

The First Argument

Canon placement: Six months before the bloom opened

Nia first heard Elias Voss before she saw him.

“Your mineral balance is compensating for a problem you haven’t identified.”

His voice carried through Greenhouse Seven with the confidence of someone who had never once considered being thrown into a nutrient reservoir.

Nia emerged from beneath the cultivation bench, wrench in hand. “And you are?”

“Elias Voss. Systems ecology.”

“The consultant.”

“The correction.”

She stared at him.

He stared back.

Behind the glass, Specimen E-17 gave one faint pulse of silver-blue light.

Neither scientist noticed.

Elias stepped closer to the readout. “You’re keeping the specimen alive by instinct.”

“Four years of data is not instinct.”

“No. The part where you ignore your own model and change the mineral ratio at 03:00 is instinct.”

Nia’s irritation sharpened. “It worked.”

“That is not the same as understanding why.”

“It’s alive. That’s a useful why.”

For a moment, Elias had no answer. He looked through the glass at the pale stem and folded petals.

Then, very quietly, he said, “Fair.”

Nia almost liked him.

Then he reached for her console.

She slapped his hand away.

The Starlight Bloom pulsed again.