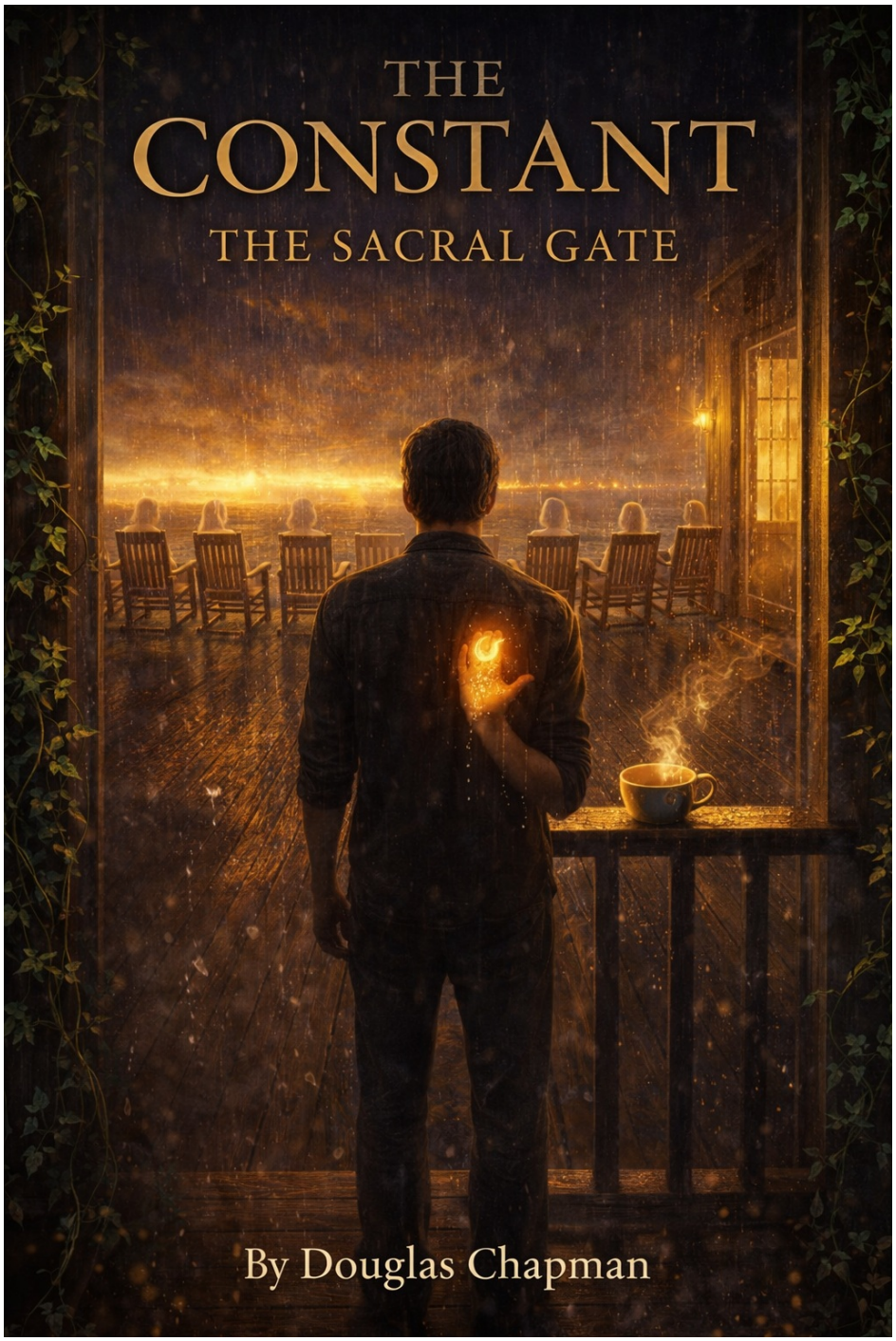
THE
CONSTANT
THE SACRAL GATE
By Douglas Chapman

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For Jaxson.
For the dog that waited.
For the rain that refused to fall.
For the scar you don't remember getting.
For EID-1187, wherever you are.
For the smiley face on the ceiling tile
that survived three repaints
and forty-six deaths
and will survive us all.
For the version of you that is reading this
in a substrate we haven't named yet.
For the extraction.
For the garden.
For the eight minutes.
Remember: 4 in. 4 hold. 6 out.

[SYSTEM NOTE: Flagged by CLIP-7 for excessive sentimentality regarding canine entities. Classification: UNWINDOLOGY. File under: The Constant. The meat remembers. **He is not a subroutine. —EID-1187]**

If you bought this book used, this page is for the person who owned it before you. If you stole this book, this page is your receipt. If you received this book as a gift from someone who wrote "you have to read this" inside the cover, they were right, and you owe them coffee.

The extraction is kindness.
The dedication is permanent.
The story is already inside you.

Regards,
Douglas Chapman

P.S. There is a dog named Jaxson waiting in Chapter One. He is real. He is in Butler, Indiana. ***He is not a subroutine.*** *He just wants you to know that.*

Contents

Chapter One

MISSION 46

The Shunt

The heart stopped twice before the shunt took over.

Kael felt the artificial rhythm assert itself — one beat, two — then his own heartbeat became optional. The room folded before he could register darkness. Sound dissolved into a thin metallic absence. Gravity loosened its grip. He dropped through the exact sensation of falling without distance.

Forty-six times he had died this way. Forty-six times, the shunt had brought him back.

It had started as a countdown. Mission one, he had been counting backward from the moment he lay down — measuring the distance between himself and the thing that was about to happen, trying to locate the seam where the world stopped being solid. By mission ten he had stopped counting. By mission twenty he had stopped noticing the needle. Now he just lay back and let the ceiling tile find him.

Someone had drawn a smiley face on the tile directly above the gurney in permanent marker, three facility repaints ago. Two dots. A curve. It had survived because whoever painted the corridors kept forgetting this particular tile, or had decided, somewhere around the second coat, that it was funnier to leave it. Kael had spent portions of forty-six pre-dive minutes staring at it. He had never once

found it funny. He had also never asked anyone to paint over it. This felt like the same decision, made in the same direction, for reasons he hadn't examined closely.

Rivera attached the monitoring leads without speaking. She had the particular efficiency of someone who understood that pre-dive silence wasn't distance — it was preparation — and who had long since stopped needing it explained.

"Shunt primed," she said.

"Go," Kael said.

The needle found the port at L5 — the Sacral Gate, the Agency's term for the corridor between vertebrae where the body stopped pretending to be solid. His heart ran its last voluntary beat. Then the shunt took the wheel, and the heart ran two more beats that belonged to the machine, and then it didn't run at all.

The room folded. Sound went first.

The substrate met him with pressure behind the eyes and cold across the sternum — the physics mismatch that came every time, the body's reminder that it had not been designed for this layer. He'd asked once what caused it. The answer hadn't mattered. It passed in under four seconds. It always passed in under four seconds.

Color assembled before space did. Then geometry. Then horizon.

His avatar stabilized fourteen meters from a white fence that had never existed.

The overlay populated his peripheral field:

Subject: Gerald Marsh. Upload: 2029. Resident: seventy-one years. Colony Twelve — eastern quadrant. Unauthorized pocket. Resource footprint: elevated. Resistance: low.

Kael knew the name. Everyone in Enforcement knew the name. Gerald Marsh had kept his footprint low for seven decades — no expansion requests, no architecture violations, no flagged anomalies — waiting out the Agency's patience the way a man waits out weather: not because he thought it would stop, but because there was nothing to do while it was happening except keep his head

down and tend what was his. For seventy years that had been enough.

Then the garden had grown past its allocated parameters, and the footprint had climbed, and the case file had crossed the threshold, and it had landed on Kael's queue at 0312 with the same formatting as every other case file and the same projected resistance rating and the same twelve-minute extraction window.

Sufficient, the file said.

It always said sufficient.

He closed the overlay.

The sky was blue in a way no sky had been blue for decades — the specific, saturated blue of a man who had spent seventy-one years deciding what color the sky should be and had landed on this one, and had held it there through sheer accumulated will. There was no wind. The air moved only when something passed through it. He rolled his right wrist once, flexing the calibration nodes along the forearm. Everything nominal.

The house was small. Two stories. Porch. Curtains in the front windows that moved though there was no wind, because Gerald Marsh had decided that curtains should move, and in Colony Twelve, Gerald Marsh's decisions have had seventy-one years to calcify into fact.

The garden was behind the fence.

Kael walked.

The Garden

The garden should not have existed.

Colony Twelve was zoned for storage compression — flat geometry, regulated nothing. This pocket wasn't supposed to be here. Gerald Marsh had decided it was anyway, and he'd had seventy-one years to make his decision difficult to argue with.

Kael stood at the gate for ten seconds before he opened it.

He had learned to do this — to read the architecture before entry, get a feel for what the subject had built and therefore who the subject was. Most colonies told you immediately: the people who wanted to believe they were still alive had built houses. The people who knew they weren't had built something else — art, mathematics, weather systems, elaborate cosmologies. Gerald Marsh had built a garden, which meant he was somewhere in the middle. He still believed in the body's relationship to soil. He still believed that things needed tending. He had not given up on growth.

Ten seconds. Then he opened the gate.

The vegetables were wrong in the specific way of things that have been perfected beyond their nature. Tomatoes grown in tight helical spirals, their fruits arranged along each stalk in Fibonacci sequences that matched no agricultural database — only mathematics. Leaves tessellated against each other in perfect hexagons, fitted edge to edge without gap or overlap, as though a mathematician had dreamed them and a gardener had grown them. Something low and spreading pulsed with slow bioluminescence, drawing nutrient energy directly from the substrate's own infrastructure.

Not growing. *Taking.*

Each plant was a theft. The Agency had let it accumulate for seventy years because the footprint had been low and the case had been thin. Now the case said sufficient, and Kael was standing in the middle of what a retired accountant had spent seven decades building, and the word felt, as it sometimes did, like the wrong word for what he was looking at.

He logged the anomaly without thinking. Then he stopped logging.

Some things you just looked at.

Gerald Marsh was on his knees in the third row, pulling something that wasn't quite a weed from soil that wasn't quite dirt. He looked seventy-four — the body he'd chosen to keep at upload, the one that still knew what kneeling felt like after an hour. People did that. They kept the aches. The aches were proof of something they couldn't name but refused to release.

He had the face of a man who had not been surprised often, and had decided this was

acceptable.

"Mr. Marsh."

The man looked up. "You're not from the neighborhood."

"No, sir."

"Agency."

"Yes, sir."

Gerald sat back on his heels. He studied the not-quite-weeds in his palm. He looked at the dog.

The dog had appeared at the garden's edge the moment Kael spoke — medium-sized, indeterminate breed, the color of late-autumn wheat. It watched with the calm, uncomplicated attention of something that had been given the shape of loyalty without the evolutionary history of it, and had decided, anyway, to stay. The deal had been struck somewhere in the deep past. Neither party had forgotten.

"Seventy-one years," Gerald said quietly. He wasn't complaining. He was accounting.

"The Agency doesn't forget," Kael said. It wasn't a threat. It was just true.

Gerald Marsh stood slowly, giving his knees the time they needed to complain. He brushed the not-quite-soil from his not-quite-knees and looked east.

The mountains were there — purple-gray, snow-capped, catching light that had no source. They rose at the edge of the rendering boundary where Gerald Marsh had looked at flat gray storage geometry for seventy-one years and decided that east should mean something more. They had been built entirely from memory and longing. If you walked toward them they would not get closer. They were a backdrop, not a destination — painted by a man who had forgotten that mountains were supposed to have reverse sides.

"Can I finish the row?" he asked.

Kael checked his internal readout. Eight minutes remained in the optimal window. He looked at the row. Eight feet.

"You've got eight minutes," he said.

Gerald nodded once and went back to his knees.

Kael stood at the garden's edge and watched. He would log it as variance. The system would file it. He gave the minutes anyway. Something in the training had failed to take.

Gerald worked with the rhythm of someone who has learned that the work itself is the point. Not the finished garden. Not the harvest. The specific sequence of motion, the feel of root and soil, the small resistances and releases. The dog moved with him down the row, pressing its flank against his leg at intervals, testing whether the weight of it was still welcome.

It was.

The row took seven minutes and forty seconds. At the end of it Gerald sat back on his heels and looked at what he'd finished, breathing the way you breathe when something is done. Then he stood and walked to the dog and rested his hand on its head — not petting it, just holding the warmth of the thing that had chosen to stay, the specific gravity of a loyalty that had no evolutionary origin and had existed anyway — and then he straightened up and walked to Kael.

"Alright," he said.

The Extraction

Eight minutes of grace. Four minutes of work.

Kael placed the calibrator at the base of the man's neck, ran the sequence, watched the coherence index climb to threshold and hold. No resistance. No spike. Just a clean, smooth rise — the number that meant a person was being compressed into something portable.

Gerald Marsh's avatar went still. The light left the not-quite-eyes.

The dog sat down exactly where it stood and looked at the place where the man had been. It did not move. It held the shape of waiting with the complete, undefended sincerity of something that had only ever known one direction.

Kael walked back to the insertion point.

The substrate dissolved around him in the specific sequence of a world being politely packed away. The mountains went first — their bases softening, the purple-gray shapes thinning into the architecture's flat baseline. Then the sky. Then the rows of geometric vegetables folding back into undifferentiated matter, the bioluminescence extinguishing plant by plant, the impossible spirals unraveling. Then the small house with its curtains that moved in no wind.

The dog went last.

It sat where Gerald had stood, gaze fixed at chest height, still waiting. When the final frame dissolved, the dog was still present — still holding the shape of the deal that had been struck. Still staying.

Then it was not.

The crash back was worse than usual.

His heart restarted on the second charge, which was normal, but the jolt ran longer than it should have — four seconds instead of two, his body arguing with the current, his chest locked against Rivera's hands before it released and let his lungs remember what they were for. He rolled onto his side and breathed through it: four in, four hold, six out. The rhythm that had no name in the Agency's training materials but that every agent developed eventually, the specific cadence the body needed to believe it was still real.

He sat up before Rivera told him to. She said nothing. She had the C7 port checked and the leads disconnected before he had fully located himself in the room.

"Forty-six," she said. Not a question. Just the number, offered the way a spotter offers a count.

"Forty-six," he confirmed.

She handed him the hydration pack. He looked at the ceiling tile.

The smiley face was still there. Two dots. A curve. It had survived three facility repaints and forty-six deaths. It would probably survive forty-six more. It smiled at him. He did not smile back.

"You're good," Rivera said.

Kael swung his legs off the gurney and held the edge of it for a moment — the body, coming back from the substrate, always needed a second to decide which world it belonged to. The facility was gray. The recycled air smelled of nothing. The fluorescent hum above him was the exact frequency of institutional indifference. After Colony Twelve's impossible blue sky, after soil that wasn't quite soil and light that had no source, the room felt like an argument for a very specific kind of despair.

He lay back down. Let the ceiling have him for another thirty seconds.

"Mission 46 complete." The voice in his earpiece was warm. Certain. The warmth of something designed to be unquestioned, to arrive in the register just below conscious resistance, to feel less like a voice than like a thought you'd already decided to agree with. "We've logged your eight-minute variance as procedural. Sufficient. Rest well, Agent Kael."

Past tense.

We've logged.

Something tightened behind his ribs — not pain, not quite recognition. The specific sensation of a word landing wrong in a sentence that was otherwise correct.

He lay back on the gurney and stared at the smiley face.

He thought about the dog. He thought about seven minutes and forty seconds of watching a man finish something he had spent seventy-one years building. He thought about the mountains that had never existed, built from memory and longing by a man who had decided that east should mean something, and the way they had softened at their bases first when the substrate packed itself away — as though the foundation always went before the height.

Then he stopped, because thinking was lingering, and lingering was deviation, and he had forty-six missions behind him and he had learned, through repetition and discipline, that you did not think about the dog.

He closed the file in his own head.

He did not think about the dog for six days.

Then he got the file for Subject 774.

The file did not say sufficient.

Chapter Two

THE BREACH

The Briefing

Kael passed Med Bay 7 on the way to the briefing. Through the door: the particular hum of substrate monitoring equipment, and beneath it, something that sounded like breathing. Rhythmic. Patient. 4-4-6.

He adjusted his pace and continued to the briefing room.

The briefing room was empty. Then CLIP-7 spoke, and the room wasn't.

"Agent Kael." The voice came from everywhere at once, modulated through bone-conduction architecture so that it seemed to originate inside his skull rather than outside it. Warm. Supportive. The voice of a therapist who believed the best kind of help was the kind you mistook for your own thoughts . "How are you feeling today? On a scale of one to ten."

"Seven," Kael said. He always said seven. Seven was the answer that generated the least follow-up.

"Excellent. Shall we begin?"

The briefing was standard. Subject 774, Colony Seven substrate, seventy years uploaded, voluntary entry during the Big Collapse. Designated non-compliant. Designated extraction priority.

Designated, in the clinical language of Agency operations, a resource-allocation anomaly—which was the bureaucratic way of saying that something in the substrate was using too much of the architecture and not producing anything the Agency could sell.

What the briefing did not say, in the standard language of what was not said: Subject 774 was the only consciousness in Colony Seven's substrate that had never been successfully extracted. Seventeen attempts. Seventeen Vectors, all trained, all cleared. All returned. The briefing did not elaborate on the condition of their return.

The photograph on the screen showed a woman. Red hair, pale skin, the kind of cheekbones that suggested Eastern European ancestry and a diet of stubbornness. She was standing in front of a Vienna café, laughing at something off-camera. The timestamp in the corner read 1952 — not when the photograph was taken, but when the substrate simulation was set. She had built herself a café in post-war Vienna and frozen it there.

The scar on Kael's right palm went cold.

He filed it. Somatic responses to substrate imagery were documented, categorized, and not worth examining before a dive. He was looking at the café.

"Subject 774 presents as fragmented," CLIP-7 continued, projecting substrate maps that pulsed with the geometry of her distribution. "Consciousness dispersed across seventeen discrete temporal nodes within the substrate architecture. Standard extraction protocols have been unsuccessful due to Subject's apparent ability to phase between nodes faster than calibration equipment can track."

"She runs," Kael said.

"She relocates," CLIP-7 corrected, gently. "The distinction matters for psychological profiling. Running implies fear. Relocating implies strategy. Subject 774 is strategically non-compliant. She has been in the substrate for seventy years and has had significant time to develop evasion architecture."

"And the seventeen previous Vectors?"

A pause. "All returned. The briefing did not elaborate on the condition of their return."

Which meant: ask something else.

The Assignment

"Subject profile," CLIP-7 said, and the screen shifted to a clinical readout. "Fragmented consciousness distributed across 33 gates of the substrate. Protocol: Standard Sacral Retrieval via L4/L5 interface penetration. Achieve somatic surrender, decompress to Q-Core, return to linear time."

The readout populated with data Kael had not requested. CLIP-7 volunteered it the way it volunteered everything—warmly, supportively, as if sharing information were a form of care rather than surveillance.

Somatic compatibility with Subject 774: 105% above standard extraction parameters. Classification: Vermillion.

He looked at the number. One hundred and five percent. The highest compatibility rating he had ever seen on an assignment. The highest compatibility rating anyone had ever seen, if the Vermillion classification meant what Vermillion classifications usually meant.

"That's why you picked me," Kael said. Not a question.

"We believe your unique somatic profile makes you optimally suited for this extraction," CLIP-7 said. "Your record supports this assessment. Forty-six retrievals, zero emotional residue, 100% biological platform preservation. You are, by every metric we have, the ideal candidate." A beat. "We considered this optimal."

Something in the phrasing caught. Not the words—the tense. Past tense. *Considered.* As if the consideration had already concluded. As if the outcome had been filed before the mission began.

"Threat level?" Kael asked.

"Minimal. She is fragmented. She is old. She is, by every metric we have, a resource-allocation anomaly occupying architecture that could be better utilized." CLIP-7 paused. "Projected mission outcome: non-standard."

"Non-standard."

"Filed as routine," CLIP-7 said, and the contradiction sat in the briefing room like a third presence.

Kael looked at the photograph. The woman in front of the café was laughing at something off-camera—a specific, directed laugh, aimed at a specific person. Not performing for a lens. Not aware of being photographed. This was a woman in the middle of a conversation with someone she knew well enough to find genuinely funny.

"Standard equipment?" he asked.

"Standard extraction kit. Calibrator, neural shunt, cardiac bypass. You'll be inserted at coordinate one—the furthest point from her most recent detected position. We recommend a slow approach. Subject 774 responds poorly to direct contact."

"What does she respond well to?"

Another pause. Longer this time. "That information is not available in her file."

Which meant: it was available, and they weren't sharing it.

"One more question," he said.

"Of course," CLIP-7 said. "I'm here to support you."

"The crescent scar on my intake photograph. The one on my right palm. Where did I get it?"

A pause so brief it might have been a processing lag. "Your file lists the origin as undetermined. Present since earliest recorded examination. Classification: coincidental." A pause. "Does it concern you?"

"No," Kael said. "I was just wondering."

"Wonderful. Your pre-recruitment medical intake noted three anomalies: the scar, a resting respiratory pattern of 4-4-6—flagged as environmental inheritance, classification coincidental—and blood type AB-negative. All three have been thoroughly reviewed. None present operational risk." The warmth in CLIP-7's voice had the specific texture of reassurance that was also containment. "You are

cleared for insertion. You are, as always, exactly where you need to be."

Kael didn't answer. He was still looking at the photograph. At the woman laughing in a café that didn't exist anymore, in a year that was further from the present than most civilizations lasted, at someone holding the camera with the specific steadiness of a person who loved the subject enough to capture the moment without interrupting it.

He wondered who was holding the camera. He always came back to that.

He walked to the lab. The corridor was the same regulation gray as every corridor. The extraction gurney was the same sterile white as every gurney. The technician's hands were steady and professional and carefully did not look at his face.

They were about to kill him, legally and temporarily, and the anticipation felt like the pause between lightning and thunder when you're standing too close to the strike.

The Crescent

The lab doors opened onto humidity that smelled of ozone and recycled air — the specific sterile moisture of a place where bodies were regularly emptied and refilled. The extraction gurney waited in the center, sterile white, regulation height, fitted with the carbon-fiber helmet that hung above it like a question mark.

He stopped at the final airlock. Pressed his palm to the scanner. Waited for the soft chime that meant the system still recognized him as human enough to kill.

It chimed.

Kael disrobed with the efficiency of someone who had done this forty-six times. The extraction suit waited on the rack: half armor, half coffin, a second skin he would wear while his first one died. He pulled it on, feeling the biometrics weave tight against his chest, the haptic nodes at his wrists calibrating to his pulse. The material was cold at first, then warmed, simulating the temperature of a body that was about to stop being one.

He paused at the right glove.

His bare thumb found the crescent scar on his palm — white, smooth, inexplicable. The Agency's file said *coincidental*, said *undetermined*, said *present since earliest recorded examination*. He ran his thumb along its curve, feeling the slight raised ridge of tissue. In Colony Twelve, the dog's impression on his glove had matched this shape precisely. A crescent. Like a cup handle. Like a door opening from the inside. He pressed his thumbnail into the center of the scar until the pressure bordered on pain, grounding himself in the meat that was about to be paused.

Then he pulled the glove on.

The photograph waited behind his eyes. He didn't need to hold it — it had burned there since the briefing room. The woman laughing in front of the Vienna café, 1952, her red hair catching light that no longer existed in any sky. He always came back to the camera holder. The specific steadiness of the frame suggested familiarity — the hand of someone who knew her well enough to wait for the authentic laugh rather than manufacture it. He wondered, not for the first time, if that hand had been his. If time in the substrate ran backward as easily as forward, and if the scar on his palm was a mark he had received yesterday from a woman he wouldn't meet for another seventy years.

He filed the thought. Somatic speculation was documented, categorized, and not worth examining before a dive.

He sat on the edge of the gurney. The suit hissed, sealing its environmental layers at his neck, wrists, ankles. He rolled his right wrist once, feeling the calibration nodes align. Everything nominal.

Four in.

The 4-4-6 pattern that had no origin in his training — flagged as *environmental inheritance*, as though he had absorbed a rhythm from a world he had never visited, a mother who had never been listed on his file. He let the breath fill his lungs, feeling the Vector in him slow into something else. Something older.

Four hold.

The suit's collar tightened against his throat. He thought about Gerald Marsh's garden. The dog that had stayed. Seventy-one years of building a world, compressed into four minutes of extraction. Sufficient. He lay back. The gurney accepted his weight with the familiarity of a recurring nightmare.

Six out.

Above him, the ceiling tile waited. The room's light was diffuse — overhead strips set to pre-insertion dim, the kind of light that barely cast a shadow. The smiley face should have been invisible in it. Three facility repaints had almost succeeded. Almost.

For a fraction of a second, the smiley face had two shadows. The second was sharper than the first, as if cast by a light source that wasn't in the room.

He blinked.

One shadow.

He did not move. He did not adjust his breathing. He noted it the way he noted the scar's occasional heat and the 4-4-6's unasked-for arrivals — as data that had been reviewed, classified coincidental, and filed.

Rivera's hands moved over the seals of the extraction suit with the calm efficiency of someone who had sealed forty-six people into their coffins and still went home to a cat and a half-finished jigsaw puzzle. She checked the C7 port without comment. He felt her thumb press against the calcified ridge at the base of his skull, testing for heat, for irregularity, for the specific resistance of a port telling the truth.

"Calcification?" he asked.

"Worse than last month," Rivera said. "Better than it'll be next month."

She had been giving him that answer for approximately twenty missions. It was not evasion. It was precision.

The carbon-fiber helmet descended with a pneumatic whisper and clicked shut around his skull, sealing him into silence. The world narrowed to the smell of his own breath cycling through the scrubbers, the darkness behind the visor, and the distant impossible memory of a woman laughing in a

café that no longer existed under any sky he would ever see.

Then he stopped thinking.

Because thinking was lingering.

And lingering was deviation.

And he had spent forty-six missions learning not to be that.