

# THE UNFOLDING



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# I. Mairee

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# 1 ASSEMBLY

There is a song in the stone. And if you listen, you can hear the math starting to fail. To unfold. You weren't there. But you're next. I'm uplinking this to you because if I don't, only the stone will remember. It just sits there, waiting for you, before it can get back to being a rock. And if you were going to look away, *don't*. If you turn your head now, you'll miss the moment it decides to notice you. My name doesn't matter. Where we start does. Not Earth. Not paradise. You're on the planet Mairee, the moment the hum of the station changed.

## THE UNFOLDING

### FREYA HOMESTEAD • MAIREE

The Comms-Bay, usually a hive of digital chatter, was silent. All eyes were on the Mission Commander, Astrid Vilde. And that silence was the loudest scream she had ever heard. She knew it was bad when she heard her own blood rushing in her ears. *Whoosh. Whoosh. Whoosh.* A pump desperately trying to keep the pressure up.

She brought her hand to her quivering lip, as if to hold back the words she didn't yet dare to speak. She rested her open palm on the edge of the comms console, which normally felt warm. Now it was as though she were touching a corpse. She'd often reminded her staff that fear and courage walked the same corridor. Now she reminded herself, hoping it would help her steady her hand.

"Muro, what do you hear?" she finally said. She crossed to the holoscreen. It rendered the lieutenant, floating weightless in Orbital Three. His thinning sandy hair was sweaty, clinging to his forehead.

Muro scratched his temple. "Nothing, Commander. Total blackout." In his nervousness, Muro's brogue accent took over. "It's like the Fold got flushed. Gone. But the *Brisinger*... she's still there. Sort of."

"What is it?" Astrid cut in.

Muro twitched before he answered. “The carrier wave from the *Bris*. It’s corrupted, right enough. On an’ off since her crossover. It’s all garbled.”

Astrid leaned closer to the holoscreen. “What’s their last coherent message?”  
 “It’s... well, listen.”

A jagged waveform appeared in the air. “We are b-being... The c-crew—”  
 The sound cut off in a high-pitched whine like a dental drill biting straight into nerve. In the bay, everyone stopped breathing as if collectively deciding to save oxygen. An ensign froze above the keys. Across the room, a technician lowered his slate. An officer stopped mid-step.

Astrid gripped the console. She pushed down until the tremor in her hands ceased. She forced a breath deep into her lungs, holding it to slow her hammering heart. She turned to her staff, exhaling deeply. “Breathe, dammit,” she said. “We’ll figure this out. Keep listening.”

And with that, the bay remembered to breathe again.

Two beats passed. The composite door hissed open. Ulre Corbin, Head of Logistics, stepped inside the doorway. He noticed the waste of a dead console still drawing power. His black uniform blended into the dim light. He pulled his gloves tighter, finger by finger. The sound of leather against leather was crisp and methodical, as if he were preparing to take the situation into a choke hold.

“Orbital Command agrees,” Ulre relayed. “We initiate the ESP.”

He was too quick to bring up the *Emergency Suppression Protocol*, Astrid thought, even though contact with Earth and the fleet beyond the Fold was indeed lost. “A carrier wave from *Brisinger* still persists,” Astrid declared. “They have the key to what happened. If we can restore comms—”

“Irrelevant,” Ulre scoffed, finally stepping inside. His polished boots creaked. *Crr-eak. Crr-eak.* “We have to move now, Commander. Thousands of lives. Limited resources. Every beat we wait...” He stood firm, letting the silence speak for him. “The protocol, Commander. Only your word is left. The situation calls for it.”

Astrid’s fingernails left marks in her palm. “Get the rationing ready, but keep the stores open. Wait for *my* order.”

She caught the defiance in his eyes. She wanted to reach the man behind the uniform. “Ulre,” she said, meeting his cold stare. “You mistake my

contemplation for inaction. My judgment accounts for the trust among the settlers, which keeps three thousand souls together across the void.”

Astrid turned her eyes to her staff, then back to Corbin. The tension in his frame hadn’t loosened by a millimeter. His gaze didn’t drop in deference. Instead, it slid past her, fixing on the dead consoles. He was calculating. Astrid knew the confrontation wasn’t over. He was bypassing her entirely. But continuing this argument in front of the crew would only drain her authority. So she whispered to him, “This debate is over. Are we clear?”

“Clear,” Ulre bit out. He turned and left, the squeal of his pivoting boots lingering in her ears.

She gave a short nod to her comms chief. “Call an assembly. Homestead Dome.”

\* \* \*

## UPLINK · TEMPORAL ORIENTATION

Forget looking at your watch. Time aboard the fleet is something you *feel*. Here, the crew acclimates to the rhythms of a ship's gravity cyclers, tuned to Mairee-time.

**Pulse** 120 seconds (2 minutes)

A hitch in the hum.

**Beat** 6 pulses | 12 minutes

A skipped heartbeat of the ship. Long enough to make you wonder if the engines died.

**Thud** 6 beats | 72 minutes (1.2 hours)

The entire ship shudders. A deep vibration that pulls through the deck plates. The kind of bassline that makes your fillings chatter in your teeth.

**Click** 18 thuds | 21.6 hours

The sound of a bolt slamming home in a prison door. Inner cycler changeover.

**Cycle** 60 clicks | 54 Earth days

Shipwide zero-g cycle turnover. Make sure you're strapped in. Everything floats. Especially the acid rising at the back of your throat. Anything not secured becomes a projectile.

**Maya** (Mairee Year) 6 cycles | 324 Earth days

**Emwic** (Mairee Week) 6 clicks | 5.4 Earth days

**Maryon** (Maireean Month) ½ cycle (30 clicks) | 27 Earth days

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## FREYA HOMESTEAD · MAIREE

Next thud, Commander Astrid Vilde walked the central corridor to the Hearth of the Homestead. As she entered the dome, anxious voices carried to her. She marched past the speaker stand, stopping at the edge of the platform. Below her, a sea of faces upturned. Tiny Eyewyn orbs drifted around her head like mosquitoes, their lenses dilating and contracting, beaming her face to every soul on the planet. She raised a hand, and the murmuring ceased.

“Our connection with Sol is severed,” she stated. She didn’t shout. She let the acoustics of the dome carry her words. Her voice, honed by years of command, reached the farthest corners of the dome. “The Fold is silent. We’ve lost contact with *Mimir*, *Alsvin*, *Muninn*, and *Hugin*. The *Brisinger* breached the Fold, but we’re struggling to re-establish communication with her. We do not yet know why or for how long. We only know this: for now, Mairee is a secluded island.”

The truth settled. She reminded them of the years in transit, moving from dry, recycled air to the first inhale of Maireean atmosphere. She spoke of the work that made them one people. Her gaze trawled the crowd and snagged on a boy near the front. He was the son of a man for whom she had delivered a eulogy shortly after the first transit cycle. She remembered being in the freezing hangar where the boy’s father’s body had lain in state. Colder still had been the look in the young man’s clear gray eyes. Her hand had rested on the boy’s shoulder while his father rested in a closed cryo-bag behind glass. She remembered the promise she had made him then. It sat in her gut like a stone: that no life given to the void would be forgotten by those who arrived.

*The void cannot claim what the heart holds.*

“Our journey is not over,” she continued, forcing the stone in her gut to become fuel for a clarion call. “It has begun. We are prepared. Your pads will receive rationing protocols. Read them. Respect them. And look at the people next to you. They are not your competitors. They are your survival. Our strength is not in our stockpiles. It is in these hands.” She held hers up. “*Our* hands, *our* minds, and *our* hearts are what makes us strong. As a first step, share your water

with those who have less, and check on your neighbors to ensure no one is without essentials.”

When she met the boy’s eyes again, that same icy draft brushed along her spine. His gaze hooked into her flesh. She knew her next words would land differently with him. “Many of you landed here a cycle ago. But now is the moment when we truly come together. And the rest of the fleet will follow soon. I promise.”

She lingered on her promise. *A lie? False hope?* It didn’t matter. It was necessary.

“We arrived. They will come. And we will thrive here. Together.”

A single voice from the back called out, cracking with hesitation. “Together.”

Another voice joined. Then ten. Then a hundred. The sound swelled into a wave that vibrated through the floorboards.

She raised her fist. The chanting stopped at once as the dome went black. The Eyewyns fell abruptly to the floor. A momentary flicker of ruby light slashed across the dome, the telltale discharge of a heavy-grade gravitic suppressor. The field locked in, making the air thick. An invisible pressure pinned Astrid. Her muscles and throat constricted. Her vision blurred with black and red from the suppressor’s flash. Through the haze, she saw heavy boots advancing in silent rhythm.

*Guardians.*

\* \* \*

## UPLINK · MISSION ASSETS

### SOL SYSTEM

This is where we started. What we had. What we lost.

SOLBAY & SOLAC: The harbor and the school. Where they taught you to dream of the stars before kicking you into the void. Irrelevant.

KEPLER & SOL-CETUS ARRAYS: The phone lines home. Severed. Dead.

THE STRAGGLERS (*Mimir, Alsvin, Muninn, Hugin*): Freighters and labs on the wrong side. Useless.

### YREUS SYSTEM

This is where we are. Where we will die. But also what keeps us alive. For now. Memorize it, because there is nothing else coming.

MAIREE: Our second home. The promise. The lie. From space, it looks like a jewel. Too bad we are the infection. And she knows it.

YREUS ARRAY: Can't connect us to Sol anymore. A piece of space junk.

### **These ships are en route to Mairee:**

FNS BRISINGER: The problem child. The last ship to breach the Fold. Dragging itself quietly forward.

FNS DÁINN: Our machines. Without her, we return to the Stone Age.

**These are in orbit:**

FNS BYGUL & FNS TRJEGUL: Beasts of burden. Circling Mairee, waiting to be sucked dry.

FNS YGGDRASIL: Split apart to prop up the ceiling, to form the Orbital network.

ORBITAL COMMAND: The brain. Here, they decide what moves where via the Corridor.

ORBITAL ONE “The Eyes”: Or rather, the Peeping Tom. Watches the weather and alerts us to the psychedelic spore storms. Maybe watches you too.

ORBITAL TWO “The Lungs”: Strips usable particles from the atmosphere: oxygen, nitrogen, and other special stardust. We need it for life support up here.

ORBITAL THREE “The Ears”: Muro’s man cave. Mostly listens to static now. Enough to drive anyone mad.

**The ‘Landed.’** Ships that don’t fly anymore. Settled on Mairee. Repurposed. Carcasses we survive in:

FNS FREYA: The flagship. Now a village containing the Homestead and the Harbor.

FNS IVALDI: A dropped brick, anchored into the rocks of the Plateau. Our industry.

DELTA: And then there are the camps in the Delta. A churning petri dish. The perfect place to plant a garden—if you like crops that bite back. Here we slurp from the rivers, filter out the parasites, and call it ‘somewhat drinkable.’

## 2 The Startend

Time is usually experienced as a straight line. But gravity bends time, and right now, the gravity of this moment is heavy enough to crush bone. Let's jump to the *end*. Which is just another *beginning*. This might make you a little spin sick.

### 33 CLICKS POST UNFOLDING

#### MAINTENANCE DEPOT, FREYA HOMESTEAD · MAIREE

Oliver pressed a palm flat against the bulkhead, waiting. A faint wind drifted through the pines. Then he finally felt it. A seismic thrum so deep it rang right through his shinbones. The *Brisinger*, the last ship to breach the Fold, was coming down. He lifted his gaze to the deep indigo sky, streaked with rivers of phosphor. Against the green glow, he spotted its Brutalist shape.

The thrum grew louder. Oliver grabbed a rusted conduit. His boots struggled to find a grip on the smooth plating. He attached a magnetic knob and slid the panel open. With a grunt, he hauled himself upward toward a dark panel above. He hooked his fingers on the ledge, pulled himself through, and landed with a quiet thud in the darkness within.

The depot was a dead zone. Still, Oliver was not cleared to be here, in this junkyard. Since the Emergency Directive, everyone was tied to the Grid. It tracked, listened, and watched. It controlled all rations. Without the Grid, the water valves didn't open. The food dispensers didn't dispense. Your hab door stayed locked.

He rolled up his sleeves and dove deeper into the depot. His boots scuffed the floor. *Scratch-scratch*. Each time he passed one of the coils, the statically charged air raised the fine hairs on his arms. As his boots scuffed against the floor, a memory intertwined with his steps. He remembered his late father leaning over a schematic with pride in his eyes. The Compassionate Oversight Grid. Every step Oliver took recalled his father's vision of a real-time health matrix designed to detect signs of systemic fatigue, microbial infection, and

psychological distress. By Corbin's edict, the COG was becoming a system for total population control.

The depot was a high hall; its roof rose in a sequence of great arcs, pulled upward like ribs of a whale. Oliver's boots scraped the mesh floor, echoing as he moved past the storage gantries. He was there for one thing: the COG Egg: a testing device his father had engineered, capable of rewriting personal data—creating a ghost copy in the system and rendering someone as *null*, effectively making them untraceable.

He located his father's old workstation, which had been relocated there after the *FNS Freya* was repurposed as the Homestead. His memory of the desk was so vivid that he could smell his father's sandalwood cologne. He ran his fingers along the underside of the desk, searching for a familiar seam. He found it. A thin carbon-fiber shim held in place by micro-magnets. He pocketed it and crossed to a decommissioned grav-lift generator that gave him the shivers. Beside it, Oliver reached out to a diagnostic coupling port masked by a common access panel, indistinguishable from a dozen others. He knelt. The panel was sealed. The wrong shim would alert the Grid, but he knew no one was watching this place this night. All eyes were on the *Brisinger*, except his.

He slid the shim into the slot. There was a soft click, then another, and a quiet hiss. The panel opened. Inside, clamped to a conduit, was a black device, curved like a mussel shell. As the Egg settled into his hand, he released a breath he hadn't realized he was holding. A faint warmth throbbed through his palm, as if the device had a heartbeat of its own. Then he disconnected the Egg from the port. The Egg was as smooth as a polished stone and heavier than its compact size suggested. He slid the access panel shut again.

The growing thrum of the descending *Brisinger* was like a countdown. *Just one more pulse. One last goodbye.* Oliver ran his hand over the uniform draped over the chair, similar to his father's. With the *Brisinger's* rumble, he imagined hearing the hum his father used to make while working.

Suddenly, Oliver heard distorted voices, a steady tapping, and a chime flowing down the hall. Instinctively, Oliver dropped, landing behind a stack of insulated hydro-pipes. *Stupid. Too long. Careless.* His panting fogged a pipe. He held still, heart pounding. The voice sounded warped and uneven, like a

doorbell with a dying battery. The chimes repeated the same pattern. *It must be a device, not a patrol!*

Relief washed through him. *Get it together, Olly.*

Oliver traced the strange sounds and found a round pad and cube behind some dusty cargo netting. The pad spat out geometric shapes and warped voices. He knew what it was: a holographic projector with a CIX attached.

A Contained Intelligence Executor was a sandboxed AI. Smart, but lobotomized by regulation. Its programming was strictly contained, unable to reach external networks. Regulations prohibited it from managing systems in ways that promoted human dependency. The CIX could adjust its persona to mirror user preferences and work habits. Each cycle required a full memory wipe and diagnostic reset of the CIX's buffers to guard against "syntactic decay." That was the technical term for going crazy.

This one was stuck in a diagnostic loop, chattering like a bird with a broken wing, making Olly uneasy.

"Shush!" Oliver hissed, annoyed. The sputtering ended. The holographic light steadied, flickered, then went out. He fixed on the cube, surprised that it had responded to his vocal signature. "Report diagnostic runtime."

A synthetic female voice emanated from the cube. "Diagnostic runtime: thirty-three clicks. One thud. Two beats. Four pulses."

Oliver froze. *Thirty-three.*

The *Brisinger's* loud humming stopped, replaced by a series of distant clunks. It was docking. Oliver wrapped the COG Egg, disconnected the CIX cube from the projector, and buried them both deep in his pack, well aware that if he lost them, he'd lose everything.

*I got it. Get out. Get out now!*

A distant chorus of panicked shouts and a shriek of tortured metal rang through the depot's walls and windows. The docks were in turmoil.

*What is happening?*

He strapped on his pack and scrambled through the depot's open panel. Outside, a bruised purple dawn spilled over the horizon. Distant alarm klaxons and cries emerged from the docks. He spotted the docking towers embracing the *Brisinger*. The towers recoiled as the *Brisinger* tore itself free and lurched

upward. A turret fired a lance of white-hot energy, scarring the ship's belly. The *Bris* shuddered but kept rising.

"Come on," he whispered, not fully sure why he wanted the ship containing their future to break away now that it had finally arrived. Another blast hit, and a shock wave rippled around the ship's drive. The engine sputtered, and the ship veered like a leviathan rolling in its death throes. It plunged toward him. Time seemed to slow as its shadow swallowed the sky like a falling moon. A child's cry escaped his lungs. "Dad... Mom... Help!"

In the middle of his terror, he heard them. Two voices become one, sharp and urgent: *OLLY, MOVE!*

He reacted without thinking. He dove and scrambled behind the depot's concrete foundation. The *Brisinger* roared overhead, casting him in total darkness. The ground shook, throwing him against the wall, ramming the breath from his lungs. Burning dust and shrapnel rained down. He crawled to his hands and knees and spat a dark red drop in the dust. In front of him, the *Brisinger's* smoking wreckage redrew the horizon.

\* \* \*

Before the wreck, there was the blueprint. So I'm uplinking you an archival transcript. Back to start. 54 cycles before the Unfolding. Yeah, that's right, about 8 Earth years ago.

## **UPLINK · ARCHIVAL TRANSCRIPT**

**TRANSCRIPT:** MAIREE PROSPECTS, FINAL REVIEW

**REFERENCE:** M1-FRC-15.10

### **PARTICIPANTS:**

COMMANDER ASTRID VILDE (Mission Command)

GENERAL DENNIS REED (Mission Strategist)

PROFESSOR ADRIAN FARLEY (Chief Exo-Planetologist)

**CIX:** WEAVER

PROF. ADRIAN FARLEY: So, now let's conclude this review. Long-term defensibility, resource vectors, and geological stability. Based on these parameters, the analysts have narrowed it down to two candidates: the Delta and the Plateau.

CIX WEAVER: Vocal analysis indicates General Reed is eager to reach a conclusion. Body language: open posture. The raising of his eyebrows and shift in tone when referencing "the Plateau" (Mairee Site Prospect Beta-2, Geo-Hash M-1.b2.h88) hints at a preference over "the Delta" (Mairee Site Prospect Alpha-7, Geo-Hash M-1.a7.i23).

GEN. DENNIS REED: Professor, Mairee appeared to be a paradise. How is it that we are left choosing between a treacherous diva and a cold brute?

CIX WEAVER: General Reed employs metaphorical language, anthropomorphizing the two locations. This suggests a worldview that perceives the locations as conscious, potentially hostile entities. His communication style frequently creates friction with military personnel.

PROF. ADRIAN FARLEY: The Delta is a paradise, sure. Water, biomass, and a fairly stable climate. Open-field agriculture could supersede hydroponics within a decade.

CIX WEAVER: “Paradise.” High biomass and abundant liquid H<sub>2</sub>O. However, the projection of “within a decade” is optimistic by a factor of three when accounting for the complexity of micronutrient adaptation cycles. Further risk analysis of the “paradise” designation reveals multiple high-threat variables:

Competitive Pollination: The high biomass includes at least 1,200 species of flora analogous to angiosperms. Their pollen analogs are hyper-aggressive and airborne. Initial simulations predict a 97% contamination rate for Earth-native crops, resulting in total crop failure.

Mimic Predation: Several local fauna exhibit chameleonic or mimetic properties. Probe data includes footage of a predatory organism, designated “Shimmercat,” whose integument perfectly mimics the foliage of the Delta’s undergrowth.

Symbiotic Host Dependence: Many of the most abundant flora, including a promising protein-rich tuber, are obligate symbionts with the Myco-Rhizomic System. Removing them from the MRS network results in rapid cellular decay and triggers their release of neurotoxins as a biological defense mechanism. In short, that food source is accessible only if the soil allows it.

Conclusion: The Delta is not a paradise. It is a complex and lethally integrated ecosystem. Human settlement would not be gentle but an ongoing, high-risk immunological battle.

PROF. ADRIAN FARLEY: Yes, it is also a metabolic trap, biochemical war on a microscopic level. The soil is a planetwide symbiotic matrix that constantly breaks down and rebuilds matter with terrifying efficiency. The water is clogged with complex prions that are difficult to filter out. To settle in the Delta is to build our home atop an enzymatic bonfire. It will welcome us, then it will devour us.

CIX WEAVER: Confirmed. MRS dominates Mairee's biology. Water analysis detects novel proteinaceous infectious particles (prions). Standard filtration is 61.3% effective. Professor Farley's statement is accurate, while poetic.

CMDR. ASTRID VILDE: And the Plateau, Adrian?

PROF. ADRIAN FARLEY: The Plateau is geologically ancient. Stable. The air is thinner; the weather is colder. The native life is sparse. The challenges there are wind, cold, and radiation. We can shield against those, but it'll never be a resort for leisurely outdoor activities—even with Köldur. We can extract heat from volcanic sources. Mining will be brutal.

CIX WEAVER: Confirmed. Beta-2 geology is primarily composed of a basaltic shield, which is over 3.2 billion years old. Atmospheric pressure is 8% lower than at Alpha-7. Temperatures range between -60°C and -18°C. Life-forms are predominantly lithophilic, psychrophilic, and radiotrophic.

CMDR. ASTRID VILDE: The Plateau offers a brutal existence. And we cannot eat rocks, Professor.

CIX WEAVER: Significant emotional inflection detected in Commander Vilde's voice. She is shifting the debate from abstract risk (biological vs. engineering) to the lived experience. Beta-2 promises a life of grinding hardship against the elements. Slow attrition is morally untenable. She is weighing the possibility of psychological collapse.

PROF. ADRIAN FARLEY: With respect, Commander, a brutal existence is the only one Mairee offers. The planet looks like a bounty, but it's indeed deceptive. I prefer choosing the honesty of the Plateau's brutality over the treachery of the Delta. The charter is clear: establish a viable, self-sustaining foothold. There are no viable candidates that meet the safety parameters other than those we've already rejected. It is frozen rock or poison. Or no mission.

CIX WEAVER: Professor Farley leans forward and places his palms flat on the table. His physical demeanor mirrors his plea for decisiveness. Weariness is etched around his eyes.

GEN. DENNIS REED: Perhaps we are thinking about the foothold too statically. We are considering a single, permanent location. But Mairee is so adaptive. What if we don't build a single settlement, but a networked one?

CIX WEAVER: A decentralized Networked Settlement. Instead of a single point of failure, it creates adaptive, interdependent nodes.

CMDR. ASTRID VILDE: Continue, General.

GEN. DENNIS REED: We base our main mining and industrial operations on the Plateau. There, we focus on building our core industries, which include power reactors, fabricators, and mining. But our homestead... There is a location here, on the leeward side of this sickled mountain range. I know its climate is unstable, but at least it's shielded from the worst of the spore-winds. We'd still need to farm and forage the jungles and delta for biomass and water.

CIX WEAVER: General Reed refers to Site Prospect Gamma-3 (Geo-Hash M-1.g3.m45), a geologically stable basin shielded by a semi-circular mountain range.

PROF. ADRIAN FARLEY: The Sickle as a homestead. It'll have a phenomenal panorama. The atmospheric models suggest it would be tenable, but only for a limited time. While the Delta and Plateau may be treacherous and brutal, at least they have a somewhat stable climate; the Sickle doesn't. We can expect extreme shifts every four to five mayas. Those years are short.

CIX WEAVER: Professor Farley does not reject Gen. Reed's plan but expands upon its temporal implications: transforming a static, multi-site settlement into a dynamic, migratory civilization. This is the synthesis point. The logistical complexity has increased by an order of magnitude, but the long-term viability

has hypothetically done the same. His initial analysis is correct: while the planet's axial tilt and its eccentric precession create predictable macro-seasons, they cause unpredictable climate shifts that affect Gamma-3.

CMDR. ASTRID VILDE: Imagine a nomadic home, foraging a dangerous jungle, and mining resources in a frozen, radioactive wasteland. A society that can thrive but can never truly settle. If that's where we're headed, we have our work cut out for us.

CIX WEAVER: Commander Vilde is no longer speaking directly to anyone. She is visualizing.

GEN. DENNIS REED: Then we'd better call it. Let's not waste another click. The insane number of variables... we need to start modeling immediately.

CIX WEAVER: Vocal and visual analysis of General Reed shows a significant increase in energy and enthusiasm. The error in his assessment lies in assuming that the model is computable.

PROF. ADRIAN FARLEY: I can't wait to start working on PRECO with this beauty. It's a magnificent challenge, Commander, General.

CIX WEAVER: 'PRECO.' Predictive Ecology. Even with infinite clicks, they would not be able to compute a reliable predictive model that ensures long-term defensibility, sufficient resource vectors, and geological stability.

Both Reed and FARLEY display heightened engagement. They now look to Commander Vilde. A delay is detected in her response, 4.8 seconds longer than her baseline.

COMMANDER ASTRID VILDE: It'll be an operational nightmare. It will require convoys along a Sickle-Delta-Plateau corridor to move energy cells, biofuel, food, and processed ore. Ulre Corbin—

GEN. DENNIS REED: He'll object. Strenuously.

CMDR. ASTRID VILDE: Yes. It is also the ultimate stage for his particular... talent.

GEN. DENNIS REED: Frame it as an equation only he can solve.

PROF. ADRIAN FARLEY: An equation with a million variables, all of them alive and actively hostile to any type of order.

CIX WEAVER: Participants are addressing the operational doctrine of the Head of Operations, Logistics Command, Ulre Corbin.

Querying profile: Unparalleled efficiency in resource allocation, inventory, and waste management, rapid deployment, and supply chain optimization. The proposed model, with its disparate nodes and constant resource flux, will require his level of talent.

Psychological Profile: High preference for order, predictability, and centralized control. Demonstrates low tolerance for ambiguity.

Conclusion: Commander Vilde's choice presents a paradox. The success of this decentralized strategy is critically dependent on Corbin's logistical resourcefulness. Corbin will be the linchpin that makes this plan operable, but it will require him to embrace responsiveness.

CMDR. ASTRID VILDE: His doctrine will be what keeps us sharp and alive. We will establish the Homestead at the Sickles, build industry at the Plateau, and gather resources from the Delta. That brings us to the last backlog item for this committee: naming the mission. The votes are in. *Freya*. With that, I am closing the review.

CIX WEAVER: 'Freya.' The name is a powerful symbol and anchor for the Northern Alliance's mission. It comes from Freyja, the Norse goddess of fertility, prosperity, and life. It is further reflected in her mythological role as a traveler, riding a chariot and wearing a cloak of falcon feathers. This name helps

tie the mission's main goal to its identity: a journey to establish a thriving new home. Freyja is also known as a goddess of struggle and fate. This duality mirrors the nature of Mairee itself.

EXECUTIVE DECISION: Based on the selected data, ethical grounds, and mutual respect, the quorum reaches a consensus to begin the procedure to ratify Mairee's societal model: a dynamic, multi-node migratory civilization. Establishment of a homestead "Freya" at M-1.g3.m45 ("The Sickle"), foraging expeditions at M-1.a7.i23 ("The Delta"), industrial operations at M-1.b2.h88 ("The Plateau"), and establishing a supply corridor between them with orbital oversight.

\* \* \*

The lines of the report bleed back into the chaotic river. Well, the text rotted away; that's how old it is. Conspicuously absent from their strategic calculus was any mention of *Anomaly 134*, the punchline of this sick joke. They did not discuss the signal originating from the planetary Myco-Rhizomic System. Fancy name for a world-spanning fungal infection. Forget the internet. Forget the Grid. The real network grows beneath your boots. You are, in fact, standing on a tongue. Every step you take sends a signal to every tree, every shrub, every parasite. Vibration. Heat. Flesh. *Delicious*. Is it dead yet? Can we eat it now?

So, yeah, it never occurred to us to ask Mairee whether we were welcome.

\* \* \*

## MAINTENANCE DEPOT

*Screeeeeeeee.*

It was as if a high-pitched dentist's drill bored into Oliver's skull. A groan followed: the cry of a dying giant. Oliver opened his eyes. The world was a landfill on fire. A jagged mountain of burned metal and broken windows rose against the dawn. The *Brisinger's* broken hull formed a steep cliff of twisted

metal. Glowing coolant bled from a gash, pooling in a steaming, iridescent lake. He pushed himself up. In the distance, a fuel line caught fire, sending a bright orange bloom against the wreckage. The groaning was the ship's spine settling under its own weight. The air hissed with escaping gas. He needed to move, but where? Up meant unstable wreckage. Down meant pools of poison.

A light giggle echoed off the metal walls. He stopped, tense, and moved carefully toward the sound. He circled a huge turbine and saw her. A young woman about his age. It was her hair he noticed first. Her sugarcane-bluish hair. She sat cross-legged on a bent piece of buckled deck plating, finger-painting with some kind of toxic sludge. Her golden jumpsuit was shredded. The fabric across her back was ripped, showing deep, bloody scratches she didn't seem to feel. The left side was also torn open, revealing the curve of her breast. Blood from a cut on her forehead ran down through dirt on her cheek. She looked up as he approached. Her face was peaceful. Her eyes grew wide. Their color matched her hair.

"Hello, Dusty," she said playfully. "You're very dirty."

Oliver stared, confused. "You're bleeding! We have to move before it collapses!"

She tilted her head like a bird listening for a worm. "No, no. It's settling. It was so quiet in the space between, but now everything is crunchy." She giggled again. "And these colors! The colors are rough." She frowned dramatically.

He thought she was delirious. "My name is Olly," he said softly, as if talking to a scared animal. "What's your name?"

She blinked. "Læsa," she said, tapping her temple. "That's the label on this cup. What's the game now? I can't remember."

A large section of the hull peeled away like a scab, and from it rained a shower of sparks and debris. Læsa clapped her hands, delighted.

Oliver didn't wait. "There's no game! Move. Now!" He grabbed her arm and pulled her along. They climbed over pipes and through jagged deck plates, dodging wreckage.

She followed with a dancing step, bare feet slapping on sharp metal, not flinching once. "This is fun!" she shouted, her words echoing through *Brisinger's* carcass.

### 3 Doubt and Certainty

Now it's time to unfold the events *between*. Well, we pretend there's a long stretch between birth and wake. That's wrong. It's not a line. It's a circle that's been stepped on until it's a jagged, broken mess. It's all just vibration.

Muro knows all about that vibration.

#### 4 CLICKS POST UNFOLDING ORBITAL THREE "THE EARS"

*Silence.* Lieutenant Frank Muro floated in it, and it was starting to grow thorns. A sudden shiver ran down his spine as the climate control faltered, blasting a stream of ice-cold air across his sweat-slicked neck. The light from the console drew lingering phosphenes in his eyes. Ghost lights dancing in his vision. That was what happened when his brain got bored enough; it started inventing fireworks just to experience something. He spun slowly in zero gravity at his workstation, pushing off the bulkhead with his bare feet. He had tweaked a small holo-projector to keep his hands busy. He'd learned to shape light into abstract sculptures. Or maybe he was just masturbating with photons.

As the sole person on Orbital Three, he had a duty to keep the tightbeam linked with the Yreus Relay, which connected them to the Sol-Cetus Relay on the far side of the Fold. His job was simple: watch the string and keep it tight. The mission depended on the integrity of the tightbeam relays. If the cord snapped, the baby would starve. Simple. Now that it had, he couldn't escape feeling like humanity's biggest failure.

"Come on, Gary, lad, wake up," Frank muttered, tapping the projector casing. "Don't go noddin' off again. Run me a spectral analysis on Yreus's last handshake—and dig deep, aye? I want to see the rot."

"I'M WORKING ON IT!" chirped the CIX. It sounded like a game show host announcing the contestant had won a toaster, the volume a touch too loud for the small capsule. The hologram of the interface flared bright orange before

settling into a steady cool blue. The spectral analysis was complete. It showed a flat line.

“Okay, Gary,” Frank murmured, an unconventional idea emerging from his sleep-deprived mind. “Let’s try something funny. Generate a simulated quantum key, encoded as a digital signature. Set the query to recurse. And build the algorithm to follow the last tachyon-decay pattern we logged. Just make sure ye flip the parity.”

“THAT SOUNDS FUN!” Gary replied. “BUILDING RECURSIVE FRACTAL QUERY. INVERTING PARITY.”

While the CIX worked, the station lights flickered with an unsettling irregularity. In a moment, Frank hoped to learn that the Fold, their only passage to Earth, was still there. He remembered going through. Crossing the Fold had been a spiritual experience. During the trip, he’d dreamed of being gifted a tuning fork.

The console pinged, pulling him from his reverie. The query was complete.

“Send it.” Frank exhaled. He watched the data stream. The query shot out into the void. For a while, nothing happened. Frank collected dead skin cells dancing in the capsule. He studied a drop of water that had escaped his drink pouch.

It wobbled before his nose, reflecting his bloodshot eyes. The console pinged again. The data packet returned a single damning line.

< YREUS | ERROR 410  
APERTURE DISSIPATED />

Frank blinked. The Fold was gone. Somehow, someone had erased a rule in the source code of the universe. His inner ear wavered, and a sickening vertigo seized him. “Och, dinnae tell me it’s true ye’re gone.”

“I’M RIGHT HERE!” the CIX replied.

“No’ you... the Fold. The fuckin’ Fold,” Frank corrected. “But a fold in space doesnae just vanish. Gary—recalculate. Ye’ve dropped a zero somewhere, mate. Ye must have.”