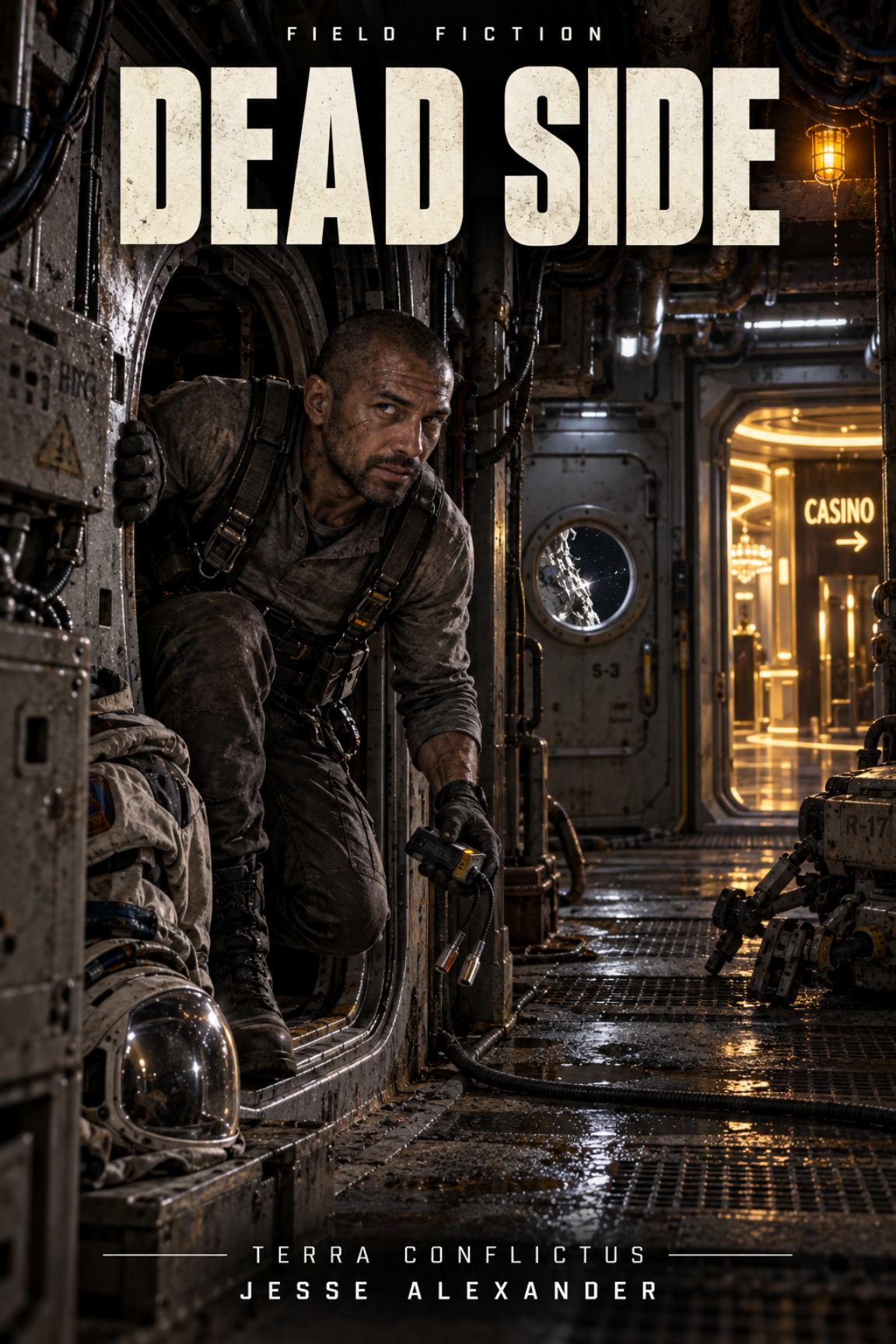


FIELD FICTION

DEAD SIDE



TERRA CONFLICTUS
JESSE ALEXANDER

PART ONE — THE CALL

THE WHEEL

The dome made its own night, and Soren ran through it. He had stopped being a man named Soren about forty hours ago, somewhere back where the cataloged ferns gave way to the things that had no catalog. Now he was just the thing that moved, and he moved the way Halcyon had drilled into him, low, broken-rhythmed, never a straight line for more than three strides. Around him the Garden breathed. He could hear it doing that, the long wet draw and sigh of a canopy the size of a sea, and he had learned in the worst possible way that it was not weather. Weather did not turn its head.

The ground here was warm. That was the part the briefing had gotten wrong, or had not known. It described an installation. A sealed Architect site, dormant, valuable, find it and fix it and walk. Nobody had said the soil would be warm under his boots like the flank of something sleeping, or that the ferns would lean after him as he passed, slow, the way grass leans in a current. He had a locator the size of a thumb in his fist and a charge in it that would not last and a half-kilometer of black living dark between him and the spot

where the standing wave broke surface, and he had been told that was all he needed.

He reached the rise. Below it the trees fell away into a clearing that was not a clearing, a flat scab of pale amber-flecked rock with the sky-glow of the failing dome smeared across it, and that was the place. The signal ran closest here. He could feel it in his back teeth, a pressure, the sense of standing too near a struck bell after the sound is gone.

He went down on one knee and thumbed the locator live.

It needed a horizon. He angled it up toward the dome's cracked seam where a thread of real starlight bled in from the far side that no one on Earth could see, and he held it there with both hands shaking and waited for the lock, and the canopy behind him stopped breathing.

He noticed the silence before he understood it. Forty hours had taught him that much. The draw and sigh had quit, all at once, the whole bowl of the Garden holding one breath, and Soren did not turn around, because turning around was three quarters of a second he did not have, and instead he pressed the transmit stud and said it into the throat mic, fast, flat, the two words they had paid for.

"I found it."

The locator chirped. Acquiring. Not yet sent.

The treeline came apart.

He never got the shape of it whole. He got pieces, the way you get a wreck you are already inside of. Plates of

something dark and wet-shining, a width that should not have moved as fast as it moved, a smell like hot mineral and crushed green. It came across the false clearing without hurry and without sound until the last of it, and the last of it was very loud. The locator went out of his hands. He did not feel it leave. He was looking at the dome seam and the thread of real stars, thinking that the far side never faced home, thinking that no one would ever know, and the warm ground came up to meet him and the Garden, having found the splinter, began, patiently, to close.

The transmit indicator was still blinking acquiring when it stopped.

Twelve hundred kilometers up and a long way around the dark, the Wheel was throwing rocks at itself.

Jason watched it do that from inside one of the rocks. He had a name for the rock, privately, because a thief gives a name to anything he is about to trust his life to, and he called it the egg. It was a salvage-grade survey shell with a stolen drive and a skin of crushed regolith slag glued over the hull so that on the Wheel's point-defense returns it read as exactly what nine thousand other tumbling lumps out here read as. Junk. Drift. The kind of rock the station's guns

swatted forty times an hour without a human ever looking at the trace.

The trick was the forty times an hour. The trick was that the guns had a rhythm, because everything built by people had a rhythm, and Jason had spent three shifts in the egg with the heat down and the lights off, drinking recycled water that tasted like a battery, learning it. The point-defense slaved to a predictive grid. It fired on vector, not on identity. It killed the rocks whose paths crossed the keep-out volume around the ring, and it ignored the rocks that grazed the edge and tumbled on, and the whole art of coming aboard the Wheel uninvited was making the egg one of the second kind right up until the half second it became the first.

He had the firing pattern in his head as a feeling more than a chart. That was the part he never explained to anyone, because the part you explain is the part they can take from you. He watched the gun flashes wink along the ring's underbelly, soft and white, and somewhere under his sternum the next one announced itself before it came. Left battery. Now.

It came. Left battery.

"There you are," Jason said, to nobody, to the gun, to the thing in his chest that knew which way the rock would bounce a half second early. He called it luck. Luck was a word with no warranty on it, and a man like him needed at least one of those.

He let the egg tumble. He did not steer, because steering was a vector and a vector was a death sentence out here. He nudged. He waited. He read the rhythm and the gaps in the rhythm and he fed the drive in little coughs that never lasted long enough to draw a clean track, and the Wheel grew in the forward port from a bright coin to a wheel to a wall, a ring of welded derelict bones and stolen modules turning slow against the stars, lit up the way only a place with no flag gets lit, gaudy, mismatched, every window a different idea of the law.

His hands were steady. He noticed that, the way he always noticed it, with a small clinical gratitude, because his hands were not always steady anymore. He was a year past the warranty on a build that had been cheap when it was new. Shelf stock. A commercial knockoff of a reflex template that had itself been a knockoff, batch-printed for somebody's notion of a useful body and sold off the rack to whoever could not afford bespoke, which had been Jason, always, his whole life, whoever could not afford bespoke. He had the drift to prove it. Some mornings the left hand buzzed and would not close clean, and there were two capsules left in the strip taped inside his collar, the gray ones, the ones that bought a forged body a few more good weeks before the genome started reading its own instructions wrong. The gray ones cost in chits what most of the Wheel cleared in a month. That was the whole reason he was riding a rock at a

wall of guns. The Halcyon money bought capsules. The Halcyon money bought time. A man with a drift clock does not turn down the thing that slows the clock.

He did not think about Halcyon more than that. He had learned not to. They had given him a vault, a take, a window, and a small flat object sewn into the lining of his jacket that he was not to think about either, and a thief who thinks too hard about the man who hired him stops watching the room.

The wall filled the port.

Jason killed the drive, went limp in the harness, and let the egg graze the keep-out volume on a dead tumble exactly the way ten thousand harmless rocks had grazed it before him. The left battery tracked him for a quarter second. He felt it the way you feel a stranger's eyes on the back of your neck in a crowd, and he felt it decide he was nothing, and pass on.

The egg kissed the hull plating below a docking spur where the running lights did not reach. Mag-clamps bit. Jason hung there a moment in the dark against the skin of the station, listening to his own breath in the suit, and then he went to work.

A station tells you everything if you let it.

Jason read the Wheel the way the gene-forge had taught him to read a card table, by what the place was not doing. He came in through a maintenance trunk below the docking spur, a crawlspace meant for repair drones, and the first thing he learned was that the drones were not running. No service traffic in the trunk, no fresh scuff on the rails, a film of dust on the conduit that should have been wiped daily. The Wheel did not maintain its own bones. It spent its money where the money showed, on the floors and the lights and the guns, and let the inside rot, and that was a map. Rot told him where nobody walked.

He stripped the vac suit in the trunk and left it folded behind a junction box where he could find it again coming out, if there was a coming out. Under it he wore the clothes of a man with no faction and no flag, gray, unmarked, deliberately cheap. Dry. Stateless. A freelancer voids his registration the day he goes private, and a forged body with no flag in its cells is a body nobody will claim and nobody will protect, and Jason had made an art of looking like exactly that, because nobody robs you of a citizenship you already threw away.

He moved up through the Wheel toward the vault, and the station unrolled around him like a hand of cards he had already counted.

The gambling floor he crossed by reading the crowd, not the cameras. Cameras you could find. People you had to feel.

He walked the edge of a craps pit where a Croc-stock bruiser the size of a door was losing badly and getting loud about it, and Jason used the man the way you use a fire, for the light it throws and the way everyone watches it instead of you. He clocked the floor security by their stillness in a room full of motion. He clocked the amber fence by the two quiet men standing too close to a nothing little kiosk. He took a chit token off a drunk PRC Tiger at the rail without breaking stride, not because he needed it but because his left hand had buzzed and he wanted to know it still worked, and it did, the token was in his sleeve and the drunk never felt the warranty's-up tremor that had almost cost him the lift, and Jason let out a breath he had not known he was holding.

Past the floor the lights got worse and the people got fewer, and that was the vault approach. He could feel it before he could see it, the way you can feel the deep end of a pool. The corridor narrowed. The cheap carpet gave out to bare deck. A pressure door, and beyond it the counting room, and beyond that the slugs, the portable chits the Wheel kept hard and cold for the deals that could not touch a network, the kind of money that only moves where there is no flag to tax it.

Two guards on the pressure door. Both forged, both bored, one of them running a stim chew that had him blinking too much. Jason watched them from the dark of the corridor's last bend for ninety seconds, and the knack in his

chest told him the blinking one would look left when the lights stuttered, because the lights stuttered every forty seconds, the Wheel's tired grid, and the man had learned without learning it to glance toward the failing panel each time it flickered.

Jason waited for the stutter, and on the stutter he crossed.

He went between them in the dark in the second the blinking guard looked left and the other guard was watching the blinking guard, which is what tired people do, they watch each other instead of the room, and he was through the gap and flat against the inside of the door frame with the override bridge already out of his sleeve and clipped across the lock's service port. The door thought about it. Jason's hand did not buzz. The door opened a hand's width, silent, and he poured through the gap and the door closed behind him on its own soft pneumatics and the two guards stood in the corridor watching each other and guarding nothing.

The counting room was dark and cold and smelled of money, which is to say of nothing, of clean ozone and machine oil. Racks of slug cassettes glowed faint amber in their cradles. Jason stood in the doorway and read the room one more time, by what it was not doing, and what it was not doing was being empty.

Someone was already there.

She was at the far rack, a tall shape against the amber glow, loading slug cassettes into a hard case with the unhurried economy of a person who had timed the guards too. Jason's knack lit up under his sternum, not a warning exactly, more like the moment a card you did not expect turns face up. He froze in the doorway, and the woman did not turn around, and she said, in a low even voice with no surprise in it at all, "You're late, Jackdaw."

He knew her by the build before he knew her by anything else.

She turned, and the amber light came up the side of a body that had cost more than the whole Wheel cleared in a year. Bespoke. Not commercial, not template, not shelf. A thing designed from the blood out for one purpose, every line of it efficient and intentional in a way Jason's batch-printed frame would never be, and his thief's eye read the price tag the way it read everything, automatically, with envy. She moved when she turned and the movement told him the rest. Fast. Hard. Built for a gravity or a place that asked more of a body than this corridor of stolen modules ever would. She had a sidearm at her hip that had not cleared leather, and the fact that it had not cleared leather

was, he understood, a courtesy she was extending him and could withdraw.

"Kir," he said. He had only ever had a name and a vault and a window. He had pictured the name attached to a broker, a fixer, a voice on a dead drop. Not this.

"You were supposed to be here twenty minutes ago," she said. She did not stop loading the case. "I assumed the guns got you."

"The guns have a rhythm."

"Everyone says that. The ones who say it from inside are rarer." She clicked the last cassette home. "Step away from the door."

"You hired me to crack this room," Jason said, not stepping away from the door. "You're standing in it. With the take. Already in a case." He let the corner of his mouth go up, because charm was a tool and he kept all his tools sharp.

"I'm trying to work out which one of us is the thief."

"Both of us. That was always the arrangement." She lifted the case. It was heavy, slug cassettes were dense, and she lifted it like it was empty, and Jason filed that away with the price tag and the way she moved. "You crack the room. I carry the take. You didn't trust me to crack it and I don't trust you to carry it. That's not an insult, Jackdaw, it's just arithmetic."

"It's a little bit of an insult."

"Step. Away. From the door."

He did not, and that was the moment the room turned, because the knack told him a half second early, the small bright certainty that the next card was bad, and he was already moving when the floor security came through the pressure door behind him.

He did not see them. He felt the door's pneumatics breathe and he was dropping under the line of it before it finished, and the stun round that should have taken him in the spine went over his bent back and hit the slug rack, and then the counting room was full of noise and bodies.

What he remembered afterward was Kir.

He moved the way he always moved, low, broken, never where the round was, using the racks for cover and the dark for friends, picking the gap and pouring through it, a card mechanic's economy applied to staying alive. He was good at it. He had never won a fight he could have walked out of instead, and he did not try to win this one, he tried to leave it, and he was good at leaving.

She did not leave. She arrived.

The first guard through she took off his feet before he had the room oriented, a movement so fast and so total that Jason's eye lost the middle of it, a body that was upright and a body that was down with nothing legible between. The second she put through the slug rack. She fought the way her build was priced, without waste, without flourish, a bespoke killing machine moving at a speed his shelf-stock reflexes

could only read in snapshots, and Jason, flat against the far wall with a stun round still ringing in the deck beside his head, found that the part of him that should have been terrified was instead, quietly, admiring the workmanship.

"Stay down or be useful," she said, not even breathing hard.

"I'm being useful," Jason said, and he was, because while she was the storm in the center of the room he had been at the edge of it, and at the edge of it he had reached the door panel, and the door was the only thing in the Wheel that mattered now. He bridged it. He locked the pressure door from the inside with the two stunned guards inside it and the floor security still piling up in the corridor beyond, and somewhere above them the station's tired grid stuttered, forty seconds, right on time, and the lights went out and came back, and in the dark Jason found Kir's arm and said, "There's a maintenance trunk. Service door, far corner, behind the cold rack. They won't have drones in it because they don't run drones. Bring the case."

She looked at him for a quarter second in the amber dark, recalculating, and he watched her decide he was worth one more minute.

"After you," she said.

The alarm started as they reached the cold rack, the whole Wheel waking up around the breach, klaxons and the heavier thud of bulkheads sealing, and Jason got the service

door open with the case banging his shins and the two of them went down into the dark of the trunk that nobody maintained, a thief who carried no money and a killer who carried it all, two people who did not trust each other and had, suddenly and completely, no one else.

"You said home," Jason said, as they ran the dark rails toward the docking spur and his folded vac suit and the egg clamped to the hull. He had caught it in the counting room, something she had said to the broker channel before he arrived, a fragment off her throat mic he had not been meant to hear. *Home needs it. Tell them home needs it by the next window.* "Back there. You said the take had to get home. Whose home, Kir?"

"Run," she said.

He ran.

THE ARMS DEAL

Kir's ship did not have a name on the hull, and Jason respected that.

It was a hard little frontier hauler, lean and ugly and fast, the kind of ship a person buys to do one thing well and never paints. Jason came aboard through the airlock with the slug case still on Kir's shoulder and his own hands empty, which

was the arrangement, and he stood dripping the cold of the egg's cargo hold off his suit and looked around the cargo bay at a stack of empty crate cradles bolted to the deck, big ones, rated for mass, and he started doing arithmetic of his own.

"You're not hauling money home," he said. "You're hauling money out here to turn it into something heavy."

Nobody answered, because nobody was in the bay yet but him, and then somebody was.

The young man who came down the ladder from the crew deck was the same expensive build as Kir and put together completely differently. Same bespoke lines, same designed-from-the-blood efficiency, but where Kir wore it like a closed fist this one wore it like a kid who had grown into a body too big and was delighted about it. Buff, broad, open-faced, grinning before he had a reason to. He had the careful, slightly overpolished manners of someone who had learned them from records instead of from people.

"You're the outworlder," the young man said, and he said outworlder the way other people said treasure. "You came in on a rock. Through the point-defense. Kir said you'd be insufferable about it."

"Did she."

"She said worse than that." He stuck out a hand, a real one, palm open, and Jason shook it and felt the strength held carefully back in it, a man who had been taught his whole life to be gentle with the fragile. "Welf. I run the bird. Is it true

the guns have a rhythm? What's it like, the floor? I've seen records of the Wheel, the gambling floor, all those people from all those places who just, who just go where they want." He stopped, embarrassed by his own appetite, and Jason recognized the hunger because he had spent his life on the other side of it, the side where you went where you wanted because nowhere wanted you.

"It's loud," Jason said. "It smells. Half of them are losing money they don't have and the other half are taking it. You'd love it."

"I would," Welf said, with total sincerity. "I really would."

Kir came past with the case. "Don't tell him about the floor."

"He asked."

"He asks everyone everything." She set the case in a cradle and stood over it, and Jason watched her hands, which had not let go of the case until it was locked down. "Welf. Strap him in somewhere out of the way and don't tell him our business."

"She's like this," Welf said to Jason, conspiratorially, when she had gone forward. "She runs hot. You learn to read past it."

"Hard case," Jason agreed, easy, the way you agree with a thing to keep a conversation moving. "I've met fences softer than your sister."

Welf's grin went out. Not angry. Just gone, like a light. "She's my sister," he said.

Jason heard the change and felt the small flat shame of having stepped on something, which surprised him, because he did not usually have room in him for shame on a job. "I'm sorry," he said, and meant it, which surprised him more.

Welf looked at him for a second, weighing it, and the grin came halfway back, gentler. "You're right," he said. "She is a hard case. But she's my sister." And that was the whole of it, and Jason understood he had just been handed the one rule of this ship that mattered, by the only person on it who would tell him a true thing for free.

The brokers were waiting at a derelict tug platform two windows out, in the dark between the Wheel and the rock fields, and Jason knew it was a kill before the docking collar sealed.

He did not know how he knew. He never did. The knack gave him the conclusion and kept the reasoning for itself, and the conclusion arrived as a cold spot under his sternum the moment the broker hull thudded against theirs, the same cold he had felt in the counting room a half second before the door breathed. He was strapped into a jump seat in the cargo bay where Welf had put him, out of the way, and he

unstrapped himself quietly while the collar pressurized and he put his back to a crate cradle and he watched the inner lock and waited for the bad card to turn over.

Kir and Welf went to the lock to do the deal. The slug case sat in its cradle, paid and counted. Through the open lock Jason could see the broker bay, a cold cavern of a thing, three crates already floated halfway across the gap on tethers, big ones, the heavy weapons crates this whole stupid dangerous chain of theft had been for. He saw the brokers, four of them, frontier stock, dressed dry like him, and he saw the fifth thing he was not supposed to see, the man on the gantry above the bay with the cutting laser already half-raised, and he opened his mouth to call it.

The brokers moved first.

It went the way these things go, fast and ugly and without speeches. The lead broker reached for Kir's case and the man on the gantry brought the laser up and Welf was already moving, and then the bay was a fight, and Jason did the only thing he had ever done in a fight, which was not be in it.

He watched Kir and Welf work, in snapshots, between the cradles he used for cover. They fought like the build they wore, like the most expensive thing in any room, two huge bodies moving at a speed the brokers' eyes could not hold, and the brokers were good and it did not matter. Welf took the man off the gantry without seeming to climb to him. Kir went through the lead broker and the one behind him in a

single line. It was terrible and it was beautiful and it was, Jason understood, completely insufficient, because the brokers had never meant to win the fight. The fight was the distraction. He felt the cold spot move, felt the wrongness relocate, and he turned his head and saw the panel the fourth broker had been standing in front of the whole time, the one nobody was fighting, and the broker was gone and the panel was open and a red count was running down on it, and Jason read demolition charges off a frontier hull the way he read everything, by what it was doing, and what it was doing was getting ready to kill all of them and erase the deal.

"It's rigged," he shouted, across the fight, into the noise. "The hull. They're not trying to win, they're trying to bury it. We've got, I don't know, ninety seconds."

Kir came out of the fight with blood on her that was not hers and looked at the count and her face did the arithmetic Jason had already done and came out the same place. "The crates," she said. "We don't leave without the crates."

"The crates weigh more than this ship."

"We don't leave without them."

And there it was, the thing under all of it, the reason a thief had nearly died at a wall of guns, the heavy answer this whole chain had been bending toward. Those crates were going somewhere they were needed worse than money. Jason looked at the count, at the floated tonnage on its slack tethers in the broker bay, at the two bespoke killers who

would carry a mountain on their backs before they left it behind, and he stopped thinking like a thief and started thinking like a thief, which is to say he looked for the one cheat in the room that nobody else could see.

The cheat was the floor.

"How long can you hold your breath," Jason said, already moving.

"Long," said Welf, which on a deathworld build was not a figure of speech.

"Good. Get to the bay. Both of you. Get on the crates and get ready to push."

"Push them where," Kir said, "they mass three tonnes each, they're not going to," and then she stopped, because she had followed him with her eyes and seen where he was going, which was the cargo bay's grav plate junction, the ugly stitched-in artificial gravity every frontier hauler ran because the cheap ones could not afford it built into the hull, the kind you bolted on after and patched and never trusted. "You can't kill the gravity," she said. "We're docked. The seals."

"The seals are rated for vac. You said it yourself, the case is hauled in a bay rated for mass." He had the junction panel off. His left hand buzzed, the warranty's-up tremor coming up his arm at exactly the wrong moment, and he breathed

through it and let the knack take the fine work, and the knack knew which lead was the inhibitor and which was the dead-man and which one, pulled in which order, would drop the field without tripping the lock alarms that would seal the bay and trap the crates inside it. He pulled them in the order the cold certainty handed him. "When the floor lets go, everything in here weighs nothing. Three tonnes of nothing pushes as easy as three grams of nothing. You point it and you push it and it goes, all the way out the lock and across the gap and into our bay, and you don't stop it, because the only hard part about moving tonnage is the part where it has weight, and I'm about to take the weight off."

"You're insane," Kir said, but she was already at the lock, already on the nearest tether, already pulling Welf with her.

"The count," Welf said.

Jason looked at the red number through the lock. Forty. "Push fast," he said, and killed the gravity.

The world let go.

It was the cleanest thing Jason had felt in years, the moment the stitched-in field died and the whole weight of everything simply ceased, his own body lifting an inch off the deck, the loose blood from the fight rising into the air in dark beads, the slug case drifting up out of its cradle and turning slow. And the crates. The three-tonne weapons crates in the broker bay, which a moment ago no two people alive could have shifted, hung suddenly weightless on their slack

tethers, and Welf put one enormous hand against the first of them and pushed, and it went.

It went across the gap into the dark like a thing thrown by a god, and Welf was already on the second, and Kir on the third, and Jason hauled himself hand over hand back to the lock through air full of floating beads of other men's blood and grabbed the slug case as it drifted past because old habits, because he was the thief and the thief carries nothing and takes everything, and he shoved the case ahead of him through the lock and into their own bay where it bounced soft off the far cradle and hung there.

The count was at twelve when the last crate cleared the lock.

"Seal it," Jason said, "seal it, seal it," and Kir hit the lock and the collar blew its bolts and the broker hull drifted free of them at the speed of nothing, and Welf got back to the grav junction and gave Jason a look, and Jason said, "Now," and gave the floor back its weight, and three tonnes of weapons crates dropped the last half-meter into the cradles of their own bay and the deck rang like a struck bell and the case hit the deck and the blood hit the deck in a soft red rain and Kir was already forward at the controls kicking them off the dead tug platform with everything the ugly little ship had.

The broker hull went up behind them as a white silence in the port, no sound out here, just light, a flower of it

blooming where four frontier brokers and their double-cross and their three-tonne arithmetic had been, and the shockwave was only a hard shove that Kir's ship rode out into the dark, and then it was over, and the bay was quiet, and the three of them hung in the after-quiet breathing.

Jason floated a bead of someone else's blood off his cheek and looked at the crates in their cradles, secure, delivered, and he started, helplessly, to laugh.

"He's good," Welf said, forward, later, with the rock fields behind them and the dark ahead. He said it like a gift he was giving Jason in front of Jason, which Jason had learned was simply how Welf gave things. "Kir. He killed the floor. Nobody else would have thought to kill the floor."

"He's useful," Kir said, and did not look up from the controls. "That's worse."

Jason was strapped into the jump seat again, out of the way again, and he heard the difference and understood it before Welf did, because reading a room was the one thing his cheap build had never failed at. He had been a liability she could dump and now he was an asset she could not, and an asset who knows too much is a problem that does not have a clean solution, and Kir was a woman who liked clean solutions.

"You can let me off at the next platform," Jason said, mildly, testing the seam. "You've got your crates. I've got my cut. No hard feelings about the floor."

"There isn't a next platform," Kir said. "Not on this heading."

"Then where's the heading."

She was quiet for a moment, and Welf was quiet, and Jason felt the cold spot under his sternum that was not danger this time, that was something larger and slower, the sense of a door closing very softly somewhere behind him.

"We can't put him off," Welf said, gently, to his sister. "There's no time. You know there's no time. The next window's already tight. If we burn a stop we miss it and the crates don't get home when home needs them." He turned to Jason, and the warmth was back, and under the warmth was something Jason had not expected, a kind of apology. "You'll come with us. It's all right. You'll see it. Hardly anyone gets to see it."

"See what," Jason said.

"Home," Welf said, and his whole sheltered hungry face lit up with a thing close to love. "The Garden."

The word went through Jason like the chirp of a locator acquiring.

He kept his face easy. That was the build, that was the craft, the one thing the warranty had not voided, the trained stillness of a man who has just been dealt the best hand of

his life across a table from people who would kill him if they saw it land. The Garden. The name Halcyon had paid him a fortune in capsules and chits to find, the name they had sewn a small flat object into his jacket to mark, the name a dead man had said into a throat mic somewhere that Jason would never know about. Not a place. A score. The score, the one at the bottom of every score he had ever taken, the richest secret off Earth, and these two had it for a home, and they were about to carry him into the middle of it strapped into their own jump seat with their own gratitude.

"The Garden," Jason said. He let a little wonder into it. Wonder was easy to fake when you felt it. "Never heard of it."

"No," Welf said, happily. "Nobody has. That's the whole point."

Kir said nothing. She had not looked back at him once. But Jason watched the set of her shoulders at the controls, the bespoke economy of a body that wasted no motion, and he understood that she had not decided he was worth keeping, only that there was no time to be rid of him, and that those were different things, and that one of them would expire.

He settled back into the straps. Outside the port the dark turned slowly toward the far side of the moon, the one face nobody on Earth could see, and somewhere under it a living thing the size of a sea breathed in and out and waited, and Jason Dalt, stateless, shelf-stock, a year past his warranty,

with the biggest score of his life ahead of him and a locator he was trying very hard not to think about sewn into his jacket, closed his eyes and let the ship carry him toward it, having gotten exactly what he came for and no way at all back off the ship that was bringing it.

The drift clock ticked in his left hand. He breathed through it. He had nowhere to be but exactly here, which for the first time in his life was the same as having nowhere to go.

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PART TWO — THE TRIALS

FAR SIDE

The moon had a back nobody had ever drawn.

Jason knew that much from the shipping he had run cargo for, years ago, before he went freelance and the registration died in his cells. The near side was mapped down to the meter, every relay and arcology yard and abandoned dig tagged and lit. The far side was a gap in the data where the maps just stopped, a hemisphere the blocs had agreed not to look at because there was nothing there worth the fuel. He had believed that the way you believe a story that costs you nothing.

He stood at the rail of the descent bay and watched the gap come up to meet him, and the gap was not empty.

It was a wound in the regolith, a sealed crater rimmed in old structure, and over it lay a skin. From altitude the skin looked like frost, like the gray-green bloom on a dead man's coin. Then the ship banked and the skin caught the bay lights and he saw it move. Slow weather turned under a dome he could not see the edges of, cloud stacked on cloud, a flicker deep in the gray that he understood after a second

was lightning. Weather. On the far side of the moon. Inside a bottle nobody on Earth knew was corked.

"You are reading it wrong," Kir said. She had come up behind him the way she did everything, without the courtesy of sound. "Whatever you are reading."

"I am reading a hole in the data," Jason said. "And a hole in the data is where I keep my money."

"It is called the Garden." She did not look at it the way he looked at it. She looked at it the way you look at a thing you were issued instead of given. "Forty years sealed. It was supposed to be dead. It is not dead. It makes its own air and its own water and its own storms, and it grew."

"Grew into what."

"Into the only thing that has ever tried to kill my whole family and mostly failed." She said it flat, no weight on it, a fact off a manifest. "The gravity is stitched. The old structure holds the floor down in places and lets it go in others, so you will be heavy in one room and light in the next and your stock instinct will lie to you about both. The weather you are admiring drops quakes. The structure is failing and every year it shudders worse. The flora hunts. The fauna drills." She finally turned and looked at him, and there was nothing in it he could use. "There is one human place in all of it. A City. It is losing."

"To a garden."

"To the Garden." She let the difference sit. "You will keep that mouth shut on the floor. My father does not have my patience."

She left him at the rail. Jason put his hand on the cold rail and asked the ship the question you ask when the intel has stopped being intel and started being a place you are going to die in, and the ship gave him the only honest answer a ship ever gives, which is the long mechanical groan of a hull deciding whether it would survive the next thing.

His knack moved under his sternum. Not a thought. A lean, the way a card leans before you turn it, the way the rock used to lean a half second before it bounced wrong. It had been leaning since they crossed the terminator into the dark face. He had spent a life learning to trust the lean and not to name it, and it was telling him, low and constant, that the place under the gray skin was paying attention.

He told it to shut up the same way he told everything to shut up. He had a locator sewn flat into the lining of his jacket, a Halcyon beacon the size of a thumbnail, and the lean had not warned him about that. It never warned him about the thing he was carrying. Only the room he was walking into.

They went down in coffins.

That was the word for it, whatever the manifest called them. Single-occupant entry cylinders, padded, sealed, dropped from the descent bay through a lock in the dome and run down a cable to the City on the floor. Welf had explained it on the way, cheerful, hands moving, the way he explained everything, as if Jason were a tourist and not cargo.

"You hate it for thirty seconds," Welf had said. "Then you are home." He had caught himself on the word and laughed at it, a big warm sound in a big warm chest. "Then you are down. Down is the word."

Jason rode his coffin into the gray with his arms crossed over the locator and his breath loud in his own ears. The cylinder bucked. The dome's weather grabbed it and shook it and let it go, and through the small fogged port he saw a flicker that was either lightning or the Garden looking in at him, and his knack leaned so hard he tasted metal.

The cylinder hit the lock at the bottom and stopped, and a green light came on, and a voice that was not Welf's said the cycle was complete and he could disengage.

He disengaged. He got the faceplate of the cylinder open a hand's width, the recycled air of the place coming in at him thick and wet and green, an air with too much in it, and something hit the faceplate from outside.

It hit it the way a thrown wrench hits a window. Then it stayed.

He had a half second of his knack screaming and then he was looking at it through the gap, close enough to fog the plate with its own breath. It was the size of a cat and it was wrong in every joint. It had too many legs and they were barbed and they had it locked to the curve of the cylinder, and it had a face that was mostly a single drilling part, a wet rotary thing of black chitin already turning, already grinding at the seam where the faceplate met the frame, and it was through the first layer before Jason's body finished deciding to flinch.

Stock instinct said push it off. He had the experience to know stock instinct was about to get his hand taken off, so he overrode it and did the thing he always did, which was nothing useful and everything mobile. He let go of the faceplate and threw his weight the other way, deep into the coffin, away from the seam, and the creature followed the gap and got its drilling face into the cylinder up to what passed for its shoulders, and the sound it made inside the small space was the worst sound he had heard with his own ears.

Then a gloved hand came out of the green air, took the creature by the back of its body, and held it.

The hand belonged to an armored soldier. Jason got that much through the gap, a shape in segmented plate the color of old bone, a faceless helm, a body that moved with the unhurried economy of something that had done this exact

thing ten thousand mornings. The soldier held the drilling creature off the cylinder, and it drilled at the gauntlet and did nothing to the gauntlet, and the soldier put the muzzle of a sidearm against it without seeming to draw the sidearm, and a flat report folded the creature in half and it came apart.

The soldier flicked the pieces off the glove. The helm tipped a few degrees, reading Jason in the coffin the way you read a parcel for the address.

"Out," the soldier said. A woman's voice, bored, behind the plate. "Before the next one smells the first one."

Jason came out of the coffin into the Garden's first morning, into wet green light and the smell of a thing that was alive in every direction, and his luck leaned and leaned and would not stop, and he understood, standing on the floor of the world he had been paid to find, that the lean was not warning him about a creature.

It was the place. The whole place had noticed the door open.

The City was a fist.

That was the read his thief's eye gave him before anything else, before he could put faction or function to it. Everything about the place was built to take a hit and give nothing back.

The inner dome over the City proper was a second skin under the great dome, lower, scabbed with patch-plate where it had cracked and been cracked again, and through the cracks the green weather of the Garden pressed down like water on a hull. Under it the City was bunkers. Squat ferrocrete, blast doors, firing slits, a grain of paranoia in every line of it. Guns on the walls were not pointed out at an enemy gate. They were pointed up. At the air.

A bunker losing a siege. He had broken into enough hard places to know the difference between a fortress that was confident and a fortress that was afraid, and this one was afraid the way a man is afraid who has been awake for twenty years.

They walked him in under guard, Kir on one side and Welf on the other, the armored soldier from the lock fallen in behind. People stopped to watch him pass. Not curious. Calculating. Every face he saw did the same fast arithmetic on him, the arithmetic of a closed place doing sums on a stranger, and he had been stateless long enough to read that math in any language. It came out the same everywhere. *He is not one of ours, and we do not have spare.*

"They are all forged," he said, low, to Welf.

"Of course." Welf said it like *of course the sky*. "You have to be. Off the shelf, you would last an hour. Bespoke for the Garden, you last." He glanced sideways, warm, hungry, the way he had been hungry the whole trip, for any scrap of a

place that was not this one. "What is it like. A street where they are not all forged. A street where you could be born wrong and live anyway."

"Loud," Jason said. "Crowded. Cheap." He watched the guns track the cracks in the dome. "Safe."

Welf made a small sound, like a man hearing the name of a city he will never get leave to visit.

They brought him to a hall that was clearly where the City made its decisions, and the decision-maker was already there.

Jurgens did not get up.

He sat in a plain chair on a plain dais with no ceremony around him at all, and that was the most frightening thing about him, that a man who ran a sealed world had stripped away everything that usually came with running one. No guards arranged for effect. No marks of rank but the wear on him. He was big, deathworld-big, the family build, but where Kir was hard and Welf was warm the father had gone to something past both, a body kept like a tool kept oiled for a job that never ended. He looked at Jason and Jason felt the same thing he had felt at the rail, the sensation of being read as inventory.

"You found the Garden," Jurgens said.

"I was brought to it," Jason said. "Against a fair amount of my own preference."

"That is not the part that matters." Jurgens's voice was unhurried, which was worse than loud. "The part that matters is that you know it is here. That is the only fact about you I will be making a decision on."

"He is useful," Kir said. The words came out of her like they cost her. "On the Wheel. In the broker hull. He killed the gravity and we cleared the blast. He is fast and he reads a room and he is, against everything, lucky."

"Lucky," Jurgens said.

"It is the word he uses."

Jurgens looked at Jason a while longer. Behind him a section of the inner dome ticked and groaned as the Garden leaned on it, and a fine dust of pulverized patch-plate sifted down through a firing slit and nobody in the room so much as glanced up, because in this room that sound was weather, and weather was always there.

"Let me tell you the only law this place has," Jurgens said. "We do not export it. Not the amber's source, not the coordinates, not the fact of the door. The whole of our survival is that nobody knows we are here, because the day they know, the lane fills with everyone who ever wanted what we pull out of the ground, and we are forty thousand people in a bottle that is already cracking. So the law is

simple and it is old and it has never once been waived. No one who finds the Garden leaves the Garden."

The room had gone quiet under the constant tick of the failing dome. Jason understood that he had stopped being a man and become a problem with one solution, and that the solution had a number on it, and that the number was small.

"You are asking me to live here," Jason said. "Forever. For the crime of being shipped in."

"No," Jurgens said, and there was no cruelty in it, which was the thing that took the floor out from under Jason. There was only arithmetic, a man who had done this sum many times and never once gotten a different answer. "I am not asking you to live here."

He looked at his children.

"Kir. Welf. He is yours. You brought him to the door." He stood, finally, and the standing was a closing of the matter. "Close it."

They took him down a corridor under guard and the guard peeled off at a blast door and then it was the three of them, and Jason did the only thing left, which was talk.

"Kir," he said. "I have been a great many bad things to you in the last week. I have not been worth killing over."

"My father gave an order," Kir said. Her hand was on her sidearm and she had not drawn it and she had not taken her hand off it. "I have never not closed an order."

"There is a first one in every career."

"Not in mine." But she had not drawn. Her face was a wall, and behind the wall something was working, and Jason had spent his life reading the thing behind the wall, and what he read was not appetite. It was a daughter inside a sum her father had taught her, doing it, hating that the answer came out the same as always.

"Kir." Welf's voice was different. Lower. Stripped of the warmth, and the absence of the warmth was a whole new man standing there. "Wait."

"There is nothing to wait for."

"There is me." Welf stepped between his sister and the thief, which Jason understood, watching it, was not a small thing in this family. It was a tectonic thing. "I cannot make it come out to murder," Welf said. "I have been doing father's arithmetic in my head the whole way down this hall and I cannot make it come out to murder, Kir, and if you can, then you and I are not the same after all, and I have always believed we were the same."

Kir looked at her brother for a long time. The dome ticked. Somewhere far off in the green a creature called and another answered it.

"Father will ask," she said.

"Then father will ask me." Welf put his hand flat on Jason's chest, over the locator he did not know was there, and pushed him a step back toward a side hatch, gentle, the way you move a man you have decided to keep alive. "I will hide him in the training hall until the next amber run, and I will put him in a shipment crate, and he will go up and out and never know the way back, and the law holds, because a man who is gone is a man who left, and a man who never speaks of it is a door that stays shut." He looked at his sister, pleading now, the warmth flooding back into him, helpless with it. "Let me have this one. Let me be wrong about one person and be allowed to be wrong."

Kir took her hand off her sidearm.

It was the smallest motion Jason had ever watched a person make, and he had watched dealers palm aces. She took her hand off the grip and she let it hang and she said, "If he speaks of the door, I will close him myself, and you with him." And she turned and walked back up the hall toward her father with her spine straight, to lie to the Overseer for the first time in her life.

Welf let out a breath that shook.

"That," Welf said to Jason, quietly, "was the bravest thing my sister has ever done, and she will never know it, because she thinks bravery is the gun." He pushed the side hatch open onto a low green-lit hall full of the sound of children. "Come on, outworlder. Welcome to school."

Jason went through the hatch, and his luck, which had been leaning since the terminator, eased a fraction, the way it eased at a table when the man across from you was, against all odds, not yet your enemy.

It did not stop leaning. It only eased. The place was still watching. But for the first time since the door opened, one thing in the Garden had decided to keep him alive, and it was the warm one, and Jason did not yet know enough to be afraid of what that would cost.

THE GARDEN

Jason thought the insult was the children.

He stood at the edge of the training hall, a low ferrocrete room sunk under the City with a simulator stage at the center, and he watched a dozen forged children run drills with the unbothered competence of veterans, and he decided the City was making a point of him. *We are so safe behind these guns, we let infants do the dangerous work.* He had been humiliated by professionals on three stations and he was not going to be humiliated by a room of ten-year-olds.

"You go," said the smallest of them, and pointed at the simulator stage.

The child was maybe ten. Lean, watchful, a face that had never once in its life been a child's face, hair cropped to the skull, eyes that did the same fast inventory arithmetic the adults had done in the street but did it faster and finished it sooner. This one had finished the sum on Jason already and the answer had clearly been *low*.

"Grif," Welf said from the doorway, fond. "Be gentle."

"He will not learn gentle," Grif said, not unkindly, just stating a property of the universe. "The Garden is not gentle. You go," he said again to Jason, and Jason, because pride is the cheapest thing a thief owns and the first thing he overspends, went.

The simulator killed him in nine seconds.

The stage lit and the green came up around him, holographic but his knack did not care, his knack leaned the same as it had leaned at the lock, and a vine that was not a vine took his ankle and a thing came out of the false canopy and was on his faceplate before he had finished falling, and the lights went hard white and a tone sounded and Grif's flat voice said, "Dead."

He went back in. Dead in eleven seconds. He went back in angry and was dead in seven, because angry is slow. He went back in cold, finally, thief-cold, the way he worked a

real room, reading not the threat but the floor, and he lasted forty seconds and was killed by the ground itself, by a patch of stitched gravity that the sim dropped under his feet so that his next step put his weight where there was suddenly almost none and his body went up and his aim went wide and the drilling thing took him while he was still a kite.

"Better," Grif allowed. "You died standing up. Most outworlders die kneeling."

"Comfort," Jason said, on the floor, breathing hard.

"The gravity is your enemy more than the animals." Grif crouched by him, and for a second was almost a teacher and not a zealot, almost a child sharing a thing it loved. "Your body knows one floor. The Garden has forty floors and it changes them on you. You cannot trust your weight. You can only trust your eyes, and your eyes lie too, so you learn to fall right. We are all very good at falling." He said it with a small fierce pride that put a cold finger on the back of Jason's neck, because it was the pride of a child who had been told that falling right was the highest thing a person could be good at, and had believed it all the way down.

"Who taught you that," Jason said.

"The City." Grif stood. "The City teaches everything. Now the gun."

The gun was the first thing in the Garden that loved Jason back.

Grif called it forged, the same word they used for people, and Jason understood why the moment Grif clipped the holster rig to him and walked him through the dry drill. The sidearm was bonded to the rig and the rig read the wearer, and at the first true spike of threat the weapon came to the hand on its own, a short hard leap up out of the holster into the palm, so that a body in the Garden never had to spend the half second of drawing that the Garden would always use to kill it.

"Do not reach for it," Grif said. "It comes. If you reach you fight it and you lose. You let it come and you are already aiming." He triggered a sim threat, a low flat shape across the floor, and Jason felt the rig read his pulse and the gun jumped and his hand was full of it before he had decided to want it. "See," Grif said. "Your body is too slow. The gun is not. So we made the gun do the wanting."

We made the gun do the wanting. Jason turned the weapon over and thought about a place that had looked at the one half second a man owns, the half second between fear and action, and decided to engineer it out of him, decided it could not even trust a child to have that half second, and had built a tool so the child would never need it.

He thought it was the saddest sentence anyone had said to him in years, and he kept that off his face, because Grif would have heard pity and pity was an insult to the highest thing he was good at.

So Jason gave him something else.

"Your turn," Jason said. He pulled the gun off the rig and set it down. "I will teach you a thing your City does not have."

Grif's face did the inventory and came up suspicious. "The City has everything that keeps you alive."

"Not this." Jason crouched to the boy's eye level. "This does not keep you alive. This keeps you *fed* when you are far from anyone who will feed you, and there is a difference, and out where I come from the difference is the difference." He held up his own hand, empty, turned it. "Watch the hand. Do not watch my face. My face is where I want you to watch."

He talked the children through it for an hour. The plant and the lift. The brush of contact that hides the take, the second touch louder than the first so the mark counts the second and forgets the first. He had a child plant a chit on him and lift it back, and another, and Grif last of all, who was the worst of them because Grif could not stop watching the face, and that was the whole lesson, that the face is the lie and the hand is the truth, and a child raised to read inventory could be taught to misread it.

By the end Grif could lift a chit off Jason clean three times in four, and the boy held the stolen chit up with a look on his face that was almost, for one unguarded second, the look of a child who has found a toy.

"This is stealing," Grif said.

"This is being unimportant on purpose," Jason said. "Sometimes that is the only weapon a small person has against a big one." He took the chit back without Grif feeling it, which got him a flat hard look and then, grudging, the ghost of a grin. "Keep it sharp. You never know when a big man with a gun will need to find his pockets empty."

He did not know yet that he had just armed the hand that would save them all. He only knew the boy had stopped finishing the sum on him at *low*, and in a place like this that was the closest thing to a friend on offer.

Welf showed him the ultralight three days in, at the bottom of a maintenance shaft nobody used, and the showing of it was a confession.

It hung from the shaft ceiling on a cradle Welf had built by hand, a frame of salvaged spar and stretched membrane, two seats where a man flying alone needed only one, a small engine cannibalized from drone stock, a thing with no business existing in a sealed colony that did not allow

anyone up off the floor. Welf stood under it with his hands in his pockets and the look of a man showing you the only true thing about himself.

"You fly it," Jason said. "In here. Under the dome."

"At night, when the weather is low and the watch is thin." Welf's voice had gone quiet, almost shy. "Up near the dome there is a layer where the gravity goes soft and the wind is clean and for a few minutes you are not on the floor. You are not in the City and you are not in the Garden. You are in between, where nothing has claimed you yet." He looked up at his own machine with naked love. "It is the only place I have ever been that is mine."

Jason looked at the ultralight and then at Welf and understood two things at once. The first was that Welf, the warm one, the bridge, the kind son, had built a thing to escape a place he claimed to love, and had been escaping into the air every night for years. The second came on a beat behind it and was colder.

"You were never going to put me in a crate and ship me out," Jason said. "Were you."

Welf did not answer for a moment. Then, "I was going to keep you here," he said. "And tell myself it was for your safety. And it would even be partly true." He met Jason's eye and there was no warmth hiding in it now, only the thing under the warmth, which was a man who had been caught telling himself a story. "But the real reason is that you have

been everywhere. You have been on a street where the air does not bite. And I cannot bear to send the only door I have ever met back out through itself."

"Welf."

"I know." He laughed, wet. "I know what I am. I built a flying machine to feel free for five minutes a night and I would cage you in this whole sealed world for the rest of your life so I would not be the only one who wants out and cannot say it." He wiped his face with the back of a big hand. "I understand the need to run. That is the thing I have never been able to say to my father or my sister. I understand it in my bones. It is why I learned to fly. And I will never, ever do it."

Jason said nothing, because there was nothing to say that was not a lie, and the man had had enough lies for one shaft.

Welf showed him the pens because Jason asked what was behind the doors that were locked from the outside, and Welf, who could not refuse a direct question any better than his brother in him could refuse anything, took him.

The worker caste lived in pens.

There was no kinder word and Welf did not reach for one. They were bunkrooms behind blast doors that locked from the corridor, tiered, crowded, the air worse than the

City's bad air, and the people in them were forged but cheaper, drift in their faces, the early aberrant cast that the City had a name for and the name was not a kind one. They watched Jason and Welf pass through the wire of the gate with the flat patience of people who have learned that watching is the only thing they are allowed to do with their eyes.

"They are locked in," Jason said.

"For their own protection." Welf said it fast, the way you say a thing you have said many times so you would not have to think about it. "The drift makes them. unsteady. Out on the floor they are a danger to the work and to themselves. In here they are safe. It is."

"It is a prison."

"It is." Welf stopped walking. He looked at the tiers and the faces and the locks that were on the outside, and Jason watched a story break in a man's face in real time, watched the *for their own protection* come apart in Welf's mouth before he could say it a second time. "It is a prison," Welf said. "And I have walked past it my whole life and called it the pens and not once said the word."

The Bleed was the end of the line, and Welf took him there because by then Welf had stopped being able to stop showing him things.

It was a wound in a wound.

They came out onto a gallery over it and Jason's knack hit him so hard he had to put a hand on the rail. Below them the Garden floor had been stripped to scorched rock, a black amphitheater carved down and down in rings, and at the bottom the drills worked. Nuclear drills, Welf said, the only thing that bit deep enough, and they had bored into the living rock and the rock bled amber, and the amber came up the rings in carts and on the backs of workers who moved like disposable parts, hooded, hunched, a long line of them in the scorched light, and the whole pit screamed.

That was the word Jason's body gave him before his mind could censor it. The pit screamed. There was a sound off the working face, under the drills, a high constant register that the workers wore ear protection against and that the City would have called the structure and that Jason, with his unregistered ear pressed to the same signal the whole Deep Game ran on, heard for exactly what it was, which was a body being opened while it was still alive.

He did not have the words for it. He only had the lean, and the lean was sick.

"This is wrong," Jason said.

"This is how we live." But Welf's voice had no floor under it anymore. He stood at the rail and looked down at the screaming pit and the disposable line and the amber coming up red-gold and beautiful out of the black, and he said it again, softer, "This is how we live," and it sounded like a man reading his own sentence.

"You feel it too," Jason said. "Whatever it is. Down there. You feel it."

"I feel that it is worse than it was." Welf turned from the rail and there were tears on his face and he did not wipe them this time. "I am twenty-six years old and I remember it greener. I remember when the floor came up to the second ring and there was moss on the rock and the air over the pit did not. do that. The Bleed has gone deeper every year of my life and the Garden has hated us harder every year of my life and my father says that is the Garden being the Garden, it was always going to fight us, and I believed him, and I stand here now and I do not believe him." He grabbed Jason's arm, hard, deathworld-hard, and Jason let him. "It was not always like this. Do you understand what I am telling you. It is getting worse, and a thing that gets worse has a cause, and my whole life I have been taught it has no cause, it is just the Garden, and that is a lie. Somebody is making it worse. We are making it worse."

The dome ticked overhead. Far below, the drills bit, and the rock screamed, and the amber bled up out of the dark.

They were on the gallery road back when the convoy was hit.

It came up the haul track below them, three amber transports and a screen of mounted City guard, and Jason saw the Grubbers before the City did, because his knack saw them first, a lean off the treeline so sharp it turned his head. Then the City saw them and the road came apart.

They came on the backs of Garden beasts. That was the thing Jason's mind refused for a half second before it accepted it. The cast-out, the aberrant, the savages the City had taught him to fear with every breath, came out of the green riding the monsters, low-slung armored things with too many legs, a rider on each, lances and harpoon-guns and a discipline the City's panicked screen did not have. They hit the convoy at the throat and the haul track became a slaughter of dust and beasts and screaming guard, and Welf was already moving, already huge and fast and terrible, pulling Jason off the high road down into it because the high road was about to come down.

Jason did what he always did. He did not fight. He fell right, the way the child had taught him, and he was mobile and clever and never where the round was, and that was how

he ended up on the cracked haul track with a Grubber pinned under a dead beast and a City guard standing over the Grubber with a lance raised to finish him.

The Grubber was huge and drifted past every stage and his face was a thing the City would have called monster, and his eyes when they found Jason's were not a monster's eyes. They were a man's eyes, pinned, out of time, watching the lance come down.

Jason had a half second. The gun did the wanting. It leapt to his hand the way the child had built it to and Jason, who had never once won a fight he could have walked out of, did not shoot the Grubber. He shot the guard's lance out of the air, a hard flat report, the City's own weapon turning in the City's own hand, and the guard staggered and Jason hit him low and mobile and dropped him, and then he was hauling the dead beast off the pinned Grubber with strength he did not have, using the soft gravity of the spot, reading the floor, and the Grubber came free and looked at the outworlder who had saved him with an expression Jason would spend the rest of the season trying to name.

"Go," Jason said. "Whatever you are. Go."

The Grubber went. He looked back once, the look of a man filing a debt, and then he was up on a riderless beast and gone into the green, and Jason did not know he had a name, and the name was Meto, and it would come back for him.

Then the StingWing came.

It came down out of the cracked dome on a scream, a winged thing the length of a man, all blade and hunger, and it came for Jason because Jason was on the open track and slow with the effort of the beast, and his knack screamed and there was no half second this time, the gun was already out and spent and the wings filled the world.

Welf hit it in the air.

He came across the track in a leap no stock body could make, deathworld-built, beautiful and terrible, and he took the StingWing out of its dive with his whole body and bore it down and broke it against the haul track with his bare hands, and it screamed and he screamed and it came apart, and he stood up over its ruin streaming its blood and his own and looked at Jason with the old warmth flooding back through the killing.

"Twice now," Welf said, breathing hard, grinning the warm grin. "Once at the lock, the soldier got that one, and twice today. You owe me a street where the air does not bite, outworlder. You owe me a walk down it."

"Done," Jason said. "The day we both get out. Done."

The transport blew.

It blew because the convoy had been carrying amber and amber cooks off when you hit it wrong, and a guard's panicked round or a Grubber's harpoon or the simple end of a bad day put fire into the lead transport's belly, and the belly was full of the Garden's blood, and the Garden's blood does not burn. It detonates.

Jason saw the light first because light is faster than sound and faster than thought. He saw the lead transport become a white thing and he felt his luck pull him, the lean that had kept him alive his whole life, the lean that always told him which way the rock would bounce, and it pulled him down and sideways behind a fallen beast a half second before the wave came.

It did not pull Welf. It never pulled anyone but Jason. That was the secret of him and he had never once understood it and he understood it now, lying behind a dead monster with the heat going over him, because the lean had saved the thief and not the warm brother who was a stride too far up the open track, a stride that the soft gravity stretched into forever, a stride Welf could not unmake.

The wave took Welf.

It took him the way the Garden took everything in the end, completely, without malice, a body being part of one body. The white closed over the place where he had been standing grinning about a street where the air did not bite, and when it cleared the track was scorched black and the

amber smoke went up red-gold and beautiful through the cracked dome into the green, and Welf Jurgens was not anywhere that Jason could see, and the last thing he had said to anyone in the world was a joke about a walk he was owed.

Jason got up. He did not remember choosing to. He stood on the burning track in the screaming light of the Garden's blood and he looked for the warm one and the warm one was gone, and his luck leaned and leaned and would not stop, and for the first time in his life he did not tell it to shut up. He let it scream, because the place was screaming too, and the place had a body and the body had just lost something, and so had he.

He woke in the medical center.

White light, clean air, the cleanest air he had breathed since the Wheel, the City spending on its medical center what it would not spend on its pens. His jacket was folded on a chair and the locator was still sewn flat in the lining because nobody had thought to look, because a man does not search a corpse he is about to make, and he understood from that alone where he stood before anyone said a word.

Kir stood at the foot of the bed. She had been crying and had stopped a long time ago and the stopping had left her

face like the floor of the Bleed, scorched flat, nothing growing.

"Welf is dead," she said.

"I know."

"My father says you killed him." Her voice did not rise. That was the terrible thing in it, that it did not rise. "My father says the outworlder brought the Grubbers down on the convoy, that they came for the door you opened, and that my brother died closing a door I should have closed in the corridor when he ordered it." She looked at Jason and there was no warmth anywhere in the family anymore, the warm one had been the only one who carried it and the wave had taken him and the heat off it. "And my father is right that I should have closed it. And now he says I must close it after all, to prove I can lead. That a leader does not flinch twice."

"Kir."

"Do not." She lifted her hand, not to her sidearm, just up, a wall going up. "Welf told me to be wrong about one person. I let him. And he is dead, and the world says it is because I let him." She turned to go, and at the hatch she stopped, her back to him, the straight spine. "I am to execute you in the morning. To prove I can lead." A breath. "Sleep if you can, outworlder. It is the only thing left I can let you have."

The hatch closed.

Jason lay in the clean air the City would not give its workers and looked at the ceiling of a fortress that was losing

a war it did not understand, and he thought about Welf saying *it was not always like this*, and the pens that locked from the outside, and the pit that screamed, and a Grubber's eyes that had not been a monster's eyes, and the official story that had so many cracks in it now that it was just cracks, just a dome of cracks with the green pressing down through every one.

His luck leaned. The place was still watching. It had killed the warm one and spared the thief and Jason did not know why, and the not-knowing was a lean under his sternum that would not ease, a low constant attention from a world the size of a sea.

In the morning Kir would come to prove she could lead.

He had until morning to become unimportant on purpose, the only weapon a small man ever owned against a big one, and he closed his eyes and did not sleep and began, in the dark, to count the floors.

PART THREE — THE CRISIS

THE GRUBBERS

The cell was carved out of the same gray rock the rest of the City was carved out of, and it had a slab to lie on and a drain in the floor and nothing else. Jason had been in better. He had been in worse, too, which was the only comfort a man in his line of work ever got to keep, the running tally of how this one ranked.

He lay on the slab and listened to the dome.

That was the thing nobody told you about the Garden. The whole structure had a sound, a low continuous groan that came down through the rock and into your back, the noise of a thing too big holding itself together against weather it made for itself. On the Wheel the hull ticked. Here it moaned. He had been listening to it for two days, and somewhere in the second day he had started to hear it as a voice, which was a thing a man told himself when the meds ran low and the drift clock got loud. He had nothing left in the jacket but the gear they had missed. He was saving that.

The door cycled. He knew the weight of her by the way the floor took it.

Kir came in alone. She had a sidearm on her hip, the forged kind, the one that woke at the first hint of trouble, and she stood with her back to the door and looked at him the way she had looked at him in the vault on the Wheel a lifetime ago. Like a sum that would not come out even.

"They want you to do it," Jason said.

"Yes."

"To prove you can lead."

"Yes."

He sat up slow. He kept his hands where she could see them, because that was a thing you did with a person built to break you, you stayed legible. "Welf was right," he said.

Her face did not change and her hand did.

"He told you the world's getting worse," Jason said. "He told you it wasn't always like this. He was the only one of you with the nerve to say it out loud, and he said it to me, an outworlder, a thief, somebody he should have shot in the airlock. You want to know why he said it to me and not to you. It's because I was leaving. You don't tell the truth to the people who have to stay. You tell it to the people who are walking out the door."

"Stop talking," she said.

"He flew the dome because it was the only honest thing left in here," Jason said. "You know that. You watched him build it."

She drew. She was fast in the way the bespoke were fast, the draw and the lift and the line all one motion, the muzzle on the bridge of his nose before he had finished the sentence. He did not flinch. He had decided two days ago he was not going to flinch, and he held to it, because the one card he had left was that she expected him to.

She pulled the trigger.

The action dropped on an empty chamber. She felt it before she heard it, the wrongness of the weight, and her eyes went to the gun and then to him, and he opened his hand and let the clip fall out of his sleeve and onto the slab between them, where it sat in the gray light looking like exactly what it was.

"You picked my weapon," she said. Not a question. A thing she was making herself believe.

"On the Wheel," Jason said. "Day we met. Old habit. I put it back light. You never checked because nobody in here ever lifts anything off anybody, you all trust each other to the grave." He let that sit. "Bought myself an hour. Maybe less. Your father's going to want to know why the execution's running long."

She looked at the clip. She looked at the man. And for one moment, before the discipline came back down over her face like a visor, he saw the thing he had been working toward, the crack, the place where the certainty did not quite seal.

"Welf came to see me," she said. Quiet. "Before. He kept asking me to come somewhere with him. To look at something." She holstered the dead gun. "He never told me where."

"The library," Jason said. He did not know it. He guessed it, the way he guessed which way the rock would bounce, and he watched her face confirm it for him.

She left him the clip. She did not say anything about the hour. She went out through the door and the lock took it behind her, and Jason picked the clip back up off the slab because in his experience you never knew, and started easing the seam of his jacket open with his thumbnail.

The library was three levels down, in the part of the City that had been built first, back when whoever cut the first chambers still thought they were making a home and not a bunker. The ceilings were higher there. Someone had once cared about the light.

Kir had not been down in years. The Librarian was an old forged, EO Bear stock gone gray at the muzzle, who had outlived his usefulness as a soldier and been given the archive the way you gave an old dog a warm corner. He looked up when she came in and did not seem surprised, which was its own kind of information.

"He came often," the Librarian said, before she asked.
"Your brother. He'd sit where you're standing."

"What did he read."

The old Bear got up. His knees were bad. He went into the stacks the way a man goes into a memory, without needing the lights, and he came back with a reader the size of a brick, scuffed at the corners from being carried, and he put it in her hands the way you put a thing in the hands of the person it belongs to now.

"The colony logs," he said. "From the start. He read them through more than once. You should know he flagged things. You'll find his marks."

She sat where her brother had sat. She turned the reader on.

The first entries were forty years old and they were nothing she recognized. Survey logs. A team of nine, then twelve, then thirty, sealed under a dome on the dark side, and they were not afraid. That was the thing that caught her first. The early voices were not afraid. They wrote about the Garden the way you wrote about a wonder you could not believe your luck at finding. There was a tree near the first camp that flowered on a cycle nobody could map and the survey lead had written three entries trying to map it and given up and written a fourth that just said it is the most beautiful thing I have ever seen and I no longer want to understand it, I want to deserve it.

Kir read that line three times.

There were images. The Garden green and gold under the dome, light coming down through the canopy in long soft bars, water that moved on its own, animals that came close to the camp and were not killed and did not kill. A StingWing on a low branch with its wings folded, photographed from two meters out by someone the thing had simply allowed to stand there. The caption was a date and a single word. Visitor.

She scrolled forward. The fear came in slowly, the way weather came in, and she could date it, because Welf had dated it. His mark sat in the margin of an entry from twenty-two years back, a small bright flag, and beside it in his own hand a note: this is where it starts.

The entry was about the Bleed. The first cut. The first drill into the amber seam, the first shipment up to the Wheel, the first money. And then, three entries later, the first death that was not an accident, a survey tech taken at the treeline by something that had never come close before. And then the walls. The reader carried it all forward in the colony's own words, the slow turn from wonder to siege, every new gun answered by a new attack, every new pen answered by a new loss, until the voices stopped writing about beauty at all and wrote only about perimeter and yield.

The Garden was beautiful once, she thought. Then we cut it.

She had been told her whole life that the City was holding a line against a world that had always hated it. The reader in her hands said the world had loved them first, and they had taught it not to.

The Librarian watched her from the dark of the stacks and did not say anything, because there was nothing to say to a person while the floor was going out from under them.

Jason got the seam open and the gear out, and the gear was good. Halcyon did not skimp on the field kit, whatever else you could say about them, and a man who had spent his life getting through doors found the lock on a colony cell about as serious as a wish. He gave it the hour he had bought and then he gave it none, and he was out in the corridor with the locator warm in his hand before the second guard rotation came around.

The locator was the size of a card and it weighed nothing and it had cost a man his life. Jason had never met the spy who came before him. He had only inherited the line.

He found a junction with a clear sightline up through the structure, the place the beam would want, and he held the locator flat on his palm and thumbed it live and watched the little amber tell-light come up, and he said the words

because they came with the device, the way a coin came with two sides.

"I found it."

The light went from amber to green. The beam was out, climbing, finding the dark above the far side, reaching for a cartel that would burn the frontier to come down on this place. He felt it leave. He told himself he felt it leave. And for one half second, the half second he lived in, the knack he called luck stood the hair up on his arms, because somewhere under his feet something very old turned over in its sleep and felt the beam too.

Then the alarm went.

Not the door alarm. The whole City. A tone he had not heard, low and grinding, and the work-lights dropped to red, and Jason understood that the green light in his hand had also been a green light somewhere in the Overseer's hall, that the beam went up and the answer came down, that he had told the one man in this place who would know exactly what the words meant.

The locator died in his hand. Jammed. The green went black.

"That's a receipt," Jason said to nobody, and ran.

In the hangar there was a ship.

It was a forged ship, low and ugly and fast, the kind the City used to run the dome's storms down to the Bleed and back, and it was fueled because everything in the City was kept fueled, because in a fortress you never knew the hour. Jason had flown worse. He had stolen worse. He went up the ramp with the alarm grinding in his teeth and dropped into the seat and woke the boards, and the boards were stock, the controls were the same controls every cheap hull in cislunar space carried, and his hands knew them before his eyes finished reading them.

He took it out of the hangar on a hard burn through a door that was still opening.

The City fell away below and behind, the cracked inner dome above, the Garden spreading dark and green and enormous to every horizon, and for one clean second Jason had the thing he always came back to, the open door, the run, the score in his pocket and the room behind him. It was the only happiness his model had ever made. It lasted exactly as long as it took the Overseer to give an order.

The point-defense the City kept against the Garden's own winged things turned inward and found him.

The first rounds went wide because the gunners were not used to a target that climbed instead of dove. The second pass was better. Something heavy walked across the hull behind the cockpit and the ship screamed and yawed, and the boards lit red, and Jason did the math the way he did all

his math, fast and without sentiment, and the math said this ship was not leaving the dome. The dome was cracked but it was not open, and the only crack big enough was three clicks east and closing, a long jagged wound in the sky where the structure had failed and not yet healed, and he was not going to make it as a ship.

He was going to make it as a pod.

He blew the canopy and pulled the eject and the seat became a coffin, a forged survival cylinder built for exactly this, for the moment a man in the Garden had to become cargo and trust the cargo to land. The cylinder fired him clear and the ship went on without him and took the next pass full in the spine and came apart in a long bright unfolding of itself, and Jason in his coffin went up through the crack in the dome on a ballistic arc with the whole green world tilting under him, and the last thing he saw before the cylinder sealed and the dark came down was the Bleed off to the south, the mine, the scorched circle in the body of the world, glowing.

Then the outworld took him.

Kir found her father in the Overseer's hall with the jamming console still live under his hands and the alarm tone still in the walls.

"He was a spy," Jurgens said. He did not turn around. "You wanted to know what your hour bought him. It bought him time to call his masters. Consortium Halcyon. They put a beam up out of my City." He shut the console down. The green tells went dark under his palms. "I jammed it. He ran. He's dead in the outworld now, which is a cleaner end than he earned."

"He was a spy," Kir said. "And Welf was still right."

That turned him.

She had the reader in her hand. She held it up so he could see the scuffed corners, the thing his son had carried down to the old levels again and again, and she watched her father's face do the thing she had never once seen it do, which was lose.

"You read the logs," he said.

"The Garden was beautiful," she said. "Before us. There are pictures. There's a man forty years ago who wrote that he wanted to deserve it. And then we cut it and it started to die and it started to fight, and you have spent my entire life telling me it hated us first." Her voice did not shake. She was proud of that, in the cold part of her that was still his daughter. "It didn't hate us first. We're the thing that went wrong. Welf knew. He came down here and he read it and he flagged the page where it starts, and he tried to take me to it, and I was too busy guarding your pens to come."

"Put the reader down."

"Jason was sent to find the Bleed," she said. "Wasn't he. That's what Halcyon wanted. Not the Garden. The mine. The money."

"Put the reader down, Kir."

"He was a spy and he was right at the same time. Both of those are true. You taught me to think one cancels the other. It doesn't."

Jurgens drew.

She saw it the way she saw everything, slow and clear, her father's hand and the forged gun coming up and the line settling on her, on his daughter, in the hall where he had raised her to be the hardest thing he owned. And she did not move, because she had decided, somewhere in the library, in her brother's chair, that she was done flinching for this man.

The muzzle held on her.

And stopped.

It hung there, shaking, and the thing behind his eyes fought itself, and for one long moment the fanatic and the father stood in the same body and the father won by the width of a held breath. Jurgens lowered the gun. He did not holster it. He just let the arm come down, and he looked at his daughter like a man looking at a debt he could not pay, and then he turned away from her so she could not see his face.

"Welf is being buried tonight," he said. "You will not interfere."

They buried Welf at the edge of the cultivated ground, where the City's last real soil met the line the Garden was always trying to cross. It was the only place a body could go into the earth instead of into the recyclers, and that was a thing Jurgens had ordered against every rule of the fortress, a grave, an opening in the perimeter, because some part of the Overseer that even he could not wall off had decided his son would lie in dirt.

Kir watched from the line. They would not let her closer.

When the body was down, Jurgens came forward with the reader in his hand. Her brother's reader. The colony logs, the wonder and the cutting and the page where it started, forty years of the truth in a scuffed brick the size of a heart. He held it over the open grave. And he let it fall.

It landed on the wrap that held his son and it lay there in the red light, and the workers shoveled the soil down over both of them, the boy and the truth he had gone looking for, until there was only ground.

The Overseer buried the logs with the only one of his children who had loved them.

Kir stood at the line and understood that she was alone now, on a side that had exactly one other living member, and he was somewhere out past the dome in a falling coffin, probably dead.

The cylinder hit the outworld hard and rolled and stopped, and Jason hung in the straps in the dark and took inventory of himself the way he took inventory of a room. Alive. Nothing broken that mattered. The cylinder's hull groaned around him, dented, holding. Outside there was the outworld, the Garden beyond the dome, the body of the place where the City did not even pretend to a wall, and Jason had no faceplate and no gun and no plan, which was three more nothings than he was used to working with.

He cracked the cylinder's port to get a look and the small predators came.

He saw them as motion first, low and quick in the gray-green undergrowth, a dozen of them, the things the City's logs called drillers, the kind that had latched onto his faceplate in the airlock a hundred years ago. They came toward the cylinder fast and confident and then, ten meters out, they stopped. They milled. And they fled, all at once, pouring away into the undergrowth like water finding a drain, and Jason sat in his dented coffin and did not understand why he was still breathing.

Then the ground started to shake, and he understood the drillers fine.

The armored thing came through the treeline.

He had seen it on the day this all started, on the worst screen in the simulator, the Harrow, the City's name for the apex of the place, a thing the size of a vehicle plated like a warship, and the logs said nothing killed it and the logs were right. It came toward the cylinder with the whole world moving out of its way, and it put one limb down on the hull and the hull folded like a ration can, and the dark came open above Jason and the thing's head came down through it, and he looked up into a deathworld's idea of a closing door.

A hand closed on his collar and hauled him out the side.

Jason came up out of the breaking coffin in a stranger's grip, dragged sideways and down into the undergrowth as the Harrow's limb came through the space he had been in, and he hit the ground rolling and came up looking into a face he knew.

He had last seen it on the convoy raid, in the half second before he pulled a Grubber off a falling beast for no reason he could name except that you did not let a man fall. The face was drifted past every word the City had for drift, the bones gone wrong and right at once, the eyes too large and the skin gone to something between hide and bark. In the City they would have shot it on sight. In the City they had a word for it. Aberrant.

The Grubber held out his other hand. The Harrow stood over both of them, enormous, and did not strike.

"Meto," the Grubber said, a hand on his own chest. Then he held the hand out further, into the space between them, and waited, and behind him the apex of the deathworld lowered its armored head and watched the way an animal watches its own.

Jason took his hand.

They went into the Garden the way you go into deep water, and the Garden let them.

Jason had walked the inside of the dome with a soldier on either side and a creature drilling his faceplate, and he had learned the place as a thing that wanted him dead. Now he walked it with one drifted stranger and no weapon at all, and nothing came. The drillers kept their distance. A thing in the canopy that should have dropped on them tracked them with its eyes and did not. The Harrow walked behind them for a while, unhurried, an escort or a shadow, and then it was gone into the trees as if it had only wanted to see them off.

"It doesn't touch you," Jason said. He did not expect to be understood.

Meto looked back at him. The ruined face did something that was almost certainly a smile. He held up his bare hand, turned it over, showed the palm, and then he pointed at Jason, at his chest, and tapped twice, and Jason felt the

knack go cold up his spine again, the same wrongness he had felt when the beam went up, the sense of a thing under everything turning to look. He did not have a word for what Meto was telling him. He filed it next to luck.

The village was in a fold of the land where two ridges came together and a slow gold river ran between them, and it was the last thing in the world Jason had been taught to expect. He had been taught monsters. He found a garden inside the Garden.

There were people, dozens of them, drifted in every direction the City had a word for and a few it did not, working ground that grew the same plants the colony logs marked in red as lethal. A woman walked a row of something with mouths and fed it from a basket and it took the food off her open hand. There were pens, and Jason's gut went cold at the word until he saw what was in them, the City's monsters, the drillers and the leapers and the low armored things, kept and tended and calm, fed and not feared. A child rode a beast the City would have called a kill-on-sight down the main path of the village at a walk, holding its mane, laughing.

The City farmed amber out of a screaming world and locked its people in cages to do it. The Grubbers farmed the poison and let the monster carry the children, and nobody here was in a cage at all.

Same world. Same drift. He had been told the drift was a clock running down to a monster. Here the drift had run down to this.

Meto led him to the center of the village, to a low branch where a StingWing sat with its wings folded, the thing that had nearly opened Jason up twice now, the thing the City lost soldiers to every week. Meto held out his bare hand, palm up, and the StingWing stepped onto it, and stood there, folded and calm, a killing thing at rest on the hand of a man the City would have put down as a monster.

Meto looked at Jason. He turned his hand, an offer, the StingWing balanced and unbothered.

Jason had spent his whole life knowing exactly how far to reach into a room and no further. He stood in the heart of a deathworld with no gun and no plan and a man he had saved by accident holding out the worst thing in the place like a gift, and he understood that everything the City had told him was a door with the hinges on the wrong side.

He reached out and touched the StingWing.

It did not strike. Under his fingers it was warm, and it turned its terrible head and looked at him with one flat eye, and the knock stood up Jason's spine one more time, cold and clear, and for the first time it did not feel like luck at all. It felt like being recognized.

THE BLEED

The locator was a Halcyon device and it had two ends, and Kir had the other one.

She had not meant to. She had taken it off the jamming console because it was her father's and her brother was dead and she wanted one thing in her hand that the old man had not buried, and only later, in the hangar, did she understand what she was holding. The beam Jason had sent up had a source, and the jammer had logged the source, and the source was a moving point now, out past the dome, alive, walking deeper into the outworld every hour. He was not dead. The thief was not dead. And the device in her hand was a string tied straight to him.

Mine Security wanted that string. Her father wanted that string. By the time she had finished understanding what she held, she was already standing in front of a squad in the staging bay with the locator live and her father's voice in her ear telling her to lead them to the nest and burn it out.

So she led them. She took the squad out through the eastern crack on crawlers, down into the outworld with the locator pulling them on, and her heart was not in it, and she knew her heart was not in it, and she went anyway, because she did not yet know how to be the other thing. You did not

unlearn a life in one library afternoon. You only learned that you had to.

The point on the locator pulled them south and east, toward a fold in the land where two ridges met.

Jason sat by the gold river with Meto and a dozen of the village's drifted while a woman drew the Garden in the mud with a stick, and he learned the shape of the truth the slow way, in pictures, because none of them had enough of his words and he had none of theirs.

The woman drew the dome. She drew the City inside it, a hard shape, all angles. She drew a line of marching figures going from the City out to a scorched circle in the south, and she struck the circle again and again with the stick until the mud was torn, and Jason understood the circle was the Bleed. Then she drew the Garden around all of it, and she drew the Garden reaching for the City with long lines, again and again, every line ending at the hard angular shape, and she did not draw the Garden reaching for the village at all.

Jason watched her do it twice. Then he took the stick.

He drew the City. He drew the lines of the Garden striking it. Then he drew the village, and he looked at her, and he reached for it with one line, the way the Garden reached for the City, and the whole circle of drifted faces

shook their heads at once, no, and Meto put a hand flat over Jason's line and pressed it out of the mud.

It doesn't reach for us, the gesture said. It only reaches for them.

"It hunts the City harder," Jason said, out loud, to himself, because he had to hear it in his own voice to believe it. "It doesn't hunt you at all. Same Garden. Same world. It comes for the City and it leaves the village alone." He looked at Meto. "It's not about what you are. The City's full of forged, you're full of drifted, you'd think it'd be blood. It's not blood."

He looked at the hand the StingWing had stood on, the bare drifted hand, and at the pens where the monsters slept calm.

"It's relationship," Jason said. "You live with it. They bleed it. It knows the difference."

He had spent his whole life as a man who lived with nothing, who took the score and went, who made not-belonging into a craft so clean he had mistaken it for freedom. He sat by a river inside a living thing that only killed the people who would not belong to it, and he felt the craft of his whole life turn over and show him its other side.

He drew the Bleed again. He pointed at it, and then he made a fist and opened it fast, a thing coming apart, and Meto's eyes changed, and Jason knew he had been understood.

"The miners are in pens," Jason said. "Your people, drifted, locked up to die at that mine because the City needs hands to bleed the world. We get them out. And then we put the Bleed in the ground, because as long as that wound's open the Garden's never going to stop, and it's going to come through that dome and kill everyone the City put behind it, the guilty and the workers both." He looked around the circle of ruined patient faces. "I came here to find the Bleed and sell it. I think I'd like to bury it instead."

Metó stood. He looked down at the thief from the City's world, and he put his bare hand on Jason's chest, over the place the knack lived, and tapped twice, and then he turned and started calling the village to move.

The crawlers reached the fold in the land at the gray hour, and the locator said the nest was over the next ridge, and Kir held up a fist and stopped the squad.

She looked down at the village in the fold. She saw the rows of farmed poison and the calm pens and the children, and somewhere down in that impossible quiet she saw a tall City-built figure moving among the drifted that did not move like any drifted she had ever seen, and her heart, which had not been in this, went out of it entirely.

Her earpiece crackled. Her father.

"You have eyes on the nest," Jurgens said. It was not a question. He had the squad's feed. He had always had the feed.

"It's not a nest," Kir said. "It's a village. They're farming. There are children."

"Mine Security has the Grubbers' approach mapped," her father said, as if she had not spoken. "They are moving on the Bleed. Good. We let them come in close, into the chokepoint at the mine mouth, and we wipe them out in one place instead of hunting them across the outworld for a year. You will hold your squad and let them pass and close behind them. Do you understand the order."

Kir understood the order. She understood that the man who had nearly shot her in his own hall had just told her he was going to take the only people in this world who had made peace with it and grind them out at the mouth of the wound, with her father's daughter holding the door behind them.

She understood she was looking at her father's whole model in one sentence. Wall it off. Lure them in. Sacrifice the others. Bleed the world. Call the bill acceptable.

She thumbed the squad channel off so they could not hear her, and she keyed her father's private line, and she said, "No."

Then she ran for the crawler, and the ultralight strapped to its back, her brother's ultralight, the thing Welf had built

to steal the only freedom a sealed world allowed, recovered from the hangar because she had not been able to leave that buried either. She tore the straps and dragged it free and threw it off the ridge into the rising wind and went after it, and behind her the squad started shouting, and ahead of her the wing caught and held, and Kir Jurgens flew her dead brother's freedom down the wind toward the Bleed to warn the people her father had sent her to kill.

The Grubbers took the Bleed from the outworld side, where the City never set a watch because the City never imagined an enemy with the patience to come the long way.

It went well at first, and Jason had been a thief long enough to hate it when things went well. They came down a scree slope into the lower works, past drills the size of buildings standing silent in the gray, into the chambers where the amber came out of the world. And there were the pens, the worker pens, the drifted and the broken miners of the City locked in cages to do the cutting, and Meto's people went to the locks the way you go to your own, and the cages started to open, and for one long stretch it was the cleanest job Jason had ever run.

Then the lights came up, all of them, and the City's voice came down through the works, and Jason understood he had walked his people into a room with the door already chosen.

"Trap," he said, and it was, and it was good, the chokepoint at the mine mouth full of Mine Security now, the way out closing, exactly the way a man like Jurgens would build it.

But the freed miners knew the works, and the Grubbers did not panic, and Jason had spent his whole life finding the half second before the room caught up. He pulled Meto and a handful of the others down, away from the mouth, deeper, into the oldest cut, the first wound, the place the colony logs marked as where it starts. They went down through galleries that got stranger as they went, the amber in the walls less like ore and more like something pooled and held, until the rock around them stopped being rock.

It became surface. Smooth, dark, fitted, far too old, the unmistakable made thing of a hand that was not human and not from this age at all.

Jason had heard the word Architect his whole life as a thing in stories. He stood in front of it now. A wall of fitted dark that ran away into the dark on both sides, curved, deliberate, sealed, and the amber did not sit on it, the amber came out of it, welling from seams in the ancient surface, slow and gold and warm, pooling and running down into the

cuts the City had made to take it. The drills had not been pulling ore out of the ground. They had been opening a vein.

"It's not ore," Jason said. His own voice sounded far away. He put his hand on the dark fitted wall and it was warm, the warmth of a body, and through it he felt the thing he had been feeling since the airlock, the slow vast turning-over under everything, and now he was touching its skin. "It was never ore. The amber's not in the rock. It's in this. This thing makes it. The Garden grew up around this thing, the whole world, all of it, one body wrapped around this, and the amber's the blood."

Meto stood beside him with his ruined hand flat on the Architect wall and his too-large eyes wet, and Jason understood that the Grubbers had known, in the way they knew everything, in their bodies, without words. The drift had not broken them. The drift had tuned them to this, to the thing in the wall, to the signal the City had never even known it was selling.

"The Bleed isn't a mine," Jason said. "It's a wound. We've been bleeding it for twenty years, and it's been fighting back the only way a body fights an infection, and the City's the infection, and the City's been calling it a war." He laughed, once, with no humor in it at all. "There's no war. There's just us, killing the thing that was trying to be a garden, and dying of the cut we won't stop making."

Above them, through the works, the world was already answering. He could feel it coming.

Kir came down into the works on foot with the ultralight folded on her back and a dead man's name in her chest, and she found Jason at the oldest wall with his hand on a thing that should not exist, and she stopped, because the floor went out from under her a second time in two days.

"It's an installation," she said. She had read enough of the logs. She knew the shape of the word. "The amber. It's not mined."

"It's bled," Jason said. He did not turn around. "Your father knows. He's always known. That's the secret he buried with Welf. The amber's the blood of the thing the whole world is, and he's been selling it by the ton."

Kir looked at the wall, at the gold welling out of the ancient dark, at the man from the outworld who had come here to find this and sell it, standing here instead with his hand flat on it like a man at a deathbed.

"He was going to wipe out the village," she said. "He sent me to hold the door. He was going to grind the Grubbers out at the mine mouth and call it a clean year." She heard her own voice settle into the thing it had been moving toward since the library. "He nearly shot me in his own hall and then

he buried the truth with his son. I'm done. Whatever you are, whatever you came here to do, I'd rather stand with the spy than hold my father's door."

Jason turned and looked at her, the hardest hand in the City, the Overseer's daughter, the woman who had tried to kill him with a gun he had already emptied, and he saw that the crack he had worked at in the cell had finally gone all the way through.

"You picked a hell of a time," he said.

High in the works, on a security gantry above the mine mouth, Jurgens watched his daughter cross the floor to the outworlder on the feed from his own cameras, and he saw it for exactly what it was, and the last thing the father had held back broke, and the fanatic took the body whole.

"She's gone over," Jurgens said, to the squad, to the City, to the dark. His voice did not shake. "Fire on her."

The order went out, and Kir heard it the way she had heard everything in her life, slow and clear, her father's voice telling his men to kill his daughter, and she did not flinch, because she had finished flinching for him in the library three days ago and had only now caught up to herself.

The rounds came. Jason had her down behind the Architect wall before they walked across the gallery, the two of them flat against the warm dark skin of the thing the whole world was, while the City fired into its own god to kill its own child.

There was unstable amber in the lower works. The Grubbers had warned him with a gesture, palms out, a thing not to touch, and the freed miners had said it in the only word they shared, careful, careful. The City pulled it and stabilized it and shipped it, and the stuff in its raw state, fresh from the vein, was the most volatile substance off Earth, the blood before it cooled. There were tons of it racked in the old cuts where the drills had opened the vein widest.

Jason looked at the racks. He looked at the gantry where the muzzle-flash came from, his employer's whole purpose and Jurgens's whole world standing on the same steel. He looked at the warm dark wall and the gold running out of it, the body the size of a sea bleeding to death one shipment at a time, and he understood the only score worth taking here was the one that left nothing for anyone to come back for.

"Get them out," he told Meto. He mimed it, the miners, the gold river, away, fast. "Get everyone out. The whole works comes down."

Meto understood. He had understood the shape of it before Jason finished, the way he understood everything, and he started moving his people and the freed miners back toward the scree and the outworld and the open air, fast, hard, the calm monsters of the Garden already gathering at the works' edges as the body felt the wound being torn wider.

Jason and Kir set it. They opened the racks and ran the unstable amber down into the deepest cut, against the oldest wall, into the lap of the Architect installation itself, and Jason rigged it the way he rigged everything, fast and without sentiment and a half second ahead. The City's fire chased them the whole way. Jurgens, on the gantry, understood what they were doing too late to stop it and in time to know it, and his last order to fire came out as something closer to a scream.

They ran for the scree with the charge counting down behind them.

Meto was at the mine mouth, at the chokepoint, holding the last of the freed miners' route open against a knot of Mine Security that had come down to close it, and he was magnificent, a drifted man the City would have shot on sight standing in the wound's own mouth with the calm of a thing that belonged there, and he held the door for his people the way Kir had refused to hold it for her father.

A round took him as the last miner went through.

Jason saw it happen and could not stop it, the way he had not been able to stop the Harrow's limb coming down on the coffin, and Meto went to one knee in the mouth of the Bleed with his hand pressed to the wound the City had put in him to stand on top of the wound the City had put in the world. He looked back at Jason. The ruined face did the thing that was almost certainly a smile. He put his bloodied hand flat

on the rock of the mine mouth, on the warm skin of the thing the whole world was, and he held it there.

Then the charge reached the unstable amber, and the blood of the place ignited.

The Bleed went up from the root.

It was not an explosion the way a hull was an explosion. It started deep, in the oldest cut, against the Architect wall, and it ran up through the vein like fire finding its way home through the body's own channels, and the whole southern works lifted and tore and came apart in a long unfolding roar of gold and dark that Jason felt in his back the way he had felt the dome's groan in the cell, except now the groan had become a word, and the word was the loudest thing he had ever heard.

He had Kir and they ran, out through the scree and into the outworld with the Grubbers and the freed miners, into the gray-green under the dome, as the mine mouth collapsed behind them and took Meto with it, the man who had pulled him out of the coffin, the man who had held the StingWing on his bare hand and offered it like a gift, dead in the mouth of the wound he had helped to close, the price of the truth, paid.

And the Garden answered.

Jason had thought the Garden was raging before. He had not known the word. Now the body felt the wound torn open to the root and the poison of the blast pouring into its deepest vein, and it woke all the way, every part of it at once, the canopy and the undergrowth and the winged things and the armored things and the slow gold rivers, and it turned with one will toward the hard angular shape inside its dome, the City, the infection, the thing that had done this, and it came.

From the ridge, with Kir beside him and the freed miners streaming past and the Grubbers already keening for Meto, Jason watched the Garden rise against the City under its cracked dome, a green sea standing up to drown a fortress, and he watched the City's lights start to call out into the dark for a help that was not coming, and he knew the wound was closing the only way it could now, by tearing the splinter out.

He had come here to find this place and sell it.

He stood in the wreckage of the thing he had blown open, with the truth in his chest and Meto's blood on the rock behind him and Kir at his shoulder on a side that now had exactly two living City-born members, and he had never been further from a clean exit in his life. No door. No score in his pocket. No room he could leave behind him.

For the first time, he did not want one.

"All right," Jason said, into the rising roar of a world coming awake to finish what it had started. "All right. Now

we get them out of the City. All of them. Before it kills the workers along with the guilty." He looked at Kir, and Kir looked at the City her father was about to die defending, and the wind off the Garden came up the ridge and smelled of gold and green and burning.

And folded on Kir's back, carried out of the works the way she had carried it down into them, a dead man's ultralight waited, two seats and a fan and stretched membrane, built by a boy who had only ever wanted to fly, the last thing Welf made and the only way left into a City that was tearing itself apart.

The Garden came on, and the long worst hour began.

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PART FOUR — THE RISE

THE LAST FLIGHT

The Bleed was a hole in the world that glowed, and the glow was going out.

Jason stood at the lip of the crater with his ears still ringing and watched the amber burn down into the ground it had come from. The mine had been a cathedral an hour ago. Now it was a throat full of fire, and the fire ran in seams that climbed back into the rock, and somewhere under all of it the machinery they had found was cooling and ticking and dying, and the Garden knew. He could feel it in his teeth. He told himself it was the cold or the burns. It was not the cold.

Meto was three meters down the slope with his face in the ash, and he was not getting up, and Jason had already gone to him twice and would not go a third time because the second time had told him everything.

"He's gone," Kir said. She was beside him and he had not heard her come, which never happened, which told him how loud the world was. Her armor was scorched along one side. Her father's men had fired on her in the dark of the mine and she had crossed to Jason anyway, and that crossing was

the only clean thing that had happened all day. "Jason. He's gone."

"I know."

"Then look up."

He looked up. The dome held the whole sky, kilometers of it, a bruise of cloud and lightning that the failing structure stitched together out of bad gravity and worse air. It had its own weather. It had moods. Right now it had a wound, and the wound went all the way up. The cloud was wrong, turning the wrong way, pulling toward a horizon where Jason knew the City sat under its cracked inner dome like a tumor in a lung. Things were leaving the treeline. Not toward them. Toward the City. Everything that flew and crawled and drilled, all of it pointed the same way, a body sending its white cells to the cut.

"It's going for them," Jason said.

"It's going for all of us." Kir's voice did not shake. He had learned that her voice not shaking was the worst sign she gave. "The Bleed was the City's lung. We just took it. The Garden has wanted the City dead for twenty years and it has never had it this open. By morning there will not be a City."

"Good," Jason said, and meant it, and then thought of the pens.

He had seen the pens. Workers locked up for their own protection, which was the lie the City told instead of the word prison. Drifted men and women and the children of

drifted men and women, behind a fence, in a fortress that was about to come apart with the air itself reaching in through the cracks to finish them. None of them had decided anything. None of them had bled the world. They had only been born into the wrong genome under the wrong flag, the same crime Jason had committed, and the world that was coming for the City did not check ID.

"Not good," he said. "There are people in there who never got a vote."

Kir looked at him a long moment. Whatever she had expected the outworlder to be, back in the vault on the Wheel, it had not been a man who stopped to count the people in a prison. He watched her file it.

A horn came across the basin. Low, organic, wrong. A Grubber horn, made from something that had grown rather than been cast, and Jason knew it now the way he knew a lot of things he had not known a week ago.

They came up out of the smoke on their beasts, the cast-out, the drifted, the ones the City called savage and the Garden called citizen. Two dozen riders and half of them carrying wounded. They had hit the Bleed alongside Jason and Meto and they had paid for it. Their leader now that Meto was dead was a woman named Sull with a forged jaw and eyes that had gone fully aberrant, gold sclera, no white left, and she rode straight to where Meto lay and got down

and put her hand flat on his back and held it there while her beast stamped and screamed at the burning ground.

When she stood up she was looking at Jason.

"He pulled you out of a pod," Sull said. "He said you were worth it. I did not believe him."

"You still don't have to."

"No." She wiped her face with the back of a hand and left a streak of ash. "The City is coming apart. There are four hundred of our people in those pens. Their pens, our blood. We want them out."

"So do I," Jason said.

"We cannot get there." Sull turned and pointed across the basin, where the storm was already eating the middle distance, a wall of cloud and flying death between the Bleed and the City. "The beasts will not fly into that, and on the ground it is a day's hard run, and they do not have a day. By the time we walk in, the dome is open and the pens are tombs." She looked at Kir, and there was old hate in it, City hate, and she put the hate down because there was no time for it. "You are his daughter."

"I was," Kir said.

"You know the City. You know the locks."

"I know the locks."

"Then there is the question," Sull said, and did not finish it, because the question was how, and nobody had a how.

Welf had a how. Welf had been dead at the midpoint and Welf still had a how, because Welf had built a thing in secret out of love and longing and the need to steal a little freedom from a sealed world, and that thing was sitting under a tarp in a Grubber lean-to forty meters away where the Grubbers had hidden it after they pulled it out of the wreck of Kir's escape run.

The ultralight.

Jason walked around it twice. Kir's brother had built it the way a man builds a confession. It was spars and skin and a hydrogen cell and a fan, light enough that the bad gravity could not get a full grip on it, ugly enough that it had never been meant for anyone's eyes but the builder's. It had two seats. Welf had built two seats into a machine he flew alone, which told Jason something he did not want to know, that Welf had always been building it for the day he would carry someone out.

"It holds two," Kir said behind him. She had the tone of a person reading a sentence off a wall.

"It holds two," Jason agreed.

"It will not hold four hundred. It will not hold a rescue team. It will hold us, and we fly it into a storm that is killing things bigger than it is, and we crash into a fortress that is coming down, and then it is two of us against my father's last

stand, and we open the locks from the inside before the air gets there." She said it flat, all of it, the whole impossible run laid end to end. "That is the plan. There is no other plan. There is no time for another plan."

"You sure you want to be the second seat?"

"I am the only one alive who knows the lock sequence on the pens," Kir said. "And he is my father. If anyone is going to be standing in front of him at the end, it is going to be me."

Sull came up while they spoke. She did not argue. She had done the same arithmetic and reached the same number, which was two, and she hated the number. "The rest of us will run," she said. "We will be a day behind you. If you open the pens and the survivors can move, we will meet them in the outworld and take them in. That is what we have. Two of you ahead, the rest of us a day late, and the dome failing the whole time."

"Protect your medic," Jason said, which was a thing he had heard a hundred times in a hundred bad rooms and had never once meant. He meant it now. "When you run. Whoever patches your wounded, put them in the middle. The Garden does not check who you are. It checks how you move."

Sull looked at him strangely. "He really did teach you," she said, meaning Meto, and Jason did not answer, because the answer was yes, and Meto was face down in the ash for it.

They fueled the cell. They checked the spars. Kir found the dead man's flight log still wired into the dash, Welf's own hand on the controls in a record the machine had kept, and she put her gloved fingers on the stick where her brother's had been and held them there one second, two, and then she climbed into the back seat and stopped being a sister.

Jason took the front. The knack came up in him as it always did before something tried to kill him, the half-second sense of which way the rock would bounce, and the knack was loud now, louder than it had ever been, a pressure behind his eyes like weather. He had called it luck his whole life because luck was a word with no warranty on it. He was beginning to suspect it had a different name. He did not have time to learn it.

"Don't count your extraction," he said, to himself, and fed the fan.

The ultralight lifted off the burning rim of the Bleed and turned its ugly nose toward the storm.

The dome's weather hit them like a hand.

There was no soft edge to it. One moment they were climbing through smoke in air that merely wanted to kill them slowly, and the next they were inside the wound itself, and the wound had wind in it, vertical wind, gusts that fell

out of the false sky and tried to drive them into the canopy. Jason flew the way he stole, a half-second ahead, reading the gusts off the cloud before they arrived, banking into holes in the air that the knack found before his eyes did. Welf's machine was light and the lightness was the only reason they were not already dead, because the gravity could not commit to them, and Jason rode that, fell through the bad patches and let the good ones lift him.

"Left," Kir said in his ear, and he was already going left, and the thing that would have taken them came out of the cloud where he had been.

It was winged. The Garden grew its own air force the way it grew everything, out of need and spite, and this was a predator the size of the ultralight with a head that was mostly mouth and a hide that ran with amber light along the ribs. Drift-bright. Tuned. It folded and dropped at them and Jason rolled the ultralight onto its side and the predator went past close enough that the wind of it bucked the spars.

"They're hunting the storm," Kir said. "They hunt the things the storm throws up. We're a thing the storm threw up."

"Then let's not look like food."

"We look exactly like food."

A second one came up from below, which was worse, because below was where Jason was not looking, and the knack saved them before his eyes did. He felt it the way he

felt a guard about to turn, a pressure, a wrongness in the floor of the world, and he dumped the nose and dove and the second predator's jaws closed on the air where the cell had been. Kir had her sidearm out. The forged pistol that leapt to the hand, the one Grif had drilled him on in the training hall a lifetime ago, and she fired into the thing's open mouth twice, three times, and it screamed and fell away trailing light.

"Don't waste rounds," Jason said.

"It was going to eat the fuel cell."

"Fair."

They climbed. The City was a smear of failing light on the horizon now, close, too close, and the storm thickened the nearer they got because the City was the wound and the wound was where the body fought hardest. Three predators now, banking in the cloud, learning them. Jason flew the ultralight through a column of falling rock that the bad gravity had pulled loose from the inner dome, threading it, using it, and one of the predators followed and a stone the size of a barrel took it out of the air. He did not have to aim. He had to know where the rock was going to bounce. He always knew where the rock was going to bounce.

"You're enjoying this," Kir said.

"No," Jason said, and was surprised to find it true. He had spent his whole life enjoying exactly this, the run, the edge, the clean joy of being better than the room. He was not

enjoying it. He wanted to be on the ground. He wanted the pens open. He wanted the four hundred out. Somewhere over the last week the run had stopped being the point and started being the cost, and he did not have the time to look at that either.

The inner dome came up out of the storm. It was cracked from edge to edge, a spiderweb of failure with light bleeding through it, and the City crouched under it, the fortress, the thing Jurgens had spent twenty years building out of fear. It was already losing. Jason could see the walls breached in three places, see the green coming in, see the storm pouring through the cracks in the inner dome to lay the Garden's own weather down inside the streets. The environment was in the walls. The deathworld was indoors.

And on the high tower, lit up against the failing dome, the lights were on. The command spire. Someone was still in there running a war.

"He's still fighting it," Kir said, and Jason heard the thing in her voice that she would not say, which was that her father was up in that tower marshaling a defense against a world that was already inside his gates, refusing the end, certain to the last, and that she was about to fly a dead man's airplane into the only home she had ever known to watch it die.

The last predator hit them over the wall.

It came out of the cloud with no warning the knack could give, because the knack was drowning, because the signal

was so loud this close to the City and the dying core that Jason could not separate the danger from the noise. The thing took the right spar in its jaws and the ultralight folded. They were not flying anymore. They were falling with style. Jason fought the dead controls and aimed the fall the way he aimed everything, for the gap, for the soft place, for the one bad option that was less bad than the others, and the gap was a collapsed market hall inside the breached wall, and the soft place was a canopy of Garden vine that had already grown in through the broken roof.

"Hold on to me," he said.

"I don't need to hold on to you."

"Hold on to me anyway."

She held on to him. The ultralight came through the broken roof into the City of his enemies trailing fire and one wing, and the vine took the worst of it, and the floor took the rest, and the world went white and then green and then black.

THE LONG DAWN

Jason came up out of the dark with Kir's hand fisted in his collar and her voice in his ear saying his name, and the City was inside out.

The market hall had a ceiling of storm. The inner dome's crack ran right over them and the Garden's weather fell through it, rain that was not quite rain, lightning that lit the green climbing the walls. Vine had come in through every breach and it was moving, the slow patient way the Garden moved when it was sure of winning. A StingWing the length of Jason's arm clung to a fallen beam and watched them with its whole body. It did not strike. The two of them were not the wound. The wound was up in the tower with the lights on.

"Can you walk," Kir said.

"I can run." He got up. Everything hurt in the specific way that meant nothing was broken, which was the only good luck the actual rock-bounce kind had handed him in a day. "The pens. Which way."

"Down. Under the spire. He kept them under his own feet so he could always feel them there." She said it without heat, the way you describe a man you have finished loving. "This way."

They went through the falling City and it did not fight them, because the City had bigger problems than two intruders. Soldiers ran past carrying wounded the other way, toward the lock gates, and none of them stopped Jason, because none could spare the attention, because the air was coming over the walls. He saw a man in City armor swing a cutting bar at a vine that had taken his sergeant and saw the

vine take him too. He saw children being carried. He felt nothing he had expected to feel, no triumph, just the clock, just the four hundred under the spire and the air coming down.

The pens were a long low vault under the command tower, and the gate to them was where Grif was waiting.

Grif had a rifle that was too big for him and he held it like it fit.

He was ten years old and he stood in the gate of the pens with his feet set the way the City had taught him to set them, square, certain, a true believer in a small body. The next generation of exactly the thing that was killing the place. Jason had taught this child to pick a pocket in a training hall and had walked away thinking he had won back a little dignity, and here the child was, between Jason and the four hundred, and the rifle did not waver.

"Stop," Grif said.

Jason stopped. Kir stopped behind him.

"You came back," Grif said to Jason, and there was something terrible in it, because the child had clearly hoped he would not. "The Overseer said you were a spy. He said you brought the world down on us. He said you killed Welf."

His voice cracked on the name and he steadied it the way a soldier steadies a name. "Was it you?"

"No," Jason said. "Welf died saving me. He died because the Bleed was going to kill this whole place sooner or later, and your Overseer knew it and bled it anyway. But I didn't kill him. I loved him too, kid. As much as you can love a man in a week."

"You're lying."

"I taught you to pick a pocket," Jason said. "Did I lie when I taught you that?"

The rifle came down half an inch. Grif's face did the thing a child's face does when two stories try to occupy the same skull. Then it set again, harder, because certainty was the only thing the City had ever given him, and he was not ready to put it down on the word of a thief.

"The Overseer will know what to do," Grif said. "He always knows what to do." And he raised his voice and called up the vault, "Overseer. They're here. The spy and the traitor. They're here."

The lights came down the stairs from the spire.

Jurgens came into the vault of the pens like a man arriving at a meeting he had scheduled.

He was not panicked. That was the worst of it. The City was dying over his head, the air was in his streets, his life's work was an hour from green ruin, and he walked down into the pens with his coat squared and his face composed, because he had decided a long time ago what the cost was, and the bill arriving did not change the arithmetic in his head. Behind him the four hundred pressed against the bars and went silent, the way people go silent when the man who owns them enters a room.

He looked at Kir first. He looked at his daughter for a long moment, and something moved in his face, and then he put it away.

"You brought the outworlder into my house," Jurgens said.

"The house is coming down, father."

"The house is under attack. There is a difference, and you used to know it." He came forward, unhurried, into the lightning-shot dark. "We have lost ground before. We held. We will hold again. When the storm breaks we will take back the breaches and rebuild the dome and the Bleed will run again, and this will be a bad year we survived, like the others." Jason understood that he believed it, completely, that the man was standing in the ashes of his world describing next spring. "What I do not have is time for my own blood to stand with a thief in my own foundations."

"There is no next year," Kir said. "There is no taking back the breaches. The Bleed is gone, the core under it is dying, and the Garden is not going to stop until the City is gone, because the City is the wound. I read the logs. I read what it was before you cut it. You knew. You always knew."

"I knew it was the richest thing off Earth and ours alone," Jurgens said, and for one moment the composure cracked and the Ahab came through. "A hundred thousand people on Earth would slit our throats for the door to this place, and the only way to keep it was to be the only ones who knew it lived. Yes. I bled it. I locked them up. I buried your brother with the logs because his doubt would have opened the door. I would do all of it again, because the alternative is we are nothing, stateless dry stock with no flag and no walls, and out there that is a death sentence and in here it is a kingdom." He drew the sidearm without hurry, the way he did everything. "You are not going to open my pens."

He leveled it at his own daughter.

Jason started to move and knew he was too slow, knew the round was already coming, felt the knock flare and find nothing it could do, because there was no rock to bounce, there was only a man and a gun and a half-second that belonged to the gun.

And Grif stepped in.

Grif had been taught his whole short life that the Overseer was the still point the world turned around, and the Overseer had just pointed a gun at his own daughter, and Grif's hands did a thing his head had not approved.

It was the pocket. Jason had taught him the pocket in the training hall, the lift, the brush, the way you take a thing off a body before the body knows it has been touched. Grif had practiced it for a week to humiliate the other children, and the Overseer had never known, because the Overseer thought the children were only learning the gun.

Grif did not decide. He would think about that later, in the long dark of being a child who had unmade his own world. His body chose for him, in the half second the knife-edge gave, while the men argued over his head. He stepped to the Overseer's side as if to flank the prisoners, the small loyal soldier moving into position, and his hand came across the belt where the spare magazines rode, and the lift was clean. Both of them. The spare and the one in the well that his small fingers walked out of the frame in the same motion Jason had drilled into him. Brush and misdirection and a thing that was theirs is now yours.

The magazines came free into Grif's sleeve. The Overseer felt nothing. He was looking at his daughter and squeezing the trigger of a gun that had nothing left in it to give.

It clicked.

Jurgens looked down at the dead weapon with an expression Grif had never seen on him. He looked confused. He looked, for the first time, like a man who had run out of the thing he had always had more of than anyone.

Grif opened his hand and let the magazines fall on the stone, where the Overseer could see that the child had done it.

"You taught me the gun," Grif said to the Overseer, and his voice did not crack this time. "He taught me the pocket. The pocket is better."

And he stepped back, out of it, a child who had just unlearned the City in one motion of his hands. He was shaking. He let himself shake.

After that it was bodies. Jurgens threw the dead pistol at Jason's face and came in behind it, bespoke, deathworld-forged the way Kir was, a body built for the worst place anyone had ever found, and Jason was shelf stock past his warranty with a knack and nothing else. In a fair fight Jurgens broke him in four seconds. Jason had never once given anyone a fair fight, and he was not about to start in the last hour.

He went mobile. Where the round was not, where the fist was not, off the bars, off a fallen beam, never planted, never there. The knack ran hot and loud and for once he let it all the way open and stopped calling it luck. It told him where the Overseer's hands were going a half second before the Overseer knew, and Jason was not there, and was not there, and the big man got slower as the small man stayed mobile. Behind them Kir was at the pen locks with the sequence her father had built into her in place of a childhood, the great bolts running back one after another, the four hundred spilling out into the dark, the workers, the drifted, the children of the drifted, all of them moving toward the breach where the storm came in, because the storm was the only way out.

Jurgens saw the pens open. He saw his daughter doing it, his hardest hand, his certainty made flesh, throwing the bolts on the thing he had locked, and the sight of it did to him what the empty gun had not. He stopped fighting Jason. He turned toward Kir.

And Jason, who had spent the whole fight not being there, was suddenly there, in the one place he had been saving, in the half-second the knack had been holding for him since the fight began.

He did not have a forged body. He had a length of broken spar off Welf's dead airplane, picked up from the floor of the market hall a hundred years ago and carried through the

burning City for exactly this, and he put it where the knack told him to. The Overseer of the City went down with the dead man's airplane through him, on the floor of the pens he had built, killed with a piece of the freedom his son had built in secret. That was the end of the old order.

Jurgens looked up at Jason from the stone. He was not afraid. He was, even now, doing the arithmetic.

"You have the locator," he said. The blood was coming and the certainty was draining and the man underneath was the one who had decided the cost was acceptable, all the way to the floor. "You will call them, and they will come, and they will do it properly, and all of this will have been a delay. They always come. There is no version where they do not come."

"I know," Jason said.

"Then you understand why I did it."

"I understand you," Jason said. "That's not the same thing."

Jurgens died still believing it would all run again. Maybe that was a mercy. Jason did not look long enough to decide.

The City came down behind them as they ran.

Kir led, because Kir knew the bones of the place, and Jason came last, because he had spent his life being the one who got out, and for the first time he used it for something

other than himself. He put the wounded in the middle and the medics with them, the way he had told Sull to, the way Meto had taught him without ever saying it. Protect your medic. The Garden does not check who you are. It checks how you move, and a column that moves like a body the Garden does not bother to read as a wound.

The vine let them pass. The StingWings hung on the broken beams and watched and did not strike. The storm poured in through the breaches and the great fortress folded floor by floor behind the running survivors, twenty years of fear coming apart in green and water, and Jason carried a child on his back the last quarter mile because the child had stopped being able to run and there was no version where you left the child. Not anymore. Not for him.

Grif ran beside him the whole way. The boy had taken nothing from the City but his own life and the magazines he had dropped on the floor. He did not look back. Probably wisdom, in a ten-year-old. He would look back later, in the years, and there was nothing to do about that except be there when he did.

They came out through the last breach into the outworld as the inner dome let go.

It did not fall so much as open. The crack ran the rest of the way across and the failing dome lost its grip on the false sky all at once, and the storm that the City had been holding in for an hour breathed out, and above the outrushing

weather, far up, was the real dark, and a line of grey at the rim of it.

And then the Garden went calm.

It happened the way a fever breaks.

Jason felt it before he understood it, a pressure going out of the world, the loud wrong hum that had been climbing in his teeth since the Bleed simply easing, the way a room eases when the shouting stops. The wind dropped. The vine stopped moving. Across the basin the things that flew came down out of the air and folded and went still, the things that drilled stopped drilling, and the great storm in the dome began to come apart into ordinary cloud. The City was the wound. The City was gone. A body with the wound closed stops fighting the infection.

The survivors stopped running because there was nothing to run from. Four hundred and some, City and Grubber both, standing in the calm of a world that an hour ago had been trying to kill every one of them, not one of them understanding why they were still alive, except for two people who did.

"It's done," Kir said. She was looking at the Garden the way she had looked at the logs, like a person seeing the true

shape of a thing she had been lied to about her whole life.
"It's not hunting. It's just. Living."

Sull's column came over the far rise as she said it, a day early because they had run the day in a night, and the two groups met in the basin under the clearing dome. There was no triumph in it. Meto was dead and Welf was dead and four hundred had been four hundred and ten before the breach. But they were alive, and the world had stopped, and that was more than any of them had been promised.

Jason set the child down. He stood up. He put his hand in his jacket, into the hidden seam where the micro-gear rode, and he took out the locator.

It was small. It had always been small. The richest secret off Earth and the device that would sell it fit in a man's palm, a Halcyon beacon with the City's jamming gone now, free to find the open sky and fix the Garden's coordinates and call the cartel down to do all of it again, on a scale that ended worlds. One press. The biggest score anyone had ever offered him, the score that bought more time off the drift clock, the score a man past his warranty does not turn down. It sat in his hand and waited to be the thing it was for.

Kir was watching him. She had known about the locator since the cell, since he said the dead spy's line and the beam went live, and she had crossed to him anyway. She did not say anything now. She had decided a while ago that this was

his to do, and the not-saying-anything was the most trust she had ever given him.

Jurgens had been right about one thing. They always came. There was no version where Halcyon did not come, if the beacon called. And there was a version, exactly one, where it never called.

Crack the Garden, run it, sell the substrate secret the cartel had spent a generation keeping in pieces, and the signal that had been writing on every forged body since before any of them were commissioned gets loose, and finds the next receiver, and the next. Four hundred people standing in the calm of a healing world, every one of them tuned to it, every one a door. The locator did not just sell the Garden. It sold all of them.

He thought about the man he had been in the vault on the Wheel, the one who took the score and was gone before the room caught up, the man who could leave anywhere and therefore had nowhere. That man would have pressed it.

He dropped the locator on the stone and put his heel on it.

It was built to survive a re-entry, not a man who had decided. It took four tries. On the last it came apart and the small light inside it went out, and the Garden's door was lost again, the way it had been lost for fifty years, the way it would stay lost as long as the only people who knew the coordinates were people who would rather die than sell

them. Jason ground the pieces into the dust until there was nothing left to find.

He had taken a lot of things in his life. It was the first one he had ever given back.

The dawn came up the far side of the moon slow as a held breath.

It did not come the way light came on Earth, all at once over a near horizon. It came the way it came here, the long lunar morning sweeping across the side that never faced home, the side no one could see and therefore no one had ever found, the grey at the rim going to silver and then to a hard pale gold as the cleared dome let it down onto the basin. It would be hours arriving. There was no rush in it. The world had all the time it had not had an hour ago.

The survivors began to move toward it. Sull went first with the Grubbers, because they knew the safe ground, and the freed workers went after, the wounded in the middle the way they had learned in a night, and the broken City dwellers came last and uncertain, people who had been the fortress an hour ago and were refugees now. The Garden let all of them pass, because none of them were the wound.

Kir walked at the front with Sull, two women who had been enemies a day ago, working out the ground between

them as they went. Grif walked between them and Jason, not quite with either, a child figuring out which way he belonged now that the City was not there to belong to. He would walk between people for a while, the boy, until he found a body to stand with. That could be waited out.

Jason came last on purpose. He had always come last out of a falling room because last was where the exits were. He came last now to count them, to watch the whole column move into the long dawn and make sure no one fell out of the back of it. He found he was good at it. He had been good at it all along and had only ever used it on himself.

The grey reached his boots. He stopped to feel it, the slow light, the first real morning of his life that he had not bought or stolen or run from.

And the signal was still writing on him.

It had gone calm with the rest, the loud wrong hum dropping out of the world when the wound closed, and for a quarter hour he had thought it had gone out the way the locator's light went out. It had not. Under the calm there was a thread of it still, faint and patient and aimed. Not at the City, because there was no City. Not at the Garden, because the Garden was healing. It was aimed at him. It had been aimed at him since the airlock, since the creature on his faceplate and the world deciding not to kill him, the faint unregistered sensitivity he had called luck because luck was a word with no warranty on it, the reason a deathworld had

spared a shelf-stock thief when it tore the bespoke spy apart in the cold open. He had thought he had given up the score and won.

The Garden was calm. The Garden was healing. But the core under the Bleed had been bled to dying before he brought the mine down, and a wounded installation does not go quiet. It goes looking. And the only door it had been writing on for a week and a half, while a thief learned to give a thing back, was walking into the long dawn with the survivors, carrying a signal that was not getting fainter.

It was getting louder.

Jason "Jackdaw" Dalt, stateless, shelf-stock, past his warranty, who had for the first time taken the one score worth more lost than kept, stood in the slow gold light of a world he had saved by losing, and felt the thing inside his skull turn its attention all the way toward him, and understood, the way he understood which way the rock would bounce, that the Surface Game was won and the Deep Game had just opened its eyes.

He shouldered the child's weight when Grif tired again, and the clock did not care that he did not know what he was, and he went to meet a dawn he had already decided to walk all the way into.

End of Reel Four. End of Season One.

