

CONFLICT

FILED SIGNALS: EMBEDDED

VOID WHERE PROHIBITED

BY TALLY REYES

Warranty Void streams the jobs everyone else would call a near-death experience. Conflict spends an afternoon in the garage where the underground gene-forged scene gets its best footage, and finds out what it actually costs.

SECTION: FILED SIGNALS: EMBEDDED

FILED: LOST ANGELES // BARRICADIA, THE WASH //

2026-08-26

VERIFICATION: LOCATION CONFIRMED // SOME OF THIS CAN BE
VERIFIED.

EDITOR'S NOTE // I. DRESSLER

Reyes was commissioned for eight hundred words on underground creators and filed two thousand. I am running all of them. The crew did not ask to see this before it went out, which puts them ahead of every corporation that has ever sent us a correction. One meal was accepted in the garage and is declared in the footer, where that belongs.

walk into the garage in time to watch a two-hundred-kilo drone rig tip off its cradle and take out a folding table on the way down. Nobody screams. The two guys nearest the table just step sideways like they've rehearsed it, and that's the whole review, right there, before a single person's said a word to me.

My ears are still ringing a half-step higher than everyone else's in the room, which is the tax I pay for hearing a fuel line hiss two doors early. Underneath the crash I can already sort three separate smells: hot metal, grease running past its safe temperature, and something with cumin in it that has no business smelling that good six feet from a drone that just tried to commit a homicide.

I'm here for Conflict, technically. Officially I'm profiling Warrantly Void for the gene-forged culture issue, a tight word count on "underground creators," the kind of assignment a features editor gives you when she'd like you back in one piece. Unofficially I've been standing in this garage for four

minutes and I've already decided the tight word count is a promise somebody's going to have to break.

Ozzy's the one who peels off the wreckage first, waving like the drone rig didn't just make a break for it. "That's not the interview," he says. "That's Tuesday. Interview's over here, but first you gotta see this thing Cas built, because if I don't show somebody today I'm gonna lose my mind."

Three sentences in and he's already promised me something Cas never agreed to show anyone. I like him immediately. I make a note to like him slightly less by the end of the day, because that's usually how it goes with the fast, warm ones.

The garage is bigger than it has any right to be, a converted transit depot with a roll door at one end and, at the other, a kitchen corner cleaner than the rest of the building combined. A pot's going on a two-burner stove back there, up against the hot metal and the grease and, somehow, winning. High in the far corner, over a workbench buried in components, a camera sits bolted to a support beam at an angle that has seen everything that's ever happened in this room and told nobody. Nobody introduces it to me. Nobody has to. I've done enough of these to recognize a camera that's already famous inside its own building.

The walls do the rest of the introducing. A pegboard the size of a garage door, tools traced in marker outlines like a

crime scene for hardware. A row of helmets on a shelf, every one scratched differently, which is its own kind of signature. Taped above Cas's bench at eye level, a single laminated card just says MEASURE TWICE in six different handwritings, like it got added to one stroke at a time over years, by everyone who ever doubted it.

"You will eat something before you ask your questions," Grigor says, not turning from the stove, in the tone of a man stating tomorrow's sunrise. "A person who has not eaten asks worse questions. I have watched this happen many times."

I eat the something. It's good, unfairly good, the kind of good that makes you suspicious of a man's other life choices. I ask where a converted transit depot gets water pressure like this, and Grigor tells me, without pride, like it's a fact about the weather: the building's still running off a hard pipe from before the block switched to trucked water. The landlord doesn't know. Maybe I shouldn't print that part. I tell him I absolutely am printing that part. He shrugs like a man who expected exactly that answer and made his peace with it before the sentence finished leaving my mouth.

The thing Ozzy wants me to see turns out to be a manifold bracket. That's the least dramatic sentence in this entire piece, and it was apparently worth interrupting a woman's lunch for.

Cas doesn't look up. Cas is holding the bracket in one hand and a caliper in the other, reading off a number, then a second number, then a tolerance I can't parse and Cas clearly can, down to the decimal. "Four of the last six failures on this platform were this part," Cas says. "There's a fifth now. I made it in my kitchen for less than the manufacturer charges for one bolt. I'm overconditioning the whole batch before any of it goes near a vehicle. I'd like that in the article. The price specifically."

Nobody else in this garage would say the words "I'd like that in the article" out loud, but everybody else in this garage is thinking some version of it, all day, about something. That's the tell that took me longest to clock: five people running one crew, and every single one of them quietly managing their own coverage.



FIVE PEOPLE RUNNING ONE CREW, AND EVERY ONE OF THEM QUIETLY MANAGING THEIR OWN COVERAGE.

Theo doesn't say hello. Theo holds up a card. It reads, in handwriting so clean it looks printed: WELCOME. DON'T TOUCH THE TIMELINE. Underneath, smaller: SERIOUSLY. I ask a real question about editing philosophy, one I was proud of in the car on the way over, and Theo looks at me for exactly as long as it takes to decide I don't

need an answer, then goes back to a monitor with four windows open and no audio at all. Ozzy, unprompted, translates: "Theo says the philosophy is, shut up, let it run long enough to be true and short enough that Monitor Central doesn't try to buy it and ruin it." Theo doesn't confirm the translation. Theo also doesn't correct it, which from Theo is basically a notarized statement.

Nobody has to point out Danka. She's the one with her whole upper body already inside the wheel well of something that used to be a delivery van and is now, specifically, the color of a bruise. I ask what happened to the drone rig that nearly ended me forty minutes ago. "Cradle bolt," she says. "Cheap bolt." I wait for more. There isn't more. I ask about the chalkboard behind her, the one with the tally marks and the single word written twice and underlined twice. "Depends on the week," she says, and almost smiles, half a second behind her own joke, like the amusement had to take the long way around to find her face. The only four extra words she gives me all day arrive unprompted: "Check your floor first."

Somewhere around that chalkboard I finally ask the question Conflict actually sent me here to ask underneath all the others: where does the name come from. This is how I learn that a five-person crew can hold four different sworn histories of its own name and defend every one of them like scripture.

Ozzy says it's because their first liability waiver got voided by an actual insurance adjuster, using those exact words, out loud, while backing toward the door. Grigor says, without missing a stir of the pot, that it's simpler than that: everything in this garage was already broken when they found it, so the crew just named itself after the truth. Cas says, flatly, that the name predates the crew entirely and refers to one manufacturer's one bolt, and everybody else's version is folklore stacked on a supply-chain fact. Danka just points, without looking up, at a faded sticker slapped crooked on a tool cabinet: two words, block letters, peeling at one corner, the kind of sticker that's been there so long it's basically load-bearing. WARRANTY VOID. Somebody stamped it on a hundred things in this garage a long time ago. Irony the first time. Load-bearing every time after.

Four versions of one origin story, and not one of them is trying to win. Nobody here is protecting a brand. They're people who got tired of a manufacturer's fine print carrying more weight than their own judgment, put that feeling on a sticker one afternoon, and now the sticker's older than half their gear. I've sat across from actual corporations that spent six figures trying to manufacture an origin story with a tenth of this one's texture, and it wasn't close.

This garage draws an audience for one plain reason: it's honest about what gene-forged bodies are actually asked to do for a living, on camera, for money, with nobody

pretending the math is romantic. Compare that to whatever Monitor Central is running this month, all clean color grading and a voice actor reading captions a legal department wrote first. There's no contest.

Ozzy tells me, cheerfully, that a wellness brand offered them a sponsorship last quarter, some kind of joint-recovery supplement pitched at forged athletes, and the crew turned it down inside of an hour. "The money was fine," he says. "They wanted us to say the stuff works before we'd tried it, and I'll tell you all day that a bolt is cheap. I won't tell you a supplement works when I don't know yet." It's the most careful sentence I hear him say all day, and he says it faster than any of the reckless ones.

That's more or less the whole pitch of underground gene-forged content once you clear away the algorithm and the platform's cut: five people who post the footage even when the job goes sideways, no reshoot, no cleanup, who'll turn down a check before they'll fake a result.



IRONIC THE FIRST TIME. LOAD-BEARING EVERY TIME AFTER.

I don't see the setup coming. "Watch," Ozzy says, already lining up a modified quad bike against a ramp built out of what I'm fairly sure used to be a shipping container door, and for about a second and a half it's the best thing I've seen

all week: a gene-forged body doing exactly what it was built to do, clean, fast, certain.

The landing goes wrong by about four inches, which turns out to be the four inches that matter, and he comes off the bike into a stack of empty drums that go down like they've done this before. For one full second my whole body is back at a checkpoint outside a city I don't talk about: dust with the exact grit of ground glass, and the flat wet-cardboard sound a body makes hitting a surface it wasn't planning on hitting. My ears do the thing. My hands do the thing. I'm not thinking about my byline anymore. I'm thinking about a name I haven't said out loud in three years.

Ozzy sits up laughing before I've finished flinching. He's checking the bike's front end before he thinks to check his own. "Okay, that's going in the highlight reel," he says. "Don't cut the part where I land wrong. That's the whole point."

Grigor doesn't even turn from the stove. "I heard four drums," he says, mostly to the pot. "Usually it is three." Nobody explains what that means, and I decide I don't actually want it explained.

And just like that I'm back in a garage in Lost Angeles that smells like cumin and hot metal, and not somewhere else.

On the way out, Danka's still got her top half in the van. I ask if she wants to add anything for the record. "Tell them

the bolts are cheap," she says, without surfacing, "and the crew isn't." She's back at work before I can decide whether that was a joke.

At the door I look back once. The camera in the corner is still up there, red light on, having caught the drone rig, the manifold bracket, Theo's card, all of it, patient and cheap and permanently on, same as it's been since before I got here and same as it'll be long after this issue of Conflict is somebody's coaster. Under it, Grigor's pot is still going. Nobody's turned it off. Nobody's going to.

I check my floor on the way to the car, the way Danka told me to, forty minutes late and for no reason I can name. There's nothing there.

There never is, until there is.

TELL THEM THE BOLTS ARE CHEAP, AND THE CREW ISN'T.

CONFLICT // FILED SIGNALS: EMBEDDED // FILING

2026-08-26

SUBJECT: WARRANTY VOID // FIVE-OPERATOR SPLICE, THE
WASH, BARRICADIA

COMMISSIONED: 800 WORDS // FILED: 2,010

ORIGIN STORIES COLLECTED: FOUR // CORROBORATED: NONE

CONFLICT // VOID WHERE PROHIBITED

SPONSORSHIP DECLINED: JOINT-RECOVERY SUPPLEMENT, LAST
QUARTER

INJURIES ON THE RECORD: NONE ADMITTED

ONE MEAL ACCEPTED // DECLARED

EDITOR: INES DRESSLER

SOME OF THIS CAN BE VERIFIED.

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