

KESRA

Before the First Departure

— AN ILLUSTRATED PREQUEL —



KESRA

Before the First Departure

An illustrated prequel

Mara takes ownership of an extraordinary rescue vessel. Before the first distress call, there are people to meet, limits to understand, and empty rooms waiting to become homes.

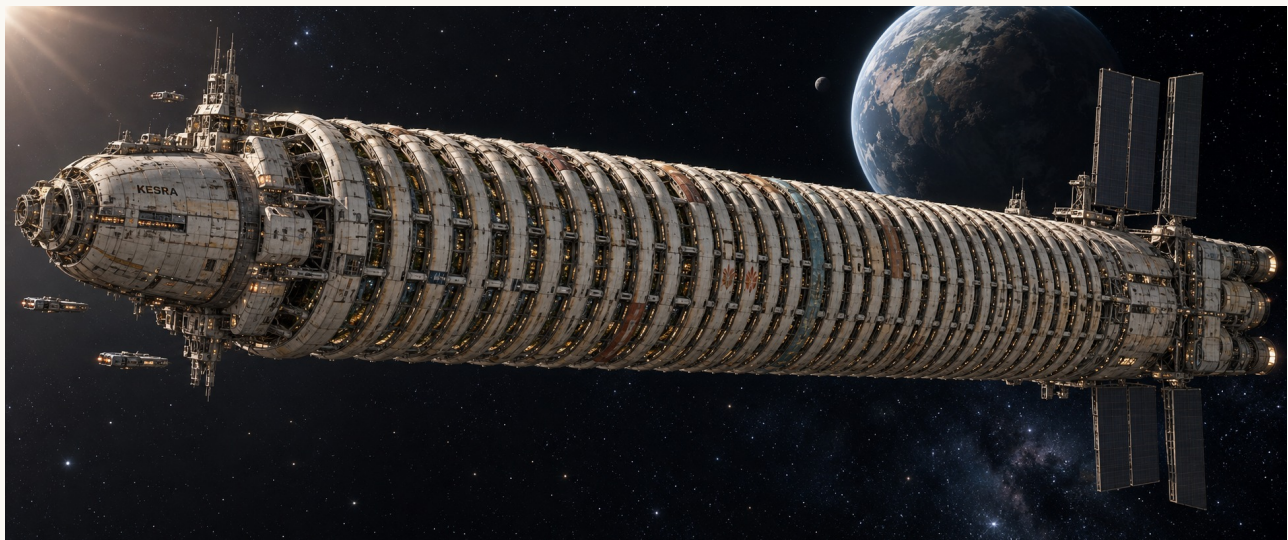
Featuring the original ship and crew concept artwork, placed alongside Mara’s first inspection.

This edition includes a short closing departure scene. Cutaways and rescue illustrations are visual concepts, not measured engineering plans. Images of occupied habitats show how the spaces will be used on later voyages.

STRANGEWOVEN

Different worlds. One imagination.

The Empty Berth



The Kesra: a working rescue vessel built around a fixed spine and rotating habitat rings.

The first thing Mara noticed was an empty docking berth.

She had expected to notice the engines. Or the rings. Or the fact that the vessel she now owned was four kilometers long and had more doors than she could reasonably expect to open in a lifetime.

Instead, as the transfer shuttle approached, she found herself studying a vacant cradle beside the forward service hull.

Its restraints stood open.

Beyond it, the habitat rings continued into the distance, broad bands of pale panels and dark framework. Some sections were newer than their neighbors. Others carried repairs so neatly fitted that they looked like part of the original design.

The shuttle pilot adjusted their approach.

“There she is.”

Mara looked at the name painted along the fixed hull.

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She had signed the final ownership papers three days earlier.

Until this moment, the decision had felt manageable.

“She looked smaller in the survey photographs,” she said.

The pilot glanced at the vessel filling the forward display.

“They stood farther away.”

A Disagreement with a Door



A civilian vessel secured in a fixed docking cradle, with an empty berth alongside it.

Someone was waiting beyond the docking airlock.

At first Mara mistook them for equipment.

A low cluster of dark mineral plates occupied the passage, with several articulated tools folded beneath its edges. Then the plates shifted, and two small manipulators lifted a maintenance panel clear of the wall.

“Mara?”

“Yes.”

“Dorr. Engineering.”

Mara caught a handhold as the shuttle’s slight motion settled out.

“Are we already broken?”

“A door sensor disagreed with a door.”

“Which one was right?”

“The door.”

Dorr secured the panel and moved along the deck by changing contact points beneath their body.

Mara followed, pulling herself gently between handholds.

The passage was weightless. Equipment sat behind restrained covers. Every loose object had somewhere to be secured.

Dorr stopped beside a broad window overlooking the docking cradle.

“The berth you were watching can take a vessel larger than your shuttle. Within the attachment limits.”

“How much larger?”

“I will give you the table. You will read it before accepting anything.”

“I’ve read the table.”

“Then I will give you the revised table.”

Outside, the empty berth extended over black space.

Mara studied its adjustable restraints.

“Why keep so many positions empty?”

“Because people sometimes arrive with ships.”

“Ships that could make the journey themselves?”

“Sometimes. Sometimes they can reach orbit and little else. Sometimes their engines fail after they get here.”

Dorr indicated the boarding connection folded against the hull.

“We can connect them to utilities, transfer their passengers into habitats, and carry their vessel with us if the structure permits.”

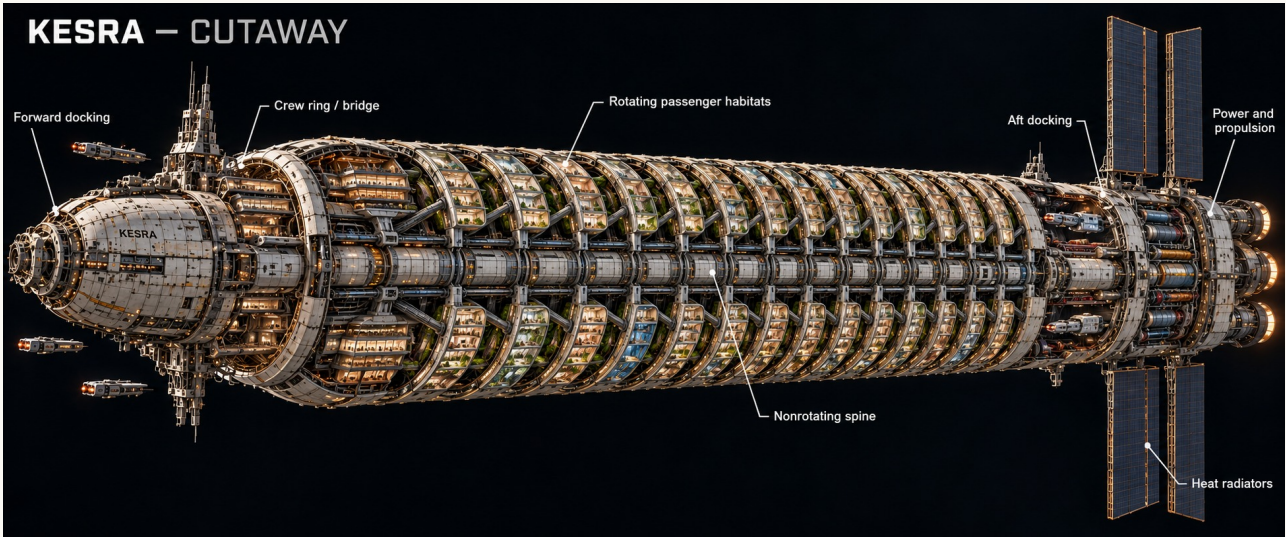
“So they keep something to land in.”

“And something to rebuild with.”

Mara looked at the open restraints again.

This time, she saw a place being held for someone.

Along the Spine



Illustrative cutaway: the nonrotating spine runs through the hubs of the surrounding habitat rings.

The central spine was less impressive than the exterior.

Mara found that reassuring.

She had spent enough time aboard working ships to distrust a spotless public passage more than a scuffed maintenance one.

Freight platforms ran along fixed rails. Inspection markings covered access panels. Through an open workshop doorway, three technicians were arguing over a component laid out between them.

One noticed Dorr and lifted it.

Dorr stopped.

“No.”

“You haven’t heard the proposal.”

“I have seen the proposal.”

They continued.

Mara waited until the workshop was behind them.

“How much of the ship stays still?”

“Still relative to the spine? The docks. Main workshops. Freight handling. Power equipment. Propulsion. Much of the storage.”

“And the habitats rotate around us.”

“Yes.”

Through a service opening, Mara could see a massive hub assembly.

Beyond it, a spoke extended toward the crew ring.

She had studied the drawings. Standing beside the machinery made the drawings seem optimistic.

“People live out there,” she said.

“People generally prefer their meals to remain on their plates.”

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A Little Weight

The transfer cabin carried them into the rotating section.

Mara stayed secured while the mechanism matched the movement of the crew ring. There were pauses, checks, and an unhurried sequence of indicator changes.

Dorr watched her watching them.

“It is faster to become impatient than it is to become safely synchronized.”

“I wasn’t going to say anything.”

“Excellent.”

Once they had transferred into the spoke, the cabin moved outward.

Weight returned gradually.

Mara felt her boots settle more firmly against the floor. By the time they reached the inhabited decks, standing no longer required thought.

A door opened onto a curved passage.

Someone was carrying a bowl of soup.

Mara watched it pass.

“That does make a difference.”

Dorr stepped out beside her.

“Welcome to the part of the ship where dropped tools become a personal failing.”

The crew common room smelled faintly of warm bread.

A broad, rootlike body rested inside a transparent humid enclosure beside the far wall. Flexible limbs supported it. Folded fronds shifted toward the newcomers.

“Mara,” its translator said. “Sere. Habitats.”

Mara approached.

“You’ve already started planting?”

A tray of small green shoots stood beside the enclosure.

“I have started testing. Whether they become lunch depends on the results.”

Dorr moved toward a wall fitting.

Sere’s fronds turned.

“If you adjust that vent again, tell me first.”

“It was producing condensation.”

“It was meant to.”

Mara looked from one to the other.

“Have you worked together long?”

“Long enough,” they answered, almost together.

Rooms Waiting for Names



A human-configured pod: living decks, shared facilities, and the service equipment that supports them.

Sere accompanied her to a passenger habitat.

The ring was turning slowly, set for a lower gravity than the crew section.

Mara noticed the difference before the door had finished opening.

Her step carried farther than expected.

Sere waited while she recovered her balance.

“Visitors often discover the setting with their knees.”

“I’ll remember that.”

“Please do. Medical is busy enough during drills.”

The habitat stretched away in a gentle curve.

Compact family rooms opened along broad passages. Beyond them were shared tables, a clinic, learning spaces, and raised planting beds beneath artificial lights.

It looked unfinished.

Not neglected. Unclaimed.

No drawings had been pinned beside the cabin doors. No belongings occupied the shelves. Nobody had decided which table was theirs.

“How many?” Mara asked.

“About two thousand human-sized passengers in a pod configured like this. Sustained occupancy, with the necessary supplies and support.”

“And six pods make a ring.”

“Yes. Fifty passenger rings.”

“Six hundred thousand.”

“As a planning figure,” Sere said. “A population twice your size will not politely fit the arithmetic.”

Mara smiled.

Sere indicated the sealed doors between adjoining sections.

“We can share compatible environments. Otherwise, these boundaries stay closed. Different pressure, temperature, atmosphere, sanitation requirements.”

“And gravity?”

“Set by the ring. Radius and rotation speed determine the loading at the floor. We can give different rings different settings.”

“But not each room.”

“No. We must put compatible needs together.”

Mara stopped beside an empty family cabin.

“So adapting the ship means work.”

Sere’s fronds lifted.

“What did the sales documents suggest?”

“They used the word ‘versatile’ quite a lot.”

“A useful word. It keeps engineers employed.”

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The Limits You Cannot See

Below the living decks, the habitat sounded different.

Pumps worked behind panels. Water storage occupied protected service spaces. Filters, treatment units, and access passages filled the volumes Mara had barely noticed in the plans.

Sere stopped at an inspection station.

“Floor space is the easy limit to see. People notice a crowded room.”

“And the others?”

“Food. Water. Waste processing. Power. Heat removal. Medical support. How long we need to keep everyone aboard.”

Mara studied the readings.

“We could have empty rooms and still be full.”

“Yes.”

She stayed beside the panel a moment longer.

“I want that on the bridge.”

“The readings?”

“The limits. Clearly. Before someone asks us to take another ten thousand.”

Sere regarded her through the enclosure.

“I think we will work well together.”

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An Early Appointment

Medical belonged to Vesh.

Mara learned this when a transparent membrane on a mobile frame approached her, pale filaments moving through the fluid within.

“Captain. Your induction examination is overdue.”

“I’ve been aboard less than an hour.”

“I was ready early.”

Dorr had departed for engineering with suspicious efficiency.

Mara looked at the examination room.

“How much does the ship tell you?”

“About your arrival? Enough. About your health? Much less than I would like.”

Vesh guided her toward a seat.

Their department included rooms that could be reconfigured, equipment that could be exchanged, and storage carrying far more labels than Mara cared to interpret without assistance.

“We cannot keep specialists for every possible passenger aboard,” Vesh said. “We carry broad capabilities, maintain remote contacts when communication allows, and work with the people we rescue.”

“Their doctors.”

“Their doctors. Their carers. The people who know how to help someone eat, rest, or communicate.”

A filament shifted toward a display.

“Do not assume the official delegation knows everything.”

“I won’t.”

“Everyone says that before meeting an official delegation.”

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The Distance Between Calls

Oru’s communications enclosure stood off the bridge passage.

Inside its curved window, a broad finned body moved through dense liquid. Long feelers drifted near a contact surface.

Mara stopped well clear of the fittings.

“Oru?”

“Yes. You are standing where the previous captain stood.”

“Is that a problem?”

“No. They usually stood on the hose.”

Mara looked down and moved another half-step.

Oru brought up a regional chart.

Several vessel markers were spread across it.

“The other rescue ships?”

“Those assigned to this region. Some are under contract to the Accord. Others work under different agreements.”

The distances between them occupied most of the display.

Mara enlarged one.

Even the nearest ship was far away.

“Who decides where we go?”

“Dispatch recommends. You command. Local authorities request assistance. Sometimes those three things happen in a convenient order.”

“And when they don’t?”

Oru let the chart remain between them.

“The messages take time. So do we.”

Mara studied a projected journey.

Months.

Farther out, years.

“There are calls we won’t reach.”

“Yes.”

The answer came without softening.

Then Oru added, “There are others we will reach because somebody prepared before the emergency became visible.”

A Practice Arrival



A rescue carrier approaches a paused receiving ring. Tavi uses this operation in Mara’s induction simulation.

Tavi was waiting at the flight station.

Their compact body rested among supports arranged for six limbs, with sensory organs positioned around the limb bases.

Mara approached from the side.

Tavi turned without seeming to turn.

“Captain.”

“Am I interrupting?”

“A simulated docking accident.”

“Should I come back?”

“It will be an accident whenever you arrive.”

The display showed a carrier approaching a receiving ring.

Mara watched it drift.

“That’s too fast.”

“Yes.”

A warning appeared.

Tavi reset the exercise.

“This time you can tell me what we do.”

Mara folded her arms.

“We stop that ring.”

“It is stopped.”

“Clear the receiving position.”

“Already clear.”

“Check the carrier’s alignment and relative movement.”

Tavi’s frontmost limbs made a small adjustment.

“Better.”

The virtual carrier eased toward the open attachment position.

“People stay sealed inside their pod,” Mara continued. “We secure it. Connect utilities. Check the boundaries. Transfer support from carrier to ship.”

“And then?”

“Balance the ring before rotation resumes.”

Tavi let the simulation continue.

“Good.”

Mara looked toward the bridge displays.

“Do you examine all your captains?”

“Only new ones.”

“How many have you had?”

“One, so far.”

A Place at the Table



The bridge lies inside the rotating crew ring, with stations adapted to the department heads.

From the bridge, the exterior appeared on large camera displays.
The view stayed steady while the ring turned around the spine.
Mara could see the forward docking section, an approaching freight craft, and the habitat bands extending aft.
Farther back, radiator panels stood clear of the rotating structures.
She rested a hand on the planning table.
No grand chair waited for her.
There was a workstation, a place to secure a drink, and enough room around the table for people who would disagree.
She liked it.
Dorr arrived first.
Then Sere and Vesh.
Oru remained at communications, connected through the bridge systems. Tavi brought the ship's status onto the shared display.
Six department heads.
Beyond them were the teams Mara had yet to meet: carrier crews, technicians, cooks, medical staff, environmental specialists, freight handlers.
A vessel this size could not run on six capable personalities and a hopeful captain.
She was grateful nobody had tried.

What Remains



The preserved chime chamber: one community’s gift, cared for by the captains and crews who followed.

Before the formal handover ended, Mara asked to visit one more room.

It had appeared in an old maintenance photograph.

A small chamber.

Ceramic objects suspended from rails.

Sere knew the way.

The chimes hung in quiet clusters, their surfaces marked by hands and tools unlike Mara’s. Several had been repaired. Low resonating benches occupied the walls.

Beside the entrance was a plaque carrying the name Orson *Kesra*.

Mara read it.

“Was this his?”

“No,” Sere said. “The chamber came much later.”

“But he began the rescues.”

“He commanded the survey vessel that became this ship.”

Mara looked around.

“How much of his vessel remains?”

“Dorr would give you a very precise answer.”

“And yours?”

Sere’s fronds shifted.

“Enough that people still come here.”

A care record hung beside the door.

Dates. Inspection notes. Replacement cords.

Nothing in the ownership documents had required Mara to preserve the chamber.

She read the latest entry.

Then she added her name beneath it.

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Before the First Departure

They gathered once more at the forward docks.
Beyond the observation window, freight crews were securing the last supply load.
Mara watched a carrier move into its berth.
On its side was the Tern Accord badge.
UNTIL EVERYONE IS SAFE
Her ship.
Their work.
Tomorrow, the *Kesra* would begin a journey to a world whose people had already been waiting too long.
Mara looked toward the empty cradle beside the carrier.
“Leave that one clear.”
Dorr checked the berth number.
“It is reserved.”
“For anyone specific?”
“Not yet.”
Mara nodded.
Behind the fixed hull, the crew ring continued turning.
Inside it, soup stayed in bowls. Someone tended seedlings. Medical staff prepared equipment for bodies they had never treated.
And along fifty passenger rings, thousands of empty rooms waited for the people who would make them different.
Mara took the handhold beside the airlock.
“All right,” she said. “Show me the revised table.”

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The First Departure

The following morning, Dorr’s revised table was secured beside Mara’s workstation.
It had acquired two handwritten additions overnight. One was hers. The other, in a careful script she did not recognize, said: Ask engineering before agreeing to anything described as almost compatible.
She decided to leave it there.
Around the planning table, departure checks passed from department to department.
Sere confirmed the prepared habitats. Vesh reported medical readiness. Oru had the latest message from the world ahead and a list of questions its local coordinators were still answering.

Tavi checked the final approach lane.

“Docking traffic clear. No vessels attached outside their approved restraints.”

Mara looked at Dorr.

“You can check the table,” they said.

“I believe you.”

She checked it anyway.

On the exterior display, the station began to fall behind as the *Kesra* eased away under maneuvering thrust. The planet’s bright curve occupied one edge of the screen. Ahead lay the departure route, and beyond that a journey long enough for Mara to learn many more of her ship’s doors.

She watched the empty berth until it disappeared from the camera’s view.

Then she turned toward the people waiting beside her.

“Take us out, Tavi.”

The pilot’s limbs settled against the controls.

The *Kesra* began her first voyage with Mara in command.

SHIP'S COMPANY

Six Department Heads



The principal crew, supported by the ship's department teams.

Mara - Captain

The living human owner and commander of the Kesra.

Sere - Habitats

Branching life; environmental preparation and passenger accommodation.

Dorr - Engineering

Mineral-based life; structure, machinery, and the limits nobody should ignore.

Vesh - Medical

A contained fluid colony; medical care and decontamination.

Tavi - Flight and Exterior Rescue

Radial, six-limbed life; navigation, carriers, and precision approaches.

Oru - Communications and Passenger Liaison

Aquatic life; contact, interpretation, and understanding what passengers need.

VISUAL FIELD NOTES

A Neighborhood in Transit



A human-configured habitat in use on a later voyage. Personal belongings, shared meals, and planting turn a pod into a temporary neighborhood.

Each rescue changes the ship a little. What remains is carried into the next journey.

VISUAL FIELD NOTES

Different Bodies, Different Homes



A liquid-filled habitat viewed from a dry passage. Separate environmental boundaries allow the Kesra to shelter people with very different needs.

Each rescue changes the ship a little. What remains is carried into the next journey.

VISUAL FIELD NOTES

From Surface to Ship



A carrier supports a detachable habitat at a surface terminal. Enclosed connections protect passengers during boarding.

Each rescue changes the ship a little. What remains is carried into the next journey.