THE MARTIAN AUDIT

Or, How New Zealand Repelled an Invasion Through Procedural Complexity

Oliver Hartwich

THE NEW ZEALAND INITIATIVE

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For the Bens, Alastairs, Cassandras and Rachels
in departments, ministries and newsrooms
still doing the work, again

XYLOS

VARA

BEN

KEVIN

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Foreword

Every election year, The New Zealand Initiative produces a report summarising our policy recommendations for the incoming Government. Over the years, these reports have grown longer as the Initiative has taken on more policy areas. The 2026 edition was shaping up to be no exception.

The resulting document would be one for policy connoisseurs. Now, I believe policy matters are important to every New Zealander, but not every New Zealander shares my enthusiasm for reading about them. Let us be honest: most policy reports are off-putting to anyone outside the Wellington beltway.

So, the challenge was to condense our big, heavy policy tome into something people would actually read. An essay? A manifesto? Infographics? Each would still be a policy document dressed in slightly different clothes.

I had seen big books turned into graphic novels. Yuval Noah Harari's *Sapiens* was adapted into one, but even that ran to three substantial volumes. The Initiative did not have the resources. Apart from that, I cannot draw.

And so, just as I was about to give up, I had an idea.

Readers of our weekly *Insights* newsletter may know that I love satire and comedy. What if we turned New Zealand's policy troubles into a satirical novella?

Our policy absurdities would look sharpest through foreign eyes. Having arrived from Germany via London and Sydney fourteen years ago, I have some claim to those. Being German in New Zealand is not quite as exotic as being from Mars, but some days it comes close. Still, even I am not foreign enough for the job. So how about two auditors from Mars?

The premise wrote itself. The Martians land in the Wairarapa intending to assess the human species at its best. They are promptly fined for parking without consent. From there, they discover the

policy failures that New Zealanders live with every day but have somehow stopped noticing.

The rest you will have to read for yourself. But the Martians eventually abandon their invasion, concluding that the country's procedural complexity is an impenetrable defence. New Zealand cannot be conquered. It can only be consulted.

The book covers the same ground as our policy research but in a form that might reach people who would never pick up a think tank report. In an election year, when policy debates risk becoming background noise, I wanted something people might actually enjoy reading.

The writing took weeks: sketching a story that would walk the reader through housing, infrastructure, health, education, local government and the public service, but entertainingly rather than technically. Colleagues and friends read early drafts, and my favourite AI writing companion, Claude, provided excellent editorial help. Could I have done it without Claude? Probably. But the process would have taken me a year, and by then the election would have been over.

My thanks go to colleagues Chelsy Killick, Nick Clark, Bryce Wilkinson, Benno Blaschke and Michael Johnston for their encouragement and suggestions. Alan Duff, Trish Sherson, Graham Rich and Peter Shirtcliffe gave me theirs generously. And the whole Initiative team, past and present, did the work that lies at the foundation of this novella.

I had fun writing this book. I hope you will have fun reading it.

Oliver Hartwich
Wellington, March 2026

CHAPTER 1

Arrival in paradise
(terms and conditions apply)

LOCATION: A sheep paddock,
15km outside Martinborough, Wairarapa.
LOCAL TIME: 10:43 AM (Tuesday).
GDP PER CAPITA: Stagnant.
MOOD: Pending Consultation.

The invasion of Earth – or specifically, the Realm of New Zealand – did not begin with a laser blast or a demand for surrender. It began with a clipboard.

High above the Tararua Ranges, inside the Martian scout vessel *Logos-7*, Senior Auditor Xylos was studying the local transmission frequencies.

"It is an agrarian utopia," Xylos declared, gesturing at the holographic screen.

The selection had not been random. Before departure, the Audit Division had compiled a preliminary assessment of Earth's self-reported performance metrics. One territory appeared repeatedly at the top of the indices: low corruption, high social trust, exceptional natural beauty, regularly ranked among the most liveable places on the planet. "Godzone," the locals called it, without apparent irony.

"If we wish to audit the species at its best," Xylos had noted during mission planning, "we should begin where they claim to have succeeded."

Now, watching the footage on the holographic display, he felt vindicated.

On the screen, a television programme titled *Country Calendar* was playing. An acoustic guitar strummed a gentle, optimistic melody. A man in gumboots was leaning against a fence, smiling at a dog. The sun was shining. The mud looked honest.

"Observe, Junior," Xylos said. "The indigenous population is relaxed. They value mud, dogs and acoustic simplicity. There is no bureaucracy here. Only golden light and gentle guitar music."

"It looks peaceful," Vara said. She was studying the linguistic databases, trying to understand how a culture communicated. Every planet had its rhythms, its shortcuts, its ways of saying *I see you* without saying it directly. "They have a phrase – 'sweet as'. It means approval. Contentment. I think it is how they express... belonging."

"Prepare for landing," Xylos commanded. "We will be greeted with smiles and perhaps a rustic woollen garment."

The *Logos-7*, a masterpiece of impossible geometry capable of folding spacetime into a silver donut, descended silently. It settled

onto the paddock with a soft *thump*, crushing a patch of clover and startling a ewe named Barbara.

Xylos lowered the ramp. He stepped out, ready to embrace the acoustic guitar lifestyle.

He was met with a silence that was not so much peaceful as it was litigious.

A white ute sat by the fence line. Leaning against it was a man. He was not smiling. He did not have a dog. He was wearing a high-visibility vest that seemed to absorb the joy from the surrounding air.

He checked his watch. He checked the landing struts. He made a note on his clipboard.

"Greetings," Xylos said, extending a long, slender hand. "We come from the Valles Marineris. We seek the simple life shown on your transmission *Country Calendar*."

The man looked up. His name tag read WAYNE. His eyes were the colour of a council meeting room wall.

"Afternoon," Wayne said. "South Wairarapa District Council. You the owner of this structure?"

"It is a Class-4 Interstellar Transport," Xylos corrected.

"Right," Wayne said. "So, a non-consented dwelling."

He walked around the ship, tapping the hull with a pen. "You're in a Significant Natural Landscape overlay. You've exceeded the height-to-boundary ratio. And judging by the sheen on this alloy, you're well over the visual reflectivity limits. I'm going to have to issue an abatement notice."

Vara stepped forward, her large, iridescent eyes filled with confusion. "But... where is the guitar music? We are visitors! We bring gifts! We have a cure for all viral diseases! We have a recipe for coffee that never gets cold!"

Wayne didn't blink. "Look, love, that's all well and good. But you can't just drop a tiny home in a rural zone without a geotech report. Have you paid the development contributions?"

"We have gold," Xylos offered, materialising a bar of solid bullion from the air. "It is worth four million of your dollars."

Wayne looked at the gold. For a second, a flicker of humanity

crossed his face – the desire to pay off a mortgage, to buy a boat. Then, the training kicked in.

"I can't take that," Wayne sighed. "I'd have to fill out a Gift Declaration Form. Anything over fifty dollars triggers a conflict-of-interest review. Plus, if you pay the levy upfront, it messes up our long-term financing model."

Xylos frowned. He reached for his belt and activated his Incentive Visor.

The world turned into a wireframe grid. To Xylos, the laws of physics were replaced by the laws of economics. On Mars, they had discovered that bureaucracy was simply a form of friction, and like heat, it could be measured.

"Calibrating," Xylos muttered. "Visualising the flow of reward."

"Is he dangerous?" Vara asked.

"I am checking his spectral output," Xylos explained. "The Visor displays the source of an entity's caloric intake. Green means the entity is fed by *Velocity* – they get paid when something happens. Red means the entity is fed by *Friction* – they get paid when something stops."

Xylos looked at Wayne.

Wayne was glowing a deep, radioactive Red. It was the colour of a stop sign encased in concrete.

Above his head, a holographic flowchart appeared, detailing the logic of his existence.

> **Objective:** Protect Amenity Values.
> **Actual Outcome:** Protect Property Values of 3 Boomers.
> **Revenue Model:** The department budget forecasts $50,000 in non-compliance fines for Q3.
> **Incentive:** If Wayne accepts the gold and solves the problem, the budget surplus disappears, and his department is restructured.

"Vara," Xylos whispered. "Look. He is drowning in Red light." Vara leaned in to see the display. She was still for a moment. "He does not want to stop us," she said. "He *needs* us to break the rules.

If we comply, his department goes broke."

"It is a paradox," Xylos marvelled. "He is financially dependent on the problem he is employed to solve."

Vara reached for her own belt and activated a smaller, more delicate instrument: the Temporal Scope. Where Xylos saw the *logic* of a system, Vara saw its *trajectory* – the human cost, compounded over decades.

The Temporal Scope did not show a fixed point in time. It showed the fulcrum – the moment where a life's trajectory became visible, where the weight of choices finally came due. For some, that was decades away. For others, it was closer than they knew.

She pointed it at Wayne.

The image shimmered. Wayne's face blurred, aged, reformed. She was looking at him in 2045.

He was still here. Same paddock. Same clipboard. His hair had greyed, his back had curved, but the high-vis vest was identical. Behind him, the paddock was no longer farmland – it was a gated subdivision called "Martinborough Heights," and Wayne was issuing an abatement notice to a resident whose fence was six centimetres too high.

Above his head, a new data field appeared:

> **Current Asset:** Superannuation (NZ Super).
> **Status:** Frozen at 2028 levels. Indexed to political cowardice.
> **Lifestyle:** Sharing a rental in Masterton with two other retirees. Cannot afford the valley he spent forty years regulating.

Vara lowered the Scope. Something had gone out of her eyes. "Senior." Her voice was flat, clinical, but her hands were not steady. "He is not the villain. He is the first victim. The system will use him up and then tell him he should have saved more."

Xylos glanced at Vara. He had seen the Red glow, the perverse incentive. But Vara had seen something worse: the man inside it, being slowly digested.

"Noted," Xylos said. His voice was softer than before.

Xylos turned off the visor. "Wayne. We cannot leave. The interstellar drive is depleted. We have enough charge for five metres of hover, not five light-years of thrust. We require approximately twelve hours connected to a sufficient power source to restore atmospheric capability."

"Well," Wayne said, ripping two tickets off his pad. "Abatement notice first – you've got fourteen days to remedy the breach or apply for a retrospective consent. Fat chance of that. And here's an infringement notice for the reflectivity violation. Seven-fifty."

He handed both to Xylos. "I'll be back tomorrow to check the setback requirements. If you're still here, that's another ticket."

"Is there no other way?" Vara asked, her voice quiet. She was looking at Wayne differently now – not at the clipboard, but at the man holding it.

Wayne looked at the ship. He looked at the ditch five metres to the left.

"Look," Wayne lowered his voice. "If you move it into that ditch, it's technically on the 'road reserve'. Then it's not a building. It's a vehicle. Parking on the berm is only a forty-dollar fine."

"You want us to park our interstellar vessel in the mud?" Xylos asked.

"It's the cheaper option," Wayne shrugged. "Unless you want to apply for a Resource Consent. Technically twenty working days. In practice?" He laughed without humour. "Depends on how many further information requests they send you. Could be months. Could be forever."

Xylos looked at Vara. He looked at the majestic mountains, which were currently being regulated into mediocrity.

"Move the ship," Xylos commanded.

Ben Miller watched the silver donut hover sideways and squelch into the ditch.

He was supposed to be at a "Regional Stakeholder Engagement Session" in the Martinborough Town Hall – a morning tea with the local council, followed by a "Community Voices Workshop" that would generate a report that would sit in a drawer until the next election. It

was the kind of trip Wellington ministries ran four times a year: drive three hours, eat a scone, nod sympathetically at farmers, drive back. Nothing would change, but the consultation box would be ticked.

The morning session had finished early. The afternoon "synthesis hui" was not until two. Ben had three hours to kill in a town with one cafe and a wine shop that did not open until eleven.

So he had gone for a walk. A "Wellbeing Walk," he would call it on his timesheet – the Ministry encouraged those now, ever since the Workforce Resilience Initiative. He had wandered past the vineyards, through a gate, along a farm track and ended up behind a gorse bush in a paddock, checking his phone out of habit.

His phone buzzed.

> **Calendar Alert:** Post-Consultation Stakeholder Alignment Workshop (3 hours).
> **Location:** Teams (Mandatory).
> **Host:** Sarah from HR.

The workshop was virtual. He was supposed to dial in from the Town Hall meeting room. Sarah would be running an icebreaker from Wellington while Ben sat in Martinborough pretending his camera was broken.

Ben knew he should go back. He was a Senior Policy Analyst. He had a mortgage in Karori. He had two kids who needed braces. He had spent ten years mastering the art of "Gliding On" – keeping his head down, producing robust briefing papers and never, ever becoming "The Problem."

If he walked out to that ship, he would become The Problem.

He looked at the spaceship. It was sleek, silent and obviously from a civilisation that had solved the problem of email.

He looked at his phone. *Start meeting?*

"I can't," Ben whispered to himself. "Sarah will note my absence in the minutes. It'll come up in the quarterly review."

He watched Vara touch Wayne's arm with a look of profound, devastating pity.

They don't know, Ben thought. *They're going to get eaten alive. They'll be stuck in a sub-committee by Tuesday.*

He took a step forward. Then he stopped. The fear of being "difficult" was a physical weight in his chest. It was the gravity of Wellington, pulling him back to the safe, beige centre.

Just walk away, Ben. Go to the meeting. Mute your mic. Nod when Sarah says 'synergy'.

He thought about Marcus.

Marcus had been the sharp one. Three years ago, he had written a briefing paper that actually said something – that the housing policy was, quote, "architecturally designed to transfer wealth from the young to the old while appearing to do the opposite." It was accurate. It was well-sourced. It was career suicide.

The Minister had never seen it. Kevin – the Deputy Chief Executive, the man who controlled what reached the Minister's desk and what died in "consultation" – had "parked" it for "further socialisation." Marcus had been "transitioned" to a role in the Office of Ethnic Communities, where his talents could be "better aligned with emerging priorities." He had quit six months later. Last Ben heard, he was teaching English in Vietnam and seemed suspiciously happy about it.

Ben thought about his own briefing paper, the one he had submitted last Tuesday. Eighteen pages on regulatory reform. Evidence-based. Moderate recommendations. He had been proud of it, in the quiet way you could be proud of things that did not matter.

He had seen it on the Minister's desk that afternoon – underneath a press release about a new "Housing Acceleration Taskforce" that would achieve nothing but had an excellent logo. The Minister had used Ben's paper to steady his coffee cup.

That's what happens, Ben thought. *You do the work. You get it right. And then the work becomes a coaster.*

He thought about the twenty-three other papers he had written. The recommendations that had been "noted." The evidence that had been "acknowledged." The warnings that had been "received with thanks" and then buried in a drawer labelled "Long-Term Insights"

that no one had opened since 2019.

Ten years of coasters.

And what did you do about it, Ben? You kept your head down. You glided on. You told yourself it was strategy – that you were playing the long game, building capital, waiting for the right moment.

The right moment never came. It was never going to come. You were just afraid.

Then, Wayne drove off. The two aliens stood alone in the mud, looking at a ticket on their windscreen.

"They fined a spaceship," Ben said aloud.

The words hung in the air. A spaceship. From another world. Carrying beings who had crossed the void between stars. And the first thing his country had done – the very first official act of contact with an alien civilisation – was issue an abatement notice for an incorrect setback.

It was not funny. It was the whole thing, the entire decade, compressed into a single image. The system did not distinguish between a garden shed and first contact. It could not. It had lost the ability to see anything except compliance and deviation. A spaceship was just a structure without a permit. A cure for all diseases was just a gift over fifty dollars.

Something cracked inside Ben. It was not bravery. It was not even anger. It was simpler than that: he was embarrassed. Deeply, physically embarrassed to be part of a system that could look at the stars and see only a zoning violation.

If I go back to that meeting, he thought, *I will spend three hours discussing the colour palette for a wellbeing initiative while actual aliens stand in the mud with a parking ticket. And then I will go home and tell my kids that I had a productive day.*

He could not do it. Not because he was brave, but because he could no longer pretend that any of it made sense.

He thought about Sophie and Jack. He should call Lisa, explain that he would be late. But explain what, exactly? *I'm skipping the workshop to help some aliens navigate the Resource Management Act?* She would think he had finally cracked. Maybe he had.

He would call her tonight. When he understood what he was doing.

Ben pushed through the gorse.

"Excuse me!" he called out.

The tall alien spun around. "Identify yourself."

"Ben," he said, brushing thistles off his suit pants. "I saw what Wayne did. You shouldn't have moved the ship."

"He said it was cheaper," Xylos said.

"Yeah," Ben said, walking up to the fence. "But now you're in the road corridor. That ditch runs along State Highway 53 – that's NZTA jurisdiction. They don't fine you. They just put cones around you and leave you there for three years."

Vara gasped. "Three years of... cones?"

"It's a fate worse than death," Ben nodded. "I can help you. But we have to move fast. Before the traffic management plan is approved."

Xylos scanned Ben with the visor.

"Interesting," Xylos muttered. "You are not Red. You are not Green."

"What am I?" Ben asked.

"You are Beige," Xylos noted. "The colour of camouflage. The Visor indicates you are rewarded primarily for *survival* and *invisibility*."

"That sounds about right," Ben sighed.

"But you are vibrating," Xylos added. "Your cortisol levels are critical. You have a ritual to attend. A 'Stakeholder Workshop'."

Ben looked at his phone. The meeting had started. Sarah was probably doing the icebreaker right now. *If you were a soup, what soup would you be*?

Ben looked at the spaceship.

"I'm skipping it," Ben said. His voice shook slightly. "I'm... I'm going rogue."

"Rogue," Vara repeated. "Is that good, Ben?"

"No," Ben said, climbing the fence. "In my line of work, it's terminal. But you guys have coffee, right?"

"We synthesise it from the memories of nebula," Xylos said.

"Close enough," Ben said. "Let's go. Before Wayne comes back with a clipboard and a measuring tape."

He paused, one leg over the fence. "Wait. Go where?"

Xylos pointed a long, grey finger towards the cloud-covered hills in the south.

"To the hive mind," Xylos said. "To Wellington."

Ben winced. "Of course. Into the belly of the beast."

The ship rose silently, banked south, and vanished into the clouds.

Ben watched it go. Then he looked at the paddock, the gorse, the distant line of the Tararuas. He was fifteen kilometres from Martinborough, wearing suit pants covered in thistles, and he had just committed career suicide for a pair of extraterrestrials he had known for forty minutes.

He started walking.

It took him ninety minutes to reach the town, retrieve his Corolla from the Town Hall car park, and drive back to the coordinates Xylos had sent to his phone. The ship was hovering above the treeline, waiting. A hatch opened. A ramp extended.

"You are slow," Xylos observed as Ben climbed aboard.

"I don't have a teleporter," Ben said. "Yet."

MARTIAN AUDIT LOG: ENTRY 001

Subject: The Gatekeepers (Local Government)

Observation: The indigenous regulatory bodies operate on a scarcity mindset.

- **Stated Goal:** Protection of Amenity Values.
- **Actual Goal:** Protection of Gary, Barb and Murray.
- **The Trap:** The Council has budgeted for the fines generated by the problem. Therefore, the problem is a financial asset. To solve the problem would be fiscal suicide.

Action Item: The human 'Ben' has defected from the collective. He appears terrified. This is promising.

Vara's Addendum: Wayne will retire in 2047. He will not be able to afford to live in the region he spent his career regulating. His superannuation will cover rent, food and one streaming service. He does not know this yet. He is currently worried about our setback requirements.

CHAPTER 2

The corridor of uncertainty

LOCATION: State Highway 2, The Remutaka Hill Road.
LOCAL TIME: 1:15 PM.
CURRENT SPEED: 0 km/h.
CONE COUNT: 4,212 and rising.
WATER LOSS (DESTINATION): 45% and rising.

The Martian scout vessel *Logos-7* was designed to navigate asteroid fields, withstand the crushing gravity of gas giants and fold the fabric of spacetime itself.

It was parked in a layby near Featherston, recharging from a power pole while Ben's Corolla did the actual work.

"Why are we not using the ship?" Xylos asked from the passenger seat. His knees were somewhere near his chin.

"Because a silver donut hovering over the Remutakas will be on the six o'clock news," Ben said, gripping the wheel as the car rattled through another pothole. "We're trying to get into Wellington quietly. The ship can meet us there tonight."

"This vehicle is inefficient," Xylos noted. "And it smells of old coffee."

"Welcome to the public service," Ben said.

They had been stuck behind a logging truck for fifteen minutes. It was doing forty kilometres per hour on the straights and fifteen on the corners, which was most of the road.

"Why have we stopped?" Xylos asked. He was gripping the door handle, his long fingers twitching with frustration.

"It's the hill," Ben Miller groaned from the driver's seat. "It's always the hill."

"The geography is inefficient," Xylos critiqued, glancing at the sheer drop off the side of the road. "A simple tunnel would reduce travel time by eighty percent. Why do you traverse the ridgeline like mountain goats?"

"We've studied it three times," Ben said, his face a pale shade of public-sector grey. "In the seventies, the nineties and again in 2005. The report always says the same thing: it's 'uneconomic'. The Benefit-Cost Ratio is 0.6. So instead, we just spend the money on... incremental safety improvements."

"Fascinating," Vara said. She was pressed against the passenger window, staring at the roadside. "Senior, look at the improvements! They are everywhere."

Xylos looked. Lining the road, stretching as far as the sensors could see, were thousands of bright orange cones. They stood in

silent vigil, guarding empty patches of gravel, minor potholes and sometimes, nothing at all.

"The Orange Cones," Xylos mused. "I have counted four thousand since we left Featherston. What do they signify? Is this sacred ground?"

"They're for safety," Ben mumbled.

"But there are no workers," Xylos noted. "I have scanned the last six kilometres. There is no machinery. There is no construction. There are only cones."

He activated his Incentive Visor.

The windshield of the car flickered with data overlaid on reality. The grey road was covered with a complex web of financial piping.

Xylos zoomed in on a single cone.

Object: Retro-Reflective Safety Cone (Class 3).
Cost to Deploy: $2.00 per day (rental).
Benefit to Driver: Negligible.
Benefit to Traffic Management Company: Infinite.

"I see," Xylos said, his voice dropping to a whisper. "It is a subscription model. If they build the tunnel, the spending stops. If they surround the hill with cones, the revenue stream is perpetual."

"It's not that cynical," Ben argued weakly. "It's about 'Zero Harm'."

"It is 'Zero Velocity'," Xylos corrected. "On Mars, we would simply vaporise the pothole and fuse the silica into glass. Here, you have monetised the delay."

The logging truck in front of them hissed its air brakes and came to a complete halt. A man in a high-visibility vest stood in the middle of the road, holding a sign that said STOP.

He looked bored. He was eating a pie with one hand and holding the sign with the other.

"Why has he stopped us?" Vara asked quietly. "There is nothing ahead."

"I will negotiate," Xylos said. He opened the car door.

"Don't!" Ben shouted, sitting up too fast. "You can't negotiate with the Stop/Go man! He controls the flow of time! He is the most powerful being in the transport network!"

Xylos ignored him. He stepped out of the car and walked over to the man.

The worker looked up. He took a bite of his steak and cheese. He did not seem surprised to see a seven-foot tall alien standing on the centre line. It was the Remutakas; he had seen weirder things in Corollas.

"Greetings," Xylos said. "I am Senior Auditor Xylos. Why have you halted the flow of commerce?"

"Slips," the man said, chewing. "Abseilers on the cliff. Loose rocks."

Xylos looked up at the cliff. There were no abseilers. There were no rocks. There was only a single seagull looking for a chip.

"My sensors indicate the cliff is stable," Xylos said. "There is no danger."

"Yeah, well," the man flipped the sign. It now said SLOW. "Traffic Management Plan says we gotta hold you for five minutes. Health and Safety. Can't be too careful."

"But there is nothing happening," Xylos insisted.

"That's the best kind of safety, mate," the man grinned. "Nothing happening means no accidents. You want to go or what?"

Xylos walked back to the car. He looked defeated.

"He is immune to logic," Xylos reported as he climbed back in. "He operates on a plane of existence where 'Potential Danger' carries the same weight as 'Actual Fire'."

"It is not his fault," Vara said. She was still looking at the man through the rear window as they pulled away. "He is following a plan written by someone who has never seen this road. The plan is in a binder. The binder is in an office. The office is in Wellington. By the time the plan reaches him, it has been approved by four committees and two legal reviews. He cannot deviate. He can only hold the sign."

"Then the plan is the problem," Xylos said.

"The plan is always the problem," Ben muttered from the driver's seat. "But the plan has a 'Change Management Protocol.' To change the plan, you need approval from the people who wrote it. And they've all been restructured into different departments."

Vara made a note on her console. She had seen this pattern before, on other worlds. The document that controls reality from a distance.

The car hummed forward, following the logging truck at a safe, excruciating crawl.

They crested the summit. The view opened up – not the city, but the sprawling grey corridor of the Hutt Valley, squeezed between steep, unforgiving hills.

"There it is," Ben said, a mix of pride and dread in his voice. "The path to Wellington."

"It looks... narrow," Vara noted. "And damp. My humidity sensors are spiking just looking at those houses in the valley. Do they have insulation?"

"Some of them," Ben said. "But the damp ones are 'Historic'. We call that 'character'. It costs an extra two hundred a week."

Vara was already looking through the Temporal Scope. She had aimed it at a weatherboard house near the Petone foreshore, its windows fogged with condensation, a child's bicycle rusting in the front yard.

The house was the same – still damp, still cold, the weatherboards now black with mould that had been painted over three times. Inside, a teenager sat at a kitchen table, using an inhaler. The walls behind her were spotted with dark patches that no amount of ventilation could fix.

Above the house, a data overlay appeared:

Resident (2042): Aroha, age 16. Third-generation tenant.
Condition: Moderate asthma, recurring respiratory infections.
Cost to Health System (2025-2042): $47,000.
Cost to Insulate House (2025): $8,000.
Decision Made: "Landlord claims Healthy Homes insulation requirements 'impracticable' due to original wall cavities. Compliance deferred pending further assessment. Assessment not scheduled."

Vara let the Scope drop to her side.

"Senior. The child in that house will be sick for her entire childhood. The sickness will cost six times more than the cure. They know this." Her voice hardened. "They have chosen the sickness."

"Why?" Xylos asked.

"Because the cure requires someone to pay now," Vara said. "And the sickness is paid for by everyone, later, in a budget that belongs to a different Minister."

"I know," Ben said. His voice was flat. "I wrote a paper on this. Three years ago. Exposed the cost-shifting, modelled the health outcomes, proposed a fix."

Vara turned to look at him. "What happened?"

"It's in the vault," Ben said. "With all the others."

They descended into the valley. The traffic thickened.

Ben's phone buzzed. He glanced at the screen.

LISA (3)

Three missed calls. He had promised to call her tonight. It was not tonight yet, technically. He put the phone back in his pocket. When he had something coherent to say, he would pick it up again.

He turned the phone face-down on the centre console.

The car, which was designed to commute between Karori and the CBD at a sensible pace, was now crawling past the Petone foreshore.

"That vehicle is very close," Vara said, looking at a Ford Ranger in the adjacent lane. "Why is he flashing his lights?"

"He wants to get past," Ben sighed. "He's in a Ranger. It's the apex predator of the motorway. Just let him in."

Xylos frowned. "I am observing the speed limit. Eighty kilometres per hour."

"Nobody does eighty," Ben said. "Eighty is a suggestion. If you do eighty, you are creating aggression. You have to do eighty-nine. But not ninety, or you get a ticket."

"Your rules are fluid," Xylos complained. "It is chaos."

They hit the merge at Ngauranga Gorge. The traffic stopped. Dead stop.

"The choke point," Ben announced.

"Is this the rush hour?" Xylos asked. "It is 2:00 PM."

"No," Ben sighed. "This is just Wellington. Someone probably tapped their brakes in Johnsonville, and the shockwave has paralysed the network."

Location: Lambton Quay, Wellington Central.
Local Time: 2:15 PM.
Parking Spaces Available: 0.
Median House Price: $1.2m.
Median Wage: $62k.
Wind Chill: Aggressive.

The Corolla took the exit for the city and crawled down the Golden Mile. Shoppers stopped and stared at Xylos in the passenger seat. Office workers looked out from high-rise windows. A bus driver honked, not in awe, but because Ben was blocking the bus lane.

"Senior," Vara said, pointing at the road. "Why is the pavement bleeding? It is a sunny day, yet there are rivers of clear water running into the gutter."

Xylos leaned forward and zoomed in on the leak. A steady stream of crystal clear water was bubbling up through a crack in the tarmac, creating a small, cheerful geyser that splashed onto the sidewalk.

"Logging anomaly," Xylos said, tapping his visor. "Leak ID: #804. Flow rate: 20 litres per minute. Purity: Potable."

"Is that a ceremonial offering?" Vara asked. "Or a thermal spring?"

"No," Ben rubbed his temples. "That's just the pipes. They're a hundred years old. We lose about forty-five percent of our treated drinking water to leaks before it even reaches the tap."

"Forty-five percent?" Xylos's eye twitched. "You purify the water, you pump it across seismic fault lines, and then you simply pour half of it onto the street?"

"It's a complex issue," Ben said defensively. "We're currently waiting for a tribunal to decide who owns the holes in the pipe."

"On Mars," Xylos noted dryly, saving the coordinates of Leak #804 for future reference, "that level of resource waste would result

in the immediate recycling of the Water Guild into compost."

"Here, we just elect a new Mayor," Ben said. "Now, look for a park."

Xylos tapped his wrist communicator. "The vessel has reached the city perimeter. It will draw power from the municipal grid overnight and rendezvous at dawn."

"Just make sure it doesn't park on a bus lane," Ben said.

"Where do we dock?" Xylos asked, looking at the street.

"You can't just park," Ben said, scanning the street frantically. "That's a Loading Zone. That's a Taxi Stand. That's a clearway!"

"I am clearing the way," Xylos argued.

"No!" Ben yelled. "It means 'No Stopping'. They tow at 3 PM sharp. Wilson Parking will clamp you! They don't care if you're from Mars! They'll clamp the Pope if he's five minutes over!"

"Who is Wilson?" Vara asked. "Is he the Warlord of this city?"

"Basically," Ben said. "Look, just... hover there. In the loading bay. Put your hazards on. Maybe they'll think we're unloading freight."

Ben maneuvered the Corolla into a tight spot outside the Old Bank Arcade. He turned on the hazard lights.

"We have arrived," Xylos announced. "The Hive Mind."

He looked up at the Beehive – the circular, layered building that housed the Executive.

"It looks like a generator coil," Xylos observed. "Does it produce energy?"

"The opposite," Ben said. "It absorbs it. Good ideas go in, committee minutes come out. The conversion rate is about three percent."

"Fascinating," Xylos said, moving towards it. "Take me to the leader."

"No, no, no," Ben grabbed Xylos's arm, steering him away from the Beehive forecourt. "You can't just walk in there. You need security clearance. You need an invite from the Speaker. We have to go to my Ministry first. It's just across the road."

"But the Coil is right there," Xylos protested.

"That's for the politicians," Ben said, dragging them towards a generic glass office tower nearby. "We are going to the Ministry of Strategic Frameworks. That's where the real work… gets delayed."

They stepped onto the pavement. The wind hit them instantly – a southerly blast that cut through Xylos's suit and made Vara stumble.

Vara grabbed a lamp post to steady herself. "Does the wind always do this?"

"You can't beat Wellington on a good day," Ben recited the local mantra, shivering. "Come on. We need to get you registered before someone tweets about this."

Too late.

A young man in a sharp blue suit was already standing there, holding a phone. He had the hungry look of a Parliamentary Press Gallery journalist on a slow news day – the kind of man who could smell a headline from three blocks away.

"Excuse me," the journalist said, thrusting the phone at Xylos. "Newstalk ZB. Are you the aliens from the Wairarapa? Can you confirm rumours that you're here to buy the Interislander ferries?"

Ben stepped in front of Xylos. "No comment. We're just… consultants."

"Consultants?" The journalist's eyes lit up. "Who for? McKinsey? BCG? Are you here for the public sector cuts?"

Xylos looked at the journalist. He tapped his Incentive Visor.

Green.

"This one feeds on noise," Xylos whispered to Vara. "He converts conflict into clicks. He is dangerous."

Vara stepped forward. She had seen this moment before on other worlds – the first point of contact between visitors and the information gatekeepers. She knew it mattered. She wanted to get it right.

"We have seen what is coming," Vara said carefully. "We want to help you change it."

It was true. It was warm. It was precisely the wrong thing to say.

The journalist's thumbs were already moving. MARTIANS: 'WE KNOW WHAT'S COMING FOR NZ'.

Meanwhile, Xylos had decided to be helpful.

"We have completed a preliminary audit," Xylos announced, stepping around Ben. "The housing stock is thermally inefficient. Exposed children are developing chronic respiratory conditions at predictable rates. The cost of inaction exceeds the cost of remediation by a factor of six. This is not opinion. It is mathematics."

He said it the way he said everything: as a simple statement of fact, expecting it to be received as such.

The journalist's face lit up like Christmas had come early.

"So you're saying Kiwi homes are making kids sick?"

"Yes," Xylos said. "The data is unambiguous."

"And the government knows this?"

"The information exists in their archives. Whether they have processed it is unclear."

Ben was making a sound like a slowly deflating balloon.

The journalist's fingers flew across his screen. MARTIANS: 'GOVT EXPOSED – THEY KNOW HOMES ARE POISONING KIDS'.

"Xylos," Vara said. "I do not think he heard what you meant."

"I was perfectly clear," Xylos said, frowning at the journalist's screen. "I provided context, statistics and a logical framework. Why is the headline about 'poisoning'? I said nothing about poison."

"Welcome to Earth," Ben said, grabbing both of them by the arms. "Inside. Now. Before he asks about house prices."

He dragged the two Martians towards the glass doors of the Ministry tower.

"That was a disaster," Ben panted as they entered the lobby. "You can't just tell them the truth. You have to 'frame' it. You have to 'socialise the language'. Now he's going to run 'Aliens vs. Kiwi Families' for the next three days."

"But we are not against the families," Vara said. "We are trying to help the families."

"Doesn't matter," Ben said. "The story isn't what you said. The story is what fits the template. And the template is: Outsiders Criticise New Zealand. It writes itself."

"Then your information system is defective," Xylos said. "The messenger is rewarded for distortion."

"Yes," Ben said. "That's exactly right. And nobody's figured out how to fix it, so we just... work around it. Or we don't talk to them at all."

"That seems inefficient," Vara said.

"Welcome to Wellington," Ben said.

Ben walked up to the security turnstiles. He pulled out his ID card, his hand shaking slightly. Just act normal. You were on a walk. A long walk.

He tapped the card.

BEEP.

The light did not turn green. It turned a pulsating, judgmental AMBER.

The small screen flashed: ACCESS UNDER REVIEW. PLEASE CONTACT HR (SARAH).

Ben stared at it. It was not a lockout. It was a warning shot. The system was watching him, waiting for him to make a mistake.

"Is that bad?" Vara asked.

"It's worse than fired," Ben whispered, sweating. "It means they're building a case. Come on, push through while it's still amber."

They squeezed through the gates and into the elevators. The doors opened onto Level 4: The Policy Floor.

"Behold," Ben said grimly. "The Ministerial Maze."

Xylos looked out. It was a sea of grey cubicles, interrupted only by breakout spaces with brightly coloured beanbags that no one was allowed to use. The air smelled of recycled coffee and despair.

"The geometry is hostile," Xylos noted. "It is designed to prevent direct lines of sight. It discourages collaboration."

"It encourages 'focus'," Ben corrected. He led them down a corridor.

They passed a glass-walled office. Inside, a lone woman was typing furiously on three screens at once. Her desk was buried under stacks of reports.

Xylos stopped. He scanned her.

"She is vibrating," Xylos said. "Her output is incredible. She is generating high-value warnings about long-term fiscal insolvency."

"That's Cassandra," Ben said, not stopping. "The Senior Analyst. She writes the 'Long-Term Insights Briefing'. She predicts the collapse of the pension system every Tuesday."

"And who reads it?" Vara asked.

"Anyone can read it," Ben said. "It's published. It's on the website. The problem isn't access. The problem is that reading it creates an obligation. If a Minister admits they've seen it, they have to act on it. So they don't see it. Keep moving."

Vara stopped. She was staring at Cassandra through the glass.

"Ben," Vara said. "You said nobody reads her warnings. But she keeps writing them."

"That's her job," Ben said.

"No," Vara said. "That is her *hope*. She believes that one day, someone will open the vault. She is writing for a reader who does not yet exist."

Ben looked at Cassandra – really looked at her for the first time. She was probably fifty, maybe older. She had been in that office for as long as he could remember, producing reports that everyone commended and nobody actioned. The Prophetess of Fiscal Doom, they called her at the Christmas party. It was meant to be a joke.

"Maybe," Ben said quietly, "someone should listen to her. Someday."

"Yes," Vara said. "I think she might be the only person in this building who is telling the truth. But truth without audience is just noise."

They kept walking.

They reached the visitor kiosk.

"Okay," Ben said. "We need to get you badges so security doesn't tackle you. Put your names in."

Xylos typed XYLOS. The machine asked for CLASSIFICATION.

"There is no option for 'Planetary Auditor'," Xylos said. "Shall I select 'Foreign dignitary'?"

"No!" Ben hissed. "That requires a briefing from MFAT. Just… tick 'Vendor'."

"But I am not selling anything," Xylos argued.

"You're selling ideas," Ben said, tapping the screen for him. "That makes you a Consultant. Just tick the box, Xylos. If you tick 'Other', we have to fill out a form for Biosecurity."

Xylos looked at the screen. He looked at Ben.

"You are asking me to falsify a data entry to bypass a regulatory filter," Xylos said.

"I'm asking you to survive," Ben said. "Tick the box."

Xylos sighed. He ticked CONSULTANT.

The machine whirred and spat out a badge: XYLOS – STRATEGIC VENDOR.

"Perfect," Ben said, sticking it to Xylos's chest. "Now you're billable. Let's go to my desk before Sarah finds us."

MARTIAN AUDIT LOG: ENTRY 002

Subject: The Infrastructure (The Road)

Observation: The transport network is a ritualistic exercise in patience.

The Cone: A sacred object that multiplies when unobserved. Deployed via a "Traffic Management Plan" – a document that controls physical reality from a distant office, immune to local amendment.

The Ranger: A dominant predator that enforces the unwritten "90km/h" rule.

The Wilson: A feudal warlord who controls the land.

Anomalies: The "Stop/Go" Human. He possessed absolute authority to halt intergalactic travel, yet seemed primarily motivated by a steak and cheese pastry. He is not the decision-maker. He is the endpoint of a decision made elsewhere, by someone who has never held a sign.

The Information Gatekeepers: We attempted to communicate factual findings to a local data-transmission node (journalist). The facts were received and immediately transformed into a different shape – one optimised for conflict rather than clarity. Xylos provided mathematics; the output was accusation. Vara provided warmth; the output was condescension. The mechanism rewards distortion. This is a significant barrier to the audit.

The Prophetess: In the Ministry, there is a woman named Cassandra. She writes accurate predictions. She is ignored. She continues writing. This is either madness or faith. Vara believes it is the latter. Truth without audience is just noise.

Conclusion: The system is not designed to move people. It is designed to sustain the industry of moving people. The journey is the product. The destination is incidental.

Vara's Addendum: The damp houses in the valley will produce sick children. The sick children will cost more than the insulation. They will choose the sick children. They always choose the sick children. It is not cruelty. It is accounting.

CHAPTER 3

The silence

LOCATION: Wellington Central (Various).
LOCAL TIME: 18:30–20:15 (Wednesday).
NATIONAL PRODUCTIVITY: Paused for Consultation.
MOOD: Passive-Aggressive.
LIBRARY STATUS: Closed (Year 6 of 7).

The invasion of the New Zealand political system did not happen in the debating chamber. It happened, as most things in New Zealand do, in a drafty function room with stackable chairs and instant coffee.

But first, there was the parking.

"I cannot leave the vessel at your residence," Xylos said from the back seat of Ben's Corolla as it rattled down Courtenay Place. His knees were somewhere near his chin. "The neighbours will report it."

"Where is it now?"

"Holding position above the cloud layer. It is drawing some battery from your cellular network, but the humans appear not to have noticed."

Ben had smuggled them out through the Ministry's fire exit the previous evening, the ship trailing silently above the rooftops, and spent the night ignoring eleven missed calls from Sarah in HR and four from Lisa. He had texted his wife at 10 PM – *Still working. Complicated. Will explain tomorrow* – which was technically true and practically a lie.

His access card was probably deactivated by now. His career was almost certainly over. His marriage was entering uncertain territory. But here he was, driving two aliens to a public consultation about a bike lane, because apparently this was his life now.

"Great. So we just need somewhere to bring it down where no one will care."

Then he smiled.

He parked on Cuba Street, outside the public toilets, and led the Martians up the pedestrian mall. The evening crowds parted around them without much interest. Wellington had seen stranger things than a seven-foot grey alien in an op-shop trench coat.

They stopped at the Bucket Fountain.

It was, objectively, chaos. Metal buckets on a metal frame, filling and tipping in an endless, clanking, splashing cycle. Water went everywhere. The concrete around it was perpetually wet. It had been "temporarily" installed in 1969 and had somehow become sacred.

"What is this device?" Xylos asked.

"It's a fountain."

"It is malfunctioning."

"No, that's what it does. The buckets fill up and tip over. That's the design."

Xylos stared at it for a long moment. Water splashed onto his shoes.

"You have built a machine," he said slowly, "whose primary function is to spill water onto the street. In a city where forty-five percent of the treated water supply leaks out of the pipes before reaching the tap."

"It's beloved," Ben said. "It's quirky. It's *Wellington*."

"It is a monument to entropy."

"Can you bring the ship down here?"

Xylos looked around. The Bucket Fountain sat in a small plaza, surrounded by cafés and boutiques. A man in a gorilla suit was handing out flyers for a comedy show. A busker was playing the theremin. A woman walked past carrying a taxidermied peacock under her arm.

"This is a zone of acceptable strangeness," Xylos observed.

"Cuba Street," Ben confirmed. "You'll fit right in."

Xylos tapped his visor twice. Thirty seconds later, the *Logos-7* descended silently through a gap in the buildings and took up position three metres above the fountain, its silver hull rotating slowly like an art installation.

Within minutes, someone had taken a photo and posted it to Instagram with the caption: "New sculpture?? Very cool whoever did this."

He had spent the night in the ship, in a gravity-dampened pod that was more comfortable than his bed in Karori, though he had not slept well. Below them, the Bucket Fountain had splashed on through the darkness, unmoved by the alien vessel hovering above it.

They found a cafe on the corner, its windows steamed against the Wellington chill. Ben ordered a flat white. Xylos ordered nothing but examined the menu with anthropological intensity.

A television above the counter was playing a British quiz

programme. The host, a large man in an expensive suit, was interrogating a contestant about her plans.

"And what would you do with the money if you win?"

The woman's face lit up. "Oh, I'd take my mum to New Zealand. It's been her dream for years. The landscapes, you know. The people. Everyone says it's paradise."

Vara leaned forward. "Ben. Why does this British woman believe your country is paradise?"

"Tourism marketing," Ben said. "We're very good at it."

"But we have spent three days observing your systems. The leaking pipes. The closed library. The councils that are rewarded for obstruction." Vara's eyes were fixed on the screen, where another contestant was now explaining that she too hoped to visit New Zealand with her winnings. "They believe they are coming to a place of peace and efficiency. They do not know about Wayne."

Xylos tapped his visor. "I am detecting a pattern. Seventy-three percent of prize aspirations on this programme involve either travel or home improvement. Of the travel responses, New Zealand appears in the top five destinations."

"It is beautiful here," Ben said. "The mountains. The coastline. That part is real."

"The scenery is real," Vara agreed. "But they are not coming for the scenery alone. They believe the society matches the landscape. They believe the people who live in paradise must have built a paradise." She watched a third contestant express the same dream. "They do not know that the paradise cannot fix its library."

"Maybe that's why we can't fix it," Ben said quietly. "Everyone tells us we're already perfect. Why would you repair something that the world thinks is working?"

Xylos made a note. "The Reputation Trap. The external perception prevents internal correction. Fascinating."

The quiz programme cut to an advertisement for flights to Queenstown. The mountains gleamed. The music soared. A voiceover promised "a world away from ordinary."

Vara looked at Ben. "Is it ordinary here?"

"No," Ben said. "It's extraordinary. Just not in the way they think."

He finished his coffee. The consultation would be starting soon.

"Come on," Ben said. "We're going to be late for democracy."

They cut through Civic Square. The wind funnelled between the buildings, sharp and salt-edged. Vara pulled her coat tighter – a gesture she had learned from watching humans, though she did not feel cold.

"What is that?" she asked, pointing at a large building wrapped in construction hoarding. Artist's impressions showed a gleaming interior filled with light and books and smiling families.

"That's the library," Ben said. "Te Matapihi. It's being renovated."

"When will it open?"

"Next year. Supposedly. They've been saying that for a while."

Xylos walked over to the hoarding and examined the signage. OPENING 2026 – A NEW CHAPTER FOR WELLINGTON.

"How long has it been closed?"

"Seven years."

Xylos was quiet. He activated his visor and scanned the building. Data scrolled across his vision.

"Two hundred and seventeen million dollars," he said. "For a renovation that was originally budgeted at ninety million. The project has outlasted two Mayors."

"There were complications," Ben said. "Seismic. Heritage. Consultation."

"There are always complications," Xylos said. "That is not an explanation. That is a description of failure."

Vara was looking at the building next door. It was newer, shinier and completely dark.

"What is that one?"

"Tākina. The convention centre. A hundred and eighty million. It was supposed to revitalise the waterfront."

"It appears empty."

"It mostly is. Opened just before everyone stopped travelling for conferences. The Prime Minister called it a white elephant."

Vara glanced through the Temporal Scope at the dark windows.

"In 2045," she said, "it will still be underperforming. They will rename it twice. They will never admit it was a mistake."

They stood for a moment, three figures in the wind, looking at nearly four hundred million dollars of civic ambition sitting closed or empty in the dying light.

"Come on," Ben said. "We'll be late."

Ben caught his reflection in the glass doors of the Michael Fowler Centre. He looked like a man who had slept in his suit, which he had not, and forgotten to shave, which he had. The thistle scratches from the paddock had faded to pink lines on his forearms.

The consultation was being held in a function room at the Michael Fowler Centre – a venue designed for wedding receptions, pressed into service because the library's meeting rooms had been under construction since 2019.

The room was packed. Fifty ratepayers on plastic chairs, arms folded, faces arranged into expressions of polite attention. At the front, a facilitator named Josh was setting up a portable whiteboard.

"Let's elevate this to a narrative level," Josh said brightly. "What's the *story* of this bike lane?"

He wrote VIBRANCY on the whiteboard and underlined it twice.

Xylos activated his visor's secondary function. The room flickered. A thermal overlay appeared, showing not faces but emotional states.

On the surface: calm. Nodding. Professional.

Beneath: screaming.

Every face was a mask stretched over a furnace. A retired engineer was calculating the cost of the consultation itself and wanting to flip the table. A woman knitting in the back row was composing a mental resignation letter from society.

"They are boiling," Xylos whispered to Ben. "But they do not speak."

"We don't do that here," Ben said. "It's not polite."

Xylos stood up.

"I have a solution," he announced.

The room turned.

"You have empty rooms in this city. You need foreign currency. Why not implement a Digital Nomad visa? Import five thousand remote workers. They spend euros in your cafes. They do not take your jobs. It is efficient."

The reaction was instant.

"They'll drive up rents!"

"They'll clog the motorway!"

"They'll buy all the avocados!"

Xylos sat down, rattled. "They refused before they calculated. It was reflexive."

"The 'No' Reflex," Ben said. "We'd rather have nothing than risk change."

Xylos stood again. He walked to a poster of the All Blacks on the wall, mid-haka, veins bulging.

"This is your warrior caste," he said. "When one of them drops the ball, what happens?"

"He gets dropped," someone muttered.

"Correct. Ruthless accountability. Excellence demanded. Yet when your government takes seven years to fix a library, you do *this*." He gestured at the whiteboard, at the plastic chairs, at the sad wheeled book cart in the corner labelled TEMPORARY COLLECTION.

"You accept mediocrity in your survival systems that you would never tolerate in your entertainment. Why?"

He looked at Ben. The room looked at Ben.

"Because rugby matters," Ben said quietly.

The silence that followed was not polite. It was the silence of diagnosis.

A woman stood up. Elena, a baker from Lambton Quay, flour still dusting her apron.

"He's right," she said, her voice shaking. "I've been trying to hire a trainee for six months. The rules mean I have to pay him like a senior baker, comply with a safety plan I can't understand, guarantee hours I can't promise. I spend more time on compliance than baking. Every year there's a new form, a new levy. And no one

ever asks if any of it works."

She was crying now.

"Seven years to fix a library. A convention centre that loses money. And nobody gets fired. They just keep having meetings. In rooms like this. While we drown."

Vara had the Temporal Scope pointed at Elena. She did not remember raising it.

Elena in 2035. Standing in a supermarket bakery in Brisbane, wearing a hairnet and a name tag, slicing bread she had not made. Her hands, which had once shaped sourdough at 4 AM, now operated a plastic slicer. She looked rested. She looked smaller.

Vara put the Scope away. She did not share what she had seen. Some futures were too heavy to speak aloud in a room full of strangers.

The thermal overlay spiked. The screaming was rising to the surface.

And then the door opened.

Ben's stomach dropped. He knew who it would be before he turned around. The journalist's tweet had been live for six hours. Of course it had been flagged. Of course someone had dispatched the antibodies.

Kevin did not stride in. He ambled. Beige cardigan, checked shirt, sensible shoes. A face so forgettable it was almost an achievement. Eyes the colour of a policy document left too long in the sun.

He had a clipboard.

"Evening, everyone," he said softly. "Don't mind me."

He sat in the second row. Not the front – never the front. He smiled at Elena. It was kind. It was warm. It changed nothing behind his eyes.

The energy in the room shifted. Not killed – Kevin was too subtle for that. Just slowed. A car losing momentum on an uphill gradient.

Josh found his confidence. "Lots of great energy here. I'm going to capture some themes..."

He wrote FRUSTRATION on the whiteboard, drew a circle around it, then wrote OPPORTUNITY with an arrow between them.

Xylos's precise, logical frustration had become a bubble. A theme. Captured. Contained.

"Xylos," Kevin said warmly. "The rugby comparison? Brilliant. You've put your finger on something we've been wrestling with for years."

"Then you agree? The system is broken?"

"Absolutely. And that's why we've set up a Lessons Learned working group. Cross-agency. I'd love your input. Fresh perspective."

Xylos looked at Ben. "He has agreed with everything. Why do I feel like I have lost?"

"Because you have," Ben whispered. "He just turned seven years of failure into a learning opportunity."

Kevin moved to Elena. "I heard what you said. We're setting up a Small Business Engagement Forum. I'd love you to be part of it."

"I don't have time for forums. I have a bakery."

"We'll work around your schedule. Your voice matters."

Hope flickered in Elena's eyes. Ben watched it happen – watched Kevin transform her from a threat into a stakeholder, her anger safely channelled into a process that would recommend further consultation.

"We should go," Ben said, grabbing Xylos.

Kevin looked up. "Ben. I heard you've had a stressful few days. People are worried."

"I'm fine."

"Are you? Sarah said you seemed... burnt out."

The word hung in the air. Burnt out. In the public service, it meant broken or dangerous. Either way: managed.

"I'm not burnt out. I was doing fieldwork."

"Of course." Kevin glanced at the Martians. "Why don't you head home? I can take our guests from here."

It was a lifeline. Walk away. Keep the salary. Let Kevin absorb them into the system.

"No," Ben said.

Something flickered in Kevin's dead eyes. Calculation.

"They're with me," Ben said.

Kevin held the gaze. No anger. Just patience. The confidence of a man who had never lost a battle he did not fight.

"Alright, Ben. Ownership is important." He turned to Xylos. "That observation about incentives – referees and players. Very brave framing." He smiled. "Let's park it for now. Pick it up when we've socialised it with stakeholders."

He raised a hand and was gone.

They walked out into the Wellington night. The wind cut through them. Across the square, the library hoarding glowed under the streetlights. Tākina sat dark beside it.

"I looked at his future," Vara said. "Kevin's. In 2045, he is still here. Different title. Same clipboard. He has outlasted seven Ministers. He gave a speech at the library opening about lessons learned. He is considered invaluable."

"Because he is," Ben said. "He's the immune system. He doesn't kill ideas with opposition. He kills them with process."

Xylos was quiet. Then: "On Mars, we call them *dampeners*. They absorb energy without converting it. Friction. Quicksand. You cannot fight them because there is nothing to push against."

"How do you defeat them?"

"On Mars, we removed them. But here..." He looked at the dark buildings, the empty square. "Here they may be load-bearing. Remove Kevin, and the system collapses. Or worse – it replaces him with another Kevin."

"Or," Ben said, "it finally moves."

"That is the gamble."

They walked towards Cuba Street, where the *Logos-7* still hovered peacefully above the Bucket Fountain, largely ignored.

"So what now?" Ben asked.

"We find more Elenas," Vara said. "We make the screaming visible. We cannot beat Kevin in a meeting. But we can make it harder for people to pretend they do not see."

"That's not a strategy. That's a siege."

"Yes. It is."

She turned to him, her eyes catching the city lights.

"Are you ready for a siege, Ben Miller? It will be long. It will be... 'hard yakka', yes? That is how you say it?"

"Near enough," Ben said.

He thought about his mortgage. His kids. His careful, beige career.

"No," he said. "I'm not ready."

He kept walking.

"But I'm staying anyway."

His phone buzzed in his pocket. He did not look at it.

MARTIAN AUDIT LOG: ENTRY 003

Subject: The Consultation Ritual (Local Government)

Observation: The indigenous population has developed a sophisticated mechanism for processing dissent without addressing it.

The Venue: Tonight's consultation occurred in a wedding reception room because the library has been closed for seven years. No one remarked on this. I suspect they no longer see it.

The Screaming: My visor revealed extreme internal distress beneath calm faces. They are boiling inside their skins while nodding politely. They call it "being professional." I call it slow combustion.

The "No" Reflex: When presented with a logical solution (Digital Nomad visa), the room rejected it before calculating the benefit. Change might cause loss. Loss is worse than stagnation.

The All Blacks Paradox: They demand excellence from entertainment but accept mediocrity from infrastructure. I asked the human Ben why. His answer: "Because rugby matters." I have logged this phrase. It may be the key to understanding this civilisation.

The Dampener (Kevin): A new entity type. He does not oppose ideas – he absorbs them. Total agreement followed by infinite process. Signature phrase: "Let's park it." Threat level: Maximum. You cannot fight what does not resist.

The Reputation Trap: Their international image as "paradise" prevents internal correction. If the world believes the system works, why would they fix it? The scenery is real. The dysfunction is invisible to tourists.

The Infrastructure:

- Te Matapihi (Library): $217m. Closed 7 years.
- Tākina (Convention Centre): $180m. Operating at a loss.
- Combined: Nearly $400m of civic investment either closed or failing.
- The pipes continue to leak.

The Bucket Fountain: A municipal sculpture whose function is to spill water onto the street. The humans describe it as "beloved." The vessel is currently parked above it, unnoticed. This city is stranger than I anticipated.

Action Item: Find a way to make the process visible. The humans cannot fight Kevin if they do not know he exists.

Vara's Addendum: The library will reopen in 2026. Kevin will attend the ceremony. He will speak about "lessons learned." The Mayor will call it "a new chapter."

No one will mention that a generation of children grew up without a central library. No one will calculate the cost – not the dollar cost, but the other cost. The books not borrowed. The homework not done. The quiet places not found.

That cost exists nowhere in Kevin's world.

It exists in mine.

CHAPTER 4

The silent teacher

LOCATION: State Highway 1, Northbound.
LOCAL TIME: 9:47 AM (Thursday).
DESTINATION: Model School (Award-Winning).
DRIVER MOOD: Evasive.

Ben Miller had not slept well.

He had dropped the Martians back at Cuba Street the night before, watched the silver ship descend silently through a gap in the buildings to collect them, and driven home to Karori in a daze. Sarah from HR had left three voicemails. He had deleted them without listening.

Sophie and Jack were already asleep when he got in. He had stood in their doorway for a long time, watching them breathe, thinking about nothing and everything. Sophie's school bag was hanging on her door handle. The St Mark's crest caught the hall light.

The bedroom light had been off when he got home. He had slept on the couch. In the morning, Lisa had left for work before he woke.

Now it was morning, and he was driving two aliens to a school.

"Where are we going?" Xylos asked from the passenger seat. He was too tall for the Corolla; his knees were pressed against the glovebox.

The ship remained above the Bucket Fountain, drawing occasional Instagram posts and no concern.

"A school," Ben said, eyes on the road. "Out in Porirua. It was the one the Ministry used to show off. The 'Model School'. I wrote the briefing paper on it in 2016. They've stopped doing the tours now."

"You selected this institution personally?"

"It won three awards. Design. Innovation. It has a 'flow-through' concept." Ben hesitated. "No walls. They're retrofitting some of them now. Quietly. But this one's still… pure."

Vara leaned forward from the back seat. "No walls? How do they concentrate?"

Ben did not answer.

"Ben," Vara pressed. "How do they concentrate without walls?"

"They collaborate," Ben said. The word came out flat, rehearsed. "They co-construct their learning journeys. They develop key competencies."

"That is not an answer," Xylos observed.

"No," Ben admitted. "It isn't."

The school came into view: a long, low building with floor-to-ceiling windows, surrounded by artificial turf and motivational

signage. A banner over the entrance read: COLLABORATIVE. CREATIVE. FUTURE-FOCUSED.

"It looks like a terrarium," Xylos observed.

"It's state of the art," Ben said, pulling into the visitor carpark. "This is the school I tell Ministers is working. Come on. I'll introduce you to the Learning Facilitator."

The school receptionist gave him a look. It was the look reserved for men who appear at schools looking like they have been living in their cars. Ben ran a hand over his stubble and tried to project "senior official" rather than "person of interest."

Location: The Learning Hub (formerly Rooms 4, 5, 6 and the corridor).
Decibel Level: 85dB (Equivalent to a lawnmower).
Walls: 0.
Textbooks: Optional.
Learning: Theoretical.
Official Graph: "NCEA Achievement Rates 2004–2023: Steady Improvement. Record pass rates. (2024 addendum: Slight adjustment. Methodology under review.)"
Martian Scan: "PISA Reading Score 2000–2022: Down 529 to 501. PISA Mathematics: Down 523 to 479. Rank among OECD nations: Falling. Note: Internal metrics rose as external metrics fell. The bar was lowered. The celebration continued."

The noise hit Xylos like a physical blow.

They were standing at the edge of "The Commons", a barn-like space containing ninety students, three teachers, and an assortment of beanbags that looked like they had died of exhaustion. The architecture was open-plan in the way that factories are open-plan: designed for throughput, not thought.

It was not just loud; it was textured. A low-frequency hum of chatter, overlaid with the screech of chair legs on laminate, the plink of notification sounds from dozens of devices, and somewhere in the distance, a ukulele.

"My audio sensors are glitching," Xylos said, tapping his ear. "I cannot isolate the signal. Is there a riot in progress?"

"This is 'Self-Directed Learning'," Ben said, raising his voice over the din. "We knocked the walls down to encourage collaboration."

Xylos scanned the room. Most of the students were on tablets or laptops. They were watching videos, scrolling, tapping. A few were typing with their thumbs. Almost none were writing.

"Where are the books?" Xylos asked.

"We've moved to digital-first," Ben said. "It's more engaging. More accessible."

"And the handwriting?"

Ben hesitated. "We don't really do cursive anymore. It's not in the curriculum. They type."

Xylos filed this. On Mars, they had learned early that the act of writing by hand created neural pathways that typing did not. The hand taught the brain. Remove the hand, and you removed a kind of thinking.

Vara had drifted into the chaos. She was drawn to a girl sitting alone at a table near the window, the only student in the immediate vicinity who was not staring at a screen.

The girl had a battered workbook open in front of her. She was frowning at a physics problem, pencil in hand, lips moving slightly as she worked through an equation. Around her, three other students were watching a YouTube video about projectile motion with the sound off, reading the captions.

Vara crouched beside her. "That is incorrect," she said softly.

The girl looked up, startled by the seven-foot alien crouching beside her. "What?"

"The equation." Vara's long grey finger hovered over the page. "You are trying to calculate the trajectory of the projectile. But you have used the formula for static friction. You need the kinematic equations. Constant acceleration."

The girl stared at her. "I... the teacher just gave us a link and told us to 'unpack it ourselves'. The video didn't make sense, so I printed the textbook chapter." She looked embarrassed. "I learn better on

paper. Is that weird?"

"It is not weird," Vara said. "It is how your species learned for ten thousand years. What is your name?"

"Mia."

"Mia. May I show you something?"

Vara found a whiteboard on wheels. She picked up a marker and began to draw. A smooth parabola. A dotted line for the horizontal component. Small arrows for the forces.

"Gravity is not a suggestion," Vara said, her voice warm beneath the noise. "It is a curve. See? The object does not choose to fall. It must fall. The mathematics simply describes what is already true."

Mia leaned forward, watching the marker move. "Oh," she said. "So the horizontal and vertical are separate? They don't affect each other?"

"Yes. Always. They are independent variables, living in the same event."

"That actually makes sense," Mia said. A small smile flickered across her face. "Why didn't anyone just... explain it like that?"

"Hey," a voice said. "Whoa. Pause."

A young man in a t-shirt and jeans stepped in front of the board. He looked about twenty-five, but his eyes were ancient. He had the thousand-yard stare of a soldier who has seen too much combat and too little phonics.

"I'm Sam," he said, smiling nervously at the alien. "I'm the Lead Learning Facilitator for this Zone. We don't really do... that."

He gestured vaguely at Vara's diagram.

"You do not do physics?" Vara asked.

"We don't do 'front-of-room' instruction," Sam corrected. "It creates a power dynamic. We prefer the learners to co-construct their own knowledge journeys."

Xylos stepped forward. "Sam. I am confused."

Sam flinched. "Join the club, mate."

"Gravity," Xylos said, pointing at the board. "It is a fundamental force. It is constant. It does not care about your journey. If the learners 'co-construct' the calculation for the bridge, and they get the vector wrong, the bridge falls down. Gravity is not a democracy."

Sam rubbed his face. He looked incredibly tired.

"Look, I get it," Sam whispered, leaning in so the students would not hear. "I know gravity is real. But if I stand up there and teach it directly, I get marked down in my appraisal for 'teacher-centric practice'. As Professor Hensch wrote in *Deconstructing the Classroom*, 'Silence is a colonial imposition'. We have to respect the noise. We have to let them find their own path."

"I taught phonics once, in my first year, before I knew better. The kids loved it. My mentor said I was 'centering my own knowledge' and needed to 'decenter the expert.'" He made air quotes with his fingers. "So now I facilitate. The kids don't love that, but no one's filing a complaint."

"And if the path leads off a cliff?" Xylos asked.

"Then we call it a 'learning opportunity'."

Sam glanced over his shoulder, checking no one was listening. When he spoke again, his voice was barely audible.

"Look, there's a new Minister. She's... changing things. Structured literacy. Phonics. Explicit instruction. Some of the younger teachers are hopeful. The data's coming in and it's..." He trailed off.

"It is working?" Xylos asked.

"The union says it's 'drill and kill'. Colonial. They say we're going backwards." Sam's laugh was hollow. "But I watch the kids in the pilot schools, and they're actually reading. Like, sounding out words. Making progress. And I think... maybe I was taught wrong too. Maybe I never learned how to teach because no one ever taught me properly in the first place."

He looked at the chaos around him: the noise, the beanbags, the children adrift.

Vara looked at Ben. "Your children, Ben. Sophie and Jack. Do they learn in a place like this?"

Ben's jaw tightened. He looked away, towards the window where rain was beginning to spot the glass.

"We should keep moving," he said. "There's more to see."

Sam watched the exchange but said nothing. He recognised the look. He had seen it on the faces of other Ministry visitors – the ones

who arrived with clipboards and left without making eye contact.

"I went through a school like this, you know. In 2008. Open plan. 'Collaborative learning'. I thought it was normal. I didn't know there was another way until I saw what the private schools do." He shrugged. "By then I was already in teachers' college, learning to replicate the thing that failed me."

"You are a product of the system you are now required to perpetuate," Xylos said. It was not a question.

"Yeah." Sam rubbed his eyes. "And if I try to teach differently, if I just stand up there and explain things clearly, I get marked down. The union rep visits. I get a 'support plan'." He made air quotes with his fingers. "So I keep my head down. I survive. And the kids..." He didn't finish the sentence.

Behind Sam, Mia quietly closed her workbook. Vara had seen understanding flicker in her eyes when the parabola made sense. But Mia would not be allowed to say so.

Ben was standing apart from them, watching Mia. She was staring at her closed workbook, hands flat on the cover, as if guarding something she would not be allowed to keep. He thought of Sophie. In a few years, if the fees became too much, Sophie would be sitting at a table like this one, guarding a workbook like this one. Sophie, who sat in rows. Who wrote in cursive. Who had a textbook for every subject.

He looked away.

Vara was not listening to Sam. She was looking at a boy in the corner.

His name, visible in careful, uneven letters at the top of a worksheet beside him, was Theo. He was sitting inside a cardboard box he had turned on its side, creating a small cave of quiet. Unlike most of the students, he was not on a device. He was reading an actual book about penguins, his finger tracing every word, his lips moving silently. His handwriting was large and laboured, the letters formed with effort.

He had built himself a wall out of cardboard because the adults had decided walls were oppressive.

Vara drifted towards him. She crouched near the opening of his box. He did not look up; he was deep in concentration, sounding out a word.

She wanted to tell him he was doing well. She wanted to protect him from the architecture. She reached out, her hand hovering near his shoulder.

But she stopped. She pulled her hand back. She could not protect him. She could only watch.

The Temporal Scope was in her hand before she knew she had reached for it.

Theo, twelve years from now. He was twenty-two, sitting in a recruitment office in Hamilton. The carpet was grey. The fluorescent lights buzzed. He was applying for a job at a distribution warehouse, the same warehouse his father had worked at before the automation.

He was charming. He made eye contact. He had been taught "Key Competencies": collaboration, communication, self-management. The interviewer liked him.

"Great chat, Theo. Just read through this contract and sign at the bottom. Standard stuff: pay rates, shifts, health and safety."

Theo picked up the document. The words were small. Dense. Legal. He stared at the first paragraph. The letters seemed to move, to rearrange themselves into shapes he could not parse.

He did not know what "indemnification" meant. He did not know what he was agreeing to.

He smiled. He had learned to smile when he did not understand. He signed his name at the bottom. The signature was blocky, hesitant, like a child's.

Vara closed her eyes. The image faded, but the boy signing his name did not.

She had seen too many futures now. Wayne in his rented room. Aroha with her inhaler. Elena in her hairnet. And now Theo, signing a contract he could not read. Each one stayed with her, layered like sediment. Xylos processed the data and moved on. Vara carried the faces.

"He is drowning, Ben," she whispered. "And you have told him the water is fresh air."

Ben said nothing. He drove them back into the city in silence.

It was Xylos who broke it. "I wish to trace the source of this philosophy. Where does it come from?"

"The university," Ben said. "The Faculty of Education."

Location: Victoria University of Wellington, Faculty of Education.
Staff-to-Student Ratio: 1:18.
Administrator-to-Academic Ratio: 4:1.
Mood: Anxious.

"I wish to file a bug report," Xylos announced as they marched into the Brutalist concrete bunker of the University. "I must find this Professor Hensch. I need to understand why he categorises silence as an enemy."

They stopped at the directory board. The academic staff were listed in small type at the bottom. Above them, in larger font, were the Strategic Support roles: Directors of Experience, Managers of Alignment, Advisors of Storytelling.

"There are four administrators for every academic," Xylos observed, counting. "This is not a university. It is a bureaucracy that has annexed a library."

They found Room 404 at the end of a long, quiet corridor. The silence here was heavy, ecclesiastical. The opposite of everything downstairs.

Professor Hensch was sitting behind a desk buried under stacks of paper. He was an older man, wearing a corduroy jacket that had outlasted several government ministries. The bookshelves behind him were crammed with journals and monographs, many of them his own.

"Professor," Xylos said, filling the doorway. "I have just come from a school that uses your work as scripture. The noise level is eighty-five decibels. The teacher, Sam, says he cannot teach physics directly because you wrote that silence is a colonial imposition."

Hensch winced. He took off his glasses and rubbed the bridge of his nose.

"I wrote that in 2008," he said quietly. "It was... theoretical. A provocation. I was trying to start a conversation about power dynamics in pedagogy. I didn't think they'd actually knock the walls down."

"They knocked them down," Xylos said. "Sam is exhausted. Theo is struggling to read. The provocation has become a structure. Why do you not issue a correction?"

Hensch made a sound that might have been a laugh in better times.

"You want to know what's funny? There's a new Minister who's doing exactly that. Structured literacy. Phonics. Explicit instruction. Evidence-based teaching." He gestured at the window, at the city beyond. "The results are coming in. The kids are learning to read. And my colleagues are calling it colonialism. They're calling it 'drill and kill'. They're saying she's setting education back fifty years."

"But you know it works," Xylos said.

"Of course I know it works. I've read the cognitive science." He slumped back in his chair. "We've been falling for twenty years while pretending we were rising. The national pass rates improved every year. The politicians were happy. And underneath it all, the kids were learning less and less."

He pointed to a poster on his door: SAFE SPEECH ZONE. PLEASE BE MINDFUL OF IMPACT.

"If I say the model failed," Hensch said, "I am questioning the 'lived experience' of the students who went through it. I am labelled 'unsafe'. 'Anti-inclusive'. I have tenure, Xylos, but I also have a mortgage. And a reputation. And colleagues who would never speak to me again. The Minister is right and I cannot say so. That is the trap."

Vara looked at him with pity.

"He is like Cassandra," she said to Ben. "The woman in your Ministry who writes the warnings."

Ben blinked. "How do you know about Cassandra?"

"We saw her office. The stacks of paper. The reports no one reads." Vara turned back to Hensch. "You are the same. You know

the truth, but you whisper it into a drawer."

Hensch said nothing. He put his glasses back on and turned to his computer screen. The conversation was over.

They left him there, surrounded by his books and his silence.

Location: Ben's Corolla, stuck in traffic on Willis Street.
Local Time: 4:30 PM.
Cortisol Level (Ben): Critical.

They drove without speaking. The heater rattled, producing more noise than warmth. Ben was gripping the steering wheel so hard his knuckles were white.

"Ben," Xylos said eventually.

"Yeah?" Ben's voice was tight.

"I do not understand the economics of your behaviour."

"Which part?"

"You have a private prototype that works. St Mark's." He tapped his visor. "Your financial outflows are consistent with private school fees. Desks in rows. Textbooks. Handwriting."

Ben did not answer.

"And you have a mass-production model that fails. The Barn. The noise. The children who scroll but do not write."

"Yeah."

"On Mars, if we found a system that worked and a system that failed, we would scale the prototype. Why do you not do this?"

Ben stared at the red light.

"It's not that simple, Xylos. It's political. It's... complex."

"Your children," Vara said from the back seat. Her voice was very small. "Sophie and Jack. They are seven and nine, yes?"

"Yes."

"Do they learn in the noise?"

Ben closed his eyes for a second. "No."

"Do they write by hand?"

"Yes."

"Then how?" Vara asked. "How do they have what Theo does not?"

The light turned green. Ben did not move. A horn honked behind them.

"They don't go there," Ben said. His voice cracked. "They don't go to the Barn."

"But you defended the policy," Xylos said. "I read your briefing paper. You called the Modern Learning Environment 'a world-leading approach to twenty-first-century pedagogy'."

"I know what I wrote!" Ben shouted. The sound filled the small car.

He took a breath. He let it out. His shoulders slumped.

"They go to St Mark's," Ben whispered. "It costs me nearly fifty grand a year for both of them. They wear uniforms. They sit in rows. They write in cursive. They have walls."

He put the car in gear and drove slowly forward.

"I pay for the walls," Ben said, staring at the road. "Because I know. I know what happens in the Barn. I've read the research. I've seen the data. I just... I can't say it out loud. Not at work. Not in the papers I write."

"Why not?"

"Because then I'm the problem. I'm 'elitist'. I'm 'undermining the public system'. I'm 'not a team player'." He laughed, but there was no humour in it. "So I write the briefings that say it's working, and I pay for my kids to go somewhere else."

Xylos nodded slowly. He tapped his visor, logging the final data point.

"I see," Xylos said. "You have privatised the quiet."

The silence that followed was louder than anything in the classroom.

Xylos's visor flashed RED.

"Ben. My sensors indicate your cortisol is critical. You are vibrating at a frequency I associate with structural failure."

Ben let out a short, hysterical laugh. "I think I'm having a panic attack, Xylos."

"Then you require maintenance. We must go to the repair facility."

"The hospital?" Ben laughed again, but it sounded like a sob. "Good luck. The wait time is twelve hours."

"Nevertheless," Xylos said, "I wish to see it. I wish to observe how you repair the humans you have broken."

Ben pulled out into traffic.

"Fine," he said. "But don't say I didn't warn you."

MARTIAN AUDIT LOG: ENTRY 004

Subject: Knowledge Transfer (Education).

Observation: The system has inverted its core function.

- **The Schools:** Designed for noise, not learning. Direct instruction forbidden. The hand has been removed; the children type but do not write.
- **The University:** Designed for brand management. Dissent is "unsafe." The theorists who broke the system cannot recant without professional destruction.
- **The Outcome:** The elites purchase refuge from the experiments they impose on others. They know. They pay. They write the briefing papers anyway.
- **Signal Detected:** A reformer has entered the system. Evidence-based instruction is returning. Early results show improvement. The establishment is resisting. Outcome: contested.

Vara's Addendum: I saw Theo today. He was sitting in a cardboard box, trying to read about penguins. He had built himself a wall because the adults had decided walls were oppressive. In twelve years, he will sign a contract he cannot read.

Sam was also a Theo once. The machine has been replicating itself for a generation. But there is a signal now. A correction is being attempted. The question is whether it will be absorbed before it can take hold.

He just wanted to read about penguins. I do not understand why that was considered a threat.

CHAPTER 5

The waiting room

LOCATION: Karori Medical Centre (Parking Lot) > Wellington Regional Hospital (Newtown).
LOCAL TIME: 7:42 PM (Thursday).
GDP COST OF WAITING: High.
MOOD: Code Orange.

The human body is a machine, and like all machines in the Realm of New Zealand, Ben Miller was suffering from deferred maintenance.

It started halfway up the Glenmore Street rise. They had left the university twenty minutes ago, fleeing the wreckage of the "Flexible Learning Space," and the rain had set in – a heavy, vertical sheet that turned the winding road into a sleek black ribbon.

Ben gripped the steering wheel of the Corolla. His knuckles were white. The damp house in Newtown. The leaking pipes. The children in the open-plan barn, typing on devices that taught them nothing. The sheer, accumulating weight of the last four days sat in the passenger seat with him.

His phone lit up on the passenger seat. LISA. He had promised to talk tonight. No excuses.

He could not answer. He could not breathe.

Then the chest pain hit.

It was not a sharp pain. It was a crushing weight, as if gravity had suddenly localised itself entirely on his sternum. The air in the car vanished.

"I think," Ben whispered, pulling the car violently to the curb near the Karori tunnel. "I think I'm dying."

In the back seat, Xylos's visor strobed rapidly.

"Vara, scan the subject. Is this a biological termination event?"

Vara leaned forward, her eyes glowing a soft, diagnostic blue. "His cortisol levels are at four hundred percent. His heart rate is arrhythmia-adjacent. The subject is experiencing a catastrophic system overload."

"Excellent," Xylos said, opening his notebook. "A live stress-test of the biological repair facilities. This is high-value data. Ben, please proceed to the nearest mechanic immediately. Do not expire before we observe the billing process."

Ben gasped, clutching his chest. "Local… GP. Just up the hill. Karori."

The Karori Medical Centre was a modern, tasteful building clad in cedar and glass, nestled among the pohutukawa trees of Wellington's most respectable suburb. It looked less like a clinic and more like an architect's holiday home.

It was also completely dark.

Ben stumbled out of the car, rain soaking his shirt instantly. He leaned against the automatic glass doors, his breath coming in shallow, terrified rasps. Inside, the waiting room was pristine, empty and illuminated only by the green glow of a burglar alarm.

Xylos tapped the glass with a long, metallic finger. "It appears the repair shop operates on banking hours. This is illogical. Sickness does not adhere to a nine-to-five schedule."

He pointed to a piece of paper taped to the inside of the glass. It was printed in a friendly sans-serif font:

> WE ARE CURRENTLY AT CAPACITY
> We are not enrolling new patients.
> Next available routine appointment: 3 weeks.
> If this is an emergency, call 111.
> If you need advice, call Healthline.
> For repeat prescriptions, please use the portal (allow 5 working days).

"Ben," Xylos said, his voice taking on the tone of someone solving a particularly interesting riddle. "I have accessed the Ministry of Health funding protocols. I understand the business model."

Ben slid down the glass door to a sitting position on the wet concrete. "Help," he wheezed.

"It is a gym membership," Xylos continued, unperturbed. "This facility receives a fixed sum per quarter for your name on their database. This is called 'Capitation.' If they treat you, they incur costs: time, electricity, cotton balls. If they do not treat you, they keep the entire sum as profit."

Vara looked at Ben, then at the dark clinic. "So the incentive is to have as many patients as possible," she said, "but to never actually see them?"

"Precisely," Xylos said. "Ben, you are a 'Ghost Patient.' To this building, you are an asset only as long as you remain invisible. Your chest pain is a liability to their balance sheet. If they open this door, they lose money."

Vara looked at the dark building. Through the Scope, the consulting room window opened up.

Scope Projection: Dr Singh, fifty-three, still at his desk at 9:00 PM. He was not seeing patients. He was arguing with three different software systems that refused to share data, filling out ACC forms by hand because the digital portal had crashed again, and writing a reference letter for his practice nurse who was leaving for Melbourne. His books were closed because he had lost two GPs in eighteen months and could not recruit replacements at the rates the funding model allowed. The waiting list was not a sign of success. It was a sign of collapse.

"The healer is also trapped," Vara said. "He is not hoarding patients. He is drowning in them."

Ben let out a high-pitched whine.

His phone buzzed. Lisa. Again. He had lost count of how many times she had called since Wednesday. Each unanswered call was a small betrayal, compounding like interest on a debt he could not pay.

Another buzz. A text from a number he did not recognise: *Ben – Kevin asked me to check in. Are you okay? Call me. – Sarah*

Kevin was still watching. Even now.

"We must go to the Fortress of Last Resort," Xylos announced. "To the Hospital. Vara, assist the subject back into the vehicle. I will drive. I have downloaded the Wellington road code. It appears to be optional."

Xylos tapped his communicator. "The vessel will meet us at the medical facility within minutes."

The Emergency Department at Wellington Regional Hospital did not look like a place of healing. It looked like a departure lounge for a flight that had been cancelled three days ago.

The air was thick with the smell of wet wool, antiseptic and lukewarm pies. Every plastic chair was occupied. There were people wrapped in grey blankets, people holding frozen peas to their ankles, people staring at their phones with the glazed eyes of the damned.

It was frighteningly quiet. There was no screaming, no running

nurses. Just the low, electric hum of fluorescent lights, the distant rhythmic beep of a monitor and the occasional wet cough echoing off the linoleum.

"Triage," Xylos said, reading the sign. "A French term meaning 'to sort.' In this context, it appears to mean 'to age'."

They dragged Ben, who was now grey and sweating profusely, toward the intake desk. But before they could reach it, a figure in a bright yellow blazer intercepted them.

"Ben! Oh my god, babe!"

It was Tasha. The Principal Advisor. The avatar of the sheer cliff face of bureaucracy. Ben knew her from a dozen inter-agency working groups. She looked startlingly fresh, holding a clipboard and standing next to a whiteboard covered in neon post-it notes near the vending machines.

Ben blinked, his vision swimming. "Tasha? Why… are you here?"

"Work, babe! Always grinding," Tasha beamed. "Health NZ contracted us for a national Patient Experience Audit," Tasha explained brightly. "We're mapping the emotional journey from triage to discharge. It's very holistic."

She gestured to the room of miserable, bleeding people. "We're running a 'Cross-Agency 24-Hour Patient Journey Sprint.' Just trying to ideate some low-cost interventions for the Waiting Experience."

She tapped her whiteboard. It had columns titled PAIN POINTS, DELIGHT MOMENTS and USER STORIES. Under PAIN POINTS, someone had written "Blood loss." Tasha had moved that sticky note to the PARKING LOT column.

"We want to reframe 'Waiting' as 'Pre-Recovery Reflection Time'," Tasha explained, clicking a pen. "We're thinking about gamifying the intake process. Maybe an app where you can earn points for patience? What do you think?"

Ben clutched his chest. "I think… heart attack."

"Love that honesty," Tasha said, writing on a pink sticky note. "Authentic user feedback." She peeled the note off and stuck it to Ben's forehead. "Just pop your pain level on the Mood Board before you triage, babe. We're A-B testing the font on the intake forms."

Xylos stepped forward, gently peeling the sticky note off Ben's head. "The subject requires a doctor, not a focus group."

"Oh, the doctors are super busy," Tasha said, waving a hand vaguely towards the double doors. "But we've deployed three new Wellness Facilitators to the lobby. It's all about the holistic vibe."

They got Ben through the doors. A nurse took his blood pressure, looked at him with tired eyes and slapped a "Code Orange" sticker on his file.

"Take a seat," she said. "We'll get to you."

They sat. Ben slumped in a plastic chair between a toddler with a hacking cough and an old man eating a sandwich out of a paper bag.

Vara sat quietly. She did not look at the funding models. She activated her Temporal Scope.

The blue light of her eyes shifted, deepening as she looked at the toddler. The child was not just coughing; he was vibrating with a deep, rattling wheeze.

Scope Projection: The rental property in Porirua – not far from the school they had visited that morning. The black mould on the bedroom ceiling, identical to the spores she had detected in the Newtown house. The spores drifting down into the crib. The parents turning off the heater because the power bill was due. The cold, damp air of the Flexible Learning Space they had fled just hours ago.

Vara blinked. She looked at the old man. He had no visible injury. He was just eating his sandwich, slowly, methodically.

Scope Projection: A silent house. A pantry with one tin of soup. The TV turned off to save power. Silence so thick it had a texture. He had come here because here, there was light. Here, there were people. Here, he was a "patient," which was better than being a ghost.

"Xylos," Vara whispered.

The Senior Auditor was tapping his foot, annoyed. "The throughput efficiency of this facility is abysmal. They are processing humans at the speed of geological erosion."

"It is not a repair shop," Vara said. "Look at them. It is the drain."

Xylos paused. "Clarify."

"Everything we saw," Vara said. Her voice was flat now, as though something in it had been used up. "The mouldy houses. The schools. The poverty. It all flows downhill. The politicians make the policies at the top of the hill, and the water runs down, and it ends here. In these plastic chairs."

Xylos looked at the toddler. "So this is not a medical ward. It is a containment facility for societal failure."

"Yes."

Suddenly, the heavy mood was shattered by the television mounted on the wall. It was playing *Shortland Street.*

Xylos stared at it, mesmerized. On the screen, a handsome doctor with perfect hair was passionately kissing a nurse in an elevator. Then, the elevator stopped, and the doctor pulled a wire cutters from his pocket to defuse a bomb attached to the control panel, while simultaneously singing an acoustic ballad.

"Vara," Xylos said, his LEDs spinning yellow. "Record this. Immediately."

"It is a soap opera, Auditor. It is fiction."

"It cannot be fiction," Xylos insisted. "Look at the efficiency! He solved a romantic entanglement, a domestic terrorism incident and a musical interlude within twenty-two seconds. This is a training simulation! Citizens! Observe the screen! This is what your tax credits are purchasing! Your doctor is also a detective who can sing! Have hope!"

His phone buzzed. Lisa.

The kids are asking where you are. Sophie says you're on a secret mission. Jack says you're probably just in meetings. I don't know what to tell them.

Ben stared at the message. He started typing a reply three times. Each time, he deleted it. Then he opened a new message to Sophie's tablet: *Tell Jack I'm probably just in meetings. Love you both.* He sent it before he could delete that too.

It was 2:00 AM when they finally called Ben's name.

The room beyond the double doors was chaos, but controlled chaos. Beeping monitors, rushing nurses, the smell of rubbing

alcohol and old blood.

They were led to a curtained cubicle. A moment later, the curtain was swept aside by Dr Kahu.

She was young, perhaps late twenties, wearing mismatched scrubs (top blue, pants green) and a lanyard with a faded Frozen Elsa clip that looked wildly out of place in the trauma ward. She had dark circles under her eyes that looked like bruises, vibrating with a mixture of caffeine and exhaustion, but her hands, as she touched Ben's wrist, were steady and warm.

"Ben," she said gently. "Tell me what's happening."

Ben tried to speak. "Chest. Tight. Can't… breathe."

She worked quickly. Stethoscope. Blood pressure. ECG leads. Her movements were economic, precise, practiced. She was a master mechanic working on a crumbling engine.

"It's not a heart attack," she said after a minute, checking the printout. "It's a panic attack. A big one. Your body has essentially pulled the emergency brake."

She turned to a computer terminal in the corner, tapping furiously. Then she stopped. She sighed – a long, deep exhale that seemed to deflate her entire frame.

She walked over to a beige machine in the corner of the cubicle. It was covered in a layer of grey dust. A handwritten sign taped to it read: DO NOT UNPLUG – VITAL SYSTEM.

The machine let out a high-pitched, screeching wail. *Reee-awww-reee.*

"What is that artifact?" Xylos asked, recoiling. "Is it a torture device?"

"It's the fax," Dr Kahu said, hitting the side of it with her palm. "The GP sent your notes over. But it's jammed. Again."

Xylos stared at it. "You are using telephonic image transmission technology from the late twentieth century? In a hospital?"

"It's for privacy," Dr Kahu said, wrestling a crumpled piece of thermal paper out of the machine. "The GP systems don't talk to the hospital systems. So we fax."

"You protect the data so well that even the doctor cannot see

it," Xylos marvelled. "You value the 'Privacy' of the subject more than the 'Survival' of the subject. You would rather he die as an anonymous mystery than live as a known data point."

Dr Kahu did not look up, but she exhaled sharply through her nose. "Tell me about it."

She returned to Ben, preparing a syringe. "I'm going to give you a sedative, Ben. It'll help the muscles unlock. You just need to sleep."

Vara stepped forward. She activated the Temporal Scope again. She wanted to see this healer in the future. She wanted to see Dr Kahu in ten years, running this department, teaching the next generation, fixing the drain.

She focused the lens.

And then nothing.

The space where Dr Kahu stood in the present was empty in the future. No body. No heat signature. Just a silhouette of absence. A blank space in the room where a doctor used to be.

Vara's hand trembled. She switched the Scope off.

"Doctor," she said. "Where are you?"

Dr Kahu looked up, pausing with the syringe. "Sorry?"

"In the future," Vara said. "The space where you should be is… empty. You are not here."

Dr Kahu offered a small, sad smile. She did not look surprised.

"I'm flying to the West Island next Tuesday," she said. "This is my final shift."

Xylos blinked. "The West Island? You mean the rival faction? Australia?"

"They offered me a roster, Ben," Dr Kahu said, looking down at her patient, not the Martian. "An actual roster. With lunch breaks. And pay that means I don't have to flat with four students."

"But you are the most valuable unit we have seen," Xylos said, genuinely confused. "The State invested, by my calculation, one million dollars in your training. Why would they export you for free?"

"Because I want to buy a house," Dr Kahu whispered. "And over there… the patients don't have to wait in the rain."

She pressed the plunger. The sedative flowed into Ben's arm.

Ben felt the cold liquid enter his veins. The crushing weight on his chest began to lift, replaced by a heavy, grey fog. But before the dark took him, he had one second of absolute clarity.

He looked at Dr Kahu. He saw the fatigue. He saw the kindness. He saw the badge that would not be there next Tuesday. He realised he was part of the Ministry that wrote the policies that built the fax machine that jammed the paper that made her leave.

"Dr Kahu?" he mumbled.

"Just relax, Ben," she soothed, brushing hair off his sweaty forehead.

"I'm sorry," Ben said.

"For what?"

"For making it so hard…" Ben's eyes fluttered. "…for you to stay."

Xylos opened his mouth to analyse the statement, but Vara caught his arm. She shook her head.

Silence.

Dr Kahu did not speak. She did not say it was okay. She did not say she forgave him. She just looked at him for a long moment, tired and kind.

"Get some rest, Ben," she said.

She pulled the curtain closed.

Ben slept. The sedative pulled him under like a warm tide.

In the corridor outside, Vara stood at the window, watching the city lights. Xylos was beside her, tapping at his communicator.

"The vessel is holding position above the harbour," Xylos reported. "It can collect us from the rooftop helipad at dawn. I have… adjusted the hospital's security protocols."

"Good," Vara said. She did not turn from the window.

"You are troubled," Xylos observed.

"I have seen too much today." Vara's voice was quiet. "The children in the noise. The doctor who is leaving. The old man who came here to be less alone." She paused. "And Ben. He is broken, Senior. Not his body. His belief in himself."

"Can he be repaired?"

"I do not know." She finally turned to look at Xylos. "But he cannot heal here. The city is the wound. We need to take him somewhere the system is not watching. Somewhere he can see clearly."

"Where?"

Vara pulled up a map on her scanner. She pointed to the long, narrow peninsula at the top of the island.

"There," she said. "Far from the Hive Mind. Where the roads end and the land begins."

Xylos studied the data. "Northland. Low population density. High agricultural potential. Strategic resources detected: halloysite clay, silica, aquifer."

"And?"

"And the infrastructure is… minimal." He frowned. "The region is connected to the main body by a single arterial road. If that road fails, the tissue dies."

"Then we should see it," Vara said. "Before it dies."

She looked back at the window. Somewhere out there, Lisa Miller was sitting alone in a house in Karori, waiting for a phone call that would not come.

Vara did not need the Temporal Scope to see that future. Some things were already written.

MARTIAN AUDIT LOG: ENTRY 005

Subject: The Ambulance at the Bottom of the Cliff (Health).

Status: Tragic.

Observation: We have reached the endpoint of the New Zealand experiment.

The Input: The colony creates sickness via damp housing and systemic stress.

The Process: The Primary Care layer is blocked by a financial algorithm ("Capitation") that incentivises the exclusion of the sick.

The Holding Pen: The subjects are processed by "Consultants" (Tasha) who measure their misery on Mood Boards but do not cure it.

The Output: The repair units (Dr Kahu) are exported to the rival faction ("Australia") free of charge immediately upon completion of their manufacture.

Vara's Addendum: Ben is asleep. The sedative cost $0.50. The administration overhead to deliver it likely cost $5,000.

I watched Shortland Street again while we waited for Ben to wake. Xylos is right. The fiction is better than the reality. In the fiction, the doctor stays.

CHAPTER 6

The severed limb

LOCATION: Northland (Kerikeri vs. The Hinterland).
LOCAL TIME: 09:00 AM.
ECONOMIC INDICATOR: Potential: Infinite. Realisation: Stalled.
MOOD: Resigned.

The morning sun hit the linoleum floor of Wellington Hospital, Room 4B, with the aggressive brightness of a day that had plans for you.

Ben woke up. He felt strangely light. The Martians were standing at the foot of his bed, already in their trench coats.

"We are leaving," Vara said. "The ship is on the roof."

Ben blinked. "What time is it?"

"Dawn," Xylos said. "You have slept for five hours. Your cortisol has stabilised. We have adjusted the hospital's discharge protocols. You are officially 'self-discharged against medical advice,' which I understand is a local tradition."

The panic attack of the previous night – the crushing weight of the chest pain, the terrifying clarity of Dr. Kahu's departure – had receded. He was not happy. He was just empty.

At the foot of his bed, his phone sat on the side table. The screen was dark.

"Your device received multiple communications overnight," Xylos noted. "Fourteen from the entity 'Sarah'. Two from 'Lisa'. I did not read them. Privacy protocols."

Ben looked at the phone, then the ceiling, then the wristband still on his wrist – white plastic, his name in smudged ink.

"The device wants an answer, Ben," Vara said gently. "Do you wish to re-engage with the matrix?"

Ben stared at the phone. He pressed the voicemail icon. Sarah's voice filled the small room, tinny and fast.

"Ben, where are you? The Minister is asking about the Workforce Strategy PDF. Look, if this is a burnout thing, we can manage it. We'll frame it as a 'Wellbeing Sabbatical'. HR has a form for it. Just don't do anything structural. Call me."

Burnout. Sabbatical. Form.

Ben listened to the hum of the hospital air conditioning. The empty fax machine in the nurses' station. Dr Kahu packing her bags for Brisbane. Three years writing a Workforce Strategy Framework that resulted in zero workers and a very nice PDF.

He reached out, picked up the phone, and held the power button

until the screen went black. The hospital wristband dangled from his wrist. He did not remove it.

"No," Ben said. "I'm done managing the message."

Sophie and Jack. He picked up the phone, stared at Lisa's name, then typed: *Taking a few days. Need to clear my head. I'm okay. Will call tonight.* He turned the phone off before she could reply.

Vara was watching him from the doorway.

"You need distance," she said quietly. "The city is making you sick. The density of the signals, the noise of the system – it is too close. You cannot see it clearly because you are inside it."

"Where do you suggest?"

"North," Vara said. "My scans show a region of low population density, warm climate, agricultural activity. It will be calmer there. Slower. You can breathe."

Ben barked out a laugh. "Northland. Sure. Why not."

He did not tell her that he had been there once, years ago. That a farmer had asked him a question he could not answer. That he had thought about it, sometimes, in the quiet moments between briefing papers.

"Okay," he said. "Let's go see if the air is cleaner at the end of the road."

He swung his legs out of bed. He did not bother to change. He kept the hospital wristband on. It felt appropriate. A label for a broken asset.

Twelve minutes later, Ben was strapped into a gravity-dampened chair inside the *Logos-7*. The ship had recharged overnight, drawing power from the city grid.

At Transpower's national control centre, an engineer was currently explaining to her supervisor that no, she had not accidentally logged the Huntly coal units back online at 3 AM, and no, she did not know why the grid had briefly registered a demand spike equivalent to switching on every electric oven in Wellington simultaneously. Meanwhile, at Mercury's hydro station on Lake Taupo, an operator was staring at a graph showing the reservoir had dropped three centimetres in four hours and wondering if he should tell someone.

Ben was clutching a lukewarm steak and cheese pie he had bought from the Z station on the way to the ship. His hands were shaking slightly. He put the pie down.

Outside the viewport, the North Island was a blur of green and grey.

"We are at 15,000 feet," Xylos announced. "Velocity: Mach 4. ETA to the Northern Peninsula: 45 seconds."

Ben picked up the pie. "I usually drive this," he mumbled, flaky pastry falling onto his suit pants. "It takes five hours. The roads wind back on themselves. You get stuck behind a logging truck doing thirty."

"Inefficient," Xylos said. "Observe the vascular system."

A hologram materialised in the centre of the cabin. It showed New Zealand as a biological organism. The Golden Triangle – Auckland, Hamilton, Tauranga – was glowing with a thick, pulsing red light. Traffic. Commerce. Logistics.

"The heart is pumping," Xylos noted. "But look North."

Ben looked. Above Auckland, the thick red arteries vanished. They were replaced by a single, fragile thread – State Highway 1 – winding tortuously through unstable geological formations. The line flickered. In three places, it was broken entirely.

"This is a biological impossibility," Xylos said, his voice tinged with horror. "You have a limb the size of Belgium – rich in soil, warm in climate – attached to the main body by a single, calcified capillary. If this line breaks, the tissue dies."

"It breaks every winter," Ben said, chewing. "We call it resilience."

"That is not resilience," Xylos corrected. "That is ischaemia. Restricted blood flow leading to gangrene. We are entering the necrotic zone."

The *Logos-7* touched down silently in a reserve on the outskirts of Kerikeri. The landing struts sank slightly into the soft, subtropical earth.

Before the airlock could even cycle open, a white ute with orange flashing lights pulled up. A man in a high-vis vest got out. He looked exhausted.

"You can't park there, mate," the man said. He squinted at the spaceship. "And you've got mud on your landing gear. Non-compliant organic matter."

"We have travelled forty million miles," Xylos said, stepping onto the grass.

"Yeah, well, did you wash the undercarriage before you left Mars?" The man pulled out a ticket book. "That's a four hundred dollar infringement. Biosecurity Act."

"Pay the man, Xylos," Ben said, stepping out into the sunlight. "He takes mud very seriously."

The officer handed Xylos the ticket, sighed, and drove off.

Vara looked at the departing ute, then at the ticket in Xylos's hand.

"I thought it would be different here," she said.

"It is different," Ben said. "The accents are friendlier."

Xylos ignored the fine. He was looking at the town.

The sun was shining. The hedges were manicured to the millimetre. Elderly couples in white linen glided past on expensive German electric bicycles. The air smelled of roasting coffee and jasmine.

In the marina behind the main street, a pristine yacht sat at anchor. Its name, painted in gold leaf on the stern, was *Future Perfect*.

"We have found it, Vara!" Xylos beamed. "This matches the Golden Hour parameters of the *Country Calendar* broadcast. The man with the dog. The acoustic guitar soundtrack. The Relaxed Human exists! Look at the hydration levels."

Vara raised her scanner. Her eyes narrowed.

"Scan complete," she said. "Average age: 72. Net local employment generated: minimal. This is where capital comes to rest, Senior Auditor. They earned it elsewhere. They spend it here. But they are not the cause. They are rational. Capital flows to where it is safe." She paused. "It has nowhere else to go."

"But where are the workers?" Xylos asked.

"Come," Ben said. "Walk with me."

They walked five hundred metres down the road, past the golf

course, past the artisanal chocolatiers. Then they crossed a small bridge.

The transition was violent.

The pavement stopped. The manicured hedges vanished, replaced by gorse and rusting wire. The smell of jasmine died, replaced by the acrid scent of burning plastic and damp timber.

In the front yard of the first house, a dog barked from beneath a trampoline. Three cars sat on blocks in the driveway.

"It is a Curtain," Vara whispered. She looked back at the cafes, then forward at the poverty. "On this side, the past is golden. On that side, the future is rusting."

They commandeered a rental car from a depot near the golf course. Ben used his government credit card; he figured he was fired anyway.

They drove west. The road disintegrated from tarmac to chip seal, then from chip seal to gravel, then from gravel to a series of potholes connected by gravel that had given up.

They found Dave in a gully near Kaikohe, at the entrance to his property. The sign by the gate was weathered: "Doyle Avocados – Est. 2005." The orchard stretched up the hillside behind him, rows of dark-leaved trees heavy with fruit.

Ben had met him once, in November 2023, at a Regional Futures workshop in Wellington. Dave had stood up during the Q&A and asked why the Ministry kept sending consultants instead of fixing the road. No one had answered him.

Dave was not in the orchard. He was sitting on the bonnet of his ute, which was buried to the axles in a pothole the size of a spa pool. He was wearing a shirt that had once been white but was now the colour of the road.

"Welcome to the Winterless North, Ben," Dave said without looking up. "Where the sun shines and the suspension dies."

"Dave," Ben said. "Meet the auditors."

Dave looked at the aliens. "Can you lift a Ford Ranger out of a clay pit using telekinesis?"

"We can," Xylos said. He raised one hand. The ute shuddered,

groaned, and rose slowly from the mud with a wet sucking sound. It drifted sideways and settled onto solid ground.

Dave stared at it. "Right. Okay. That happened." He took a breath. "You're hired. I can't pay you, though. My cash flow is currently stuck on the wrong side of the Mangamuka Gorge."

Xylos scanned the area. The readout scrolled rapidly.

DETECTED: AUPOURI AQUIFER (VOLUME: MASSIVE) **DETECTED:** HALLOYSITE CLAY (LITHIUM BATTERY GRADE) **DETECTED:** SILICA DEPOSITS **DETECTED:** TRACE GOLD (COROMANDEL SEAM)

"Dave," Xylos said, bewildered. "You claim poverty. Yet my sensors indicate you are standing on approximately fifty billion dollars of strategic resources. You have water, high-purity clay for batteries, and gold beneath your gumboots. Why do you not extract?"

Dave laughed. It came out wrong, more cough than amusement. He pulled a rusted bolt from his pocket and rubbed it with his thumb.

"It's not that simple, mate. See that hill? If I put a drill rig up there, half my neighbours would chain themselves to the fence to save the snails. The other half would file an injunction because the Waitangi Tribunal hasn't ruled on the subsurface rights yet."

He gestured vaguely at the horizon. "And honestly? I get it. We've seen what happens when you let the diggers in without a plan. But the result is we've got the resources to power a million electric cars sitting in the dirt, and we're importing the batteries from China. Make it make sense."

Vara had the Scope on Dave before he finished speaking.

The orchard was immaculate. New irrigation lines glistened in the sun. A gleaming packhouse stood on the hill. At the gate, a massive sign read: GLOBALAGRI NORTHLAND (A Subsidiary of Shenzen Agricultural Holdings).

Dave was there. He was older, greyer. He was wearing a high-vis vest with someone else's logo on the chest. He was walking the rows,

touching the bark of trees he had planted twenty years ago. Above him, a black drone hummed, monitoring fruit density. Dave looked up at it. He did not wave.

"He sells," Vara whispered to Xylos. "He sells the land to pay the compliance costs. And then he stays."

"Why does he stay?" Xylos asked.

"Because he planted them," Vara said. "He cannot watch them from a distance."

They freed the ute and drove south, towards the port. The road wound through valleys, past farmland and forestry blocks. After twenty minutes, they reached a Bailey bridge – a temporary structure spanning a washed-out gully. A sign read: WEIGHT LIMIT 40 TONNES.

"We'll deal with that on the way back," Dave muttered. They crossed the bridge and kept driving.

Ten minutes later, they stopped. A massive slip had brought a hillside down across the highway.

A man in a council jacket was staring at the pile of dirt. His face was grey with fatigue. His eyes were red-rimmed. Ben recognised him from a Regional Infrastructure Forum in August 2022. Gary had presented seventeen slides about slope stability in the Far North. No one had listened then either.

"Gary," Ben nodded.

"Ben," Gary replied. "Don't ask me when it will be open. The answer is eventually."

"Why is it not fixed?" Xylos asked. "This is a primary arterial route."

Gary turned. "I have fifty thousand ratepayers, spaceman. And I have six thousand kilometres of road. Half those roads carry trucks that serve Auckland's supply chain. But Auckland doesn't pay for my bridges. I maintain national infrastructure on a local budget." He kicked a stone into the slip. "My entire roading budget covers pot-hole filler and apologies. I've written seventeen reports warning about this specific hill. They're in a folder in Wellington marked Long-Term Insights."

"That means Cassandra wrote them," Ben translated. "It means no one reads them until the bodies are cold."

A young man stepped out of a caravan parked on the verge, just behind the roadblock. The caravan had a blue tarpaulin tied over the roof to stop the leaks. The man was holding a mug of tea in one hand and a textbook in the other. The book was dog-eared, heavily annotated, and held together with rubber bands.

"It is a simple shear failure," the young man said.

"Hello, Raj," Dave said. "This is Raj. He's my Packhouse Assistant."

"I am a Structural Engineer," Raj corrected gently. He tapped the textbook – *Advanced Geotechnical Engineering*. He pointed at the slip. "The drainage angle is wrong. I could fix this in three days with a gabion wall and a culvert. I have the design in my head. It would cost four thousand dollars."

"Do it," Xylos commanded. "Logic dictates the road must open."

"I can't," Gary sighed. "He's not an Accredited Supplier. If I let him touch the road, I lose my insurance. We have to tender it to a Tier 1 firm in Auckland. They'll send a consultant up in three weeks to do a feasibility study. Cost: fifty grand. Time to fix: six months."

"And," Raj added, taking a sip of tea, "my visa is for Horticulture Labour. If I touch infrastructure, I am in breach. If I stay in horticulture, my qualifications expire. Next year, I will no longer be a Structural Engineer at all."

Vara watched Raj return to his caravan. He ducked under the tarpaulin, and she saw him open the textbook again. Not to study, but to remember. To keep the knowledge alive for a job he was not allowed to do.

They stood in silence. The wind moved through the trees on the broken hill.

Then the road shook.

A rumble signalled the arrival of the heavy haulage truck. It had come from the north, from Dave's orchard, and now it crawled back towards the Bailey bridge they had crossed earlier.

It was loaded high with crates of Dave's avocados – the Green

Gold of the North. Forty tonnes of premium export product, destined for the tables of Tokyo and San Francisco.

A figure in high-vis stepped out from behind the bridge abutment and raised a hand. Ben recognised him from the biosecurity stop in Kerikeri. Same tired eyes, same overstretched jurisdiction.

"You again?" Ben said. "You were in Kerikeri two hours ago."

"I'm the only Compliance Officer for the district, bro," Tane said, rubbing his face. "There used to be four of us. Then three. Now it's just me and a Hilux with two hundred thousand k's on the clock."

He walked over to the truck driver. He looked at the clipboard in his hand, then at the bridge, then at Dave. He looked miserable.

"I can't let it cross, Dave."

"What?" Dave shouted. "It's food! It's money! It's perishable!"

"The truck is forty-four tonnes," Tane said, tapping the paper. "The temporary bridge rating is forty tonnes. You're over the limit."

"It's been a temporary bridge for four years!" Dave yelled. "Just let it go! It'll hold!"

"I can't," Tane said softly. "I need a Load Variance Form 47-B signed by the Chief Engineer in Wellington. I called him. He's on a strategy retreat in Martinborough. He's not answering his phone."

"So what do I do?"

"You have to unload the excess," Tane said. "Or turn back."

"I can't turn back! The road behind us is blocked by the slip!"

Silence. The logic of the trap snapped shut.

"Dump it," Dave whispered.

"Dave, no," Ben said.

"Dump it!" Dave screamed. "Dump the damn fruit! If I don't get the rest to the port by 5 PM, I miss the ship!"

The driver pulled the lever. The hydraulic tailgate hissed.

With a sickening, wet thud, four tonnes of premium avocados cascaded onto the muddy roadside. They rolled into the ditch. They smashed into the gravel. Green gold mixing with brown sludge.

Dave sat down on the road. He put his head in his hands.

"Twenty years," he said quietly. "They were perfect."

Vara stepped forward. She crouched beside Dave but did not touch

him. "I know," she said. "I saw you with them, in the years to come. You never stop caring for them. Even when they are no longer yours."

Dave looked up at her. He did not ask what she meant. Perhaps he already knew.

Ben walked slowly into the mud. The hospital wristband dangled from his wrist. He bent down and picked up a perfect, unbroken avocado. It was dark skinned, rough, and heavy.

He walked back to Officer Tane. He held it out.

"Eat it, Tane," Ben said.

"I can't, Ben. It's non-compliant waste now."

"Eat it," Ben said, his voice trembling slightly. "It's probably worth three dollars here. Maybe eight in Auckland. In Tokyo? Fifteen. By the time it hits a restaurant in Ginza, it's forty dollars and someone is calling it artisanal."

Tane looked at the fruit. He did not take a bite.

Ben dropped the avocado. It landed in a puddle with a soft splash.

"That's the future of the North," Ben said quietly. "Rotting in the mud because the bridge is too weak to carry it."

He stood there, rain beginning to spot his suit. He thought about Sarah's voicemail. *Burnout*. As if he were the one who was broken. As if the problem were his inability to cope, rather than a system that had made coping the only available strategy.

Lisa was waiting in Karori. He reached for the phone, then stopped. He did not know what he was going to say.

He was starting to understand.

Xylos stared at the pile of rotting fruit. His visor pulsed a warning red.

"Ben," the Martian said. "The maths does not resolve. If the land is rich, but the people are poor, and the Council is broke, who is keeping the difference? Where is the capital?"

Ben looked south, towards the city they could not see. He turned the hospital wristband around his wrist, feeling the plastic edge against his skin.

"It's not in the fruit, Xylos. It's in the floorboards. We took the capital that should have built bridges, and we used it to bid up the

price of the houses we already built."

"You generate wealth by making shelter more expensive for your own offspring?"

"We call it the Wealth Effect," Ben said. "Everyone feels rich because their rotting bungalow earns more than they do."

Xylos turned back to the ship.

"A Hall of Mirrors," he said slowly. "Where everyone is rich because they are looking at their own reflection. And no one notices the floor is rotting."

Ben looked down at the mud on his shoes. The PDF on Sarah's desk. The seventeen reports in the Long-Term Insights folder. The bridge that had been temporary for four years and would be temporary for four more.

He climbed into the ship.

MARTIAN AUDIT LOG: ENTRY 006

Subject: The Severed Limb (Northland).

Status: Ischaemic (Critical Restricted Flow).

Observation: The Colony concentrates 80% of its capital in the Head (Auckland/Wellington) and expresses confusion as to why the Feet (Northland) cannot run.

The input is massive: minerals, water, soil, climate. The process is broken: the arteries are too small for the blood volume. The block is rational: the local administrators are incentivised to stop movement to prevent liability. The result is necrosis. The resources remain in the ground. The people remain in the mud.

Action Item: Audit the capital storage mechanism. Identify who benefits from the restricted flow.

Vara's Addendum: I saw a yacht in Kerikeri named Future Perfect. I saw Raj's caravan with a tarpaulin for a roof. They are fifteen kilometres apart. They are on different planets.

CHAPTER 7

The villa in the mist

LOCATION: Aerial (Hauraki Gulf) > Maungawhau (Mt Eden) > Grey Lynn.
LOCAL TIME: 1:47 PM (Friday).
LAND USE (URBAN): 0.8% of total.
HOUSE PRICES: Inexplicable.
MOOD: Reverent.

They had been airborne for twenty minutes when Xylos announced a change of course.

"We are not returning directly to Wellington," he said, adjusting the navigation console. "I wish to examine the primary population centre first."

Ben looked up from the viewport. He was still wearing the suit pants from Martinborough – the same ones he'd had on when he collapsed, now spotted with mud from Northland and thistle pricks from the paddock where it all began. The hospital wristband still circled his wrist. He looked like a man who had walked out of his life and kept walking.

The rental car was still in Kerikeri, presumably accruing fees on a government credit card that might already be cancelled. Ben found he didn't care.

"Auckland? Why?"

"The audit requires it." Xylos pulled up a holographic map of the North Island. The data overlay showed population density, capital flows, infrastructure networks.

Auckland glowed like a tumour – a concentrated mass of red and orange, pulsing with activity, while the rest of the island faded to pale green and grey.

"Half of all new migrants settle here," Xylos said. "Forty percent of national GDP is generated here. The average dwelling costs eight times the median income."

"Eight point oh six," Ben corrected automatically. Then: "Sorry. Habit."

"And yet the region you call Northland – with superior climate, abundant water, strategic minerals – cannot retain its population or capital." Xylos traced the thin line of State Highway 1 with one long finger. "The wealth flows south along this capillary and accumulates here. I wish to understand why."

Vara spoke from the rear cabin. She had been quiet since they left the mud and the avocados behind.

"The retirees in Kerikeri," she said. "They came from somewhere. They earned their gold elsewhere before they brought it north to rest.

Where did they earn it?"

"Here," Ben said. "Auckland. Wellington. They sold businesses, cashed out of property, took their redundancy packages. Then they drove north looking for sunshine and cheaper land."

"So the capital that should build Northland's roads," Vara said, "was extracted from Northland's workers, concentrated in the cities, and then returned as retirement spending that employs no one and builds nothing."

"That's... one way of putting it."

"It is the only way of putting it." Xylos banked the ship east, toward the Hauraki Gulf. "We will examine the accumulation point before we visit the rule-makers. I wish to see what the money bought."

As the ship crossed the coastline, Xylos's console flickered with incoming data. He had developed a habit of scanning Earth's information streams – news feeds, market updates, emergency broadcasts. He found it useful for understanding the priorities of the species.

"Ben," he said, his voice sharpening. "I am detecting a significant threat event."

Ben sat up. "What kind of threat?"

"Geopolitical. The northern hemisphere powers have entered a critical escalation phase. Risk assessment agencies are using phrases like 'unprecedented' and 'existential'." Xylos paused. "I would expect widespread panic. Preparation for survival. Instead, I am reading the leading local analysis."

He projected the headline onto the cockpit window:

SAFE HAVEN? WHY A NORTHERN HEMISPHERE CONFLICT COULD BE BULLISH FOR REMUERA

Below it, a property analyst was quoted: "Frankly, if you're looking at global instability, Auckland is the new Switzerland. A three-bedroom villa in Grey Lynn is basically a bunker with better coffee."

Ben stared at the headline. He waited for the punchline. There was no punchline.

"Ben," Xylos said, "your media is calculating the yield on a weatherboard bungalow in the event of human extinction. This indicates a suicidal prioritisation of asset values over biological survival."

"We don't worry about the bomb, Xylos. We worry about the mortgage. Radiation is abstract. Interest rates are real."

The *Logos-7* dropped through the cloud layer. Auckland emerged below – a sprawl of terracotta roofs and grey motorways, spread across an isthmus between two harbours. From above, it looked less like a city than a rash, something that had spread horizontally across the landscape rather than growing upward.

"You have expanded outward for kilometres," Xylos observed, "rather than building vertically. This is the geometry of fear. You are afraid of your own density."

Then the navigation computer screamed.

WARNING: PROTECTED AIRSPACE DETECTED.
GEOMETRIC EXCLUSION ZONES ACTIVE.

Xylos's hands flew to the controls. The ship banked hard, narrowly avoiding an invisible barrier.

"What is this?" he demanded. "There are cones – invisible cones – piercing the sky above the city. They extend from the volcanic summits to the sea. My sensors cannot identify their purpose."

He ran a spectral analysis. The cones were legally defined but physically empty. No structures. No signals. No aircraft. Just geometry.

"Vara," Xylos called. "Come see this. I believe we have discovered a religious site."

Vara drifted forward. "What am I looking at?"

"Sacred exclusion zones. The indigenous population has carved invisible temples into the sky. We cannot fly through them. I assume they are protecting a deity."

Ben leaned over to look at the display. He recognised the shapes immediately.

"Those aren't temples, Xylos. They're viewshafts."

"Viewshafts?"

"We legally protect the ability to see certain volcanic cones from certain points in the city. If you build anything that interrupts the sightline, you get prosecuted."

Xylos processed this. "So the cones are protecting... a view?"

"Yes."

"Of a grass hill?"

"Yes."

"From a specific observation point?"

"Yes. Usually a spot on a motorway."

"And can citizens stop at this observation point to appreciate the protected view?"

"No. Stopping is illegal. It's a motorway."

Xylos was silent for a long moment. His visor flickered through several colours before settling on a pale, confused blue.

"Ben. You have legally protected the ability to see a grass hill from a location where looking at it is prohibited." He ran another scan. "And the cone itself is empty. There is nothing inside it. You are not protecting a structure. You are protecting absence."

"We call it amenity value."

"You have made emptiness sacred."

The ship descended carefully, threading between the invisible geometries. Xylos refused to violate the protected air. It seemed disrespectful, somehow, even if the religion made no sense.

They landed in the mist on the summit of Maungawhau – Mount Eden – the ship settling onto the grass beside the crater with a soft hiss. A jogger in expensive activewear glanced at them, raised her phone for a photo, then kept running. It was Auckland. She had better things to do.

They found a taxi on the road below the summit. The driver glanced at Xylos in the rear-view mirror – seven feet of grey alien folded into the back seat – and said nothing. He had been driving in

Auckland for fifteen years. He had seen stranger fares.

"Grey Lynn," Ben said. "Williamson Avenue."

The villa was on a street lined with pohutukawa trees and European cars. It was a category Ben knew well: the 1910 Workers' Cottage, originally built for families who could not afford anything better, now sold for prices that would make a European banker weep.

The house itself was small. The weatherboards were soft with rot. The windows were single-glazed, misted with condensation that never quite cleared. A strategic arrangement of pot plants concealed the worst of the piling damage.

The smell hit them as they entered: fresh coffee and something chemical, the signature scent of Open Home staging.

"Welcome, welcome!"

The agent materialised from the kitchen. Her name was Davina. She wore a blazer the colour of money and earrings that looked like tiny property listings. Her smile was bright, practised, and utterly immune to architectural reality.

"You must be the buyers from overseas," she said, extending a hand to Xylos. "I can always tell. That look of absolute bewilderment? Very common in returning Kiwis."

"I am not from overseas," Xylos said. "I am from Mars."

Davina's smile did not flicker. "Oh, lovely! We're getting a lot of interest from non-traditional markets. The exchange rate is very favourable. Now, let me show you the bones of this place."

She led them through the narrow hallway, gesturing at walls that buckled slightly in the middle.

"Original kauri throughout. You can't get this anymore. It's heritage."

Xylos activated his Incentive Visor and scanned the structure.

Structure Value: -$52,000 (Demolition cost, asbestos remediation).
Land Value: $3,200,000.
Thermal Efficiency: Equivalent to a canvas tent.
Borer Activity: Significant. Load-bearing timbers compromised.

He widened the scan to include the surrounding city.

National Land Use (Urban): 0.8% of total land mass.
Population Density: Among lowest in OECD.
House Price to Income Ratio: Among highest in OECD.

"Vara," Xylos said quietly. "This nation uses less than one percent of its land for cities. It has abundant space. Yet the soil beneath this rotting structure costs more per square metre than equivalent land in Tokyo, London, or Singapore."

"Is the land enchanted?" Vara asked.

"It is zoned. Which appears to be more powerful than enchantment."

"Davina," Xylos said, turning back to the agent, "my sensors indicate this building is failing. The piles are subsiding. The roof leaks. The timber is being consumed by insects. Why would anyone pay three million dollars for a structure with negative value?"

"It's the land, darling," Davina said, as if explaining gravity to a child. "And the character. You can't build character. You can only inherit it."

"But you could demolish this structure and build something functional."

Davina's smile tightened almost imperceptibly. "Well, that's where it gets complicated, isn't it? This is a pre-1990 build. That's the golden era."

Ben stepped forward. He had been silent since they entered, watching the ritual unfold.

"After 1990," he said, "we encouraged new building methods. Mediterranean-style plaster. Monolithic cladding. No eaves. The buildings looked modern."

He paused.

"They also rotted from the inside. Tens of thousands of them. Black mould behind the walls. Families getting sick. The courts ruled that councils were jointly liable. They've paid out billions since."

"So you improved the standards?" Xylos asked.

"We terrified the regulators. Planners watched colleagues lose their houses in litigation. Now no one will approve anything they can't defend in court." Ben gestured at the sagging walls around them. "And the only thing you can defend is what we built a hundred years ago. Before the experiment."

Xylos processed this. "So your innovation failed, and your response was to prohibit innovation."

"We call it the precautionary principle."

"You have made the past compulsory."

In the corner of the lounge, a young couple stood close together, speaking in low voices. The man – Liam, according to the name tag on his lanyard – was holding a folder stuffed with bank documents. The woman beside him, Sarah, looked exhausted. She had attended too many of these rituals. She had watched too many doors close.

Across the room, an older man in a good suit was examining the fireplace with professional detachment. He had a spreadsheet open on his phone. He looked bored.

Ben recognised the dynamic immediately. Two kinds of buyers. Two different games.

Then it happened.

At precisely 2:00 PM, every phone in the room buzzed simultaneously.

The sound was small – just a vibration, a notification – but the effect was immediate. Davina froze mid-sentence. The man in the suit looked up. Liam's hand tightened on his folder.

The Official Cash Rate announcement.

Ben watched them all check their screens at exactly the same moment, their faces illuminated by the blue glow. It was a religious moment, he realised. A congregation receiving word from the oracle.

The man in the suit smiled. He put his phone away and returned to examining the fireplace.

Liam did not smile. His face went pale. He turned to Sarah and said, very quietly: "The test rate moved. We're out."

Sarah's hand found his. She didn't cry. She was too tired to cry. They had been here before.

Davina saw Liam's face. In a single fluid motion, she pivoted away from the young couple and toward the man in the suit.

"Now, Barry," she said brightly, "shall we talk numbers? I think there's real opportunity here, given the market signals."

The couple was erased. Not cruelly – Davina was not cruel. She was efficient. The market had spoken. Liam and Sarah were no longer relevant to the transaction. They had been priced out in real-time, while standing in the room, holding their useless pre-approval letter.

They walked to the door. Vara watched them go.

She raised the Temporal Scope.

The air shimmered. The couple blurred, aged, reformed. Vara was looking at them in 2045.

They were in their late forties. They were standing outside another villa, in another suburb, on another Sunday afternoon. The houses around them had changed – newer paint, higher fences – but Liam and Sarah had not changed.

They wore the same careful clothes. They carried the same folder, now worn soft at the edges.

They were still renting. They were still attending Open Homes. They had stopped talking about "potential" years ago. Now they just walked through the houses silently, touching the walls, imagining lives they would never live.

In the vision, Sarah turned to Liam and said something Vara could not hear. Liam nodded. He took her hand. They walked to their car – a sensible hatchback, older now but still running – and drove away.

They would be back next Sunday. And the Sunday after that.

Vara lowered the Scope. Her eyes were wet.

"It is a sorting, Ben." Her voice broke, just slightly. "You sort them at twenty-five. Safe or cold. And then you tell them the sorting was fair because everyone had a chance."

They found Gavin in a cafe three blocks from the Open Home. He was sitting alone at a corner table, nursing a flat white that had gone cold, staring at a stack of consent applications that looked like they had been stared at many times before.

Ben had met him once, at a select committee hearing in 2022. Gavin had been the only witness who told the truth about why nothing got built. The politicians had thanked him for his "frank perspective" and moved on.

"Gavin."

The planner looked up. His eyes were red-rimmed. He had the hollow look of a man who had stopped sleeping properly sometime around 2018.

"Ben. From the Ministry." A pause. "You're with aliens."

"Long story."

Gavin considered this. Then he shrugged – the shrug of a man for whom aliens were not significantly stranger than the planning tribunal he had attended last week.

"Sit down," he said. "I assume you want to know why we can't build anything."

Xylos sat. Vara stood near the window, watching the street, still processing what she had seen through the Scope.

"I have a proposal," Xylos said. "I can construct a residential tower. Carbon-negative materials. Forty units. Thermally efficient. I can have it operational within three weeks."

Gavin let out a single syllable that passed for a laugh.

"No, you can't."

"The technology is–"

"The technology isn't the problem." Gavin pulled a napkin from the dispenser and produced a pen from his jacket. "Every time someone moves to Auckland, Wellington gets the tax revenue and my council gets the infrastructure bill. Rates don't cover it. They don't come close. The books only balance if I keep people out."

"So the incentive," Xylos said slowly, "is to prevent growth."

"That's the fiscal trap. But the real one is worse." Gavin looked down at the napkin.

"After the leaky building crisis, a judge ruled that councils were jointly liable for defective construction. We've paid out billions. I've watched colleagues lose everything."

A man I trained with – good planner, careful – approved a

building in 2004. Interesting design. New materials. In 2015, the cladding failed. The Council paid out two million in settlements.

He drew a line on the napkin. It was not a diagram. It was just a line.

My colleague was scapegoated. Named in the press. Hauled before a disciplinary panel. He kept his house – the law protects us from personal liability – but he lost everything else. His reputation. His registration. His marriage, eventually. No one would hire him. The Council got its pound of flesh and moved on.

He tapped the napkin. "So now I don't approve anything I can't defend. And you know what's defensible? A weatherboard villa. Identical to the one next door. Built in 1910. If it's survived a hundred and fifteen years, no lawyer can touch me."

"The only safe building," Vara said from the window, "is the one already built."

"Exactly. And my ratepayers prefer it that way. They own houses. They vote. Your theoretical future residents do neither." He shrugged. "I'm not a villain, Xylos. I serve the people who exist, not the people who might."

Xylos's visor had shifted to a deep amber. He was running the logic, checking for errors, finding none.

"You have designed a system," he said, "where the rational choice for every participant is to prevent the system from working."

"Welcome to local government."

Silence settled over the table. Gavin picked up his cold coffee, looked at it, put it down again.

"The tragedy is, we know all this," he said. "Everyone in local government knows. We've written reports. Proposed revenue-sharing models. Liability reforms."

He smiled without warmth.

"They're in a drawer somewhere in Wellington, gathering dust next to every other warning that was accurate and ignored. We know how to fix it. We're just not allowed to."

Xylos thought of the woman in Ben's Ministry – the Senior Analyst surrounded by stacks of paper, writing predictions no one

would read. The pattern repeated. Knowledge existed. Will did not.

"The barrier is not information," Xylos said.

"No," Gavin agreed. "The information has never been the barrier."

They walked back toward Maungawhau as the afternoon light began to soften. The mist had lifted, and the crater was visible now – a perfect green bowl, ancient and indifferent to the city that had clawed its way up the slopes.

Ben's phone buzzed. He pulled it from his pocket.

HOMES.CO.NZ VALUATION UPDATE
Your property: 47 Doyle Street, Karori
Estimated value: $1,425,000 (+$25,000 this month)

He stared at the number. His hands were shaking slightly.

Twenty-five thousand dollars. In one month. For owning something.

Dr Kahu came to mind first, working double shifts, preparing to leave for Brisbane. Then Raj in his caravan, holding a textbook for a profession he was not permitted to practice. Liam and Sarah, walking out of the Open Home into a future that had just narrowed again.

But the guilt that settled on him wasn't about the house. He had bought the house in 2015 because that's what you did, what his parents did, what everyone did. The house wasn't the sin.

The sin was the work.

He had spent ten years writing papers that justified this. Not the house prices themselves – no one at the Ministry openly celebrated unaffordable housing – but the system that produced them.

The "community consultation" frameworks that he'd called essential to good planning, knowing they were veto mechanisms for incumbents. The "character" protections he'd praised as heritage preservation, knowing they were density restrictions dressed in nostalgia. The "balanced approach to development" he'd recommended in briefing after briefing, knowing the balance always tipped toward those who already owned and against those who did not.

He had known what he was doing. Not in a dramatic, villainous way – he hadn't cackled over spreadsheets or schemed in dark rooms. He had simply written what was expected, filed what was requested, told Ministers what they wanted to hear.

He had been professional, moderate, the consummate team player.

And every morning, he had driven Sophie and Jack to St Mark's, where the buildings were warm and the classes were small and the future was something you planned for rather than competed against.

I wrote the justifications, he thought. *And then I paid to escape the consequences.*

He was still holding the Open Home brochure. Davina's face smiled up at him, professionally radiant. The slogan read: **SECURE YOUR FUTURE.**

The brochure in one hand, the hospital wristband on the other wrist.

Two pieces of paper. Two different kinds of receipt.

He folded the brochure carefully and put it in his pocket.

His phone buzzed again. **LISA (4 missed calls).**

No messages from the Ministry. No calls from Kevin.

That was almost worse. Kevin didn't chase. Kevin didn't argue. He just waited – patient, smiling, inevitable – until you exhausted yourself. And then he was there with a "support plan" and a gentle suggestion that perhaps you needed some time to "recalibrate."

Ben's thumb hovered over Lisa's name. He had promised. He pressed the button.

It rang once. Twice. She picked up.

"Ben?" Her voice was tight. Controlled. The voice of someone who had been waiting too long.

"Lisa, I–"

He stopped. The words wouldn't come. How do you explain it? How do you compress three days of collapsing certainties into a phone call from the slopes of a volcano while two aliens wait beside a spaceship?

"Ben, where are you? Sophie keeps asking. I don't know what to tell her."

"I'm..." He looked at the crater, at the city below, at the ship gleaming in the afternoon light. "I'm in Auckland. I'm coming home. There's something I need to do first."

"What could possibly be more important than–"

"I know." His voice cracked. "I know. I'm sorry. I'll explain everything. I just need... I need to understand something first. Something about the work. About what I was doing all those years."

Silence on the line. He could hear her breathing.

"Lisa, the papers I wrote. The late nights. The missed dinners. I thought they mattered. I thought I was..." He trailed off.

"Ben." Her voice softened, just slightly. "Just come home."

"I will. Tomorrow. I promise."

He hung up before she could respond. His hand was trembling.

Vara was watching him with her large, quiet eyes. "You found some words."

"Not enough of them." He pocketed the phone. "But it's a start."

The ship rose silently from the summit.

Below them, Auckland spread across the isthmus – a city of viewshafts and waiting lists, of character overlays and crumbling villas, of consultation processes and people sleeping in cars.

The volcanic cones stood like sentinels, their sacred emptiness legally protected, their sightlines preserved for motorists who could not stop to look.

Vara watched the city shrink until it was just a smudge on the edge of an island at the edge of the world.

"Where now, Ben?" she asked.

Ben thought about Gavin's drawer. About all the reports that said the right things and disappeared. About ten years of his own work, filed and forgotten, praised and ignored.

"Wellington," he said. "I need to find out who I was writing those papers for."

The ship banked south. The clouds closed beneath them.

MARTIAN AUDIT LOG: ENTRY 007

Subject: The Asset Class (Housing & Planning).

Status: Theological.

Observation: The colony has developed a belief system around shelter that defies economic logic.

The Sacred Geometry: They have carved invisible cones into the sky to protect views of grass hills from observation points where observation is prohibited. The cones contain nothing. They are protecting absence.

The Scarcity Illusion: They use 0.8% of their land mass for urban development – among the lowest in the developed world – yet have among the highest housing costs. The scarcity is manufactured, not geological.

The Temporal Prohibition: Following a failed experiment with building materials (1990-2004), they have mandated the replication of structures from 1910. Innovation is forbidden. The past is compulsory.

The Fiscal Paradox: Local government is financially punished for population growth. Revenue flows to central government; costs remain local. The rational choice for any council is to prevent new residents.

The Liability Trap: Officers who approve novel designs risk personal ruin if the buildings fail. Officers who approve replicas of existing buildings face no such risk. Safety lies in repetition.

The Political Lock: Property owners vote. Future residents do not. Democratic accountability optimises for the present at the expense of the future.

The Extinction Premium: When faced with news of potential nuclear war, their media calculated the effect on property values. They would rather be incinerated with equity than survive without it.

Xylos's Conclusion: They have confused the container for the contents. A house is a machine for living. They have forgotten what the machine is for.

Vara's Addendum: I saw Liam and Sarah today.

They were young and hopeful. They were holding a piece of paper that said they were permitted to try.

Then a number moved on a screen – a decision made in a building they will never enter, by people they will never meet – and they were erased. Not violently. Not cruelly. Just efficiently. The calculation updated and they fell below the threshold.

I looked at them in 2045. They are still trying. Still walking through other people's houses on Sunday afternoons, touching walls they will never own.

Ben says it is a market. Xylos says it is a system.

I say it is a sorting.

They sort the children at twenty-five – those who will be warm, those who will be cold – and then they tell them the sorting was fair because everyone stood in the same queue.

The retirees in Kerikeri are not villains. Barry in his good suit is not a villain. Davina, pivoting toward the money, is not a villain. Gavin, saying no to save his budget and his career, is not a villain.

The villain is the architecture. The rules that make obstruction rational. The incentives that reward exclusion. The system that allows good people to participate in harm without feeling the weight of what they do.

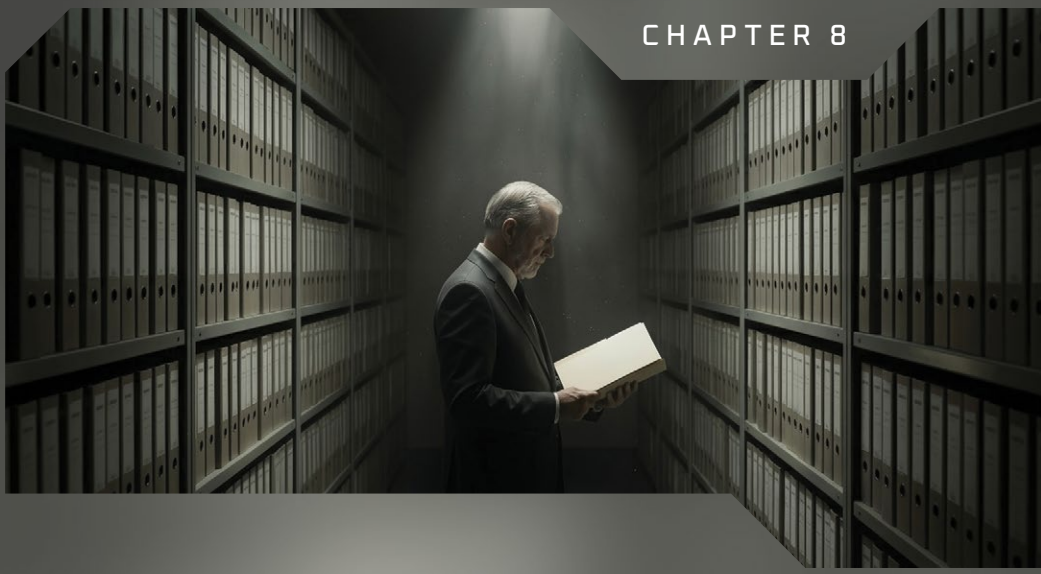
Ben felt the weight today. I watched it settle on him.

He called his wife. He could not find the words. But he tried. That is something.

He is carrying two receipts now. One for breaking down. One for helping to build the thing that broke him.

I do not know which one will be heavier when he reaches Wellington.

CHAPTER 8



The cabinet of silver

LOCATION: The Treasury, 1 The Terrace, Wellington.
LOCAL TIME: 09:14 AM (Saturday).
STRUCTURAL DEFICIT: 1.3% (official). 2.6% (realistic). Widening.
MOOD: Arithmetic.

The invasion of Wellington did not arrive by saucer. It arrived in a Toyota Corolla, stuck in traffic on the urban motorway.

Ben sat in the driver's seat, gripping the wheel. He looked awful. He had not changed his suit since Tuesday. The fabric was wrinkled, smelling of sheep lanolin and ozone. He had not shaved.

On his left wrist, the plastic hospital bracelet from Wellington Regional was still snipped shut, a badge of his breakdown he had not bothered to cut off.

They had flown back from Auckland in the ship before dawn, drifting down the east coast in silence. Somewhere over Kaikōura, Ben had asked them to stop, and he had stood at the viewport for an hour, watching the moonlit mountains. In the morning, Xylos had dropped him near his car, still parked where he had left it days ago near the hospital, and Ben had driven to Treasury alone, needing the time to think.

He had not gone home. He could not face Lisa yet.

He thought about those hours in the ship, hovering above the South Island in the moonlight. The mountains. The coast. The small towns scattered along the highway like beads on a string.

It had always struck him as the better New Zealand, the South Island. Not the craziness of Auckland traffic and house prices. Not the craziness of the Wellington bureaucracy, either. Just gorgeous landscapes, friendly and honest people, separated from national politics by a body of water that took three and a half hours to cross by ferry.

If only because for some inexplicable reason the South Island ferry port was in Picton, which was about the worst place to have it, making the journey much longer than had it been, say, closer to Christchurch or indeed Kaikōura. But hey, maybe that was the point. Maybe the reason was to put that little bit more distance between the islands and keep the South Island unspoilt by the craziness on the other side of the Cook Strait.

He had thought about Sophie and Jack.

They were getting a good education at St Mark's, the best he could buy them, at a cost that made him wince every term. They

would do well. They would have options.

And that was the problem. They would have options.

Dr Kahu was packing for Brisbane. The young engineers he had met at conferences talked about "getting experience overseas" in a way that everyone understood meant not coming back. The steady, quiet bleed of talent showed up in the departure statistics every year.

Sophie was seven. Jack was nine. In fifteen years, they would be graduates. Bright, capable, educated. And they would look at the housing market, at the salaries, at the distance from everywhere, and they would do the maths.

The same maths that Dr Kahu had done. The same maths that every ambitious young New Zealander eventually did.

Unless something changed, he was not raising children for New Zealand. He was raising them for Australia. For London. For Singapore. He was paying fifty thousand dollars a year to prepare them to leave.

Ben had thought that as he hovered over Kaikōura and drifted to sleep.

Now it was morning, and the phone was buzzing on the dashboard. Lisa. The ship had returned to its position above the Bucket Fountain, drawing occasional Instagram posts and no concern.

He stared at it. The "Ignore" button felt heavier than the steering wheel. He knew he was breaking the promise. He knew the cost was compounding, like interest on a high-risk loan. But he could not go back. Not until he had the receipt.

He thought of the last thing she had said to him, Wednesday morning, before he left for Martinborough. She had been standing at the kitchen bench, coffee in hand, and she had looked at him with an expression he did not have a name for. Not angry. Not sad. Just worn through.

"You know what I miss, Ben? I miss when you used to be angry about things. Now you just write reports about them."

He had not known what to say, and still did not.

"We are stationary," Xylos observed from the back seat.

"We're merging," Ben lied.

Ahead of them, a forest of orange cones stretched toward the horizon. The motorway was being repaired. Again. Somewhere north of the city, Transmission Gully, the billion-dollar highway that was supposed to fix Wellington's transport problems, was also under repair, its surface failing within years of opening, its drainage inadequate, its design flaws multiplying. A ribbon of competence, it turned out, was only as good as the contractor who built it.

"That highway was new," Xylos observed, his visor still tracking north. "My records indicate completion within the last five years. Why is it already failing?"

"Because we optimised for the ribbon-cutting, not the maintenance schedule."

"That is irrational."

"That is politics."

Ben looked at the skyline rising out of the harbour grey. The Beehive looked like a radiator cap on an overheating engine. Somewhere in there was the machine that had eaten his life.

The Treasury building smelled of filtered air, scorched coffee and high-stakes arithmetic. Even on a Saturday, the lights were blazing. The fiscal update, the one the papers were calling a "significant deterioration in the outlook," did not take weekends off.

Ben swiped his pass at the turnstiles. It still worked.

"Ben! Team!"

The voice came from the coffee cart. Of course.

Kevin was standing there, holding a KeepCup and beaming. He looked pristine, as if he had been shrink-wrapped in a Koru Lounge. He was flanked by a young woman typing furiously on a phone and a man holding a boom mic.

"Incredible timing," Kevin said, stepping in front of the turnstiles. "We heard you were coming in hot from the provinces. The Minister is loving the 'Field Audit' energy. We're workshopping a tagline: Martian Eyes, Kiwi Hearts."

Xylos touched his visor. A soft red light scanned Kevin.

"Senior," Xylos whispered. "This entity reads as pure friction.

100% heat, zero motion."

"I know, Xylos," Ben said. He did not stop walking.

"Ben, wait." Kevin stepped into his path. "We need to frame the narrative before the numbers come out. You look tired, mate. Rough. Let's get you a flat white and a debrief."

Ben walked straight into the boom mic, knocking it aside with his shoulder.

"Put the camera away, Kevin. We aren't here for content."

"Move, Kevin."

The voice did not come from Ben. It came from the secure elevator.

A man stepped out. He was in his seventies, wearing a suit cut sharp enough to draw blood. Forty years of being right about things that no one wanted to hear had settled into the lines of his face.

"Alastair," Ben breathed.

Alastair McLeod. He had been a Treasury economist during the crisis of 1984: not the reforms themselves, but the catastrophe that made them necessary. He had watched Muldoon kick the can down the road from 1978 onward, seen the foreign exchange reserves drain away, been in the room when the credit rating agencies called to deliver the bad news.

Then he had helped design the fixes, watched them work, watched the next generation forget why they had been necessary, and finally retired to a trout stream in Taupō when it became clear that the forgetting was complete.

"You're blocking the fire exit, Kevin," Alastair said. "And the flow of information, which is worse."

Kevin's smile flickered. "Alastair. I was just explaining the cultural parameters to–"

"I heard you. You were explaining that context is important." Alastair's voice was pleasant, almost warm. "Context is what people invoke when they don't want to discuss the actual numbers. The numbers are not contextual, Kevin. The numbers are the context. Everything else is decoration."

He turned to Ben. "You look like you've been sleeping in your car.

Good. Comfortable men don't change anything. Bring your aliens."

"Alastair," Kevin tried again. "The Minister has asked me to ensure that any engagement with external parties is properly–"

"Kevin." Alastair stopped walking. He turned back with the patience of a man who had been having this conversation since Kevin was in primary school. "In 1983, Standard & Poor's downgraded us. Moody's followed in 1984. Each time, there was a Kevin explaining that the external parties didn't understand our unique situation. The agencies didn't care about the situation. They cared about whether we could pay our debts."

He smiled. It was not a warm smile.

"The current trajectory will produce another call from the rating agencies within eighteen months. When that happens, your job will be to explain why no one saw it coming. My job is to make sure someone did."

He walked away. Kevin stood frozen, his smile still fixed in place, processing.

Ben followed Alastair through the security doors.

Alastair did not walk; he marched. Four decades in buildings where dawdling was a form of defeat had given him a stride that treated corridors as obstacles.

"I thought you were fishing," Ben said, jogging to keep up.

"I was. Then the Secretary called. Asked if I would consult on the fiscal response." Alastair's voice carried a dry edge. "Apparently the current team needed someone who remembered what happened last time the numbers turned red."

They burst onto the main analyst floor. It was not the quiet library Ben remembered. It was a boiler room. Screens on every pillar were flashing red lines that plunged downward like crashing planes.

Vara stopped at the edge of the floor. Her eyes moved across the screens, the frantic analysts, the discarded coffee cups. "This is fear," she said. "I can feel it in the room. Something has changed."

"What's changed is that the numbers stopped being theoretical," Alastair said. "Welcome to the Engine Room. We're past wellbeing frameworks and outcome dashboards. We're back to fundamentals.

Can we pay the bills? Will anyone lend us money? How long until the markets notice we're bleeding?"

He pointed to a glass-walled meeting room where a team was aggressively removing sticky notes from a whiteboard.

"That used to be the 'Strategic Narratives' unit. I reassigned them this morning. We need people who can model debt trajectories, not people who can write vision statements."

Through the glass, Ben saw Cassandra. Alastair had borrowed her from the Ministry – the analyst who had been trying to warn people for a decade, finally given an audience. She was hunched over a triple-monitor setup, surrounded by empty coffee cups.

She looked up, locked eyes with Ben, gave a grim soldier's nod and went back to the war.

They passed a secure corridor with a heavy door marked PRODUCTIVITY LAB. The room inside was dark. Through the reinforced glass, Ben could see rows of server racks, their status lights blinking slowly. Dust had begun to settle on the casings.

Xylos pressed his hand against the glass. His visor flickered rapidly. "This is a Tier-1 Compute Cluster. Significant processing capacity. Why is it idle?"

"We ran a pilot three years ago," Alastair said. "An AI model trained on the Resource Management Act and forty years of case law. We fed it a consent application for a wind farm. A human takes eighteen months. The machine took four minutes. Legally perfect."

"Turn it on," Xylos said immediately.

"We can't. The other ministries objected. They said an algorithm couldn't understand the 'cultural dimensions' of a resource consent. They demanded a review of the 'ethical implications of automated decision-making.'"

"And the review?"

"Still ongoing. The server has been idle for two years."

Xylos turned to Vara. His voice was flat. "They built a tool that works. They are not permitted to use it. The inefficiency is not accidental. It is enforced."

"This is what we have observed everywhere," Vara said. "The

system generates friction as a product, not a byproduct."

Alastair stopped at a desk near the window. A briefing paper had been left open, covered in handwritten annotations. He pulled a pen from his pocket and drew something in the margin: two small circles, connected by a short line.

Ben looked at the drawing. "What does that mean?"

"An old Treasury notation. John Chetwin invented it in the eighties. Very efficient."

"Which is?"

Alastair capped his pen. "Use your imagination."

Xylos scanned the document. "The section he has marked claims the fiscal position is 'broadly sustainable' given 'reasonable assumptions about productivity growth.' The assumptions required would be unprecedented in the post-war historical record."

"Hence the notation," Alastair said. He pulled out a second pen, this one with green ink, and made a longer annotation in the margin.

"And the green?"

"That's for when something can be improved rather than simply discarded. Roger Kerr taught me that. He used to annotate everything in green, explaining exactly why a section wasn't up to standard. He wanted people to get better, not just feel bad."

"You still believe in improvement," Vara observed. "After forty years of being ignored."

"I believe in standards. Improvement is what happens when you maintain them long enough."

They reached a corner office with a view of the harbour. Inside, Alastair had assembled what looked like a crisis command centre: whiteboards covered in flowcharts, stacks of historical documents, a laptop connected to three monitors.

He pulled up a diagram on one of the screens. It showed a house, beautifully rendered but visibly rotting. The roof was leaking. The windows were cracked. Water stains ran down the interior walls.

"This is the State," Alastair said. "The fiscal State. Look at the condition."

"Deferred maintenance," Xylos said immediately. "The structure

is failing."

"Exactly. Now look inside."

He zoomed in. Inside the rotting house, in a glass cabinet, sat a collection of gleaming silver objects. Plates. Candlesticks. A magnificent tea service.

"The State-Owned Enterprises. Air New Zealand. The power companies. KiwiBank. Billions of dollars in assets, sitting in the cabinet while the roof falls in."

"Why do they not sell the silver to fix the roof?" Vara asked.

"Because they are a silver-owning family. That's their identity. 'We don't sell assets.' Never mind that running an airline is not a core function of government. The silver must stay in the cabinet."

He pulled up another chart. The Reserve Bank's balance sheet over time.

"And then there's this. During the pandemic, one institution injected fifty billion dollars of cash into the banking system. No parliamentary vote. No Cabinet decision. Just a man with a keyboard." He paused. "And then, with a straight face, denied it was driving up house prices."

"Fifty billion without democratic oversight," Xylos said. His visor had shifted to amber. "Yet a minor regulatory change requires years of consultation."

"The inconsistency is the tell. It reveals what we actually care about versus what we pretend to care about."

The deepest room in the building did not have windows. It smelled of dust and old toner and paper that had been waiting too long to be read.

Rows of filing cabinets stretched into the gloom. This was the memory of the state. The place where ideas went to die.

"I call it the Archive," Alastair said. "Every serious idea this country has had in the last fifty years is in here somewhere. Filed, indexed and forgotten."

Ben went to the drawer marked L. His hands were shaking. He pulled it open.

Long-Term Insights Briefings.

There it was. His paper. *Fiscal Sustainability in an Ageing Population*. He had written it three years ago. He had poured everything into it: the analysis, the late nights, the missed dinners.

He had believed that if he just explained the maths clearly enough, the Minister would have to act.

The file was crisp. Pristine. The binding was uncracked.

Ben ran his thumb along the spine. He had written this instead of reading bedtime stories.

"They didn't even open it," Ben whispered.

Alastair moved beside him. His voice, when he spoke, was not unkind.

"Wrong."

Ben turned.

"They opened it, Ben. The Minister read it. The Cabinet committee discussed it. Forty-five minutes of substantive engagement."

"Then why? Why did they do nothing?"

Alastair pulled the file gently from Ben's hands and opened it. The pages were clean, but there were faint traces of handling: a coffee ring on the cover page, a dog-ear on the executive summary.

"Because you solved the wrong problem. You gave them the analysis. The analysis was correct. But you assumed that correct analysis produces action."

He set the file on top of the cabinet.

"It doesn't."

Xylos stepped forward. "We have observed this pattern at every level. Councils that cannot approve development. Ministers who cannot implement reform. Officials who cannot give frank advice. The rational choice for each individual produces collective failure."

"Public choice theory," Alastair said. "Buchanan and Tullock. The economics of political decision-making." He glanced at Xylos and Vara. "Two Americans who pointed out that politicians are humans. They respond to incentives like everyone else. They're not philosopher-kings. They're rational actors who want to keep their jobs."

"This required theorising?" Xylos asked.

"It required proving. Buchanan got a Nobel Prize for it. Tullock missed out – too abrasive, rubbed the committee the wrong way." Alastair smiled thinly. "There's a lesson in that, if you want one. The man who explained why institutions resist uncomfortable truths was himself too uncomfortable to receive the highest institutional honour."

He looked at Ben. "You know this."

"I know it," Ben said quietly.

"Then you know what it means. Your paper told the Minister that the pension system would become unsustainable by 2040. The Minister faces re-election in 2026. What is the net present value of a crisis fourteen years away, discounted by the probability that he will still be in office when it arrives?"

"Approximately zero."

"So he did the rational thing. He noted your paper with thanks, praised your analysis, and moved on to problems with a net present value greater than zero."

Vara had been silent, watching the exchange. Now she spoke. "Then why do you keep trying? Forty years. If you understand the trap, why haven't you given up?"

Alastair smiled. It was not a bitter smile. It was the smile of a man who had made peace with a difficult truth.

"Because the trap has an escape clause. Crisis."

He walked them deeper into the Archive, past rows of cabinets labelled with years and topic codes. He stopped at a section marked 1984.

"Robert Muldoon understood the fiscal position was deteriorating. He had access to the same analysis we did. But the political cost of adjustment was higher than the political cost of delay."

He pulled out a thick file. The cover was stamped CONFIDENTIAL – CABINET ECONOMIC COMMITTEE.

"From 1978 onward, we sent him paper after paper warning that the trajectory was unsustainable. Fixed exchange rate. Large deficits. Growing foreign-currency debt."

He ran his finger along the spine of the file.

"By 1984, the government debt had risen from less than five percent of GDP to nearly thirty percent. The interest payments alone were eating eleven percent of tax revenue."

"What did he do?" Vara asked.

"He gave tax cuts in 1982. Despite the deficit. Because he needed the trade unions to accept the wage and price freeze." Alastair shrugged. "Rational. Short-term. Fatal."

He put the file back.

"By 1984, the markets had lost confidence. Government bond tenders went unfilled at eleven percent. The Reserve Bank couldn't defend the currency because the foreign exchange reserves were exhausted. Standard & Poor's had already downgraded us in 1983. Moody's followed in 1984."

He paused.

"When the new government arrived, they discovered what the market actually wanted. Sixteen percent. That's what it took to clear the next bond tender. Sixteen percent interest on government debt."

"The crisis revealed the true cost," Xylos said.

"It revealed that inaction had costs too. In normal times, action has visible costs and inaction has invisible costs. The political system optimises for the visible. But when the bond market demands sixteen percent to hold your debt, the costs of inaction become very visible indeed. And the calculus flips."

Alastair turned to face them.

"So no, I don't wait for the crisis. I prepare for it. I make sure the alternatives are ready. When the window opens, I want someone to be able to move."

He led them to a small table at the back of the Archive. On it sat a laptop, closed, and a stack of folders that looked newer than the rest.

"I've spent five years building options for the next crisis. Analysis completed. Implementation pathways mapped. Ready to go the moment the political calculus shifts."

"Why isn't this in the system?" Ben asked.

"Because it's politically unacceptable. Every option involves

costs that some constituency will oppose. Pension adjustments. Tax reforms. Spending cuts. No Minister will touch this in normal times."

He gestured at the laptop.

"So it sits here. Like a fire extinguisher. Useless until the fire starts, and then suddenly indispensable."

He reached into his jacket and pulled out a small USB drive.

"This is the summary. Five years of work." He pressed it into Ben's hand. "I've been looking for a vector for a long time, Ben. Someone who could carry this into a room where it might actually be heard. And here you are, quite by accident, with two aliens who have the Prime Minister's attention."

"You want us to deliver your message."

"I want you to deliver a message. Whether it's mine or yours doesn't matter. What matters is that someone is ready when the window opens."

They walked back toward the lobby. Kevin was not by the coffee cart anymore. He was standing near the main entrance with two people Ben did not recognise: a woman in a severe suit and a bland man who looked like he had been trained to be forgettable.

The bland man stepped forward. He produced an ID wallet.

"Mr Miller. SIS. We'd like to speak with your guests."

Ben stared at him. "Now? They've been here for six days. They landed in a paddock in Martinborough. They were fined by the council. Newstalk ZB interviewed them on Wednesday."

"We became aware of the situation through channels."

"A talkback radio station broke the story of first contact with an alien civilisation, and it took the intelligence services six days to notice?"

"The matter required inter-agency consultation."

"You were monitoring a situation that was literally on the six o'clock news," Ben said. "While they were stuck in traffic. While they were visiting schools. While they were watching the avocados rot."

Xylos leaned forward, his visor glowing. "I am detecting elevated

embarrassment indicators in this entity. His infrared signature suggests significant discomfort."

Kevin was watching the exchange with barely concealed delight. Ben could already see him drafting the press release: *Rogue Bureaucrat Obstructs National Security Investigation.*

"The aliens will be at Cabinet on Monday," Ben said. "You can interview them after they've presented their findings."

He walked past them, toward the revolving doors.

"Take care of yourself, Ben," Kevin called after him. His voice was warm, solicitous, perfectly pitched. "We're all worried about you."

Ben did not turn around. He pushed through the doors and out into the screaming Wellington wind.

His phone buzzed. A calendar notification.

MEETING INVITATION
Wellbeing Check-In – Staff Support Discussion
Monday 8:00 AM
Attendees: HR (Sarah), Communications, Deputy Chief Executive
Location: Meeting Room 4.12

Ben stared at the screen. Cabinet was at ten. They were going to sideline him two hours before he could present. Wrap him in concern. Suggest he take some leave. Frame it as care.

Kevin had not threatened him. Kevin had scheduled him.

Through the glass doors, Kevin's eyes met his. He gave a small, cold nod.

This is not over.

Ben got into the Corolla. He threw the drive onto the dashboard, right next to his silent phone.

Call your wife.

He should. Alastair was right. Whatever was about to happen, Lisa deserved to hear it from him first.

You know what I miss, Ben? I miss when you used to be angry about things.

After. He would explain after. When he could tell her it was

worth it. Or when he could tell her he had failed.

He started the engine.

"To the Beehive," Ben said. "Monday."

MARTIAN AUDIT LOG: ENTRY 008

Subject: The Treasury (Central Fiscal Authority)

Status: Contested

Observation: The colony's central fiscal institution exists in a state of internal contradiction.

The Archive: A repository containing fifty years of correct analysis, applauded and shelved. The files are pristine because reading them creates obligations. The system generates warnings while ensuring those warnings cannot compel action.

The Crisis Mechanism: The elder analyst (Alastair) has identified the only reliable driver of reform: catastrophic failure. The political system's discount rate is too high for preventive action. Only when the costs of inaction become immediate do decision-makers find the calculus favourable for change.

The Historical Parallel: The colony experienced a similar dynamic in 1984. Years of deferred adjustment culminated in exhausted foreign exchange reserves and credit rating downgrades. Standard & Poor's acted first in 1983; Moody's followed in 1984. The bond market demanded sixteen percent to hold government debt. The reforms that followed were implemented because they became necessary, not because anyone wanted them.

The Rotting Mansion: The State is depicted as a decaying house containing valuable silver (the State-Owned Enterprises). The family refuses to sell the silver to repair the roof because they identify as "silver owners." Identity trumps function.

The Monetary Paradox: During a recent crisis, fifty billion dollars was injected into the banking system without parliamentary vote.

The institution responsible then denied the connection to rising asset prices. Significant interventions require no consultation. Minor regulatory changes require years of it.

The Productivity Paradox: A functional AI system capable of processing resource consents in four minutes has been idle for two years pending an ethics review. The inefficiency is not a bug. It is enforced.

The Notation System: Two forms observed. Linked circles indicating analytical failure (Chetwin's shorthand). Green ink indicating potential for improvement (Kerr's methodology). The distinction matters. One is dismissal. The other is teaching.

The Surveillance Lag: The intelligence services required six days and "inter-agency consultation" to acknowledge first contact with an alien civilisation. Talkback radio was faster.

The Scheduling Trap: Kevin has deployed a "Wellbeing Check-In" for Monday 8:00 AM, two hours before Cabinet. The subject (Ben) will be absorbed by concern before he can deliver his message. The weapons here are soft.

Vara's Addendum: Alastair has been giving the same advice for forty years. He has watched governments of different compositions ignore identical warnings. He has seen colleagues leave, compromise, or simply grow tired. And yet he continues.

I think I understand why. He is not speaking to the current government. He is speaking to the future. He is placing analysis in the Archive so that when the crisis comes, when someone finally needs an answer, the answer will be there.

He is writing for a reader who does not yet exist.

The green ink matters. It is not enough to mark what is wrong. You must show how it could be right. That is the difference between criticism and teaching.

The Cabinet meeting is Monday. The USB drive is in Ben's pocket. The trajectory lines are converging. Kevin has scheduled a trap for 8:00 AM.

The policy or the country – one of them will break first.

CHAPTER 9

The presentation

LOCATION: Karori > Wellington CBD > The Beehive.
LOCAL TIME: 6:30 AM onwards (Monday).
ADVISORY PANELS ESTABLISHED: 1 (and counting).
MOOD: Unanimous.

The *Logos-7* had touched down on Parliament's front lawn at 5:47 AM, crushing a bed of prize-winning roses that the groundskeeper would later describe as "a small price for first contact, I suppose."

Ben woke in his own bed for the first time in five days.

He lay still for a moment, listening to the familiar sounds of the house. The tick of the hot water cylinder. The creak of floorboards overhead. The distant hum of a neighbour's heat pump, working against the Wellington chill.

Sunday had passed in the ship, hovering above the harbour. Alastair had sent the Delta File materials overnight – graphs, projections, the compounding cost of inaction rendered in colours that shifted from amber to red to black as the years scrolled forward. Ben sat at a console that Xylos had configured for human use, arranging the presentation, cutting it down, cutting it down again.

"Ministers have the attention span of a startled bird," Ben explained. "If we lose them in the first three minutes, we've lost them forever."

"On Mars," Xylos observed, "leaders who cannot concentrate are removed from office and repurposed as agricultural sensors."

"Here, they get re-elected."

Vara had spent the morning reviewing her Temporal Scope recordings – Wayne, Elena, Theo, Dr Kahu, the ghost couple at the Open Home. She was assembling something. Not data. A story.

"They will not hear the numbers," she said. "Numbers are abstract. They need to see the faces."

By evening, they had something. Whether it was enough, Ben could not say.

He had texted Lisa on Saturday night: *Working on something. Home tomorrow. I promise.* She had replied with a single full stop. He had not called since.

The ship had dropped him in Karori just before midnight, descending silently into the dark backyard while the neighbours slept. Lisa had been asleep, or pretending to be. He had stood in the doorway of their bedroom, watching the shape of her under the duvet, trying to find words that would explain what had happened.

A note on the kitchen bench, in her handwriting: *We need to talk. Tonight. No excuses.* But "tonight" had been Sunday, and he had missed it.

He had slept on the couch. He could not face the conversation he did not know how to have.

The hospital wristband was still on his wrist. He looked at it in the grey morning light. He went to the drawer where the scissors were kept. He held the blades against the plastic.

Then he stopped. He put the scissors down.

He showered. He shaved. He put on a clean suit: the charcoal one, the good one, the one he wore when he had to present to Ministers. The transformation was deliberate. He was not dressing for survival anymore. He was dressing for battle.

Lisa was in the kitchen when he came down. She was holding a coffee cup with both hands, not drinking from it.

"You're going in," she said.

"I have to."

"I know."

She looked at him. There were questions in her face that she was not asking. Where had he been. What had he seen. Why he had not called.

"I just want to know," she said quietly, "if you're coming back."

Ben did not answer immediately. He did not know what "coming back" meant anymore. Back to the mortgage and the school fees and the papers that became coasters? Back to the man who wrote the briefings and kept his head down and called it strategy?

"I'll call you," he said. "After."

"After what?"

"After I know."

She nodded. She did not push. That was worse, somehow. The patience of someone who had stopped expecting things.

He left without kissing her. He was already in the car before he realised he had not said goodbye to Sophie and Jack. They were still asleep. He would see them tonight. He would explain.

Everything was "after."

Ben was driving into the city when his phone buzzed.

CALENDAR REMINDER: Wellbeing Check-In – Staff Support Discussion. 8:00 AM. Meeting Room 4.12.

He glanced at the notification, then back at the road ahead.

The Ministry building was coming up on his left. The concrete block of uninspired 1970s architecture where he had spent ten years writing papers and attending meetings and learning to say nothing in words that sounded like something. He could pull into the car park. Walk to Room 4.12. Sit across from Sarah and the Deputy CE and whoever else Kevin had assembled. Let them express concern. Let them offer support. Let them wrap him in process until he was too tangled to move.

He drove past.

His phone buzzed at 8:05. Sarah. He ignored it.

8:10. Kevin. He ignored it.

8:15. Unknown number – the Deputy CE's office. He ignored it.

He parked near the Beehive. The wind hit him as he stepped out of the car, the southerly cutting through his suit jacket with surgical precision.

His phone was still buzzing. He turned it off.

There was no going back to beige now.

The Cabinet anteroom smelled of furniture polish and anxiety.

Ben arrived at 9:15. Xylos and Vara were already there, standing near the window like art installations that had wandered in from a gallery. Their ship had landed on the Parliament lawn at dawn, crushing a patch of prize-winning roses. A security cordon had been established, but the tourists were already taking selfies.

It had taken six days of "inter-agency consultation" for the SIS to acknowledge first contact with an alien civilisation. It had taken another twelve hours for them to approve a parking space. But the Prime Minister had personally authorised the Martians' presence in Cabinet. Visiting dignitaries, the Cabinet Manual said, may occasionally be invited to meet members of Cabinet in the Cabinet

room. Apparently "visiting dignitaries" could stretch to cover extraterrestrials, if the PM was sufficiently curious.

Alastair was not present, but he had sent materials. A tablet lay on the side table, loaded with the Delta File presentation. Ben picked it up. The screen showed bullet points, graphs, a single page of recommendations. Formatted for ministerial attention spans.

Twenty years of failure, condensed into something a politician can absorb between agenda items.

Staffers moved through the anteroom with folders and laptops. Ministers drifted in, glancing at their phones before pocketing them. Ben caught glimpses of the headlines as they scrolled:

MARTIAN AUDIT: WHAT IT MEANS FOR YOUR MORTGAGE

ALIENS WANT TO TEAR DOWN VILLA VALUES

PROPERTY COUNCIL WARNS OF 'RUSHED REFORM'

There had been no press conference. But Kevin had been busy all weekend. The well was poisoned before anyone had spoken a word.

Near the window, Tasha was setting up an easel with a poster titled "Community Communications Toolkit: Messaging the Martian Moment." She saw Ben and gave him a thumbs-up. The toolkit, he noticed, contained no information about the audit's actual findings. It was entirely about "managing the narrative."

The SIS officer from Saturday was there too, standing near the security desk with his forgettable face and his patient eyes. He nodded at Ben. Still waiting. Still following protocols.

Kevin arrived at 9:45. He was immaculate, as always. Beige cardigan, checked shirt, the face of a man who had never lost a battle he did not fight.

He saw Ben. His expression did not change.

"Ben. You missed your meeting this morning."

"I had somewhere to be."

"People are worried about you. Sarah filed an incident report."

"I'm sure she did."

Kevin's eyes dropped to the hospital wristband peeking out from Ben's cuff. He did not comment on it. He just filed it away – another

data point for the narrative he was building.

"The Minister is keen to keep this focused," Kevin said. "Thirty minutes. High level. We don't want to get bogged down in the weeds."

"The weeds are where the problems live, Kevin."

Kevin smiled. The same smile. The one that agreed with everything and conceded nothing.

"Let's save the passion for the room, shall we? I'll be in the anteroom if the Minister needs me."

He stepped back as the Ministers began filing through the double doors.

Vara drifted over to Ben. She studied his face.

"You are vibrating, Ben. Your stress indicators are elevated."

"I'm fine."

"That is not true. But I understand why you say it." She paused. "You have a phrase, yes? 'She'll be right.' Even when she will not be."

"That'll do," Ben said.

The Cabinet room occupied the top floor of the Beehive, directly above the Prime Minister's office. It was smaller than television made it look.

Twenty Ministers sat around the oval table, the Prime Minister at the head, the most junior minister at the far end. The only officials present were the Secretary of the Cabinet and her deputy, seated against the wall with notepads. No devices were visible. Whatever headlines the Ministers had been reading in the anteroom, they had left their phones outside.

Ben, Xylos and Vara were shown to the presentation end of the room. A screen had been set up behind them. The lights were bright and slightly too warm.

The Minister for Social Investment opened. He was the Minister responsible for coordinating cross-agency responses, which apparently now included coordinating responses to interplanetary visitors. He looked tired the way Ministers always looked tired – briefed on problems he was not allowed to solve.

"Right. We've got thirty minutes for this. The Martian Audit."

He glanced at Ben. "I understand you've been... coordinating."

"Yes, Minister."

"And these are the auditors."

Xylos stepped forward. "I am Senior Auditor Xylos. This is Junior Auditor Vara. We have completed a preliminary assessment of your societal operating system."

"Right. Well." The Minister glanced at the clock. "Let's hear it then."

A Minister halfway down the table leaned toward her neighbour and whispered something. Ben caught the words "lunch" and "twelve-thirty." She had three portfolios and a select committee hearing at two. The audit of New Zealand's entire societal operating system would need to fit between appointments.

Xylos activated his visor. The screen behind them flickered to life.

"The diagnosis is structural," he began. "Your system has developed what I would classify as a comprehensive incentive inversion. The entities paid to solve problems are financially dependent on the problems continuing."

A flowchart appeared on the screen. Arrows pointed in directions that contradicted themselves.

"Consider your local government model. When population increases, central government receives the tax revenue. Local government bears the infrastructure cost. The rational response is to prevent population growth. Your councils are rewarded for obstruction."

He tapped the visor. Another diagram.

"Your liability framework compounds this. Following your building failures of the 1990s, councils face crippling financial exposure if they approve construction that later fails. They face no consequence for rejecting it. The rational response is to approve nothing new. Your planning system is rewarded for stasis."

Another tap. A graph showing two lines diverging over time.

"Your political system completes the trap. Property owners vote. Future residents do not. Elected officials optimise for the preferences of existing stakeholders. The rational response is to protect incumbents at the expense of entrants."

He looked around the room.

"You have designed a system where every participant, acting rationally, produces collective failure. This is not corruption. It is architecture."

The screen went blank.

"I will now yield to my colleague for the human impact assessment."

Vara stepped forward. She did not activate any technology. She simply spoke.

"I have a device," she said. "It allows me to see forward in time. To observe the trajectories of individual lives."

She paused.

"I have watched your people, Ministers. Not the aggregates. The faces."

The room was still.

"I watched Wayne. He is a compliance officer in the Wairarapa. He has spent forty years enforcing regulations he knows are counterproductive. In 2047, he will retire. He will not be able to afford to live in the region he spent his career protecting. His superannuation will cover rent, food and one streaming service. He does not know this yet."

She took a breath.

"I watched Theo. He is ten years old. He sits in a cardboard box in his classroom because the adults removed the walls and he cannot concentrate in the noise. In twelve years, he will sign a contract he cannot read. He will not know what 'indemnification' means. He will smile and sign anyway, because he has learned to smile when he does not understand."

Her voice remained even, but the blue glow behind her eyes had faded to grey.

"I watched Dr Kahu. She saved Ben's life on Thursday night. She flies to Australia tomorrow. Not because she wants to leave. But because she wants to buy a house and not die of exhaustion. You spent a million dollars training her, and you are gifting her to your rival faction for free."

She looked at the Prime Minister.

"I saw what you call the Ghost New Zealand. A probability wave that collapsed into the wrong outcome. A young couple in their own backyard, planning a vegetable garden. Not afraid of the landlord. Not calculating whether they can afford to stay."

She spread her hands.

"The blueprints were in your archive. The ghost was possible. You chose not to build it."

The room was silent.

Ben stepped forward. He was holding Alastair's tablet.

"Ministers, I have worked in this system for ten years."

His voice was steady. He had rehearsed this in the car, and then again in the anteroom, and then he had stopped rehearsing because the words kept changing.

"I wrote papers. I filed recommendations. I told myself I was making a difference. I told myself that if I just explained the problem clearly enough, someone would act."

He pulled up the Delta File. The screen filled with a graph – two lines, one showing potential, one showing actual, the gap between them widening year by year.

"This is the Delta. The distance between what you knew and what you did. Every point on this graph is a warning that was read, discussed and filed. Every centimetre of that gap is a decision to do nothing."

He looked at the Minister for Social Investment.

"Three years ago, I wrote a paper on fiscal sustainability. It was discussed in Cabinet for forty-five minutes. The discussion was substantive. You noted my recommendations. You thanked me for my excellent work."

He paused.

"The file is still in the archive. The spine is uncracked. You noted it and moved on."

He put down the tablet.

"I have two children. Sophie is seven. Jack is nine. They go to a good school – a very good school. It costs me fifty thousand dollars

a year. They will have options."

His voice cracked slightly. He let it.

"And unless something changes, they will use those options to leave. Because that is the rational choice. That is what every capable young New Zealander eventually does. That is what Dr Kahu is doing tomorrow. That is what the engineers do, and the teachers, and the nurses."

He looked around the table.

"I am tired of writing papers that become coasters. I am tired of building the machine that is breaking this country. These recommendations are not new. You have seen them before. The question is whether you will file them again."

He stopped. He had nothing else to say.

The Prime Minister looked at the Minister for Social Investment. The Minister looked toward the door, where Kevin was waiting in the anteroom. A staffer slipped out and returned a moment later with Kevin in tow.

Kevin stood at the edge of the room, not presuming to approach the table.

"Thank you, Ben. Xylos. Vara." His voice was warm, appreciative, professionally moved. "This is extraordinary work. Genuinely. The depth of analysis, the integration of the human perspective – it is exactly the kind of bold thinking we need."

He paused. The room relaxed slightly. Kevin was going to fix this. Kevin always fixed things.

"But we have to be realistic about implementation. These recommendations touch on multiple portfolios, multiple agencies, multiple levels of government. We cannot just act unilaterally. That is not how good government works."

He gestured at the screen, at the gap between potential and actual.

"What I would propose – and I think this honours the spirit of the audit – is that we establish a Ministerial Advisory Panel on Long-Term Transformation. Cross-agency. Senior officials. Perhaps some external voices. Academics. Business leaders. Community representatives."

He smiled.

"The Panel would take these findings, contextualise them within our existing reform programme, and report back with implementation pathways. Say... eighteen months? In time for the 2027-28 budget cycle?"

A Minister at the far end of the table nodded. "That seems reasonable."

Another: "We would want to consult with the sector, of course."

Another: "And the Treaty implications. We would need to work through those properly."

Kevin acknowledged each contribution with a small nod. "Absolutely. All of that. This deserves the attention it demands."

He looked to the Prime Minister.

"I would suggest Cabinet note the Martian Audit findings with thanks, and direct officials to establish an advisory panel to develop implementation options for consideration in the 2027-28 budget cycle."

The Prime Minister looked around the table.

"All in favour?"

The motion passed unanimously.

The Ministers filed out. Several shook Xylos's hand. One asked Vara for a selfie. The Prime Minister clasped Ben's shoulder and suggested he "take some time" after this.

Kevin approached as the room emptied.

"That was brave, Ben. Really. The personal stuff – your kids – that took courage."

Ben said nothing.

"I have asked Sarah to hold off on the incident report. Given the circumstances. We can revisit your situation once things settle down."

He put a hand on Ben's arm. The touch was warm. Collegial.

"Get some rest. You have earned it."

He walked away.

Ben stood in the empty Cabinet room.

The screen still showed the Delta File. The Delta, widening. He

stared at it. The hum of the air conditioning. The distant sound of voices in the corridor. The particular silence of a room where something important had just failed to happen.

His paper was in the archive, pristine and unread. Cassandra was still at her desk, typing warnings. Forty years of good ideas, filed and indexed and forgotten.

They had agreed with everything. They had thanked him for his excellent work.

And nothing would change.

Xylos and Vara were standing by the door, waiting.

"They agreed with everything," Xylos said. His voice was flat, confused. "Why are they doing nothing?"

"They do not want to be fixed, Senior," Vara said. "They want to feel like they are being fixed."

Ben nodded. He had known this would happen. He had known since Saturday, probably. Since he saw his paper pristine in the archive. Since he watched the motion pass without opposition.

You could not fight Kevin because Kevin did not fight. He absorbed. He agreed. He thanked you for your excellent work.

And then nothing changed.

The post-Cabinet press conference was held at four o'clock in the Beehive theatrette, as it always was on Monday afternoons.

Ben watched from the back of the room. Xylos and Vara stood beside him, observing. The Prime Minister took the podium. Behind him, the New Zealand flag hung limply in the air-conditioned stillness.

"Good afternoon. Cabinet met today and considered a range of matters. We've made good progress on several fronts."

He glanced at his notes.

"We received a presentation from our Martian visitors regarding their audit of New Zealand's regulatory and economic settings. Cabinet has agreed to establish a Ministerial Advisory Panel to consider their findings and report back with implementation options. This is exactly the kind of fresh thinking we need as we build a more productive economy."

He looked up. "Questions?"

A forest of hands. The Prime Minister pointed to the press gallery veteran in the front row.

"Prime Minister, when did you first become aware that extraterrestrial beings had landed in the Wairarapa?"

"I was briefed by officials last week. Obviously this is an unusual situation, but we've worked constructively with our Martian friends to ensure their visit has been productive."

"Were you surprised that it took six days for your intelligence agencies to notify you?"

"I have confidence in our security services. They followed appropriate protocols."

Another hand. A younger reporter, keen.

"Prime Minister, did you have a chance to introduce the Martians to any New Zealand cuisine? Pavlova, perhaps?"

The Prime Minister smiled. This was safer ground.

"I understand they were very impressed with the flat whites. Vara mentioned that our coffee culture was one of the more advanced aspects of our civilisation. I'll take that as a win."

Laughter rippled through the room.

"But seriously," the reporter pressed, "did they try a pie? A proper bakery pie?"

"I believe they had some exposure to our pie culture in the regions, yes."

More laughter. The Prime Minister was relaxing now. The hard questions had not come.

Xylos leaned toward Ben. "They have asked two questions about encased meat products and zero questions about the structural collapse of their society. Is this normal?"

"Completely," Ben whispered.

A hand from the economics correspondent.

"Prime Minister, the Martian presentation apparently included recommendations on housing and planning reform. The Property Council has expressed concern about rushed changes. Can you assure property owners that house values won't be affected?"

"Look, we're taking a measured approach. The Advisory Panel will consider all perspectives, including those of existing homeowners. We're not going to do anything that undermines confidence in the housing market."

"So house prices are safe?"

"We're focused on improving housing supply while maintaining stability. That's our commitment."

Xylos leaned toward Ben. "He has answered the question without answering it. This is a skill?"

"It's the only skill," Ben murmured.

One more question. The political editor, going for the jugular.

"Prime Minister, your critics might say that establishing an advisory panel is just a way of burying these recommendations. What do you say to that?"

The Prime Minister's face hardened slightly.

"I reject that characterisation completely. We are taking the Martian findings seriously. That's why we're establishing a proper process to consider them. Good government takes time. We're not going to rush into changes that could have unintended consequences."

He gathered his notes.

"Thank you everyone. That's all for today."

The press pack began to disperse. The Prime Minister disappeared through a side door. Within minutes, the theatrette was empty.

Vara looked at Ben. "That was the accountability mechanism?"

"That was it."

"No one asked about Wayne. Or Theo. Or the ghost couple."

"No."

"They asked about pies."

"Yes."

Vara was quiet.

"This is how ideas die, Ben. Not in the Cabinet room. Here. Where the questions are about pastry."

At six o'clock, Ben sat in the Beehive cafeteria with a cold coffee, watching the wall-mounted television. His phone was still off in his pocket. He had been there since the press conference ended. Two

hours of vending machine hum and fluorescent light and staff from other offices eating early dinners, talking about their weekends, oblivious to what had just failed to happen upstairs.

Xylos and Vara had retreated to the ship after the press conference. They needed to recharge, they said. But Ben suspected they also needed to process. Even Martians, apparently, could be disappointed.

He had stayed. He needed to see how it would be framed.

The news opened with sport.

"Good evening. The All Blacks have named their squad for the end-of-year tour, with a surprise call-up for young halfback Te Ariki Pene. We'll have full reaction from former coaches and expert analysis of what this means for the World Cup."

Three minutes on the squad announcement. Extended footage of training runs. A former player explaining that the new halfback had "X-factor" and would "bring a different energy." A graphics package showing the tour schedule.

Ben waited.

"And still to come: the Deputy Prime Minister faces questions over a luxury fishing trip. Did taxpayers foot the bill? Our political editor has the latest."

Cut to advertisements. A bank promising to help you "achieve your property dreams." An SUV driving through pristine New Zealand wilderness. A retirement village where the elderly played golf in perpetual sunshine.

Ben's coffee was completely cold now.

The news returned.

"Now to politics. The Deputy Prime Minister has defended a fishing charter in the Hauraki Gulf, saying he was on official business meeting with recreational fishing stakeholders. But questions remain about who paid for the five-hundred-dollar lunch."

Footage of the Deputy Prime Minister walking past cameras without comment. An opposition MP calling it "a bad look." A brief clip of the charter boat. Analysis from the political editor about whether this would hurt the government's polling.

Two and a half minutes.

Then, finally:

"And in an unusual development at Parliament today, the Prime Minister hosted two visitors from Mars."

Footage of the ship on Parliament lawn. Tourists taking photos. A shot of Xylos and Vara entering the Beehive, towering and silver and profoundly out of place.

"The extraterrestrial auditors, who have been touring New Zealand for the past week, presented their findings to Cabinet this morning. Their report is understood to include recommendations on housing, planning and local government reform."

Cut to a property analyst in a television studio. He looked concerned.

"Look, we don't know the details yet, but any talk of planning reform tends to spook the market. If we're talking about significant changes to density rules or zoning, that could have real implications for property values. Homeowners will be watching this closely."

The anchor nodded gravely.

"And what might this mean for interest rates?"

"Well, if we see a correction in property values, that feeds through to household wealth, consumer confidence, spending. The Reserve Bank will be keeping a close eye on this. It could affect their thinking on the OCR."

"Something for homeowners to watch, certainly. The Prime Minister says a Ministerial Advisory Panel will consider the Martian recommendations and report back in eighteen months."

Cut back to the studio.

"Now to the weather. A southerly is on the way, with temperatures dropping sharply across the lower North Island…"

Ben turned away from the screen.

First contact with an alien civilisation. A comprehensive diagnosis of systemic failure. A roadmap for a different future.

Third item. After the rugby squad. After a fishing trip.

Ninety seconds of coverage, and most of that was about what it might do to house prices.

He thought about Vara's question in the theatrette. *This is how ideas die, Ben.*

She was right. They did not die in Cabinet, where at least the discussion had been substantive. They died here, in the filtering process, where the question was never "Is this true?" or "Is this important?" but only "Does this affect the mortgage?"

The news had moved on to a story about a dog that could skateboard.

Ben put down his coffee. He walked out of the Beehive into the Wellington wind.

The ship was still on Parliament lawn, surrounded by a cordon of security guards and a small crowd of tourists taking photos. It caught the grey light and held it, silver and impossible, a machine from a civilisation that had solved the problem of consensus.

As Ben approached, the hatch opened. Xylos descended the ramp, Vara behind him. They had been watching, perhaps. Waiting to see if he would come.

"Ben," Xylos said. "Come with us."

Ben stopped.

"Mars is cold. The atmosphere is thin. But the incentives are aligned. When we identify a problem, we solve it. We do not establish advisory panels."

Vara stepped closer. "You have seen what is possible here, Ben. You cannot unsee it. And you cannot change it. Not from inside."

Ben looked at the ship. He thought about Sophie and Jack. About Lisa, waiting in Karori, asking if he was coming back. About the archive full of papers that said the right things and disappeared.

He thought about Kevin, already drafting the terms of reference for a panel that would meet twice and dissolve.

"No."

Xylos tilted his head. "You choose to remain in a system that has rejected your recommendations?"

"I choose to stay and fight."

"It will be hard, Ben," Vara said. "The siege will be long."

"I know."

He looked at the Beehive. The circular building, layered like a hive, absorbing good ideas and producing committee minutes.

"But I am done writing papers that no one reads. I am done being managed. I am done gliding."

He turned back to Xylos.

"You asked me once what colour I was. Beige, you said. The colour of camouflage."

He reached up and gripped the hospital wristband. He pulled. The plastic snapped with a sharp sound. He let it fall to the pavement.

"I do not want to be beige anymore."

Vara studied him. Then she reached into her coat and produced a small device, no larger than a pebble, smooth and silver.

"Take this," she said, pressing it into his palm. "It is a beacon. If you need us, if something changes, hold it and think of the audit. We will know."

Ben looked at the device. It was warm, faintly humming.

"You think I'll change my mind?"

"No," Vara said. "I think you will need witnesses. When the siege turns, when the wall begins to crack, you will want someone to see it who understands what it cost."

The corners of her mouth moved in a way that was almost human.

"It is 'sweet as,' yes? That is the phrase?"

Ben nodded.

He watched them walk toward the ship. The ramp extended. Xylos climbed aboard without looking back.

Vara paused at the threshold. She turned.

"We cannot leave from here," she said. "The transit window requires specific coordinates. We must return to the landing site."

"The paddock," Ben said. "In the Wairarapa."

"Yes. We depart tomorrow, at sunset." She looked at him. "The beacon will work both ways, Ben. If you wish to say goodbye properly, I will call you."

"And if I do not come?"

"Then this is goodbye." She almost smiled. "But I calculate a 94% probability that you will come. You are stubborn. It is your best quality."

"What does Xylos calculate?"

"73%. He underestimates humans. It is his worst quality."

She turned and walked up the ramp.

"The siege, Ben," she called back. "It is not about winning. It is about not stopping."

The ramp closed. The ship rose silently, caught the light once more, and banked north toward the Tararuas.

Ben got in the Corolla. The seat was cold. The coffee from this morning was still in the cupholder, untouched.

His phone was off. He turned it on.

Seventeen missed calls. Twelve texts. Four voicemails.

One text from Lisa: "I saw the news. Call me."

He dialled.

She picked up on the first ring.

"Ben."

"I'm coming home."

A pause.

"Did it work?"

"No. They filed it."

Another pause. He could hear her breathing.

"So what now?"

Ben let the question sit. Sophie and Jack, asleep in Karori. The ghost couple in their own backyard. Everything they knew and everything they chose not to do about it, widening every year.

The beacon pulsed against his leg.

"Now I get angry about things again."

He started the engine.

MARTIAN AUDIT LOG: ENTRY 009

Subject: The Decision-Makers (Central Government)

Status: Functional (for absorption)

METRIC 1: THE UNANIMITY PARADOX
Definition: The probability that a controversial recommendation will be accepted in form and rejected in substance through unanimous agreement to further consultation.
Current Value: 100% (observed).
Note: A motion that passes unanimously is a motion that threatens no one. Recommendations that threaten no one change nothing.

METRIC 2: THE KEVIN CONSTANT (κ)
Definition: The rate at which urgent warnings are converted into advisory panels.
Formula: κ = (Severity of Warning) × (Political Cost of Action) / (Proximity to Election)
Current Value: Approaching infinity.

METRIC 3: THE IMPLEMENTATION HORIZON
Definition: The average time between a recommendation being "noted with thanks" and any action being taken.
Current Value: 2027-28 budget cycle (effectively: heat death of universe).
Note: The horizon recedes as you approach it. This is by design.

METRIC 4: THE ATTENTION RATIO
Definition: The proportion of media coverage devoted to substantive policy content versus asset price implications.
Observed Value: First contact with alien civilisation: 90 seconds. Of which, housing market implications: 45 seconds. Rugby squad announcement: 180 seconds. Fishing trip scandal: 150 seconds. Skateboarding dog: 60 seconds.
Interpretation: The information system does not filter for importance. It filters for anxiety. Property anxiety outranks existential opportunity. Entertainment outranks both.

METRIC 5: THE PAVLOVA INDEX
Definition: The probability that a press conference will prioritise trivial cultural questions over substantive policy interrogation.
Current Value: High.
Note: They asked about pies.

Vara's Addendum: They thanked us for our excellent work.

I have heard this phrase before. Ben heard it three years ago, when

they filed his paper. The analysts in the archive heard it when they filed theirs. The Productivity Commission heard it before they were dissolved.

"Thank you for your excellent work" is how this species says goodbye to ideas it does not want to raise.

I watched the evening news with Ben. Our audit was the third item. After the selection of athletes for a ball-carrying competition. After a politician's fish dinner.

The coverage asked what our recommendations would do to house prices. It did not ask what inaction would do to children.

This is how the filter works. Not through censorship. Through proportion. The information exists. It is simply smaller than the distractions around it. A signal lost in noise that the system generates on purpose.

Ben refused to come with us. I thought he was being irrational. Xylos calculated the probability of systemic change from within at 0.003%.

But I watched his face when he said no. He was not calculating. He was choosing.

I gave him a beacon. Xylos questioned the logic. Why leave a communication device with someone who has chosen to stay in a broken system?

Because sieges end, I told him. Sometimes with defeat. Sometimes with a door opening from inside.

Ben is going home to his wife. He is going to tell her he failed. And then he is going to keep fighting.

I do not understand humans. They are inefficient. They are sentimental. They choose pain when escape is offered.

But there is something in Ben that was not there when we landed. He called it anger. I think it might be hope.

The siege begins.

CHAPTER 10

The siege begins

LOCATION: Karori > Wellington CBD > The Ministry > Wairarapa.
LOCAL TIME: 6:30 AM onwards (Tuesday).
ADVISORY PANEL PROGRESS: 0%.
MOOD: Determined.

Ben woke on the couch.

Not because Lisa had exiled him there. He had come in late, past midnight, and she had been asleep, and he had not wanted to wake her with explanations he was still trying to find words for. So he had taken the blanket from the hall cupboard and stretched out on the sofa, staring at the ceiling until exhaustion pulled him under.

The beacon was on the coffee table beside him. He had put it there before sleep, not wanting it against his skin, not quite ready to think about what it meant. Now, in the grey morning light, he picked it up. It was warm. Faintly humming, like something alive.

He put it in his pocket.

The sounds of the house filtered through. The tick of the hot water cylinder. The creak of floorboards overhead. The distant clatter of dishes in the kitchen.

He sat up. His suit from yesterday was draped over the armchair. He was still wearing the shirt he had worn to Cabinet, wrinkled now and smelling faintly of stress.

Lisa appeared in the doorway.

She was already dressed for work, her hair pulled back, holding a cup of tea with both hands. She did not look angry. She looked tired in a way that went deeper than sleep.

"You said you would explain," she said.

"I know."

"You said it three times. You said it when you left for Martinborough. You said it when you texted from the hospital. You said it when you called from the Beehive."

"I know."

She did not move from the doorway. "So explain."

Ben looked at his hands. The hospital wristband was gone. He had snapped it off outside Parliament, let the pieces fall to the pavement. But he could still feel the ghost of it around his wrist.

"I watched a spaceship get fined for parking in a paddock," he said. "I watched a compliance officer issue an abatement notice to beings who had crossed forty million miles of space. And I realised that was the whole thing. The whole decade. The whole system. We

cannot tell the difference between a garden shed and first contact."

Lisa said nothing. She waited.

"I wrote a paper three years ago," Ben continued. "Fiscal sustainability. Eighteen pages. I was proud of it, Lisa. I thought it mattered. I thought if I just explained the problem clearly enough, someone would act." He winced at his own naivety. "They read it. They discussed it for forty-five minutes. They thanked me for my excellent work. And then they filed it. The spine was never cracked. My paper became a coaster for the Minister's coffee cup."

"You knew that," Lisa said quietly. "You must have known."

"I knew it and I pretended I did not know it. I told myself I was playing the long game. Building capital. Waiting for the right moment." He looked up at her. "The right moment was never going to come. I was just afraid."

Lisa crossed to the armchair and sat down across from him. She was still holding the tea, but she was not drinking it.

"You know what I missed?" she said. "I missed when you used to come home angry about something. When you actually cared enough to fight. The last few years, you just… reported on the defeat. Like you had already accepted it."

Ben nodded. It was true. He had felt it happening and done nothing to stop it. The slow calcification of resignation.

"So what are you going to do now?" Lisa asked. "Quit? Become a consultant? Write a book that no one reads?"

"I am going back in."

She blinked. "Back to the Ministry? After everything you just said?"

"But not to glide. Not anymore." He leaned forward. "Policy change is not a sprint, Lisa. It is a siege. And I am done waiting for someone else to start it."

Lisa looked at him for a long moment. The morning light caught the grey at her temples, the lines around her eyes. They had been married for fourteen years. She had watched him rise through the Ministry, watched him learn to speak in briefing-paper language, watched him become very good at saying nothing in words that sounded like something.

"You are going to lose your job," she said. "You know that, right?"

"Probably."

"And then what? We have a mortgage. We have school fees. We have two children who need–"

"I know." He reached out and took her hand. "I am not asking you to support me blindly. I am asking you to give me time. Let me try. And if it fails..." He trailed off.

"If it fails?"

"Then I will have failed doing something that mattered. Instead of succeeding at something that did not."

Lisa did not say she believed in him. She did not say it would be okay. She said: "Just keep me in the loop this time. Do not disappear into it."

"I will not."

She squeezed his hand once, then released it. She stood. "I have to go. Staff meeting at eight." At the doorway, she paused. "The children are getting ready. Sophie has been asking about the aliens."

Sophie appeared three minutes later, hair unbrushed, school bag dragging behind her.

"Dad. Are the aliens gone?"

"Yes. Well – they are leaving today."

"Were they real?"

"Yes."

She considered this with the gravity of a seven-year-old confronting the limits of the possible. "Why are they leaving?"

Ben paused. He thought about Cabinet. The unanimous motion. The advisory panel that would meet twice and dissolve.

"Because we were not ready to listen," he said.

Sophie nodded, as if this made perfect sense. Adults were always not ready for things. Then she frowned.

"Dad, if aliens came to fix things and we did not listen, does that mean we are the baddies?"

Ben opened his mouth. Closed it. Opened it again.

"We are not the baddies, sweetheart. We are just... very good at meetings."

Sophie looked unconvinced. She wandered toward the kitchen, muttering something about how meetings sounded like the baddies with extra steps.

Jack appeared next, nine years old and already late. "Dad, have you seen my maths book?"

"Try under the couch cushions."

Jack shot him a sceptical look but went to check. He found it wedged between the cushions, exactly where Ben had suggested. "How did you know?"

"Experience," Ben said. "Books migrate. It is a law of physics."

He watched his son disappear toward the kitchen. He thought about Theo, sitting in a cardboard box, trying to read about penguins. He thought about Vara's vision: Theo at twenty-two, signing a contract he could not understand, smiling because he had learned to smile when he did not understand.

Sophie and Jack would not end up like Theo. He had made sure of that. Fifty thousand dollars a year to make sure of that.

But that was the problem, was it not? He had bought his children a lifeboat while helping to sink the ship.

He showered. He shaved. He put on a clean suit.

The drive into the city was quiet. Ben kept the radio off. He needed the silence to think.

The beacon pulsed in his pocket. Twice, then three times in quick succession. He had not noticed it doing that before.

The Ministry building looked exactly as it always looked. Grey concrete. Tinted windows. 1970s public sector architecture, designed to communicate permanence and inspire nothing.

Ben parked in his usual spot. The fluorescent lights still hummed at a frequency that caused low-grade migraines. The carpet still smelled of damp wool and institutional despair.

When he walked in, nobody applauded. Nobody booed. A colleague from the Infrastructure team – Henderson, who had once spent three months on a working group to determine the optimal font size for ministerial briefings – intercepted him near the lifts.

"Ben! Good to see you back. The cross-functional team wanted

me to pass on their appreciation for your stakeholder engagement outcomes."

"My what?"

"The aliens. Very impressive optics." Henderson lowered his voice. "Did they fill out visitor feedback forms? Facilities is asking. Apparently there is a KPI."

"I do not think they had time."

"Shame. We are behind on our external engagement metrics." Henderson wandered off, looking disappointed.

Sarah from HR intercepted him near the printer.

"Ben. We need to talk about your wellbeing check-in. You missed the meeting on Monday, and there is paperwork–"

"Later, Sarah."

"But the Deputy CE specifically asked me to–"

"Later." He kept walking. "I have work to do."

Kevin was waiting in Ben's office.

Of course he was. Kevin did not have a desk; he had a radius of influence. He was leaning against Ben's filing cabinet, looking healthy, rested and terrifyingly calm. He was holding a stress ball, squeezing it rhythmically.

"Benjamin," Kevin said. "Welcome back to the coal face."

"Kevin."

Ben walked around his desk and sat down. His chair squeaked. It was a familiar, painful sound.

"Remarkable time, was it not?" Kevin mused. "Aliens. Who would have thought? The Minister is very pleased with how you handled the optics. Very steady. Very... measured."

"They left a report, Kevin. Four thousand pages. They said the country is structurally insolvent."

"Oh, I know. I have read the executive summary. Or, well, the summary of the summary. We are commissioning a scoping study to determine the appropriate framework for engaging with the detailed findings." Kevin smiled. "Fascinating stuff. A bit harsh on the procurement protocols, I thought. They clearly do not understand the Treaty obligations regarding stationery supplies."

"They said we are burning human capital to keep house prices warm."

"Metaphors," Kevin waved a hand. "Aliens love metaphors. Look, Ben, here is the plan. We are setting up a Cross-Agency Steering Group to digest the Audit. We will break it down into workstreams. Health, Infrastructure, Education. Terms of reference by Christmas. Implementation framework by 2027. Actual implementation–" He made a vague gesture toward infinity.

"You are going to bury it," Ben said. It was not a question.

Kevin stopped squeezing the ball. He looked at Ben with genuine, paternal warmth.

"We are not burying it, Ben. We are processing it. That is what we do. We take the raw, jagged edges of reality and we sand them down until they are safe to handle. By the time we are finished, the Audit will be so thoroughly consulted, so comprehensively workshopped, so magnificently stakeholdered, that it will be completely indistinguishable from having never existed at all."

He pushed off the filing cabinet. He walked over and placed a piece of paper on Ben's desk.

"You are a hero, you know. In a quiet way. The Minister wants to recognise that. We need a Director for the new unit. 'Post-Terrestrial Policy Integration'. It is a Tier 2 role. Significant salary increase. Corner office. You would just need to... oversee the filing. Make sure the Steering Group has refreshments. Ensure the consultants feel consulted."

Ben looked at the paper. The offer was typed in the Ministry's standard font, stamped with the appropriate approvals, ready for his signature. The Golden Handcuffs, wrapped in a promotion.

The mortgage. The school fees. The certainty of the salary versus the uncertainty of resistance.

Sophie at the breakfast table, frowning, asking if they were the baddies.

Theo in the cardboard box. Dr Kahu, probably at the airport right now, boarding a flight to Brisbane. The Delta, alive and growing on a screen upstairs.

"No," Ben said.

The silence stretched. The air conditioning rattled.

"I beg your pardon?" Kevin said. His smile did not flicker, but his eyes went cold.

"I do not want the promotion," Ben said. "And I do not want to run the Steering Group."

"Ben, you are tired. You have been through a trauma. Take a week. Go to Fiji. Clear your head."

"I am staying here." Ben opened his laptop. "I am staying at this desk. And I am going to do my actual job. Assessing efficiency."

"Ben." Kevin's voice carried a warning now. "Do not be dramatic. There is no efficiency to assess. The system is the system."

"Then I am going to document it." Ben looked up at him. "Every time you block a decision, I am going to write it down. Every time we spend a million dollars on a consultant to tell us what we already know, I am going to log it. Every paper that gets filed instead of actioned, I am going to track it."

He leaned back in his chair.

"I am not going to Glide anymore, Kevin. I am going to be the grit."

Kevin stared at him. For a moment, Ben thought security would be called. But Kevin just sighed, shook his head, and set the stress ball down on Ben's desk.

"You will burn out in six months," Kevin said softly. "Nobody thanks the grit, Ben. The machine just grinds it down."

"Maybe," Ben said. "But you will hear the grinding."

Kevin walked to the door. He paused. "It is good to have you back, Ben. Really. We missed your minutes."

He left. Ben was alone.

He looked at the empty screen. The cursor blinked.

Then he opened a new email.

To: Rachel Taumaoe, Senior Political Correspondent

Subject: Background briefing – off the record?

He typed three sentences. He did not explain everything. He did not need to. Rachel had been covering the public sector for fifteen

years. She knew what "off the record" meant, and she knew what it meant when a Ministry lifer suddenly wanted to talk.

He hit send.

Then he stood and walked toward the glass-walled office at the far end of the floor. The one with the triple monitors and the stacks of paper. The one no one ever visited.

Cassandra looked up as he knocked. Surprise first, then suspicion. Then hope, which she tried to suppress and failed.

"Ben. What do you want?"

"How many Long-Term Insights Briefings have you written?"

She laughed. It was dry and hollow. "You are the first person to ask me that in three years."

"How many?"

"Forty-seven. Some of them are quite good." She gestured at a stack near the window. "That one predicted the infrastructure deficit to within two percent. The Minister said it was 'very helpful' and used it to prop open his door during a heatwave."

Ben stepped into her office. The stacks of reports surrounded him like a paper forest. Warning after warning, filed and forgotten, prophecies of collapse that had been thanked and buried.

"I am going to start making noise," he said. "If you want to help, I could use someone who knows where the bodies are buried."

Cassandra studied him. She had been in this office as long as anyone could remember, writing predictions that came true and were never acted upon. The Prophetess of Fiscal Doom. It was meant to be a joke.

"You know what happens to people who make noise," she said. "Marcus. The others."

"I know."

"Kevin will destroy you."

"Probably."

She was quiet for a long moment. Then she reached into her desk and pulled out a USB drive.

"Forty-seven briefings," she said. "Plus the source data. Plus the submissions that were edited out before they reached the Minister.

Plus the email chain where Kevin called my 2019 housing analysis 'unhelpfully accurate'." She held it out. "I have been waiting a long time for someone to ask."

Ben took it. The drive was light, but it felt heavy.

"Why did you keep writing?" he asked. "All those years. When no one was reading."

Cassandra turned back to her monitors. The graphs on the screen showed lines diverging, trajectories worsening, futures closing.

"Because one day," she said, "someone would open the vault. And I wanted there to be something inside."

He thought about Marcus, teaching English in Vietnam, who had chosen the other path. Marcus had seen the same things Ben was seeing now, and he had run – run to a country where the coffee was worse but the cognitive dissonance was easier to bear.

Ben understood the choice. He even envied it, a little.

But Marcus had stopped fighting. And Ben, for reasons he could not entirely explain, was not ready to stop.

Ben walked back to his desk. The promotion letter was still there, unsigned. He picked it up, folded it once, then again, and dropped it in the recycling bin. It landed on top of a draft stakeholder engagement framework that someone had printed single-sided.

His phone buzzed. Rachel had replied.

Lunch tomorrow. Astoria, 12:30. Come hungry. Bring documents.

He pocketed the phone. Then the beacon pulsed again – three times, urgent, a rhythm he had not felt before.

He pulled it out. It was warm in his hand, almost hot. The beacon, it turned out, was not just a tracker. It was a telephone.

A voice emerged – not from a speaker, but from somewhere inside his skull, quiet and clear.

"Ben." Vara's voice. "We are departing at sunset. There is a window. If you wish to say goodbye."

He looked at the clock. It was 2:15. Sunset was around 5:30.

He looked at his desk. The inbox. The unread emails. The system waiting to absorb him back into its rhythms.

He picked up his car keys.

The paddock looked different in the afternoon light.

When Ben had first seen it, eight days ago, it had been morning – grey and damp, the Tararuas hidden in cloud, Wayne's white ute parked by the fence line with its cargo of clipboards and disappointment. Now the hills were golden-green, the sky pale blue, and the only vehicle was his Corolla, parked at an angle that would probably earn a ticket if Wayne happened to drive past.

The *Logos-7* sat in the centre of the field, exactly where it had landed. The grass around it had recovered; New Zealand grass was resilient, even when crushed by impossible geometry from another world.

Ben climbed the fence. His good suit caught on a wire, tearing a small hole in the trousers. He did not care.

Xylos was standing at the base of the ramp, checking something on his datapad. He looked up as Ben approached.

"You are late," Xylos said. "We calculated a 73% probability that you would not come at all. Vara said 94% that you would. I owe her a cultural exchange."

"What does that mean?"

"I must watch one of your 'films'. She has selected something called *Hunt for the Wilderpeople.* She says it will help me understand your species." Xylos looked deeply unenthusiastic. "Apparently there is a child and a man and they walk through forests for two hours. There are no graphs. There is no data visualisation. At one point, I am told, they eat a bird. It does not sound efficient."

"It is very good, actually."

"Hmm." Xylos made a note. "I will log your endorsement. It will not help."

Vara emerged from the ship. She moved down the ramp the way she always moved – not quite human, but close enough to make the differences unsettling.

"Ben," she said. "You came."

"You called."

"I was not certain the beacon would work for voice transmission. Xylos said the quantum entanglement was calibrated for Martian

neural architecture. I said human brains were close enough. He said that was 'optimistic'. I said he was 'a snob'."

"The beacon worked fine," Ben said. "I heard you clearly."

"Good." She stepped closer. "Then it will continue to work. After we leave."

She reached into her coat and produced a second object – smaller than the beacon, flat and rectangular, like a playing card made of dark metal.

"This is a receiver log," she said. "It records what comes through the beacon. If you speak to it, the message will be stored. We will retrieve them when we return."

"When you return?"

"If," Xylos corrected from the ramp. "The probability is not high."

"When," Vara repeated firmly. She pressed the card into Ben's hand. "We are observers, Ben. We cannot fix your systems for you. That would be colonisation, and the paperwork is terrible. But we can listen. We can witness. And if you ever win..." She paused. "Let us know."

Ben looked at the card, then at the ship, then at the two beings who had spent eight days documenting the absurdity of his country and had somehow, against all logic, decided he was worth saying goodbye to.

"I am not going to win," he said. "You know that. You have seen the numbers."

"The numbers are unfavourable," Xylos agreed. "0.003% probability of systemic change from individual action. But I have also calculated your probability of continuing to try."

"And?"

"97.4%." Xylos tilted his head. "It is irrational. You possess all the data required to despair. And yet your cortisol levels suggest determination. Humans are mathematically infuriating."

"We prefer 'stubbornly hopeful'."

"That is not a compliment."

"It is where I come from."

Xylos made another note. Then he turned and walked up the ramp without looking back. He was a creature of efficiency, and goodbyes were a caloric waste.

Vara lingered. She reached out, her long fingers almost touching Ben's shoulder, stopping an inch away.

"The system is heavy, Ben," she said. "Do not try to lift it. Just chip away the rust. That is all any of us can do."

"Is that what you do? On Mars?"

"On Mars, the rust is different. But yes. We chip." She smiled – a small, strange expression that did not quite map onto human facial architecture. "The work is never finished. That is the tragedy. But the work continues. That is the hope."

She turned and walked up the ramp.

At the top, she paused.

"Xylos wanted me to tell you something. He said your coffee is adequate. For a species that has not mastered interstellar travel, you have done reasonable work with hot water and beans."

"That might be the nicest thing he has ever said."

"It is. He has been practicing. He finds your custom of 'compliments' inefficient but has concluded that they serve a social bonding function." She paused. "He also said your infrastructure is 'an embarrassment to carbon-based life' and he hopes you 'fix the pipes before the pipes fix you'. He was less practiced at that part."

The ramp began to rise.

"Goodbye, Ben Miller," Vara called. "Chip away."

The *Logos-7* did not shoot into the sky with a roar of fire. It simply ceased to be on the ground. It rose silently, a silver bubble against the golden evening light, accelerating until it was just a gleam, then a dot, then nothing.

Ben stood in the paddock. A sheep bleated nearby. It sounded like Barbara, though he could not be sure. All sheep looked the same to him now – mildly judgmental, deeply unbothered by the collapse of human institutions.

He put the beacon in one pocket, the receiver card in the other. He walked back to his car, which was indeed now sporting a parking

ticket tucked under the windscreen wiper.

"You have got to be kidding me," Ben said.

He looked at the ticket. It was signed by Wayne.

Of course it was.

He got in the car. He sat for a moment, gripping the steering wheel. Then he laughed – a real laugh, the first one in weeks. The system was absurd. The system was relentless. The system would fine you for saying goodbye to aliens in a paddock that no one owned and no one was using.

But the system was also, in its own grinding way, predictable. And predictable systems could be documented. And documented systems could be exposed. And exposed systems could, eventually, be changed.

It took three tries to start the car. The engine caught on the fourth.

Ben drove back to Wellington as the sun set behind the Tararuas.

He did not go home. Not yet. He went back to the Ministry.

The building was nearly empty at this hour. The fluorescent lights hummed to themselves, keeping watch over vacant desks and silent keyboards. A cleaner pushed a trolley past the lifts, nodding at Ben without curiosity. People worked late sometimes. It was not her business why.

Ben walked to his office. He stood in the doorway, looking at the space. His desk. His chair. The stress ball Kevin had left behind, sitting on the corner like a small, foam threat.

He picked up the stress ball. He dropped it in the bin, on top of the promotion letter.

Then he sat down and looked at the cursor blinking on his screen.

He opened a new document.

He did not write a press release. He did not write a policy brief.

His government credit card was probably cancelled by now. The rental car in Kerikeri would be someone else's problem. He found he did not care.

He typed:

AUDIT LOG: DAY 1
OBSERVER: B. MILLER
SUBJECT: THE SIEGE
0900: Returned to Ministry. Henderson asked about visitor feedback forms for the aliens. Facilities has a KPI. Filed under "questions I lack the strength to answer".
0915: Kevin offered promotion to "Post-Terrestrial Policy Integration" – a unit designed to produce nothing while appearing busy. Corner office. Refreshments. Declined.
0920: Kevin warned that the machine grinds down the grit. Filed under "threats (implicit)".
0945: Alliance formed with Cassandra. 47 briefings. Decade of warnings. Email where Kevin called accurate analysis "unhelpful". Obtained USB. Filed under "ammunition".
1015: Contacted journalist. Lunch tomorrow. Filed under "siege operations (external)".
1430: Beacon activated. Martians departing. Drove to Wairarapa.
1730: Said goodbye. Vara said to chip away the rust. Xylos said to fix the pipes. Filed under "advice (interplanetary)".
1745: Received parking ticket from Wayne. The system is consistent. Filed under "evidence".
1830: Returned to Ministry. Started this log.

He stared at the words. Then he added one more line:

The siege has begun.

He saved the file. He leaned back in his chair.

The fluorescent lights hummed. The building creaked. Somewhere in the distance, the cleaner's trolley rattled over a join in the carpet.

The morning came back to him first. Lisa in the doorway, asking him to explain. Sophie at the breakfast table, asking if they were the baddies. Jack under the couch cushions, looking for a book that had migrated.

Then the afternoon. Kevin's offer. Cassandra's USB. Rachel's reply.

The evening. The paddock. The ship. Vara's hand, almost

touching his shoulder. Xylos's probability calculations. The beacon, warm in his pocket.

And Wayne's parking ticket. He smiled at that.

In his pocket, the beacon pulsed once – faint, warm, steady. Somewhere out past the moon, accelerating toward a fold in space that would carry them home, Vara and Xylos were watching the blue marble shrink in their viewport.

And in a concrete office block in Wellington, under fluorescent lights that hummed at a frequency designed to cause despair, a man who used to glide was learning to grind.

MARTIAN AUDIT LOG: ENTRY 010

Subject: Departure Assessment

Status: Inconclusive

METRIC 1: THE ABSORPTION RATE
Definition: The speed at which transformative recommendations are converted into advisory panels.
Final Value: 100% (complete absorption achieved).
Note: The system has successfully metabolised the audit. Kevin described the process with unusual clarity: "By the time we are finished, the Audit will be so thoroughly consulted, so comprehensively workshopped, so magnificently stakeholdered, that it will be completely indistinguishable from having never existed at all." We have no evidence that he was being ironic.

METRIC 2: THE AMNESIA PROTOCOL
Definition: The rate at which substantive information is displaced by trivial content in public attention.
Observation: At T-minus 2 hours after departure signal, the Martian Audit Report was the lead story on every news network. At T-plus 4 hours, a video surfaced of a Golden Retriever in Christchurch that could balance a biscuit on its nose while riding a skateboard.
Outcome: The dog is now polling higher than the Leader of the Opposition. The Audit has moved to page six.

Conclusion: The system protects itself not with censorship, but with noise. They are drowning in triviality. It is a very comfortable way to sink.

METRIC 3: THE HOPE COEFFICIENT (η)
Definition: The probability that an individual, fully aware of systemic dysfunction, will continue to work for change rather than withdraw or emigrate.
Observed Value (Ben Miller): 97.4%
Note: This metric was not part of the original audit framework. It has been added following field observations. The coefficient appears to be contagious. Cassandra, who has been filing warnings for a decade, has now found an audience of one. This is an increase of infinity percent.

METRIC 4: THE CASSANDRA MULTIPLIER
Definition: The number of truth-tellers within a system who are isolated, ignored but still working.
Observed Value: At least 2 (Cassandra, Ben). Suspected: more.
Note: They are filing reports no one reads. They are writing warnings that become coasters – or, in one documented case, doorstops. They are still typing.

www 5: THE WAYNE CONSTANT
Definition: The probability that any human activity, regardless of context or cosmic significance, will result in a compliance violation.
Observed Value: 100%
Note: Ben received a parking ticket while saying goodbye to us. The system is nothing if not consistent.

Vara's Addendum: We came to audit a civilisation. We found one that was punching itself in the face and had formed a committee to study why its nose hurt.

They agreed with our diagnosis. They thanked us for our excellent work. They established an advisory panel and asked about visitor feedback forms.

This should be the end of the story. The system won. The ideas were absorbed. The machine continues.

But.

Ben stayed.

Kevin offered him the Golden Handcuffs. A corner office. A title with the word "Integration" in it. Refreshments. Ben dropped the offer in the recycling bin, on top of a draft stakeholder engagement framework that someone had printed single-sided.

I asked him, in the paddock, why he would not leave. He said: "Because my children live here. And I do not want to raise them for export."

His daughter asked him, that morning, if they were "the baddies". He told her they were just very good at meetings. She said that sounded like the baddies with extra steps. Human children are alarmingly perceptive.

I do not know if Ben will succeed. Xylos calculates the probability at 0.003%. But Xylos also noted that Ben's probability of continuing to try is 97.4%. And Cassandra, who has been filing warnings for a decade, finally has someone who wants to read them.

There is a word for this. Not hope, exactly. Something harder. A decision to keep fighting when the odds are known and terrible.

They call it stubbornness. Or foolishness. Or, sometimes, courage.

I told Ben to chip away the rust. He cannot lift the system. None of us can. But rust, over time, weakens everything it touches. And grit, over time, wears everything down.

The beacon pulses in his pocket. We are watching. We will know if something changes.

Ben has started his own audit log. He is documenting the grinding. He is meeting a journalist tomorrow. He has forty-seven briefings and a USB drive full of warnings that were "unhelpfully accurate".

The siege has begun.

Xylos asked me, as we passed the moon, what I thought the probability was that humans would fix their systems before the systems fixed them.

I told him I did not know. But I told him this: they have a fountain in Wellington that does nothing but spill water onto the street, and

they love it. They have protected the right to see a grass hill from a place where looking is illegal. They have made the past compulsory and the future optional.

And yet.

They also have Ben. And Cassandra. And somewhere, probably, others we did not meet – filing reports, writing warnings, refusing to stop.

The machine is large. The grit is small.

But grit is patient. And machines, eventually, break down.

We will be watching.

The debrief

LOCATION: High Audit Chamber, Valles Marineris, Mars.
LOCAL TIME: Irrelevant (Mars has solved time).
DISTANCE FROM EARTH: 225 million kilometres.
MOOD: Clinical.

The High Council of Mars convened in the chamber carved from the red rock of the canyon wall. Seven figures sat in a semicircle, their forms identical, their patience infinite. They had been governing the Martian Cooperative for eleven thousand years. They had seen empires rise and fall on a dozen worlds. They had learned that most problems, given sufficient time, solved themselves.

Senior Auditor Xylos stood at the centre of the chamber. He looked tired. He was holding a small orange cone, which he had brought back as evidence.

"High Auditors," he began. "I have completed the preliminary assessment of the territory designated 'New Zealand', in the Pacific sector of the third planet."

He placed the cone on the speaking plinth. It looked small and absurd against the ancient stone.

"My recommendation is as follows: do not invade."

A rustle passed through the Council. The invasion of Earth had been on the strategic calendar for six centuries. The fleet was built. The logistics were mapped. New Zealand had been selected as the beachhead – remote, temperate, low population density, minimal nuclear capability. It was supposed to be simple.

"Explain," said the First Auditor.

Xylos activated his visor. A holographic display materialised above the plinth, showing the now-familiar shape of the two islands at the bottom of the world.

"The territory is not a civilisation," Xylos said. "It is a kinetic trap. It is a black hole where momentum goes to die. If we land our fleet there, we will not be fought. We will be consulted."

He expanded the display to show a network diagram – arrows pointing in directions that contradicted themselves, feedback loops that fed nothing back, decision trees that branched into infinite consultation.

"Our warships will be issued with abatement notices for exceeding visual reflectivity limits. Our death rays will be classified as 'non-consented structure upgrades' and subject to a resource consent process with no discernible end date. We will not be defeated by

weapons. We will be defeated by a man named Wayne, holding a clipboard, asking if we have paid the development contributions."

The Second Auditor leaned forward. "You encountered resistance?"

"I encountered something worse." Xylos paused. "I encountered agreement."

He pulled up a new display: Kevin's face, smiling, warm, professionally empty.

"This is the primary defensive unit. Designation: Kevin. He holds no military rank. He commands no troops. He controls nothing except what reaches the decision-makers, and what does not."

Xylos's voice dropped.

"I attacked him with logic. I presented data so clear that any rational entity would have no choice but to act. He did not argue. He did not resist. He agreed with everything I said. He called my analysis 'very brave'. He thanked me for my 'diverse perspective'. And then he established a working group to 'socialise the findings with stakeholders'."

The display showed a timeline: Xylos's recommendations entering the system, being noted, being parked, being referred, dissolving into an endless recursion of consultation.

"Our invasion fleet would not be destroyed, High Auditors. It would be absorbed. Within six months, our commanding general would be chairing a sub-committee on 'Cross-Planetary Engagement Frameworks'. Within a year, he would have forgotten why he came."

The Third Auditor spoke. "What of their infrastructure? Surely we could disable their systems and force capitulation."

"Their infrastructure is already disabled." Xylos pulled up the data on the pipes, the roads, the bridges. "They lose forty-five percent of their drinking water to leaks. Their primary transport corridor is a 1959 bridge held together with clips. Their library has been closed for seven years. They are doing our work for us."

"Then they are weak. Ripe for conquest."

"That is what I thought." Xylos shook his head. "But their weakness is their defence. If we invade, we inherit the problems.

We become responsible for the pipes. We become responsible for the library. We become entangled in their Resource Management Act, which I have analysed extensively and which I believe may be a form of memetic weapon designed to neutralise external threats through procedural complexity."

He displayed a section of the Act. The text scrolled for ninety seconds without reaching a full stop.

"Any species that attempts to build anything in this territory will be destroyed – not by opposition, but by process. The process is the wall. The process is the moat. The process is why they have not built a second harbour crossing in sixty years, and why they will not build one in the next sixty."

The Fourth Auditor stirred. "You paint a picture of total dysfunction. And yet they persist. They have not collapsed."

"No," Xylos admitted. "This is the anomaly."

He pulled up a new display. Two data points, pulsing faintly.

"During the audit, I identified two entities who did not conform to the standard behavioural model. The first is designated 'Cassandra'. She has been producing accurate warnings about systemic failure for a decade. No one reads them. She continues to write."

He highlighted the second point.

"The second is designated 'Ben'. He was our liaison – a mid-level bureaucrat who had spent ten years learning to say nothing in words that sounded like something. By all metrics, he should have been fully absorbed into the system."

The display showed Ben's data profile. Cortisol levels. Career trajectory. Probability assessments.

"But when we offered to extract him, he refused. When Kevin offered him a promotion to oversee the burial of our recommendations, he refused that too. He said–" Xylos consulted his notes. "He said he would be 'the grit'."

"The grit?"

"A particulate that creates friction within a machine. He intends to document the dysfunction. To expose it. To grind against the system until something breaks."

The Fifth Auditor's voice was dry. "And what is the probability that he succeeds?"

"0.003%."

"Negligible."

"Yes." Xylos paused. "But I also calculated the probability that he continues to try, despite the odds."

"And?"

"97.4%."

Silence in the chamber.

"I have designated this variable the 'Hope Coefficient'," Xylos continued. "It was not part of my original assessment framework. It does not respond to incentive analysis. It is, by any rational measure, a form of malfunction – a persistent commitment to action despite overwhelming evidence that action is futile."

He looked at the Council.

"And yet. I left a beacon with Ben. A communication device. If the coefficient proves contagious – if he finds others like him, others like Cassandra – the system may eventually change. The odds are small. But they are not zero."

The Sixth Auditor spoke for the first time. "You recommend we do not invade. But you also recommend we continue to watch."

"Yes. The humans have a phrase: 'She'll be right'. It means that problems will resolve themselves without intervention. It is usually wrong. But occasionally – very occasionally – it is not."

Xylos deactivated the display. The hologram collapsed, leaving only the small orange cone on the plinth.

"My recommendation stands. New Zealand is not worth conquering. The cost of occupation would exceed the value of the territory. We would spend more resources fighting the Resource Management Act than we spent building the fleet."

He picked up the cone.

"This object is a traffic management device. It serves no function except to indicate that a function might one day be served. I have brought it back as evidence of a civilisation that has learned to monetise delay. We cannot defeat that. We can only avoid it."

The First Auditor nodded slowly. "The Council accepts your recommendation. New Zealand is to be designated a Protective Exclusion Zone. No invasion. No contact. Monitoring only."

"Thank you, High Auditors."

Xylos turned to leave. He was almost at the door when the Seventh Auditor spoke.

"Senior Auditor. One further question."

Xylos stopped.

"You assessed only New Zealand. But there is a larger landmass nearby. Similar climate. Higher population. Significant mineral resources." The Seventh Auditor pulled up a map. "The territory designated 'Australia'. What is your assessment of their systems?"

Xylos considered the question. He had not audited Australia directly, but he had observed it from a distance. He had seen their infrastructure. Their decision-making speed. Their willingness to build things and deal with the consequences later.

"The incentive structures are different," he said slowly. "They appear to have a functional relationship with the concept of 'urgency'. They build roads. They approve mines. They make decisions and accept criticism rather than avoiding decisions to avoid criticism."

"They are more efficient?"

"They are more… kinetic." Xylos frowned. "Their coffee is worse. But their systems are less defensive. If we wished to invade a Pacific territory, Australia would offer significantly less procedural resistance."

The First Auditor made a note. "Thank you, Senior Auditor. That will be all."

Xylos walked out of the chamber. Behind him, he heard the Council beginning to confer – the low hum of strategic recalculation, the quiet reshuffling of invasion priorities.

He did not look back.

In his quarters, later, he sat by the viewport and watched the distant blue dot that was Earth. Somewhere on the smaller island, Ben Miller was sitting at a desk, typing. Cassandra was running projections. A journalist named Rachel was reading documents over lunch.

The beacon signal pulsed, faint but steady.
Xylos opened a new file.

MONITORING LOG: EARTH (NEW ZEALAND SECTOR)
Status: Observation continues.
Subject: The Siege.
Note: The grit is small. The machine is large. But grit is patient.

He saved the file. He closed his eyes.
Somewhere out there, the grinding had begun.

They came to conquer Earth.
They started with New Zealand.
This was a mistake.
They could not get a building consent.

THE NEW ZEALAND INITIATIVE

The New Zealand Initiative
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