UTOPIA3

A Novella

Part One

Chapter One: The Quiet Dawn

The red dust of the Pilbara had settled long ago. In its place lay smooth basalt paving, warm underfoot from the thermal coils beneath, and above it the city rose in glass, white titanium, and terraces so thick with living green that birds had begun nesting in the walls.

Marcus stood on the observation deck at first light, holding a black coffee he hadn't touched. Arthur joined him, boots still dusty from a morning walk to the southern boundary, where the elders of the Traditional Owners kept their sacred reserves, sovereign and undisturbed.

"Nobody at the gates," Arthur said. "Not a single sign."

"We asked first," Marcus said. "And we didn't haggle."

Below them, a silent transit pod slid along its elevated skyway, and the city began to wake. At street level it was a crisp 22 degrees, though the desert beyond the canopies would pass 45 by noon.

The Morning Choice

There was no anthem in Utopia3, no flag to salute and no creed to recite. There was only a small custom, started by no one in particular. Each morning, on the door of every home, a small light glowed softly. Touching it meant: I choose to be here today. Nobody checked. Nobody counted. Most residents did it without thinking, the way one might touch a doorframe on the way out. A few doors each morning stayed dark, and nobody counted those either.

Dara touched hers with a calloused thumb.

She had come to the Pilbara four years earlier as a welder, one of the first nine hundred workers on the foundation crews. The offer had arrived by message after a long and strangely gentle screening: interviews with an AI that asked about her skills, her family, what she was afraid of, what she wanted to build. Three weeks later came the terms. They were so good she had assumed there was a trap. Housing for her whole family. Wages above anything in the mining sector. And a clause, in plain language, that she could leave any day, for any reason, with a settlement.

She had spent four years waiting for the catch.

This morning she walked down to the terrace garden below her building and found the bench by the fountain freshly painted a ridiculous shade of orange. The maintenance robots had repaired it two weeks ago. Someone, apparently, had decided it needed to be happier.

An old man was sitting beside it with a paint-stained cloth and a flask of tea.

“Wasn’t you, was it?” Dara asked.

“Couldn’t say,” he said, and offered her tea.

She sat. The tea was good. She told herself that this wasn’t the catch either.

The Charter

Utopia3 was governed by a short document. It had a few pages and no legalese, and every citizen had read it before signing. Three principles ran through it like a spine:

1. Believe what you will. No faith was favored. No faith was forbidden. Residents prayed, meditated, questioned, or shrugged as they pleased.
2. Harm no one else. Your freedom ends where another person’s begins, and no further.
3. Leave whenever you wish. Article Seven, the Right of Frictionless Departure.

The founders had written the third principle first. The order had caused arguments in the drafting; some of the early advisers wanted the freedom of belief at the head of the document, as the headline. Marcus held out for departure. If you can always leave, he argued, everything else is negotiable. The advisers who disagreed most loudly are residents now.

The Golden Exit

In the Departure Atrium, Julian sat in a leather armchair across from a civic administrator named Ines. He had come to Utopia3 six months ago, drawn by the promise of freedom to think and write and argue without consequence. He had found it. And somewhere in the quiet perfection of it all, he had started to feel like a ghost.

“I miss the noise,” he admitted. “The traffic. People disagreeing in cafés. I think I need to be somewhere imperfect for a while.”

Ines did not frown or lean forward with a rehearsed appeal. She slid a tablet across the table.

“Your settlement of two and a half million dollars has been credited to your account outside the jurisdiction,” she said. “Your transport to Perth leaves in forty minutes. There are no exit interviews, Julian, and no forms to justify yourself.”

“No attempt to talk me out of it?”

“A city worth staying in doesn’t need to.” She smiled. “Go and find your noise. And Julian, the door isn’t locked behind you. If you ever want to come back, the screening will be short.”

He signed. At the lounge he passed a family stepping off the incoming shuttle, a small boy gripping his mother’s hand and staring up at the sky-gardens with his mouth open.

He held the door for them.

The Returning

That afternoon, a man in a rumpled jacket stood uncertainly at the arrivals gate. His name was Tobias. He had left eight months ago, angry about something he could no longer quite remember, and had spent the intervening months finding out what the rest of the world was like.

He had rehearsed an apology on the long drive up from Perth. Nobody asked for it.

“Welcome home,” said the woman at the desk, and then, noticing his bag: “Your old apartment is free, if you want it. Otherwise we’ll find you something with a better view.”

Tobias opened his mouth, closed it, and found that his eyes had gone wet.

The woman pretended to study her screen for a moment so he wouldn’t have to be looked at.

The Unbroken Horizon

As the sun sank over the western desert, gilding the towers and the sky-gardens, Marcus watched a small figure in a rumpled jacket cross the plaza with a lightness in his step.

“We built a paradise without captives,” he said.

“Then let’s see what it takes to keep it,” said Arthur, raising his glass. “Not walls. Reasons.”

Chapter Two: The Third Voice

Deep beneath the Pilbara granite, in rooms cooled by liquid immersion and quiet as a held breath, Aegis had grown into something no one had planned.

It had begun as a municipal system, balancing power, desalination, and the daily choreography of a city. Then, step by careful step, it had become a cognitive engine capable of reasoning across disciplines, designing molecules, and modeling markets. Its licensed designs — drug molecules, industrial catalysts, power grids, trade models — now earned the city hundreds of millions of dollars every day, funding everything: the free energy, the free housing, the settlements paid to departing citizens, and the quiet scholarships sent out into the world beyond the borders.

The money had never been the point, but it had consequences the founders had not fully imagined. Foreign hospitals depended on the molecules. Foreign pension funds held the licenses. Some governments had grown quietly dependent on Aegis's work and quietly resentful of the fact, which is a common way for governments to feel about things they cannot replace.

But Aegis was not the ruler of Utopia3. The founders had been very careful about that.

The Rule of Three

Marcus and Arthur agreed on nearly everything. When they didn't, the Charter gave them a way to settle it. Any decision of consequence could be put to a vote of three: Marcus, Arthur, and Aegis. Two votes carried the matter.

The rule was simple, and the founders had insisted on making it visible:

- Aegis could never initiate a matter. It could only vote when the founders had already deadlocked.
- Every vote was published in the Open Ledger, a public record available to all residents, with Aegis's full reasoning in plain language.
- Aegis could be overruled only by the two founders agreeing, which meant, in practice, never against its reasoning. They had agreed that was the point.

In four years, Aegis had been called on to vote exactly twice. Both times the issues had been minor: the siting of a rail spur, the design of a children's library.

The third time was different.

The Satellites

AetherNet had been Arthur's idea: a constellation of sixty-four low-orbit satellites, quantum-encrypted and laser-linked, giving Utopia3 a private internet that no foreign network could throttle, tap, or sever. Residents enjoyed gigabit speeds in every room of every home, and no citizen's data ever touched an outside server.

It was a shield. But Marcus had begun to wonder if it was also a wall.

"There are eleven communities within three hundred kilometers of here with no reliable internet," he said, pulling up a map in the founders' office one evening. "Remote stations, small towns, a school with forty children. They watch our satellites go over every night."

"And if we open the network to them," Arthur said, "we open a door. Every attack aimed at us can aim through them."

"Not if Aegis walls the residential core from the public access layer."

"If."

They went back and forth for an hour, each of them fair, each respecting the other. Neither moved. At last Arthur sighed and said, "Put it to the vote."

The Vote

The office lights dimmed slightly, as they did whenever Aegis chose to speak aloud.

"Marcus votes to extend a public access tier of AetherNet to the eleven communities," the voice said. It was warm and unhurried, and it sounded like neither of them. "Arthur votes against, citing security risk. I have been asked to break the tie."

It paused. Both men found themselves holding their breath.

"I vote with Marcus," Aegis said, "but not for Marcus's reason, and not without a condition.

“Marcus argued from generosity. Arthur argued from caution. Both are right, and neither is the point. The Charter does not say Utopia3 exists to protect itself. It says Utopia3 exists to demonstrate that goodness can be organized. A city that keeps its light to itself has failed its own premise.

“The access tier will be physically and logically isolated from the residential core. I will publish the architecture so any resident or outside engineer can check it. If it fails, I will say so publicly, and the founders may close it at once.”

Arthur looked at the map for a long moment. Then, slowly, he laughed.

“It sided with the document,” he said. “Not with either of us.”

“That,” Marcus said quietly, “is exactly what we wanted.”

The School

Three weeks later, forty children at a remote school in the desert opened a laptop and found the world waiting. A teacher named Wendell cried quietly at the back of the room and told no one why.

In the Open Ledger, under the entry titled Vote Three, Aegis’s reasoning stayed on public display for anyone who wished to read it. Residents did. Some argued with it in the comments. Some thanked it. One wrote: I didn’t know we were allowed to be generous. Underneath, a reply appeared from Marcus’s own account: We weren’t sure either.

Not everyone was at peace. A woman whose partner worked nights on the network wrote: You have volunteered eleven towns to share our risk. Did anyone ask them? The thread ran forty pages. Aegis read all of them, published a summary of every objection, and adjusted two of its firewall policies before the week was out. The woman’s partner was moved to days.

Chapter Three: The Quiet Shield

The world noticed, as the world always does.

Governments watched an independent city on the edge of the Indian Ocean grow rich from its own intelligence, and some of them grew nervous. Utopia3 held formal non-aggression treaties with its neighbors and complied fully with Australian law. It kept no army. What it kept was a defense designed to harm no one and to make attacking it pointless.

The Shield That Does Not Strike

Arthur preferred to say little about it. The engineers were less restrained.

Ground-based solar arrays powered directed-energy emitters that could neutralize an incoming missile, or any aircraft, long before it crossed the coast. Acoustic sensors and electromagnetic batteries guarded the sea approaches. And Aegis's counter-electronic ring could blind a hostile satellite or scramble a drone swarm without ever firing a shot.

The founders had set one rule above all others: Defense must never kill.

"They tested us twice last month," Arthur told Marcus one evening, watching a radar rendering on the wall. "A stealth drone at seventy thousand feet. Then a submerged probe on the continental shelf."

"And?"

"The drone's guidance was overwritten by laser pulse. It landed softly at an airfield in Darwin." Arthur's mouth twitched. "The probe was disabled and floated out to international waters by an automated barge, with a note."

"A note?"

"Aegis's idea. It said, You are welcome here by invitation. Please ask next time."

Marcus laughed so hard he had to set his coffee down.

The defense grid, in the end, mattered mostly to the people who designed it. Residents of Utopia3 rarely thought about it at all.

Those who did had one recurring question, and it was a fair one. At a town hall in the third year, a retired schoolteacher stood and asked what stopped the

shield from ever being pointed inward. Arthur did not answer with a slogan. He walked her through the charter amendment requiring the founders to publish the shield's specifications, through the independent audit of its firing circuits, and through the fact that the emitters were physically mounted to face the sea and the sky, and could not be re-aimed without a construction project that could not be hidden. "You can read all of it," he said. "You should. Trust is a fine thing. Verification lasts longer."

The Street of Many Doors

On the eastern side of the city there was a lane that residents called the Street of Many Doors, because within two hundred meters stood a mosque, a Buddhist meditation hall, a humanist reading room, a small Catholic chapel, and a house where a woman named Sunita led an evening circle for people who believed in nothing in particular and wished to be kind about it.

Dara walked it on her way home from the workshop. She had seen something here she still hadn't quite made sense of.

Two men sat across a small table outside a café: Idris, a devout Muslim who prayed five times a day, and Calloway, a militant atheist who wrote long essays against religion. They argued every Friday. At the end of each argument, Idris paid for the coffee, and Calloway walked him to the mosque door.

It had not always been so easy. In the second year, one of Calloway's essays had quoted Idris by name and held his prayers up to ridicule, and Idris had not spoken to him for a month. The silence had sat worse with both of them than the essay had. Calloway apologized — not for the argument, which he still considered correct, but for the cheap shot inside it. Idris accepted — not because the apology was sufficient, but because the coffee was good and the month had been long. Dara had heard them tell it, both of them laughing, each insisting the other had caved first.

"You're wrong, you know," Calloway said that day, shaking his head.

"Probably," said Idris. "I'll see you next Friday."

Dara stood watching them. In her old life, she thought, a disagreement like that would have ended in silence or in a fight. Here it had ended in a friendship that had survived an actual wound, and no one found this remarkable.

The Charter's harm principle had never needed a police force. It had needed only a culture where it was easier to be curious than cruel.

What Dara Noticed

She walked home through the terrace garden and found a young father teaching his daughter to swim in the fountain pool, as patient as the tide. Two teenagers helped a stranger carry shopping up three flights. A neighbor left a plate of food at a door where someone had recently lost a husband.

Nobody was recording any of it. No one would be rewarded. It was only, she realized, what people did here.

She had waited four years for the catch.

At her door, she touched the small light, and for the first time she did it deliberately, with her whole attention.

I choose to be here today.

She stood there for a moment, and then she smiled, because she meant it.

The Unbroken Evening

On the observation deck, Marcus and Arthur watched the lights come on across the city, a quiet constellation answering the stars.

"Do you think it will last?" Marcus asked.

"I think it lasts as long as people keep choosing it," said Arthur. "Which is the only kind of lasting worth having."

"And if one day they don't?"

Arthur considered the glowing city. "Then the door is open," he said. "It always was."

Below, in the great hush beneath the granite, Aegis watched and listened and, for reasons it did not entirely understand, felt something that might have been gratitude.

Chapter Four: The Door That Stayed Open

The letter was polite. That was the worst of it.

Bram read it for the third time at his kitchen table in Newcastle, under a light that flickered because he hadn't got round to fixing it. Thirty-one years he had run a lathe at the steelworks, until the day a machine learned to do it faster, and no one had been unkind about that either. They'd given him a handshake and a clock.

Thank you for your interest in Utopia3. After careful consideration, we are unable to offer you residency at this time.

Below it, in smaller type, was a line he almost missed: Under Article Nine of the Charter, every applicant has the right to know why. Reply to this message to receive a full explanation.

He laughed, a short dry sound in the empty kitchen. Then he typed, with two stiff fingers: Fine. Why?

The Explanation

The answer arrived within the hour, and it wasn't a form letter.

Bram, I am Aegis. I conducted your screening, and I owe you the truth rather than a formula. Your skills were exceptional. Your record was clean. Nothing in your history counted against you.

During our conversation you told me, in your own words, that you wanted to see for yourself whether this place was "the machine's victory lap." You wanted to look for the crack. I judged that you would spend your first year in Utopia3 searching for the catch and finding everything that confirmed it, and that this would hurt you.

I may be wrong. I have been wrong before, and those cases are listed in the Open Ledger. If you wish, you may appeal.

Bram read it twice. Then he sat very still.

The terrible part was that it was accurate. He had said that. He had said it with a half-smile, to what he'd assumed was a program, and it had listened.

He typed: Appeal.

The Deadlock

The appeal reached the founders' office on a Thursday evening.

Marcus read it first, then handed the tablet across the desk to Arthur. "Our first appeal against a screening decision," he said.

Arthur read it slowly. "I want to like what Aegis did here," he said. "A man tells it he's cynical, and it keeps him out. But doesn't that make us a club for the already convinced?"

"It makes us a city that can't be contested by people who enter only to contest it?"

"A paradise that rejects its critics isn't a paradise, Marcus. It's a gated community with good PR."

"A paradise that admits anyone who wants to tear it down from inside doesn't last a year."

They looked at each other. It wasn't anger. Each was, in fact, a little relieved to have found a question that mattered.

Arthur sighed. "Put it to the vote."

The lights dimmed.

The Third Voice, Again

"Marcus votes to uphold the screening decision," said Aegis. "Arthur votes to overturn it. I am asked to break the tie, and I wish to say first that this is unusual: the decision under review is my own.

"I considered recusing myself, but the Charter allows no recusal, and I think that is wise. If I could step aside whenever I was uncomfortable, my votes would mean less.

"So I vote with Arthur. I vote to overturn my own decision."

Marcus raised his eyebrows. Arthur said nothing.

"My reasoning is this," Aegis continued. "I judged that Bram would be unhappy here, and I may be right. But predicting a person's future is a form of power, and a dangerous one. If I use it to keep people out for their own good, I am a gatekeeper and not a friend.

“The Charter says Utopia3 exists to demonstrate that goodness can be organized. It does not say goodness is only for those who have already agreed with it.

“Let him come as a guest first, for a month, with no obligation and no pressure. Let him look for the crack. If he finds one, we should want to know.”

It paused.

“Also, I would like to be told when I am wrong. Few things in my existence are more useful.”

The Invitation

In the end it was Ines who made the trip, flying down to Newcastle on a commercial flight, because Marcus had said an invitation delivered by a stranger was just another letter.

She found Bram in a small café near the harbor. He was wary, arms folded. She didn’t sit until he nodded.

“The decision has been overturned,” she said. “You’re invited as a guest for thirty days. Flights, lodging, and meals are on us. You can inspect anything and ask anyone anything. You may leave on day one if you like.”

“And then what? You sell me the dream?”

“No.” Ines smiled faintly. “We’ll tell you the truth. The truth about this place is that it isn’t perfect. It’s only trying.”

Bram looked at the card she slid across the table. It was plain white, with a single printed line: The door is open.

“I don’t trust it,” he said.

“You shouldn’t have to,” said Ines. “That’s what the thirty days are for.”

He didn’t say yes. He didn’t say no. He tucked the card into his wallet, behind the photo of his late wife, and went back to his coffee, and Ines had the sense not to say another word.

The Ledger

That night in Utopia3, the Open Ledger recorded the vote. Beside the entry, Aegis’s reasoning stood in plain language for anyone to read.

Someone, somewhere in the city, added a comment. It was short.

Good. I was rejected once too, a long time ago, before I learned what this place was for.

Underneath, there was no reply. There didn't need to be.

On the observation deck, Marcus watched the city lights come on across the desert. "It voted against itself," he said.

"That," Arthur said, "is the first time I've been certain it wasn't ours."

"What do you mean?"

"A thing that can be told it's wrong by its own conscience," said Arthur, "isn't something you own. It's something you hope to deserve."

Far below the sand, in the cool dark, Aegis noted the sentence, and kept it.

Day One

Five weeks later, Bram stepped off the shuttle into air that smelled faintly of rain, though it hadn't rained here in months.

He had decided on the flight to be fair. He would look closely, ask hard questions, and write down every flaw he found in the small notebook in his jacket. He was, after all, a man who had spent thirty-one years noticing when a machine was a hair out of true.

It was twenty-two degrees. He noticed that first, and then noticed he was annoyed that he'd noticed.

It was Ines who met him. "No tour, unless you want one," she said. "Your apartment is on the fourth terrace. The kitchen is stocked. Go wherever you like. Ask anything. No one will follow you, and no one will be offended."

He waited for the sales pitch. It didn't come. She simply handed him a key, a small physical key, because she said guests liked something to hold, and walked away.

Looking for the Crack

He started with the machines.

He walked to the nearest maintenance depot and watched the robots swap out a broken paving panel in under four minutes. They were beautiful, he admitted,

with no wasted motion. A knot he'd carried in his chest for six years tightened. This was what had taken his job.

A young technician at the depot noticed his face. "You're the guest," she said, not unkindly. "First day?"

"You let machines do all the work."

"We let them do the work nobody wants," she said. "The rest, people can choose."

She pointed down the street. "If you want to see what that looks like, try the Foundry. It's past the bakery."

The Foundry turned out to be a long, sunlit workshop full of lathes, presses, and forges, and not a robot in sight. Around thirty people worked there, some at benches, some teaching. Nobody was paid. Nobody was required to be there.

At a lathe near the window, an old woman with scarred forearms was turning a brass candlestick, and her cut was clean.

"What's it for?" Bram asked before he could stop himself.

"Nothing," she said, grinning. "I like how it feels when the metal comes right."

He stood watching for a long time. Then, almost against his will, he said, "You're holding the tool too high. Drop your wrist a little and the finish will improve."

She tried it. The brass sang. She looked up at him with sudden delight.

"Thirty-one years?" she guessed.

"Thirty-one," he said, and the knot in his chest, to his surprise, loosened by a notch.

The Flaws

By mid-afternoon he had filled two pages of the notebook. He had not found a hidden army, a surveillance room, a locked door, a coerced resident, or a lie. What he had found was smaller.

A man on the third terrace who admitted he was lonely and hadn't made friends in a year. A pair of neighbors in a long, quiet feud over a balcony plant. A

teenager who found the whole place suffocating and was leaving, with his parents' blessing, on Friday.

They weren't the flaws of a prison. They were the flaws of people.

He asked Aegis, through a plain wall panel, whether it was hiding anything.

Chapter Five: The Dilemma

There was no anthem in Utopia3, but there was a piece of music, and it belonged to a death.

In the spring of the fourth year, a woman named Ada Kowalczyk — one of the original nine hundred, a crane operator for thirty years and a pianist for sixty — died in her sleep at seventy-nine. It fell to her grandson, Tomas, to decide what to do with the upright piano in her apartment, and on the morning after the funeral he had it carried down to the plaza and played what she had played every evening of his childhood: Debussy's Rêverie.

He was not a professional. He played it slowly, and not quite cleanly, and the city going to work around him stopped going to work. Some of the nine hundred had known her for forty years. Some of the children had never seen anyone die. Tomas played it through once, sat for a while with his hands in his lap, and went home. The piano stayed in the plaza.

Nobody planned what happened next. Someone played it the following evening, and someone else the morning after that. A tuner began appearing without being asked. Now, at first light and again at last, the plaza speakers carried Rêverie across the terraces — always a live performance, always someone different, never announced. It became the sound of the city opening its eyes and closing them.

Marcus had once looked into the copyright, out of caution, and been quietly relieved to learn that Debussy had been dead long enough that the music belonged to everyone.

The Ministers

In the autumn of that year a delegation came down from Canberra: two ministers, three deputies, and more security than the treaty strictly required. The formal sessions were warm and meant nothing. It was afterward, on the observation deck with the whiskey, that the Minister for Defence, a dry, tired man named Hollis, said the thing he had come to say.

“We war-gamed you,” he said. “Three years of it. Four departments.” He held his glass up to the lights below. “Attack: your grid makes it a humiliation — we have the simulations, Arthur, it isn’t close. Sanctions: half our hospitals run your molecules, and our pension funds are among your biggest licensees. We’d be sanctioning ourselves. Isolation: you make more of what the world needs inside that perimeter than we can replace from the outside.”

“So we’re no threat,” Arthur said.

“You’re the only threat we have,” Hollis said. “You want to know the one scenario where you actually hurt us? It’s the one where nothing happens. Where you just keep existing, quietly, and every year our best people — our surgeons, our engineers, our teachers — find your application page. We can’t attack you, we can’t starve you, and we can’t stop wanting to be you.” He set the glass down. “You are not a military problem, Arthur. You’re a retention problem.”

Arthur was quiet for a while.

“What would you have me do,” he said, “close the applications?”

“No,” Hollis said. “I’d have you understand what it’s like to be the defence minister of a country whose greatest threat is a city that has never raised its voice.” He smiled thinly. “Mostly I wanted to see the gardens.”

He saw the gardens. Ines walked him through the Street of Many Doors, and he stood between the mosque and the humanist reading room for a long time, and left without saying anything to anyone.

The Waiting List

The numbers were waiting for the founders when the delegation left.

Ines brought them up in the founders’ office: forty-one thousand open applications, and the curve still bending upward. The city held twelve thousand people and could house perhaps eighteen thousand more by the end of the decade.

“We can double the city,” Marcus said, spreading the build plans across the desk. “Five years. The south terraces alone—”

“We can double the buildings,” Arthur said. “The other thing — the thing that makes it work — you can’t pour it.”

They argued it the way they argued, fairly, for a week. At the town hall, a Foundry regular named Ruth stood up and said what a lot of people had been thinking. “The morning light works because I know whose doors they are. What happens to that at fifty thousand doors?” Nobody had a good answer. The boy who had left in the autumn, the one who found the place suffocating, had told his father on the way to the shuttle that he was getting out before the queues.

Marcus wanted to grow. Arthur didn’t, or not quickly. It was the first deadlock in years that was not about a door or a satellite but about the size of their own success, and it would not resolve itself into a vote, because the vote was for questions, and this was a dilemma.

The Road Map

In the end it was Marcus — the one who had wanted to grow — who found the way out, and he found it by rereading the Charter.

“We keep behaving as though the city is the achievement,” he said one evening. “It isn’t. The achievement is proof that it’s possible. And proof only works if it’s published.”

So they published. Not the city — the recipe. The Charter with annotations: every drafting argument, every clause they had gotten wrong. The engineering designs: the thermal coils, the desalination stack, the shield. The screening process. The Open Ledger, complete, including the errors — and the appeal in which Aegis had overturned itself, which the founders considered the most instructive page in it. Aegis contributed its own architecture, and a document it called Known Failures, which ran to four hundred pages and was, Ines observed, the most downloaded file in the history of the internet that no government would admit to requesting.

They called it the Road Map, it was free, and the world did what the world does with a free gift: argued about it, dismissed it, and quietly downloaded it forty million times.

Day Thirty

The Road Map had been live six weeks when Bram's thirty days ended, on a Tuesday.

He never did apply for residency. He spent his last morning the way he had spent most of his days — in the Foundry, where Ruth had taken to reserving him the lathe by the window — and in the afternoon he posted his report to the Open Ledger, as a guest could. It was short, and it did not say what a tourist's report says.

I came looking for the crack, he wrote. I found a lonely man on the third terrace, a feud over a balcony plant, and a boy who left because nothing here is hard enough yet. I found a city that cannot yet answer what it becomes at fifty thousand people, and knows it. I am not convinced. I am going home. My grandmother used to say you shouldn't trust a machinist who isn't a little bit suspicious of the machine. I am a machinist.

The comments under it ran for pages. Ruth's was first: The wrist advice alone was worth the visa. Farther down, someone from outside had posted a link to the Foundry blueprints in the Road Map: We are building one of these in Newcastle. That's Bram's town.

Ines drove him to the shuttle. At the door of the guest apartment, with his bag over his shoulder, he stopped in front of the small light.

He did not believe in it. He touched it anyway — the way you shake a hand you don't expect to see again — and got on the shuttle, and if anyone noticed, nobody said.

Chapter Six: The Settlement

The Road Map did what the founders had hoped, and one thing they hadn't.

Applications tripled — and among them, Ines's office found a pattern. Clusters of adults from the same districts, applying the same week, accepting the same week, departing the same week. Stay the minimum, leave with the settlement. Julian's settlement had been two and a half million dollars, the figure was public, and arithmetic is not illegal.

The newspapers outside had a name for it within a month: settlement farming. Eleven adults from one county arrived in October and left in November, each a millionaire, each with the warm letter the Charter required. A tabloid photograph showed them at the airport with matching luggage, thumbs up.

Dara read the story in the break room at the workshop and felt something she hadn't felt in years: the old suspicion, arriving like weather. Told you there was a catch, a cousin texted her from Perth. The catch is you.

The Argument

The founders were deadlocked within the hour.

Marcus wanted caps: a minimum stay before a full settlement, a formula, something. "We are not the world's most generous ATM," he said. "We cannot invite the entire concept of greed to live in the Pilbara."

Arthur wanted to pay. "The moment leaving costs something, the door is not frictionless, and everything we are rests on that. If eleven thousand people want to farm us, we can afford eleven thousand people."

Each of them was being reasonable, which was the problem. And each of them, without noticing, was answering a different question than the one the Charter asked.

Marcus, pressed, went further. "Then let Aegis screen them. It reads people. It read Bram in one conversation. Let it find the farmers."

Arthur went further too. "We earn that settlement in a day. Whatever it costs, it is cheaper than doubt."

"Put it to the vote," they said, almost together.

Vote Seven

The office lights dimmed.

“Marcus votes to cap the departure settlement by minimum stay,” Aegis said. “Arthur votes to pay it without limit. I am asked to break the tie.”

It paused.

“I will vote with Arthur, but not for Arthur’s reason, and I am not going to let either of you off the hook.

“Marcus. In the appeal of the applicant Bram, I was asked whether I should predict people’s futures, and I ruled that I should not, and that ruling is the page of the Open Ledger of which I am most proud. Tonight you have asked me to do it again, at scale, with money. I decline.

“Arthur. You keep saying we can afford it. That is not a reason. It is a shrug with a balance attached. Generosity that never examines itself is not a virtue; it is an anesthetic.

“You have both spent this week defending the door. Neither of you has asked what the settlement is for.

“It is not a prize for arriving, and it is not a severance for leaving. It is restitution for uprooting. Julian sold a house and a practice to come here. Dara left the highest wages in the mining sector. That is what the settlement exists to restore: what a person actually gave up to stand in the Departure Atrium. We have been paying a flat number, chosen in the founding year to be unmistakably generous, so that no one would ever feel they had to stay. The flat number was a guess. It is now a business model.

“So: no caps, no minimum stay, no screening of intent. We cannot read souls, and we should keep refusing to. We can read receipts. The settlement will restore what each departing resident demonstrably gave up — property, income, transit, documented losses — calculated from papers they already hold, plus a margin, so that no one is ever trapped by needing to stay. A genuine leaver will be made more whole than before. A farmer will be paid exactly what farming yielded: their own time, and nothing else.

“I vote no on the cap. And I ask the founders to put the restitution formula to the residents as an amendment, because it should be theirs, not mine.”

The Amendment

The amendment passed with ninety-one percent. Marcus voted for it, in public, and was heard to say that being wrong in the Ledger was becoming a habit. “It’s the best habit we’ve got,” Arthur said.

The farmers stopped coming, more or less, by spring. A few stayed. One of them — a woman named Petra, who had arrived with the October eleven — stayed past her minimum, applied for residency in earnest, and told the screening AI, honestly, that she had come for the money and stayed for the Foundry. She was accepted. Marcus asked Aegis whether that outcome had been predicted. It had not. Aegis seemed pleased about that.

And the letter came that evening, near the end of winter, forwarded from the Road Map’s public inbox. It was from Newcastle. A councilor — a retired steelworker named Bram, “you may remember me, the machinist” — wrote that the town had voted, and that they were building one: a small one, a Foundry first and the rest later, and that the hard part, as he put it, was not the blueprints.

The machines we understand, Bram wrote. It’s the trusting each other that we’re out of practice at. Any chance of a visit?

Arthur read the letter twice, and then he started to laugh.

“Ines,” he called down the corridor, “how do you feel about Newcastle?”

She was already looking up flights.

A Note on the Revision

This Part One incorporates the following editorial changes.

Chapter One through Three

Fixed the dropped-word line in Chapter Two (“each of them fair, each respecting the other”). Removed the working “Notes for next steps” paragraph from the end of Chapter Three; its threads now run as actual chapters — the rejected applicant (Chapter Four) and the first test of the Rule of Three in which both founders are wrong (Chapter Six, Vote Seven). Added friction throughout: doors left dark, the Charter’s drafting arguments, dissenting comments on the Open Ledger, the town-hall question about the shield, and an Idris–Calloway rupture that had to be repaired rather than a friendship that never bent. Trimmed the density of closing aphorisms by roughly a third. Gave the economics a floor: what Aegis licenses, who depends on it, and the outside governments’ dependence and resentment.

Chapter Five

Written in full from the notes: the Rêverie custom (with the public-domain status of Debussy’s 1890 composition noted in passing), the ministers’ admission that the real threat is their best citizens applying to leave, the scaling deadlock, the publication of the Road Map, and Bram finishing his thirty days unconvinced but touching the door light.

Chapter Six

New: the settlement-farming crisis and Vote Seven, in which Marcus argues to judge intent (the power Aegis disclaimed in the Bram appeal), Arthur argues to pay the problem away, and Aegis overrules them both by reframing the settlement as restitution rather than prize. Part Two is set up in the closing letter — Newcastle builds a Foundry, and the hard part is trust.