

TERRA CONFLICTUS 2066

FIELD FICTION // NO. 14 // NOVELLA // ESPIONAGE

FALSE FLAG

SETTING ·

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A lynx-stock operator who only ever trusted the work takes a clean extraction off a billionaire's yacht and surfaces inside a frame built around his own blood: a journalist who knows too much to kill and too much to walk away from, a father eight years dead who isn't, and the Cartographer's File, the one secret every faction in the Cold Era would burn the world to bury.

PART ONE — THE CALL TO ADVENTURE

THE EXTRACTION

The gulf off the Saharan Oasis went black at its edges and gold in the middle, where the city threw its light across the water like it was settling a debt it never meant to pay in full.

Cole Brandt rode the dark part. He always rode the dark part. It was where the work lived, and the work was the only thing in his life that had never once asked to see his papers.

He came in under the yacht on a propulsion sled, no lights, the water cold enough through the suit to keep him honest. The gulf tasted of salt and diesel and under both of those the chemical sweetness of money, the sunscreen and the fuel and the perfume that rich men's boats left on the water like a signature. Above him the hull sat fat and white and certain of itself, two hundred feet of confidence that thought distance was the same thing as safety.

The men aboard thought so too. That was the first mistake people made out here, in the open water where the cities could not reach. They confused distance with safety. Down here, distance was just more room to be hunted in,

and Cole had spent his whole life learning to be the thing that did the hunting in all that room.

He surfaced at the stern and killed the sled and let it sink, and for a moment he hung in the black water and listened. This was the part the gene-forged had built him for. Lynx-stock. Reflex and hearing, mostly, a nervous system tuned a half second ahead of the world and a pair of ears the Federation had grown into his skull and then spent twenty years pretending it still owned. He could hear two guards on the aft deck before he could see either of them. One bored, shifting his weight, the small sounds of a man who has decided nothing will happen tonight. One scared, too still, breathing wrong. The scared one would move first. The scared ones always did.

He came up the anchor chain hand over hand, slow, water sheeting off him, and went over the rail in the half second between their heartbeats.

The neuro-scrambler was an old weapon, the model the Vipers had stopped issuing because it didn't kill, which was the exact reason Cole still carried it. It made a sound like a held breath. No wound, no noise, just the scared one folding down onto the teak as if someone had cut his strings, and then the bored one turning, opening his mouth, and folding too. Cole caught the second man before he hit the deck and lowered him the way you would lower something you did not want to wake, because noise was the enemy and always had

been, and because somewhere in him there was still a line he kept on the right side of when he could.

Then he was inside, moving through staterooms that smelled of cut flowers and refrigerated air, the kind of air that cost more than most people's water ration, the kind of cold a whole drowned world had been priced out of. He did not let himself feel anything about that. Feeling things about that was a younger man's luxury, and he had spent it.

The package was on the lower deck. A girl, nineteen, Inner Council blood, worth a war to the people who had taken her and a quiet fortune to the people who wanted her back. She looked up at him and did not scream, which told him she had been raised by people who knew that screaming was something you did only when it bought you something. He put a finger to his lips. She nodded once, fast, and stood, and he saw that her hands were shaking and saw her decide not to let them. He respected that more than he expected to.

That was when it happened.

The engine hum, three decks down, climbed a half step into a register that was not there. A pressure built behind his eyes, slow and then sudden. The room went too bright and too loud at once, the girl's face stretching a fraction wider than a face should go, the gold light smearing, and under all of it a sound that was almost a word. Then it let go, all of it, in less time than it took to blink, and left him standing in a stateroom with his heart going and his mouth dry.

“Sir,” the girl whispered. “Are you all right.”

“Fatigue,” he said.

It was the word he had been using for months now, the smooth lie he kept in his pocket to have something to hold. He did not believe it. He had stopped believing it somewhere around the third time the world rang like a struck glass and went strange. But there was a job in front of him and a girl with steady hands she was forcing to be steady, and a man did the job in front of him, so he put the rest of it away in the place where he put everything, and he got her moving.

They went off the stern into the amphibious craft he had left running silent against the hull. The Corsair patrol boats found them inside a minute. They always did. Three of them, fast, throwing spotlights that turned the spray to something almost solid, and Cole did not run straight, because running straight was how amateurs died. He ran for the shoals off Sand Gate, where the water turned shallow and mean and the Saharan Nomad Federation did not bother to chart it because they did not need to, and he took the craft through a gap a meter wider than the hull with the engines screaming and the girl’s knuckles white on the seat. The Corsairs peeled off. They were not paid enough to die on a sandbar. Nobody was.

He delivered her at first light to people who paid in something a stateless man could actually spend, and he stood on the dock afterward, past a vendor’s pyramid of

warm BURNER cans nobody was buying, and watched the desalination towers churn against the dawn, the great failing array that kept three hundred thousand people alive one membrane at a time, and felt nothing about any of it except tired. He had saved a stranger's daughter and he would never learn her name and that was the shape of the work now. Money was the one citizenship that never asked to see his genome. It would have to be enough. He had decided a long time ago that it would have to be enough, and most days he even believed it.

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Half a world away, in a city that still kept its lights on at night, Wren Calderwood was stealing something, and she was doing it sitting perfectly still.

That was the part people never understood about the work. The work looked like boredom. It looked like a woman in a transit lounge with a cold tea she was not drinking, which was exactly what she wanted it to look like. She sat on a dead slate that had never once touched an open network, a NULLMARK patch doing the little it could against the rest, and she let the foothold she had planted in a Calderwood procurement server eight months back do the quiet thing it had been left there to do. You did not break a Foundation system on the night you needed it. The amateurs tried that, and the amateurs got caught. You broke it a year early, slowly, one patient inch at a time, and then you waited, and

you let the system forget you were inside it, and you came back when it mattered and walked out the front door it had stopped guarding.

CHORUS watched the logs for the shape of a honeypot while she pulled, one way only, taking nothing that would phone home, leaving nothing that would miss her once she was gone. CHORUS, which answered in a voice that was half her own joke and half something she had never tried to explain to anyone, not in all the years it had been the only company she trusted.

The file came out small and ugly and worth more than the building she sat in. She checked the metadata before she let herself believe it, the way her first editor had beaten into her, back when she still had editors, because the cheapest lie in the world was a true-looking document somebody wanted you to find. The chain held. It was real. She sat with that a moment, the small clean joy of it, the one joy she had left that nobody could take from her, and then she routed it where she always routed things, out to the back pages of Gutter Bible Quarterly, where the people who had burned it in the Document Wars could never reach it again.

She believed in this the way other people believed in God, without an argument attached. Buried truth was just a weapon waiting for the wrong hand to find it. You put it in the light, where everyone could hold it, or you let it rot in the dark and become leverage, and leverage was how her family

had run the world for three generations. She had decided as a girl that she would spend her life turning on lights. It had cost her the family. She told herself, most days, that it had been worth the family.

Then a message came in on a channel only one man used. He signed himself the Cartographer, the way he had for years, the source who had never once been wrong and never once asked her for anything but her silence, and he wanted to meet. Today. Alone.

A man that careful did not break his own rules. She knew it, somewhere under the curiosity, and she ignored it, because she always ignored it, because the story was always worth the risk and she had built a whole life on that being true. She told herself she would ask him why when she saw him.

She never got the chance.

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They flew Cole to a Monitor Central black site that did not have a name, only a number, and they made him wait in a white room, because making a man wait was a tactic, and he had used it himself enough times to feel the insult of it land.

Director August Thorne came in alone, which was also a tactic. Thorne was a soft-spoken man in a coat that fit him the way money fits, with the eyes of someone who had reclassified more deaths than he had ever mourned and slept

fine on the difference. He ran the Federation's surveillance state the way other men run a household. Calmly. With the lights off in the rooms nobody used.

"Cole," he said, and sat down across from him, unhurried. "I'm sorry to be the one."

"The one for what."

"Your father is dead."

The white room held very still.

Asher Brandt. The Cartographer, the factions called him, in the rare moments they admitted he existed. A man Cole had stopped speaking to years ago, somewhere in the wreckage of a Nordics operation his father could have called off and chose not to. His mother had died in that operation. Asher had made a choice between the mission and his wife, and he had made it the way he made every choice, cleanly, and Cole had been nineteen, and the wall that went up between them that year had never once come down, not in all the time since, not even now that the man behind it was gone. Cole sat in the white room and waited to feel something enormous, and felt instead the small terrible thing he had been most afraid of, which was relief, and then immediately and forever after, shame.

"How," he said, when he could.

"A shaped charge. A safe house under the Assembly Quarter in New Buenos Aires." Thorne let it sit, watching

him. “Whoever did it wanted us to know it was done. That should concern you more than I think it does.”

He slid a file across the table, and it opened itself in the air between them.

A woman. Early thirties. A sharp face and sharper eyes, the kind of person who looked at a camera the way you look at someone who owes you money. Wren Calderwood. Journalist. Calderwood as in the Foundation, as in the dynasty that owned half the world’s clean water and most of its grid and all of the VERDANT intelligence that ran Arcadia like a garden.

“She met your father the day he died,” Thorne said. “Her signatures are all over that scene. She is going to take a buried murder and make it a movement, and a movement is the one thing the Federation cannot afford in a season like this one. I need her gone. Quietly. By someone with no flag left to embarrass.” He folded his hands. “You understand the shape of the thing I’m asking.”

Cole looked at the woman’s face for a long time.

He should have asked more questions. He would think about that a great deal, later, in all the places this would take him. He should have asked why a man like Thorne brought a job like this to a man like him in person. He should have asked why the evidence was so clean. He should have asked any of the dozen questions an operator asks before he picks up a weapon. But grief is a current, and it had been pulling at

him since Sand Gate, since before Sand Gate, since a white room and the word relief, and a target was a thing he knew how to hold when everything else had gone to water in his hands.

“I understand it,” he said.

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New Buenos Aires kept its power up high, where the air was clean and the view was long and the people who decided things could decide them without ever having to look at the people the decisions landed on.

The Highland Assembly Quarter was the oldest elevated district in the city, where three governments pretended to share a building and only one of them was telling the truth about it. The funeral was small, the way the funerals of careful men are small. Brotherhood men stood at the edges of it as if they had grown there out of the stone, reading every face, giving nothing back, mourning in the particular way of people whose grief is also tradecraft.

Cole watched from across the plaza and felt like a thief at his own father’s grave, which, he supposed, was exactly what he was.

He found Wren Calderwood the way you find the center of a room, by the way everything arranged itself around her. The powerful leaned toward her or leaned away, and either one told him something. He watched a silver-haired man cross to her, expensive, unhurried, a Southern Compact

oversight delegate named Crane whose name Cole knew from the kind of files a man was not supposed to keep. Crane took her hand in both of his and said the right things, and his face did all the right things, and none of it reached his eyes, and when he let go and walked away he looked back at her once, the way a man looks at a problem he has decided to solve at a more convenient time.

She caught it. Cole saw her catch it, saw the small recalibration behind her eyes, the journalist filing it away. She did not scare easily. He noted that the way he noted everything about a target, professionally, and told himself it changed nothing, and followed her when she left.

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She went where grieving people do not go. Down, out of the Quarter, out of the clean air, into the working levels where the city did its actual living. Somebody had stencilled WHAT THEY PUT IN YOU IS NOT WHAT YOU ARE down the flank of a dead transformer, the paint not yet dry, and Cole read it the way you read a thing written about you by a stranger. She went to a basement bar that kept a Brotherhood man behind the counter and a back booth the cameras had been politely instructed to forget.

Cole took a rooftop across the street and built his nest the way his father had taught him, a lifetime ago, on a different roof in a different country, back when his father teaching him things had still felt like being given the world instead of

being shaped into a tool. Breathe. Find the still place under the heartbeat. Let the world go quiet and small and far away until there is nothing in it but the work. He talked himself down through it in Asher's exact cadence, because it was the only cadence he had for this, and using a dead man's voice to settle his own hands so that he could kill the woman the dead man had trusted was a cruelty he did not have the time to examine.

He found her in the booth through the scope, talking to the Brotherhood contact, her face lit blue by something on the table between them. He could not hear the words. He did not need the words. He needed the stillness and the angle and the half second, and he had all three.

His finger found the trigger and took up the slack.

Then the parabolic mic caught the contact's voice, low and fast, and what the man said did not fit anything. The Federation's incident report on the safe house had been filed at four in the morning. Complete. Cause, casualties, the journalist's name. The charge had gone off at twenty past six. Somebody had written the ending two hours before the bomb agreed to it.

Cole had read that report. In a white room, the day before, with Thorne watching his face. Thorne had slid it across the table and let him believe every word of it, had let him carry it out of that room and up onto this roof and down into the still place under his own heartbeat. The report that

named Wren Calderwood had existed before Asher Brandt died. Which meant the woman in the scope had not killed his father. Which meant the man who handed Cole the rifle already knew that. Which meant the rifle had never been a mission at all.

Cole's hand stopped on the trigger.

He sat with it. The weight of it did not lift. He had not expected it to.

Below him, on the street, two figures moved into the bar's blind spot with an economy he felt in his own body before his mind had finished naming it. The way they cleared the corners before they cleared the faces. Military. Worse than military. He knew the breach signature the way he knew the inside of his own hands, because he had worn it once, on the worst night of his life, in a country he tried not to think about.

Pale Roster.

And they were not there only for her.

He understood it all at once, cold and total, the way you understand a fall once you are already in the air. The contract had never been a mission. It was a leash, and he was the dog on the end of it, and he had been pointed at the one person alive who knew the truth, and the moment he balked, the moment his hand stopped, the people holding the leash had sent the rest of the pack for both of them. He had been a

loose end since the white room. He had simply been too busy grieving to see the shape of his own neck in the noose.

Cole left the rifle on the roof. He would never see it again, and he would not miss it.

He went down the fire stairs three at a time, toward the woman he had been sent to kill, with the only thought a stateless man ever really gets to have, the one that had kept him alive through every country and every contract and every version of himself he had buried to get here.

Not yet.

SHADOWS AND SECRETS

Wren Calderwood had spent her whole life learning to read a room, and the man who came through the bar door wrong was the easiest read she had had all week.

He did not come in like a customer. He came in like a closing door, like the last page of something, and every instinct she had spent twenty years sharpening stood up at once and told her to move.

She was already gathering her slate when he reached the booth. Her contact, the Brotherhood man, was already gone, out the back the way Brotherhood men were always already gone, leaving her alone with the cold tea and the closing door

and the certainty, arriving a half second too late to be any use, that she had walked into exactly the kind of room her mother had always promised her the truth would get her killed in.

“Whatever they paid you,” she said, because talking was the thing she did when she was afraid, the way other people froze or ran, “I’ll double it. You’d be amazed what I have.”

“They stopped paying me twenty minutes ago,” the man said. “Get down.”

She did not get down. She was a Calderwood. Getting down was for people who had not been raised to believe the floor belonged to them, and even now, even here, the old training held, the certainty that nothing in any room could really touch her, the certainty she had spent her whole adult life trying to burn out of herself and never quite had.

Then the front of the bar came apart.

After, she would never be able to put it in order. Only that the man moved like the air was something he had negotiated with in advance, like the room was a conversation he had already finished having. The window came in. The Brotherhood man’s bar, the neutral booth, the careful little world she had built her meeting inside, all of it became noise and glass and muzzle-light at once, and she stood in the middle of it, frozen, useless, a journalist with a slate full of other people’s secrets and no idea at all how to keep from dying.

And the man who had come to kill her put his body between her and the window without appearing to decide to do it. He took the first shooter off his feet before she had finished registering the second. When she froze, he did not waste breath telling her to move. He took her by the collar, the way you would move a child or a sandbag, and he moved her, through the kitchen, past a cook who had learned a long time ago to look only at the rice, out a service door and into the wet dark of the working levels.

He could have left her. A clean exit had stood three meters to his left, and she had been nothing but weight on his arm, and they had both known it. He had not taken it. She filed that away, in the place she filed everything, because filing things away was the nearest thing to a religion she had left, and because some animal part of her had already understood that this one small refusal was going to matter more than anything else that happened tonight. He was ghost kit all the way down, stripped of every mark and insignia, nothing on him that answered to a flag, and she had interviewed enough of them to know that a man stripped that clean was either free or hunted, and usually both.

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They came up two levels and out into a New Buenos Aires service alley, the Assembly Quarter glittering uselessly far above them, clean air for clean people, and they stopped in a

doorway long enough to confirm they were both still breathing.

“You’re hurt,” she said. There was blood on him, dark in the bad light.

“I’ve been hurt. It’s a different thing.” He looked at her then, really looked, and she understood with a lurch exactly how he had been looking at her an hour ago. Through glass. Through a scope. With one finger resting on the rest of her life. “You were going to kill me.”

“Yes.”

“And now you saved my life.”

“Now somebody wants us both dead, which means somebody has decided we’re the same problem.” He started walking, and she followed, because the alternative was standing alone in the dark with what she now knew. “I don’t like agreeing with people who try to kill me. But they’re rarely wrong about who’s dangerous to them.”

“So we run.”

“You run. I work.” He said it flat, like a fact about the weather. “I find the people who did this, and I make it quiet.”

“Quiet.” She almost laughed, and heard how ugly it came out, and did not care. “A man murders your father and stages a war, and your grand plan is quiet.”

“Loud is how people like us get other people killed.”

“Loud is the only thing the powerful have ever been afraid of.” She stopped, and he stopped, and for a moment

the whole argument that would one day break them was already there in the alley between them, fully grown, just waiting for the years to catch up to it. “You bury this, it festers into leverage, and leverage is the only language they speak. You drag it into the light, it dies. That is the only way anything like this has ever died.”

He did not answer. Some arguments you do not win in an alley at two in the morning, bleeding from somewhere you will not admit to. But he slowed his pace to match hers, without appearing to decide to, the second time that night he had done a kind thing while refusing to call it one, and she filed that away too.

“You knew my father,” she said.

“I knew of yours. You knew mine.”

That stopped her cold in the dark. “Asher.” The pieces turning, falling into place. “You’re Asher’s.”

He did not give her his name. He just kept walking, toward a city neither of them had named yet, and after a moment she went after him, because her father was dead and the man who had been sent to kill her was the last thread she had left to him, and because she had spent her whole life choosing the dangerous thing over the lonely one, and she was not going to stop tonight.

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Istanbul was the one city in the world that had decided, on purpose, not to burn.

The Bosphorus Compact ran on a single ugly truth, which was that everyone in it lost more by destabilizing the place than they could ever gain by owning it. So the powers kept their consulates here and their knives sheathed, the Eastern Offensive in Beyoglu, the rest scattered through the hills like teeth, and the whole impossible arrangement held together on a web of small sacred rituals nobody dared be the first to break. The tea houses were neutral ground. You could sit across a low table from the man who would kill you tomorrow, and neither of you would do it over the cups, because the cups were older than the war and would outlast it. They called it the Tea House Protocol. It was the nearest thing the Cold Era had to a church, and like a church it ran on the agreement of people who mostly did not believe.

Wren led him through it like she had been born to it, because in a way she had. Her work lived in cities like this, in the gap between what powerful people said and what was true, and she had learned long ago that the gap was widest exactly where everyone had agreed to be polite. She sold those gaps for a living. Most of the time she even got paid in money.

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Asher's trail ended under a tea house in Fatih, a few streets from where the Brotherhood kept its archive, behind a wall that did not read as a wall until you knew the old man's habits.

“He kept a place like this in every city that ever mattered,” she said, running her hand along the seam, and heard the grief in her own voice and was surprised by it. He had been her source, not her father. But he had been the one man in years who answered when she called, and she had not let herself count what that was until it was gone.

“I know.” Cole found the catch she had missed. “He taught me the trick. Never keep one of anything.”

The wall opened on a bunker. Caches, drives, the particular clutter of a man who trusted nothing and prepared for everything, a whole hidden life laid out in the dark, and Wren stood inside it a moment and understood she was standing inside her dead source’s paranoia, which had also turned out to be the only thing keeping the truth alive.

She went to work.

This was the part she was good at, and she let him watch her be good at it, because she was tired of being weight on his arm. CHORUS came online at her wrist, and together they took Asher’s encryption apart layer by layer, and she felt Cole recalibrating behind her with every wall that fell.

“You’re not just a reporter,” he said. It was not a question.

“No.” She did not look up. “I’m the other kind too. Null Chorus. We recover what the Document Wars erased. Somebody decided which knowledge survived the collapse, and we disagree with their selection.” She braced for the

operator's flinch, the reflex of a man whose whole world had a prosecution category for what she was.

"And the machine on your wrist."

"Is mine," she said, in the tone that closed the subject, because the rest of what CHORUS was belonged to a story she was not ready to tell a man who had had her in a scope that morning. It was the most defended thing she owned.

Then the last wall fell, and the file opened, and for a while neither of them said anything at all.

It was a plan. Clean, patient, professional, the work of people who had time and money and no fear of either. An attack on the Calderwood campus at Arcadia, weeks out, staged down to the last detail to read as a Sons of the Serpent atrocity. Manufactured grief, prebuilt, sitting in a drawer waiting to be detonated and blamed on a faction that had not done it.

"That's my family's house," Wren said, very quietly. The words came out of her strange. "Somebody is going to bomb my family's house and hang it on the wrong people."

"Your father found this," Cole said. "That's why he's dead."

She looked at the architecture of the lie hanging in the air, the careful inevitability of it, and felt the floor she had been raised to believe was hers tilt under her feet, and she understood that whatever this was, it had come out of her

own house, her own name, the clean cold world up high where the air was good.

That was when CHORUS told them, in its small dry voice, that they were no longer alone.

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The Pale Roster came in quiet, which is the only warning you ever get from people that good.

This time there was no clean save to make. This time she was not a civilian to be moved out of the way. This time she was, God help them both, a partner, and that turned out to be worse.

Cole had a plan in the first half second, the way he always seemed to, and it required exactly one thing of her, which was that she hold still where he put her. She did not hold still. She saw an angle, a server rack, a line to the passage, and she took it, because in her world the dark was a friend and movement was life. She told CHORUS to kill the lights.

The dark did nothing at all to men wearing thermal optics. It only took away the single advantage Cole had left, which was knowing where she was. For a few seconds the bunker was muzzle flash and her own ragged breathing and his voice in the black saying a name she had not given him yet, trying to hold two falling things at once and dropping neither only because he refused to.

They got out. Barely. Up through a passage Asher had built for exactly this, into the Bazaar Circuit, the rotating

black market that moved through Istanbul like weather, past stalls of stripped faction surplus and a dead-stacker selling expired clearance by the meter, and they lost themselves in a crowd that had survived worse than them by knowing how not to see things.

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They came to rest in a doorway that smelled of cardamom and rust.

“That,” Cole said, when he had the breath for it, “was a disaster.”

“I made an opening.”

“You made a hole I had to cover. There’s a difference.” He pressed a hand to his side, and it came away dark, and he looked at it without much interest. “This is what I was trying to tell you in the alley. Apart, we’re each good. Together, we nearly died in a basement. Twice now.”

She should have walked. She had every reason in the world. The man fought like a weapon, and being near him was clearly a fast way to die in interesting cities, and she had spent her whole life being told that the smart thing and the safe thing were the same thing, by the very people who, it turned out, had built the horror she was now standing in the wreckage of.

But she thought about the lie hanging in the bunker. Her family’s name woven through a murder. Her father, who was not her father, dying alone in a safe house to keep this from

happening, and calling this man, somewhere in the years she would never get to know about, the one thing he had gotten right and could not fix.

“My father trusted yours,” she said. “And whoever is doing this knew exactly how to take the two of them and make them into a weapon pointed at each other. You and me. We are the only two people alive who know this is a lie. Think about how badly somebody wanted us never to be in the same room.”

Cole was quiet a long moment. She watched him do the math she had already done.

“And here we are,” he said.

“And here we are.” She put out her hand. It had stopped shaking somewhere back in the Bazaar, and she had not noticed when. “Wren.”

He looked at it like a contract he already knew he would regret signing. Then he took it. His hand was warm, and there was still blood on it, and she did not pull away.

“Cole.”

It was not trust. Trust was a long way off, and some of it would burn down before they ever reached it, though she could not know that yet. It was just two people choosing the worst available option because every other option was worse. Freedom weighs more than chains, she had read somewhere once, or maybe she had simply decided it was true because she needed it to be, and standing in a Fatih doorway at the

end of the worst night of her life, with the man the Federation had aimed at her heart, she felt the whole weight of it settle onto her shoulders and stay.

“So,” Cole said. “Where does the trail go from here.”

She almost laughed. It was not a good laugh, but it was real, the first real thing in hours.

“You’re not going to like it,” she said. “It runs through Arcadia. Through VERDANT. Which means through my family’s systems, which means there is exactly one way left to get ahead of it.” She made herself say it, the sentence she had spent four years never having to say. “We have to break into my mother’s house.”

Down the alley the Bazaar moved on around them, indifferent, eternal, hiding them the way it hid everything, for now.

PART TWO — THE FIRST TRIALS

THE CANOPY HEIST

Arcadia did not look like a place that had ever survived anything. That was the work it did.

Up in the Pacific green, under a sky the Foundation paid to keep blue, the city wore its safety like a coat that had never once been rained on. Vertical gardens climbed the towers in tended cascades, green on green, every leaf accounted for. The air tasted filtered and sweet, scrubbed clean of the salt and the ash and the particulate grief that every other city in the world breathed as a matter of course. Somewhere at the center of it the Canopy Core held its secrets behind glass, and a light burned in Elliot Calderwood's office the way it always burned, all night, every night, the one honest thing in the skyline, because the old man did not sleep and had never seen why anyone else should be permitted to.

Wren hated it the way you hate a childhood bedroom. Not cleanly. That was the trouble with hating it. Some traitor part of her still read the skyline as home, still knew which terrace caught the morning and which stair her grandfather's footsteps used to come down, and she had spent four years

and a whole second life trying to starve that part of herself, and it would not quite die. You could leave a place like this. She had proved that. You could not get it out of your hands.

She had been twelve when she understood what the family actually did, and twenty when she stopped being able to sit at the table while they did it, and somewhere in the long gap between she had learned that the people who owned the water spoke about the people who needed it the way you speak about weather, as a thing to be managed and never a thing to be answered to. Her grandfather had told her once, kindly, as a kind of inheritance, that mercy was a luxury you bought with control, and that the family's whole purpose was to keep enough control that mercy stayed affordable. She had been fourteen. She had believed him for almost a year. She had been unlearning it ever since.

She walked out at twenty with a duffel and a conscience and not much else. Looking at the towers now, she felt the old pull and the old nausea arrive together, holding hands, the way they always did. Home was the place that had taught her exactly what she was now risking her life to tear down. There was no clean way to feel about that, so she stopped trying to feel a clean way about it, and got to work.

They watched it from a service roof two districts out, because watching was the only part of a job you could do for free, and because Wren needed the distance before she could make herself go in.

Two districts out was where Arcadia stopped paying for the sky. Somebody had run a mark down the flank of a retaining wall there, big enough to read from the roof: STRIP THE FACTION, KEEP THE JACKET. Cole had been living that sentence for eight years. He did not say so.

“Three systems,” she said. “VERDANT runs the city. Foundation security runs the campus. And the Canopy Core runs itself, because my grandfather built it that way. Elliot Calderwood never trusted anything he couldn’t hold in his own hand, the other two systems included.” Something that was almost a smile, and was not. “Paranoia runs in the family. It’s the only thing we ever passed down clean.”

“Which one do we beat,” Cole said.

“None of them. We beat the seams. They don’t talk to each other. They were built not to talk to each other.”

Cole studied her in the wet light coming off the towers. She was not bluffing. She had grown up inside this, and a person who grows up inside a thing knows where it is weak the way she knows her own teeth. He understood, watching her hold herself very straight against the skyline, that bringing her home was costing her something she was not going to name, and that he was not going to ask. They had that much in common. They were both very good at not asking, and he was beginning to suspect that the not-asking was the thing they would eventually have to learn to give up, if any of this was going to work.

“You take the seams,” he said. “I take the ground.”

“You make it sound simple.”

“It’s never simple. It’s just divided.”

*

Getting onto the campus was the easy part, which was the first thing that frightened her. The Foundation did not waste money on hard outer walls. It spent money on knowing, on the patient total surveillance that meant it never needed a wall, and Wren had spent her whole childhood inside that knowing and had never once felt watched, because the watched do not feel it when the watching is the water they swim in. She felt it now. Every lens was a small cold weight on the back of her neck. She made herself breathe, and reminded herself that the only thing more total than the Foundation’s knowing was its certainty that no one it had raised would ever turn around and use it against it.

The campus smelled of jasmine and ozone, the gardens and the machines, the exact compound smell of her whole childhood, and it went into her like a hook and pulled.

Nothing here was stripped or stacked or marked. Every badge was live, every face read HELIX-clean, every surface held its registration. The Foundation did not permit the city to look lived in, because a place that looks lived in is a place where somebody might be getting away with something, and getting away with something was the only freedom the working levels had ever had.

They went in at the hour the Core trusted itself most, which is always the hour to go in.

Wren didn't fight the three systems. She made them distrust each other, the way her grandfather had built them to, feeding each watcher a version of the night the other two would not contradict. It was, she thought, the most honest thing she had ever done inside this building: turn the family's paranoia against the family. CHORUS rode her wrist and the building's nervous system at once. Doors forgot they were locked a half second before Cole reached them. Cameras looped onto themselves and showed the guards an Arcadia where nothing at all was happening.

It was the first time the two of them had moved as one thing instead of two, and she felt it land somewhere under her sternum before she let herself name it.

She opened. He crossed. She opened the next, and he crossed that. He did not look back to check her work, and she did not watch to see whether he made it, and the not-watching was its own kind of trust, the cheap kind, the kind you can build in a single night and lose in a single second. She had lost it that way before. She let herself have it anyway, because it had been a long time since she had stood in a room with anyone who simply assumed she would do her part, and longer still since being assumed-upon had felt like a gift instead of a trap.

For his part, Cole moved through the Foundation's perfect house and found it the most dangerous building he had ever worked, precisely because nothing in it looked dangerous. Give him a fortress and he could read its walls in a glance. This place had no walls. It had only the soft total attention of a thing that had never once been surprised, and he trusted the woman at his back to keep it surprised for exactly as long as this took, and he was aware, distantly, professionally, that he had decided to trust her without ever deciding to.

The records vault had a lock CHORUS could not touch from the outside. Genomic. Live tissue only.

"This one's yours," Wren breathed.

Cole pressed his forearm to the plate. Under the skin, a carrier Asher had given him a lifetime ago woke up and told the lock a lie it wanted to believe. The plate went green.

For half a second the corridor stretched. The light climbed into a register that was not there, the floor going far away beneath him, the almost-word rising in the back of his skull, louder this time, closer, a thing trying to resolve into meaning and not quite managing it. Then it let go, and Wren was looking at him with something in her face that was not quite alarm and was on its way there.

"You good?"

"Fatigue," Cole said, and watched her decline to believe it, and was grateful when she let it go, and did not let himself

think about how quickly he had come to rely on her letting things go.

The vault opened.

*

They took everything and understood none of it, which is how the best jobs go.

And then the night decided it was done being quiet.

A patrol came early, the way patrols come exactly when you have told yourself they will not, and the clean job turned into the other kind. Cole moved Wren ahead of him through the hanging gardens while the Foundation's people came up behind, and for ninety seconds Arcadia got to learn what its safety actually cost. The muzzle flash strobed the manicured green. The planters burst into dirt and leaf. Sprinklers triggered somewhere in the chaos and came on all at once, and the whole engineered paradise stood there in the gunfire weeping clean water down onto the people trying to kill each other in it, a city built never to be rained on finding out at last what weather felt like.

They went off the garden terrace into the dark with a Foundation drone screaming after them, and lost it in the canopy the way Cole lost everything, by being where it was not.

When they came down somewhere quiet, both of them breathing hard, Wren was almost laughing, the adrenaline turning over into something giddy and a little awful, the

specific hysteria of having shot her way out of a place that was supposed to be home.

“That,” she said, “tasted like winning.”

“It wasn’t winning. It was leaving.” But the corner of his mouth moved when he said it, the first thing she had ever seen in his face that was not on guard, gone again almost before it arrived, and she filed it away, and was annoyed at herself for how badly she wanted to see it a second time.

*

Far from any of it, in a city that drank water other people died for, the men who owned the campaign were not worried.

They sat behind plasma-crowned walls in the Saharan Oasis, above three hundred thousand people rationed down to the milliliter, and talked through the plan over glasses that sweated in the heat. They were calm. Calm is what power feels like from the inside. To them, the turned operator and the journalist were a housekeeping matter, two names already handed to the Pale Roster. Loose ends were what the Pale Roster was for. They poured another glass and moved on.

*

The argument started the moment they were safe, which is the only time people like them ever argue.

Wren had the take spread in the air between them, already sorting, already routing, her hands moving the way

they moved when the work was the only thing holding her together. “Half of this should be public by morning. The procurement trail alone would end three careers.”

“You publish, they know exactly what we have. And exactly what we don’t.”

“They know a journalist is coming. Good. Let them sweat.”

“They send the Pale Roster to your apartment, and your sources, and everyone who ever bought you a drink.” Cole did not raise his voice. He never had to. “Loud gets people killed who didn’t volunteer.”

“And quiet lets the people who did this keep doing it in the dark, which is the only place they can do it.” She turned on him, and it came out harder than she meant it to, because an hour ago they had moved like one thing and she had liked it, and that made this worse instead of better. “That’s the whole game. They live in the dark. You want to fight them there. I want to turn on the lights.”

“The lights get people shot.”

“The dark already did.”

They stood in it a moment, the gap between them suddenly the exact size of the thing they were fighting, the first clear sight either of them got of the cliff they would eventually go over together, and neither of them looked away.

Then CHORUS, quietly, said it had finished sorting the contract ledger, and that there was a name in it Wren thought Cole should see.

A unit. Hired through a Syndicate blind channel, paid through a shell, deniable all the way down.

The Pale Roster.

Cole went very still. Stiller than the scope. Stiller than the vault. Wren had known him only a handful of days and she already knew that this stillness was the most frightening thing his body did.

“Cole,” she said. “What is it.”

He did not answer. He was eight years gone, in a different country, on the worst night of his life.

GHOSTS OF THE PAST

Cole sat with the file until the sun came up, and the file did not change, and neither did what it meant.

The Pale Roster. A Federation Dire Wolf unit, gene-forged for pack assault, decommissioned on paper after an incident nobody was allowed to name. He knew the incident. He had worn it on his skin for eight years. They had not decommissioned the Pale Roster. They had simply moved it somewhere the books could not follow, into the Syndicate’s

blind channels, where good soldiers go to become deniable ones.

He had been one of them, once. Before he had a name for what they were.

The op was called Clearance Point 9.

He had told himself, the way he had told himself for eight years, that the manifest was wrong. That the building was supposed to have been empty. That nobody had known the families were still inside. He had told himself this so many times that the telling had worn smooth, the way a stone wears smooth when you keep it in your pocket to have something to hold in the dark. He had built a whole survivable man on top of that smooth stone, a man who had made one terrible mistake in good faith and spent the rest of his life paying it down with interest, and most days that man could get up and do the work, and once in a great while even sleep.

The contract ledger reached into his pocket and took the stone out and showed him it had never been smooth at all. It told him the manifest had never been wrong. The building was supposed to have people in it. That was the point of the building. Clearance Point 9 had not been a mistake the Pale Roster made. It had been a service the Pale Roster sold, a line item with a price, and he had carried it out clean, and gone home, and spent eight years grieving an accident that someone in a comfortable room had ordered the way you

order a meal and then forgotten before the plates were cleared.

He understood, sitting there while the light came up gray and then gold over a city that did not know his name, that he had not been hunting his father's killers at all.

He had been hunting himself. The long way around.

*

"Where does the money sleep," he said, when Wren woke.

She looked up from the take. He had not told her the rest of it, and she had not asked, because she knew the shape of a man carrying something and knew better than to reach for it before he set it down. She had her own version of that weight. She recognized the exact way it bent a person at the shoulders, the way it made a man go quiet and precise, and she felt something for him in that moment that she did not have a safe name for, so she answered the question instead.

"The shell that paid them," she said. "Meridian East. It launders through the Lakefire Corridor. There's a compound outside Kalemie dressed up as a private preserve. That's where the money goes to look clean."

"Then that's where we go."

*

The Lakefire Corridor kept its secrets behind a fence and a promise.

On the surface, the ACU's Obsidian Wardens kept the lake clean and the peace keepable, and at night the festival lights ran in long warm strings along the shore for the forty million people who lived on the right side of the water, music carrying out across it, a whole region celebrating the simple miracle of a lake that was not poisoned. Down on the shore the stalls ran CLEAR LINE banners and crates of DEPOT RATION and a NULLCAST feed turned up loud over the water, the ordinary noise of people who had clean water tonight and knew better than to ask about tomorrow.

Underneath, a company called Meridian East ran a hunting estate where rich men shot animals that had been built from the ground up to be worth shooting. Leopard stock. Wild dog. Gorilla stock, for the clients who wanted to feel something they had paid for. They were clade builds, bred to be worth the bullet, and Meridian East had let the drift run wild in them on purpose, because drift made them stranger, and stranger made them sell. And ringed around all of it, a Lumicite exclusion zone nobody was permitted to ask about, a five-hundred-meter circle of ground that glowed faintly if you knew how to look, and that the Wardens guarded as if it were the lake's actual beating heart.

They went in as buyers, and they came out as prey.

Their cover lasted exactly as long as it took someone to run Wren's face against a list, and then the estate stopped being an estate and became a kill box with weather. The

whole preserve smelled of musk and cut grass and the iron under both, the smell of a place that fed things to other things. The animals came off their leashes, and they did not roar. Bred quiet, they came through the long grass making almost no sound at all, which was worse than any roar, the silence of predators that had never once needed to announce themselves to eat. Cole had fought a great many things, but he had never fought something built from the ground up to feel no fear of him, and he learned fast that the only thing that worked was sound. He put a sonic disruptor between his own throat and a leopard that had decided to have it, and the leopard screamed, the one honest animal sound in the whole manufactured place, and broke, and the night kept coming.

Wren ran beside him through the dark, no longer cargo, holding his pace because she had decided to, and somewhere in the running she understood what the family's money actually was when you stripped the towers and the blue sky off it. It was this. A place where living things were built to be hunted for sport, behind a fence, so that the people on the right side of the lake could enjoy their clean water and never once have to know. She had grown up on the proceeds of rooms like this one. She ran faster.

They went through the inner fence and into the control room at the center, where the money kept its real books.

Meridian East, laid out like an anatomy lesson. The whole laundering machine, every shell nested inside every

shell, the patient plumbing of stolen power. Wren pulled it down into CHORUS while Cole held the door.

And on the wall, in light, hung the thing they had come all this way without knowing they were looking for.

A map. The whole world, stuck with points of fire. Every continent. Every coordinated strike, waiting, patient, on a single signal.

“That’s not an attack,” Wren said softly. “That’s a season of them.”

Arcadia was on it. The strike they had been racing to get ahead of, the one staged for the campus, was one point of fire among hundreds. They had been bailing a single window of a house already burning, and had not understood until they stood in front of the whole map that it was the entire house, the entire street, the entire world, set and dressed and waiting only for a match.

Cole memorized it the way he memorized everything, and grabbed the command package off the core, encrypted to hell, and then the Wardens’ response birds were inbound and there was no more time to understand anything.

They went out the way they came in, through the teeth, and into the dark, and gone.

*

They stopped running somewhere east of Kalemie, in the ruin of a pump station the lake had long since taken back, the water standing black and patient in rooms that had once

kept a city alive, and for a long while neither of them said anything at all. The festival lights were a far orange smear across the water. Somebody over there was happy. It seemed very far away.

Then Cole said the thing he had never said out loud to a living person.

“Clearance Point 9.” His voice was flat, which was how she knew it was not. “Eight years ago. I was Pale Roster. We hit a building they told us was empty. It wasn’t.” He stopped. Made himself start again. “There were three families on the floor we breached. I have spent eight years calling it the worst mistake of my life, because calling it a mistake was the only way to keep getting up in the morning.” He looked at the dead black water. “Tonight I found out it wasn’t a mistake. It was the job. The building was always meant to have people in it. I just didn’t read the fine print, and reading the fine print was the one thing I was there to do.”

Wren did not tell him it was not his fault. She was too honest for that, and he would have hated her for it, and the hating would have been right. She had spent her whole career learning the exact and unbridgeable difference between comfort and company, and she knew which one a man like this could survive being handed.

“My family taught me to read fine print before I could ride a bike,” she said instead. “I turned it on them the second I understood what it said. It cost me everyone I grew up

with. My mother hasn't spoken my name in four years." She pulled her knees up to her chest, a girl's posture, one she had not let herself sit in since she had actually been a girl. "I tell people I left to chase the truth. It's a good line. I've said it on panels and watched a room decide I was brave. Mostly I left because I could not stand at their table and eat food I knew was bought with other people's water. That isn't bravery. That's a stomach. The brave version is a story I tell because the true one makes me sound like someone who ran."

"You didn't run," Cole said. "You're here."

"So are you. We're both here. Look where here is." But she said it without any edge, and after a moment she let her shoulder come to rest against his, the smallest possible weight, and he did not move away, and the two of them sat in the ruin of a thing that had once kept people alive and let themselves, for exactly that long, be kept alive by the only thing on offer.

It was not comfort. It was company, which is the only thing that has ever actually helped anyone. They sat in it together, two people who had each been built by the very thing they were now trying to kill, and something moved between them in the dark that was past trust and well short of safety, and neither of them named it, because naming it would only have made it one more thing they could lose.

"We finish this," Cole said.

"We finish this," Wren said.

*

Later, while he slept the way operators sleep, with one hand near a weapon and the rest of him gone somewhere it could not be followed, Wren cracked the command package.

It took CHORUS most of the night. The encryption was Foundation-grade, which she knew because she had grown up watching it built, had done her homework at a kitchen table while her mother's people argued key lengths in the next room. Layer after layer came away under her hands, familiar as a childhood prayer she had thought she had forgotten and found she could still say, and the map bloomed again in the dark, the whole patient season of fire, and under it the command spine, the authority that would one day send the single signal that set the world alight.

The authority had a name on it.

She had known, somewhere under everything, since the moment the map first routed back to a Foundation system. She had known and refused to know, the way you refuse the sound of a thing breaking in another room, the way you keep your eyes hard on the page so the house can stay standing one more minute.

Eleanor Calderwood.

Her mother.

Wren sat very still in the dark, the way Cole had sat with his file, and across the ruined room he slept on, trusting her, the man who put the quiet thing above all the wrong things

and had just handed her the worst truth he owned the way you hand someone a live round, carefully, expecting them to be careful back. She held the matching round in her hand now. Her mother's name. The end of the story she had spent her whole life chasing, and it ran straight back through her own front door, up the stair her grandfather's footsteps used to come down, to a woman who had not said her name in four years and was, it turned out, going to end the world in an orderly fashion in order to keep it in the family.

An hour ago she had leaned her shoulder against this man and let him believe, for the length of it, that they were the same kind of thing. She looked at him now and understood that telling him would cost her the only person in years who had assumed, without once asking, that she would do her part.

She closed the package.

She did not wake him.

PART THREE — THE CRISIS AND TRANSFORMATION

THE PUPPET MASTERS

The plan had a shape now, and the shape was patient. That was the worst part of it.

Wren had been reading it for three days, in safe rooms and the backs of markets and once in the dead carriage of a cable line that had not run since the water came up. Three days of living inside the architecture of it, and the longer she looked the worse it got, because it was not the work of fanatics. It was the work of administrators. It had budget lines. It had contingencies. Somewhere a competent person had project-managed the end of self-government and gone home to dinner at a reasonable hour.

Cole watched her read. He knew the look of a person carrying something they would not set down, because he had worn it for eight years, and she had been wearing it since the night east of Kalemie, the night he told her the truth about Clearance Point 9 and then slept, and woke to find her already awake and changed in a way he could not name.

He did not ask. You did not reach for a thing like that before someone set it down. He just watched the weight of it bend her at the shoulders, the same bend he knew from his own mirror, and he let it be, and he waited, and he told himself the waiting was patience and not cowardice.

What she would say out loud was the plan.

“It isn’t the attacks,” she said. “The attacks are the instrument. Every staged atrocity buys an emergency. Every emergency buys a law. Every law puts a friendlier man in a chair that used to be elected.” She turned the map in the air, the patient season of fire. “Run it long enough and the democracies vote their own hands tied, because a frightened people will trade anything for the feeling of safe. When it’s done, the men who own the water and the grid and the data don’t have to govern. They just have to own. The Offensive and the Collective never fire a shot. They buy a world that already surrendered.”

“Who sends the signal,” Cole said. “Who’s at the top of it.”

A beat. Small. He almost missed it. He was learning not to miss them, and he hated what he was learning.

“It routes to a Foundation system,” she said. “A Calderwood box.”

“Your family.”

“My family’s been in everything since before I was born.” Which was true, and which was not the answer to the

question he had asked, and they both let it sit there in the room being not the answer.

She did not look at him when she said it, and she told herself that meant nothing. She had carried harder things than a name. She had carried them alone, which was the only way she knew how to carry anything. But she had never before carried a thing while sleeping in the same safe rooms as a man who would have burned the world down for her if she only asked, and the not-asking was becoming a weight of its own. Eleanor Calderwood. Her mother. It sat in Wren's chest like a swallowed coal, and every hour she did not hand it to him it burned a little hotter, and every hour she told herself the same thing. Not yet. Not until she knew what she meant to do with it. Not until she had decided whether her mother was a target, or a reckoning that belonged to her alone.

"We can't break the live command channel from out here," she said, before he could push. "I need people I trust. There's one place left I have them."

*

Neo-Tokyo did not sleep, because Transit Node 7 did not let it.

Twelve million people up top, every step counted, every face matched against every other face, the whole city a single enormous eye that had taught itself to blink in patterns so the people inside it would forget they were being seen. And

under all of it, in the layers the eye pretended were empty, the forty thousand the city called the Ghosted, the unregistered, the people who had stepped out of the count and learned to live in the places the light did not reach.

Up top it was all Transit Node 7, the grid drawn in hard cold type that told you, in the same compressed letters on every wall, exactly how thoroughly you were counted. Down in the layers the type went human, hand-marked and stacked and layered and lying, every surface claimed by someone, every claim a small refusal of the count. Cole hated the top of the city and Wren hated the bottom, and they were each, in their way, right.

They went down into it because down was where the people who refused to be counted kept their tools, and Wren's people had always lived down, in the gap, in the dark she kept insisting to Cole was a friend. She felt him not trust it. She felt him hate every blind corner and every unlogged face, the operator's whole body objecting to a place built to lose people on purpose. She had spent her life learning to vanish into exactly this, and he had spent his learning to find anyone anywhere, and somewhere in the descent she understood that this was the same argument as the alley, the same argument as everything, only wearing the city's clothes.

The moment they came up into the Hikari Bazaar, past the BURNER pyramids and the CLADE DRIP stalls and a

dead-stacker working a blanket of expired clearance, the neon hit Cole wrong.

It came in too loud, and this time it did not pass. Not the old half-second flicker he could blink away and file under fatigue. This one held. The signs stacked and smeared and the crowd noise rose into a register that was not there and stayed there, ringing, the whole bright undermarket folding down to a single screaming point, and under the screaming, almost, nearly, the shape of a word. Then Wren's hand closed on his arm and dragged the world back up around him, and he stood in it breathing hard, more frightened than he would let his face admit.

"Hey. You went somewhere."

"Fatigue," he said.

She looked at him a half second longer than the word deserved, and said nothing, and he understood that she had stopped believing it a while ago, and that she was letting him keep it the way he had let her keep the Calderwood box. Two people handing each other small mercies across a gap that was getting wider in the dark, where neither of them could quite see it.

Then the crowd changed, the way a crowd changes when something professional moves into it, and Cole forgot his own skull, because he knew that movement. He had trained it into men.

*

They came out of the bazaar light in a loose three, no weapons showing, the way you close on a man you want breathing. They still wore the flag, all three of them, full kit, every insignia live and legible, the opposite of everything the bazaar around them stood for. Cole had worn it too, once. It had felt like belonging right up until it felt like a leash. The one in front had a face Cole had bled beside in three countries.

“Snare,” the man said. The old callsign landed like a hand laid on a wound he had thought was closed. “You look like hell.”

“Reyes.”

For a moment Cole was somewhere else. Somewhere with this man’s voice in his ear on a bad night and this man’s blood on his hands on a worse one, the whole brotherhood of it, the only family he had ever chosen, standing here now in a Neo-Tokyo undermarket with an offer held out in its open hands.

“They sent us because they figured you’d listen to us.” Reyes kept his hands open, easy, brotherly, which was how Cole knew exactly how dangerous it was. “Clean offer. Walk away from the Calderwood woman. Your file goes white. Eight years of paper just stops existing. You come home.”

Home. The word did what it was built to do. It opened a door in him he had nailed shut, and on the other side of the door was a version of his life where he had a flag and a unit

and a name that meant something to someone, and no white room, no leash, no woman in the dark keeping something from him.

“Home,” Cole said. “To the people who sold Clearance Point 9 to the Pale Roster and let me carry it eight years as a mistake.”

Something moved behind Reyes’s eyes. So he knew. Maybe they all knew. Maybe every man in the unit had his own smooth stone he kept in his pocket to have something to hold in the dark, and maybe the offer Reyes was holding out was the same lie they had all agreed to swallow, passed hand to hand down the line, keeping each other upright.

“That’s above my pay,” Reyes said quietly. “The offer isn’t.”

“Tell them no.”

“Snare. Don’t.”

“Tell them I said it in a way they’ll feel.”

It went the way it goes between people who learned the same tricks from the same instructors. Fast, ugly, decided in the half second one man will do the thing the others still hope they will not have to. Cole was willing. A man with nothing left to protect is the most dangerous thing in any room, and the offer had just confirmed, out loud, in his oldest friend’s voice, that he had nothing left.

He left them breathing. That was the message, and it was the only mercy he had to give, and he gave it. He could have not.

“Those were your people,” Wren said, after, in the dark below.

“They were.” He did not look at her. “Now there’s just the work.”

He told himself he meant the work. He was getting very tired of the things he told himself.

Wren had watched the whole of it from the mouth of the alley, watched him take apart the last family he had and walk away with his hands open and empty, and she had understood, with a clarity that frightened her, that she was going to have to tell him about her mother soon, because a man who had just given up the last of his own people deserved the truth about hers. She told herself soon. She had been telling herself soon for five days.

*

The Null Chorus node lived three levels down in the Black Clinic layer, past the last camera, in a room that had been an operating theater back when the city still pretended to heal the Ghosted.

Wren stopped at the door. For the first time since he had met her, she looked afraid, and not of anything behind the door.

“There’s a thing about CHORUS I never told you,” she said.

“I know.”

“You don’t.”

“I know you’ve got a wall. I’ve watched you stand behind it for days. Figured you’d show me the door when you wanted to.” He said it gently, which was not a thing he was practiced at, and watched it land on her, and watched it hurt, and did not understand why it should.

She almost laughed. It was not a good laugh, but it was real. “CHORUS isn’t an it,” she said, and opened the door.

The woman inside was older than Wren, gray coming in at the temples, eyes that had read too much by bad light. Half the wall was wired into her rig. Her smile did not trust easy, and did not need to.

She was a scene elder, the kind of person a place grows instead of hires, and the shelf behind her was stacked with GHOST KIT JOURNALS going back further than the war, the whole memory of a culture nobody had ever been allowed to keep.

“Vesper,” she said to Wren, warm, the warmth of a long friendship that had never once happened in a room. Then, to Cole, less so: “And the operator. She’s been talking about you. None of it good. All of it worried.”

“Cole, Kess,” Wren said. “Kess has been half of CHORUS since before I had anything worth hiding. The voice you’ve

been hearing. Some of it's the machine. Some of it's her. I've never been in a room with her until right now."

Cole looked at the two of them, the journalist and the ghost who had been her only company through God knew how many years of the loneliest work there was, and understood that Wren had just handed him the most guarded thing she owned, opened the one door she had never opened for anyone.

And understood, in the same breath, with a cold drop in his chest he chose not to examine, that it still was not the thing she was hiding.

And Wren, watching him understand it, felt the coal in her chest flare, because she had just given him Kess, the realest thing she had, and used the giving to buy herself one more night of not giving him the other thing. She knew exactly what that made her. She did it anyway.

*

Kess did not waste the reunion. She put the live command channel on the wall, and the patient season of fire began, all at once, to count.

"Whatever you pulled out of Kalemie woke something up," she said. "The channel's gone hot. They moved the timetable." She looked from Wren to Cole. "First move, seventy-two hours. They blind the democratic blocs before the strikes, so nobody sees the strikes coming. Cut the eyes. Then cut the throat."

“Where,” Cole said.

“The chokepoint.” Kess’s smile was gone now. “Makassar. Seventy-two hours, and the world goes dark.”

THE GLOBAL CHESSBOARD

Wren had spent her whole life believing that the truth, set loose, would save the world. Makassar was where she learned what it cost to be right about the truth and wrong about the world.

Makassar Crossing was the place the whole ocean had to hold its breath. The Java Sea narrowed there to a single lane of cable nodes, the nerves of half the world bundled into a trench a boat could straddle, and the Pacific Free Zone guarded it with Corsair interception and a standing rule that anything running dark within fifty kilometers earned a boarding party. Across the strait, a Pacific Rim platform sat and watched and pretended to fish. Somewhere on the PFZ side a NULLCAST relay was running a Traverse League final to people who would never feel the world go dark if these two failed tonight, which was the whole point of doing it down here, in the cold, where nobody was watching.

They went in under all of it, on a propulsion sled, into the flooded service spine beneath the cable vault. The water was black and cold enough to make the jaw ache, and the only

sound in the world was Cole's own breathing fed back too loud through the regulator, the steady rasp of a man counting the air he had left. Wren swam at his shoulder in the dark, and thought, absurdly, that it was the most honest place she had been in days. Down here nobody could lie to anybody. Down here there was only the cold, and the count, and the thing they had come to stop. The coal in her chest had gone cold and hard as the water. She still had not told him. There had not been a right hour, she told herself, and knew it for the lie it was, because the truth is that there is never a right hour and you tell people anyway, and she had not.

The cable vault itself was a cathedral built by people who believed in nothing but throughput, a vast cold cylinder of bundled light running floor to ceiling, the whole nervous system of half the planet humming in the dark, and Wren hung at the lip of it and understood the size of what one keystroke down here could do. Cut this, and four blocs went blind at once. Cut this, and the strikes that followed would land on people watching the wrong screens, the way the worst things always land, on the ones who never saw them coming.

The sabotage was already live when they reached the core.

Wren could see it the way she saw everything, in the architecture, a worm coiled through the cable controls,

primed to put four blocs in the dark the instant someone keyed it. And she could see the only thing in the world that could stop it.

It was beautiful work, the worm, and she hated that she could tell. Patient, surgical, written by someone who had been paid well and slept fine. It did not announce itself. It would wait in the dark of the controls until the moment came, and then it would put the lights out everywhere at once and look, to anyone who survived to investigate, like an accident, like weather, like the kind of thing nobody could be blamed for. Her whole family wrote in that hand.

The Cartographer's File. Asher's file, the thing she had carried out of Istanbul and finished in the dark east of Kalemie. It held the conspiracy's own command keys, because Asher had stolen them, because Asher stole everything. With those keys she could send a countermand and kill the worm.

Or she could do the other thing.

She could broadcast. She could take the whole file, the map, the money, the names, the one name, and throw all of it onto every screen the conspiracy was about to seize, and let the world see at once. The truth, set loose. The thing she had believed in since before she had a reason to. The thing she had walked out of her family for. The thing she had told herself, on every panel and in every safe room, was worth any price at all.

But the channel ran on single-use authorization, the way a paranoid system always did. One live token, and then the locks turned over behind it. She could spend it on the countermand and kill the worm, or spend it to seize the feed and show the world, and the token would die in the using either way, and the channel would rekey the instant it was gone. Eleven seconds before the window closed. She could do exactly one of them.

She had imagined this moment her whole life, though she had never known it would look like this. The switch in her hand. The whole rotten machine laid bare and one motion from the light. Every story she had ever published, every source she had buried to protect, every panel where she had said the words the truth wants to be free as if they cost nothing, all of it had been walking her toward this trench in the dark with eleven seconds on a clock. And in the same hand, the same motion, was the other thing. Four blocs blind. The strikes landing on people who could not see them coming. The exact arithmetic Cole had been trying to make her feel since the alley in New Buenos Aires. She had spent her whole life refusing that arithmetic. She refused it now.

She reached for broadcast.

Cole caught her wrist.

“Don’t.”

“This is everything.” Her voice came out a stranger’s.

“The only proof there is. You spend it on a countermand and

they're invisible again. They do it next month, somewhere else, and nobody ever knows it was them."

"And if you broadcast, the worm fires, four blocs go blind, and the strikes land on a world that can't see them coming." His hand did not move. "People who didn't volunteer. Tonight."

"You don't know what's in this file."

"I know what's outside it."

Six seconds, and he was stronger than her, and in the end that was the whole argument. He took the keys out from under her hands and sent the countermand, and the file burned as it went, the map and the money and the names going to nothing in the space of a breath, the worm dying in the same instant. Somewhere above them, in the light, four blocs kept their eyes, and did not know what it had cost, and never would.

She watched the file die. She watched her mother's name, the map, the whole impossible proof go to light and then to nothing, and she felt something in her own chest go out with it, the particular grief of a believer who has waited her entire life for the one moment her faith was built for, and watched it arrive, and watched it pass, un-acted-upon, in another person's hands.

The cables held. The world kept its eyes.

Cole let go of her wrist. In the dim of the vault his face was doing nothing at all, which she had learned to read as

the most his face ever did, and she understood that he believed he had just done the only correct thing in a night with no correct things in it, and that he was right, and that she was going to hate him for being right for a very long time.

And Wren came apart.

“That was my mother.”

Cole went still.

“Eleanor. The name at the top of the spine. The one I cracked east of Kalemie while you slept. It’s my mother, and I’ve known for six days.” The words tore out of her, six days of them, all at once. “I carried it because it was mine to carry. Because I was going to be the one who put her in front of the world, on my terms, with proof nobody could bury. It was the only ending I had ever actually wanted that I was actually going to get. And you spent it to save a cable.”

“You knew.” Cole’s voice dropped very low, lower than the dark. “Six days. You let me sit in that pump station and tell you the worst thing I have ever done. You leaned on me. You let me think we were the same thing.”

He was not shouting. That was the worst of it. She could have stood against shouting. He said it the way he said everything, low and exact, a man reading back a number, and she understood that she had done to him in the dark precisely what the conspiracy had done to him in the white

room. Handed him a clean story. Let him carry it. Let him trust it, all the way up to the second it went off in his hands.

“We were never the same thing. You make it quiet. I turn on the lights. You’ve been telling me that since the alley in New Buenos Aires.” She was crying now, and furious that she was. “I finally had the switch in my hand. The one switch. And you broke it.”

“I’d have broken it either way.” He said it because it was true, and because it was the cruelest true thing within reach, and because he was an operator, and that was what he grabbed for when he was bleeding out somewhere he could not put a tourniquet. “Your mother or a stranger. Tonight or never. I make the same call every time.”

“I know,” Wren said. “That’s the problem with you. You’d make the right call over my whole life and never once feel the weight of it land.”

That one got through. She watched it get through, watched it hit something in him the gunfire had never reached, and for once in her life she took no pleasure at all in having aimed true.

They stood in the flooded dark on opposite sides of a thing that could not be unsaid or unburned, and the distance between them was the exact distance it had always been, the alley in New Buenos Aires, the argument on the safe-room floor, only now it had a body count of two, and the two were them.

*

There was nothing to say after that. The Corsairs were inbound and the vault was a tomb, and they went up into the dark separately, which is its own kind of answer.

She went up through the black water alone, counting her own breaths now, no one's rasp in her ear but hers. Somewhere in the cold she stopped crying, not because it had stopped hurting but because crying is a thing you do when some part of you still believes that someone is coming, and she had just taught herself, finally, in the most expensive way there is, that no one was.

By the time she surfaced, she had already decided.

The proof was ash. Confrontation was all that was left. If she could not put Eleanor in front of the world, she would put herself in front of Eleanor, and she would do it without a man who would always, every time, choose the quiet thing over the true one, and be right, and never once be made to carry what being right had cost everyone else.

Cole watched her go and did not stop her. He had burned the one thing she loved more than the truth, which was the chance to be the one who finally told it, and there was no next sentence that fixed that, so he did not reach for one. He had nothing left to be loyal to, and now no one left to be loyal with. He had made the right call. He was sure of it. Being sure of it did not help at all, and he stood in the cold afterward and let himself understand, all the way down, that

for him being right and being alone had turned out to be the same address, and that he had been living there a very long time.

*

There are betrayals that end a thing, and betrayals that only reveal it was never as whole as you had let yourself believe. Wren did not yet know which kind this was. She knew only that the proof was gone, and the partner was gone, and the one road left ran uphill, into the clean air she had spent four years climbing down out of.

Wren went home. To Arcadia, to the campus behind the glass, where her grandfather's light still burned all night the way it always had, and her mother still ran the world from the floor below it.

Her mother was expecting her.

She had been expecting her for four years.

PART FOUR — THE RISE FROM THE ASHES

CONVERGENCE

The campus let her in like it had never stopped expecting her, because it had not.

Wren walked up through the vertical gardens she had played in as a child, past security that had clearly been told not to stop her, and the not-stopping was its own message, the family's old certainty wearing a uniform: nothing you do here is a surprise to us, and nothing you do here can touch us. She went up to the floor below the tower, where her grandfather's light still burned all night the way it always had. Her mother ran the world from the floor below the light. She always had. Wren had simply never let herself say it plainly until now, standing in the smell of jasmine and ozone that was the smell of every good and ruined thing in her childhood.

She had learned to read in this building. She had learned to lie in it too, later, the small social lies first and then the large structural ones, and somewhere in the middle she had understood that the two were the same skill, and that her

family was simply better at the large lies than anyone alive. She climbed toward her mother now carrying the one thing the family had never managed to teach her, which was the refusal to look away, and it felt, as it always had in this house, like a deformity she had chosen on purpose and would choose again.

Eleanor Calderwood was exactly as Wren remembered, which was the worst thing about her. Not a monster. A woman at a desk, certain of the shape of things, with her daughter's own jaw and her daughter's own habit of going still before she spoke.

"You came without your proof," Eleanor said, not looking up. "I heard you lost it. I'm sorry. I know what it cost to get."

And there it was, the thing that had driven Wren out of this house at twenty: the sympathy. Real, even. Her mother was not pretending to be sorry. Her mother was sorry, in the clean weightless way of a woman who had decided long ago that being sorry and being stopped were entirely unrelated activities.

Wren had come up the mountain rehearsing accusations, a prosecutor's whole case, and standing here she understood the case was useless, had always been useless, because you cannot prosecute a person who concedes every fact and disputes only your right to be upset about them. Her mother was not hiding. That was the horror Wren's whole career had been built to expose and had never once been able to touch.

The people at the top were not ashamed. They had simply done the math, and the math had come out in their favor, and they had gone to bed and slept.

“I came to look at you when I asked,” Wren said. Her voice held, which surprised her. “Asher Brandt. My source. The man who trusted me. Did you sign the order that killed him.”

“I have signed a great many things.” Eleanor set down her pen. “Sit. You look like the wars you cover.”

Wren did not sit.

Eleanor sighed, the patient sigh of a woman explaining arithmetic to a child who keeps insisting on a different answer. “You think this is corruption. Corruption is small. This is maintenance.” She gestured at the window, the green city, the blue sky the Foundation paid for. “Your grandfather built the systems that keep nine figures of people breathing. My mother widened them. I am finishing the work, which is to stop pretending the people who depend on a thing should also get to vote on whether it runs. Democracy was a luxury of abundance. The abundance is gone. Someone has to own the water. I would rather it was a family that has done it well for three generations than a committee that drowns everyone being fair.”

“You’re going to murder your way into owning the world and call it housekeeping.”

“I am going to let a frightened planet ask to be governed, and then govern it well. The asking matters. People keep what they ask for.” Eleanor’s eyes were not cruel. That was the unbearable part. They were patient, and a little sad, and certain. “In three days it will be orderly. The right people are gathering to agree on it, so there is no scramble after. You could be in that room, Wren. You were always supposed to be in that room.”

“Which people. Which partners.”

“The ones who matter.” A small smile, the one she gave reporters, and rivals, and, once, a daughter. “Come home. The story you have chased your whole life ends in that room. You can be the daughter who was there, or the orphan who wasn’t. There is no version where you stop it.”

Wren looked at her mother a long moment, at the jaw that was her own jaw, and understood two things at once. The first was that she had her answer: the gathering, the room, three days. The second was that Eleanor had handed it to her freely, completely, without a flicker of worry, because Eleanor could not conceive of losing, and a person who cannot conceive of losing will tell you everything, because to her your knowing changes nothing at all.

“I’ll see you there,” Wren said, and left, and did not look back, because looking back is a thing you do when some part of you still hopes, and she was done hoping in this house.

She walked back down through the gardens she had played in, past the security that had been told not to stop her, and she did not cry, because she had done her crying in a flooded vault two nights ago, for a man, which she found she could forgive herself for and probably never would. Her mother had given her the room, the gathering, the three days. Her mother had given her everything, the way she always had, on the unshakable assumption that nothing Wren did with it could possibly matter. It was the last gift. Wren intended to make it the worst one her mother had ever given.

*

Cole had gone to the one place a stateless man could disappear and still be found by the right people.

Shinkai was the Syndicate's neutral water, the single table in the world where every faction agreed to keep its hands where the others could see them. Baroness Volstok ran it the way Istanbul ran itself, on the principle that the place was worth more to everyone intact than it could ever be worth to anyone broken. Down in the Deep Room, where you paid in secrets to be forgotten for an hour, Cole sat with the wreckage of the only plan he had had, which was to finish his father's work and not think too hard about who he had burned to do it. He was thinking too hard about it. He had not stopped since the water.

The Deep Room was the kind of dark that cost money, velvet and old smoke and the low murmur of people buying each other's silence by the hour, and Cole sat in it the way a stone sits in a river, letting the talk go around him. He had been alone before. Alone was the baseline of the work, the water he swam in. This was different. This was the specific loneliness of having had, for a few weeks, the alternative, and having set fire to it himself, on purpose, for a good reason, in the dark, under a chokepoint, while she watched.

Every other coat in the place was dead-stacked, expired clearance worn as jewelry, faction surplus stripped down to the lining. In a room where everyone was no one on purpose, Cole's bare kit made him invisible and, for the first time in a long while, entirely at home.

"My father never kept one of anything," he told the Brotherhood man across the table, an old contact of Asher's summoned through channels that still answered the Cartographer's name. "There's another copy of that file somewhere. There has to be."

"If there is," the man said, "Asher hid it the way he hid everything. Which means you'll find it the day after you stop needing it. That was always his idea of a joke."

So that was gone too, the file and the joke both, and Cole sat in the dark with the last of his father's habits and understood that he had burned the proof and lost the woman in the same eleven seconds, and been right to do it, and that

being right had a sound now, and the sound was a room with no one else in it.

*

She found him because Kess told her where to look, and because some part of her had been looking since she surfaced at Makassar alone.

She came into the Deep Room and stopped at the edge of the lamplight, and Cole looked up, and for a moment neither of them said the thing.

“You could have kept walking,” he said.

“I know.”

“Why didn’t you.”

“Because you were right.” It cost her, and she paid it anyway, standing in the light where he could watch her pay it. “Loud would have killed people who didn’t volunteer. You made the call I couldn’t, and I hated you for it, and you were right, and I have spent two days being right back at you in my head and getting nowhere.” She came the rest of the way into the light. “And because I can’t take that room alone. I need the man who makes it quiet.”

“And I need the woman who turns on the lights.” Cole stood. He had been sitting in the dark deciding that he deserved it, and here she was, refusing to let him have it. “The proof’s ash. The only thing left to hang them with is them. We catch them saying it, in their own room, and we put it on every screen they were about to steal.”

“Expose and stop,” Wren said. “Both. At once.”

“Both. At once.”

It was the first time the two of them had ever agreed on the verb, and they both heard it land, and neither of them said what it meant, because there was a room three days out that would either make it true or kill them, and saying it now would only have been one more thing to lose.

She did not apologize for the alley, or the vault, or the six days of the swallowed coal, and he did not ask her to, and that was its own kind of contract, the only kind either of them had ever been able to keep. They would carry what they had done to each other into the room with them. They would simply carry it together, which turned out to be the whole of what either of them had to offer, and which turned out, tonight, to be enough.

*

The Nordics Arcology was a sealed white machine bolted to a mountain, and the only way in was the Threshold, where the NIA Border Authority read every arriving delegate down to the marrow and the performance of neutrality was the entire point of the architecture.

Everything at the Threshold read HELIX-clean and signal-cold, the type on every surface the same compressed institutional hand, a place built to make certain no one ever walked in wearing a face that was not already on file. They walked in wearing faces that were not on file.

They went in on Asher's network and Wren's stolen credentials, through the one door built to process the most careful people on earth, and it almost held.

It held right up until Inspector Adrian Roux smiled at them from the GCOA arbitration desk like an old friend.

Roux had been everyone's friend for years. It was how he had stayed alive in a profession that killed friends. He was the man who moved between factions because each of them believed, with good reason, that he was theirs.

"The journalist and the ghost," he said, low, just for them. "You are either the bravest people in this building or the most expensive. I haven't decided which pays better." He let it stretch, enjoying it. "Go on in. I do want to see how far you get."

It was not mercy. It was a man keeping all of his doors open at once, betting on both horses and charging admission to watch the race. He let them through, and he made a call, and by the time they reached the floor the room already knew they were coming.

Inside, under the great transparent dome with the glacier burning white a thousand feet below, the powers of the earth had sat down to divide it.

And along the edges of the room, unhurried, in the gray that was not quite a uniform, every mark and insignia stripped from it, stood the Pale Roster. Stripped that clean,

in a room like this one, was its own kind of flag: we belong to no one, which means we will do anything.

Cairn was already watching the door when Cole came through it.

NEW WORLD ORDER

There is a version of Cole Brandt that walks into that room and starts shooting. Eight years ago he was that man, and that man would have died there, and taken the room and the broadcast and the whole fragile chance down with him. He had spent every day since Clearance Point 9 becoming someone else without knowing what he was becoming it for. He knew now. He had been becoming the man who could stand in the worst room in the world and not reach for the loud answer.

The plan had two halves, and neither worked alone, which was the only kind of plan they trusted now.

Cole's half was quiet. Reach the command core, the relay the cabal had built to hand their partners a synchronized dark, and hold it long enough for Wren to do the loud thing. No bodies if he could manage it. The old Cole would have cleared the room. The new one threaded it, a hand on a throat here, the old scrambler dropping a man soft there, moving through the most dangerous gathering on earth like

a rumor. Restraint, he had learned, was the harder discipline, and tonight it was also the whole job, and somewhere under the focus he understood that the woman who had taught him the cost of going loud had taught it to him by leaving, and that he was using the lesson now to try to earn her back.

Wren's half was loud, and it would cost her everything, and she had decided she could carry that.

Under the dome, the world's owners were polite to each other. Eleanor Calderwood stood at the head of a table that held a delegate of the Eastern Offensive and a minister of the Pacific Rim Collective, and at her right hand, smiling his elected smile, sat Delegate Ezekiel Crane, who had once watched a journalist at a funeral and decided she was a problem for later. Above them turned the map, the patient season of fire, rendered now in light for the comfort of partners who liked to see what they were buying.

Wren watched it from a service gallery with Kess in her ear and did not let herself look too long at her mother, at the jaw that was her own jaw, at the woman who had been expecting her for four years and was about to learn exactly what she had been expecting.

"The feed's a fortress," Kess said. "I can crack it. But the second I push it public they'll know exactly where you are, and you can't take it back. No clean version. No second pass.

You broadcast, it's everything, all at once, ugly. Your name in it. Your face. The family. You."

The old Wren would have waited for clean. Would have built the perfect unanswerable case and dropped it whole, with herself safely outside the frame, the teller and not the told. Cole had spent a whole season trying to teach her that clean was a luxury that got other people killed while you polished it. She had learned it at last in a flooded vault, too late to save what learning it had cost her.

"Do it ugly," Wren said.

*

Cole reached the command core and found Cairn waiting, because of course Roux had called ahead, because the man who had made him a murderer had always known he would come.

Cairn had no confirmed face in any file Cole had ever read. Up close he was just a tired man built like the work, gray and unhurried, with the particular calm of someone who had never once in his life thought of what he did as killing. He had handed Cole the manifest for Clearance Point 9 eight years ago and told him the building was empty, and he had done it the way you hand a man a duty roster.

"Snare." Cairn almost sounded glad. "You came back to the unit after all."

They went out through a maintenance lock onto the spine of a transit gondola, the glacier a white nothing below, the

wind trying to take them both off the cable and down into all that clean indifferent white. Cairn fought the way the Pale Roster fought, like a man who had never once been told no, economical and patient and entirely without heat.

The drift took Cole at the worst possible moment. The white climbed into the register that was not there and held, the whole frozen world ringing, and for a second he was nowhere, his own body a thousand miles away, and Cairn's forearm was crushing his throat against the cable.

And in the ringing, for the first time, he heard that it was not noise. That it had shape. That it was aimed, the way a voice is aimed, the way his name in his father's mouth had once been aimed, and the sheer addressed intent of it frightened him worse than the arm at his throat and woke him the rest of the way up.

He came back into his body with the wind and the white and a dead man's weight, and he did the thing the new Cole could do that the old one could not. He did not kill him. He broke the arm at his throat, put Cairn down on the spine of the gondola, and held him there, breathing, for the cameras that were about to exist.

"You think this changes the number." Cairn said it without heat, the way he said everything, a man reading back an invoice. "The building was always on someone's manifest, Snare. You were only ever the pen."

“A body proves nothing,” Cole said into the wind. “You’re going to be evidence. That’s worse, for men like you. You spent your whole life being deniable. I’m going to make you a fact.”

*

Above, Wren pushed it all out at once, ugly and whole and unanswerable in its ugliness. The cabal’s own map. The cabal’s own voices. Her mother, mid-sentence, explaining maintenance to the world she had been about to inherit. It went to every screen the conspiracy had meant to seize, and to ten thousand they had not, jumping from the summit feed to Gutter Bible to a hundred NULLCAST relays faster than anyone could pull it back, the whole stateless scene catching it and running with it the way the scene caught everything the people up top wanted buried, and there was no calling it back, and her own name went out in it, and her own face, the daughter who had finally, at the cost of the entire family, turned on the one light big enough to matter.

Eleanor stopped talking. For the first time in Wren’s life, her mother had nothing prepared, and Wren watched it happen from the gallery and felt no triumph at all, only the enormous cold quiet of a thing finally, irreversibly done.

Down in the core, with Cairn’s command keys and Kess in his ear, Cole held the relay open long enough for the abort to reach the waiting cells, and one by one across the patient map the points of fire went dark before they could be lit, a

whole season of atrocities un-happening in the space of a held breath, the most important thing neither of them would ever be able to prove they had done.

*

It came apart fast, the way it does once the lights are on.

The partners from the Offensive and the Collective were gone before the broadcast finished, denying everything, which is what denial is for. Crane was arrested on his own floor by people who a minute earlier had answered to him, the elected smile gone at last. Thorne's name was in the file Wren pushed, and Monitor Central, which had watched everyone for so long, finally got to feel what it was like to be seen. The Pale Roster scattered into the gray they had come from, all but the one Cole walked out by the arm.

The Calderwood empire did not so much fall as crack, all at once, down every wall. Eleanor was led out of the room she had been certain she could not lose, past the gallery where her daughter stood. She did not look up. Wren had not expected her to, and had braced for it anyway, and it cost exactly what she had known it would cost, which was everything, which was the whole family, paid in full, on the record, in the light. She had always said the light was worth any price. She had simply never before been handed the bill.

*

They stood in the cold outside the Threshold while the arcology emptied behind them, two people who had torn the

world down to save it and were not yet sure what that made them.

“You took him alive,” Wren said.

“You did it ugly.”

“I did it ugly.” She almost smiled. “We’re going to be insufferable about this.”

“We’re going to argue about it for years.”

“Is that a threat or a plan.”

“Haven’t decided,” Cole said. “I haven’t decided which pays better.”

It was Roux’s line, and she caught it, and the laugh that got out of her was real, the first real one since the vault, and it was the nearest either of them had come to saying the other thing, and they let it stand in for the other thing, because they were who they were, and because some things you do not say at the end of the worst week of your life. You say them later, if there is a later. And for the first time in a long time, it looked like there might be a later, friction and all.

*

Later, when the world was busy being shocked by what it had always half known, Cole felt his arm go warm.

The carrier. Asher’s carrier, the one his father had slipped under his skin a lifetime ago, the one that had told a vault a lie in Arcadia and worked the locks of a dozen rooms since. It

had been waiting for a signal that the truth was finally out. Now it had one.

His father never kept one of anything. The safest vault in the world, for a man like Asher Brandt, was the son he had thrown away, the one place no enemy would think to look and no friend would be allowed to open. Cole had been carrying the only surviving copy of the Cartographer's File in his own arm since before he knew there was a war, since before the funeral, since a wall went up between a father and a son that neither of them ever climbed.

It opened behind his eyes, the way the carrier spoke, and the whole file came up whole again, the map and the money and the names, everything Wren had wept to watch burn, alive after all. And under it, a last entry. A string of coordinates in his father's hand.

Installation sites. Dated three weeks after the funeral.

Cole stood very still, the way he had stood on the yacht, the way he had stood at the vault. The drift came up in him, the register that was not there, and this time he did not call it fatigue, because this time he understood that it was not noise.

It was a signal. It had always been a signal. And it was addressed to him.

Somewhere his father was alive, and had been since before the bomb, and had spent the time he was supposed to be dead leaving his estranged son a map to the thing under

the thing. The war beneath the war. The one the false flag had only ever been built to hide.

The Surface Game was won.

The Deep Game had been waiting the whole time. It had been waiting in his own arm. It had been waiting, patient as a season of fire, for him to finally go quiet enough to hear it.

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COMING NEXT — SEASON TWO: THE DEEP GAME

The Surface Game is over. The Cartographer's File was never the only copy, because Asher Brandt never kept one of anything, and the safest vault in the world turned out to be the son he threw away. The coordinates are real. The signal that has been rewriting Cole Brandt since the first night on the water was always addressed to him, and now, at last, he can hear the shape of it. Somewhere a dead man is leaving a map to the war beneath the war, and the only two people who tore down the world to save it are going to have to decide whether they trust each other enough to go and find him.

FALSE FLAG returns.