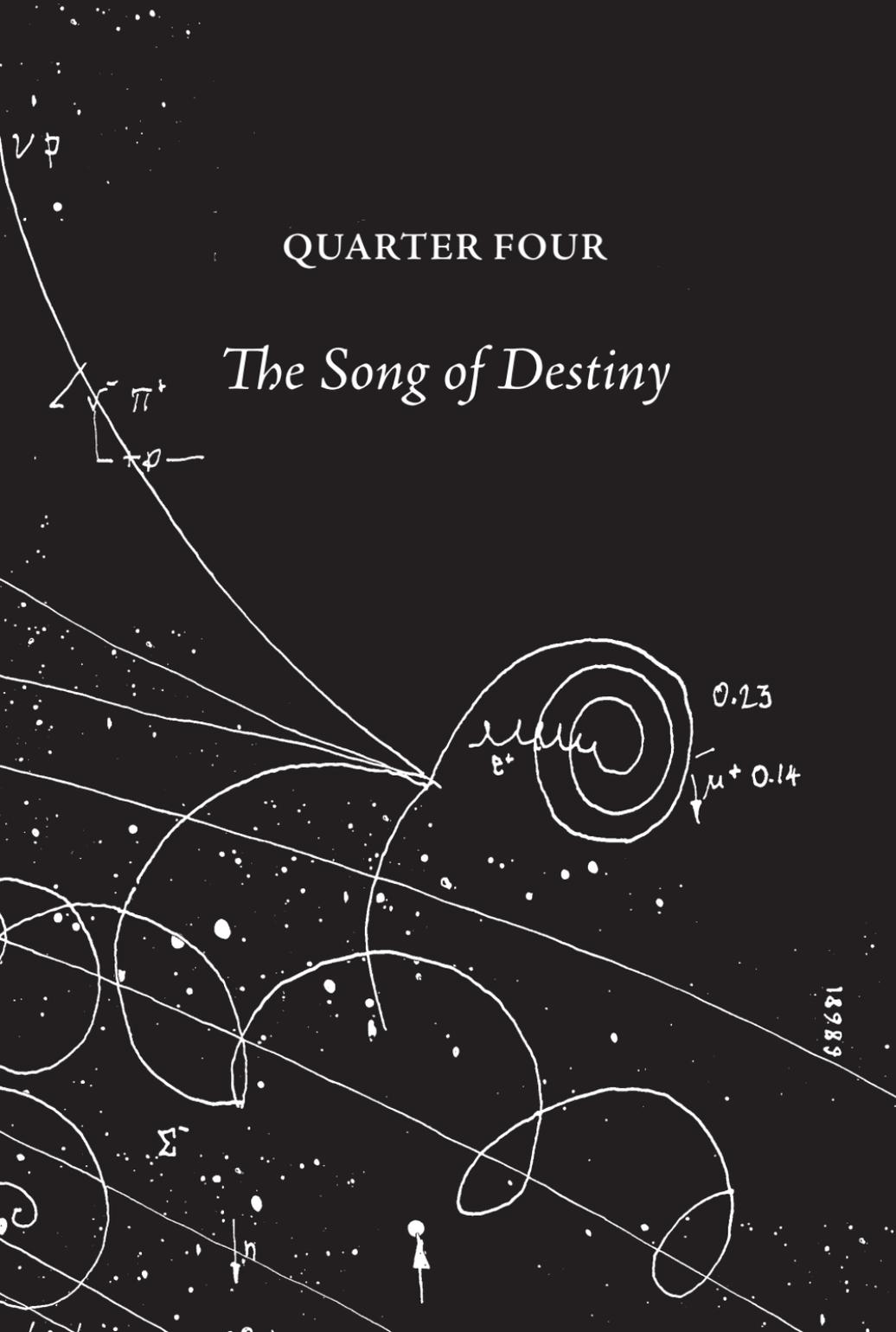


QUARTER FOUR

The Song of Destiny





Every night he dreams of things for which there are no words.

The dreams are strange and last all night.

Each night is ten years long.

His days, by comparison, are but a blink in time. Twelve hours is all he is allowed, twelve hours for waking, to do whatever work must be done, twelve hours every ten years. He has been woken twice so far; when he is woken for the third time, Sentinel Bowman is 425 trillion kilometres from home.

Twelve hours is more than enough, he decided, the first time he was awake. Without the need to eat, and with a ship that runs itself, there is, in truth, little to do but read the reports of the five sentinels who were awake before him, one per year, each for their own twelve hours. Once he's done that, he writes his own report as Sentinel Six, adds it to the log of the others, and posts all of them for the four sentinels who will wake after him to read, each in turn, a year apart.

Outside the twelve-hour slots during which the sentinels are awake, for the rest of each year the *Song of Destiny* ghosts on through space, carrying its cargo of five hundred who float somewhere between life and death, in Longsleep.

‘Yes,’ Bowman said aloud, to no one, the first time he woke. He wanted to see if his voice still worked after ten years in Sentinel Sleep, a gentler but vastly more expensive technique than that applied to the five hundred pods; hence the allowance of only ten sentinels to each wake, alone, for routine maintenance and surveillance of the cargo and other of the ship’s systems. Just twelve hours every year.

When the five hundred reach their destination, to wake from Longsleep will be a slow and laborious process. The bodies slowly raised from sub-zero temperatures; the oxygenated preservation fluid drained from lungs and airways; the sustaining gel pumped from their digestive system, and so on and so on. The whole method will take a day or more; the waker only fully recovering consciousness some hours after that. Despite the ship’s gravity system and constant bone/muscle stimulation on the sleepers, it will take weeks of recuperation before they can be said to be close to functioning normally.

The trials back on Earth for Longsleep were messy and dangerous; only after decades of research into each individual obstacle posed by trying to shut down aging to an absolute minimum was the technique declared ready for purpose.

Sentinel Sleep, a rival system developed during the same period, is another matter; it is an almost prohibitively expensive technology aboard a ship where every single thing is unimaginably expensive. But waking takes only half an hour or so, during which Bowman tries to hold on to the dreams that slip through his mind, teasing and taunting his memory like sand running through his fingers.

Once the waking process is over, the lid to Sentinel Bowman's pod beeps twice as it glides open. Then there is only the need to remove the feeding and excretion tubes from his body before he climbs out.

Now, waking for the third time, he stands on the gently curving deck, testing his legs against the force of gravity. Even though he designed several of the ship's systems himself, he still marvels at the elegant simplicity of the gravity system; artificial gravity created by the application of basic physics.

The ship is a Toroid Class IV; essentially a giant ring, two kilometres wide, spinning; spinning perpendicular to its direction of travel. The *Song of Destiny*, like all the Toroid IVs, spins at just the right velocity to create a continuous outward momentum almost equal to the force of gravity on Earth.

It is this ring that forms the living space of the ship, if living is the word that can be applied to the five hundred Longsleep pods and ten sentinel pods that line its walls. On deck, the gravitational effect is almost indistinguishable

from Earth. There are a couple of tell-tale signs that things are different: the gentle concave curve of the floor, and the fact that on the ship, gravity has a *supplementary direction*. Yes, the ship spins at its constant speed, so gravity pulls down just as it would on Earth, but then there is the rotation to consider; which means that walking one way round the ring of the ship's deck is more like walking uphill, and walking the other, something like walking down.

Even though, for the majority of the time, everyone on board the *Song* is sleeping, gravity is a necessary part of the fight against the long-term effects of space travel. And when the ship finally arrives at its destination and goes into orbit, then, of course, it will truly come into its own. For now, it merely makes the sentinel's work sessions that much easier than they would be in zero g.

The ship is completed by the five Bases; spaced out equally around the rim; like five stones spread around an eternity ring. Each is a replica of the other: inside are computer terminals where the sentinels work, chlorophyll banks, water recirculation systems, nutrient facilities, control systems for the ship's motor, and a planet-to-planet ship, or PTP.

'Yes,' says Bowman, as he wakes for the third time and climbs from his pod. He slides open the drawer from underneath the pod and pulls on his sentinel's uniform; dark grey, orange trim. Though he is effectively alone on the ship, it wouldn't seem right to go to work naked. Besides,

there are CCTV cameras in various key places on deck; and he knows that some of the other sentinels are women.

‘Yes,’ he says, ‘twelve hours are more than enough.’

He gazes down the length of the deck, as far as he can see until it curves upwards out of sight. Every ten metres is a Longsleep pod. After fifty Longsleep pods, there’s the pod of Sentinel Seven; fifty pods the other way would take him to Sentinel Five. Whenever he passes one of his colleagues, he waves a hand in greeting. He’s never met any of them, and never will, not till the journey is over. He saw a couple of them briefly on Venture Day, as they were installed in their pods for real, all practice done, a day or so before the ship left Earth orbit. He doesn’t know them, but they are just like him, he supposes; each chosen for their special skills and aptitude, to be the guardians of five hundred souls through space for a hundred years.

There is not the slightest sound and not the slightest movement anywhere. Inside each pod rests a just-living human being, each of them invisible.

Since the ship has a radius of a kilometre it’s over 1200 metres from one Base to the next; Bowman’s pod is four hundred metres from where he has spent twenty-four hours in the last twenty-six years; Base Four.

The lights are dim but grow brighter as he walks towards the Base. He catches sight of his reflection in one of the small ports in the wall of the ring. It faces forward, in the direction they’re flying, but there is no sense of movement at

all; the stars are too far away for them to change position as they travel. It's hard to be sure in this light, but there is his face, looking back at him; not a day older than when he first climbed into the sentinel pod, twenty-six years ago.

It doesn't seem possible, but it is. Yet it is only possible because his waking hours are so limited; there is no option; in eleven-and-a-half hours, he must be refitting himself in his pod, waiting to be taken into Sentinel Sleep again. If he misses just one deadline with the pod, his life expectancy will drop, vastly. The chances are he will not make it to destination a young man, if alive at all.

That's when it occurs to him; staring through the narrow porthole; he, like all the others on board the *Song of Destiny*, is not travelling through space in a straight line. The ship itself is travelling in a straight line, but the ship is spinning; so everyone on board is rotating as they move forward at something close to nine-tenths light speed.

He is travelling in a spiral; a helix through space.

He ambles into Base Four, shutting the door to the ring; only vaguely wondering why he is bothering to shut the door when there is no operational need to do so. If he'd stopped to think, he might have realised that the sight of pod after pod stretching away round the curve of the ring unnerves him slightly; as if he's flying a mortuary through space. He knows none of these people; none of them. That's

why he was chosen for his job as a sentinel, in part at least. Along with the other sentinels, it is his job simply to see them, and the ship, safely through space.

He flops down into the chair in front of Terminal Base Four, and that's when he sees the series of red lights blinking on the screen in front of him.

Six of the five hundred are dead.

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