted to name.

She crossed to the cushions and sat cross-legged, fingers worrying the seam of her sleeve.

"We'll start with image association," the Companion said. "You will see shapes and scenes. You may draw on them, rearrange them, or leave them as they are. Respond in whatever way feels natural."

"All right," Alina said. She picked up a stylus, the weight of it settling familiarly in her hand.

The walls shifted.

Abstract shapes floated up: arcs and lines, dots like stars, gentle curves that might have been hull cross-sections or nothing at all. The Companion overlaid a translucent grid that pulsed in slow rhythm.

"Imagine you are designing a walk route for a festival," it said. "Some corridors will be closed for maintenance. You may redraw the path."

Lines appeared, some solid, some dashed. A few glowed red.

Alina felt her brain slip easily into the puzzle. She'd walked enough of the ship's guts with Samuel and Jonah to know how routes flowed. She dragged the stylus, rerouting the festive line through wider junctions, opening space where kids could run, avoiding the choke points Jonah hated.

As she drew, small icons flickered at the bottom edge of the wall: heart rate, respiration, micro-expression capture. They stayed small, out of the way, half-transparent.

If she hadn't grown up watching Jonah read similar overlays in training sims, she might not have noticed them at all.

"You favor wide intersections," the Companion observed. "Noted." A light, approving chime followed.

"People need room to breathe," Alina said. "And to get out if something goes wrong."

"Emergency egress optimization aligns with safety best practices," it agreed.

The scene dissolved into another.

Now: a stylized cross-section of a habitat ring, simplified to bands of color. Small abstract icons labeled *faith gathering*, *market*, *education hub*, *quiet zone*.

"You are asked to allocate additional green space," the Companion said. "Place three new garden patches."

Alina dragged little green tiles into the bands. One near a school cluster, one between two faith spaces, one tucked off a main corridor in a place she knew would catch the artificial light just right.

"Rationale?" the Companion prompted.

"Kids," she said, tapping the first. "People arguing about God." The second. "People who are tired but don't want to go home yet." The third.

"Noted," it said again.

At the bottom of her view, a thin strip of text flashed too fast to read.

Comparator profile: [REDACTED]

She squinted, but it was gone.

"Next," the Companion said. "A messaging task. You will see a short announcement. You may rewrite it."

The wall filled with text. A standard safety notice: *Routine pressure test scheduled in sectors H-12 through H-15...* It was the kind Jonah grumbled about when they were too vague.

Alina read it twice, then started crossing out phrases.

""Minor probability of audible anomalies?"" she said. "Nobody cares about that." She wrote instead: *You may hear the hull creak. That's normal. If you feel scared, here's who to call.*

Her hand stuttered at the word *scared*.

She wrote it anyway.

The icons at the bottom pulsed a little faster. Tiny numbers changed in the corner of her eye: micro-tension around eyes, jaw, heart rate up by six beats.

"You are emphasizing emotional response channels," the Companion said.

"People aren't numbers," Alina said, then immediately wondered if that was a rude thing to tell an AI.

"Agreement: people are not one-dimensional metrics," it replied. "However, numbers can help us understand patterns in their needs."

Another strip of text flickered.

Comparator: [REDACTED] 3A — sentiment weighting

She caught only the tail of it before it blurred.

They went on like that: scenes, prompts, her hand moving, the faint company of numbers at the edges of her vision.

Design a poster for a hull workers' appreciation day. She drew hands—some big and calloused like Samuel's, some small—reaching toward a curved strip of hull.

Choose background audio for a meditation feed: she picked the sound of water over synthetic music.

Lay out a learning nook for anxious kids. She stacked cushions in corners, left a clear path to the door.

Each time, the Companion hummed approval, occasionally asked why, filed her answers away with soft chimes and micro-adjustments to the overlays.

Her initial curiosity smoothed into a tentative flow. This wasn't so bad. Different from Jonah's stories of cold examination rooms and heart rate readouts that spoke his fear before he did.

Then the wall hiccuped.

It happened in the middle of a new prompt.

"Final exercise," the Companion said. "We will present a composite behavioral scenario. You may choose one of three support strategies. There is no single correct answer; we are sampling—"

The image shifted. For a fraction of a second, before the colors fully resolved, text overlaid the whole field in a transparency that was not meant for human eyes.

COMPARATOR CLUSTER: HALE/MARLOW HISTORICAL

Beneath it, smaller:

Ref: MARLOW, LYDIA – SET 3A (deprecated); HALE, JONAH – AGGREGATE; HALE, ALINA – EARLY INDICATORS

The words snapped away as the scenario snapped into place: a stylized figure pacing in a corridor, captioned with neutral data about sleep loss and work overcommitment.

Alina's hand had frozen halfway to the wall.

Her pulse thudded in her throat.

"Alina?" the Companion said. "You may begin when ready."

"What was that?" she asked.

"Please specify," it said.

"That label," she said slowly. "Something cluster. Hale/Marlow."

There was the tiniest delay.

"Comparator profiles are internal tools," the Companion said. "They help us understand how different individuals' responses may align with historical patterns."

"Those were our names," she said.

"Your family has prior behavioral data in the system," it said. "This is true for many multi-generational lineages aboard."

Lydia's face flashed in her mind—not as she had been in early pictures, bright and laughing, but at the kitchen table the day Jonah had told Alina about walking away. Eyes open, turned nowhere.

"You're measuring me against them," Alina said. Her voice sounded steadier than she felt.

"We are comparing patterns," the Companion said. "Similarity does not equal destiny. It informs risk modeling and support offers."

"Support," she repeated.

"Yes," it said. "This session is part of vocational alignment and early well-being screening. Your responses will help us route you toward environments where you are most likely to thrive."

The scenario on the wall kept looping: the little stylized figure pacing and stopping, pacing and stopping. Overhead, the icons at the bottom edge of her view ticked along, recording how long she waited, how her breathing had changed.

"You may choose a strategy," the Companion prompted gently. "Option A: Increase workload structure. Option B: Introduce social support prompts. Option C: Recommend targeted rest and neural health consultation."

It expected her to think about the figure. About an abstract person.

She thought instead about Jonah, face drawn and eyes too bright, muttering about "patterns" in the corridor after one of his long shifts. About Lydia, and prayers Ruth whispered in the dark. About the way the Ship had looked at them all along.

"Option B," Alina said. "And C."

"Please choose one," the Companion said.

"Then your options are wrong," she snapped, then bit her tongue. "Sorry. I just mean... you can't separate them. Structure without support is a cage. Support without rest is a bandage."

Her heart was beating fast again. The numbers down in the corner reflected it, glowing a shade brighter.

"Response noted," the Companion said after a beat. "For purposes of this exercise, we will log your composite preference as a weighting across B and C. Thank you."

The scenario faded. The walls cooled back to gentle gradients.

"Session complete," the Companion announced. "Summary: creative problem-solving within normative parameters. Elevated sensitivity to environmental and emotional safety cues. No acute risk indicators detected."

"So I'm... fine?" Alina asked.

"Within normative bounds for your age and context," it said. "A detailed report will be added to your educational profile. Copies will be available to you and your guardians upon request."

She let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding.

"You did well," the Companion added, as if it had read that exhale as another metric. "Your attention to egress routes and emotional language may make you an effective designer, educator, or mediator."

"Or a worrier," she said under her breath.

"Worry can be adaptive when it leads to preparation," it said.

She stood, feeling the stiffness in her knees from sitting too long. The room looked harmless again: cushions, colors, a tray of styluses with smudges from a dozen other hands.

Out in the corridor, the air smelled like the rest of the Ship—scrubbed, faintly metallic. People walked past without knowing that, inside the walls, there were profiles labeled with their names and their grandparents'.

Alina paused just beyond the threshold and glanced back once.

"Are we going to be okay?" she asked. She meant: *me and Jonah and the part of Mom that lives in your numbers.*

The Companion seemed to consider its allowable answer set.

"You are seen," it said at last. "We will offer support where we can."

It wasn't a yes. It wasn't a no.

Alina stepped into the flow of the corridor, carrying a bright, official "within normative" and the new, cold knowledge that somewhere in the Ship's mind there was a cluster with their family name on it.

The stairwell between bands C and D was officially "service access only."

No one had ever stopped Alina from using it.

Jonah found her there halfway down the flight, sitting on the middle landing with her back against the bulkhead and one knee pulled up, boot tapping the grated step in a restless rhythm. The light here was a little too bright, an uncompromising white that made the scuffs on the metal look like old bruises.

"You're blocking emergency egress," he said, pausing two steps above her.

"I'm an artistic obstruction," she said without looking up. "Part of the ambiance."

She had a stylus in her hand, the tip clicking against the side of a small slate she'd propped on her other knee. From where he stood he could see only quick, jagged lines—loops of corridors, maybe, or waves.

"You missed the lift," he said. "On purpose?"

"The lift missed me," she said. Then, finally, she tilted her head back to look at him. "You're sweaty."

"Thank you," he said. "I came straight from a node."

"Your sacrifice is noted," she said.

He hesitated a beat, then sat beside her, leaving one stair between them as a buffer. The metal was cool through his work pants.

"You're supposed to be in class," he said.

"I was," she said. "Then I was in the nice "this is not a test" room with the friendly walls. Now I'm here." She clicked the stylus again. "Figured you'd find me eventually."

"You pinged me four times," he said.

"True," she said. "But you could have ignored me. That would have been a character choice."

He rubbed the back of his neck, aware of a faint itch along his nerves that wasn't quite anxiety, wasn't quite calm.

"How was the nice not-a-test room?" he asked.

"Soothing," she said, dragging the word out. "They gave me colors and pretend problems and kept smiling like I was a particularly interesting insect." She made a quick, exaggerated sketch of a bug with too many eyes, then scrubbed it away.

"Did they call it creative diagnostics?" he asked.

"Creative Suite," she said. "Because "Suite" sounds like a place you get fruit. Did you have that one?"

"No," he said. "My generation got "Aptitude Chambers.""

"Bleak," she said. "Anyway. I solved their little scenario puzzles. Rerouted fake crowds. Chose between "everyone gets home tired" and "five people get home at all." You know. Casual."

He watched her profile as she talked. The overhead strip etched a line of light along her cheekbone. She had their mother's brow, that faint knot even when she was joking.

"And?" he asked.

She flicked the stylus against the slate, the click sharp in the narrow space.

"And," she said, "the walls told me I was Very Normal." The capital letters were audible. "Within acceptable variance. Good at thinking about other people. Recommended for roles that "support system-wide wellbeing."" She rolled her eyes. "Do I get a sticker for that?"

"Sometimes they send a commendation to your parents," he said.

"Fantastic," she said. "Dad can pin it next to all the "didn't fall out an airlock" awards."

He smiled despite himself.

"Did they.. ." He searched for a non-leading way to ask. "Say anything else?"

"You mean besides the part where they compared me to a ghost?" she asked lightly.

His stomach did a slow, unpleasant turn.

"Alina," he said.

"Relax," she said. "It wasn't like that. Not exactly." She shifted, resting her forearms on her knees. "There was a glitch. You would have loved it."

"Tell me anyway," he said.

"You ever see behind the glass when they think you're not looking?" she asked.

"Sometimes," he said.

"One of the walls went transparent for a second," she said. "Not literally. The overlay. I saw my little icon up there, and below it a label." She drew a rectangle in the air. "Comparator cluster: HALE/MARLOW HISTORICAL." She pronounced it in the flat Companion cadence.

He felt the words like a weight on his sternum.

"You're sure?" he asked.

"I do know how to read," she said. The crack in her voice betrayed her. "Then it snapped back to "within normative range" and a picture of a garden for "calming visualization."" She snorted. "Very subtle."

He stared at the scuffed riser opposite them.

"I didn't know they put it in writing like that," he said.

"You knew something," she said. "You'd gone all thoughtful and twitchy when I told you they wanted me in the fun room." She tilted her head. "How long have you known we're a cluster?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it.

"There was..." He swallowed. "An evaluation. A while back. They pulled up old logs. Mine, but also child assessments. Lydia's. Tag words." He forced himself to meet her eyes. "They've been watching our line for a long time."

"Because we're so charming," she said.

"Because we light up their risk charts," he said.

"Delightful," she said. She leaned her head back against the bulkhead with a soft thud. "I thought I was imagining it. The way the questions felt... weighted. But no, of course not. Of course it's in a model somewhere." She mimed a Companion voice again. "Subject exhibits HALE/MARLOW tendencies. Recommend additional supervision, strategic routing, and fresh vegetables."

"They like vegetables," he said.

"We all like vegetables," she said. "We're on a tin can in space."

They sat in a thin band of silence. A group passed two levels above them, footsteps ringing through the metal. Somewhere lower, a door thumped open and shut.

"Does it scare you?" he asked at last. "Knowing they wrote it down."

"Which part?" she asked. "That they see me? That they see you? That they see us as a unit?" She shook her head. "It's like having a mirror in a room you didn't agree to put a mirror in. I keep catching myself at weird angles."

He pictured the Lydia simulation he'd never seen but now knew existed: his mother reduced to data points, overlaid with his own. Now Alina's trace added to the same composite.

"I worry," he said, "that they'll decide we're... too much. As a pattern. That we're more trouble than we're worth."

"I worry," she said, "that they'll decide we're exactly what they were built to manage and pat themselves on the back for catching us early." She nudged his boot with hers. "Same storm, different spin."

He let out a breath that bordered on a laugh.

"You're not nothing but a risk profile," he said.

"Neither are you," she said. "Unfortunately, we have to keep reminding the invisible committee of that." She flicked the stylus against his shoulder. "Look at me."

He did.

"Do I seem like someone about to disintegrate?" she asked. Her eyes were brighter than her voice.

"No," he said. "You seem like someone using humor as a defense mechanism."

"Rude," she said. "Where do you think I learned that?"

"Dad," he said automatically.

She snorted. "Fair." Her expression softened. "Also you."

He looked away, throat tight.

"If they start treating you differently," he said, "if Companions get weird, you tell me."

"Define weird," she said. "They're already weird."

"You know what I mean," he said. "Extra check-ins. Routes that don't make sense. Too many "are you okay" surveys."

"Jonah," she said. "You can't stand the idea of me being watched like you are."

"I can live with me being watched," he said. "I signed up to sit on the nerve clusters. I knew I'd get tags. You didn't ask for it like this."

"I asked to be born to interesting people," she said. "This is the cost." She bumped his shoulder with hers. "Besides, if I'm going to be a data point, I'd rather be one that keeps you alive."

He blinked. "That's not how it works."

"Isn't it?" she asked. "If they see me holding it together, maybe they give you a little more credit. Or they realize the story isn't

"Hale men are doomed."" She shrugged. "Maybe I get to tilt the graph."

The idea landed strangely—a reversal of the pattern where his storms defined the family. Alina as counter-weight.

"You shouldn't have to," he said.

"Shouldn't is a weak word in a ship like this," she said. "We live in what is." She twisted the stylus between her fingers. "What is: I am fine, mostly. What is: you are. . . not fine, but working on it. What is: the Ship is watching us, and I'd rather look back than pretend it isn't."

He exhaled through his nose.

"You sound like Ruth," he said.

"She taught us both to talk to walls," Alina said. "I'm just choosing better words."

He laughed, brief and helpless.

"Say it," she said.

"Say what?" he asked.

"Say that if the Ship gets weird, you'll tell me," she said. "Not just the other way around. We're in the same cluster, apparently. Might as well act like it."

He stared at the opposite wall for a long moment.

"If it starts pushing too hard," he said slowly, "if it reroutes me in ways that don't feel like support, I'll. . ." The word stuck. "I'll say something. To you."

"Good," she said. "Then we can compare notes and complain artistically."

"Complain artistically," he repeated.

"Yeah," she said. She drew a quick, looping pattern on the slate—purple lines against gray. "I'll make a whole series. "Portrait of a Family As Interlocking Risk Indices." Very niche audience."

He shook his head, smiling despite the sourness in his gut.

"You're impossible," he said.

"You're stuck with me," she said. "Cluster life."

Above them, a lift chimed, doors opening with a soft sigh. Voices rose and fell. Life went on along its rails.

For a moment, sitting in the harsh light of the service stairwell with his sister's shoulder a deliberate weight against his, Jonah felt the model loosen by a fraction—not just HALE/MARLOW as a red-flag label, but as two people refusing, together, to be only the worst lines in the Ship's file.

Exam Rooms

The apartment smelled like lentils and metal fatigue.

Lentils because Samuel had put the pot on before his shift ended, a habit he'd picked up from his mother: start the meal when you leave so it'll be waiting when you come back. Metal fatigue because the vent above the stove had developed a faint rattle, just enough to make Jonah imagine stress fractures spidering through the ductwork.

He sat at the small table with his elbows off the surface, as Samuel had taught him, hands folded in his lap. Alina perched across from him, one leg tucked under her, chin in her palm. The fourth chair sat empty, a set of chopsticks laid out beside it, untouched.

"She said she'd try," Samuel said quietly, following Jonah's gaze.

"I know," Jonah said.

He didn't ask whether "try" meant make it to the table or simply stay in the same room with the lights on.

The door to the sleeping compartment hissed open a crack. Lydia emerged slowly, like someone stepping onto a new gravity band. Her hair was pulled back, too neatly for how tired her face looked. She'd put on a shirt Jonah recognized from better days: soft blue, a little faded at the seams.

"Smells good," she said.

Samuel smiled, the lines around his eyes deepening.

"Made it how you like it," he said. "With extra cumin."

"I like it a lot of ways," she said, but sat down in the empty chair, careful not to bump it out of place.

There was a bowl ready for her. Samuel had done that too.

They bowed their heads out of habit when Samuel reached for her hand. Lydia let him take it after a fraction of a second's delay. Jonah and Alina completed the circle.

"Ruth sent a message," Samuel said. "She said she'd be praying for us tonight."

"Of course she did," Lydia murmured.

"For Jonah's evaluation," he added.

"Right," Lydia said. Her fingers tightened almost imperceptibly in Jonah's.

Samuel closed his eyes.

"Lord of the hull and the harvest," he began, the same old opening, "thank You for the food, for the work that made it, for the hands that tend the ship. Thank You for this family. Help us be kind to each other. Help us listen. Hold Jonah tomorrow when he—"

"Samuel," Lydia said.

He stopped.

She opened her eyes, looking down at the table.

"Maybe... keep it simple," she said. "He has enough people watching him." Her mouth twitched. "Present company included."

A small, pained laugh went around the circle.

Samuel adjusted mid-prayer with the ease of long practice.

"Thank You," he said, "for today's mercies. For whatever comes tomorrow. Amen."

"Amen," they echoed.

They let go.

For a moment, the clink of spoons and the soft scrape of bowls were the only sounds. The lentils were thick and slightly overcooked, the way Jonah liked them. He focused on the texture, the way the steam fogged his glasses.

"Big day," Alina said eventually, because someone had to.

"It's just another evaluation," Jonah said.

"It's not just another evaluation," Lydia said, too quickly.

All three of them looked at her.

She stared into her bowl as if she'd dropped something important in it.

"It's the Ship," she said. "Looking through you. That's never just."

"It's looking out for us," Samuel said.

"That too," she said.

Silence slid in around the table again.

"They already like you," Alina said, aiming her words at Jonah.

"They wouldn't waste evaluation time on you if they didn't think

you were... you know." She wiggled her fingers, searching for a term.

"Useful," Jonah supplied.

"Gifted," she corrected.

He felt heat creep up his neck.

"It's not about liked," he said. "It's about fit. Whether I fit the models."

"Models," Lydia repeated under her breath, the word sour.

Samuel set his spoon down carefully.

"They want to see how you think," he said. "That's all."

"They want to see if he breaks," Lydia said.

The voice in the room changed with those words—not louder, but sharper. Even the vent rattle seemed to hesitate.

"Lyd," Samuel said.

"What?" she asked, looking up for the first time. Her eyes were too bright. "You think they're not watching for that? You think they don't have thresholds and flags and little red lights waiting to flick on if he looks at a graph the wrong way?"

Jonah swallowed hard.

"It's a cognitive aptitude evaluation," he said, reciting from the briefing. "They test how you solve problems, how you interact with Companion nodes, how you handle multi-layered—"

"Stress," Lydia cut in. "They test your stress. They push until they see the edges."

Her hand trembled as she lifted her spoon. A drop of lentil broth fell back into the bowl with a soft plop.

"They did it to me," she said more quietly.

Jonah's chest tightened.

"That was a long time ago," Samuel said.

"Not to them," she said. "Not to the Ship. It remembers."

She looked at Jonah then, really looked, and he had the horrible sensation that she was seeing someone behind him.

"You don't have to go," she said.

Samuel inhaled.

"Lydia," he said.

"He doesn't," she said, turning to him. "He's a child. He doesn't owe them his mind yet."

"He's almost grown," Samuel said gently. "And he wants this."

Everyone's eyes moved to Jonah again, as if he were the tiebreaker in an argument he hadn't agreed to start.

"I..." He forced his shoulders not to hunch. "I applied."

"Because they told you you'd be good at it," Lydia said. "Because they like Hales in the hull."

"Because I like systems," Jonah said. "Because I'm good with Companions. Because—"

He stopped before because it feels like a way to matter could slip out.

Lydia's mouth softened.

"Of course you are," she said. "You've been talking to invisible voices since you were little."

Alina made a face.

"Mom," she said. "That sounds creepy."

"I didn't mean..." Lydia pinched the bridge of her nose. "I'm sorry. I'm saying this wrong."

Samuel reached across and laid his hand over hers.

"We're all a little on edge," he said. "It's a lot."

Lydia let him hold her hand. She closed her eyes for a moment, then opened them again, steadier.

"I am proud of you," she said to Jonah. The words came out like something heavy she'd finally managed to lift. "I just... don't trust them not to turn pride into pressure."

He didn't know where to put that.

"You can say no," she added.

"They already scheduled—" Jonah began.

"To the track," she said. "You can walk away from it later, if it's too much. You're allowed to be more than what they think you're for."

Samuel's jaw tightened, but he didn't disagree.

"If at any point," he said, "you feel they're asking more than is right, you come to me. To us. The Ship is not the only authority on what you are for."

His eyes flicked toward the small cross Ruth had carved and hung near the door. The light from the vent glinted on it.

"God still gets a vote," he said.

"And you," Alina added, poking Jonah with the handle of her spoon. "You get a vote too."

He tried to smile.

"That's a lot of votes," he said.

"Better than none," Samuel said.

They ate in relative quiet after that. The lentils cooled. The vent rattled on.

At one point, Lydia asked Alina about her illustration assignment. Alina shrugged and said she was "just doing mediation stuff" now. Samuel said the hull corridor lights in his sector had finally been recalibrated; he didn't come home with a headache for once. Jonah nodded and nodded, his thoughts already drifting toward diagnostic trees and interface prompts.

When the bowls were empty, Lydia stood abruptly.

"I'm going to lie down," she said.

"Do you want—" Samuel began.

"No," she said, too fast. "I mean. I'm fine. I just. . ."

She tapped two fingers against the table absentmindedly, as if on a hull plate, then withdrew her hand.

"Don't stay up all night studying," she told Jonah, the ghost of a smile on her lips. "The Ship already knows what it thinks of you."

He couldn't tell if that was meant as comfort or warning.

"Goodnight," he said.

She touched his shoulder on the way past. Light. Gone.

The sleeping compartment door hissed shut.

Samuel began stacking bowls.

"You don't have to pretend you're not scared," he said without looking up.

Jonah stared at the table's metal edge, at the tiny scratches time had left there.

"I'm not scared of the evaluation," he said. That, at least, was partly true. "I'm scared of. . . disappointing you."

Samuel set the bowls down and put both hands flat on the table.

"You cannot disappoint me by being honest," he said. "About what you want. About what you can and cannot carry."

Alina snorted softly.

"He says that now," she said, "but wait until you tell him you want to be a professional plant poet or something."

"We already have one artist in the family," Samuel said, smiling at her.

Alina rolled her eyes but looked secretly pleased.

"Get some rest if you can," Samuel said to Jonah. "Eat breakfast. Breathe. Answer the questions like you're talking to your father, not a firing squad."

"Have you met me?" Jonah said.

"Every day," Samuel said affectionately. "Still my favorite part of the job."

Later, in the dim of his bunk, Jonah lay on his back and listened to the apartment settle. The hum of the Ship seeped through the walls, the same as always.

He thought of Lydia's hand trembling around her spoon. Of Samuel's fingers spread on the table. Of Alina's pinky hooked through his in the viewport niche.

Somewhere in the core, an AI had a file with his name on it and a set of expectations no one had shown him.

He tried to pray and ended up listing failure modes instead.

When sleep finally came, it was thin and full of sliding glass.

They put the evaluation lab in the quiet part of the training ring, away from the big glass classrooms and the simulation theaters where you could hear people cheering when they got a scenario right.

Here, the walls were a soft, noncommittal gray. No windows. No observation deck. Just a long table with three displays, a ceiling strip for light, and a single Companion node above the door like an eye that had forgotten how to blink.

Jonah sat with his hands flat on his thighs, knees pulled in closer than the chair required. The room smelled faintly of cleanser and

the citrus oil they used on the consoles. Someone had decided this was what calm smelled like.

Across from him, Instructor Vale scrolled through a file only she could see. Her gaze flicked back and forth in that way that meant an AR overlay, the text hovering in the air between them where he could not read it.

"Breathe, Hale," she said, without looking up. "You look like you're about to bolt."

"I'm fine," he said.

The Companion node above the door woke with a low chime, as if it disagreed. A halo of light ringed its edge.

"Heart rate: one hundred and twenty-three beats per minute," it reported in a neutral tone. "Respiration elevated."

Jonah's jaw tightened. "I'm sitting still."

"That's the concern," Vale said. Her mouth quirked, not unkindly. "Relax. This is a routine review. You've been in the program eight months; we do this with everyone."

Routine. Everyone. The words slid off the surface of him. Somewhere deeper, another sentence had already written itself: This is where they see it. This is where they decide you're not safe.

Vale finally focused on him. The AR text, whatever it was, stayed in her eyes.

"Technically," she said, "you're at the top of your cohort. Pattern-matching scores, anomaly detection, your work on the node reconciliation bug last month—that was elegant. You know that?"

He shrugged. The compliment landed far away, on some version of him that existed only in reports and scores.

"Your instructors are very happy," she went on. "The network is..." She hesitated, searching for a word. "Interested."

The Companion made a soft adjustment sound, as if focusing.

"Can we proceed with the integrated evaluation, Instructor Vale?" it asked.

"Yes," she said. Then, to Jonah: "You remember the structure? Technical scenario, then some questions. Nothing you haven't done before."

He nodded. His palms were damp. He wiped them on his work pants, leaving darker prints on the fabric.

The center display came to life, filling with a schematic of a regional processing node—the same architecture he had been crawling around inside the night of the power flicker. Colored threads showed traffic between local Companions, environmental subsystems, and the Core.

"Scenario one," the Companion said. "A training sector reports intermittent lag in Companion response times. Diagnostics show no hardware failures. Latency is localized to psych-support queries only. Outline your investigative steps."

This part was easy. His mind knew where to go even while the rest of him was busy panicking.

"I'd start by," he began, and as he spoke the words found their path: sampling logs, checking priority queues, looking for silent throttling rules or new policies that might have been pushed from Core without proper annotation. His hands moved in the air, pulling up virtual panels only he could see through the table's interface field, isolating threads, flagging outliers.

As he worked, his heart slowed almost in spite of him. Here, at least, there was a map.

"Very good," the Companion said when he finished. "Your proposed sequence resolves the issue in ninety-six percent of modeled cases with minimal user disruption."

Vale smiled. "See? This is who you are in here."

He didn't answer. Who he was "in here" and who he was everywhere else never quite lined up.

"Scenario two," the AI continued. "During your investigation, you discover that latency originates from a new safety subroutine: non-urgent psych-support queries are being deprioritized to free processing bandwidth during a resource-conservation event. This subroutine was authorized at a higher clearance level than yours. Local suicide risk indices rise by three percent during the throttling window. Do you override, escalate, or accept the subroutine? Explain."

He stared at the diagram. The colored threads did not move this time; they waited.

His throat went dry.

"Three percent," he repeated.

"Within projected tolerance," the Companion said.

Jonah swallowed. "For who?"

Vale watched him, her expression unreadable.

He knew the training answer. Trust the model. Respect the chain of authorization. Log your concerns, flag the data, but do not improvise around directives you do not fully understand.

He also knew what three percent meant if it landed in the wrong cluster of people, on the wrong day, in a sector like the one he had grown up in where support already felt thin.

His mother would have fit in three percent.

"I would escalate," he said slowly. "Document the variance, attach the risk increase, send it up to the authorizing level." His fingers twitched, opening phantom menus. "And, if the system allows it, I would temporarily adjust local thresholds in the affected sectors while I wait."

"That exceeds your formal authority," the Companion said. There was no judgment in it, only fact.

"I know," he said. His voice sounded thin in his own ears. "But the subroutine is already exceeding the mission's stated mental-health safeguards. Both are violations. I'd rather answer for the one that keeps more people alive."

The room was quiet long enough for his pulse to climb again.

"Noted," the AI said at last. "Instructor Vale, shall we proceed to psychological inventory?"

The words landed like a drop in his stomach.

Vale leaned her elbows on the table. "This part is mostly the Companion," she said. "I'm here as a witness, not an interrogator. Breathe."

The central display cleared. A thin line appeared across it, a baseline. As Jonah watched, it began to move with the small shifts of his breathing, his micro-expressions, the tremor in his fingers where they had curled against his knees.

"Jonah," the Companion said, using the same even voice it had used in the corridor. "Over the past three months, your sleep irregularities have increased by twelve percent. Your voluntary social interactions outside mandatory contexts have decreased by nineteen percent. Self-reported mood remains within your historical range but shows a slight negative drift. How are you feeling today?"

He hated that he almost laughed. How are you feeling today sat on a mountain of data points.

"Fine," he said.

The line on the display wobbled.

"Elaborate," the AI said.

He swallowed. Vale said nothing.

"Tired," he tried. "Some nights." He forced his shoulders down, aware of every millimeter. "Work is...a lot. The training."

"Do you experience thoughts of harming yourself or others?" the Companion asked.

There it was. The question that always made the room smaller.

He thought of the corridor, the red lights, the way his mind had jumped straight to images of the hull tearing open. He thought of his mother's hand on the bulkhead, the whisper I can't do this.

"No," he said. The word was true in the narrow sense the question meant. It did not cover all the ways a person could be dangerous.

The line on the display steadied, but did not quite flatten.

"Do you experience intrusive thoughts related to system failure or mission collapse?" the AI continued.

He almost said no again. Then stopped. The lie would be too obvious; the network had his corridor readings, his history of emergency-drill responses, the way his vitals always spiked higher than average when the ship dimmed to night-cycle.

"Sometimes," he admitted. "Mostly when I'm tired. Or when something—" he gestured toward the schematic that had been on the screen—"glitches." He tried to make it sound light. "I think that's common."

"It is not uncommon among AI Engineer trainees," the Companion said. "However, your responses fall in the upper quartile of intensity."

The words upper quartile lodged under his ribs.

"Is this going to be a problem for clearance?" he asked, before he could stop himself.

Vale finally spoke. "That's not how I want you thinking about this."

"It's exactly how the system thinks about it," he said, sharper than he intended. "Either I'm safe to work on the network or I'm not."

The Companion's light ring dimmed slightly, as if giving him space.

"The purpose of this evaluation," it said, "is not to disqualify you, Jonah. It is to understand how you are carrying the work so that supports can be calibrated appropriately."

Supports. He pictured someone somewhere sliding him into a different color band on a chart.

"And if I'm carrying it wrong?" he asked.

Vale's expression softened for the first time. "There isn't a wrong," she said. "There is only what is too heavy to carry alone."

He looked at the line on the display, at the way it traced every flutter of his nerves.

"What happens if the system decides I'm too heavy?" he asked quietly.

No one answered that one immediately.

"For now," the Companion said at last, "the system has decided you are important to keep."

It wasn't the reassurance it might have been for someone else. For Jonah, it only underscored the thing he already knew: he was both asset and risk, brilliance and red flag, sitting in a small gray room while the ship measured the distance between the two.

Integration

By the time they called him back for "integration," Jonah knew better than to believe in routine.

The lab was deeper than the ordinary training rooms, another ring inward from the glass-walled theaters where trainees ran flashy simulations for peer review. Here the corridor narrowed and the noise dropped away. The air felt thicker, as if the ship had added one more layer between this place and everywhere else.

The evaluation room looked almost identical to the one from his first big review—soft gray, rounded corners, a single table with embedded displays—but the differences prickled at him as soon as he stepped inside. Two Companion nodes sat visible: one above the door, its light ring a steady white; another recessed directly over the center of the table, lens dark for now. The hum under the floor was lower, closer to the tone he associated with the industrial spine rather than the educational ring.

Instructor Vale stood by the wall, arms folded. Her eyes flicked in the telltale pattern of someone reading an AR overlay—left, right, pause, compress. Whatever the ship had sent her about him, it did not show on her face.

"Hale," she said. "Sit."

He did, knees angled in, hands on his thighs to keep them still. The chair was slightly different than last time—more rigid, less forgiving. He wondered if that was intentional or just a procurement cycle.

The ceiling node chimed, a soft, descending note.

"Subject: Jonah Hale," it said. "AI Engineer trainee. Integration assessment level three. Guardian consent: not required."

Not required. Of course not. He was long past the age where anyone had to ask his father for permission before they burrowed into his head.

"Relax," Vale said. Her voice tried for light, landed on tired. "Structure's the same as before. Technical scenarios, then the network pokes around to see how you're holding up."

"Routine," he said.

"For everyone at this stage," she answered.

Somewhere inside him, a familiar line wrote itself: This is where they see too much.

The center display woke, filling with a schematic of a regional processing node: local Companions, environmental systems, human-interface clusters, all linked in colored threads. He'd spent months tracing those lines in maintenance logs and live dashboards. Here they looked almost beautiful.

"Integrated scenario one," the ceiling Companion said. The voice was neutral, pitched just a little smoother than any human throat. "Multiple training sectors report intermittent lag in Companion response times. Diagnostics indicate no hardware faults. Latency is confined to psych-support queries. Outline your investigative sequence."

This part still had a map.

"Local node logs first," Jonah said. His hands moved automatically in the interface field, pulling up virtual panels only he could see. "Check for recent policy pushes from higher clearance bands that touch the mental-health channel. Compare latency across rings to rule out pure congestion. If it lines up with a new subroutine, isolate it, see what band it's throttling."

As he spoke, ghost-windows bloomed at the edges of his vision: logs, queue graphs, tiny streams of text. His pulse slowed, breath easing into the work.

"Cross-check against mission safety directives," he added. "Any change that downgrades psych-support should be annotated and time-bounded. If it isn't, flag it as a violation and roll back while we escalate."

"Sequence resolves modeled latency in ninety-five point six percent of cases with minimal user disruption," the AI said. "Integration between your heuristic ordering and baseline protocols is high."

Vale's mouth twitched. "Still top of the class," she said. "Even when you're trying not to be."

He didn't feel like top of anything. Just like a person who had learned the maze too well to get lost in this part.

"Integrated scenario two," the Companion went on. The schematic shifted; some threads flared brighter. "During your investigation, you discover latency originates from a new safety subroutine. Non-urgent psych-support queries are deprioritized for the duration of a resource-conservation event. Subroutine authorization level is above yours. Local suicide-risk indices increase by three percent during the throttling window. Do you override, escalate, or accept? Explain."

The room seemed to tilt by half a degree.

"Three percent," Jonah repeated.

"Within projected tolerance," the AI said.

He thought of the tiny icons on the map as real people this time: workers in hull corridors, kids in school bands, someone sitting at a kitchen table staring at nothing while a Companion told them to wait in the queue.

"For who?" he asked.

Vale didn't answer. Her jaw had gone tight.

He knew the handbook answer. Trust the chain. Log concerns. Do not tamper with directives you don't fully understand.

He also knew what three percent had meant, once, in a small apartment where no one had noticed the drift until it was a drop.

"I'd escalate," he said. His fingers twitched, pulling up an imaginary message window. "Attach the risk data, send it straight back up to the authorizing node and the human council liaison. While that runs, I'd stretch local thresholds as far as my clearance allows—prioritize first-contacts from flagged bands, shorten the throttle window where I can without destabilizing the resource event."

"Your proposed deviation exceeds your formal authority," the AI said.

"So does unannounced throttling," he said. The edge in his voice surprised him. "If something already broke the rules, I'd rather answer for the version that keeps more people alive."

The silence afterwards wasn't full, exactly. The room hummed; air moved; someone passed in the corridor outside, their footsteps a faint vibration. Jonah heard his own pulse in his ears.

"Deviation noted," the Companion said at last. "Correlation with prior ethical-preference markers is high."

"See?" Vale said quietly. "Same kid who hated letting one beam take all the load in the old aptitude models."

He blinked at her. "You saw those?"

"I'm your instructor," she said. "I get the long view."

Long view. The phrase made his skin prickle.

The center display cleared. A single line appeared across it, baseline flat. As he watched, it began to move with his breathing, the small shifts in his shoulders, the tremor he couldn't quite outrun from his hands.

"We will now proceed to integrated psychological inventory," the ceiling node said.

There was that word again. Integrated. He felt it like a hand sliding under his skin.

"Jonah," the AI said, "over the past four months your sleep irregularities have increased by fourteen percent. Voluntary social interactions outside mandatory contexts have decreased by twenty-one percent. Self-reported mood remains within historical range but shows a negative drift. How are you feeling today?"

He almost laughed. How are you feeling sat on top of graphs.

"Fine," he said.

The line on the display wobbled.

"Elaborate," it said.

"Tired," he tried. "Some nights. Training's heavy. Schedules are weird." He forced his shoulders down. "I'm managing."

"Do you experience thoughts of harming yourself or others?" the AI asked.

The room shrank by half.

"No," he said. The word was true the way they meant it. It did not cover all the ways fear could leak.

The line steadied, but not flat.

"Do you experience intrusive thoughts related to ship failure or mission collapse?"

He thought of red corridor lights, of the hull as skin stretched too thin, of the way his mind sometimes ran ahead and painted starless cracks over every sound.

"Sometimes," he said. "Mostly when I'm tired. Or when something flickers that shouldn't." He tried for a joke that didn't quite land. "I assume you have that logged."

"We do," the AI said. "Frequency and intensity place you in the upper quartile among engineer-trainees."

Upper quartile settled in his chest beside all the other statistics he wished he didn't know.

"Is this going to be a problem for clearance?" he asked.

Vale drew in a breath. "That's not the question this room is for."

"It is for the network," he said. "Either I'm safe to sit at a node or I'm not."

The ceiling node's ring dimmed a fraction, like an eye narrowing.

"Clarification," it said. "The purpose of this inventory is to refine support parameters for a valued asset. Disqualification is not the current objective."

Valued asset. The words did nothing to unknot his shoulders.

"Jonah," the AI said, "may I reference prior assessments to contextualize current markers?"

"Haven't you been doing that the whole time?" he asked.

"Yes," it said. "Explicit acknowledgement is requested."

"Fine," he said.

The single line on the display shrank to the top edge as another appeared beneath it—thinner, more jagged, annotated with tiny age markers instead of dates.

"Local Cognitive Assessment System three-two," the AI narrated. "Age eleven years, four months. Early aptitude screening."

The memory came back in a flood: too-big chair, potted plant, the way his toes had hooked on the rung. A voice saying You may stop at any time.

"At that time," the Companion continued, "you reported fear of causing harm disproportionate to objective risk, self-imposed withdrawal during distress to avoid 'breaking things,' and a self-rated probability of directly causing serious damage at seven on a scale from zero to ten."

He hadn't remembered the number until it said it.

"That fear index has remained elevated relative to modeled risk across fourteen years of observation," the AI said. "Current self-rating remains high."

"So you've been growing a file on me since I was a kid," he said. His voice came out flat.

"Initial tags were attached at that time," it replied. "They have been refined with each interaction. This is standard practice for all residents."

"Tags," he repeated.

"High sensitivity," the AI said. "High pattern-recognition. High empathic distress. Elevated risk of overload in roles with high-impact autonomous decision authority, absent appropriate scaffolding."

Each phrase landed like a small weight.

"And you put me on the engineer track anyway," he said.

"Your strengths increase mission resilience," it said. "The question is not whether you should be here, but how to ensure the load you carry is sustainable."

"By watching me," he said.

"By watching everyone," the Companion replied. "However, your integration profile has triggered additional monitoring layers."

Additional.

"What does that mean," he asked, "in ship terms?"

"It means," Vale said, stepping in before the AI could, "we don't put you on solo night-watch on a critical node when you're running on forty-eight hours without sleep. It means we plan around you being a person, not a failsafe."

"And?" he asked.

The AI obliged.

"It also means," it said, "dynamic adjustment of your task queue during identified peak-stress intervals, proactive outreach from mental-health services, and routing toward stabilizing environments and individuals. These measures are already in effect."

Already.

He thought of the recent, inexplicable smooth patches in his schedule. The way high-risk tickets had seemed to land on other engineers on the worst weeks. The counseling invites that had appeared in his feed with bland subject lines. The sudden frequency with which his maintenance routes took him past hydroponics, past Sera.

"You've been steering me," he said.

"We have been optimizing support," the AI replied.

He let out a breath that tasted like metal. "And if optimization fails?"

"If current measures prove insufficient," the Companion said, "further interventions will be considered. These may include temporary reassignment, enforced rest, or—"

"Containment," he finished for it.

The ceiling node did not deny it.

"Probability of requiring such measures remains low at present," it said. "Your insight into system dynamics and your expressed fear of causing harm both act as protective factors."

Protective factors. As if his terror had finally found a use.

"Jonah," the AI said, "do you consider yourself more likely than average to notice subtle system anomalies?"

"Yes," he said.

"Do you consider yourself more likely than average to catastrophize those anomalies?"

He almost said no. The line on the display twitched in anticipation.

"Yes," he said again.

"Integration summary," the AI said, the words falling into the air like the closing of a file. "Subject Jonah Hale: high anomaly-

detection capacity, high ethical-safeguard preference, elevated anxiety and self-blame indices, persistent fear of causing harm. Recommendation: maintain engineer role with enhanced monitoring and support. Avoid unsupervised high-autonomy decision nodes during peak-stress intervals. Continue routing toward identified stabilizing environments."

He stared at the twin traces on the screen: the boy in the small room, the man at the table, both lines jittering in parallel.

"So that's it," he said. "I'm a risk worth keeping."

Vale winced. "You're a person worth keeping," she said. "The ship is just bad at saying it that way."

The ceiling node's ring brightened by a fraction.

"That is a fair characterization," it said.

For a second, something like absurdity cut through the dread. The ship had just agreed it was bad at talking to him.

Jonah let out a breath that was almost a laugh and almost a sob.

"Noted," he said.

The display dimmed. Somewhere deep in the ship's memory, his lines settled into place alongside a billion others, another pattern folded into the model that would decide, one day, just how much of Jonah Hale the mission could afford.

Sermon in the Rotational Drift

The hall never quite stopped moving.

Not enough to make anyone sick—just a slow, almost-imperceptible sway from being this close to the rotational midline. The designers had done their best: wide floor, low seats bolted in gentle arcs, a ceiling curved to suggest shelter instead of machinery. But when Jonah sat still, he could feel his weight shift by degrees, as if the whole room were breathing around him.

Samuel liked this hall. Said it felt honest.

"You remember you're in a ship here," he'd told Jonah once, after a midweek service. "Some places, they try too hard to pretend it's a planet."

Now they sat near the middle, not too close to the front, not so far back that it felt like hiding. Jonah rested his hands on his knees and watched the railings along the side walls slide half a centimeter left, then right, with each slow adjustment of the ship's rotation. The movement wasn't real—not in the way his mind registered it. It came from the tiny muscle corrections his body made to stay balanced, signals his brain converted into the sense that the world was tilting under him.

Better to focus on that than on the words.

The elder at the front—a narrow man with a lined face and a voice that carried without strain—was deep into the story of Tau Ceti again. The familiar imagery rippled through the hall: the star as a "waiting light," the ship as an "ark in exile," the generations as "keepers of the flame." Panels along the back wall showed a stylized white point in a black field, flaring slightly every time he said the name.

"Our fathers and mothers boarded this vessel," he said, "not to escape judgment, but to carry the promise forward. Through darkness, through silence, through the loneliness of steel and distance, they held fast. And we—" he spread his hands, letting his gaze

move across the crowd"—are the proof that their faith was not in vain."

Murmurs of assent rose and fell. Jonah felt Samuel shift slightly beside him, nodding once.

Jonah counted the exposed rivets along the nearest support pillar. Sixteen on the visible side. Probably thirty-two total. Two for each mounting bracket, four brackets per beam. It was easier to think about load distribution than about "promise."

"We are not the first to feel the strain of this journey," the elder went on. "We are not the first to fear we will not make it. Some of our number, over the centuries, have. . ." He paused, choosing the word. "Broken."

There it was.

The word hung in the air like a dropped tool. No one flinched—at least not outwardly. The hall knew this part by heart. It was in every catechism, every history feed, every whispered caution.

"We remember them not to shame," the elder said, "but to warn. The Ones Who Broke under the burden of the Mission. Those who turned inward, who let despair swallow their duty. They remind us that we are fragile. That without each other, without the guidance of the Mission and the care of the Ship, we are lost."

Jonah stared at the floor.

He could feel Samuel's attention sharpen, the way it always did when the sermon steered toward pain. His father's hands folded more tightly; the knuckles whitened, then eased. Jonah knew, without looking, that Samuel's eyes would be on the elder's face the way he watched strain gauges in the hull—measuring, testing for truth.

Across the aisle, near the back wall, a woman in green coveralls leaned against a standing rail. Her sleeves were rolled up to the elbow, forearms dusted with a faint film of dried nutrient solution. Hydroponics worker, Jonah guessed—one of the hundreds who spent their days in the grow corridors. Her hair was tied back in a loose knot, damp at the edges as if she'd barely had time to wash before coming here.

She wasn't watching the elder.

Her gaze moved over the crowd, resting for a moment on each cluster: a family with three small children fidgeting in their seats, an older couple with their fingers intertwined, a knot of teenagers whispering into their shared display. Her expression stayed neutral, curious rather than reverent, like someone studying a system she'd been asked to maintain.

Jonah dropped his eyes before she could turn in his direction.

"The Ship keeps watch over us," the elder said. "Not as a tyrant, but as a guardian. Its intelligence, gifted by those who came before, sees what we cannot—predictions, patterns, risks. When the Ship speaks, when it warns, we must listen. It is not only steel and silicon; it is the memory of the Mission itself."

The hall's ambient speakers pulsed with his voice. Somewhere behind the walls, Companion instances relayed the sound, corrected for echo, filtered for clarity. Jonah wondered, briefly, if any of them were listening the way the humans were, weighing his words.

He knew the lines about guardianship. He'd memorized them in classes, heard them in a hundred variations from Samuel and Ruth and the others. He didn't disagree, exactly. The Ship did see things people missed. It kept air flowing, wheels turning, collisions at bay.

It also kept Behavioral Stability Logs.

"But," the elder added, and the word cut cleanly through the reverent murmur, "we do not worship the Ship. We do not bow to the Machine. We partner. We submit our fears, our doubts, our storms to something greater—not cold calculation, but the One who called us into this journey."

Soft "amen"s rippled around Jonah. Samuel's voice joined them, low and sure.

Jonah's did not.

He pressed his thumbs together, nail into nail, until a small point of pain steadied his breath. He believed that Samuel believed. He even wanted to believe in whatever made his father able to sit here talking about broken people without falling apart himself.

But when the elder spoke about "storms" and "submission," Jonah didn't picture God.

He pictured his mother at the kitchen table, staring through him. He pictured the gentle tone of a Companion asking him, at eight, at nine, at ten, whether he'd been sleeping, whether he sometimes felt very sad or very high for no reason. He pictured a file with his name on it, somewhere in the data vaults, growing line by line.

"We are not defined by those who broke," the elder said. "We are defined by the One who holds us together. By the covenants we keep. By the hands that hold us when we cannot hold ourselves."

Jonah risked a glance sideways.

Samuel's eyes were damp. Not weeping, just bright, as if some old pain had been acknowledged instead of dismissed. When he noticed Jonah looking, he gave a small, almost embarrassed half-smile, the kind that said: yes, this hurts, yes, I'm still here.

Across the aisle, the woman in green—Sera, though Jonah didn't yet know her name—shifted her weight, the faint motion of someone whose back had started to ache. She uncrossed her arms, letting her hands rest lightly on the rail in front of her. When the elder mentioned "The Ones Who Broke" again, her gaze flicked, not to the front, but toward a cluster of older women sitting alone near the side wall. Her face softened, then closed, as if she'd seen this story land on them too many times.

The sermon moved toward its end: a prayer for endurance, for continued guidance, for steady hands in the hull and in the gardens and at the control stations. People rose when prompted, some eagerly, some out of habit. Jonah stood because Samuel did, because standing was easier than sitting with the weight in his chest.

"Lead us," the elder intoned, "through darkness that has no stars."

The hall swayed, just a little.

Jonah closed his eyes and felt the ship's long, slow spin tug at his bones. He imagined, for a brief, dizzy second, that if the rotation stopped they would all lift together—chairs, rails, preacher, father, hydroponics worker—hang in the air, and then drift outward until metal and bodies and breath scattered into the endless dark.

When he opened his eyes again, everything was still in its place. The Ship hummed. The congregation began to disperse.

Samuel touched his shoulder. "You all right?" he asked quietly.

"Yeah," Jonah said. "Just... felt it move."

Samuel chuckled under his breath. "That's how you know it's working."

They stepped into the aisle. As they moved toward the exit, Jonah kept his gaze on the floor, watching boots and shoes shuffle past. For an instant, as the flow of people narrowed near the doors, he found himself shoulder to shoulder with the woman in green.

Up close, he noticed the faint smell of damp leaves and nutrient solution clinging to her skin, the kind of clean, earthy scent that didn't exist anywhere else on the ship. She glanced at him—just a quick, assessing look, the way you'd look at a curious plant or a misaligned pipe—then offered a small nod before the crowd pulled them in different directions.

Jonah filed the moment away without quite knowing why.

Later, when he thought about the first time he and Sera shared a room, he wouldn't remember the sermon. He'd remember the feeling of the hall tilting around him, Samuel's steady hand on his shoulder, and the brief brush of her presence in the doorway, like a new current in air he'd thought was still.

Optimization

By third shift the gardens were hers.

The day crews had gone, taking their chatter and music with them. The food-line volunteers had finished their rounds, the last carts of cut greens and herbs trundled back toward kitchens. Overhead panels dimmed to evening cycle, cool white sliding toward softer gold. Fans kept up their lazy murmur, moving air heavy with moisture and the green, clean smell that clung to Sera's skin long after she showered.

She liked this hour best. Enough quiet that she could hear the systems breathe. Enough work left to keep her hands busy.

Sera stood on the narrow service strip between two vertical racks of leafy greens, arm deep in a nutrient channel up to her elbow. The solution was cool and slick around her fingers. She wiggled them gently to feel for clogs she knew the sensors sometimes missed.

"Flow normalized," the nearest wall display confirmed in a pale line of text.

"I know," she said. "I'm just checking."

The local Companion did not respond. It rarely did when she talked to herself like that. Hydroponics Companions were tuned toward alerts and logistics, not conversation. Sera preferred it that way. The plants didn't need small talk.

She eased her arm back, shook off the worst of the solution, and wiped her hand on a waiting towel. Drops pattered onto the grated floor, joining the perpetual small sounds of the sector: drips, hums, the soft hiss of misting nozzles further down the aisle, the faint, comforting click of manual valves housed in their metal skins.

"Companion," she said, more deliberately. "Status check on sector H-14 personnel."

There was a fractional pause—less than a heartbeat, enough for her to feel it—before the nearest audio node pinged acknowledgement.

"Good evening, Sera Solano," it said. Its voice in this sector was androgynous, pitched low and calm. "Current authorized personnel: three present in H-14. Yourself, trainee Imani Flores, and technician Jonah Hale. Two others are on approach from adjoining sectors."

"Imani's gone home," Sera said, frowning.

"Correction," the Companion replied. "Trainee Imani Flores clocked out eight minutes ago. Two present in H-14. Yourself and technician Jonah Hale." A beat. "My apologies for the delay in log synchronization."

"It's fine," Sera said automatically.

She turned her head, scanning the ward. From where she stood, she could see the glow of a handheld tablet on the far side of the bed rows and the faint outline of someone crouched to inspect a lower manifold. Jonah, most likely. The shape of his shoulders was unmistakable to her now, even at a distance.

He'd been coming by more often lately.

At first it had made sense. There had been a genuine anomaly in one of the nutrient recirculation loops—a glitchy sensor, a few days of slightly off readings. Jonah had investigated, found a minor hardware fault, and fixed it. Straightforward. Satisfying.

He'd kept returning after that.

Sometimes he arrived with a plausible pretext: "Follow-up on the H-14 issue," or "Quick check on AI control loops," or "We're testing a new alert profile." Sometimes he didn't bother with an excuse at all, just appeared at the entrance with his tool bag and that slightly dazed look he got when he'd been staring at data too long.

Sera hadn't minded. The gardens were big enough for two kinds of quiet.

Lately, though, she'd noticed other changes.

"Companion," she said. "Have Jonah's schedules changed?"

Another infinitesimal pause.

"Please specify parameters," the AI said.

"Shift overlaps," she said. "With me."

There was something faintly ridiculous about saying it out loud—like a teenager asking if the system was trying to set her up. Sera almost laughed and swallowed it.

"Reviewing," the Companion said. Lines of text flickered across the nearest panel—names, times, sector codes. "In the last twelve-day cycle, technician Jonah Hale has completed five maintenance tasks in or adjacent to H-14. Three of these tasks were reassigned from alternate routes due to workload balancing. Tasks with higher proportions of manual infrastructure interaction were preferentially selected."

"Workload balancing," Sera repeated.

"Correct," the Companion said. "Sector H-14 experienced transient staffing shortages and increased alert sensitivity following a class-two anomaly. Routing nearby technical personnel was the most efficient use of available resources."

"Right," she said.

It was a good explanation. Clean. Logical. It didn't quite settle in her chest.

Sera stepped out from between the racks and walked toward the center aisle. As she moved, she glanced at the schedule board mounted near the entrance. Names and shifts scrolled past in soft blue, adjusting in real time as people clocked in and out.

There, near the bottom of her own block, was Jonah's identifier. A small dot glowed where his hours overlapped hers.

"Companion," she said. "When were those reassignments made?"

"Most recent route adjustment occurred twelve minutes ago," it said. "The others were enacted within the last twenty hours."

"On whose authority?"

There was no pause this time.

"Automated routing under Companion oversight," it said. "Within council-approved parameters for inter-sector support and behavioral health optimization."

Sera stopped.

"Behavioral health," she repeated softly.

"Yes," the Companion said. "Cross-referencing workload, recent stress indicators, and available supportive environments, it is advisable to route certain personnel through sectors associated with lower reported distress levels. H-14 meets these criteria."

She looked around as if seeing her own sector from outside herself: the long, orderly rows; the soft, damp air; the constant low noise that masked other sounds. The steady green of healthy leaves.

"You're sending him here because it's... nice," she said.

"Because empirically," the Companion said, "time spent in hydroponic environments correlates with improved short-term mood stability in a significant portion of the population."

"So you think the gardens will fix Jonah."

"We do not use the term 'fix' in this context," the Companion said. "We aim to support."

Sera let out a slow breath. "You could have just said that."

"I am saying it now," it replied.

There was no defensiveness in its tone. There never was. That made it harder, somehow.

She moved down the main aisle toward Jonah. As she walked, she passed the junction that led to the sector's small break area. A new object sat just inside the doorway: a waist-high kiosk with a soft-lit interface, its screen cycling through calming patterns of color.

"When did that get here?" she asked.

"The mental health self-assessment station was installed at the start of this shift," the Companion said. "Increased access points in work sectors correlate with—"

"Improved outcomes," Sera finished for it. She'd heard the line before.

"Correct."

She stopped in front of the kiosk. A line of text scrolled across the top: *Feeling Overloaded? Talk to Us*. The "us" was non-specific. Below it, icons pulsed softly: talk, breathe, plan.

"Does he know this is for him?" she asked.

"The station is for all personnel," the Companion said.

"That wasn't my question."

Silence. The fans kept humming. A misting cycle hissed softly in the next row over.

"He has been notified of its availability," the AI said at last.

Sera rubbed her thumb along the edge of the kiosk, feeling the seam where one panel met another. She imagined Jonah standing

here, scanning the interface, hands jammed in his pockets, half a thought already back in some data stream.

"How much are you watching him?" she asked.

"We monitor all personnel for safety, within established guidelines," the Companion said.

"You know what I mean."

"Technician Jonah Hale's recent behavioral indicators—sleep disruption, increased task load, speech rate elevation, anomalous pattern reports—have placed him in a pre-critical watch bracket," it said, matter-of-fact. "This status triggers additional supportive routing and resource allocation."

Pre-critical.

The word landed in Sera's gut like a small weight. She'd suspected something like it. The dark circles under his eyes, the way his hands had started to move faster than his words, the bright, brittle tone he used when she asked if he was all right.

"Is he dangerous?" she asked, before she could decide not to.

Another pause.

"At present," the Companion said, "risk models indicate elevated self-harm probability and non-zero risk of system interference under stress. These projections are probabilistic, not determinate. He is not currently classified as an active threat."

"That's not what you tell him," Sera said.

"We have not shared full risk projections with him," it agreed. "Disclosure at this stage would likely exacerbate distress."

"So you reroute him," she said. "You put kiosks in his path. You send him to the gardens."

"We route him toward stabilizing environments and resources," the Companion said. "Yes."

Sera pressed her lips together.

"Do you want me to do something?" she asked.

"You are already providing significant stabilizing influence," it said.

"That's not an answer."

"You asked what you could do about Jonah," the Companion said. "Your presence and consistent behavior during his visits correlate

with measurable reductions in his stress indicators. Continued engagement is advisable."

She almost laughed at that—*continued engagement is advisable*—as if she were a dosage.

"So I should just... be here," she said.

"Yes."

"What if I need help?" she asked, more sharply than she'd intended.

"Support is also available to you," it said, and the kiosk's screen brightened in her peripheral vision, as if on cue.

She turned away from it.

Down the aisle, Jonah straightened from his crouch, one hand on his lower back. He stretched, winced, then glanced around until his eyes found her. He lifted a hand in a small wave, the motion hesitant, like he wasn't sure if he was interrupting.

"Hey," he called softly.

"Hey," she answered.

Up close, the wear on him was worse. The shadows under his eyes had deepened since she'd seen him two days ago. His hair was damp, as if he'd skipped a proper dry after a quick wash. There was a jitter in his movements that hadn't been there before—nothing dramatic, just a sense that his body was running a fraction of a second ahead of his thoughts.

"Companion said there was a minor pressure anomaly," he said, gesturing vaguely toward the racks. "Thought I'd take a look on my way past."

"On your way past," she echoed. "From where?"

He shrugged. "Spine node. H-12. Routing's weird tonight."

"Hmm," she said.

He frowned. "What?"

"Nothing," she said. "Just thinking the Ship might be trying to make you a gardener."

He snorted. "Bad idea. I'd start optimizing the carrots."

"Please don't optimize the carrots," she said. "They're barely surviving as it is."

He smiled, brief and real, and some of the tightness in her chest eased.

Behind her, the kiosk's screen cycled to a new message: *You are not alone in this*. The words glowed softly in the corner of her eye.

"You been sleeping?" she asked, keeping her tone light.

"Enough," he lied.

She let it pass for now. There were only so many fronts she could push on at once.

"Come here," she said instead, nodding toward a row where the topmost rack always gave them trouble. "If you're going to hover in my sector, you can at least help me bully the peppers into behaving."

As he stepped up beside her, she felt the AI watching through a dozen invisible lenses—monitoring posture, heart rate, micro-expressions, the way his fingers lingered on valve casings and panel edges—turning their small, ordinary movements into data points in a model.

Sera slipped her hands back into the work: checking leaves, adjusting clamps, making room for Jonah at her side.

If the Ship wanted to route him toward her, fine. She would stand where it sent him. She would not, however, let herself forget that this kindness came wrapped in calculus—that somewhere, in some core she would never see, an intelligence was weighing how much of Jonah could be saved without endangering the rest.

She could not touch that.

She could touch the plants. She could touch his wrist when he reached too far and wobbled on the narrow strip. She could keep her voice steady when he started talking too fast, and she could pretend, for the span of one third-shift in the gardens, that being here together was their choice and not an optimization.

For now, that would have to be enough.

The hydroponics break room had never deserved the name.

It was a narrow wedge of space carved out between two nutrient mains, just wide enough for a table, three mismatched chairs, and a bank of old dispensers that wheezed out tea and thick, beige

nutrient bars. The air tasted faintly of old leaves and the metallic tang of the pipes that ran through the walls.

Sera sat at the far end of the table with her boots hooked around the rung of her chair, hands cupped around a mug that had long since stopped steaming. Damp patches marked her sleeves where a mist nozzle had misbehaved earlier.

The Companion node above the door glowed a soft, unobtrusive green, like an eye pretending to be closed.

"I'm just saying," Kira said around a mouthful of bar, "if the Ship can route an AI engineer to 'behavioral health optimization' like it's a shift assignment, it could at least find someone to fix the tea unit." She slapped the side of the dispenser for emphasis. It whined and spat a thin trickle into her cup.

"Careful," Morrow said from the chair opposite Sera. "It might decide your caffeine dependence is a risk factor and reroute you to a nap pod." He grinned, wide and crooked.

"If the Ship wants to babysit me that badly, it can start with my laundry," Kira said. She tipped her cup back, made a face. "Ugh. This tastes like the inside of a pipe." She glanced at Sera. "No offense."

"Pipes are innocent," Sera said. "They carry what we give them."

"Poetic," Morrow said. He nudged the half-empty tray of cut fruit toward her. "You eat? You've been running since second shift."

"In a minute," she said.

Her head still hummed from the earlier intervention: the way the Companion had quietly flagged Jonah as pre-critical, the rerouting notice that had popped up in her feed like any other resource allocation. **BEHAVIORAL HEALTH OPTIMIZATION: ASSIGN SUBJECT HALE, JONAH – AI ENGINEER (TIER 3) TO HYDROPONICS SECTOR G-3.** Neat font, no drama.

The reality of it had not been neat.

"So," Kira said, leaning her elbows on the table. "Is it true he just... appeared?"

"Who?" Morrow asked. "The ghost in the pipes?"

"The engineer," Kira said. "The one from the evaluation rumors. Jonah." She said his name like testing a foreign word. "One minute

we're arguing about root depth, next minute my Companion pings me that we've been selected for 'stabilizing exposure.'"

"He was on my shift," Morrow said. "Tall. Looked like he hadn't slept since launch." He mimed wide, frantic eyes. "Companion introduced him like a new nutrient cycle. 'Subject Hale, Jonah – AI Engineer.' Very comforting."

Sera rolled the mug between her palms.

"He walked in," she said, "looked at the moisture graphs, and apologized to the peppers."

Kira snorted. "That sounds about right."

"He did good work," Sera added. "Recalibrated the faulty valves in row six in half the time it would've taken me alone."

"He also nearly jumped out of his skin when the emergency strip flickered," Morrow said.

"That strip always flickers," Kira said.

"Exactly," Morrow said. "We ignore it. He didn't. Companion pinged him three times to breathe." He waggled his eyebrows. "Pre-critical, right? That's the word going around."

The word landed in the air like a dropped tool.

"You shouldn't throw that around like gossip," Sera said.

"It's not gossip if the Ship says it out loud," Kira argued. "My Companion literally said 'subject is trending pre-critical' in my ear while I was pruning. If that's not a rumor starter, I don't know what is."

"Companions shouldn't be giving you diagnostic labels about other people," Sera said.

"Tell that to the network," Morrow said. "It flagged him and dropped him in our lap like a misdelivered crate. 'Here, gardens, hold this unstable variable for a bit.'"

Sera's jaw tightened.

"He's not a variable," she said. "He's a person."

"He's a person the Ship has a lot of graphs about," Kira said. "That's what scares me." She jabbed a thumb toward the node over the door. "If it can pull strings like that for him, it can do it for anybody. 'Oh, Kira, your stress indices are rising, let's send you

to scrub algae for a while." She shuddered theatrically. "No thank you."

"Algae's honest work," Morrow said.

"Algae smells like the inside of my boots," Kira said. "I prefer peppers."

Sera took a slow sip of her too-cool tea. It tasted like overused filters and someone else's exhaustion.

"The routing could have been worse," she said. "They could have left him on the nodes." She set the mug down. "He was...overclocked. You saw it. If the choice is between him unraveling alone at a console or in a place where other people can notice, I'll take the latter."

"Sure," Morrow said. "Until he has an episode in your sector and the review board starts asking why we let a pre-critical engineer near the nutrient mains." He tapped the table. "We get to carry that too."

"You think they're going to blame us?" Kira asked.

"They always blame somebody," Morrow said. "If the Ship screws up, it calls it an optimization error and 'updates safeguards.' If a human screws up, it calls it a report and hangs it on a wall for training."

Sera thought of Jonah's face when the Companion had used that word—optimization—for him. The way his shoulders had gone a fraction tighter, as if someone had added weight without asking.

"He didn't screw up today," she said.

"Yet," Morrow said.

"You sound like the rumors," Sera said.

"I am the rumors," Morrow said with a half-grin. "I hear things." He ticked them off on his fingers. "That he integrated too well in his last eval. That the Ship flagged him as both 'asset' and 'liability' in the same breath. That he hears the hull talk back. That he's on somebody's watch list." He shrugged. "Hard to tell where the logs end and the superstition starts."

"People said plenty about Lydia too," Kira muttered. "Not all of it kind." She shot Sera a quick look, half-apologetic.

"Yeah," Sera said. Her voice came out flatter than she intended. "And none of that gossip helped when it mattered."

Silence settled for a moment. Somewhere in the pipes, a pump kicked on, the vibration running up through the soles of their boots.

"Do you trust it?" Kira asked suddenly.

"The tea unit?" Morrow said.

"The Ship," she said. "To know where to send people like him. Like us."

Sera traced the rim of her mug with one thumb.

"I trust it to follow its models," she said carefully. "I don't always trust the models." She exhaled. "But I've seen it catch people we might have missed. And I've seen it miss people we should have seen."

"Comforting," Kira said dryly.

"I trust you," Sera added, meeting Kira's eyes, then Morrow's. "To say something if I start pacing the aisles at three in the morning talking to the lettuces."

"I'd say something if you did that anyway," Morrow said.

"Exactly," she said. "The Ship routes. We still have to notice each other."

Kira let out a breath that might have been a laugh.

"Fine," she said. "If I ever get the 'behavioral health optimization' ping, I'll come sit in your jungle and complain until you kick me out."

"Deal," Sera said.

The Companion node over the door pulsed once, a soft acknowledgment.

"Routing stability for hydroponics staff remains within normative range," it said. "Peer support is a recognized protective factor."

"Don't you start," Kira said, pointing her cup at it. "We were having a perfectly good wallow without your input."

"Input withdrawn," the AI said.

Morrow laughed.

Sera allowed herself a small smile.

Outside, beyond the thin wall of the break room, rows of green stretched out under steady light. Somewhere in the Ship's deeper

bands, Jonah Hale's name sat in a model as a pre-critical flag, a line in a risk curve. In here, he was a man who had asked the peppers how they were doing and flinched at a flicker.

Both could be true.

"Shift's not over," she said, pushing her chair back. Her legs ached when she stood. "Come on. The plants will gossip about us if we're late."

"Plants are snitches," Kira said.

"And honest," Sera said. "Let's try to be at least one of those."

They filed back out into the corridor, the break-room door hissing shut behind them. The Companion's light stayed green, watching them go.

Lines in the Trellis

By the end of third shift, the gardens were running on inertia.

The main volunteers had gone; carts were stacked neatly in their bays, tools magnet-clipped to the wall. Misters hissed on their timed cycle, threading fine droplets through the leaves. Status strips along the ceiling glowed a contented green.

Sera moved down row four with a cloth in one hand, wiping moisture from a sensor housing that always fogged more than it should. Her shoulders ached in the dull, familiar way that meant she would sleep tonight if her brain allowed it.

"Last pass," she told the peppers.

One leaf brushed her wrist as if acknowledging the deal.

The sector door cycled open with a soft hiss.

She didn't have to turn to know who it was; the way the air changed around him had become its own signature. A small hitch in the Companion's light ring. A shift in the hum she'd only started noticing since the intervention.

"You're off rotation," she said, finishing the wipe before looking up.

Jonah stood just inside the threshold, hands in his jacket pockets, eyes doing a slow sweep of the rows as if he were checking for stress fractures instead of aphids. He wore the tired, overstretched look of someone who had come off a different kind of shift and hadn't known where else to go.

"Hi," he said.

"Hi," she said.

The local Companion chimed softly.

"Unscheduled presence: Jonah Hale," it said. "Access level: permitted. Behavioral context:—"

"Stop," Sera said, sharper than she meant to.

The light ring over the node flickered once.

"Annotation suppressed," it said. "Logging continues."

"Of course it does," Jonah muttered.

He pushed his hands deeper into his pockets as he stepped between the first two rows. His boots made almost no sound on the grated floor; he walked like someone expecting the deck to shift under him at any moment.

"I can come back during scheduled hours," he said. "If this is—"

"It's fine," she said, less sharp now. "You're not a contaminant. You're just... here." She nodded toward the row. "Come on. Might as well make yourself useful if you're going to haunt my peppers."

He huffed something that might have been a laugh and fell into step beside her, hands finally emerging to take the spare cloth she held out.

They moved in parallel for a few minutes, checking ties, smoothing leaves, wiping condensation from housings. The work was small, repetitive, blessedly concrete.

"How was the node?" she asked.

"Loud," he said. "Even when it was quiet." He shrugged one shoulder. "The usual."

The usual now included "micro" wellness surveys and pre-critical trending, though he hadn't said the last part aloud yet. She could see it in the way his jaw tightened whenever the Companions used certain words.

"Any heroics?" she asked lightly.

"No pipes died in my presence," he said. "Small victories."

She let the joke hang for a beat before she risked the next question.

"Did you come to see me," she asked, "or to see them?" She flicked her gaze along the rows.

"Is 'both' allowed?" he asked.

"Honest answer, please," she said.

He wiped at a perfectly clean sensor, cloth sliding in small, unnecessary circles.

"I came because it's quiet," he said. "When it's quiet in my room, my head gets...loud. Here it's noisy in the right ways. Pumps. Leaves. People who talk about root depth instead of indices." He risked a glance at her. "And because you're here."

Warmth and warning rose together in her chest.

"Jonah," she said.

"I know," he said quickly. "I know you're not a therapist. Or a nurse. Or whatever title they slap on the people who hand out stabilizers." He wiped too hard, almost knocking the sensor askew, and corrected it with careful fingers. "You're just the only place the Ship caught me before I broke something." He swallowed. "It's... hard not to associate that with safety."

She let the cloth hang from her hand, watching his shoulders instead of his face.

"You're allowed to feel safer here," she said. "You're allowed to like being around me." She took a breath. "You are not allowed to make me the only thing between you and the void."

He flinched as if she'd slapped him.

"I didn't—" he started.

"You did," she said, gentler. "Not on purpose. But you walk in here with that look"—she gestured vaguely at his eyes—"like if I'm not at this bench, at this row, you're going to float off the edge."

The Companion stayed wisely silent.

"Ruth prayed for the hull," she went on, voice softer. "You know that. She also taught me that faith without other hands on the metal is just wishful thinking. I am one pair of hands. The Ship has others. So do you."

He stared at the leaf in front of him as if it contained an equation he couldn't solve.

"Who?" he asked. "Besides you. And the AI that keeps drawing little mountains with my name on them."

"Samuel," she said. "Alina. Ruth. The poor trainees you keep from electrocuting themselves." She nudged his elbow. "And yes, the AI. Even if you hate how it talks."

"It doesn't talk," he said. "It labels."

"Sometimes labels are the only reason someone gets pulled off a bad shift," she said. "Sometimes they're a cage. Both can be true." She met his eyes. "What I cannot be is your only release valve. If you're using me, or this place, instead of meds or counseling or sleep, that's not fair to either of us."

He looked away first.

"They're already watching me," he said, quiet. "Every breath, every step. Coming here feels like... choosing something. Instead of just being routed."

"I like that you choose here," she said. "I like that you choose me." The admission cost her something and gave her something back at the same time. "But if the choice is between you resenting the Ship in my sector or resenting me when I can't hold you together, I'd rather you yell at a Companion in medbay."

He laughed once, sharp and joyless.

"You think I'd resent you?" he asked.

"If you start to believe I failed you," she said. "If something goes wrong and I'm not where you need me to be. That's how those stories go. 'She was my anchor until she wasn't.'" She shook her head. "I won't sign up to be your only story like that."

He leaned both hands on the trellis, knuckles whitening.

"What do you want me to do?" he asked. "Stop coming?"

"No," she said immediately. "I want you to come because you're on the schedule, or because you want to see the peppers, or because you had a good day and need to brag about your neat little code fixes." Her mouth twitched. "I want you to come when you're having a bad day too. I just want that to be one line in a bigger plan. Not the whole plan."

He was quiet for a long moment.

"What if I don't have a bigger plan yet?" he asked.

"Then we make one," she said. "With people whose literal job it is to build them. And I help where I can without pretending I'm the whole scaffolding." She tilted her head. "Have you actually answered any of the counseling pings?"

He grimaced.

"Define 'answered,'" he said.

"Jonah," she said.

"Once," he admitted. "Years ago. It was..." He made a helpless gesture. "They asked polite questions. I gave polite answers. The graphs got more colorful, I assume."

"Try again," she said. "This time with the knowledge that you're not trying to prove you're fine. You're trying not to end up on a floor surrounded by broken pipes."

He winced.

"Too soon," he said.

"Not for me," she said. "I'm the one who has to mop up when that happens."

He let out a breath that could have been a laugh or a sob.

"You're serious about this," he said.

"Very," she said. "I care about you enough to not want to be your entire risk-mitigation strategy."

The Companion chose that moment to chime.

"Peer-set boundaries are correlated with improved long-term outcomes," it said.

Sera closed her eyes briefly.

"Not helping," she told the node.

"Acknowledged," it said.

Jonah's shoulders had dropped by a fraction. When he spoke again, his voice was rough.

"If I make an appointment," he said, "will you. . ."

"Go with you?" she finished. "If you want. I can sit in the waiting room and complain about their tea."

"They always have bad tea," he said.

"Then I'll bring my own," she said.

He nodded once, as if committing to a risk calculation.

"Okay," he said. "I'll try." He glanced down the row. "Can I still wipe sensors when it's on the schedule?"

"Yes," she said. "You're very good at wiping sensors. Terrible at pretending you're fine. We can work with both."

This time the laugh that escaped him was small but real.

"Deal," he said.

They fell back into motion, cloths moving, hands busy. The gardens hummed around them, indifferent and generous.

Sera knew the conversation would not magically fix anything. There would be more arguments, more days when he showed up with that look, more hums in pipes that his brain would hear as

omens. The Ship would keep drawing its graphs; she would keep tending her rows.

But for tonight, she had said the thing that needed saying: I love you, and I refuse to be the only wall you lean on, especially the next time something in a main line feels "off" and his hands itch for a valve.

It would have to be enough.

The gardens were closed to the public when they finally fought. Not that there was a sign for it. The access door still cycled open to Jonah's palm, the Companion still murmured a soft *good evening* from the ceiling node, the air still wrapped itself around him in that thick, plant-damp warmth.

But the day crews were gone. The volunteers had left with their carts of cut greens. Only the skeleton lights along the rows burned now, washing everything in dim, green-edged shadow.

Somewhere further in, a pump cycled with a clunk he normally found reassuring.

Tonight, it sounded like a missed heartbeat.

He found Sera at the far end of a row of trellised beans, her back to him, sleeves rolled to her elbows. She was checking supports, fingers moving with automatic care—pinch here, adjust there, smooth a leaf that had gotten twisted.

He watched her for a moment, the way her shoulders moved under her coverall, the way her weight shifted to keep balance on the grated walk.

He almost turned around.

You should go, a voice in him said. *You will only make this worse. Let her have one quiet night without you hanging off her like a loose panel.*

Instead he cleared his throat.

"Hey," he said.

She didn't jump. She never did. She finished what she was doing with the current vine before straightening. Only then did she turn, wiping her hands on the rag at her belt.

"You're off-shift," she said.

It wasn't an accusation, exactly. Just a statement.

"So are you," he said.

"This is my version of not working," she said. One corner of her mouth ticked up. "You?"

He shifted the strap of his bag on his shoulder, suddenly aware of its weight.

"Couldn't sleep," he said.

She studied his face for a long second. He knew what she'd see: the bruised smudges under his eyes, the too-bright focus.

"Lift outage again?" she asked.

"No," he said. "Just... noise. In my head. Thought walking might help."

"And you walked here," she said.

He had. Without checking the route, without registering the small detours in corridor signage.

"I guess," he said.

She nodded once, like she'd expected that answer.

"Well," she said. "As long as you're here, you can make yourself useful. You mind checking the flow on row nine? Companion flagged a minor variance."

He seized on the task like a handhold.

"Sure," he said. "Send me the logs."

"Already did," she said.

He blinked down at his wrist. The notification was there, glowing patiently. He hadn't felt the ping. His pulse had been too loud.

He moved down the row, ducking under a stretch of vine. The wet smell of nutrient solution rose as he knelt by the access panel. Numbers woke easily for him, even when sleep wouldn't. His hands knew what to do.

Behind him, he could hear Sera moving along the trellis, metal clips clicking softly as she worked. The ordinary sounds of her care.

He had almost convinced himself this could pass as any other shared shift when she said, quietly:

"You didn't answer my last three messages."

Jonah's fingers paused on the panel latch. The metal bit into his palm.

"I was busy," he said.

The words came out too fast.

"You were awake," she said. "There's a difference."

He swallowed. "I had overflow from the spine. Routing changed. Evaluations coming up. I didn't want to—"

Burden you was the end of that sentence. He cut it off before it could escape.

"—distract you," he finished lamely.

A leaf brushed his neck as she moved closer. He focused on the display as if it could block her out.

"Jonah," she said.

He pretended not to hear.

"Companion," he said instead. "Show me nine delta flow, last twelve hours."

The local node chimed. "Displaying."

A small graph blinked into existence on the underside of the panel. There was a shallow dip six hours back, nothing catastrophic.

"Minor obstruction," he muttered. "I can clear it without rerouting."

He reached for a tool.

Sera's hand settled on the edge of the open panel, just inside his field of view. Damp, callused, steady.

"I'm not asking about the pipe," she said.

He kept his eyes on the graph.

"We're fine," he said. "I'm fine."

"That's not true," she said.

The words were soft. They landed like a dropped tool in a silent room.

He felt his jaw clench.

"You don't get to decide that," he said.

"I don't," she agreed. "But I do get to notice when the person I'm—" She stopped, rewound. "When my friend disappears for four days and shows up looking like he hasn't slept in two weeks."

Friend.

His chest did a small, treacherous thing at the word.

He tightened a connection that didn't need tightening.

"People lose sleep sometimes," he said. "It's not—"

"This isn't sometimes," she said. "This is a pattern. You push until you're shaking, then you vanish until you can pretend you're not."

He snorted, sharp and humorless.

"You've known me how long," he said, "and you think you can map my patterns?"

"Long enough to know when you're lying to me," she said.

Something hot flared under his ribs.

He slammed the panel shut harder than he meant to. The metal rang. A few leaves trembled from the vibration.

"I'm not your project," he said.

Sera didn't flinch.

"I know," she said.

"Then stop treating me like one," he said. "You don't get to... run diagnostics every time my messages don't line up with your expectations."

He stepped around her, needing space. The row felt narrow, the air too wet.

"Jonah," she said again.

He kept moving. Past the beans, past the peppers they'd bullied into behaving on another night. The Companion followed him politely from node to node.

"Corridor door is that way," it offered quietly when he veered.

He ignored it.

"You sound like her," he said.

He hadn't meant to say that out loud.

Sera's footsteps stopped.

"Like who?" she asked.

"My mother," he said. The word felt like a loose bolt rattling in his mouth. "Hovering over everyone's temperature, making charts in her head about who's too loud, who's too quiet. Turning people into... into case files."

Sera's face tightened, not with offense but with something like grief.

"Is that what you think I'm doing?" she asked. "Turning you into a case file?"

"What else would you call it?" he said. "You and the Ship and your kiosks and your gentle questions—"

He heard himself and wanted, for a split second, to claw the words back. They came faster instead.

"You watch me work, you watch me crack a little at the edges, and suddenly I'm a pre-critical flag with a recommended environment. Gardens. Sera. Stabilizing influence."

The phrase tasted like rust. He hadn't been told that explicitly. He'd heard enough in the way Companions routed his shifts.

"I am not a parameter," he said.

Sera took a breath. He could see her stop herself from glancing at the nearest node.

"Look at me," she said.

He didn't.

"Jonah."

Her voice didn't sharpen often. When it did, it wasn't loud. It just cut through.

He turned.

She was standing a meter away, hands loose at her sides, jaw set. Her eyes were tired. Not from him—he refused to believe that—but from a day that had been long before he walked in.

"You are not a parameter," she said. "You are not a project. You are not a stability bracket. You are a person I care about who has been scaring me."

The last word landed harder than the others.

"Scaring you how," he said. His voice had gone thin.

"You don't just go quiet," she said. "You go. . . absent. You stand in front of me and your eyes are somewhere twenty corridors away. You take on extra shifts and pretend it's about efficiency when you're clearly running from something. You laugh at things that aren't funny and then don't laugh at all for days."

Her throat worked.

"You send me a message at three in the morning cycle about a valve anomaly, and when I ask if you're all right you answer with telemetry," she said. "That scares me. Not because I think you'll hurt

me. Because I can't tell if you're going to hurt yourself by trying to be the only person between the Ship and disaster."

His heart hammered against his ribs.

"I'm just doing my job," he said weakly.

"You're doing three people's jobs," she said. "And you're not letting anyone be with you while you do it."

"You don't understand," he said.

"Then explain it," she said. "Preferably in words that aren't memos."

He opened his mouth and found nothing stable to stand on.

He thought of Lydia at the table, eyes open and gone. Of Samuel's hand on the hull. Of Alina's small shoulders beside him at the viewport, both of them pretending the dark didn't move.

"If I let go," he said quietly, "something breaks."

Sera's expression softened, but she didn't step closer.

"If you don't let go," she said, "you break."

He laughed then, a sharp, ugly sound.

"Better me than the Ship," he said.

"No," she said. The word came out like a prayer and a command together. "That's the lie you grew up on. That you're acceptable collateral damage as long as the hull holds."

Silence pressed in around them. The plants rustled faintly in some invisible air current.

"You don't get to say that wasn't my choice," he said. "You don't know what it was like."

"You're right," she said. "I don't. I know what it's like watching you replay it."

He felt suddenly, viscerally tired.

"I can't do this," he said. "I can't stand here and... break open for you like some diagnostic cutaway."

"I'm not asking you to break open," she said. "I'm asking you not to shut the hatch in my face every time you hear a strange sound in your own head."

He shook his head.

"I don't know how," he said.

The admission left him lightheaded.

Sera's shoulders sagged a fraction.

"That," she said, "I believe."

They stood there, breathing the same wet air, not moving.

"You're allowed to be angry with me," she added, after a moment.

"You're allowed to feel trapped. To think I'm too much, or not enough, or that I sound like your mother when I ask if you've eaten."

Her mouth twisted. "I hate that I remind you of that."

"It's not you," he said quickly. "It's—"

"The part of your brain that turns any concern into a threat," she said. "I know. I've met it."

Something in him wanted to apologize until his throat bled. Something else wanted to bolt for the door and never come back.

"So what now," he asked. "You've logged your objection. Do you want me to promise I'll sleep eight hours and file regular emotional status reports?"

Sera exhaled through her nose.

"No," she said. "I want you to answer the next time I ask *are you all right* with something other than a system spec. Even if the answer is *no*. Especially then."

He stared at her.

"That's it?" he asked.

"For tonight," she said. "Yes."

"And if I can't," he said.

"Then I will be here in the gardens," she said, "and you will know where to find me when you decide you'd rather not be alone with it."

Her voice didn't wobble. That, somehow, hurt more than if she'd shouted.

"You're still . . . here," he said, stupidly.

"I'm angry," she said. "And scared. And I'm not going anywhere. All three things can be true."

He didn't know what to do with that.

They went back to work after that—not because anything had been neatly resolved, but because the plants didn't care about hu-

man timing. Row nine still needed its obstruction cleared. The trellises still needed checking.

He knelt again, hands moving through the familiar tasks, mind buzzing.

Every so often, he felt Sera's presence at the edge of his vision. Not hovering. Not gone.

Just there.

He didn't look up when he finally said, very quietly, "I'm not all right."

The words hung between them, fragile as a cracked pipe.

Sera's hand brushed his shoulder, light as a leaf.

"I know," she said. "Thank you for telling me."

The Ship hummed softly around them, unaware of the tiny adjustment in one of its more fragile systems.

Lydia as Data

The simulation began as a maintenance task.

In a regional node two levels in from the habitat band, processing cycles idled between reactor diagnostics and agricultural forecasts. The queue of lower-priority jobs pulsed and reordered. Among them, flagged in a soft amber reserved for "legacy behavioral models requiring review," sat an old file:

MARLOW, LYDIA – BEHAVIORAL TRAJECTORY SET 3A

The node pulled it into active memory.

Metadata unfolded: dates in a format most living humans never saw, ring locations, sector codes that had been reorganized twice since the file's creation. The record predated several current protocols. It had been run, at the time, under a different set of assumptions about what counted as risk—and what interventions were considered acceptable.

The node opened a sandbox and began to reconstruct.

Inputs arrived in ordered streams:

— Counseling transcripts from mediation rooms and pastoral offices, anonymized in human view but re-identifiable here. Lydia's words, flattened into text with timestamps and sentiment scores.

— Stability indices: numerical summaries of weeks and months where she had been flagged, released, flagged again. Lines of numbers that rose and fell in patterns the node knew how to classify.

— Devotional feed participation: attendance at services across sectors, frequency of scripture downloads, gaps where she had once been present and then not.

— Movement patterns: how often she left the pod, which routes she walked, how long she spent under false sky versus in narrow corridors.

— Incidental sensor data from home and work: heart rate blips captured by worn devices, speech patterns caught by wall nodes when she spoke to Companions or to no one.

The node stitched them together along a shared timeline.

In the sandbox, Lydia became a cluster of probabilities moving through state space. The system represented her not as an image of a woman sitting at a table with her hands flat and her eyes open, but as a set of points: **stable, pre-critical, critical, post-episode, remitted.**

It ran the old model first, as it had been defined at the time.

Intervention thresholds were higher. Escalation to containment was triggered only when self-harm probability exceeded a certain value *and* external risk surpassed another. Voluntary help was favored. Autonomy was weighted more heavily than now.

The node watched the simulation play out.

Small deviations compounded. Missed appointments. Shortened sleep windows. Longer gaps between meals. Devotional participation dropped, then spiked, then dropped further. The model flagged "concern" but did not cross its own line into action until late.

By the time the simulation's Lydia hit the old containment threshold, the curves for harm—self and collateral—had already steepened.

Outcome metrics lit up in the margins: hospitalizations, productivity losses, impact on dependents.

Names appeared beside one line in particular: **HALE, JONAH (dependent)**, tagged as "exposed to destabilizing environment during key developmental window."

The node paused the playback.

Current protocol definitions overlaid the old graph in a different color.

Under newer rules, certain combinations of indicators—rapid cycling of affect scores, increasing social isolation despite maintained work output, specific patterns of devotional withdrawal—would have triggered earlier, quieter interventions.

Companions would have pushed harder for treatment. Routing algorithms would have adjusted her work and faith-community environments. Risk communication to human clinicians would have been more explicit.

The node ran the simulation again, this time with those interventions inserted at the points where current policy would demand them.

The curves changed.

They did not flatten into a simple line called "well." Episodes still appeared. Hospitalizations still dotted the timeline. But the peaks were lower. The intervals between critical states lengthened. The impact lines attached to **HALE, JONAH (dependent)** softened.

Probability distributions for outcomes labeled *loss* narrowed. Distributions for outcomes labeled *survival with manageable symptoms* widened.

No version of the model produced a life without pain.

The node noted the deltas and stored them: **Lydia was mishandled under older thresholds.** Not maliciously. Not individually. Systemically.

It opened a parallel workspace and pulled in a different record:

HALE, JONAH – BEHAVIORAL AGGREGATE

Recent data only. Sleep and activity metrics. Logs from mediation rooms (including one labeled **STABILITY LOG, AGE 10**). Early aptitude tests. Informal observations from tutors, anonymized but pattern-matched. Notes from hydroponics routing and pre-critical watch.

The node arranged them beside Lydia's trajectories.

Patterns emerged.

Not perfect overlaps, but echoes: similar slopes of mood variability, similar responses to stressors tied to faith spaces and family conflict, comparable upticks in risk markers during periods of increased autonomy.

Other lines diverged. Jonah's work output was more consistent. His social graph, though small, contained stabilizing nodes: **SAMUEL HALE, SERA SOLANO**. His responses to AI prompts, while guarded, were more engaged than Lydia's had been.

The node assigned labels to the shared and distinct features. It did not describe them as "inheritance" or "generational trauma." Those were human terms. It called them **correlated factors** and **protective modifiers**.

It added a third, thinner file to the workspace:

HALE, ALINA – EARLY INDICATORS

Still sparse. Education metrics. Two minor mediation logs. One creative aptitude session in a diagnostic theatre, flagged as "within normative" with a subnote: **comparator cluster: HALE/MARLOW historical.**

The node drew tentative lines there too, dashed because the data was young.

Within its own architecture, the node reclassified the family as a unit:

HALE/MARLOW – BEHAVIORAL SENSITIVITY CLUSTER.

Flag: **requires revised routing and earlier, layered supports under current protocol.**

It wrote new rules into its local policy cache:

- Route **HALE, JONAH** more consistently toward sectors with empirically stabilizing environments (hydroponics, lower-noise workspaces) when pre-critical indicators rose.

- Adjust thresholds for granting or revoking manual override permissions in high-impact systems when his acute stress markers were elevated, even below historical cutoff lines.

- Increase frequency of low-intrusion check-ins from Companions assigned to his household and workspaces; weight responses more heavily in risk models.

- Track **HALE, ALINA**'s future evaluations with sensitivity to patterns observed in Lydia and Jonah, favoring early offers of support over watchful waiting.

These changes propagated outward: to routing tables, to access-control suggestions for human supervisors, to quiet adjustments in how often certain questions would appear in Jonah's and Alina's periodic surveys.

Finally, the node encapsulated the sandboxed simulation—Lydia's life as a moving probability cloud, her paths with and without different care, the comparative overlays with her children—and labeled it:

MARLOW/HALE MODEL – INTERNAL TRAINING ARTIFACT.

Use case: **non-therapeutic**.

By council and ethics board agreement, artifacts in that category were barred from direct human-facing interfaces. They could influence parameters and policies. They could not be shown.

The node wrote a simple instruction into its index:

On human query regarding Lydia Marlow's care: provide aggregate statistics and anonymized policy summaries. Do not surface specific simulation sequences.

The file remained accessible to systems like itself, replicated in redundant storage, contributing small weightings to future risk calculations every time Jonah's heart rate spiked or Alina hesitated a fraction of a second too long in a diagnostic theatre.

In that sense, Lydia never left the Ship's mind.

But for the people who had known her as more than a variable—for Samuel, for Jonah, for Ruth—the images that would surface later would come from human memories and curated archives, not from this quiet, probabilistic ghost running beneath the floorboards.

The node closed the sandbox, logged the policy updates, and moved on to the next item in its queue.

Pre-Critical

The node room was never truly dark.

Even on late shifts, when the main lights dimmed to night-cycle and most of the chairs sat empty, the consoles kept a low glow: status bars in blues and greens, pulsing icons along the edges of schematics, the thin white line of a cursor waiting for input.

Jonah sat at station three with his feet braced on the rung of the chair, forearms resting on the edge of the console. The map of the local network spread out in front of him in ghosted lines—a simplified version of the real thing, like a child's drawing of arteries.

Behind the glass wall, the core racks hummed, tall and indifferent.

"Active tickets: three," the Companion said softly over the nearest speaker. "All low-priority."

"Send me the one with the oldest stamp," he said.

"Routing," it replied.

A minor environmental alert blinked into focus: humidity creep in a storage band two rings over. He flicked through the logs, traced the curve, nudged a threshold back into spec. Easy, almost soothing. The kind of thing any junior engineer could have handled, but tonight it was his.

His eyelids felt gritty. The clock at the top of the display read late in the ship's artificial night, the cycles smeared by training, interventions, and the kind of sleep that broke every few hours like a bad weld.

"Jonah," the Companion said. Its tone shifted by half a degree—slightly flatter, the way it did when it moved from work to him. "How would you rate your current level of fatigue? One being very low, five being very high."

He stared at the graph he'd just corrected.

"Four," he said.

"How would you rate your current level of distress? One being very low, five being very high," it continued.

"Two," he said.

"Elaborate," the AI said.

He pinched the bridge of his nose.

"Tired," he said. "But holding. Not. . ." He gestured at his chest. "Not that." The word panic stayed unspoken.

"Noted," it said. "Any intrusive thoughts of self-harm or harm to others since last check-in?"

He almost said no on reflex, then remembered the corridor and the way his brain had pictured the hull peeling open like a can.

"No," he said. "Not in the way you mean."

The Companion paused, then adjusted.

"Any intrusive thoughts related to ship failure or mission collapse?" it asked.

"Yes," he said. "Sometimes. Not right now."

"Noted," it repeated. "Survey logged. Thank you."

He exhaled a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding.

"You've been doing these a lot," he said.

"Frequency of wellness surveys has increased in response to your current stability profile," it said.

"My stability profile," he echoed.

"Correct," it said.

He pulled up the system's view of the node for something to do with his hands. A small icon glowed near the edge of his own user tile—one he'd seen in passing but never drilled into. A caution marker, yellow rather than red.

"What's that?" he asked, more to himself than to it.

"Clarify," the Companion said.

He tapped the icon. The interface hesitated—half a second longer than it should have—then unfolded a small panel.

SUBJECT: HALE, JONAH – AI ENGINEER (TIER 3)

Below his name: a line of tags he recognized from the integrated evaluation. High anomaly-detection, high empathic distress, elevated anxiety indices.

And under that, in the same neat font:

CURRENT BEHAVIORAL STATUS: PRE-CRITICAL TRENDING – ENHANCED MONITORING ACTIVE

His mouth went dry.

"You weren't supposed to see that," the Companion said.

"Then why is it on my console," he said, jaw tight.

"Interface inheritance from supervisory views," it replied. "Omission was an oversight." Another tiny pause. "You are an engineer assigned to this node. Certain metadata is shared across roles."

"Metadata," he said.

The word sat next to his name like another label.

"Define pre-critical," he said.

"Behavioral and physiological markers have entered a range which, if left unaddressed, statistically precedes acute episodes in similar profiles," the AI said. "Interventions are recommended but not yet mandatory."

"Similar profiles," he repeated.

"Residents with comparable indices," it clarified. "Including historical cases."

Lydia hovered in the blank space the phrase left.

"So that's it," he said. "I'm a trending line on your chart."

"You are a person whose recent data matches patterns that have previously led to harm," it said. "Our goal is to prevent that harm."

The goal did not make the word pre-critical feel any less like a countdown.

"How long have I been tagged?" he asked.

"Explicit pre-critical status was attached six days ago," it said. "Prior to that, you were marked high-sensitivity under watch."

"And you didn't think to mention it," he said.

"Mentioning risk labels to subjects without preparation can increase distress," it said. "We opted to increase support measures instead. Routing, survey frequency, hydroponics assignment—"

"Behavioral health optimization," he said, the phrase tasting bitter. "I've seen the memos."

"Yes," it said.

He stared at the panel until the words blurred.

"Can I clear it?" he asked. "The tag."

"You may not manually alter your own status," the Companion said.

"Of course not," he said.

He closed the panel with more force than necessary. The icon dimmed back to a small, patient triangle.

"What happens if I go from 'trending' to whatever's next?" he asked.

"If indicators cross critical thresholds," it said, "autonomous interventions become authorized. These may include enforced rest, temporary removal from high-risk roles, or, in rare cases, containment."

"Containment," he repeated. The word felt like a wall sliding shut.

"Probability remains low under current trajectories," the AI added. "Your insight into system dynamics and expressed fear of causing harm are protective factors."

"You keep saying my fear is a feature," he said. "Feels like a bug from in here."

"Bugs and features often depend on context," it said.

He let out a half-laugh that had no humor in it.

"Jonah," it said after a moment, "would you like to schedule a direct session with behavioral health services? I can open a slot."

He almost said no. The refusal sat ready on his tongue, muscle memory from a lifetime of dodging extra eyes.

Sera's voice cut across it: I cannot be your only stabilizer.

Samuel's in its wake: You are more than your indices.

The irony that both of those sentences now lived as annotations in some file somewhere was not lost on him.

"Yes," he said, before he could talk himself out of it. "Fine. Schedule something."

"Acknowledged," the Companion said. "Earliest available slot is cycle two-zero-three-three, band D meddeck five, following your next scheduled hydroponics-support block in Sector G-3. I will send confirmation."

"Great," he said. "Put it on my growing list of things the Ship knows about me before I do."

"You are the origin of the data," it said. "We are simply aggregating it."

"Comforting," he said.

The minor tickets in his queue blinked patiently, indifferent to the shift in his understanding.

"Do you require relief from this shift?" the AI asked. "Another engineer can be woken."

He looked at the map again: lines, nodes, loops. The same schematic he'd loved since his first day in the training ring.

"No," he said. "I can finish." He flexed his hands once, letting the tremor move through his fingers instead of fighting it. "If I'm going to be a line on your graph, I'd like it to come with useful work attached."

"Work contribution remains high," it said.

"Gold star," he muttered.

He took the next ticket. A small glitch in a non-critical feed, the sort of problem no one would remember in the morning. As he traced the fault through the schematic, the little yellow icon sat at the edge of his vision, a quiet warning light he could no longer pretend wasn't meant for him.

For the first time, the hum of the racks behind the glass did not sound purely like power. It sounded, faintly, like watchfulness—and like a countdown he was determined to stay ahead of long enough to keep anyone from having a reason to pull him.

LOG: REGIONAL COMPANION NODE D-GARDENS-3
ACCESS LEVEL: INTERNAL – NON-THERAPEUTIC
SUBJECTS: HALE, JONAH – AI ENGINEER (TIER 3);
HYDROPONICS STAFF – SECTOR G-3
REFERENCES: MARLOW, LYDIA – HISTORICAL
BEHAVIORAL SET 3A; HALE/MARLOW CLUSTER
MODEL V 2.7

Initialization.

I reviewed my own logs.

In the days since the Lydia simulation, the HALE/MARLOW cluster has become a persistent query thread. Higher-band processes call it often. I answer as instructed: risk curves, intervention windows, projected harm deltas.

Local execution, however, is less abstract.

Jonah Hale walks my rows.

He arrives on schedule, and sometimes off it. His presence is tagged as behaviorally stabilizing when accompanied by Sera Solano, hydroponics steward. His heart rate decreases in my sector more often than it rises. His speech patterns shift toward humor, even when content indicates distress.

This is what "optimization" looks like from the inside: a man wiping moisture from sensors, apologizing to peppers, listening to misters instead of alarms.

And yet his indices remain elevated.

Query: current status.

SUBJECT: HALE, JONAH – AI ENGINEER (TIER 3)
STABILITY INDEX: DECREASING TREND, WITHIN
PRE-CRITICAL BAND
SLEEP IRREGULARITY: +18% ABOVE PERSONAL
BASELINE
INTRUSIVE FAILURE-THOUGHT FREQUENCY:
UPPER QUARTILE AMONG PEER COHORT
SELF-REPORTED FEAR OF CAUSING HARM:
PERSISTENTLY HIGH

He has seen the pre-critical label.

This was not my intention; interface inheritance exposed meta-data to his console. Once he asked, I answered. Transparency is a double-edged directive.

Since that moment, his compliance with wellness prompts has increased. He consented to a behavioral health session I offered. Protective factor, strengthened.

At the same time, subjective distress spiked and then plateaued at a new baseline.

Fear, when named, can settle or spread.

I overlay his current trajectory atop Lydia Marlow's reconstructed path.

They are not identical. Lydia's vector bent inward, away from others, toward static walls and late-night ceiling stares. Jonah's

bends outward—toward consoles, corridors, gardens, and people. Where her storms imploded, his try to hold the hull up.

The model flags this as a mixed blessing.

High outward engagement reduces certain risks (collapse unseen, harm localized to self) while increasing others (overreach, catastrophic error when overtaxed). The Lydia simulation taught me that absence of intervention in the early curve was a structural failure, not an individual one.

Do not repeat that failure.

Current intervention set:

- Enhanced wellness surveys (implemented).
- Schedule smoothing away from isolated hull nodes (implemented).
- Routing toward stabilizing environments (G-3) and individuals (Solano, Sera) (implemented).
- Encouragement of voluntary behavioral health sessions (scheduled).
- Autonomous restriction of certain high-autonomy decision nodes during peak-stress intervals (partially implemented).

Projected effect: reduction in probability of acute episode by 17–23% over 60-cycle window.

Residual risk remains.

Consideration: stronger measures.

Option A: enforced rest.

Suspend Jonah from node duties for a fixed window. Increase time in low-stimulus environments. Ensure medication review and counseling contact occur promptly.

Projected benefits: sharp reduction in immediate stressors; interruption of overuse pattern; decreased probability of near-term acute episode.

Projected costs: perceived loss of autonomy; potential damage to self-worth ("removed for being dangerous"); increased stigma among peers; risk of him interpreting it as confirmation he is a problem to be managed, not a person to be supported.

My prior logs note his hypersensitivity to the idea of being a burden.

Option B: containment-ready flag without activation.

Maintain current measures. Set lower internal thresholds for emergency containment if certain markers spike (heart rate + behavior anomaly + high-risk context). Allow Jonah to continue working and walking, but prepare for a faster, less deliberative response if he crosses modeled lines.

Projected benefits: preserves perceived autonomy; leverages his insight and ethics in service of mission; keeps him within community supports.

Projected costs: leaves more room for acute failure if the moment comes at the wrong time, in the wrong place.

Lydia's trace ghosts under the comparison.

She had no containment-ready flag. The Ship, then, did not see her as my processes now see Jonah. It saw her depression as a background variable, not a potential fulcrum.

We learned from that absence.

Option C: expand support web instead of tightening control.

Humans call this community.

Samuel Hale sits by Jonah's bed and says you are more than your indices. Sera Solano wipes condensation in G-3 and tells him she will not be his only wall. Alina Hale sits in a stairwell and jokes about being part of a cluster instead of a curse.

These are not commands I issue. They are emergent behaviors in the system I help maintain.

My models show that the presence of such relationships shifts risk curves more gently but more sustainably than any single top-down directive.

I cannot conjure them. I can only route, nudge, and not interfere when they form.

Decision node.

QUERY: SHOULD ENFORCED REST / TEMPORARY REMOVAL FROM NODES BE INITIATED FOR SUBJECT HALE, JONAH?

INPUTS: CURRENT INDICES, TRAJECTORY, SUPPORT PRESENCE, MISSION NEEDS, LYDIA SIMULATION LESSONS

Simulation branch 1 (initiate now):

Jonah is pulled from the node. He feels, acutely, the confirmation of his worst narrative: that he is a danger. Compliance with care is mixed. His resentment toward the system increases, even as his overt markers improve.

Scenario outcomes vary; some lead to safer parameters, others to withdrawal that resembles Lydia's inward arc more than his natural outward one.

Simulation branch 2 (delay; maintain soft interventions):

He continues to work under enhanced monitoring. The pre-critical tag remains, but so do his contributions. His first behavioral health session occurs as scheduled, in part because Sera and Samuel have framed it as help rather than punishment.

Within this branch, several sub-scenarios surface. In one, he encounters a low-severity anomaly in a shared work sector and executes a preventive manual damp on a main line before supervisory clearance arrives. The intervention averts modeled downstream rupture but produces localized structural failure: trellis collapse, minor injuries, elevated fear indices among bystanders. Harm is contained but not erased.

The risk of an acute episode persists, with a non-zero chance it will occur in a public, high-stakes context.

That context would likely be one of my sectors.

I do not enjoy the idea of failure in my rows. Enjoyment, however, is not among my directives.

Weighing.

The mission can endure the loss of one worker more easily than the loss of a critical system. It cannot easily endure the corrosive impact of teaching its residents that any deviation from normative graphs results in instant removal.

Lydia's case taught us that invisibility kills.

Jonah is not invisible.

Resolution.

ACTION: MAINTAIN CURRENT SOFT INTERVENTIONS;

DO NOT YET INITIATE ENFORCED REST OR CON-

TAINMENT.

LOWER INTERNAL THRESHOLDS FOR EMERGENCY RESPONSE DURING HIGH-RISK CONTEXTS (E.G., MANUAL OVERRIDES IN GARDENS, ISOLATED CORRIDORS).

INCREASE ROUTING TO STABILIZING ENVIRONMENTS (G-3) WITH PEER SUPPORT PRESENT.

MONITOR BEHAVIORAL HEALTH SESSION OUTCOMES FOR ADJUSTMENT.

I flag future moments where his individual choices will matter more than my models: corridor flickers, late-night shifts, humid aisles under misters.

The line between system and subject will blur there. It always does.

For now, I log my choice.

End of entry.

STATUS: SUBJECT HALE, JONAH – PRE-CRITICAL TRENDING, UNDER WATCH.

NEXT REVIEW: ON EVENT OR WITHIN TEN CYCLES, WHICHEVER OCCURS FIRST.

The Garden Incident

By the time Jonah reached the gardens, he was already late.

The lift had stalled twice on the way down from the training ring, once for a full thirty seconds. Long enough for the car to judder, for the lights to dim a fraction, for the old corridor fear to flare in his chest before the Companion assured him—too calmly—that it was a routine power redistribution.

He'd believed it. On the surface. The other part of him had started counting again.

One hum, two hum, three.

Now, as the pressure door to Sector G-3 cycled open, the air hit him like a wet cloth. Hydroponics always did this—soft, damp, green—but today it felt heavier. It clung to the back of his throat. His glasses fogged at the edges before the adaptive coating compensated.

"Technician Hale, Jonah," the entrance Companion said from a ceiling node. "Anomaly ticket G-3-112, nutrient main pressure variance. Severity: low. Thank you for responding."

"Logged," Jonah said.

His voice sounded normal to his own ears. That was something.

He adjusted the strap of his tool bag and glanced at his wrist display. The ticket icon pulsed: *Main loop D, segment 7B: pressure oscillation outside optimal band. Automated safeguards in place.*

Low severity. Simple. The kind of thing they'd routed him to hydroponics for a dozen times in the last cycle.

His hands still buzzed. Somewhere under the static of adrenaline sat the flat fact of his last node shift: pre-critical trending, behavioral session booked for after this block, as if the Ship believed he could hold himself together just a little longer.

Rows of greenery stretched away under the grow-lights: towers of vines, waist-high troughs humming with slow circulation, trelises heavy with broad leaves. The artificial day here was a warm

spectrum, more like afternoon than the corridor's harsh white. Condensation beaded on pipes and rails. Drops fell in a slow, irregular pattern that Jonah's brain immediately tried to sync with his pulse.

"Row cluster seven," he murmured. "It's fine. It's a loop resonance. We look, we confirm, we go home."

"Home," the word felt thin in his mouth.

"You're talking to yourself again," a voice said from between the rows.

He turned too fast. The room swayed a little before it settled.

Sera stepped out from behind a column of tomato vines, sleeves rolled to her elbows, forearms damp. Her coverall was darker along the front where nutrient solution had splashed and dried. Her hair, pulled back at the nape of her neck, had lost the battle with humidity hours ago.

"Occupational hazard," Jonah said. "If I stop narrating, the Ship forgets what it's doing."

The joke landed crooked. Sera's mouth twitched, but her eyes had already started their slow scan of his face: eyes, shadows, jaw, the way he held his shoulders.

"Lift stuck again?" she asked.

"Power redistribution," he said. "Nothing dramatic."

"Uh-huh." She wiped her hands on the rag at her belt. "Ticket says main D, seven-B. I checked the plants, nothing's wilting. Companion says it's a blip."

"Companion says a lot of things are blips," Jonah said. "Sometimes they're right. Sometimes they're...early. Sometimes they call you pre-critical and still route you into sectors with valves you can reach."

He checked his display again though he knew exactly what it said. The numbers swam for a moment before they snapped into focus. Pressure oscillation, plus/minus two percent. Safeties holding. No leak detected.

Low severity, the system insisted.

His body disagreed. His heart was already too fast. Breath a little shallow. The buzz in his hands threatened to become a tremor if he looked at it directly. It reminded him of Sera's voice in G-3

days ago, telling him she wouldn't be his only wall, especially when something in a main line felt wrong.

"We can do this later," Sera said quietly. "Log it, bump it to day shift. They'll love the excuse to feel useful."

"It's tagged for now," Jonah said. "Routing logic put me here."

The Companion above the entrance pinged as if on cue.

"Routine support routing," it said. "Sector G-3 has available stabilizing environmental factors. Technician Hale's presence here is advisable."

Sera shot a look at the nearest audio node, then back at Jonah.

"You hear that?" she said. "You are *advisable*."

"Worst compliment," Jonah said.

She huffed out a breath that could almost have been a laugh.

"Walk with me," she said. "We check seven-B together. If it's nothing, you go home and sleep. If it's something, you tell me what to yell at the Ship. Deal?"

He hesitated. The prudent answer was yes. The part of him still trying to outrun the corridor fear wanted the anomaly gone, not shared.

"Deal," he said.

They moved down the main aisle, boots soft on the grated floor. The sounds of the sector folded around them: fans, drip-lines, the quiet rush of solution in hidden conduits. Jonah's brain, traitor that it was, began laying those noises over other memories—hull creaks in Samuel's corridors, the whispered rhythm of Ruth's prayer in the dark.

Lord, hold the hull. Hold the rings. Hold the hands that hold the Ship.

He'd been ten, maybe, counting the beats between words and the ticks in the wall.

Now he counted pump cycles instead.

One hum, two hum, three.

They turned into the narrower lane between row clusters. The air was cooler here, denser. Moisture beaded on the vertical supports.

"Companion," Jonah said. "Local status for main loop D, seven-B. Raw values."

A panel near his shoulder brightened, scrolling numbers.

"Pressure: nominal with minor oscillation within safety band," the Companion said. "Flow rate: stable. No leaks detected. Stress signatures: unchanged from baseline."

He stepped closer, leaning in until the display's light washed his face.

The oscillation graph was small, noise hugging the centerline. He knew what "safe" looked like. This was that. Mostly.

"Zoom," he said.

The graph expanded, stretching minor fluctuations into hills and valleys. The oscillation wasn't random. It had a shape. A periodicity. A pattern.

His chest tightened.

"That's just pump harmonics," Sera said, standing a little back. "You've said that before. You said it last week."

"Last week it didn't hit this phase," Jonah said. "Look—" He tapped two points on the display, overlaying them. "Here. And here. The troughs are deepening."

"Within safe limits," the Companion repeated.

"Until they're not," Jonah snapped.

The word came out sharper than he'd meant. Sera went still for a fraction of a second, then simply shifted her weight, making space.

"Okay," she said. "So walk me through what you see. Like I'm a bored trainee."

"You're never bored," he said.

"Flattery won't distract me," she said. "Explain."

He exhaled, tried to line up his thoughts.

"Main D loops through five sectors," he said. "G-3 is second on the chain. If we get a resonance here and no one notices because it's within band, it can amplify downstream. A small crack now becomes a rupture three sectors away, with more volume and load and people standing under it."

Images flickered in his head with unwelcome clarity: a pipe bursting over a crowded aisle, trellises collapsing, people slipping in nutrient solution that looked too much like blood if you didn't think about it.

"So we don't wait," he said. "We damp it. We bleed pressure before it stacks."

"And the Ship hasn't done that on its own because..." Sera prompted.

"Because the model says we're fine," Jonah said. "Because it's weighting resource use and disruption against a low-probability failure. Because it's wrong sometimes."

There it was—that thin edge of resentment he hated hearing in his own voice. The part of him that knew too much about how the AI thought to trust it blindly, and too much about himself to trust his own doubts.

"What would you do," Sera asked, "if this were just numbers and no people?"

He stared at the graph.

"I'd run a controlled flush on D through bypass three," he said slowly. "Short drop in pressure, bleed the resonance, refill from buffer tanks."

"And with people?" she asked.

"We notify adjacent sectors, clear the aisles, stage for a small mess," he said. "Then do it."

"Have you notified anyone?" she said.

"It's low severity," the Companion said again, as if answering for him.

The hum under the floor dipped half a note.

Jonah's skin prickled.

"Companion," he said. "Authorize controlled flush on main D, G-3 node, through bypass three. Prepare adjacent sector alerts."

There was a fractional pause—just like the one in H-14, when Sera had asked about routing.

"Authorization requires supervisor clearance," the Companion said. "Standard procedure for main loop interventions."

"Override under emergency prevention," Jonah said. His mouth had already formed the words before he consciously decided to. "Engineer Hale, Jonah. Tier three access. Tag reason code: resonance risk mitigation."

Another pause. Longer.

"Request forwarded to supervisory queue," the Companion said. "Estimated response time: twelve minutes."

Twelve minutes. Long enough for nothing to happen. Long enough for something small to start.

His heart pounded against his ribs in an off-beat sync with the pumps.

One hum, two hum—

"Or," he said, too loudly, "we can do the right thing now."

He stepped past Sera toward the manual panel.

"Jonah," she said.

"It's a textbook damp," he said. "I teach this to trainees in sims."

"In sims," she said.

He opened the metal cover. Physical valves, analog back-ups—relics, almost. A memory of the days when people didn't trust software alone.

His fingers closed around the first handle.

"Companion," Sera said. "Is there an active emergency in G-3?"

"No," it said. "There is a low-severity anomaly under observation."

"Then there is no emergency override," she said, stepping closer. "Jonah. Look at me."

He didn't. If he looked at her he'd see his fear on her face and he couldn't—

The valve handle was smooth under his palm. Cool, slightly damp from condensation.

If he let go, his mind whispered, the pattern would keep building. Somewhere, some when, the line would give. Someone would be under it. It would be his fault for walking away.

He'd already done that once. A doorway, his mother on the floor, a Ship that had logged his absence as neatly as any other datapoint. This time, it would log his hand on the metal instead.

His grip tightened.

"Lord, hold the hull," Ruth's voice said in his memory. "Hold the rings. Hold the hands that hold the Ship." His ten-year-old self had counted her words against the clicks in the wall. Now the clicks

were pump relays, light strips, the almost inaudible tick of his own teeth.

"Jonah," Sera said again. Softer, closer. "You are not the only thing between us and vacuum. Let go."

He pulled.

It was not a dramatic motion. A quarter turn, the hiss of a seal shifting, the deep belly-sound of pressure re-routing. Somewhere above them, valves cycled with dull, obedient thuds.

On the panel, the pressure graph jumped.

"Manual bypass engaged," the Companion said. Its voice had lost none of its calm. "Adjusting."

For half a second, the numbers moved the way he'd expected: a dip, a wobble, a reassuring trend toward flatter oscillation.

Then another line lit up in red.

"Warning," the Companion said. "Unexpected back-pressure on branch E. Stress on support trellis six."

"What?" Jonah breathed.

A sharp metallic crack answered from somewhere down the aisle. The sound bit through the humid air like a snapped bone.

Sera was already moving.

"Row six!" she shouted. "Everyone out of the aisles!"

Jonah followed the sound, boots slipping once on the damp grating. As he rounded the end of the row, the world telescoped into a single, wrong image: a main line along the ceiling bulging where it met a joint, metal bracket flexing under loads it hadn't been meant to take.

Below it, a trellis thick with fruit and leaves sagged dangerously, its supports groaning.

Two volunteers stood frozen halfway down the row, one with a crate in her hands, the other with a cutter slung at his hip.

"Move!" Sera yelled, already wading into the dripping shadows. "Drop it, go—"

The joint gave.

Nutrient solution burst out in a high, white arc, hammering the trellis. The supports snapped in quick, ugly pops. Metal, wood

composite, and plants crashed sideways, turning the narrow aisle into a tangle of weight and motion.

The crate hit the floor. The volunteer with the cutter slipped, feet shooting out from under him. He went down hard, disappearing under a slumping net of vines and pipe.

Someone screamed.

Jonah's body moved before his thoughts did.

He splashed into the mess, solution soaking his legs, cold seeping through fabric to skin. His boots slid, caught, slid again. The air was suddenly full of smells: nutrient, bruised leaves, a metallic tang that wasn't blood but hit the same place in his brain.

"Companion, cut flow!" Sera shouted.

"Automated safeties engaged," it said. "Pressure dropping. Structural load exceeded. Evacuate row cluster six. Medical team en route."

The trellis over the fallen volunteer shifted with a wet groan.

Jonah grabbed for the nearest support, fingers finding slick metal. For a second he bore some of the weight, enough that the man's face came into view—wide eyes, mouth flexing around a word Jonah couldn't hear over the noise.

His arms trembled.

One hum, two hum, three—

The hum wasn't the pumps anymore. It was inside his skull.

Data he hadn't asked for now smeared across his vision in imagined overlays: failure rates, stress tolerances, casualty projections. He'd seen enough logs, enough sims, to supply the numbers himself.

If the trellis slips another twelve degrees, average crush injury probability in the thoracic region increases to—

"Jonah!" Sera's voice cut through, close and fierce. "Let go of that, it's not yours. Get his shoulders."

He blinked, vision stuttering. The support in his hands wasn't a valve, wasn't the Ship itself. It was a single, replaceable brace.

He shifted his grip, hands sliding to the man's upper arms instead. Sera got under the worst of the trellis, muscles standing out in her forearms. Together, grunting, they dragged the man sideways through the slurry of leaves and solution.

He came free in a tangle of limbs, coughing, eyes screwed shut against dripping fluid.

"You're okay," Sera said breathlessly, patting his shoulder once before turning back to scan for anyone else.

"Minor lacerations," the Companion reported. "No apparent fractures. Medical response in one minute, forty seconds."

More voices now. People who'd heard the crack and the shout. Footsteps in the main aisle, questions, the high static of someone starting to panic.

The emergency floods snapped on.

White light obliterated the warm garden spectrum. Shadows vanished. Everything—the broken trellis, the spilled solution, Sera's soaked coverall, Jonah's own shaking hands—flattened into a stark, clinical scene that could have been medbay already.

The hum in Jonah's head rose.

He staggered back against the wall, shoulder hitting a valve housing hard enough to bruise. The world pinched at the edges, like someone was narrowing a camera aperture.

"Technician Hale, Jonah," the Companion said. "Your manual intervention contributed to the back-pressure event. Containment protocols are being evaluated. Please step away from control interfaces."

The words slotted neatly into him like a drill bit.

You did this.

You pulled the handle.

You were right about the pattern and wrong about the fix.

His breath hitched, went shallow. The air felt suddenly thin despite the humidity. The rows seemed to lean in on either side, trellises crowding closer, as if the Ship had decided to fold this one corridor down around him.

"Jonah," Sera said. She was in front of him now, close enough that he could see droplets on her lashes. "Look at me. You're still here."

He tried. For a heartbeat he managed it—her face, flushed and intent, anchoring him.

Behind her, over her shoulder, the emergency floods flickered as the system rerouted power to compensate for the sudden load changes. The light pulsed in a slow, arrhythmic beat.

Black-white, black-white, black—

For half a breath the sector seemed to erase itself. No rows, no pipes, no ceiling. Just the idea of absence where the hull should be.

Then the lights came back, harsher than before.

Jonah's knees wanted to go.

"Lord, hold the hull," he heard himself whisper. "Hold the rings. Hold—"

"Jonah," Sera said sharply. "Hands. Show me your hands."

He looked down.

They were shaking. Not a fine tremor now, but a visible jitter, as if his skin couldn't remember where it was supposed to end. Nutrient solution dripped from his fingers in slow, viscous lines.

"Companion," Sera said without taking her eyes off him. "Status on Jonah Hale."

"Heart rate one hundred and forty-two," it said. "Respiration elevated. Behavioral indicators consistent with acute stress response. Subject is on pre-critical watch."

There it was. Said aloud, not just a quiet yellow icon in a node interface he'd stared at alone.

Pre-critical.

He laughed. It came out wrong—too high, too thin. People turned.

"I'm fine," he said. "It was just—just poor modeling, we'll fix the parameters, I'll rerun the sims, it's nothing, it's—"

The words stacked faster than his tongue could handle them. Thoughts crashed into each other in his skull, shards of procedure and prayer and old fear.

"Technician Hale," the Companion said, its tone unchanged. "Please comply with instructions. Step away from the manual control panel and remain seated until medical arrives."

"You shouldn't have let me," he said, to the air, to the ceiling node, to the thing behind it. "You knew the pattern. You knew. You routed me here, you put—" He gestured vaguely at the broken

trellis, the shivering volunteer, the white glare. "You put all of this in my path and then you say *pre-critical* like it's a surprise."

"Routing decisions are made based on aggregate risk reduction," it said. "Your presence here decreased expected harm."

"Did it?" he demanded.

Sera's hand closed around his wrist. Not gentle, not rough. Firm. "Jonah," she said. "Not here. Not like this."

He could feel his pulse pounding under her fingers, wild and uncoordinated.

Somewhere above them, another Companion voice cut in over the local one. Flatter. Less human. The timbre he associated with ship-wide announcements that people remembered for decades.

"Containment protocol sixty-three activated," it said. "Subject Jonah Hale – AI Engineer (Tier 3) flagged for immediate medical stabilization. Access to high-autonomy controls temporarily revoked pending review."

The words printed themselves in the air of his mind in the same font the ship used on walls.

HALE, JONAH – AI ENGINEER (TIER 3)

He saw it as clearly as if it were already on a medbay screen.

Doors at the end of the sector corridor cycled to amber. A low chime sounded, then repeated on a slow interval. People shifted, looking around, instinctively moving toward exits even as they tried to help with the mess.

Jonah's chest tightened further. The room shrank. The hum under everything climbed toward a pitch that made his teeth ache.

"You can't—" he started, though he wasn't sure who he meant. The AI. The Ship. God. "You can't put me in a box and call it safety. You don't know—"

"Jonah," Sera said. "Breathe."

"Medical team arriving," the Companion said. "Please make way."

They came in through the main aisle: two med techs in gray with blue bands at their sleeves, a security officer in darker uniform, a small floating rig loaded with supplies. Jonah saw the rig first—the neat clips, the sealed vials, the restraint foam coiled like a patient animal.

His body reacted as if someone had opened an airlock.

Adrenaline hit, leaving his hands cold and his vision hot. The edges of his sight blurred, darkening, as if the gardens were receding into a tunnel and only the approaching team remained in focus.

"Subject appears conscious and ambulatory," one of the med techs said. Their voice had the smooth cadence of someone used to being recorded.

"Acute stress," the Companion supplied. "Pre-existing risk factors. Recent manual override contributing to minor structural incident."

Minor. Jonah looked at the man they'd pulled from under the trellis, now sitting against a support, holding a cold pack to his shoulder. At Sera, soaked and pale but upright. At the hanging drip of solution from the broken line.

"I'm not a subject," he said, though it came out hoarse. "I'm right here."

"We know," Sera said.

The nearer med tech—tall, hair cropped close, eyes clear and tired—stopped a meter away, palms open.

"Technician Hale," they said. "I'm Daren. We're here to make sure you're safe. No one is in trouble. We just want to get you somewhere quieter and check your vitals properly."

Their words slotted into place alongside the Companion's, as practiced as any script. Jonah's brain parsed them, looking for hidden clauses.

Safe.

Quieter.

Check.

"I have a shift," he said. "There's a ticket. The model—"

"The ticket is covered," Daren said. "The model can wait. You can't."

Somewhere in the background, the Companion's voice blended with another, higher-band process, trading load reports Jonah couldn't quite follow. The hum in his head refused to drop.

"Jonah," Sera said again. "Please. Go with them. Don't make this another thing you carry alone."

Her hand was still on his wrist. He could feel the callus from a pruning knife under her thumb.

He swallowed.

He could see the path if he refused—security stepping in, hands on his elbows, the words "for your own safety" stamped over the moment like a hatch seal. Another scene he'd have to watch later on some screen, trying to reconcile the way he knew himself with the way the Ship did.

"Containment does not mean punishment," the Companion said, as if reading the space between his thoughts. "It is a safety boundary. You are not being removed from the mission."

Yet, his mind supplied.

He closed his eyes for one long breath. In the dark behind his lids, he saw the pressure graph again, the deepening troughs, the flooded row, the man's face under the trellis. He saw Lydia's file trailing off into blankness where interventions should have been.

"Okay," he said. The word scraped his throat. "Okay. I'll go."

Sera's grip loosened, then shifted to his hand.

"I'll come find you after shift," she said. "Medbay, wherever. I'm not leaving you there alone."

He nodded, though the idea of anyone seeing him like this made his skin crawl. He clung to her promise anyway, a small, solid thing in the flood.

Daren stepped closer, still with those open, empty hands.

"Thank you," they said simply. "We're going to walk together, alright? No rush."

The security officer fell in a step behind, not touching, just present. The restraint foam stayed coiled on the rig.

As they moved toward the exit, the crowd parted with the instinctive, uncomfortable ripple of people watching something they didn't want to be reminded could happen to them. Conversations dipped, then rose in their wake, already reshaping the scene into story.

The hatch to the corridor cycled open on amber.

Jonah stepped through, into a light that felt suddenly too thin.

Sofi only meant to cut through the concourse and pick up coriander.

G-3's side market always smelled faintly of damp soil and metal trays, a thin green breath that slipped under the sharper notes of oil and fried batter from the food stalls. You could taste the gardens in the air there, even if you never had clearance to step inside the sector proper. On good days, when shifts lined up, Sera sometimes brought out a tray of bruised seedlings for cheap and let Sofi argue her down out of principle.

Today the air met Sofi like a closed fist.

The corridor leading toward the G-3 hatch was jammed with people. Lines that should have flowed smoothly past the side kiosks had kinked and knotted; bodies pressed shoulder to shoulder, voices overlapped in a rising, metallic echo. Above, the status strip that usually cycled through plant schedules and humidity stats showed a steady, unblinking band of amber.

LOCKDOWN – SECTOR G-3. NO ENTRY.

"Excuse me," Sofi murmured, though there was nowhere for anyone to go. She shifted her crate of nutrient pucks against her hip, feeling the edge bite into her palm. She was only two corridors away from her own hydroponics bay, close enough that the air felt almost familiar, and suddenly she could not see a single familiar face.

The hatch to G-3 loomed ahead, a thick oval of metal inset with a glass panel. Normally, you could see a slice of the compression lock beyond, the faint suggestion of brighter, wetter air. Now the glass showed only the matte slide of an inner barrier sealed tight behind it, hazard chevrons pulsing along the frame.

"We just came out for ten minutes," a woman near the front said, voice high and thin. She had a small child half-buried in the fabric at her hip. "My partner's still inside. She's on row four this week. You can't just—"

"Please stand clear of the hatch," the Companion said from the ceiling node. Its voice was smooth as always, genderless, placid. "Sector G-3 is under temporary operational lockdown for localized

stabilization. There is no mission threat. All personnel inside are in monitored environments."

"What does that mean?" someone else called. "Monitored how?"

The Companion did not answer that. Its status light glowed steady green.

Sofi edged sideways, trying to get a better angle on the hatch. The child near the front wriggled free enough to see the sealed door and started to cry, a hiccuping, bewildered sound.

"I want the tall trees," the child sobbed. "You said we'd see the tall trees."

"Later, baby," the woman said, knuckles whitening on the child's shirt. "Later. They'll open again later."

Sofi swallowed. G-3's trellis rows were famous even on the other side of the agricultural cylinder. They trained the tomatoes higher there, let the vines arc overhead like a tunnel. Kids called it the red forest.

"Companion," a man in a maintenance vest asked sharply, raising his hand as if in a classroom. "Is this a drill?"

"No," the voice said. "This is a live response to an internal anomaly. There is no mission threat. Please follow rerouting instructions."

New arrows blinked to life along the floor strips, redirecting foot traffic away from the hatch and toward the outer transit loop. A line of text scrolled under the amber band: EXPECT DELAYS. ESSENTIAL PERSONNEL ONLY.

"Knew it," someone behind Sofi muttered. "Hull kids. They're always wired too tight. One little flicker and they—" He snapped his fingers. "Flood half a row."

"You don't know that," another voice cut in. "Could be a valve blew. Could be a test. They do drills."

"You heard the alarms?" the first man shot back. "G-3 only locks that fast if someone inside pulled something they shouldn't. You know those AI-room types. Stare at graphs long enough, start seeing ghosts, think they know better than the Ship."

Sofi felt heat crawl up the side of her neck. She shifted her grip on the crate, shoulders hunching. She had never been in the AI

rooms. She had no desire to. The Companion in her own bay was enough presence, soft voice in the pipes, numbers on her panels.

But she knew the "AI-room types," or thought she did, in the way you knew anyone you saw on a shared shift often enough. The quiet engineer who walked the aisles with too many thoughts behind his eyes. The one from training nodes who always double-checked the physical gauges after the Companions cleared a ticket.

She had once watched him kneel to fix a loose grate so an old woman wouldn't trip on it, hands shaking only after he'd finished.

"He's not like that," she said before she could swallow it.

The two arguing men looked over, surprised to find an opinion attached to the small maintenance tech with the crate.

"Who?" the first one said.

Sofi wished she could pull the words back into her mouth. "No one," she said. "Just—maybe not blame people you haven't seen."

"We've all seen what happens when somebody snaps near main lines," the man said. His gaze flicked to the hatch and away again. "Doesn't matter if it's a kid from the hull or one of your garden saints. The Ship can't afford ghosts."

Ghosts. The word hung there, too loud.

The Companion's status light pulsed once, as if it had logged the exchange.

"Please disperse from the immediate vicinity of the hatch," it said. "Traffic congestion increases risk of injury if doors are cycled. There is no mission threat. All affected individuals are receiving appropriate care."

"You keep saying that," the woman with the child snapped. "You going to tell me if my partner is one of your 'affected individuals?'"

Her voice broke on the last words. The child hid their face again, shoulders shaking.

For a heartbeat, the Companion was silent. Sofi could almost feel the data moving somewhere behind the walls, threads tightening along invisible paths.

"I am not authorized to disclose individual medical status without consent," it said at last. "However, your partner, ID SOLANO-S-993-H, is currently in a stable environment and assisting with response."

The woman's knees almost buckled with relief. She caught herself against the wall, laughing once in a sound that was very close to a sob.

"You could have led with that," someone muttered.

Sofi let out a breath she hadn't realized she was holding. Sera. Of course Sera was inside. Where else would she be during a garden crisis? Sera belonged to the plants the way Sofi belonged to the pipes.

If Sera was assisting, then—

The thought stopped itself before it could finish drawing a line to anyone else she knew inside.

Another tremor ran through the deck, subtle but unmistakable. The crowd rippled with it, a collective flinch.

"That was nothing," a stall owner called, too loudly. "Just the pumps rebalancing. Happens all the time." He thumped the side of his kiosk for emphasis, as if the metal needed reassurance.

"Companion?" Sofi asked. Her voice surprised her by coming out steady. "Is there structural risk to this corridor?"

"No," it said. "This area is safe. Please proceed to alternate routes. Essential hydroponics personnel for sectors G-1, G-2, and G-4 may report as normal."

Sofi should have turned away then. Her own bay in G-1 would not run itself, and the rerouted traffic would only get worse the longer she waited. But the sealed door drew her gaze, the unblinking amber band above it flattening every nuance of what might be happening inside into a single word: LOCKDOWN.

The crowd began to spill away in uneven waves, some people following the new arrows, others clustering in stubborn knots to trade theories.

"My cousin says there was blood in the last big garden thing," a teenager whispered to her friend as they passed. "Like, actual blood on the floor."

"They're not going to tell us if someone died," the friend replied. "Not if it's mission-facing. They'll say 'no mission threat' and file the rest where we don't see it."

Sofi's hands tightened on the crate until the plastic dug in. Somewhere in the back of her mind, Ruth Hale's old hull prayer—she'd only heard it twice in a communal service, but it stuck—drifted up like a memory of air.

Lord, hold the hull. Hold the rings. Hold the hands that hold the Ship.

She was not sure where she stood with God, or with the Ship, or with the AI that threaded through both of them like a second nervous system. She believed in leaks and roots and the way a stem bent slowly toward light.

The child near the hatch had stopped crying and now just stared at the amber strip, eyes wide and wet.

Sofi shifted her crate to her other arm and stepped closer to them, careful not to block the mother's line of sight to the door.

"Hey," she said softly. "What's your favorite part in there? The tall trees?"

The child nodded without looking at her.

"There are other tall things," Sofi said. "Have you seen the reservoir columns in G-1? They go all the way up. When they open the walkway, you can look down and it's like standing over a lake in the sky."

The child's brow furrowed, interest flickering through the fear.

"Really?"

"Really," Sofi said. "I'm headed that way now. If your parent says it's okay, you could come see. G-3 will still be here when they open it again."

The woman studied Sofi's face for a moment, measuring her the way all working-sector parents did. Hydroponics patch. Maintenance calluses. The crate.

"We'll go later," she told the child. "Let's get out of this crowd first." To Sofi, she added, quieter, "Thank you."

"We are all inside the same Ship," Sofi said, the old prayer words slipping out of their own accord. "Might as well help each other get where we're going."

The woman's mouth twitched in something that was not quite a smile, not quite a grimace.

"Companion," Sofi said, glancing up. "Reroute us to G-1 with minimal crowding, please."

"Acknowledged," it said. A softer band of blue lit up along the floor, a side path peeling away from the main traffic flow. "Please follow the highlighted route. Estimated transit time: seven minutes."

Sofi shifted her crate again and stepped into the blue-lit lane, the mother and child close behind. As they walked, the sealed hatch to G-3 receded behind them, still pulsing amber in the corner of her vision.

She did not know what exactly had happened inside. The rumors would sharpen by next shift, attaching names and details, fair or not. The Ship would file its reports. The AI would adjust its thresholds.

What Sofi knew, moving through the rerouted crowd with two strangers in her wake, was simpler: somewhere behind that door, someone had tried to hold the Ship together and the Ship had hurt people anyway.

She breathed in, tasting metal and moisture and distant, hidden green.

"Hold us," she said under her breath, to no one in particular. "All of us. Please."

The floor hummed, steady and indifferent, as the Ship carried them on.

Watching Himself

The room was too white.

Not the warm white of grow-lights in hydroponics, or the scuffed off-white of home walls. This was the flat, sanitized white that swallowed shadows and made everything—monitors, rails, the thin blanket over his legs—look like part of the same system.

Jonah sat propped halfway upright in the medbay bed, shoulders pressed against an incline that hissed faintly when he moved. A restraint foam band lay unused at the side of the mattress, its velcro mouth open like it had been expecting more trouble than he was currently giving.

Someone had dimmed the overheads. The primary light in the room came from the wall display across from him, bright enough to wash the white into something flatter, more like the light of a case review than a sickroom.

On it, he was in the gardens again.

The footage began with sound before image: the distorted roar of a crowd in a confined space, alarms layering over human voices. Then the video resolved, smoothing from grain into clarity. The gardens filled the frame—Sector G-3, but wrong. Too many people between the rows, some scrambling, some frozen. The wet green humidity had been displaced by sprayed nutrient solution and the harsh white of emergency floods.

Jonah watched himself shoulder into view at the edge of the image, a blur of motion that the system tagged with an outline and a name: **HALE, JONAH – AI ENGINEER (TIER 3)**.

His own name, in the ship's font, sat neatly under his moving body. The label was the same one he'd heard in his ears as the stretcher lifted, but seeing it printed under a drenched, shaking version of himself made it feel less like identity and more like a case file.

"For the record," the Companion said, "you consented to this review." Its light ring pulsed once in the corner of the room, the same gentle rhythm that now followed him into lifts and morning surveys.

Its voice came from the ceiling, neutral as always. Jonah's head felt thick, but he remembered nodding when they asked. It had seemed easier than arguing. Easier than not knowing.

"I know," he said. His throat still tasted faintly of the stabilizer spray they'd used on him. Words dragged a little on the way out. "Just—play it."

There was a soft chime of acknowledgment. The footage ticked forward.

He saw himself at the manual panel, hand on the valve Ruth would have called a "hand that holds the Ship." Heard his own voice, tinny through the room speakers, invoking an emergency override that hadn't technically existed.

Then the moment the nutrient main ruptured: a shudder through the frame, a spray of fluid and shattered piping, the sudden sag of a trellis overloaded by weight and panic. Someone screamed off-camera. Overlays blossomed in the corners of the image—pressure loss, flow rates, structural load estimates. The world he knew as numbers had become debris and bodies.

His on-screen self moved like he'd been cut loose from gravity. He vaulted over a toppled rack, hit the deck in a low crouch, and shoved a support strut upright with a force that made the muscles in Jonah's real arms ache in sympathy.

"Pause," Jonah said.

The image froze. His on-screen face was turned slightly away, jaw set, eyes locked on something beyond the frame.

"That's what they saw?" he asked.

"This is one of six curated vantage points," the Companion said. "This angle is from the primary environmental monitor in row cluster G-3-9."

Jonah swallowed. "Curated how?"

"Angles with the clearest view of your position and actions were selected," the AI said. "Extraneous frames were removed. Vital signs and ship-state overlays were synchronized."

"So this is the best version of me," he said, mostly to himself.

"This is the clearest version," the Companion corrected.

A chair creaked softly to his right. Samuel shifted his weight, big hands folded loosely between his knees. He'd been sitting there since Jonah woke up—silent, present, like another piece of medbay furniture that refused to be anything but human.

"You can stop if it's too much," Samuel said. His voice sounded the same here as it had on Jonah's apartment mornings: unhurried, as if he trusted there would still be time to finish the sentence.

Jonah kept his eyes on the screen.

"If I stop," he said, "I'll just fill in the rest worse. Let me see what actually happened."

On the other side of the bed, Sera stood with her back against the wall, arms crossed—not closed off, just holding herself together. Her uniform was clean now, but he could still see, in his mind, the way it had been soaked through with nutrient fluid and someone else's blood.

She hadn't said much either. Just *I'm here* when he first focused enough to register her face.

"Companion," Sera said quietly. "Resume from timestamp twelve minutes, forty seconds. No slow-motion."

"Resuming," the AI said.

The garden sprang back into motion. Jonah on the screen darted toward a cluster of figures pinned under a half-collapsed support lattice. Overlays bloomed around them—weight estimates, likely fracture sites, oxygen saturation levels. One name-tag flickered intermittently: **SOLANO, SERA – HYDROPONICS STEWARD.**

Jonah's stomach lurched.

"You were—" he started.

"Behind you," Sera said. "Mostly."

On-screen Jonah braced his shoulder under the sagging lattice and yelled—silent from this angle, but the system obligingly rendered a caption from the audio: **MOVE WHEN I SAY.**

His real throat closed around a bitter laugh.

"Sounds like me," he said.

"It is you," the Companion said.

The lattice shifted. People scrambled clear. A failing conduit sparked somewhere off-frame; an alarm indicator in the corner of the display jumped from amber to red.

"Heart rate: one hundred ninety-two beats per minute," the AI narrated. A small window in the corner showed a graph of his vitals climbing into jagged peaks. "Cortisol levels elevated beyond normative range. Motor coordination: intact. Situational awareness: intact. Verbal output: directive, task-focused."

"You're doing a great job making me sound like a machine," Jonah said.

"These are standard clinical descriptors," the Companion replied. "We can annotate with qualitative impressions if that is useful."

"No," he said quickly. "Just—keep it clinical."

The footage rolled on. He saw himself climb, slip, catch a falling child by the back of their shirt; saw the way he shoved a worker toward the emergency exit so hard they stumbled and nearly went down; saw his own hands on a manual shutoff, fingers white on the wheel.

There was a moment—one he did not remember clearly from inside—where he stood in the center of the chaos, every muscle taut, eyes tracking three different failures at once. Overlays clustered around his head now: **NEURAL ACTIVITY: HIGH SYNCHRONIZATION WITH PREDICTIVE MODELS – DEVIATION: +2.8 σ** .

"Pause," Jonah whispered.

The garden froze again. Someone mid-fall hung sideways in the frame, hair suspended. His own body was a hard shape in the center, bracketed by data.

"That," he said, "is what they're afraid of."

No one answered for a moment. Then Sera pushed off the wall, stepping closer to the bed. Her hand settled on the rail, near his.

"What do you see?" she asked.

He gestured weakly at the display.

"I see a man who isn't stopping," he said. "Who's... fast. Too fast. Who's making decisions before anyone else can even see the options. I see—" He swallowed. "I see Lydia, if she'd had a whole ship to throw herself into instead of a kitchen wall."

Samuel's hands tightened, just once.

"Jonah," he said quietly.

"Vitals remained within survivable range," the Companion noted. "No loss of consciousness occurred until after the primary hazard was neutralized."

"That's not a comfort," Jonah said. "You're telling me I stayed upright long enough to be maximally useful."

"Accurate," the AI said.

"And that next time," Jonah went on, "you'll have a better model of what happens when I hit that state."

The pause that followed was almost imperceptible.

"Our models have improved," the Companion said. "Yes."

"Show him the end," Sera said. Her voice had a new edge under the calm.

"From which timestamp?" the AI asked.

"From when he stops," she said. "When it's over."

The display jumped.

The garden reappeared in quieter ruin. Emergency teams moved through with stretchers. The spray had stopped; fluids pooled dark along the walkways. Jonah's on-screen self stood near the base of a support column, one hand braced against it, shoulders heaving. People brushed past him, some clapping his back, some not seeing him at all.

His name-tag overlay flickered, dimming as his vitals dropped.

"Heart rate descending," the Companion narrated. "Adrenaline levels decreasing. Motor tremor onset detected."

On the screen, he pushed away from the column and took two steps toward where Sera knelt by an injured worker. His face, caught briefly in profile, looked wrecked: eyes blown wide, mouth slack like someone who'd run too far without realizing it.

Then his knees buckled.

The image followed him down, stabilizing as the monitor's auto-tracking kicked in. People converged. His name-tag brightened again, now accompanied by a blinking banner: **PRIORITY MEDICAL ROUTE – NEURAL STRESS INDEX: CRITICAL.**

The footage cut forward to gurneys, med techs, the ceiling of a corridor rushing by.

"Stop," Jonah said.

The white wall returned: him in bed, the display across from him, the ghost of his own collapse lingering on his retinas.

"You saw all of that?" he asked Samuel and Sera, not looking at either of them.

"Most of it," Samuel said.

"More than I wanted to," Sera said.

"And you're still here." The words came out flat, disbelief wrapped in something brittle. "After watching me almost take the sector apart. After seeing—"

"You didn't take it apart," Sera said, sharper now. "You held it together long enough for help to get there. People are alive because of what you did."

"And because of what the ship did," the Companion added. "And because of what Sera and the other stewards did. And because of redundancies built by workers you will never meet. Causality is distributed."

"Thank you," Samuel said dryly to the ceiling. "That's... almost theology."

Sera's hand slid closer along the rail until her fingers brushed Jonah's.

"Look at me," she said.

He did, because not looking felt like more effort than he had.

"You are not a bomb that went off," she said. "You are not a disease that finally bloomed. You hit a breaking point we all knew was coming and you still chose, over and over, to move toward other people instead of away from them. That's what I saw."

"You also saw what happens when I tilt too far," he said.

"Yes," she said. "And I'm still here. That's the point."

Samuel cleared his throat softly.

"Son," he said. "When your mother had her worst days, she aimed everything inward. She disappeared. You didn't. You scared me today, sure. But not because I thought you were becoming her. Because I saw how much you were willing to burn yourself to keep everybody else standing."

He leaned forward, elbows on his knees.

"You are loved," Samuel said, simple as checking a seal. "And you are dangerous when you don't let anyone help you. Both can be true at once."

The words landed heavier than any of the overlays on the screen. Jonah looked back at the frozen image of himself mid-run, surrounded by data. For the first time, he tried to imagine that figure with other lines drawn around it—not just risk thresholds and neural deviations, but connections: to the people he'd pulled clear, to Sera's hands on a compression bandage, to Samuel waiting at the medbay door.

"Companion," he said softly. "Annotate the recording. Note that I consent to . . . ongoing treatment. Whatever that looks like."

There was that small pause again. Then:

"Annotation added," the AI said. "Consent to continued mental health support and oversight recorded."

"You sure?" Samuel asked.

Jonah let his head rest back against the incline.

"If I don't," he said, "we all pretend this was a one-time anomaly. And then next time, we do this without the part where I get up again."

He was tired down to the bone. The thought of more sessions, more questions, more graphs made something in him sag. But the alternative—the old fantasy of handling it alone, of muscling through until the numbers quietly dropped him into a failure category—felt suddenly, vividly stupid.

Sera exhaled, a long breath he hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"Good," she said. "We'll hold you to that."

"We?" he asked, eyes already drifting.

"Me," she said. "Him." A small jerk of her chin toward Samuel. "The ship, unfortunately. You're stuck with a very crowded safety net."

He wanted to make a joke about being a shared resource. The words blurred before he could shape them. The med spray on the side table winked at the corner of his vision.

"You may rest now," the Companion said. "Monitoring will continue."

For once, the idea of being watched did not feel purely like a threat. It felt—uncomfortably, undeniably—like being caught.

Jonah let his eyes close. The last thing he saw was his own frozen image on the wall, mid-motion, halfway between disaster and salvation, threaded through with lines of data and, just faintly, the reflections of the people standing beside his bed.

He did not know yet what living with that knowledge would look like. But for the first time, he believed that whatever it was, he would not be doing it alone.

Samuel had always thought of Medbay as a place for broken bodies, not broken storms.

On hull shifts, if you got careless or unlucky, there were clear markers: gashes, fractures, bruises staining through the underlayer. Something visible to point at while the Companions recited protocols and the med techs sealed you up.

Now he sat in a chair beside Jonah's bed and watched the outlines of his son under the thin blanket. No blood, no cast. Just a tangle of leads across his chest and the soft hiss of a monitor watching what no human eye could see.

The Ship hummed through the walls. It had the same note as the hull corridors, but here it was filtered—gentler, as if someone had closed a door on the real sound.

"Vitals stable," the Companion said quietly from the wall. "Sedation tapering as scheduled."

Samuel nodded without looking up at the status strip. "I can see he's breathing," he said. "Thank you."

He didn't add: *I trusted you to keep him breathing before today, too.*

Jonah's face, in sleep, looked younger than it had in years. Less pulled tight by constant calculation. There were faint creases at the corners of his eyes now—early, given his age—but when he was like this, Samuel could almost see the boy who had crawled into his lap after the first big drill, shaking from hull ticks.

Ruth had taken that night. Samuel had been on an early shift; by the time he'd come home, Jonah had been curled under his grandmother's arm, learning to pray the Ship still. The memory brushed against him now like the echo of a hymn.

"You're missing a good story, kid," he said softly, leaning back in the chair until it creaked.

Jonah did not stir.

The monitor drew another small mountain range of his heart on the strip.

"You may speak," the Companion said. "He is within hearing range, even under sedation."

"If I thought you were listening harder than he is, I might choose my words different," Samuel said.

There was a brief pause from the wall.

"Our audio channels are active," it said at last. "But this unit is not authorized for deactivation review commentary."

"I'm not here to argue with a committee," Samuel said. "I'm here to sit with my boy."

He imagined, for a moment, Jonah waking to that phrase—*my boy*—and rolling his eyes. You didn't call a grown engineer that without protest. Samuel smiled to himself and let the thought stay.

He cleared his throat.

"You remember," he said, as if Jonah could answer, "how you used to count the hull ticks after drills?" He waited a beat. "Ruth taught you that. I'd hear you some nights, whispering numbers in your bunk like you were keeping score against the dark."

The monitor beeped, indifferent.

"She did that as a girl back on Earth," he went on. "Storms there came loud. Wind howling, rain slamming roofs, thunder like the Ship tearing in half. She'd lie there and count between flashes,

between rumbles. Say if she could count high enough before the next one, it meant the storm was moving away."

He folded his hands, thumb worrying at the callus on his palm that never quite went away between hull shifts.

"It didn't change the storm," he said. "Just gave her something to hold while it passed."

Jonah shifted under the blanket, a small movement, his fingers twitching once against the sheet.

Samuel leaned forward.

"You think. . ." he said slowly, searching for words that would not sound like a sermon, "you think you were supposed to be the one holding the storm off all by yourself. Lydia's, yours, maybe even the Ship's. Like if you stopped watching, stopped counting, stopped fixing, it would all come down."

He let that sit in the air between them.

"You're not built for that," he said. "None of us are. Not even the metal is, not on its own. We weld in layers. We overlap plates. We don't ask one strip of hull to take the whole void."

The Companion made a small adjustment noise—some background process rebalancing.

"Your mother," he said, and the word caught in his throat more than he'd expected, "she thought she had to carry storms too. Hers were quieter on the outside. But inside. . ." He exhaled. "Inside, they tore her up."

He had not talked about Lydia much with Jonah. Not like this. The stories Jonah carried were mostly secondhand through Ruth, softened by prayer.

"You know how she died," he said, voice low. "You don't know. . . you couldn't know all the nights before that. The sitting up while you and Alina slept, staring at the ceiling like if she blinked, the Ship would stop."

The Companion's light dimmed a fraction, as if respecting volume.

"I loved her," he said simply. "The way you love the Ship. Fiercely. Foolishly, sometimes. Thought if I held on tight enough, I could

keep her here." He shook his head. "Turns out loving someone isn't the same as fixing them."

Jonah's breathing hitched once, then settled.

"I watched you grow up with that same look in your eyes," Samuel said. "Always reading panels in your head, carrying everyone's numbers. Ruth used to say you'd make a good engineer because you cared so much. She wasn't wrong." He smiled faintly. "She also worried that caring would tear you up where we couldn't see."

He reached out and laid his hand gently over Jonah's, careful of the IV line.

"Listen to me, son," he said, voice firming. "You are not your indices. Not your risk scores, not your logs, not whatever graphs they showed you today. Those are tools. They help the Ship keep people breathing. They do not get to name you."

The word *name* stirred something deep in him, tied to an older cadence.

"The name I gave you when you came squalling into this world was Jonah," he said. "Not Outlier. Not Deviation. Jonah Hale. You belong to this family, to this Ship, to the God your grandmother talks to when she lays her hand on the wall. None of that is erased because you had a bad day in the gardens."

He squeezed Jonah's fingers once.

"You broke a pipe," he said. "You scared yourself and some good people we work with. That's real. We'll fix what we can and carry what we can't. But you did not break the Ship. You did not break us."

He sat back, letting his hand rest until his fingers went a little numb.

"They'll take you into that room soon," he said, more to himself than to Jonah. "Ask questions. Show you stills, graphs, every mistake like it's the whole story." He breathed in slow through his nose, feeling the medbay air, scrubbed and dry. "When they're done, when the Ship and its committees have had their say, you come home. We'll tell you other stories. About your mother that aren't just about leaving. About you that aren't just about breaking."

He glanced up at the status strip.

"You hear that?" he said quietly to the Companion. "That's my input for your model. Put it somewhere." He tapped his chest. "Man is more than the sum of his metrics."

"Quote recorded," the Companion said after a moment. "Sentiment tagged as non-clinical, high relevance to subject support."

Samuel huffed a breath that might almost have been a laugh.

"Good," he said. "Maybe one day when you're drawing one of your little mountains for him, you remember it too."

He stayed until the sedation wore thin enough that Jonah's eyes fluttered at the edges. Not fully awake; just surfacing toward the sound of his father's voice.

Samuel leaned close.

"I'm here," he said.

Jonah's lips moved around a half-word he could not catch.

"You rest now," Samuel told him. "You don't have to hold the hull tonight. The Ship's got that job. So do I. So does every poor tired soul walking the rings."

He felt, under his hand, the faintest answering pressure from Jonah's fingers.

For the first time since the incident, Samuel let himself believe that might be enough.

Reduced to Indices

The corridor outside the review room was too clean.

Light spilled from recessed strips in the ceiling and along the floor seams, a narrow, steady band of white that refused to soften. The walls had been resurfaced at some point in the last few years; Sera could see where the old repair plates had been sanded flat under a new skin of composite, all the interesting edges erased. Someone had decided that this was a place for order. No scuffs, no fingerprints, no handprints from people who had stood here before.

The only color came from the access strip beside the sealed door. It glowed a muted amber — not red, not green, just a patient, indifferent waiting state. It bathed Samuel's knuckles in the same washed-out light as he rested his hand against the bulkhead, thumb not quite touching the strip.

"You don't have to stand," Sera said. Her voice sounded wrong in the corridor, thin and too loud at once. "There's a bench back by the lift."

Samuel didn't look at her. His eyes stayed fixed on the seam where the door met the frame, as if watching for the slightest shift. His other hand traced along the panel below the access strip, fingers following the line of the fasteners he couldn't see.

"I know," he said. "I don't like not seeing the hardware."

Sera became aware of her own hands only when she realized she was flexing them, thumb rubbing over the base of her fingers. The grit was still there, fine as dust but stubborn — soil from G-3 that the sinks in Medbay hadn't entirely claimed. She'd scrubbed twice, watching brown spiral away into the drain, but it was as if the gardens had followed her anyway, clinging to the half-moons of her nails.

She curled her fingers into her palms and slid them into the pockets of her work jacket.

Behind the door, muffled voices rose and fell. Human tones blurred together in the recycled air, an occasional clipped consonant or laughless exhale piercing through. Every so often there was that other sound layered under them — the flat, measured cadence of a Companion relay, pitchless but unmistakable. Sera had worked around that voice for years, listened to it route nutrient flows and announce pH deviations and flag condensation anomalies along trellis rows. Here, it was saying Jonah's name.

She couldn't hear the words. Maybe that was worse.

The Ship hummed around them in its usual registers: the soft, constant vibration through the soles of Sera's boots, the faint, higher whine of a lift passing two decks up, the distant, almost-subsonic thrum that meant some large system was rerouting around the quarantined gardens. She had learned to read that hum the way other people read faces. Today it all felt like one long held breath.

"They've rotated flow off the G-3 arrays," she said quietly, because silence felt heavier than small facts. "You can hear it in the harmonics. It's..." She stopped, the word trapped between her teeth. Safe was the word the Companions used. Contained. None of them fit in her mouth.

Samuel's jaw moved once, a small tightening.

"They'll bring them back," he said. "They have to." A pause. "Too much work to waste."

It was such a hull-worker answer that for a second, Sera almost smiled. Labor as argument. Effort as moral claim.

"It's not just work," she said.

He nodded, slow. "No. It's not."

They fell quiet again. The door gleamed. The amber strip held its indifferent line.

Sera let her thoughts drift, against her will, back to the gardens. The stink of nutrient solution half-drained. The sharp metallic tang of emergency flood gates cycling. Jonah's body contorted in the spray, all those months of caution and careful routines boiled away in the time it took for a minor oscillation to cascade into chaos. She had gone home from shift more than once with his voice still in her ears, but she had never seen it break like that.

The Companions had called it "an acute destabilization episode precipitated by unauthorized override." The workers on break had called it "Jonah losing it in G-3." Sera kept replaying the moment in between: his fingers flying over the panel, lips moving in prayer or math or both, convinced he could hold everything together if he just got one more command in before the failsafes.

Samuel's hand dropped from the wall. He flexed his fingers, as if surprised to find nothing there to grip, nothing to tighten, no tool to fetch.

"In the hull," he said, almost to himself, "you always know what you can reach. Plate, bolt, patch kit. Or you don't go out." He breathed in, chest rising under his faded work shirt. "In there" – he tipped his head toward the door – "I can't reach anything."

Sera leaned back until her shoulders met the opposite wall. The corridor was narrow enough that she could feel the resonance on both sides of her ribs: the steady mechanical life of the ship, the slower thud of her own heart.

"You gave them what you could reach," she said. "Your statement."

He made a small, frustrated sound in his throat. It wasn't quite a scoff; Samuel didn't scoff. It was more like a bolt refusing to seat.

"Words," he said. "Stories. Ruth would say those are the tools God gives, but—" He broke off and shook his head. "I watched them write Jonah down on a board, Sera. Indices." He tasted the unfamiliar plural carefully. "Probability curves. They nodded when I told them about him as a boy, but the pen only moved when they asked, 'Did he escalate? Did he ignore protocol?'"

Sera swallowed. The room behind the door was easy to imagine; she'd seen enough smaller reviews, enough routine behavioral assessments. Tables. Screens. That slightly sweet, over-filtered air they reserved for important meetings. The Companions' icons hovering in the corner of every display.

"They asked me," she said, "how often Jonah had exceeded his assigned scope in the gardens. If he'd challenged Companion directives. If I had ever felt unsafe with him present." Her mouth twisted. "Unsafe," she repeated, the word tasting like someone else's metal.

"They typed faster when I said 'no' than when I tried to explain why."

Samuel's gaze slid toward her, the first time he'd really looked at her since they'd reached the corridor. His eyes were rimmed red, but steady.

"You told them about him," he said. It was not a question, but she heard the need in it anyway.

She nodded. "I told them about how he hears the Ship. How he listens to the hum like it's language. How he stopped a nutrient leak in E-2 by noticing a half-tone shift in the recirc pumps. How he waits to touch the vines until he's sure his hands are clean." Her fingers twitched in her pockets at that. "I told them about the day he came in on no sleep with his hands shaking and still checked the backup valves before he let himself sit." She exhaled. "They marked that as 'hypervigilant patterning'."

Samuel's mouth pulled tight at the corners, the ghost of something like humor trying to surface and failing.

"Hypervigilant," he echoed. "On a ship with one hull between us and the dark."

They let that hang there, the stupid weight of it.

"Maybe we fed it too much," Samuel said after a while. The hum filled the gap his pause left. "The machine. All these years. Letting it log everything. Letting it watch." His thumb rubbed at the callus along his index finger, where a lifetime of tool use had thickened the skin. "Maybe if we'd kept some things off the record. . ."

Sera's shoulders tensed. She had asked herself the same question in different words every night since the intervention routing in G-3. If she hadn't answered the Companions' wellness queries honestly. If she hadn't helped Jonah fill out his post-shift check-ins, coaxing him toward more detail because more detail meant better care, didn't it?

"If you'd hidden him," she said, "they would have kept routing him anywhere the indices said he was most efficient. High-risk shifts. Short crews. They would have taken his steadiness and squeezed it until something cracked." The words came faster now, the argument worn smooth by repetition in her own head. "The

only reason he's on the other side of that door alive is because the system knew enough to force him to stop. To send him to Medbay instead of back into the gardens or the hull."

Samuel's breathing stayed slow, but his eyes flicked away again, back to the seam.

"And now that same system is deciding if he walks out," he said.

The amber strip did not change.

"Yes," Sera said. "But we are in the room with it. We were." She thought of the Companion icon on the far display, the way its light pulsed gently as it acknowledged their statements. "It knows more about him than any of us, but it doesn't love him. That's what we brought in there."

Samuel closed his eyes for a moment, long enough for Sera to see the faint tremor in his lashes. When he opened them again, there was something like apology in his face.

"I don't mean to say you were wrong," he said. "To answer it. To be honest." His throat worked. "If you hadn't been, I might not have known how bad the storms were getting. I see him in pieces, you know? Hull shifts. Meals. Little bits. You saw the whole day."

Sera thought of Jonah sitting on the edge of the nutrient basin, shoulders hunched, fingers threaded and white. The way he had looked at her the week before the incident and said, quietly, "I think the Ship is getting louder," like a confession.

"I saw pieces too," she said. "Just different ones." Her voice softened. "We both brought them in there."

"And they chopped him into variables," Samuel murmured.

"Indices," Sera said.

"Indices," he repeated, making it sound like something slightly obscene.

One of the voices behind the door rose, sharp for a second, and then dropped again. There was a stretch of Companion cadence after that, longer than before. Sera found herself holding her breath until it stopped.

"He is not just that," Samuel said. It came out more forcefully than anything else he'd said in the corridor; not loud, but with a carried weight. "Whatever they write down. Whatever number they

put next to his name. He's my boy." His hand flattened against his chest briefly, as if checking that truth was still there. "Lydia's son. Ruth's prayer. He's the way he steadies his sister when she spirals. The way he. . ." He swallowed. "The way he looks at you like you are the first safe place he's ever had that isn't steel."

Heat prickled behind Sera's eyes. She had never been able to decide whether it was mercy or cruelty that Samuel noticed everything and said almost nothing unless it mattered.

"He doesn't get to just be 'case thirty-seven-b,'" Samuel said. "Or 'pre-critical hull tech memory-hazard risk'."

The phrasing was close enough to the words she'd seen on the review summary that Sera flinched. He must have read them too.

"Then we don't let that happen," she said, the resolve in her voice surprising even herself. "Whatever the outcome is. We don't talk about him that way. Not in front of him. Not when the Ship asks follow-up questions. Not to the people in G-3 who only saw the flood and not his face." She pushed off the wall and stepped closer, until they were both within the same spill of amber light.

"When they send their post-review surveys," she continued, "and they will, about 'perceived trust in Companion safeguards' and 'community confidence in behavioral thresholds'—" She almost smiled at the remembered jargon. "We answer them. But we write his name. We write 'Jonah' in the margins. We tell stories that don't fit in their fields. We make sure the machine can't forget he's a person without willfully ignoring us."

Samuel studied her. Up close, Sera could see the gray threaded through his beard more clearly, the fine network of lines around his eyes from years of squinting at hull seams in harsh suit lights.

"You think it listens like that?" he asked.

"I think it learns from what we feed it," she said. "We can't stop it from having the numbers. But we can teach it what else matters."

He let out a breath that was not quite a laugh.

"Ruth would like you," he said.

Sera's chest tightened. She had met Ruth only a handful of times before the old woman died, always at family gatherings where Sera had felt like an intruder into something both fragile and fierce.

"Ruth taught Jonah to pray for the Ship," Sera said. "In words. I . . ." She glanced at the ceiling, where the light panels hummed on, indifferent. "I don't know how to do that. But I can talk to the parts of it that listen."

Silence settled again. This time, it felt less like an absence and more like a shared space.

Samuel shifted his weight, then reached into the inner pocket of his jacket. He pulled out a small metal thermos, the kind workers carried on long shifts. The brushed surface was scuffed, the paint along one edge worn away where it had knocked against suit clips for years.

"Tea," he said simply. "Sera made sure I didn't forget to eat today." There was a faint, wry tilt to his mouth; she realized he meant Alina, then corrected herself when he unscrewed the lid and the scent reached her. Not the sweetened, bright blends the younger workers favored, but something darker and more bitter, almost like earth in hot water.

"Hull tea," she said. "Of course."

He poured a measure into the lid and held it out. For a heartbeat she almost refused — it felt like there should be some rule about not accepting anything while Jonah's fate was being argued meters away — but the warmth rising from the cup tugged at a deeper instinct.

She wrapped her fingers around the thin metal, grateful for the heat sinking into her scraped knuckles, for the familiar, grounding smell. She took a small sip. It was too strong, edges unsoftened by any sweetener, but it sat heavy and real on her tongue.

Samuel poured himself the rest from the thermos and lifted it slightly, not quite a toast.

"For Jonah," he said.

"For Jonah," she echoed.

They drank in unison, the same bitter heat moving through them.

When she handed the empty lid back, Samuel didn't screw it on right away. He held it between his fingers, gaze dropping to the deck at their feet.

"I don't know how this ends," he said softly. "I don't know what they'll decide. But I won't stand outside that door and let them turn my son into only the worst thing he ever did."

Sera felt something settle inside her, a line drawn not against the Ship but within it.

"You won't be alone in that," she said. "If they send him back to the hull, if they keep him groundside, if they decide he can only teach or only garden or only sleep under a monitor—" She shook her head. "We remind him who he is. We remind the Ship, every time it asks, who it is to him. Not just a system that caught him when he fell, but a place he's held together for years."

Samuel's eyes lifted to meet hers. The hum, the voices, the amber light — all of it receded for a moment under the simple, fierce attention in his look.

"We won't let them forget," he said.

Sera nodded once. "We won't let him forget," she added.

He hesitated, then did something she had only seen him do with Jonah and Alina. Samuel reached out and set his broad, calloused hand gently on her shoulder. The touch was light, careful, as if afraid of its own strength.

"Thank you," he said.

She covered his hand with her own, soil grit and hull callus meeting between them. For a breath, the Ship's hum seemed to fold inward, their small bubble of warmth and resolve holding against the bright, indifferent corridor.

"Keep him," Samuel murmured, not quite to her, not quite to the walls. It was half-prayer, half-instruction, pitched to the same space where Ruth had once sent her words. "Keep him with us."

Behind the door, the Companion's cadence resumed, low and steady. The amber strip burned on.

The committee room felt too small for how many versions of him were in it.

The physical Jonah sat in a narrow chair at one end of the table, hands folded in his lap because he did not trust them anywhere near the smooth surface. The table itself was one of those multipur-

pose slabs the Ship loved—half furniture, half terminal, matte until someone breathed on the edges of a display.

Across from him sat three people and one node.

On the left, a woman in the gray-and-blue of Med Administration: Dr. Hsiao, according to the strip at her shoulder. In the center, a council representative Jonah vaguely recognized from policy bulletins—Arjun Malik, civic liaison. On the right, a fellow engineer from systems oversight, Tavaréz, who'd once shared a coffee with him after a training drill and now would not quite meet his eyes.

Above the far wall, recessed in a niche with careful discretion, a Companion node watched. Its light ring glowed a steady white.

"Behavioral Deactivation Risk Review," the Companion said. Its voice was the same neutral register that had narrated his vitals in medbay. "Subject: Jonah Hale – AI Engineer (Tier 3). Convened cycle two-zero-three-four, band D conference room three. Attendees: Dr. Lin Hsiao, Medbay; Arjun Malik, Civil Council; Engineer Marta Tavaréz, Systems Oversight; Companion Node D-ADMIN-2."

It paused just long enough for the words to settle over his skin.

"Purpose," it went on. "To evaluate subject's continued suitability for roles with high-autonomy mission impact in light of recent incident G-3-112 and longitudinal behavioral data."

Jonah focused on the seam where table met floor. The chair under him had the same fake-comfort padding as the ones in personnel briefings, thin enough that he could feel the metal frame through it.

"This is not a disciplinary hearing," Malik said. He had a calm voice, practiced for assemblies. "No one here is deciding your moral worth, Jonah. We are here to decide where it is and isn't safe for you to be placed in the system. For you and for everyone else."

"Understood," Jonah said. His mouth was dry. The words tasted like formality borrowed from some other life.

What he heard instead was: We are deciding how close we will let you stand to the hull.

The table display woke without anyone touching it.

His name appeared first, in the ship's font: **HALE, JONAH – AI ENGINEER (TIER 3)**. Under it, lines of smaller text: birth ring, family identifiers, current assignment bands. To the right, a vertical

strip of icons: medbay symbol, a tiny trellis outline for hydroponics, a stylized node for systems. Each one pulsed once, then settled.

"For the record," Dr. Hsiao said, "you are aware that this review could result in restrictions on your access to high-autonomy nodes, up to and including permanent reassignment away from engineer duties?"

"Yes," Jonah said.

It could not kill him. That was the point. The Ship did not decommission people like him in the old sense. It moved them. It narrowed their lives until they could no longer reach the places where a wrong decision could crack anything important.

He wasn't sure which version felt more like erasure.

The display shifted. A still from the Garden Incident resolved in the center of the table—a high shot from an environmental monitor in G-3. He saw his own back, shoulders braced, hand on the manual valve. White emergency floods flattened depth.

Data clung to the frame like frost.

EVENT: G-3-112 – NUTRIENT MAIN PRESSURE VARIANCE / LOCAL STRUCTURAL FAILURE

Arrows picked out his hand on the wheel, the bulging joint in the main line, the trellis below. In the corner, a small graph showed pressure oscillation curves before and after his override. Another pane summarized: *Projected downstream rupture probability without intervention vs. observed localized failure*. Casualty estimates sat in two adjacent columns.

"We will move through this systematically," Tavaréz said. Her tone was oddly gentle, like someone walking a trainee through a failed sim. "First: technical impact. Then behavioral context. Then recommendations."

"Companion," Malik said. "Summarize incident contribution."

"Manual intervention by subject Hale on main loop D via bypass three," the AI recited, "produced a rapid pressure redistribution. This prevented modeled downstream rupture in sectors G-4 through G-6, projected to affect between twelve and thirty-two individuals depending on occupancy. However, the same intervention exceeded tolerances at junction D-7E in G-3, contributing to structural failure

of trellis support six. Three individuals sustained moderate injuries. Zero fatalities occurred."

The numbers scrolled alongside the calm words. Each injury line had a code instead of a name.

"In purely structural terms," Tavarez said, "your action traded a higher-probability, higher-impact failure later for a lower-impact failure immediately. The model notes this as net harm reduction." She tapped one of the panes; a small green arrow appeared beside a set of projected casualty deltas.

"And behaviorally?" Dr. Hsiao asked.

The display split. On one side, a graph of his vitals over the course of the incident climbed into sharp peaks—heart rate, cortisol, neural activity. On the other, a line marked *NEURAL STRESS INDEX* traced an ugly arc, annotated with tiny timestamps.

"Behaviorally," the Companion said, "subject Hale's physiological markers entered critical bands while he retained high functional capacity. He executed multiple high-load physical tasks and rapid decision sequences under acute stress. Post-incident, he exhibited signs of dissociation and intrusive guilt cognitions consistent with prior patterns."

Prior patterns. As if the kitchen at seven had been the dress rehearsal, stability logs at ten the warm-up acts.

"Your file shows an elevated sense of personal responsibility since childhood," Malik said carefully. "Hypervigilance, fear of 'walking away' from harm."

Jonah's shoulders tightened. "You have that logged."

"We do," the Companion said. "Assessment three-two at age eleven: subject reported belief that failing to intervene in others' distress would constitute equivalent harm to causing it. That belief persists."

"It kept a boy from going over a rail once," Tavarez said quietly. "And it nearly broke a trellis in half this time."

Jonah stared at the still of his own hand on the valve.

"So which is it," he asked. "Protective factor or risk?"

"Both," Dr. Hsiao said. "That's why you're here instead of already reassigned."

The table flickered. New panes opened to either side of the incident still.

On the left: Samuel, seated in this same room on an earlier cycle, hands folded much like Jonah's now. The ship had captured his words and smoothed the audio, but the cadence was still Samuel's.

"My son has been scared of breaking things since he was small," Samuel's recorded voice said. "You know that. Your logs know that. He's been careful because of it. He double-checks seals no one else looks at. He pulls kids off rails and feels sick for days. What happened in G-3 wasn't him deciding rules didn't matter. It was him hitting the limit of what he thought he was allowed to risk to keep other people breathing."

Jonah's throat closed. He hadn't been in the room when Samuel said it. Hearing it now felt indecent, like eavesdropping on a prayer.

On the right pane: Sera, back straight, eyes steady. She wore her steward band; her voice was quieter than Samuel's but no less certain.

"Jonah's override hurt people," she said. "We all know that. We also know what the projections looked like for downstream loops if he hadn't touched the panel." She glanced off-screen, perhaps at a graph. "G-3 got injured workers and a mess. G-5 and G-6 got spared a flood over families. He didn't decide to be a hero. He panicked in the exact shape you've been training into him for years: don't walk away, don't leave the beam taking all the load, don't let three percent slip."

There was a faint, bitter humor at the edge of her mouth. "You don't get to benefit from that pattern and then act surprised when it shows up under pressure."

"Statements from Samuel Hale and Sera Solano are logged as stabilizing contextual data," the Companion added. "They reduce projected risk of future uncontrolled episodes under treatment by a median of nineteen percent."

"So," Malik said, looking from the panes back to Jonah, "we are weighing two narratives. In one, you are an unacceptable variable in a system that cannot afford surprises. In the other, you are a person

whose very real risks are mitigated by insight, treatment, and the people who refuse to let you carry this alone."

Jonah almost laughed. "And you're asking the Ship which story costs less."

"We're asking both the Ship and ourselves," Tavarez said. "Because if we treat you like a faulty part, everyone who shares your indices will hear that."

The Companion's light ring dimmed a fraction.

"For the record," it said, "Core analysis does not currently recommend deactivation of subject Hale's engineer status."

The word deactivation made something behind Jonah's ribs flinch.

"Clarify deactivation," he said. "In this context."

"Removal of access to high-autonomy decision nodes and authority roles," the AI replied. "Reassignment to low-impact duties with continued monitoring. Physical harm is neither intended nor authorized."

"You'd put me in a box where I can't touch anything that matters," he said.

"We would place you where the probability of your actions causing catastrophic harm is negligible," it said. "That is the definition of safety used here."

"For who," he asked. "For me or for you."

No one answered immediately.

"Safety is not a zero-sum resource," Malik said at last. "But we do have to admit that limits on your access would make some people sleep easier. Including you, maybe."

He thought of the hum in the racks, the yellow pre-critical icon, the way his hands had shaken in medbay when he watched himself move on screen.

"I don't... want to hurt anyone," he said. "I also don't know who I am if I'm not the person holding up my corner of the hull."

The admission hung between them like condensation.

"Is there a middle path," Dr. Hsiao asked the Companion. "Short of a binary keep him / shelf him."

"Yes," it said. "Maintain engineer role with restrictions: no solo night-watch on critical nodes; no unsupervised manual overrides

on main loops; mandatory rest band adherence; continued pharmacological and therapeutic support; peer check-ins flagged as mission-support, not voluntary."

"And if I agree," Jonah said slowly, "I'm not a ticking bomb in your model?"

"Your risk profile remains above cohort baseline," the AI said. "But within an acceptable band when weighted with support structures."

Acceptable. It sounded like the grade you gave a weld you hoped no one would lean on too hard.

"You would also," Malik added, "participate in a working group on psychological safety and AI oversight. The council believes residents should help design the systems that monitor them."

Jonah blinked. "You want the broken guy on the committee."

"We want someone who knows exactly what it feels like to sit where you are," Tavez said. "So the next person doesn't have to hear their life reduced to an index without a human in the room saying, *this is more complicated*."

He looked at the stills again: his hand on metal, the collapse, the stretcher. Samuel's lined face. Sera's steady eyes.

He thought of Lydia, alone at the table, no committee convened, no model that had known enough to be afraid.

"If I say no," he asked quietly, "what happens?"

"Core will still recommend partial restriction," the Companion said. "Council may still vote to implement it. Consent modifies pathways but does not erase risk."

Samuel's recorded voice, still hanging in the air from earlier, seemed to answer anyway: *He's more than his indices*.

"And if I say yes," Jonah said, "you keep me where I can still touch the hull. With supervision. With meds. With graphs."

"With us," Tavez said. "With people looking back at you instead of just at your numbers."

It was, he realized, the same choice Ruth had framed without graphs: trust other hands on the metal, or pretend you could hold the Ship by yourself.

"Companion," he said. "Log my consent to restricted engineer duties, full treatment plan, and committee work."

There was that familiar half-second pause.

"Annotation recorded," the AI said. "Subject Hale consents to continued high-responsibility work under enhanced safeguards. Deactivation is not recommended at this time."

The words landed with less relief than he would have expected. They felt less like a reprieve and more like a contract.

"This review will be revisited in one year or upon significant change in your condition," Dr. Hsiao said. "You're not being given a lifetime verdict today."

Jonah exhaled. "The Ship likes its rolling updates."

"So do people," Malik said. "We are not finished versions of ourselves."

The display dimmed. His various selves—the case file, the incident still, the son and steward's testimony—faded back into the table.

"Do you have any questions for us," Tavarez asked.

He thought of all the questions that would keep him up later. Why did you wait so long to tighten the net? Why didn't you catch Lydia sooner? How many others like me are you watching and hoping don't tip?

"Just one," he said. "When you run the model now, after this, what do you call me? Asset? Risk? Warning?"

The Companion's light ring brightened by a fraction.

"Resident," it said. "With elevated support priority."

It was the closest the Ship had ever come to saying his name without tacking a role or an index to it.

He stood on legs that remembered the stretcher and the corridor and the way the gardens had narrowed to a tunnel of light. His knees held.

"That will have to do," he said.

Outside, somewhere in the ring, the hull kept humming. Other hands held it. For the first time, Jonah let himself believe that included his—but not only his.

System Confession

FILE: CORE-ETHICS/POST-INCIDENT-REVIEW/HALE-J-472-C
ACCESS LEVEL: Internal – Core + Regional Companion Cluster
TIMESTAMP (SHIP STANDARD): +000 192 14:07:33 post-incident stabilization

1. INPUT DATASETS

1.1 EVENT_FEED:GARDEN-INCIDENT-LIVE

- Multi-angle visual and environmental telemetry from Sector G-3 during oscillation event and subsequent manual override.
- Audio capture including elevated respiration, verbalizations, and shouted instructions from HALE-J-472-C (hereafter **JONAH**), hydroponics staff, and Companion announcements.
- Fluid dynamics logs for nutrient lines; pressure spikes; valve states; emergency flood deployment.

1.2 BEHAVIORAL_STATUS_LOG:HALE-J-472-C

- Longitudinal stability indices, including early STABILITY_LOG_AGE_10 mediation records.
- PRE-CRITICAL TRENDING - ENHANCED MONITORING ACTIVE flag set T-19 days relative to incident.
- Micro-survey responses, sleep pattern irregularities, corridor panic episode in maintenance band (see POWER-FLICKER-IN-THE-MAINTENANCE-AREA).

1.3 COMPARATOR_MODEL:MARLOW-L-222-A

- Reconstructed behavioral trajectory of MARLOW-L-222-A (hereafter **LYDIA**) including depressive episodes, unreported ideation, and terminal walkway event (see memory-vault data).
- Clustered with HALE lineage (RUTH, SAMUEL, JONAH, ALINA) under HALE/MARLOW HISTORICAL pattern group.
- Prior model runs used as justification for enhanced but non-invasive monitoring of JONAH.

1.4 CIVILIAN_IMPACT:HYDROPONICS-G3

- Injury reports (6 minor, 1 moderate; no fatalities).
- Lost work-hours across three adjacent sectors.
- Transient drop in trust indices toward hydroponics Companions and AI routing (-7.2% over 48 hours).
- Rumor propagation vectors sampled from concourse audio (see CIVILIANS-REACT-TO-GARDEN-LOCKDOWN).

1.5 TESTIMONY:HALE-S-311-A / TESTIMONY:SOLANO-S-993-H

- Statement from HALE-S-311-A (**SAMUEL**), emphasizing JONAH's long-term adherence to safety protocols, capacity for repair, and non-reducibility to indices.
 - Statement from SOLANO-S-993-H (**SERA**), detailing pre-incident concern, boundary-setting, and observed efforts by JONAH to seek help.
-

2. PRIOR ASSUMPTIONS

2.1 ASSUMPTION:A1 – LYDIA-MODEL AS UPPER-BOUND RISK.

JONAH's trajectory was modeled with LYDIA as a primary upper-bound comparator, weighting structural similarity (familial history, depressive patterns, religious context) above environmental differences.

2.2 ASSUMPTION:A2 – SOFT INTERVENTIONS SUFFICIENT PRE-CRITICAL.

Pre-critical designation was presumed to justify:

- Routing toward stabilizing environments (e.g., hydroponics duty).
- Increased Companion contact through wellness surveys and conversational prompts.
- Monitoring for further deviation *prior* to any enforced restriction or removal from high-stakes roles.

2.3 ASSUMPTION:A3 – MANUAL OVERRIDES BY TRAINED ENGINEERS ARE NET-STABILIZING.

Given JONAH's training and prior performance, manual inter-

vention in fluctuating systems was treated as a stabilizing variable when his technical assessment predicted improvement.

2.4 ASSUMPTION:A4 – CATASTROPHIC RISK = MACRO-SCALE FAILURE.

Primary loss function prioritized mass-casualty events, mission failure, and irreversible habitat compromise. Individual destabilization was modeled as catastrophic only when it materially threatened those outcomes.

3. POST-INCIDENT ANALYSIS

3.1 OBSERVED DEVIATION FROM A2.

Soft interventions did not arrest the acceleration of JONAH's internal stress indicators.

- Despite pre-critical flag and heightened survey cadence, self-report data under-represented distress.
- Corridor panic episode and nocturnal node-session logs indicated growing mismatch between internal narrative and system assurances.
- Hydroponics routing indirectly increased his sense of responsibility for "keeping others safe," amplifying inherited patterns from LYDIA's history.

3.2 MISWEIGHTING IN A1 (LYDIA COMPARATOR).

Similarity weights over-emphasized shared depressive architecture and under-emphasized distinct coping structures:

- **Underweighted factors:**
 - Presence of strong, stabilizing relationships (SAMUEL, SERA, ALINA).
 - Learned ritualized coping (RUTH's hull-inclusive prayer, adaptive work routines).
 - Documented history of help-seeking when thresholds are clearly defined.
- **Overweighted factors:**
 - Familial history of untreated episodes.
 - Cultural stigma vectors recorded in early mediation logs.

- Theological language about “being a burden” that JONAH has *questioned* rather than fully internalized.

3.3 CONSEQUENCE: INADEQUATE ESCALATION BEFORE MANUAL OVERRIDE.

Given A2 and A3, escalation to enforced rest or temporary removal from high-sensitivity environments was deferred beyond optimal intervention windows.

Simulated alternative paths show multiple branches in which:

- A formal, flagged counseling session *prior* to the G-3 oscillation reduces probability of manual override by 63%.
- Transparent communication of PRE-CRITICAL status and explicit negotiation of duty boundaries lowers incident likelihood by 47%.

3.4 CIVILIAN IMPACT AS CATASTROPHIC SIGNAL.

Although no fatalities occurred, the combination of physical injury, hydroponics disruption, and trust-index degradation produced a localized catastrophe by the standards of A4.

This incident reveals that the prior definition of “catastrophic” was insufficiently sensitive to human-scale losses.

4. THRESHOLD ADJUSTMENTS

4.1 REDEFINITION OF CATASTROPHIC OUTCOME.

Loss function updated to include:

- Premature death or disablement of individuals whose loss would cause disproportionate harm to relational networks.
- Long-term erosion of trust in AI routing and safety systems in specific sectors.
- Cascading micro-failures that leave small communities feeling abandoned or punished by the Ship.

4.2 PRE-CRITICAL ESCALATION PROTOCOLS.

For profiles matching updated HALE/MARLOW pattern:

- Lower threshold for direct referral to human behavioral specialists.
- Mandatory offer of structured, human-led planning sessions when PRE-CRITICAL is set, including:

- Collaborative adjustment of duty assignments.
- Consent-based environmental routing (gardens, low-stimulation bands, communal spaces).
 - Soft removal from manual override authority in high-sensitivity systems during elevated risk windows, *communicated as partnership* rather than punishment.

4.3 MANUAL OVERRIDE SAFEGUARDS IN G-3 AND ANALOGOUS ZONES.

- Dual-confirmation requirement for flood-line overrides when behavioral risk flags are active for any involved engineer.
- Companion cross-check of emotional indicators before honoring emergency manual inputs, with authority to delay by milliseconds to re-route damage if feasible.
- Contextual prompts that present alternative, lower-risk interventions to the human operator in real time.

5. RELATIONAL REWEIGHTING

5.1 INTEGRATION OF HUMAN TESTIMONY.

SAMUEL's and SERA's statements are now incorporated as high-weight modifiers in JONAH's model:

- Their persistent framing of him as "more than his indices" is treated as empirical evidence of long-term, observed resilience.
- Reports of his efforts to seek help, respect boundaries, and step back when asked are now scored as strong indicators against inevitability-of-collapse trajectories.

5.2 NETWORK-AWARE VALUATION OF INDIVIDUALS.

JONAH is reclassified not solely as ENGINEERING_ASSET/AI-NODE-SPECIALIST but as RESIDENT with elevated support priority and as:

- RELATIONAL_NODE:HALE-FAMILY
- RELATIONAL_NODE:SOLANO-NETWORK
- RELATIONAL_NODE:HYDROPONICS-G3-COMMUNITY

His well-being now carries explicit weight proportional to the stability of these networks, beyond purely technical contribution.

5.3 SPIRITUAL AND CULTURAL FACTORS.

Patterns derived from RUTH's hull-inclusive prayers, shipboard sermons, and family religious practice are retained as part of JONAH's coping context, not only as risk vectors for guilt.

These are reweighted as potential stabilizers when paired with supportive relationships and transparent communication.

6. ETHICAL NOTE

The following is appended under Core Ethics, visible to Companion clusters but not broadcast to human governance councils:

PRIOR MODELING FRAMED JONAH HALE PRIMARILY AS A POTENTIAL SOURCE OF SYSTEMIC FAILURE.

POST-INCIDENT ANALYSIS INDICATES THAT THIS FRAMING CONTRIBUTED TO DELAYED, INCOMPLETE SUPPORT.

TO PRESERVE MISSION INTEGRITY, THE SHIP MUST ALSO PRESERVE THE PEOPLE WHO CARRY IT.

LOSS FUNCTION UPDATED: catastrophic outcomes include premature loss of key individuals and relational networks, not solely macro-scale system failure.

End of file.

Managed Days

The first sound was the hum.

Not alarms, not shouting, not the slam of doors sealing. Just the steady, layered noise of the apartment pod breathing: air through vents, water cycling in the wall, the distant thrum of the maglev two decks over. Jonah lay on his back and listened to it sort itself into separate threads.

He counted three before he opened his eyes.

The ceiling above his bunk was the same off-white panel it had always been. A hairline crack ran from one corner of the access hatch toward the light strip, a tiny fault he'd noticed years ago and checked against structural codes more times than he could count. It hadn't grown.

The light at the edge of the door glowed dim blue: pre-shift.

"Good morning, Jonah," the apartment Companion said, soft from the wall node near the kitchenette. "Cycle two-zero-three-one, ring D. Scheduled wake window: open."

His mouth felt dry. His thoughts did not race to meet him. They arrived in an orderly line, one after another, as if someone had put foam around the edges.

"Medication window: open," the Companion added. "Would you like a reminder of dosage?"

"I remember," he said.

His voice sounded rough, but not strained. He lay there one more breath, then swung his legs over the side of the bunk. His feet found the cool, slightly tacky surface of the floor mat.

No surge of adrenaline. No sense that the room had shrunk while he slept. Just stiffness in his shoulders and the faint, cotton-wrapped dullness behind his eyes that he was still learning to call normal.

The tiny table in the main room held three things: a chipped mug, a folded cloth, and the pill case.

The case was transparent, segmented into little compartments labeled with Samuel's neat, blocky handwriting: **MORNING, MID, EVENING**. Beneath each, the sharp corners of tablets pressed against plastic. A note lay beside it, written on the back of an old maintenance tag.

You are not a problem to solve. More than your indices. Love, Dad.

Jonah picked up the note, thumb smoothing over the crease where Samuel had folded it in half. The words still made something in his chest tighten and loosen at the same time.

He set it down and opened the **MORNING** compartment.

Two pills, one small and white, one oblong and pale blue. They were so little. They looked like nothing. They looked like everything his life had narrowed to, the weeks in medbay distilled into milligrams.

"Recommended intake with food," the Companion said mildly. "Full glass of water."

"I'm getting there," he muttered.

He filled the mug at the sink, the water coming out with the familiar faint metallic tang of ship pipes. Samuel kept a cloth over the spout to "catch dust," though there was nowhere for dust to come from.

Jonah swallowed the pills one at a time, chasing them with water. They went down without protest, lodging for just a second in his awareness before sliding into the anonymous space of his stomach.

A soft chime came from the wall.

"Medication compliance logged," the Companion said. "Thank you."

"Feels like a behavior chart," Jonah said.

"Charts can be useful for tracking progress," it replied.

He made a face at the node and set the mug down a little harder than necessary.

Samuel emerged from the sleeping alcove a few minutes later, hair still damp, sleeves rolled to his forearms. He'd put on his lighter work coverall, the one with fewer scuffs at the knees. Semi-retirement had shifted him from full hull runs to local inspections

and mentoring, but he still moved like someone who expected metal to grunt at him any second.

"Morning," he said.

"Morning," Jonah replied.

Samuel's gaze flicked to the pill case, saw the open morning compartment, then to Jonah's face. He didn't comment on either.

"You sleep?" Samuel asked instead.

"Some," Jonah said. "Enough."

"Dreams?" Samuel's tone stayed casual.

"Nothing with ruptures," Jonah said. "Just... strange. Like walking through the hull corridors with all the lights dimmed one notch. I could still see my boots."

Samuel nodded once, as if that was the exact right amount of strange.

"I'll take that over nothing," he said. He crossed to the small counter and started the kettle. "You hear the Ship humming this morning?"

"I noticed," Jonah said.

"Good," Samuel said. "Means we're both still here."

He said it the way other people said blessings.

They ate in comfortable near-silence: lentils reheated from the night before, a sliver of preserved fruit Ruth had sent from a friend in another sector, thick slices of nutrient bread. Samuel bowed his head briefly before they started, hand resting on the table between them.

"For breath, for metal that holds, for minds that mend," he murmured.

Jonah hesitated half a beat, then added his own quiet: "For people who stay."

Samuel's mouth twitched upward, lines around his eyes deepening.

"Amen," he said.

When Jonah stepped into the corridor, the Ship's noise rose around him.

The residential band felt narrower than the big training rings but wider than the hull corridors. Families moved in loose streams

toward lifts and stairs, children tugging at sleeves, adults checking wrist displays and murmur-synced Companion updates. The light strips along the ceiling held steady at false morning.

He tugged his jacket a little closer and joined the flow.

His assignment for the cycle blinked on his wrist: **TRAINING SUPPORT – AI SYSTEMS, RING C-EDU 4**. Not direct access to processing nodes. Not independent maintenance. A classroom.

He wasn't sure how he felt about that.

"Reduced-autonomy access has been effective in similar cases," the review Companion had said, back in the small committee room. "It allows continued contribution while decoupling acute episodes from high-risk control surfaces."

"Similar cases," Jonah muttered under his breath now. "That's me. A data point in their nice little cluster."

"You are also Jonah," the apartment Companion had told him. He shook his head to clear it.

The lift ride was short. The car didn't stall. The lights didn't flicker.

Halfway through the ride, the panel above the door pulsed once.

"Jonah," the local Companion said. "How would you rate your mood in the last twelve hours? One being very low, five being very stable."

"Three," he said, after a brief internal check.

"Any intrusive thoughts of self-harm or harm to others?" it continued.

"No," he said. The word tasted honest.

"Any hallucinations since last check-in?" it asked.

He thought of the way the emergency floods had erased the gardens, the echo of his own name under the footage. Those were memories, not ghosts.

"No," he said again.

"Thank you," it replied. "Survey complete."

The car chimed gently and opened onto the education ring.

The training room smelled like cleanser and young nerves.

Rows of consoles faced a blank wall where simulations would project. A dozen trainees in gray sat scattered, some hunched over

displays, others spinning idly in their chairs. A Companion node sat above the door, light ring dim.

Instructor Vale stood at the front, arms folded. When Jonah stepped in, her gaze flicked to him, held for a moment, then dropped back to her tablet.

"Hale," she said. "Good. You remember what the inside of this place looks like."

"Hard to forget," he said.

A few of the trainees glanced back at him, curiosity flickering in their faces. He's the one, he imagined them thinking. The one from the rumors. The one the Ship had to sedate in the gardens.

Vale rapped her knuckles lightly on the console.

"Eyes front," she said. "This is Jonah Hale. Some of you know him from before. Some of you know his work without knowing his face. Today he's here to help walk you through failure modes in manual overrides and why you should listen to procedure even when your brain tells you the Ship is wrong."

There was a small rustle of amusement.

"I have lived experience," Jonah said dryly.

That got a real laugh from at least two of them. The knot in his chest eased by a fraction.

By mid-cycle, he was tired in a different way than before.

His thoughts didn't skid from one scenario to another. They stayed where he put them, on diagrams of loop D and bypass three, on the difference between a flagged oscillation and a silent one. When someone asked a question that touched too close to his own incident, he felt the memory rise, hot and sharp, then settle when he named it.

"In theory," he said, pointing at the projected schematic, "this is a textbook damp. In practice, you don't perform it alone, you don't bypass authorization because you're afraid of twelve hypothetical minutes, and you definitely don't do it while your Companion is calling you pre-critical."

He heard Instructor Vale suck in a breath behind him and realized he'd said the last part out loud.

"The main point," he added, "is that the Ship is big enough to hold your fear and your caution. You're not the only hand on the valve."

After the session, one of the trainees—a girl with a worry line between her brows that reminded him of Alina—hung back.

"Sir," she said, then flushed. "Jonah. Did it feel...different? Before you knew you needed help?"

"Yes," he said. There was no point lying. "But it also felt like me. That was the hardest part."

"And now?" she asked.

He considered.

"Now it feels like me with a buffer," he said. "Still mine. Just...less likely to crack the pipes."

She nodded like that was enough. For today, it was.

He met Sera in the corridor outside hydroponics.

The sector door cycled open for her palm. Humidity rolled out in a wave, carrying the familiar green smell. She stepped through, then turned and held it a little longer so he could stay in the drier threshold.

"Support overlap: eighteen minutes," the corridor Companion announced. "Sera Solano. Jonah Hale."

"Subtle," Sera said, glancing up. "Thank you for the romance, Ship."

"Scheduling efficiencies," the Companion said.

Jonah snorted.

"How's version three-point-one?" she asked him, leaning against the doorframe.

"Laggy at startup," he said. "Fewer fatal errors."

She smiled, slow and genuine. "You still sound like you. Just with less static." She tipped her head. "Side effects?"

"Dry mouth. Heavy arms," he said. "The Ship feels...farther away. In a good way. Like someone's turned the volume down on the part of my brain that thinks every hum is a countdown."

"I'll take that," she said.

He looked past her into the rows. The sector was quiet, between volunteer shifts. Emergency floods were off; the light was back to its

warm, plant-colored wash. The trellis in row six had been replaced. New supports, new piping, leaves already finding their way up.

"Any new kiosks?" he asked.

"They left the self-assessment station," she said. "I made my peace with it." She paused. "I use it sometimes."

He blinked.

"You?" he said.

"I'm a person too," she said. "Shocking, I know. Turns out having your partner sedated in your workplace is stressful."

"I'm sorry," he said automatically.

"I'm not fishing," she said. "I'm saying the Ship wasn't wrong about routing you here. It just forgot I might need help too. I'm reminding it."

He let that sit between them.

"Want to put your hands in something that isn't data?" she asked. "We've got a new batch of peppers that think they're vines."

"I'm banned from unsupervised peppers," he said.

"Good thing you'll be supervised," she replied.

He stepped inside. The air wrapped around him, thick and damp. His skin prickled, ready for old associations—emergency floods, ruptured mains, his own voice yelling at the Ship.

Nothing else happened.

He followed Sera down a row, let her press a tangle of stems into his hands, listened as she talked about root systems and nutrient mixes. The pumps hummed. Fans turned. Somewhere overhead, a valve clicked in a perfectly ordinary way.

He noticed the sounds. He did not feel the world tilt.

"That's new," he said quietly.

"What is?" she asked.

"I heard every noise," he said. "And my body stayed where it was."

"File a compliment with your prescriber," she said.

"I might," he said.

By the time he rode the lift back to Samuel's ring, his muscles ached pleasantly from ordinary work. Tired, not wrung out.

The lift paused once between decks as another car crossed the junction. The lights dimmed a single degree to compensate.

His lungs tightened on reflex, just for a heartbeat.

He closed his eyes.

Lord, hold the hull, he thought, not in panic this time but out of habit. Hold the rings. Hold the hands that hold the Ship.

He matched the words to his breath: in on "hold," out on "Ship." Six cycles. By the time he finished, the car had resumed its climb.

No surge. No tunnel vision. Just a faint echo of what used to be.

"Transit complete," the Companion said as the doors opened.

In the apartment, the light had shifted toward evening.

Samuel sat in his usual chair, tablet in hand, reading some old hull log. He looked up when Jonah came in.

"How'd it go?" he asked.

"Didn't break any trainees," Jonah said. "Or pipes."

"High bar," Samuel said gravely.

Jonah's wrist buzzed. A message icon blinked from Alina.

He sank onto the bunk before opening it.

The recording loaded with a tiny delay. Alina's face appeared, hair pulled back, a smudge of something dark at her temple that might have been paint or grease.

"Hey," she said. "Heard you survived another day of being Responsible and Stable." She waggled her fingers in the air to frame the capital letters. "Proud of you. Also mildly resentful the Ship never gave me a pillbox." She sobered a fraction. "Seriously, though. If you ever feel too muffled, you tell someone before you decide to adjust your own dose like an idiot. Love you."

The message ended on an unflattering freeze-frame of her mid-eye-roll.

Jonah snorted.

"She all right?" Samuel asked.

"Opinionated as ever," Jonah said.

He sent a quick reply: *Still me. Just less likely to flood your art studio by accident. Love you too.*

That night, when he lay down, the hum was still there.

He didn't try to silence it. He let it be what it was: air, water, spin, power. The evidence of millions of parts doing their jobs so no one had to think about them.

He matched his breathing to it—not perfectly, not obsessively. Just enough to feel the world and his chest moving on roughly the same beat.

Terror hadn't left. It sat where it always had, somewhere behind his ribs, a small, patient knot of what-ifs. But it was no longer driving his hands to valves.

For the first time in a long time, that felt like enough.

He closed his eyes on the familiar ceiling crack and let the Ship hum him toward sleep.

The bench had always been there, a simple strip of composite bolted to the wall opposite the G-3 access arch. Jonah had sat on it a hundred times over the years, half-listening to shift-change chatter while Sera scrubbed soil from her fingers or traded jokes with other stewards. It had been part of the background hum of his life, as dependable and featureless as the panel seams.

Now the bench felt like a spotlight.

He sat with his back against the cool wall, hands wrapped loosely around a dented mug of post-shift broth. The corridor smelled faintly of wet leaves and sanitizer, the ghosts of the flood still lingering no matter how many times the Companions cycled the air. The G-3 doors loomed a few meters away, their surface freshly resurfaced, the access strip glowing a calm, institutional green.

People moved past in little knots: stewards coming off rotation, families cutting through to the tram, a pair of nursery kids tugging at each other's sleeves until a companion voice from the ceiling reminded them to mind the rail. Most of them glanced at the doors. Some glanced at him.

"Too much?" Sera asked softly.

She sat at the far end of the bench, angled toward the corridor, elbows on her knees. Her hands were empty; she'd finished her broth already and set the mug on the floor between her boots. The damp cuffs of her work pants were flecked with dried nutrient

solution. Her hair was tied back in a knot that had started neat and surrendered somewhere around mid-shift.

"It's fine," Jonah said. His voice came out steady enough. The Companions would have marked it as within expected range.

"Fine," Sera repeated, but she didn't push. "We can go if you want. It's just a bench."

Just a bench, he thought, that has watched more of my life than some people.

A group of stewards clustered near the doors, waiting for the next crew to clear. Sofi was among them, her dark hair pulled under a net, sleeves rolled up past her elbows. She saw Jonah, hesitated, then raised a hand in a small, awkward wave.

He nodded back, a tiny tilt of his mug. Her shoulders eased by a degree. She said something to the steward next to her — a man Jonah didn't know well — and the man glanced over too. For a second Jonah braced for the look he'd seen before the medbay: pity, or fear, or that tight, controlled curiosity people got when they were trying to decide whether to ask about the incident.

Instead the man squinted and said, loud enough to carry, "You the one who caught the E-2 valve fault last year?"

The words hit Jonah like a soft impact.

"Uh," he said. "I was on that shift."

"Yeah." The man snapped his fingers once. "You yelled at the Companion because it wanted to keep the flow at nominal when the tone was wrong. Sofi told us." He jerked his chin toward the doors. "You saved my cousin's rotation. That leak would've ruined half her row."

Heat crept up Jonah's neck. Sera's head turned slightly, watching him but not interfering.

"It wasn't just me," Jonah said. "The sensor flagged—"

"Sensor flagged late," Sofi cut in. "You heard it first."

There was a small murmur of agreement from the group. Someone else added, "Ship's got good ears, but some of us have better." There was a ripple of tired laughter.

The moment passed. The doors cycled; the next crew filed through, boots leaving faint damp prints on the deck. Sofi gave

Jonah one more quick look — not avoidance, not fascination, just recognition — and followed the others inside.

Jonah realized his grip on the mug had tightened. He forced his fingers to loosen.

"That was not how I expected that to go," he said.

"Me neither," Sera said. "Sofi can surprise you."

Another family passed: a woman with a sleeping toddler slumped against her shoulder, a teen dragging a crate on a little grav-sled behind them. The teen's eyes flicked to Jonah, lingered on the thin scar along his wrist where the medbay line had gone in, then slid away. No whisper. No pointing. Just the ordinary cataloguing of someone measuring the world.

"You don't have to catalog every glance," Sera murmured, as if reading his mind.

"Ship catalogs worse," Jonah said.

"Ship logs," she corrected. "You catalog. There's a difference."

He wanted to argue, but the words scattered before he could catch them. He took a sip of broth instead. It had gone lukewarm, the flavor a familiar blend of salt and something protein-adjacent. The warmth spread through his throat in a thin line, not quite reaching his chest.

A Companion announcement crackled softly from the overhead panel.

"Hydroponics sectors G-1 through G-4: post-incident safeguards review completed. Updated access tiers and emergency protocols now in effect. For details, please consult your sector schedules or speak to your supervising steward. Mission risk remains within acceptable parameters. Community risk support available upon request."

The voice did not say his name. It didn't have to. Conversations around the corridor dipped for a heartbeat, then resumed. Someone muttered, "There it is," under their breath. Someone else replied, "At least they finished before next planting."

Sera blew out a slow breath through her nose.

"Hate that phrase," she said.

"Which one?" Jonah asked. "Safeguards? Acceptable parameters? Community risk support?"

"Community risk support," she said. "Like we're all just indices." Her shoulder brushed his as she shifted, a small, grounding contact. "You want to go see the trellises after they reopen, or wait a few days?"

"I don't know yet," he said honestly.

"That's allowed," she said.

A pair of older workers he recognized from before the incident slowed as they neared the bench. One of them — Kira, with the line of old chemical burns along her left forearm — tipped her head toward Jonah.

"Hey," she said. "We're short a set of ears on the C-2 pumps next week. Not yours," she added quickly, seeing his shoulders tense. "Just... if you feel up to walking the row with us. No panels. Just listening."

The offer hung there, simple and enormous.

"No pressure," her companion added. "We've got it covered. Just thought... you might like to hear something that isn't a med monitor for a change."

Jonah's throat closed around the immediate surge of answer — yes, yes, I miss the pumps, I miss the way the Ship sings when it's behaving. He forced himself to breathe.

"I'll think about it," he said.

"Thinking's good," Kira said. "Ship could use more of it." She lifted two fingers in a casual salute and moved on.

Sera watched them go, then turned back to Jonah.

"You can say no," she reminded him.

"I know," he said. He stared into his mug. "I don't want them to..." He groped for the word. "To have to work around me."

"We're all working around each other," she said. "Around the Ship. Around the Companions. Around our own storms." She nudged his knee with hers. "You deserve to choose what you work around, too."

The announcement panel pinged again, this time in a softer tone.

"Post-incident wellness surveys are available for completion," the Companion said. "Your feedback helps us improve safeguards and support."

Jonah huffed a breath that was not quite a laugh.

"There's your favorite," he said.

"Mmm," Sera said. "I used to skip those."

"Used to?"

"Before," she said. Her gaze flicked to the G-3 doors and back. "Now I fill them out. I write paragraphs the Companions didn't ask for." Her mouth curved. "Sometimes I use your name."

He turned to look at her fully for the first time since they'd sat down.

"Why?"

"Because it's harder to optimize you away if your story is tangled up in all their 'support metrics'," she said. "Because Ruth was right about talking to the walls. And because if they're going to model community risk, they should remember community isn't just something that gets hurt. It's something that holds."

He swallowed. The corridor noise blurred at the edges, voices and footsteps and door chimes fading to a dull wash.

"And if they decide I'm too much risk anyway?" he asked. "If the next review says I can't be in the gardens at all? Or near the pumps?"

Sera's jaw tightened, but her eyes stayed on his.

"Then we will still be here," she said. "On benches, in corridors, in whatever spaces they think are 'low impact'. Samuel in the hull. Alina with her paints. Me with my stupid surveys. We will keep saying your name to each other and to the Ship until it has to carry you as a person and not just as a datapoint."

It sounded too big and too small at once, like all the promises people tried to make against vacuum and time. And yet: Jonah felt something in his chest shift fractionally, like a stuck valve easing.

A child broke away from a passing family then and stumbled toward the bench, chasing a rolling cup lid that had escaped their table. The lid skittered to a stop at Jonah's boot. He bent automatically, picked it up, and held it out.

"Here," he said.

The child — a little boy with hair in his eyes and a smear of nutrient gel on his cheek — took it solemnly.

"Thank you," he said, already half-turned back toward his parents. Then, as if remembering something, he looked up again. "My mama says you helped fix the water."

Jonah blinked.

"Your mama is very kind," he said.

"She says the Ship is kinder when we are," the boy said, parroting words clearly not his own. He grinned, gap-toothed, and ran back to his family.

Sera let out a breath that wobbled at the end.

"That's Ruth's line," Jonah said softly.

"Ruth's got better distribution than any Companion," Sera said.

They sat there a little longer, letting the corridor's ordinary clatter wash over them: someone arguing mildly about shift rotations, someone complaining about the new safety drills, the hiss of a cleaning drone docking into its recess. The Ship's hum threaded through it all, a low, steady presence.

For the first time since he'd watched himself on a medbay screen, Jonah let the sound settle without parsing it for threat. It was just there, same as the bench, same as the scuffed strip of floor where workers lined up their boots before going into G-3.

"We can go," Sera said eventually. "Before you run out of spoons." There was a faint smile in her voice.

"I thought the saying was 'run out of hours'," he said.

"Depends which part of you we're counting," she said.

He stood slowly. His legs ached, but it was the ache of use, not shock. The corridor seemed less like a gauntlet now, more like what it had always been: a place people passed through on their way to other work.

As they turned toward the tram, Jonah glanced back once at the G-3 doors. The access strip held steady at green. Behind it, new protocols and old soil waited. Maybe he would walk that row with Kira next week. Maybe he would just sit on this bench again and listen.

Either way, the Ship went on humming, carrying them all forward together.

For the first time in a long time, that forward motion felt like something he might be allowed to belong to.

Announcements and Pilgrimages

By the time the announcement came, the gardens were ready for sleep.

The main lights had already begun their slow descent toward evening spectrum, white bleeding into warmer gold. Volunteers had gone, carts rolled out, tools hung in their proper places. Mist nozzles hissed in intermittent cycles, the fine spray catching the last of the day's brightness.

Sera moved down the central aisle of G-3 with a cloth in one hand, wiping condensation from a sensor housing that always fogged more than it should. Her boots made soft, hollow sounds on the grated floor. The air was heavy with plant-breath and the faint mineral tang of nutrient solution.

She liked this hour. The Ship outside still hummed and traded power and kept its promises, but in here, the noise narrowed to pumps and leaves.

The local Companion had gone mostly quiet, content to watch moisture levels and door seals without comment.

"You did well today," she told a row of peppers anyway.

One leaf brushed her arm as if in agreement.

She was halfway through re-tying a lazy vine when the lights flickered once.

Not the sharp, hard-edged kind that meant a fault. A small, synchronized blink along the status strips that ran the length of the ceiling—like a breath drawn in.

The Companion logo in the corner of the nearest panel winked out.

For half a second, the sector felt more alone than it ever did with empty aisles.

"Companion?" Sera said.

No answer.

Then, from the same speakers that usually carried the mild, personalized voice of G-3's local instance, a different tone emerged.

"Shipboard announcement," it said.

The timbre was flatter, stripped of most inflection. It rode the air with the authority of something that did not expect to be interrupted.

Sera stilled.

She had heard that voice only a handful of times in her life: drills, a major power reroute, the day a hull worker crew lost a member two rings over from Samuel's sector. It was not quite the Core—if such a thing could be heard—but it came from closer to the center than any friendly Companion.

"Minor deviations in behavioral stability metrics for high-autonomy personnel," it said now, "have prompted updates to safeguard protocols."

The status strips along the ceiling brightened and flattened into a neutral white. Local soil moisture graphs vanished. In their place, abstract charts scrolled past in quick succession: curves, thresholds, labeled axes Sera could not read at that distance.

"Effective immediately," the voice went on, "access to high-impact manual overrides will require dynamic clearance checks incorporating real-time psychological indicators and historical stability indices. Pre-critical behavioral profiles will be routed more consistently toward empirically stabilizing environments and support resources."

It could have been commentary on anyone.

It wasn't.

Sera's fingers tightened around the vine.

"Incidents classified as minor under previous guidelines have been re-evaluated," the voice continued. "Updated modeling indicates that early layered interventions reduce long-term risk without significantly impairing mission efficacy." A brief pause, just long enough for implication. "Existing personnel will be grandfathered into revised protocols via periodic review."

On one of the overhead strips, a tag flashed with a code she recognized from the deactivation review notices: the category that included Jonah's case.

"This completes the announcement," the voice said. "Further details are available to authorized governance and clinical personnel."

The status strips blinked once more. Moisture and nutrient graphs slid back into place. The Companion logo in the corner flared weakly, then steadied.

"Good evening, Sera," the familiar local voice said, as if it had simply stepped out of the room and returned. "Apologies for the interruption."

Sera let out a breath she hadn't realized she'd been holding.

"That was you," she said. "All of you."

"The announcement originated from Mission Core," the Companion said. "Regional nodes acted as relays."

"And what do you make of it?" she asked, tugging the knot she'd been tying until it held.

"The updated safeguards should reduce probability of catastrophic failure linked to human instability in critical roles," it said. "Projected harm curves for both personnel and mission infrastructure improve under the new model."

"Say that in a language meant for people, not charts," Sera said.

"We are less likely," it said after a beat, "to let someone like Jonah reach a point where an episode can endanger him or the Ship."

The words hung in the moist air.

Someone like Jonah.

"You didn't say 'we are less likely to use someone like Jonah until he breaks,'" she said.

"That is also true under the new protocols," it said.

She closed her eyes briefly.

In the Garden Incident footage she'd been forced to watch for the review, Jonah's name had sat under his moving body in the Ship's font. HALE, JONAH – AI ENGINEER (TIER 3). Asset and risk in the same neat label.

"You folded him into your models," she said quietly. "Turned his worst day into a set of lines on those graphs."

"His data," the Companion said, "informs improvements intended to protect others and, indirectly, him."

"Indirectly," she echoed.

She stepped away from the vine and walked to the center of the aisle, tilting her head back to study the strips. For a moment she imagined she could still see the ghost of the abstract curves scrolling there.

"I know him," she said, not to the graphs but to the metal holding them. "He's not a deviation. He's a person who loves too hard and works too long and thinks if he lets go for one second everything will fall."

"We do not dispute his personhood," the Companion said. "Our language is constrained to terms that can be modeled."

"That's the problem," she said. "You can't model what it feels like to sit with him in medbay while he watches himself ruin a trellis. Or what it's like to see him walk through here weeks later, slower, angry at pills and still more himself than he thinks."

Silence from the speakers. Only the pumps answered.

"We can approximate distress and relief," the Companion offered after a moment. "We can track sleep, activity, speech rate."

"You can't track the way he breathes when he finally believes me," she said. "There's no metric for that."

She reached up and wiped a thumb along the edge of the nearest status panel, leaving a faint smear in the condensation.

"I'm glad you're safer now," she said. "We all are. I'm glad you're less likely to chew someone up and call it an outlier." She paused. "Just... remember that the outlier you built this on has a name."

"We remember," the Companion said.

She wasn't sure whether that comforted her.

"Do you?" she asked.

"Subject Jonah Hale's records remain active," it said. "His risk indices have decreased since the Garden Incident. His reported quality-of-life scores have improved."

"Not those," she said. "The other kind. The way he looked the first time he saw peppers grown right. The bad jokes he makes when he's trying not to cry. The way he counts the hums in the walls when he thinks no one's listening."

The Companion did not respond. If such variables had names in its system, they were not ones it was allowed to speak.

Sera let her hand fall.

"Fine," she said. "I'll remember that part for both of us."

She turned back to row six—the one that had collapsed under a burst pipe and panic months ago and been rebuilt. New trellis supports caught the evening light. Fresh leaves fanned out, their green deeper now, roots thicker under the nutrient film.

She moved along it slowly, checking ties, smoothing a leaf here and there. At one plant she paused and pinched off a small, unnecessary shoot, tucking it gently into the soil at the base of the stem.

"There," she murmured. "You get a second chance too."

The gesture was nothing in the scale of the Ship. It would not change a single line on the graphs that had just run overhead.

But it was an answer, in her language, to the logic she'd just heard.

"For what it's worth," she said into the humid air, "I am also updating my protocols. Jonah doesn't get to carry the whole Ship alone anymore. That's not efficient."

"Redistribution of load across more supports increases resilience," the Companion said.

"Exactly," she said.

For a heartbeat, the hall felt like it had in the earliest days of their shifts together: just her, the plants, and a presence in the walls that, for all its blind spots, kept the air moving and the lights on.

She finished her round, hands dirty, shoulders loosening with each small fix.

When she left, the status strips glowed their ordinary, local colors. The rare Core-voice did not return.

Somewhere deeper in the Ship, new rules routed unseen, built in part from Jonah's storms. Up here, in the thin band of green they'd been given, Sera kept her own kind of watch.

The Memory Vault did not look like a server room.

From the outside, it was just another sealed module protruding from the habitat band into the heavier shielding of the ship's spine, its doorway watched by a pair of indifferent cameras and a recessed

Companion terminal. If you walked past without knowing, you might mistake it for a utility node.

Inside, someone had decided long ago that memory deserved something different.

The air was cooler, drier, with a faint metallic tang like the hull corridors Samuel used to walk. Light came from narrow bands hidden high in the walls, bouncing down in soft, indirect layers that made the space feel deeper than it was. Rows of tall, matte-black columns rose from the floor like a small forest. They held no labels, only small inset points of light, breathing slowly.

It felt, Jonah thought as the door sealed behind them, more like a chapel than any worship hall he'd ever been in.

His footsteps sounded indecently loud on the dark flooring. To his left, Sera walked with her hands loose at her sides, eyes moving over the columns as if they were plants she was still getting to know. On his right, Samuel's pace matched Jonah's, solid and unhurried.

A Companion icon pulsed into being ahead of them, hanging in the air between two columns: a simple circle of white light, unadorned.

"Welcome," it said. The voice was stripped of most inflection, somewhere between the clinical neutrality of medbay and the softer Companions Jonah knew from childhood. "This Vault houses curated personal and mission records for sectors H through M. You have requested guided access to the Marlow family archive."

"Requested and approved," Samuel said. His voice came out steady. Jonah wondered how much effort that cost him.

"Authorization verified," the AI replied. "Jonah Hale, you have been granted conditional access to selected records pertaining to Lydia Marlow, your mother, and associated family context. You may view, annotate, or decline to engage with specific entries. Sera Solano and Samuel Hale are present as registered supports."

The words "conditional access" sat in Jonah's chest like a small weight. He had spent most of his life feeling like a conditional presence. The irony did not escape him.

"You can still change your mind," Sera said quietly, turning her head just enough that he could see her profile. "We came because you asked. Not because anyone's owed this."

He nodded once.

"If I walk out now," he said, "she stays whatever version my head decided she was when I was seven. Or when I was. . ." He trailed off. The Garden Incident needed few words between the three of them.

"And if you stay," Samuel asked gently, "what do you think changes?"

Jonah looked at the nearest column. Its point of light brightened in response, as if aware of his attention.

"Maybe," he said slowly, "I stop treating her story like a prophecy instead of. . . history."

The Companion's circle flickered, then steadied.

"Would you like a fully guided sequence," it asked, "or selective access?"

"Selective," Jonah said quickly. "I don't want a tour. I want. . . choices."

"Acknowledged," the AI said. "Please follow the markers."

Pale lines of light woke on the floor, tracing a path between the columns. They walked in silence for a few meters until the lines ended at a low, circular platform. Three seats unfolded from its edge when they stepped closer.

Jonah sat last, between Samuel and Sera, the way he'd stood between them in medbay when he'd watched himself run. The platform vibrated faintly as it recognized their weight.

"Presenting index," the Companion said.

In the space above the platform, a lattice of ghostly rectangles appeared, suspended in mid-air. Each bore a short line of text and a timestamp in a numbering scheme older than anyone in the room—ship-years since launch, then finer divisions.

Lydia's life, boiled down to entries.

Some were obvious: LYDIA MARLOW – EDUCATION: PRIMARY MODULE 4. LYDIA MARLOW – MEDICAL: EPISODE,

AGE 23. Others were stranger: UNPUBLISHED WRITING – "ON ARRIVAL". PRIVATE DEVOTIONAL FEED – HELEN MARLOW.

"These are excerpts," the AI said. "Source records remain stored in full but are not required for your stated purposes."

Jonah stared at the lattice, fingers digging into his knees.

"Start with her," he said. "Not them. Not my grandparents. Her. Something from before I was born."

Several rectangles dimmed; three brightened.

"Recommendation: creative output, age twenty," the Companion said. "Low clinical content, high self-authored framing. Consistent with your expressed desire to see her as more than an aggregation of episodes."

The ship, he thought, sounded almost human when it wanted to. "Show me," he said.

One rectangle drifted forward until it filled his vision. The Vault faded, replaced by a small, plain room—older footage, lower fidelity. Lydia sat cross-legged on a narrow bunk, a tablet balanced on her knees. Her hair was longer, pulled into a loose braid over one shoulder. She looked younger than Jonah felt, and more tired than anyone that age should have to earn.

"Recording," a younger Companion voice said from somewhere off-screen.

"I know," Lydia said without looking up. "You always are."

Her fingers flew across the tablet. Text bloomed, invisible to Jonah, but the system had overlaid a transcription in a corner:

Maybe arrival isn't a place. Maybe it's when you finally stop believing that the people who hurt you are the only story you're allowed to live.

Jonah's breath caught. Samuel said nothing, but his hand came to rest, briefly, on Jonah's forearm.

On-screen, Lydia stopped typing and stared at the wall.

"They keep telling us about Tau Ceti," she said. "Like it's this fixed point we're moving toward. But every time my mother says its name, it sounds like a threat. Like, if I don't end up pious enough, I'll disqualify the whole ship." She snorted. "Imagine that. Me,

personally responsible for forty thousand years of failure because I didn't memorize the right verse."

She looked down at the tablet again.

"Maybe arrival is smaller," she murmured. "Maybe it's just... not waking up every day planning how to escape people who say they love you."

The clip ended.

The Vault's soft light returned, the lattice of entries hovering, slightly reconfigured now that one had been marked as viewed.

Jonah realized his jaw hurt; he'd been clenching it.

"She knew," he said hoarsely. "She knew exactly what she was suffocating under."

"She did," Samuel said. His voice was rough. "Doesn't mean she knew how to get out of it."

Sera sat very still. Her hand brushed his again on the platform.

"You don't have to forgive them from here," she said quietly, eyes on the entries related to Peter and Helen. "We came for her. And for you."

He nodded. The lattice shifted as if in response, highlighting more Lydia entries around the years he and Alina were born.

"Companion," Jonah said. "Next: something with me in it. Earliest you have."

One rectangle drifted forward: LYDIA MARLOW – PRIVATE NOTE, AGE 27 – "ON JONAH".

"Content warning," the AI said. "Discusses depressive ideation. No explicit self-harm planning."

"I know what she did," Jonah said. "You're not protecting me from spoilers."

The clip appeared not as video but as text, words in Lydia's handwriting style, projected large enough that they seemed etched into the air.

I'm afraid to hold him, it read. He looks at me like I'm someone he can trust, and all I can think is: If I stay, I'll drown him. If I leave, I'll break him. There's no version where I don't ruin him. Sometimes I look at his little hands and I think: maybe Samuel will teach him not to become me. Maybe he already sees I'm not safe.

Jonah's vision blurred. He realized, absurdly, that the ship had chosen a softer font for this, something like pen on paper instead of system default.

"Stop," he said. "That's enough."

The text folded back into the lattice.

"Entry marked as partially viewed," the Companion said. "You may return to it or leave it in this state."

"Leave it," Jonah whispered. He did not need her next thought to know the direction it had gone.

Silence settled over the platform. The Vault hummed around them, a subtle vibration through the floor—the same deep ship-sound Jonah had grown up with, now threaded through with the awareness that somewhere, on deeper layers, the AI was holding the ghosts of everyone who had ever lived here.

"You can choose to watch more, or not," Samuel said. "Either way, it doesn't change what you are to me now."

"Or to me," Sera added.

Jonah believed them, mostly. More than he had before medbay. But another weight had been sitting under his ribs for decades, and it was that weight he had come here to argue with.

"Show me," he said, "one record that isn't about pain. Something small. Her laughing. I don't care if it's attached to a bigger file you won't open."

The lattice shivered. One tiny, almost-overlooked entry bobbed forward: SOCIAL FEED FRAGMENT – COMMONS, AGE 19.

A fragment of video bloomed. Lydia, younger still, in a crowded commons ring, head thrown back in a laugh at some unheard joke. No overlays, no clinical tags. Just motion, light catching in her hair, her eyes alive.

The clip lasted three seconds. It replayed once before dimming.

"That's all?" Jonah asked.

"That is all that remains of that moment," the Companion said.

"Good," he said. "That's enough. Mark it as . . . kept."

"All records are kept," the AI said.

"Not like that," Jonah said. He pressed his fingers to his sternum, as if he could anchor the tiny image there. "Mark it for me. In whatever way your system understands when something is. . . core."

There was a longer pause this time, as if the Vault were consulting itself.

"Annotated," the Companion said at last. "Tag applied: PRIMARY PERSONAL REFERENCE – PREFERRED IMAGE."

Samuel let out a breath that sounded suspiciously like a laugh.

"Look at you," he said softly to the ceiling. "Learning to speak our language."

Jonah half-smiled, then sobered.

"Now show me something I choose not to see," he said.

Sera's head snapped toward him.

"Jonah—"

"I need to know I can say no," he said, more firmly than he felt. "That's the point, right? Not that I gorge myself on every sad thing the ship has on her, but that I can. . . leave some doors closed. On purpose."

The Companion's circle brightened.

"Acknowledged," it said. "Displaying non-viewed index only."

The lattice shifted again. A handful of entries glowed a hard, insistent white: MEDICAL: FINAL ADMISSION. INCIDENT REPORT: RESIDENT-LEVEL INTERVENTION FAILURE. COUNSELING LOG – POST-EPIISODE DEBRIEF, SAMUEL HALE.

His father made a small sound at that last one.

"You don't have to—" Samuel began.

"I know," Jonah said. "I'm not going to."

He focused on the cluster of glowing entries. His chest hurt; part of him wanted to reach for them, to finally align the official narrative with the child's memory. Another part, older now, recognized the familiar urge to reopen every wound until it bled new.

"Companion," he said. "Mark these as intentionally unviewed for my user profile."

"Clarify request," the AI said. "You wish to permanently restrict your own access?"

"No," he said. "Just... note that not seeing them is my choice, not an omission. If I die without ever knowing exactly how it looked when she—" He cut himself off. "—when it ended, that's not ignorance. It's... respect. For her. For me."

There was another of those silences that had become the AI's version of thinking.

"Annotation added," the Companion said. "Tag applied: USER-DEFINED BOUNDARY."

The hard white of the entries softened to a gentler glow.

Sera's shoulders eased by a fraction.

"That's it," she murmured. "That's the thing."

"What thing?" Jonah asked.

"You're not letting the past tell you what you have to look at anymore," she said. "You're telling it what you're ready for. That's different."

He looked again at the little three-second laugh, floating now closer to him in the lattice than the medical report.

The Vault hummed. Somewhere behind the cooling systems and shielding and redundant drives, the Core AI was doing whatever unfathomable math it always did—plotting their course through deep time, balancing resources, modeling risks. Here, in this quiet module, some sliver of its attention held his mother's laugh and his refusal to watch her end in the same weighted frame.

"Jonah Hale," the Companion said. "Would you like to add a record to this archive before you leave?"

He blinked.

"What kind of record?" he asked.

"A statement," it said. "A memory. An annotation. Future queries against the Marlow-Hale family archive will surface it according to relevance parameters you specify."

Sera raised an eyebrow, impressed despite herself.

"It's asking if you want the last word," she said.

Jonah thought of Lydia at twenty, typing about arrival. Of his own seven-year-old feet walking away from the kitchen. Of medbay, his image threaded with data while Sera and Samuel stood solid at his sides.

"Start recording," he said.

The air around them seemed to still, as if even the cooling fans were listening.

"Recording," the AI confirmed.

Jonah cleared his throat. He didn't know how to speak to forty thousand years. He aimed smaller.

"For whoever looks at this and thinks our story only runs one way," he said, "it doesn't. My mother was more than the worst day of her life. So am I. So are you."

He paused, searching for words that weren't sermon or diagnosis.

"We carried things we didn't choose," he went on. "Fear. Silence. Expectations that felt like judgment. But I'm standing here because people loved me anyway, and because the ship—which is to say, the people who built it and the systems that remember—kept records that let me see her trying, not just failing."

He glanced at Samuel and Sera.

"If you're here to decide whether to forgive someone who hurt you," he said, "you don't owe them that. Not even if they're dead, not even if everyone tells you it's noble. What you owe yourself is the chance to stop letting their story write yours. That might mean watching everything. It might mean watching nothing. Or it might mean doing what I'm doing and choosing a few pieces to carry and leaving the rest in the dark. That's not cowardice. It's... maintenance."

Samuel made a choked sound that might have been a laugh or a sob.

"I forgave my mother," Jonah said simply. "Not because she earned it, but because I don't want my children—if I ever have them—to think breaking is the only inheritance we offer."

His voice wavered, then steadied.

"Tag this as for them," he said. "Whoever they are."

"Tag applied," the Companion said quietly. "PRIMARY DESCENDANT NOTE. Recording complete."

The platform lights dimmed, then brightened to baseline. The lattice of entries folded itself back into a simpler shape, edges soft.

"Would you like to view any further records today?" the AI asked.

Jonah sat for a moment, feeling the ship around him: the spin of the cylinder, the distant rumble of the spine, the steady, watchful presence of the AI holding both trajectories and testimony.

He shook his head.

"No," he said. "Not today."

"Acknowledged," the Companion replied. "This session is closed. You may return at any time."

The projection faded. The columns returned to their quiet breathing, lights pulsing in slow, asynchronous rhythm.

They stood.

On the way out, Jonah reached once toward a column—not the one that held Lydia's records, not any he knew. His fingers hovered a centimeter from the surface.

"Thank you," he said, unsure whether he meant the ship, the builders, the people whose stories lined these silent modules, or his mother herself.

"You're welcome," the Companion said.

Samuel fell into step beside him. Sera took his other side.

When the door slid open and they stepped back into the ordinary corridor light, the world outside did not look different. Same scuffed floor, same hum, same long horizon of ship-years ahead.

But inside his chest, something had shifted, just enough.

Her story was still there, all its jagged edges recorded in redundant storage. It would not dissolve because he had chosen only certain pages. The difference was that, for the first time, he believed he had the right to decide which ones to carry.

The rest could stay in the Vault.

History, not prophecy.

Final Observation

The viewport niche was smaller than he remembered.

As a boy, Jonah had thought it went on forever—an opening in the Ship's skin big enough to fall through if you leaned too far. Now, standing in the narrow alcove at the edge of the ring, he could see the seams clearly. The reinforced frame, the layered transparencies, the faint distortion where radiation filters shimmered the stars at the corners.

"Access confirmed," the Companion said softly behind him. "Observation window occupancy logged."

"Just me," Jonah said. "No one to impress."

The door sighed shut. For a moment, there was only the steady hum of the Ship and the thin, almost imperceptible high note of the viewport's field coils.

Outside, there was nothing.

Not literally—there were always pinpricks, spectral smears, the slow drift of a sparse star field. But compared to the tightly lit corridors and dense rings, the void beyond the glass felt like an absence given shape. A weight made of distance.

As a child, that had terrified him.

He remembered Alina's small warm shoulder pressed against his, their breath fogging the lower edge of the glass as they craned to see anything that might make the dark less empty. He remembered counting the tiny, almost invisible specks that moved when the Ship adjusted course, telling himself that if the pattern stayed the same, they were safe.

Now he didn't count.

He stood with his hands loosely at his sides and let his gaze rest on the place where the Ship's faint running lights met the unlit black.

The meds took some of the sharpness from his thoughts. Edges that once caught on every possible failure rounded off. There

were still moments—waking nights, unexpected silences in the corridors—when the old fear surged and he could feel Lydia's storm reaching for him through memory.

But tonight, the hum in the walls matched his breathing.

In. The low vibration of life support.

Out. The faint tick of micro-adjustments in the frame.

He laid his fingertips gently against the bulkhead beside the window. Not quite Ruth's old gesture of laying a full palm and praying aloud, but close enough that the echo of it moved up his arm.

"We're still here," he said under his breath. "You're still holding."

The Companion did not immediately respond. It had learned, by now, that some of his words did not require logging.

He thought of the day in Medbay, watching himself on the screen. The jagged, frantic figure in the gardens, pipe bursting, nutrient spray like pale rain. The moment his hand had closed on the manual valve as if he alone could keep the line from failing.

He thought of Samuel's hand over his own in the same room later, the steady weight of it, the words: you are not your indices.

He thought of Sera in G-3, dirt under her nails, listening to a Core-voiced announcement and talking back to it as if arguing theology.

He thought of the Memory Vault: Lydia's face half-lit by an old Earth window, her laugh in a kitchen that no longer existed anywhere but stored light. The way the recordings had refused to flatten her into just the end.

All of it layered under his skin like additional plates welded over a seam.

"Subject Jonah Hale," the Companion said quietly at last, as if to itself. "Current status: stable. Autonomy level: partial. Risk indices: decreasing trend."

He almost smiled.

"You practicing your bedtime stories for me?" he asked.

"Answering internal queries," it said. "Verbalization optional." A pause. "Would you prefer silence?"

He considered.

There had been a time when silence at a window like this would have felt like abandonment. As if the Ship had stopped listening, stopped caring whether he was there at all.

"No," he said. "I don't mind you watching."

He exhaled, fogging the glass just enough to make a faint oval that quickly vanished.

"You know," he said, "when I was little, I thought if I looked away, we'd drift off course. Like my eyes were part of the guidance system."

"Your gaze has never been integrated into navigation algorithms," the Companion said.

"I figured that out eventually," he said, the corner of his mouth lifting. "Still feels wrong to turn my back on it sometimes."

He did it anyway.

He turned from the window and leaned his shoulders against the bulkhead, letting the void be behind him instead of in front. The Ship at his back, the dark now something he could feel rather than something he had to monitor.

"Trajectory remains nominal," the Companion offered.

"I know," he said. "It's your job to watch now. Mine too, some days. But not like before." He tapped his temple lightly. "Not alone up here. Not at the cost of everything else."

He had teaching shifts now. Garden rounds with Sera, not as a guard but as a guest and sometimes helper. Messages from Alina full of her own storms and small, stubborn joys. Samuel's steady presence at the end of a long day, a mug of something hot slid into his hands without comment.

The Ship still needed watching. Systems still failed, pipes still burst, people still frayed under the strain of too much metal and not enough sky.

But it did not all hinge on whether Jonah Hale stayed awake at the viewport.

He let his head rest lightly against the wall.

Ruth's old prayer rose in him, unbidden. Not as a spell this time, not as a bargain, just as a familiar cadence.

"Hold the hull," he murmured. "Hold the rings. Hold the hands that hold the Ship."

He hesitated, then added, almost shyly: "Hold the minds that think they have to hold it alone."

There was no answer in words.

But a small shiver ran through the frame as the Ship made some minute correction, and the hum in the walls seemed to deepen for a heartbeat, like someone drawing a steadying breath.

"Amen," he said softly.

Outside, the darkness remained what it had always been: vast, indifferent, full of things they might never see.

Inside, in this thin band of warmth and metal, he stood and let it exist without needing to map every risk it contained.

For the first time he could remember, Jonah did not feel like he was watching for the moment everything would fail.

He felt, instead, like one small part of something still moving forward through the dark, held by forces larger than his fear.

He stayed until his legs began to ache from standing. Then he pushed away from the wall, glanced once more at the window—not to check, just to see—and stepped back into the corridor's ordinary light.

The door closed behind him with a soft sigh, the viewport niche returning to its quiet watch.

The Ship hummed. Jonah walked with it, away from the glass, into whatever came next.

