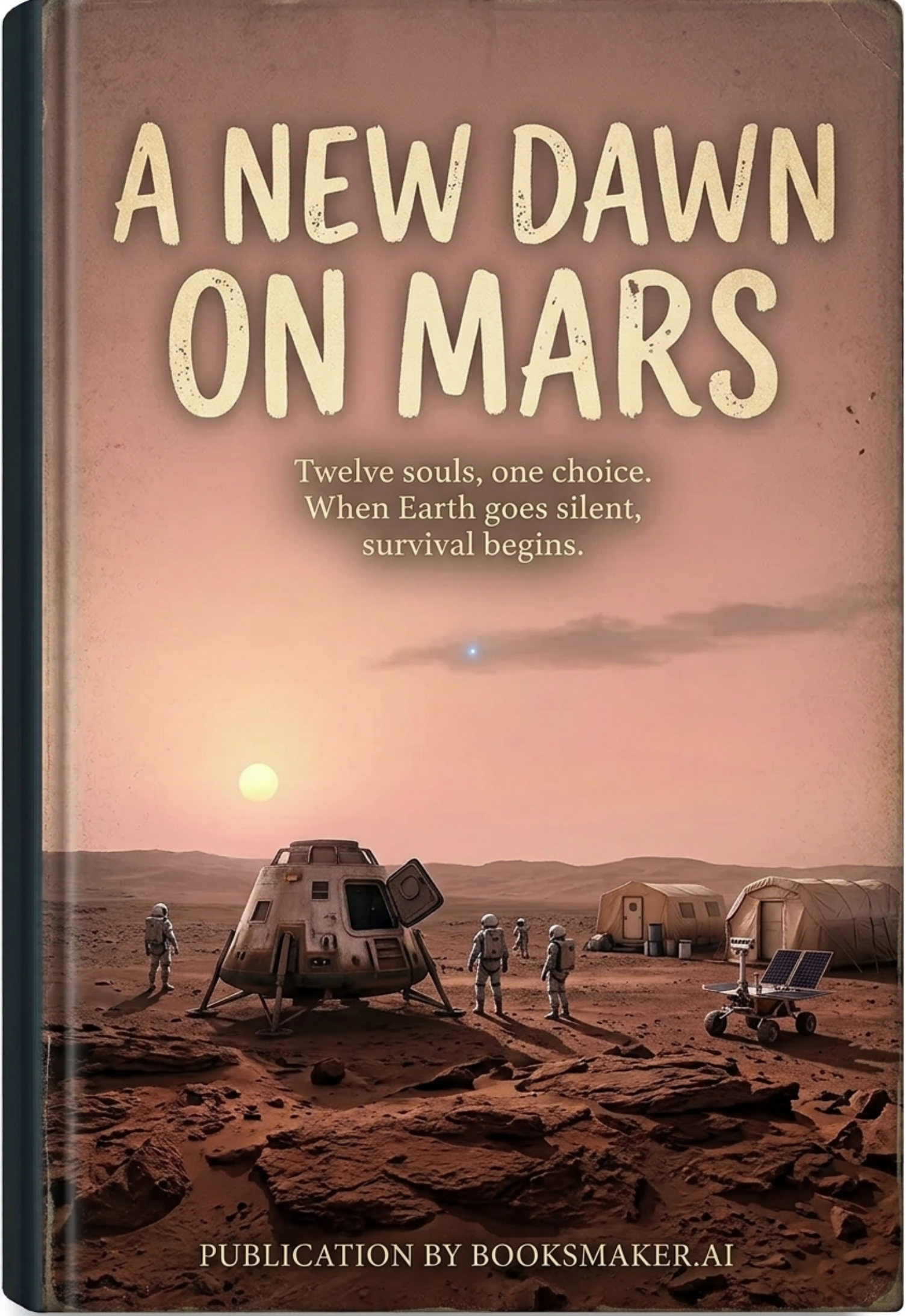
A NEW DAWN ON MARS

Twelve souls, one choice.
When Earth goes silent,
survival begins.



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An Hour Without Earth

Her mother's voice came through while Nora was trying to put a screw back in the bag.

"I can't remember if I've already told you," she said, then stopped to think.

Nora held the bag against the edge of the station and guided the screw with her fingernail. She had closed the panel beneath the left screen, but the latch hadn't caught at first and she'd had to pull it out again. Now the little metal head was snagging on the fold in the plastic. In her headset, her mother moved something on the table: a dull thud, then the familiar sound of a teaspoon.

"Anyway, I moved the plant. It was in the way on the landing. Not for me, of course."

The screw went in. Nora sealed the bag and secured it to the fastening strip beside the screwdriver. She could have deleted the message from the listening queue, but she left it where it was. Her mother still had a little over a minute to explain who the plant had been in the way for.

On the central screen, the mission day was one hundred and twenty-one. Ninety days until the scheduled arrival. Nora rarely looked at the second number: it changed with a regularity that made it less useful than reception times, error counters, or inspection deadlines. One hundred and twenty-one, on the other hand, appeared in every log and passed beneath her fingers dozens of times during a shift.

Her mother finished without resolving the question of the landing. She said she would record another message when she remembered the important thing. The file ended with a few seconds of empty room.

Nora slipped one earpiece out.

Jonas was standing at the entrance to the station, two fingers hooked into a handhold. His large hands made every gesture seem a little tentative, as though the equipment had been built for someone else.

"Am I interrupting?"

"A botanical dispute. It can wait."

"The report's in the medical queue. There's also a separate question for the consultant."

Nora minimized the private archive window and opened the delivery list. She didn't read the medical contents: destination, size, and priority were enough. The report had been received; the

separate request hadn't.

"Your question's still on your terminal."

Jonas closed his eyes for a moment, then pulled himself toward the side screen to check.

"I saved it without forwarding it."

"It happens to doctors too."

"Don't put that in the report."

The new item appeared in the queue. Nora linked it to the report and checked that there were no different routing restrictions. Jonas followed the cursor's movement without trying to hurry her. At this point in the journey, Earth received, assessed, and replied on timelines that had nothing in common with a conversation; and yet many people still lingered near Nora after sending something, as if their presence might keep its recipient there.

"When you get the receipt, a notification is enough," he said.

"Onboard or terrestrial?"

"Terrestrial."

"I can't make that one up."

Jonas smiled faintly and pushed himself away with a gentle motion. He avoided a poorly secured bag along the passage without touching it. Nora watched him turn back to fasten its second strap.

The ventilation carried a faint smell of damp fabric. The airflow moved the loose end of a label near the screen; Nora had already pressed it down twice, only to make it peel up at a different corner. It bothered her more than the panel she had just put back in place. She grabbed a piece of tape, then put it away: it wasn't worth another note in the materials-used log.

Daniel arrived with his terminal secured to his wrist.

"You sent the inventory back."

"I sent the attachments back."

"They're the inventory."

"They're photos of the labels. The quantities file went through."

She moved close enough to show him the queue. A row of thumbnails took up a disproportionate share of the volume to be transmitted. Daniel scrolled through the list and enlarged an image.

“This one’s useful. The marking on the container doesn’t match the manifest.”

“I’ll keep that one. The others go in the next batch.”

“If they tell me the photo isn’t legible, we lose another cycle.”

Nora pressed a finger against the foot restraint and shifted position. After two hours in the same posture, she could feel a pull in her neck, a tension she would have blamed on a bad chair on Earth.

“If Jonas has to wait for your labels, he loses the cycle.”

Daniel looked at the medical line, of which he could see only the size and priority. He removed two attachments and kept one.

“Then this one. The others later.”

He wasn’t angry, or at least Nora couldn’t tell from the way he gathered up his terminal. He had been angry other times: then he became much more polite. Before leaving, he pointed to the tool bag.

“Are you done with that panel?”

“Yes.”

“Could you close it in the log too? It still shows as open.”

Nora did it while he was there. The line changed status.

“Now it’s really closed,” she said.

Alone again, she checked the summary of the previous pass. The flow from Earth carried technical data, recorded messages, and procedure updates. The contents didn’t all spill onto her screen: onboard services separated them, checked the integrity of completed items, and delivered them to authorized destinations. What remained for her were the system’s margins, what was missing or needed intervention. For most of the shift, the job was to make sure the others didn’t need her.

The link was locked on. Nora checked the block counter and allowed herself time to take the

drink pouch from its holder beside the seat. She hardly ever used the seat; she preferred to secure her feet and let her knees rest slightly bent. The drink was lukewarm and had absorbed the taste of the container.

At nine, the number of blocks stopped growing.

Nora didn't notice at the exact moment. She was comparing two delivery times, and when she returned to the summary, she found the counter frozen. The last complete item had been received just before then. An expected update hadn't arrived.

She waited for the window to refresh. Then she requested it manually.

No alarm accompanied the gesture. The ship continued blowing air against the lifted label; from a nearby compartment came a muffled knock and a voice asking who had taken a wrench. Nora put the pouch in its holder and brought the receiver trace to the foreground.

The lock indicator was no longer stable.

She checked the transmission schedule. There was no scheduled pause at that hour. A change from Earth might have come in out of sequence, or it might not have been distributed yet: she searched the log for a notification and found none.

She waited a little longer, counting the seconds on the shared clock without meaning to.

Then she opened a work record and wrote: terrestrial flow update missing. She left the cause field blank.

The first test didn't require her to touch anything. Nora pulled up the link history, widened the interval, and looked for an increase in errors before the interruption. A gradual loss of lock would have left a different pattern. That line, by contrast, ended almost cleanly.

Almost wasn't a diagnosis. She zoomed in again.

The distribution service didn't report a halt. Items already received continued reaching the internal terminals, and the outbound queue moved according to schedule. The fact that the ship was transmitting didn't prove anyone was receiving it. Nora added both observations to the record, on separate lines.

She called Leila on the service channel.

"I need a check of the data chain. I've lost the flow from Earth."

“How long?”

Nora read the clock. “Four minutes.”

“I’m coming. Don’t restart anything.”

“I hadn’t decided what to break yet.”

Leila didn’t respond to the joke. Nora opened the power page and checked the receiver branch. No recent switching, no transients reported. Temperatures were within the normal range. She saved a capture of the readings, then realized she was about to replace it with an updated one and renamed the file. She needed the sequence, not an ever newer image of the same absence.

Leila arrived with a soft case secured to her belt. She looked at the screens first, then at Nora.

“What have you done?”

Nora listed the checks she had made and the only changes to the display. Leila confirmed that the system was still recording the available raw data, then pointed to the lower panel.

“We’ll open it here. Short internal test, without switching the antenna.”

Nora retrieved the screwdriver she had just put away. The bag resisted her fingers; she had sealed it too close to the fold. Leila waited with the case between her forearms, holding on with one foot.

“Daniel just got the maintenance closed,” Nora said.

“Now he gets a new opening.”

Unscrewing it took less time than logging the new access. Nora secured the screw before lifting the panel. Inside, bundles of cable held by the guides left barely enough room to reach the test points. There was nothing a glance could solve. No loose connector, no sign of heat. Leila ran two fingers along a cable tie without pulling it.

Before inserting the lead, Nora checked the reference printed beside the socket. The nearby point looked similar, but belonged to a different test. In training they had repeated those gestures often enough to make them boring; now she made herself read them anyway. Leila held the cable while Nora found the right angle to reach the socket without leaning on the bundles. She waited for Nora’s signal before letting go.

Nora read the prescribed sequence and selected the test signal. The check would pass through part of the internal route, not the antenna or everything preceding the input. The expected

response appeared on the screen.

“This section passes,” Leila said.

Nora was already writing internal chain normal. She stopped and replaced the phrase with the name of the section actually tested.

They then switched to the backup receiver according to procedure, preserving a record of the initial configuration. The unit completed startup. For a few seconds, the readings settled; Nora felt the physical urge to see any number at all start to rise, even the wrong one.

The terrestrial lock didn’t return.

Leila compared the readings with those from the primary receiver.

“Same behavior.”

“We can remove a faulty receiver from the top of the list.”

“We can lower its priority. The input is shared.”

Nora nodded. That was another reason she had asked for help: on her own, she would have ended up using a phrase broader than the results justified. She saved the parameters from the second test and returned to the initial configuration. No general restart, no clearing the logs to make room for another attempt.

At nine eleven, Elena asked for a report.

Nora activated the service-channel microphone; she didn’t want her headset, hanging open around her neck, to make the commander miss any words.

“No new data from Earth since nine. No scheduled interruption found in the logs. The internal service is distributing what it already has. Local test of the data section passed; the backup receiver has no lock, same as the primary. Pointing is the next check.”

“Are attitude adjustments required?”

“Not at this point.”

“Consult Malik before commanding the antenna. Update me if anything changes. We’ll maintain the schedule.”

“Understood.”

The channel closed. Nora realized she had been speaking with her shoulders raised and relaxed them. Elena hadn't told her not to worry. She had given an order that left each of them with something precise to do.

Leila withdrew the test lead and secured it in the case. One end remained outside; she caught it before it hit the edge of the compartment.

"Show me the service's latest events," she said.

Nora opened the log. The lines scrolled by: acquisitions, integrity checks, transfers to authorized archives. Ordinary work seemed more complicated now that they were searching it for a possible error. A distribution to a terminal had taken place after nine. Nora selected it.

"Earlier reception," Leila said, reading the arrival time.

"Yes."

She closed it. For a moment, Nora had felt relief before even checking what she was looking at.

Jonas passed through the corridor. He didn't come in; he looked for her gaze among the screens.

"The receipt?"

"Not yet. There's a link interruption under investigation."

"My transmission?"

"The entire incoming flow from Earth. Yours went out, but I don't have terrestrial confirmation."

The doctor held still, then nodded. "Let me know if that changes."

"I will."

He didn't ask how long it would last. Nora was grateful, though the question would have been legitimate.

They checked the system times and the continuity of the logs. Leila looked for desynchronization that might conceal recent acquisitions under the wrong date. She found none. Nora checked that her interface filters weren't excluding anything: she removed even the ones that couldn't have caused that effect.

Beneath the open compartment, the tip of her sock brushed an edge. She realized she had shifted too far and caught the foot restraint. The drink had stayed where it was; a small fold in the pouch

pressed against the closure. She wasn't thirsty, but wanted a sip to break the sequence of tests.

"Nineteen minutes," Leila said.

Nora looked at the frozen counter. After each test, she had reopened the page as if the gesture might refresh it differently.

She switched to the antenna screen and called Malik.

Malik answered from his terminal. Nora sent him the references from the work record without starting the story over from the beginning, and he asked what comparison she needed.

"Measured attitude against the solution loaded for the antenna. I'd like to rule out our comparing the same prediction over two different time windows."

"I'll send you the independent measurements. There haven't been any burns or attitude changes during the period."

The data appeared on the side screen. Nora set them beside the pointing history while Leila checked the actuator states. The command and reported position matched; the predicted direction of Earth hadn't suddenly changed at nine. No mechanical limit was shown as reached.

"We're not correcting the ship's attitude," Nora said.

"I see no reason to," Malik replied. "For a fine antenna search, you're within the expected range. I'll send you the confirmation."

Nora prepared the limited search sequence. Before starting it, she brought up the constraints, read them, and waited for Leila to finish her own check. Leila marked a step on her terminal.

"Here. Keep the intermediate values too, not just the maximum."

The search began. The position moved in small increments around the nominal direction. Nora tracked the signal measurement, looking for a recognizable pattern in the noise. There was no sound to listen to: the headset remained silent, connected to the service channel, while the readings changed on the screen.

One value rose and dropped again. She let the sequence continue. It didn't recur at the same point on the next pass.

Leila shifted the terminal from one hand to the other to loosen her fingers.

“Nothing stable.”

“I see it.”

Nora heard the sharpness in her voice and added, “I’ll save everything. Let’s return to nominal.”

The reacquisition time elapsed without a result. They logged the starting and ending points, then left the antenna in its scheduled configuration. Putting it back where it had been should have given her the satisfaction of a completed test. All she had was a list of parts still unverified.

The automatic Martian signal came in at nine twenty-seven.

It wasn’t on the same page. A side service notified them that the bulletin had been received, and Leila reached toward the screen, stopping before she touched it.

“That one’s new.”

Nora checked its arrival time. This time, yes: the acquisition had just taken place. She opened the technical summary, not the extended report on the installations. Martian origin, integrity confirmed, routing completed. The automatic system had carried out the scheduled transmission.

She felt such a sharp rush of relief that she had to place her palm on the edge of the station. Something far away had worked. The message wasn’t a line retrieved from onboard memory; it didn’t belong to the sequence of internal tests.

“Let’s update Elena,” she said.

Leila read the brief bulletin over the service channel. Nora listened and checked that it didn’t claim more than it contained.

“Reception from Mars confirmed. The route and equipment aren’t entirely the same as those used for the terrestrial link. This doesn’t rule out a problem with the antenna or the Earth leg.”

“Good,” Elena said. “Add it to the results. Continue.”

Nora fixed her gaze on the automatic sender’s identifier. There was no operator down there who could switch equipment or look for the Aurora off schedule. The installations sent what they had been designed to send. That was enough to make her breathing slow.

Leila closed the summary.

“Should I prepare the request for Earth?”

“I’ll prepare it. Check that the outbound configuration hasn’t changed.”

Nora opened an operational message and wrote down the time of the loss, the identifiers of the tests performed, and the current status. She requested confirmation of the transmission schedule and the link. She reread the text, looking for adjectives to remove. It wasn’t a total communications outage for the ship, they hadn’t checked every terrestrial receiver, and they didn’t know whether their transmission was being received.

Leila showed her the outbound page: scheduled configuration, power and routing within limits, no local anomaly reported.

“Looks good,” Nora said.

She sent the request. The log confirmed it had been transmitted and calculated the first time a reply could arrive. Not when it would arrive: only the time before which they couldn’t expect it. Nora left the reference visible beside the clock, then moved it to a less obtrusive corner. She didn’t want to look at it with every breath.

Daniel returned while Leila put away the test cable.

“Should I resend the attachments, or are you keeping them?”

“I’m keeping them. Don’t put them in again or you’ll create two jobs for me.”

“Is there a delay outbound too?”

“Transmission is continuing. We’re missing confirmation from Earth.”

Daniel held on to the handhold. He looked at the open panel, Leila’s terminal, the receiver page. Nora saw the questions forming on his face, but he chose just one.

“Do you need me to hold back the non-urgent items?”

“Not yet. I’ll let you know if the priorities change.”

“Then I’ll update the manifest as usual.”

He left without asking for a prediction. This time Nora almost wished he had: an irritating request she could answer the same way as always. Leila tucked the case under a strap and stayed beside the compartment, waiting to see whether she should close it.

“Let’s leave it accessible,” Nora said. “Nothing connected.”

The first time at which a reply could arrive passed. The request might still be under review; perhaps no one had read it, or perhaps it had arrived just as people on Earth were changing configuration. Nora knew the possibilities because she had seen them on previous shifts. She listed them in the record as hypotheses, until she realized she was using the notes field to tell herself what might happen.

She deleted them from there and moved them to the right field.

To reply to her mother, she would have to open the private archive, record a message, and put the file in the queue. There was no prohibition, nor any cost they suddenly couldn't afford. And yet that gesture, simple until a little while ago, now required her to take off her service headset and decide what to say. She thought of the plant on the landing and the table the teaspoon had struck. She couldn't think of a question that didn't seem out of place.

She simply left the message among those she had to answer.

At nine forty-four, Leila handed her the last summary of the local checks. Nora compared the entries one by one with the record, approved those that were complete, and left the others open. The terrestrial counter was still frozen at the same value.

Elena arrived without calling them. Nora saw her stop to let Daniel pass in the corridor, then hook herself onto the free support behind Leila. She wasn't carrying a terminal; she asked to see the record on the screen.

Nora enlarged the summary. She had grouped the tests by equipment, and now wondered whether it would be clearer to order them by possible cause. Elena read without suggesting any changes.

"Did the fine search end here?"

She pointed to a line.

"Yes. Return to nominal verified."

"And the attitude?"

"Compared with Malik's independent measurements. No discrepancy found."

Elena continued to the Martian bulletin entry. Leila clarified which sections were shared with terrestrial reception and which were not. She spoke while pointing to the steps on the diagram, without using the received signal to absolve the entire system.

Nora shifted to give her a better view. Her wrist strap brushed the drink holder and made it turn; she set it back in place before the pouch could cover a control. The small disorder seemed intolerable to her in front of the commander.

“So we haven’t identified a cause onboard,” Elena said.

“Not in the checks performed.”

“We don’t know whether the flow is still being transmitted.”

“Exactly.”

Elena placed two fingers on the edge of the screen without pressing it.

“Let’s keep that distinction in our communications to the others too.”

Nora nodded. She had used the phrase “lost the flow” when she called Leila. It was a normal expression, but now she felt the need to reconstruct its meaning: they were no longer receiving new data. Everything else required further tests.

A confirmation request for a scheduled activity came over the service channel. Elena listened, asked a question about the configuration, and authorized them to proceed. She stayed at the station during the exchange, as if there were no incompatibility between the two things. Nora felt a brief irritation: she wanted Elena’s full attention. A moment later, she recognized how unfair that was. The ship couldn’t stop needing its commander because Nora had a page that wouldn’t change.

Leila checked the acquisition log again.

“There are no new items, not even incomplete ones the service is holding back.”

Nora opened the corresponding page. Her gaze slid over the last complete packet. Until then, it had been mostly a time reference: the certain end of something that had previously kept arriving. The services had recorded its arrival and applied the ordinary transport checks, but she hadn’t examined its technical contents. To do so, she would have to interrupt the diagnosis of reception and start another task.

She selected it only to check that it was still available.

“This needs to be preserved outside the ordinary rotation,” Elena said.

“I can lock the original and make a working copy.”

“First a protected copy, with references to the logs. I don’t want the recovery attempts to take away the previous state.”

Nora checked the space reserved for anomalies. There was enough. She set up the destination without starting the transfer yet and added the link logs and test records to the selection. She didn’t include the personal archives: files already delivered to those services followed separate paths. Preserving transport data didn’t give her a reason, or the authority, to gather families’ voices into a folder accessible to everyone working on the fault.

Leila pointed to an item left out of the selection.

“The configuration before the switch too.”

“Yes.”

Nora added it and opened a preview of the list. She checked that the references pointed to the right versions. The first capture of the parameters, the one she had nearly overwritten, was there.

It was a few minutes to ten.

The smell of a heated meal drifted in from the habitation module. Nora couldn’t identify it. Usually she could by process of elimination, remembering who had chosen what on the previous shift; now she couldn’t even remember her own meal. Her stomach tightened, and she finally drank from the pouch. The liquid left a stale taste in her mouth.

“Do you want me to stay on the logs?” Leila asked.

“Stay for the preservation. Then we’ll close the compartment.”

There was no reason for both of them to stay in front of the same wait once they had exhausted the available checks. Saying it out loud would have felt premature, as if assigning tasks meant giving up. Nora looked at Leila and understood only that she too needed to change position: she had kept one foot hooked for too long and was rubbing it through the fabric.

Elena asked how monitoring would continue. Nora showed her the settings and the notification system for a new acquisition. Recording would remain active; there was no need to occupy the service channel with periodic announcements that nothing had changed. They could repeat the useful checks at set intervals without adding random commands between tests.

“And the recovery request?”

“Sent. No confirmation received.”

Nora checked that it was still true at that moment, not merely the last time she had looked. It was.

For the first time, she imagined the work on the other side: an operator in front of a screen, a list of tasks, someone asking for a different priority. She didn’t see her mother’s face, or a view of Earth. She saw someone who might reply with a few practical words and let her get back to her shift.

She would even have accepted a reprimand for a wrong configuration.

“Nora.”

Elena hadn’t raised her voice. Nora brought her gaze back to the summary.

“Are there automatic operations that risk deleting data before the next check?”

Nora checked the retention policies. She didn’t rely on memory, even though she had consulted them during training and then several more times in flight. She read the deadlines, compared the sizes, and answered that there were none for the interval in question.

“Then let’s prepare the report.”

In the anomaly form, the description field had room for more text than necessary. Nora copied the wording from the work record and made it more precise: failure to receive new data from the terrestrial flow since 09:00, ship time. She listed the completed tests, attached the references, and left the cause undetermined. In the operational consequences box, she noted the absence of terrestrial confirmations, without assigning the sent messages a status they didn’t know they had.

Elena reread it. She had one verb corrected: the backup receiver test hadn’t ruled out the fault; it hadn’t detected it. Nora changed the sentence and felt a sudden fatigue at the necessary, minimal distance between the two expressions.

At ten, the counter was still frozen.

“Open the anomaly,” Elena said. “Preserve the packet and the logs.”

Nora confirmed. The system assigned the formal reference; she started the protected copy and waited for the integrity check. She didn’t open the contents or look for an explanation in the preview. She watched the progress until it was complete, compared the identifiers, and applied the write lock.

The time remained in the log: 10:00.

The last complete packet was preserved. The cause field remained blank.

The Last Packet

At nine the next day, Nora closed the summary of the tests on the connection. She had already read it during the handover, but before moving it she wanted to verify that the last line really was the last one. No new terrestrial data. The period covered by the log had reached twenty-four hours without an explanation appearing.

Leila arrived with a still-sealed food pouch and secured it under a strap, outside the command area.

“Have you eaten?”

“Yes.”

It was true. Nora had eaten without noticing she was finishing, then had looked for the pouch where it was no longer. She fitted one foot into the restraint and called up the protected archive.

During the previous shifts, they had kept looking for a cause in the reception. Now Elena had authorized an examination of the technical contents of the last complete packet, not just its transport logs. Nora opened a working copy. The original remained write-locked, along with the logs and evidence of the anomaly; personal archives did not appear in the list.

The packet was not a single message. The terrestrial system had collected objects produced by different services and forwarded them to the ship along with priorities, receipts, and updates. One part would feed the onboard instruments; another was intended for reading during the shift. On reception, the prescribed automatic checks had been run. None of those checks could read in their place.

Nora sorted the attachments by production time. Leila had her remove the sort.

“Dependencies first. Otherwise we’ll open a revision without the document that corrects it.”

Nora nodded and reconstructed the sequence indicated in the manifest. Her usual irritation at such a small correction gave her, for a moment, something to lean on. She could still do her work badly in a recognizable way, and be corrected.

There were technical bulletins, an update to the catalog for optical observation, administrative receipts. Further down appeared an emergency relay from the planetary defense network. The title was truncated in the column. Nora widened it.

She did not open the document right away.

“This was among the objects queued for consultation,” she said.

Leila brought her own screen into Nora’s field of view. “Open the metadata.”

The relay service’s signature was valid against the credentials stored onboard. The content matched the fingerprint recorded in the manifest. Nora checked both a second time, this time following the path Leila had reconstructed on her screen. The authenticity of the relay did not guarantee that every estimate it contained was correct. It guaranteed something narrower, and at that moment enough to make her movements slow: that document really did belong to the stream they had received from Earth.

She opened the text.

The first lines used a language she knew only from training materials. Newly characterized object. Updated orbital solutions. Possible intersection interval with Earth’s surface. The body had been recognized as a threat when the time available for a response was already insufficient.

Nora looked for the word exercise. She did not use the automatic search: she scrolled through the heading, the markers, the operational category, as if the word’s position might matter. She did not find it.

“There’s a follow-up,” Leila said.

The first update narrowed the possibilities rather than broadening them. It offered no history of the object, nor explained why it had been recognized so late. It contained observations, uncertainties, and instructions for centers that could still acquire useful measurements. Nora read a reminder to preserve the raw data. For no reason, it seemed like an instruction addressed to her.

Beside the document times was the time of reception on the Aurora. They did not match. The packet had reached them after the signal’s journey; some objects had remained in a queue before being forwarded. Nora opened two separate columns and wrote out the headings in full. She did not want a difference between clocks to become an invented sequence of events.

“This isn’t the time of impact,” she said, pointing to the ship’s log.

“No.”

Leila added nothing else. There was no need to explain the communications delay to each other. They needed to keep that delay from disappearing from their minds now that every line seemed

to be happening in front of them.

Nora linked the identifiers of the updates. None of the subsequent available objects had rescinded the alert. In their place were references to observations from orbital platforms and to a luminous event detected by independent sensors. Some links pointed to materials that were not included in the packet. Nora opened one out of habit. The system showed that the local resource was unavailable and offered to request it.

She canceled.

The ease with which she could have pressed send provoked a surge of anger in her. Not at the program: at the ordinary action that would not produce its ordinary consequence. She noted the missing reference and returned to the document.

“We have to call her,” Leila said.

Nora left her hand near the internal communication control. She had been thinking of Elena since the alert’s heading, but part of her wanted to reach a conclusion first that she could say without being questioned. She would not find it by scrolling faster.

“Elena, we’re in the working copy of the last packet. There’s a planetary defense alert and subsequent updates. The container’s provenance is verified. We’re checking the attachments.”

The reply came over the internal network, without delay.

“What does the alert say?”

Nora looked at the text, although she already remembered the words.

“An asteroid on an impact trajectory. Recognized too late for the planned response measures. The updates include references to detections of the event. We haven’t verified all of them yet.”

After saying it, she realized she had been holding her knees rigid against the restraint. She slowly bent them.

“Don’t circulate a provisional summary. I’m coming.”

Leila marked the attachments already checked and those still to be examined. She did not color-code them by severity; she used only the verification status. Nora was grateful not to have had to suggest it.

From the passage came the sound of a fastener being opened and closed. Someone was working a

few meters away, on a morning that, for Nora, had stopped at the workstation. The terrestrial-flow indicator remained at the edge of the screen. She did not hide it, but brought the next document to the foreground.

The alert could be authentic and the impact might not have happened. It might have happened and not explain everything. Those distinctions were still necessary. Nora held on to them enough to read the first line without skipping it.

Elena arrived without summoning them elsewhere. She secured herself to a handhold behind them and asked to see the list before the images. Nora moved her display to the side screen, leaving the references to the individual objects open.

“We checked this one. This one only partly. The material cited here is missing.”

The commander followed the pointer without interrupting her.

The available data did not come from a single machine. One summary aggregated optical detections; another reported measurements from sensors placed in orbit. The service that had relayed them associated them with the object in the alert. Nora could verify their document trail up to the packet they had received, but she could not reach the instruments to query them. She wrote that in the notes before looking for corroboration.

Leila was working on the transformations already applied to the data. One of the images had been reduced for transmission. Another was a crop identified as coming from the original product. These were not hidden defects: they were recorded limitations that a frightened reader might forget.

“We’ll show this at the dimensions we received it,” she said. “If we enlarge it, it has to be clear that we’re not adding detail.”

Nora opened the first visual attachment.

Earth did not appear as they kept it in the mission materials, whole and luminous. A curved arc crossed one corner of the frame; the rest was a distribution of bright areas that, without a heading, might have been an exposure error. The legend indicated the acquisition interval and the saturated regions. There was a reference to the instrument’s orientation, but no usable map of the surface.

Nora waited to feel something precise. She felt only a resistance to accepting that this insufficient image had anything to do with her mother.

“The next one?” Elena asked.

Leila called up a second product. The planet’s edge did not occupy the same position. Above the atmosphere, luminous structures could be made out that the report associated with ejected material. A continuous sequence between the acquisitions was missing. Nora looked for the playback control before remembering there was no footage to start.

“Can we align them?”

“For comparison, yes. Not to construct the missing frames.”

Leila prepared two separate panels, preserving the times and orientation. Nora recognized her own impatience in how quickly she had asked the question. She wanted a readable movement, something that would let her see the event happen and then stop imagining it. The measurements did not owe her that favor.

She also checked that the program was not applying a different automatic contrast enhancement to the two panels. She added the settings beside the captions. A difference in display should not become, in the eyes of those who would look at them later, a measured change in Earth’s atmosphere. Elena waited through that check, too, without urging them on.

They compared the sequence of products with the alert’s time references. The instrument summary placed the event after the last forecast update. The luminous component, observations of the atmospheric region, and material above Earth’s edge were consistent with an impact. The report accompanying the attachments stated this explicitly, but distinguished the observations from the initial interpretations.

Nora read the passage aloud. Halfway through, she had to repeat a word because she had mispronounced it.

Elena waited for her to finish.

“Can we still think it was an alert without an event?”

“Not without ignoring the data we have,” Nora replied.

It was the first sentence that morning she could not soften with a qualification. Leila nodded, then pointed to the image’s limitation.

“We can say there’s corroborating evidence of the impact. We can’t infer the conditions across the entire surface from these images.”

Elena shifted to get a better view. Nora could not see her face without turning all the way around; she saw the reflection of a cheek at the dark edge of the screen, then nothing when the display changed.

“The object’s size?”

“The alert gives an estimated range, not a resolved measurement,” Leila said. “The attachments needed to check the method are missing. We can report it as the source’s estimate, but we can’t turn it into an assessment of the damage.”

Nora had already opened the field to copy it into. She left it blank in the brief summary and added a reference to the document. They would make the information available without manufacturing a precision they did not possess onboard.

“And the location?” Elena asked.

Leila returned to the surface references. There were cited products they had not received, partial geometries, and data that were still preliminary. None of the materials they had managed to verify allowed them to draw a reliable map of the affected areas. They did not say that all of Earth was the same. They said they did not know how to distinguish its parts.

Nora realized she had been looking among those references for the location of her mother’s city. She had not written it down anywhere. The temptation to overlay a map from the archive was so strong that she moved the pointer away from the open control.

“There’s no overall view,” she said.

Elena looked at her. “We have to say it in those words.”

They prepared a short document. In the first part, Nora listed the verified objects: alert, updates, instrument summaries, visual products. In the second, she reported the conclusion supported by the corroboration between sources. In the third, she included what was missing: a reliable assessment of global damage, news about the population, and the status of infrastructure on Earth and the Moon.

She wrote that the impact had interrupted communications. She reread it and deleted the verb.

“We don’t know that,” she said before Leila could intervene.

“We know we received this data and then nothing new,” the other replied.

Nora rephrased it. The impact and the lack of reception were in the same documented sequence; the steps connecting them were not observable from the ship. It was not enough to invoke dust or debris to explain every frequency, every antenna, every piece of infrastructure. Still less to explain the Moon.

Elena read the summary twice. The second time, she spent longer on the gaps than on the evidence.

“I’ll inform them today. Everyone, with the shifts covered. You’ll both be there.”

Nora nodded. She had wanted to stop being one of the only people who knew; as soon as the commander made that possible, she wanted a few more minutes.

Leila unfastened the food pouch from the strap. She had not opened it.

“First we close the materials index,” she said.

Nora saved the summary along with the references, not in place of the documents. She checked that every image still had its caption and that no empty panel looked like an undamaged region of Earth. Then she turned off editing mode.

Throughout the work, the reception counter had remained frozen. Now the figure had not changed, but Nora could no longer look at it as she had that morning.

In the afternoon, Daniel cleared two bags of material away from the shared viewer and secured them in the adjacent compartment. No one had announced an extraordinary meeting about news from Earth: the invitation mentioned the results of the analysis. Nora had found the wording accurate until she saw Sofia arrive with her personal terminal, as if it might be useful for opening an attachment just delivered.

They secured themselves wherever there was room. Their bodies did not form an orderly row; a knee near a shoulder, an elbow held back to keep the screen visible. Asha closed an instrument case and passed it to Pavel, who clipped it outside the meeting area. Gabriel had to move back to let Jonas reach a handhold. These adjustments took little time and seemed to Nora like a long activity, with an ending she wanted to put off.

She counted the people without meaning to. Twelve, including herself.

Elena did not introduce the report with praise for the work they had done.

“The last terrestrial packet contains an asteroid alert and subsequent data documenting an

impact. Nora and Leila have verified the available parts. We'll show them to you, distinguishing what we know from what we can't establish."

Sofia lowered her terminal. The movement did not stop on its own; she had to pull it back toward herself and hold it against the strap.

Nora opened the index. She had prepared to begin with the integrity checks, but realized that would make the others wait to learn the meaning behind a procedure.

"The alert was real. It wasn't a simulation. The updates and subsequent measurements are consistent with an impact on Earth. There are also partial images."

"How partial?" Mei asked.

Nora showed the first panel with its legend. Leila explained which areas were saturated and which parts of the original product had not been received. She did not raise her voice or look for a formula that would make it less difficult to look. When the second image appeared, Pavel moved close enough to block Daniel's view, then immediately shifted with an apologetic nod.

"Is that ejected material?" Mei asked.

"That's the interpretation given in the product, supported by the other available detections," Leila replied. "It isn't a view of the entire planet."

"There could be another follow-up," Malik said. "A report produced after these."

"There could be," Nora replied. "We haven't received one. The sequence you see ends here."

Malik looked at the identifiers, then the last production time. He asked no more questions. Nora saw him trace a line on his own screen with his finger, as if not to lose it among the others.

"Where?" Sofia asked.

Nora explained what was missing to reconstruct a reliable map. She heard how much the answer sounded like evasion. They were used to knowing the position of a sensor, a line, a removed screw; now they could not tell Sofia which cities were inside or outside something.

"Can't you show me even one area?"

"I can show you preliminary references in the documents. I can't tell you that nothing happened outside them."

Sofia kept her eyes on the screen. “I didn’t ask you that.”

“You’re right.”

Nora left the index of available materials open. She could have added a justification, but Sofia was not asking her for one. Daniel pointed her to the link to the full document, and she opened it on her personal terminal.

Tomás had one foot outside the restraint. He put it back in before speaking.

“An impact doesn’t mean there’s no one left.”

“No,” Elena said. “It doesn’t mean that.”

“Then that has to be in the report, not just in what we say here.”

Nora brought up the section on missing information. The sentence was there, along with the limits of the observations. Tomás read it to the end. For a moment he seemed ready to argue about the order in which it had been written, but instead asked whether they had received subsequent messages from local services, from networks not included in the main stream.

“None confirmed,” Nora replied. “We’ve kept listening and transmitting. The requests haven’t received a response.”

Asha asked which consultations and updates they should now consider unavailable. The question seemed to shift the air in the room. Not because it was insensitive: because it forced each of them to acknowledge their own work on the other side of the news.

“Activities that depend on confirmation remain flagged as such,” Elena said. “No one should invent authorization from Earth. We continue with the planned local procedures and record the exceptions.”

Gabriel passed the back of one hand over his mouth.

“The people on shift down there had this data before we did.”

It was not phrased as a question. Nora had the impulse to correct down there, as if the expression could alter the geometry. She did not.

“Some services produced it,” she said. “We don’t know who was able to read it or act on it.”

Jonas asked them to turn off the image while they finished talking. Elena looked at Nora, who

returned the screen to the text index. The pale outline disappeared. Only then did Nora realize she had kept seeing it even while looking at the others' faces.

Pavel asked how to access the originals. Leila clarified that they would consult copies, with references to the files received; there was no reason to work on the protected archive. Daniel asked whether access included everyone's personal messages.

"No," Elena said. "Those remain private. No one has to hand over a family voice message as evidence, or listen to one in front of the others."

Nora thought of her mother's message, still among those she had yet to answer. She had not told anyone about it. Being exempted from doing so brought her such a sharp relief that she lowered her gaze.

The questions continued, some repeated in different words. Nora answered again without saying she had already explained. They were not all reading the same document at the same speed; someone was looking for a person between the lines.

Elena concluded without asking them to make a collective gesture. The report would remain available. Contact attempts would continue. Anyone who needed to read it again could stay.

They did not all leave together. Asha retrieved the instrument case from Pavel and stayed to keep it closed. Sofia continued scrolling through the document. Tomás waited for the passage to clear. Gabriel asked Daniel where the bags had been moved, and it took two attempts to answer because Daniel first pointed to the wrong compartment.

Nora detached her terminal. The report's title remained on the shared screen. For the first time it seemed to her like an object left in the middle of the ship, something everyone would have to learn to walk around.

At the communications station, Leila had brought up the request schedule. Nora secured herself beside her and checked the destinations already queried. They would not send the same command over and over: any response had to be associable with a specific request, a listening window, a known configuration.

"We'll pick up from here," Leila said.

They had onboard the addresses and procedures for lunar services usable by the mission. Some routes depended on routing they could not verify; for those designated as direct, they checked pointing, ephemerides, and window compatibility. Choosing a name from a list was not enough

to ensure there was someone on the other end.

Nora prepared a brief request for identification and status. She reread it to remove every reference that assumed knowledge of the report from Earth. Anyone who received it should be able to reply even without knowing what had reached the Aurora.

The first transmission was correctly logged onboard. Nora avoided the word delivered. Their equipment could say what it had done, not what had happened to the signal afterward.

While they waited, they checked the channel intended for the reply and the available signaling services. The minimum time for a reply to reach them passed. The operational interval they had reserved for that attempt passed. Nothing appeared that they could identify as a transmission from the station they had called.

Nora recorded the result before moving on to the next destination. She wanted to write absent. She chose no response received during the specified window.

Leila handed her a drink pouch. Nora clipped it in place, forgot about it, then took it again when the other woman pointed to the tube without saying a word.

“If Earth has lost its communication installations,” Nora said, “some requests to the Moon might not get through for the same reason.”

“The ones that pass through Earth, yes.”

“And the others?”

“We don’t have enough information.”

Nora drank. The question had not helped their work; they both knew it. Leila did not seem annoyed at having had to answer anyway.

They checked the transmission configuration against the planned one again and moved on to the other usable options. They did not look for a fault in the pointing just to have a screw to tighten. Nor did they turn the test results into a certificate of efficiency for the entire chain. There were parts they could check and parts they could not see.

Between two windows, an automated Martian product arrived. Reception recognized the source and archived the data according to procedure. Nora checked the message type and closed it. The small change in the list of new items had already made her lift her head; she felt annoyed, then ashamed of her annoyance. Those functioning machines were part of the mission, not a taunt

prepared for them.

Leila made no comment. She checked that the acquisition had not taken resources away from the ongoing attempt and returned to listening.

Elena passed by as they were preparing the last group of requests for the day. Nora showed her the log: terrestrial services queried, lunar attempts, windows closed, no new contact confirmed. The commander read the results without searching for the most favorable summary.

“We’ll keep to the schedule,” she said. “I don’t want both of you staying here past your shift to repeat what the machines can already record.”

Nora was about to say she could stay. Leila closed a configuration tab and pointed her to the entry that still needed to be completed in the report. The shift did not end by abandoning the work; it ended with someone else being able to pick it up.

They added the lunar attempts to the summary without attributing an explanation to them. Nora reread the passage on the impact, checked the references, and verified that the copy available to the others contained the same version. The report did not declare Earth destroyed. It did not declare those they could not see safe. For a moment, that balance seemed almost obscene to her; then she recognized that no more compassionate sentence would also be true.

During the handover, she spoke the information in an even voice. Daniel had her repeat the reference for a window that was still open. She repeated it without consulting the screen and immediately checked it afterward, so the confidence in her voice would not replace the data.

When she pushed away from the station, her body kept moving briefly in the direction of the push. She caught a handhold closer than necessary. She had spent so long stationary, looking at a screen, that she felt unprepared for an ordinary movement.

The light in the habitat module was already set for evening. There was no night outside to provide a rhythm; there were schedules chosen by human beings and maintained even when the place that had taught them those schedules did not answer. Jonas’s voice came from the common compartment, too low for Nora to make out the words. She paused for a moment, then continued toward her own bunk.

Behind the curtain, her personal terminal opened to the usual list. Her mother’s recording was still among the ones she had yet to answer. Nora did not play it. She remembered the plant moved from the landing, the teaspoon, the important thing her mother could not remember. She did not want to use every sound as a clue. The message had not been recorded to survive an impact; it had

been recorded for her.

She opened the reply function and checked that the audio was not routed through the speakers. Then she positioned the microphone.

“Hi, Mom.”

Her own voice sounded to her like someone testing a device. She stopped. The segment remained available to be saved or discarded. She did neither.

She could have told her about the shift, as she had other times. She would not have had to explain the protocols, only say they had worked a lot, that Leila still had not opened her lunch when it was nearly time for her to eat. It could all be true and hide the one thing that mattered.

She restarted the recording.

“We’re not getting any more messages from you. I don’t know if these are getting through. We’re all right here.”

She hesitated over the last sentence, but did not remove it. It was not a sufficient description of them; it was the information her mother would have wanted first.

“I listened to the one about the plant. I would’ve answered sooner, but then the shift…”

She stopped again. She lacked the simple way of ending a sentence that, until the day before, would not have required a choice.

She saved the message in the private archive, still to be completed. She would decide next shift whether to send it as it was. Before switching off the terminal, she checked the time, only to know how much rest she had left.

Beyond the curtain, someone carefully closed a compartment. The Aurora had not grown quieter. Its systems, movements, and voices were all still there. What was missing was the possibility of calling somewhere else and expecting an answer after the necessary time had passed.

Nora fastened the terminal to the wall of the bunk. She did not write to her mother that they had had a malfunction. After the images, after the report read to all twelve of them, that word alone could no longer contain the day.

No Funeral

Elena found two signatures on the same check and none on the one that followed. She scrolled through the log to the beginning of the shift, then went back. The check had been carried out: the measurement appeared in the notes field, accompanied by Pavel's name. The box intended for confirmation was empty.

It was not a malfunction. It was not even a missed check. It was the kind of discrepancy she would once have corrected during handover without keeping the sheet on the screen.

Pavel was waiting beside the hatch, a tool case secured at his side.

"Here?" he asked, pointing to the empty field.

She nodded.

"I recorded the value while Gabriel was reading. Then I picked up from the next line."

"Did you check that one too?"

"Yes. Twice, apparently."

Elena handed him the terminal. Pavel reconstructed the sequence without irritation and added the confirmation in the right place, leaving the correction visible. He did not look for an excuse. That detail unsettled her more than the mistake: in recent days, they had stopped being surprised by their own oversights.

"Are you finished?" she asked.

"With the shift, yes."

"I meant the work."

He looked at the case. "I was supposed to check a closure. It isn't urgent."

"Then hand it over to the next shift."

For a moment, Elena thought he would object. Pavel simply unclipped the case and secured it in the service bay. He wrote a note, read it before confirming it, and headed toward the bunks.

It was day eight. At nine, a week would have passed since the interruption. The number appeared in the logs; there was no need to add it to the bulletin, and yet Elena knew they would all be

counting.

Her medical reminder flashed silently. She had postponed it once while answering a request from Asha about the shifts. This time, she closed the log and went to Jonas.

The doctor had secured a container to the work surface. Inside, small items for clinical use were divided by elastic separators; one compartment was still open. Jonas closed it before turning toward her.

“This isn’t an emergency visit,” he said.

“I didn’t ask if it was.”

“You were about to.”

Elena hooked a foot into the support beside the wall. The compartment was narrow enough to force them into an almost face-to-face position. She could not look at Jonas’s terminal without making the gesture seem like a question.

“I saw the summary,” she said. “More awakenings, less rest.”

“You saw what people noted down. Some also record time spent awake with their eyes closed. Others only mark when they get up.”

“How much can we trust it?”

“Enough to act. Not enough to make a ranking.”

Elena thought of the two signatures on the same line. She told him about it without naming Pavel, then realized that the detail about the check would make his identity easy to reconstruct. Jonas did not ask.

“The checks have to stay,” he said. “But if you add a check for every oversight and have the same people do it after their shift, you’ll get more oversights.”

“I haven’t added any.”

“You’re letting them add them.”

Someone passed in the corridor; Elena heard a sole touch a handhold, then the light bump of a buckle. She waited for them to move on.

“Do you think someone shouldn’t be working?”

“I think there are duties that need to be distributed better. That’s a different question.”

Jonas unclipped his terminal and showed her a shift grid, with no medical files. There were overlaps created by voluntary substitutions, rest periods interrupted by non-urgent requests, names appearing again where there should have been empty spaces.

“No one wants to leave a station without doing everything possible,” he said. “Nora extends her listening sessions. Others stop by to ask if there’s anything. She checks again because someone asked her to. Her rest gets shorter, and the others’ doesn’t really begin.”

Elena recognized one of the interruptions. It had been hers. She had not asked for news; she had asked for confirmation that there was no news, as if that difference made it necessary.

“We can schedule updates at predictable times.”

“And enforce the end of shifts.”

“Even if someone says they can’t sleep?”

“Rest isn’t a reward for people who manage to sleep. They can stop working even if they stay awake.”

She studied the grid. She had always found relief in documents that could be corrected: an assignment moved, an interval cleared, a responsibility assigned. It did not describe everything happening in the bunks, but at least it showed a harm she could act on.

“I don’t want grief to become a reason to take work away from them,” she said.

“Neither do I. If I see a concrete risk, I’ll flag it for what it is. Not because someone cries or listens to a recording again.”

Jonas rubbed the bridge of his nose. For an instant, the skin beneath his eyes stayed red.

“That goes for you too,” he added.

Elena could have replied that the commander had no substitute for every decision. It was true, and it would have avoided the rest of the conversation.

“I wake up before the shift change,” she said instead. “I check the time. Then I check whether there are any requests.”

“Urgent ones?”

“Not always.”

“Would someone have seen them without you?”

“Yes.”

Jonas nodded, without rushing to turn the admission into a prescription. Elena was grateful for that brief space. She did not want to talk about her daughter in the place where vital signs were recorded; she did not want her silence about her to be mistaken for strength, either.

“I’ll try not to open the log during rest periods,” she said. “Urgent matters should come through the designated channel. For everyone.”

“It’s a start.”

A discreet chime from the habitation module announced the meeting. Elena freed her foot from the support but stayed beside the hatch a moment longer.

“Someone will ask to go back today.”

Jonas looked at her. “Do you know that, or are you afraid of it?”

“Tomás asked me to put it on the agenda.”

“Then it isn’t a symptom to report to me.”

“I’m not reporting it to you as a symptom.”

She realized as she spoke that she had needed to hear herself say it. The doctor lowered his terminal.

“I’ll listen with the others,” he said.

Elena went out first. Before reaching the common module, she turned off ordinary notifications during her rest period. The system asked her to confirm. For once, she did so without reopening the list of exceptions.

In the common module, there was no place for food as there usually was. Daniel had folded one of the surfaces to leave the handholds accessible; the still-sealed packets were gathered behind a net. Elena secured the terminal in front of her and waited for Gabriel to clear the passage to the hatch.

They counted themselves without calling out. They did it at every full meeting, with a glance at the occupied supports and at anyone who preferred to stay near the wall. Twelve people required

attention even just to avoid bumping into one another. Leila gathered up the headphone cable; Pavel shifted to give her a handhold.

Nora reported first. No confirmed contact with Earth, no response from the lunar stations. Reception of automated Martian signals continued. She did not reopen the impact images. Elena had let her choose whether they were needed; Nora had said there was nothing new to show.

No one asked to see them again.

Elena outlined the changes to shift handover. Non-urgent assignments left open were to be handed over, not completed by taking time away from rest. Requests during protected intervals would go through whoever was on duty.

“There’s no need to leave a station to keep working from a bunk,” she said.

Gabriel let out a short breath through his nose. “We should put that on the terminals too.”

“I’ll start with mine.”

There was no laughter, but Asha looked up and for a moment stopped running her thumb along the edge of her sleeve.

Then Elena looked at Tomás.

The pilot had stayed near the structure where objects were secured during meals. One knee was bent under the restraint strap, and his terminal was closed. When he began to speak, he did not open it.

“I’m asking for a return to Earth to be studied.”

Elena let the brief pause that followed run its course. She had read the request, but hearing it there changed the weight of the words. It was no longer a private conversation she could summarize to the others.

“I’m not asking for an engine burn now,” Tomás continued. “I’m not saying we can just point in the opposite direction. I’m asking for someone to put a return among the things to calculate, instead of leaving it among the things we don’t name.”

Malik kept his hands on his terminal without activating it.

“You’re right that we need to distinguish between those two things,” Elena said. “Studying a deviation doesn’t mean carrying it out.”

“And continuing without studying it isn’t neutral.”

She felt the urge to reply that the current trajectory was the result of years of preparation, not something she had omitted. It would have been a defense of the mission from before the silence. That no longer needed defending; it needed to be examined under present conditions.

“No,” she said. “It isn’t.”

Tomás held her gaze for another moment, almost waiting for the qualification that would empty the agreement of meaning.

“I left someone there,” he finally said. “I don’t know what happened to him. If we decide we can’t look for him, I want the reason to be something we’ve verified.”

Sofia lowered her gaze. Elena saw her foot slip out of the support and return with a movement that was too deliberate.

“He’s not the only one,” Sofia said.

“I know.”

“I’m not saying that to take away your right to ask.” She raised her face again. “But I want to be able to ask the other thing too. If we continue, what does it mean to live there?”

No one answered right away. The destination appeared on every mission diagram; Elena realized how rarely, since Earth had fallen silent, anyone had used the verb live instead of arrive.

“There are the supplies,” Daniel said. “And there’s what we have on board. They aren’t the same inventory.”

“The experimental crops don’t become our food just because we need them to,” Sofia said. “I have to say that now, before someone puts them into a reassuring answer.”

“No one is asking you to,” Elena replied.

“Not yet.”

Sofia touched the edge of her terminal but did not turn it on. “When I was preparing the program, there were experiments that could fail. They were supposed to teach us something. Now I’m afraid everything will be treated as if it has to save us.”

Elena deleted a word she had written without realizing it: autonomy. It was too broad for that

line.

“In the comparison, we’ll distinguish what we need to stay alive from what we hope to learn,” she said.

“Even if giving up an experiment feels like giving up on the future?”

“Even then.”

Asha shifted slightly so she could see both Sofia and Tomás. “And duration isn’t just a sum of rations. We’ll have to keep the systems running for as long as we choose to remain in flight.”

Tomás nodded. “I want it included in the comparison. I don’t want to erase it.”

His tone had grown harder, but Elena did not hear it as a challenge to Asha’s expertise. She had spent enough hours beside him in simulations to recognize when he was looking for an error and when he was trying not to be misunderstood.

“Let’s do this once,” she said. “Let’s not attribute to someone else the easiest version to dismiss. Tomás hasn’t asked us to ignore the systems. Sofia hasn’t said the people on Earth don’t matter.”

Pavel reached out an arm to catch a packet that had slipped from the net. He put it back before speaking.

“I’d also like to understand what we mean by waiting.”

The question turned everyone’s eyes to Malik.

“Before the how,” Elena interjected, “is there anything else that needs to go into the request?”

Mei lifted two fingers from the handhold. “Access to resources. The site maps aren’t a water reserve inside the ship. When we talk about Mars, I want us to distinguish what has been deposited from what we hope to extract.”

“And what the machines are reporting from what we’ll have to inspect,” Leila added.

Gabriel asked that energy include heat to be dissipated, not just available power. Asha nodded without interrupting him. Elena noted their contributions as requirements, taking care not to turn the list into a series of answers: none of those observations, on its own, proved which path to choose.

Nora had not spoken since her report on contact. She was looking at the edge of the folded

surface, where a worn label revealed a glimpse of adhesive.

“What if we got a reply while we were doing the calculations?” she asked.

Elena realized she had been waiting for that question too.

“We’d change the information we were working with.”

“And if no reply came?”

Elena did not look at the clock. “We’ll have to decide with what we have. But today we’re defining what to ask, not pretending we already have a conclusion.”

Nora nodded. Tomás finally opened his terminal and checked that his request was on the shared agenda. Elena watched him scroll to the line, stop, and leave the screen open.

Malik turned his terminal toward the center, but the screen remained on the notes page. No curve, no planet represented by a colored circle.

“To answer Pavel,” he said, “waiting can mean postponing a choice. It doesn’t mean keeping the situation the same.”

He pointed at the empty surface in front of him without trying to draw a trajectory there.

“We keep moving. If we don’t fire the engines, we continue along our current trajectory. When we want to change it, we’ll start from the position and velocity we have then.”

“So waiting has to have a duration too,” Daniel said.

“It has to have defined conditions. Otherwise I can’t compare it with anything.”

Elena wrote down the sentence. She had heard Malik talk about initial conditions hundreds of times; now those words had entered a conversation where someone still hoped that postponing would be enough to give nothing up.

“I want it to stay visible,” she said. “Even if it seems obvious when we read the report.”

Tomás moved to a higher handhold. “And let’s not call it a return only if it’s a version chosen to prove it won’t work.”

Malik looked at him without stiffening. “Specify what you want us to consider.”

“What we could try. Where we could get to. What we’d need to find working so we didn’t die after

getting there."

Elena saw Daniel add a note.

"The same goes for Mars," the copilot said. "A ready descent vehicle doesn't mean a supply cache has been reached."

"It applies to all the options," she confirmed. "The same categories. If information is missing, it stays missing. It doesn't become favorable in one column and unfavorable in the other."

Gabriel asked who would check the maintenance assumptions. Asha replied that she would provide those for life support, but she would not sign off on estimates for systems she was not responsible for. Leila would distinguish automatic data from confirmations they could not obtain; Mei would indicate which local resources still required on-site verification.

Elena let them refine the method. Talking in terms of areas of expertise had not made Tomás's question disappear; it had made it concrete enough to assign to someone without betraying it.

Then Sofia asked, "And in the meantime, what do we say in our messages?"

The question interrupted the rhythm of the notes. Nora raised her head.

"Whatever you want," she said. "The personal channel stays personal."

"I don't mean who listens to them here. I mean, should we still talk about the mission, the expected arrival date, things we promised to do?"

Elena looked for an answer that would not take up the space of the others. In her own messages, she had kept asking for news, carefully avoiding phrases that might sound like a goodbye. She did not know whether that caution protected her daughter or only herself.

"There won't be a shared formula for private recordings," she said. "In operational bulletins, we'll report the actual conditions and what we're doing. We'll keep sending them."

"Even without confirmation they've been received?" Pavel asked.

"Even without."

Jonas had been listening, leaning against the handhold near the hatch. He straightened just enough to draw attention.

"I'd like to clarify something before this becomes a way to ask everyone to say their goodbyes."

Elena lowered her terminal.

“We don’t have confirmation of death for the people we left behind,” the doctor said. “We have evidence of a catastrophe and an absence of news. I can help you bear what you’re going through. I can’t give that absence a medical meaning it doesn’t have.”

Tomás stopped moving the cursor. Sofia nodded once, almost imperceptibly.

“There will be no compulsory ceremony,” Elena said. “And no obligation to behave as if nothing happened.”

She paused. She was tempted to add something that would hold the two sentences together, a promise of mutual understanding. She had no right to: a little while earlier, she had wanted Tomás to postpone a legitimate request simply because it would have made the meeting more difficult.

“If someone doesn’t want to hear someone else’s recording,” she continued, “they shouldn’t have to find it playing over the common speakers. If they want to listen to their own, they should have a way to do it without asking for a favor each time.”

Nora turned her terminal toward herself. “We can make the available time slots visible, without names of recipients or content.”

“For sending and for access to the station,” Daniel clarified. “Those are two different needs. Listening again to a file that’s already been received shouldn’t take up an opportunity to transmit.”

“Agreed,” Nora said. “Operational priorities stay in place. In the personal space, no one jumps ahead because they show up more often.”

Elena felt the slight embarrassment that passed through the group. She did not need to know who had shown up more often; those who had stayed away might have done so to avoid hearing another refusal.

“And no one loses their opportunity because they’re on shift,” she added.

Leila asked them to make it explicit that sending did not mean delivery. Nora gave a short nod. That limit was not new, but it weighed differently for personal recordings than for bulletins.

“We’ll write it without turning it into a notice people have to accept every time,” Elena said.

Gabriel rubbed his cheek. “Can we also stop asking anyone coming out of there if there’s anything?”

Elena remembered Jonas’s grid. “Updates will be available at shift handover. If confirmed contact comes in, you’ll be informed. There’s no need to question us at every hatch.”

She could keep that promise. It was not about the planet, but about the twelve people in the room.

She read the agreed points aloud again: a comparison of the options, clearly stated assumptions, protected rest, regular transmissions, fair and confidential personal access. She asked if she had left anything out.

Tomás checked his list. “That the request for a return won’t be summarized as a need for reassurance.”

“It won’t.”

Jonas did not speak. Elena glanced at him and found him closing his terminal, like someone who considered his part finished without needing to approve another’s.

The meeting ended without a shared gesture. Pavel retrieved the packet he had put back in the net and handed it to Sofia; she took it after checking the label. Asha waited until the hatch was clear. Tomás stayed until Elena had saved the shared notes, then went out with the others. He did not ask when they would know. For now, she had managed to guarantee him that the question would not disappear.

At the communications station, Nora had to move a handhold to make room for her. Elena waited for her to secure it. The windows shown at the meeting had disappeared from the terminal; the reception logs and the shift task list remained.

“I don’t want to add invisible work for you,” Elena said. “What we agreed on should cut interruptions, not ask you to manage everyone’s reactions too.”

Nora secured herself in her place. “I can keep a list of the time slots. I can’t know who most needs to talk.”

“I’m not asking you to.”

“Then let’s not have a field for the reason.”

Elena looked at the template Nora had opened. The field was there, carried over from requests to use the station. On a normal mission, it would have helped distinguish an operational need from a preference. Now it invited each person to prove that their absence mattered more than anyone else's.

"Remove it for personal use."

Nora edited the template. She kept the requested duration and an indication of availability, then separated access to files from entry into the transmission queue. Elena followed the steps without asking her to open a private archive.

"What about recordings that don't get sent?" she asked.

"They stay with the person who made them. They don't go into the technical report."

"And anyone who'd rather not record anything?"

Nora glanced at her. "They'll have nothing in the queue."

Elena nodded. The answer had the simplicity they risked losing at the meeting each time they tried to protect one another.

They agreed that the calendar would show only when the station was available; individual requests would be handled without publishing recipients or content. Anyone working during the available time slots could arrange another one. Urgent onboard communications would keep priority, without turning every routine check into an emergency.

Nora scrolled through the list of bulletins in preparation.

"For today's one, should I report that a study of the alternatives has been requested?"

"Yes. No decision on the trajectory."

"Do you want to review the text?"

Elena was about to say yes. It was a short sentence, and at that moment the brief wait needed to check it seemed harmless. Then she thought of the shifts overlapping because of the accumulation of harmless interventions.

"Use the shared notes. If the meaning changes, ask me. Otherwise, no."

Nora marked the item. She did not seem relieved, just ready to move on. Elena stepped aside to

leave her room to move toward the console and went to the navigation terminal, where Malik and Daniel were waiting.

Malik had opened a blank document. Daniel had an inventory index beside him, still closed on the general summaries. Neither of them had started showing her a solution.

“I want to send you a request you won’t have to interpret from my tone of voice,” she said.

“Then let’s read it before I sign it,” Daniel replied.

Elena brought up the meeting notes and created the assignment. In the title field, she wrote comparison of flight continuation alternatives. She paused over the word continuation, then read it again. It could make it seem as if she had already reduced the study to a single outcome. She replaced it with flight options and crew sustenance.

Malik followed the change without comment.

“Three cases,” she said. “Continue toward Mars. Divert toward Earth. Postpone the decision, indicating what each interval considered would entail. I don’t want the last one to become a line without movement or consumption.”

“Nor a single duration we’ve chosen without explanation,” Malik said.

Elena added the requirement. She asked him to state the assumptions for each case, the maneuver options to examine, and the missing information. No deadline was to appear as an order already given: the study would have to identify which time frames mattered and what they depended on.

Daniel moved his terminal closer to hers without connecting them.

“For resources, we need a shared baseline. If someone updates an inventory while we’re working, the reader needs to know which version we used.”

“Include the date and source of the data.”

“And separate quantities on hand, usable quantities, and reserves we can’t reach during flight.”

Elena wrote it down. She did not ask how large the differences were. Asking now would produce an estimate outside the document they were trying to make reliable.

Malik pointed to the paragraph on risks. “We can describe uncertainty. We won’t always be able to give it a number.”

“I don’t want invented numbers to fill in the fields. If the data doesn’t support a probability, say what we know and what we don’t.”

Daniel asked her to explicitly include the absence of ground support. The procedures and inventories had been prepared for a crew in contact with teams of specialists; simply removing the time needed to receive an answer would not be enough. Elena added the availability of expertise, instructions, and spare parts, with input from the systems leads.

Asha and Gabriel would provide the conditions of their respective systems. Mei and Leila would distinguish the resources expected at the site from data already available about their status. Jonas would contribute on the limits of the crew’s endurance without handing over private medical information. Tomás could specify the possibilities he wanted included, just as the others could flag any missing assumption.

“I’m not asking you for a document that favors one choice,” Elena said. “I’m asking for something that lets us understand why a possibility exists, doesn’t exist, or depends on a condition.”

Malik rested his terminal against the handhold. “It’ll have to be readable even when I’m not in the room.”

“Yes.”

Daniel scrolled through the page from the beginning. “And we won’t use reserves for an ideal person who never gets sick and never makes a maintenance mistake.”

Elena thought of the missing signature that morning, Jonas’s grid, and her own habit of waking up to check requests someone else had already read.

“Use this crew,” she said. “With the shifts it can sustain.”

What remained was to define access to the work. The report and operational assumptions would be available to all twelve; updates would keep earlier versions identifiable. Personal data not needed for the comparison would stay out of it. Elena added a space for unresolved questions, separate from the conclusions, then left it empty along with the other fields to be filled in.

She read through everything in a low voice. There was no promise to return, and no order to forget the return. Nor was there a way to relieve her of future responsibility: Malik and Daniel would describe the possibilities, not choose on her behalf what she could ask the others to endure.

For an instant, she imagined her daughter in front of a receiver, somewhere she could not see. The image contained no evidence, but neither did the opposite thought. Elena returned to the last line

and checked that the recipient was correct.

“This is the assignment,” she said. “It isn’t a trajectory decision.”

She signed the formal request to Malik Haddad and Daniel Cho, made the copy available to the crew, and pressed send.

The Way Back

On the morning of day 9, Nora found a request from Malik among the shift handovers. He wasn't asking her to look for a signal. He wanted to know which functions of the ship still depended on a reply from Earth and which could continue without receiving one.

She opened the spreadsheet before going to him. Beside each entry were three boxes: data available, local substitute, limits of the substitute. The radio link appeared under navigation, maintenance, medical. It felt as if she were watching her own work taken apart and distributed among people who until then had been able to think of it as a constant service.

Malik had secured a terminal to the side support of the station. Daniel occupied the one opposite; Asha, braced with one foot, was reading a list without scrolling. To get in, Nora had to wait for Daniel to gather up his screen cable.

"I need the log of the Earth-based products we actually used," Malik said. "Not all the ones specified in the mission contract."

"Some of them arrived without us even opening them."

"I know. That's why I'm asking you."

Nora clipped on the terminal and selected the receipts from the shifts before the silence. Updates, requests, automatic confirmations appeared. She left the personal archive closed. It contained nothing that could help with the spreadsheet, and being able to exclude it gave her a brief, almost unpleasant sense of relief.

Malik showed her three trajectories. They didn't have the usual destination colors; they bore only working names and a calculation date. In the first, the Aurora reached Mars. In the second, a series of arcs moved away from the nominal path. The third continued along the current trajectory, with subsequent points at which a possible correction had been recalculated.

"Is that the delay?" Nora asked.

"For now. I'm sampling it. There's no point where we can put the ship on standby."

"It's there in the heading."

Malik looked at the word, then replaced it with a phrase: continuation without choosing the next maneuver.

Asha looked up. “Keep it short enough to fit in the report.”

“I’d rather have a long heading than a possibility that doesn’t exist,” Daniel said.

They weren’t arguing with her. Nora could tell by the way each of them returned to their own screen without waiting for a reply. It was the first concrete use of Elena’s assignment: find the promises hidden in the names before anyone started counting on them.

Daniel opened the inventory. The rows didn’t end with a single quantity. For food, they distinguished what was stowed from what was usable, then indicated where the lots were located. For consumables, there were opened packages, intact seals, replacements already made. The supplies that were supposed to be waiting for them on Earth after the mission weren’t listed among those available.

“I’m not assuming there’ll be a functioning depot when we get to Earth,” he said. “I can put that assumption in a separate case.”

Nora studied the arcs. “Not even to compare timings?”

“For timings, yes. For eating before we get there, no.”

Asha moved a list of components onto the shared screen. “And this doesn’t become the number of days we can breathe. I can estimate use, schedule maintenance, compare configurations. I can’t guarantee that a pump will wear out at the average rate.”

“I’ll put in a range,” Malik said.

“Also state that the ranges aren’t independent. More frequent processing takes hours, materials, checks. If I save one consumable by using another, Daniel needs to see that.”

Nora opened an entry in her log: an Earth-based analysis that had accompanied a request for verification. The request had been carried out, but there had been no reply. They had the raw data on board and the procedure used to collect it. They no longer had the group that was supposed to compare them with the records of other missions.

She wrote that local checking was possible, external comparison wasn’t. She hesitated over the word substitute, then marked it partial.

A second entry referred to a document that had been updated several times. Nora found two copies with the same title and different dates. She checked which one had actually been used, following the reference from the activity log instead of choosing the most recent one.

“This one,” she said, making it visible.

Malik kept its fingerprint beside the corresponding input. “Does the new one change anything?”

“I don’t know yet. I can compare them.”

“Then we’ll leave the verification open.”

Nora added the task to her own handover notes. It was a finite job, with a beginning and a verifiable result. For a few minutes, she could give it all her attention without wondering what was happening beyond the receiver.

They worked that way for part of the morning. For each document, Nora recorded the version preserved on board; where an attachment was missing, she left the reference without pretending the title could tell them what it contained. Malik asked her to check the dependencies of his calculation tools too. The program worked without Earth. The data it was supposed to work with, however, varied in age and uncertainty.

“We can measure,” he said. “Not in the same way or at the same frequency. That has to be in the comparison, not just the notes.”

Nora found a column reserved for the quality of their knowledge of the arrival position. In the Earth case, the field was still blank.

“If we received a bulletin right now?”

Malik didn’t answer immediately. He opened the model’s conditions, as if he wanted to make sure he was answering the question he’d heard.

“It depends what it said. A link might tell us where to direct a rescue request. It wouldn’t add propellant to the tanks.”

“It might give us a rendezvous point.”

“If there were a vehicle capable of reaching it. We can describe that as an external condition. We don’t have confirmation that such a vehicle exists.”

Nora nodded. Until then, she had been the one correcting anyone who turned a missed reception into a nonexistent transmission. Now she had to recognize the same precision when it took something away from her.

Daniel split the screen and set two windows side by side. One contained the timings for the

trajectories still under consideration, the other the resource coverage. Nora didn't look for a number right away. Instead, she looked at where the supply band ended in relation to the arcs Malik was keeping. For the return, the uncovered section was too large to mistake for rounding.

"Is that the result already?" she asked.

"It's a provisional comparison," Malik said. "I have to check the other cases. I don't want the first one calculated to look like the only one."

Asha called Daniel over to a maintenance note. No alarm interrupted them; no value changed color to give them a simpler explanation. The Aurora was working. That was exactly why the limit was so hard to accept: there wasn't a part they could replace to shorten that road.

Before moving away, Nora added the distinction between transmitting and getting assistance to the spreadsheet. They could keep sending requests, reports, and messages. They couldn't plan their work on the assumption that a reply would come.

She read the line twice. Then she left it visible to the others, along with the reference to the logs.

Leila had already prepared the query for Approdo, but she hadn't yet put it in the transmission queue. On the screen, Nora found a request shorter than she'd expected.

"You're not asking for the full inventory?"

"I have the inventory declared at the depot. I want to know which entries the system can verify on its own."

Leila indicated the permitted responses. Unit identity, report version, measurement time, sensor status. For quantities not directly measured, the request required the source of the data to be returned. A container recorded at the time of unloading wasn't supposed to reappear as a container that had just been inspected.

Nora checked the recipient and the planned route. The transmission wouldn't interrupt the Earth windows; it used the availability of the Martian link that had already been scheduled. She entered the request and left the log open. After the transmission, they didn't sit watching the indicator. Leila handed her the stored reports, and they divided up the work.

The Approdo pages still had the headings from the original program. Some activities assumed that a group on Earth would examine the results before the crew arrived. Nora looked for references that led only to those checks. Leila followed the ones tied to a local measurement.

“This one is active,” Nora said, showing the signal from a system.

“It’s powered.”

“The report calls it active.”

Leila opened the field definition. “The controller is communicating and hasn’t recorded a shutdown condition. That doesn’t mean it’s producing at the expected rate.”

Nora corrected the note. The word had taken up six letters and made her imagine an entire room: pipes, heat, air someone could breathe. Replacing it required a much less comfortable sentence.

When the response arrived, Leila first checked the reference to their query, then the identity of the unit that had generated it. Nora compared the report time with the reception time and verified that the requested fields hadn’t been filled in from an older summary. The delay was that of a communication between two distant places, not of a hesitant machine.

The response contained no greetings. Nora realized she had been looking for one only when she saw the first line of values.

Leila expanded the report. Some data were recent; others retained the date when the supplies had been uploaded. An entry unsupported by the requested sensor was returned as unavailable. Nora read it with a sense of relief that surprised her: at least the system wasn’t inventing the check they wanted.

“So these depots are there,” she said.

Leila paused before nodding. “We have a record of their arrival and reports from some associated systems. Not a visit to every container.”

“Write it that way. Otherwise Malik will have to guess from our summary.”

They worked on the same document without deleting the report they’d received. Beside each conclusion, they added the field it came from and the one that would have to be checked on site. The modules were located; the controllers’ responses indicated that part of the automated infrastructure was still functioning. They couldn’t speak to the integrity of all the stowed material. Whether they could reach it was also a question for whoever would have to land them.

Daniel arrived with his own terminal and stopped just outside the station, one knee bent to keep from blocking the passage.

“Can I import it?”

“The summary, yes. With the qualifications,” Leila replied.

He read a line and opened a new group in the inventory. Nora watched the words surface resources, access not acquired appear. He didn’t add them to the ship’s supplies.

“Not even for Mars?” she asked.

“I’ll compare them with what’s needed to reach them. But they aren’t here.”

Daniel showed her the point. An extended flight couldn’t be covered by food waiting for them beneath an atmosphere, inside a module that was still sealed. First came approach, capture, verified orbit, descent. The machines’ report reduced uncertainty about one part of the last leg; it didn’t eliminate the rest.

Asha joined them during the next check. She asked that Approdo’s spare parts be kept distinct not only by location, but also by compatibility. A component intended for surface systems didn’t automatically become a part for the Aurora. If it could be adapted, that required tools, work hours, and verification.

“I’m not saying they won’t be useful to us,” she added. “I’m saying I need to know what we’re promising the model.”

Nora widened the document so everyone could see the notes. To do that, she had to close the small Earth-status window. She didn’t lose any data: the receiver continued recording. And yet she had the physical sensation of turning away.

“How long can the base continue without us?” she asked Leila.

“It depends on the system. The automatic sequences don’t do everything we’ll do once we’re there.”

“And after that?”

“After that, we’ll be there, if we get there. Not a new shipment at every deadline.”

Daniel added to the summary that the reserves were finite. He didn’t write how much time they would buy before he had compared the crew’s needs with the usable data. Asha insisted that long-term operation not be inferred from a favorable status measured that day.

Nora knew that kind of caution. She had used it for every piece of news about the impact, and she

didn't want to give it up now just because the destination seemed less unbearable to her.

When the document was ready, Leila reread the conclusions while Nora followed the references in the data. It wasn't a search for a voice, only the checking of a technical report that had to stand on its own. They corrected an entry that confused the absence of an alarm with a positive measurement. They left a question open about inspection after descent.

Daniel imported the verified version. In Malik's comparison, Mars didn't turn into an all-green band: some rows changed status, others retained a mark of uncertainty. For the first time, Nora saw the destination without the apparatus of the program that had made it familiar. It wasn't a community ready to welcome them. It was machines, containers, and places they would have to enter on their own.

Leila unclipped her terminal when her shift ended. Nora pointed out a reference that was still open.

"Tomorrow," Leila said. "It won't change today's transmission."

Nora checked. She was right. She added the matter to the handover notes, made the report available, and reopened the link status. Earth and the Moon hadn't replied. The Martian response, with all its limitations, remained the only new item they had received that they could use.

On day 10, the report arrived in the shared folder before the meeting. Nora opened it, looking for the rows she had filled in. They were still there, but they had become side references in a comparison that could be read from beginning to end. Malik had kept the unanswered questions too.

In the common area, Tomás was reading the conditions for one of the Earth trajectories. He didn't look up right away when Nora fixed her terminal in place. He waited until he reached the end of the page, then pointed out a passage to Daniel.

"Here you're assuming we have to arrive with the capability to insert into orbit."

"It's one of the cases," Daniel replied.

"I want to see the rendezvous without capturing the ship too. An external recovery."

Malik, on the other side of the support, opened a separate section. "It's here. I haven't included it among the destinations accessible by our own means alone."

Tomás followed the arc with a finger without touching the screen. Nora looked at the empty interval between the supply coverage and the point marked as the hypothetical rendezvous. It didn't disappear.

"In the most favorable configuration?" Tomás asked.

"The one you're looking at is already favorable in terms of flight time. Not in every other respect."

Elena let them complete the comparison before asking Malik to begin. Nora recognized among the people gathered in the common area the same gestures as in ordinary meetings: someone enlarging the text, someone looking for a more comfortable handhold, someone keeping space free for notes. No decision had been requested. Everyone had come to hear what shape the possibilities took.

Malik started with the current path. The screen showed the motion of the Aurora and that of the destinations, not three stationary roads waiting for a vehicle. The points moved together. When he selected a later epoch, the available arcs changed.

"We haven't only looked for a maneuver to turn us around," he said. "We've looked for families of transfers. Different durations, different arrivals, different constraints. Some solutions require more propellant than we can use. Of those that remain, none closes the resource balance for the return."

Daniel set the supply coverage beside it. Asha left the maintenance limits open without converting them into a single failure date.

"We run out of food before it becomes necessary to discuss the last possible failure," Daniel said. "Reducing some activities changes the associated consumption. It doesn't eliminate the needs of twelve people for the added duration."

Tomás opened the consumption section. "You've kept the operating shifts."

"Yes."

"What if we reduced some of them?"

Daniel showed him the corresponding case. The bands shifted without meeting.

"I haven't removed what's needed to preserve the ability to work and pilot. That isn't a free reserve."

Nora saw Tomás look to Asha, not Elena. “Fewer people awake at the same time, fewer systems in use. Can we lengthen the maintenance intervals?”

“Some of them. They’re listed there. The others, no, not without losing the function they’re supposed to maintain.”

Asha opened one of the dependencies. She didn’t talk about an imminent failure. She showed an activity that required a consumable and an alternative configuration that saved some of it while increasing the use of other components. The advantage had been counted only once.

“If you want to change a condition, we’ll recalculate it,” she said. “But we have to change it everywhere it appears.”

Tomás scrolled through the spreadsheet in silence. Nora realized she was waiting for him to find an error. Not a serious error, nothing that would call Malik’s competence into question: just an entry out of place, an interval added up wrong. She was ashamed of that convenient distinction. An error big enough to get them home wouldn’t be small for the person who made it.

“And what if we wait for a signal before choosing?” Tomás asked at last.

Malik changed the model date. The Aurora advanced again; the arcs were replaced by others, and some didn’t reappear.

“That’s the third case. We consume resources, the geometry changes, and some maneuvers require more. I’ve set an operational limit, not a date after which celestial mechanics stops working.”

He enlarged the heading. Day 40 of the timeline. Nora copied it into her note and left room beside it for the explanation.

Malik pointed to two groups of solutions. Up to that deadline, with the propulsive margins used in the comparison, an alternative diversion remained to the configuration planned for arrival at Mars. The model didn’t make it sustainable for the people on board: the resource deficit remained. It only allowed them to distinguish the point at which they lacked the means to live through a still-reachable path from the point at which they would also have given up that geometry.

“So you’re not saying we can return all the way until day 40,” Nora said.

“No. I’m saying the maneuver choice has to be resolved by that deadline. And that any alternative can’t be presented without its incomplete resource balance.”

Tomás scrolled through the summary. “That sentence has to be next to the date. Not in a separate note.”

Malik inserted it. Then he opened the continuation chart. The arrival at Mars remained the one planned, subject to the required corrections and capture. It wasn’t enough to leave the ship to itself to reach it. The propellant intended for arrival operations wasn’t spare fuel they could spend twice.

Elena asked which margins still needed to be verified. Daniel indicated inventory checks; Asha, maintenance dependencies; Malik, updates to navigation measurements. The report didn’t hide those gaps. Nora watched them appear on the screen without anyone trying to fill them with reassurance.

Tomás returned to the excluded cases. “Can I open the inputs for these?”

“Not from this view,” Malik said. “They’re linked in the attachments.”

“I’d like the link to be here. And I want the failed attempts to remain too, not just the summary.”

No one reminded him that the assignment was already public. Malik moved the reference and showed where to read the conditions, the tools used, and the previous versions. Daniel checked access from Nora’s terminal, without using his own work permissions. Now every case could be followed back to its source data.

“If I find a different condition?”

“Flag it with what it requires,” Malik said. “We’ll keep it and test it.”

Tomás nodded, but didn’t close the report. Neither did Nora. The deadline continued to occupy a nearly innocuous line, between a reference and a qualification. It hadn’t changed Earth’s fate. It had given an edge to the time they could spend not choosing.

Elena didn’t close the meeting with a conclusion about the destinations. She asked Daniel to indicate which checks required opening the stowage and which could be completed from the logs. Then she did the same with Asha and Malik. Nora noted the dependencies on the data received, ready to distinguish a local check from information no one could ask Earth for anymore with any certainty of getting it.

“We’re not looking for a more favorable value,” Elena said. “We’re checking that the one we used is justified.”

Tomás looked up. “Does that apply to the excluded conditions too?”

“Yes. If an assumption requires something we don’t have, it has to be written down. The case shouldn’t be erased, and neither should the lack.”

The commander scrolled through the current version of the report and checked the operational deadline. Nora saw her read the sentence added beside the date too, the one that denied any promise of a sustainable return. She waited for Elena to repeat it as a verdict. She didn’t.

“The final decision remains open during the checks,” she said. “It has to come in time to prepare the maneuver by the stated limit. We won’t treat the last available moment as if it were extra margin.”

Malik added the request to the report’s action items. Elena asked him to keep the day 40 deadline recognizable in the updates too, and to flag any change that brought it forward immediately. No one was ordered to schedule an engine burn. Tomás still had to check the cases, not choose the maneuver he would pilot.

When the others began unclipping their terminals, Nora stayed to look at the comparison. In the compact version, all three possibilities fit in the same space. They had equal width on the page and radically different contents. She enlarged the return option, as if the full view could give her back the time missing between the supplies and the arrival.

Tomás asked her to move a cable. Only then did she realize she was blocking his way.

“Sorry.”

“You don’t have to close it.”

He settled at the support Daniel had vacated. He had kept the references for some of the assumptions and opened them one after another. Nora could have left. Her shift hadn’t started yet, and she had no professional reason to watch what he was doing.

“I thought they’d find a shorter way,” she said.

Tomás didn’t answer with encouragement. He enlarged the starting point of one of the cases, then went back.

“I was hoping the comparison would be different too.”

“You knew what to expect.”

“I knew it would be difficult. I didn’t want to be the one deciding which difficulties weren’t worth calculating.”

Nora rested two fingers on the edge of the terminal. She had spent the previous hours looking for overly generous terms and nonexistent measurements. Now she couldn’t form a question that hadn’t already been answered.

“If a message came in,” she said, “we could find out where they are.”

“Someone might tell us where they are. That would already be a lot.”

The correction was slight. Not everyone, not Nora’s mother simply because another receiver was still on. It was the same limit she explained to others, and hearing it in Tomás’s voice irritated her before it helped her.

“I didn’t mean everyone.”

He nodded without making her clarify. He returned to the report and let her remain silent.

Nora thought of the plant on the landing. In her mother’s recording, it had been moved because it was in the way. That gesture was all she knew of it: she didn’t know where the plant had ended up, or how unwieldy the pot was. She had kept a domestic scene with too many empty spaces, filling them in without noticing. In one of those spaces, her return had always been waiting. Her mother would explain better, Nora would see the place, and they would argue about something that hadn’t seemed important in the message.

She had never put that return into a calculation. She had left it behind every transmission, as the natural outcome of a communication that was temporarily difficult.

“I don’t know how to stop asking for a reply,” she said.

Tomás took his eyes off the terminal. “No one’s asked you to.”

“I know.”

“I haven’t withdrawn my request.” He pointed to the report. “But I want to challenge what’s written there, not something else.”

Nora read the condition selected on his screen. It concerned arrival at Earth without verified external support. There was no competent person who could declare it irrelevant; there was no proof, either, that such support would never exist. But between the two, twelve people had to

survive the journey.

“If I found a reply, I’d give it to you,” she said.

Tomás looked at her. “You’d give it to everyone.”

“Yes.”

She was grateful that he didn’t add anything else. She left him to his work and went to the station to prepare the shift change. The Approdo report was still available with its references to the measurements; the trajectory report had a new version, distinct from the previous one. Nora checked that the links added during the meeting could be read with her ordinary access. They could.

Elena arrived while she was completing the technical handovers. She didn’t come all the way into the station.

“Are you missing any data for the dependency check?”

“Some of it we don’t have. I’ve marked it.”

“And the data we do have?”

“I can verify the copies and references. I can’t reconstruct attachments we never received.”

Elena read the line Nora showed her. “Then leave it that way.”

Nora hesitated, then brought up the summary. “The day 40 deadline still applies even if nothing changes in the supplies.”

“Yes.”

“And we could do all the checks without finding another possibility.”

Elena paused to read the document. “We need to be able to know we’ve done them properly even in that case.”

She didn’t ask which side Nora was on. She checked that the assigned actions were there and cleared the passage. Nora returned to her place with one fewer question to defend and the same ones to face.

At the start of her shift, she opened the link status. No new Earth message was confirmed; no reply from the Moon had been received. She recorded both in the usual terms, without turning

them into proof of a death and without adding hope to the data field.

Some transmissions in the personal queue were ready; others were waiting for their window. Nora checked only the elements needed for sending. The list didn't tell her who had found the words and who had given up for the day, and it didn't need to.

She left the trajectory report among the available documents and brought the reception log to the foreground. She knew now that a reply wouldn't shorten the road by itself. She adjusted her headphones, checked the level, and started listening anyway.

The Missing Water

On the morning of day 12, Daniel asked Elena to look at a quantity he couldn't account for. He didn't call it an emergency. He sent her a notice on the operations channel, and by the time she reached the logistics station, he had already brought up the transfers between tanks, the amounts dispensed, and the estimates of how much water was still inside the system.

"If it's a transfer that's been recorded twice, I can't find it."

Elena secured herself to the handhold beside him. The highlighted number wasn't red like an alarm; it was a note in an inventory comparison. In the preceding days, she had examined resources scattered along trajectories no one would travel. This quantity was a few meters away from her—or should have been.

"How long have you been looking for it?"

"Since the start of the shift. I asked Asha before calling you."

Asha arrived with a terminal strapped to her forearm and a small sample container. She secured it to a strip of Velcro, checked that it held, and brought up the recovery-cycle log. Elena shifted her legs to clear the passage. For three people to stand in front of the same screen, one of them had to give up looking at it straight on.

"I checked the manual operations," Asha said. "Including the ones that were interrupted."

Daniel opened an entry. "Here, the transfer-complete confirmation was missing."

"The quantity is in the destination container. I checked it."

They moved on to the amounts dispensed for food, the refilled bags, and the samples taken for testing. The measurements weren't all equally precise. The system tracked the water in the tanks with instruments different from those it used to estimate the moisture awaiting recovery; neither gave a complete picture at every moment. Asha aligned the intervals, removed a cycle still in progress from the comparison, and added a completed one that the summary hadn't yet incorporated.

The discrepancy shrank. It didn't disappear.

Elena waited for them to repeat the check without suggesting where to look. Daniel scrolled through a list of sample containers, read the references to Asha, and checked off only those she

confirmed. Her work had the unpleasant slowness of urgent things that couldn't be done quickly.

"Six point four kilograms," she said at last. "Estimated shortfall against the reconciled balance. Not a weighing of the water lost."

Elena read the note she had added. "How much could still be due to the measurements?"

Asha pointed out the range accompanying the figure. "Not enough to bring it within normal variation. I want to search the circuit."

"Which part?"

"The one that transfers the recovered water to final treatment. The levels don't explain the recorded movement. I'll check there first."

Daniel reopened the standard inventory. The stored drinking water was available; there was no need to reduce anyone's water allowance. Elena had Asha confirm that, then called Jonas.

The doctor answered from the medical compartment. He didn't ask how much they would have to ration. He asked whether the quality of the water in distribution had changed.

"No indication of that," Asha said, close enough to join the channel. "We're checking for a leak upstream of final treatment."

"Then hydration stays as planned," Jonas said. "Let me know if availability changes, not after you've reduced it."

Elena confirmed. She suspended deferrable washing and activities requiring nonessential withdrawals, leaving drinking water and food preparation unchanged. She didn't call the measure precautionary conservation: in the message, she wrote that the balance was abnormal and that they were searching for a leak. She asked everyone to report any moisture out of place without opening panels or touching lines.

She reread the text. The word water appeared four times. She didn't replace any of them.

Asha was gathering the container and the terminal.

"I need Pavel and Gabriel," she said.

She didn't add that she could check by herself. Elena assigned them both and asked what activities needed to be interrupted to clear the compartment. Asha dictated the two necessary items, then paused before leaving the station.

“I don’t have the leak location yet.”

“I know.”

“We may need to remove more than one panel.”

Elena brought up the shift plan. “Tell me what space you need. We’ll move the rest.”

The water-recovery compartment was separated from the passage by stowage that, at launch, had seemed like a good use of the available volume. Clearing it meant finding another place for bags of materials that couldn’t simply be left to float. Tomás took the bags Daniel pointed out, securing them one at a time to a temporary net and leaving the labels legible. No one used the corridor to shorten the route.

Elena intercepted a bag with her shoulder before it could rotate into Asha’s terminal. Tomás stopped it from the other side.

“Does this go back here?” he asked.

“After we’re done,” Asha replied.

“Then I won’t put it behind the others.”

He secured it on the outside of the net. It was a minor decision, yet Elena realized she needed it: someone was already making it possible to put things back in order, without assuming how long the work would take.

Gabriel arrived with the diagram of the adjacent utilities. Pavel secured a tool bag to a ring and checked each tether. They didn’t seem any faster than usual. Asha explained what wasn’t adding up in the data and pointed to the section to inspect. Pavel asked if she could pause the transfer before they opened it; she carried out the sequence and waited for local confirmation.

Elena stayed outside the work area. From there she could see little of the tubing, but everyone could reach it without having to ask her to move.

The first panel came off dry. Pavel passed it to Tomás, who secured it against a clear surface. On the second, Gabriel spotted a strip along the edge of the lining that was just a little darker.

Asha brought the lamp closer. She didn’t touch it right away.

“Here,” she said.

Elena moved enough to see the reflection. There was no jet, no water suspended in the compartment to fill it. The material had changed color for a few centimeters. A quantity that already seemed large in the log could be hiding like this, spread out where no one looked during an ordinary shift.

“Let’s stop opening it until Gabriel has isolated the utilities,” Asha said.

Elena confirmed and called Daniel on the work channel. The discrepancy now had a place to check. They still hadn’t found everything that was missing.

Gabriel identified the utilities on the diagram and then on the structure. He read the references to Asha, powered down those adjacent to the wet section, and verified the absence of voltage at the specified points. Only then did he give Pavel room to proceed.

The lining came away with uneven resistance. The water held it against the support; where Pavel lifted an edge, glossy surfaces formed and changed shape without falling. Asha handed him the liquid extractor nozzle. The hose led to a sealed technical container, secured beneath the tool bag.

Elena watched the first small transparent mass separate from the wall and enter the nozzle. She felt compelled to follow its path to the container, as if seeing it collected were enough to restore it to the inventory. Daniel, who had arrived with the labels, immediately set a limit on that idea.

“Technical recovery. I’m keeping it out of the potable supply.”

Asha nodded. “It passed over the lining. Even the stuff that looks clean.”

Daniel applied a label near the closure and another on the side visible from the passage. Elena helped him rotate the container without twisting the hose. On the transparent material, the letters seemed too large, but they would remain legible even to someone who hadn’t followed the work.

“Can you confirm the reference?” he asked.

She read it, then compared the entry on the terminal. Daniel recorded the source and the contents’ status. For a few seconds, the collection remained on hold until they had both finished. No one urged Asha to start again: the container might pass to other hands, and those hands shouldn’t have to guess its history.

The removed material gave off an odor different from the module’s usual air, damp and slightly acrid. Elena couldn’t have said what it smelled like, only that she hadn’t smelled it in that passage before. Pavel rolled it inward, slowly, while Asha vacuumed along the edge. Gabriel held the

protected cables aside without pulling on them.

“Don’t go beyond that fastener,” Asha said.

Pavel stopped. He inserted a small camera into the cleared space; the image appeared on the terminal. Elena saw two nearly identical tubes, a bracket, and a fitting with a film of water around its body. Asha asked him to move the light. The reflection broke, then began to grow again in the same spot.

They didn’t immediately discuss the cause. To identify it, they would have to dismantle things; for now, they knew where the liquid was coming out.

Asha brought up the schematic, pointed to the two valves that delimited the section, and dictated the sequence. Pavel confirmed the first valve’s position. She shut off the transfer control, then had him check it locally. They isolated the line, drained the liquid it contained into technical recovery, and waited before touching the fitting.

“It’s contained now,” Asha said.

Elena looked at the open panel. “Can recovery continue?”

“Collection can, in the intermediate storage tanks. Not transfer through this branch. We’ll use the potable reserves for ordinary use until we restore the flow.”

Daniel noted the time in the log without reading it aloud. Elena cared that it was there, not that every operation became an announcement. She asked which levels needed to be monitored during isolation and who would receive the alerts. Asha assigned the check and showed her the threshold beyond which they would have to change the configuration.

They continued collecting. The liquid had seeped into the folds of the lining and beneath a conduit; the visible part disappeared quickly, while the hidden part required them to clear space and change angles. Pavel tried to reach an edge with the nozzle, but his sleeve struck the handhold and made him lose his position. He stopped without swearing. He pulled his arm back and secured himself better.

Elena noticed that Asha had begun giving him instructions one at a time, waiting for confirmation before giving the next.

“How long until your break?” she asked.

“I’ll finish this part.”

“Which part?”

Asha looked away from the compartment. The answer didn’t come right away.

Gabriel pointed to the spot on the camera feed. “The lining up to the bracket. Then we can leave everything secured.”

Elena approved that limit. She didn’t order them to abandon an operation halfway through; she stopped the word finish from expanding to include everything.

When they reached the bracket, Daniel closed the container and began measuring the collected liquid with the calibrated-volume device. In microgravity, he couldn’t set it on a scale and wait for the weight to solve the problem. He checked the temperature, the container reference, and the bubbles remaining in the measurement, then repeated the reading.

“Four point eight kilograms equivalent,” he said. “Compared with the shortfall, that leaves one point six unrecoverable. I’m keeping the balance’s precision separate from the recovery’s.”

The rest was in materials they couldn’t usefully clean, in inaccessible spots, in small quantities dispersed while the fault was present. It wasn’t all visible at once. Elena asked for the damp materials to be sealed and identified, not put back in stowage as if they were just clutter.

Pavel secured the last bag to the technical net. The skin on his wrist was red where the glove had rubbed. Jonas, who had stopped by to make sure no one skipped water because of the break, asked him to show it without taking hold of his arm.

“Wash and dry that first. Then you can get back to it.”

“I’m not getting back to it,” Pavel said.

It was true: he was looking at the removed fitting, motionless inside a secured tray. It showed a thin flaw near the sealing seat. Asha rotated it under the lamp and asked Gabriel to enlarge the image. She didn’t attribute the break to fatigue, vibration, or a fitting error. She noted the location and kept the component.

“We don’t have this whole assembly among the unassigned spares,” she said.

Pavel pointed to the diagram of the alternative branch. “It’s the same there.”

“If we take it, that branch will be out of service.”

“We can first see whether the seat can be salvaged.”

Asha set the fitting down in the tray. “We can examine it. We can’t declare it reliable just because we don’t have another one.”

Elena waited until they both looked toward her. “The line is isolated and the levels are being monitored. Hand over before your break. We’ll revisit the options with everyone who’s rested.”

Pavel closed the tray with what seemed to her greater care than necessary. He didn’t protest. Daniel marked the recovered container as segregated, ready for a controlled treatment cycle, and left the permanent-loss entry open.

In the message to the next shift, Elena wrote that the fault was contained, not repaired. Then she detached herself from the handhold to let Asha out of the compartment. The space that opened up seemed insufficient for the weariness with which she crossed it.

At the start of day 13, Elena found the fitting still in the transparent tray. Pavel had added images of the flaw from several angles and the reference for the assembly it had come from. Beside it, on Asha’s terminal, the alternative branch appeared isolated from the rest of the schematic, with its shutoff valve closed.

Elena had slept less than she would have liked, but she had slept. During the interval no one had called to ask whether she agreed with the configuration already approved. The handovers reported stable levels in the intermediate storage tanks and no new moisture observed. She opened the latest check confirmation, then turned to Asha.

“What did you rule out?”

Pavel answered before she could. “A new seal won’t fix the flaw in the body. I could prepare an external patch, but we wouldn’t have enough verification of how long it would last.”

He didn’t seem to be asking permission to try. He seemed to want the possibility he was giving up recorded in the logs.

Asha slid the alternative assembly diagram in front of him. “This has the same reference. It’s installed on the same kind of line. We can check it before we install it.”

“How much of the branch will we lose?” Elena asked.

“All of it except the connector assembly we need. We’ll isolate it, cap the ends, and mark it unavailable. It won’t be a second route ready for use.”

Gabriel had already checked the adjacent electrical elements. No component taken from another

system appeared on his list: no oxygen pump to adapt, no component serving some hidden function elsewhere. The sacrifice stayed within the water circuit, and it was serious enough without needing to become anything else.

“What if the active branch fails again?” Elena asked.

“We’ll have to stop it again and work on it,” Asha said. “We’ll have the storage tanks and the reserves, but not the complete alternative route. And we’ll keep using up the technicians’ hours.”

Pavel ran a finger over the outside of the tray. “The sound assembly hasn’t been used where it is.”

“I know,” Asha said.

Elena understood that neither of them was defending the damaged part. Pavel wanted the intact component to remain a future possibility. Asha wanted to use it before the buildup of water awaiting treatment became a second problem. Their disagreement was about when a reserve stopped being a precaution and had to become a repair.

“How long can we continue in the isolated configuration without complicating recovery?” she asked.

Asha showed her the level trends and the forecast with the suspended uses already factored in. She didn’t give her a dramatic countdown. There was time to dismantle methodically, inspect, and test, but no reason to keep the system crippled while waiting for a component that wouldn’t arrive.

Elena read the plan’s conditions through to the final check. “I approve removing it. I want the alternative branch marked unavailable in the regular summary too, not just in the repair log.”

Asha nodded. Pavel pushed away from the station and went to the tool bag.

“And the broken assembly stays in storage,” Elena added.

“It stays,” he said.

There was no relief in his voice. Elena didn’t ask him for any. She had authorized a solution, not secured the emotional agreement of the person who would have to carry it out.

The work began again with a reading of the isolation conditions. Asha pointed, Pavel checked at the location, and Gabriel checked the utilities. The alternative branch was dry, but they treated it like a process line, protecting the ends from the air in the compartment and from fibers in the

removed materials. Elena followed the plan on the terminal without calling out every step. When a confirmation was delayed, she watched the technicians instead of repeating the question.

The component came out of its seat without visible damage. Pavel left it inside the protective casing, opened only as much as needed for inspection; Asha compared the references and mating surfaces. Then they returned to the active section. Before installing it, they checked that the supports wouldn't put a twist on the fitting. Pavel loosened and repositioned a bracket until the tube aligned without being pulled.

"Like this?" he asked.

Asha looked from another angle. "Like that. Mark the new position."

Elena recorded the detail in the intervention report. It didn't prove the original cause of the flaw, but it explained how they had left the assembly. They might need to know without remembering the words spoken inside the compartment.

Tomás passed by with a meal for whoever would remain on the next check and stopped outside the marked-off area. He read the tag that had just been applied to the alternative branch.

"Is this permanent?"

"It's the current status," Elena said. "Restoring it will require another compatible assembly."

"All right. As long as it doesn't still show up as available in the resource comparison."

Daniel, connected on the work channel, replied that he had already removed it from operational availability. Elena checked the entry. Part of her wished Tomás didn't always need to look for the point where a sacrifice became invisible. Another part recognized that this was exactly what they had promised he could do.

Once the installation was complete, Asha didn't immediately reopen the regular transfer. She asked Gabriel to check the electrical area again, then prepared a small quantity for the controlled test, keeping it out of potable distribution. Pavel placed dry witness strips at the points where a new trace would be visible and cleared the camera's view.

Elena had them confirm the stop criteria. A visible leak, unexpected pressure behavior, or a mismatch in the transfer would stop the test. No one suggested compensating for a small discrepancy by adding a margin to the tolerance.

Asha opened the passage according to the planned sequence. The line filled, the readings changed

and settled. On the screen, the fitting looked like an unremarkable, intact component. Elena searched for the reflection she had seen the day before and had to make herself stop seeing it in changes in the light.

“First section dry,” Pavel said.

Gabriel confirmed there were no anomalies in the area being checked. Daniel read the correspondence between the output and the input, then waited for the transfer to end before closing the entry.

Asha let the specified interval pass and asked for another local check. No new trace appeared on the strips. She stopped the test and recorded the result.

Elena checked the time. They could have called the replacement a success and spent a few minutes feeling as though they were done.

“Let’s move on to the repetitions,” Asha said.

The commander confirmed. The assembly they had removed had held once. To return the circuit to the ship, they still had to show that the result didn’t depend only on the most favorable conditions.

The second test lasted long enough for Elena to eat the meal Tomás had brought. She did it outside the technical area, reading the report while the food rehydrated. The package specified the amount of water required; for a moment she thought of using less, then recognized the impulse as a private and useless form of command. She had just told everyone not to alter their food or hydration. She used the amount indicated.

At the end of the transfer, Asha had them check the repaired section first, then the downstream route. Pavel showed her the dry strips without removing them until she had recorded the result. Gabriel checked the area where they had found the damp lining; the compromised materials had been removed and the accessible surfaces cleaned and dried. The adjacent utilities would be powered up again only after the required checks were complete.

The next test included a stop and restart. Elena stepped away to handle other shipboard handovers, leaving a contact open on the operations channel. She didn’t need to stand in front of the fitting to make it hold. When she returned, Asha was comparing the latest transfer with the previous ones.

“No leak observed. Quantities consistent,” she said. “I want the last check after the ordinary cycle.”

The ordinary cycle tested a different kind of patience. It had no dramatic beginning: a sequence resumed doing the work it had been designed to do. The readings fell within the expected ranges and stayed there. Pavel inspected the repaired spot with the lamp from both sides. Then he closed the camera and left the witness strips accessible for the next shift to inspect.

Asha authorized the active branch to return to service. Gabriel completed the electrical checks before restoring the utilities; the guards went back into place without covering the repair references. Pavel reinstalled the access panel only after Elena had seen where the label for the alternative branch would remain. Its unavailable status wouldn't disappear behind the lining.

The collected water remained. Treatment had been started separately, and not all the contents of the technical container could be recovered for use. Asha showed Daniel the results of the cycle and the quality checks. They compared the batch references before he changed the inventory.

"Four point five can go back in," Daniel said.

Elena secured herself beside the terminal. "Out of the four point eight collected."

"Yes. Three tenths remain in the treatment waste and residue we won't put back into the circuit. The permanent loss on the balance is one point nine kilograms."

He opened the entries so she could follow them. The initial estimated shortfall had been six point four; they had collected four point eight, leaving one point six unrecoverable. Of the four point eight, four point five had become usable again after treatment and checks. The rest added to the loss.

"I don't want these decimals to suggest a precision we don't have," Daniel said. "The reconciliation is still within the uncertainty of the measurements. But there isn't a discrepancy that keeps growing."

Asha had him add the reference to the transfers used for comparison. That statement was valid because the section was dry and the subsequent measurements were consistent, not because the final total was more reassuring than the first.

Elena looked at the two resources they had lost: water and an alternative route. The first could be expressed as a quantity; the second required a description of what they would no longer be able to do automatically. She had them kept close together in the summary without combining them into a single assessment.

Daniel entered the new inventory in the resource overview. "With these restrictions, the margin

to Mars remains. I'm not counting anything on the surface."

"And the Earth scenarios?"

"They weren't viable before. This repair doesn't add water or reliable duration. It doesn't make them practicable."

Elena confirmed the update. There was no route decision to hide inside a maintenance report. The ship was already bound for Mars; the possibility of diverting remained a question to address with all the data, including what had just worsened. Day 40 hadn't turned into a reserve to spend simply because it was still ahead of them.

She asked for the report to be available before the shift handover. Then she went to the common area, where restoring the stowage was returning the passage to its usual width. Tomás handed her a bag that needed to be secured near the food distribution area. She checked the label and fastened it in the indicated place.

She didn't call an extraordinary meeting. She announced it on the shipboard channel, leaving the same text available to anyone who was resting. The leak had been located, isolated, and repaired. Repeated transfers and inspection of the compartment showed no new leaks. The recovered water had been treated separately; the balance showed a permanent loss of one point nine kilograms, within the reported measurement limits. The alternative branch was unavailable.

Then she listed the restrictions. Drinking water and water for food preparation retained priority and the planned quantities. For personal washing, they would use the premoistened supplies already in inventory; nonessential washing remained suspended until the next review. Water-balance checks were now part of every shift handover. Any new moisture was to be reported, not quietly wiped up in an attempt to fix things alone.

Jonas asked her to repeat the instruction about hydration. Elena did, without calling it a medical exception.

"It applies to everyone," she added.

Confirmations came over the channel from those on duty. Pavel asked where to put the material being kept for the fault analysis. Daniel assigned it a place in technical stowage and updated the reference; the broken fitting was no longer an object they had to decide what to do with every time someone needed to clear space.

Asha joined Elena after signing off on the system release. She carried the terminal under one arm

and held the other close to her body to avoid hitting the net that had just been put back in place.

“The local check at shift change stays,” she said.

“It’s in the handover.”

“Even if the balance keeps matching.”

Elena showed her the entry. Asha read it, nodded, and headed for the bunks. She didn’t apologize for being brusque, and the commander was glad she didn’t have to tell her she didn’t need to.

Left alone in the common area, Elena took her drinking pouch and checked how much she had consumed. Some of the amount planned for that interval was still left. She drank without waiting to feel thirstier.

She would have liked to wash her face. At work, she had touched a handhold with a damp glove and then her cheek; the skin near her ear felt tight. She opened one of the premoistened packets assigned for personal use and cleaned that spot first, then her fingers. She put the used material in the waste container, as everyone else would.

On the terminal, the active circuit showed as stable. Below it, in the same summary, the alternative branch remained unavailable. Elena read both lines before confirming the handover.

A Voice Already Heard

On day twenty, Nora had learned to recognize the change of shift from the pause between two movements in the corridor. Whoever was arriving stopped to read the handover; whoever was leaving waited for confirmation before letting go of the handhold. The water-circuit check still occupied its own line, beside transmissions and connection status. It was no longer news, but it still required a name.

She signed for the communications shift and secured the terminal to the console. The casing had a raised edge that rubbed against her wrist. She pressed it against the adhesive surface, without success, then slipped her foot into the brace and opened the reception summary.

No new confirmed contact from Earth.

By now she read that sentence before the data. She had to force herself to reverse the order: check the logs, then confirm the summary. The previous day's absence could not be inherited as an already established result. Absence, too, had to be measured again.

Tomás appeared at the entrance as she completed the transmission check.

“Am I early?”

Nora looked at the personal station calendar. The shared screen showed only the available and occupied intervals.

“A few minutes. You can get ready; I’m not using your queue.”

He secured himself to the side handhold and connected his device to the reserved terminal. Nora tilted the technical screen to keep the light out of his eyes. Neither of them asked the other what they intended to send.

She had one earpiece over her left ear; the other was pushed aside so she could hear anyone coming in. The audio monitor was almost always useless. When data came in, it was the integrity checks and logs that told her what it was, not the sound. Even so, Nora kept listening to the designated channels, with the volume low enough not to drown out internal communications.

She was comparing two entries in the log when she heard a clipped consonant, a brief rasp, and a male voice.

“Wait, I’ll repeat the reference.”

Her hand shot toward the recording control before she looked at the screen. The device was already saving the monitoring output; she knew that. Even so, she pressed the marker and brought the second earpiece to her ear.

The voice was gone.

For an instant she pictured a room with someone inside it. She didn't see her mother, or a landscape, or the planet from the incomplete images: only someone leaning toward a microphone because the others hadn't understood. Someone busy correcting something small.

There was a recent entry on the application panel. Nora read its timestamp and felt her chest expand against the restraint belt.

"What?" Tomás asked.

She didn't answer at once. She opened the details, found the fragment in the audio output, and stopped it before it played again.

"I heard a voice."

The sentence came out too whole, without the cautions she would have expected of anyone else. Tomás lifted his fingers from his screen.

Nora pointed to the panel, as if the gesture could diminish what she had said.

"On the monitor. I don't know where it came from yet."

"From Earth?"

"The language, yes. I have to verify the source."

She realized how absurd that distinction sounded when they both knew what question he had asked. She took off one earpiece.

"I don't have a confirmed contact, Tomás."

He looked at her for another moment, then moved aside to leave her clear access to the service terminal. His personal device remained open, its contents facing the wall.

Nora called Leila on the operations channel.

"I need a check at the communications station. I have a voice fragment in the monitoring output. I haven't linked it to an input yet."

Pronouncing the last sentence cost her more than the first. Until then she had avoided looking at the receiver counter: she was already searching for the message where it would have appeared if her first impression had been true.

“Preserve the state before reopening anything,” Leila replied. “I’m on my way.”

Nora blocked automatic deletion of the relevant logs, saved the session configuration, and noted the sequence of her own commands. She didn’t restart anything. The habitual action of closing and reopening a window suddenly seemed dangerous: it might clear the very point they needed to understand.

She searched for Elena’s name and opened a direct link.

“There’s a check underway on an audio output. It could be material from Earth, but I have no evidence of a new acquisition. Leila is on her way.”

“Is routine service continuing?”

“Yes.”

“Update me when you can distinguish between the two cases. Do I need to clear the station?”

Nora looked at Tomás. He had heard enough to understand that she was speaking with the commander.

“Not for now.”

Elena didn’t ask her to play the voice. That lack of a command left Nora alone with her own desire to let someone else hear it. If three of them had heard it, for an instant it might have seemed more real.

Leila arrived with the service terminal held against her side. She secured herself to the brace beside Nora and looked first at the general display, then at Nora’s face.

“Did you change the audio routing?”

“No. Marker, opened the details, stopped playback. I preserved the state.”

“Good. We won’t start by listening. Show me the input.”

Nora moved the window containing the recent timestamp. The lower-level logs appeared beneath it. They did not contain the evidence she had expected.

“That’s the time of the application event,” Leila said. She didn’t point to anything yet. “Let’s see what it means here.”

Tomás disconnected his device.

“I’ll give you room.”

“Your interval is still available,” Nora said.

“I’ll make it up later.”

There was no resentment in his reply, at least none she knew how to recognize. She would have preferred him to ask for proof, to insist, to give her something to push back against.

Before leaving, he turned around.

“If it isn’t new, you tell me.”

Nora nodded.

She remained looking at the handhold he had let go of. The voice had promised nothing: it was waiting, repeating a reference. She had put everything else into it herself.

Leila opened a copy of the log and asked her to start again from the last command she had executed before the sound. Nora brought her eyes back to the screen. This time she started there.

Nora reconstructed the transmission check, the comparison of the entries, and the sound that had come through her earpiece. Leila had her distinguish what she remembered from what the system had recorded. The two sequences almost matched; between them were the time it had taken her to turn toward Tomás and the useless gesture at the recording control.

“This doesn’t help establish how quickly I reacted,” Nora said.

“No. It helps us avoid attributing an event that came before it to something you did.”

Leila copied the session log into a separate workspace. Nora added the monitor configuration, then they checked that the preservation included the data still present in the buffer. The sound could be replayed without touching the originals.

Nora also checked that the copy preserved the order of the elements, not just their contents. A list reordered for ease of reading would have hidden the sequence in which the service had handled them. Leila showed her the raw view; they compared the beginning and end of the saved interval,

then noted which references belonged to the session and which to the archive. It was a slow check, without sound. Nora realized that the silence itself allowed her to work without anticipating the answer.

For a few minutes they worked without listening to it. On the screen, Nora arranged the chain's steps according to the data path: acquisition from the receiver, reconstruction, delivery to the service, output to the monitor. She knew where everything passed and discovered how easy it was to skip a step when she wanted to get to the end.

The timestamp that had caught her attention belonged to the playback queue.

"Queued today," she said.

Leila enlarged the header. "Not received today."

"Not proven yet."

"Exactly."

Nora was grateful that she didn't correct that second qualification. The timestamp didn't prove a new reception, but neither was it enough, on its own, to reconstruct the fragment's origin. They had to go on.

They examined the corresponding interval in the input log. The radio chain showed no new block from Earth that could be associated with the voice. The monitor, on the other hand, reported having served a valid item. The disagreement narrowed down the problem without yet resolving it.

Nora checked that the two views used the same time reference. Then she checked that she hadn't accidentally excluded an acquisition path. Leila examined the audio service requests. Neither of them suggested changing filters or thresholds during the search.

"It could be an item that was left pending," Nora said.

"It could. Let's look at the original identifier."

The ordinary window showed only an internal reference. To trace it back to the object, they had to go through the log of the service that had prepared fragments for the monitor. Leila opened the local documentation and searched for the expected behavior when the queue resumed. Nora passed her the configuration version before she asked for it.

That was when they listened again.

The sentence lasted long enough to leave a feeling of incompleteness. There was a rough compression on the consonants, a pause before “reference.” Nora had the impression she knew the voice. She couldn’t say whether she had known it before or from the repetitions of the last few minutes.

“I’ve heard it before,” she said.

Leila stopped the player. “Where?”

“I don’t know.”

“I’ll note it as an impression, not a finding.”

“I know how to write a report too.”

Her reply hung between them, out of proportion. Nora lowered her eyes to the raised edge of the casing and pressed it down again.

“Sorry.”

“I’m not trying to convince you it’s old,” Leila said. “I’m trying to find where it came from.”

Nora reopened the list of archived technical objects. She excluded personal areas from the search before starting it. The voice was operational, but that resemblance did not give her license to search everyone’s messages. They had a technical path to follow and enough data to do it.

The list of segments contained material from before the silence. Each item retained references to the original block, while the listening service could extract shorter portions. It wasn’t enough to compare the outgoing audio file with the fingerprint of the entire object: first they had to reconstruct which portion had been served.

Leila set up a search on the contents of the copy, limited to the technical archive. Nora checked the limits of the operation and preserved the request. The work would not provide an immediate answer. For the first time since hearing the voice, she managed to look at the transmission panel without expecting confirmation to appear there.

Elena connected while they were reconstructing the passage between queue and archive.

“What can I write in the handover?”

Nora cleared her throat.

“A voice fragment appeared on the audio monitor. The recent timestamp relates to local queuing. We haven’t found a corresponding radio acquisition. We’re checking whether it came from material already on board.”

“Do we need to change the service?”

Leila pointed to the only component involved on the screen. Nora followed her gesture.

“We can suspend automatic playback on that branch without interrupting reception and recording. The audio monitor isn’t proof of contact.”

“Do that, and record the change. Then hand the work over at shift change.”

Nora looked at the time. “We can stay until we find the segment.”

“Is there an emergency that requires both of you?”

She would have liked to say yes. She felt it in her body, the same urgency that had made her take the earpiece in both hands. On the screen, however, the originals were preserved and the suspect path could be isolated. The service could continue.

“No,” she said.

They agreed with Elena on continuing the checks and handing over the information. It was not yet a new general procedure, only the handling of that anomaly. Leila prepared a handover that separated the operations already completed from those not to be repeated on the originals. Nora added a commitment to give Tomás an outcome too.

When the shift ended, the search had not yet produced a verified match. Nora checked that the copy was accessible to authorized personnel and took off her headphones. Her ears hurt where the earbuds had pressed against them.

On the way to the bunks she ran into Tomás. He didn’t block her path; he let her be the one to stop.

“We don’t have a new radio input,” she told him. “We’re looking for the source in the technical archive. It’s not finished yet.”

Tomás nodded, but didn’t move right away.

“I saw you smile.”

Nora didn’t remember doing so.

“Yes,” she replied.

He moved away from the handhold to let her pass. Nora reached her bunk without adding an explanation. She had handed over all the necessary data; she didn’t know where to put that smile.

On day twenty-one, Nora arrived at the station with her headphones still in their case. She had slept in fits and starts, but had kept to her return time. Leila showed her the search result without opening the player.

There was a match to verify in the technical archive from before the silence.

Nora secured herself to the console and read the original block references. The object did not belong to the last protected packet: it was operational material received earlier, stored with the mission’s other exchanges. It had its own logged input and a stable place in the archive. There was no need to touch the catastrophe data or open personal folders.

“Let me do the path without your selection,” she said.

Leila left the terminal to her. Nora started from the archive reference and again retrieved the portion served to the monitor. She compared it with the saved output. The content matched; the differences concerned the container prepared for playback and its local fields.

She listened first to the archived segment, then to the one from the previous day. The same clipped consonant, the same pause. She placed the sound representations side by side and checked that she wasn’t recognizing only the words.

“This is it,” she said.

Neither of them let go of the brace. They had found the origin of the content, but not yet how it had reappeared. Leila marked the match and opened the isolated test environment.

They used copies of the buffer and the preserved configuration. The test session had no access to the receivers or the operational queue. Nora checked the separation, then left Leila to run the service-resumption sequence.

The fragment didn’t appear on the first run.

Nora felt a shameful relief, too quick to hide from herself. It didn’t mean the voice was new. It

only meant the defect required conditions they hadn't yet reproduced. She wrote that in the note before the emotion could change the weight of the evidence already obtained.

Leila compared the simulated resumption with the preserved session.

"The pointer state is missing here," she said.

The item's content had remained available in the buffer even after it was served. The queue log considered it consumed; in the saved condition, however, the session recovery could reconstruct the reference as if it were still pending. Nora followed the two readings of the same object, one at a time.

"It doesn't generate the sound," she said. "It puts what's already there back in the queue."

Leila nodded. "With a new queue timestamp."

They repeated the test, restoring the corresponding state. The sentence came back. The isolated system could not have received it from Earth: it had no connection to the receiver. A recent timestamp appeared on the panel, the time of the test, beside the reference to the old content.

Nora saved the result, restored the initial copy, and asked Leila to repeat the steps without using her command log. The fragment reappeared at the same point.

There was nothing spectacular about the demonstration. A line changed state; a short portion of sound was served a second time. The person speaking remained in the past when those words had been recorded. They had not come closer to the ship; they had not called again.

Nora stopped playback.

"That's enough for the finding," she said. "We'll keep the correction details separate."

They contacted Elena first. Nora summarized the match with the archive, the absence of a new input, and the reproduction of the defect on an isolated copy. Leila confirmed the steps they had checked.

"So, not a recent transmission," Elena said.

"No. A local duplication. The buffer returned a segment that had already been received before the silence."

"Can you say that in the update?"

Nora looked at the window still open on the sound. “Yes. First I’ll tell Tomás.”

She reached him on the direct channel and asked if he could talk. He replied after a brief pause. Nora didn’t try to guess what he was doing.

“We’ve identified the fragment. It was already in our technical archive. An error in buffer recovery put it back into playback with a recent local timestamp. No new signal came from Earth.”

Tomás didn’t speak. Nora waited without filling the connection.

“Are you sure?” he finally asked.

“We found the same content in the old archive and reproduced the defect on a system disconnected from reception. Yes, we have a verified result on that.”

“All right.”

The words seemed unfair to both of them. Nothing was all right, but he hadn’t asked her to describe the world.

“I reacted before checking yesterday,” she added.

“I noticed.”

“I shouldn’t have told you only that I’d heard a voice.”

Tomás exhaled close to the microphone. “I couldn’t have failed to notice. And I didn’t want you to leave me waiting for an answer you already had.”

“I would have told you anyway.”

“You did.”

The connection ended without Nora finding an apology that could contain everything. She returned to the report and wrote the summary for the public handover. She deleted “false signal”: it would confuse local playback with a radio event. She also deleted “no voice from Earth,” which erased the material’s terrestrial origin and left the ambiguity about its timing intact.

She wrote that the fragment that appeared on the monitor was a technical segment already received before the interruption, returned by the onboard buffer. The recent timestamp referred to local queuing. No new acquisition from Earth was associated with it. Routine reception and transmissions had remained active.

Leila read the text and handed the terminal back to her.

“Add where they can check the evidence.”

Nora added the references to the copies and the reproducible sequence. She didn’t attach the sound to the general bulletin: anyone with an operational reason to examine it could reach it from the technical area, but there was no need to bounce that voice around the whole ship.

At the handover, she read out the summary in her own voice. She didn’t attribute the episode to some generic malfunctioning system to hide behind the explanation.

“The first interpretation was mine. I brought Leila in before announcing a contact. The check ruled out a new reception.”

A question followed about the suspended audio service. Nora explained that the branch would remain excluded from automatic playback until the correction was verified, without disabling inputs and recordings. Another question concerned what the retraction meant for the possibility of receiving more messages.

“It doesn’t change what we know about Earth,” she replied. “It explains what happened here.”

After closing the connection, she realized she had been holding her foot too tense in the brace. She released it and waited for the discomfort to pass. Leila was completing the anomaly label; beside her name she left space for the second signature. Nora read everything before adding hers.

Jonas asked her to stop by the medical compartment when she had finished the handover. He specified that she didn’t need to interrupt her work. Nora replied that she’d have a break shortly and regretted using the tone with which she assigned a request to the right queue.

She found him putting away a case. He secured the closure flap, checked that it held, and pointed her toward a handhold away from the entrance.

“Do you want to talk here?”

“Depends what you need to ask me.”

Jonas left the terminal with its screen facing the wall.

“How are you after giving the result?”

Nora hooked one foot into the lower strap. She hadn’t prepared an answer to that question; she had prepared the log references, in case she was asked to prove that she hadn’t lost control.

“I made Tomás hope.”

“What did you tell him?”

She repeated the words she had used when she reacted to the fragment and the correction that came right after. She didn’t embellish the pause between them. Jonas listened to the end.

“And then?”

“Then I asked for a check and told him it wasn’t new.”

“That’s what you did. What do you think you took from him?”

Nora rubbed her wrist against her sleeve. The edge of the casing had left a faint mark.

“I don’t know. Another chance.”

It was an imprecise answer, but Jonas didn’t force her to make it tidy.

“When I heard the voice, I didn’t think about the logs,” she said. “I thought there was a room. Someone still doing his job. A timestamp on the screen was enough.”

“For how long?”

“Long enough to smile.”

Jonas shifted slightly to get the light out of his eyes.

“I would have liked to hear it too.”

Nora looked at him. It was the first thing he had said without putting her at the center of it, and for that reason she was able to hear him.

“It wasn’t your responsibility,” she replied.

“Wanting to hear it wouldn’t have become my responsibility either, if I’d been at the console. Responsibility has to do with what I would have done next.”

She pressed her lips together. “That doesn’t erase the mistake.”

“I’m not trying to erase it.”

Someone passed through the corridor; a buckle tapped lightly against the entrance edge. They waited for them to move away. Nora would have liked to measure the damage of a brief hope too,

put it in a column, and determine what restriction was needed to keep it from happening again.

“Should I leave the listening to someone else for a few shifts?” she asked.

“Do you feel unable to do it?”

“I feel capable of wanting to hear things that aren’t there.”

“You heard something that was there. You attributed meaning to its presence too soon. Those are two different problems.”

Nora followed the case closure with her eyes. One corner had folded over; Jonas noticed and straightened it without stopping his wait.

“I can’t promise I won’t hope next time,” she said.

“Do you need to promise that in order to work?”

She thought of Leila asking her for the input before listening. Leila hadn’t asked her to stop wanting an answer. She had asked her to open another log.

“No.”

They talked about rest and the handover, without turning the conversation into a declaration of full fitness. Jonas asked her to let him know if her broken sleep continued. Nora agreed. She left without a concluding phrase to take with her, but with less need to punish herself through work.

At the station, Leila had laid out two views of the same event: the monitor view and the acquisition view. Nora asked her to leave them open.

“The new card has to prevent people from confusing them,” she said.

“And it has to work even if the person using it hasn’t seen this defect.”

They prepared a brief procedure, then tested it against the case they had just resolved. A possible voice, unexpected content, or recent indication would not automatically become a contact. The first operator would preserve the state, record what they had observed, and call in a second person. Routine reception was not to be interrupted to make the search cleaner.

Nora wrote a line about the evidence required, then deleted it.

“This makes it sound as though a missing result is enough to rule everything out.”

Leila read it. “Let’s distinguish unverified from disproven.”

They rewrote the passage. An incomplete result would remain incomplete, with the reason for the uncertainty and the checks still needed. To confirm a new contact, they would have to trace it back to the actual input, verify timing and source, and compare the content with the material already available. A recent reference inside a service would not replace the path back to the receiver.

The second person would reconstruct that path from the data, not merely approve the first person’s interpretation. They could use the same documentation, but they had to know what they were checking and leave a record of their own finding. Nora wanted it written without phrases like “independent validation,” which sounded precise even when nobody did anything different.

“What if the second person isn’t available right away?” Leila asked.

“Preserve it and alert whoever is coordinating the shift. It remains a possible event, not a confirmed contact.”

“And we don’t wait in silence just because the card isn’t complete.”

Nora added the distinction between an operational report and an announcement to the crew. Elena needed to know that a check might require resources; everyone needed to receive a clear result when there was one. Neither required broadcasting a voice before its source had been established.

They tested the card starting only from the window that had misled Nora the day before. This time the recent time stopped at its actual meaning: queuing. The check required them to look further. It didn’t make mistakes impossible, but it left less room for one person’s desire to become everyone’s result.

Elena reviewed the proposal on the shared terminal. She asked who could perform the second check and how unresolved cases would be handed over. Leila outlined the necessary tasks; Nora specified where to find instructions and data without entering personal areas. The commander had the reference added to the routine handover and approved the new procedure.

“It applies even when the signal seems obvious,” Nora said.

Elena looked at her. “That’s when it needs to be easy to follow.”

They didn’t discuss the route. The card did not determine where to go or assign probabilities to anyone’s survival. It concerned the next data point that came in, whatever choice they made.

Before leaving the station, Nora checked the transmission queue. The pending recordings remained in the expected order; personal intervals were available according to the calendar. She didn't open the contents to look for comfort or go to her own folder to listen to her mother again. The technical fragment had already taken up enough hours without stealing more from those who wanted to send something.

Tomás confirmed from another terminal that he had read the update. Nora saw the acknowledgment and didn't write to ask whether he forgave her. That question would have assigned him a task that wasn't his.

With Leila, she checked the final handover: the suspect monitor branch still excluded, reception and recording active, anomaly materials preserved, new procedure available. Then they returned to the contact summary.

The sentence hadn't changed. Nora read it after the logs, not before. She added her signature and waited for Leila to complete the check. Only when she saw Leila's name as well did she take off her headphones and put them beside the console.

Without Assistance

The first instruction that needed correcting asked them to wait for authorization.

Elena found it on the shared terminal, between the configuration check and access to the local commands. The document was available on board, complete with figures and revisions. They didn't need Earth to open it. To go beyond that point, however, the procedure still called for the opinion of a specialist who wasn't answering.

"This shouldn't have been in the test version," she said.

Asha came up to the terminal, hooking one foot under a strap. She didn't try to justify the wording. She opened the linked reference and compared the two pages.

"The main sheet is up to date. The cross-reference isn't."

Elena added a note. "Let's mark it before we begin."

It was day 31. In the onboard schedule, the test occupied a separate block from routine maintenance, although by now the difference seemed slight: they hadn't received assistance for all that time. And yet they kept coming across instructions written for a crew that could hand a problem over to someone else, go to sleep, and wake up to an analysis done elsewhere. The others hadn't been replaced. Their functions had been distributed among twelve people who also had to eat, sleep, and keep the filters clean.

Leila brought up the list of planned operations on her screen. Each item had an owner, a second check, and a condition for stopping. Elena had requested this precisely to prevent the word autonomy from authorizing any kind of improvisation.

"We're not disconnecting anything to make the test more convincing," she said over the common channel. "The safeguards stay active. Reception too."

Nora confirmed from the communications station. Transmissions would follow the usual queue; any new data would be handled with the prescribed checks. There was no need to manufacture an artificial silence inside the real one.

Gabriel checked the load schedule. Jonas had prepared the instrument for independent environmental measurements. Daniel would be available for inventory references, without opening any packages ahead of time. The test didn't require them to use spare parts, only to show that they could find them and identify them.

Elena read the final stop condition. A real anomaly would suspend the simulated sequence. It wouldn't become a more interesting exercise.

"Anyone who notices a discrepancy reports it immediately," she added. "You don't need to reach a diagnosis before stopping the test."

Leila pointed out where she would distinguish the exercise notes from the real system data. Asha checked that the planned commands were still the ones in the loaded configuration. Elena waited for both confirmations. She didn't want to have to reconstruct afterward whether an unexpected reading had been introduced to test them or had actually appeared: that uncertainty would make the very comparison they were trying to carry out useless.

"We can begin."

Asha took charge of checking the carbon dioxide removal system. The sequence called for comparing readings, verifying the switchover, and locally retrieving the data needed for maintenance. Elena followed the first items without intervening. She had chosen to observe how information passed from one person to another as well: a value read aloud, a reference repeated, a request that found someone free to deal with it.

Two trends remained side by side on Leila's screen. Asha pointed to a section of the first.

"Zoom in here."

The curve stretched out. Elena saw a brief rise, then an almost exact return to the previous level. It didn't seem important until the phenomenon repeated, more narrowly.

"Is that part of the sequence?" she asked.

"No."

Asha said nothing more. She checked the channel reference and asked Leila to show the unfiltered samples. The line became irregular. One value stayed fixed for several readings, then jumped.

Gabriel turned toward the power panel. "Did you change anything?"

"Not yet," Asha replied. "No commanded switchover."

Elena scanned the test sheet. They hadn't reached the point where they were supposed to change the configuration. The fault had appeared during a check that, on paper, was only meant to collect

an initial reference reading.

“Let’s suspend the simulated part,” she said. “From this point on, we’re recording a real intervention.”

Leila marked the transition in the log without ending data acquisition. Jonas, who had secured the case for his instrument to a handhold, opened it and checked the battery status and function test. He didn’t look to Elena for permission to do what was his job.

For a few moments, the commander felt an urge to call everyone to the station. She recognized it and let it pass. Twelve people crowded around the same screen would be breathing the same air without measuring it any better.

“Brief update to the rest of the crew,” she said. “Measurement anomaly under investigation. No change to activities unless Asha and Jonas ask otherwise.”

“Instrument-related, to be confirmed,” Asha clarified.

Elena corrected herself at once. “Measurement anomaly. Cause to be confirmed.”

Leila sent the corrected wording. It was a small difference, but Elena knew how large it could become if they started acting as though the first hypothesis were already a diagnosis.

Asha asked to see the valves’ actual positions, not just the ones requested by the controller. Removal continued; the fans were running. Another measurement point didn’t show the same trend. Neither fact was enough to dismiss the intermittent reading.

“First, let’s check the air,” Jonas said.

Elena cleared the way. The doctor moved toward the first designated sampling point, careful not to hold the instrument in front of his face. Leila announced that she would preserve both the received data and the commands sent. Gabriel took up the reference for the local electrical diagram.

The test had lasted long enough to reveal a bad cross-reference and a value they couldn’t use. Elena looked at the sentence about Earth authorization, still open on the terminal. She closed it, leaving the revision note visible. She didn’t need to stare at it while the others worked.

“Asha, tell me which people you need right now.”

The engineer listed tasks, not names. An independent environmental measurement, a power

check, an acquisition-chain check, and someone to monitor the controls. Elena assigned each task to someone already there and kept one person free for the next handover.

Then she moved far enough not to block the screen. The ship hadn't changed its sound. There was no smell that could tell them how safe they were. To find out, they would have to finish the work, in the right order.

Jonas reported the first measurement, indicating where he had taken it. Asha repeated it, then waited for the next one. Elena noted that the value remained within the procedure's limits; she didn't turn that into an announcement of safety.

The doctor moved through the habitation module and returned along the recirculation path. He needed to rule out the possibility that the discrepancy came from uneven distribution, not gather a reassuring series of numbers in the same place. Meanwhile, Leila checked that the samples' time reference hadn't shifted. A correct trend displayed with the wrong delay would have suggested a different problem from the real one.

"The times match," she said. "The jump is already coming from the measurement channel. It isn't originating in the graph."

Gabriel found the power supply stable at the accessible points. He didn't loosen any connectors to see if the fault changed: first he recorded the state and checked the diagram. Elena saw him catch a loose tie that had lifted beside his wrist and put it back in the closed pocket of the case. They still had to do those things, too, while looking for the cause. No object could be left loose just because something more important needed attention.

Asha brought up the last routine switchover. The sensor's jump didn't correspond to a consistent change in the other measurements or a different actuator position. Jonas finished his circuit and secured the instrument near the station, with the inlet clear.

"The environmental measurements agree with each other," he said. "Within limits, with no upward trend at the moment."

"We won't use that channel to decide the next step," Asha replied.

She explained to Elena which part of the cycle they could manage locally and which conditions would require a different configuration. The adsorbent materials were still doing their job; the fault hadn't turned them into inert components. But they couldn't rely on a reading that changed without corroboration to determine when to switch over. The procedure provided for temporary management based on conservative intervals and independent monitoring of the atmosphere,

with the actual positions checked after every command.

Elena read the operating limits in the local document. “How much monitoring?”

Asha pointed to the items. It wasn’t necessary to keep a hand on the controls at all times; it was necessary for someone to have the explicit task of monitoring them, know when to intervene, and not be assigned to an incompatible task at the same time.

Leila separated the suspect channel from the others on the screen. She didn’t delete the value or replace it with Jonas’s, as though the handheld instrument had become part of the controller. She assigned it the correct status and set up the logging of local actions. The safeguards that didn’t depend on that channel remained active.

“Confirm temporary local management,” Asha said.

Leila read out the configuration. Gabriel checked it at the panel. Only then did Asha carry out the switchover.

Elena followed the first sequence to the end. The requested positions and the detected positions matched. The circuit went through the planned section without irregularities, while Jonas repeated the measurement. The suspect sensor oscillated again, but this time it didn’t control anything.

That was when Elena realized she had clenched her jaw. She relaxed it and asked for the update to send to the others.

Asha dictated it without looking up. System operating, unstable channel excluded from regulation, monitored local management. Checks ongoing. She didn’t say resolved.

Elena sent the message, then opened the duty roster. The names already had assignments for the rest of the day. Moving one meant leaving another task waiting; it wasn’t enough to add a line beneath the previous one.

“I can stay until the handover,” Asha said when she saw the change appear.

“We don’t know when that will be.”

“I know what I’m looking at.”

“So must the person taking over from you.”

The engineer stopped scrolling through the document. Elena waited for an objection. Instead, she

got a practical question.

“Who’s taking over?”

They agreed on people based on their qualifications and the assignments they could postpone. The handover wouldn’t coincide with a phase that had to be left unfinished. The person taking over would observe a complete cycle and reconstruct from the log what had been changed. Asha would remain available for a real problem, not to avoid writing a clear handover.

Jonas asked for the sampling to have a separate owner, too. “If we all do it, sooner or later we’ll assume someone else has done it.”

Elena added the task. The roster lost the neat symmetry it had had at the beginning of the shift: a scientific check postponed, nonurgent maintenance moved, a free interval turned into monitoring. She didn’t erase rest periods to make the schedule fit again.

In the afternoon, Daniel brought the reference for the available sensor module. He showed it to Asha along with the compatibility documentation, but the package remained sealed. Leila still wanted to rule out the connection and the acquisition chain before they used a spare part. Elena approved the order of checks. Waiting had an attentional cost; replacing the wrong part would have had a material one, without eliminating the first.

When the new monitor arrived, Asha had them read the status from the instruments. She didn’t tell him in advance which value to expect. Elena stayed until the first command after the handover had been checked: read the procedure, announce the action, check the positions, record it. The person taking over spotted an abbreviation that wasn’t explained in the note and asked what it meant.

Asha replaced it with the full name of the measurement point.

Only then did she leave the station. She made her way through the passage, pulling herself along by a handhold, and almost struck the frame with her elbow. Elena didn’t interpret it as a sign of imminent collapse. It was enough to remind her that the technicians’ precision didn’t make them inexhaustible.

Before her own rest period, the commander checked the handover: air within limits, removal active, no trend matching the sensor’s deviations, manual management still necessary. The list of outstanding checks was shorter. It wasn’t empty.

She switched off her own screen without closing the other crew members’ operational session.

She would sleep with people working on the other side of the curtain, as she had throughout the crossing. This time she had to remind herself that it was part of the solution, not a way to shirk her duties.

On waking, Elena read the handover before opening the curtain. Local management had continued without exceeding the prescribed limits. The independent measurements had shown no persistent increase; the suspect channel had continued to produce intermittent deviations. Checks carried out during monitoring had narrowed the problem down to the sensor module, without finding irregularities in the power supply or the downstream chain.

She paused at Leila's concluding note. The fault followed the module in the comparisons permitted by the procedure; it didn't appear in the separately verified acquisition path. That wasn't certainty about the internal cause. It was enough of a basis for replacement.

In the technical compartment, Asha had already secured the tool case. Gabriel was guarding access to the electrical isolation point. The flow needed for removal remained assured by the configuration prescribed for the intervention; they would work on the measurement module without pretending they could switch off the ship's need for air.

Daniel arrived with the package and the inventory sheet. Elena noticed that the transparent seal was still intact. Asha read the reference off the installed component, Daniel read the one on the label, and Leila checked that they matched the onboard document. They also checked the revision and storage conditions.

"It's the one specified," Asha said.

"Availability after withdrawal?" Elena asked.

Daniel showed her the entry. That spare part would no longer be an untouched option in storage. It would begin to age inside the circuit, like the one they were about to remove. Elena approved the withdrawal, and Daniel recorded the change before opening the package.

Gabriel announced that only the affected power supply had been isolated and verified it was dead at the work point. Asha disconnected the module according to the sequence. A screw remained captive in its housing; a connector resisted as expected, then came free. Nothing happened that could turn the intervention into a brilliant feat. Each step took as long as it needed to, so it wouldn't have to be repeated.

Elena stayed at the edge of the compartment. Her view was imperfect but sufficient; to see better, she would have had to occupy the space where Gabriel was checking the connections. She made

herself hold back.

The removed module looked intact. It had no burn mark, crack, or smell that could explain its behavior. Asha put it in the quarantine case and attached the anomaly reference. She didn't declare it recoverable just because it was whole.

"We're not opening it here," Gabriel said.

"Not today," she replied.

Elena recognized in that qualification a discipline she needed to apply to herself as well. Keeping a part for future analysis didn't mean assigning someone to carry it out right away.

The new module slid into place. Asha checked the connections, Gabriel restored power once the compartment was in the required condition, and Leila monitored startup from the terminal. The reading appeared, stable and almost banal after all the hours they had devoted to the old one.

No one celebrated it. Asha asked for the manufacturer's specified stabilization time.

Jonas took a new measurement at the comparison point. Leila displayed the module's reading beside the independent instrument's, with their times and uncertainties kept separate. Elena looked at the small difference between the two numbers and waited for Asha to assess it. There was no point expecting different instruments to produce exactly the same figures down to the last digit; it mattered to know whether the discrepancy met the test criteria and remained consistent over time.

"Comparison acceptable," the engineer said. "Now let's watch the cycle."

They remained in local management during the first check. The sensor followed the expected variation without the previous one's jumps. The actuator positions matched the commands; the other measurements showed no associated anomalies. Then they repeated the check after the next switchover, without shortening the wait just because the result already seemed clear.

Elena left the compartment to eat something. Crossing the habitation module, she met Daniel, who was updating the postponed activities. She asked him whether any problems had appeared in the water inventory.

"No new discrepancy," he replied. "The restrictions remain."

She nodded. For a moment, she had felt the unreasonable desire for solving one problem to grant them a respite from the other systems, too. The ship kept no such accounts. The alternate water

branch remained unavailable, and the new sensor gave them nothing back from it.

When she returned, Asha showed her the check results. Leila pointed out which commands would go back to the controller and which monitoring tasks would remain in the handover. Jonas confirmed that the environmental measurements were consistent, not that there would be no future risk. Gabriel had closed off the work point, checked the tools, and verified that no connection had been strained during reassembly.

Elena authorized the return to automatic mode in accordance with the procedure. Asha announced the change; Leila verified it in the log and against the actual status. The next switchover came from the system, not a person. They followed it through to the end.

Only after that test did the engineer pull away from the terminal.

“Reliable configuration restored. Additional checks included in the handover.”

Elena asked whether continuous monitoring could be ended. Asha checked the schedule again, then nodded. Jonas put the instrument away without making the case inaccessible. The doctor still had the fastening strap around his wrist; he noticed it when he tried to close the case and freed it with an impatient gesture.

“Do you need any more data for the report?” he asked.

“The measurements, already logged,” Leila said. “You don’t have to stay.”

Elena looked at the three terminals, the case containing the excluded module, and the label from the opened package. They could have described those hours as proof that they could manage on their own. It wouldn’t have been false. It would have been incomplete if they left out the independent instrument, the document only partly corrected, the people who took over, and the part that was no longer in storage.

She asked Daniel to keep both pieces of information visible in the summary: system returned to its ordinary configuration and spare part used.

“Not just the green check mark,” she clarified.

Daniel added the link to the inventory transaction. Then he showed her the work time absorbed by the anomaly, distinguished from the time planned for the test. Elena read it all the way through. It was time taken from other checks, but also time they had managed to organize without using up all the clarity they had available.

Asha closed the intervention sheet, leaving the procedure review sheet open. The line about Earth authorization was still among the items to correct. Elena didn't ask her to deal with it right away. She assigned it to a later shift, with a mandatory second read-through, and for the first time since the reading had begun to jump, no one had to stay at the station simply to stop an automatic system from obeying the wrong measurement.

Elena found Malik at the shared terminal when the technical compartment had already been closed again. The navigator hadn't opened a trajectory on the screen. He had the new version of the inventory in front of him and the reference to Asha's report.

"I'm waiting for Daniel's final check," he said.

She secured herself to the handhold nearby. "On consumption?"

"On how we report it. The replaced sensor doesn't change the amount of food we have. It changes what we can claim to know about reliability."

Elena read the note. It didn't contain a precise probability of survival: they didn't have enough data to assign one to their situation. Instead, it described the capabilities that remained, the interventions available, and the dependencies that had tightened. It was harder to compare than a column of numbers, and for that very reason it required attention.

"I don't want a successful repair to disappear inside a reduction in margins," she said.

Malik turned. "I'm not making it disappear. The system works. That's written down, too."

Elena noticed her tone. "I know. I want both things to be visible."

"That's what I'm trying to do."

They waited for Daniel without filling the pause with checks that had already been assigned to someone else. From the neighboring module came the brief sound of a case being closed. Elena followed the edge of the terminal with her eyes, where the covering had worn away under the fingers of people using it as a handhold. Before the silence, she had considered that mark a detail to report on their return. Now she didn't want to turn every sign of wear into an omen.

Daniel confirmed that the spare-part transaction matched the summary. Malik inserted the link, locked the version for comparison, and opened a read-only copy.

The continuation case retained the planned operating margin, with the water restrictions and updated maintenance schedule. Approdo's resources remained separate: they weren't a reserve

they could draw on in flight, and their status still required local checks. The Earth diversion cases hadn't acquired the necessary time, food, or reliability just because they remained available on the screen. The delay had its own motion and consumption. No line said waiting as if it were a place where they could stop.

"Did you change the term?" Elena asked.

"No. Day 40 remains the operational deadline with the adopted propulsion margins."

Malik showed her the updated inputs and the points that had been checked. The sensor fault hadn't changed the trajectory geometry. Replacing it didn't extend the time allowed by their supplies. These were different issues to consider together, not values to add up to get a single answer.

"And after that?" she asked, though she knew the distinction she wanted him to maintain.

"After that, no wall appears. The costs change, and we leave the alternative we've defined. The deadline doesn't certify that return remains sustainable up to that day."

Elena checked that the sentence was in the text, not only in the oral explanation. It was. Below it, Malik had kept the reference to the preparations needed before the deadline.

"I don't want to find myself making the decision while you're already waiting at the controls."

"Neither do I."

Daniel secured himself beside them. He scrolled through the list of activities and pointed out those that required cross-checking. They didn't need to begin them then and there to know they would take time. Elena asked that they be clearly distinguished from maintenance to be carried out regardless of the deliberation's outcome. She didn't want preparation presented as neutral to become a choice made without being named.

They agreed on the version to distribute. The inputs, rejected cases, and reasons would remain accessible, as Tomás had requested in the first discussion. Elena also checked that no individual clinical details had made it into the report: the cost of medical supplies was relevant; private conversations with Jonas weren't.

Then she left the terminal to Malik and opened the test report on the one beside it.

Asha had separated the interrupted exercise from the real intervention. The former couldn't be declared complete just because the latter had succeeded. Some sequences had been carried out in

practice; others still needed to be checked. The cross-reference to the Earth consultation had a correction assigned; the instructions for temporary monitoring would be amended to include clarifications that had emerged during the handover. The spare part could be traced. The removed module was quarantined and wasn't counted among the parts ready for use.

Elena added a note on coordination. She had needed to free people from deferrable tasks and enforce rest even when no one wanted to leave. She didn't write that the crew had proved they could do without anyone. They had used instruments built on Earth, manuals written by people who were absent, and a part prepared before launch. Their capability was real precisely in its concrete form, with all those dependencies.

Nora passed through the corridor and stopped when Elena called to her.

"The report will go out over the common channel. Can you confirm the notice won't interfere with personal intervals?"

"I can make it available at shift changes. For the invitation, I'll use the service channel."

"No requests for access to messages."

Nora looked at her with a dry expression. "That wasn't planned."

"Good."

Elena let her go. She realized she had repeated an already established rule because that evening she needed to recognize something that hadn't been called into question by a faulty component. The rule still stood; there was no need to ask Nora to reassure her about that as well.

On the calendar she found a slot to begin the deliberation on day 35. Before then she would distribute the data and give everyone time to read it without taking up their rest periods. Questions about the calculations would have a visible route, so an explanation given to one person wouldn't remain unknown to the others.

She wrote the agenda. Comparison of updated data, clarification of assumptions, presentation of positions. She stopped before adding a formula that sounded like a vote they had already agreed on. The consultation had to be real; the commander's responsibility also had to remain clear. They would define those terms openly, not through the format of a meeting notice.

She reread the text from the perspective of someone who still hoped to return. She found no hidden outcome in the subject line, but removed an expression that reduced the alternatives to a final check. They weren't calling twelve people together to certify Malik's work. They were about

to discuss what to do with lives that no table could make equivalent.

Before sending it, she opened the environmental summary once more. The new sensor tracked the cycle with an acceptable discrepancy from the checks. The handover listed routine monitoring, supplemented by the additional checks, without the watch that had occupied the station during the fault. There was no new request awaiting her intervention.

Elena returned to the notice. The attachments field contained the updated comparison, the inventory, and the test report, with links to previous versions. She checked the recipients: all twelve, herself included.

Then she sent the notice for day 35 and watched the delivery confirmation, without adding a sentence promising she already knew where it would lead them.

The Right to Dissent

On day 35 Elena had to wait for Daniel to clear the shared screen of the meal schedule. Two packets were still fastened to the wall, beside the spot where Malik would show the trajectories. Sofia detached one and asked whose it was. No one answered at first; then Gabriel recognized it, closed it, and put it in the net for items to be stowed.

Elena had prepared an opening more solemn than the room warranted. She erased it from her mind before speaking.

“Does everyone have the same revision?”

Daniel pointed to the reference on his terminal. The others checked; Pavel took a few seconds to reach the correct page. This was no formality. In the preceding days, questions had circulated about flight times, consumption, and maintenance, and each answer had been added to the shared collection. Elena did not want an explanation given between shifts to become the private advantage of whoever had asked the question.

She waited for Pavel to nod. Twelve people occupied almost every useful handhold. She had secured herself to a restraint beside the screen, but from there she could mostly see the back of Nora’s head; she shifted, letting the belt stop her farther back.

“Before the results, we need to clarify how we’ll make the decision. Today we’ll hear positions and objections. We’ll record them alongside the responses. I won’t ask you to elect a trajectory.”

Tomás looked up from his terminal.

“So it’s a consultation.”

“Yes. Responsibility for the order remains mine.”

“And if the consultation says something different from what you want to order?”

Elena felt the urge to correct that want. She let it go.

“I’ll have to justify it. I’ll have to answer the objections, not just attach them. And I won’t write that we all agree if we don’t.”

“I’m not asking for a better sentence in the minutes.”

“I know.”

She did not add that her authority had been laid down before launch. Tomás knew the rules as well as she did. But before launch, no one had really had to imagine that kind of order. Invoking the contract would have answered the question of who could sign, not why the others should continue to trust her.

Daniel asked whether anyone could correct the record of their own position.

“Before the final version,” Elena replied. “And the corrections will remain identifiable. We won’t use a summary to erase the differences.”

Malik brought up the updated comparison on the screen. He did not begin with the line to Mars; he opened the page on shared conditions. It was a gesture Elena appreciated, though she knew what it would cost: they would have to look once more at the list of things they did not know.

The ship continued the transfer already underway. Waiting did not mean holding a stationary position in space. The Earth-bound options they had examined remained reachable in terms of trajectory only under conditions that did not balance the resources needed to remain aboard. Some depended on an unconfirmed external recovery. None offered them a verified means of obtaining that recovery.

“The operational deadline remains day 40,” Malik said. “It’s not the day after which Earth becomes unreachable under the laws of dynamics. It’s the limit adopted for this decision, with these margins. Preparations come first.”

Tomás scrolled through a page.

“And the limit doesn’t make the cases that come sooner sustainable.”

“Exactly.”

“I want that to remain in the record too. Otherwise it sounds as though we’re throwing away a return that’s ready to go.”

Malik added it to the summary of clarifications without defending himself. Elena watched the reference appear on the terminals. That understanding between them had not resolved the disagreement, but it kept the disagreement from being attributed to an error no one claimed existed.

Daniel displayed the inventory. The surface resources still appeared under the label “surface resources, access not acquired.” The length of the phrase forced the column to take up more space than the others. He had not shortened it.

“We didn’t load them onto the Aurora just because we can see them in a report,” he said. “To use them, we have to arrive, complete capture, descend, and reach them.”

“And find them usable,” Mei added.

Leila clarified which findings came from the automated units and which data remained tied to the loading records. Elena let her finish without asking for a single probability. A number would have made uncertainties that did not all depend on the same thing look neatly contained.

Asha spoke when Daniel got to maintenance. The alternate water branch was unavailable; the active one continued to pass the required checks. The replaced sensor module was no longer listed among the ready spares, while the removed part remained segregated. The additional checks on carbon-dioxide removal continued in the handovers.

“The system is working,” Asha said. “That doesn’t give us back the component we used.”

Pavel leaned closer to read a reference. “Is the work on the water circuit in the routine plan?”

“The check is. Another intervention isn’t: we’re not assuming one is inevitable.”

“And we’re not assuming there won’t be one either.”

Asha confirmed this. Elena noted the distinction without repeating it aloud. She was beginning to recognize the risk of the meeting: they could produce ever more precise sentences until there was no time left to say the decisive ones.

She asked whether anyone had found an error in the distributed data that changed the comparison. Gabriel wanted to check a reference between the energy summary and the loads permitted during flight. Daniel opened it, and together they showed that the load was already included. Sofia asked whether the crops were considered a food source during the crossing. They were not.

“Not even as a favorable margin?”

“No,” Daniel said.

She made sure the reference was visible, then closed the page.

Elena realized her tongue was dry. She drank from her own pouch without interrupting the pause. For days she had wanted this work to be over; now that the technical questions were being answered, relief did not come. They were only removing the possibility of pretending there had

been a misunderstanding.

“We can revisit any assumption,” she said. “If a new fact emerges, we’ll examine it. But I won’t ask you to present a reason that’s different as a technical uncertainty.”

Tomás unclipped his terminal from its support and fastened it to his belt. He no longer needed to look at it to speak.

“Then my reason is this,” he said. “We don’t know who we’re leaving behind.”

No one asked him to name anyone. Elena knew the name of his partner and forced herself not to reach for it in her memory as though it were a sufficient explanation. It would have been easier to listen to a man who wanted to save one person. Tomás was asking them to account for all the others, too.

“We’ve studied how to reach the supplies,” he continued. “We had to. We’ve studied the return, and we had to do that too. But if the conclusion is that we return only when we already know we can get there alive, then we’re giving no weight at all to the people who might be waiting.”

Sofia freed one foot from its restraint, settled it again, and spoke without raising her voice.

“How much weight would you give them?”

“I can’t express it in a column.”

“I’m not asking for a column. I’m asking what we could do once our resources were exhausted.”

“We could find someone before then.”

“Yes. And we might not find anyone.”

Tomás nodded, with a brief movement Elena could not interpret as irritation or acknowledgment.

“I’d like not knowing to count in both directions.”

“It does,” Sofia replied. “But it doesn’t refill our reserves in either direction.”

Elena saw Gabriel lower his gaze. For a moment she feared that sentence would become the point beyond which they would no longer listen to one another. She did not intervene at once. Sofia still held her terminal closed against her chest, as if she had to keep herself from turning back to the documents for protection.

“I don’t want to die to prove we haven’t abandoned them,” she said at last. “And I don’t want to have to call it selfishness that I’d like to live.”

Tomás opened his mouth, but she continued.

“I’m not saying you called it that. I’m saying this is where I end up every time. If I defend Mars, it seems as though I should be ashamed that I’m still here.”

Elena felt a pressure beneath her sternum, a reaction more physical than emotion. She had often thought of her daughter while checking the calculations. She had not let herself ask whether she truly wanted to return, or whether what she wanted most was not to be the person who ordered them to turn away. No one in the room could resolve that difference for her.

“I’m not asking you to be ashamed,” Tomás said. “I’m asking that the risk not be considered unacceptable only because it concerns us.”

“It concerns all of us,” Jonas said.

The doctor had been listening with his arms folded, anchored beside a passage he had to keep clear. He shifted when Leila moved aside to make room for him.

“We can take risks,” he continued. “But we’re not twelve lives without ties until we set them against lives on Earth. Everyone here has someone who might want them alive, too.”

“We don’t know if anyone’s still there,” Tomás said.

“Exactly.”

Jonas let a few moments pass.

“And I want to be precise about something else. I won’t sign a declaration of collective death. Not as a doctor, not as a crew member. We don’t have the evidence to make one.”

“I haven’t asked you to,” Elena said.

“I know. But I don’t want it to become an implicit condition for proceeding. We don’t need to declare them dead to say we can’t reach them.”

Nora raised her face. “And listening doesn’t mean we can return. I wish we didn’t have to choose between those two things as well.”

Elena looked at her, trying not to turn her intervention into testimony in favor of Mars. Nora had

the right to talk about her work without that false voice becoming, every time, proof of something about her grief.

“Reception continues,” Elena replied. “It isn’t a concession tied to the outcome of this meeting.”

Mei asked to speak in order to challenge an expression used in the preparatory questions: safe haven. Approdo was a destination with supplies deposited there and controllers who responded; it was not a guarantee.

“If we choose Mars, we’re also choosing to verify what’s missing,” she said. “Ice on the maps isn’t water in the pouch. But at least there we’ll be able to work on something we can reach.”

Gabriel added that keeping the surface systems running would require choices. It would not be enough to land and restart the original program. Pavel asked that maintenance times remain in the comparison even if no further failures occurred during the wait.

“A shift without failures is a shift used,” he said. “It isn’t a spare part given back.”

Elena gathered the requests. She did not search for a sentence that would unite them. Beside Tomás’s position she wrote search for the missing and acceptable risk, then asked him if that summary was enough.

“The duty to try is missing.”

She added it.

Sofia wanted the refusal to treat the lives aboard as a resource that could be spent without limit recorded as well. Jonas asked that his medical observation be distinguished from his position on the route. Malik said he would respond to new, verifiable hypotheses, but would not choose parameters to produce the result someone preferred.

The discussion resumed on the cases involving external recovery. Tomás was not claiming to have a signal; he was asking how far it was legitimate to assign a probability of zero to help that had not been observed. Malik showed him that they had not done so: help was listed as an unverified condition, not an impossibility.

Elena let them debate until the shift-change alert appeared on the terminals. She realized she was waiting for the moment when everyone would stop being right about at least one thing. That moment would not come.

She suspended the session for shipboard duties and rest. Anyone with a further objection could

add it to the shared pathway; no one had to stay awake to defend it in person. The session would resume on day 36.

As the others began to unclip themselves, Tomás remained at his handhold.

“Have you already decided?”

Elena could have answered that she was still weighing things. It was true, but not the whole truth.

“I don’t see an Earth-bound option I can order. I still have to answer what you said.”

“That’s not the same as finding another option.”

“No.”

Tomás nodded and pushed himself toward the passage. Elena remained with the documents open. She read the duty to try, then Sofia’s sentence. She deleted neither.

At her station she began the rationale with the hardest objection, not the conclusion. She wrote that the possibility of survivors had not been ruled out. Beneath it, she left space to explain why that was not enough to make a return an orderable option. The field stayed blank long enough for the screen to dim.

When the session resumed on day 36, Elena found Tomás reading the summary with Daniel. They did not interrupt their conversation when she arrived. They were correcting a reference to an excluded option: the summary pointed to the results page, while Tomás wanted it to lead to the initial conditions as well.

Daniel completed the link. Elena waited for the change to propagate to the shared version, then secured herself to the same restraint as in the previous session.

The ship gave no sign that this morning was different. Asha had finished handing over the additional checks, and Gabriel still had a tool case fastened to his side. Jonas pointed out that it was blocking the passage; Gabriel moved it without detaching it. Each of them had come from work they would have to return to.

Elena opened the record.

“Before the order, let’s check that the positions have been recorded correctly.”

She did not read everything aloud. She showed the revised points and asked whether any objections already raised were missing. Sofia clarified that she had not demanded that every risk

to those aboard be ruled out. Tomás confirmed that his dissent concerned the weight assigned to the search for survivors, not an error he had found in the calculations. Jonas found his statement about the lack of evidence of death separated from the assessment of the destination.

Elena incorporated Sofia's last clarification. The text became less concise, harder to read. She preferred it that way: clarity should not be achieved by assigning others positions simpler than their own.

"Has any new data emerged that changes the comparison?"

Malik said no. Daniel confirmed the status of the inventory they had used. Leila had no new confirmation that would turn Approdo's resources into resources already available. Nora reported that there had been no new verified Earth contacts.

Elena listened to the last answer like all the others. She did not ask her to repeat it or to wait longer. She had feared that at that very moment someone would look toward the communications station, seeking a suspension of the order in a signal. No one did.

She brought her rationale up on the screen.

"I've decided to continue toward Mars and prepare the planned correction."

She said the sentence without reading it. Then she looked at the text, so the reasons would not be reduced to what she could remember under the others' gaze.

"The Earth-bound diversion options we examined don't cover the flight time with the resources available. Those that depend on an external recovery require help we haven't confirmed and can't consider part of our operational capacity. Delaying doesn't leave the alternatives unchanged: it consumes resources and preparation time."

She paused. Tomás's face remained still. Elena forced herself not to address only him.

"Mars is not a safe destination. The supplies require capture, descent, access, and verification. Even once reached, they remain finite. But it is the destination for which we have an operational sequence supported by the current margins, without assuming a rescue."

Asha lowered her gaze to the document. Sofia held one thumb beneath the edge of her terminal; Elena noticed the gesture and lost her place for an instant. She found it again in the next line.

"To the request to search for possible survivors, my answer is not that they don't exist. We don't know. My answer is that I can't order the ship's survival capacity to be spent reaching them

without a sustainable option. It's a choice for which I take responsibility, not a conclusion contained in the impact data."

When she stopped speaking, there was no collective response. Elena felt how easy it would be to fill the pause with a question that forced everyone to reassure her. She did not ask whether they understood, or whether they were with her.

Tomás looked at the document reference.

"I want my position attached to the order. Not in a separate summary that can't be found after two revisions."

"It will remain linked to the order and the rationale."

"And I don't want it to say that, after hearing the reasons, I withdrew the request."

"You haven't withdrawn it."

"No."

Elena confirmed the link on the screen. She did not ask him to endorse her rationale. The signature needed to issue the order was hers; acknowledgments of receipt would document that it had been received, not that it had been approved.

Daniel wanted to check how those acknowledgments would appear in the summary. He opened the view used during handovers and showed Elena the field.

"One wrong word here makes it look as though whoever read it agreed."

Elena had him distinguish access to the document from acknowledgment of the operational assignment. She would not require anyone to sign off on a thought in order to keep working. They waited until both references were legible; meanwhile Gabriel unclipped himself to let a pouch someone had left beside the support pass by. The room's attention scattered for a few moments, then returned to the text. Elena found the small interruption useful: no one could mistake the gravity of the moment for a suspension of practical matters.

Jonas pointed to a passage.

"This says we're continuing toward the supplies. I'd like the order itself to make it explicit too: we're not changing the status of the missing."

Elena read the sentence again. She had written it in the rationale; not in the operational order.

She added the clarification without relegating it to a note. The decision did not certify the fate of Earth's population or explain the absence of lunar responses.

Nora asked whether routine transmissions would continue as scheduled.

"Yes. Listening and transmissions continue. Personal access doesn't change."

Leila asked that any updates be handled according to the procedures already in force, not as exceptions entrusted to whoever happened to be on duty. Elena confirmed this. If new information came in, they would verify it; they would not pretend that a decision made it impossible to learn anything else. But an event that was still unresolved would not automatically halt every activity aboard the ship.

Malik asked a question about authorization for the preparations. Elena distinguished the stages: the order set the destination and allowed them to prepare the correction; execution would require the prescribed checks and conditions. No one was to confuse the signature with permission to skip a check.

She reread the final version. She found a we had assessed in the rationale and replaced it: the comparison had been a shared effort, the decision had not. She did not want to claim other people's work as her own, but neither did she want to use it to spread around a blame she did not yet know how to name.

She signed.

The confirmation appeared without a sound. Elena made the order, rationale, positions, and references to the calculations available together in the same document set. Then she waited until everyone could access them from their own terminal.

Pavel was the first to ask where the plan for the next tasks was. There was no relief in the question. Elena was grateful for that, precisely because it offered her no absolution, only the chance to answer something that now had to be done.

Elena showed the preparation plan without extending the meeting into a full assignment of duties. They needed navigation checks, a review of the sequence, and confirmation that it was compatible with the ship's updated status; the details would be handed over to the people responsible, with enough time for them to read and challenge them. Routine checks were not suspended. Mending a relationship between them would not make the water handover any less necessary.

When the first people began to leave, Sofia stayed behind to adjust a latch on the shared screen that was not holding its edge properly. Elena asked if she needed help.

“No. If we keep leaving it like this, next time someone will pull the whole support loose.”

Elena waited until she had finished, then unclipped her own terminal. She wanted to tell her that her contribution had mattered. She did not do it there, beside Tomás, as if she had to reward whoever had given her the most useful argument. She only asked her to report the latch if it kept giving way.

Sofia tested the edge again, nodded, and reached the passage.

Tomás waited until there was room, then moved closer to Elena.

“Before I go to Malik, I need to tell you something.”

She fastened her terminal to her belt. “Go ahead.”

“I can do my job. I don’t want you to have to guess that from the fact that I show up at the station.”

Elena looked at him. During the discussion she had heard his opposition clearly; only now did she understand how much she had feared hearing those words in the opposite form.

“Are you fit to do it?”

“Yes. If that changes, I’ll report it, as I would for any other operation.”

There was no bravado in his answer. Tomás was not promising to become suddenly immune to fatigue; he was stating a specific responsibility and how he would report a limit.

“I won’t ask you to withdraw your dissent,” Elena said.

“And I won’t use the checks to redo the vote we never held.”

The word vote still seemed alien to what they had experienced. Tomás left it between them and continued.

“But if I find a discrepancy, I’ll follow it through.”

“That’s what I’m asking you to do.”

“Even if it costs us time.”

“Even then. We’ll need to know what discrepancy and what time, not who found it.”

Tomás rubbed his cheek with the back of his fingers. Elena noticed the small marks left by his stubble and looked away, as if that detail were more private than everything they had said to each other in front of the others.

“I’m not convinced,” he said.

“I understand.”

“Not just about the choice. I’m not convinced I’ll be able to think of it as the right thing a year from now.”

Elena felt the urge to tell him he would have a year to discuss it. It would have been a promise disguised as encouragement.

“I don’t know how I’ll think of it,” she said instead. “I know why I ordered it.”

Tomás nodded. They did not shake hands. To reach navigation they had to let Jonas pass, carrying a case back to the medical compartment. They parted at the same handhold, and for a few moments Elena had to concentrate only on not hitting her knee against an edge.

At the station, Malik had already opened the revision of the chosen solution. Daniel was checking the inventory reference to which the preparation had to be linked. Elena saw Tomás approach the screen without immediately taking a place in front of the controls. He first asked which document Malik was reading from.

The navigator pointed it out.

“This is the reference calculation. The sequence still has to be checked against the current status.”

“Then I’ll start with the inputs.”

Elena assigned Malik to verify the solution and Tomás and Daniel to the prescribed cross-checks, making sure no one was simply confirming their own work in another form. She asked that dependencies on shipboard systems be mentioned in the respective handovers. Asha and Gabriel would verify what fell within their areas of expertise without being kept at navigation waiting for a question.

Daniel opened the work schedule.

“There’s a rest period before the second review.”

“It stays,” Elena said.

“What if we find something that requires us to redo the comparison?”

“Bring it to me at once. We won’t treat day 40 as free time until the last minute.”

Malik added the reminder to the handover. The deadline was already in the documents, but Elena wanted it to appear where the work was being assigned, not only where it was being justified. A deadline known to everyone could still become, for each person, a problem someone else was handling.

Tomás asked to see the procedure for interrupting the sequence. Malik opened the corresponding document. They did not activate anything: they read the references, conditions, and responsibilities. Daniel found a link that led to the general version instead of the updated set and flagged it for verification rather than replacing it on trust.

Elena stayed long enough to see that they were not pretending to begin work in order to reassure her. Tomás had already stopped looking at her after every question. Malik answered by referring to the calculations, and Daniel separated what was ready from what still needed checking. Their collaboration had resumed a recognizable shape, but it did not erase the conversation in the habitation module.

She left before becoming a fourth check without a defined task.

At her station she found the access confirmations for the documents and an update on routine activities. She opened the latter first. The active water branch remained subject to local checks and monitoring in the handovers. Carbon-dioxide removal was functioning automatically with the additional checks. There was no request requiring a change to the shared restrictions.

Then she returned to the order.

She could have added a personal note to the crew. She had words that seemed appropriate: trust, future, necessity. She tried them out in her mind and felt them asking something in return. Trust could mean don’t doubt me; future could sound like a guaranteed reward. She closed the field without writing anything.

In the record she found Tomás’s position, still accessible from the same place as the rationale. She opened it. The text had not become any less difficult simply because it now also carried a reference to the signed order. It did not ask for another answer that evening; it asked not to be rewritten later as a stage everyone had moved past.

Elena checked that the link also worked from the handover summary. Then she moved on to

operational preparation.

At navigation, the voices were distinct but not clear enough for her to follow every word. She heard Tomás ask to start again from an initial condition and Malik tell him to wait while he opened it. She did not try to listen more closely. Their discussion was not an obstacle to her order: it was one of the things necessary for carrying it out.

On the screen, the work still had the status of preparation. Unfinished checks were visible, each with its own responsible person. Elena confirmed the assignments and left the page open. The Aurora continued on its course without any ignition.

The Maneuver

On Day 40, Nora found her work bag secured in the wrong place. The bag could not move freely, but once she was settled into the restraint, she would not be able to reach it. She detached it from the net, checked that it was closed, and secured it beside the terminal. Inside were adapters she probably would not use. For a moment she thought about putting them somewhere else, then left everything as it was: she wanted to avoid searching in the middle of the sequence.

At navigation, Daniel was reading a reference. Tomás compared it on his screen before answering. Malik had the initial data open, not the trajectory display Nora had seen so many times in the preceding days.

“It's the revision associated with the current inventory,” Daniel said. “The general reference is still in the change log. This opens the verified set.”

Tomás followed the link and went back. “Confirmed.”

That work had continued while Nora slept, ate, and worked her shifts. She had read the handovers, but seeing the correct reference under Daniel's finger gave her a different impression: they weren't about to leave an incomplete page behind. They'd had time to find something wrong with it and correct it.

At her station, the transmission queue was ready for the change in attitude. Nora checked that the acquired data would remain recorded even if the high-gain link failed to maintain useful geometry. The maneuver wasn't supposed to pretend there was radio continuity the ship couldn't guarantee. The receiver hadn't been switched off to make the moment more definitive; link availability also depended on where they pointed the equipment.

Leila arrived with the terminal secured to her forearm. She didn't look at Nora's summary right away. She opened the recording path and followed its references all the way to the data destination.

“Does this remain independent of audio playback?”

“Yes. The excluded branch isn't called up.”

Leila checked the actual configuration, then compared the times of the last acquired blocks. Nora let her work. She had learned to recognize the irritation she felt when someone checked something she was sure of. It hadn't diminished; she'd simply stopped taking it for a reasonable

objection.

She also showed her where any gaps in acquisition would appear. Leila opened the monitoring view and returned to the timeline.

“This way it doesn't look as though two consecutive blocks in the file are necessarily consecutive in time,” she said.

“The indication stays in the export, too.”

They checked it on an already available segment, without introducing interruptions to test the system. Nora then restored the operational view and checked that she hadn't left a work path open instead of the one intended for the maneuver. Leila followed that route back as well, until they were both looking at the same actual configuration.

“Recording ready,” Leila said. “No new incoming Earth transmission to hand over.”

Nora entered the status on the shared page. She could have written still none, but that word belonged to her, not to the log.

Pavel passed behind the stations to check the stowage. He secured a flap of fabric sticking out of a closure and tucked it back in. He asked Nora to test the bag without opening it. She pulled it toward her; the fastening held.

“Don't chase it during the burn,” he said.

“If it gets away, I'll consider it your handover.”

He checked a second fastener. “Then I'll secure it better.”

The brief exchange helped her more than she had expected. Not because it made what they were doing feel lighter, but because Pavel didn't ask how she felt. He gave her back a bag that could be checked with a tug.

Nora settled into the restraint. In the direction of the planned thrust, the straps would keep her body from shifting relative to the station. In free flight, they immediately felt too present. She loosened one section slightly, checked that she could reach the necessary controls, and adjusted it again. Her job didn't require her to take control of the thrusters; it required her not to lose the data and not to get in the way of those who were operating them.

She heard Asha give Elena her status. The active water circuit showed no new discrepancies; the

alternative branch remained unavailable. Carbon dioxide removal was in automatic mode, and the additional checks had been completed. Gabriel confirmed the power conditions and the availability of the necessary loads. They didn't say everything was perfect. They listed what they had checked and what remained in the configuration already accepted.

Elena reached her own station and read the statuses before speaking. Nora saw her pause over an item, ask Gabriel for the reference to the check, and wait for him to open it. She wasn't looking for a reason to stop. At least, Nora didn't find one in the question: it concerned a specific condition and received a specific answer.

Malik began the final comparison of the initial conditions. Daniel reconstructed the adopted mass value from the configuration and the inventory, while Tomás checked that the loaded sequence matched the approved solution. The answers came without overlap. At a longer pause, Nora looked up; Daniel was scrolling to the end of a page, not waiting for Malik to prompt him.

“Check complete,” he said at last.

Tomás called up the abort conditions. Nora didn't try to learn them by listening just then: she'd already read them to understand which calls needed to appear in her log. She focused on the difference between a check that had been carried out and one that had merely been declared available. She heard the pilot ask for confirmation, receive it from Malik, and proceed only then.

She would have liked to watch his face longer. The last time they'd spoken alone, it had been easier to discuss where a fragment had come from than where they were going. Now Tomás was nearby, and there was nothing she needed to tell him. She returned to the screen before her attention turned into a request.

The report to be transmitted after the maneuver was still a technical draft. It contained a reference to Elena's order, not a formula proclaiming a departure. The Aurora had been traveling toward Mars since before the silence. That day they would change their velocity and geometry within the mission already underway, using up some of what still allowed them to choose something else.

Nora realized she'd been holding her breath during the final read-through of the sequence. She exhaled and moved the cursor to the correct field.

Elena asked for the final status reports. Malik confirmed the solution; Tomás and Daniel gave the results of their respective checks. Nora confirmed the recording and communications configuration. Her yes, too, went into the collection of necessary conditions, without becoming a

vote.

“Execution authorized according to the verified sequence,” Elena said.

Nora recorded the order. Then she cleared the screen of everything she wouldn't need during the burn. A set of times, statuses, and data destinations remained visible. The space she'd cleared seemed enormous.

The change in attitude began without offering Nora a direction to look in. The indicators moved on the screen; restrained in her seat, her body couldn't tell her which part of the sky was now in front of the ship. For an instant she looked for a reference along the edge of the terminal. It was the least useful thing she could do: the terminal was moving along with her.

Tomás followed the rotation and the reduction in residual motion. Malik compared the achieved orientation with the required one; Daniel read from a separate display. The callouts made phases distinct that, to anyone listening only to the ordinary sound of the ventilation, would have seemed like one long wait.

Nora marked the change in link availability. The log continued to receive internal data. No indication asked her to intervene, and instead of reassuring her, that left her room to think about the propellant still in the tanks. Soon some of it would be outside the ship. It would no longer make sense to revisit the approved quantity as if it were a word to replace in a document.

She made herself read the next line, rather than stare at the one she'd just completed.

Tomás announced the phase preceding the burn. The sequence prepared the propulsion system under the planned conditions. Nora followed her telemetry stream without trying to substitute her readings for the pilots'. She saw the expected statuses appear and recorded the callouts. Daniel confirmed one response; Malik let an interval pass before giving the next. Nobody counted aloud to make the moment more solemn.

When the thrust began, Nora recognized it in the strap before she heard it.

Her body pressed lightly and steadily against the restraint. A short cable, secured at only one end, shifted position beside the terminal. Everything else stayed where it was. There were no pens falling, no people standing, no floor suddenly becoming necessary again. There was a direction along which every unsecured object would begin to shift relative to the ship.

The vibration reached the terminal mount and, through the contact, her fingers. She lifted them to tell whether it was really there, then rested them again. She wasn't hearing the engine through

space: the structure was carrying to her the work being done far from the stations.

“Burn confirmed,” Tomás said.

Malik reported the progress. Daniel followed the responses without repeating every word the navigator said. The elapsed time advanced alongside the measurements, but Nora found herself looking more often at the channel that attested to the continuity of the recording. She didn't want the operation to be represented only by its final values. The process was needed to understand how they had arrived at them.

She thought of Earth without imagining it destroyed. A street with no operational name came to mind, the spot where her mother would stop to decide whether to pass in front of the market. The memory contained neither a sky nor a face. It was the worn stretch of sidewalk beside a grate, seen when she was a child and then thousands of times afterward. She was surprised by how precise something could be when it served no purpose at all.

A call from Tomás brought her back to the log. She'd heard every word; she hadn't missed any data. And yet she felt ashamed for having drifted away in her thoughts, as if the trajectory demanded a kind of concentration that could erase the reason it was difficult.

She checked the data destination. The stream was intact.

The acceleration remained modest, but present enough to make the position of her shoulders feel unusual. Nora wanted to lift one, then decided to wait. The discomfort wasn't signaling a problem. At the other station, Tomás asked for a response, and Daniel gave it to him after checking it. Their care hadn't taken on a heroic tone. They spoke to each other as they had before the order, when a difference between two readings deserved attention without having to mean anything more.

Elena remained on the operational circuit. Nora could see her profile beyond a screen, but didn't look for a reaction. It was already hard enough not to read every movement by someone else as a judgment on what they were doing.

The end of the burn came through a planned call, not an alarm. The pressure of the restraint eased; for an instant her body maintained the expectation of that direction, and Nora felt herself shift even though she hadn't moved. The small cable beside the terminal stopped obeying the thrust, remaining where it had come to rest until a vibration made it swing.

“Shutdown confirmed,” Tomás said.

The callouts continued. Nora had imagined that the absence of thrust would bring relief; instead,

she received a new list of things not to confuse. Engine off didn't mean the system had already been reconfigured. Sequence complete didn't mean the trajectory had been verified with the necessary precision. Malik asked them to maintain the planned data collection for the next comparison.

Daniel checked the final propulsion statuses. Gabriel confirmed the initial power readings. Elena didn't release the stations immediately: she waited until each person responsible had a result or an explicit handover.

Nora closed the main segment of the log, leaving acquisition active. She kept the sequence times, statuses, and references for the readings together. The field for the outcome didn't yet contain the word successful. Instead, she wrote what she could support: burn and shutdown executed, post-burn checks in progress.

The attitude changed again according to plan. When conditions for the link returned, Nora checked the radio path before putting the prepared queue back into service. She found no reply waiting. She had no reason to expect one just then, and realized she'd done so anyway.

Malik briefly lowered his hands from the terminal.

“The burn data are consistent with the requested correction. We'll complete the determination with the subsequent measurements.”

Nora entered the sentence without shortening it. She would have time to look for more accessible wording in the report; here, the qualification needed to remain attached to the result.

When Elena allowed them to leave the restraints according to their assignments, Nora unfastened one strap and stopped. Her body didn't move toward Mars. It remained beside the terminal, in free flight, until she reached for a handhold. That ordinary gesture, not the thrust that had just ended, made her understand they would have to carry on with the day.

Before returning to her work bag, Nora helped Leila free a fastener that hadn't fully opened. Nothing was broken: the strap had been caught under tension against the edge. It only needed to be eased in the right direction. Leila folded it carefully, then returned to her station to complete the comparison of the acquired data.

Nora wanted a drink. The water bag was in its place and within reach; nevertheless, she kept putting it off until Jonas passed by and she remembered that no restriction had changed the planned hydration. She drank slowly, with irritation directed only at herself. She wasn't going to preserve an Earthly alternative by giving up that sip.

The ordinary checks reappeared one after another on the ship-status page. Asha confirmed the local checks of the active water branch and the absence of any new, growing discrepancy. The witness strips were dry. Carbon dioxide removal continued in automatic mode; the additional comparisons remained on the handover list, just as they had before the burn. Gabriel reported the power readings and the thermal trend after the maneuver. There was no need to add an intervention to the activities already planned.

The absence of a failure didn't produce applause. It allowed Pavel to put away a case and Jonas to ask who still needed to eat. The question carried through to navigation, where no one had entirely left their data behind.

Nora prepared the narrative section of the report. She wrote a first sentence and deleted it almost immediately. The sentence “The Aurora had chosen Mars” was brief, but it concealed the person who had issued the order and turned the others into a single will. She started again with a reference to Elena's decision and the correction they'd carried out. She left a space for the trajectory verification, still in progress.

Later, Malik called her over to look at the comparison. He didn't show her a line dramatically diverging from another; he opened the measurements used to update the flight state and their agreement with the requested solution. Tomás had completed his own check. Daniel kept the updated propellant inventory alongside them, distinguishing adopted estimates from available readings.

“This is the version to link to the report,” Malik said.

Nora checked the reference before copying it. “And the deviation?”

The navigator didn't answer by pointing to a color.

“With the resulting geometry and the remaining propellant, it no longer falls within the margins we'd adopted. We'll retain the comparison conditions. We won't rewrite it as a return that had been sustainable until a little while ago.”

Tomás followed the passage in the document. “That needs to stay in the summary.”

“It stays,” Nora said.

She didn't ask him if he felt differently now. She saw how easy it would be to make his presence reassuring news: the pilot had carried out the maneuver, therefore the disagreement was over. The text of the order said otherwise, and she had no reason to know more than the text did.

Daniel showed her the reserve update. The consumption wasn't listed twice, nor had the amount intended for later phases been turned into freely available stock. Nora followed the line to the correct reference; Daniel closed the view only when she was finished.

“Water remains in the balance with the current limitations,” he said. “The surface supplies are still outside the onboard inventory.”

“I don't intend to include them in the message.”

He looked at her, then saw she was serious. “Good. Today it would be easy to write that we've finally solved something more.”

Nora returned to her station with the updated report. She read it aloud without recording. Operational language had the advantage of keeping her from telling certain lies; it also had the drawback of allowing sentences that gave no hint there were people on board.

She added the number of people aboard. Not a claim about the rest of humanity: twelve crew members on the Aurora. She stated that the essential systems were in service with the limitations already documented and that the ship was continuing toward its planned destination. For the situation on Earth, she kept to verifiable wording: no new contact confirmed.

Elena read the text on Nora's terminal. She checked the links to the order, the rationale, and Tomás's position, without asking for the dissent to be repeated in the voice of the person transmitting. The attached technical documentation remained separate from the personal archives.

“Here, it sounds as though we're waiting for authorization,” she said, pointing to a concluding sentence.

Nora reread it. She'd used the old bulletin template, the one that requested acknowledgment of the operations and confirmation of the next program. She removed the request for authorization, but not for any possible acknowledgment.

“If someone is listening, they need to know what we've done,” she said.

“Yes.”

Elena said nothing more. Nora checked the intended recipients once again and began the recording. She stated the ship's identification, the onboard day, and the report reference. She stumbled over a word on the first take, stopped, and started again from the beginning. No one had asked her for a perfect voice, but she didn't want the reading error to sound like an interruption in

the content.

The second recording was usable. She listened to all of it, then associated it with the verified data. She didn't add music, images of the ship, or a greeting spoken on behalf of everyone. She let it be what it claimed to be: a report sent by a crew that continued to work.

Leila checked the transmission preparation with her. When the link was in the right configuration, Nora began sending and followed the local acknowledgments through to completion. The power delivered, the completed sequence, and the absence of errors detected on board didn't tell her who, elsewhere, might receive it.

She recorded the transmission. The remote acknowledgment field remained unconfirmed.

She didn't remain frozen in front of that field for as long as a signal might take to travel. She had to archive the report, hand over the link status, and let the ordinary program continue. If a reply arrived, receiving it and carrying out the planned checks wouldn't require her eyes to be fixed on the screen.

Passing toward the habitation module, she found Tomás heating a meal pouch. He made room for her without talking about the maneuver. Nora only told him the report had been sent and that the references were the ones they'd checked together.

“I'll read it,” he replied.

Nora nodded. That evening, opening the document couldn't be mistaken for agreement. She continued toward her own meal, leaving him time to finish it without witnesses.

The request came from Sofia while Nora was securing the empty pouch in the designated waste collection. It wasn't about a new transmission.

“If I wanted to keep a separate copy, different from the one I use, would I have to listen to everything first?”

Nora left the pouch and turned around. “No. You don't need to play anything back to copy it.”

“I know that for an individual message. I mean, to make sure I don't leave anything out.”

Leila, not far away, looked up. “We can check the set of items and their integrity. We don't have to open their contents.”

Sofia held on to her handhold to let Gabriel pass. “I have recordings that start badly. People

adjusting the device, a door opening. I wouldn't want them to be considered throwaways."

"We don't select anything," Nora said. "Or edit anything."

She'd answered too quickly. She stopped before adding a promise they hadn't yet arranged. Preservation wasn't just copying files; it required knowing which ones had been copied, where, and with what access options. There were already copies of the archives on board, but Nora didn't want to answer that request with a general reassurance about the system working.

She asked Sofia if they could bring it up with the others, limiting the discussion to the technical problem. She wouldn't say who wanted to save what.

"You can say I asked," Sofia replied. "Just don't let it turn into the shift when we have to make people listen to a voice."

Later, in the common space, they didn't gather as they had for the deliberation. Some had to return to duty; Asha listened to the first part and left Daniel a question before going to her scheduled check. Nora explained that they were proposing a check of personal copies, separate from transmissions and technical archives. Anyone who wished could authorize a copy of their own collection of messages without having others listen to them.

"Do we need more space?" Gabriel asked.

Leila showed them the available plan before answering. They wouldn't overwrite mission data or alter the operational recording path. The first task would be limited to what they could verify and maintain using the media already available.

Pavel asked how they would check a voice without hearing it.

"We check that the copy matches the original," Nora said. "Not whether the person speaking says something comprehensible. If a message was incomplete when it arrived, it will stay incomplete. We note that without inventing the missing part."

"And what if it's the only one I've left on my personal terminal?"

"We include it from the path you authorize. First we see what's there, without mixing up received messages with your own recordings."

Mei asked who would be able to see the list. Nora pulled toward herself the terminal on which she'd started her notes. She had written recipient in a column that didn't need to be in the shared summary. She deleted it.

“Everyone else only needs to know whether the operation was requested, completed, or left pending. The detailed list stays personal.”

“Even knowing who hasn't requested anything could become a list,” Jonas said.

Nora looked at the page. “Then we won't publish that either. The assignments needed for the work stay among the people carrying it out.”

She didn't mind being corrected. The plan was taking shape precisely where she'd assumed a word like private was enough to protect them.

Elena listened to the proposal through to the end. She asked that the work not absorb rest periods or introduce improvised exceptions to personal permissions. To begin with, they would make only copies authorized by their owners, with verification and location recorded privately. No one had to decide that evening on a final fate for the archives.

Tomás, who had come to the passageway during the conversation, asked if they could add material later.

“Yes,” Nora said. “A verified copy doesn't close the archive you use.”

“And it doesn't send it anywhere.”

“Not into the radio queue. Those are separate operations.”

He nodded without immediately giving authorization. Nora didn't ask him to. It was a question that needed an answer, not a threshold she had to draw him across.

The first requests were few. Leila set up the copying path; Nora checked the permissions with her and how the results of the check would be kept. They worked on authorized sets without opening playback windows. Quantities, sizes, and digital fingerprints scrolled across the screen. No family member's face appeared to announce that a transfer was complete.

Sofia came back when they told her her check was finished. Nora showed her where to find the private result and how to trace the preserved set.

“Even the bad beginnings?”

“Everything you included. We didn't cut anything.”

Sofia followed the reference, then closed the page. “Thank you.”

She didn't seem more at ease in any way Nora knew how to read. She went about her shift and made room for whoever needed to use the terminal. The copy didn't need a visible reaction to have meant something.

When Nora reached her bunk, she brought her personal terminal with her. She pulled the curtain far enough to block the passage from view without closing it entirely against the airflow. She opened her archive. The received recordings and drafts appeared in separate groups, as always; that evening, it seemed important to her that they stay that way in the copy, too.

She saw her mother's message still among the ones she had to answer. She didn't play it. She remembered the plant moved from the landing and that useless detail her mother hadn't been able to recall during the recording. She could have listened to it, but she didn't need to prove to anyone that she was ready.

Instead, she checked that the private draft wasn't included in the transmissions. The unfinished words were still hers. Preservation didn't turn them into a reply that had arrived, or a promise to finish it before going to sleep.

She authorized a copy of the two groups, keeping them separate. The system asked her to confirm the personal path; she verified it against the results of the checks she'd set up with Leila. No words spoken by her mother appeared during the transfer. Nora could watch the work progress without feeling that the whole ship was listening along with her.

When the fingerprint comparison finished, she opened the private summary and read the result. The copy was intact in relation to the selected originals. She didn't call it eternal, and she didn't think she'd secured what might have happened on Earth. She had reduced one specific risk: losing even what had already made it to them.

Before closing the terminal, she checked the communications handover. No new Earth contact had been confirmed. Reception remained active according to the schedule, and the maneuver report appeared among the completed transmissions, without a remote acknowledgment.

Nora returned to the personal page and left her mother's message among the ones she had to answer. Then she turned off only the screen. On the other side of the curtain, someone asked for room to pass with a case. She drew in her elbow and let them through.

Capture

On day 88, Elena found a pale patch on the lining beside Leila's station. It wasn't moisture: the fabric had worn thin where, for months, they had rested their elbows to hold themselves in place in front of the screen. Leila had moved her support lower down. The ship's body, too, preserved the time that had passed since the last maneuver.

In the intervening weeks, they had continued replacing filters, checking the water circuit, eating their assigned rations. The delivery reports still listed the alternate branch as unavailable and the sensor's additional checks. Nora had maintained the transmission and listening schedule; no new contact from Earth had been confirmed. Mars had grown in the data before it did in the images. Now it imposed schedules that no one aboard could postpone.

"This is the extended report," Leila said. "Not the summary."

She had laid out the measurement timestamps beside the reception times on the screen. Elena recognized the query reference, then let Leila work her way through the document. She didn't want to get her into the habit of skipping steps just because the commander had already seen them.

The automated units responded with consistent identities. The instrumented tank series showed continuous trends; some cargo containers, by contrast, appeared only in the manifests filed before departure. Leila opened a technical photograph of the inside of a compartment. A dark edge cut across the frame and hid part of a rack.

"I don't have another view of that side."

Daniel moved his terminal closer. "So those packages still need to be inspected."

"Yes. The compartment closure is confirmed. I can't tell you what you'll find behind every package."

Elena looked at the rack. She had studied images like that for years, back when Approdo was still a collection of tests, industrial deliveries, and conditional promises. Now she looked for the point where she might hold on with a gloved hand and undo the first strap. The gesture seemed more difficult than she remembered from the simulations.

Mei enlarged a map of the site without overlaying it on the photograph.

"The transported reserves are here. The area to check for ice is a separate entry."

“How soon can we use it?” Elena asked.

“I can set an order for the checks. Not a date for the water.”

Mei traced a line with her finger that ended before the base symbol. The maps had different resolutions; the route suitable for the wheels, the one a person could take, and the one an installation would need did not automatically coincide. Elena had those distinctions kept in the sequence for the first survey, without turning it into an assignment that had already been authorized. They still had to reach orbit.

Gabriel asked Leila for the energy series. He examined them with his lips parted, returning twice to the heading of one group of measurements.

“They’re consistent with the declared automated configuration,” he said. “The loads vary according to the program. I see no reason to discard these data.”

“And the transition to the habitat?”

“We’ll verify it on site. The report helps me prepare the startup sequence. It doesn’t measure a load that isn’t there yet.”

Elena nodded. She didn’t ask whether the base was safe. It would have been too broad a question, good mainly for forcing someone to give her a reassuring answer. Instead, she asked which checks required physical access and which could be completed before descent. Gabriel and Mei ended up competing for space on the screen; Leila opened a second one and let them work.

Daniel kept the surface quantities out of the ship’s total inventory. Elena saw the separation in the inventory and felt a brief, unreasonable irritation: they were close enough to talk about the compartments, but not close enough to drink the water they held. She said nothing. That line was precisely what kept her desire from becoming a nonexistent resource.

When they left the station, Jonas was waiting for her by the food storage. He held a package secured to a strip of fabric.

“The prep shift overlaps with the time you marked for eating.”

“I saw.”

“And where did you move it?”

Elena searched for the schedule on her terminal. She hadn’t moved it. Jonas handed her the

package without commenting on what he'd discovered.

They ate, holding on to two different handholds. Pavel appeared in the passage with a slim case; he stopped to let Daniel finish checking an obstruction at the access to the second vehicle. Throughout the journey, those accesses had existed as parts of the ship to be checked. Now the equipment arranged beside the hatches announced that separation would have a date.

"For capture, I want the restraint checks completed before the last rest shift," Jonas said.

"You'll have them."

"Yours too."

Elena tore off a small piece of food. "Mine too."

Later, Tomás and Daniel showed her the manifests for the two vehicles, six seats each. On the first, beside Tomás, were her name and those of Asha, Gabriel, Mei, and Pavel. On the second, Daniel would have Nora, Jonas, Sofia, Leila, and Malik. Elena followed the names without moving them. The necessary skills were distributed as planned, along with the mass limits and operational requirements. She would have liked to keep another person from the second group close to her; she couldn't find an operational reason to ask for it.

Sofia arrived with the list of biological materials. She didn't ask for extra space. She asked that the storage conditions remain legible during the transfer, even if the inspection of a package slipped to the next shift. Daniel added the reminder about the second vehicle's load.

"We're not opening anything just to show it," she clarified.

"There's no welcoming tour on the schedule," Daniel replied.

Sofia smiled faintly and left him the list.

At the end of the shift, Elena went back to Malik. On the screen, the trajectory crossed a colored region around Mars; he removed the representation and opened the entry conditions. Capture was still a future burn. The descents depended on an orbit not yet acquired, on the ship's checks, on the vehicles' status, and on the site.

"We'll keep preparations running in parallel," Elena said. "The authorizations stay separate."

Malik added the reminder to the handover. She checked that the request hadn't taken rest away from anyone who would have to do the second review. Then she closed out her shift. In the

passage, the worn patch beside Leila's station suddenly seemed like something she would remember from somewhere else.

On day 91, Elena slipped beneath the restraint at the station and found Tomás already settled in. The schedule showed two hundred and ten days since launch. She had thought the number would make her feel something; looking at it, she realized she was searching instead for the time of the last observation.

Malik had two results open. He hadn't overlaid them.

"I'm not accepting the optical solution yet," he said.

Elena stopped her hand before securing the terminal to its support. "How much does it change?"

He showed her the deviation in the arrival plane and the associated uncertainties. It wasn't the difference between hitting Mars and missing it. It was enough, though, that they couldn't treat two reconstructions that ought to agree as equivalent. The dispersion couldn't be made smaller by choosing the one they liked better.

"The previous comparison?"

"Consistent. This new group shifts the result."

Tomás called up the sequence, which had not yet been authorized. "The commands are inhibited. We have the planned verification interval."

Elena looked at the remaining time on the schedule. There was no need to give the discrepancy more urgency than it had. There was a need not to waste the interval arguing about whether it was really a problem.

"Preserve everything. Malik, reconstruct from the raw observations. Daniel, use a separate path. Don't share conclusions before you've recorded them."

Daniel moved to the free terminal. Leila connected the acquisition logs to the working set and checked its copy. Elena asked Nora to maintain the recordings and report attitude limitations to communications. No one asked when an assessment from Earth would arrive.

Her first impulse was to stand behind Malik. Elena recognized it as she was already pushing away from her seat. She stopped, secured herself again, and asked instead which checks could proceed without depending on the solution under review. Tomás pointed out the configuration checks; those requiring new parameters remained suspended.

Asha confirmed the life-support status. The summary still listed the alternate water branch as unavailable. Gabriel worked through the maneuver's electrical and thermal constraints, Pavel through the secured objects. Elena listened to the calls all the way to the end. Their ordinary rhythm kept her from measuring the wait only by Malik's movements.

"Geometric references are consistent," Daniel said after a stretch of silence. "The difference starts with the more recent series. I'm reconstructing the timings."

Malik didn't look up. Leila opened a column Elena couldn't read from where she was.

"Here," Leila said at last. "This timestamp isn't the exposure."

No one had moved the navigation result yet. Leila isolated the record and displayed the full header. The value used in the intermediate step was the time the processed product had become available. The acquisition time existed in the source record, but the newly imported group had inherited the other field. The images weren't false, and Mars's motion hadn't changed: the time associated with those directions was wrong.

Elena felt her shoulders loosen and didn't yet take that as permission.

"Does it explain the direction and the size of the deviation?"

"We're calculating that," Malik replied.

Leila left the preserved data untouched. She prepared the corrected association in a copy, making both the original field and the one that had been used visible. Daniel continued along his own path. When they showed the results, the deviation had shrunk to within the expected dispersion. Malik plotted the difference before and after the correction; Daniel confirmed it without having received Malik's solution.

Elena asked for both steps to remain legible in the report. Leila arranged the original record references beside the comparison, so whoever resumed the work on the next shift wouldn't have to trust their memory. Daniel also checked that the exclusion of the erroneous group appeared in the list actually used by the calculation.

Tomás reviewed the report and returned to the operational timing. "We need the new series."

It had already been planned as a final confirmation. Elena authorized its acquisition under the scheduled conditions, without calling it an extra test invented to reassure them. They waited for the cycle to produce usable images. Leila read the acquisition reference aloud; Daniel checked it against the source record before the data entered the calculation.

For Elena, the wait took the form of an irritation beneath a strap. The restraint wasn't too tight, but the seam had twisted. She had tolerated worse positions for hours during training. That morning, she had to make herself adjust it: there was no merit in letting a tiny distraction add to the others. Tomás held the edge of the support steady while she slid the fabric into place.

"Like that?"

"Like that."

It was brief help, without reconciliation. Elena was grateful for that too.

The new observations agreed with the corrected reconstruction. Malik showed the expected conditions at the burn point, then the dispersion and the margin available for execution. Capture didn't require an unscheduled maneuver to repair the association error: it required the final parameters to be calculated from the valid state and checked.

Daniel repeated the comparison. Tomás examined orientation, entry conditions, cutoff criteria, and expected responses if performance differed from what was expected. Elena asked him where any dependencies on the erroneous path remained.

"The imported group is no longer used. The sequence receives this verified state. The reference to the previous product is marked excluded, not deleted."

"And the timing step?"

Leila pointed to the check added to the handover. "Verified against the source record for the new series too. Correcting the import path remains a separate task: we're not installing an untested change here."

Elena followed the references through to the verification signatures. She still wanted to ask whether they were sure. She chose a question someone could answer.

"Is there an open condition that prevents the burn?"

Malik said there wasn't for navigation. Tomás confirmed for the sequence and Daniel for the independent check. Asha and Gabriel completed their respective calls; Jonas had checked the crew's restraints and physical readiness without turning that into a promise about how their bodies would respond after the journey.

Elena recorded her acceptance of the solution. The discrepancy remained in the report, with its explanation and evidence; it wasn't reduced to a note just because it hadn't caused damage.

Nora confirmed that the recorder was capturing. Her voice came through clearly on the local channel.

Elena looked over the operational set one last time, then stopped searching for a check no one had yet thought of.

“Solution accepted. I authorize the capture sequence.”

Tomás confirmed the authorization and called the first item. Elena responded when her turn came. The burn attitude didn’t offer the view of Mars she had imagined before departure: in front of her were indicators, the edge of Daniel’s terminal, and a small pale thread caught in the seam of a glove. The planet was in the guidance references, in the decreasing distances, in the direction in which the ship would have to lose speed.

The orientation operations ended. Gabriel confirmed the status of the prepared loads; Asha reported that the systems needed to sustain the crew were in the planned configuration. The calls came from people distributed throughout the ship, each secured at their station. Elena couldn’t turn around to see them all, and she didn’t try.

“Continuous recording,” Nora said. “Radio availability according to attitude. No confirmation from Earth.”

Elena made a mental note not to ask her again during the burn. Nora would report if anything changed, according to the procedure they continued to follow. Command gave her no shorter path to news.

Tomás announced the start of the sequence. Some changes appeared first as electrical states, then as propulsion responses. Elena followed the established path on her screen. When the acceleration took hold, her back met the seat with an unfamiliar weight. A flap she hadn’t secured perfectly stopped floating and settled in the new direction.

It wasn’t gravity regained. The restraint had a cause, a duration, and a commanded end. And yet her body welcomed the support with a relief she hadn’t authorized.

“Burn confirmed.”

Malik called for the comparison between measured and expected impulse. Daniel reported his own check of the sequence. Elena listened to the figures over the channel and checked the trend on the screen; she didn’t search every small oscillation for an omen. Guidance was correcting within the expected limits. The sound transmitted through the structure had a texture that didn’t

belong to ordinary ventilation.

The journey wasn't stopping in front of Mars. The ship was changing its motion enough not merely to pass through its domain and move away again. Elena knew the explanation; she had repeated it in meetings and training. Under acceleration, though, she thought instead of all the times she had signed a plan that took that part of the future for granted.

A page changed state. For an instant, it seemed like a new warning; then she recognized the planned transition and let Tomás call it. The impulse to speak rose to her mouth. She held it back. Interrupting a pilot to confirm what he was already saying wouldn't increase control.

"Performance within the corridor," Malik said.

Gabriel responded to a request about thermal status. Elena saw the margin remain on the accepted side of the limit. Her task was also not to let it expand inside her, not to think that the planet's mere proximity made any cost tolerable. If the conditions specified for an abort appeared, she would have to recognize them. None of the ones she was monitoring called for it.

The seat pressed against parts of her body that had lost the habit of bearing her. It didn't hurt in any one spot; it made it impossible to forget her own mass. Elena moved her fingers as far as the gloves allowed and checked that she could reach her assigned controls without changing position. Jonas had insisted on that test before the sequence began. She owed him thanks, which stayed off the channel.

Tomás continued the calls without raising his voice. His place in the deliberation remained visible alongside the order. Nothing in the way he was conducting the operation suggested it should be withdrawn. Elena looked at him in profile for only a moment: his jaw taut, his eyes returning to the same group of indicators. Then she brought her attention back to her own screen.

The final part of the burn seemed longer because by then she could imagine its end. She looked for the datum that would authorize cutoff instead of waiting for relief. Malik called the approach to the expected condition; Daniel confirmed the check. The sequence completed the programmed segment and commanded shutdown.

The pressure of the seat left Elena before she had finished preparing for its absence. The flap of fabric lifted. She held herself in the restraint and watched the indicators return to their post-maneuver state.

"Shutdown confirmed," Tomás said.

The channel didn't erupt in voices. Instead came the verification requests they had assigned during training: propulsion, attitude, systems, people. Asha reported no new life-support anomalies. Gabriel checked the recovery of normal conditions. Jonas collected the crew's responses; Elena said her name when it was her turn, without replacing her answer with a question about the others.

Malik displayed the first estimate of their state.

"Consistent with capture. The onboard reconstruction indicates a bound orbit."

Elena stared at the line long enough to read it again. "The observations are still outstanding."

"Yes."

She didn't ask him to say anything more definitive. The calculation needed the next data, just as her body needed to recover from the work. She looked at Tomás and saw that he still had his hand near the designated control, even though shutdown was confirmed. He completed the next item and withdrew it.

Nora reported that the local sequence log had been preserved. Transmission opportunities would follow the attitude and schedule; onboard acquisition didn't depend on being able to send every moment as it happened. Elena asked her to prepare the bulletin with the status still preliminary, then update it only after the checks. An image to send didn't take priority over measurements to obtain.

When she was able to ease out of her working posture, Elena realized she was hungry. She didn't know whether she had been hungry throughout the burn. Daniel already had the propellant reserves page open, with data to consolidate; Malik was preparing the plan for the next observations. Beneath the ship's symbol, the projected line no longer continued toward a distant edge of the screen.

Elena didn't let herself scroll along it in search of the descent point. For this shift, the task was to acquire and verify the orbit. She asked Tomás for a handover of the remaining activities, then had water and food distributed according to the planned quantities. Pavel's voice came over the local channel with a slight delay because he had waited for another call to end: no loose objects, no problems at his station.

Only then did Elena let out her breath without using it to speak. There were still twelve of them. The ship had responded to the burn. Mars was holding them according to a first measurement they now had to test.

On day 92, Malik waited for Elena to finish reading the comparison before speaking to her. The subsequent observations covered a long enough arc to verify the state they had achieved; Daniel had reconstructed the result through the independent path. The orbit was bound and met the conditions set for the next operations. There was no need to call an estimate good when they could now document the outcome as verified.

Elena opened the dispersion details. The report preserved the link to the discrepancy resolved before the burn and to the new acquisitions. The images used had been associated with the correct times. She looked over Daniel's checks, then the conditions concerning the descent opportunities.

"Ship status?"

"Reports complete," he said. "They're linked here."

Propellant consumption had been updated using the available measurements, without adding back to the margin what had already been spent. The systems checks had not required new interventions. The limitations with which they had completed the last part of the crossing remained; Elena went through them to the end instead of skipping them because she knew them. They hadn't disappeared when they entered Mars orbit.

She signed the orbital acquisition report. Nora prepared its transmission with references to the checks, not just the announcement of capture. Elena let her finish the review with Leila and went to the vehicle access points.

Pavel was half inside the first hatch, holding himself in place with his feet. He came out just far enough to show her the clear route and the restraint check. The secured equipment didn't encroach on the space needed to get in. Elena ran a hand along the edge, looking without thinking for the point she had used during training; she found it a little farther along than she remembered.

Inside the vehicle, the close-set seats made the six names on the manifest concrete. Tomás showed her her assigned seat and waited for her to check her restraints. This wasn't a landing test: they were checking that the body and equipment they had now actually fit into the space planned months earlier.

"Your shoulder?" he asked when he saw her turn.

"The path of the strap."

She showed him. Tomás helped her untwist it without changing the setting that had already been checked. Elena repeated the motion, and this time the latch reached its point without forcing. Pavel recorded the result in the seat check, then asked her to get out so they could check the next access point.

Elena pulled herself out and watched as Asha compared equipment and planned system durations for the vehicle. The reserves assigned to descent were allocated to that use; they did not become available water that could erase the ship's restrictions. Gabriel completed the power and thermal checks, Tomás the guidance and propulsion systems. The seal tests had their own recorded results, not just a generic box marked ready.

"Anything missing before we close out the preparation?" Elena asked.

Tomás pointed to the final cross-check of the load. "This. After that, no open items for vehicle readiness."

"Not for separation."

"Not for separation," he confirmed.

From the other access point, Daniel called Sofia. A case wasn't in the position she had listed in her personal note. Elena heard only that fragment of the conversation and moved closer without intervening. Daniel showed her the package reference and its actual location; Sofia checked the storage conditions, then corrected her note. The case was already secured in the location accepted by the loading plan. They didn't move it just to make the incorrect sheet true.

Leila completed the second vehicle's communications test with Nora. Their voices came first from one side of the passage, then the other, slightly different through the small speakers. Malik was checking the navigation references intended for Daniel. Elena let the two of them finish the comparison and asked Jonas whether the rest schedule remained workable.

"If we close out the non-urgent tests here, yes."

She looked at her own list. She had marked another group review of the full program. They had already done two, with the changes highlighted and the people responsible present. A third one now would mainly give her people to watch while they stayed awake.

"No full run-through tonight. Just handover of the assigned items."

Jonas nodded and returned to the second vehicle to complete the medical-equipment check. He didn't look like a man who had reached the end of anything. Elena realized that she didn't feel

that way either. Orbit had brought their transfer to an end, but the ship's body still demanded the same actions: a case left unsecured would float, the air would need the fans, and sleep wouldn't come just because the report bore a signature.

When both vehicles were ready, Daniel brought her the manifest summary. Six and six. No one had been transferred to the surface, and no Approdo supply was listed as having been taken. The hatches would have their own sequence; authorizations still depended on the checks at the time of the operation.

Elena closed out the preparation and communicated the status to all twelve. She said the orbit was verified, the ship required no new interventions, and both vehicles were ready. She gave them the handover references and rest intervals. She didn't add that the worst was over. That would have been a wish spoken in the voice of an order.

Before leaving the module, she asked Nora for the communications status.

"Report sent and preserved. No Earth response confirmed. Reception according to schedule."

"Thank you."

Nora returned to work without looking for another way to say it.

Later, Elena went to the observation window. She didn't take a terminal with her. She held on to the handhold and waited until she could position her head to see without the reflection of the inner lining. Mars filled a field that seemed too large for that small opening. Its edge curved above expanses whose colors were hard to name through the glass; a pale area broke the continuity of the surface.

She couldn't find Approdo. She knew where to look for it on the maps and in the coordinates, but her eyes offered her nothing equivalent to a symbol on the screen. She couldn't see the water containers, the modules, the racks. She liked—and it frightened her—that the place was real even without appearing in a form useful to their needs.

She thought of her daughter, not of the last message but of the way she bent down to put on a shoe while already holding her bag on her shoulder. An hurried, earthly balance. Elena kept that image without trying to place it in a present she didn't know.

Behind her, Pavel asked if the handhold would be free after her shift. Elena said yes and moved slightly, allowing herself another moment. The planet continued sliding through the visible portion of the sky. No sound announced its nearness.

She gave the place to Pavel and headed back toward the habitat module. Both vehicles remained connected to the Aurora. Inside the ship, all twelve people still had a shift to hand over and a place to sleep before setting out.

The Price of Air

When she passed the last bag to Pavel, Elena felt the urge to check the berth once more. She knew she had left it empty of the equipment specified in the manifest. Everything else was secured, inventoried, meant to remain on the Aurora. And yet the departure seemed incomplete precisely because of the absence of an ordinary gesture: there was no door to close behind her.

At the vehicle's docking point, Nora showed her the communications summary. A strap was looped around her wrist, and she had turned the terminal so Elena could read it without pulling it from her fingers.

"The local recording is independent of the link with us. The orbital bridge windows are here. If we lose voice contact, proceed with the planned sequence."

Elena followed the references. She didn't look for reassurance in the way Nora had arranged them.

"Earth reception?"

"No new contact confirmed."

"Hand-over to Daniel complete?"

Nora moved aside to let the second pilot come into view. He reviewed the ship's condition and the assignments of the group remaining with Elena. Malik would be with him; Leila would oversee automation. They weren't leaving the Aurora to wait. Those six still had checks to perform, a night to get through, and a vehicle to bring down to the surface.

Elena rested her hand briefly on the edge of the docking point. Then she crossed over.

Inside the vehicle, there was little room for second thoughts in each person's place. Gabriel had to draw in an elbow so Mei could reach the restraint on her bag. Asha read Pavel an item from the list and waited for him to check the latch before answering her. Elena secured herself in her seat. The straps, firm across her hips, gave her a clear sense of her body, which microgravity had made unfamiliar.

Tomás didn't invite them to look at Mars. He checked that they were ready.

Day 93 appeared in the shared clock's logs. Elena checked the conditions that distinguished this departure from the readiness of the previous day: updated status, accepted window, connections,

no outstanding constraints. She read the authorization to undock and confirmed it only when all the responses were complete.

The separation wasn't as violent as her body seemed to expect. A small movement, felt through the seat, and the instruments' geometry changed. Tomás announced the increasing distance. The Aurora was already beyond the reach of their arms before it became distant.

After the deorbit maneuver came an interval in which Elena could only follow parameters and callouts. The program continued, the measured values were compared with the expected ones. There was no Earth voice commenting on the work. She felt its absence now, of all times, when no one should have spoken without need.

"Entering the atmospheric sequence," Tomás said.

The deceleration pressed her shoulder blades against the seat. It wasn't yet the weight of a place: it was the vehicle changing the motion of their bodies. Elena kept her eyes on her assigned display, resisting the temptation to check the pilot's as well. The vibrations increased. A buckle began transmitting a rapid beat through her suit, almost a minor, domestic defect amid an enormous strain.

Nora's voice disappeared during the scheduled degraded-communications interval. The local recorder continued to indicate acquisition. Elena looked at that confirmation only once.

Tomás called the next transition. His words came precisely, without emphasis; Pavel answered for the check assigned to him. Elena couldn't see his whole face, only the profile of his helmet. The cabin was full of people, each seeming isolated in their own seat.

When the final powered phase began, the noise reached Elena through the structure. Below the vehicle, the ground stopped being merely an image in motion and began to give shape to recognizable distances. Tomás followed the altitude and speed data. The dust thrown up robbed the image of some of its usefulness; the instruments continued to provide what the eyes couldn't judge.

The touchdown was sharper than Elena remembered from the tests. Then the vehicle settled.

No one unbuckled.

Tomás checked the shutdown, the stability, the conditions that allowed them to call the landing complete. Asha checked the cabin. Gabriel read out the power status. Elena waited for all the responses before repeating the pilot's report over the channel.

“First vehicle on the ground. Six people aboard. We’re proceeding with post-landing checks.”

Confirmation from the Aurora came with the brief delay of the local link, without the interplanetary distance that had governed so many other replies. Daniel repeated the number of people. To Elena, six seemed like a fragile quantity: exact, and for the moment separated from the other half.

Only after securing the vehicle did they loosen their restraints according to procedure. Elena raised one forearm and let it fall back onto the support. The gesture had an inevitable end. Gravity was weak compared with Earth’s, but no longer allowed her to abandon an object wherever it happened to be.

Mei got up first, with the help of the handholds, slowly. She waited before taking the next step. Jonas, on the ship, asked about symptoms and individual responses; it wasn’t enough for Elena to declare everyone fit for duty. Gabriel admitted to mild nausea. Her legs felt uncertain and she had a discomfort behind her eyes, and she said so.

Approdo appeared in the exterior feed as a low collection of pale surfaces and shadows. The distances between the modules were less comprehensible than they had been on the map. No door opened to welcome them.

“The planned route is still clear,” Mei said. “A close-up inspection is still pending.”

They didn’t go outside to turn their arrival into a ceremony. They stayed in the vehicle, used the supplies they had brought with them, and organized the watch. The two groups would move into the base together after the second landing; until then, Approdo remained a nearby structure, not their living quarters.

Later, while Asha was logging a check, Elena asked Tomás if he needed a shift change. He pointed to the item that was nearly finished.

“In a little while. I’ll hand this over first.”

She nodded. She didn’t tell him he had brought them home. Instead, she looked at the space in front of her seat and worked out how to place both feet there without hitting Pavel’s bag. To rest, even on Mars, they would have to start there.

On day 94, Elena realized she had slept when the call for the hand-over startled her with her mouth open. For a few moments she searched for the handhold above the Aurora’s berth. She found the edge of the seat and the weight of her arm.

Pavel handed her the terminal without comment. The vehicle's status was stable; the orbital update indicated that the second group had completed the planned checks. Elena read it before drinking. The water seemed different because she had to tilt the container, although it still came from the flight supplies.

Daniel announced undocking while she was secured at her station. From that moment on, no one remained aboard the Aurora. The ship continued in the verified orbit, with the systems left in the planned automatic configuration and the recordings to be retrieved through the available links. Elena followed the hand-over without imagining the empty berths. She needed to see six names associated with the second vehicle, not twelve absences aboard the ship.

During the descent, the telemetry didn't arrive as one continuous story. There were readable stretches, brief callouts, and intervals when the group on the ground could only wait. Tomás was beside her. He didn't touch the controls: he compared the received status with the sequence, speaking up only about what was useful.

Elena was more frightened than she had been in her own seat. Now her body wasn't part of the deceleration, and it didn't even offer her that deceptive sense of knowing what was happening. She felt the need to ask a question. She didn't until there was an operational reason.

The landing report came in Daniel's voice. The stability check followed, then the check of conditions on board.

"Six people. No urgent medical needs," Jonas confirmed.

Elena let out her breath and realized Gabriel had lowered his head. He ran two fingers across his forehead, then returned to the data.

The transfer didn't begin immediately. They had to secure the second vehicle too, complete the suit checks, and approve the route based on the updated images. The vehicles had landed in assigned areas, separated from the structures so their exhaust and the material they kicked up wouldn't strike them. Reaching the base required work outside, not a few celebratory steps.

Elena followed Pavel to the opening. The light outlined his helmet, but through her own visor she didn't see pure colors: filters, reflections, and dust altered everything. She waited for him to check the foothold. Then she climbed down, keeping her hands on the supports.

The first step on the ground came without a line of dialogue. Her foot sank slightly and stopped against a resistance she hadn't felt in months. The second step was too long. She corrected herself as her torso tried to keep going in its original direction. The weight was less than she remembered

from Earth; the difficulty of stopping her body, however, was real.

“Short steps,” Pavel said over the channel.

“Copy.”

It wasn’t advice to the commander. It was a direction for the person behind him, and she was grateful he’d given it without hesitation.

Mei checked the ground ahead of the group. She didn’t collect samples; she compared depressions and obstacles with the prepared route. They carried only what was required for the first entry, leaving the additional loads for later trips. Pauses to check their balance and physical responses interrupted any chance of feeling like a procession.

The other six met them at the agreed point along the route. Elena recognized Nora by her voice before the way she moved. Sofia kept her head lowered, concentrating on her feet; Jonas called for a stop for her and took one for himself as well. No one removed their helmet to make the meeting more human. Daniel reported that his vehicle was secured, Tomás checked that the count of those present was complete, and they continued.

Only then did all twelve reach the entrance to Approdo.

Pavel checked from the outside what the images hadn’t allowed them to see. Leila compared the local status with the one received in flight; Asha didn’t authorize passage into the base’s atmosphere on the panel’s indication alone. They entered in groups, observing the capacity and sequence of the chamber. Elena waited her turn, looking at Gabriel’s back and a thin strip of insulating material near the frame, fastened as it should be but suddenly important because it was there, within reach.

Inside, they completed independent measurements of the atmosphere and checked the pressure. Even when they were given permission to open their helmets, Elena waited to hear the result repeated.

The air brushed her damp forehead. It didn’t smell of fields or wet earth. It had a faint smell of enclosed materials and ventilation, almost disappointingly industrial in its normality.

Nora sat on the first authorized surface and laughed once, without cheer or despair.

“I’d forgotten how much work chairs do.”

Jonas leaned beside her. “For now, let them do it.”

Elena wanted to move straight on to the next compartments, but accepted the medical break and ate part of the planned ration. The base had been designed to be brought online by people who had arrived tired. There was no need to prove they were different.

The inspection of supplies proceeded by access and priority. Daniel compared identifiers and conditions, separating the packages that had been checked from those that were only listed in the manifest. Where the transmitted photograph had shown part of the rack, Pavel could now move and see behind the edge that had hidden it. That didn't mean the contents of the packages had been verified. Asha accepted the water reserves only after the planned checks; Mei kept the ice on the maps out of that calculation.

For their quarters, they provisionally chose the places already ready in the usable core. The personal bags stayed closed until the exit routes and access to the panels were clear. Elena placed hers beneath a berth and secured it anyway, out of habit, then loosened the strap just enough to make it possible to open.

Nora and Leila checked the local connection and the continuity of the recordings. There was no new voice from Earth. Elena received the information standing between two people passing a blanket; landing hadn't changed the nature of the distance from home.

That evening, they drank sitting down, from containers that could be set down. Gabriel put his on the edge of the table and moved it farther in before anyone warned him. Elena looked at the damp ring left on the surface. She took a cloth from the permitted supplies and wiped it up, without using more water. They had finally reached the reserves. They still had to learn how much they could afford to use.

On day 95, Gabriel asked Elena to join him before authorizing the next phase of the startup. He didn't use the emergency channel. The difference let her finish the hand-over with Jonas, but not walk down the corridor without hurrying. She had to stop at the turn so she wouldn't hit the doorframe with her shoulder.

Asha and Leila were standing in front of the local panel. Gabriel had set the terminal on a low surface, beside a meter connected to the designated monitoring point. Elena crouched carefully. The simple movement had already begun to make her thighs ache.

"No shutdown," he said. "I've paused the addition of loads. This is the measurement, this is the forecast."

The two curves didn't diverge enough to suggest an obvious error to Elena. It was the reserve

band, compressed between them and the adopted limit, that showed her the problem.

“Is this still the initial warm-up?”

“Partly. That’s why I’m not showing you just the peak. We compared the stabilized intervals and checked the measurement from the loads’ side.”

Leila opened the references for the timings and configurations. The reports received in flight hadn’t lied: they described an automatic base, with only a few volumes kept in the conditions required by the machines and the storage area. Habitation startup added demands the forecast had estimated, but hadn’t measured all together on site.

Asha pointed to the cycles of the oxygen system and those of the thermal-management system.

“The peaks aren’t the only thing. If I keep the volumes we want at living temperatures, the margin stays too small even between peaks.”

“Can we stagger them?”

“We can manage some of the loads. We can’t tell thermal loss to wait its turn.”

Gabriel showed her the effect of an additional demand already included in the safety analyses. There was no need to invent an accident to put the balance under strain. It was enough to preserve the possibility of dealing with one.

Elena looked at the safeguards, all still enabled. “I don’t want a configuration that works only if no one needs anything.”

“Neither do I,” Gabriel replied.

He didn’t sound pleased. The table also held the list of checks already made to rule out a discrepancy caused by a wrong channel, a load counted twice, or a load left active by mistake. Elena went through them with him. She would have preferred to find a switch in the wrong position. Instead, each check made it more certain they would have to give something up.

She asked to review the source of the adopted limit too. Gabriel retrieved the reference and set it beside the measurements, without moving it to make the curve fit. Elena followed Asha’s second reading. They weren’t using up a tolerance invented on Earth: they were trying to preserve a concrete possibility of intervention for whoever remained on duty there.

Asha and Gabriel’s proposal reduced the volume maintained at habitation conditions. It kept the

essential functions in the core and postponed use of the nonessential compartments. The lines serving those volumes would have to be made safe: closing a door wasn't enough to stop a fluid from freezing in the wrong part of the circuit.

"The crop lab," Elena said.

Asha nodded. "One of the areas we shouldn't bring online."

Sofia joined them with Daniel. She was still carrying the wrapping from one of the supplies, folded beneath her arm. She set it outside the passage and asked to see the proposed configuration before hearing its summary.

Elena let her take the place in front of the terminal. Up close, she noticed the mark the edge of Sofia's helmet had left on her skin. On the Aurora, she could have attributed the stiffness in her face to a shift's fatigue. Now she didn't want to attribute it to anything.

"The lamps can wait," Sofia said after reading. "The preparation can't, if you're planning to start the crop on the date written here."

She moved the reference point for the food forecast. Daniel opened the link to the supplies inventory without trying to replace her answer with his own.

"We won't have that crop by the planned date," Elena said.

"I want that to be what the record says. Not 'crops ready, startup postponed.' If we don't start now, we lose biological time. I can't make it up by having someone work at night."

Gabriel straightened. "I'm not counting the lab as a luxury."

"I know. But a line switched off in your balance sheet can easily turn into a line still alive in the food ledger."

Daniel removed the experimental yield from the period under consideration. He didn't shift it to the following weeks as if it were already guaranteed. Elena followed the change: the base became more sustainable just as the future they could promise themselves narrowed.

"How much do you need to preserve what you brought?" Elena asked Sofia.

She separated the supplies that were still sealed from the materials that required controlled conditions. She hadn't started wetting the substrates or opened the seeds for planting. They could postpone without destroying a crop already underway, provided the designated storage area met

the requirements. She asked to verify them in person with whoever would move the containers.

Elena agreed. Then she asked Jonas, called in on the local link, what constraints the denser arrangement would impose. The doctor wanted verified ventilation at the sleeping spaces, clear access, and shifts that wouldn't turn every maintenance task into a wake-up call for everyone. He didn't insist on rooms the balance couldn't sustain, but refused to let fatigue disappear from the calculation just because it wasn't an electrical load.

The discussion took longer than the initial proposal. Pavel had to check which sections could be isolated without interfering with the core. Leila distinguished the alarms to be retained from those that should reflect the authorized status of the excluded compartments. No one suggested silencing everything just to get a display without alerts.

Elena waited for the checks before signing the new sequence. The restriction wasn't yet a tested configuration; it was an intervention to be carried out with responsibilities assigned.

"Proceed with the reduced volume. No crop startup. Update the food reserves without assuming a harvest. Tomorrow we accept the configuration only after the tests."

Sofia picked up the folded wrapping and put it in the designated collection. "I need someone to help with the crates. I don't want to drag them."

"I'll come," Daniel said.

When they left, Elena stayed with Gabriel in front of the curves. She wanted to ask if this was finally the true measure of Approdo. She corrected herself before speaking.

"What conditions haven't we tested yet?"

He reopened the list. They sat down to review it. It was the first moment of the day when Elena stopped looking for a short answer.

On day 96, the lab lights were still on, but only so Pavel could complete his check. Elena joined him at the threshold without crossing the temporary marker. Pale rectangles remained on the floor where the crates had been set down before they were moved.

Sofia was checking the last container with Daniel. She read the identifier, compared it with its assigned place in the core storage area, and let him lift one end. They carried it outside together. Elena moved aside to make room; that step backward gave her an exact sense of what they were doing. They would use the corridor as a passageway and some of the storage space for materials that should have been elsewhere. Every function they kept took the place of another.

Asha checked with Pavel that the sections exposed to cooling had been drained or protected according to procedure. The valves weren't declared closed based only on the remote command: a local check was on the list. Gabriel separated the nonessential loads while leaving the controls and safeguards required by the preservation configuration powered. No one simply unplugged something to save energy.

Elena followed Leila's second reading. The expected statuses appeared in the summary with a reference to the excluded compartment. Alerts from that volume shouldn't look like new failures to whoever came on shift, but out-of-limit conditions still had to be recognizable. Leila tested the planned alert path and checked its recording.

Pavel bent to pick up a tool and paused before straightening. Elena waited without pretending to look elsewhere.

"Dizzy?"

"Just for a moment. It's passed."

She called Jonas and, while waiting for his reassessment, assigned Pavel a seated task. Pavel didn't protest. He seemed more annoyed by the tool still in his hand than by the change of assignment; he put it away and had Gabriel check the last signed item.

The compartment door closed after the final check. Elena read the permanent label: non-routine access, circuit status, reference to the reactivation procedure. It wasn't a space lost forever, but they could no longer walk through it without preparation, or heat it because someone needed to be alone.

In the inhabited core, the air stirred one corner of Nora's blanket. She folded it more tightly and cleared the ventilation intake, then called Jonas over to check the space before leaving her bag there. Elena watched the airflow check near the berths and the independent measurement of the atmosphere. Twelve bodies, their meals, their sleep, and the instruments left on had to appear in the tests, not remain a footnote beneath the machine data.

Gabriel started the sequence of authorized loads. The oxygen system went through its planned cycles while the core heating continued to regulate. Asha monitored pressures, quality, and transfers to storage before accepting the system's contribution. The reserves already verified remained distinct from expected production. Even the air they would breathe later needed an honest accounting.

Elena didn't stay glued to the panel for the entire test. She walked through the sleeping spaces,

the table, the passage to the access chamber. She needed to be able to see the configuration as it would be when no one was watching it with the attention of a startup. She had someone show her how to reach the panel behind the medical supplies without clearing the corridor; Jonas and Daniel moved a crate and repeated the action.

At the table, Malik had wedged a list under the edge of the terminal so it wouldn't slide. The habit of securing everything survived in new forms. Tomás passed by carrying a supply to be put away and waited for Elena to clear the narrow section.

"Is your place ready?" she asked him.

"Ready to sleep in. Not yet ready to find anything in the dark."

"Don't leave anything in the passage."

He lifted the supply he was carrying, as proof of his intentions, and continued. They didn't talk about the descent. Elena kept the exchange brief without trying to draw out another sign. Tomás was there, he was working, and he would have a shift after his rest. He didn't owe her reconciliation for having arrived alive.

The measurements proved useful just when the urge to declare the work finished became strongest. Gabriel called for another stabilized interval, then for the change of load specified in the test. The reserve didn't disappear during the transition. The thermal values didn't resume the drift that had prevented acceptance of the extended configuration. Leila compared the local recording with the summary; Asha had one measurement repeated without deleting the previous one.

Elena used the wait to eat. Sofia sat across from her with the terminal open to the storage conditions.

"Are the crates all right?"

"Yes. The conditions are suitable for preservation. I included the checks in the hand-over."

"And you?"

Sofia closed the terminal. For a moment, Elena was afraid she had asked too broad a question in front of everyone.

"I'd rather have had my hands in a substrate," she replied. "But not today."

Elena nodded. She didn't promise her a date. She finished her meal and carried the container to the designated spot, relieved to discover that there was already a next step simple enough to take without deciding the future.

Acceptance came after the last check and the hand-over to the next shift. Gabriel called the configuration stable under the conditions tested; Asha confirmed the life-support systems. The report retained the limits, the excluded loads, and the checks still to be made periodically. It didn't contain the word self-sufficiency. They depended on their supplies for food, on the materials at hand for repairs, and on the work of people who had to sleep in order to carry on.

Elena signed off on the provisional configuration. Nora saved the report among the technical data. There was no confirmed news from Earth regarding communications. The listening work continued with the available means and the checks already established; no speech was needed to keep it among their duties.

Before her rest, Elena walked through the corridor once more. Beyond the lab door, the temperature would follow the preservation configuration. On this side, a sleeve had been badly stuffed into a bag and stuck out toward the floor. She picked it up and quietly called its owner, who put it away and cleared the passage.

Elena's place was narrower than the one she had imagined during the journey. She sat down, then swung her legs onto the berth one at a time. She felt the mattress give beneath her hips and searched for a position that wouldn't pull at her aching muscles. Nearby, someone dimmed the local light; someone else kept reading on a shielded screen.

The ventilation remained on. Elena noticed a change in the sound of a machine and waited for the shift call, but only the expected confirmation came, with no urgency. She didn't get up to check again. They had checked, assigned, handed over. She let that be enough for those few hours and rested her head, while the others kept watch over the air.

A New Dawn

Nora learned to recognize her place by the edge of the blanket. In the dimmed light of the core, all the berths were almost the same color, but her blanket stayed folded outward near her feet, where she searched for space in her sleep. She straightened it before getting up. To get her shirt, she no longer had to search for a handhold to steady herself: she only had to bend down, slowly, and let her weight settle back onto the soles of her feet.

The communal calendar showed day one hundred and five. The local night was not over yet. Some people were asleep, some were working, and the meal available in the common area could be called breakfast or dinner, depending on the shift. Nora reached the preparation counter with her empty container and waited for Pavel to finish. He cleared the space, checked that he hadn't left anything in front of the grille, and pointed out a small stain on his own cuff.

"Food," he said. "Already checked."

Nora smiled before she could stop herself. Then she passed him the cleaning material. The distinction between a trace of food and moisture that needed reporting had by now become part of the way they looked at things.

At the communications station, Leila was completing the handover. Nora read the status before asking if there was any news. There was no confirmed news from Earth. The available connection logs had been preserved; transmissions had their own local results, separate from confirmations no one had received. The empty space reserved for those confirmations no longer filled Nora's entire screen when she looked at it. She still saw it.

"I've prepared the bulletin structure," she said. "I'm missing the surface updates."

"Daniel's finishing the summary. Don't take the open version on the common counter: it's still under review."

Nora noted the correct reference. Since they had been living at Approdo, the distances between a question and the person to ask had shrunk to a few steps; that didn't mean they could stop distinguishing a half-finished sentence from accepted data. She set aside the public text and went to find Daniel without taking her headset with her.

She found him with Mei in front of a representation of the terrain. Nora recognized the outline of the infrastructure, but didn't try to interpret the highlighted areas beyond the perimeter. Mei kept one hand on the edge of the counter to leave the passage clear.

“For the bulletin, can I write that you’re preparing to assess the ice?”

“Yes. Preparing.” Mei zoomed in on a section. “First we have to confirm a practicable route, then choose where to take measurements. And verify the instruments under operating conditions.”

“No water added to the inventory,” Daniel said.

“No water added,” Mei confirmed. “Even finding ice wouldn’t tell us on its own how much we could extract and process.”

Nora recorded the wording without shortening it into a promise. Mei showed her two possibilities for future reconnaissance: one required more preparation time, the other passed near an area for which there weren’t enough observations. She hadn’t chosen yet. She had assigned each option its outstanding checks and asked Pavel to compare the equipment. It was practical work, even though nothing had changed on the surface.

“Do you miss geology?” Nora asked.

Mei looked at the map and then at her. “This is geology. I miss working without having to explain that a possibility doesn’t fill a tank.”

Daniel raised a finger. “I’m fine with it as long as it doesn’t fill one on my screen.”

Mei closed the zoomed view and gave him room. Nora moved toward Sofia, who had opened a storage compartment in the core. There were no leaves beneath lit lamps, nor the damp smell Nora had imagined during the journey. There were packages, references, and a comparison of required conditions against recorded ones. Sofia checked a package without opening it, read her list, and put it back in its assigned position.

“Everyone keeps asking when you’re going to plant?”

“Often enough.”

“I’m not asking.”

Sofia looked at her, tired but not hostile. “You can ask. Just don’t let it be the only question.”

Nora set the now-empty container on the designated spot and asked what should go in the bulletin. Sofia indicated the stored materials, the checks that needed to continue, and the laboratory still not in ordinary use. She hadn’t watered any substrate or opened seeds for planting. The delay hadn’t turned into a new date. She added that properly preserving what they couldn’t

yet use took time and responsibility, just like growing it.

“Write it that way,” Nora said.

“You write it.”

“Then check it afterward.”

Sofia nodded. Her list remained visible on the storage compartment for whoever took over. Nora picked up her container and carried it away before it became an object someone else had to move.

When Daniel called the twelve of them together for the briefing, they didn’t all arrive at once. People arranged themselves where they could see without getting in the way; those monitoring the systems kept the necessary data in front of them. Asha asked for a moment to complete a confirmation. No one told her to hurry. Nora waited beside Malik, her text still incomplete.

Daniel made the reviewed version of the inventory available and displayed it on the common counter. It distinguished what had been verified from what required further checks and from resources not yet available. The food supplies didn’t include a future harvest. Spare parts weren’t one reassuring quantity: it depended on which components they could replace. The consumption projections showed the conditions they needed to maintain, not a guaranteed duration for every possible choice.

Nora recognized the temptation to look for a single number, an answer that would tell them how long they had the right to feel safe. Daniel didn’t offer one. Instead, he made the path to understanding each limit available.

“If we change how something is used, the forecast changes,” he said. “We record the change first. Not after we’ve used it up.”

Gabriel called out the loads they couldn’t overlap. Asha confirmed the life-support checks. From their exchange, Nora drew the sentences for the bulletin, but beneath her notes she also wrote one for herself: ask when I don’t understand. She wouldn’t delegate her fear of the numbers to others and then reproach them for hiding the future from her.

Elena, standing near the accessway, read the summary to the last line.

“This stays available to everyone,” she said. “Now we decide how to work with it together.”

The first proposal concerned the counter they were reading from. Gabriel asked that it be cleared for meals during the designated intervals. It wasn’t the issue Nora would have imagined starting

with when it came to building a shared life on another planet, and yet she realized she had been eating standing up without needing to. Work left open on a surface couldn't turn into an endless reservation.

"Even if I'm coming back to it soon," Gabriel clarified. "I close it and clear the spot."

Pavel pointed to his terminal. "For maintenance, we leave the reference, not the parts."

Asha intervened before the sentence could be lumped in with the general rules. Components being worked on needed an assigned space and a recognizable status; they weren't to be put back in storage just to tidy up. Pavel agreed. Nora watched two lines take shape out of a habit that, if left unstated, would have led to an argument or a mistake. She separated personal space, shared surfaces, and technical space. The words were as small as the environment they had to regulate.

Daniel asked for an owner and a handover for less visible tasks too. Whoever checked a supply had to know whom to entrust with the next check. Anyone who couldn't finish could say so without waiting for the task to become urgent. Malik added that a second review needed its own time, not time tacked onto the end of someone's rest period.

"And if no one has time?" Nora asked.

"We postpone what can wait," Jonas said.

"Everything seems postponable until it breaks," Asha observed.

"And everything seems urgent to the person doing it." Jonas turned to her. "We need to talk it through before someone decides to work instead of sleep."

Elena had them note the process: urgent matters went to whoever was coordinating the shift, ordinary tasks were to be weighed against other needs, fatigue was to be reported, and coverage arranged. She didn't remove the commander's responsibility to intervene. But she made it clear where that responsibility would have to meet the others.

Nora noticed Elena had taken a place at the side, where she had to lean slightly to read. She hadn't taken the center of the counter. When a request about conserving energy remained too vague, Gabriel stopped it; when a proposed interval intruded on the sleep of someone who had worked earlier, Daniel pointed it out. Elena listened and corrected the note.

Tomás waited until the work guidelines had been collected. He had followed the supply summary without objecting. Now he shifted just enough to look at those near the systems station too.

“I want it to be clear what we’re agreeing to.”

Nora held her fingers still above the controls.

“These rules,” Elena said.

“Not a reconstruction in which we all agreed on how to get here.”

“No.”

The answer wasn’t enough to close the issue, and Nora was relieved. She added a reference in the text to the decisions and disagreements that had been preserved. Tomás read the wording on the common screen.

“Working here doesn’t withdraw them,” he said.

Nora added that too, then had him read it again. Tomás didn’t smile or look to Elena for a gesture of reconciliation. He confirmed that it was what he had asked for. Beside the issue, his name remained as the author of the clarification, not as an exception tolerated by the group.

They moved on to the archives. Nora had prepared a few lines, but as soon as she showed them, she felt how inadequate they were. Talking about preservation seemed simple until they had to decide who could access another person’s message when that person wasn’t able to answer.

“The copies we began on the ship aren’t a public collection,” she said. “And the fact that they’re here doesn’t change the permission.”

Leila explained the difference between verifying the integrity of a set and reproducing its contents. Detailed lists remained private. They could authorize a copy without authorizing anyone to listen to it, or share a single item without opening everything else. The decisions had to be understandable to the people making them, not hidden in a general formula.

Sofia asked that no one have to choose a final destination for their messages that night.

“I’m not ready,” she said. She didn’t explain what for, and no one asked.

“In the absence of an instruction, they stay closed,” Nora proposed. “We preserve them within the limits of the available resources. Any change is discussed; we don’t make it in silence.”

Jonas asked them to separate from that consent the information needed for care and safety. A personal archive wasn’t a place to search for such information out of curiosity or convenience. They would maintain the designated process for necessary data without turning it into general

access to other people's lives.

Nora reread everything aloud. She noticed a word that could mean either copying or sharing and replaced it with two different terms. Leila had her go back to a sentence that was too broad. Daniel asked what would appear on the common list: only service availability and instructions, not participants, recipients, or contents. It was already the criterion they used for personal access to communications; they kept it on the surface too.

"And no one has to leave us a message," Mei said.

Nora looked at the line she had just written. Until then, she had thought mostly about the right to save a voice. There was also the right not to give it to others, not to produce a document about one's own grief.

She added Mei's sentence without reducing it to a note.

When they finished, they didn't call the text a constitution or a pact for a new humanity. It contained responsibilities, access limits, ways to report a problem, and the option to ask for a review. Urgent decisions remained the responsibility of whoever had to make them; decisions that changed the use of shared resources required reasons that could be consulted and discussion when conditions allowed. The agreements did not, by themselves, change technical procedures.

Everyone had a chance to read and ask for a correction. Nora waited even for those who had to break off for a scheduled check. They didn't want agreement obtained while someone was looking elsewhere. When everyone had agreed to the rules as worded, Elena approved their use for shared work.

Then Gabriel actually cleared the counter. He moved the terminal, closed his document, and gathered his belongings. The first consequence of the agreement needed no further signature: space remained at the edge for the container of someone who hadn't eaten yet.

They didn't change the lighting. Someone suggested it quietly, but people were still working in the core, and a ceremony shouldn't make it harder to read data. They moved only the documents off the common counter. Nora closed the rules document too, after making sure the approved version was available.

Jonas had asked beforehand if they wanted to stop together for a little while. He hadn't assigned any compulsory meaning to that time. They could stay without speaking, continue a check, or leave without giving a reason. Nothing would be recorded, and none of the preserved voices would be played to fill the silence.

Nora sat down. For the first time since getting up, she had nothing in her hands. She felt as if she had forgotten something, then recognized the impulse to find herself a task. Across the counter, Sofia rested her arms on her legs. Pavel had turned his terminal facedown. Asha stayed near the station from which she could monitor the systems; Gabriel stood beside her without blocking her view.

Elena spoke without seeking a place from which to dominate the group.

"We're stopping for the people we haven't heard from. For what we know has happened and what we don't know."

Nora waited for a sentence that would make the moment final. None came. Elena lowered her head slightly and left the others the space she had opened.

For a little while, they continued to hear the small movements of the core: fabric against a seat, a sole repositioned, the discreet confirmation of a check. Nora looked at her fingernails. She had imagined grief many times as something visible, something that would change people's faces and make them recognizable from a distance. Here were the same faces she had argued with over a rest interval, and the same man who had shown her a food stain.

Daniel moved his container so it wouldn't knock against Malik's elbow. The gesture made Nora think of places set for a visitor, chairs added when a table already seemed full. She didn't try to reconstruct a particular table: she would have missed details, overlaid different occasions. Instead, she let the gesture belong to Daniel too, to that common counter, and to the person beside her now. It took nothing away from what she remembered.

Mei said she missed the sound of rain against a window. She stopped immediately, almost surprised by the precision of what she had chosen. No one asked her where the window was. Malik named a street without describing it. To Nora it was just an unfamiliar name, spoken with an accent she didn't hear from him during work. She understood that she could learn things about him for years without reaching the point where that name had begun.

Tomás said only, "I haven't stopped waiting."

"Neither have I," someone replied.

Nora didn't try to work out who it was. She looked at Tomás, who was staring at the now-clear counter. His sentence contained no operational request, and no one turned it into one. He could keep waiting and still have an assignment for the next shift. He could have piloted them to that place and still not be at peace.

When her turn came, Nora couldn't say mother. She felt the word forming, then stopping, as if saying it in front of everyone required her to choose which verb tense would follow. She stayed seated. Jonas didn't give her an encouraging nod, and she was grateful he hadn't turned her hesitation into a test to pass.

Elena didn't speak of her daughter. She stayed with them and listened. Nora didn't know whether it was a choice or an inability like her own; she didn't need to decide.

The pause ended without a solemn signal. Asha had to confirm a status, Daniel quietly asked Gabriel to pass him a container. Mei wiped her eyes with the material she had available, then checked where to put it away. No one started applauding, no one looked for a photograph. Nora got up when her legs began to ache and returned the seat to its place.

Before returning to the bulletin, she went to her personal space. There was no room to close off. She positioned herself to shield the terminal and put on her headset, using the gesture the others had learned to respect. She opened her own archive, not the technical one. The messages she had received were separate from the drafts; the copies hadn't changed that separation.

She found her mother's recording among the ones she had yet to answer. Before playing it, she lowered the volume. She heard her mother talking about the plant moved from the landing because it was in the way, then about something important she couldn't remember. An object was set on a table; the sound of a teaspoon followed. There was nothing that sounded like a farewell.

This time Nora didn't try to extract information she had missed from the background. She didn't look for signs of fear or a hidden awareness. Her mother was sending her an ordinary message, and Nora listened to it to the end.

She opened the old draft. The saved sentences still spoke from the beginning of the silence: they didn't know whether the transmissions were getting through, they were all right, she had listened to the message about the plant and would have replied sooner, but then her shift. She left that text as it was. She didn't want to make it seem as though the woman sitting at Approdo had already known what to say back then.

She created a new draft and wrote that they had arrived. She paused over the next sentence. She could have explained the closed modules, the seeds still in their packages, Mei's work; instead, she chose something her mother had asked her often during training: whether she could sleep with other people so close by.

She wrote that sometimes she could, and sometimes she couldn't. That she had learned to tell who

was passing by the way they slowed near the berths. Then she realized she had given a true answer, not a reassuring bulletin. She left it in the draft without adding it to the transmission queue.

When she took off her headset, the core had returned to its work. She didn't feel relieved. Her eyes ached and the meal still sat heavy in her stomach, but she felt no need to delete what she had written. She closed the private archive before joining Leila.

The bulletin still needed its final revisions. Sofia corrected a sentence that could give the impression planting was imminent; Daniel checked the inventory reference. Nora kept activities in preparation, measured results, and outstanding needs separate. In the recipient field, she didn't enter the name of someone who could guarantee her a reply. She prepared a message that anyone still able to listen could recognize and understand.

Leila read the bulletin without taking Nora's seat. She followed the references to the accepted data, checked the source of the updates, and returned to the heading. Meanwhile, Nora made sure no items from the personal archive had ended up in the material intended for transmission. There shouldn't have been any path between those two sets, but she checked the actual contents anyway, not just the folder name.

After reading the ready version, Elena approved the report on the status of the crew and the base. She asked them to make explicit that local resources still awaiting verification weren't part of the available supplies. Nora showed her the passage, then waited for Leila to finish her reconstruction.

"No personal attachments," Leila said. "References are consistent. This is the verified version."

Nora compared the text to be read with the one included in the package once more. She wasn't looking for a memorable sentence. She wanted a distant listener to be able to distinguish who was speaking, where the transmission came from, and what was being requested. If someone received only part of it, at least that part should remain understandable.

She recorded a first reading. On the second line her voice came out too low, and she started again. The attempt remained a working recording, excluded from the material to be sent. She took a sip of her water, set the container away from the controls, and gave herself a breath before trying again.

"This is Approdo, Arcadia Planitia site, Mars. Nora Serra transmitting, crew member of the Aurora, third human mission to Mars. There are twelve of us. All crew members have reached the base."

She paused briefly. Leila followed the text, not her face.

“We are operating in a reduced inhabited configuration. Life-support systems are online under verified conditions. We depend on the supplies and materials on hand; we are not self-sufficient. The crops have not been started. We are preparing further assessments of local resources.”

The next sentence had been the hardest to write. Nora read it without changing it.

“We have received no new confirmed messages from Earth since the flow was interrupted. We do not know the status of Earth’s populations or the cause of the absence of lunar responses. We are maintaining reception and transmissions according to the available communications links.”

The necessary data for identifying the transmission and the operational instructions for a possible response followed. They didn’t assume that a control center was intact or that anyone on the other end had the same procedures as they did. Nora had also avoided asking for an immediate reply. The distances hadn’t shrunk just because they had stopped receiving messages.

“This bulletin is addressed to any listener able to receive it. You may preserve and retransmit this information. We will continue to communicate our status.”

At the end, she said the name of the base again. Then she stopped the recording and left the controls before looking at Leila. They listened to the material intended for transmission, checking the technical sections too. Nora heard her own voice from the outside: tired, less even than she would have liked, but clear. She didn’t ask it to sound like the voice of someone already saved.

They verified the connection setup before sending. Leila checked the local route, Nora the expected data and the status of the apparatus. The bulletin entered the authorized sequence without arbitrarily displacing other assignments. The entire time, Nora kept the reception status visible, separate from the transmission status.

When the logs attested that the transmission had been sent, she recorded exactly that. She didn’t write delivered. Nothing appeared beside remote confirmation.

She remained seated for a few moments. She could have opened more windows, queried a status she had just read again, invented work to keep herself at the station. Instead, Leila handed her the prepared handover. Nora read it: reception active, checks assigned, procedure for verifying possible contacts unchanged. There was no need to keep her body in front of the screen to make the waiting real.

“If we need you, we’ll call,” Leila said.

“I know.”

Nora stood only after completing the handover. She found Elena near the corridor, reading a request that didn’t require an immediate decision. The commander checked its assignment and closed the document.

“There’s some light,” she said.

Nora followed her to the service porthole. They didn’t need to open sealed compartments or put on suits. They stopped in the pressurized core, leaving the passage behind them clear. The opening was small enough that they had to approach one at a time. Nora waited, then Elena moved aside to make room for her.

Outside, the plain emerged through minute differences. First an edge against the sky, then a surface that no longer seemed uniform. Nora didn’t see a new world every time she looked: she saw a place they still had to learn. A rise in the ground didn’t promise protection; a lighter patch didn’t mean accessible ice. The light made visible even the things they didn’t know how to use.

“Did you sleep?” Elena asked.

“Enough for this shift. I’ll go back to bed afterward.”

Elena nodded, and Nora realized she had given an answer she wouldn’t need to correct to reassure her. They stayed there, watching the edge of the landscape. At times, Nora could see a reflection of her own face superimposed on the plain in the glass; a movement of her head was enough to make it disappear.

“I haven’t stopped thinking we might receive something,” she said.

“Neither have I.”

Nora looked at Elena. She didn’t know whether she was thinking of a signal, a particular voice, or both. For once, she didn’t look for a question that would force her to choose.

“I started another message to my mother.”

Elena turned slightly, leaving her the option to stop there.

“I wrote to her about how we sleep,” Nora added.

“Is that something she would have wanted to know?”

“Yes.”

Elena turned back to the view. She didn’t say that her mother would hear it, or that writing it would be good for her anyway. Nora was able to keep her gesture without defending it. In the core, someone quietly asked for a maintenance reference; someone else answered. The necessary work went on without demanding their presence at every step.

The first direct light reached the plain. Thin shadows appeared on the ground, longer than Nora had expected. The Sun didn’t fill the porthole: it arrived as a bright edge that made her narrow her eyes. Elena stepped back a little to give her a better view, but Nora shifted with her until they could both look.

Earth hadn’t answered. Behind them, reception remained active, entrusted to people who would know when to call them. Ahead lay ground to measure, systems to maintain, and mornings whose number they didn’t know. Nora didn’t try to count them. She stayed beside Elena as the light rose and, for the first time since the flow had been interrupted, didn’t wait for a voice before letting the day begin.