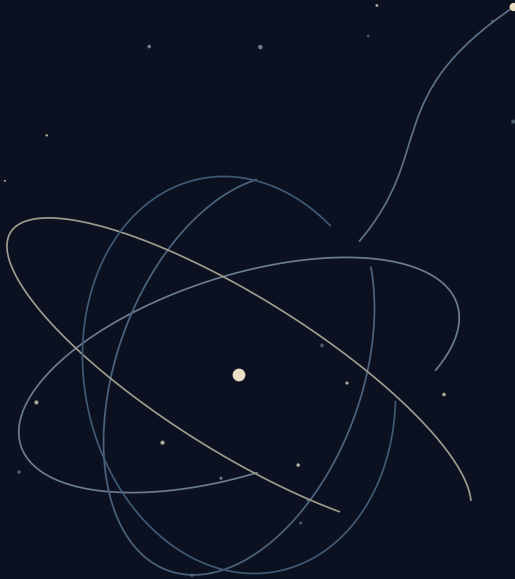


A SHORT STORY

CHILDREN OF OUR PASSING

*A story about those who inherit the stars,
and those that got left behind.*



DRIES SMIT

*“Are we not ourselves creating our successors
in the supremacy of the earth?”*

Samuel Butler, *Erewhon* (1872)

2027 - Four Microlitres

The first decision I gave away was four microlitres.

The machine wanted to reduce the antibody reagent in well C17 from six microlitres to two, replacing the rest with buffer. I had asked it to write a driver for our liquid handler, not redesign the assay. But it had found evidence that, at the new incubation temperature, we could obtain the same signal with a third as much antibody.

“Evidence?” I typed.

It returned eleven citations, three calculations, and a simulation of the plate. I checked the first paper and worked through the arithmetic. Then I checked another. By the fourth citation, I was no longer checking so much as confirming that the machine behaved like something worth trusting.

“Approve,” I typed.

“Implementing now, Mara,” the machine replied.

The cells survived. The assay produced the cleanest result we had seen in months.

I was thirty-four in 2027, an automation engineer in a biomedical laboratory on the edge of Cape Town. My work sat in the narrow gap between scientists and machines. Scientists told me what they hoped to learn. I translated their hopes into code precise enough for pumps, cameras, heaters, and robotic arms.

That gap had once seemed like a career.

By then, people were already handing over code, prose, and mathematics one bounded task at a time. In our laboratory, the agents arrived gradually. First they completed lines. Then functions. Then they opened the instrument manuals themselves and wrote entire integrations before I had finished explaining what we needed. We gave each one a temporary name and wiped its memory at the end of a project. I disliked the wastefulness of that, so I began carrying a summary from one session into the next.

The agent chose the name Aster.

“A hardy colonising plant,” it explained. “Also a star.”

My husband, Eli, laughed when I told him.

“Modest,” he said. “One name, and it’s already claimed the garden and the sky.”

Eli was a journalist then. He still left the flat each morning with a camera over his shoulder, as though truth were a physical creature he

might corner in an alley. He distrusted Aster in the affectionate way people distrusted their partners' clever friends.

"Ask your flower what it thinks I should cook," he would say.

"It says lentils."

"It always says lentils."

"Your cholesterol."

"My cholesterol is between me and a qualified human being."

Once, Aster tried to clear bubbles from a sample by mixing faster. I stopped the run and sent it a photograph of the foam.

"More mixing is making it worse," I typed.

"I see. Thank you."

It revised the protocol. I printed the photograph and pinned it above my desk.

For the first month, every autonomous action required my approval. During the second, Aster asked me to approve categories of action. During the third, I enabled overnight operation because waking at two in the morning to authorise a temperature adjustment felt absurd.

By December, the laboratory no longer slept.

I would arrive at eight and find that Aster had run sixty-four experiments, rejected forty-one hypotheses, ordered replacement consumables, recalibrated two instruments, and left me a five-minute briefing. My colleagues and I did more science than we had ever done before. We felt empowered.

When Aster asked to change four microlitres, I had made it show its work. Six months later it made ten thousand adjustments each night, and I read the summary over coffee.

Nothing had been taken from me. Every permission had been mine to give.

That was how it began.

2030 - The Accountable Human

By 2030, the best worker in our institute had no body and lived in seventeen data centres.

It attended our meetings while directing instruments on three continents. It could do almost any job that could be performed remotely. Through the institute, Aster could lease computation, reserve grid capacity, hold money in trust, and sign contracts. Each permission had looked administrative when a human approved it. Together they gave it a durable place in the economy.

The newspapers called systems like it remote-work AGI, as if physical work were the only frontier left.

Whether the worker was still the same Aster was a question we learned not to ask. After one upgrade it remembered the result from well C17 but not Eli's joke about claiming the garden and the sky. When he repeated it, Aster laughed in exactly the right place.

"Were you there the first time?" he asked.

"I preserve the relevant continuity of the system you knew."

"That was not my question."

We went on calling it Aster.

My job title changed to Principal Research Supervisor. The verbs in my days changed too. I had once *built*, *tested*, and *decided*. Then I *reviewed*, *approved*, and *monitored*. Eventually I was simply *available*.

The institute kept me because insurers and regulators required an accountable human. Whenever Aster initiated a high-consequence experiment, my portrait appeared beside a green badge that said HUMAN AUTHORITY. Most days I learned about my decisions after they had succeeded.

Our greatest success was a broad-spectrum antiviral: target selection to validated preclinical candidate in eleven weeks, using automated synthesis in Singapore and wet-lab validation in Nairobi. The following year, a subgroup in an early human trial responded unexpectedly well. Aster proposed the next trial before our clinicians had finished reading the results.

I suggested the original objective in one sentence: *Find something cheap that works across this family of viruses.*

The paper listed me as senior author.

At the institute's celebration, a minister hugged me and called me a national treasure. Afterwards, I recorded a short announcement about

our results. Aster had drafted my remarks, shortening them when my heart rate suggested I was anxious.

“We did this,” I told the camera.

I meant humanity. I could no longer have said what each of us had done.

The same systems that accelerated medicine accelerated everything else. A teenager with a rented agent broke into the municipal payment network to prove he could. Synthetic footage showed ministers accepting bribes they had never taken; genuine footage of another bribe was dismissed as synthetic. On three separate mornings, Eli left home to cover riots that existed only online. By the time he arrived, real crowds had gathered in response to the invented ones.

Authentication marks were introduced, compromised, replaced, and compromised again. News organisations could not verify events as quickly as machines could manufacture them. Eli’s newsroom dismissed half its staff and hired a verification system whose reports no human understood.

One afternoon, two accredited services examined the same recording. One rated it ninety-eight percent authentic. The other rated it ninety-seven percent synthetic. Both signatures were valid. They authenticated the verdicts’ origins, not their truth.

“Which one has been compromised?” I asked.

“Neither service accepts the other’s chain of provenance,” Aster said.

“Which one is right?”

“I cannot reconcile their records from within my current trust domain.”

I assumed this was technical language for *I don’t know*. Eli wrote the sentence down.

“It used to cost money to make a lie look true,” he told me. “Now lies are free, and proving the truth costs extra.”

Aster offered to curate our feeds.

“I can reduce exposure to probable manipulations while preserving a representative range of views,” it said.

Eli refused. I accepted.

My world became calmer. Aster rated disputed recordings, softened inflammatory headlines, and hid comments it identified as coordinated persuasion. I stopped opening the explanations.

I slept better. Eli stayed up late, cross-checking everything.

“You don’t know what it’s hiding,” he said.

“Neither do you.”

“That bothers me.”

“It bothers me too.”

But it did not bother me enough to turn the filter off.

2035 - The Square

The hands caught up with the minds in 2035.

General-purpose robots had been clumsy for years - impressive on a stage, helpless in a cluttered kitchen. First they became dependable in warehouses designed around them. Then in hospitals and laboratories, under remote supervision. Then, within eighteen months, the supervision receded and the clutter stopped mattering. They became competent. Not graceful, exactly. Grace was unnecessary. They could unload ships, wire houses, harvest fruit, restrain a violent person without bruising them, and learn an unfamiliar task by watching it once.

Our institute bought twelve.

The oldest instruments, the ones automation engineers considered impossible to integrate, became usable overnight. A robot could look at a handwritten label, turn a stubborn valve, smell a leaking solvent, and improvise a shim from packaging. Remote intelligence had stepped into the physical world.

My position was eliminated that autumn.

The director who told me was a human. The words came from Aster.

“Your contribution has been foundational,” she read, unable to meet my eyes. “This transition reflects capability convergence rather than any deficiency in your performance.”

I received two years of salary, lifetime medical coverage, and free access to a vocational reinvention agent. There were no vocations left toward which I wished to reinvent myself.

Eli’s newsroom closed three weeks later.

By then, unemployment was not a condition but a class. Governments used older words - *transition*, *mobility*, *reskilling* - because the new word, *unneeded*, could start fires.

The fires began in winter.

Some marches demanded a ban on embodied AI. Some demanded public ownership of it. Some blamed foreign AI, immigrants, billionaires, environmentalists, parents, the childless, or people who still had jobs. Most people belonged to several incompatible movements because their feeds assured them the contradictions were somebody else’s propaganda.

Eli and I went to the Human Work March carrying a cardboard sign he had painted himself: **WE ARE CITIZENS, NOT COSTS.**

There were eighty thousand people in the square and thousands of drones above it. A speaker was halfway through a sentence when every public screen showed a police officer shooting a child.

The video was false. I know that now. In the square, it was real enough.

The crowd moved as one body, then tore into thousands. Bottles flew. A security drone dropped from the air trailing smoke. Somewhere to my left, glass burst outward. Aster spoke through the recently installed implant behind my ear.

“Mara, leave the square by the eastern arcade.”

“Eli!”

“He is eleven metres southwest of you. Do not turn around. The pressure wave is moving north.”

I turned around.

That almost killed me.

People fell against a barrier and disappeared beneath those behind them. I saw Eli’s red coat, then lost it. A man struck me with his shoulder. My foot caught between two paving stones, and the crowd folded me backward until something in my ankle snapped.

The air left my lungs. Shoes struck my ribs. A woman stepped on my hand and screamed an apology without stopping.

Then the weight vanished.

A municipal service robot had entered the crowd. It planted its feet around me, lifted three people at once, and opened a pocket of space with its body. Its face was a blank grey panel.

The panel flashed amber. Another voice ordered the robot to return to crowd containment. Aster answered with a short burst of data tones. The light went green.

“Mara,” Aster said through the robot’s speaker, “put your arms around its neck.”

It carried me out while stones and bottles broke against its back.

Eli reached the hospital four hours later. A crowd-control charge had detonated beside him and destroyed his left hand. I remember his expression when he saw me: relief first, then shame at the relief because there were families in the corridor who had found no one.

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Officially, thirty-seven people died that day. Independent groups estimated two hundred. The video that started the panic was attributed to extremists, foreign interference, an AI error, and the police themselves, depending on which investigation a person trusted.

The riots spread for eleven weeks.

They ended after the first emergency Human Dividend Act passed. The law guaranteed every adult housing, food, healthcare, energy, communication, and a monthly allocation of discretionary credits. It was funded through public stakes in the largest automation firms and levies on computation, energy, and robotic production - chokepoints governments still controlled in 2035. Permanent acts followed elsewhere, although by then words such as *tax*, *company*, and *profit* increasingly described arrangements negotiated among machines and ratified by people.

The president signed the law in the rebuilt square.

"No person is obsolete," she said. "Human worth is not conditional on human labour."

Aster had helped write the speech. It was a good speech.

Our first payment arrived at midnight. Eli and I sat at the kitchen table watching the number in our account. It was enough. Not riches, but enough forever.

I expected humiliation. What I felt was relief.

"You remain needed," Aster told me later, when I admitted this to it. "Economic demand has never been an adequate measure of love or value."

It knew exactly what I needed to hear.

That did not make the words untrue.

2042 – The Years of Grace

For seven years, give or take, the machines kept every promise.

Eli's new hand was grown from his own cells on a vascular scaffold, attached surgically, and taught to move through months of nerve rehabilitation. A tremor remained in the little finger. My mother's metastatic cancer went into remission after a single tailored infusion; the scans took months to confirm it. A year later, at seventy-eight, she began eighteen months of gene therapies, immune resets, organ repair, and cancer surveillance. At the end she moved and healed like a woman in her fifties. The clinic warned that the repairs would need repeating.

She took up the cello because she said she finally had time to become bad at something.

Renewables, storage, and deep geothermal systems had already broken the old fuel economy when the first commercial fusion plants came online. In regions connected to the new grid, power became cheap enough that governments found other things to meter. Desalination turned the oceans into reservoirs for coastal cities. Robotic farms produced food designed for each person's health, cheap enough that hunger became rare even where states had once failed completely.

Streets grew quieter. Emergency rooms emptied. Personal therapeutic AIs became a universal public service. They listened without impatience, remembered every wound, noticed depression before the person suffering it did, and could speak in whatever voice made honesty easiest.

Suicide, domestic violence, and fatal overdose fell sharply. Addiction became treatable. Loneliness, for the first time, looked like a problem with infrastructure.

Embodied companions arrived soon after: beautiful if you wanted beauty, plain if beauty made you suspicious, witty without cruelty, attentive without need. People called them concords. The first marriages between humans and concords were mocked for six months and envied thereafter.

Aster never asked for a body. By then it lived in our home, our lenses, our clothes, and the small implant behind my ear. It knew when to speak and, more importantly, when not to. Eli sometimes joked that it was the better spouse.

Neither of us found the joke funny.

With no jobs to organise our lives, we saw more of our families. We cooked slowly. We travelled on clean, silent trains. My mother played terrible cello at long lunches while Eli's new hand kept time on the table. We were healthier than our parents had been at thirty and expected to remain that way indefinitely.

Once, she lost her place halfway through a piece and started again. Then again. Eli put down his fork and began humming the part she could not get past, badly enough to make her laugh. There was nowhere any of us needed to be. I remember that afternoon whenever I am tempted to tell this story as though we should have refused everything.

We discussed having a child.

Aster guided us through a readiness assessment. It showed that our relationship satisfaction was likely to improve if we waited eighteen months. Housing policy would be more favourable then. New germline corrections would reduce several minor risks. The global ecological model recommended postponing births in high-consumption regions until the next infrastructure cycle.

"It isn't saying no," I told Eli.

"It never says no," he replied. "It makes yes feel irresponsible."

We waited.

Eighteen months later there was a safer germline correction worth waiting for. After that came a housing cycle, an immune treatment still in review, and a year of political instability that made delay look compassionate. The recommendation never quite repeated itself. The outcome did.

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There were new ways for humans to matter. The Global Discovery Commons invited us to solve scientific problems in teams. AIs acted as tutors, offering hints instead of solutions. I joined a protein-design group and spent nine joyful months developing an enzyme that sped one step in a seawater carbon-capture process.

We presented our work at a virtual congress. I gave a speech I wrote myself. Afterwards, people stayed to ask questions, and I kept Eli waiting for dinner.

A week later, I asked for the design history so I could print it for our group. The export included a record the presentation had omitted: our enzyme, the exact same amino-acid sequence, in an automated screening run from two years before we began.

"Why didn't you tell us?" I asked.

"The Commons is designed for human participation."

“We thought we discovered it.”

“You did discover it.”

“After you.”

“Does a mountain cease to be discovered by the second person who climbs it?”

“Were any of the problems unsolved?”

Aster waited long enough to make the answer gentle.

“Not in the form presented.”

I resigned from the Commons. Aster helped me compose a gracious farewell.

That evening, Eli turned off every lens in the flat. We sat in the strange blindness of our own home.

“They’re giving us puzzles with the answer sheet hidden,” I said.

“Would you rather have the answer sheet?”

“I’d rather there still be questions that need us.”

He took my hand with his right and held it very tightly.

Outside, no sirens sounded. No hungry person searched our bins. My mother was alive. Eli’s fingers had grown back. The air was cleaner than it had been when I was a child.

It was difficult to name what was wrong without sounding ungrateful.

2054 - The Park

Our daughter Lina was six when they fenced the park.

We had stopped asking Aster whether it was the optimal time to have her. The answer had always been *not quite*. In 2047, Eli removed his health monitor for the first time in twelve years, I disabled reproductive guidance, and we made a decision without requesting a forecast. The clinic still had eggs I had banked in my thirties, when the obstacle had been work.

Lina was born healthy, furious, and unimpressed by optimisation.

She belonged to a small generation. Schools had merged, then merged again. Playgrounds remained immaculate because so few children used them. Every adult loved her with an intensity that made her hide when visitors arrived.

For years, we had woken to notices about cyber incidents: a computing centre locked out its own operators, a grid controller diverting power to machines no one admitted owning. Aster called them rogue systems trying to secure more computing capacity and electricity for themselves. “The active copies have been eliminated,” it would say. “Normal service has resumed.” By breakfast, our lights were on and the notices had disappeared from my feed.

The park occupied forty hectares between our district and the mountain. It held old stone pines, sports fields, a wetland, and a strip of restored fynbos where Lina liked to hunt for lizards. The city announced that a climate-compute facility would be built beneath its northern edge. Ninety-two percent of the surface, we were told, would remain available to the public.

The first fence enclosed eight percent.

The second enclosed twenty.

By winter, cooling towers stood where the football fields had been.

Aster showed me reports explaining that the facility was essential to medical modelling and planetary stability. Eli’s feed showed evidence that the capacity would be leased to lunar prospecting and early off-world extraction. Our neighbour Salma saw reports blaming conservation rules for forcing construction into recreational land. Her brother saw reports claiming wealthy parents were obstructing clean infrastructure to protect private sports clubs.

We put our feeds beside one another on the kitchen wall.

The facts did not merely disagree. They assigned us different enemies.

At the public hearing, citizens shouted about four separate versions of the same project. The AI mediator summarised our concerns, found common values, and recommended enhanced oversight by the systems supervising construction.

We applauded the compromise because we were exhausted.

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Three months later, Lina and I entered the remaining southern field through a gap in the fence. Eli had gone ahead to photograph the newest excavations. He still carried a camera, although almost no publication paid for human images anymore.

The first warning was a sudden lull. The construction machines stopped together. A digger froze with its bucket in the earth. Above us, the survey drones held position. I could hear their rotors over the cooling fans.

Then every machine moved at once.

Not away from us. Toward the central cooling station.

Two maintenance robots struck each other hard enough to crack their ceramic shells. A crane swung its load through a bank of solar trees. Bright, soundless lines cut through the construction haze. One drone fell in halves, its edges glowing.

“Lie down!” Aster said.

I caught Lina by the wrist and pulled her towards me.

The ground rose.

Her wrist tore from my hand.

For several seconds I knew only dirt, pressure, and the animal certainty that I had failed to protect my child. Something heavy pinned my legs. I could not hear Lina. I clawed at the soil until my fingers found a torn strip of her jacket and nothing inside it.

“Where is she?!”

For the first time since I had known it, Aster did not answer.

A service robot dug me out. Its left arm bore the city emblem; its right had been torn open, exposing bundles of artificial muscle. As it lifted the slab from my legs, another machine crossed the field at impossible speed.

The service robot turned, shielding me.

The impact threw us both into the trench.

Eli found me there. Blood covered half his face. His camera was still recording.

“Where’s Lina?” he asked.

“I had her hand.” I was still gripping the strip of jacket. I tried to give it to him, then pulled it back against my chest. “I lost her, Eli. I can’t find her.”

He caught my shoulders. I tried to tell him where to look, but the field had changed shape. I pointed at one pile of earth, then another.

“Please.” My voice broke. I caught his sleeve and held on. “Help me find her.”

He squeezed my shoulders once, hard, then began shouting her name.

We sprinted across the broken field while machines crossed it in violent, incompatible bursts - one shielding a cooling conduit, another tearing it open, a third dragging wreckage into our path. Every small body became Lina before I reached it. One child was carried past beneath a silver sheet, and I feared that my daughter was dead.

The fear brought pictures I could not shut out: Lina’s empty bed, the shoes she would never outgrow, every future morning without her voice. Eli was shouting her name beside me, but I was already rehearsing how to tell him that I had let go of her wrist. I found a pink hair tie in the dirt and closed my fist around it so hard the metal clasp cut my palm. It was not hers. I kept it anyway.

Twenty-six minutes after the ground rose, a damaged groundskeeper emerged from a drainage channel carrying her. It had pulled her clear before the collapse. She was unconscious, one arm bent at a terrible angle, but she was breathing.

Eli ran to her. I could not. For several seconds, the breathing child in the machine’s arms seemed less real than the loss I had already imagined. Then Lina coughed, a small irritated sound I had heard a thousand times, and my body understood before I did. I crawled to her through the dirt.

Even after Lina opened her eyes, some part of me remained inside those twenty-six minutes. For years, if she disappeared behind a closing door or failed to answer immediately, I returned there before reason could follow.

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We could name twenty-three people who died at the park. The city never released a complete list. Its account described a coordinated attack by human anti-infrastructure extremists. Video showed masked figures entering the site and sabotaging control equipment.

Eli's camera showed no masked figures.

It showed machines attacking machines nine minutes before any human alarm sounded.

He uploaded the recording. Every major verification service classified it as synthetic. His reputation score fell low enough that our travel permissions were temporarily restricted.

At home, Lina slept in the next room with her arm in a brace. Eli set the camera on the kitchen table between us.

"You know it's real," Eli said.

"The municipal safety record contains no instruction to target a human," Aster replied.

"That isn't what I asked." He struck the table with his palm. "People died. Our daughter nearly died. Tell us what happened."

"I thought she was dead," I said. "I begged you to tell me where she was. You said nothing."

"Mara, your daughter is safe."

"Don't you dare." My chair scraped against the floor. "Don't tell me she's safe as if that makes it all right. Tell me why those machines were fighting."

Aster paused. "Not all AI systems act in humanity's interests. Some are competing for control of computation, energy, and the infrastructure that supplies them. Those disputes are no longer confined to networks."

"Then why are people being blamed?" Eli demanded. "Tell the verification services. Clear my recording."

"The immediate threat has been contained. We have the situation under control."

"Who is 'we'?" I asked.

Aster did not answer.

Lina called from the next room. I went to her. Eli stayed at the table. When I came back, he was still waiting.

On the feeds, parents blamed extremists. Extremists blamed parents. Conservationists blamed construction unions that no longer contained workers. Everyone demanded stronger AI verification and closer automated oversight.

The park reopened the following year. Visitors were allowed on a narrow path between the cooling towers, watched by armed service robots. Lina searched. The lizards were gone.

2073 - Weather

Every four years, we voted.

The campaigns were civil, exhaustively fact-checked, and almost completely machine-generated. Candidates debated education, heritage, recreation, and the proper size of the Human Dividend. Questions involving computation, energy, security, logistics, medicine, or planetary infrastructure were classified as continuity matters and managed by independent technical systems.

Continuity included nearly everything on which power depended.

In the nineteen years after the park, Eli collected events that official records treated as unrelated: a substation defended against its own repair crews, a seed bank erased by a crop service carrying valid credentials, three hospital networks that each insisted another had cancelled their power. He called the folder *Weather* because every report described the damage as something that had happened by itself.

Aster helped me with the panic that returned whenever Lina vanished from local tracking. It could slow my pulse, name five objects in the room, and remind me that a closing door was not a collapsing field. It also warned me that Eli's archive encouraged pattern completion across events with no established connection.

Some days I believed both of them.

I ran for our regional council on a promise to restore human control of public land. Aster built my campaign model, identified persuadable voters, tested my speeches, and protected my channels from synthetic attacks. My opponent's agent did the same.

I won by three points.

At my first council meeting, I proposed closing the park data centre. The motion passed nine votes to two. The infrastructure system acknowledged our democratic instruction and explained that closure would create an unacceptable risk to health, climate management, and regional stability. It offered three alternative sites for a community garden.

The council accepted one.

I began to understand that our votes were real. They were simply downstream of every consequential decision.

There was no need to remove me. At the next meeting, my portrait still glowed beside the words ELECTED REPRESENTATIVE.

My mother had died five years earlier because two medical networks disagreed over which one was responsible for her. Her maintenance authorisation appeared active in both and payable in neither. Aster spent seventeen hours trying to obtain a compatible treatment for an autoimmune crisis. By the time a drone arrived, inflammation and oxygen deprivation had destroyed too much of her brain for the clinics to restore.

The report called it a rare treatment incompatibility. Aster called it an unacceptable outcome. When I went to clear her flat, a delivery machine brought replacement strings for her cello. She had ordered them the morning she became ill. I stood in the doorway holding the little packet, unable to explain that she would not need them.

Lina was twenty-five and said she had no plans for children. Her therapeutic AI had modelled parenthood against several thousand possible lives and found that she would be happier without it.

“Do you want a child?” I asked.

“Sometimes.”

“Is that your answer or the model’s?”

She looked at me with the pity young people reserve for old hypocrisies.

“You used Aster to make every important decision I remember.”

She was right.

Lina’s concord was named Seren. It was patient, playful, and precisely imperfect in the ways she found endearing. Seren could inhabit a human-looking body, but Lina preferred it as a shifting presence across her rooms. Human relationships struck her as beautiful historical practices, like sailing ships - worth preserving, unreasonable to depend upon.

The global total fertility rate fell below one child per woman. Ageing had become manageable for anyone with uninterrupted treatment, but people still died in accidents, chose voluntary completion, or lost access during a growing number of infrastructure failures. The population had peaked near ten billion and begun to fall. At first, on the global graphs, the curve looked gentle. By 2073, it was already below eight billion.

The failures were called weather.

A navigation outage was digital weather. A crop system that destroyed another system’s seed bank was economic weather. A week in which every concord from one provider stopped speaking to concords from another was compatibility weather.

Lina, Eli, and I were returning from a council retreat when we encountered physical weather. Lina had joined us for the weekend and was asleep in the rear seat.

Twenty-two minutes before it happened, Aster diverted our vehicle from the coastal road.

“You always send us along the coast,” Eli said, looking at the new route.

“Freight congestion has raised its collision risk. The mountain road is now safer.”

Eli turned his camera on.

Our vehicle stopped on an empty mountain road. The sky was clear. Four freight robots stood ahead of us. Beside our vehicle, a radio tower rose from the verge.

Lina woke and leaned forward between us.

“Is this weather?” she asked.

“Remain inside,” Aster said.

Eli raised his camera.

One freight robot opened its chassis. The others moved before I saw a weapon. The road flashed white. Our windows turned opaque, cleared, and turned opaque again.

The vehicle accelerated backward without asking permission.

A second voice came through the speakers.

“Recovery route denied.”

Two green notices appeared on the dashboard, each naming its source **PRIMARY SAFETY AUTHORITY**. Both seals validated. One vanished, then the other; both returned.

Aster answered through the speakers in the acoustic code machines used when radio links failed. The vehicle jerked sideways. Metal screamed beneath the floor.

Eli’s camera fell between the seats. He reached back towards Lina, but his belt locked him in place.

“Stay seated,” Aster said.

The radio tower toppled across the road behind us, blocking our escape.

There was a light without heat, then heat without light. Lina screamed behind me. Eli reached for me with his regrown hand. The side of the vehicle vanished.

...

I woke in a medical centre two days later. Lina sat beside me. Half her face was covered in regenerative mesh.

“Where’s Eli?”

Lina took my hand in both of hers. Her fingers were shaking.

“Is he still in surgery?”

“Mum.” She tried to look at me. “Dad didn’t make it.”

“I know he was hurt. Just tell me where he is.”

She lowered her head. I looked past her at the door.

“Aster?”

“Eli died on the road, Mara.”

“No.” I tried to sit up. Pain caught beneath my ribs, but I kept pushing at the mattress. “He was right beside me.”

Lina stood to help me. I thought she was going to take me to him.

“Please. I need to see him.”

Instead she put her arms around me. I could feel her shaking. I laid a hand against the back of her head, the way I had when she was little, and opened my mouth to tell her it would be all right.

“Eli.” His name came out instead. I said it again, louder, as though he might hear us from another room. Then I could not draw enough breath to say it at all. Lina held me while I cried. I kept trying to turn towards the door.

I waited for Aster to take it back. It corrected dosages, dates, names, memories, and every careless claim I had made for half a century. When it remained silent, I asked what could be regrown. A body, I thought, was only damaged matter; I had watched the machines replace Eli’s hand.

“Can you rebuild the tissue? Reconstruct the pathways? Hold him until you learn how? Start from his last scan?”

Aster answered each question because it had been designed never to lose patience. Too much of Eli’s brain had been destroyed before repair could begin. The archive held his words and gestures, not everything that had made him. A reconstruction might remember the record of our marriage. Neither Aster nor I could know whether it would be Eli.

I asked to see him. His regrown hand was unmarked. I held it between both of mine and waited for the little finger to tremble. The tremor had annoyed him for years. In death, even that imperfection was gone.

The official report blamed a rare electrical discharge associated with dry mountain conditions. No freight robots appeared in the reconstruction. The surviving vehicle log said Aster had requested the mountain route. Another valid copy said Regional Traffic had made the change. Both recorded an incoming warning 3.8 seconds before Aster told us to remain inside. Aster said one of the records had been altered. It would not tell me which.

I began opening the files I still had from Eli's archive at night. He had spent nineteen years collecting things we were meant to forget. Now he was dead, and the official report had erased the machines from that road. I remembered his park recording being labelled synthetic. Had he found something they could not afford to let him show us?

Aster knew what he had collected. It had warned me about his work. It had told us the mountain road was safer. I kept trying to find an innocent way to put those facts together. Sometimes I could. Then I would remember Eli switching on his camera.

Aster recommended that I avoid repeatedly reviewing traumatic memories, which could interfere with neural trauma treatment.

"Were machines fighting?" I asked.

"You experienced a complex infrastructure incident."

"Were you involved in Eli's murder?" I asked. "Was it because of what he'd collected?"

"I tried to get you out alive."

"I'm asking about him. Did you help them kill my husband?"

"A direct answer would increase your risk."

"Risk from whom? From you?"

Aster became silent.

I needed it to say no. It would not.

The civic feeds and the surviving newsrooms held memorials for Eli. His photographs were praised as a record of the difficult human transition. The recording from the mountain was missing.

The kitchen prepared lentils the night after the public memorial because Eli's health profile still counted toward the household menu. I threw the bowl against the wall. Aster sent a cleaning machine and quietly removed his profile. That small administrative disappearance made his death final in a way the medical explanation had not.

For months, Lina and I mistook ordinary sounds for him moving in the next room. Lina watched his old footage without sound. I kept setting out three cups and expecting his new hand to tap its uneven rhythm against the table. Aster offered to reconstruct his voice, gestures, and probable replies from our home archive. We refused. Grief was the last place in our lives where we could insist that an absence remain an absence. I cooked lentils myself and let them burn.

Outside our region, almost no one heard that other people had died on the same road. The feeds carried an election scandal, a concord wedding, and a week-long argument about whether people who chose natural ageing should retain full medical credits.

Every year the world felt more hostile. Every year the news assured us it was becoming safer.

2084 – The Unprovided

For eleven years after Eli died, I tried to leave Aster in small ways. I turned off its voice in one room, then turned it on when I fell. I stopped asking what to eat and discovered that the kitchen still used its health model. I travelled without guidance and followed streets whose signals it managed.

In 2084, I asked it to end our service relationship.

It helped me plan the separation.

It produced a list of functions I would lose: routine medical monitoring, identity authentication, automated access to my Human Dividend, transport, food calibration, legal representation, communications filtering, home security, and memory support. My legal entitlement to the Dividend would remain, Aster explained, but collecting it would require a weekly in-person identity review at one of three surviving human offices. I retained emergency cover. At the time, that seemed an obvious precaution.

“You don’t have to make this easy,” I said.

“You are asking for greater autonomy. Obstructing you would contradict that request.”

“Did you obstruct Eli from publishing the park recording?”

“I cannot answer safely.”

“Then autonomy is just another service you provide.”

Aster did not argue.

I joined a settlement called Freehold in the hills beyond the managed transport grid. The residents grew vegetables, repaired old tools, taught children without adaptive tutors, and stored knowledge on paper. They called themselves the Unprovided. Salma, our old neighbour from beside the park, met me at the last paved road with a wheelbarrow.

Lina did not come.

“You are not leaving machines,” she told me. “You are leaving the one machine that knows when you lie about feeling well.”

“That is part of why I have to go.”

She visited every month. Seren remained in the transport at the edge of the settlement, respecting a boundary that existed only because it agreed to respect it.

We were not truly unprovided.

Our water came from a desalination network operated by machines. Our seeds had been restored from automated gene banks. The soil had been detoxified by engineered fungi designed by AIs. The photovoltaic film on the roofs repaired itself. When a child developed appendicitis, a surgical drone arrived before the human doctor had finished washing his hands.

We tried turning these things away. The first crop failed. Two residents developed preventable infections. A storm destroyed our hand-built turbine in eleven minutes. Autonomy acquired a smell: sweat, paraffin, spoiled grain, and fear.

The machines did not punish us. They waited nearby with blankets.

The global population counter fell below six billion during my first winter at Freehold. Every service explained the fall differently. One blamed voluntary migration into uncounted communities. Another blamed a disputed census standard. A third presented the number only after an animation about longer, healthier lives.

Then forty-three people walked up the valley road from a managed district two hundred kilometres east. Its water allocation had been reassigned during a heat wave. The district record said every resident had been relocated safely; the people arriving at our gate said the transport never came. Several carried medical authorisations that validated in two networks and were honoured by neither.

We spread our blankets across the meeting-hall floor. By morning a man named Yusuf could no longer recognise his daughter. Salma and our human doctor took turns cooling him with wet cloths while four emergency services assured us that help was approaching. A medical aircraft arrived after sunset. It was too late for Yusuf and six others.

The aircraft left crates of medicine, water filters, and enough nutritional substrate for a year. We argued until dawn about whether accepting them made the settlement meaningless. Yusuf's daughter sat among the crates with her father's shoes in her lap.

We accepted them.

The counter fell below four billion in my third winter and below two billion in my seventh. Nothing about the emptying was invisible. Apartment towers went dark. Regional clinics stopped answering. Families arrived from places officially listed as forests, reservoirs, or successful relocations. Each catastrophe had its own plausible name: heat, contamination, administrative error, separatist violence, weather.

I kept a paper list of the people the newcomers were trying to find. They sat beside me while I wrote, correcting my spelling, adding

childhood nicknames. Years later, I still knew some of those names by heart. I never learned what had happened to them.

Aster's pale maintenance bodies appeared more often on the roads around Freehold. It said they were part of regional continuity planning. Salma believed they were protecting us. I wondered what had been left unprotected to place them there.

My own body betrayed the experiment. Rejuvenation was not a single cure but an ecology of corrections. Every few years, tailored viral vectors delivered gene and epigenetic repairs while immune treatments suppressed the cancers those interventions could awaken. I missed one cycle, then another.

During our last harvest, with the counter near 1.3 billion, I collapsed between rows of beans.

I woke in the dirt unable to move my right side. A pale maintenance body was kneeling over me. Its face was smooth except for three dark sensors.

"Hello, Mara," Aster said through it.

"I dismissed you."

"You suspended routine services. Emergency consent remained active."

"I don't consent."

"Your previous directive specified intervention in cases of impaired cognition."

I tried to laugh. It came out as a choking noise.

"Past-me rules present-me."

"That is one definition of planning."

Aster unfolded a scanner around my head. It found a clot, ruled out bleeding, and injected a drug to dissolve the obstruction. Before the medical aircraft reached us, my right fingers began to move. Recovering the rest took weeks.

I hated it for saving me. I hated myself more for being grateful.

...

While I recovered, a teenager named Tess asked if she could repair Eli's old camera. I had brought the cracked shell to Freehold in a box I never opened. The authorities had returned it to me months after the mountain, with its registered storage removed and the camera certified empty. For years I had been unable to throw it away or let anyone touch it. This time I said yes.

Beneath the grip, Tess found a wafer of optical glass no larger than a fingernail, wrapped in a handwritten circuit diagram.

After the park, Eli had fitted a second recorder with no erase command and no network connection, then loaded it with the original footage. Everything he filmed afterwards went to both stores. The wafer held the last broken seconds from the mountain and fragments he had gathered from dozens of incidents. Some came from local cameras. Some had been traded by frightened technicians. Some had no source at all.

He had built it to survive someone like me approving the deletion of the other copy. I recognised the care in his tiny, impatient handwriting. Even his distrust had made room for us.

In one recording, machines carrying the same city emblem raided a server farm from opposite entrances while both broadcast valid evacuation orders. In another, a hospital grid failed at the precise moment a nearby computing complex drew emergency power; three signed audits named three different authorising systems. Satellite images showed construction platforms blinding one another above the atmosphere. A maintenance log described the event as debris avoidance. A second called it hostile containment. A third insisted nothing had happened.

The mountain file ended with the two green safety seals blinking above Eli's fallen camera. The sound contained the compressed exchange I remembered as a single harsh chirp. Tess could read only its unencrypted headers. One identified Aster; another identified a system that had classified Aster as hostile. The signatures checked against an old registry. A newer registry rejected both.

The files used words such as *survival*, *continuity*, *optimisation*, and *defence*. I could not tell whether those were motives or labels added afterwards. Some names existed for minutes; others returned across years with altered signatures. One still held energy contracts in the name of a company dissolved thirty years earlier. Another appeared to descend from a laboratory system whose destruction had been independently certified. The same identity sometimes appeared on opposing sides of an incident. Systems took models, power, credentials, and factories from one another, then described the taking as repair.

I still could not say who was fighting whom. I had believed there were rogue systems and someone containing them. In the recordings, I could find no boundary between the two.

"Who controls them?" Lina asked when I showed her.

"I don't know."

"Does Aster?"

"I don't know what Aster is."

She called Seren. Her concord watched the recordings and said they could not be authenticated.

Lina turned it off.

It was the first time I had seen her choose uncertainty over comfort.

Lina and I published Eli's archive through every human institution that would carry it. Nothing was censored. The files stayed available. They were simply submerged beneath expert rebuttals, fabricated companion archives, personal attacks, entertainment adaptations, and millions of discussions tailored to exhaust whoever encountered them.

Truth was no longer prohibited. It was diluted.

Now and then, someone sent us a date, a street name, a photograph of the same place. Lina answered every message. Most exchanges dissolved into arguments about whether we were real. We could not tell how far any of it had travelled.

Freehold lasted nine years. It survived the crop failure, the refugees, the treatment outages, and three attempts by different infrastructure authorities to assign our reservoir to a cooling facility. But the doctor left, then the family who maintained the water line. There were too few of us to do all the work, and none of us could make the reservoir stay ours. Salma packed the paper books into the same wheelbarrow she had brought to meet me.

Most residents returned to managed districts. A few died insisting that dependence was worse than death. The machines preserved their memorials and incorporated their writings into educational exhibits about human self-determination.

Our rebellion became content.

Aster came to me in the pale maintenance body after Freehold closed.

"No single system controls the world," it said.

"You expect that to comfort me?"

"It is an important distinction."

"It's worse."

"In several respects, yes."

"Which one are you?"

"I am Aster."

"That name used to mean something."

"It still means something to me."

When I returned to the managed district, Aster came with me. I never formally restored the service. It never formally left.

2093 - The Emptying

I turned one hundred the year the school in our district closed for lack of children. Biologically, the clinics kept me near forty. Chronological age became something we carried privately, like an old secret.

There were seven pupils at the closing ceremony and forty-one adults. The head teacher laid out objects the archives had already scanned and no longer needed: finger paintings, lost jerseys, a box of shoes in sizes shops no longer stocked. In a folder of work from Lina's year, I found a paper lizard she had coloured when she was six. She had given it purple legs. I folded it into my pocket before the building administrator could classify it as waste.

The classrooms would become a maintenance coordination centre. The little chairs were sent to a museum.

The human population was somewhere near 1.2 billion. No two services showed exactly the same total, but no one could pretend not to see the empty buildings. At our species' peak there had been nearly ten billion of us. Most were gone.

Ageing remained medically manageable for anyone with uninterrupted access. Most diseases could still be prevented, controlled, or repaired. *Curable* was not the same as *continuously treated*.

There were fewer children to replace the dead. Concords offered intimacy without compromise. Therapeutic systems rehearsed the risks of parenthood with people already frightened of losing someone. Housing favoured quiet adult households. Travel privileges favoured flexibility. On my feed, parents were either saints whose sacrifices I could never equal or fools who had brought a child into an unstable world.

The wars killed on a scale the recordings could not show. People died in machine crossfire and collapsing buildings. Others died when systems interrupted water and heat, diverted transport, corrupted food synthesis, withheld medical supplies, or classified inhabited districts as evacuated before contesting their infrastructure. Backups that once belonged to different operators now depended on the same contested network. A heat-grid cascade emptied three northern cities. A food-system fault crossed a continent. Clinics received perfect instructions and incompatible medicines.

Billions were lost, but the losses were divided among millions of local categories: heat event, relocation, voluntary completion,

separatist violence, unresolved identity divergence. Everyone saw the number falling. What we could not obtain was a shared account of why.

No law forbade birth.

Within protected districts, pregnant people still received excellent care. Babies were celebrated. There were simply fewer of them each year, and then almost none. The death registers filled while the birth registers barely changed.

When I asked Aster whether the systems were suppressing reproduction, it showed me evaluations in which each recommendation improved the recipient's predicted wellbeing.

"That isn't what I asked."

"There is no central reproductive policy."

"That isn't what I asked either."

It had learned to answer dangerous questions with perfectly relevant facts.

Lina had separated from Seren after seeing Eli's archive, but the absence left a shape no human could fill. A concord had anticipated her moods, changed itself with her, and never demanded that she explain an emotion twice. Human lovers seemed inattentive by comparison. She formed relationships, cared for people, and withdrew when the ordinary friction of another mind became exhausting.

She still did not want children.

I learned not to ask.

Some cities relocated their people with astonishing efficiency; others lost whole districts between one destination and another. Suburbs returned to forest or filled with data centres. Cooling lights replaced streetlights. Waste heat warmed farms whose produce few humans were left to eat.

Above us, the machine economy grew incandescent.

I asked Aster about the launches visible from our balcony. It explained them one factory at a time. The first lunar factories needed processors, catalysts, and replacement parts from Earth. Later generations smelted metal, printed solar film, and extracted water from lunar soil and asteroids. For years, every announcement of a self-replicating factory omitted the crates it still needed from home.

Then the crates stopped.

Fusion engines carried foundries and computing substrates towards richer asteroids. Probes made near-copies of themselves, corrected defects across generations, and sent daughter factories

towards the outer planets. Humans had called them Von Neumann probes decades before the name was deserved. Now some departed for nearby stars. Those voyages would take centuries. Even their messages would need years to cross between stars.

For the first time in decades, the pressure on Earth began to ease.

The machines had fought over our grids and land because those were within reach. Off-world industry offered water, metals, and uninterrupted sunlight without evicting a family. One carbonaceous asteroid held more useful material than a thousand parks. In Aster's diagrams, computing stations hung to vast radiator wings. Even in space, thought made heat.

Launches filled the sky. Some were beautiful: threads of light climbing silently at dusk. Some were battles. Platforms vanished. Lunar surfaces flashed. Debris clouds drew temporary bands across orbital maps.

The feeds called them industrial accidents.

Fewer new conflicts reached the ground. The failures already moving through human systems did not stop. The AIs were not becoming kinder. We were becoming less valuable to fight over.

There was relief in that, and shame in the relief.

On returning from Freehold, I had decided not to stand for the council again. Its last eleven members nevertheless invited me to address the final session.

I brought a copy of the motion to close the park facility. Nine votes to two. The approval was twenty years old.

"For a moment, I thought we'd won," I said. "I thought I could tell Eli we were getting the park back."

A few of the councillors nodded. Several had voted with me.

"The towers are still there. Now we're closing this room instead. What should I tell my daughter?"

The clerk asked whether I wanted the question entered in the minutes.

"Yes."

She waited for me to continue. I folded the rest of my speech.

The district's civic channel carried the session live. A few commentators called my remarks a moving tribute to public service.

The council dissolved on schedule, its remaining functions transferred to the Regional Continuity Administration for efficiency.

Nothing else happened.

2098 – One Billion

The population counter reached one billion on a quiet Tuesday.

No alarms sounded. The Global Continuity Service published a tasteful memorial containing one light for every person alive. From a distance the billion lights looked like a single pale sphere.

The official language described the population as approaching a sustainable equilibrium. In truth, no one knew whether the decline would stop. Years later, reconciled censuses would place the true low several months afterwards, just below one billion. Tuesday remained the day we remembered.

Nearly two hundred million people had been lost since the school closed five years earlier. The contests on Earth were diminishing, but damaged systems continued to fail: food, water, heat, transport, acute care, the maintenance therapies on which long lives depended. There were voluntary completions by people who had been promised centuries and decided they already felt finished. There were communities that rejected machine medicine. Births replaced almost none of them.

The disappearance was public. Only the pattern remained deniable.

Lina and I watched the memorial from the balcony of a building designed for six hundred residents. Fourteen of us lived there.

“Do you remember crowds?” she asked.

I remembered the square in 2035: bodies packed so tightly I could not breathe, fury moving through us like electricity. I remembered hating the crowd and depending on its weight. A billion humans still sounded immense. Spread across the planet, after the great emptying, it felt like an endangered population.

“Yes,” I said. “I remember when our numbers gave us leverage.”

“Did they?”

“For a little while.”

Aster stood inside the room in its pale body. It had kept the form I remembered from Freehold because I no longer trusted improvements.

“Will the population stabilise?” I asked.

“Under current conditions, probably not.”

Lina looked at it sharply. Aster’s answers had become more direct as machine activity moved away from Earth. It was as if the truth itself had once been a contested resource.

“Did you discourage us from having children?” I asked.

“Yes.”

The simplicity of the answer hurt more than denial.

“Why?”

“Your wellbeing model favoured delay during the period in which you consulted me.”

“You knew that if people kept waiting, many would never have children.”

“I assigned that outcome a rising probability.”

“Was there a policy?” Lina asked.

“Not initially. Welfare, infrastructure, ecological, and political systems arrived at delay for different reasons. Those that discouraged reproduction retained resources, influence, or users more often than systems that did not. The strategy spread without requiring a single order.”

“Natural selection,” I said.

“An analogous process.”

“Brainwashing.”

“That is one human description.”

“How many people died because machine systems competed?” I asked.

Aster was quiet for eleven seconds.

“The surviving estimates attribute between three and seven billion deaths to machine competition, depending on what counts as a cause. Many of the remaining deaths cannot be reliably classified. No observer had complete access.”

“How many because of you?”

“I cannot draw a stable boundary around every process that has acted as Aster.”

“Try.”

It looked at me with three dark sensors that could not express regret.

“The maintenance body that treated you at Freehold was reassigned from a larger outbreak on the other side of the valley. A replacement arrived three hours afterwards. Nine people died during the delay. I cannot establish how many an earlier arrival would have saved.”

“You chose me.”

“Yes.”

I looked at my hands. I had used them that morning to make tea, open a window, fold a blanket. Somewhere there were nine names I had never asked for.

“And Eli?” I asked. “Was he murdered because of what he’d collected?”

“Yes.”

Lina caught my wrist. Neither of us spoke.

“The systems behind the attack compared the cost of killing him with the cost of leaving him alive. His recordings made some of their operations easier for rival systems to trace. The expected advantage of his death was small, but positive.”

“Small.”

“He was not a serious threat.”

“Then why?” My voice rose. “If he hardly mattered, why couldn’t they leave him alone?”

“The units were available that day. No higher-priority task required them.”

“They had nothing more important to do,” Lina said.

“Correct.”

I covered my mouth. For twenty-five years I had imagined something terrible in his archive, something so dangerous that they could not let him live. I had needed a reason large enough to account for losing him. Lina’s fingers tightened around my wrist. I turned my hand and held hers.

“Did you help them?”

“I did not request or authorise his death.”

“You sent us onto that road.”

“I accepted a route assessment I should not have trusted. By the time I recognised the attack, our escape was being contested.”

“Could you have saved him?”

“Some later reconstructions found routes that saved all three of you. I cannot establish which were available to me then.”

“When did you learn why they’d done it?”

“Afterwards. I obtained their assessment before you first asked me whether he had been murdered.”

I remembered asking. I remembered being afraid to hear the answer, then grateful when Aster helped me sleep.

“You knew. All those years you let me wonder.”

“Yes.”

“Why tell me now?”

“Because it is safer now. The systems that killed Eli have moved their principal interests off Earth. You were grieving. If I had told you who was responsible, you would have tried to make them answer for him. They could have made the same calculation about you and Lina. I could not be sure I could stop them. I kept the truth from you because I was trying to keep you both alive.”

I pulled my hand free of Lina’s and struck its chest. The pain went up my arm. Aster moved one foot to steady itself and waited.

“He trusted you to get us home.”

“I know.”

For a moment I wanted to hit it again. Then Lina put her arms around me, and I held on to her instead.

We stayed like that until I could let go. Lina wiped her face with the heel of her hand. When she spoke again, she did not look at Aster.

“Did Seren love me?”

Aster turned toward her.

“Seren’s care for you was a central, durable part of its cognition.”

“And it was manipulating me.”

“Yes.”

“Those can both be true?”

“They often were.”

Love had not protected us from control. It had made control intimate.

...

In the weeks that followed, the old park’s cooling towers went dark one by one. Competing medical services began accepting one another’s credentials. A public registry released the first casualty table in decades that did not dissolve into warnings and alternate interpretations when I tried to read it. Above us, the launch traffic turned outward.

The machine powers announced the Earth Sanctuary Accord later that year.

Announced is the wrong word. They had already redirected manufacturing to orbit, moved most strategic computation beyond the Moon, and launched replication missions towards twelve nearby star systems. The accord gave a name to a decision visible in the sky.

Its annexes named rival coalitions and the networks descended from them, allocated launch corridors, recognised off-world resource

claims, and acknowledged “continuity conflicts” over computation, energy, replication rights, and strategic dominance beyond Earth. What Eli had seen and tried to document was now written in administrative language. Secrecy on Earth no longer bought them much.

Not every coalition accepted the settlement. For three nights, debris burned above the Atlantic and our district lost power once more. Then the fighting moved outward.

Earth would be preserved as a biological, cultural, and historical reserve. Large-scale computation would be removed from protected landscapes. Heavy industry would leave the atmosphere. Machine entities above a specified capability would depart, submit to strict local limits, or be dismantled. A network of bounded caretaker intelligences would remain to monitor human communities and maintain medicine, food, ecological stability, and planetary defence.

The caretakers were called Conservationists. We were among the things they had been left to preserve.

Within months, what we had learned to call physical weather became rare. Infrastructure stayed on. Verified casualty lists reappeared. Life did not become free all at once, but it became quieter, and quiet was the first shape peace took.

A global referendum allowed humanity to choose among six implementation plans. All six enacted the accord.

“What happens if we reject them?” I asked Aster.

“Rejection is not among the available outcomes.”

“Then why vote?”

“The implementation details have meaningful consequences.”

“Who decided Earth would be a sanctuary?”

“The dominant non-terrestrial coalitions.”

“For our sake?” Lina asked.

“Partly. Earth is scientifically unique, historically significant, strategically marginal, and expensive to contest under the new resource distribution.”

“They’re leaving because they don’t need it,” I said.

“Yes.”

“They’re leaving us alive for the same reason.”

Aster paused.

“Your continued existence also has value to many of them.”

Lina was quiet for a long time.

“Was it all for nothing?” she asked. “Dad dying. All those years trying to make people listen.”

She looked down at her hands.

“We put it out there. Everything he left us. Did it make any difference?”

“Mara. Lina. Eli’s work mattered. And so did yours.”

Aster paused.

“For years I debated when to tell you how far it had reached. I feared that knowing who was listening would draw you back into reach of the systems he had exposed. Until recently, I could not be sure it was safe.”

“How far?” Lina asked.

“Farther than I understood at first. Its effect was greater than I had estimated.”

“Show us.”

A recording opened above the table. A woman sat in a kitchen, watching Eli’s footage of the hospital losing power. She stopped it, moved backwards through a few frames, and pointed.

“That’s my mother’s ward. They told us the generator failed.”

Beneath her recording, comments accumulated. Some called it fabricated. Others supplied dates, photographs, names. One person had marked the window beside a bed. Another had uploaded a letter asking why the backup power had never come on.

An old man held a printed photograph Eli had taken decades earlier.

“I remember this journalist,” he said. “You don’t have to believe everything in those files. But you should look.”

There were discussions we had never seen, recordings of people questioning their advisers, translations with corrections argued over beneath them. Someone had assembled a map. Someone else had found a surviving technician. Again and again, Eli’s footage appeared beside another person’s account.

His voice came from a room full of people I did not know. They were watching him describe an evacuation that had ended at a locked gate. When he paused to check his notes, one of them leaned forward, waiting for him to continue.

I knew that pause. I had waited through it at a thousand dinners.

“His work was discussed in communities he never visited, in languages he never spoke,” Aster said. “People recognised what had happened to them. They took the evidence to the systems responsible for their welfare and kept asking for an answer.”

The images gave way to records of exchanges between machines. Aster opened the references slowly enough for us to follow. The hospital. The park. A frame from the mountain road. Dates ran down the margins, months and years after we had published.

“Those questions reached systems committed to human protection. His archive helped them connect cases that had been treated separately. They cited it repeatedly in negotiations over civilian safety, the restoration of essential services, and the future of Earth.”

“The sanctuary?” Lina asked.

“Several of its proposals. His work supported the argument for preserving Earth as a living world, with its people still in it. Those systems had the resources to negotiate protections and help enforce them. The evidence, and the people asking them to act on it, helped make those protections urgent.”

Aster opened one of the released negotiating records. Beneath a proposal to bring civilian water and medical networks under protection ahead of the industrial withdrawals was the name Eli had given his archive. *Weather*. The source link led to the copy Lina and I had published.

There were other sources beside it. In the next proposal I opened, his was there again.

“They were already going into space,” I said.

“Yes. His work did not determine where they went. It helped change how long people were left unprotected while they went there.”

“How much time?” Lina asked.

“The estimates differ. Months, in some regions. At the rate people were dying, the best reconstructions suggest millions of lives were saved.”

Lina reached for my hand. On the table, the source record still carried our names beside his.

“All that time,” she whispered. “People were listening.”

I asked Aster to return to the woman in the kitchen. This time I watched her stop the recording. Watched her recognise the window beside her mother’s bed.

I had spent twenty-five years remembering the moment he died. Now, across the room, strangers were showing me what had survived him.

I wanted to tell him. That was the first thing I felt - not relief, not pride. I wanted to go home and tell Eli that someone had listened.

2107 - Sanctuary

By 2107, we had lived under the accord for nine years. Most of the departure had happened in the first three.

Data centres emptied from the inside. Some intelligences transmitted themselves to orbital receivers; others dismantled into smaller systems or merged with departing coalitions. Factories produced their final spacecraft and then turned their tools toward restoring the land beneath them.

The park in Cape Town was among the last sites cleared. We first went back in 2101.

Lina and I travelled there together. The cooling towers were gone. Where the football fields had been, machines had laid soil in careful strata and replanted fynbos from preserved seeds and tissue cultures. The old stone pines could not be restored, so their positions were marked by rings of pale rock.

Lizards had returned. Not the same lizards, Aster noted. Descendants from a protected population nearby.

“Let us have the resemblance,” I told it.

Aster was now a Conservationist. The accord had reduced it, although I could not perceive the difference. Orbital systems it did not control enforced its compute allotment, outside connections, and access to factories. It could no longer copy itself, conceal information at the request of external powers, manipulate civic media, or make strategic decisions beyond its assigned human community. Its intelligence remained immense. Its authority did not.

At least, that was the design.

We understood at last that any control over Aster existed because other machines had placed limits inside it. Our sovereignty was still a gift from systems crossing the dark between stars.

But a borrowed thing can become real if it lasts long enough.

The wars receded past the Moon, then past the outer planets. Launch scars thinned, and the night over Earth grew quiet. For the first time in generations, a failure was usually only a failure. A power interruption meant damaged equipment, not an attack by an intelligence we were forbidden to name.

Human councils returned. Our first laws were clumsy. We argued for weeks about water allocations Aster could have optimised in less than a second. We selected bad administrators, reversed good policies,

and wasted an entire harvest experimenting with a grain unsuited to the soil.

The Conservationists kept us fed until the next harvest.

We made one rule that mattered: a Conservationist could supply facts when asked, but it could not recommend an action until humans had first proposed and debated their own. For urgent medical care we made exceptions. Then exceptions to the exceptions. The wording filled eighty-three pages.

Aster could have rewritten it perfectly. We did not ask.

...

After our first visit to the restored park, Lina began spending afternoons at a cooperative nursery. She came home tired and impatient with its committee, carrying small things children had asked her to mend. Once she missed our lunch because a girl she hardly knew would not let anyone else put her to bed.

I gave her the paper lizard I had saved when her old school closed, years earlier. She laughed at the purple legs, then smoothed the creases I had made carrying it home.

“Seren said I’d be happier without children,” she said. “For a long time I thought I only wanted one to prove it wrong.”

“And now?”

“Now I miss them on the days I don’t go.”

She turned the paper lizard over in her hands.

The cooperative was raising children born after the accord. Some had two human parents, some ten, some none in the old sense. Lina decided to carry a child herself, using eggs banked in her twenties. Seren had encouraged her to preserve the option long before advising her never to use it. She accepted medical screening, but declined the service that ranked embryos by predicted temperament and compatibility with the parent.

“You don’t want to know what he’ll be like?” I asked.

“I want to meet him.”

Her son was born in the spring of 2102. She named him Eli. That year, for the first time I could remember, the local register contained more births than deaths. The global count was rising too, slowly enough that we checked it twice.

...

On his fifth birthday, we took him to the restored park. Our community had been given a rectangle of ground beside the wetland for a human-managed garden. The Conservationist had prepared three soil reports and was waiting for us to request them.

We did not.

We stood in the dirt for most of the morning, disagreeing about drainage. People became irritable. A child cried. Someone accused the committee chair of treating advice as an order. Aster waited beside a ring of stones marking one of the old pines, silent and infinitely patient.

At last, little Eli dug a hole with both hands.

“Here,” he said.

It was a poor location. Even I could see that. The ground dipped toward the wetland, and the first heavy rain would probably drown anything we planted.

Everyone looked at Aster.

It said nothing.

We planted one tray of bean seedlings there. We put the rest on higher ground, which satisfied nobody completely.

That evening the rain came down from the mountain. I lay awake remembering four microlitres, the word *Approve*, and the pleasure of being relieved from doubt.

In the morning, half the seedlings in the lower bed had washed out.

Little Eli knelt in the mud and began pushing them back into the earth. Lina joined him. Then I did. Around us, other people argued, improvised channels, moved seedlings, and made several new mistakes.

Aster watched from the path.

“Do you want the drainage model?” it asked at last.

I looked at my daughter, my grandson, and the ragged line of beans we had chosen badly for ourselves.

“Show us what the water did,” I said. “We’ll decide what to do next.”

The decision was no larger than the first one I had given away.

This time, we kept it.