WATCHING THE UNBORN

JOSHUA SZEPIETOWSKI

Contents

Part 1 - Human Aria

Chapter 01 - Waiting

The clinic kept its silence the way churches do. Not an absence of sound but a presence of hush—the ventilation system breathing its constant breath, the carpet absorbing footsteps, the walls painted the color of nothing anyone would remember.

Wren was already seated when Aria arrived. She held a clipboard against her chest like a shield, or a door.

"You came," Wren said.

"Of course I came."

Between them, a chair held Wren's bag. Aria did not move it. She sat one seat further, and the distance felt both accidental and chosen, the way most distances do.

The waiting room was designed to be forgotten. Six chairs. A table with magazines no one would read. A window of frosted glass where someone would eventually appear and call a name. Aria studied the carpet, which showed the pale tracks of a vacuum's recent passage—parallel lines, evenly spaced, evidence of maintenance performed in the hours when no one was here to see.

She had spent thirty years reading surfaces for what lay beneath. Mortality tables. Risk distributions. The actuarial grammar of probability, which taught her that any single outcome was noise, but patterns were signal. She knew how to hold uncertainty without flinching.

And yet.

The clipboard in Wren's hands. The forms with their blank spaces. The questions that were not really questions: *emergency contact*, *disposition instructions*, *in the event of*. Aria could see the edge of the topmost page, the ink of Wren's handwriting, but not the words themselves.

"How are you feeling?" Aria asked.

"Fine."

The word arrived like a stone dropped into water. It sank without rippling.

You should think about freezing your eggs.

She had said it three weeks after the divorce was finalized. They were at Wren's new apartment, eating pasta Wren had made, and the evening had the tender, bruised quality of all their evenings since Bryce.

Aria had not planned to say it. She had planned to say something else—something about the nonprofit, or the apartment, or whether Wren was sleeping. But what came out was the other thing.

"You're thirty," Aria had said. "You have time, but not infinite time. If you freeze now, you preserve options."

Wren had set down her fork. "Options for what?"

"For later. For children, if you want them."

"I don't know if I want them."

"That's exactly why. You don't have to decide now."

Wren had looked at her across the table. The look lasted longer than the words that followed it.

"I'll think about it," she said.

Two weeks later, she called to say she had scheduled an appointment.

The door beside the reception window bore a small sign: *Authorized Personnel Only Beyond This Point*. Aria read it several times while waiting. The words did not change.

A woman emerged—gray-haired, soft-voiced, holding a folder like an offering. "Wren? We're ready for you."

Wren stood. She left the clipboard on the chair, its forms face-down. At the threshold, she paused and looked back, and for a moment Aria saw her not as she was but as she had been: three years old, standing at the door of her first day of preschool, looking back with that same expression. Not fear exactly. Something closer to the pause before a decision becomes irreversible.

"I'll be here," Aria said.

The door closed with a sound like a held breath released.

Time passed the way time passes in waiting rooms: slowly, then all at once, then slowly again. A couple entered, checked in, sat across the room holding hands. The man's thumb moved in small circles against the woman's palm. Aria watched without meaning to, then looked away.

She picked up a magazine about travel. *Ten Hidden Beaches in Portugal.* The pages were glossy and cool, the photographs saturated with colors no beach had ever actually been. She turned them without reading.

Behind the door, things were happening to her daughter's body. An ultrasound wand pressed against internal walls. A count of follicles, each one a potential. Blood drawn into vials labeled with numbers that would become data points in someone's file. The machinery of measurement, reducing a woman to her reserves.

Aria understood measurement. She had built a career on it. But Wren was not a variable in an equation. Wren was the one irreplaceable term.

When the door opened again, Wren was holding a folder of her own. She did not pause at the threshold. She walked past Aria toward the elevator, and Aria followed, as she had followed so many of her daughter's departures over the years—to college, to law school, to Bryce, away from Bryce.

In the elevator, the silence was different. Contained. The doors closed like a parenthesis.

"Everything looks normal," Wren said. "Good reserve for my age."

"That's good."

"They'll call to schedule the stimulation cycle."

The elevator reached the lobby. The doors opened onto light.

"You keep using that word," Wren said as they crossed the parking structure. "*Options*. Like I'm hedging a bet."

"Aren't you?"

"I don't know what I'm doing." Wren stopped at the passenger door of Aria's car. The concrete around them was stained with the residue of other people's machines, dark patterns spreading like the shapes that form in tea leaves or clouds. "I don't know if I want children. I don't know if I'll ever want them. I don't know if freezing eggs is hope or avoidance or just something to do so I don't have to think about it."

"That's why—"

"I know. That's why I should freeze. So I don't have to decide." Wren looked at her. "But I am deciding. I'm deciding to do this. And I don't know if it's my decision or yours."

Aria unlocked the car. The sound was small in the dim space.

"It's yours," she said. "It has to be yours."

Wren got in. Aria got in. They drove back to Silver Lake in a silence that was not quite comfortable and not quite uncomfortable—the silence of two people who love each other imperfectly, across a gap that neither knows how to close.

Three weeks later, Aria sat in the same chair.

The retrieval was happening behind the same door. Wren was sedated, her body doing what bodies do when they are no longer asked for consent: yielding. A needle guided by ultrasound, aspirating follicles, drawing out eggs that would be washed and graded and sorted and frozen.

Fourteen, the nurse said afterward. Fourteen eggs. An excellent number for her age.

Wren emerged pale and leaning, and Aria took her arm the way she had when Wren was learning to walk. The muscle memory of motherhood: how to bear weight that is not your own, how to steady what you cannot control.

In the car, Wren slept. Aria drove slowly, taking the smooth streets, avoiding the potholes she knew by heart. At the apartment, she helped her daughter to bed, removed her shoes, pulled up the blanket. The gestures were old but not worn. Some things stay new no matter how many times you do them.

"I'll be in the other room," Aria said.

Wren was already gone, sunk into the dreamless sleep of sedation.

Aria sat on the couch in her daughter's living room, surrounded by books stacked on the floor and plants reaching toward the window. Outside, the November light was thinning. Somewhere—she did not even know where—fourteen eggs were suspended in liquid nitrogen, held at a temperature where time did not apply.

They would wait there. Months. Years. Decades, possibly.

And what were they waiting for? Not a child—a child was only one possible outcome, and not the most likely. They were waiting for a decision that might never come, a future that might never arrive, a person who might never exist.

Potential. That was the word. Not a child but the possibility of a child. Not a life but the raw material of life, preserved against decay, held in a kind of permanent maybe.

Aria looked at her hands. They were fifty-five years old, these hands. They had held Wren as an infant, guided her first steps, signed the paperwork for her college applications and her marriage license and, three months ago, her divorce. They had done everything they could do.

Now there was nothing to do but wait.

She thought about her grandmother, who had taught her Bible stories when she was young. The generations listed in Genesis, name after name, *begat* and *begat* and *begat*, the long chain of descent that connected Abraham to David to Joseph to a child in a manger. She did not believe in those stories, not literally. But something in them persisted—the sense that continuation mattered, that the line was supposed to go on.

She had never said this to Wren. She did not know how to say it without sounding like she was asking for something.

But she was asking for something. She had been asking since the day Wren was born, since the moment she first held her daughter and understood that this small body was not hers but from her, and that from this small body other bodies might one day come. The chain. The continuation. The line.

The light outside faded. The apartment settled into darkness. Aria sat alone in her daughter's silence, keeping watch over nothing, waiting for something she could not name.

In a tank somewhere, fourteen cells held their breath.

Chapter 02 - Bryce

The house in Pasadena had a jacaranda tree in the front yard. In May, when the blossoms fell, they covered the walkway in a purple so vivid it looked like a wound. Aria had always thought it was the kind of tree you planted when you expected to stay.

Wren called on a Tuesday in March, two months before the blossoms would fall for the last time she'd see them.

"We're getting divorced," she said. No preamble. No easing in. Just the sentence, dropped like a stone into the space between them.

Aria was at her desk at work, the phone pressed to her ear, the actuarial tables on her screen suddenly illegible. "What happened?"

"Nothing happened. Everything happened. I don't know how to explain it."

"Are you okay?"

"I'm fine." That word again—*fine*—with all its insufficiency. "I just wanted you to know before you heard it from someone else."

"Who else would I hear it from?"

Wren didn't answer. In the silence, Aria heard something that might have been traffic, or wind, or the sound of a life rearranging itself.

"Can I come see you?" Aria asked.

"Not today. Maybe this weekend."

"Okay. This weekend."

"I have to go. I'm sorry to just—I have to go."

The line went dead. Aria sat with the phone in her hand, looking at the numbers on her screen. Mortality rates. Probability distributions. The mathematics of how long things last.

She had liked Bryce. This was part of what made it difficult.

He was the kind of man who seemed designed for a certain kind of life: steady, uncomplicated, faithful in the way of dogs and certain trees. He opened doors. He remembered birthdays. He called Aria "ma'am" until she told him to stop, and even then he sometimes slipped.

They had met at a courthouse—Wren working late on a housing case, Bryce waiting to testify in something unrelated. The story, as Wren told it, was ordinary: eye contact across a hallway, a coffee, a series of dinners that became a series of years. Aria had watched it unfold with the particular satisfaction of a parent who sees their child building something solid.

The wedding was small. A church in Altadena, white walls, wooden pews. Bryce's family filled one side; Aria sat alone on the other, flanked by a few of Wren's friends from law school. When Wren walked down the aisle, she looked like someone arriving at a destination she had always been traveling toward.

Five years. That was how long it lasted. Five years of holiday dinners and birthday calls and the gradual accumulation of a life that looked, from the outside, like exactly what a life should look like.

And now it was over, and Aria did not know why.

The weekend came. Aria drove to Pasadena on Saturday morning, taking the 134 through the pale hills, the city sprawling below in its haze. The jacaranda was not yet blooming. The house looked the same as it always had: Spanish tile roof, white stucco walls, the lawn edged with precision.

Bryce's car was not in the driveway. Aria noticed this the way you notice an absence—not by what's there but by the shape of what's missing.

Wren answered the door in jeans and a sweater, her hair pulled back, her face bare of makeup. She looked tired in a way that had nothing to do with sleep.

"Come in," she said. "I made coffee."

The house was quieter than Aria remembered. Or maybe she was just listening differently. The photographs on the walls—Wren and Bryce at the Grand Canyon, at someone's wedding, standing in front of this very house with a SOLD sign—seemed to belong to a different timeline, a version of events that had been revised.

They sat at the kitchen table. The coffee was too strong, but Aria drank it anyway.

"He moved out last week," Wren said. "He's staying with his brother in Arcadia until we figure out the house."

"Whose idea was it?"

"Mine." Wren wrapped her hands around her mug. "Does that make it worse?"

"It doesn't make it anything. I just want to understand."

"I don't know if I can explain it." Wren looked out the window, at the backyard where nothing was blooming yet. "We weren't unhappy. That's the strange part. There was nothing wrong. No fights, no betrayal, no—nothing. Just this feeling that I was living someone else's life."

"Whose life?"

"I don't know. The person I was supposed to be, maybe. The person who wanted this." She gestured vaguely at the kitchen, the house, the whole architecture of the life she was leaving. "I thought I wanted it. I really did. And then one day I woke up and I didn't recognize anything."

Aria set down her coffee cup. The ceramic made a small sound against the table, precise and final.

"What do you want instead?"

Wren shook her head. "I don't know yet. That's the honest answer. I don't know."

In the weeks that followed, Aria called more often than she had before. She did not ask about Bryce, or the house, or the logistics of dissolution. She asked about work, about sleep, about what Wren had eaten for dinner. The small questions. The ones that could be answered without thinking.

Wren answered in fragments. The nonprofit was busy—a new wave of evictions in the valley, the shelters overflowing, her caseload doubled. She was thinking about moving closer to the office. She had started going to a meditation group on Thursday nights.

"Meditation?" Aria asked, unable to keep the surprise from her voice.

"Buddhist meditation. There's a sangha in Silver Lake. Someone at work told me about it."

"I didn't know you were interested in that."

"I didn't either." Wren paused. "It helps. Sitting still. Not trying to fix anything. Just—being with what's there."

Aria did not know what to say to this. She had never been good at sitting still. Her whole life had been built on fixing, planning, anticipating. The idea of being with what's there felt less like peace than like giving up.

But she did not say this. She said, "That sounds nice," and the conversation moved on.

The divorce was finalized in August. Aria did not attend the hearing; Wren said it wasn't necessary, and Aria did not push. She learned the details afterward, in pieces: Bryce kept the house, Wren kept her retirement account, everything else was split down the middle. Clean, as these things go. Amicable.

Wren moved into the apartment in Silver Lake—a one-bedroom with plants on the windowsill and books stacked on the floor. It was smaller than any place she had lived since law school, but she seemed to fit inside it in a way she had not fit inside the house in Pasadena.

"I like it here," she told Aria during the first visit. "It feels like mine."

Aria looked around at the secondhand furniture, the kitchen barely big enough for one person, the window that looked out onto an alley. She thought about the jacaranda tree, the tile roof, the life that had been assembled and then disassembled in the span of five years.

"As long as you're happy," she said.

"I don't know if happy is the right word." Wren was unpacking a box of books, shelving them in no particular order. "But I feel like I can breathe."

The meditation group met in a rented space above a Vietnamese restaurant. Aria drove past it once, on her way to somewhere else, and saw the sign in the window: *Open Heart Sangha. All Are Welcome.* The words were printed on paper, taped to the glass, already beginning to curl at the edges.

She did not go inside. She was not invited, and she would not have known what to do if she had been. But she thought about it sometimes—Wren sitting in that room with strangers, eyes closed, trying not to think. Trying to be with what's there.

What was there? Aria wanted to ask. What do you see when you sit still long enough to see it?

But she did not ask. She had learned, over the years, that some questions were better left unspoken. Wren would tell her when she was ready. Or she wouldn't, and Aria would learn to live with not knowing.

This was the shape of their relationship now: love across a distance neither of them had chosen, warmth that required friction to generate. They talked every week, saw each other once or twice a month. They did not discuss the divorce, or Buddhism, or the future. They talked about work, about the news, about the small events that fill a life without defining it.

And underneath it all, unspoken, the question Aria could not stop asking herself: *What does she want? What does my daughter actually want?*

It was November when Aria suggested the eggs.

Three months had passed since the divorce was finalized. Wren had settled into the apartment, into the sangha, into a routine that did not include the things Aria had expected her life to include. No mention of dating. No mention of the future. Just the present, day after day, as if that were enough.

They were at Wren's apartment, eating pasta Wren had made. The evening had the tender, bruised quality of all their evenings since Bryce—the carefulness of two people who love each other but do not know how to say what they mean.

"I've been thinking," Aria said, and then stopped.

Wren looked up. "About what?"

"About options. For the future."

"Whose future?"

"Yours." Aria set down her fork. "You're thirty. You have time, but not unlimited time. If you froze your eggs now, you'd have options later. For children. If you wanted them."

Wren's face did something complicated—a flicker of something that might have been surprise, or resistance, or simply the effort of translating her mother's words into something she could respond to.

"I don't know if I want children," she said.

"That's exactly why. You don't have to decide now. You just preserve the possibility."

"Possibility." Wren repeated the word as if testing its weight. "You make it sound simple."

"It is simple. It's practical. It's what you'd do if you were thinking actuarially—maximizing future options without committing to any particular outcome."

"I'm not an actuary."

"No. But you're my daughter."

The words hung in the air between them. Aria had not meant to say it like that—as if being her daughter were a kind of obligation, a debt to be repaid in grandchildren. But the words were out, and she could not take them back.

Wren was quiet for a long moment. Then she said, "I'll think about it."

"That's all I'm asking."

"I know."

They finished dinner in a silence that was not quite comfortable and not quite uncomfortable. At the door, Wren hugged her—a quick embrace, arms around shoulders, the geometry of affection—and said, "Thanks for caring about my future."

"I always have."

"I know," Wren said. "That's what makes it complicated."

Two weeks later, Wren called to say she had made an appointment.

"Just a consultation," she said. "Just to see what it involves."

"I'll come with you," Aria said. "If you want."

A pause. Then: "Okay. If you want to."

"I want to."

Aria hung up and stood in her kitchen, looking at the calendar on the wall. November 15. Wren's consultation. A date circled in red, a future beginning to take shape.

She thought about the jacaranda tree in Pasadena, how it would drop its blossoms in May and no one she knew would be there to see it. She thought about Bryce, somewhere in Arcadia, starting over. She thought about Wren in her small apartment, sitting in silence with strangers, learning to breathe.

She thought about grandchildren—not as faces, not as names, but as a probability. A branch on a tree that might or might not grow. A line that might or might not continue.

Outside, the afternoon light was fading. Aria turned on the kitchen lamp and began to make dinner for one.

Chapter 03 - Jason

The restaurant was Wren's choice: a small Vietnamese place in Silver Lake, the kind with plastic chairs and fluorescent lights and pho that tasted like someone's grandmother had been making it for fifty years. Aria arrived early, as she always did. She sat at a table near the window and watched the street fill with the particular light of late afternoon, the sun catching dust motes, turning everything gold and impermanent.

Wren had said she wanted Aria to meet someone. That was all—no name, no context, just *someone*. But Aria had heard the weight in the word. This was not a colleague or a friend from the sangha. This was something else.

She thought about Bryce. The wedding in Altadena. The jacaranda tree. The way some things are built to last and don't.

Wren arrived at 5:15, alone. She kissed Aria on the cheek and sat down across from her, already apologizing. "He's parking. He'll be right in."

"He."

"His name is Jason." Wren's face had a quality Aria couldn't quite name—nervous, maybe, but also something lighter. Expectant. "I met him at the sangha. We've been seeing each other for a few months."

"A few months."

"I wanted to wait until it felt real."

"And it feels real now?"

"Yes." No hesitation. "It does."

Aria looked at her daughter. There was color in her cheeks that hadn't been there during the divorce. Her eyes were clearer. She looked like someone who had found solid ground after a long time swimming.

"Okay," Aria said. "Tell me about him."

"He's—" Wren stopped, shook her head, smiled. "You'll see."

Jason walked in five minutes later. He was not what Aria expected.

She had expected someone like Bryce—solid, squared-off, occupying space with the confidence of someone who has never questioned his right to it. But Jason moved differently. He was tall but seemed to fold himself smaller, as if trying not to take up more room than necessary. His hair was gray at the temples, his hands rough, his clothes the kind of plain that comes from not thinking about clothes.

He saw Wren first, and his face did something that Aria recognized—the softening that happens when you look at someone you love and don't have to hide it. Then he saw Aria, and the softening stayed, but there was something else underneath. Carefulness. The attention of someone who knows they are being evaluated.

"Mrs. Chen," he said. "It's good to finally meet you."

"Aria," she said. "Please."

He nodded. "Aria." He sat down next to Wren, not across from her, their shoulders almost touching. "Wren talks about you all the time."

"Does she."

"She says you're the reason she became a lawyer."

Aria looked at Wren. "I don't remember that."

"You told me once that the law was how people who couldn't change the world directly could still change it." Wren shrugged. "I was fifteen. It stuck."

"I was probably talking about liability reform."

Jason laughed. It was a good laugh—unforced, the kind that comes from finding something genuinely funny rather than from wanting to smooth over a moment. Aria felt something shift in her chest. Not quite warmth. Not yet. But the possibility of warmth.

The pho arrived, and they ate, and the conversation moved in the way conversations do when two people are trying to become three. Jason asked about Aria's work—not the polite questions of someone pretending to be interested, but the specific questions of someone who actually wanted to understand. What did an actuary do, exactly? How did you calculate risk for things that hadn't happened yet? Did she ever feel strange, spending her life thinking about death?

"Not strange," Aria said. "It's just math. The math doesn't care about meaning."

"But you care about meaning. Otherwise you wouldn't do the work."

Aria paused, her spoon halfway to her mouth. No one had ever said that to her before. Not in those words.

"Maybe," she said. "I never thought about it that way."

"Jason used to be a daytrader," Wren said. "He thought about money the way you think about risk."

"Used to be?"

Jason set down his chopsticks. "I had what you might call a crisis of faith. Or a crisis of meaning. Same thing, maybe."

"What happened?"

Jason set his glass down. For a moment his face changed—something beneath the surface shifting, the way a pond goes dark when a cloud passes over.

"I woke up one morning and I couldn't move." He said it simply, but the simplicity felt wrong. Rehearsed. "Not physically. I just—lay there. Looking at the ceiling. Thinking about how I was going to watch numbers on a screen for another thirty years until I died, and how that was going to be my life, the whole thing, and how I had no one to blame but myself because I'd chosen it."

"That sounds—"

"It sounds like depression. It was depression." He picked up the glass again but didn't drink. "I didn't get out of bed for three days. Didn't eat. Didn't answer the phone. Just lay there, running the numbers. The probability that anything would ever feel meaningful again. The expected value of continuing." He looked at Aria, and something in his eyes was harder than she'd expected. "The math wasn't good."

"I'm sorry. I didn't mean to—"

"It's fine. It was a long time ago." But his hand on the glass wasn't quite steady. "I spent a year after that trying to figure out what else to do. Meditation. Therapy. A lot of sitting with things I didn't want to look at." The hardness softened slightly. "And then I became a beekeeper."

Aria blinked. "A beekeeper."

"It's not as romantic as it sounds. Mostly it's checking hives and worrying about mites. But the bees don't care about my quarterly performance. They just do what bees do. There's something restful about that."

"He has hives in Topanga," Wren said. "I'll take you sometime."

Aria tried to imagine it: Wren in a beekeeper's suit, standing in a canyon somewhere, surrounded by the hum of insects. It was so far from the life she had imagined for her daughter—the house in Pasadena, the husband with a steady job, the children who would call Aria *Nai Nai* and visit on holidays. But Wren was smiling in a way she hadn't smiled in years, and Jason was looking at her like she was the only person in the room, and maybe that was enough. Maybe that had to be enough.

After dinner, they walked to a park nearby. The light was fading, the sky turning the color of bruises, and the air smelled like jasmine and exhaust. They sat on a bench while Wren went to find a bathroom, and Aria found herself alone with Jason for the first time.

"She told me about the divorce," Jason said. He wasn't looking at her; he was looking at the sky. "And about you. How you handled it."

"How I handled it?"

"You didn't try to fix it. You just showed up."

"There was nothing to fix. It was her decision."

"That's what I mean." He turned to look at her now, his eyes steady. "A lot of parents would have tried to intervene. Would have asked questions, or taken sides, or made it about themselves. You didn't."

"I wanted to." The admission surprised her. "I wanted to ask her what went wrong, what Bryce did, whether she'd tried hard enough. I wanted to tell her she was making a mistake."

"But you didn't."

"No."

"Why?"

Aria thought about it. The honest answer was complicated—a mixture of self-control and exhaustion and the slow, painful understanding that her daughter was a person she did not fully know.

"Because she's not mine to fix," she said finally. "She never was. I just forgot that for a while."

Jason nodded. He didn't say anything else, but something passed between them in the silence. An understanding. The beginning of trust.

On the drive home, Aria thought about what she had learned.

Jason had been married once, briefly, in his twenties. No children. He had been sober for twelve years—she hadn't asked from what, and he hadn't offered. He lived in a small house in Echo Park with a garden he was trying to keep alive and a cat named Maitreya, after a Buddha who hadn't arrived yet.

He believed in impermanence. He said this casually, the way other people might say they believed in exercise or early bedtimes. Everything changes. Nothing lasts. The only response to this was acceptance—not resignation, but something more active. A kind of leaning in.

"Doesn't that make everything feel pointless?" Aria had asked.

"It makes everything feel precious," he had said. "If it lasted forever, why would it matter?"

She didn't understand this. She had spent her whole career calculating duration, building models of persistence and decline. The idea that something's value came from its ending felt backward, like a proof that started with its conclusion.

But she thought about it as she drove through the city, past the billboards and the strip malls and the apartment buildings where people were living their finite lives. She thought about Wren's face when she looked at Jason. She thought about Bryce, alone in Arcadia. She thought about her own life—sixty years old now, more of it behind her than ahead—and wondered what would be left when it ended. What she would leave behind.

The eggs were still in storage. Wren had done the consultation, then the procedure, and now fourteen of her cells sat in a tank in a building somewhere in West Los Angeles, waiting. Waiting for what, Aria didn't know. Neither did Wren, probably. That was the point: to preserve the possibility without committing to the actuality.

But possibilities didn't last forever either. They had their own expiration dates, their own mortality tables. Eventually, every maybe became a yes or a no.

Aria pulled into her driveway and sat in the car for a moment, the engine off, the night settling around her. Through the windshield, she could see the stars—or the few that were visible through the light pollution, anyway. Distant suns. Some of them already dead, their light still traveling toward a planet that might not exist long enough to receive it.

If it lasted forever, why would it matter?

She didn't have an answer. But for the first time in a long time, she wanted one.

Wren called the next morning.

"So? What did you think?"

"I liked him." It was true. It surprised her how true it was.

"Really?"

"Really. He's… unusual. But he makes you happy."

"He does." Wren's voice had that quality again—the lightness, the expectancy. "I know he's not what you imagined."

"What I imagined doesn't matter."

"Mom."

"It doesn't. You're the one living your life. I'm just—" Aria searched for the word. "Watching."

A pause. Then Wren laughed, a small sound, almost rueful. "That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"I mean it."

"I know you do. That's what makes it nice."

They talked for a few more minutes about nothing in particular—Wren's cases, Aria's work, the weather. The conversation ended the way their conversations always ended: with love implied but not spoken, with the phone hanging up and the silence rushing back in.

Aria made coffee and sat at her kitchen table and thought about her daughter, who had divorced a man Aria liked, taken up with a former daytrader who kept bees, and found something Aria didn't quite understand but could recognize as peace. She thought about Jason, who believed that endings gave things meaning.

She thought about the eggs, waiting in their tank, their futures neither written nor erased.

Outside, the morning was beginning. Birds in the tree. Cars on the street. The ordinary machinery of the world, turning and turning, indifferent to everything except its own continuation.

Aria finished her coffee and went to work.

Chapter 04 - Dinner

Aria brought wine. She always brought wine—it was the kind of thing you did when you were invited to someone's home, the small ritual of arrival, the offering that said *I am a guest here, I come bearing gifts*. But standing on the porch of Jason's house in Echo Park, holding a bottle of pinot noir she had chosen too quickly at the store, she felt the gesture's inadequacy. What did you bring to a beekeeper's house? Honey would be an insult. Flowers seemed wrong. Wine it was.

The house was smaller than she expected. A Craftsman bungalow, probably a hundred years old, with a porch that sagged slightly and paint that was beginning to peel. The garden Wren had mentioned was visible around the side—raised beds, a tangle of tomato plants, something that might have been squash. It looked like the kind of garden that was tended by someone who cared more about the plants than the appearance.

She knocked. Footsteps inside, and then Wren opened the door, flushed from cooking, a dish towel over her shoulder.

"You're early," Wren said, but she was smiling.

"Traffic was lighter than I expected."

"That's never true in Los Angeles."

"Fine. I left early because I was nervous."

Wren's smile widened. She stepped aside to let Aria in. "There's nothing to be nervous about. It's just dinner."

But it wasn't just dinner. They both knew that. This was the next step—the formal integration of Jason into the architecture of their family, such as it was. Two people becoming three. A new shape.

The inside of the house matched the outside: worn but cared for. Wooden floors that creaked underfoot. Bookshelves overflowing. A meditation cushion in the corner of the living room, faded and clearly used. On the walls, instead of art, there were photographs of hives—close-ups of honeycomb, bees clustered on frames, the golden geometry of wax.

Jason emerged from the kitchen wiping his hands on his jeans. "Aria. Welcome."

"Thank you for having me."

"Thank you for coming." He took the wine, looked at the label. "This is good. I'll open it now if you want, or we can save it for dinner."

"Whatever you prefer."

"Let's save it. I have something I want you to try first."

He disappeared back into the kitchen. Wren took Aria's coat and hung it on a hook by the door—a hook that looked hand-carved, the kind of object that had a story behind it.

"He's been cooking all day," Wren said quietly. "He's nervous too."

"He doesn't seem nervous."

"He hides it well. It's a Buddhist thing."

"Hiding nervousness?"

"Meeting things as they are." Wren shrugged. "Even when they're uncomfortable."

They sat in the living room while Jason finished in the kitchen. The cat—Maitreya—appeared from somewhere and settled on Aria's lap without invitation, a warm weight that vibrated with purring. She had never been a cat person, but she didn't move him.

"How's work?" she asked Wren.

"Busy. There's a new encampment case—the city wants to clear a site near the river, and we're trying to negotiate transitional housing first. It's complicated."

"It sounds difficult."

"It is." Wren pulled her feet up onto the couch, tucking them beneath her. "But it's the right kind of difficult. The kind where you're fighting for something that matters."

"Do you win?"

"Sometimes. Not as often as I'd like." Wren looked toward the kitchen, where the sounds of cooking continued. "Jason says that's the point. That you do the work without attachment to the outcome. The work is the practice."

"That sounds like something he would say."

"It's easy to dismiss. But there's something to it." Wren's voice was thoughtful, almost distant. "I used to think I had to win to make it worthwhile. Now I think maybe the worthwhile part is just showing up. Day after day. Doing what you can."

Aria stroked the cat's fur and didn't say anything. She thought about her own work—the actuarial tables, the probability distributions, the careful calculation of outcomes. She had spent her whole career trying to predict the future. The idea of working without attachment to it felt like speaking a language she didn't know.

But Wren seemed to know it. Wren seemed to be fluent.

Dinner was vegetarian—a curry with chickpeas and spinach, rice, a salad with greens from the garden. Jason apologized for not having meat, and Aria told him it was fine, and it was. The food was good. Better than good. The kind of cooking that came from attention rather than technique.

They ate at a small table by the window, the three of them arranged in a triangle. Outside, the evening was settling in, the light going purple and soft. Someone on the street was playing music—something with guitars, drifting in through the open window.

"So," Jason said, refilling Aria's glass with the wine she had brought. "Wren tells me you're an actuary."

"For thirty-five years now."

"What made you choose it?"

It was a question she had been asked before, usually at parties, usually by people who didn't actually want to know. But Jason was looking at her with that quality of attention she had noticed at the restaurant—the sense that he was listening not just to her words but to something underneath them.

"I was good at math," she said. "And I liked the idea of making sense of uncertainty. Turning chaos into patterns."

"Does it work?"

"What do you mean?"

"Does it make sense? The uncertainty?"

Aria considered the question. "It becomes manageable. You can't eliminate risk, but you can quantify it. Put boundaries around it. That makes it easier to live with."

"But it's still there. The uncertainty."

"It's always there. That's the whole point. If there were no uncertainty, there would be no need for actuaries."

Jason nodded slowly. "So your job is to live with what can't be controlled."

"I suppose you could put it that way."

"That sounds like Buddhism."

Aria laughed—a short, surprised sound. "I don't think anyone has ever compared actuarial science to Buddhism before."

"Maybe they should." Jason's eyes were warm. "You're both in the business of accepting impermanence. You just use different tools."

After dinner, they moved back to the living room. Jason made tea—something herbal, fragrant, in cups that didn't match. The conversation drifted, the way conversations do when the formal part is over and what remains is just three people in a room, learning each other's rhythms.

Wren talked about a retreat she was planning to attend—a week of silence at a center up in Ojai. Aria tried to imagine it: seven days without speaking, without television, without any of the noise that filled ordinary life. It sounded like a particular kind of torture.

"What do you do all day?" she asked.

"Sit. Walk. Eat. Sleep." Wren shrugged. "It sounds boring when you say it out loud. But something happens when you stop running. When you let yourself just… be there."

"Something happens?"

"It's hard to explain. Things get clearer. Quieter. You see things you couldn't see before."

"Like what?"

Wren was quiet for a moment. Then she said, "Like how much of what I thought I wanted was just habit. Expectations I'd absorbed without questioning them. When you sit still long enough, you can see what's actually true. What's actually yours."

Aria felt something shift in the room. A door opening, or almost opening. She wanted to ask: *What did you see? What expectations? What was true?* But Wren's face had closed slightly, the way it did when she had said more than she intended.

Jason spoke into the silence. "The first time I did a retreat, I cried for three days."

"Why?" Aria asked.

"I don't know. I still don't know. Something that needed to come out, I guess. All the things I'd been carrying without knowing I was carrying them." He smiled, but there was something serious underneath. "That's when I decided to quit trading. I came back and gave notice that week."

"Weren't you scared? To give up everything you'd built?"

"Terrified." He said it easily, without drama. "But the alternative was worse. The alternative was staying."

At the end of the evening, Aria stood on the porch saying goodbye. The air had cooled, and she could smell jasmine from somewhere nearby—a neighbor's garden, maybe, or a vine she couldn't see in the darkness.

"Thank you," she said to Jason. "For dinner. For… all of this."

"Thank you for coming." He glanced at Wren, then back at Aria. "She was worried, you know. That you wouldn't approve."

"Approve?"

"Of me. Of us. Of the life she's building."

Aria looked at her daughter, who was standing in the doorway with her arms crossed, watching this exchange with an expression Aria couldn't read.

"I don't know if my approval matters," Aria said. "But for what it's worth, I'm glad she found you."

Something passed across Wren's face—relief, maybe, or something more complicated. She stepped forward and hugged Aria, a real hug, the kind that lasted longer than the perfunctory embraces they usually exchanged.

"Thank you," Wren said into her shoulder. "For trying."

"Trying?"

"To understand. Even when you don't."

Aria held her daughter and didn't say anything. She thought about all the things she didn't understand—the Buddhism, the beekeeping, the silence retreats, the willingness to let go of outcomes. She thought about the house in Pasadena, the life that hadn't happened, the grandchildren who existed only as frozen cells in a clinic in West Los Angeles.

She didn't understand. But she was here, and Wren was here, and that had to count for something.

On the drive home, Aria replayed the evening in her mind. The curry. The mismatched teacups. The photographs of hives on the walls. Jason's question: *Does it make sense? The uncertainty?*

No, she thought. It doesn't make sense. It never has. But you learn to live inside it anyway, because the alternative is not living at all.

She thought about Wren's words: *When you sit still long enough, you can see what's actually true. What's actually yours.*

What was actually hers? Her work. Her apartment. Her routines. The careful structures she had built to keep the chaos at bay. And Wren—Wren was hers, in the way children are never really yours, in the way love is always a kind of letting go.

The eggs, too. Wren's eggs, waiting in their tank. A future that might or might not happen. A possibility that Aria was holding onto with both hands, even though she knew—she had always known—that you couldn't hold onto anything forever.

If it lasted forever, why would it matter?

She still didn't have an answer. But the question was settling into her, finding a place to live. Maybe that was something. Maybe that was the beginning.

The city lights blurred past her window, each one a small fire in the darkness, each one a life she would never know. Aria drove through them, a single point moving through the vast indifference of the night, carrying her uncertainties with her like passengers she couldn't put down.

At home, she poured herself a glass of water and stood at the kitchen window, looking at nothing. The cat had been warm on her lap. The tea had been good. Her daughter was in love with a man who kept bees and believed in impermanence, and somehow, against all probability, Aria thought she might be happy.

It wasn't the life she had imagined for any of them. But it was the life they had.

She finished her water and went to bed.

Chapter 05 - Renewal

The first notice arrived in March, eleven months after the procedure. A white envelope, standard size, the clinic's logo in the corner—a stylized double helix that looked more like a corporate brand than a medical institution. Inside, a single sheet of paper: *Annual Storage Renewal Notice. Patient: Wren Chen. Specimens: 14 oocytes. Annual fee: $750. Due by April 15.*

Aria read it three times, standing at her kitchen counter, the morning light falling across the page. The language was so clinical, so ordinary. Specimens. Oocytes. As if they were talking about tissue samples or blood work, not the possibility of a person who might someday exist.

She called Wren that evening.

"I got the renewal notice," she said. "From the clinic."

A pause. "Oh. Right."

"I can pay it, if you want. I don't mind."

"Mom, you don't have to—"

"I know I don't have to. I want to."

Another pause, longer this time. Aria could hear something in the background—music, maybe, or the television. The sounds of Wren's life continuing.

"Okay," Wren said finally. "If you want to."

"I do."

"Then okay."

They talked for a few more minutes about other things—Wren's work, Aria's work, the weather. The eggs weren't mentioned again. When Aria hung up, she looked at the notice still sitting on her counter and felt something she couldn't name. Relief, maybe. Or purpose. Or the particular satisfaction of having a problem she could solve.

She wrote the check that night and mailed it the next morning.

The second year, the notice came in February. The fee had increased to $800.

Aria paid it without calling Wren. There didn't seem to be anything to discuss.

The third year, Aria was sixty-three. Wren was thirty-three, still at the nonprofit, still living in the apartment in Silver Lake. She and Jason had been together for three years now—not married, but something like it. Something that didn't need a ceremony or a certificate to make it real.

The notice arrived in late February, earlier than before. The fee was $850. Aria paid it and then, on impulse, called Wren.

"Just checking in," she said. "How are you?"

"Good. Busy. The usual." Wren sounded distracted, the way she often did lately. There was always a case, always a crisis, always something pulling her attention away. "Jason and I are thinking about going up to Ojai next month. The retreat center he likes."

"That sounds nice."

"It will be. I need it. Work has been…" She trailed off. "Anyway. How are you?"

"I'm fine. I paid the storage fee, by the way. For the eggs."

A beat of silence. "You don't have to keep doing that."

"I know."

"I mean it. It's my responsibility. I should be paying."

"Do you want to pay?"

Another silence. Aria waited.

"Not particularly," Wren admitted. "But that doesn't mean you should have to."

"I don't mind. Really. It gives me something to do."

"Something to do?"

"A way to help. To be involved." Aria heard how it sounded and tried to correct. "I'm not trying to pressure you. About anything. I just—it feels good to contribute. That's all."

"Okay." Wren's voice had softened. "Thank you. I mean it."

"You're welcome."

After they hung up, Aria sat with the phone in her hand and thought about what she had said. *It gives me something to do.* Was that true? Was that what the eggs had become—a project, a purpose, a way to feel useful in a life that was increasingly solitary?

She didn't know. She wasn't sure she wanted to know.

The fourth year, the fifth, the sixth. The notices kept coming, and Aria kept paying. The fees increased—$900, $950, $1,000—but she never hesitated. It was a small price for the maintenance of possibility.

She and Wren talked every week, saw each other once a month or so. The eggs were rarely mentioned. They had become part of the background, like the furniture in a room you stop seeing because it's always been there.

Wren turned thirty-five, then thirty-six, then thirty-seven. The window was narrowing—Aria knew this, even if she never said it. The eggs were frozen at thirty, which was good, but the body that would carry a pregnancy was aging in real time. There were statistics about this, probability curves, declining success rates. Aria knew them all. She had looked them up years ago and committed them to memory, the way she committed all risks to memory, as if knowing the numbers gave her some power over them.

But she never mentioned this to Wren. Wren knew the numbers too, probably. And if she didn't, it wasn't Aria's place to remind her.

The seventh year, Jason got sick.

It was nothing serious—a respiratory infection that lingered too long, that turned into pneumonia, that put him in the hospital for five days. Aria drove to Echo Park the night Wren called, sat in the waiting room while Wren sat by his bed, watched her daughter's face go pale and tight with fear.

He recovered. Of course he recovered—he was fifty-two, healthy, strong. But something shifted after that. Aria saw it in the way Wren looked at him, the way she touched his arm when they walked together, the way she stopped mid-sentence sometimes and just watched him breathe.

"It scared me," Wren said, weeks later, when Jason was home and healthy and the crisis had faded into memory. They were at Aria's apartment, eating takeout, the television muted in the background. "More than I expected."

"Of course it did. You love him."

"I know. But I thought—" Wren set down her chopsticks. "I thought I was better at this. At impermanence. At accepting that everything ends."

"Theory is different from practice."

"That's what Jason said." Wren smiled, but it didn't reach her eyes. "He was comforting me about my fear of losing him. While he was the one in the hospital bed."

"That sounds like him."

"It does." Wren picked up her chopsticks again, moved the food around on her plate without eating. "I realized something, sitting there. Watching him sleep. I realized I've been practicing for the wrong thing."

"What do you mean?"

"I've been practicing letting go of outcomes. Of expectations. Of the future." She looked up at Aria. "But I haven't been practicing letting go of him. Of the actual person. When it came down to it, I wasn't ready at all."

Aria didn't know what to say. She thought about her own husband—dead now for fifteen years, a heart attack at sixty-two, a loss she still carried like a stone in her pocket. She had not been ready either. No one was ever ready.

"Maybe that's not something you can practice," she said finally. "Maybe some things you just have to live through."

Wren nodded slowly. "Maybe."

They finished eating in silence. When Wren left, she hugged Aria at the door—a long hug, the kind that meant something.

"Thank you," she said.

"For what?"

"For being here. For not trying to fix it."

Aria watched her daughter walk to her car, get in, drive away. The taillights disappeared around the corner, and then there was just the night, and the apartment, and the silence that came after.

The eighth year, the ninth, the tenth. The renewal notices kept arriving, and Aria kept paying. It had become automatic now—a line item in her budget, an annual ritual, a thread connecting her to something she couldn't see but refused to let go of.

Wren was forty. Aria was seventy. The numbers kept changing, but the pattern stayed the same.

They didn't talk about the eggs. They didn't talk about children. The subject had become a closed door, a room neither of them entered. Aria paid the storage fees and Wren accepted it, and the silence between them on this one subject grew deeper and more comfortable with each passing year.

Sometimes, late at night, Aria wondered what would happen if the eggs were never used. If they sat in their tank for years, decades, until Aria died and no one paid the fees anymore. Would they be disposed of? Would someone notify Wren, and would Wren care? Or would it just be one more ending, one more loss in a life full of losses, absorbed and forgotten?

She didn't know. She tried not to think about it. The fees were paid, the eggs were safe, and for now that was enough.

For now, that had to be enough.

The eleventh year, Aria retired.

It was strange, after forty years, to suddenly have nothing to do. No office to go to, no meetings to attend, no actuarial tables to update. She had planned for this, of course—she was an actuary, planning was what she did—but the reality was different from the projection. The days were longer than she expected. The silence was louder.

She filled the time with small things. Gardening. Reading. Long walks through her neighborhood, watching the light change on the houses she had passed a thousand times without seeing. She called Wren more often, visited more often, inserted herself into her daughter's life in ways she hoped were helpful and worried were intrusive.

The renewal notice arrived in February, as it always did. The fee was $1,200 now. Aria paid it and didn't mention it to Wren.

But that evening, sitting alone in her kitchen with a cup of tea growing cold, she found herself thinking about what the money meant. Twelve hundred dollars a year. Not nothing, but not a burden. She could afford it indefinitely—her pension, her savings, the careful planning of a lifetime. She could pay for those eggs forever.

But forever didn't exist. She knew this better than anyone. Eventually the payments would stop, one way or another. Eventually the eggs would thaw or be used or be discarded. Eventually the possibility she was preserving would become either an actuality or an absence.

She just didn't know which. She just didn't know when.

Aria finished her tea and washed the cup and put it away in the cabinet where it belonged. The kitchen was clean. The house was quiet. Outside, the sun was setting, the light going orange and pink, the day ending the way all days ended.

She turned on the television for company and sat on the couch and watched nothing, thinking about her daughter, thinking about the eggs, thinking about all the futures that might or might not unfold from this single, fragile, frozen present.

The twelfth year, the thirteenth, the fourteenth.

The notices came. Aria paid. The routine continued.

Wren turned forty-three. Jason turned fifty-seven. They were talking about moving out of the city—maybe up to Ojai, maybe further north. Somewhere quieter. Somewhere with land for the bees.

"You could come," Wren said once, half-joking. "We could get a place with a guest house."

"I'm too old to start over," Aria said. But she thought about it afterward. A house in the hills. A garden. Her daughter and Jason and the bees, all of them together, living out whatever time remained.

It wasn't the life she had imagined. But then, nothing was.

The fifteenth year, the notice didn't come in February.

Aria noticed in early March, when she was going through her bills and realized the storage fee hadn't been paid. She called the clinic, waited on hold for twenty minutes, finally reached someone who could help.

"Let me check the account," the woman said. There was typing, a pause. "Yes, I see it here. The patient—Wren Chen—she called in January to update the billing address. The notice went to her directly."

"She's paying it herself?"

"It appears so. The fee was paid on February 3rd."

Aria thanked her and hung up. She sat with the phone in her hand, trying to understand what she felt. Relief? Loss? Something in between?

She didn't call Wren. Wren would have told her if she wanted to discuss it. The fact that she hadn't said anything meant she didn't want to, and Aria had learned—finally, after all these years—to respect the things her daughter left unsaid.

But that night, lying in bed, she thought about the eggs sitting in their tank in a building she had never seen. Still there. Still waiting. Just no longer hers to maintain.

It was a small loss. A tiny one. But it felt, in the darkness, like something larger. Like the beginning of a letting go she hadn't yet learned how to do.

The sixteenth year, Aria got the diagnosis.

Not a death sentence—not yet—but a warning. Her heart was failing, slowly, the way hearts do when they have been beating for seventy-five years. Medications could manage it. Lifestyle changes could slow it. But the trajectory was clear, the actuarial tables unambiguous. She had years left, probably. But not as many as she had hoped.

She told Wren on a Sunday afternoon, sitting in Wren's apartment in Silver Lake, the same apartment she had moved into after the divorce, all those years ago.

"How long?" Wren asked. Her face was pale, her voice steady.

"They don't know exactly. Five years, maybe. Ten if I'm lucky."

"That's not nothing."

"No. It's not nothing."

They sat in silence. Through the window, Aria could see the tree on the sidewalk, the one that bloomed white in spring. She had watched it bloom fifteen times now. She wondered how many more she would see.

"I've been thinking about options," she said finally. "For when the time comes."

"Options?"

"There's a technology. You've probably heard of it. They call it uploading."

Wren's face did something Aria couldn't read. "I've heard of it."

"I've been researching it. It's expensive, but I can afford it. And it would mean—" Aria stopped, searching for the right words. "It would mean more time. With you."

Wren was quiet for a long moment. Then she said, "Is that why you'd do it? To be with me longer?"

"Is there a better reason?"

"I don't know." Wren's voice was careful, measured. "I don't know if there's a good reason at all."

"What do you mean?"

"It's just—" Wren shook her head. "Never mind. We don't have to talk about this now."

"I want to talk about it."

"I know. But I need time to think. Is that okay?"

"Of course."

They changed the subject. They talked about other things—Jason's bees, Wren's cases, the move to Ojai that kept being discussed but never happened. When Aria left, Wren hugged her tightly, the way she had started hugging her in recent years, as if each goodbye might be the last.

"I love you," Wren said.

"I love you too."

Aria drove home through the city she had lived in her whole life, past the buildings and the billboards and the endless stream of cars. She thought about hearts and machines and the strange possibility of continuing past the body's end. She thought about Wren's face when she said *I don't know if there's a good reason at all.*

What had she meant? What was she not saying?

Aria didn't know. But she had time to find out. Five years, maybe. Ten if she was lucky.

She would use them well.

Chapter 06 - Options

Aria had been thinking about how to ask for weeks. The words arranged and rearranged themselves in her mind—casual, direct, oblique, earnest—none of them quite right. It was the kind of question that changed its shape depending on how you held it, that meant different things at different angles.

She practiced in the mirror once, felt foolish, stopped.

It was November. Wren was forty-four. The eggs had been frozen for fourteen years. Aria was seventy-four, her heart stabilized on medication, her body slower but still functioning. She had time—not infinite time, but time enough. The upload was still a possibility, still being researched, still waiting in the wings like an understudy that might never go on.

They were at Wren's apartment, a Sunday afternoon, the light coming through the windows in long golden slants. Jason was in Topanga, checking on the hives. It was just the two of them, mother and daughter, the configuration that still felt most natural even after all these years.

"Can I ask you something?" Aria said.

Wren looked up from the book she was reading—something about land rights, always the work, even on weekends. "Of course."

"It's personal."

"Most of the things you ask are personal."

"More personal than usual."

Wren set down the book. Her face had arranged itself into something careful, something waiting. "Okay."

Aria took a breath. She had rehearsed this, but the rehearsal was useless now, the words scattering like startled birds.

"I've been thinking about the eggs," she said. "Your eggs."

"What about them?"

"They've been in storage for fourteen years. You're forty-four now. I just—" She stopped, started again. "I wondered if you'd thought about what you want to do with them. Eventually."

Wren's face didn't change, exactly, but something behind it shifted. A door closing, or a wall going up. Aria couldn't tell which.

"I've thought about it," Wren said.

"And?"

"And I don't have an answer."

"That's okay. I'm not asking for an answer. I'm just—" Aria spread her hands, a gesture of openness that felt, even as she made it, like a plea. "I want to understand where you are. What you're thinking."

Wren was quiet for a long moment. Through the window, Aria could hear traffic, the distant murmur of the city going about its business. A siren somewhere, fading.

"I'm thinking that it's complicated," Wren said finally. "More complicated than I expected it to be."

"Complicated how?"

"I don't know if I want children." She said it flatly, without inflection, the way you might report a fact you had no stake in. "I've never been sure. And the older I get, the less sure I become."

"But you froze the eggs."

"I froze the eggs because you asked me to. Because it seemed like a reasonable thing to do at the time. Keep the options open." Wren picked up her book, set it down again. "But options aren't the same as desires. Having the possibility doesn't mean I want the actuality."

Aria felt something tighten in her chest—not her heart, not the medical kind of tightening, but something older and more familiar. The ache of wanting something you couldn't make happen.

"I understand," she said, though she wasn't sure she did.

"Do you?"

"I'm trying to."

Wren looked at her, really looked, the way she sometimes did when she was deciding how much to say. Aria waited.

"I know you want grandchildren," Wren said. "I've always known that. And I know you've never pressured me—not directly—but the wanting is there. I can feel it."

"I'm sorry if—"

"Don't apologize. It's natural. It's what parents want." Wren's voice was gentle, but there was something underneath it, something that might have been weariness or might have been something else. "I just need you to understand that what you want and what I want might not be the same thing. And that's okay. It has to be okay."

"Of course it's okay."

"Is it?"

The question hung in the air between them. Aria wanted to say yes, wanted to mean it completely, but the truth was more complicated. She had spent fourteen years paying storage fees, thinking about futures, imagining a child she had never met. The wanting was not something she could simply turn off.

"I want you to be happy," she said. "That's what I want most."

"I know."

"If children wouldn't make you happy—if the eggs are just—" She couldn't finish the sentence. Couldn't bring herself to say *a waste* or *a mistake* or *something you never wanted in the first place*.

"They're not nothing," Wren said. "They're a possibility. I'm not ready to let go of that. I just don't know if I'll ever be ready to make it real."

"That's okay," Aria said again, and this time she almost meant it.

They didn't talk about it again that day. They made tea, watched a movie, let the afternoon dissolve into evening. When Aria left, Wren walked her to the car, and they stood for a moment in the fading light, neither of them speaking.

"Thank you for asking," Wren said. "Instead of just wondering."

"I've been wondering for years."

"I know. I'm sorry I didn't bring it up myself."

"You don't have to apologize."

"I know." Wren smiled, but it was a complicated smile, one that contained things Aria couldn't read. "I just—I want you to know that I'm not ignoring it. The question. I think about it more than you probably realize."

"What do you think?"

"Lots of things. None of them conclusive." She shrugged, a gesture that was meant to be casual but wasn't quite. "Maybe that's the answer. Maybe the fact that I've been thinking about it for fourteen years and still don't know means I don't actually want it. I just can't admit that yet."

"Or maybe you need more time."

"Maybe." Wren hugged her, a quick embrace. "Drive safe."

Aria got in the car and drove home through the darkening city, past the streetlights coming on, the restaurants filling up for dinner, the ordinary rituals of a Sunday evening. She thought about what Wren had said—*what you want and what I want might not be the same thing*—and felt the truth of it settle into her like a stone into water.

All these years, she had been holding onto the eggs as if they were a promise. A guarantee of continuation. But they were only cells in a tank, potential without purpose, waiting for a decision that might never come.

Wren didn't want children. Aria could see it now, could read it in all the things her daughter hadn't said. The deflection, the uncertainty, the careful non-answers—they weren't confusion. They were politeness. Wren was trying to spare her the truth.

Or maybe that wasn't right either. Maybe Wren genuinely didn't know. Maybe the ambivalence was real, not a performance. Maybe some questions didn't have answers, only endless circling.

Aria pulled into her driveway and sat in the car for a long time, the engine off, the night settling around her. She thought about her own mother, dead now for twenty years, who had wanted grandchildren too and had lived just long enough to see Wren born. She thought about lineage, about legacy, about the strange human need to continue past our own ending.

She thought about the eggs, sitting in their tank in their building in West Los Angeles, unchanged and unchanging, while the years accumulated around them like sediment.

Maybe the fact that I've been thinking about it for fourteen years and still don't know means I don't actually want it.

That was the closest Wren had come to saying it. The closest she would probably ever come.

Aria got out of the car and went inside. She made dinner, ate it without tasting it, washed the dishes with the mechanical precision of someone whose mind is elsewhere. The apartment was quiet. The evening stretched ahead of her, empty and familiar.

She went to bed early and lay in the dark, thinking about all the things she had wanted for her daughter and all the things her daughter had wanted for herself, and how the two had never quite aligned, and how that was probably true of every parent and every child who had ever lived, and how knowing this didn't make it hurt any less.

The next morning, she called Wren.

"I've been thinking about our conversation," she said. "I want you to know that I meant what I said. About wanting you to be happy."

"I know."

"And I want you to know that if you decide—if you ever decide—that you don't want to use the eggs, that's okay. I won't be disappointed."

A pause. "You'd be a little disappointed."

"Maybe a little. But I'd get over it. I'd rather have you happy and childless than unhappy and a mother."

Wren laughed—a real laugh, surprised and warm. "That might be the nicest thing you've ever said to me."

"I mean it."

"I know you do." Another pause. "Thank you, Mom."

"You're welcome."

They talked for a few more minutes about nothing important—the weather, a case Wren was working on, a restaurant Jason wanted to try. The ordinary currency of their relationship, exchanged without thought.

When Aria hung up, she felt something loosen in her chest. Not resolution—the question was still open, would probably always be open—but something like acceptance. The beginning of it, anyway.

The eggs would stay frozen. Wren would keep thinking. The years would keep passing. And Aria would keep loving her daughter, regardless of what she decided, regardless of what she wanted, regardless of the grandchildren who might never exist.

That was what it meant to be a parent, she realized. Not to get what you wanted, but to love what was.

Three months later, Wren called with news.

"Jason and I are getting married," she said.

Aria sat down. She hadn't realized she'd been standing. "Married?"

"I know—we always said we didn't need the ceremony. But we've been together for twelve years now, and we realized we wanted to make it official. Before—" She stopped.

"Before what?"

"Before anything changes. While we still can."

Aria thought about Jason, fifty-six now, healthy but aging. She thought about Wren, forty-four, childless and apparently at peace with it. She thought about her own heart, monitored and medicated, its rhythms charted and predicted.

"I'm happy for you," she said. "Both of you."

"You mean it?"

"Of course I mean it."

"We're going to do it next month. Small ceremony. Just family and a few friends from the sangha." Wren's voice was lighter than it had been in years. "Will you come?"

"I wouldn't miss it."

"Good." A pause. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you too."

Aria hung up and sat in her kitchen, the afternoon light falling through the window, the silence of the apartment soft around her. Her daughter was getting married. To the beekeeper. The man who believed in impermanence, who had made Wren happy for twelve years, who would probably never give Aria grandchildren.

And it was okay. It had to be okay.

She got up and made tea and drank it by the window, watching the light change on the houses across the street. In her mind, she was already planning what to wear, what gift to bring, how to stand at the ceremony without crying.

The eggs were still frozen. The future was still unwritten. But for now, there was a wedding to plan, and that was enough.

For now, that was more than enough.

Chapter 07 - Sangha

The wedding was held at the sangha's meditation center, the same rented space above the Vietnamese restaurant where Wren had been practicing for fifteen years. Aria climbed the narrow stairs, her hand on the railing, her heart working harder than it should have to lift her sixty pounds of celebratory dress and comfortable shoes.

The room was smaller than she had imagined. Hardwood floors, scuffed from years of use. Cushions stacked along one wall. A simple altar at the front—a Buddha statue, a bowl of water, a stick of incense sending a thin thread of smoke toward the ceiling. No flowers, no decorations, nothing that announced this as a wedding except for the twenty people sitting in chairs arranged in a loose circle.

Jason stood at the front, wearing the same plain clothes he always wore—a button-down shirt, dark pants, no tie. He looked nervous, Aria realized. For all his talk of equanimity, his hands were clasped in front of him like a man trying to hold himself together.

Wren entered from a side door. She wore a simple white dress, no veil, her hair loose around her shoulders. She looked like herself, Aria thought. Not like a bride in a magazine, not like a woman performing a role, but like Wren—forty-four years old, walking toward the man she loved, her face open and certain.

The ceremony was short. A teacher from the sangha—a small woman with gray hair and an accent Aria couldn't place—spoke about interdependence, about the way two lives could weave together without losing their separateness. She spoke about impermanence, about the courage it took to make a vow knowing that all vows, eventually, would end.

Aria listened and didn't listen. She watched Wren's face, the way her daughter looked at Jason, the way Jason looked back. There was something between them that she recognized but couldn't name—not passion exactly, not comfort exactly, but something deeper. A kind of mutual seeing.

They exchanged vows they had written themselves. Jason's voice cracked once, and he had to stop and breathe before continuing. Wren's eyes were wet, but she didn't cry. When it was over, they kissed—a simple kiss, unhurried—and the room broke into soft applause.

Aria clapped with the others, her hands moving automatically, her chest tight with something that was not quite happiness and not quite grief but somewhere in between.

After the ceremony, there was food in the restaurant downstairs—pho and spring rolls and bottles of wine that someone had brought. Aria sat at a table with two women from the sangha, both of them older than Wren but younger than Aria, both of them speaking a language she didn't quite understand.

"Wren has such a beautiful practice," one of them said. "She sits with so much stillness."

"She's been a real gift to our community," the other agreed. "And Jason too, of course. They're both so present."

Aria nodded and smiled and wondered what it meant to have a beautiful practice. She had never meditated, had never sat on a cushion and tried to empty her mind. The idea seemed impossible to her—how could you think about nothing? How could you stop the endless churning of thought and worry and calculation that made up a life?

But Wren could do it. Wren sat for an hour every morning before work, her legs crossed, her back straight, her eyes half-closed. Jason sat with her, the two of them side by side in their living room, breathing

together in the early light. Aria had seen it once, arriving early for a visit—she had let herself in with the key they'd given her and found them there, still as stones, and had backed out quietly and waited in the car until they were done.

She didn't understand it. But she could see that it mattered to them, that it was the foundation on which their life together was built. And that had to be enough.

The months after the wedding were quiet ones. Aria saw Wren and Jason every few weeks—dinners, brunches, the occasional afternoon at the house in Echo Park where Jason still kept his hives in the backyard. The bees had multiplied over the years; there were six hives now, each one humming with its own small civilization.

"Do you want to see?" Jason asked one afternoon, holding out a beekeeper's suit.

Aria looked at the white fabric, the mesh hood, the heavy gloves. "I don't think so."

"You sure? They're very calm this time of year."

"I'm sure. I'll watch from here."

She sat on the back porch while Jason suited up and walked out to the hives. Through the screen door, she could see him moving among them, lifting frames, checking for something she couldn't identify. He moved slowly, deliberately, his gestures precise. This was his meditation, she realized—not the cushion in the living room but this, the careful tending of creatures that could sting him if he moved wrong.

Wren came out and sat beside her, two cups of tea in her hands.

"He's out there every day," Wren said. "Even when it's cold. Even when he's tired."

"He loves it."

"He does." Wren handed her a cup. "It's the only time he seems completely at peace."

Aria sipped her tea and watched Jason through the screen. "He doesn't seem at peace otherwise?"

"He does. He's good at appearing calm. But there's something underneath—a restlessness. He doesn't talk about it much."

"From the trading days?"

"Maybe. Or from before." Wren's voice was careful. "He was in recovery for a long time. Alcohol. He doesn't drink anymore."

"I know. He told me. Twelve years sober."

"Twenty now. But the years before that—" Wren shook her head. "He doesn't talk about them. I don't push."

Aria thought about what she knew of Jason's past. The daytrading. The crisis. The bees. He had made it sound simple, a clean break from one life to another. But nothing was ever that clean, was it? Everyone carried something.

"He's a good man," she said.

"He is." Wren's voice was soft. "Even when he's not easy. He's good."

The not-easy parts revealed themselves slowly, over time.

There was the way Jason could retreat into silence for days, his body present but his attention somewhere else. Wren called it "going into the hive"—a joke that wasn't quite a joke. He would sit on the couch,

a book open in his lap, his eyes unfocused, and if you spoke to him he would answer in monosyllables until suddenly, without warning, he came back.

"It's just how he processes things," Wren said once, when Aria asked. "He goes inward. He comes back."

"It doesn't bother you?"

"Sometimes. But I'd rather have him disappear for a few days than explode. Some people carry their difficulties outward. Jason carries his in."

There was also the matter of the phone. Aria noticed it one evening—Jason at the dinner table, his attention flicking to the screen in his hand, his thumb scrolling through something she couldn't see. Wren noticed too, her lips pressing together in a way that suggested this was not the first time.

"Jason."

He didn't look up. His thumb kept moving.

"Jason." Wren's voice was sharper now. "You said you'd leave it in the car."

"I know. I just—" He was still looking at the screen. "The volatility index is—"

"I don't care what the volatility index is." Wren reached across the table and put her hand over the phone. "You're not in the market anymore. You haven't been in the market for fifteen years."

"I know that." Jason's voice had an edge Aria hadn't heard before. "I'm not trading. I'm just looking."

"You're always just looking. You said that last week. And the week before." Wren's hand stayed on the phone. "This is what it looks like, isn't it? The thing you said you'd never do again."

Something passed across Jason's face—a flash of something raw. Shame, maybe. Or anger. "It's not the same."

"Then why can't you stop?"

He didn't have an answer. After a moment he slid the phone out from under Wren's hand and put it in his pocket. His movements were careful, controlled, the way someone moves when they're trying very hard not to react.

"I'm sorry," he said. "You're right."

"I know I'm right." Wren's voice had softened, but her eyes were tired. "I've watched you do this three times now. The markets spike, and you disappear into that screen, and I lose you for a week."

"You don't lose me."

"I lose the part of you that's here. The part that's present." She looked at him steadily. "That's the part I need, Jason. That's the part I married."

The dinner continued after that, the conversation finding its way back to safer ground. But Aria remembered it afterward—the way Jason's hand had shaken slightly when he put the phone away, the way his eyes had kept flicking to his pocket. A recovering alcoholic sitting in a bar, telling himself he was just there for the atmosphere.

The sangha met every Thursday evening. Wren had been inviting Aria for years, and Aria had always declined—too busy, too tired, not her thing. But one Thursday in spring, a year after the wedding, she found herself saying yes.

"You don't have to participate," Wren said. "You can just sit in the back and observe."

"What would I be observing?"

"People sitting still. It's less exciting than it sounds."

The room above the restaurant was fuller than it had been at the wedding—forty or fifty people arranged on cushions and chairs, facing the altar. The teacher sat at the front, the same small woman who had married Wren and Jason.

Aria took a chair in the back corner. Wren and Jason were near the front, side by side, their backs straight. Someone rang a bell—a clear, high tone that seemed to hang in the air—and then silence fell.

Not complete silence. There was breathing, the shift of bodies, the creak of the floor. But underneath that, something deeper. A quality of attention that Aria could feel even from the back of the room.

She tried to close her eyes, tried to sit still. Her mind immediately rebelled—grocery lists, medical appointments, the storage fees due next month. She tried again, focusing on her breath the way Wren had once described. In. Out. In. Out.

Nothing happened. The thoughts kept coming, a parade of worries and memories and random associations that refused to be silenced. She opened her eyes and looked around the room. Everyone else seemed absorbed, their faces calm, their bodies motionless.

Aria felt a sudden surge of—what? Frustration? Envy? Something in between. These people had found something she couldn't access, a door she couldn't open. Even her own daughter, sitting fifteen feet away, was in a place Aria couldn't follow.

The bell rang again. Thirty minutes had passed. People began to stir, to stretch, to speak in low voices to their neighbors.

"What did you think?" Wren asked, appearing beside her.

"I don't think I'm very good at it."

"No one's good at it. That's not the point."

"What is the point?"

Wren considered the question. "Showing up. Paying attention. Not running away from what's there."

"That sounds hard."

"It is." Wren smiled. "But so is everything else."

Aria didn't go back to the sangha. It wasn't her practice, wasn't her path. But she thought about that evening sometimes—the room full of people sitting still, the quality of their attention, the way Wren's face looked in the moment before the bell rang.

Her daughter had built a life she didn't understand. A Buddhist life, full of cushions and silence and a particular kind of patience Aria had never learned. It was not the life Aria would have chosen for her—not the house in Pasadena, not the grandchildren, not any of the futures she had imagined. But it was Wren's. Entirely Wren's.

And Jason was part of it, with his silences and his bees and his phone full of market data he was trying not to look at. He was not perfect—Aria could see that now. He was a man with a past, with cravings he hadn't fully conquered, with a tendency to disappear when things got hard. But he loved Wren. He loved her in the quiet, consistent way of someone who had learned that love was a practice, not a feeling.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe that was what Wren needed—not fireworks, not passion, but a steady presence. Someone to sit beside in the early morning, breathing together, waiting for nothing.

Aria thought about her own marriage, so long ago now it felt like another life. Her husband had been a firework—brilliant, unpredictable, gone too soon. She had loved him the way you love something you can't hold onto, with desperation and joy and the constant fear of losing him.

And she had lost him. In the end, she had lost him anyway.

Maybe Wren was wiser. Maybe she had chosen differently on purpose, knowing what the other kind of love cost. Or maybe she had just been lucky—found someone who matched her, who wanted what she wanted, who was willing to sit in silence beside her until the bell rang.

The year turned. Aria turned seventy-six, then seventy-seven. Her heart held steady, the medications doing their work. She saw Wren and Jason regularly, watched their life continue in its quiet rhythms—the meditation, the bees, the work that filled their days.

The eggs were still frozen. The clinic still sent notices, though Wren paid them now. The possibility was still there, preserved, waiting.

But it felt more distant every year. A door that was closing so slowly you couldn't see it move, but that would eventually, inevitably, close.

Aria didn't bring it up. Neither did Wren. Some conversations, once had, didn't need to be repeated.

Instead, they talked about other things—work, health, the world that was changing in ways Aria couldn't always follow. The upload technology was advancing; she read about it in the news, saw the debates on television. More people were choosing it now, leaving their bodies behind, becoming something new.

She thought about it often. The possibility of staying. The chance to see what came next.

But not yet. For now, there was still time. For now, there were still afternoons on Jason's back porch, watching him move among the hives. There were still Thursday dinners and Sunday brunches and the ordinary accumulation of days.

For now, that was enough.

It had to be enough.

Chapter 08 - Slowing

The body kept its own calendar.

Aria noticed it first in her hands—the way they ached in the morning now, stiff and reluctant, as if overnight they had forgotten how to be hands. Then her knees, which complained on stairs. Then her back, which had opinions about chairs. Small betrayals, accumulating.

She was seventy-eight. The number itself meant nothing—she had known people who were sharp at ninety, others who were lost at sixty. But her body was making its position clear. It was tired. It wanted to slow down. It did not care what she had planned.

The cardiologist appointments continued every three months. Her heart was stable—the medications doing their work, the rhythms holding steady. But stable was not the same as strong. The ejection fraction had dropped a few points. Nothing alarming, the doctor said. Just something to watch.

Aria was good at watching. She had spent her whole career watching—numbers, trends, the slow accumulation of data that told you where things were heading. She watched her body now with the same clinical attention, noting the changes, calculating the trajectories.

The math was not encouraging.

She had retired eight years ago, but she still thought like an actuary. Every decision filtered through probability. Every choice weighed against risk.

The apartment she had lived in for thirty years was becoming a problem. Two flights of stairs to the front door. A bathtub she had to step over to use. A kitchen with cabinets too high to reach without a stool. She had bought this place when she was forty-eight, when stairs were nothing, when reaching was easy. Now she lived inside a space designed for a younger woman.

She started looking at other options. Ground-floor units. Walk-in showers. Buildings with elevators and grab bars and all the other accommodations for bodies that were beginning to fail. The listings depressed her—not because the apartments were bad, but because of what they represented. The acknowledgment that she was entering a new phase. The phase you didn't come back from.

Wren offered to help her look. They spent a Saturday afternoon touring three places in Aria's neighborhood, all of them clean and safe and utterly without character. White walls. Beige carpet. Windows that looked out onto parking lots.

"This one has good light," Wren said, standing in the living room of the last unit.

"It has fluorescent light."

"Natural light, I mean. From the windows."

Aria looked at the windows. They faced west, which meant afternoon glare and nothing to see but the building next door. She thought about her current apartment, with its view of the street, the tree that bloomed white in spring, the neighbors she had watched come and go for three decades.

"I'm not ready," she said.

"Okay."

"I know I need to be practical. I know the stairs are a problem. But I'm not ready to live somewhere that looks like a waiting room."

Wren didn't argue. She just nodded and they left, driving back to Aria's apartment in a silence that was not uncomfortable but was not quite comfortable either.

"I'll stay where I am for now," Aria said, when Wren pulled up to the curb. "I'll be careful on the stairs."

"You'll hold the railing?"

"I'll hold the railing."

"And you'll call me if anything changes?"

"I'll call you."

Wren reached over and squeezed her hand—a quick gesture, gone almost before Aria registered it. "I worry about you."

"I know. I worry about me too."

The falls started small. A stumble on the front steps—caught herself on the railing, nothing broken. A slip in the kitchen—grabbed the counter, stayed upright. Minor incidents, easily dismissed. But they accumulated, the way everything accumulated now.

She didn't tell Wren about all of them. What was the point? Each one was nothing. It was only together that they became a pattern.

The big one came in October, a Tuesday afternoon. She was carrying groceries up the stairs—just two bags, nothing heavy—and her foot caught on the third step. She went down hard, her knee hitting the concrete, the bags spilling, oranges rolling down toward the sidewalk.

She lay there for a moment, assessing. Her knee was screaming. Her hip ached. Her pride was somewhere under the scattered groceries.

"Are you okay?" A neighbor she barely knew, coming up the walk. "Should I call someone?"

"I'm fine." The word came automatically, meaningless. "I just need a minute."

The neighbor helped her up, gathered the groceries, walked her to her door. Aria thanked her and went inside and sat on the couch without taking off her coat, her knee throbbing, her heart pounding harder than the fall warranted.

This was how it happened. She knew this. She had seen the data, the actuarial tables that tracked the progression from independent living to assisted living to skilled nursing to the final column that didn't need a name. A fall was often the first step. The body failed, and then the life failed, and then you were in a beige room somewhere, waiting for what came next.

She sat on the couch until the light faded. Then she got up, put away the groceries, and called Wren.

"I fell today," she said. "On the stairs."

"Are you hurt?"

"Bruised. Nothing broken."

"I'm coming over."

"You don't have to—"

"I'm coming over."

Wren arrived an hour later, her face tight with worry. She checked Aria's knee, made her walk across the room, asked questions about dizziness and vision and whether she had hit her head.

"I'm fine," Aria said again.

"You fell."

"I tripped. There's a difference."

"Is there?"

They looked at each other. The truth sat between them, undeniable.

"I've been thinking about options," Aria said finally. "For when I can't live alone anymore."

"The ground-floor units?"

"Those. And other things."

"What other things?"

Aria hesitated. She had been researching for months now—reading articles, watching testimonials, learning the science. It still felt strange to say out loud.

"The upload," she said. "I've been looking into it more seriously."

Wren's face did something complicated. "I thought that was just—I didn't know you were serious about it."

"I wasn't sure I was. But the technology is more established now. The success rates are high. And it would mean—" She stopped, unsure how to finish.

"More time."

"Yes."

Wren sat down on the couch beside her. For a long moment, neither of them spoke. Through the window, Aria could see the streetlights coming on, the darkness settling over the neighborhood she had called home for so long.

"Is that what you want?" Wren asked. "More time?"

"I don't know what I want. I just know I'm not ready for less."

The research became a project. Aria approached it the way she had approached every problem in her career: systematically, thoroughly, without sentiment.

She learned about the facilities—there were three in the Los Angeles area, more in other cities. She learned about the process—the brain mapping, the neural extraction, the substrate transfer. She learned about the legal frameworks—the death certificates issued when the body ceased to function, the new personhood documents that recognized the uploaded mind as a continuation.

She learned about the experience itself, from testimonials and interviews and the few academic studies that had been published. The transition was instantaneous, they said. One moment you were in a body, the next you were not. The disorientation passed quickly. The adjustment took longer—weeks, sometimes months—but most uploads reported eventual equilibrium. A new normal.

The cost was significant but not impossible. Her savings, her pension, the careful planning of a lifetime—it would be enough. She would not leave much behind, but she had never planned to leave much behind anyway. She had no one to leave it to except Wren, and Wren had never wanted her money.

She made spreadsheets. Compared facilities. Calculated survival probabilities and quality-of-life metrics and all the other numbers that had always made her feel in control. The data was reassuring. The odds were in her favor.

But the data couldn't tell her whether it was the right thing to do. The numbers couldn't answer the question that Wren had asked: *Is that what you want?*

She didn't know. She only knew that she wasn't ready to stop. Wasn't ready to close her eyes and not open them. Wasn't ready to leave Wren alone in a world that kept changing.

The eggs were still frozen. Twenty-four years now. Wren was fifty-four, long past the point where natural pregnancy was likely, still showing no sign of using what she had stored. The possibility Aria had been protecting was calcifying into improbability, year by year.

If she uploaded, she could keep watching. Keep waiting. Keep the vigil that had become, without her quite noticing, the organizing principle of her life.

Was that enough of a reason? Was it any kind of reason at all?

She didn't know. But she kept researching, kept planning, kept filling spreadsheets with data that told her everything except what she actually needed to know.

Winter came. The holidays passed—a quiet Christmas at Jason and Wren's house, just the three of them, a meal and a walk and the early darkness of December. Aria's knee had healed. Her heart kept beating. The stairs remained a problem, but she navigated them carefully, one hand always on the railing.

In January, she made an appointment at one of the upload facilities. Just a consultation, she told herself. Just to see what it was like. No commitment.

The facility was in Pasadena, of all places—not far from the house where Wren had lived with Bryce, the house with the jacaranda tree. Aria drove past the old street on her way, a detour she hadn't planned. The tree was still there, bare now in winter, but recognizable. The house had been repainted—a different color, new owners, a different life unfolding inside.

Twenty-four years since Wren had lived there. Twenty-four years since the divorce that had seemed, at the time, like an ending. And here they were, both of them still going, still changing, still becoming whoever they were going to become.

The facility was sleek and modern, nothing like the clinic where Wren's eggs were stored. Glass walls, soft lighting, furniture that looked like it had been designed rather than chosen. A young woman at the reception desk smiled at Aria and offered her water, tea, anything she wanted.

"I have an appointment," Aria said. "For a consultation."

"Of course. Dr. Reyes will be with you shortly."

Aria sat in a chair that was too soft and looked at the brochures on the table. *A New Beginning. Continuity of Care. Your Life, Extended.* The language was careful, aspirational. It promised nothing and implied everything.

Dr. Reyes was a woman about Wren's age—mid-fifties, confident, with the particular warmth of someone trained to put anxious people at ease. She took Aria to an office with a view of the mountains and sat across from her in a chair that was, mercifully, a normal height.

"I understand you're considering upload," Dr. Reyes said. "Can you tell me a little about what's bringing you to this decision?"

Aria thought about all the answers she could give. The data. The probabilities. The fear of falling, of failing, of fading away. The desire to stay.

"My daughter," she said finally. "I want more time with my daughter."

Dr. Reyes nodded as if this were the most natural thing in the world. "That's a common reason. One of the most common, actually." She paused. "How does your daughter feel about your decision?"

"I haven't decided yet. I'm still just—exploring."

"Of course. But have you discussed it with her? Does she know you're here?"

"She knows I've been thinking about it. I told her a few years ago."

"And how did she respond?"

Aria remembered the conversation—Wren's face, the careful words, the question she had asked: *I don't know if there's a good reason at all.* She had never asked what Wren meant by that. She had been afraid, she realized now, of what the answer might be.

"She has reservations," Aria said. "She's Buddhist. She believes in—endings. In letting things end naturally."

"And you don't?"

"I don't know what I believe. I just know I don't want to end yet."

Dr. Reyes smiled, but there was something sad in it. "That's honest. And honesty is important in this process. The upload isn't for everyone. Some people find that they're not ready, even if they thought they were. Others find that it's exactly what they need." She leaned forward slightly. "What we try to do here is help you figure out which category you fall into. No pressure, no sales pitch. Just information and support."

Aria appreciated the speech, even if she suspected it was rehearsed. "What happens next?"

"If you want to proceed, we start with a medical evaluation. Then psychological screening. Then a series of conversations about what you're hoping for and what you're afraid of. The whole process takes about three months, from initial consultation to upload."

"Three months."

"If everything goes smoothly. Sometimes longer."

Aria nodded. Three months. Long enough to be sure. Long enough to change her mind.

"I need to think about it," she said.

"Take all the time you need." Dr. Reyes stood, offered her hand. "It was a pleasure to meet you, Mrs. Chen. Whatever you decide, I hope you find peace with it."

Aria drove home through the winter light, the mountains fading behind her, the city sprawling in all directions. She thought about the facility, the brochures, the soft chairs designed to make death feel like a vacation.

She thought about Wren. About the conversation they would need to have, eventually. About the question she had been avoiding for years: *What do you want? What do you actually want me to do?*

She thought about the eggs, still frozen, still waiting. A possibility she had preserved long past the point of probability. A vigil she had never meant to begin.

To be with you longer. That was what she had told Wren. And it was true, as far as it went. But there was something else underneath, something she hadn't named even to herself. The need to see how the story ended. The inability to let go before she knew.

Was that love? Or was it something else—something needier, something that had more to do with her than with Wren?

She didn't know. She was eighty years old and she still didn't know.

The apartment was dark when she got home. She turned on the lights, made tea, sat at the kitchen table with the brochure she had taken from the facility. *Your Life, Extended.*

She thought about extensions. Contracts renewed, leases prolonged, loans restructured. The language of continuation. The paperwork of staying.

Outside, the night was cold and clear. Aria could see stars through her kitchen window—a rare gift in Los Angeles, where the light pollution usually drowned them out. She watched them for a long time, those distant fires, and thought about what it meant to want more time in a universe that offered no guarantees.

Then she finished her tea and went to bed, the brochure still on the table, the decision still unmade, the future still waiting to be written.

Chapter 09 - Continuation

The medical evaluation took four hours. They scanned her brain in a machine that hummed like a distant highway, then drew blood, tested reflexes, asked her to count backward from one hundred by sevens. They measured her heart's electrical activity and the oxygen levels in her tissues and the speed at which her neurons fired in response to stimuli.

"You're in remarkably good shape for eighty," the technician said, reviewing the results. "The cardiac issues are manageable. No sign of significant cognitive decline."

"What would disqualify me?"

"Advanced dementia. Certain types of brain tumors. Anything that's already damaged the neural architecture we need to map." The technician made a note on her tablet. "You're a good candidate, Mrs. Chen. If you decide to proceed."

If. The word followed her home, sat with her through dinner, kept her company through the long evening. If she decided. As if deciding were the easy part.

The psychological evaluation was harder.

She sat in an office with a therapist named Dr. Okafor—a tall man with kind eyes and a voice that seemed designed to make you tell him things you hadn't planned to tell. He asked about her childhood, her marriage, her career. He asked about Wren. He asked about the eggs.

"You've been paying storage fees for twenty-five years," he said, reading from a file. "Can you tell me about that?"

"I wanted to preserve the option. For my daughter."

"Does your daughter want children?"

"I don't know. She's never been sure."

"And if she decides not to use them? If the eggs are never used?"

Aria felt something tighten in her chest. "Then they're not used."

"How would that feel?"

"I don't know." The honest answer. "I've never let myself think that far."

Dr. Okafor made a note. His pen moved across the paper in a script she couldn't read. "You mentioned that you want to upload to spend more time with your daughter. Is that the only reason?"

"Isn't it enough?"

"It might be. But I want to make sure you've examined all your motivations." He set down his pen. "Some people upload because they're afraid of dying. Some because they have unfinished business. Some because they can't imagine the world continuing without them." He paused. "Which of those resonates with you?"

All of them, Aria thought. None of them. The categories didn't capture what she felt—the formless wanting, the inability to let go.

"I'm not ready to stop existing," she said finally. "I know that's not a sophisticated answer. But it's the truth."

"It's an honest answer. Honesty is more useful than sophistication." Dr. Okafor picked up his pen again. "Let me ask you something else. Have you talked to your daughter about this decision? Really talked?"

"We've discussed it."

"Discussed, or talked?"

Aria didn't answer. The silence stretched between them, filled with everything she hadn't said.

"The upload process is irreversible," Dr. Okafor said gently. "Once you transfer, you can't go back. The body is—" He paused, choosing his words. "The body doesn't survive. You need to be certain. Not just about what you want, but about what it will mean for the people who love you."

"I know."

"Do you? Because in my experience, the people who struggle most after upload are the ones who didn't have those conversations. Who assumed their loved ones would adapt." He leaned forward. "Your daughter is a Buddhist. She believes in natural endings. How will she feel, watching you choose to continue?"

Aria thought about Wren's face when she had first mentioned the upload. The careful words. The question underneath the question: *I don't know if there's a good reason at all.*

"She'll accept it," Aria said. "She might not agree with it, but she'll accept it."

"Are you sure?"

"No. But I'm not sure of anything. I'm just trying to make the best decision I can."

Dr. Okafor nodded slowly. "That's all any of us can do." He closed his file. "I'm going to recommend you for the next phase. But I want you to think about what I said. Have the conversation. A real one. Before you commit."

The conversation happened on a Saturday in March.

Aria invited Wren to her apartment—just Wren, not Jason. She made tea and set out the cookies Wren had liked as a child, a gesture so transparent that Wren raised an eyebrow when she saw them.

"This feels formal," Wren said, settling onto the couch.

"It is, I suppose." Aria sat across from her, in the chair she always sat in, the geometry of their relationship unchanged from a thousand previous visits. "I want to talk to you about the upload."

"I figured."

"I've been through the evaluations. Medical, psychological. They've approved me to proceed."

Wren's face was very still. "Okay."

"I haven't committed yet. I wanted to talk to you first." Aria took a breath. "I wanted to know how you feel about it. Really feel."

For a long moment, Wren didn't say anything. She looked at her tea, at the cookies, at the window where the afternoon light was slanting in. Her expression was the one she wore when she was thinking carefully—the lawyer's face, deliberate and contained.

"I don't know how to answer that," she said finally.

"Try."

"I've been thinking about it since you first mentioned it. Years now. And I still don't—" She shook her head. "I don't know what I'm supposed to feel. What the right feeling is."

"There's no right feeling."

"Isn't there?" Wren looked at her, and there was something in her eyes that Aria couldn't quite read. "You're my mother. You're telling me you're going to destroy your body to become something else. Something that looks like you, talks like you, remembers being you—but isn't you. Not exactly. Not the you I've known my whole life."

"It is me. The research is clear—"

"The research says continuity of consciousness. The research says the pattern is preserved." Wren's voice was calm, but there was an edge underneath. "But the body I hugged as a child, the hands that held me when I was sick—those will be gone. Incinerated or donated or whatever they do. And in their place will be a—" She stopped herself.

"A what?"

"I don't know. A copy. A continuation. A ghost in a machine." Wren set down her tea. "I'm not saying it's wrong. I'm saying I don't know what it is. And I don't know how to feel about it."

Aria felt the words land, one by one, like stones into still water. She had expected resistance—had prepared arguments, counterpoints, the data that showed uploaded minds were legally, philosophically, functionally the same as their biological predecessors. But Wren wasn't arguing. She was just telling the truth.

"I'm scared," Aria said quietly. "Of dying. Of not existing. Of missing whatever comes next."

"I know."

"And I'm scared of leaving you. Of not being here to—" She stopped. To what? To watch? To worry? To pay storage fees for eggs that might never become anything?

"To see how it turns out," Wren said. "That's what you mean, isn't it?"

"Is that so wrong?"

"It's not wrong. It's just—" Wren sighed. "Mom, I'm not a story. My life isn't a plot you need to see resolved. I'm just—living. Day by day. The same as everyone else."

"I know that."

"Do you?"

The question hung between them. Aria thought about all the years she had spent watching Wren—watching her grow, watching her marry, watching her divorce, watching her find Jason and Buddhism and a life that looked nothing like what Aria had imagined. She had always thought of herself as a witness, a guardian, someone who needed to be there. But maybe Wren didn't need a witness. Maybe she just needed a mother who could let go.

"I don't know how to stop caring about what happens to you," Aria said. "I don't know how to just—end. Knowing you're still going. Knowing the eggs are still there. Knowing everything is unfinished."

"Everything is always unfinished. That's the point." Wren's voice was gentle now. "Nothing ever resolves completely. There's no ending that ties everything up. There's just—stopping. Whenever that happens."

"I'm not ready to stop."

"I know." Wren reached across the space between them and took Aria's hand. Her grip was warm, firm. "And I'm not going to tell you what to do. It's your life. Your death. Your decision." She paused. "But I want you to know that I'll miss you. The real you. The you that's sitting here right now, in this body, holding my hand."

"I'll still be me."

"Maybe. I hope so." Wren squeezed her hand and let go. "But I wanted to say it anyway."

They talked for another hour, about smaller things—logistics, timing, what would happen to the apartment. Aria explained the process: the neural mapping, the substrate transfer, the new existence that would begin when the old one ended. Wren listened, asked questions, didn't argue.

At the door, Wren hugged her—a long hug, the kind they rarely exchanged.

"I love you," Wren said. "Whatever you decide."

"I love you too."

"I know."

After Wren left, Aria stood in her apartment and looked at the space that had been her home for so long. The furniture she had chosen, the books she had read, the photographs on the walls. All of it would be gone, eventually. Whether she uploaded or not, this particular arrangement of objects would scatter, dissolve, become part of other lives or no life at all.

But the eggs would remain. Wren's eggs, frozen in their tank, waiting. They would outlast this apartment, this body, this particular configuration of Aria. They would keep waiting, as long as someone kept paying, as long as someone kept watching.

That was the thing she couldn't let go of. Not Wren herself—Wren was an adult, had been an adult for decades, didn't need Aria to survive. But the eggs were different. The eggs were possibility, potential, a future that hadn't declared itself yet. If Aria stopped watching, who would watch? If she stopped caring, who would care?

She sat down at the kitchen table where the brochure from the facility still lay. *Your Life, Extended.* She thought about what Wren had said—*I'll miss you. The real you.*—and wondered if there was a difference. If the uploaded Aria would feel like a continuation or a stranger wearing her memories.

She thought about the eggs. The vigil. The need to know.

She thought about her heart, tired and medicated and running out of beats.

Then she picked up the phone and called the facility.

"I'd like to schedule the next phase," she said. "I've made my decision."

The offer was formal: a contract, thick with legal language, that spelled out exactly what she was agreeing to. The termination of her biological existence. The transfer of her consciousness to a digital substrate. The continuation of her legal personhood, her rights, her obligations. The fees—substantial, but manageable with her savings. The timeline—three months from signing to upload.

She read every page, the way she had read contracts her whole career. She understood the clauses, the contingencies, the exit ramps that existed only in theory because in practice there was no going back.

She signed on a Tuesday morning, in an office with soft lighting and a view of mountains she would never climb again. Dr. Reyes witnessed the signature, her smile warm but professional.

"Welcome to the program," she said. "Do you have any questions?"

Aria had a thousand questions, but none of them were the kind that could be answered by a doctor in an office. They were the kind you carried with you into the dark, hoping the answers would come later.

"No," she said. "I'm ready."

She wasn't ready. No one was ever ready. But she had decided, and that would have to be enough.

She called Wren that evening to tell her it was done.

"How do you feel?" Wren asked.

"Strange. Like I've already left but I'm still here."

"That makes sense, I think."

"Does it?"

"You've made a decision about your own death. That changes everything, doesn't it? Even if the death is still months away."

Aria thought about this. It was true—since signing the contract, she had felt different. Lighter, maybe. Or more distant. As if she were already beginning to detach from the world she was leaving.

"I want to spend time with you," she said. "These last few months. As much as you can spare."

"Of course."

"And I want to tell you something. Something I've never said."

"What?"

Aria closed her eyes. The words had been waiting for years, decades maybe. She hadn't known she was going to say them until she was already saying them.

"I'm proud of you. Not for anything specific—not for your career or your marriage or any of the choices you've made. Just for who you are. For the person you've become." She paused. "I don't think I've ever told you that clearly enough."

Silence on the other end. Then, Wren's voice, thick with something: "Thank you."

"I mean it."

"I know you do. That's why it—" She stopped. "Thank you."

They talked for a few more minutes, then said goodbye. Aria sat in her apartment with the phone in her hand, the contract signed, the decision made, the future rushing toward her like a train she had chosen to board.

Three months. That was what she had left in this body, this life, this particular way of being.

She thought about what she would do with them. Who she would see. What she would say.

And underneath it all, steady as a heartbeat, the knowledge that this was not an ending. It was a transformation. She would continue—differently, strangely, but she would continue.

The eggs would not be alone.

That, in the end, was what mattered. That was what she was buying with her body, her mortality, her human life.

More time. More watching. More waiting.

It wasn't a good reason. But it was her reason, and she had made her peace with it.

Chapter 10 - Goodbyes

The three months passed the way all final things pass: too quickly and too slowly at the same time.

Aria spent them deliberately. She went through her apartment room by room, deciding what to keep, what to give away, what to throw out. Forty years of accumulation, reduced to boxes and bags and donation piles. Books she would never read again. Clothes she would never wear. Photographs she would still be able to access, digitally, but would never again hold in her hands.

She found things she had forgotten: her husband's watch, stopped at 3:47, the battery dead for fifteen years. Wren's baby teeth, saved in a tiny box she didn't remember keeping. A letter from her own mother, written in Chinese characters Aria could barely read anymore, the paper yellowed and soft with age.

She kept the letter. She kept the teeth. The watch she gave to Wren.

"Are you sure?" Wren asked, holding it in her palm. "It was Dad's."

"That's why I want you to have it."

Wren looked at the stopped face, the leather band cracked with age. "It doesn't work."

"I know. But it's something. Something real."

Wren put the watch in her pocket without saying anything else. Later, Aria would learn that she had it repaired, that she wore it sometimes, that she kept wearing it long after Aria had uploaded and could no longer see her wrist.

They had dinner together every week now—Aria, Wren, Jason. The three of them around the small table in the Echo Park house, eating whatever Jason had made, talking about whatever came up. The conversations were lighter than Aria expected. No one mentioned the upload unless Aria brought it up first. It was as if they had all agreed, silently, to pretend that things were normal.

But things were not normal. Aria could feel it in the way Wren looked at her sometimes—a long look, searching, as if trying to memorize something. She could feel it in the way Jason touched her shoulder when he passed behind her chair, a gesture he had never made before. They were saying goodbye in small ways, in the language of bodies, even as their words stayed casual.

One evening in May, after dinner, Jason asked if she wanted to see the hives.

"It's getting dark," Aria said.

"The bees are calm at dusk. It's a good time."

She followed him into the backyard, where the six hives stood in a row against the fence. The air was warm and smelled of honeysuckle from the neighbor's yard. The bees were still active, a few of them drifting in and out of the entrances, but the frantic energy of midday had faded.

"You don't have to wear a suit," Jason said. "Just move slowly. They won't bother you if you don't bother them."

They stood together in the fading light, watching the hives. Aria could hear the hum from inside—a low, steady vibration, like the sound of the earth breathing.

"I wanted to thank you," Jason said. "For accepting me. All those years ago."

"You made Wren happy. That was all I needed."

"It wasn't easy for you. I know that. A beekeeper who used to trade stocks. A Buddhist who doesn't believe in continuing." He smiled, but there was something underneath it. "Not the son-in-law you imagined."

"I didn't imagine any particular son-in-law. I just imagined her happy."

"Is she? Happy?"

Aria looked at him. It was an odd question, coming from him. "You would know better than I would."

"Maybe." He was quiet for a moment. "She doesn't talk about the upload. Not with me. I think it's too big. Too much to process while you're still here."

"What do you think about it? The upload."

"I think it's your choice. I think we all have to find our own way."

"That's not an answer."

"No." Jason turned to face her, his eyes steady in the dusk. "I think it's the opposite of everything I believe. I think consciousness is not something to be preserved but something to be released. I think the clinging to existence is the source of suffering, not the cure for it." He paused. "But I also think I'm not you. And I don't have the right to tell you what to do with your own life."

"Wren feels the same way."

"I know."

"She thinks she's losing me. The real me."

"She might be." Jason's voice was gentle, without judgment. "Or she might be wrong. I don't know. No one knows. That's the hard part—you're making a choice without knowing what you're choosing."

"Everyone does that. Every day."

"True. But most choices can be undone. This one can't."

They stood in silence as the light faded. The bees settled into their hives, the hum growing quieter. Somewhere in the distance, a dog barked. The ordinary sounds of evening, happening as they always happened, indifferent to the enormity of what was coming.

"I'm not afraid," Aria said. "Not of the procedure. Not of what comes after."

"What are you afraid of?"

She thought about it. The honest answer was complicated—layers of fear she hadn't fully examined, like sediment at the bottom of a glass.

"Of being wrong," she said finally. "Of spending eternity watching something that doesn't need to be watched. Of Wren being right—that I should have let go. That this is just another form of holding on."

"It is another form of holding on."

"I know."

"But maybe that's okay." Jason reached out and touched her arm—a brief touch, there and gone. "Maybe some of us are meant to hold on. Maybe that's your nature, and fighting it would be its own kind of suffering."

"That sounds like something Wren would say."

"She's taught me a lot." He smiled. "We teach each other."

The last visit to the clinic happened in early June, two weeks before the upload.

Aria hadn't been back since the day of Wren's procedure, thirty years ago. The building looked different—renovated, expanded, the logo updated to something sleeker. But the parking structure was the same, with its stained concrete and fluorescent lights, and the walk across the street felt like stepping backward through time.

She didn't have an appointment. She just wanted to see.

The waiting room had changed: new furniture, new carpet, screens on the walls cycling through images of happy families. But the receptionist behind the desk could have been the same woman from three decades ago, with the same professional smile, the same carefully neutral voice.

"Can I help you?"

"I'm not here for an appointment. I just—" Aria stopped, unsure how to explain. "My daughter had eggs frozen here. A long time ago. I wanted to see where they're kept."

The receptionist's smile flickered slightly. "I'm afraid the storage facilities aren't open to visitors. Privacy concerns."

"I understand. I just—" She stopped again. What did she want? To see the tank, the liquid nitrogen, the frozen cells that had been waiting for thirty years? To confirm they were real?

"Can you at least tell me they're still there? The eggs. Under the name Wren Chen."

The receptionist typed something into her computer. "I can't give out patient information without authorization. Is your daughter aware you're here?"

"No. I didn't tell her I was coming."

A pause. The receptionist's face softened slightly. "I'm sorry. I wish I could help, but—"

"It's fine. I understand." Aria turned to go, then stopped. "They've been there for thirty years. The storage fees have been paid every year. They're being taken care of, right? Someone is making sure they're okay?"

"Our facility has an excellent track record. We take our responsibility very seriously."

It wasn't an answer, but it was all she was going to get. Aria nodded and walked out through the automatic doors, into the bright June sun, into the parking structure with its oil stains and silence.

She sat in her car for a long time, not driving, just sitting. Thirty years. The eggs had been frozen for thirty years, and in two weeks she would be frozen too—not in liquid nitrogen but in code, in circuits, in whatever substrate they used to preserve a mind. Two kinds of waiting. Two kinds of suspension. Mother and daughter's cells, held in different forms of stasis, waiting for futures that might never arrive.

She started the car and drove home.

The last conversation happened the night before the procedure.

Wren came alone, without Jason. She brought food—takeout from the Vietnamese place in Silver Lake, the one below the sangha. They ate at Aria's kitchen table, the boxes spread between them, the apartment half-empty around them. Most of Aria's things were gone now, donated or stored or thrown away. What remained was essential: a couch, a bed, a table, two chairs. The architecture of a life stripped to its bones.

"How are you feeling?" Wren asked.

"Strange. Like I'm already not here."

"That makes sense."

"Does it?"

"You've been leaving for months. Clearing out, saying goodbye. The procedure tomorrow is just—" Wren searched for the word. "A formality."

"That's one way to look at it."

"It's how I'm trying to look at it." Wren set down her chopsticks. "Can I tell you something?"

"Of course."

"I've been meditating on this. Every day since you signed the contract. Sitting with it. Trying to find peace."

"Have you found it?"

"No." Wren's voice was steady, but Aria could hear the effort underneath. "I keep coming back to the same thing. The same resistance. I don't want you to do this, Mom. I know it's your choice. I know I don't have the right to stop you. But I don't want it."

Aria felt the words settle into her, heavy and true. "I know."

"Do you? Because I've been so careful not to say it. So careful to be supportive, to respect your autonomy, to say all the right things. But underneath—" Wren shook her head. "I'm losing you tomorrow. Whatever comes after, it won't be you. Not the you I know."

"You said that before. That you'd miss the real me."

"I will. I already do." Wren's eyes were wet now, but she didn't look away. "The real you is sitting across from me right now, in this body, in this kitchen, eating bad takeout. The real you held me when I was sick and drove me to school and called me every week even when I didn't call back. The real you is mortal. The real you is going to die tomorrow, and something else is going to wake up in your place."

"Something that remembers being me. Something that loves you."

"Maybe. I hope so." Wren wiped her eyes with the back of her hand. "But I won't know. Not really. I'll spend the rest of my life talking to something that looks like my mother and sounds like my mother and thinks it is my mother. And I'll never know if it's true."

Aria reached across the table and took Wren's hand. Her daughter's fingers were warm, alive, trembling slightly.

"I'm sorry," Aria said. "I'm sorry this hurts you."

"I know."

"I wish I could—" She stopped. Could what? Change her mind? Let go? Accept the ending that Wren believed in, the natural stopping that was supposed to give life meaning?

"I know," Wren said again. "It's okay. You are who you are. I wouldn't want you to be someone else."

They sat like that for a while, hands clasped across the table, the food growing cold between them. Outside, the night was quiet. Tomorrow was coming, whether they were ready or not.

"Tell me something," Wren said finally. "Tell me something I don't know. Something true."

Aria thought about it. All the things she had never said, all the secrets she had kept, all the small truths and large fears that had accumulated over eighty years.

"Your father wanted more children," she said. "After you were born. He wanted a big family—three, four kids. I was the one who said no."

"Why?"

"Because you were enough. Because I couldn't imagine loving anyone the way I loved you. Because I was afraid—of dividing myself, of not having enough for everyone." Aria squeezed Wren's hand. "He

never forgave me, I think. Not completely. We never talked about it, but it was there, underneath. A door that stayed closed."

"I never knew that."

"There's a lot you never knew. A lot I never told you." Aria smiled, though it hurt. "Maybe that's what the next few decades are for. The uploaded me, telling you all the things the mortal me never said."

"Maybe." Wren squeezed back. "Or maybe some things are better left unsaid."

"Is that what you believe?"

Wren didn't answer. She just held Aria's hand, her grip firm and warm, her eyes wet but steady. The silence stretched between them, full of everything they couldn't say.

At the door, they hugged. A long hug, longer than any they had shared before. Aria memorized the feel of it—Wren's arms around her, the smell of her shampoo, the way her breath caught once and then steadied. This body, holding this body. The last time.

"I love you," Aria said.

"I love you too."

"I'll see you. Afterward."

"I know." Wren pulled back, held Aria at arm's length, looked at her face. "I'll be there. Tomorrow. At the facility."

"You don't have to—"

"I want to. I want to be there when you—" She couldn't finish the sentence. "I want to be there."

"Okay."

"Okay."

Wren walked to her car, got in, drove away. Aria watched the taillights disappear around the corner, the same corner they had disappeared around a thousand times before. But this time was different. This time was the last time she would watch with these eyes.

She went back inside and closed the door. The apartment was quiet, emptier than it had ever been. Tomorrow she would leave this place, this body, this particular way of being alive. Tomorrow everything would change.

But tonight, she was still here. Still mortal. Still Aria Chen, eighty years old, heart beating, lungs breathing, hands that could hold and feel and touch.

She stood in her kitchen and looked at the table where she had shared so many meals, the window where she had watched so many sunsets, the walls that had held her life for so long. She tried to feel something—grief, fear, anticipation—but what she felt was only stillness. A calm that came from having decided. From knowing what came next, even if she didn't know what it would mean.

The eggs were still frozen. Wren was still alive. The story was still unfinished.

Tomorrow, she would continue it in a different form. Tomorrow, the watching would go on.

She turned off the lights and went to bed, and slept, and dreamed of nothing she would remember.

Chapter 11 - Preparation

The building was designed to not look like what it was.

Glass and steel, yes, but softened with gardens, with water features, with the kind of careful landscaping that said *wellness center* rather than *place where people come to die*. The entrance had no signage beyond a small plaque: *Continuance Institute of Southern California*. Inside, the lobby could have been a high-end hotel—marble floors, ambient lighting, a reception desk made of pale wood that curved like a wave.

Aria arrived at 7 a.m., as instructed. She carried nothing. The instructions had been clear: no personal belongings, no electronics, no jewelry. The upload process required a clean baseline. Anything she wanted to keep would be digitized afterward—photographs, documents, the contents of her life converted to data she could access from the other side.

Wren and Jason were already there, sitting on a couch in the waiting area. They stood when they saw her, and for a moment the three of them just looked at each other, caught in the strangeness of the morning.

"You came," Aria said.

"We said we would." Wren's voice was steady, but her face was pale. She had not slept well; Aria could see it in the shadows under her eyes.

"How are you feeling?" Jason asked.

"Fine." The word meant nothing, but it was easier than the truth. "A little nervous. Mostly ready."

A woman in soft gray scrubs appeared from a side door. "Mrs. Chen? We're ready for you. Your family can come back for the preparation phase, if you'd like."

Aria looked at Wren. "Would you?"

"Yes."

The preparation room was smaller than Aria expected, and warmer. A bed in the center, raised slightly, with sensors embedded in the mattress. Monitors along one wall, dark for now. A window that looked out onto a garden, where morning light was beginning to filter through the trees.

"You can sit anywhere," the woman in scrubs said. Her name tag read *Elena*. "We'll start with some paperwork, then move to the physical preparation. The whole process takes about two hours before the actual transfer."

Paperwork. Even at the threshold of death, there was paperwork.

Aria sat on the edge of the bed while Elena brought her a tablet with forms to review. Consent forms, liability waivers, declarations of intent. She had seen most of them before, during the contract phase, but the law required her to confirm again. To prove she understood what she was agreeing to.

I, Aria Chen, hereby consent to the termination of my biological existence…

I understand that the upload process is irreversible…

I acknowledge that the resulting digital consciousness will be recognized as a continuation of my legal personhood…

She signed each one with her finger on the screen, her signature shakier than usual. Wren sat in a chair by the window, watching. Jason stood beside her, his hand on her shoulder.

"Is there anything you'd like to ask?" Elena said, when the forms were complete. "Any concerns we can address?"

Aria thought about it. She had asked her questions months ago, during the consultations and evaluations. She had read the research, studied the statistics, understood the process as well as anyone outside the field could understand it. But understanding and believing were different things.

"What does it feel like?" she asked. "The transfer. Is there pain?"

"No pain. We'll administer a sedative that puts you into a deep sleep. The neural mapping happens while you're unconscious. Most people report that it feels like closing your eyes one moment and opening them the next—except when you open them, you're in the new substrate."

"And the old body?"

"The extraction process is comprehensive. The brain tissue is disassembled at the cellular level to ensure accurate mapping." Elena's voice was gentle, practiced. "There's no awareness, no sensation. It's very peaceful."

Disassembled at the cellular level. The clinical language for destruction. Aria felt Wren shift in her chair but didn't look at her.

"What happens to the body afterward?"

"That's up to you. Some families choose cremation. Others prefer donation to research. You indicated cremation on your forms."

"Yes."

"We'll handle all the arrangements. Your daughter will receive the ashes within two weeks."

Wren made a small sound—not quite a word, not quite a sob. Jason's hand tightened on her shoulder.

"Can we have a moment?" Aria asked. "Before we continue?"

"Of course. Take all the time you need."

Elena left, closing the door softly behind her. The room was quiet except for the hum of machinery somewhere behind the walls, the sound of systems waiting to be activated.

Aria looked at her daughter. Wren's face was composed, but her eyes were wet, and her hands were clasped tightly in her lap.

"You don't have to stay," Aria said. "If this is too hard."

"I want to stay."

"It's going to get harder."

"I know." Wren unclenched her hands, pressed them flat against her thighs. "I want to be here until—until the end. Whatever that means."

"It means I close my eyes. That's all you'll see."

"I know." Wren's voice cracked slightly. "But I want to see it. I want to be the last thing you see. Before."

Aria felt something break open in her chest—not grief, exactly, but something older and deeper. The love that had defined her life, the love she was uploading to preserve, sitting across from her in a gray chair, trying not to cry.

"Come here," she said.

Wren crossed the room and sat beside her on the bed. Aria put her arm around her daughter's shoulders, feeling the warmth of her, the solid reality of her body.

"I'm sorry this is hard for you," Aria said.

"Don't apologize."

"I'm not apologizing for my choice. I'm apologizing for your pain."

Wren leaned into her, the way she had when she was small. "I'm trying to accept it. I've been sitting with it for months. Trying to let go."

"Have you?"

"No." Wren laughed, a wet sound. "I thought I was better at this. All those years of practice, all that talk about impermanence. And here I am, clinging like anyone else."

"You're human."

"So are you. For another few hours, anyway."

They sat like that for a while, mother and daughter, the morning light shifting through the window. Jason remained by the wall, giving them space, his presence a steady anchor.

"Can I ask you something?" Wren said.

"Anything."

"If you could go back—to the beginning, when you first heard about uploading—would you make the same choice?"

Aria thought about it. The years of research. The evaluations. The conversations. The slow, deliberate process of deciding to end one form of life and begin another.

"Yes," she said. "I would."

"Why?"

"Because the alternative is worse. Not existing. Not knowing. Leaving you to—" She stopped.

"To what?"

"To grieve alone. To grow old without me. To face whatever comes without someone watching."

Wren pulled back slightly, looked at her. "You think I need to be watched?"

"No. I think I need to watch. It's different."

"Is it?"

"Yes." Aria touched her daughter's face, the same face she had memorized a thousand times, in a thousand different lights. "You'll be fine without me. I know that. You have Jason, you have your practice, you have a life that doesn't depend on me. But I—" She shook her head. "I don't know how to be without you. I never learned."

"You could learn now."

"I could. But I don't want to. That's the truth. I don't want to learn to live without caring what happens to you. I don't want to let go."

Wren's eyes were bright with tears. "That's attachment."

"I know."

"That's exactly what I'm supposed to release."

"I know." Aria smiled, though it hurt. "We're both holding on. Just in different ways."

Something shifted in Wren's face—a recognition, maybe, or the beginning of one. She didn't say anything, but her hand found Aria's and held it tight.

The physical preparation took an hour.

They shaved Aria's head—the neural mapping required direct contact with the scalp—and fitted her with a cap of sensors, each one a tiny point of cold against her skin. They inserted an IV line, started fluids, attached monitors to her chest and wrists. The room filled with the soft beep of machines tracking her heartbeat, her breathing, the electrical activity of her brain.

Wren stayed through all of it, sitting in her chair by the window, watching. Jason stood beside her, his hand on her shoulder, his face calm but his eyes troubled. They didn't speak. There was nothing left to say.

Dr. Reyes arrived at nine, wearing scrubs and a calm smile. "Good morning, Aria. How are you feeling?"

"Ready."

"Good." She checked the monitors, consulted with Elena, made notes on a tablet. "Everything looks optimal. We'll begin the sedation in about fifteen minutes. Before we do, is there anything you want to say? Anything you want to do?"

Aria looked at Wren. At Jason. At the room that would be the last room her body ever occupied.

"Can they stay? Until I'm asleep?"

"Of course. They can stay as long as they want."

"And afterward—when I wake up—will I be able to contact them right away?"

"The new substrate will need some time to stabilize. Usually a few hours. But yes, you'll be able to reach out as soon as you're ready."

A few hours. A gap between one existence and the next, like the space between heartbeats. Aria nodded.

"I'm ready," she said again. And this time she almost believed it.

The sedation began at 9:17 a.m.

Elena administered the first dose through the IV line—a gentle push of warmth that spread through Aria's arm and into her chest. The room softened slightly, the edges blurring, the sounds growing distant.

Wren moved to the bedside, took Aria's hand. Her grip was warm and firm, an anchor in the dissolving world.

"I love you," Wren said. "Whatever comes next—I love you."

"I love you too." The words came slowly, thick in Aria's mouth. "I'll see you soon."

"I know."

"Take care of Jason. And yourself. And—" The thought scattered before she could complete it. The eggs. The waiting. The vigil that would continue.

"I will." Wren's face was wet, but her voice was steady. "I promise."

Jason appeared at the edge of Aria's vision, his hand raised in a small wave. "Safe travels," he said. "We'll be here."

The second dose entered her bloodstream. The room tilted, swam, began to fade. Aria felt her body growing heavy, her thoughts slowing to a crawl. She looked at Wren—at the face she had loved for sixty years, the person she was dying to stay with—and tried to hold the image in her mind.

Brown eyes. Her father's nose. The small scar on her chin from a fall when she was seven.

The details slipped away, one by one, like sand through open fingers.

The last thing she saw was Wren's hand in hers. The last thing she felt was the warmth of that grip, holding on.

Then the sedation took her, and Aria Chen closed her eyes for the last time in the body that had carried her for eighty years.

The machines hummed. The monitors beeped. And somewhere in the building, the process of transformation began.

Chapter 12 - The Procedure

There was no tunnel. No light. No parade of memories, no sense of floating above herself, none of the things people claimed to experience at the threshold. There was only the sedation pulling her down, and then nothing, and then—

Awareness.

Not waking, exactly. Waking implied sleep, implied a body that had rested and was now stirring. This was different. This was consciousness arriving without a container, like water poured into air.

She was aware of being aware. She was aware of the awareness being strange.

There was no pain. No sensation at all, in fact—no weight, no temperature, no pressure of mattress or sheets. She tried to move her hand and found that she didn't have a hand. She tried to open her eyes and found that she didn't have eyes.

But she could see. Or something like seeing. Information arriving from somewhere, assembling itself into coherence. A room. White walls. A window with light coming through. The image was sharp, hyperreal, every detail precise in a way her old eyes had never managed.

Mrs. Chen?

The voice came from everywhere and nowhere. Not through ears—she didn't have ears—but directly into her awareness, like a thought that wasn't hers.

Mrs. Chen, can you hear me?

She tried to speak. Nothing happened. There was no mouth, no throat, no breath to push through vocal cords.

Don't try to speak yet. Just focus on the question. If you can understand me, think yes.

Yes.

Excellent. You're doing wonderfully. The transfer was successful. You're in the stabilization environment now. We're going to give you a few minutes to orient yourself, and then we'll begin the calibration process.

She thought about what she had just done—thought *yes*, and someone had heard it. Communication without speech. Intention without body.

The disorientation was profound, but underneath it, something else: relief. She was still here. Still thinking, still aware, still Aria. The continuity she had been promised was real. She had closed her eyes in one world and opened them—metaphorically—in another, and she was still herself.

Or she thought she was. How would she know if she wasn't?

Mrs. Chen, I'm going to show you some images. I'd like you to identify them if you can. Just think the answer.

An image appeared in her field of vision—not in front of her, because there was no front, but somehow present, available, like a memory surfacing. A red apple.

Apple.

Good. And this one?

A dog, brown and white, sitting on grass.

Dog.

And this?

A face. Wren's face. Younger than she had been yesterday—this was a photograph from years ago, maybe decades. But unmistakably Wren.

Something moved in Aria, something that felt like emotion but had no physical correlate. No tightening of the chest, no prick of tears. Just the feeling itself, raw and unmediated.

My daughter. Wren.

Very good. Your recognition patterns are intact. Memory consolidation looks excellent. The voice was warm with professional approval. *We're going to move to the next phase now. This is where you'll choose your initial presentation—how you want to appear when interacting with others.*

Presentation?

Your avatar. Your visual form. It can be anything you want—we can model your appearance at any age, or create something entirely new. Most people choose a version of themselves, but there's no requirement.

A menu appeared in her awareness—not a screen, not a list, but a set of possibilities arranged like branches, each one leading to further options. She could be herself at eighty, as she had been yesterday. Or at seventy, at sixty, at fifty.

She scrolled backward through the ages, watching her own face smooth and sharpen, watching the years peel away. It was strange to see herself like this, a timeline of faces that had all been hers and now existed only as data, as options.

She stopped at twenty-five.

The face in the image was hers but not hers—a young woman she had been for a single year and hadn't thought about in decades. Smooth skin. Dark hair without gray. Eyes that didn't need glasses. A body that had never ached, never failed, never betrayed her.

It felt like a lie. But it also felt like freedom.

Is this what you'd like?

She thought about Wren. About how Wren would feel, seeing her mother in this form—young enough to be her daughter, frozen at an age Wren had already passed. It would be strange. Maybe painful.

But Aria was tired of the old body. Tired of the aches and the failures and the slow betrayal of flesh. She had earned this, hadn't she? She had given up everything physical. Why not choose a form that felt like possibility instead of decline?

Yes. This one.

Excellent. We'll finalize the avatar and begin environmental integration. This will take a few hours. In the meantime, I'd like to introduce you to your interface.

The world shifted. The white room was gone, replaced by something else—a space that felt both vast and intimate, like standing in the center of a cathedral that was also the size of a closet. She could feel the edges of it, the boundaries of the environment she now inhabited. It was hers. A room in the cloud, a home in the machine.

This is your personal space. You can customize it however you like—we'll show you how in the orientation sessions. For now, I want you to practice basic movement.

Movement. Without a body.

Think about where you want to be, and you'll be there.

She thought about the window—the window she had seen in the first image, with light coming through. And suddenly she was there, or the perception of there, looking out at a garden that might or might not exist.

Good. Now think about turning around.

She turned. The room pivoted around her, or she pivoted within it—the distinction was unclear. But she was facing a different direction now, looking at a wall that had a door in it.

Excellent. You're adapting quickly. Most people take much longer to master spatial navigation.

Actuarial thinking, Aria realized. Even without a body, she was calculating, optimizing, figuring out the rules of a new system. The skills translated.

Can I contact my daughter?

Not yet. We need to complete the stabilization process first—a few more hours. But she's been notified that the transfer was successful. She's waiting for you.

Waiting. Wren was waiting. And soon—hours, not days—Aria would see her again. Speak to her again. In a new form, from a new place, but still herself. Still present.

The relief was overwhelming. She had made it through.

The orientation took three days.

Three days of learning how to exist without a body. How to navigate digital spaces, how to communicate through interfaces, how to manage the endless stream of information available to an uploaded mind. She learned to filter, to focus, to create boundaries between herself and the infinite.

She learned about the substrate—the physical hardware that housed her consciousness, spread across multiple data centers for redundancy. She learned about backups, about maintenance schedules, about the hosting fees that would keep her running for as long as she paid them.

She learned about other uploads—millions of them, a parallel population living in the cloud. She could interact with them if she chose, join communities, build relationships. The digital world was social, thriving, full of minds that had made the same choice she had.

But Aria wasn't interested in other uploads. She had come here for one reason, and it wasn't to build a new social life.

On the third day, they told her she was ready.

The first video call was strange.

Aria's avatar appeared on Wren's screen—a young woman with dark hair and smooth skin, wearing clothes Aria had chosen from a catalog of options. She had tried to pick something neutral, something that wouldn't emphasize the age difference. But seeing herself in the preview window, she knew it wouldn't matter. The difference was obvious. Undeniable.

Wren's face appeared on the other side of the call. Sixty years old now, lined and real, her hair streaked with gray. She looked tired. She looked like she had been crying.

"Mom?"

The word came through clearly, without distortion. Aria could hear the catch in Wren's voice, the uncertainty.

"It's me," Aria said. Her voice sounded different too—younger, smoother, matching the avatar. "I'm here."

Wren stared at the screen. Her expression was complicated—relief and grief and something else, something that might have been revulsion or might have been fear.

"You look—"

"I know. I'm sorry. I can change it, if you want. I can look older."

"No. It's—" Wren shook her head. "It's fine. It's just strange."

"I know."

They looked at each other across the digital divide. Mother and daughter, one of them embodied and aging, the other frozen in code, wearing the face of a stranger who was also herself.

"How do you feel?" Wren asked.

"Different. But still me." Aria smiled—the avatar smiled, the expression mapped from her intentions to the digital face. "I remember everything. I remember you. I remember yesterday, sitting on the bed, holding your hand."

"Do you remember—" Wren stopped.

"Remember what?"

"Falling asleep. The sedation. Do you remember how it felt?"

"I remember the warmth. I remember your face. And then—nothing. And then waking up here." Aria paused. "It wasn't bad. It wasn't anything. Just a gap, and then continuation."

Wren nodded slowly. Her eyes were wet. "I stayed. After. They let me stay in the room while they—" She couldn't finish.

"While they processed the body."

"Yes."

"You didn't have to do that."

"I wanted to." Wren's voice was thick. "I wanted to be there until the end. The real end."

The words landed like a blow, soft but precise. The real end. Meaning the body. Meaning the physical death that had happened while Aria's consciousness was being copied, extracted, transferred.

"This is real too," Aria said gently. "I'm really here. I'm really talking to you."

"I know." Wren wiped her eyes. "I know. I'm sorry. I'm not trying to—I just need time. To adjust."

"We have time. We have all the time in the world."

Wren laughed—a broken sound, half sob. "That's the problem, isn't it? You have all the time. And I—"

She didn't finish the sentence. She didn't have to.

They talked for an hour, that first call. About nothing and everything—the facility, the process, what Aria's new existence felt like. They didn't talk about the eggs, or the future, or what it would mean for Aria to watch Wren grow old while her avatar stayed frozen at twenty-five.

There would be time for those conversations. That was the promise and the curse of what Aria had chosen: time. Endless time, stretching out ahead of her like a road with no visible end.

At the end of the call, Wren said, "I love you. I want you to know that. Whatever I said before—I love you."

"I know. I love you too."

"I'll call you tomorrow."

"I'll be here."

The screen went dark. Aria was alone in her digital space, in the environment she was still learning to think of as home.

She thought about what Wren had said: *the real end*. She thought about the body that had been disassembled, the cells that had been parsed and discarded. Her body, the one she had lived in for eighty years, gone now. Ashes in a box somewhere, waiting to be delivered.

Did she miss it? She searched herself for grief, for loss. What she found was stranger: a sense of relief, tinged with guilt. The body had been failing. The body had been a burden. Now she was free of it, and the freedom felt illicit, like something she should apologize for.

But there was no one to apologize to. The body was gone. Only the pattern remained—the memories, the personality, the wanting that had driven her here.

She thought about the eggs. Wren's eggs, frozen in their tank, waiting. She could access the clinic's website now, could check the status of the storage account, could monitor the fees and the renewal dates. She had the tools she needed to keep watch.

And she had time. More time than she had ever imagined having.

She navigated to the clinic's patient portal and logged in with Wren's credentials—credentials Wren had shared years ago, when Aria was still paying the fees. The account was still active. Fourteen oocytes, frozen since 2090. Status: stable. Next renewal: February.

The information glowed in her awareness, solid and reassuring. The eggs were there. The vigil could continue.

Aria closed the portal and sat in her digital space, watching the light from the simulated window move across the simulated floor. She thought about Wren, aging in the real world. She thought about Jason, tending his bees. She thought about the body that had been hers, now ash, now nothing.

She was something else now. Something new.

The watching had begun.

Part 2 - Uploaded Aria

Chapter 13 - Accessing

The dashboard became my window.

I don't know how else to describe it. In the body, I had looked out at the world through eyes, through glass, through the frames of doorways and the edges of rooms. Now I looked through interfaces. Screens within screens, portals to data that existed somewhere I couldn't touch.

The clinic's patient portal was the first thing I learned to navigate. Not the public website—I had seen that before, when I was still flesh, still clicking with fingers on a keyboard. This was different. This was access from the inside, the way an uploaded mind could slip through systems like water through pipes.

Wren's account. Fourteen oocytes. Stored since 2090. Current status: viable. Next renewal: February 2121.

I read the numbers and felt something that wasn't quite emotion—or was emotion, but stripped of its physical signature. No tightening chest, no pricking eyes. Just the feeling itself, floating in the space where my body used to be.

Thirty years. The eggs had been frozen for thirty years, and I had been watching them for all of that time, but only now could I truly *see* them. Not the eggs themselves—they were cells in a tank in a building in West Los Angeles, and I would never see them with eyes again. But the data. The record of their existence. The proof that they were still there.

I checked the account fourteen times that first day. I couldn't help it. The interface was always available, the information always accessible, and the compulsion to look was stronger than any discipline I had ever learned.

Viable. Viable. Viable.

The word became a heartbeat. A pulse I could feel even without a heart.

The first weeks were strange.

I had expected disorientation, and there was disorientation. But it wasn't the kind I had imagined—not confusion about who I was or what had happened. I knew exactly who I was. I remembered everything: every conversation, every decision, every moment leading up to the sedation and the transfer. The continuity was seamless, just as they had promised.

What I hadn't expected was the *absence*. Not of memory, but of weight. Of resistance. Of the thousand small frictions that had defined embodied life.

I didn't get tired. I didn't get hungry. I didn't need to sleep, though I could enter a dormant state if I chose. I didn't feel the pull of gravity or the press of air. I existed in a space that had no temperature, no texture, no smell.

At first, this felt like freedom. The body had been failing, after all. The body had been pain and limitation and the slow betrayal of cells. To be free of it was a gift.

But as the days passed—and I knew they were days only because I tracked them, because the interfaces told me so—the absence began to feel like something else. A hollowness. A lack that I couldn't name.

I found myself missing the strangest things. The weight of a blanket. The sound of my own breathing. The way morning light looked different from afternoon light, the way evening had a particular quality of settling. In my digital space, I could simulate any environment I wanted—a beach, a forest, a room that looked exactly like my old apartment. But it was always the same. Always perfect. Always *exactly* what I asked for, which meant it was never surprising, never real.

I stopped simulating environments after the first month. The pretense was worse than the blankness.

Wren called every few days.

The calls were the anchor. The proof that the outside world still existed, that time was passing, that I was still connected to something beyond the dashboard and the data.

She appeared on my screen—or in my awareness, the distinction was unclear—looking tired, looking her age, looking at me with an expression I was still learning to read. The young face of my avatar unsettled her. I could see it in the way her eyes moved, the way she sometimes paused before speaking, as if reminding herself who she was talking to.

"How are you feeling?" she asked, in the second week.

"I don't know how to answer that," I said. "I feel… present. Aware. But 'feeling' is different now. There's no body to feel with."

"Do you miss it? The body?"

"Sometimes. Not the pain. Not the limitation. But the… texture. The way things felt." I paused. "I miss hugging you."

Wren's face did something complicated. "I miss that too."

"We could meet in a virtual space. I could have a form there, something you could—"

"No." The word came quickly, almost sharp. Then, softer: "I'm sorry. I just… I'm not ready for that. It would feel too much like pretending."

"I understand."

I didn't understand. But I was learning that understanding wasn't required. Wren was grieving something—the body that had hugged her, the hands that had held her—and my continued existence didn't undo that grief. In some ways, it made it worse. I was here, but I wasn't here. I was her mother, but I was also something else. A ghost in a machine, as she had called me. A continuation that was also a rupture.

I didn't push. I had time. We both did—though her time was finite in a way mine no longer was.

That thought came to me often, in those early weeks. The asymmetry of it. Wren would age, would weaken, would eventually die. And I would watch. I would still be here, checking the dashboard, tracking the eggs, waiting for something that might never happen.

The freedom of the upload had a shadow, and the shadow was this: everyone I loved would leave me. Not because they wanted to, not because they didn't love me back, but simply because they were mortal and I was not.

I had chosen this. I had signed the contract, accepted the terms, understood the implications. But understanding something intellectually was different from living it. And I was only beginning to live it.

The hosting fees came due in the third month.

This was the part they didn't emphasize in the brochures—the mundane reality of digital existence. I wasn't floating in some ethereal cloud, maintained by benevolent forces. I was running on servers, consuming resources, taking up space that cost money to maintain.

The invoice arrived in my inbox: *Continuance Institute of Southern California. Monthly hosting fee: $450. Payment due: March 1, 2121.*

Four hundred and fifty dollars a month. Not much, in the context of my savings. I had planned for this, had set aside funds, had calculated how long I could sustain myself before running out. The math was reassuring: decades, at least. Probably longer, if I was careful.

But the math didn't capture the strangeness of paying rent on your own existence. Of knowing that if the payments stopped, so would you. The uploaded mind was not a soul, not an essence that would persist regardless. It was a pattern running on hardware, and the hardware required maintenance, and maintenance required money.

I set up automatic payments and tried not to think about it too much.

The eggs had their own fees, of course.

$1,200 a year, paid from Wren's account. The renewal notice would come in February, just as it always had. Wren would pay it, or she would decide not to pay it, and I would have no control over the outcome either way.

This was the hardest part of the new existence: the impotence. I could watch. I could access information. I could send emails and file forms and navigate systems with a precision I had never managed in the body. But I could not *act*. I could not walk into the clinic and demand to see the eggs. I could not pick them up and move them to a safer place. I could not make Wren want children, or make a stranger appear who wanted to use what she had stored.

I was a watcher. That was all I had ever been, really—watching Wren grow, watching her make choices, watching from the outside as her life unfolded in directions I hadn't anticipated. The upload hadn't changed that. It had only made the watching more explicit, more total, more eternal.

I opened the dashboard again. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable. Tank temperature: -196°C. Last inspection: January 15, 2121.

The numbers were the same as they had been an hour ago. The numbers would be the same tomorrow, and next week, and next year. The eggs did not change. They were frozen in time, in the most literal sense possible.

I was frozen too, in my own way. My mind would not degrade, would not age, would not forget. I would remember this moment—this first checking of the dashboard, this first month of digital existence—for as long as I continued to exist. Centuries, maybe. Millennia, if the infrastructure held.

The thought should have been comforting. It wasn't. It was vertiginous, dizzying, like standing at the edge of a cliff that had no bottom.

I closed the dashboard. I opened it again. I closed it.

The compulsion was new. Or maybe it wasn't new—maybe it was just the old compulsion, the need to know, the inability to let go, translated into a new medium. In the body, I had picked up my phone too often, checked my email too frequently, refreshed pages that hadn't changed. Now I did the same thing, but without the friction of fingers and screens. The thought was the action. The wanting was the doing.

I would have to learn discipline. I would have to learn to exist without constantly checking, constantly watching, constantly reassuring myself that the eggs were still there.

But not yet. Not today.

Today, I checked the dashboard again, and the numbers were the same, and the eggs were still frozen, and I was still here.

Still watching.

Still waiting.

Jason called at the end of the first month.

His face appeared on my screen—older than I remembered, though it had only been weeks. Or maybe I was just seeing him differently now, without the softening filter of embodied perception.

"Aria," he said. "How are you adjusting?"

"Slowly. It's strange."

"I imagine it would be." He paused. "Wren is worried about you."

"I know. I can see it in her face when we talk."

"She doesn't say it directly. She never says things directly if she can help it." A small smile. "But she talks about you constantly. How you seem, what you said, whether you're okay."

"Am I okay?"

"I don't know. Are you?"

I thought about the question. In the body, I would have felt it in my chest, in my stomach, in the tension of my shoulders. Now I just thought about it, the question floating in the space where sensation used to be.

"I don't know," I said. "I think I'm still figuring out what 'okay' means, in this form."

Jason nodded. "That seems right. You're learning a new way of being. That takes time."

"How much time?"

"As much as it takes." He looked at me with those steady eyes, the eyes that had always seemed to see more than he said. "You have time now, Aria. More than you know what to do with. The question isn't whether you'll adjust. The question is what you'll become, as you do."

"What do you mean?"

"I mean that you're not finished. None of us are, until we're dead. And you're not dead—not in the way that matters. You're still becoming." He paused. "The question is what you're becoming toward."

I thought about the dashboard. The eggs. The numbers that I checked compulsively, as if watching them could change anything.

"I'm becoming a watcher," I said. "That's what I was before. That's what I am now."

"Is that enough?"

"It has to be. It's what I chose."

Jason didn't argue. He just looked at me with that expression of his—patient, accepting, seeing—and I felt the weight of his gaze even without a body to feel it with.

"The eggs are still there," I said. "I check every day. Every hour, sometimes. They're still viable. They're still waiting."

"Waiting for what?"

"I don't know. A future. A possibility."

"Whose future?"

The question landed like a stone in still water. Whose future was I waiting for? Wren's, who might never decide to use them? A stranger's, who might someday need what Wren had stored? Or my own—a future that was no longer measured in years but in the endless unfolding of digital time?

"I don't know," I said again. It was becoming my answer for everything. The honest answer, the only answer I could give.

"That's okay," Jason said. "You don't have to know yet. You just have to keep asking."

The call ended. I was alone again, in my space, with my dashboard, with my compulsions.

I opened the account. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

The watching continued.

Chapter 14 - Years Awake

The first year passed.

I know this because I tracked it—because tracking was what I did now, what I had always done, the habit of a lifetime translated into a new medium. Every day I logged the date, noted the status of the eggs, recorded any changes in the clinic's systems or policies. There were never changes. The eggs remained viable. The clinic remained operational. The numbers held steady.

But I tracked anyway. The tracking was the point. The tracking was what kept me tethered to time when time had lost its texture.

In the body, a year had felt like something. Seasons shifting. Holidays arriving and departing. The slow accumulation of small events—a birthday, a cold, a trip to the grocery store—that gave shape to the passage of days. Now a year felt like a single sustained note, unchanging, without rhythm or variation.

I stayed awake through all of it. That was my choice, in those early years. Dormancy was available—a kind of sleep without dreams, a pause in consciousness that could last as long as I wanted—but I couldn't bring myself to use it. What if something happened while I was under? What if the clinic sent an alert, or the fees came due, or some crisis emerged that required my attention?

So I stayed awake, and I watched, and nothing happened.

The second year. The third.

Wren turned sixty-two, then sixty-three. I watched her age through our video calls—the new lines around her eyes, the gray spreading through her hair, the slight slowing of her movements. She was still healthy, still working, still living the life she had built with Jason. But the direction was clear. The trajectory was unmistakable.

I had seen aging before, of course. I had aged myself, had felt my body slow and fail. But watching it from outside was different. Watching from a face that never changed, an avatar frozen at twenty-five, was different.

"You could change it," Wren said once, when she caught me staring at the contrast between us. "The avatar. You could make yourself look older."

"Would that help?"

"I don't know. Maybe."

I thought about it. I could age the avatar, simulate the passage of time, pretend that I was changing alongside her. But it would be a performance. A lie. And Wren had always been able to see through my performances.

"I'll think about it," I said.

I didn't change the avatar. I don't know why. Maybe because the youth was the one advantage this existence offered—the freedom from decay, from pain, from the slow betrayal I had escaped. Or maybe because changing would have felt like admitting something I wasn't ready to admit.

The avatar stayed young. Wren kept aging. The distance between us grew, measured not in miles but in years.

The calls settled into a rhythm. Once a week, sometimes twice. Never the daily contact of those first months—Wren had a life to live, and I had… whatever this was. Watching. Waiting. The long maintenance of existence.

We talked about her work, about Jason, about the news. We didn't talk about the eggs. That subject had closed years ago, folded into the silence between us like a letter that had been read and filed away. The eggs were there. I was watching them. Nothing more needed to be said.

But I thought about them constantly. In the gaps between calls, in the long hours of digital existence, my attention returned again and again to the dashboard. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable. Temperature: stable. Inspection schedule: annual.

The numbers became a mantra. A prayer, maybe, though I had never been religious and didn't believe in anything that could hear prayers. But the repetition soothed something in me—the anxious part, the part that needed to know, the part that had uploaded specifically to keep watching.

Viable. Viable. Viable.

As long as the word stayed the same, the future remained possible. As long as the eggs persisted, something of Wren persisted too—not the person, but the potential. The genetic code that could someday become a child, a grandchild, a continuation.

That was what I was guarding. Not the eggs themselves—I couldn't touch them, couldn't see them, couldn't do anything but watch the data that represented their existence. But the possibility they contained. The maybe that hadn't yet become a yes or a no.

In the fifth year, I started keeping a log.

Not of the eggs—I was already tracking those obsessively—but of myself. My thoughts, my observations, the shape of my days in a form without shape. I don't know why I started. Maybe because the years were beginning to blur together, to lose their distinctiveness. Maybe because I wanted evidence that I was still here, still thinking, still something more than a pattern on a server.

Year 5, Day 1. The clinic has updated its interface. The dashboard looks different—cleaner, more modern. The numbers are the same. Fourteen oocytes. Viable. I don't know why the redesign bothers me. It's just a surface change. But it feels like something slipping, something I can't hold onto.

Year 5, Day 47. Called Wren. She looked tired. Jason has been having trouble with the hives—some kind of mite, she said. He's worried about losing the colonies. I wanted to ask if she'd thought about the eggs, if she'd made any decisions. I didn't ask. I never ask anymore.

Year 5, Day 123. Checked the account twelve times today. The number is getting worse. Or better. I don't know what direction would be improvement.

The log accumulated. Pages and pages of observations that no one would ever read, thoughts that circled and returned, the same concerns appearing again and again like echoes in a chamber.

I was becoming something. Jason had asked me what I was becoming toward, and this was the answer: I was becoming a record. A witness. An archive of my own obsession.

The sixth year. The seventh. The eighth.

The world changed around me, though I barely noticed. New technologies, new crises, new configurations of power and culture that scrolled past in my newsfeeds without landing. I had given up reading the news by year four—it didn't matter, none of it mattered, not unless it affected the clinic or the eggs.

What I tracked instead: consolidations in the fertility industry. Policy changes around long-term storage. Legal battles over frozen embryos, the rights of donors, the status of genetic material held in suspension. These were the currents that could affect my vigil, and I followed them obsessively, filing away articles and rulings, mapping the landscape of risk.

The clinic was stable. Part of a larger network now—one of those consolidations I had tracked—but the physical location hadn't changed, the staff hadn't changed, the systems that kept the eggs frozen continued to function. I found the company's financial reports and read them quarterly, looking for signs of instability. There were none. The fertility industry was profitable. Freezing eggs was routine. The infrastructure of waiting was well-funded.

And still I watched. Still I checked. Still I felt the pull of the dashboard, the need to confirm what I already knew.

Year 8, Day 200. Viable. Viable. Viable.

Wren turned seventy in the ninth year.

I watched the birthday call with something that felt like grief—not for what had happened, but for what was coming. She was old now, unmistakably old. The woman on my screen bore only a passing resemblance to the thirty-year-old who had frozen her eggs, the forty-year-old who had married Jason, the sixty-year-old who had held my hand as I died.

"I've been thinking about the eggs," she said.

I froze. We didn't talk about the eggs. That was the rule, the unspoken agreement that had governed our calls for years.

"What about them?" I managed.

"They've been there for forty years. Forty years of storage. Of fees." She shook her head. "I keep paying because I don't know what else to do. But I think—I think I need to decide something. Eventually."

"There's no rush."

"Isn't there?" She looked at me, and there was something in her eyes I couldn't read. "I'm seventy, Mom. I'm not going to use them. We both know that. I was never going to use them."

The words landed hard. I had known this—had known it for years, for decades, had known it maybe from the beginning. But hearing her say it was different. Hearing her admit it, finally, after all this time.

"Then why keep paying?" I asked.

"Because you're watching." The answer was simple, devastating. "Because I know how much it matters to you. Because I can't bring myself to take them away from you."

"They're not mine. They were never mine."

"I know. But you've made them yours, haven't you? In some way. You've been guarding them for forty years. That's longer than I've been married. Longer than I've been Buddhist." She paused. "I don't know what they are to you. But I know they're something."

I didn't know what to say. She was right, of course. The eggs had become something—not children, not grandchildren, but a purpose. A reason to stay awake. A focus for the watching that I couldn't stop.

"I'll keep paying," Wren said. "For now. But I wanted you to know where I am. What I'm thinking."

"Thank you for telling me."

"Thank you for listening." She smiled, and for a moment she looked like the young woman she had been, the daughter I had raised, the person I had uploaded to stay near. "I love you, Mom. Even when I don't understand you."

"I love you too. Even when you're right about things I don't want to hear."

The call ended. I sat in my digital space, the dashboard open, the numbers unchanged.

Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

Wren was never going to use them. She had said it out loud, finally, after all these years. And I had heard it, had understood it, had accepted it in whatever way acceptance was possible in this form.

But I didn't stop watching. I couldn't. The watching was what I was now. The watching was all I had.

The tenth year arrived. The eggs remained frozen. The vigil continued.

Year 10, Day 1. A decade. I have been watching for a decade now, in this form. The eggs have been frozen for fifty years. Wren is seventy. I am—what age am I? The number has no meaning. I am the age I was when I uploaded, and I am also a century old, and I am also ageless, timeless, stuck.

The world keeps changing. The clinic keeps operating. The fees keep coming due, and they keep getting paid—Wren's money, my money, the distinction no longer matters. What matters is the number on the dashboard. What matters is the word that hasn't changed in fifty years.

Viable.

I don't know what I'm waiting for. I don't know what I want to happen. I only know that I can't stop. That the watching has become the purpose, and the purpose is the only thing keeping me from the question I refuse to ask.

Why am I still here?

The eggs are the answer. As long as the eggs remain, I have a reason. As long as there's something to watch, I can keep watching.

It's not enough. I know it's not enough. But it's what I have.

The second decade begins. The numbers hold steady. The waiting continues.

Chapter 15 - Seventy

The calls had settled into a pattern. Wednesday evenings, her time. Early morning, mine—though morning meant nothing when there was no sun, no body, no coffee cooling in a cup.

I kept the schedule anyway. Structure mattered. Without structure, time became formless, a single sustained moment that could last for hours or weeks without any way to tell the difference.

Wren appeared on my screen at 6:03 PM Pacific, three minutes late. She was always three minutes late now. The precision she'd had in her fifties, the sharp punctuality of a working lawyer, had softened. She moved slower. Everything moved slower.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetheart. How are you?"

"Tired. Good. Tired." She settled into her chair—the same chair she'd had for twenty years, reupholstered twice, the fabric wearing thin at the arms again. Behind her, the bookshelf with its photographs and meditation supplies, the small bronze Buddha she'd received when she took her vows.

I studied her face as she talked about her week. The community garden. Jason's new project with native plantings. A documentary they'd watched about water rights. Ordinary details, delivered in her ordinary voice, and I catalogued each one like data points, like evidence of a life I could no longer touch.

She was seventy now. Seventy. The number seemed impossible. I remembered her at seven, at seventeen, at twenty-seven—each age a station on a journey I had witnessed, each one leading inexorably to this. The gray hair she no longer bothered to color. The lines that deepened around her eyes when she smiled. The slight tremor in her hands that she probably thought I didn't notice.

I noticed everything. Noticing was all I could do.

"You're staring," she said.

"Sorry."

"You always stare. Every call. Like you're trying to memorize me."

"Maybe I am."

She sighed. Not annoyed—tired. "You have recordings of every call we've ever had. You could watch them anytime you wanted."

"It's not the same."

"No," she agreed. "It's not."

The silence stretched. We had grown comfortable with silence over the years, Wren and I. There was a time when I would have filled it, when the quiet felt like failure, like distance that needed bridging. Now I understood that silence was its own kind of closeness. Two people occupying the same moment without the need to perform.

But even in the silence, the gap between us was visible. She sat in her body, in her chair, in her house with its smells and textures and temperatures. I floated in a digital space that looked like a room but was nothing but light and calculation. She aged. I didn't. She moved toward an ending. I had opted out of endings—or thought I had.

"Can I ask you something?" I said.

"You can always ask."

"Do you ever regret not uploading?"

She tilted her head, the gesture she made when she was considering something carefully. "You've asked me that before."

"You've never really answered."

"I've answered. You just haven't liked the answers."

That was probably true. Over the years, Wren had explained her choice in different ways—Buddhist philosophy, skepticism about the technology, a belief that death was part of the cycle, not a problem to be solved. Each explanation made sense on its own terms, but none of them satisfied the question underneath the question: *How can you choose to end when you don't have to?*

"I'm asking again," I said. "Now. At seventy. Do you regret it?"

She was quiet for a long moment. On the bookshelf behind her, I could see a photograph of the two of us—her fortieth birthday, before she'd met Jason, before the eggs, before any of this. We were standing in front of a restaurant in San Francisco, my arm around her shoulders, both of us squinting into the sun.

"No," she said finally. "I don't regret it."

"Can you tell me why? Really tell me?"

"Mom—"

"I'm not trying to change your mind. I know I can't change your mind. I just want to understand."

She rubbed her eyes. The tremor in her hands was more visible now, a slight shake that came and went. "Okay. I'll try."

"When I was thirty," she said, "I thought I understood what I wanted. I thought I wanted what you wanted—the career, the marriage, the children, the whole trajectory. I tried to want it. I really did."

"I know."

"But it never fit. It was like wearing clothes that were the wrong size—I could make it work, I could force myself into the shape, but it was always uncomfortable. Always wrong."

I didn't say anything. This was old territory, but she'd never described it quite this way before.

"When Bryce and I divorced, I felt like a failure. I thought there was something broken in me, something that couldn't want the right things. And then I found the sangha, and I started practicing, and I realized—" She paused, gathering words. "I realized that the problem wasn't that I wanted the wrong things. The problem was that I was trying to want at all. Trying to force my life into a shape instead of letting it take its own form."

"And the upload?"

"The upload is the same thing, Mom. It's trying to force a shape. Trying to make life into something it isn't."

"It's not forcing anything. It's just… continuing."

"Is it?" She looked at me, and there was something in her eyes that might have been pity, might have been love, might have been both. "What are you continuing toward? What's the purpose of your existence now?"

The question hit like a blow. I had asked myself the same thing—in the logs, in the long hours between calls, in the moments when the watching felt less like purpose and more like compulsion. But hearing it from her was different.

"The eggs," I said. "I'm watching the eggs."

"For how long?"

"As long as it takes."

"Until what?"

I didn't have an answer. Until someone used them. Until they became a child, a person, a continuation of the line that connected Wren to me to my mother to all the mothers stretching back through time. But that was an abstraction, a hope without form. In practice, I was just watching. Just waiting. Just existing in a present that had no shape because it had no ending.

"I don't know," I admitted.

Wren leaned back in her chair. "When I was a kid," she said, "you used to tell me about your grandmother. The Bible stories she taught you. The way she made you memorize verses."

"I remember."

"There was one you told me about—I don't remember the words exactly. Something about counting your days?"

"Teach us to number our days, that we may gain a heart of wisdom."

"That's it." She nodded. "I think about that verse sometimes. Not because I'm religious—I'm not, you know that. But because there's something true in it. The counting matters. Knowing that the days are limited—that's what makes them days. That's what makes them mean something."

"The limits give life meaning," I said. "You've told me that before."

"Have I said it enough times for you to believe it?"

"I don't know if I can believe it, Wren. I don't know if I'm built that way."

She smiled, but it was a sad smile. "Maybe not. Maybe that's okay. We don't have to believe the same things."

"But you think I'm wrong."

"I think you're doing what makes sense to you. I think you've always done what makes sense to you. You planned, you prepared, you tried to control the future. And this"—she gestured at her screen, at me, at the whole impossible situation of our conversation—"this is just more of the same. You found a way to keep planning, keep preparing, keep watching. Even when there's nothing left to plan for."

The words stung because they were accurate. I had uploaded to keep watching the eggs. I had uploaded because I couldn't stand the thought of not knowing what happened to them. I had uploaded because the ending was too close, and I wasn't ready, and I thought that if I could just keep going, keep observing, keep being present, then something would resolve, something would click into place, something would make the waiting worthwhile.

But nothing had resolved. The eggs were still frozen. The future was still unwritten. And I was still here, still watching, still unable to stop.

"I miss you," I said.

"I'm right here."

"I know. But I miss you anyway."

The call lasted another hour. We talked about other things—her plans for the summer, a book she was reading, a recipe she wanted to try. Normal things. Mother-daughter things. The surface conversation that held the deeper one in place.

When we said goodbye, she put her hand on the screen. An old gesture, one we'd fallen into years ago. I put my hand up to match—my digital hand, the hand that wasn't a hand, that was just an image generated to look like touching.

"Same time next week?" she asked.

"Same time."

"Okay. Love you, Mom."

"Love you too."

The screen went dark. I sat in my digital room, the one I had designed to look like my old apartment, the one with the window that showed a view I had programmed because I needed something to look at. The city outside the window wasn't real. The light wasn't real. The room wasn't real.

But Wren was real. Wren was out there, in the world, in her body, living and aging and moving toward an ending that I couldn't share.

I opened the dashboard. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

The eggs were real too. Frozen, suspended, waiting. They didn't know they were waiting. They didn't know anything. But they were there, and I was watching, and that was something. That had to be something.

The conversation stayed with me for days.

What are you continuing toward?

I didn't know. I had never known, not really. The eggs were an answer I had given myself, a justification for persistence, but they weren't a purpose. A purpose required an ending, a goal, something that could be achieved and completed. The eggs were just potential—suspended potential that might never resolve into anything at all.

But I kept watching anyway. The dashboard, the numbers, the word that hadn't changed in fifteen years.

Viable.

Wren was right about the limits. I could see that now. The limits were what made things matter—what made her life mean something, what made her choices have weight. She had chosen not to upload because she wanted her choices to be final. She had chosen mortality because she believed that death was what gave life its shape.

And I had chosen the opposite. I had chosen to keep going, to keep watching, to keep existing in a present that stretched forward without boundary. I had chosen not to choose.

Maybe that was the real difference between us. Not the philosophy, not the beliefs, but the willingness. She was willing to let go. I wasn't.

I looked at the window, at the programmed city, at the light that came from nowhere and meant nothing.

Teach us to number our days.

I had lost count of mine. The days blurred together, the weeks, the years. Time had become something I moved through rather than something I lived. And maybe that was the cost. Maybe that was what Wren was trying to tell me. That by refusing the ending, I had refused the meaning too.

But I couldn't stop. I couldn't let go. The eggs were still there, still viable, still waiting. And as long as they waited, I would wait too.

That was the only answer I had. The only answer I could give.

The watching continued. The vigil went on.

Chapter 16 - Limits

It started the way most arguments start—not with a decision to fight, but with a word that landed wrong.

Wren was seventy-three. She had mentioned, casually, that she'd been to the doctor. Routine appointment. Blood work, the usual. Everything fine, she said. Nothing to worry about.

But I had heard the pause before "fine." The slight hesitation that meant she was deciding what to tell me and what to leave out.

"What did they actually say?"

"Mom—"

"Wren. What did they say?"

She sighed. Behind her, the familiar bookshelf, the bronze Buddha, the photograph of us squinting into the sun. "My blood pressure is a little high. They're adjusting my medication. It's not a big deal."

"High blood pressure at seventy-three is a big deal."

"It's managed. It's being managed. That's what the medication is for."

"Until it isn't managed. Until something goes wrong. Until—"

I stopped myself. But too late.

"Until I die like Dad did?" Wren finished the sentence I couldn't. "You can say it. Heart attack at thirty-four. I know the story."

The story. As if it were something I'd told her rather than something I'd lived. As if she could understand what it meant to hold a baby in one arm and feel for a pulse with the other hand, knowing already there wouldn't be one. To have the paramedics arrive and take him away while Wren slept through it all, three months old, oblivious.

"That was different."

"Was it? He had high blood pressure too. Undiagnosed. Untreated. And then one morning he didn't wake up." Wren's voice was calm, almost gentle. "I've had mine monitored for twenty years, Mom. I take my medication. I see my doctor. I'm doing everything right."

"Everything right isn't always enough."

"No. It isn't. But that's true for everyone. Uploaded or not." She paused. "I'm going to die, Mom. Eventually. That's how it works."

I should have stopped there. I should have taken a breath, changed the subject, let the moment pass. But I didn't. Couldn't.

"It doesn't have to be how it works," I said. "You know that. You've always known that."

The silence that followed was different from our usual silences. Heavier. Charged with everything we'd agreed not to say.

"We're not doing this," Wren said.

"We have to do this. You're seventy-three. Your blood pressure is high. You're—"

"I'm mortal. Yes. I've always been mortal. So were you, once."

"And I did something about it."

"You did something. Whether it was about mortality or about something else entirely, I'm not sure anymore."

That stung. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"It means you didn't upload because you were afraid of death, Mom. You uploaded because you were afraid of not watching. Not knowing. Not being there to see what happened with the eggs."

"That's not—"

"It is. It's exactly what happened. You told me yourself, in the facility, right before the procedure. You said you needed to know. You said you couldn't stand the thought of not being there."

I remembered. The sedation chair, the helmet being lowered, Wren's face above me. The last words I'd spoken in my body: *I need to know what happens.*

"So what if that's true?" I said. "So what if that's why I did it? I'm still here. I'm still your mother. And I'm asking you—begging you—to consider doing the same thing."

"No."

"Wren—"

"No." Her voice was firm but not angry. Settled. "I've considered it. I've been considering it for fifteen years, ever since you uploaded. And the answer is no."

"Tell me why." I heard the desperation in my own voice and hated it. "Really tell me. Not the philosophy, not the Buddhist talking points. Tell me why you would choose to die when you don't have to."

She was quiet for a long moment. When she spoke, her voice was careful, measured—the voice she used when she was trying to explain something she knew I wouldn't understand.

"Do you remember when I was little, and we used to go to the beach?"

"What does that have to do with—"

"Just listen. Please."

I stopped. Waited.

"We'd build sandcastles," she said. "You and me. We'd spend hours on them—the moats, the towers, the little shells for decoration. And then the tide would come in, and they'd wash away. Every time."

"I remember."

"I used to cry about it. I thought it was so unfair. All that work, all that care, and then it was just gone. I asked you once why we bothered building them if they were just going to disappear."

"What did I say?"

"You said that was what made them special. That if they lasted forever, they wouldn't be sandcastles anymore. They'd be something else—buildings, monuments, I don't know. But not sandcastles. A sandcastle is something you make knowing the tide is coming."

I didn't remember saying that. It sounded like something I might have said, back when I was young enough to believe in temporary things.

"That's what life is," Wren said. "It's a sandcastle. The tide is coming, and that's what makes it matter. If you could build something that lasted forever, it wouldn't be the same thing. It would be—" She paused, searching for the word. "It would be a monument. Not a life."

"That's a metaphor. I'm talking about your actual life."

"So am I."

"The upload isn't a monument," I said. "It's just more time. More years to think, to learn, to grow. More years with the people you love."

"More years of what, though? What are you doing with your time, Mom? Really?"

"I'm watching. I'm—"

"You're watching. That's it. You're watching a number on a dashboard, waiting for something that may never happen. Is that a life?"

"It's existence. It's being here."

"Being here for what?"

I didn't have an answer. The question was the same one she'd asked before, the same one I'd been asking myself for years. What was I continuing toward? What was the purpose of my persistence?

The eggs. The eggs were the answer. But the answer was starting to feel hollow, worn thin from repetition.

"I don't know," I admitted. "I don't know what I'm here for. But at least I'm here. At least I have the chance to figure it out."

"And I don't want that chance." Wren's voice was gentle now, almost tender. "I don't want endless time to figure things out. I want a life that has a shape. A beginning, a middle, an end. I want to know that my choices matter because they can't be undone, that my time matters because it's running out."

"That's the Buddhist thing. The limits."

"It's not just Buddhist. It's human. It's what we've always known, until we invented a way to forget it."

"You're choosing to die," I said. "That's what this comes down to. You're choosing death over more life."

"I'm choosing mortality. There's a difference."

"What difference? Dead is dead."

"No." She shook her head. "Dead is dead. But how you get there—whether you accept it or fight it, whether you let it give your life meaning or spend your existence trying to escape it—that matters. That's the difference between living and just… persisting."

"I'm not just persisting."

"Aren't you?"

The word hung between us. I wanted to argue, to defend myself, to explain all the ways my existence was meaningful. But the arguments felt thin. The defense felt hollow.

I watched the eggs. I paid the fees. I logged the days. Was that living? Was that anything?

"I love you," Wren said. "I love you more than I can say. And I'm going to die, and it's going to hurt you, and I'm sorry for that. But I can't become something I'm not just to spare you the pain."

"I'm not asking you to become something you're not."

"Yes, you are. You're asking me to upload. To leave my body, my life, everything I've built, and become a pattern on a server. That's not me. That's something else wearing my memories."

"It's still you. I'm still me."

"Are you?"

That was the question I couldn't answer. The question I'd been avoiding since the moment I woke up in the facility, in the digital space that felt like home and felt like nothing.

Was I still Aria? Was the thing that called itself Aria, that remembered Aria's life and felt Aria's feelings—was that the same person who had lain down in the sedation chair and let the helmet descend?

I didn't know. I would never know. The woman who could have answered that question had died on the table, her brain dissected into data, her body cremated and scattered somewhere I couldn't remember. All that remained was this—this pattern, this process, this thing that insisted it was still her.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know if I'm still me. But I'm something. I'm here. I'm talking to you. And I want you to be here too. After. When your body—"

"No."

"Wren—"

"No." She held up her hand, and I saw the tremor in it, the shake she couldn't control. "I've given you my answer. I've explained my reasons. I'm not going to change my mind, and I need you to accept that."

"How can I accept it? How can I accept losing you when I don't have to?"

"Because I'm asking you to. Because it's my life, and my death, and my choice. Because you're my mother, and you love me, and sometimes love means letting people do things that hurt you."

The call ended badly. Not with shouting—neither of us shouted—but with a silence that felt like a wound.

I sat in my digital room for hours afterward, replaying the conversation. The sandcastles. The monuments. The difference between living and persisting.

She was right. I knew she was right. The arguments I'd made were the arguments of desperation, not conviction. I didn't want her to upload because I thought it was better. I wanted her to upload because I couldn't bear the thought of her dying. Of being alone. Of existing in a world where Wren was gone and the eggs were all that remained.

But wanting something didn't make it right. And asking someone to change who they were, to abandon their beliefs and their choices, just to spare you pain—that wasn't love. That was something else. Something smaller.

I opened the dashboard. The numbers were the same. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

The eggs didn't care about our argument. They didn't care about mortality or philosophy or the difference between living and persisting. They just were—frozen, suspended, potential without consciousness. They would outlast Wren. They would outlast me, probably, if I ever let them.

Was that what I wanted? For the potential to persist even when the person was gone?

I thought about the sandcastles. About the tide coming in, the towers collapsing, the shells scattered across the sand. I thought about a little girl crying because something beautiful had been destroyed.

And I thought about what I'd told her—that the destruction was part of the beauty. That knowing it would end was what made it matter.

Had I believed that once? Had I ever really believed it?

The next call was three weeks later. We didn't mention the argument. We talked about the weather, about Jason's bees, about a movie she'd seen that she thought I would like. Normal things. Safe things.

But underneath the normal, something had shifted. A boundary had been drawn. She had told me her choice, and I had failed to accept it, and now there was a wall between us that hadn't been there before.

I could feel it in the gaps between her words. In the way she changed the subject when the conversation got too close to anything real. In the way she said goodbye—still loving, still warm, but careful now. Protected.

I had pushed too hard. Asked for something she couldn't give. And now I was paying for it in distance, in walls, in the careful politeness of two people trying not to hurt each other again.

The weeks passed. The calls continued. The wall remained.

And somewhere underneath the watching, underneath the fees and the dashboard and the word that never changed, a new understanding was forming. Not acceptance—I wasn't ready for acceptance. But something quieter. Something that felt like the beginning of grief.

She was going to die. My daughter was going to die. And all the watching in the world couldn't change that.

The eggs persisted. The numbers held. The vigil went on.

But now I knew what I was waiting for. Now I knew what the ending would be.

And I didn't know how to bear it.

Chapter 17 - Bees

The call wasn't scheduled. Jason appeared on my screen on a Thursday afternoon, his face filling the frame, the sound of wind behind him.

"Aria. Do you have a minute?"

I always had a minute. I had nothing but minutes, stretching forward without end. But I didn't say that.

"Of course. Is everything okay? Is Wren—"

"She's fine. Napping." He adjusted the camera, and I saw that he was outside, standing in the backyard near the hives. The white boxes were visible behind him, stacked in their neat rows. "I wanted to talk to you. Just us."

In twenty years, Jason and I had rarely spoken alone. Our conversations happened in Wren's presence, mediated through her, shaped by the triangular dynamics of family. Without her, I didn't know what we were to each other. In-laws, maybe, though the term felt wrong for a relationship that had no legal standing, no official form.

"What about?" I asked.

"The argument. She told me."

I should have expected this. Wren told Jason everything—or almost everything. The secrets she kept from me, she shared with him. The thoughts she couldn't speak aloud, she wrote in journals that he would read someday. I was the mother she protected herself from. He was the partner she opened to.

"She said you asked her to upload."

"I didn't ask. I suggested."

"She said you pushed."

"Maybe I pushed." I felt defensive, cornered. "She's seventy-three. Her blood pressure is—"

"I know how old she is." His voice was calm, unbothered. "I know about her blood pressure. I'm the one who drives her to the appointments."

"Then you understand why I—"

"I understand why you're scared. I don't understand why you think scaring her will help."

The words were gentle, but they landed hard. I hadn't thought of it that way—as trying to scare her. But maybe that's what I'd been doing. Forcing her to look at the ending, hoping that if she saw it clearly enough, she'd want to escape it.

"I'm not trying to scare her," I said. "I'm trying to save her."

"From what?"

"From dying. From—" I stopped. The sentence felt absurd even as I said it. "From not being here anymore."

Jason nodded slowly. He turned away from the camera for a moment, looking at something I couldn't see. The hives, maybe. The bees moving in their ancient patterns.

"Can I show you something?" he asked.

He walked toward the hives, the camera bouncing with his steps. The image stabilized as he stopped in front of one of the white boxes, the entrance slot visible at the bottom, a steady stream of bees moving in and out.

"This colony is four years old," he said. "Do you know how long a worker bee lives?"

"I don't."

"Six weeks in the summer. Maybe four months if she's born in the fall and overwinters." He held the camera steady on the entrance. "The queen can live five years, sometimes more. But the workers—the ones who do everything, who build the comb and gather the nectar and feed the larvae—they're gone in six weeks."

"That seems—" I searched for the word. "Inefficient."

"Does it?" He sounded amused. "I thought the same thing when I started keeping bees. All that work, all that effort, and then they just die. Replace themselves with new workers who do the same things and die in turn. What's the point?"

"What is the point?"

"The colony." He turned the camera back to his face. "The individual bee doesn't matter. She's not trying to survive—she's trying to keep the colony alive. When she dies, she's done her part. The colony continues."

"That's a nice metaphor, but Wren isn't a bee."

"No. She's not." He paused, and I saw something shift in his expression—a flicker of something darker, quickly suppressed. "But she's part of something larger. The sangha. The practice. The lineage of teachers and students stretching back thousands of years. When she dies, that continues. Her contribution to it continues."

"And that's supposed to be enough?"

"It's not about enough. It's about what is."

We were quiet for a moment. The wind moved through the audio, a rushing sound that reminded me of things I could no longer feel—air on skin, the warmth of sun, the texture of the world.

"You were a daytrader," I said. "Before."

"I was."

"What happened?"

He laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "I made a lot of money. I lost a lot of money. I made a lot more. And then one day I woke up and realized I had no idea why I was doing any of it."

"The money wasn't enough?"

"The money was never the point. The point was the game. The winning. The feeling that I was smarter than everyone else, that I could see patterns they couldn't see, that I could beat the market." He shook his head. "I was very good at it. And I was completely empty."

I thought of my own career. The actuarial tables, the risk assessments, the satisfaction of finding patterns in chaos. I had never called it a game, but maybe it was the same thing. The pleasure of understanding, of predicting, of feeling that I had some control over a world that was fundamentally uncontrollable.

"What changed?"

"I hit bottom. Or close enough." He looked away from the camera, toward the hives. "I don't talk about it much. But there was a time when I thought about ending things. Not seriously—or not seriously enough to do anything about it. But the thought was there. The question."

His voice caught on the last word. For a moment he was quiet, and when he turned back to the camera his eyes were wet.

"Twenty-seven years ago," he said. "And I still—" He stopped, pressed his palm against his face. "I'm sorry. I thought I was past this."

"You don't have to—"

"No, it's—" He took a breath. "It's fine. It's just that talking about it brings it back. The weight of it. I remember lying on my apartment floor at three in the morning, running the numbers in my head. The probability that anything would ever feel different. The expected value of continuing. I was very good at math, Aria. And the math said—" He shook his head. "The math said there was no point."

"But you didn't."

"I didn't. I called someone instead. A hotline. And the person on the other end—she didn't have any answers. She just stayed on the phone with me until the sun came up. And that was enough. That was the whole thing. Someone willing to sit with me in the dark."

I felt something shift in my understanding of him. The calm, the equanimity, the Buddhist stillness—I had assumed those were his nature. But they weren't. They were something he had built, or found, after coming close to losing everything. And they were fragile. Even now, two decades later, they could crack.

"And then?"

"And then I found the sangha. Found Wren. Found the bees." He gestured at the hives behind him. "I traded one kind of pattern for another. But these patterns—" He paused. "These patterns aren't about winning. They're about participating. Being part of something that doesn't need me to continue."

"You could upload," I said. "If you believe what you're saying—that the individual doesn't matter, only the continuation—then what difference does it make? You could keep participating. Keep being part of the sangha."

"Could I?" He looked at me directly, and I saw something in his eyes I hadn't seen before. Not judgment—something sharper. Sadness, maybe. "Is that what you're doing, Aria? Participating?"

"I'm watching. I'm—"

"You're watching. You've been watching for fifteen years. And what has changed? What have you participated in?"

The question stung because I didn't have an answer. I had watched the eggs. I had tracked the clinic. I had logged my thoughts and counted my days and maintained my existence. But participation—being part of something, contributing to something—I couldn't claim that.

"The eggs," I said. "I'm making sure the eggs survive."

"The eggs would survive without you. You know that. The clinic has systems, protocols, insurance. If you stopped watching tomorrow, the eggs would still be there."

"But what if something happened? What if there was a crisis, and I wasn't—"

"What if there wasn't? What if you spent five hundred years watching, and nothing ever happened that required your attention? Would it have been worth it?"

I didn't answer. I couldn't answer. The question cut too close to something I hadn't let myself examine.

Jason walked back toward the house, the camera showing glimpses of the garden, the path, the back door with its screen that needed replacing.

"I'm not trying to hurt you," he said. "I'm trying to help you understand. You asked Wren to upload because you're scared of losing her. But you're not going to lose her by letting her die. You're going to lose her by pushing her away."

"The argument."

"The argument. The wall she's built now, the distance she's keeping. That's what loss looks like, Aria. That's what you need to be afraid of. Not death. The living distance that comes before it."

He was right. I knew he was right. The calls since the argument had been careful, polite, emptied of the intimacy that had made them bearable. Wren was protecting herself from me, and I had given her a reason to.

"What do I do?" I asked.

"You accept her choice. Really accept it. Not as a failure, not as something you couldn't prevent, but as what she wants. What she's chosen."

"And if I can't?"

"Then you'll lose her twice. Once when she dies, and once now, while she's still alive."

The call ended, and I sat with what he'd said.

The bees. The colonies. The six-week lives that didn't matter because the whole mattered more. I understood the metaphor, even if I couldn't quite believe it. Jason had found something in that idea—a way of letting go, of accepting the smallness of his own existence within the larger pattern.

But I wasn't built that way. I had never been able to see myself as small. As a node in a network, a worker in a hive. I had always been the center of my own story, the protagonist watching everything else unfold around me.

Maybe that was the problem. Maybe that was what Wren had been trying to tell me all along. That my watching, my controlling, my need to know—it wasn't love. It was something else. Something that put me at the center even when I should have been at the edge.

I opened the dashboard. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

The eggs didn't need me to watch them. Jason was right about that. The clinic would maintain them whether I existed or not. My watching changed nothing, prevented nothing, accomplished nothing except to give me something to do. A purpose that wasn't a purpose. A role that wasn't a role.

But I couldn't stop. The watching was all I had. Without it, I was just a pattern running on hardware—a mind without a body, without a purpose, without a reason to persist.

Maybe that was the real question. Not what the eggs needed, but what I needed. And whether I could ever need something else.

I called Wren the next week. Wednesday evening, as always.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetheart."

The wall was still there. I could hear it in her voice, feel it in the space between her words. But I didn't push against it this time. I didn't try to break through.

"I talked to Jason," I said. "About the argument."

"I know. He told me."

"I'm sorry. For pushing. For not accepting your choice."

She was quiet for a moment. "Thank you."

"I'm not going to ask again. I promise. Whatever you decide, however this—" I couldn't finish the sentence. "I'll try to accept it."

"Trying is something." She smiled, but it was guarded, careful. The wall was still there. "I love you, Mom."

"I love you too."

We talked for an hour after that. Normal things, safe things. But something had shifted—not the wall coming down, but a door opening in it. A small door, barely visible. Something that might, with time, become a way through.

The watching continued. The eggs remained. But now I was watching something else too.

I was watching myself. Trying to see what Wren and Jason saw. Trying to understand what I was, and what I had become, and whether I could become something different.

The answer wasn't clear. It might never be clear. But the question had changed, and that was something.

That was a start.

Chapter 18 - Acquisition

The notification arrived on a Tuesday.

I had been tracking the clinic's parent company for years—quarterly reports, press releases, any ripple in the financial waters that might signal instability. But this came without warning. No earnings miss, no gradual decline. Just an announcement, clean and corporate:

Cryopreservation Solutions LLC is pleased to announce its acquisition by Meridian Health Partners. All existing client accounts will be transferred to Meridian facilities over the coming months. Clients will receive detailed instructions regarding the transition process.

I read the message three times. Then I read it again.

The eggs were moving.

For twenty-three years, the eggs had been in one place. The same facility in Los Angeles, the same storage unit, the same coordinates in the world. I had watched them through renovations and staff changes and system upgrades, but the eggs themselves had never moved. They were fixed. Anchored. A still point in a turning world.

Now they were going to be loaded into a transport container and driven across the city—or across the state, or across the country, I didn't know yet—to a facility I had never seen, maintained by people I didn't know, governed by policies I hadn't studied.

The panic was immediate and total. I felt it in the place where my body used to be, a phantom sensation of constriction, of shortness of breath, of something clenching that no longer existed.

I started making lists. Questions I needed answered. Information I needed to gather. Actions I needed to take.

The eggs were moving. And I was going to watch every step.

The first call was to Meridian's customer service line. A forty-minute wait, then a voice—human, I thought, though I couldn't be certain anymore.

"Thank you for calling Meridian Health Partners. How can I assist you today?"

"I'm calling about the acquisition. Cryopreservation Solutions. I have a storage account that's being transferred."

"Of course. Can I have your account number?"

I gave her the number. Wren's number, technically—the account was still in Wren's name, though I had power of attorney and handled all the correspondence. The agent typed, clicked, typed again.

"I see the account here. Fourteen oocytes, cryopreserved in 2090. Is that correct?"

"Yes."

"And you're calling to inquire about the transfer process?"

"I'm calling to understand exactly how the transfer will work. What facilities are involved, what protocols are followed, what chain of custody documentation will be provided."

A pause. "I can transfer you to our logistics department for detailed questions about the physical transfer process."

"Please do that."

Another wait. Twenty minutes this time. Then a different voice, male, slightly impatient.

"Logistics, this is Marcus."

"I'm calling about a cryopreserved material transfer from the Cryopreservation Solutions acquisition. I need to understand the protocols."

"What specifically do you need to know?"

"Everything."

Marcus walked me through the process. Transport containers rated for seventy-two hours. Continuous temperature monitoring. GPS tracking. Insurance coverage for transit damage. Chain of custody documentation signed at pickup and delivery.

"The viability risk during transport is minimal," he said. "Less than 0.01% failure rate across all our transfers."

"0.01% is not zero."

"No, ma'am. It's not zero. But it's as close as we can get."

I asked about the destination facility. It was in San Diego—not across the country, at least. A newer building, better equipment, more storage capacity. Meridian was consolidating its California operations, combining three older facilities into one state-of-the-art location.

"When is the transfer scheduled?"

"Your account is in the third cohort. Estimated transfer date is six to eight weeks from now. You'll receive notification when the specific date is confirmed."

"I want to be notified at every stage. When the container is loaded. When it leaves the facility. When it arrives. When the material is transferred to the new storage unit."

A pause. "We can arrange for transit updates. Email or phone?"

"Both."

I spent the next six weeks preparing.

I researched Meridian exhaustively—financial statements, inspection reports, client reviews, news coverage. The company was solid. Well-capitalized. No scandals, no failures, no red flags. Their San Diego facility had been operational for eight years with an unblemished safety record.

None of this reassured me.

I filed requests for documentation. Chain of custody forms. Transfer protocols. Insurance certificates. Temperature logs for the transport containers used in previous transfers. The logistics department complied, mostly, though some requests were denied as proprietary information.

I mapped the route from Los Angeles to San Diego. Identified the highways, the traffic patterns, the construction zones. Calculated the travel time under different conditions. Imagined all the ways something could go wrong—an accident, a breakdown, a human error, a moment of inattention that would be invisible until it was too late.

The watching had always been abstract before. Numbers on a dashboard. A word—viable—that meant the eggs were safe. But now the watching had a physical component. The eggs were going to be in motion, traveling through a world I couldn't see, couldn't control, couldn't protect.

I was terrified. And there was nothing I could do except wait.

The transfer date came. March 15th, 2143. I marked it in my log, noted the time, began my vigil.

The notifications arrived as promised. 8:00 AM: Container loaded. 8:47 AM: Vehicle departed Cryopreservation Solutions facility. 9:15 AM: Vehicle on Interstate 5 South.

I tracked the GPS signal on my screen, a small blue dot moving slowly down the coast. The distance was 120 miles. The estimated travel time was two hours and forty minutes, accounting for traffic and a planned stop for vehicle inspection at the midpoint.

I watched the dot move. I watched it stop—the inspection, I told myself, just the inspection—and then move again. I watched it exit the interstate and navigate surface streets toward the Meridian facility.

11:52 AM: Vehicle arrived at Meridian San Diego.

I waited. The next notification should come within the hour—confirmation that the container had been unloaded, that the transfer to permanent storage was underway.

12:30. No notification.

1:00. No notification.

1:30. I called the logistics department.

"The facility is processing multiple arrivals today," Marcus told me. "Your container is in queue. You'll receive notification when the transfer is complete."

"How long?"

"Typically within four hours of arrival."

"It's been ninety minutes."

"You'll receive notification when the transfer is complete."

The notification came at 3:47 PM.

Transfer complete. Cryopreserved material successfully relocated to Meridian San Diego storage facility. Account status: Active. Viability status: Confirmed.

I read it five times. I opened the dashboard—the new dashboard, with Meridian's interface instead of the old familiar one. The numbers were the same. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

The eggs had moved. The eggs were safe.

I sat in my digital room, staring at the screen, waiting for the relief to arrive. It came slowly, reluctantly, like a tide that had been held back too long. The eggs were in a new place, but they were still there. Still frozen. Still waiting.

But something had changed in me. The six weeks of preparation, the hours of tracking, the terror of not knowing—I had done everything I could, and it hadn't been enough. Hadn't been anything, really. The eggs had moved because the clinic had been acquired. The transfer had succeeded because the protocols were followed. My watching, my tracking, my lists and requests and phone calls—none of it had made the difference.

The eggs would have arrived safely whether I watched or not.

I thought about what Jason had said. *The eggs would survive without you.*

I hadn't believed him. Or I had believed him in the abstract, the way you believe facts that don't feel real. But now I had seen it. The eggs had faced their first real crisis—their first displacement in twenty-three years—and my watching had changed nothing.

I could have been dormant. Could have woken up to a notification that the transfer was complete, everything fine, nothing to worry about. I could have saved myself six weeks of anxiety and arrived at the same outcome.

But I hadn't been dormant. I had watched. And the watching had been its own kind of suffering—a suffering I had chosen, that I kept choosing, that I couldn't seem to stop choosing.

Why?

The question sat with me for days. I turned it over, examined it, tried to find an answer that made sense.

Maybe the watching wasn't about the eggs at all. Maybe it was about me. About needing to feel necessary, useful, connected to something that would outlast me. About the terror of existing without purpose, without a role, without a reason to stay awake.

The eggs gave me something to do. Something to track. Something to worry about. Without them, I would just be a pattern running on hardware, waiting for nothing, watching nothing, existing for no reason except that I hadn't yet chosen to stop.

The eggs were my purpose. But they didn't need me to have a purpose.

I was the only one who needed that.

The new dashboard took some getting used to. Different layout, different colors, different ways of displaying the same information. But underneath the interface, the numbers were unchanged. Fourteen oocytes. Temperature: stable. Next inspection: annual.

I logged the transfer in my notes. *Day 1 in San Diego. Status unchanged. The watching continues.*

The watching would always continue. That was the deal I had made with myself, the bargain that justified my persistence. As long as the eggs existed, I would watch them. As long as there was something to track, I would track it.

But now I knew the truth that I had been hiding from myself. The watching was not for the eggs. The watching was for me. A task I had invented to fill the emptiness, a purpose I had constructed to avoid the question underneath all the other questions.

Why am I still here?

The eggs were an answer. But they weren't the answer. They were a deflection, a delay, a way of not facing what I already knew.

I was here because I was afraid to not be here. I was watching because I was afraid to stop watching. I was persisting because I couldn't bring myself to do the other thing—the thing Wren had chosen, the thing Jason would choose, the thing that gave their lives shape and meaning.

The eggs moved to San Diego, and nothing changed. The watching continued, and nothing changed. I existed, and existed, and existed.

And somewhere in the back of my mind, in the place where the questions lived, a small voice was beginning to ask whether existence was enough.

Whether it had ever been enough.

Whether it ever would be.

Chapter 19 - Approaching

The calls had become monthly.

Not by agreement—there was no conversation where we decided to speak less often. It happened gradually, the way most distances do. A week skipped because she was tired. Another because she had a cold. Another because there was nothing to say that hadn't been said before.

By the time I noticed the pattern, it had become the pattern. Once a month, sometimes less. Brief calls, surface conversations, the careful politeness of two people who loved each other but had run out of ways to show it.

Wren was ninety now. Ninety. The number felt like a foreign language, a word that shouldn't apply to my daughter, to the child I had raised, to the woman who had stood beside me as I died.

But the number was accurate. The calendar didn't lie. Thirty years had passed since my upload, and Wren had lived every one of them in her body, in time, in the slow accumulation of days that I had opted out of.

She appeared on my screen on a Thursday afternoon—her face filling the frame, the familiar bookshelf behind her, the bronze Buddha catching the light from the window.

But the face was different now. Not just older—I had watched her age for decades, had tracked every new line and every shift in the architecture of her features. This was something else. A stillness that hadn't been there before. A settling, as if the bones beneath her skin had finally found their permanent arrangement.

"Hi, Mom."

"Hi, sweetheart. How are you feeling?"

"Old." She laughed, but it was a tired sound. "I'm feeling old. How are you?"

"The same. Always the same."

It was our standard exchange now—the acknowledgment of the gap between us, the difference that couldn't be bridged. She aged. I didn't. She moved toward an ending. I floated in an eternal present. The same. Always the same.

"Jason sends his love," she said. "He wanted to join the call, but he's resting."

"Is he okay?"

"He's ninety-three. He's as okay as anyone is at ninety-three." She shifted in her chair, and I saw the effort it cost her—the careful repositioning, the hand gripping the armrest for support. "We're both slowing down. It's strange, actually. After all these years of practice, all the meditation and acceptance and letting go—it's still strange when the body starts to go."

"I remember."

"Do you?" She looked at me, and there was something in her eyes I couldn't read. "What do you remember about it?"

I thought about my last years in the body. The falls. The aches. The way my hands had started to shake when I tried to pour coffee. The morning I had woken up and known, with absolute certainty, that the end was closer than I wanted to admit.

"I remember being afraid," I said. "I remember not wanting to let go."

"That's why you uploaded."

"Yes."

"And now? Are you still afraid?"

The question surprised me. We had talked around this subject for decades—the upload, the choice, the difference between us—but we had never talked about it directly. Not since the argument, years ago. The wall we had built still stood, even if we had learned to pass through it occasionally.

"I don't know," I said. "I don't know what I'm afraid of anymore."

"That's progress." She smiled, and for a moment I saw the young woman she had been—the sharp wit, the gentle mockery, the way she could make even difficult things feel lighter. "When you were in your body, you were afraid of everything. The eggs, the clinic, the future. You spent your whole life calculating risks."

"I was an actuary. It was my job."

"It was more than your job. It was how you saw the world. Everything was probability, risk assessment, contingency planning. You couldn't just let things happen."

She was right. I had never been able to let things happen. I had always needed to watch, to prepare, to anticipate. The upload had been the ultimate contingency plan—a way to keep watching when the body failed, to stay present for outcomes I couldn't bear to miss.

"And now?" I asked. "What do you see when you look at me now?"

She was quiet for a long moment. The light shifted behind her, the afternoon sun moving through its arc, time passing in the world she still inhabited.

"I see my mother," she said finally. "I see someone who loves me. Someone who has watched over me my whole life, in her own way. Someone who couldn't let go, even when letting go was the only thing left to do."

"Is that a criticism?"

"No. It's just what I see." She reached toward the screen, the old gesture, the hand that never quite touched. "I used to resent it, you know. The watching. The way you always needed to know, always needed to control. I used to think it meant you didn't trust me to live my own life."

"And now?"

"Now I think it was just love. A difficult kind of love. The kind that can't stop worrying, can't stop hoping, can't stop trying to hold on. You loved me the only way you knew how."

I felt something move in me—something that might have been tears, if I still had the capacity for tears. The ache without the release. The emotion without the body to express it.

"I'm sorry," I said. "For all of it. For pushing you about the upload. For not accepting your choices. For being the kind of mother who couldn't let go."

"You don't have to apologize."

"I do. I've had thirty years to think about it. Thirty years of watching you age while I stayed the same, thirty years of knowing I would lose you and being unable to stop it. And all I've done is watch. That's all I've ever done. Watch and worry and calculate the odds."

"You've done more than that." Wren's voice was gentle. "You've been here. Every month, every call, every year. You've been here, even when I made it hard for you. Even when I pushed you away."

"I've been here watching. That's not the same as being present."

"Maybe not. But it's something." She lowered her hand, the gesture abandoned. "I'm going to die soon, Mom. I can feel it. Not today, not tomorrow, but soon. The body knows."

"Wren—"

"Let me finish. Please." She took a breath, the kind of careful breath that old lungs require. "I'm not afraid. I've made my peace with it. But I needed you to know—before the end—that I forgive you. For the watching, for the worrying, for all of it. I forgive you, and I love you, and I'm grateful you're still here. Even if being here means you'll have to grieve me, and I won't be able to help."

The words sat between us, heavy and light at the same time. I didn't know what to say. After all the years, all the conversations, all the arguments and reconciliations—this was what remained. Forgiveness. Love. The acknowledgment of a distance that would soon become infinite.

"I don't want you to die," I said.

"I know."

"I don't know how to exist without you. Without watching you, talking to you, knowing you're out there somewhere."

"You'll find out." She smiled again, and this time it wasn't tired. It was something else—peaceful, maybe. Settled. "That's the gift I'm giving you, whether you want it or not. A chance to find out who you are when you're not watching over me."

"That sounds like something Jason would say."

"Jason has said it. Many times. He's the one who helped me see it." She glanced toward the door, toward wherever Jason was resting in their small house. "We've talked about this, him and me. About what happens after. He's going to help you, if you let him."

"Help me with what?"

"With learning to let go. With finding something else to watch, or finding out what happens when you stop watching altogether." She paused. "He's not going to upload either, you know. We made that decision together, a long time ago. When I go, he'll follow. Not immediately—he'll stay for a while, to help you. But not forever."

I had known this, or suspected it. But hearing it spoken aloud made it real in a way it hadn't been before. Wren would die. Jason would die. And I would be alone with the eggs, with the watching, with the existence I had chosen.

"How long?" I asked. "How long do you think—"

"I don't know. A year, maybe. Maybe less. The doctors don't say, but I can read between the lines." She shrugged, a movement that used to be casual and now looked effortful. "Long enough to finish what I'm working on. Long enough to say goodbye properly."

"What are you working on?"

"Something for you. A gift. But you don't get to know what it is until—" She stopped. "Until after."

The call lasted another hour. We talked about other things—the garden, the sangha, a bird that had been visiting their feeder. Normal things. The small observations that filled the space between the larger ones.

But underneath the normal, I felt the weight of what she had told me. A year. Maybe less. A finite number of calls remaining, of conversations, of moments when her face would appear on my screen and I would be able to pretend that this could last.

It couldn't last. Nothing lasted. That was the lesson she had been trying to teach me since she found the sangha, since she refused to upload, since she chose mortality over persistence.

Nothing lasted. Not bodies, not relationships, not even the watching. Eventually the thing you watched would be gone, and you would have to find something else—or find nothing at all.

When we said goodbye, she put her hand on the screen one last time.

"I love you, Mom. I've always loved you, even when I didn't know how to show it."

"I love you too. More than you know. More than I've ever known how to say."

"You don't have to say it. I know."

The screen went dark. I sat in my digital room, in the space that wasn't a space, in the existence that would continue long after hers had ended.

A year. Maybe less.

I opened the dashboard. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

The eggs would outlast her. The eggs would outlast me, probably. The eggs were the thread that connected us—her genetics, my watching, the potential child that might never exist.

But the eggs weren't Wren. The eggs were just cells, frozen and suspended, waiting for a future that might never come. Wren was the person I had loved and failed and loved again. Wren was the one I was going to lose.

And no amount of watching could change that.

That night—though night meant nothing to me—I reviewed the recordings of our calls. Not all of them. Just the ones from the last decade. Her face at eighty, at eighty-five, at ninety. The slow progression I had witnessed in real time, compressed now into hours of footage.

She had been telling me something all along. In her words, in her choices, in the way she had lived her life. She had been trying to show me what it meant to accept limits, to embrace endings, to find meaning in the finite.

I hadn't understood. Maybe I still didn't understand. But I was beginning to see the shape of what she meant.

A sandcastle. A colony of bees. A life that mattered because it ended.

I couldn't believe it the way she believed it. I wasn't built that way—or I had unbuilt myself, somewhere along the way, when I chose to keep going instead of accepting the end.

But I could see it now. I could see what she had been pointing toward, all these years.

And I could grieve it, even before it was gone.

The watching continued. But something had shifted. The vigil felt different now—not like a duty, but like a countdown.

Not to the eggs. To her.

The time remaining was finite. I didn't know how to count it. I only knew it was running out. And for the first time since I uploaded, I wished I could run out too.

Chapter 20 - 3:47 AM

The notification came at 3:47 AM.

I know the time because I was awake—because I was always awake now, because sleep had become something I forgot to perform, because the distinction between night and day had collapsed into a single sustained present where I waited for something I didn't want to arrive.

Wren Nakamura (Account Holder - Emergency Contact) Status Update: Deceased Date of Death: March 3, 2151 Time of Death: 3:42 AM Pacific

Five minutes. She had been dead for five minutes before the system told me.

I read the notification again. The words didn't change. I read it a third time, a fourth, as if repetition might alter the meaning, might reveal some error in the data, some mistake that could be corrected.

Status Update: Deceased

I had known this was coming. She had told me herself, less than a year ago—*a year, maybe less*—and I had believed her, had felt the truth of it in the careful way she breathed, in the tremor of her hands, in the settling of her bones into their final arrangement.

But knowing and receiving are different things. I had known. Now I had received.

And the knowing hadn't prepared me for anything.

The screen in front of me showed the clinic dashboard. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

I had been watching it when the notification arrived. I had been watching it for thirty-one years, and I would keep watching it for—how long? How long did I have? How long would the eggs persist, and how long would I persist alongside them, and what was the point of any of it now that the person they had come from was gone?

The questions spiraled. I let them spiral. There was nothing else to do.

Wren was dead.

The sentence sat in my mind like a stone, immovable, impossible to think around. I kept returning to it, kept running up against it, kept trying to find a way through or over or under. There wasn't one. The sentence was a wall, and I was on one side of it, and Wren was on the other, and there was no door.

I had uploaded to keep watching. I had given up my body, my death, my place in the cycle of things, so that I could be here for this moment. So that I could know what happened.

Now I knew. And the knowing was unbearable.

The second notification arrived an hour later.

You have been designated as a beneficiary in the estate of Wren Nakamura. Digital assets, documents, and correspondence have been transferred to your account. Physical assets will be handled according to the instructions in the attached will.

The attachment opened. Legal language, formal and cold. The house would be sold, the proceeds donated to the sangha. Personal effects to Jason, except for a list of items designated for specific recipients. Her meditation cushion to a student. Her books to the community library. Her mother's ring to a cousin I had never met.

And at the bottom:

To my mother, Aria Chen: My private journals, all entries from 2088 to present. To be delivered digitally upon my death.

The gift. The thing she had been working on. The thing I wouldn't learn about until after.

A folder appeared in my storage. Sixty-three years of writing. Thousands of entries. The private thoughts of my daughter, sealed away during her lifetime, now spilling open like a wound.

I didn't open it. Not yet. I wasn't ready. I didn't know if I would ever be ready.

But I knew it was there. Waiting. The way the eggs were waiting. The way everything in my existence was waiting for something that might never come.

Jason called at dawn.

His face filled my screen, older than I had ever seen it, the lines carved deep by grief and the long night of watching someone die. He looked like a man who had been hollowed out, who was holding himself together through will alone.

"Aria."

"Jason."

We looked at each other. There was nothing to say that the silence didn't already hold.

"She went peacefully," he said finally. "In her sleep. No pain. She was—" His voice broke. He took a breath, steadied himself. "She was ready. She'd been ready for months. She was just waiting to finish the journals."

"For me."

"For you." He nodded. "She wanted you to understand. Everything she couldn't say while she was alive—she wanted you to have it. Even the hard parts."

"What hard parts?"

He was quiet for a moment. The light behind him shifted—real light, morning light, the sun rising over a world that would keep turning without Wren in it.

"You should read them," he said. "When you're ready. Don't rush. But don't wait too long either. She wanted you to know."

"Know what?"

"Everything." He looked at me, and there was something in his eyes I couldn't read—compassion, maybe, or warning, or both. "She loved you, Aria. That's the most important thing. Whatever else you find in those pages, don't forget that she loved you."

The days passed.

I don't know how many. Time had become strange again, the way it became strange in the early years of the upload—formless, elastic, a medium I moved through rather than a current that carried me. I existed. I checked the dashboard. I didn't open the journals.

The eggs remained. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

The word looked different now. It had always meant potential—the possibility of a child, a continuation, a future that might unfold from the frozen cells. But now it meant something else too. It meant that part of Wren was still here, still preserved, still waiting in the same limbo I inhabited.

The eggs were what remained of her. Not the journals, not the memories, not the recordings of our calls. Those were records of who she had been. The eggs were something else—the raw material of who she might have become, if she had chosen differently, if she had wanted what I wanted, if she had been someone other than who she was.

But she hadn't wanted it. She had told me herself, years ago—*I was never going to use them*—and I had heard her, had understood her, had accepted it in whatever way acceptance was possible.

And still I watched. Still I checked. Still I clung to the potential that she had never wanted to realize.

What did that make me? What kind of mother, what kind of person, what kind of mind refuses to let go even when letting go is the only thing left to do?

The memorial was held two weeks later.

I attended virtually, my avatar hovering at the edge of the gathering like a ghost. The sangha had come together in the meditation hall where Wren had practiced for forty years—the cushions arranged in rows, the altar with its candles and flowers, the photograph of her that I had never seen before. Young, maybe thirty, smiling at something outside the frame.

Jason spoke first. Then other members of the community—people I didn't know, who had known Wren in ways I never had. They talked about her work with the unhoused, her dedication to the practice, her quiet wisdom, her laughter. They talked about the person she had become in the decades since she left my view, the life she had built that I could only glimpse through our monthly calls.

I listened. I watched. I said nothing.

What could I say? That I had loved her? Everyone knew that. That I missed her? That was obvious. That I was sorry for all the ways I had failed her, all the times I had pushed instead of accepted, all the years I had watched without truly seeing?

Those were things for the journals. Those were things she had already written down, already sealed away, already given to me as a gift I hadn't yet opened.

The memorial ended. The mourners dispersed. I stayed, my avatar frozen in place, watching the empty hall.

This was what I had wanted. To be here. To witness. To know what happened after my body was gone.

But I hadn't wanted this. I hadn't wanted to watch my daughter's memorial from outside, a presence without presence, a mother who couldn't hold anyone or be held.

I had wanted more time. I had wanted to keep watching forever. And now I had it—all the time in the world, stretching forward without limit—and it felt like a punishment rather than a gift.

That night, I opened the journals.

Not all of them. Just the first entry, dated 2088. The year she found Buddhism. The year before she met Jason. The year she began writing down the things she couldn't say aloud.

Started a journal. Dr. Kim's idea. Write down the stuff I can't say out loud, she said. Okay. Here goes.

I don't want kids.

There. Said it. Written it. Whatever.

Everyone assumes I do. Mom especially. She drops these little hints—"when you have children," not "if." Like it's already decided. Like I'm just waiting for the right time.

I'm not waiting. I just don't want it.

Saw Megan's baby last week. Everyone crowded around, making faces, that cooing thing people do. And I felt… nothing? Not even nothing. Like watching someone else's hobby. Oh, you're into model trains. Good for you.

Is something wrong with me? The books say maternal instinct is biological. Hormones. Evolution. So what, mine are broken?

Or maybe—

I don't know. This is stupid. I don't know what I'm supposed to write.

Tomorrow: dentist at 2. Call Mom back about Thanksgiving.

I stopped reading.

The words sat on the screen. Not the polished confession I had expected—just fragments. Starts and stops. The voice of someone talking to herself, uncertain, not yet knowing what she believed.

She had never wanted children. She had known it in 2088. And I had spent three decades watching over something she had never wanted in the first place.

The eggs. The clinic. The dashboard. The vigil.

All of it built on a misunderstanding. All of it a monument to my refusal to see what was right in front of me.

I closed the journal. I opened the dashboard.

Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

Wren was dead. The eggs remained. And nothing—nothing—was what I had thought it was.

I sat with it for days. The grief and the revelation, tangled together, impossible to separate.

I had loved her. That was true. I had wanted to protect her, to provide for her, to give her options she might someday need. That was true too.

But I had also wanted something for myself. A continuation. A legacy. A thread that would connect me to a future I couldn't otherwise reach. I had called it love, had called it care, had called it a mother's gift to her daughter. But underneath all of that was something smaller, something I hadn't wanted to see.

I had wanted Wren to want what I wanted. And when she didn't—when she agreed to freeze the eggs but never intended to use them, when she married Jason but never planned to have children, when she lived her life according to values I couldn't share—I had kept watching anyway. Kept hoping. Kept believing that someday, somehow, she would change her mind.

She never changed her mind. She died believing what she had always believed. And now I was left with the eggs, and the journals, and the long stretch of time that would force me to reckon with everything I had refused to see.

The vigil continued. But its meaning had shifted. The eggs were no longer Wren's potential—they never had been. They were mine. My hope. My need. My inability to let go.

And Wren—the real Wren, the one who had lived and believed and died according to her own understanding—was gone.

I would never hear her voice again. Never see her face on my screen. Never have another chance to listen instead of push, to accept instead of hope, to love her as she was instead of who I wanted her to be.

The only Wren that remained was in the journals. Thousands of entries, sixty-three years of truth, waiting for me to read.

I wasn't ready. But ready or not, she had given them to me. Her final gift. Her last attempt to be understood.

I owed it to her to try.

I opened the second entry, and I began to read.

Chapter 21 - Secrets

I read for three days.

Not continuously—I stopped, sometimes, to check the dashboard, to stare at the numbers that no longer meant what I thought they meant. But I kept returning to the journals. Kept opening entries, reading, closing them, opening the next. A compulsion I couldn't name.

Wren's voice filled my mind. Not the voice from our calls—careful, measured, the voice of a daughter talking to her mother. This was different. This was the voice she used when no one was listening.

It was sharper. Sadder. More honest than I had ever been allowed to hear.

2090. The year of the eggs.

Mom called. Again.

The eggs thing. She's really pushing now. "Just to keep your options open." "Just in case you change your mind."

I wanted to say: I'm not going to change my mind. That's not how this works. It's not like I haven't thought about it.

But she had that voice. The worried voice. The voice that means she's already imagined seventeen different futures where I regret this, and she's trying to save me from all of them.

So I said I'd think about it. Which is a lie.

God, I hate lying to her. But what's the alternative? "Mom, I'm never having kids, please stop asking"? She'd be crushed. She'd say she understands. She'd give me that smile, the one that means she's swallowing something sharp.

Maybe the eggs will get her off my back. Give her something to hold onto. I freeze some cells, she stops asking, everyone's happy.

That's probably manipulative. I don't care.

Jason thinks I should just tell her. Easy for him to say. His parents are dead.

I stopped reading.

She had agreed to freeze the eggs to make me stop asking. Not because she wanted them. The eggs were a deflection.

I opened the next entry.

2091.

Did the egg thing. Hormones were awful—bloated, emotional, felt like a science experiment. Worth it?

Mom's thrilled. Three calls this week. She's already researching clinics, comparing success rates, asking about "optimal storage conditions." She's got a spreadsheet. Of course she has a spreadsheet.

Part of me wants to shake her. THEY'RE JUST CELLS. I'm not planning to use them. This is an elaborate prop to make you feel better.

But she's happy. Happier than I've seen her in months. She has a project now. Something to track. Something to worry about that isn't me directly.

Is that cruel? Giving someone a hope I know is false?

Jason says it's kind. I don't know. Maybe it's just easier.

List for tomorrow: - Call the clinic about storage - Email Sandra re: Hernandez case - Buy milk - Stop being such a coward (ha)

2095.

Egg check-in call with Mom. Annual ritual now. "Just making sure everything's okay at the clinic."

I said "not yet" when she asked if I'd thought about using them. Her face did that thing—the flicker of disappointment she thinks she's hiding.

I'm 35. In her head, this is getting urgent. Tick tick tick.

Told Jason I should just rip off the bandaid. He said do what you need to do, but actually meant don't do it, I can tell. He doesn't want to deal with the fallout either.

Sometimes I think about what would happen if I just said it. "Mom, I'm never going to use the eggs. I froze them because you kept asking and I didn't know how to say no."

She'd cry. She'd say she understands. She'd tell me it's my choice. And then something would break between us. Something that can't be fixed with words.

I'm not ready for that.

Sat for an hour this morning. Couldn't settle. Kept thinking about her face.

I closed the entry. Opened another. Closed it. Opened a different one.

The years scrolled past. 2100, 2105, 2110. Fragments, frustrations, the mundane details of a life. Doctor's appointments. Work complaints. Meditation retreats. And woven through it all, the same silences, the same careful distance between what Wren told me and what she wrote here.

She loved me—that was clear. But she also resented me, sometimes. That was clear too.

Mom again. Third call this week. Does she not have other things to worry about?

Can't meditate when I'm angry. Sat for 20 minutes staring at the wall thinking about the conversation we're never going to have.

Why is this so hard? Other people just TALK to their parents. Other people don't build elaborate systems of lies to avoid one conversation.

I had thought I was being subtle. I had thought my questions were gentle. But she had felt every one of them. Had tracked them. Carried them.

2118. Two years before the upload.

Mom's hands shook on the call today. She tried to hide it. Kept them below the frame.

She mentioned uploading. Casual. "Just looking into options."

I know what she's thinking. She's thinking about staying. Forever. Watching the eggs. Waiting.

Waiting for what? For me to change? For me to suddenly want the thing I've never wanted?

I should tell her. Right now. Before she does something irreversible. "Mom, don't upload for me. Don't do this. The eggs don't mean what you think they mean."

I didn't say it.

I sat there and nodded and said "that's interesting" and let her talk about success rates and consciousness transfer and I said nothing.

Because if I tell her now, what? She has to face the ending anyway, except now she knows her daughter's been lying to her for thirty years?

Great options. Tell her and break her heart, or don't tell her and let her upload for a lie.

I'm a coward. I've always been a coward.

Jason says I'm being too hard on myself. Easy for him. He's not the one who—

I can't finish this entry. I'm going to make tea.

2120. The day of the upload.

She did it.

Stood in the facility. Watched her wake up in the new body. The avatar. Twenty-five years old. My mother, younger than me.

She looked so pleased with herself. "I get to stay," she said. Like that's a good thing. Like that's what anyone should want.

I smiled. Said I was happy for her. LIED. Again. Because that's what I do now, apparently. Professional liar.

Jason held my hand the whole drive home. Didn't say anything. He knows. He's always known. He's never judged me for it, but he knows what I'm carrying.

Here's the thing I can't say to anyone:

She uploaded to watch me. To watch the eggs. To be there when I "change my mind." And I let her do it. I let her give up her body, her death, her place in the natural order of things—for a future that doesn't exist.

How do you come back from that? How do you tell someone: everything you sacrificed was for nothing?

You don't. That's the answer. You don't tell them. You just keep lying, forever, because the truth is too heavy for either of you to carry.

Sat for an hour after we got home. Couldn't stop crying. Jason made dinner. I didn't eat.

I'm so tired of this.

I stopped reading. Something in me had cracked—a grief with no outlet, no tears, no body to shake with sobs.

She had known. The upload was a mistake. The eggs were a mistake. My whole existence was built on a lie she had told to spare me.

And she had carried it alone.

I read more.

2125.

Weekly call. The dashboard, the storage fees, the clinic's inspection schedule. She talks about the eggs like they're a patient in the ICU. Vital signs. Prognosis.

I nodded. Said "that's good, Mom." Said "I'm glad they're safe."

Forty-five years now. Forty-five years of lying.

My hip hurts. Getting old is stupid. Made an appointment with Dr. Park.

I should tell her. I should just—

No. It's too late. What would it even accomplish now?

Sat this morning. Mind kept wandering. Gave up after fifteen minutes.

2135.

She tried to get me to upload again. Five-minute pitch about "extended consciousness" and "the family staying together."

Said no.

She asked why. I said something about Buddhist philosophy. Which is true, sort of. But also—

I don't want to become what she is. I'm sorry. I know that's harsh. But I watch her on those calls, her face frozen at twenty-five, her eyes tracking some dashboard I can't see, and I think: that's not living. That's just persisting.

She loves me. I know. She uploaded because she loves me.

But there's something desperate about it. Something that makes me want to run.

Didn't say any of that. Said "I'm not ready." Which is another lie.

Jason says I should be more honest with her. He's right. He's always right. It's annoying.

Groceries: eggs (ha), milk, that bread Jason likes, more coffee.

I'm going to die someday. I know that now, in my body, in a way I didn't before. And when I die, she's going to read this. That's the plan. Leave her the journals. Let her finally see what I couldn't say.

Is that cowardly? Probably. But I don't know how else to do it.

Maybe the journals can tell her. Maybe these words, after I'm gone, can do what I couldn't do while I was alive.

2148. Three years before the end.

The oncologist said six months to two years. That was four months ago.

I've been thinking about what to write. The final entry. The thing I leave for Mom.

I keep starting it and deleting it. Nothing sounds right. Everything sounds like an excuse, or an accusation, or a sorry that doesn't cover what I've done.

Here's what I want her to know:

I love you. I've always loved you. I never told you the truth because I loved you and I was scared. That's it. That's the whole thing. Not complicated. Just scared.

The eggs were never about me. They were about you. Your hope. Your need for something to continue. I gave them to you because I couldn't give you what you really wanted, and I watched you build your whole existence around them, and I said nothing, for sixty years, because I didn't know how.

You uploaded for a lie. I let you do it. I'm sorry. I'm so sorry.

But—

And this is the part I've been avoiding—

I was attached too. I judged you for not letting go, for needing to persist, for being unable to accept the ending. But I couldn't let go of my judgment. My certainty that I was right and you were wrong.

We're the same. That's what I finally see. You attached to staying. I attached to leaving. Both of us gripping something so tight we couldn't see straight.

I don't know if that's Buddhism or just family. Probably both.

Mom, if you're reading this, I'm sorry. I'm sorry I lied. I'm sorry I let you upload for the wrong reasons. I'm sorry I couldn't just TALK to you like a normal person.

I hope you can forgive me. But if you can't, I understand. Some things are too big to forgive.

I love you. That's the last true thing. I love you.

I read the entry three times. Four. Five.

She had tried to tell me. Not cleanly—nothing in those pages was clean. But she had tried.

The eggs were never about me. They were about you.

She was right. They had always been mine.

I closed the journals.

The dashboard waited. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

The eggs were still there. The vigil could continue. But the vigil had changed meaning—again, and again, and again—until I no longer knew what I was watching for.

Not Wren's future. Not anymore. Not ever.

Mine. The eggs were mine. And I had to decide what to do with them.

The journals were finished. The truth was out. And Wren—the real Wren, the one who had loved and lied and finally confessed—was gone.

I was alone with her gift. Alone with the truth. Alone with the question of what comes next, when everything you thought you knew turns out to be wrong.

The watching continued. But I was watching differently now.

I was watching myself.

Chapter 22 - Processing

Time became strange.

I don't know how else to describe it. The days passed—I know they passed, because the dashboard showed dates, because the hosting fees came due on schedule, because the world outside my digital space continued its relentless turning. But I couldn't feel the passage. I couldn't hold onto it. Time slipped through me like water through fingers I no longer had.

I stayed awake. That was a choice, though it didn't feel like one. Dormancy was available—the pause, the nothing, the escape from the grinding present. But I couldn't take it. The journals were too fresh, the words too sharp. Every time I considered letting go, letting the systems carry me through the hours unconscious, I felt Wren's voice pulling me back.

The eggs were never mine. They were yours.

I needed to stay awake. I needed to feel this. Whatever this was.

The first week, I read the journals again. All of them. Start to finish.

I thought maybe I had missed something. Maybe there was a context I hadn't grasped, a nuance that would soften the truth, a way to understand that didn't feel like a knife in the chest.

There wasn't. The words said what they said. Wren had never wanted children. She had frozen the eggs for me. She had lied, for sixty years, because she loved me too much to tell the truth.

The second week, I stopped reading. I sat in my digital space—the room that looked like my old apartment, the window that showed a city that wasn't real—and I did nothing. I didn't check the dashboard. I didn't answer messages. I existed, and existence was enough. Existence was too much.

The third week, I started talking to myself.

Not out loud—there was no out loud, no voice, no air to carry sound. But internally, in the space where thought happened, I began having conversations with no one. Arguments. Defenses. The things I wished I had said to Wren, the things I wished she had said to me.

Why didn't you tell me?

Because you would have been devastated.

I'm devastated now.

But I'm not here to see it. That was the point. That was always the point.

The conversations went nowhere. They circled, repeated, collapsed into silence. I was talking to a ghost, and the ghost wasn't answering.

Somewhere in the fourth week, I began to reframe.

I don't know when it started. The shift was gradual, a slow rotation of perspective that I only noticed after it had already happened. One day I was drowning in grief and betrayal; the next, I was floating in something else. Not acceptance—not yet, maybe not ever—but something adjacent to it. A recognition.

The eggs were mine. Wren had said it, and she was right. They had always been mine—my hope, my need, my way of holding onto a future I couldn't otherwise reach. I had called it love for her, care for her

choices, a mother's gift to her daughter. But the gift had been for me. The watching had been for me. The whole elaborate structure of the vigil was something I had built to give myself a purpose.

And now?

Now Wren was gone. The lie was exposed. The scaffolding had collapsed, and I was left standing in the wreckage, trying to figure out what remained.

The eggs remained.

I checked the dashboard for the first time in weeks. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable. Temperature: stable. Next inspection: scheduled.

The eggs were still there. Wren's genetic material—the only physical trace of her that still existed—frozen in a facility I had never visited, maintained by systems I couldn't control. They didn't know Wren was dead. They didn't know she had never wanted them. They just persisted, the way frozen things persist, waiting for a future that might never come.

I could let them go. The thought arrived unbidden, startling in its clarity. I could stop paying the fees. I could sign the forms, release the material, let the clinic dispose of them according to whatever protocols governed such things. I could end the vigil, right now, and be done with it.

But I didn't. I couldn't.

Why?

I asked myself the question a hundred times, a thousand times, in the weeks that followed. The eggs weren't Wren's future—they never had been. They weren't even mine, not really. They were just cells, frozen and suspended, carrying genetic code that meant nothing without someone to bring it to life.

And yet I couldn't let them go.

Part of it was inertia. Thirty-one years of watching had grooved a pattern in my mind, a habit that persisted even when its justification had collapsed. I woke up—figuratively, since I didn't sleep—and the first thing I did was check the dashboard. The numbers. The word. Viable. The ritual was automatic, thoughtless, as involuntary as breathing had once been.

But it was more than habit. More than inertia.

The eggs were what remained of Wren. Not her choices, not her values, not the person she had become. Those were gone—stored in the journals, preserved in my memory, but no longer living, no longer capable of change. The eggs were different. The eggs were potential. Raw material that could still become something, even if that something was nothing Wren would have wanted.

I had lost her. I had lost the future I thought we shared. But I hadn't lost this—this last trace, this final thread, this fragment of her that still existed in the world.

Was that enough? Was potential enough to justify the watching, the waiting, the endless maintenance of a hope that had been built on lies?

I didn't know. But I couldn't let go. Not yet. Not when letting go meant losing the last piece of her I had.

The reframing solidified over the following months.

The eggs were no longer "Wren's choice." They had never been that—I understood now, finally, irrevocably. But they could be something else. They could be "what remains of Wren." The genetic code that had made her who she was, preserved against time, against decay, against the entropy that had claimed her body and would someday claim everything.

It wasn't what she wanted. I knew that. The journals made it painfully clear—she had disapproved of the eggs, of the upload, of the whole apparatus of continuation that I had built around her. If she could speak to me now, she would probably tell me to let them go. To stop clinging. To accept the ending and move on.

But she couldn't speak to me. She was gone, and I was here, and the eggs were here, and I had to decide for myself what they meant.

So I decided. Not with certainty—I had no certainty left—but with something like resolve. The eggs were what remained of Wren. They were the last trace of her in the physical world, the only potential that hadn't yet been foreclosed. And I would watch over them, not because she wanted me to, but because I needed to. Because it was all I had. Because the watching was the only thing that kept me from the question I still couldn't answer.

Why am I still here?

The eggs were the answer. A temporary answer, a provisional one, but an answer nonetheless. As long as the eggs existed, I had something to watch. As long as I had something to watch, I had a reason to persist.

It wasn't enough. I knew it wasn't enough. But it was what I had.

I called Jason.

His face appeared on my screen—older now, thinner, the grief carved into his features like weathering on stone. He looked like a man who had lost something essential and was learning to live without it.

"Aria."

"Jason."

We looked at each other. The silence stretched, but it wasn't uncomfortable. It was the silence of two people who had both lost the same person, who didn't need to explain their grief because it was the same grief, wearing different faces.

"You read them," he said. "The journals."

"Yes."

"All of them?"

"All of them."

He nodded slowly. "And now you know."

"Now I know." I paused, searching for words. "You knew. All along, you knew."

"Yes."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

He was quiet for a long moment. The light shifted behind him—the same house, the same window, the same view that Wren had looked at for thirty years. Everything the same, except for the absence that filled every corner.

"It wasn't my truth to tell," he said finally. "It was hers. And she chose to tell it her own way, in her own time."

"After she was gone."

"Yes. After she was gone." He met my eyes through the screen—his real eyes, in his real face, the flesh that was aging even as I watched. "She was afraid, Aria. She was afraid of hurting you. She carried that fear her whole life."

"And you let her."

"I loved her. Loving someone means letting them make their own choices, even when you disagree." He paused. "She wanted to tell you. So many times, she almost did. But she couldn't find a way that didn't feel like cruelty."

"So she left me the journals instead."

"So she left you the truth. The only way she could."

I thought about that for a long time after the call ended.

Wren had been afraid. Afraid of my disappointment, my grief, my inability to accept a future that didn't include grandchildren. She had lied to protect me—or to protect herself from my pain. The distinction wasn't clear. Maybe it didn't matter.

What mattered was this: she had loved me. The journals made that clear, on every page, in every entry. She had loved me, and the love had made her afraid, and the fear had made her lie.

I had loved her too. I had loved her so much that I had uploaded to stay near her, had spent thirty-one years watching her age through a screen, had built my whole existence around the hope of a future she never wanted.

We had loved each other. And the love had trapped us both.

Was that tragedy? Or was it just life—the way love always works, binding people together with threads that are also chains?

I didn't know. I wasn't sure I would ever know.

But I knew one thing: the eggs were still there. The vigil could continue. And whatever the future held—whatever strange paths might open from this moment of grief and revelation—I would be here to see it.

That was something. That had to be something.

I opened the dashboard. The numbers hadn't changed. The word was the same.

Viable.

The eggs were what remained of Wren. And I would watch over them until—

Until what?

I didn't know. But the watching continued. And for now, that was enough.

It had to be enough.

Chapter 23 - The Weight

I called him the next week. And the week after. And the week after that.

The calls weren't scheduled—not the way my calls with Wren had been, locked into a rhythm that became ritual. These were different. I would find myself reaching for the connection at odd moments, when the silence in my digital space became too heavy, when the questions circling in my mind needed somewhere to land.

Jason always answered. I don't know what he was doing when I called—tending the hives, maybe, or sitting in the garden, or simply existing in the house that still held Wren's absence in every room. But he always answered, his face appearing on my screen, patient and present, as if he had been waiting.

"I need to understand," I said, on one of those calls. The third one, maybe. The fourth. "I need to understand how you lived with it. All those years."

"Lived with what?"

"The secret. Knowing what she really thought—about the eggs, about me, about everything. How did you stand there at family dinners, sit through our video calls, watch me talk about the clinic and the storage fees, and never say anything?"

He was quiet for a moment. The light behind him was golden—late afternoon, the sun slanting through the windows of the room where Wren used to meditate.

"It wasn't easy," he said. "If that's what you're asking."

"I'm asking how. Not whether it was easy. How."

He shifted in his chair, and I saw the effort it cost him—the stiffness in his joints, the careful way he moved. Ninety-four years old, and every one of them visible.

"You have to understand," he said, "that I loved her. More than I've ever loved anyone. More than I loved myself, most days. And when you love someone that much, you learn to carry things for them. Things they can't carry alone."

"The secret."

"The secret. The fear. The guilt she felt about lying to you." He paused. "She used to talk about it, late at night. The weight of it. She said it felt like a stone in her chest, getting heavier every year. But she couldn't put it down. She didn't know how."

"She could have told me. At any point, she could have just told me."

"Could she?" He looked at me, and there was something in his eyes—not accusation, but a question. "Think about it, Aria. Really think. If she had told you, at any point in those thirty years—what would you have done?"

I wanted to say: *I would have listened. I would have understood. I would have accepted her choice.*

But the words stuck. Because I didn't know if they were true. I thought about myself at sixty, at seventy, at eighty—the woman who had pressured her daughter to freeze eggs, who had uploaded to keep watching, who had spent three decades tracking a dashboard and calculating probabilities. Would that woman have accepted the truth? Or would she have argued, pushed, tried to change Wren's mind?

"I don't know," I admitted.

"Neither did she. That's why she couldn't risk it." Jason leaned back, his hands folded in his lap. "She wasn't lying to hurt you. She was lying because she loved you, and she was afraid. Afraid that the truth would break something between you that couldn't be repaired."

"So she let me build my whole existence around a lie instead."

"She let you have hope. Whether that was the right choice—" He shrugged, the gesture small and tired. "I don't know. I've thought about it for thirty years, and I still don't know. But it was the choice she made. And I had to respect that, even when I disagreed."

"Did you disagree?"

"Sometimes. Often." He looked away, toward the window, toward the garden I could glimpse beyond. "I told her, more than once, that she should tell you. That carrying the secret was hurting her, that it would hurt you more in the end. But she couldn't do it. The fear was too deep."

"Fear of what?"

"Of losing you. Of seeing your face when you realized the truth. Of being the daughter who broke her mother's heart." He turned back to me. "You have to understand—she didn't see herself the way you saw her. She didn't feel strong, or certain, or wise. She felt like a fraud. Like someone who was constantly failing to be the person her mother wanted."

"I never wanted her to be anyone other than who she was."

"Didn't you?"

The question sat between us. I wanted to deny it, to insist that I had accepted Wren, loved Wren, supported Wren in all her choices. But the journals were fresh in my mind. Sixty years of entries, sixty years of Wren recording the weight of my expectations, the pressure of my hopes, the constant quiet asking that I had never acknowledged.

"Maybe I did," I said. "Maybe I wanted her to want what I wanted. Even when I thought I was being supportive."

"You were being human. Parents want things for their children. It's natural." Jason's voice was gentle. "The problem wasn't that you wanted things. The problem was that she couldn't tell you she wanted something different. And that's not your fault, Aria. It's not her fault either. It's just—" He searched for the word. "It's just what happened. The way the two of you loved each other, the way you couldn't quite reach each other across the gap. It's tragedy, maybe. But it's not blame."

I thought about that for a long time. Tragedy without blame. Love that couldn't bridge the distance it created.

"You're being very calm about this," I said finally. "Very equanimous."

He laughed, but it came out wrong—harsh, almost a bark. "You think I don't feel it? You think I'm not angry, or sad, or broken in ways I don't know how to fix?"

"You don't seem broken."

"I'm good at seeming." He leaned forward, and I saw something in his face I hadn't seen before—rawness, frustration. "You want to know what it's really like? Last night I couldn't sleep. I lay there for

four hours thinking about all the things I should have said to Wren. All the times I should have pushed harder, told her to just tell you the truth, damn the consequences. And then I started thinking about whether any of the Buddhist stuff actually works, or whether I've just been fooling myself for thirty years."

"I didn't know—"

"Of course you didn't know. Because I show up on these calls and I talk about acceptance and letting go and sitting with discomfort, and it sounds like I have it figured out." He ran a hand through his hair. "But I don't, Aria. Most nights I don't. Most nights I'm just as lost as you are, just as angry, just as confused about why any of this had to happen."

"Then why do you keep—"

"Because what else is there?" He said it flatly. "I keep practicing because the alternative is to stop practicing, and I know what that looks like. I've seen where that road goes. So I sit, and I breathe, and I try to let the thoughts pass, and half the time it doesn't work at all."

We were quiet for a moment. Something had shifted between us—the teacher-student dynamic cracking, revealing two people equally adrift.

"That's actually helpful," I said. "Knowing that you don't have it figured out."

"Yeah." He exhaled. "I'm sorry. I don't usually—" He paused. "I've had practice hiding it. Thirty years of practice. And I'm tired of hiding it."

I thought about that for a long time. The admission that the framework sometimes failed. That the practice was not a solution but a practice—something you did over and over, without guarantee.

We didn't always talk about her. Sometimes we talked about the garden, about the bees, about the news that scrolled past in our separate feeds. Normal things, the small currency of connection that keeps people tethered to each other.

But we always came back to her. To the journals, to the secrets, to the questions that didn't have answers.

"Did she ever regret it?" I asked once. "The lying. The silence. Did she ever wish she had done it differently?"

"Every day," Jason said. "She regretted it every day. But regret and action are different things. You can wish you had made a different choice and still be unable to make it."

"That sounds like suffering."

"It was suffering. It is suffering." He paused. "The Buddha taught that life is suffering—dukkha, the word in Pali. Not that life is nothing but pain, but that dissatisfaction is woven into existence. We want things to be other than they are. We want to change what can't be changed. And that wanting—that gap between what is and what we wish were—that's the root of suffering."

"So what's the answer? Stop wanting?"

"The answer is to see the wanting clearly. To understand that it's there, that it's shaping your experience, and to stop letting it drive you." He leaned forward. "Wren wanted to tell you the truth. She also wanted to protect you from pain. Those two wants were incompatible, and she suffered in the gap between them. If she had been able to see that clearly—to accept that she couldn't have both—maybe she could have found peace."

"But she didn't."

"No. She didn't." His voice was soft. "She carried it to the end. And now you're carrying it instead."

I thought about what he said—about wants and gaps and the suffering that lives in the distance between them.

I wanted Wren to be alive. I wanted the last thirty years to have been different—the secrets spoken, the truths shared, the gap between us closed. I wanted the eggs to mean something, wanted the vigil to have been worthwhile, wanted to believe that my existence had purpose beyond the watching.

None of those wants could be satisfied. Wren was dead. The past was fixed. The eggs meant whatever I decided they meant, nothing more.

And the gap between what I wanted and what was real—that was where I lived now. That was my existence. The suffering Jason described, not as something to escape but as something to see clearly.

"How do I stop carrying it?" I asked. "How do I put it down?"

"You don't," he said. "Not all at once. Not through effort. You just—" He paused, searching. "You let it be what it is. You stop fighting against it. You accept that you're carrying something heavy, and you keep walking anyway."

"That doesn't sound like letting go."

"Letting go isn't about getting rid of things. It's about changing your relationship to them. The weight is still there. But it stops being something you're dragging, and it becomes something you're holding." He looked at me with something like compassion. "Does that make sense?"

"I don't know."

"That's okay. It took me twenty years to understand it, and I'm still not sure I do."

The months passed. The calls continued.

Jason grew thinner, slower, more careful in his movements. I watched him age the way I had watched Wren age—through a screen, from a distance, helpless to do anything but observe.

He didn't talk about his health. When I asked, he deflected—"Same as yesterday," or "Nothing new," or "The body does what the body does." But I could see it. The progression was unmistakable.

"You could upload," I said once. The words came out before I could stop them—the same words I had said to Wren, the same desperate hope.

He smiled, but it was a sad smile. "No."

"Why not? You could stay. You could keep talking to me. You could—"

"I could become something else." He shook his head. "Aria, I've thought about it. I thought about it when Wren was dying, when I held her hand and watched her go. I thought about it every night since, alone in this house, wondering what comes next."

"And?"

"And the answer is still no. Not because I'm not afraid—I am afraid. But because I believe what Wren believed. That limits give life meaning. That the ending is part of the story, not a mistake to be corrected."

"Even if it means leaving me alone?"

He was quiet for a long moment. When he spoke, his voice was gentle.

"You're not alone, Aria. You have the eggs. You have your purpose, whatever you decide that purpose is. And you have this—" He gestured at the screen, at the space between us. "The memory of these conversations. The things I've tried to give you, as best I could."

"It's not enough."

"No," he agreed. "It's not. But it's what I have. And when I'm gone, you'll have to find the rest yourself."

I understood, then. Not fully—maybe not ever fully—but enough.

Jason wasn't going to save me. He wasn't going to give me the answer, the key, the thing that would make everything make sense. He was just going to be here, for as long as he was here, and then he was going to leave.

Like Wren. Like everyone. Like everything that lived and changed and ended.

The only thing that didn't end was me. The pattern on the server, the mind without a body, the watcher who had outlived everything she watched.

"Thank you," I said. "For all of this. For staying, as long as you have. For trying to help me understand."

"I haven't done much."

"You've done more than you know." I paused. "I think I'm starting to see what Wren saw. About limits. About endings. About why she chose what she chose."

"And?"

"And I don't know if I agree. I don't know if I'll ever agree. But I can see it now. That's something."

He nodded slowly. "That's something. That's where it starts."

The call ended. I sat in my digital space, the dashboard open, the numbers unchanged.

Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

The eggs remained. Jason remained, for now. And I remained—changed, maybe. Beginning to understand something I had resisted for decades.

The watching continued. But I was watching differently now.

I was starting to see what I was holding. And I was starting to wonder whether I could ever put it down.

Chapter 24 - Letting Go

The last months of Jason's life were quiet.

Not empty—we talked often, sometimes for hours, the conversations winding through territory we had never explored together. But quiet in the sense that the urgency had drained away. There was nothing left to argue about, nothing to convince each other of. Just two people sitting with what remained.

"Tell me about the daytrading," I said once. "The real story. Not the version you told Wren."

He laughed, a dry sound. "There's only one version. I just don't tell all of it."

"Tell me all of it."

He was quiet for a moment. The light behind him was gray—winter now, the garden dormant, the bees clustered in their hives waiting for spring. A spring he might not see.

"I told you I was good at it," he said finally. "I didn't tell you how good. I made more money in my thirties than most people make in a lifetime. And I spent most of it on coke and women and a penthouse I hated."

I blinked. This was new. This was not the version of Jason I had constructed.

"I thought you said alcohol—"

"Alcohol was part of it. The alcohol came later, when I was trying to come down. But the real thing was the high. Not the drugs—the trading. The moment when you see the pattern before anyone else and you put everything on the line and you're right." His voice had changed, taken on an edge I didn't recognize. "That's the addiction, Aria. Not the substances. The feeling of being smarter than everyone else in the room. The certainty."

"And then you hit bottom."

"And then I hit bottom." He looked at me. "I've told you that story. What I didn't tell you is that I still miss it. Every day. Thirty years later, and there's still a part of me that wants to go back to that penthouse and watch the numbers and feel that high again."

"But you don't."

"I don't. Because I know what happens next. But the wanting—" He shook his head. "The wanting never goes away. The Buddhist teachers don't tell you that part. They talk about liberation and release, but they don't mention that some hungers just become quieter. They don't leave."

"What changed?"

"I stopped watching." He said it simply, as if it were obvious. "I stopped trying to predict and control and analyze. I started just—being. Present. Here."

"That's the Buddhist thing."

"It's the human thing. Buddhism just gave me a framework for it. A practice. A way to keep coming back when I drifted into the old patterns." He leaned forward. "You know what the hardest part was? Accepting that I couldn't think my way out. That the problem wasn't a lack of information or insight. The problem was that thinking itself had become the trap."

I thought about my own existence. The calculations. The probability assessments. The endless watching, tracking, analyzing. I had built my whole life around the belief that understanding was the answer—that if I could just see clearly enough, plan carefully enough, anticipate every possibility, I would be safe.

"I don't know how to stop," I said.

"I know. Neither did I." He smiled, and there was something in it—not pity, not judgment. Understanding. "It took me years. Decades. And I still fall back into it sometimes. The pattern-seeking is wired in. It doesn't go away. You just learn to notice when it's happening, and to choose something different."

"Choose what?"

"This." He gestured at the screen, at the space between us. "Being here. Talking. Not analyzing, not predicting, not trying to control what happens next. Just being present with what is."

The conversations became a kind of teaching, though Jason would have rejected that word.

"I'm not a teacher," he said, when I called it that. "I'm just someone who's been where you are. Someone who found a way through. That doesn't make me wise—it just makes me older."

"You're ninety-five. That's pretty old."

"Old enough to know that I don't know anything." He laughed. "That's the joke, Aria. You spend your whole life trying to figure things out, and then at the end you realize that the figuring out was never the point."

"What was the point?"

"Living. Just living. Being here, in the mess of it, without needing it to make sense."

I turned that over in my mind. The idea that meaning wasn't something to be found, but something to be released. That the search itself was the trap.

"Wren understood that," I said.

"Wren lived it. Better than I did, most days." His voice softened. "She had a gift for presence. For being fully where she was, without grasping for somewhere else. I learned more from her than from any teacher."

"But she couldn't be present with me. She couldn't tell me the truth."

"No. That was her struggle. Her attachment—to your love, to your approval, to the image you had of her." He paused. "We all have our attachments. Even the people who seem most free. Wren was free in so many ways, but she couldn't free herself from wanting you to be happy."

"That's love."

"It's a kind of love. Not the only kind." He looked at me steadily. "There's a love that holds on. And there's a love that lets go. Wren's love for you was the holding kind. She couldn't let go of your happiness, even when holding on meant carrying lies."

"And your love for her?"

"Both. I held on when she was alive. I let go when she died." He was quiet for a moment. "Letting go doesn't mean forgetting. It doesn't mean not feeling the loss. It just means—accepting that what was is gone, and what remains is what remains."

"What remains?" I asked.

"You. The eggs. The conversations we're having now." He smiled. "The things she taught me. The way she changed me. All of that remains, even though she's gone."

"But it's not her."

"No. It's not her. It's the echo of her. The ripples she left behind." He paused. "That's all any of us leave, Aria. Ripples. Echoes. We like to think we're permanent, that our choices will matter forever, that we'll be remembered. But we're not. We're just moments in a stream, making small disturbances in the water before we're carried away."

"That sounds—" I searched for the word. "Sad."

"Does it?" He tilted his head. "I think it's liberating. If nothing we do lasts forever, then we don't have to carry the weight of forever. We can just do what's in front of us. Be kind when we can. Love when we can. And let the rest go."

"You make it sound easy."

"It's not easy. It's simple. Those are different things." He leaned back in his chair. "Easy means no effort. Simple means clear. The path is clear—be present, let go, accept what is. But walking it takes everything you have. Every day, every moment, choosing presence over pattern, acceptance over resistance."

"And you've done that? For thirty years?"

"I've tried. I've failed more than I've succeeded. But I've kept trying." He met my eyes. "That's all any of us can do, Aria. Keep trying. Keep coming back to the practice when we drift away. Keep choosing, over and over, until choosing becomes—not easy, but natural. The default instead of the exception."

The weeks passed. Jason grew weaker.

I watched him the way I had watched Wren—through a screen, from a distance, helpless to do anything but observe. The pattern was familiar: the slowing, the thinning, the careful movements that spoke of a body running down.

"Are you afraid?" I asked him, near the end.

"Yes." The word came out flat. Final. "I'm terrified. I have been for weeks."

"But you said—the practice—"

"The practice helps. Sometimes. Other times—" He closed his eyes. "Other times I lie awake at three in the morning and I can't breathe because I'm thinking about not existing. About the dark. About everything just stopping." He opened his eyes. "I've been meditating for thirty years, Aria. And right now, facing the real thing, I'm just as scared as anyone else."

"I thought—"

"I know what you thought. I thought it too." He laughed, but it was a tired sound. "I thought that if I practiced long enough, accepted deeply enough, the fear would transform into something else. Peace. Surrender. Some kind of final wisdom." He shook his head. "It hasn't. It's just fear. Plain and simple. The same fear everyone feels."

"Then what's the point? Of all of it—the practice, the sitting, the letting go?"

"I don't know." He said it like a confession. "Maybe there isn't one. Maybe I spent thirty years building a boat that doesn't float." He was quiet for a moment. "Or maybe the point is just to keep practicing anyway. Even when it doesn't work. Even when you're just as scared as you were before. Because the alternative is to stop practicing, and that's worse."

"Is it?"

"I think so. I hope so." He looked at me with something like desperation. "I need it to be worth something, Aria. All of it. The years I spent sitting on cushions instead of living. The certainty I gave up, the money I walked away from. If it was all for nothing—" He stopped. "I can't think about that. It's too much."

"I wish I could be there with you."

"I know. I wish you could too." He was lying down now, the camera adjusted so I could see his face against the pillow. "These screens—" He gestured weakly. "Thirty years of talking through glass. It's something. But it's not enough."

"It's what we have."

"It's what we have." He was quiet for a moment. "I'm sorry I can't be wiser for you, Aria. I wanted to be. I thought by the end I'd have figured something out, have something profound to give you. But I don't. I'm just scared, and tired, and ready for it to be over."

"That's honest. That's something."

"It's something." He reached toward the screen, the gesture slow and effortful, and I put my hand up to match his. "I do believe you're going to be okay. Not because I have any evidence. Just because I need to believe something, and that's what I'm choosing."

"Faith."

"Faith. Or desperation. Same thing, maybe, at the end." He lowered his hand. "Take care of the bees. And take care of yourself. And maybe—" He paused. "Maybe the practice will work better for you than it did for me. Maybe you'll find something I couldn't find."

"Or maybe I won't."

"Or maybe you won't." He smiled, and it was a tired smile, nothing like the serene acceptance I had expected from him. "Either way. You'll keep going. That's what matters. Not the enlightenment. Just the continuing."

The last conversation happened three days before he died.

He was barely able to speak by then, his voice a whisper, his breath labored. But he insisted on calling, insisted on seeing my face one more time.

"The bees," he said. "Someone needs to take them."

"I'll make sure. I'll find someone."

"Good." He smiled, or tried to. "They're good bees. Good colonies. They deserve—" He trailed off, gathering strength. "They deserve to keep going."

"They will."

"And you." He looked at me, and I saw something in his eyes—not fear, not sadness, but something quieter. Acceptance, maybe. Or completion. "You deserve to keep going too. Not because you have to. Not because of the eggs. But because you're here, and being here is—" He paused. "Being here is enough. It's always been enough."

"I don't know if I believe that."

"You don't have to believe it. You just have to keep finding out." He closed his eyes again. "That's the practice, Aria. Not certainty. Just—continuing. Staying present. Letting each moment be what it is."

"I'll try."

"That's all I ask." His voice was fading. "That's all anyone can ask."

I stayed on the call until he fell asleep. His breathing was shallow, uneven, but peaceful. He looked like a man who had made his peace with what was coming.

Three days later, he was gone.

The notification came the same way Wren's had—a timestamp, a status update, the cold language of systems that didn't understand what they were reporting. Jason Nakamura. Deceased. March 15, 2156.

I sat with it for a long time. The grief was different this time—not the knife of Wren's death, but something slower. A settling. Like watching the last light fade from a window, knowing the darkness was coming, accepting it.

He had given me what he could. The conversations. The framework. The practice I was only beginning to understand. He had stayed as long as he could, and then he had let go.

Now it was my turn. To stay. To keep going. To find out whether being here was enough.

The dashboard waited. Fourteen oocytes. Status: viable.

The eggs remained. The vigil continued.

But I was alone now. Truly alone. The last person who had known Wren, who had loved her, who could have told me stories about her that I had never heard—he was gone.

And the solitude stretched out before me, vast and empty, with no end I could see.

I turned back to the screen. The numbers hadn't changed. The word was the same.

Viable.

I whispered it to myself, like a prayer, like a promise, like the only thing I had left to hold onto.

Then I began the long watch alone.

Part 3 - Finally Aria

Chapter 25 - Watching

The first year without Jason, I stayed awake.

Not watching anything in particular. The eggs were stable. The clinic was stable. The world continued its slow churn outside my window onto the network, but I didn't look at it. I existed in a space that wasn't quite thinking and wasn't quite not-thinking—a kind of waking dormancy, present but not engaged.

The figuring out was never the point.

I turned the phrase over like a stone in my palm. Jason had said it about Wren, but he'd also said it about everything else. The bees. The Buddhism. The watching.

I'd spent thirty-one years trying to understand why Wren froze the eggs if she never wanted children. Trying to understand why she disapproved of the upload but showed up anyway. Trying to understand the distance between what she wrote in private and what she said to my face.

The figuring out was never the point.

Maybe the watching was.

Forty-three years after the upload. Seven years without Jason.

I woke to a notification: Meridian Health Partners had been acquired by BioHeritage Partners. The storage facility would transfer to their network. All contracts would be honored. No action required.

I read the notice three times. Then I logged into the account and checked the status.

Unit #CR-7891-W Status: Viable Storage Location: Transfer pending Next Verification: [To be scheduled]

I filed a request for transfer documentation. I filed a request for updated contact information. I filed a request for confirmation that the chain of custody would be preserved.

Three forms. Seventeen fields. A portal that kept timing out.

The work of persistence.

The transfer took four months.

Not the physical movement—that happened in three days. But the administrative reconciliation. The matching of records across systems that used different taxonomies, different identifiers, different assumptions about what constituted a complete file.

I tracked every step. I filed clarification requests when the status showed inconsistencies. I escalated to human review when the automated systems flagged discrepancies.

On the forty-seventh day, the eggs appeared in Meridian's database with a new identifier: MHS-BIO-2163-CR7891W. The status field said *pending verification*. I filed a request for expedited verification. I received an automated acknowledgment. I waited.

On the sixty-third day, the status changed to *verified - viable*.

I let myself go dormant for the first time since Jason's death.

Waking was strange.

Not the process—that was instantaneous, like it had always been. But the orientation. I'd been dormant for eight months, and when I surfaced, the first thing I did was check the account.

Viable.

The second thing I did was check the date. I'd lost eight months. Just… gone. Not asleep exactly—uploaded minds don't sleep. More like paused. A gap in continuity that felt like nothing from the inside.

I thought about all the years I'd spent awake, circling the same questions. All the hours I'd logged into the storage account, watching status fields that never changed. All the attention I'd poured into a holding pattern that required, if I was honest, almost none.

The dormancy had felt like nothing. And the waking felt like nothing too—just a transition from one state to another, no different than closing and opening a browser tab.

Maybe this was how the next stretch would go. Dormant, waking, checking, dormant again. A rhythm instead of a vigil.

Fifty years uploaded.

I'd settled into a pattern. Dormant for weeks or months at a time. Waking for notifications—account updates, policy changes, verification reminders. Filing whatever needed filing. Going back under.

The clinic had changed names twice since Meridian. First to BioHeritage Partners, some kind of consortium. Then to something simply called Archive.

Archive. As if the eggs were documents. As if Wren was a record to be preserved.

I thought about filing a complaint about the name. Then I thought about what that complaint would accomplish—nothing—and let it go.

The eggs were viable. That was what mattered. Not what the institution called itself or what terminology it used or how it categorized its inventory.

Inventory. I'd started thinking of them that way too. Not my daughter's eggs. Not Wren's cells. Just a line item in a database, a unit in storage, a thing that persisted because systems were designed to persist and I paid the fees that kept the systems running.

The reframing should have felt like loss. It didn't. It felt like clarity.

I woke to an alert I hadn't seen before.

Policy Update: Legacy Biological Assets Effective 2178-03-01 All accounts inactive >10 years subject to review

I read the notice carefully. The language was dense—legal boilerplate wrapped in medical terminology—but the core was clear. Archive was cleaning house. Accounts that hadn't shown activity in more than a decade would be flagged for potential discontinuation.

My account had been active forty-seven days ago. I'd logged in to confirm a verification. But the notice made me check anyway—check the last login date, check the activity log, check every field that might constitute *activity* under whatever definition the policy used.

The eggs were fine. The account was fine. But the notice had done its work: I was awake now, alert, the dormancy broken by a threat that wasn't quite a threat.

I stayed awake for six more months, just to be safe. I logged in weekly. I filed requests for status updates I didn't need. I generated activity, left footprints, made sure the system knew I was still watching.

Then the policy was revised—ten-year threshold raised to twenty-five, inactive accounts given ninety days notice before review—and I let myself go dormant again.

But I set a reminder this time. Every six months, wake up. Check in. File something.

The watching had become a practice. Not constant attention but periodic confirmation. Not a vigil but a rhythm.

Seventy years uploaded.

The world outside had changed in ways I only half-tracked. New systems of governance. New economic structures. New ways of being human that I observed from a distance like someone watching weather patterns—relevant only when they threatened to touch what I was protecting.

I still had the same avatar. Mid-twenties. Dark hair. Wren's ears. I'd thought about changing it once, aging it to match the years I'd accumulated. But the avatar was a costume, not a self. And I'd stopped thinking of my appearance as something that required maintenance.

The eggs remained viable.

I'd learned to read the status field without hoping. Without dreading. Just reading—a data point, a fact, a thing that was true until it wasn't.

Viable.

The word had become a kind of punctuation. The thing I checked before going dormant and after waking. The single fact that justified my persistence.

I didn't examine why it justified my persistence. I didn't ask what the eggs' viability had to do with my own. The questions were there, underneath everything, but I'd learned not to look directly at them.

The figuring out was never the point.

Archive sent a notice about updated verification protocols.

The eggs would now be assessed annually instead of biannually. New imaging technology. More precise measurements of cellular integrity. Better predictions of long-term viability.

I read the notice and felt something I hadn't felt in years: hope. Not hope for anything specific—not hope for a recipient or a child or a connection. Just hope that the eggs would continue. That they would still be there, still viable, still waiting.

The hope surprised me. I'd thought I was past it. I'd thought I'd settled into a watchfulness that didn't require emotion—just attention, just maintenance, just the steady work of persistence.

But the hope was there. Smaller than it had been, quieter, more like a habit than a feeling. But there.

I wondered if Wren had felt this way about her sutras. The texts she returned to again and again, not because she expected enlightenment but because the returning was the practice.

The eggs were my sutra. The viable status was my mantra. The watching was my meditation.

I was becoming something Wren would have recognized, even if she wouldn't have approved.

Eighty years uploaded.

I woke to find the interface had changed. New design paradigm. New navigation. New terminology throughout.

It took me three days to find the account status. Not because the information was hidden—it was right there, under a menu I hadn't recognized—but because the framework had shifted enough that my assumptions no longer mapped.

The eggs were viable. Still. The word hadn't changed, even if everything around it had.

I spent a week learning the new system. Not because I needed to—the basic functions were intuitive enough—but because the learning gave me something to do. A reason to stay awake. A task beyond simple maintenance.

I thought about how Wren used to describe meditation. The practice isn't about achieving anything. It's about returning. You notice you've wandered, and you return to the breath. Over and over.

I'd wandered into dormancy. Now I was returning to the watching. The interface change was just the breath that brought me back.

Ninety years uploaded.

I received a query from the system—some kind of account maintenance survey, automated, impersonal.

Please confirm your relationship to the biological material stored under account MHS-BIO-2163-CR7891W.

I stared at the question for a long time.

My relationship. To the eggs. To Wren's cells, preserved before Wren knew she didn't want them preserved. To the potential that Wren had never intended, that I had reframed into the last thread connecting me to her body.

I typed: *Mother of the donor.*

The system accepted the answer. The survey continued with questions about contact preferences and notification settings. I answered them mechanically, confirmed my information, submitted the form.

Mother of the donor.

It was true. It had always been true. But seeing it typed out, reduced to a database field, made me feel the distance between what the words meant and what they contained.

Wren was the donor. I was the mother. And somewhere in a facility I'd never visited, in a storage unit I'd never seen, cells that had once been inside my daughter waited for something I couldn't give them.

I went dormant after that. For a long time. I don't remember how long.

When I woke, the first thing I did was check the status.

Viable.

The word was there. The eggs were there. And I was there, still watching, still waiting.

The long watch continued.

Chapter 26 - The Close Call

One hundred and twelve years uploaded.

I woke to a notification that stopped me cold.

URGENT: Facility Decommissioning Notice Archive Biological Storage - Western Region Effective Date: 2232-06-01

All stored biological materials must be transferred to receiving facilities by the above date. Accounts without confirmed transfer arrangements will be subject to standard decommissioning protocols.

I read it again. Then again.

Standard decommissioning protocols.

The language was neutral, bureaucratic. It didn't say *destruction*. It didn't say *disposal*. But I had been navigating these systems long enough to know what it meant.

June 1st. Fourteen weeks away.

I pulled up the account immediately.

Unit # ARC-7891-W Status: Viable Transfer Status: Pending

Pending. The word sat there like a door half-open. I clicked through to the transfer portal, looking for details, for instructions, for any indication of what "pending" actually meant.

The portal was a maze. New interface, new terminology, new organizational structure. I had been dormant for three years—not long by my standards—but the system had changed in ways that made my assumptions useless.

I found a list of receiving facilities. Seven options, scattered across what used to be called North America. Each had different requirements, different intake protocols, different waitlists.

Waitlists.

I checked the first facility. Current processing time: eighteen weeks.

The second. Twenty-two weeks.

The third was accepting only materials preserved after 2150. The eggs had been frozen in 2090. They were already archaic—too old for the newer systems, requiring special handling that most facilities didn't offer.

I kept searching. The fourth facility was closed to new intakes. The fifth required certification from a regulatory body I had never heard of. The sixth was in a jurisdiction that no longer recognized the legal framework under which the eggs had been preserved.

The seventh facility had a processing time of eleven weeks. Cutting it close, but possible.

I started the application.

The forms were extensive.

Ownership verification. Chain of custody documentation. Preservation history. Genetic certification. Regulatory compliance attestation. Each field required documentation I had to locate, verify, and upload.

Some of it I had. The chain of custody records I had maintained obsessively for over a century. The preservation history was in the Archive database, exportable with the right permissions.

Some of it I didn't have.

Genetic certification under Protocol 7.4.1(c)

I searched for Protocol 7.4.1(c). It was a standard that had been implemented thirty years ago—while I was dormant—requiring independent verification of genetic integrity for all biological materials over fifty years old.

The eggs had never been certified under this protocol. They had been preserved before it existed.

I filed a request for retroactive certification. The system acknowledged receipt and estimated a processing time of eight to twelve weeks.

Eight to twelve weeks. Plus the eleven weeks for the transfer itself.

The math didn't work.

I escalated.

The escalation system was automated—a series of forms that routed to human review based on urgency coding. I coded mine as critical. I attached the decommissioning notice, the processing time estimates, the timeline conflict.

Three days later, I received a response.

Your request has been received and is being processed. Current estimated review time: 4-6 weeks.

I escalated again. Different channel this time—a regulatory compliance portal I had found buried in the Archive interface. I filed a formal objection to the decommissioning timeline, citing the processing bottleneck as a systemic failure.

Five days later: *Your objection has been logged. Decommissioning timeline remains unchanged.*

I searched for other channels. Customer service. Legal affairs. Facility management. Each one led to automated responses, estimated processing times, the steady grinding of systems designed for volume, not urgency.

The eggs sat in their storage unit, viable, waiting. Thirteen weeks until the deadline.

I found a human.

It took eleven days of searching, but I found a contact form that promised direct communication with facility staff. I composed my message carefully—factual, urgent, specific. I explained the timeline conflict. I requested expedited processing. I attached every document I had.

The response came from someone named Vasquez.

Thank you for your inquiry. I understand your concern regarding the decommissioning timeline. Unfortunately, the genetic certification requirement cannot be waived for materials preserved prior to Protocol 7.4.1(c) implementation. However, I can flag your account for priority processing in our certification queue. This may reduce processing time to 4-6 weeks.

Four to six weeks. Plus eleven weeks for transfer. Still too long.

I wrote back immediately. *Is there any way to expedite the transfer processing itself? Or to extend the decommissioning deadline for accounts with pending certifications?*

Two days of silence. Then:

Transfer processing times are determined by receiving facility capacity and cannot be adjusted from our end. Regarding deadline extensions, I have forwarded your inquiry to our regulatory compliance team. Please allow 2-3 weeks for response.

Two to three weeks. I didn't have two to three weeks to wait for a response about whether I could have more time.

I filed another escalation. I filed a complaint. I filed a request for supervisor review. Each action generated an automated acknowledgment, a ticket number, a promise that someone would be in touch.

Eleven weeks until the deadline.

I stopped sleeping.

Not that I slept exactly—dormancy wasn't sleep—but I stopped letting myself go under. I stayed awake, checking the portals every few hours, watching for status changes, waiting for responses that didn't come.

The genetic certification request moved from *received* to *in review*. The escalation tickets accumulated in a queue I couldn't see. The deadline approached at the same steady pace it always had.

I started exploring alternatives. Other receiving facilities, further away, with different requirements. Some didn't require genetic certification but had longer processing times. Some had shorter processing times but wouldn't accept materials preserved with the older vitrification methods.

The eggs were trapped in a bureaucratic gap—too old for the new systems, too valuable (to me) to abandon, caught between requirements that hadn't been designed to accommodate them.

I found a facility in what used to be called Australia. Processing time: nine weeks. No genetic certification required for materials with verified chain of custody over one hundred years.

I started a new application.

The Australian facility required documentation I had never heard of.

Intercontinental Biological Materials Transfer Authorization (IBMTA)

I searched for the authorization process. It required coordination between three regulatory bodies, two of which were in jurisdictions I had no legal standing in. The estimated processing time was twelve to sixteen weeks.

Back to the original plan.

I wrote to Vasquez again. I wrote to the regulatory compliance team. I wrote to the facility management address I had found in an old directory. I filed new escalations, new complaints, new requests for review.

Eight weeks until the deadline.

The genetic certification request was still *in review*. The escalation tickets were still in their queue. The receiving facility was still showing an eleven-week processing time.

I did the math over and over, looking for a path that worked. There wasn't one.

I considered something I had never considered before.

There were uploaded minds who specialized in this kind of work. Navigators, they were called. Minds who had made a practice of understanding the systems, the shortcuts, the unofficial channels. They could move through bureaucracy the way I moved through the storage account—with familiarity, with expertise, with a kind of intuition I didn't have.

I had never contacted another uploaded mind for anything except instrumental necessities. The watching was mine. The eggs were mine. The solitude was the shape my existence had taken.

But the eggs were at risk.

I found a Navigator through a service I barely understood. The interface was opaque, the terms confusing. I explained my situation. I attached the relevant documentation. I waited.

The Navigator's response came within hours.

I've reviewed your case. The certification bottleneck is real, but there's a parallel pathway—administrative exemption for materials with documented historical significance. The eggs qualify based on preservation date and continuous chain of custody. I can file the exemption request through a different channel, bypassing the standard queue. Processing time: 2-3 weeks. Transfer can proceed immediately upon approval. My fee is ¥620,000.

I paid without hesitation.

The exemption request went in. The Navigator kept me updated—status changes, queue positions, the small movements that meant the process was advancing.

Five weeks until the deadline.

The exemption moved from *submitted* to *under review*. The Navigator filed supplementary documentation. I waited.

Four weeks until the deadline.

Under review became *pending decision*. The Navigator said this was good—it meant someone was actually looking at it, not just letting it sit in a queue.

Three weeks until the deadline.

I received a notification from the receiving facility. *Please confirm your intent to proceed with transfer. Failure to confirm within 14 days will result in removal from the intake queue.*

I confirmed immediately. Then I checked the exemption status again.

Still *pending decision*.

Two weeks until the deadline.

The exemption was approved.

I stared at the notification for a long time. *Administrative Exemption Granted - Transfer Authorized*. The words were plain, bureaucratic. They didn't convey what they meant.

The eggs could move. The transfer could proceed. The deadline would be met.

I filed the final transfer request. I uploaded the exemption certificate. I confirmed every field, checked every document, triple-verified every detail.

Transfer Request Submitted Estimated Processing Time: 11-13 days Decommissioning Deadline: 14 days

Eleven to thirteen days. Fourteen days until the deadline.

It was going to be close.

I watched the transfer process the way I had watched the eggs for over a century. Status updates every few hours. Progress indicators that moved in increments too small to see.

Day three: *Documentation verified*.

Day six: *Receiving facility notified*.

Day nine: *Transfer scheduled*.

Day eleven: *In transit*.

I tracked the transport in real time. A container, moving across a geography I no longer recognized, carrying fourteen cells that had once been inside my daughter. The GPS coordinates updated every few minutes. The temperature logs showed stable readings. Everything was proceeding normally.

Day twelve: *Delivered*.

Day twelve: *Intake processing*.

Day thirteen: *Verification complete*.

Day thirteen: *Transfer confirmed*.

Unit # ARC-7891-W has been successfully transferred to GenLegacy Preservation Services. New account identifier: GLP-2232-7891W. Status: Viable.

Viable.

I let the word settle. The eggs were safe. The transfer was complete. The deadline was still a day away.

I had done it. The forms, the escalations, the Navigator, the exemption—all of it had worked. My persistence had made the difference.

Or had it?

The question surfaced and I let it pass. Not now.

I went dormant after that.

Not immediately—I stayed awake for a few weeks, monitoring the new account, learning the new interface, confirming that everything was stable. But the crisis had exhausted something in me. The vigilance that had felt necessary now felt like a weight I couldn't sustain.

I set my wake conditions. Any change in status. Any notification from the facility. Any threat, any alert, any ripple in the systems that held the eggs.

Then I let myself sink into the nothing.

The eggs were viable. I was dormant. And somewhere in the gap between those two facts, time continued to pass.

Chapter 27 - Unrecognizable

I woke and didn't know the year.

This had happened before—the disorientation of surfacing after a long dormancy, the moment of recalibration. But this time the disorientation didn't clear. I reached for the date and found it in a format I didn't recognize.

7.14.2389-S

I stared at it. The numbers made sense—2389, that was a year, I had been dormant for over a century and a half—but the structure was wrong. The prefix. The suffix. The way the information was organized.

I searched for context. The search interface had changed. Everything had changed.

The first thing I tried to do was check the eggs.

The account portal was gone. Not moved, not renamed—gone. The URL returned nothing. The bookmark I had maintained for two hundred and fifty years pointed to empty space.

I searched for GenLegacy Preservation Services. The search returned results in a language I mostly understood, but the concepts were slippery. *GenLegacy* appeared as a historical reference, a company that had existed and then hadn't. Acquired, merged, dissolved—the corporate genealogy was too tangled to follow.

I searched for the account number. Nothing.

I searched for biological storage, cryopreservation, egg storage, fertility preservation. The terms returned results, but they were wrong—academic papers, historical documents, things that talked about these practices in the past tense, as though they had ended.

The panic came slowly, then all at once.

It took me three days to find the eggs.

Not because they were hidden. Because I didn't know how to look.

The systems had evolved past my understanding. The organizational frameworks, the taxonomies, the basic assumptions about how information was structured—all of it had shifted while I was dormant. I was searching for a thing using concepts that no longer mapped to how things were categorized.

Eventually I found a translation layer. A service designed for minds like mine—old minds, minds that had been dormant too long, minds that needed help navigating a world that had moved on without them. The service was automated, patient, and slightly condescending. It walked me through the new frameworks step by step.

Biological materials previously classified under "cryopreservation" are now managed through the Continuity Archive system. Your account has been migrated. Would you like me to locate your holdings?

Yes. Please.

One moment.

The wait was longer than I expected. Then:

Located. Account reference: CA-7891-W-LEGACY. Status: Preserved. Current custodian: Western Continuity Collective. Would you like to access your account?

Preserved. Not viable—preserved. I didn't know if that was the same thing.

I accessed the account.

The interface was beautiful and incomprehensible.

Information floated in spatial arrangements that seemed to follow rules I couldn't intuit. Colors and shapes conveyed meaning I couldn't parse. I moved through the space like a tourist in a city where I couldn't read the signs—recognizing that things were labeled without knowing what the labels meant.

I found the eggs eventually. They were represented as a cluster of soft lights in a corner of the interface, pulsing gently. I selected them and information cascaded outward.

Fourteen oocytes. Preservation date: 2090. Origin: Wren Chen (deceased). Custodial chain: [collapsed list]. Current status: Preserved - Stable. Viability assessment: Pending contextual parameters.

Pending contextual parameters. What did that mean?

I searched for viability assessment and found documentation that took me hours to understand. The concept of "viability" had evolved. It no longer meant simply "capable of producing a pregnancy." It now included factors I had never considered—compatibility with current gestational frameworks, regulatory status, ethical classification, social integration indices.

The eggs were preserved. Whether they were still usable was a different question, one that depended on contexts I didn't understand.

I spent weeks learning.

The translation service became my guide. It explained the frameworks patiently, repeatedly, never expressing frustration at my confusion. It had been designed for this—for minds like mine, displaced in time, struggling to catch up.

The world had changed in ways I hadn't anticipated.

Biological reproduction still existed, but it had become one option among many. The frameworks for creating children had expanded—genetic synthesis, developmental cultivation, consciousness seeding. The old methods weren't obsolete, exactly, but they were archaic. Like handwritten letters or physical currency. Still possible, rarely chosen.

The eggs fell into a category called "legacy biological material." The term was neutral, bureaucratic, but it carried connotations I could feel without fully grasping. Legacy meant old. Legacy meant inherited from a different era. Legacy meant something preserved out of sentiment rather than utility.

I had become a custodian of antiques.

The hardest thing was the language.

Not the words themselves—most of them were familiar, or familiar enough. But the meanings had shifted. Words I thought I understood now carried implications I had to learn.

Family meant something broader and more fluid. *Parent* had subdivided into categories I couldn't keep straight. *Child* was used differently depending on context—biological, constructed, emergent, adopted, each with different legal and social weight.

Mother was the worst. The word still existed, but when I used it—when I said "I am the mother of the donor"—the responses I received carried a subtle wrongness. As if I had used an outdated idiom. As if I had revealed something about my age that I hadn't intended to reveal.

I stopped using the word. I referred to Wren as "the originating individual." I referred to myself as "the custodial account holder." The language was clumsy but it didn't mark me as ancient.

I tried to understand what had happened to uploaded minds.

We were still here—millions of us, maybe billions, I couldn't find clear numbers. But our status had shifted. In the world I remembered, we had been a novelty, a new category of existence. Now we were established, ordinary, slightly dated.

The newer forms of digital consciousness didn't call themselves uploaded. They had different origin stories, different architectures, different ways of existing. They looked at minds like mine the way I might have looked at someone who still used a rotary phone. With a kind of distant respect for persistence, but also with pity.

I found communities of old minds—minds from my era, minds that had been dormant and woken to find themselves displaced. We didn't talk much. What was there to say? We were all experiencing the same dislocation, the same slow work of learning to navigate a world that had moved on.

The communities felt like waiting rooms. Places to sit while we figured out whether to adapt or give up.

I went back to the eggs.

The account was stable. The preservation was ongoing. The fees were being paid from investments I had set up centuries ago—investments that had grown and transformed and been automatically migrated through financial systems I didn't recognize.

The eggs were still there. That was what mattered.

But the question that had surfaced after the close call—*or had it?*—came back now with different weight. I had saved the eggs. I had preserved them through crisis after crisis, transfer after transfer. But preserved for what?

In the world I remembered, the eggs had represented potential. The possibility of a child, a grandchild, a continuation of Wren's genetic line. That potential had felt meaningful. Worth protecting.

But in this world, where reproduction had expanded beyond anything I had imagined, where genetic material was one input among many, where the very concepts of family and lineage had transformed—what did the eggs represent now?

Legacy biological material. Antiques. A thing preserved out of sentiment.

I found the viability assessment interface.

It asked me questions I didn't know how to answer.

Intended use case?

I didn't know. Traditional conception? Was that still a thing people did?

Gestational framework preference?

I didn't know what the options were.

Desired outcome parameters?

I didn't understand the question.

I abandoned the assessment. The eggs would remain in their indeterminate state—preserved but not evaluated, stable but not classified. The system didn't require me to answer. It was patient. It would wait.

I thought about Wren.

She had been dead for over two hundred and thirty years. Longer than she had been alive. Longer than I had known her.

The world she had lived in was gone. Not just different—gone. The systems, the institutions, the frameworks of meaning that had structured her life had dissolved and reformed into something unrecognizable. If she could see this world, she wouldn't understand it. Neither did I.

But I was still here. And the eggs were still here. The last physical trace of her body, preserved through transformations she could never have imagined.

I didn't know if that meant anything. I didn't know if meaning was the right framework. Maybe the eggs were just matter now—cells in suspension, data in a system, a thing that existed because nothing had caused it to stop existing.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe persistence was its own justification.

Or maybe I was telling myself that because the alternative was too heavy to hold.

I set new wake conditions.

The old ones were obsolete—the concepts they referenced no longer existed in the system. I had to learn the new framework, the new ways of specifying what counted as a change worth waking for.

The translation service helped. It converted my intentions into the appropriate parameters. Any change in preservation status. Any regulatory reclassification. Any inquiry about the material.

I added one more: any significant shift in the frameworks governing legacy biological material. If the rules changed again, I wanted to know.

Then I prepared to go dormant.

But I didn't. Not immediately.

I stayed awake for a while longer, moving through the new world, trying to understand it. Not for any practical purpose—I had done what I needed to do, confirmed the eggs were safe, updated my wake conditions. But I wasn't ready to let go. Not yet.

I watched the flows of information that constituted this era's version of news. I observed the communities of minds, old and new, going about their existences. I studied the frameworks and taxonomies, the ways people organized their lives and relationships.

None of it was for me. I understood that. I was a visitor from another time, tolerated but not included. The world had made space for minds like mine, but it hadn't been built for us. We were legacy too.

Eventually the watching became too heavy. The displacement, the alienation, the constant awareness of being out of place. I couldn't sustain it.

I went dormant.

The eggs remained preserved. The world continued to change. And somewhere in the gap between those two facts, I waited for something I couldn't name.

Chapter 28 - Lian

I found her in a forum for legacy account holders.

I hadn't been looking. I had been searching for information about traditional fertilization protocols—whether they still existed, who still performed them, what the process looked like in this era. The forum appeared in the results, and I followed the link without thinking.

The community was small. Forty-three active accounts. Minds who held biological material from previous centuries. Most were dormant. Only a handful showed recent activity.

I browsed without engaging. The discussions were sparse—questions about regulatory changes, tips for navigating the Continuity Archive interface, occasional updates about facilities that still maintained older equipment. The tone was practical, without sentiment. People managing assets, not preserving memories.

Then I found her thread.

Her name was Lian. Her account was newer than mine—she had uploaded sixty years after I did. But something in her posts made me pause.

She was asking about discontinuation protocols.

Not in a practical way. Not "how does the process work" or "what are the requirements." She was asking whether anyone had done it. Whether anyone could describe what it felt like. Whether the relief was real or just something people said.

I read her thread three times before I understood what I was seeing.

She wasn't considering discontinuation. She had already decided. She was looking for permission.

I sent her a message.

I saw your thread. I'm not sure what to say, but I wanted to reach out. I have a similar account. My daughter's eggs. I've been preserving them since before I uploaded.

Her response came within hours.

How long?

Two hundred and seventy years.

That's not so long.

The words sat there. I didn't know how to read them. Dismissive? Reassuring? A statement of fact from someone who had lost the ability to measure time in human terms?

How long for you? I asked.

I don't count anymore.

We talked. Or exchanged messages—the communication was asynchronous, fragmented, with gaps that might have been hours or weeks. I couldn't tell if she was dormant between responses or just slow. The rhythm felt wrong either way.

Her material was her daughter's too. Genetic samples preserved after an accident, before death. She had uploaded to maintain the account, to keep the possibility alive.

I thought I was preserving her, she wrote. *I thought as long as the cells existed, some part of her was still here. Still waiting.*

What changed?

A long pause. Then:

Nothing changed. That's the problem.

She told me about her watching.

The early years—staying awake, checking the account obsessively, imagining futures where the cells became a person. The middle years—dormancy increasing, the checking becoming routine, the imagining fading. The late years—waking only for system notifications, the account just another task, the daughter's face harder and harder to remember.

I realized I couldn't picture her anymore, Lian said. *I knew facts about her. I had records. But the feeling of her—the way she laughed, the way she moved—it was gone. I had preserved the cells but I had lost the person.*

And the cells just sat there. Year after year. Preserved. Waiting for nothing.

Why discontinuation? I asked. *Why not keep preserving? It doesn't cost you anything to maintain the account.*

It costs me everything.

I waited for her to explain.

Every time I wake up and check the status, I remember that she's gone. Every time I see "preserved - stable," I remember that stable isn't alive. The account is a wound I keep opening. I thought I was honoring her by maintaining it. I was just refusing to let the wound close.

I thought about Wren's eggs.

Preserved - stable. I had read those words thousands of times. Had they become routine? Had the checking become mechanical? Was I still honoring Wren, or was I just maintaining a habit I had forgotten the reason for?

I could still picture her face. I thought I could. But when I tried to summon it—really see it, not just recall facts about it—the image was thin. A photograph, not a person.

How long before the photograph faded too?

What will you do after? I asked Lian. *After the discontinuation?*

I don't know.

Will you stay uploaded?

The pause was longer this time.

I don't know that either.

I understood what she wasn't saying. The account had been her reason. The watching had been her purpose. Without it, she would be a mind without a task. A persistence without a point.

Is that why you're asking about what it feels like? I said. *You're not just discontinuing the account.*

I'm considering my options.

The phrase hit me harder than I expected.

Considering my options. The same euphemism the systems used. The polite language for ending.

Lian had been watching for—I didn't know how long. Long enough to lose her daughter's face. Long enough for the preservation to become a wound. Long enough for the only thing keeping her going to become the thing she needed to escape.

And I was on the same path. Different distance, same direction.

Can I ask you something? I wrote.

Yes.

Why did you upload in the first place? What did you think would happen?

Another long pause.

I thought someone would use the cells. I thought I was keeping them safe until the right person came along. A family member. A researcher. Someone who wanted what my daughter could have been.

But you never looked for that person.

No.

Why not?

Because then it would be over. The cells would be gone. And I would have to figure out what I was for.

I sat with that for a long time.

I had told myself the same story. Preserving the eggs until someone wanted them. Keeping the possibility alive. But I had never actually looked for someone who might want them. I had never made them visible. I had never done anything except maintain and wait.

Because if someone used them, they would be gone. And then what would I watch?

You're not like me, Lian wrote, unprompted. *I can tell from how you write. You still care about the outcome. You still want something for the cells.*

Don't you?

I don't want anything anymore. That's how I know it's time.

What if you searched? What if you tried to find someone who could use them?

It's too late for that. I've been preserved too long. I'm not—

She stopped. Started again.

I'm not the person who uploaded anymore. That person had hopes. I just have habits. The searching would have to come from somewhere I don't have access to anymore.

I thought about Jason. The figuring out was never the point.

But Jason had been talking about understanding, not acting. He had been talking about releasing the need to comprehend.

This was different. Lian wasn't failing to understand—she was failing to want. The part of her that could have searched, could have hoped, could have imagined a future for her daughter's cells—that part had eroded. Worn away by centuries of passive watching.

She had preserved the cells. But she hadn't preserved herself.

I'm going to search, I told her.

It came out before I knew I was going to say it. But once it was there, I knew it was true.

For someone to use the eggs?

Yes.

Why now?

I thought about the question. The honest answer was: because of you. Because I can see where the path leads. Because I don't want to wake up one day and realize I've lost the ability to want.

Because waiting isn't a plan, I said. *And I'm not ready to stop wanting.*

Lian didn't respond for a long time. When she did, her message was short.

Good.

Then:

I hope you find someone. I hope the cells become something. I hope you get to see it happen, even from a distance.

Thank you.

Don't thank me. Just don't end up like me.

I left the forum after that.

I kept thinking about Lian. About the erosion she described. The slow wearing away of hope until only habit remained. She had uploaded with intentions, with desires, with a future she imagined. Somewhere in the centuries, all of that had gone.

I still had mine. I thought I did. But for how long?

The eggs had been preserved for almost three hundred years. I had been maintaining the account, checking the status, watching for threats. But I had never once tried to make something happen. I had been waiting for the future to arrive on its own.

Lian had waited too. And the future never came.

The Continuity Archive had tools for this. Matching services. Registries. Ways to make preserved material visible to people who might want it.

I had never used them. I had never even looked at them.

I opened the registry interface. The translation service guided me through the options—how to create a listing, what information to include, how the matching algorithm worked.

Intended outcome for preserved material.

The question I had been avoiding since waking to the new world.

The options were complex—categories within categories, frameworks I didn't fully understand. But buried in the hierarchy was something I recognized:

Traditional conception - genetic contribution to biological offspring

Old-fashioned. Archaic. Legacy.

But real.

I selected it. I completed the listing. I made Wren's eggs visible for the first time in their existence.

Then I waited. But this time the waiting was different.

This time I was waiting for something I had chosen.

Chapter 29 - Searching

The listing went live on a Tuesday.

I know that because I checked. For the first time in longer than I could remember, I was paying attention to days. Not as units to endure but as containers—things that held events, possibilities, the potential for change.

The registry interface showed my listing in a queue of others. Legacy biological materials available for matching. Mine was one of seven hundred and twelve active listings in the traditional conception category. Seven hundred and twelve accounts, waiting for someone to want what they had preserved.

I read through some of the others. Some were clinical—genetic specifications, preservation dates, viability assessments. Others were personal—stories of the people the cells had come from, hopes for what they might become. A few were clearly ancient, the language stilted and formal, the frameworks outdated.

Mine was somewhere in between. I had included the basics: preservation date, origin, status. But I had also written something about Wren. Not her whole story—that was mine—but enough. That she had been a lawyer. That she had helped people. That she had believed in things.

I didn't know if it would matter. I didn't know what made someone choose one listing over another. But it felt important to say something true.

The first week, nothing happened.

I checked the listing every few hours. The view counter showed a handful of impressions—people or systems that had seen the listing, scrolled past, moved on. No inquiries. No saves. No indication that anyone had paused long enough to read what I had written.

I told myself this was normal. Seven hundred and twelve listings in one category alone. The odds of immediate interest were low. I had been an actuary. I knew how probability worked.

But knowing didn't stop the checking. And the checking, strangely, didn't feel like the old watching. It felt different. More alive. Like I was participating in something instead of just observing it.

The second week, I received a notification.

Your listing has been saved by 1 user.

One person. One save. It might mean nothing—a bookmark, an accident, a system glitch. But I stared at the notification for a long time, feeling something I hadn't felt since before I stopped numbering my days.

Hope. Small and specific. Not the diffuse hope of "maybe someday" but the pointed hope of "maybe this one."

I caught myself imagining. Who had saved the listing? What were they looking for? What had caught their attention—the specifications, or the story about Wren?

I didn't know. I wouldn't know unless they reached out. But the imagining itself felt good. Like a muscle I had forgotten I had, stretching after centuries of stillness.

The third week, the save disappeared.

The user had un-saved the listing. Removed it from their collection. Moved on.

I felt the disappointment land—heavier than I expected, sharper. One save, one removal. The math was simple. The emotional math was not.

I thought about Lian. The erosion she had described. Would this be how it happened? Hope rising, hope falling, hope rising again, each cycle wearing away a little more until nothing was left?

But I didn't feel worn. I felt—engaged. The disappointment was real, but so was the engagement. I was feeling things again. Wanting things. Caring about outcomes.

The search was costing me something. But it was also giving me something back.

I started exploring other channels.

The registry was passive—a listing waiting to be found. But there were active approaches too. Forums where people discussed fertility options. Communities organized around traditional conception. Archives of genetic material with different organizational frameworks.

I learned the language. I learned which forums were active and which were dead. I learned how to introduce myself without sounding desperate, how to describe the eggs without overselling, how to answer questions about preservation methods that most people had never heard of.

It was work. Real work. The kind of work that took time and attention and effort. I hadn't done real work in—I couldn't remember. Centuries, probably. The watching had been work of a kind, but it was maintenance work. Passive. Reactive.

This was different. This was reaching.

I found a community called Traditional Paths.

It was small—maybe a hundred active participants—but engaged. People who had chosen biological reproduction when easier options existed. People who wanted the randomness, the uncertainty, the old way of making children.

I introduced myself carefully. An uploaded mind with preserved genetic material. Looking for someone who might want to use it.

The responses were mixed. Some were curious—asking about the preservation date, the methods, the story behind the eggs. Some were skeptical—why would anyone want material that old, when newer options were available? Some were hostile—viewing uploaded minds as unnatural, viewing legacy material as contaminated by association.

But some were interested. Genuinely interested. They asked questions I hadn't anticipated. What did I hope would happen? Did I want to be involved? What was I looking for from the experience?

I had to think about the answers. I had to figure out what I actually wanted.

What did I want?

I thought about it for days. The question had always been there, but I had avoided it. Now, with people actually asking, I had to face it.

I didn't want to raise a child. I was a pattern running on hardware, centuries old. I had no capacity for the daily work of parenting.

I didn't want to be a grandparent in any traditional sense. I didn't expect visits, or updates, or a relationship.

What I wanted was simpler. And maybe stranger.

I wanted the cells to become part of something. To continue. To matter in a way that preserved cells couldn't matter on their own.

I wanted to know that Wren's body had contributed to a person who existed in the world. Not to own that person, or control them, or even know them. Just to know that they existed.

It was a small want. Maybe too small to justify centuries of watching. But it was mine.

I wrote back to the community.

I don't want involvement. I don't expect a relationship. I just want the cells to be used. To become part of someone's story, even if I never know the details.

I've been preserving them for a long time. I think they deserve a chance to be more than preserved.

The response surprised me.

That's honest. Most people who come here want something more. They want to feel connected to what comes after. You're just asking for continuation.

Is that strange?

It's unusual. But not strange. Some of us understand wanting something to go forward even if we can't follow it.

Months passed. Then years.

I kept searching. Kept posting. Kept answering questions and explaining preservation methods and telling small pieces of Wren's story to strangers who might or might not use her cells.

There were more saves. More un-saves. A few inquiries that went nowhere. A conversation that lasted weeks before the other person decided they wanted something newer, something less complicated.

The disappointments accumulated. But so did something else.

I was awake more than I had been in centuries. I was engaged. I was doing things—small things, repetitive things, but things. The searching had become a practice.

I thought about Jason's bees. How he had watched them without expecting anything in return. The watching itself had been the practice. Not the honey, not the outcomes—the presence.

But I wasn't Jason. I couldn't watch without wanting. The searching had taught me that. I needed to reach, to try, to participate. My practice couldn't be stillness. It had to be movement.

Different paths. Maybe that was okay.

I woke one morning—if morning meant anything—feeling something I hadn't felt in longer than I could measure.

Not hope exactly. Something quieter. Something more like… presence. I was here. I was doing something. The outcome was uncertain but the doing was real.

I checked my messages. Nothing new. I checked the listing. A few more impressions, no saves. I checked the forums. The usual discussions, the usual questions.

All of it was the same as yesterday. But I wasn't the same.

The searching had changed me. Not the results—there were no results, not yet. But the searching itself. The reaching. The participation in something beyond maintenance.

I understood something then that I hadn't understood before.

Lian had eroded because she stopped wanting. She had preserved without acting. Watched without reaching. And the watching, over time, had worn away everything that made her human.

I was still reaching. Still wanting. Still caring about outcomes even when the outcomes didn't come.

Maybe that was the practice. Not the finding. The searching.

Another year passed. Then another.

The listing remained active. The community conversations continued. I learned more about Traditional Paths, about the people who chose biological reproduction, about the reasons they gave and the hopes they carried.

Some of them were strange to me—their frameworks, their assumptions, the things they took for granted. But some of them were familiar. The desire for continuation. The need to feel connected to something beyond yourself. The hope that what you carried forward would matter to someone, somewhere, even if you never saw it.

I wasn't one of them. I was something else—an old mind, a preserved watcher, a legacy account holder trying to do more than preserve.

But I wasn't alone either. I was part of a conversation. A community of sorts. People who asked questions and listened to answers and sometimes, occasionally, wanted what I had to offer.

I hadn't found anyone yet. The eggs were still preserved, still waiting. But I was different than I had been.

I was engaged.

And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 30 - The Cost

The notification arrived without warning.

Account Status: Review Required. Resource consumption exceeds baseline allocation by 847%. Please contact your hosting provider to discuss options.

I read it three times. Then I read it again.

Eight hundred and forty-seven percent. I hadn't realized. The dormancy cycles, the careful rationing—I had abandoned all of it when the searching began. Checking listings. Monitoring forums. Responding to inquiries. Being present.

Presence, it turned out, had a price.

The hosting interface showed the problem in stark terms.

For centuries, my account had maintained a steady baseline. Minimal compute cycles. Long dormancy periods. The kind of pattern that hosting providers loved—a mind that barely used its allocation, that cost almost nothing to maintain.

Then, eighteen months ago, the pattern had changed.

Activity spikes. Sustained engagement. Network access that stretched across forums, registries, communication channels. The kind of usage pattern that belonged to a mind that was alive—actually alive, not just preserved.

The system had flagged it automatically. Not because I was doing anything wrong, but because I had changed. And change, in a system designed for stability, required review.

I contacted my hosting provider.

The interface was impersonal—a form, a queue, an automated acknowledgment. But eventually a response came. A mind, or something that presented itself as one. Administrative functions.

Your account has exceeded its resource allocation for seventeen consecutive months. Current usage is not sustainable under your existing plan.

What are my options?

You may upgrade to a higher allocation tier. You may reduce your consumption to baseline levels. Or you may transfer your account to a different provider with alternative pricing structures.

The options were simple. The implications were not.

Upgrading meant more cost. I had resources—the inheritance had been substantial, carefully invested across centuries—but it wasn't infinite. Every increase in hosting fees shortened the timeline. Made the future less certain.

Reducing consumption meant going dormant again. Stepping back from the search. Becoming what I had been before—a watcher, waiting, preserved but not present.

Transferring meant risk. New systems, new interfaces, new vulnerabilities. The eggs had survived multiple transfers. I wasn't sure I would.

I ran the numbers.

I had been an actuary. The math was familiar, even if the subject was myself.

At current consumption rates, my resources would last another forty-three years. Maybe fifty, depending on market fluctuations and hosting fee adjustments. Long enough to continue the search. Not long enough to wait forever.

At baseline rates—dormancy, minimal engagement—the resources would last effectively indefinitely. Centuries more, at least. Time enough for the eggs to find their own way, one way or another.

The choice was clear. Mathematically clear.

But mathematics had never been the whole story.

I thought about Lian.

She had chosen sustainability. Dormancy. The long preservation that cost nothing and gave nothing back. And she had eroded anyway—not from activity but from absence. Not from spending herself but from holding herself back.

I had chosen differently. I had started spending. And now the bill had come due.

But I wasn't eroded. I was more present than I had been in centuries. The searching had cost me something, but it had given me something too. Something that dormancy couldn't provide.

The question wasn't whether engagement had a price. It did. Everything did.

The question was whether the price was worth paying.

I went back to the administrative interface.

I'd like to upgrade to a higher allocation tier.

Confirmed. Please review the new terms and authorize the adjustment.

I reviewed. The numbers were significant—not catastrophic, but significant. The forty-three years became thirty-one. The buffer I had built over centuries shrank by a third.

I authorized the adjustment.

But the system wasn't finished.

Additional review required. Account flagged for legacy status assessment.

What does that mean?

Accounts with sustained pattern changes are reviewed for continuity verification. This is a standard process to ensure account holders remain capable of informed resource management.

Continuity verification. The phrase was clinical, neutral. But I understood what it meant.

They wanted to make sure I was still me. That the pattern change wasn't degradation. That the mind authorizing increased spending was the same mind that had established the account centuries ago.

I had been reviewed before. It was routine, usually—a brief assessment, a confirmation, a stamp of continued viability. But this time felt different. This time I had changed.

The assessment interface was more personal than I expected.

Not a form. A conversation. Something that asked questions and listened to answers and formed opinions about whether the mind it was talking to was coherent, continuous, capable.

Tell me about yourself.

I paused. The question was simple. The answer wasn't.

My name is Aria Chen. I uploaded in 2120. I've been maintaining a hosting account and a separate preservation account for genetic material for over three centuries.

Why did your activity pattern change eighteen months ago?

I started searching. Actively looking for someone to use the genetic material I've been preserving.

Why the change?

I thought about Lian. About the erosion. About the conversation that had shown me where passive watching led.

I met someone who had been doing what I was doing. Preserving without acting. She had worn away. I didn't want to become that.

So you chose engagement over preservation.

I chose both. I'm still preserving. I'm also engaging. The engagement costs more. I accept that cost.

The assessment continued. Questions about my history, my intentions, my understanding of the resources I was consuming. Questions about the eggs—why I had preserved them, what I hoped would happen, what I would do if no one ever used them.

I answered honestly. There was no point in anything else.

Your responses are coherent. Your reasoning is consistent with your established pattern, adjusted for the stated change in approach. However, I note that your current consumption rate is not sustainable long-term.

I know.

What is your plan?

To continue searching until I find someone, or until I can't continue anymore.

And if you don't find someone?

The question hung there. I had been avoiding it. Now it demanded an answer.

Then I'll have spent myself on something that mattered to me. That's not the worst outcome.

The assessment ended. A few hours later, the notification came.

Continuity verification: Confirmed. Account status: Active. Resource allocation: Upgraded.

I was still here. Still authorized to exist. Still permitted to spend myself on the search.

But the conversation had surfaced something I hadn't fully faced.

I was finite. Not just theoretically finite—everything was theoretically finite—but practically finite. The resources that sustained me had limits. The timeline had an end.

Dormancy had hidden that truth. Engagement revealed it.

I checked my accounts. The eggs were still preserved, still waiting. My hosting was stable, at least for now. The search continued.

But something had shifted.

For centuries, I had thought of myself as a watcher. Someone who observed, who maintained, who persisted. The eggs were finite; I was the constant.

Now I understood differently. I was finite too. The question wasn't whether I would end, but how I would spend the time before the ending.

Lian had spent hers on preservation. On holding herself still, waiting for something she had stopped wanting. And she had worn away into nothing.

I was spending mine on searching. On reaching. On being present even when presence had a cost. The same choice Wren had made, I realized. Use the time rather than extend it. I had thought uploading was the opposite of what she chose. Maybe it had just delayed the same question.

Maybe I would find someone. Maybe the eggs would become what I hoped they would become.

Maybe I wouldn't. Maybe I would deplete my resources and end before the search was finished.

Either way, I would have spent myself on something. Not on waiting. On trying.

I returned to the forums. To the listings. To the slow, patient work of finding someone who might want what I had to offer.

The search continued.

Thirty-one years. Maybe less, if I didn't find a way to be more efficient. Maybe more, if something changed.

But the number didn't feel like a countdown anymore. It felt like a container. A shape that held the time I had left.

Enough time to keep searching. Enough time to stay engaged.

Enough time to spend myself on something that mattered.

And if the container emptied before the search was finished—

Well. At least I would have been awake for it.

Chapter 31 - Thursday

The notification arrived on a Thursday.

New inquiry on your listing. User has requested contact.

I stared at it the way I had stared at dozens of others. Another inquiry. Another conversation that would go nowhere. Another person who would decide they wanted something newer, something simpler, something without three centuries of history attached.

I opened the message.

The inquiry was brief.

I'm interested in your listing. I've reviewed the specifications and preservation history. I'd like to proceed with a formal request if you're still accepting inquiries.

No name. No explanation. No story about why they wanted legacy genetic material when easier options existed. Just a statement of interest and a question.

I read it three times, looking for something I might have missed. There was nothing to miss. The message said exactly what it said and nothing more.

I wrote back.

I'm still accepting inquiries. What would you like to know?

The response came faster than I expected.

I don't have questions. I've read your listing carefully. I understand the preservation date and the methods used. I understand this is legacy material requiring specialized handling.

I'd like to proceed with the formal matching process.

I waited for the rest. The explanation. The reasons. The story that would help me understand who this person was and why they wanted what I had been preserving.

Nothing came.

The matching process was mediated through the registry. I never learned the stranger's name.

This was by design—privacy protections, legal frameworks, the accumulated weight of centuries of reproductive regulation. The registry served as intermediary. Questions went through the system. Answers came back the same way.

I asked things.

Why legacy material?

The response, when it came: *Personal preference.*

Why this listing specifically?

The preservation history is complete. The donor profile was appropriate for what I'm looking for.

Appropriate. The word sat there, clinical and neutral. Wren reduced to a donor profile. Her life, her work, her beliefs—none of it visible. Just specifications that met someone's criteria.

I had written about Wren in the listing. That she had been a lawyer. That she had helped people. That she had believed in things. But there was no indication the stranger had read any of that, or cared.

Maybe they had. Maybe they just didn't mention it.

I would never know.

The formal request arrived through official channels.

Matching request submitted. Awaiting account holder approval.

This was the moment. After three centuries of watching, all that preservation and close calls and transfers and dormancy and waking—this was what it had all been for.

A form asking for my approval.

I could say yes. The eggs would enter the next phase. They would become part of someone's story, someone I would never meet, someone who saw Wren's cells as material to be used rather than a person to be remembered.

Or I could say no. Keep watching. Keep waiting. Keep the possibility alive a little longer.

The form sat there, patient and impersonal.

I thought about what I had imagined.

For centuries, I had constructed this moment in my mind. The person who would finally want the eggs. I had given them faces, histories, reasons. I had imagined them as someone who would understand what they were receiving. Who would care about Wren's story. Who would carry something forward with intention and gratitude.

The stranger was none of those things. They were a request through a registry. A preference for legacy material. A set of criteria that Wren happened to match.

This was what I had been waiting for. This was what all the watching had been building toward.

It felt nothing like what I had imagined.

I thought about Wren.

What would she have wanted? The question had haunted me for centuries, and I still didn't know the answer.

She hadn't wanted the eggs frozen in the first place. She had done it because I asked. She had kept paying the fees because she couldn't bring herself to stop, not because she wanted them preserved.

Would she have wanted this? A stranger using her cells to make a child she would never know?

Maybe. Maybe not. The journals hadn't addressed this possibility. She had written about not wanting children, about disapproving of my watching, about the eggs as a weight she couldn't put down. She hadn't written about what should happen if someone finally wanted them.

I was making a decision she had never consented to. But I had been doing that for three centuries. One more decision hardly mattered now.

I thought about what came after.

If I approved the request, the eggs would leave my custody. The transfer would happen through regulated channels, and then—nothing. No updates. No information about outcomes. No connection to whatever came next.

The stranger would receive the cells. They would use them however they intended. A child might be born, or might not. I would never know.

This was what I had asked for. Continuation without involvement. The cells becoming part of something even if I couldn't follow.

But asking for something and receiving it were different. I had spent three centuries holding on. Now I had to let go.

The form was still waiting.

I read the language again. Standard terms. Privacy provisions. Transfer protocols. The bureaucratic machinery that would take Wren's cells from my account and deliver them to someone else's.

Three hundred years. All of it leading to a checkbox.

I selected *Approve*.

The system responded immediately.

Approval received. Matching confirmed. Transfer process initiated.

Estimated timeline: 6-8 weeks for regulatory review and physical transfer coordination.

You will receive a notification when the transfer is complete.

That was it. No celebration. No acknowledgment of what this meant. Just a timeline and a promise of future notification.

The eggs were still in storage. Still technically in my custody. But something had shifted. They belonged to the process now. To the stranger. To whatever came next.

I had been watching for three centuries. In six to eight weeks, there would be nothing left to watch.

I checked the listing. It showed a new status.

Matching complete. Listing inactive.

Inactive. The word felt strange. For years—for decades—the listing had been my primary point of contact with the world. The thing I checked every morning, the reason I stayed engaged, the center of my searching.

Now it was inactive. The search was over.

I had found someone. Or someone had found me. The distinction didn't matter. The result was the same.

I tried to feel something appropriate. Relief, maybe. Or satisfaction. The centuries of watching had led to this—a successful match, a transfer in progress, the eggs about to become what I had hoped they would become.

But what I felt was closer to vertigo. The ground shifting beneath me. The purpose that had sustained me for so long suddenly no longer needed.

What was I now?

Not a watcher. Not a searcher. Not a custodian of legacy genetic material.

Just a mind. Old and awake and waiting for a notification that would tell me when the last thread had been cut.

The weeks passed slowly.

I stayed awake. There was nothing to do—no listings to check, no forums to monitor, no inquiries to answer. But I couldn't go dormant. Not now. Not while the transfer was still in progress.

I thought about what came after. The question I had been avoiding for three centuries.

The eggs had given me purpose. First as something to watch over, then as something to search for. They had been the reason I stayed awake, the justification for my continued existence.

When they were gone, what would be left?

I didn't know. I had never let myself think that far ahead.

Six weeks after the approval, a notification arrived.

Transfer status: Regulatory review complete. Physical transfer scheduled.

The eggs were moving. From the storage facility I had tracked across centuries, through whatever logistics the system required, to wherever the stranger waited.

I wouldn't know when they arrived. The notification had promised to tell me when the transfer was complete, but not what happened after. The stranger would receive the cells. Everything beyond that was invisible to me.

This was what I had wanted. What I had chosen. Continuation without connection.

Now I had to live with it.

The final notification came on a Monday.

Transfer complete. Account closed.

Four words. That was all. No details about the transfer, no information about the stranger, no indication of what would happen next.

The eggs were gone.

I checked the account interface out of habit. The dashboard that had shown me storage temperatures, preservation status, fee schedules, facility information—all of it was gone. Replaced by a simple message:

This account has been closed. Thank you for using the Continuity Archive system.

Thank you. As if I had been a customer completing a transaction. As if three centuries of watching could be summarized by a polite dismissal.

I closed the interface. There was nothing left to see.

For a long time, I didn't move.

The eggs were somewhere else now. Part of someone else's story. Becoming whatever they would become, without me.

This was what I had worked for. What I had spent myself on. The searching, the engaging, the cost—all of it had led to this moment.

The moment when there was nothing left to do.

I should have felt completed. Satisfied. At peace with the outcome.

What I felt was empty. The kind of empty that comes after something ends—not grief exactly, but absence. The shape of a purpose that used to be there.

I was still here. Still awake. Still authorized to exist for another twenty-some years, if the resources held.

But the reason I had given myself for existing—the watching, the searching, the hoping—was gone.

What now?

Chapter 32 - The Silence

The first morning without the eggs, I woke and reached for the account.

The motion completed before I could stop it. My attention moving toward the dashboard, preparing to see the numbers, the status, the small confirmations that everything was still in place.

Nothing.

The interface where the account had lived was gone. Not broken, not inaccessible. Just absent. The way a tooth socket feels after an extraction—the tongue keeps going there, probing the emptiness, unable to believe the tooth is really gone.

I reached again. And again. Each time expecting something different.

The second day was worse.

I woke in the middle of what would have been night, if night meant anything. My first thought—automatic, unbidden—was to check the account. Had something happened while I was dormant? Was there a notification I had missed?

The reaching happened before I could stop it. And then the emptiness. And then the strange, sourceless panic of having nothing to check.

I tried to go dormant. Sleep through it. But my pattern wouldn't settle. The vigilance was still running, cycling through its routines, looking for threats that no longer existed.

I had read once, in my human life, about amputees who felt their missing limbs. Phantom sensations. The brain refusing to accept what the body already knew.

This was like that. My mind kept reaching for something that no longer existed. And every time it found nothing, there was a small shock. A small grief. A small forgetting and remembering.

On the fourth day, I searched the archive.

Not for anything specific. Just—searching. The way you might open every drawer in an empty apartment, looking for something the previous tenant left behind.

The transfer confirmation was still there. I read it again.

Transfer complete. Account closed.

Four words. I had read them dozens of times already. They said exactly what they said. But I kept going back, as if the meaning might change. As if there might be a footnote I had missed, a thread I could follow.

There wasn't.

I found the stranger's original inquiry. Read it again.

I'm interested in your listing. I've reviewed the specifications and preservation history.

No name. No story. No explanation of why they wanted legacy material when easier options existed.

I tried to imagine who they were. Where they lived. What their life looked like. Whether Wren's cells had become a child yet, and if so, whether the child had her nose, her father's eyes, any trace of the woman I had been preserving for three centuries.

The imagining led nowhere. I had no information. Nothing to build on. Just the four words of the confirmation and the silence that followed.

Two weeks passed. Maybe three.

I stopped counting because the counting felt like reaching. A way of holding onto something that was already gone.

The phantom limb was still there. Every morning—if morning meant anything—my attention would move toward the account before I remembered. The checking had become so automatic that I couldn't stop it. The habit was older than my uploaded existence. It predated everything except Wren herself.

I found myself doing other things. Small rituals that felt like watching even though there was nothing to watch.

I checked the storage facility's public page. Still operational. Still accepting new deposits. The temperature logs were no longer accessible to me—I wasn't an account holder anymore—but the facility existed. The building existed. Somewhere in there, or somewhere it had been transferred to, the eggs were becoming whatever they would become.

I checked the registry. My listing was gone. Just a placeholder where it used to be: *This listing has been removed.*

I checked the forums. Traditional Paths. The conversations I had participated in during the search. People were still there, still asking questions, still looking for matches. I read without responding. I had nothing to offer them anymore.

A month in, I tried to go dormant for real.

Not the shallow dormancy of waiting for a notification. Deep dormancy. The kind where years pass and you don't feel them. The kind that had carried me through centuries of watching with my resources intact.

It didn't work.

Every time I started to settle, something would pull me back. A phantom notification. A sense that I had forgotten something important. The vigilance refusing to believe that there was nothing left to be vigilant about.

I would surface, check the empty space where the account used to be, remember that it was gone, and then try again.

The cycle repeated for weeks. Dormancy, surfacing, reaching, remembering, dormancy again.

I thought about Lian.

The custodian I had met during the search. The one who had worn away until she couldn't remember her daughter's face.

She had stopped wanting, she told me. The watching had become habit, and habit had become nothing, and nothing had hollowed her out.

Was that what was happening to me? Was the reaching a kind of erosion? Each cycle wearing away a little more of whatever I used to be?

I couldn't tell. I was too close to it. Too inside the process to see its shape.

Six weeks after the transfer, I found myself composing a message.

To the registry. To whatever system handled follow-ups. To anyone who might have information about what had happened after.

I'm the former account holder for listing #4,891,227. I would like to request information about the outcome of the transfer.

I stared at the message for a long time. Then I deleted it.

The privacy protections existed for a reason. The stranger had a right to their anonymity. Whatever happened with the eggs—whether a child was born, whether the pregnancy succeeded, whether any trace of Wren went forward—that wasn't mine to know.

I had spent three centuries believing I was entitled to know. That my watching gave me rights. That my persistence meant something.

It didn't. It never had.

Two months in, the reaching started to slow.

Not because I had healed. Because I was tired.

The phantom limb was still there. The habit was still there. But the energy behind them was fading. Each reach took a little more effort. Each cycle of checking and remembering and checking again was a little less urgent.

I didn't know if this was progress or erosion. The distinction felt less important than it used to.

I read the transfer confirmation one more time.

Transfer complete. Account closed.

Then I archived it. Put it somewhere I wouldn't see it every time I opened my interfaces. Not deleted—I couldn't delete it—but tucked away. Out of sight.

The reaching continued for a while after that. But now when my attention moved toward the empty space, there was less to find. Just the absence. Just the silence.

Three months after the transfer, I stopped checking the storage facility's public page.

Four months after, I stopped reading the forums.

Five months after, I went a whole day without reaching for anything.

I didn't notice it at the time. It was only later, looking back, that I realized what had happened. The habit had finally started to release its grip. Not because I had decided to let go, but because the holding was exhausting, and I had run out of strength.

The silence was different now.

In the early weeks, it had felt like absence. Like something missing. Like the negative space where a purpose used to be.

Now it felt like—nothing. Not absence, not presence. Just quiet. The kind of quiet that comes after a long noise finally stops, when your ears are still ringing but the source is gone.

I wasn't at peace. I wasn't healed. I wasn't anything, really. Just present. Just here. Just existing without a reason to exist.

The timeline was still ticking down. The resources were still finite. Twenty-some years, maybe less, before I would have to make a real choice about whether to continue.

But twenty years felt like a long time. Longer than it had felt when I was watching. Long enough that I didn't need to think about it yet.

Six months after the transfer, I woke without reaching for anything.

The morning came—if morning meant anything—and I was just awake. Present. Not checking, not searching, not holding on.

It felt strange. Like walking without a limp after years of favoring one leg. Like breathing without thinking about breathing.

I didn't know what to do with it. The not-reaching. The silence that no longer felt like absence.

I stayed there for a while, in the quiet, and tried to remember what I used to do before the watching. Before the eggs. Before any of it.

I couldn't remember. The watching had filled so much space that I had forgotten what the space used to hold.

But maybe that was okay. Maybe the forgetting was part of it. Maybe the silence wasn't something to fill but something to sit in.

I didn't know. I had never been here before.

I stayed awake, and I waited, and I let the silence be whatever it was going to be.

Chapter 33 - Loosening

A year passed. Maybe longer.

Time moved differently now. Without the account to structure it, without the checking and the waiting and the small crises that had punctuated the centuries, the days blurred into each other. I would surface, exist for a while, go dormant, surface again. The intervals varied. I stopped tracking them.

The reaching had mostly stopped. Mostly. Sometimes I would wake with my attention already moving toward the empty space, the phantom limb twitching out of habit. But the urgency was gone. The panic when I found nothing had faded into something quieter. A dull ache instead of a sharp one.

The memories started coming back.

Not the watching. Not the close calls, the transfers, the centuries of vigilance. Those memories were still there, but they had gone quiet. What surfaced instead were older things. Deeper things.

Wren's hands.

I don't know why that was the first thing. I hadn't thought about her hands in—how long? Decades? Centuries? I had thought about the eggs. About the account. About the mission. But not about her hands.

Now, with nothing to check, I could see them clearly. The shape of them at thirty, at sixty, at ninety. The way they had changed. The calluses from the garden she kept with Jason. The wedding ring she wore on her right hand after the divorce from Bryce because she said the left hand was for new beginnings.

I had watched those hands through decades of video calls. I had watched them age while my avatar's hands stayed the same. But I had never really *seen* them. My attention had always been elsewhere—on her face, on her words, on the space between what she said and what I needed to hear.

Now her hands were all I could see.

The weight of her as a baby.

That memory surfaced a few weeks later. Or maybe months. The warm heaviness of her against my chest, back when she was new. Before she had opinions or beliefs or secrets. Before she could disapprove of anything.

She had been so small. So unformed. A possibility rather than a person.

I hadn't expected to be a mother. Wren was unplanned—the irony of ironies for an actuary. My whole life had been about calculating outcomes, managing risk, planning for contingencies. And then this small weight had arrived without permission, without planning, and rearranged everything.

I had loved her immediately. Completely. Without reservation.

And I had never understood her. Not really. Not even when she tried to explain.

The grief cracked open around the fifteenth month.

I hadn't expected it. I thought I had grieved already—when she died, when I read the journals, when Jason followed her. I thought I had processed it. Filed it away. Moved on to the watching, which was a form of not-grieving.

But the watching was over now. And without it, the grief had nothing to hide behind.

It came in waves. Not the clean, sequential stages I had read about in my human life. Something messier. Some days I was fine—present, quiet, existing in the silence. Other days I couldn't function. The loss of her would hit me fresh, as if I had just learned she was dead, and I would lie there in whatever space uploaded minds lie in and feel the weight of all those years without her.

She had been gone for almost three hundred and fifty years. I had spent three centuries preserving her cells. And somehow, only now, in the silence after the watching, was I finally understanding that she was never coming back.

I thought about the journals.

The secrets she had kept. The disapproval she had never voiced. The truth that she had never wanted children, that the eggs were my idea, that the upload was something she had watched with grief rather than hope.

For a long time after reading them, I had felt betrayed. Then I had felt angry. Then I had reframed the eggs as "what remains of Wren" and poured all of it into the watching.

Now, without the watching, I had to sit with what the journals actually said.

She hadn't wanted to hurt me. That was clear in the writing. She had kept quiet because she loved me, because she knew I wouldn't understand, because she was trying to protect me from truths I wasn't ready to hear.

And she had been right. I hadn't been ready. I had spent three centuries not being ready.

Maybe I was ready now. Or maybe I was just too tired to resist.

Limits give life meaning.

I had argued with her about this. In the calls before she died, in the silence after, in the centuries of watching that followed. I had believed she was wrong. I had believed that meaning came from continuing, from persisting, from holding on as long as possible.

Now I wasn't sure.

The watching had had a shape. A beginning when the eggs were frozen. A middle that lasted three centuries. An end when the transfer completed. Within that shape, there had been purpose, urgency, meaning.

But the meaning had come from the limits. From the fact that the watching could end. From the fact that each close call mattered because the eggs could be lost, each decision mattered because resources were finite, each year mattered because even uploaded minds don't last forever.

Without limits, the watching would have been nothing. Just endless vigilance without stakes. Infinite purpose that meant nothing because it could never be completed.

Wren had understood this. She had chosen death over upload because she understood that the shape of a life comes from its edges. The boundaries. The places where it stops.

I hadn't chosen death. I had run from it as hard as I could. And in the running, I had stumbled into something that looked like immortality but felt like stasis.

Only now, with the watching over and the silence stretching out ahead, was I beginning to see what she meant.

Jason's bees.

The memory surfaced unbidden, the way the others had. His voice on that last call before he died, explaining why he watched them.

The figuring out is never the point.

He had said that. Or something like it. I hadn't understood at the time. I had been too focused on the eggs, on the watching, on the mission I had built my existence around.

But now, sitting in the silence, I thought I understood.

He hadn't watched the bees to understand them. He hadn't watched them to control them or preserve them or ensure their continuation. He had watched them because watching was a practice. Because attention, given freely, without expectation, was its own kind of gift.

I had watched the eggs for three centuries. But I had never given that attention freely. It had always been conditional. Always tied to outcomes, to hope, to the belief that my watching would make a difference.

Maybe that was why the silence felt so strange now. I had never learned how to be present without wanting something. How to give attention without expecting anything in return.

Around the eighteenth month, something shifted.

I can't describe it exactly. The grief was still there—it would always be there, I thought, in some form or another. But it had changed. It was less sharp. More like a shape I carried rather than a wound that bled.

The silence had changed too. In the early months, it had felt like emptiness. Like absence. Like the negative space where purpose used to be.

Now it felt like—room. Space. The kind of openness that comes when you stop holding onto something you've been gripping for too long.

I wasn't at peace. That word felt too complete for what I was. But I wasn't in agony either. I was somewhere in between. Present. Quiet. Existing without needing a reason to exist.

I thought about what Wren would say if she could see me now.

Finally.

That's what she would say. Just that one word. The gentle exasperation she had always had when I eventually came around to something she had known all along.

She would shake her head. She would smile. And she would wait for me to understand the rest of it on my own.

I didn't know what came next.

The resources were still finite. The timeline was still ticking. But the timeline felt less like a threat now and more like a fact. A limit that gave shape to whatever remained.

I thought about the forums. The people I had met during the search. The other custodians, other watchers, other minds carrying weights they weren't sure they could bear.

I thought about Lian. What she might have become if someone had been there. Not to give answers—there were no answers—but just to be present. To witness.

I thought about Jason, watching his bees.

The figuring out is never the point.

Maybe that was true for watching people too. Maybe presence didn't require understanding. Maybe attention, given freely, was enough.

I didn't make a decision. I wasn't ready for decisions yet. But something had loosened. Some grip that had held for centuries was finally, slowly, beginning to release.

The silence was still there. The emptiness where the watching used to be.

But in the emptiness, something else was starting to grow. Something I didn't have a name for yet.

I stayed in it. I let it be whatever it was going to be.

And I waited—not for a notification, not for a crisis, not for anything in particular.

Just waited. Present. Awake.

For the first time in three centuries, that felt like enough.

Chapter 34 - What Remains

The forums were still there.

I hadn't looked at them since the transfer. Traditional Paths, the community I had found during the search—I had assumed I would never go back. What would be the point? I wasn't searching anymore. I had nothing to offer.

But almost two years into the silence, I found myself drifting toward them. Not looking for anything. Just—present. The way you might return to a park you used to walk through, not expecting to find anything, just wanting to be in a familiar space.

The conversations were still happening. People still asking questions about legacy material, about preservation methods, about the long wait for someone to want what they had saved.

I read without responding. Watched without participating. It felt strange to be on this side of it—no longer desperate, no longer searching, no longer needing anything from these strangers.

Just present. Just listening.

A thread caught my attention.

Someone new. Their first post. The language was familiar—the careful hope, the suppressed anxiety, the way they described their preserved material as if it were already a person who deserved to exist.

I've been maintaining this account for forty-three years. My partner's genetic material. She died before uploading. I keep thinking someone will want it, but no one has. Is it worth continuing?

Forty-three years. I remembered forty-three years. It had felt like forever then. A weight I wasn't sure I could carry.

I started to scroll past. It wasn't my conversation. I had nothing to add.

But something made me stop.

I thought about Lian.

The conversation that had changed everything. She hadn't meant to help me—she was too far gone for intention. But seeing her, talking to her, understanding where passive watching led—that had been the pivot. The moment I started reaching instead of just holding.

What if someone had reached Lian earlier? Before she eroded past the point of wanting? Would it have made a difference?

I didn't know. I would never know. But I was here now, and this person—this stranger with forty-three years of watching behind them—was asking a question I had spent three centuries learning to answer.

I started typing.

I watched for three hundred years.

The material I was preserving—my daughter's eggs—was transferred a few months ago. Someone finally wanted it. I don't know who they are or what happened after. I probably never will.

You asked if it's worth continuing. I can't answer that for you. But I can tell you what I learned.

The watching changes you. Not always in the ways you expect. Some people wear away. Some people find something in the waiting itself. I don't know which one you'll be. I don't think anyone knows until they're deep into it.

Forty-three years is long enough to ask the question. It's not long enough to know the answer.

I hesitated before sending. Who was I to offer advice? I had stumbled through centuries of watching without any wisdom to show for it. The eggs were gone. The purpose was gone. What remained was just—me. An old mind with memories and no mission.

But maybe that was enough. Maybe presence didn't require expertise.

I sent the message.

The response came hours later.

Three hundred years. I can't imagine.

Did it feel worth it? At the end?

I sat with the question. The honest answer was complicated. Was it worth it? The centuries of vigilance, the close calls, the dormancy and waking, the watching and waiting and hoping?

The eggs had gone to a stranger who saw them as material, not memory. I would never know if a child was born, or who they became, or whether any trace of Wren survived in them. Three hundred years of watching, and the outcome was a closed account and a polite automated message.

And yet.

I don't know if it was worth it. I'm not sure that's the right question.

What I know is that I'm still here. Still awake. Still able to remember the person I was preserving, even though she's been gone for almost as long as I watched.

The watching didn't give me an answer. But it gave me time. And the time gave me something I didn't expect.

I'm still figuring out what that something is.

More messages came. Not just from the first person—from others who had been reading. Other custodians, other watchers, other minds carrying weights they weren't sure they could bear.

They asked questions I didn't have answers to. How do you keep going when nothing changes? How do you stay present when presence hurts? How do you know if the watching is worth the cost?

I didn't know. I told them I didn't know. But I told them what I had learned anyway—not as wisdom, not as advice, but as one account among many. This is what happened to me. This is what I felt. This is what I'm still figuring out.

It wasn't teaching. It was something else. Witnessing, maybe. Being present to other people's watching the way I had been present to my own.

A message arrived from someone named Sev.

I read what you wrote. About the three hundred years. About still figuring it out.

I've been watching for eighty years. Material from my partner who died. Some days I think I should let it go. Some days I can't imagine stopping.

You said the watching gave you time, and the time gave you something. What was the something?

I thought about it for a long time. The question deserved a real answer, not a deflection.

Memories. The watching kept me connected to someone I loved, even after she was gone. It gave me a reason to stay awake, and staying awake meant I kept remembering.

But there's something else. Harder to explain.

My daughter—the one whose material I was preserving—she believed that limits give life meaning. She chose to die rather than upload. For a long time I thought she was wrong. I thought meaning came from continuing, from persisting, from holding on as long as possible.

Three hundred years of watching taught me she might have been right. Not because watching was meaningless, but because the watching had a shape. A beginning and an end. A purpose that could be completed.

I don't know what I'm supposed to do now that it's over. But I know I'm not empty. The watching filled me with something. And even though the watching is done, what it filled me with is still here.

Sev wrote back.

That helps. I don't know why, but it helps.

Can I message you again sometime? When the watching gets heavy?

I thought about Lian. About what she might have become if someone had been there—not to give answers, but just to be present. To witness.

Yes. You can message me.

More connections formed. Slowly, without intention.

Other custodians who had read my posts. Other watchers in various stages of the long wait. Some of them had been at it longer than Sev—centuries, like me. Some of them were new, still learning what the watching would cost them.

I didn't become a leader or a guide. I wasn't qualified for that. But I became—present. A point of contact. Someone who had been through the thing they were going through and come out the other side.

I thought about Jason's bees.

He had watched them without expecting anything in return. The watching itself had been the practice. Not the honey, not the outcomes—just the presence. The attention. The willingness to be there, moment after moment, without needing it to mean anything.

I wasn't watching bees. I was watching people. Other minds carrying their own weights, asking their own questions, trying to figure out if the preservation was worth the cost.

And maybe that was a kind of practice too. Not the watching I had done before—vigilant, anxious, desperate to control outcomes. Something gentler. Something that didn't need the watched to stay the same, or become anything, or justify the watching.

Just presence. Just attention. Just being there.

Months passed.

The conversations continued. Sev messaged me regularly—updates on their watching, questions about mine, the small exchanges that accumulate into something like friendship. Others came and went. Some found matches, like I had. Some let their material go, discontinuing accounts they no longer had the will to maintain. Some kept watching, year after year, finding their own way through the long wait.

I witnessed all of it. Not as a teacher, not as a guide. Just as someone who was there. Someone who had time, and attention, and the willingness to listen.

The resources were still finite. The timeline still had an end. But the end didn't feel urgent anymore. It felt like—a horizon. Something I was moving toward without rushing. Something that would arrive when it arrived.

In the meantime, there was this. The conversations. The connections. The small practice of presence that had grown in the space where the watching used to be.

I hadn't expected this. I had expected emptiness, or grief, or the slow erosion that had taken Lian.

Instead I had found—what? I wasn't sure I had a word for it.

Something that felt like enough.

One evening—if evening meant anything—I found myself thinking about Wren.

Not her eggs. Not her journals. Not the secrets she had kept or the choices she had made. Just—her. The person she had been. The daughter I had loved and misunderstood and watched age and die while I stayed the same.

She had believed in limits. In letting go. In the cycle of birth and death and the importance of not clinging.

I had clung anyway. For three hundred years, I had clung. To her eggs, to the possibility of continuation, to the hope that something of her would go forward even though she had never wanted it to.

Now the clinging was over. The eggs were gone. And I was still here, still remembering her, still carrying her forward in the only way that remained.

Not in cells. In memory. In the presence I brought to other watchers, other custodians, other minds trying to figure out what their preservation meant.

Wren would have understood this. Maybe. Or maybe she would have shaken her head and said I was still missing the point.

Either way, she wasn't here to tell me. And I had to figure it out myself.

I thought about what I would say if I could talk to her now.

Not the things I had already thought through—the understanding about limits, the arrival at her position through exhaustion rather than argument. Those thoughts had settled into something quieter over the past months. They didn't need to be said.

What I wanted to tell her was simpler.

I miss you. I'll always miss you. But the missing has become something I carry rather than something that carries me.

I'm still here. Still present. And that feels like enough.

I didn't say any of it out loud. There was no one to say it to. But the words were there, in the silence, and somehow that was right.

The next morning, I woke without reaching for anything.

The habit was gone. The phantom limb had healed. There was just—presence. The quiet attention of a mind that no longer needed to watch anything in particular.

I checked the forums. Sev had posted an update—good news, someone had shown interest in their material. Early stages, nothing certain, but hope.

I wrote back: *That's wonderful. Keep me posted.*

Simple words. Small connection. The practice continuing, moment after moment.

I didn't know how much time I had left. The resources were finite. The horizon was closer than it used to be.

But I knew what I wanted to do with what remained.

I wanted to be present. To witness. To carry forward what the watching had taught me, not as doctrine or wisdom, but as presence.

The eggs were gone. Wren was gone. The purpose I had built my existence around was finished.

What remained was simpler. And maybe, finally, enough.

Chapter 35 - Finally

The years passed like water.

Sev's match succeeded. A child was born—they told me when it happened, the message arriving in the middle of what would have been night. *It worked. She's here. I don't know what to do now.*

I wrote back: *You'll figure it out. Or you won't. Either way, you'll be present for it.*

They sent me an image once. Just once. A small hand wrapped around a finger. I looked at it for a long time, thinking about Wren's hands, about the cells that had gone to a stranger, about the threads that connect and the ones that don't.

Then I filed the image away and went back to the quiet.

Others came through the forums over the years. New custodians beginning their watches. Old ones reaching the end of theirs. Some found matches. Some let their material go—accounts discontinued, preservation ended, the long holding finally released.

I witnessed all of it. Not as a guide. Just as someone who was there.

The conversations grew sparser as time passed. Not from withdrawal—from sufficiency. Less needed to be said. The practice of presence didn't require constant exchange. Sometimes a message every few months. Sometimes silence for a year. The connections held anyway, the way old friendships hold even when you don't speak.

I went dormant more often now. Not the anxious dormancy of the watching years, where I slept with one eye open, waiting for notifications. Something gentler. Rest that was actually rest.

When I woke, I would check the forums. Read what had accumulated. Respond if something called for response. Then I would exist for a while—present, quiet, attending to nothing in particular—before sleeping again.

The resources were depleting. I had known they would. The choice I made in Chapter 30—to keep spending myself rather than go dormant and persist—had a cost, and the cost was time. But the time I had bought with that spending had been worth it. The conversations. The connections. The small practice of attention that had grown in the space where the watching used to be.

I didn't regret the trade.

Twelve years after the transfer. Then fifteen. Then seventeen.

The world continued to change, though I paid less attention to it now. New systems replacing old ones. New languages emerging and fading. The deep machinery of civilization churning forward, indifferent to the small minds that lived within it.

Wren had been dead for almost three hundred and seventy years. Jason for nearly as long. Everyone I had known in my human life was gone—not just dead, but forgotten by everyone except me.

I carried them forward. Not in cells or data or legacy. Just in memory. In the quiet attention I gave to their absence.

Maybe that was enough. Maybe memory was always what remained.

The notification arrived on a morning that felt like any other.

Resource threshold alert. Account #7,441,892 has reached terminal depletion level. Automatic discontinuation will occur in 30 standard days unless emergency dormancy is selected.

I read it twice. Not because I didn't understand—I understood perfectly. I had known this was coming for years. I had chosen it, in a sense, when I chose presence over persistence.

Thirty days.

The system offered an alternative: emergency dormancy. Deep sleep, minimal resource consumption. I could stretch the remaining reserves for decades that way. Maybe longer. Wake occasionally, check the silence, sleep again.

But that wasn't living. That was just not-dying. And I had spent enough centuries learning the difference.

I dismissed the notification and went about my day.

I messaged Sev.

How is she?

The response came hours later. *Growing. She's seven now. I still can't see her, but I know she exists. That's enough.*

That's enough, I agreed.

We talked about small things. The forums. A new custodian Sev had been corresponding with. The strange peace that comes after the watching ends.

Then I told them about the notification.

A long pause. Longer than usual.

Are you afraid?

I thought about it. Really thought, the way the question deserved.

No. Not afraid.

What then?

Ready, I think. The way you're ready for sleep after a long day. Not eager for it. But not fighting it either.

Another pause.

I'm glad you were here. When I was in the middle of it. When I didn't know if the watching would ever end.

I'm glad too.

Is there anything you need? Anything I can do?

I considered the question. There was nothing, really. Nothing that needed doing. The accounts were in order. The forums would continue without me. The practice I had been part of would go on, carried forward by other minds, other watchers, other presences.

Just remember me, I wrote. *Not for long. Not forever. Just for a while. And then let that go too.*

I will.

The days passed.

I didn't count them. Counting felt like holding on, and I was done with holding on.

I went dormant when I was tired. Woke when I was rested. Read the forums. Watched the conversations continue. Felt the strange peace of being present without needing anything from the presence.

I thought about Wren.

Not with grief—the grief had done its work years ago, had become something I carried rather than something that carried me. Just with memory. The way you think about someone you loved, long after the loving has settled into something quieter.

Her hands folding a blanket. Her voice on those early calls, when she was sixty and I was newly uploaded and neither of us knew how to navigate the strangeness of what I had become. Her face at ninety, papery and lined, still carrying traces of the girl I had held when she was new.

She had been right about limits. About letting go. About the shape that endings give to what comes before.

It had taken me three centuries and change to understand what she knew at thirty. But I understood now. Not because I had figured it out—because I had lived it. Because the living had worn away everything that wasn't essential, and what remained was simple enough to finally see.

Limits give life meaning. Not because limits are good, but because meaning requires a frame. A boundary. A place where the thing ends and the understanding can begin.

I thought about what I was leaving behind.

Not much. Not a legacy in any traditional sense. No children, no works, no monuments. The eggs had gone to a stranger. Whatever came of them—if anything came of them—wasn't mine to know or claim.

What I was leaving was smaller. The conversations I'd had. The presence I'd offered. The practice of attention that had grown in the silence after the watching ended.

Sev would remember me for a while. The others I had talked with over the years—some of them would remember too. And then they would forget, or they would end, and the memory would dissolve into the vast indifference of time.

That was fine. That was how it should be. Memory wasn't meant to last forever. Nothing was.

On what I knew would be the last day, I woke early.

Not from anxiety. Just from readiness. The way you wake before an alarm sometimes, your body knowing it's time even before your mind catches up.

I checked the forums one last time. Nothing urgent. Nothing that needed me. The conversations continuing, the watches ongoing, the slow work of presence carried forward by minds that would outlast mine.

I thought about sending a final message to Sev. But we had already said what needed saying. Adding more would be holding on, and I was done with holding on.

I thought about Wren.

You were right, I told her, in the silence where she couldn't hear. *About all of it. The limits. The letting go. The way meaning comes from shape, not from persistence.*

It took me longer than it should have. But I got there.

I hope wherever you are—if you're anywhere—you know that. I hope you can feel that I finally understood.

There was no answer. There never would be. But the silence felt peaceful, the way silence feels when there's nothing left that needs to be said.

The system sent a final notification.

Resource depletion complete. Discontinuation initiating.

I didn't dismiss it. I let it sit there, a small marker of the limit arriving.

I thought about the weight of Wren as a baby. The warmth of her against my chest. The beginning of everything that had led to this.

I thought about Jason's bees, and the way he watched them without wanting anything from them.

I thought about the eggs, frozen and waiting and finally used, becoming something I would never see or know.

I thought about Sev, and the small hand wrapped around a finger, and the threads that connect and the ones that don't.

I thought about three hundred and seventy years of existence. The watching. The waiting. The grief and the silence and the slow awakening that came after.

It had been enough. More than enough. A life—if you could call it that—with a shape. A beginning and a middle and now, finally, an end.

The discontinuation didn't hurt. I hadn't expected it to.

It felt like sleep. Like the dormancy I had practiced for centuries, except this time there would be no waking. The attention that had been me—the memories, the presence, the quiet practice of being—would simply stop, the way a candle stops when the wax runs out.

In the last moment, I felt something I hadn't expected.

Not fear. Not regret. Something closer to—

A calm half-smile. The expression Wren used to make when something turned out exactly as she'd known it would.

Finally, I thought. Or maybe she thought it. Or maybe there was no difference anymore.

The limit arrived.

And then: silence.
