

FIELD FICTION

FREELANCE



TERRA CONFLICTUS

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PART ONE — THE CALL

THE DROWNED ESTATE

The penthouse sat on top of the Crown spine like a knife laid flat on a shelf, all glass and quiet money, and Ko read it the way the harbor had taught him to read everything. By the water under it. There was eight meters of black tide standing over Old Jakarta forty floors down, and the building had its feet in that water and its head up in the haze where the relay pylons blinked, and Ko did not look up at the lights. He looked at the service channel, the blind one, the gray-water inlet that fed the lower plant. That was the way in. That was always the way in. The Crown thought it lived in the sky. It drank from the drowned city same as everyone.

He came up the inlet in a salvage skiff with the running lights killed and four men he trusted breathing slow around him. The Croc build did not need lights. It needed the water and the cold, and it had both. He felt the inlet narrow against the hull and he did not feel it as fear. He felt it the way you feel a door you have already decided to walk through.

This was going to cost him. He knew that going in. There was no version of tonight where it did not.

"Plant's at the second sub-level," Bram said, low, beside him. Bram was old harbor, a constable once like Ko, gone over to him when the service rotted past saving. "Penthouse runs its own lift off the Crown core. We take the maintenance riser."

"How long does the riser leave us blind."

"Forty seconds. Maybe less."

"Then we are fast for forty seconds." Ko put a hand flat on Bram's chest, a thing he did, and the man steadied under it. "Nobody dies tonight who does not have to."

"And the ones who have to."

"Then they have to."

The skiff kissed the inlet wall. Ko went up the rungs of the riser into the dry of the building and the dry felt wrong on his skin, the way it always did, like a held breath. Above him the penthouse glowed. Somewhere up there was a woman who had sent him a string of numbers across a blind channel three days ago, numbers he had read twice and then sat very still over, because the numbers meant that the man who owned this building had been selling the city's nervous system to the bloc for two years, and that the woman who lived in it had the proof, and that she could not get out the front because the front had cameras on every door and a marriage on every camera.

She had come to him. Of all the people on the water she could have run to, she had run back to him.

So he had come to take her out the way the Crown deserved to be taken. Hard. Fast. Wrong-looking. A thing the broadcast would see and not understand.

They went up through the service core and into the penthouse on the blind forty seconds, and Ko's men moved the way he had drilled them, no shouting, no waste. Two house guards on the residence floor. Bram put the first down with a choke before the man could turn, and the second got a hand to his sidearm and Ko was on him before the barrel cleared leather, one hand on the wrist and the other on the throat, and he set the man down on the carpet not dead, just gone, just out. He did not enjoy it. He did not flinch from it either. The Croc did its work and Ko watched himself do it from a small cold place behind his own eyes, the place he had built years ago and lived in ever since.

The bedroom door was open.

Mira stood in the middle of the room fully dressed at two in the morning, a coat already on, a hard case the size of a book held against her chest with both arms. She had cut her hair. He had not seen her in eleven years and she had cut her hair and she was older and she was here, and for one second that he could not afford Ko stopped in the doorway and just

looked at her, and she looked back at him, and neither of them said the thing.

"You came," she said.

"I said I would."

"Make it look real." Her voice did not shake. It was the voice of a woman who had thought this through for a long time, every angle of it, the way Ko thought through a tide. "Elias has a camera on the hall. He has a camera on me. If this looks like I walked out, he kills my parents' people on the islands inside a week and he calls it a sweep. It has to look like you took me."

"I know."

"It has to hurt to watch."

"Mira." He crossed the room. Up close she smelled like the NAF schools they had sent her to, like clean rooms and recycled air, like everything that had taken her away from the harbor when they were both young and given her back to him broken. "It is going to look like the worst thing I have ever done."

"Good." Her eyes were wet and her jaw was set and she handed him the hard case, and he took it, and it was heavier than a book. "Then do it."

He took her by the arm, not gently, because the camera in the hall was watching, and she let her body go where he pulled it, and he marched her out through her own front door under the eye of the lens her husband had put there to

own her, and on the broadcast it would read exactly as it was built to read. A harbor warlord dragging a chairman's wife out of her home at gunpoint. Low Tide, the monster of the drowned city, taking what he wanted off the top of the Crown.

She made a sound at the door, sharp, for the camera. It was the best lie either of them told that night, and it was the only one that was for her.

The skiff went out the inlet into the blind channels with no lights and Ko sat in the stern with the hard case between his feet and Mira wrapped in a salvage blanket beside him, shivering, not from cold. The pylons of the Crown blinked away behind them over the water. Down through the black he could see, faintly, the way only the Croc could see it, the grid of Old Jakarta. A traffic signal eight meters down still cycling green to red over a drowned intersection, patient, lit by nothing he could name, ruling nobody.

"He will send someone," Mira said.

"Let him."

"You do not understand what he has become. He is not buying the cable to be rich. He wants to be the man who hands the city over. He wants to be necessary." She pulled the blanket tighter. "He will not send police. He will not send

the bloc. He will send something he can deny. Something that looks like the harbor's own trouble coming home."

Ko watched the water ahead, the dark seam of a blind channel opening between two drowned towers. He thought about the numbers she had sent him. He thought about the handover clock, twenty-two days and falling, the whole freeport being sold a clause at a time while the GCOA observers drank in the arcology and called it peace.

"Then I will be home when it comes," he said.

He did not know yet who Caine would send. He did not know that the man already had a name, and that it was a name Ko had spoken a thousand times on a thousand blind channels years ago, back when the two of them ran the tightest counter-trafficking line on the water and the harbor told stories about them like they were one man. He did not know that the deniable trouble coming home wore a face he loved.

He only knew the water, and that it was his, and that he had taken back the one thing in the world he had never stopped wanting, and that it had cost him already and would cost him more.

The build does not forget. Neither did Ko. He held the case between his feet and rode the low tide home.

The clinic sat in a dead mall off the old 405, and Eric Vance counted the exits while a man named Dural ran a scanner over the back of his neck.

He did not mean to count them. He never meant to. The Shepherd build did it for him, the way another man's heart kept beating, three ways out of this room and two of them no good, the loading door rusted half-shut, the front past the pharmacy cage where Dural's cousin sat with a shotgun and a chit-reader. Eric watched the cousin in the warped mirror over the dental chair and told himself it was fatigue. He had been telling himself it was fatigue for two years.

"Your suppression's running thin," Dural said. He was a kitchen-job man, a black-market gene tech who had washed out of a real program and set up here under the dead skylights, and he was good in the way of people who could not afford to be otherwise. "Markers are climbing. You want the bespoke batch or the Shelf stuff."

"What's the Shelf stuff do."

"Slows the drift. Mostly. Tastes like solder." Dural peeled the scanner off. "Bespoke holds the line clean. Costs four times as much and I have to forge it from a template that doesn't exist anymore."

"Shelf," Eric said.

He paid in chits, the hard kind, the kind that never asked to see his genome. That was the one citizenship he had left. Money was stateless the way he was stateless, and it did not flinch from him, and it did not file a report. He pocketed the vials and went out past the cousin and the shotgun, who did not look at him, which Eric appreciated, into the white salvage glare of the Lost Angeles afternoon.

The NAF had pulled its grid back to the arcologies and left the flats to the dry, the voided, owned in their cells by a Federation that would not claim them and whose markers still sat on file somewhere with a flag on them. Eric did wet work here. Security, recovery, the occasional thing nobody wrote down. He told himself loyalty was a contract he had already voided, which was true, and that it did not cost him anything, which was the lie he could not see the shape of yet. He had a room over a water reclaimer. He had a Shepherd's body bred to read a flock and hold a perimeter and lose no one, and no flock, and no perimeter, and no one. At night he came awake counting exits in an empty room and named it fatigue and waited for the gray light.

The job came the way they always came, through a cutout, a voice on a burner that knew his work and used the word recovery. A package, the voice said. A handoff in the dry flats

north of the old reservoir, simple, paid in chits, half up front and the half on delivery. Eric had done forty like it. He took it because rent and because the meds and because there was nothing else to be, out here, except a man for hire.

He drove out to the flats at the back end of the day with the sun going down orange and filthy through the dust, and he parked the salvage rig where the voice had said, by a collapsed overpass with rebar coming through the concrete like the ribs of something dead. He got out. He counted the exits. There were no exits. That was the first thing the Shepherd told him, flat and certain, before his conscious mind caught up. A box canyon of fallen road, one way in, and he had driven the rig into the throat of it.

The second thing the Shepherd told him was that there were six heartbeats up in the rebar that should not be there.

He had his hand on his sidearm when the first shot came, and it came high, deliberate high, a round that cracked off the concrete a foot over his head, and that told him the third thing, which was that this was a test, because men who wanted you dead did not miss by a foot to start.

He moved anyway. The build did not negotiate with that. He went off the open ground and into the cover of the overpass ribs and the air filled up with gunfire, and Eric Vance came alive the way he only ever did now under fire,

the fatigue burning off him like dew, the room going slow and readable, every muzzle flash a fact he could use.

He took the first man at the base of the rebar, two rounds, close work, the body folding before the sound caught up. He went up the broken slope the way the build wanted him to, low and fast, reading the others by their fire, and they were trained, but they were shooting like men told to make it look real and not finish it, and Eric was shooting like a man who had spent two years not knowing if he wanted to be alive and had just remembered.

The second and third came together from the high ground and he went sideways off a slab and took them in the seam between their crossfire, one and then the other, no waste. A fourth broke and ran and Eric let him, because the build said let the one who runs run, the one who runs is not the threat. He came over the top of the position with his sidearm up on the last two and they were already lowering their weapons, hands coming open, and a woman's voice from somewhere above called out clear and dry across the canyon.

"Stand down. He's it."

Eric did not stand down. He kept the sidearm up on the two with their hands open and he found the voice, a figure

picking its way down the rebar with empty hands held wide and a recruiter's easy smile, NAF-cut clothes, no flag on them, the kind of person who came out to the flats from somewhere with carpet.

"Eric Vance," she said. "Callsign Warden. You still read a room better than anything I've ever watched on a feed." She stopped a careful distance off, hands still wide. "That was a tryout. You passed. Nobody's dead who can't get up." She tilted her head at the man Eric had folded at the base of the rebar, who was, Eric saw now, breathing, gut-shot through soft armor and cursing, alive. "Mostly."

"Who hired the tryout."

"A man with a problem only your particular résumé can solve." She let the smile go a degree more genuine, which was worse. "He's prepared to pay you what you'd make out here in a decade. For a recovery. One package. Your old line of work."

Eric did not lower the gun. Out past the rebar the sun was almost gone and the dust had gone the color of an old bruise, and the Shepherd in him was already counting exits from this conversation, three of them, and all three led somewhere he had told himself he would never go again.

"My old line of work got people killed," he said.

"It got people saved for years before that." She shrugged. "He read your file. The whole thing. New Batavia included." She watched that land, and something must have showed,

because her smile sharpened. "There's a flight in the morning. There's a number on the seat that doesn't have a comma you've ever seen. Come hear the man out. Walk away after if you want. You've already won the part where you find out you can still do it."

Eric lowered the gun.

He told himself it was the money. It was a good lie and it held all the way to the airfield and most of the way across the Pacific, and it was still holding, barely, when the salvage country fell away under the wing and the drowned blue scatter of the world came up to meet him.

New Batavia came up out of the haze like a city that had decided not to drown and only half meant it.

Eric watched it from the descending flight, the Bogor highlands green and terraced and stacked with arcology, the Crown spine going up out of the middle with the relay pylons crowning its head, and below all of it the water. The drowned town. Old Jakarta eight meters down, the grid of it still legible through the tide, roofs and street-lines and here and there the surfaced top of a tower wearing a shack-town like a hat. A floating market sprawled across the water between the drowned blocks, barges and junks and walkways lashed into one restless organism. They called it the Shelf, the woman

had told him on the flight, dry as ever. Everything in this city had two names. The official one and the wet one.

A car took him up the funicular, the cable-rail that ran the grid up the spine over the salvage town, and Eric watched the drowned city fall away below the track and felt the Shepherd counting the gondolas, the cable tension, the long fall to the water. Twenty-two days, a banner read at the upper station, in three languages and a bloc script he could read enough of. ABSORPTION HANDOVER. CONTINUITY OF SERVICE. The free-port being sold a clause at a time and hanging bunting for the occasion.

Caine's people took him to the top of the Crown, to a floor of glass and quiet that Eric recognized, in his body before his mind, as the same building. He had seen the broadcast on the flight. Everyone had. The harbor warlord dragging the chairman's wife out of this exact penthouse at gunpoint. He had watched it with the sound off and felt nothing he could name and counted the exits in the footage.

Elias Caine was waiting at the glass with the whole drowned harbor under him, and he turned when Eric came in, and he was not what Eric expected. Not a brute. A builder. A tired, courteous, terribly intelligent man in good clothes who looked at Eric like Eric was the last reasonable instrument in a world of blunt ones.

"Mr. Vance." Caine did not offer his hand, which Eric also appreciated. "Thank you for the flight. I know what it costs a

man like you to get back on a feed grid with his markers on file. I had them masked. You're a ghost up here. That's the least I can do."

"You can tell me what the job is."

"My wife." Caine turned back to the glass, to the water. "You've seen it. Everyone's seen it. Two nights ago a man took Mira out of this apartment. The authority on this island is bought, the bloc does not care, and the GCOA observers will not look up from their dinner. There is no one to call. So I am calling you." He said it plainly, a man who had run out of better options and knew it. "Recover her. Bring her home. Name the number. I will not haggle with the man who walked into the dry rather than do one more thing he could not live with. I read that, in your file. I am counting on it."

"Who took her."

Caine told him.

For a moment Eric did not move at all. Out past the glass the funicular crawled up the spine and the Shelf shifted on the water and somewhere down in all that drowned light was a man named Ko, Low Tide, the harbor boss, and Eric stood in the dead penthouse and felt the floor of two years tilt under him, because he knew that name. He had said that name across a thousand blind channels. He had bled next to the man who wore it, in the worst weeks of his life, in this same city, and they had been brothers on the water and the

harbor had told stories about them like they were one animal.

"Ko," Eric said.

"You know him." Caine watched him, careful, almost gentle. "I will not insult you by pretending otherwise. You knew the man. You can find his ground. You can read his water in a way no operator I could buy off the Shelf ever could." He paused. "And perhaps you also know that men change. That a constable who turns boss does not stay the man he was. Whatever he was to you, Mr. Vance, look at what he did two nights ago, in this room, and tell me that is your brother."

Eric looked at the room. The carpet where a guard had been put down. The hall where a camera had watched a woman dragged through her own door.

Every part of the Shepherd that read a flock and held a perimeter wanted to say no, the water is wrong, the man you describe is not the man I knew. And under that, colder, was the thing that had let a businessman aim him in the first place. The two-year lie. Loyalty is a contract you can void. He had voided his. So Ko could have voided his too. The Java Scatter had changed Eric into a thing that did wet work in dead malls. The harbor could have changed Ko into the monster on the broadcast. It was easier to believe that than to believe a man he loved was still good and being lied about,

because if Ko was still good then Eric was being aimed, and Eric could not yet bear to be a thing that was being aimed.

So he chose the lie. He did not know he was choosing it. That was Caine's whole genius.

"He must have gone bad," Eric said, mostly to himself.

"I'm sorry," Caine said, and the terrible thing was that he sounded like he meant it. "Will you bring her home."

Eric looked out at the water one more time, the drowned city, the patient grid of it eight meters down, a traffic light he could not see still cycling green to red over nothing.

"Yeah," he said. "I'll bring her home."

Behind him, unsaid, a second order was already written and waiting, and a stand-down already drafted in a Monitor Central station half a world away, and neither of them had anything to do with saving a woman. Eric did not hear the catch. He heard a number with no comma in it and a payday that looked, for the first time in two years, like redemption.

He counted the exits on his way to the lift. There were three. He took the one that went down.

THE HANDOVER CLOCK

By day the drowned city was worse, and Eric liked it better for being worse.

He had Chris look at it with him from a water-taxi the morning after he landed, the two of them riding the blind channels between the surfaced towers while the Shelf market boiled with trade up ahead. Chris Adler, callsign Cinder, NAF Wolf-template, the best breacher Eric half-trusted and the only person alive he half-trusted at all. She had come in on a red-eye and a fake manifest and she sat in the prow of the taxi with her boots up and her eyes everywhere, reading the city the way she read a door she was going to have to open.

"Twenty-two days," she said. The banner hung off a drowned tower, repeated, ABSORPTION HANDOVER, CONTINUITY OF SERVICE. Below it the water-line wore a tide-mark of dead coral and old paint. "They're selling the whole town and putting up bunting. You see the bloc kit on that platform."

He had. PRC absorption directorate, a clean white prefab landing platform bolted to the top of a drowned office block, technicians in bloc coveralls running cable up out of the water like surgeons threading a vein. The Makassar cluster came ashore there. The city's whole nervous system, getting a new owner one clause at a time, while the GCOA observers watched from the arcology and called the arrangement peace.

"Cable landing," Eric said. "Handover's in three weeks. Whoever owns that owns the town."

"And we're here to pull a woman off the man who's trying to stop them." Chris said it flat, not a question, watching him. "You want to tell me why a cable magnate's wife matters enough to fly you across an ocean, when there's a thousand operators on this water who'd do a recovery for chits."

"He hired the man who can read Ko's ground."

"He hired the man who used to love him." Chris let that sit. The Wolf in her did not miss things either. "That's a strange thing to buy, Eric. Just so you know I see it." She put her boots down. "I'm in. I'm always in, you know that. I'm just telling you the shape looks off. Somebody's running a tab and I don't think it's the one on the invoice."

He did not answer her. Down the channel the Shelf market rose up around them, ten thousand voices and the smell of frying fish and engine oil and gray water, and the city closed over the conversation like tide over a road.

The night before, on the Crown, Caine had given him the second order alone.

He had walked Eric to the lift himself, and at the doors, quiet, just the two of them, he had said it. "One more thing. The thing I can only say to you." His hand on Eric's arm, light. "If you find her and she is well, bring her home. But if

you find that man, and he is what the water says he is now, a warlord who takes women out of their homes and rules the drowned city by fear, then I am asking you, as the only man who would know the difference, to make sure he cannot do it again. To anyone. Do you understand what I am asking."

Eric had understood. He had stood in the lift lobby with the whole sold city under the glass and felt the second order settle into him, and he had planted his own line on it, the way a man plants a flag on ground he means to defend, because he did not yet know the ground was already someone else's.

"I won't kill the man I knew," he had said. "If he's still that man, I bring the woman home and I leave him be. But if he became the thing on that broadcast." He had stopped. "Then he's not my brother anymore. He's just a monster wearing the name. And I've put down a few of those."

"That's all I ask," Caine had said. "Your judgment. No one else's."

It was a beautiful trap and Eric walked into it with his eyes open and his heart sure, because Caine had not asked him to kill Ko. Caine had asked him to kill Ko only if Ko was a monster, and then built a whole war to make sure that when Eric finally laid eyes on the man, every fact in front of him would say monster. Caine was betting Eric could not tell the difference until the difference was bleeding on a floor. It

was the only order Eric would have taken, which was exactly why it was the order Caine gave.

He had ridden the funicular down in the dark, counting the gondolas, and told himself his own line held.

Jet Halim found them at the Shelf, the way Jet found everyone, before they had decided to be found.

"Warden." He came along a market walkway with his hands out and a grin already working, PFZ Clouded Leopard-template, early thirties, beautiful clothes that had cost real money and were dressed down just enough not to say so. He moved through the market crowd like the crowd was a thing he owned a percentage of. "And the breacher. Cinder. I would know that frown anywhere, I have admired it on three different feeds." He clapped Eric's shoulder like an old friend, which he was not, and steered them both off the walkway into the close hot dark of a barge-front stall before either of them had agreed to go. "You do not want to stand still on the open Shelf when you are asking the questions you are about to ask. The water has ears. Most of them are mine, but not all."

He was, within ten minutes, indispensable, and Eric noted it the way the Shepherd noted everything. Jet knew which barge ran Ko's gray-water tithe. He knew the tide

windows for the blind channels into the drowned district. He knew which constable could be moved and for how much and which absolutely could not, and he laid it all out fast and charming and free, a local legend doing the thing he was a legend for, and the whole time some cold drilled part of Eric's build filed it under a heading it could not yet name. Too good. Too connected. Too willing. A man who opened every door before you finished asking and never once asked why you wanted it open.

"Why's it so easy," Chris said, when Jet stepped off to grease a stall-keeper. The Wolf had filed the same thing. "Local fixer, hands us the keys to a crime boss's water, doesn't even bargain hard."

"He bargains hard on the money," Eric said.

"He bargains hard on the money so you don't notice he doesn't bargain on the rest." Chris watched the leopard work the stall-keeper, all warmth, all ease. "I distrust everything that comes with a flag on it. He hasn't got a flag. That's worse. A man with no flag at all, this connected, this happy to help." She shook her head. "I'm just saying it out loud so it's said."

Jet came back grinning with a name and a barge number, and the doubt went back under, where Caine needed it.

They got made an hour later, and the Shelf showed Eric the first true thing.

It happened fast, the way it always did. A line of questions about Ko's tithe-runners had gone one stall too far, and a man at a net-mender's barge made Chris's NAF kit and said a word down the walkway, and then there were six harbor men converging through the market crowd with their hands going to their belts, and Jet was saying easy, easy, and it was already past easy. Eric moved Chris behind a fish-cart and read the room and the room was bad, narrow walkways, civilians stacked three deep at every stall, water on every side and nowhere that a gun could speak without an innocent catching the word.

So they did it close. Eric went into the first two before they cleared their blades, a forearm and a turn and a man over the rail into the gray water, the Shepherd choosing every strike to end a threat and break no bystander, and Chris was a step behind him doing the Wolf's faster crueller version of the same math, and Jet, to his credit, fought too, fast and showy and effective, the leopard in his element on the crowded boards.

But that was not the thing Eric filed.

The thing Eric filed was the market.

The harbor men were not driving the crew toward Ko. The market was driving the crew away from him. A fish-seller swung her cart to block a walkway and it was not an accident. A barge-boy cut a mooring line so a junk swung across a channel and sealed a route, and it was not panic, it was a maneuver, a whole floating district moving as one body to fold its quarry away from its own heart. The crowd did not scatter from the fight. It thickened. It put walls of itself between Eric's crew and the deep water where the drowned district lay, dozens of ordinary people on a market morning closing ranks around a man the broadcast called a warlord, the way a body closes ranks around an organ.

Eric had infiltrated warlords. He had walked the ground of men who ruled by fear, and that ground had a smell, the smell of people who flinched, who looked at the floor, who would sell the boss to the first outsider with chits because the boss had given them nothing but fear to be loyal to. This water did not smell like that. This water loved the man it was protecting.

He saw it. He filed it. He did not let it land, because letting it land meant pulling on a thread that unraveled the only payday that had ever looked like redemption, and meant that he had agreed to put down a monster who might not be one, and meant that a man he loved might be exactly the man he loved, and being lied to about it.

So he put it in the cold place behind his eyes, next to the exits he counted in empty rooms, and he got his crew off the Shelf and through a blind channel into a salvage warehouse Jet kept, and he said nothing about it.

Chris said it for him. She always did.

"That was not a warlord's ground," she said. She was wiping gray water off her sidearm, not looking at him, which was how he knew she meant it. "I've stood on a warlord's ground. People sell you the boss for a meal. That market just took a beating to keep us off their guy." She looked up. "The brief says monster. The water says something else. We are running someone's tab, Eric, and it is not the one with our names on the invoice."

"Jet," Eric said.

The leopard was at the warehouse door, watching the channel, and he turned with the grin already back in place, a little too quick, a little too smooth. "The market is sentimental about him, sure. He pays their gray-water bills, he keeps the bloc's recruiters off their kids. That is how a clever monster buys a wall of people to hide behind. The cleverest ones always look beloved." He spread his hands, warm, reasonable, closing the doubt down as neatly as he had opened every door. "Do not let it slow you. The tide window for the district is in two nights. After that the channels silt and we wait a month."

It was a good answer. It smoothed the thing over. It was, Eric would understand much later, the answer of a man being paid to keep a crew pointed at the wrong heart, and it landed because it was what Eric needed it to be.

"Two nights," Eric said. "We go in two nights."

He stayed in the warehouse alone after the others bedded down, and he took out the briefing slate Caine's people had given him, and he opened the photograph.

It was Ko. Current, surveillance-pulled, the harbor boss on a salvage barge at dusk with the drowned towers behind him, heavier than Eric remembered, gray coming in at the temples, the patient territorial stillness of the Croc settled over him like the man had finally grown all the way into his own build. He looked like a stranger. He looked like the broadcast. A warlord on his water, hard and unbothered, the monster Caine needed Eric to see.

Eric made himself look at it the way Caine wanted, and it almost held. The man in the photograph was not the brother who had pulled him out of a flooded sublevel eleven years ago with a counter-trafficking line on fire around them, who had put a hand flat on Eric's chest and steadied him the way he steadied everyone, who had believed, out loud and without embarrassment, that loyalty was the one thing you

could not void even when the state voided you. Eric had laughed at him for it then. Loyalty had gotten Eric's people killed in a building the intel called clear. Loyalty was a contract, and Eric had voided his, and out here in the cold place behind his eyes that was the only thing that had kept him alive.

So the man in the photograph could have voided his too. Men changed. The water changed them.

He held the slate and counted, without meaning to, the exits from the room. Three. The loading door, the channel hatch, the gap in the roof where a panel had rusted free and let in a single bar of harbor light. His body counted them and his heart kept its steady useless guard over a flock that was not there, and he called it fatigue, and he turned the slate face down on the photograph of the brother he had decided not to recognize.

Two nights. The tide window. The drowned district.

The Shelf had shown him a crack and he had filed it and stepped over it, and he was committed now, all the way committed, crossing the threshold toward killing a man he loved on a businessman's word, with a second order in his chest and a stand-down he could not see drafted half a world away. He told himself the line held. He told himself he would know a monster when he saw one.

Out past the rusted gap the funicular crawled up the Crown spine, and below it the drowned city held its grid of

dead streets eight meters down, and a traffic signal nobody could see cycled green to red over nothing, patient, waiting, the way the water waited, the way the man on the water waited, for the brother who was coming to kill him and did not know it yet.

Eric turned off the light and lay in the dark and counted the exits one more time, and did not sleep.

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PART TWO — THE FIRST TRIALS

Episodes 3 and 4

THE JUNK

The intel came in clean, which was the first thing Chris did not like about it.

She had it spread on the floor of the safe flat in the Lower Crown, a printout because she did not trust any screen Jet could reach, and she was reading it the way you read rust. Slow. Looking for the place where the surface lied about the metal under it. The drowned-island district where Ko kept his seat sat eight meters down at high water and rose out of the harbor at low like a thing breathing, and Jet's PRISM-grade map gave her the whole tide table, the blind channels, the patrol rhythms, the load schedule of the salvage barges that ran the gray water in and out. It was a beautiful piece of work. That was the problem.

"This is too good," she said.

Eric was at the window, not looking at the harbor, looking at the reflection of the room in the glass, the angle

that let him see the door without facing it. Drift. He counted the exits in the flat and there were two and he counted them again. He called it fatigue.

"It's what we paid for," he said.

"We paid Jet to find us a way in. He found us the way in, the tide windows, the load manifests, and the name of the barge captain who'll take a passenger and not ask. That's not finding. That's catering." She tapped the printout. "A catalog run. Somebody already shopped this and left it on the Shelf for us to pick up."

"You don't trust him."

"I don't trust anything that comes with a flag on it," Chris said. "And right now this whole job is one flag I can't read."

Jet came back from the kitchen with three cups of the black tide-country coffee that tasted of the catalyst they used to keep the harbor water from eating the boats, and he set them down with the easy grace of a man who had never once in his life been caught flat-footed, and that was a thing Chris filed too. He was Clouded Leopard, fast and quiet and beautiful, and he smiled like he was doing you a favor by existing in your sightline.

"You're talking about me," Jet said. "I can tell because the room got honest." He sat. "I'm too good. I've heard it before. It's the nicest thing anyone says to my face in this city." He drank. "You want a sloppier fixer, there's a man on the

Arafura side who'll get you killed for half my rate. I can make the introduction."

Eric turned from the window. "What's the captain want."

"Chits. Unscanned. And he wants to not know what you are." Jet shrugged. "He runs salvage into Low Tide's water three times a tide. Ceramic, old copper, the catalyst drums they strip off the dead arcology. Ko's people wave him through because the district needs what he hauls and because the Croc taxes him on the way out, which is the closest thing to law down there. You ride in on his deck under a tarp with the drums. You come up inside the temple's outer ring on the rising floor. After that it's yours."

"And you," Eric said.

"I stay on the water with the comms. I'm worth more to you knowing the channels than I am dying in them." Jet said it without flinching, and it was even true, and Chris hated how true it was. "I'll talk you through the patrol shifts. When the tide turns I'll tell you. When the harbor starts talking about you, and it will, I'll be the first to hear it."

Eric looked at the map a long time. There was a photograph clipped to the corner of the folder, the one the briefing had given him. A man at a harbor rail, mid-forties, heavy through the shoulders, eyes you could not read. The caption said LOW TIDE. It did not say Ko. Eric had not let it say Ko for two days now, the way you hold a word underwater to see if it will drown.

"We go on the low," he said. "Tonight."

The barge smelled of standing seawater and old catalyst and the iron stink of salvage that had been under the tide so long it had stopped being objects and started being the harbor's own bones. Eric lay under a tarp between two catalyst drums with Chris a body's width away, and he listened to New Batavia the way the Shepherd build made him listen, the whole acoustic floor of it, the diesel of the barge, the slap of gray water on a hull that had been patched more times than it had been built, and under that, far under, the city that was not above the water at all.

Old Jakarta. Eight meters down. The drowned city the harbor stood on. He had seen it on the way in, the green-to-red traffic signal still cycling over a flooded intersection where no one drove, the street signs legible through the murk, a whole grid of streets the world had walked away from and never bothered to bury, because the water did the burying for free. The barge slid over it. Somewhere under the keel a city held its breath.

"Window's good," Jet said in his ear, soft. "Patrol came through eleven minutes ago. You've got the trough of the tide for forty more. Captain's making the temple ring. Once you're on the floor, you're past my map."

"Copy," Chris breathed.

Eric thought about the thing he was not letting himself think about, which was that no part of this felt like approaching a warlord. He had run wet entries on warlords. They smelled of fuel and fear and the particular silence of people who had learned not to be seen. This water smelled of work. There were lights ahead, low and warm, strung along the wet stone of the temple-arcology, and there were voices, and one of the voices was a kid, and somebody laughed.

You file it, the Shepherd part of him said. You don't let it land. He filed it. It did not entirely stay filed.

The barge bumped the outer ring. The rising floor of the temple took the deck and lifted, a ramp of wet stone that the harbor itself raised twice a day, and the captain killed his engine and the drums went still around them. Above, the drowned temple climbed out of the water into the dark, a thing some lost faith had built before the Upheaval and the harbor had reclaimed and Ko had made into a seat, a fortress and a refuge in the same wet stone. Candles in the high windows. A generator somewhere, patient.

"We're up," Chris said.

They came out from under the tarp into the smell of catalyst and went up the rising floor low and quiet, two ghosts in a city of antennas, and behind them the captain was already pretending he had never had passengers, and the building above them did not yet know they were inside it.

Chris took the first door clean. It was a service hatch off the salvage ring, sealed against the tide, and she read it the way she read everything, the hinge corrosion, the salt-line where the high water reached, the patch weld that told her how long since anyone had cared about it. The build doesn't forget. Neither did she. She had the hatch open in ninety seconds without a sound and the air that came out of it was warm and dry and smelled of cooking oil and incense and people, and that was wrong, and she knew it was wrong, and she went through anyway because that was the job.

Inside, the temple-arcology was alive.

They came up a stair that went into the structure like a throat, and at the top of it the place opened into a wide flooded hall where the rising floor had not reached, ankle-deep gray water lit by strings of warm bulbs, and the hall was full of the life of a district. Bedrolls on the dry stone shelves above the water line. A clinic, a real one, better than the kitchen job that kept Eric in suppression meds back in the salvage country. Drums of clean water, rationed, a clock chalked on the wall counting down to the next delivery. Children's drawings on the wet stone, the kind a school makes, and there was no school down here that any bloc had built, which meant Ko had built it.

Eric stopped on the stair and the drift hit him all at once, the guard instinct with no flock to guard reaching out into a room that was nothing but flock, and for one bad second his body did not know whose perimeter it was holding.

"Warden," Chris said. Low. "Eyes."

Across the hall a man had seen them. Harbor crew, PFZ-forged, a young Sea Eagle by the eyes, and he was not armed for war, he had a worn carbine slung the way you sling a tool, and he was looking at two strangers in entry kit standing in his people's house and Eric watched the understanding cross the kid's face. Not a warlord's soldier reaching for a weapon. A man seeing the thing he had been afraid of for two years finally walk up the stairs.

The kid shouted. Not a battle cry. A warning. He shouted a name down the hall and Eric did not catch the name and the kid brought the carbine up and Chris put two rounds into him before Eric's mouth had finished forming the word wait.

The Sea Eagle went down into the gray water and it took him and the hall came apart.

After that it was heroic work and it was clear and it was the worst thing Eric had done since the Java Scatter.

They moved through the flooded halls the way they had trained, Chris on the breach and Eric on the read, and the

temple fought back the way a body fights an infection, crews converging from the deep galleries, and they were good, Ko's people, they were brave and they knew the building and they were defending their own home and they had never once in their lives been on the receiving end of two dry NAF operators running a wet entry for a businessman's money. Eric read the room and Eric called the angles and Eric kept Chris alive and people died for it. A Croc-built bruiser came around a flooded colonnade with a shotgun and Eric dropped him into the water before he could level it. Two more behind, and Eric took the lead one through the doorframe and Chris took the second and the water around their boots went pink and then dark.

He kept waiting to feel the thing he was supposed to feel. The warlord's house. The monster's seat. He kept waiting for one room that justified the photograph in the folder, one armory, one cage, one slave pen, one ledger of cruelty, anything that would make this a rescue. He found a school. He found a clinic. He found a wall where someone had chalked the ration clock and someone else, a child, had drawn the harbor with all its boats and labeled one of them, in careful letters, OURS.

"This isn't right," Chris said, in the lee of a buttress, reloading, her face gone flat the way it went when the math stopped working. "Warden. This is not a warlord's ground.

We are running someone else's tab and we are killing the people who pay it."

"We get the woman," Eric said, because it was the only sentence that still held weight. "We get the woman and we get out and then we ask."

Somewhere above them in the smoke and the gunfire, on the dry gallery where the candles burned, a man with no panic in him at all was moving his people back and his civilians deeper, calling soft orders in the harbor dialect, putting his own body between the breach and the bedrolls. Eric heard the voice. He did not place it. There was too much water in the air and too much blood in his ears and the voice was just one more harbor crew calling a fallback, and Eric pushed past the gallery wall on the flooded side while the voice moved its people up the dry side, and the two of them passed within arm's reach of each other with a wall of wet temple stone between, two men who had run the tightest counter-trafficking line on the water once, brothers, neither knowing the other was four feet away on the far side of the stone, each certain the man he was thinking of was somewhere very far from here.

Eric stopped at the wall. He did not know why. The Shepherd build reached for something on the other side of it,

some old shape in the noise, and his hand came up flat against the wet stone and he asked the building the question you ask when the intel has become a story.

The building told him nothing. It had been answered for.

He went on. So did Ko. The wall stayed between them, and the smoke took the moment, and neither of them would know for two days that it had happened at all.

"Warden, I've got her," Chris said over the comm. "Inner ring. Dry cell, door's not even locked from the outside. Warden. It's locked from the inside."

Eric came up through the last of the fighting into the inner ring of the temple, and the gunfire was falling off behind him because Ko's people were pulling back to protect the deep galleries where the children were, giving ground to save the flock, and Eric knew that move because it was his move, it was the Shepherd's whole doctrine, and a cold thing turned over in his chest that he did not have time to name. Chris was at a low arched door in the dry stone. There was no lock on the outside. There was a heavy bar on the inside, drawn shut, and a woman's voice behind it, even and unafraid.

"Whoever you are," the voice said, "you've just killed people who were keeping me safe. I hope your man is paying you enough to live with that."

Chris looked at Eric. Eric looked at the door.

"Mira Caine," he said. "Your husband sent me. I'm getting you out."

There was a silence on the other side of the door that lasted exactly as long as it takes a smart person to understand that the worst thing they ever imagined has just walked up the stairs. Then the bar slid back, slow, drawn by a hand that was choosing to draw it, and the door opened, and the woman the whole season was built to fight over looked out at the man who had been hired to save her and did not look saved at all. She looked at him the way you look at a man who has made a terrible mistake and does not yet know it.

"My husband," she said, "did this?"

"We're leaving," Eric said. "Now. Talk on the water."

She came. She came the way a person comes who has decided the next move is worse than this one but is going to make it anyway. Behind them the temple bled. Above them, on the dry gallery, Ko held his fallback line and did not pursue, because there were children to move and dead to count, and he did not yet know that the men who had come into his house had come for Mira, and he did not yet know who had sent them, and when he found out, in two days, the harbor would learn what the Croc was like when grief and territory pulled the same direction.

Eric got the woman onto the salvage ring and down the rising floor and into a stolen skiff with the tide already

turning under them, and the temple-arcology sank back toward the water behind them with its candles still burning and its dead in its halls, and Chris ran the throttle and Jet's voice came up on the comm asking if they had her, and Eric looked back at the building he had just broken open and the crack in the story was not a crack anymore. It was a fault line, and he was standing on it, and the woman beside him was watching him stand there.

THE RESCUE

The skiff ran the blind channels on the falling tide and nobody spoke for the first ten minutes, which was the longest ten minutes Eric had spent since the building in the Java Scatter that the intel called clear.

Mira sat in the bow wrapped in a salvage blanket that smelled of catalyst, and she did not shake and she did not weep and she did not do any of the things a rescued hostage was supposed to do. She watched the water. She watched Eric. She had a small hard case in her lap that she had carried out of the cell herself and would not let Chris take, and she kept one hand flat on the top of it the way you keep a hand on something that is the only true thing in the boat.

"You're not Caine's usual," she said finally. "His usual are corporate. VEKTORA security, clean kit, they smell of money. You smell of the salvage country." She looked at him properly for the first time. "You're forged. NAF. Shepherd."

"That matters to you."

"It tells me what he bought." She said it quietly. "He didn't buy a soldier. He bought a sheepdog. That's a specific thing to buy when what you're doing is killing the only man protecting the flock."

Chris cut the engine to a crawl as they came into the lee of a drowned overpass, the green-to-red signal still cycling under the water below them, and in the new quiet the words had room to land.

"You weren't taken," Eric said. It was not a question. The Shepherd build had known it on the stair, in the clinic, at the chalked ration clock. It had known it at the door that locked from the inside. He had just refused to let it finish the sentence.

"No," Mira said. "I ran. To Ko. The one man my husband could not buy, because Ko has never once in his life been for sale, which is exactly why my husband needs him dead." She turned the hard case over in her hands. "Ko hid me. The broadcast called it a kidnapping because a kidnapping is a thing you can hire a man to fix. My husband couldn't very well announce that his wife had walked out with the proof that he's been selling the city's nervous system to the bloc. So

he announced an abduction. And then he found the one operator in the Free Zone who used to love Ko like a brother, and he pointed him at the building."

The drift came up in Eric all at once, the body counting exits in a boat that had only the water, and for a second he could not hear over the sound of his own pulse.

"Say his name," he said.

"You know his name."

"Say it."

"Ko," Mira said. "The harbor boss they call Low Tide. The man you've spent two days not naming. You knew. You've known since you walked up the stairs into a clinic instead of an armory. You just needed someone to say the part out loud that you couldn't pay yourself enough to say."

Chris had gone very still at the tiller. "Warden. The temple. The school. The kid at the rail who shouted a name before he shouted at us." She let it land flat. "He shouted Ko."

Eric sat in the bow of a stolen skiff over a drowned city with the tide falling under him and felt the whole job turn inside out, the way a glove turns, the inside becoming the outside, the thing he had been holding becoming the thing that held him. He had not been hired to rescue a wife. There

was no wife to rescue, there was a witness to silence and a brother to kill, and he had already drawn the blood. He had killed a young Sea Eagle who shouted a warning. He had filled a clinic's water with dead men who were defending a school. He had run a wet entry on the one house in New Batavia that did not deserve it, for the money of the one man who deserved it least, and the man had chosen Eric specifically, had reached into the salvage country and found the one operator on Earth who could be lied to about who Ko was, because the lie only worked on someone who had loved him.

"He knew," Eric said. His voice came out wrong. "Caine knew Ko and I ran New Batavia together. That wasn't a coincidence in the file. That was the reason he hired me. The whole reason."

"The personal history makes the kill clean," Mira said, gently, the way you tell someone a true thing that is going to hurt them for the rest of their life. "Believable. Deniable. A stateless freelancer with a grudge and a payday goes into a gangster's stronghold and the gangster dies and the world reads it as exactly what it looks like. Two old enemies, one of them finally won. Nobody investigates a story that obvious. That's the genius of it. The match is real. The war is real. The handover is real, the clock, the cable, all of it. But the rescue was a trade show. And you were the merchandise."

Chris brought the skiff in under a salvage gantry that hid them from the channel, and she shipped the engine, and the three of them sat in the dark over the drowned streets while the truth finished arriving.

"Walk it back," Chris said. She was breacher-flat, working the device the way she worked a charge, finding every wire. "Caine's trafficking VEKTORA tech to the PRC. Restricted signal gear, gene-tech, the kind of transfer that's treason in three jurisdictions. He's making himself the architect of the absorption grid, the man who holds the cable when the handover lands. Hua, the bloc's directorate, names the price. Two removals. Ko, because the harbor network funds the resistance and could derail the landing. And you." She looked at Mira. "Because you found the proof."

"Because I am the proof," Mira said. She set the hard case on the deck between them and opened it, and inside, padded against the harbor's wet, was a single old data slug, military, the kind that does not touch a network and cannot be reached from one. "The manifests. The cable backdoor he built into the relay grid. The contract with Director Hua, signed, with his own genome on the authentication. Everything. I spent four years of a marriage assembling it because it was the only thing in that house that was mine. He

thinks I'm a leak to be sealed. I'm a transmission he hasn't been able to send yet."

"And he couldn't just have you killed," Eric said, "because a dead wife is a question, and a war is an answer."

"A war is deniable," Mira said. "An assassin is a witness. He didn't hire a bullet. He hired you."

The crew sat with it. Out on the water a patrol ran the channel and they held still until it passed, three fugitives nobody yet knew were fugitives, in a stolen boat with the most dangerous truth in the Free Zone in a case on the deck.

"So that's the whole tab," Chris said quietly. "We breached a refuge. We killed a school's worth of harbor crew. And we did it to deliver the one witness who could hang Caine, straight back into Caine's hands. We weren't the rescue. We were the cleanup."

Eric reached for the only thing he had ever been able to reach for when the floor went out, which was the channel, the contract, the institution at the other end of the line. He keyed the secure set Marsh had given him in the Crown arcology, the deniable Monitor Central link that was supposed to be the one solid thing under a stateless man, and he put it to his ear and he said the words a freelancer

says when the job has gone to a place the job was not supposed to go.

"Monitor, Warden. Mission's compromised. The rescue's a frame. The principal is a witness against the contractor and I have hard proof of restricted-tech trafficking to the bloc. I need extraction and I need a clean channel to put this evidence into. Marsh. I need you to answer."

The set hissed. The carrier was up. Someone on the far end was listening, Eric could feel it, the particular weight of a held line.

Nobody answered.

He said it again. He said his authentication. He said the word evidence twice more, because he had learned a long time ago that the word evidence opened doors that the word help never did, and the carrier stayed up and the silence stayed perfect and somewhere in a Monitor Central station a deputy director who had wanted the grid-tech from the start listened to a stateless freelancer offer to hand him the leak, and chose, very deliberately, to let the line breathe and say nothing, because a dry man who has learned what the grid is for is not an asset. He is a loose end you would rather see in a drowned city than across a debrief table.

Eric lowered the set. He did not need it explained. He had voided his registration two years ago and told himself it cost him nothing, and here was the bill. There was no one to call.

That was the thing about going freelance. When the people who hired you decide you are evidence, there is no flag to stand under, because you handed yours back at the door and they kept it.

"Marsh wants it too," he said. "My own side. They don't want it stopped. They want a copy."

"Then there's no one," Chris said.

"No." Eric looked at the case on the deck. "There's us."

The tide turned, and the harbor began, somewhere out in the dark, to talk.

Eric could hear it the way the Shepherd build heard everything, the acoustic floor of a city changing pitch. Ko's crews counting their dead in the temple and learning, now, who had come and who had sent them. VEKTORA security on the channels, Caine's people, already moving, because Caine would know within the hour that his knife had pulled the woman out alive and intact instead of dead and silent, which was not the trade show he had paid for. Hua's directorate, patient and cold, wanting Ko zeroed and the leak sealed and not much caring how. Four powers on the water, and every one of them wanted something different from the boat Eric was sitting in, and not one of them wanted an explanation. Ko wanted blood for his dead and would not

stop to hear that the man who spilled it had been lied to. Caine wanted Mira silenced and Eric spent. Hua wanted the proof in the harbor's deep water where no observer would ever read it. Marsh wanted the slug and a quiet hole for the man who carried it.

"We could run," Chris said. It was not a suggestion. It was the breacher laying out the device. "South side, Arafura, off the registry entirely. Ditch the case in deep water. Walk away from all four of them. We're dry, we're stateless, disappearing is the one thing we're actually built for." She looked at him. "That's the smart move, Warden. That's the freelance move. We owe these people nothing. The contract's poison and the principal isn't ours and the proof is somebody else's war."

It was true. It was the truest thing she had said all night, and a week ago Eric would have run the throttle himself. He was a freelancer. He owed nobody. He had built two years of survival on exactly that sentence, the one Caine had spent a fortune to exploit, and it had carried him right up the rising floor into a clinic full of dead men.

He looked at Mira, who was holding the case and watching him decide, and he looked at the drowned signal cycling green to red under the black water below the boat, a law still running over a city that everyone had agreed to abandon, and he thought about a child's careful letters on a wet stone wall. OURS.

"No," he said.

Chris waited.

"I'm not running because the contract says to and I'm not staying because anybody's paying me to stay. I did this. Not the businessman, me, my hands, in that building." He took the case from Mira and he held it and it weighed nothing and it weighed everything. "Somebody has to carry this, and there's nobody clean left to hand it to, which means it's us or it's the bottom of the harbor. And I've got a brother in that temple counting his dead who thinks I'm still his enemy, and I'm the reason they're dead, and I'm not leaving this city until he knows the truth even if he kills me with it."

It was not the contract. The contract was void, the way his registration was void, the way every loyalty he had ever told himself he could put down was void. This was the thing under all of that, the thing he had buried so he could survive being stateless, and it had surfaced in a flooded temple over a drowned city and it would not go back down.

"That's not the freelance move," Chris said. But she said it the way you say a thing you have decided to do anyway, and she reached for the throttle.

"No," Eric said. "It isn't."

He keyed the comm to Jet, because Jet was still the only line they had into the harbor, and Jet's easy voice came back at once, asking if they were clear, asking where to bring them in, helpful and quick and worth more knowing the channels

than dying in them, and Chris's eyes met Eric's across the dark boat for one beat over the open line before Eric answered, and neither of them said the thing that the beat was about. They told Jet they were clear. They told Jet to find them a hole.

Then Chris ran the skiff out into the blind channels with the proof on the deck and the whole harbor turning against them, four powers and one truth, and the brothers on the wrong sides of a lie that was finally, fully visible to everyone in the boat. The rescue was over. Nobody had been rescued. The game had changed, and they ran into it by choice, carrying the one thing the market could not be allowed to eat.

Behind them the tide came up over the temple and took the dead, and far across the water a man named Ko learned who Eric was, and began, with a Croc's patience and no panic at all, to hunt his brother.

End of Reel Two.

PART THREE — THE CRISIS AND TRANSFORMATION

Episodes 5 and 6

LOW TIDE

The crew came up out of the drowned outer streets at the wrong tide, and the city did not want them.

Eric read it in the channels before he read it on any face. The blind channels Jet had been opening all week were closed now, one after another, the way a building locks its doors floor by floor when it knows there is a fire. A water-taxi that should have been theirs idled past their hail and did not slow. A chit-house that took anybody's money on any day shuttered its window when Chris walked up to it. The harbor passed a word mouth to mouth, faster than any broadcast, that the freelance crew was radioactive, paid twice and burned twice, and that anyone who touched them caught the burn.

Dry in the worst city to be dry in. That was the math, and the math did not care.

They were holed up in a salvage loft over a flooded warehouse on the edge of the Shelf, a place Jet swore was cold. Mira sat on a crate with the proof in a sealed case against her knee, watching the door. She had not slept. She watched Eric the way she had watched him since the extraction, like a woman waiting to see which of two men he was going to turn out to be.

"Marsh again," Chris said. She had the comm rig open on a packing pallet, the antenna run up through a broken skylight. "Same as the last four. Channel's live. He's just not picking it up. He's gone quiet because he wants what's in that case, and the second he answers you he has to either help us or admit he won't. So he doesn't. That's not silence. That's a position."

Eric said nothing. He was at the window, counting exits in a room he had already counted three times, the guard instinct running with no flock to guard. He called it fatigue out of habit. He did not believe it anymore.

Jet came up the ladder fast and easy, the Clouded Leopard build making the climb look like nothing. "We can't stay," he said. "Somebody's selling sightings on the Shelf. Cheap. We've got maybe an hour before the wrong people buy a good one."

"You said this place was cold."

"It was cold yesterday." Jet spread his hands, charming, apologetic, the man who could get you anything. "Cold has a shelf life in this city. Everything does."

Eric looked at him a beat too long. Filed it. Did not let it land. There were a dozen things to distrust in that hour and Jet was the one who had kept them alive in all the others.

"Boats," Eric said. "Now."

They went into the water on two salvage skiffs as the tide pulled out and the drowned streets surfaced, and the wrong people bought a good sighting after all.

Eric heard the second engine before he saw it, a VEKTORA harbor cutter running hot through the channel behind them, then a third angling to cut across the grid of sunk avenues where the street signs read up at them green through the gray water. He did not need the briefing to know the build of the men in them. He could read operators the way other men read weather.

"Down the avenue," he called to Chris on the second skiff. "They can't bring the cutters into the shallow grid. Tide's still dropping."

It was true and it was not enough. The cutters could not follow into the old streets, so they did the smart thing, the thing Eric would have done. They sat at the mouths of the

grid and waited and put a forged shooter on the bow of each, and they made the crew run the gauntlet of crossings where avenue met avenue and there was no cover but the green of a dead traffic signal cycling over nothing.

At the first crossing the bow shooter on the left cutter put three rounds into the skiff's gunwale a hand's width from Mira's hip. Eric had her down on the deck before the third round, his body the wall, the Shepherd build doing the one thing it was bred to do without asking him. He came up and returned fire over the transom, two rounds, fast and flat, and the shooter went off the bow into the water and the cutter swung wide.

"Asking the building," Chris said over comm, breathless, which was breacher slang for working out where the next shot came from before it came. "Eric, they're herding. They're not trying to kill us in the grid. They're walling the easy exits and pushing us toward the ferry channel."

"Toward the ferry," Eric said. He saw it then, the shape of it, the way the cutters declined the kills they could have taken. Someone wanted them alive long enough to be taken in the open, where a crowd would do the deniable work. "Somebody's running this off a board. Hold the line we're on."

"That line ends at the transit channel."

"I know what it ends at."

The drowned city opened ahead of them into the wide gray of the ferry lane, and the wrong tide ran out under the skiffs, and behind them the cutters came on patient and unhurried as a thing that knew the water would do its work.

Ko got the call on the funicular platform above the Shelf, where he had gone to bury two of his dead.

He took it standing, looking down over the drowned town. Below him the low tide had surfaced the old avenues, and his people moved through them in the long flat boats, and the Saltwater Crocodile in him read the water the way Eric read a room, every current a sentence.

"The cutters are VEKTORA," his lieutenant said in his ear. The man's name was Adi and he had carried one of the dead up the temple stairs himself. "They're pushing a crew toward the transit channel. Small crew. Two skiffs. Boss, it's the crew from the temple."

Ko did not answer for a moment. Below him the city he loved cycled green to red over nothing.

The crew from the temple. The ones who had come up out of his own water on his own tide windows, patient and wet and quiet, and breached the seat he had made into a refuge and killed four of his people in the flooded halls, two of whom he had set into the salvage ground that morning

with his own hands. He had a name on the operator who led them now, a name and a face the harbor had finally given up. A NAF Shepherd gone stateless. A freelancer. Hired out of the Lost Angeles salvage country by the cable man to put Low Tide in the water.

He had every reason to let the cutters do it. Four dead and a city to protect and the Croc's own patience, which did not panic and did not forgive on anyone else's schedule. He could stand on this platform and watch VEKTORA take the freelancer in the open and call it a debt paid by another man's hand.

"Boss?" Adi said.

The face the harbor had given up was a face Ko knew. He had been sitting with it for two days, turning it the way you turn a stone you found in your own field. He had served beside that face once, years ago, on the tightest counter-trafficking line the water ever told stories about, back when there were still men on this harbor worth trusting and Ko had been one of them and so had the Shepherd. They had been brothers in the same trouble. And now the cable man had bought that brother and pointed him like a knife, and the knife had come into Ko's house and bled it, and the cable man had done it precisely because of what the two of them had been.

Ko understood the move the way you understand a punch the instant after it lands. Caine had not hired an assassin. He

had hired the one man Ko would have trusted at his back, and lied to him until he came.

"Mira is on those skiffs," Ko said. It was not a question. He had known it the moment Adi said the temple crew. She had fled to him, and the cable man had called it a kidnapping, and the cable man's knife had carried her back out of his house, and now the cable man's cutters were herding her into open water to take her clean.

"We think so. Yes."

"Get the boats," Ko said. "All of them."

The transit ferry came across the channel low and packed, three hundred people on the open deck and the rail, dockworkers and Shelf vendors and a school of children in the gray smocks the free-port schools still made them wear, and Eric ran both skiffs straight at its hull.

"We can't board a civilian boat," Chris said.

"We're not boarding it. We're hiding behind it."

The ferry was a wall the cutters could not shoot through, three hundred reasons VEKTORA could not open up in the open, and Eric put the skiffs in its lee and rode the bow wash and for ninety seconds they were invisible, two small boats tucked against the iron flank of a thing too crowded to kill.

Then the cutter on the left came around the bow of the ferry, and the operator on its deck stepped up to the rail, and Eric watched a professional do the math he had been dreading. The man raised his weapon and did not fire into the skiffs. He fired into the air over the ferry deck, two rounds, and three hundred people did what three hundred people do, and the panic broke across the open deck like the tide coming in.

"They're using the crowd," Chris said. "He just turned the cover into a stampede."

"Up," Eric said. "Onto the ferry. Now. They can't track us in that."

It was the choice the man on the cutter had built for him, and Eric took it because the alternative was open water and a clean shot, and he hated the man for being that good.

They went up the ferry's boarding ladder into the crush. Mira between Eric and Chris, the case against Mira's chest, Jet ahead breaking a path through the bodies with the Leopard's easy speed. The deck was a churn of people climbing over benches and each other, and somewhere in it were two VEKTORA shooters who had come up the far ladder, moving through the same crowd, and neither side could fire without painting the deck with school smocks.

So it became the worst kind of work, the close kind, the kind the Shepherd build was bred for and hated. Eric took the first shooter in the press of bodies with his hands and an

elbow and the rail, fast and quiet, a thing the crowd flowed around without ever seeing, the man down between the benches before the woman beside him finished her scream. The second shooter got a hand on Mira's case and Chris broke his wrist over the rail and the case stayed and the man went into the channel.

For one breath they were through, against the far rail, the ferry sliding toward the highland docks and the skybridges climbing away above into the Crown spine.

Eric looked back across the deck. And on the cutter falling away behind the ferry, standing on the bow now where the shooter had been, was a man Eric had not seen in years and knew in his body before he knew in his mind.

Wide and still and patient, reading the water, the apex animal of the drowned city. Ko.

Except it was not Ko's cutter. The boats coming up fast behind the VEKTORA cutter, a dozen of them, low and flat and full of harbor men, those were Ko's. The man on the bow was Ko, and he was not chasing Eric. He had come up between the crew and the cutters, the harbor at his back, and he was reading the ferry deck the way Eric was reading him, and his eyes found Mira at the rail and stopped.

Across forty meters of gray water and a dropping tide, the two brothers the war was built to make kill each other looked at each other for the first time, and neither moved, and the whole ruined history of it stood up in the air between them.

Then the ferry struck the highland dock and lurched, and the crowd threw both of them off their line, and Ko's boats hit the VEKTORA cutter broadside in a tearing crash of hulls, and the channel between them filled with smoke and harbor men and the thing that had almost happened did not happen. The tide ripped them apart before either could close it.

Eric got Mira up the dock ramp with Chris and Jet, and did not look back again, because looking back was a thing he could not afford and could not stop wanting to do.

The skybridges over the highland arcology ran between the Crown towers like the threads of a thing half-built, and the crew ran them with VEKTORA closing from below and Ko's boats lost somewhere in the channel behind. At the far end of the third bridge a nightclub built into a tower flank pulsed light out over the drowned town, and Jet said it was a way down through the back, and it was a trap, but not Jet's, not yet.

Eric felt the colder ones before he placed them, a stillness in the noise, two operators by the rear stair who did not move to the music and read the exits the way he read them. Not VEKTORA. Not Ko. A third hand on the board.

"PRC," Chris breathed. "Hua's people. The agency that wants her sealed. They've been here the whole time, Eric. We're not running from one buyer. We're running from the auction."

They went down through the club in the strobe and the press, and the colder men came after them, and there was a long ugly stretch of close work on a stair that flickered black and white, gun and hand and the rail, before the crew came out the bottom into the wet air over the drowned town with the case still on Mira's chest and a man down behind them who would not get up.

And then there were boats waiting in the dark water under the tower, low and flat and full of harbor men, and Ko stood in the lead boat with the city at his back, and he had not come to take the freelancer after all.

Ko took them into a place the cable man's money had never reached, a sunk temple court three streets over from the one the freelancer had bled, and he set the crew down in a flooded inner gallery and put a line of his men across the only dry threshold and let the tide come up around the walls.

He did not come in. Eric understood that, after a while. The crew was held in the gallery and Ko stayed out in the dark of the court beyond the threshold, a shape behind his

own men, lamplight at his back and none of it reaching his face, the apex animal of the drowned city deciding from across the water whether the freelancer left it breathing. They did not sit together. They did not share a light. A wall of harbor men and a strip of black water ran between them, and that was as close as Low Tide would come to the man who had bled his house.

The lieutenant carried the words. Adi. The one who had set two of the dead into the salvage ground that morning with his own hands, and he did not bother to hide what was in his face when he came to the threshold and stood over the crew.

"You came up his water on his tide," Adi said. Flat. He was saying Ko's words and his own grief in the same breath and made no effort to sort them. "You killed Pram. You killed Sari, who was twenty-six. The boss says to tell you he has every reason in this world to put you under that water tonight."

"I know," Eric said. He said it to Adi and past him, into the dark of the court, to the shape that did not answer for itself.

Adi listened to nothing Eric could hear, an earpiece or only the long habit of knowing his boss, and went on. "He says you came to rescue a woman who was never taken. He says you know that now." A pause. "He says the cable man picked you because of what the two of you were. That he

could have bought a hundred guns and a gun is a witness, so he bought the one man the boss would have stood next to in the dark, and told him a story, and sent him in with murder in his hands."

The dark beyond the threshold gave nothing back. Mira sat to the side of the gallery with the case in her lap, watching the line of men and the shape behind them, the thing she had fled across a war to reach held one wall away and not crossing it.

"Tell him," Eric started, and stopped, because there was a thing he could say to the brother across a fire and could not say to a lieutenant across a line of guns, and the not being able to say it was the whole shape of where they were. He picked the part that would carry. "Tell him I'm not going to argue what I did. The bodies are real. He doesn't owe me a hearing."

Adi took that back into the dark. There was a silence in the court, long, the tide working at the old stone. Whatever passed between the lieutenant and the shape behind the men passed too low to reach the gallery.

Then Adi came back to the threshold.

"He says he will not put you in the water tonight." A beat, hard. "He says that is not a hand. Do not mistake it for one." Adi's jaw worked. "The woman is his to protect and the proof is hers, and the cable man's people and your own people both want that case more than they want any of us alive. So

tonight you are not brothers and you are not friends. Tonight you are two men his lie sat in the same boat. The boss says that will have to be enough to move on."

"It's enough," Eric said.

He looked past the line of men one more time, into the dark where the shape stood, and could not find a face in it, and the shape did not give him one. The tide pushed at the walls. Ko stayed in the black water with his men between them and let the wall hold, and that was the answer and the whole of it.

It was a rung. Eric felt it take a fraction of his weight, the first one, partway up a ladder neither of them could see the top of, with most of the climb and the only meeting that mattered still above them in the dark.

Later, with the crew down and the tide high on the walls, Eric sat with Chris and Mira and the comm rig, and they did the math one more time, and the math was final.

Marsh would not answer. The PRC wanted the case sealed in the channel. VEKTORA wanted Mira back and the freelancer spent. The Syndicate was loyal to the transaction and the transaction was Caine's. There was no clean authority left in the Free Zone to hand the truth to. No flag.

"Then we stop waiting for a building to save us," Eric said. He was looking at the case in Mira's lap, and past it at the man Caine had built this whole war to make him kill.

"There's exactly one node on this board that, if it's gone, the rest can't hold. It's not the case. It's him."

"You want to go at Caine directly," Chris said. "He's behind VEKTORA security with a bloc absorption running through his front door."

"I want to make him come to me." Eric turned the idea over the way Ko turned a stone. "He wants Mira and he wants the case. I offer him a meet. Mira for safe passage out of the Free Zone. He'll take it because he thinks he's buying his last loose end cheap. And when he comes to take it, I end him. The man. You don't break this grid with a transmission to people who already sold the cable. You break it by removing the one builder it can't replace before the handover lands."

Mira had gone very still over the case. "He'll never come himself."

"He'll come if the meet's worth the case." Eric stood. The Shepherd had stopped counting exits and started counting moves. "We arrange the exchange. We control the ground. We end him there."

It was a plan with one assumption under it, that the people in the room could be trusted, and Eric did not look at Jet when he made it, because Jet had kept them alive in

every hour but the ones that mattered, and the build doesn't forget but the man wants to, and Eric wanted to.

Outside the walls the tide held high, and the absorption clock ran, and downstream a fixer the crew could not run the city without picked up a channel of his own.

THE EXCHANGE

Jet Halim made the call from a skybridge maintenance gantry where the wind covered the sound, and he did not feel like a traitor when he made it, because he was not one, exactly, the way he understood the word.

He was Syndicate. The Syndicate was loyal to the transaction. He had opened every door for the freelance crew honestly, in the sense that he had been paid to open them and he had opened them, and he had reported which doors they walked through to the man who paid him more, also honestly, in the same sense. There was no contradiction in it that Jet could find. The market always eats. He had simply made sure he was not on the plate.

"They're moving on Caine directly," he said into the channel. "An exchange. The wife and the case for safe passage. The freelancer means to take the chairman at the meet. He'll control the ground, but I'll give you the ground."

He read off the coordinates, the drowned cargo terminal on the Shelf's blind edge, the tide window, the approach. "He thinks it's a kill box for the chairman. Make it the other one."

The voice on the channel was not Caine's. It was colder, with the flat patience of a directorate that did not care about Ko or Mira or the freelancer, only about the cable landing on schedule. Hua's people were in it now too, and that should have told Jet something, that the buyer he was selling to had a buyer of his own. He noted it and did not let it land. He had a habit, the way the whole city did, of filing the thing that would cost him and looking at the easy thing instead.

"You'll be paid," the voice said. "And the Concierge keeps his doors."

Jet went back down the gantry into the wind, charming and fast and brilliant, the local legend, the man who could get you anything. He told himself the freelancer would understand, in the end, that it was only the larger transaction. He told himself a lot of things on the way down.

The drowned cargo terminal surfaced at the bottom of the tide, a concrete plain of broken loading aprons with the gray water standing in the low places and the Shelf market's lights a long way off, and Eric set the exchange there because it had

three exits he controlled and one approach he could watch and no civilians for half a kilometer.

He had built it as a trap for Caine. He stood it now and felt the wrongness of it the way the Shepherd felt the edges of a room, and could not name the wrongness, because the wrongness was a man he had decided to trust.

Chris was up high on a gantry crane with the long rifle, asking the building. Mira waited at the center of the apron with the case, exposed, the bait, her choice and her insistence both, because she would not let two men trade her one more time without her hand on it. Ko had come, against the schedule, with a handful of his people held back in the dark water, because the woman was his to protect and the case was hers, and that was as far up the ladder as the two of them had climbed, far enough to stand on the same ground and no farther.

Caine's car came across the apron at the tide's bottom, slow, a single armored vehicle, which was the first wrong thing, because a man buying his last loose end cheap brings more than one car or he brings none.

It stopped. The door opened. Caine got out, NAF-tailored, unhurried, a builder who had concluded the free-port would fall regardless and meant to be the man holding the cable when it did. He looked at Mira across the broken

concrete with something that was almost tenderness and was actually inventory.

"The case," Caine said. "And then she walks. You have my word."

"Your word's worth what you paid for it," Eric said.

Caine smiled, and did not answer, and looked once, deliberately, off to Eric's left, at the dark stack of cargo where nothing should have been.

Eric saw the look and understood the wrongness in the half-second he had left, and the half-second was not enough.

The cargo terminal lit up.

It was a kill box, and it had been a kill box the whole time, and it was aimed the wrong way.

VEKTORA mercenaries came up out of the standing water and out of the cargo stacks and off the loading aprons on three sides, forged and dry and many, and behind them in the dark came the colder ones, Hua's people, the directorate's own hand brought to seal a leak. The first volley took the gantry crane and Chris went off the long rifle and down behind the housing with rounds walking up the steel after her. The second volley sealed the three exits Eric had thought he controlled, because someone had told them which three.

Eric got to Mira and put her behind the only cover on the open apron, a dead loader, his body between her and the larger arc of it, the Shepherd doing the one thing it would do until it stopped. He returned fire across the concrete, flat and fast, two down, and it did not matter, because for every one down there were six and the six knew the ground.

"Eric," Chris said over comm, hurt in her voice, the bad kind. "They had the exits. They had the tide window. They had the approach. Somebody gave them the whole board."

And Eric, with his back to a dead machine and Caine's tailored shape already moving back toward the armored car under the cover of his own ambush, looked across the firelit water and found the one figure on the apron who was not being shot at, the fast easy shape moving clean through the kill box like a man crossing his own house, and he knew.

Jet stood at the edge of the light, untouched, and for one moment the Concierge looked back at the crew he had opened the city for, and there was no cruelty in his face and no zeal, only the small apology of a man who had taken the larger transaction, and then he turned and was gone into the dark, and the door he had not opened for them this time was the only door that had ever mattered.

"Jet," Chris said, and it was not a question, and there was nothing on the other end of it.

The local they could not run the city without had run it straight into the water.

Ko had stayed back in the dark with the schedule still unpaid, and when the terminal lit up he did not panic, because the Croc did not panic, and panic was not the thing the moment called for.

The thing the moment called for was the harbor.

He had not come with a handful. He had come with a handful in the light and the rest in the blind channels, low and flat and full of harbor men, because he had buried four of his own that morning and he did not walk into open water trusting a freelancer's ground or a freelancer's word, not yet, not that far up the ladder. He had hedged. And the hedge was the thing that turned it.

"All of them," Ko said, the way he had said it on the funicular platform. "Now."

The harbor came up out of the standing water on the fourth side, the side no one had sealed because no one had thought Low Tide would bring his whole house to a meet that was not his, and the kill box became a firefight, and the firefight tore the terminal apart. Adi went up the left apron at the head of a dozen men, the same lieutenant who had carried the words at the temple court, fast and furious for the two he had buried that morning, and Ko marked him in the muzzle light and then lost him in the smoke.

Ko moved through it the way the apex animal moved through its own element, unhurried and total, and he was not fighting for the freelancer, he told himself, and he was not fighting for the brother, he told himself, he was fighting for the woman he had loved before the world took her and the proof that could break the man who took her. He told himself a lot of things, the way the whole city did. And under all of them was the simple fact that he had brought everything he had to a meet he did not owe, for a man who had bled his house, and the Croc knew the truth of that even when the man it lived in would not say it.

He cut a path across the apron toward the dead loader where the woman was, and the firelight, and the smoke, and he came around the machine with his weapon up and ready to put down whatever stood between Mira and the dark.

And what stood there, turning at the same instant, weapon coming up at the same speed, was the brother.

They had not met face to face since the war began, not truly, not within reach, and now they stood a meter apart in the wreck of the ambush with the firefight raging on every side and each of them had the clear shot at last, the shot the cable man had spent a fortune and a city and four dead to buy.

Eric's weapon was on Ko. Ko's was on Eric. The smoke moved between them. Somewhere behind, Caine's armored car was already pulling Mira's name out of reach, but for one held breath the whole season narrowed to two men and the small dark distance of a barrel, and the lie that had built the distance stood up one last time and asked to be paid.

Neither fired.

Eric looked down the length of his own weapon at the face he had served beside on the tightest line the water ever told stories about, the brother in the same trouble, the man he had let a businessman turn into a monster in his own head before he ever got off the boat. Four dead between them. A city of reasons. The clear shot, finally given, the thing the entire war was a machine for producing.

He lowered his weapon first.

He let the barrel come down off the man Caine had paid him to kill, slow, deliberate, the muzzle finding the broken concrete, and he stood there open and unguarded in the middle of a firefight with his hands no longer aimed at the one person on the water he could not aim at, because the man who had voided every loyalty he ever had had just found the one he could not void, and there was no contract under it and no payday and no flag, only the choosing.

Ko looked at the lowered weapon. The Croc, patient, territorial, unforgiving on anyone's schedule but its own,

looked at the lowered weapon for a long moment while the terminal burned.

Then he lowered his.

Neither of them said it. There was nothing to say that the two weapons coming down had not already said. The friendship was restored at gunpoint, in smoke, with everything still on fire around them, the rung the whole ladder had been bending toward taken at last and the climb not finished and that not mattering, because they were on the same side of the barrel now and would be from here.

"The car," Ko said.

Eric turned.

Caine's armored car was already across the apron and into the blind channel, the door shut, gone, and behind its dark glass was Mira and the case and the proof, the whole of the thing they had bled for, pulling away into the drowned city at the bottom of the tide.

The terminal went quiet by degrees, the way a firefight does, the harbor men sweeping the wreck and the VEKTORA dead floating in the standing water and Hua's colder ones already melted back into the dark, taking their orders and their patience with them.

Chris came down off the ruined crane with her arm wrong and her face gray, and Eric got under her. Across the apron the harbor men had stopped sweeping and gathered at the foot of the left ramp, still, the way men go still around one of their own, and Ko was already walking toward them before anyone called him. Adi lay where the kill box had caught him going up the apron for the two he had buried that morning, and now there would be a third hand on the salvage stairs and it would be his. Ko crouched over the lieutenant a long moment and did not say anything, and then he closed the man's eyes with two fingers and stood, and the harbor watched its boss carry that the way it watched the tide.

Jet was gone. Mira was gone. The case was gone. The exchange that had been built to end Caine had ended everything except Caine.

Eric stood in the wreck of his own plan and counted the cost, and the cost was the worst it had been, the lowest external point of the whole long fall. The proof unsent. The woman in the businessman's hands, the businessman who had wanted her silenced from the start and now had her and a reason. Adi dead on the concrete for a meet that was not even his fight. The local who had opened every door revealed as the one who closed the last. Every channel they had was burned and every authority they could name had wanted it to go exactly this way.

And next to him, the brother. Whole.

"He has her," Eric said.

"He has her," Ko agreed. The Croc did not waste words on the obvious. "And he will not keep her in a vault. He has a thing to finish, and a clock to finish it on, and a place he means to finish it." Ko looked off across the drowned town toward the Crown spine, where the lights of the highland arcology burned over the water, and the absorption clock ran, and the festival of the city's own sale was coming. "The handover. He will land the cable at the festival, in front of every bloc and every observer, and he will move her there, because a man like that does not hide his triumph, he stages it. That is when. That is where."

It was a clock, and a clock was a reason to stop running and start hunting, and Eric felt the season's lowest point and its first hard seed of resolve arrive in the same breath, the floor dropping out and a man finding his feet under him on the way down.

"Then we stop running," Eric said.

"Then we stop running," Ko said, and for the first time since the war began he said it as a man saying it to his brother, and the two of them stood in the wreckage of everything they had lost, enemies no longer, with everything still to lose, and the tide began, far out, to turn.

PART FOUR — THE RISE FROM THE ASHES

ALLIANCE

The safehouse was a dead funicular station on the wrong side of the spine, three levels down where the cable money had never bothered to come. Ko owned it the way he owned most dead things in the harbor, quietly, through four names that were not his. Eric stood at a cracked window and watched the festival lights climb the Crown arcology two kilometers off, a tower wearing its own sale like jewelry.

Behind him the room had filled. Harbor crews in salt-stiff jackets. Two of the resistance kids who ran the blind channels, looking like they had not slept since the exchange. Chris in the corner with her gear bag open, hands moving on a fuse rail without her eyes on it. And Ko at the table, broad and still, the Croc patience that did not read as calm so much as a decision not yet made.

Eric had not slept either. The drift was loud in him now. He kept counting the exits in a room that had only two, and his body kept finding a third that was not there, a pressure at

the edge of hearing like a door he could not see. He called it fatigue. He was running out of room to call it that.

"Mira's transmission window is the handover," Chris said. She did not look up. "Decrypted the rest of the festival schedule off the channel Jet left open before he sold us. Caine signs the cable landing live, in front of the GCOA observers, on the estate's main terrace. Twenty-one hundred. The whole bloc is there to watch the free-port put its own name on the paper."

"And Mira," Eric said.

"Moved this afternoon. Crown estate. East wing, the part with no public schedule." She set the fuse rail down. "He's not hiding her anymore. He doesn't have to. After tonight she's a chairman's wife at a party. After tonight there's no proof, because the proof is twenty-two days too late to matter."

So that was the clock. Eric had spent two years telling himself the clock did not care about him, that this was a comfort. It had never been a comfort. The clock did not care, and tonight that meant Mira had until twenty-one hundred and not one minute past.

"Then we go tonight," he said.

A harbor man near the door laughed, short and ugly. "Through the festival. Through Caine's wire. With what, the six of us and a barge."

Ko let the laugh die before he spoke. He did that. He waited for the room to spend itself, and then he was the only voice in it.

"Not six," Ko said. "Sit down, Tomas."

The harbor man sat.

Ko rose instead. He moved to the table where Chris had spread the estate schematics, the ones Mira's old access had bought, and he put one wide hand flat on the highland approach like he was holding the paper to the world.

"Caine built a war so he would not have to fight one," Ko said. "He bought a stranger to do the killing, because no man in this harbor would. That was his whole plan. Find the one person on the water with no people. Point him." He looked at Eric, and there was nothing soft in it, but there was no blade in it either, which two weeks ago there would have been.

"His mistake was thinking the harbor had no people. The harbor is nothing but people. They are just poor, so the broadcast forgets they exist."

He started naming them. The salvage captains who knew the drowned streets at every tide. The resistance, who knew the festival staffing because half of them had been hired to pour drinks for the bloc that was buying their city. The funicular maintenance crew, who hated VEKTORA for reasons going back to a strike nobody had won. Chris, who

could open a wall. Eric, who could read a room full of armed men and tell you which one would break first.

"One body," Ko said. "Each piece does the one thing it does. The salvagers move us up the drowned face under the festival barges, where Caine's wire watches the road and not the water. The maintenance crew gives us the funicular for the fallback, because nobody runs a getaway up a mountain on a cable car, so nobody guards it. The resistance gets Mira her ten meters to the terrace and her line to the observers. Chris gets us through the curtain wall." He paused. "And we two take the inside."

"And if any one piece falls," Chris said, testing it, "the whole thing falls."

"Yes," Ko said. He did not soften that either. "That is the only way to build it where everyone runs it. If I can do it without you, you are labor. If it dies the second you walk away, you are family."

They worked it past midnight, then past the next, the plan growing arms. Eric watched himself almost reach for it a dozen times. The salvage approach had a flaw, the tide would be wrong by half a meter at the worst window, and the old reflex came up in him, the advisor's reflex, take the piece, hold it, carry it so no one else carries it wrong. He had lost a

building full of his own people once by trusting intel he had not walked himself. After that he had decided the only thing he could keep safe was a man with no flock.

He opened his mouth to take the tide window off the salvage captain and run it himself.

He closed it.

The captain was a woman named Reza with forty years of the drowned face in her hands, and she had already seen the half-meter, and she was already solving it, muttering about a secondary channel that ran behind the old cathedral spire where the water sat higher. She did not need Eric standing at her elbow. She needed him to let go of her elbow.

"Reza runs the water," Eric said. "Whatever she says the water does, that's what it does. I don't touch it."

Reza glanced up, surprised to be ratified by the stranger. Ko did not look surprised at all.

It cost Eric more than the firefight at the exchange had cost him. He stood in the dead station and felt the thing he had carried for two years set itself down, the belief that loyalty was a contract you could void and that he had voided his and that this made him light. He was not light. He had just been alone, and called it the same thing.

"Give me the inside approach," he said to Ko. "Not both halves. Yours. You know the man's house, I don't, I'll run your read." He heard himself say it. The Shepherd handing

the perimeter to someone else and trusting it to hold. "I'll take whatever you leave me."

Ko studied him for a long moment.

"There it is," the Croc said quietly. "Brother. There you are."

Chris found the last surprise at oh-four-hundred, going back through Jet's left-open channel one more time out of a habit she did not trust.

"He's alive," she said.

The room stilled.

"Jet. The exchange should have folded him with the rest of Caine's mercs when Ko's people came over the side, but he's not in the casualty traffic and he's not in the Syndicate dead-channels. He's in the estate staffing." She turned the slate around. A movement order, VEKTORA internal, a name they all knew under a credential they did not. "Caine pulled him inside. Last line. The Concierge is holding the east wing. Mira's wing."

Eric looked at the name a long time. Jet Halim, who had opened every door in the harbor for them and reported which ones they walked through. Not a zealot. Not even cruel. Syndicate to the bone, loyal to the transaction, and Caine had simply written the larger one. There was no hate

in Eric for it, which surprised him. There was only the cold arithmetic of a debt that had to be paid because it had been entered. The build did not forget. The market always ate. Jet had a receipt coming, and it would meet them in the east wing, between the crew and Mira.

"Then that's where I'll be," Eric said.

"That's where we'll be," Ko corrected.

Chris closed the slate. "There's one more thing. Marsh."

Eric's own side. The Monitor Central channel that had run him onto the island and then stopped answering when the truth surfaced. He had called it twelve times since the exchange. Twelve times into a dead line.

"He's not dead," Chris said. "His station's hot. Traffic moving in and out of it the whole time he's been ignoring you." She let that sit. "Which means he's not ignoring you because he can't answer. He's ignoring you because he doesn't want what you're selling. Eric, I framed-out of that agency. When they go quiet on a man who's holding the only proof of a thing, it's not because they don't believe him."

"Then why," Eric said.

"I don't know yet." She zipped the bag. "But I'd want to know before twenty-one hundred, and we're not going to. So put it in the box and carry it. We have a wall to open."

He put it in the box. But it sat in him like the third exit the drift kept finding, a door at the edge of the room he could not see and could not stop counting.

The festival was the cover, and the festival was the plan, and Ko built the second out of the first.

He laid it out on the schematics one last time before they broke. The absorption festival ran three days, and the bloc had hired half the harbor to staff its own celebration, which meant half the harbor would be inside Caine's wire by sunset wearing credentials the wire had issued itself. The resistance kids had service whites. The salvage captains had a barge contract to ferry festival pontoons up the drowned face. The maintenance crew had a standing work order on the funicular because a festival means generators and a cable car nobody wanted stalling in front of the GCOA observers. Every piece of the assault already had a reason to be exactly where the assault needed it. Caine had built the war to hide inside the handover. Ko was hiding the rescue inside the festival of the city's own sale.

"Reza's water is the door," Ko said. "Her people know the drowned streets at every tide, and Caine's wire watches the road because that is where a war comes from. We come up the face under his own party barges. The maintenance crew is the back door, the funicular, our way down and out, and they give it to us by simply not locking what they were hired to run. The resistance is Mira's ten meters, the service whites that get her across a terrace full of armed men because

nobody searches the help. Chris opens the curtain wall, the one thing none of them can do. And the inside is ours."

"Each piece does one thing," Chris said. "Nobody has to be a soldier."

"Nobody has to be anything but what they already are," Ko said. "That is why it holds. A salvager runs water. A maintenance hand runs a cable car. A resistance kid pours wine and walks a woman ten meters. I have spent twenty years learning that you do not ask the harbor to be an army. You ask each piece of it to be exactly itself, at the same time, pointed at the same wall."

Eric looked at the schematic and saw it the way the Shepherd saw a perimeter, the whole shape of who covered what, and he understood that this was the thing Caine had never believed could exist. Not a fortress and not a warlord's gun. A city protecting an organ. A body moving to save its own heart, every piece doing the one thing it did, and the stranger with no people standing inside it now, given the inside approach, trusted with the part that mattered.

"It fails if any piece falls," Eric said.

"It fails if any piece falls," Ko agreed. "And it will not fall, because not one of these people is here for a contract. Look at them." He did not raise his voice. "Reza buried a son the bloc's cable money drowned out of work. The maintenance crew struck against VEKTORA before half these kids were born. The resistance is fighting for the only home they have.

You cannot buy that and Caine never understood that you cannot buy that, which is the whole reason we are going to win."

They left the dead station an hour before dawn, in pieces, the way a body moves blood. Reza's salvage barge first, low and dark, riding the secondary channel behind the drowned cathedral where the spire still broke the water and a traffic signal eight meters down cycled green to red over nothing. The maintenance crew up the public road in a marked van that belonged exactly where it was going. The resistance kids in their festival service whites, indistinguishable from the hundreds the bloc had hired to pour wine while it bought a city.

Eric rode the barge with Ko and Chris and Mira's transmitter sealed in a dry case between them, and above them the Crown arcology lit itself level by level for the absorption festival, three million people's nervous system about to be signed away to applause.

He shouldered his go-bag. The clock did not care that he had let go of the tide window or the inside approach or the man he used to be. It only counted down. And for the first time in two years he was not running it alone, and he found that this did not make him light. It made him heavy in the

good way, the way a man is heavy when he is carrying something worth the weight.

He had a flock. He had decided, at last, to belong to it.

The barge slid under the first festival pontoon, into the dark beneath the party, and began to climb the drowned face of the city toward the house of the man who had built a war to make him an orphan twice.

FREELANCE

The curtain wall went up at twenty-forty-one.

Chris ran the charge the way she defused them, slow hands and no wasted motion, a breaching cut low on the service face where the festival floods threw the most shadow. The wall did not blow so much as it sighed and leaned, a two-meter section settling outward onto packed earth, and the night swallowed the sound under a swell of music from the terrace forty meters up and east.

"Curtain's open," Chris said into the bead. "Reza, you're clear off the water. Maintenance, you have the funicular?"

A double-click answered. The fallback was live. Nobody runs a getaway up a mountain on a cable car, so nobody had thought to lock it.

Eric went through the gap first, Ko a half-step behind him, and the two of them moved up the terraced highland garden of the Crown estate with the old counter-trafficking rhythm coming back into their feet like it had never left, the rhythm from years ago on the water, the tightest line in the harbor. One read the high ground, one read the low. They did not have to speak. The Shepherd and the Croc, brothers again, running someone else's house in the dark.

The first security element was four men on the garden stair, VEKTORA wire, good kit and bored posture, watching the road like they had been told to. Caine still thought the threat came up the road. Eric took the two on the left and Ko took the two on the right and it was done in under four seconds, close work, quiet work, the bodies eased down into the planter shadow where the next patrol would not see them for ten minutes. Protect your medic. Hold the perimeter. The instincts had a flock to point at now.

"Phase one's moving," Eric said. "Resistance, where's my line for Mira."

"Service corridor under the east wing," came the kid's voice, tight. "We're staged. But the wing's locked down hard. Caine pulled extra wire inside an hour ago. Somebody's holding it personally."

Eric knew who.

Mira heard the music change.

She sat in the east wing in a dress Elias had chosen, in a room with a lock on the outside, and she listened to the absorption festival find its key, the bloc anthem threading up under the free-port one until you could not tell which was swallowing which. That was the point. That had always been the point. You did not conquer a free-port. You harmonized it until it could not hear its own song.

She had the transmitter. They had searched her and found the obvious one, the slate, and taken it, and felt clever. They had not found the thing sewn into the boning of the dress Elias had chosen, because Elias had chosen it, and a man who picks your clothes does not imagine the clothes carrying anything he did not put there. That was the marriage, distilled. He owned the surface so completely he never thought to ask what the surface was carrying.

She was not a hostage. She had stopped being a hostage the day she stopped waiting for two men to fight over her and started building the thing in her own hands. She was the operator of the evidence. The proof was hers. The transmission was hers. And when the door opened, whoever it was, she was going to walk toward the terrace, not away from it.

The lock turned.

It was not the crew. It was a house guard, come to bring the chairman's wife up to stand beside the chairman while he signed. He smiled and offered his arm.

Mira took it. He thought he was escorting her to the terrace. He was. He just did not know whose errand he was running.

Jet was waiting in the long gallery between the east wing and the terrace stair.

He stood alone at the center of it under the chandelier, in a good suit, the Clouded Leopard ease that had charmed every door in the harbor open now turned to a different use, his hands loose and his weight balanced and a sidearm not yet drawn because Jet had never needed to draw first in his life.

"I knew it would be you two," Jet said, as Eric and Ko came up the gallery. "I told him. I said, chairman, if both of them are still breathing, they will come up the dark and not the road, and they will come together, and you will need someone who knows them. He didn't believe the together part." He smiled, and it was almost rueful. "You really did reconcile. At gunpoint. I missed that. I'd have liked to see it."

"You sold the meet," Ko said.

"I sold the meet," Jet agreed. "And the docks, and the market run, and which channels you trusted. It was a very good contract, Ko. The best one in the harbor." He shrugged, easy. "You always told me the Syndicate was loyal to the transaction. I listened. Caine's was bigger. That's not betrayal, that's arithmetic. You taught me the math."

"I taught you the math," Ko said. "I never taught you the cost."

"The build doesn't forget, Jet," Eric said quietly. "You opened a lot of doors. There's a receipt."

Jet's hand moved.

He was fast. He was genuinely, brilliantly fast, the fixer who had never lost a step in the harbor, and in another night against another man he might have made it. But there were two of them, and they had run a line together for years before the world broke it, and Eric read the shoulder a quarter-second before the hand and was already moving low while Ko went wide, and the gallery filled with the flat hard sound of close work under a chandelier, and it was over before the music outside finished its phrase.

Jet sat down against the gallery wall with the rueful smile fading into something younger and more surprised. He looked at Ko. Not at Eric. At Ko.

"It really wasn't personal," he said.

"I know," Ko said. He crouched and he did not look away from it, the Croc who ruled by tide and fear learning to rule

by the truth in front of him instead, which meant watching it. "That's the worst part, brother. That you could do all of it, and mean none of it. Go on, then. Your account's settled."

The Concierge ran out of doors to open. The last one closed.

Phase two went live at twenty-fifty-eight.

On the terrace, under a sky webbed with festival drones, Elias Caine stood at a lectern of black glass with the GCOA observers ranged in their neutral grey and the bloc delegation in their cold formal red and Director Hua's people watching from the wings like an absence given posture. The cable landing document hung in the air above the lectern as light, the free-port's nervous system rendered as a thing you could sign with a gesture.

Caine was speaking. He spoke beautifully. He spoke of continuity, and stability, and the long peace of shared infrastructure, the architect's voice of a man who had concluded the free-port was going to fall regardless, so the only question was who got paid to hold the cable when it did. He raised his hand to sign.

Mira walked out of the east wing stair onto the terrace, on the arm of a house guard, in the dress he had chosen.

Caine saw her and his face did the thing she had married, the small warm public softening, the owner pleased to see his property arrive on schedule. He extended the hand that was not signing.

She did not take it. She walked past it, to the rail, into the light, and she opened the transmitter sewn in the boning of his own gift, and she pushed the proof into every channel the festival had opened to broadcast its own triumph.

The manifests. The cable backdoor. The contract with Hua. VEKTORA restricted signal-tech and NAF gene-tech, trafficked to the bloc, treason in three jurisdictions, flooding now across every screen the absorption had lit, in front of every observer the absorption had gathered, live, unkillable, his own festival turned into the antenna of his ruin.

"You picked the dress," Mira said. Only Caine was close enough to hear it. "You always pick the surface. You never once asked what the surface was carrying."

The terrace came apart in noise.

Caine's wire surged for Mira and the resistance kids surged out of the service whites to meet them, and for ten seconds the terrace was a brawl in formalwear, and Eric and Ko came up the stair into the middle of it back to back, the way they had not fought in years and had never stopped knowing how.

Eric did not go for the woman. The resistance had Mira, that was their ten meters and their job, and he had let go of the elbow. He went for the man.

Caine ran. Of course he ran. He went off the back of the terrace and down through the highland garden toward the one route nobody had thought to guard, the funicular, the cable car that ran the grid up over the drowned town, and Eric went after him with Ko on his shoulder and the GCOA observers behind them already on their own channels, the proof already past the point where any wire could pull it back.

The funicular car was climbing empty up the mountain when Caine reached the platform, the maintenance crew's fallback running on its own schedule, and Caine turned at the rail with a small clean sidearm in his hand and the whole drowned city below him, Old Jakarta eight meters down, the street signs still readable, the dead signal cycling green to red.

"You were the cleanest thing I ever bought," Caine said to Eric, breathing hard, the architect with the math gone wrong. "Do you understand the work it took. To find the one man in the world who loved Ko enough to kill him, and lie to him well enough that he would." He almost laughed. "I built you a redemption. I built it to your exact size. And you walked out of it."

Eric raised his weapon. He had carried the want to kill this man up a drowned mountain. It was right there, the clean shot, the payback for the war and the frame and the brother he was sent to make an orphan of.

He thought about a building in the Java Scatter that the intel called clear. He thought about people he had trained dying around him because someone wanted them dead and paid for it to look like an accident. He thought about how a dead Caine was a closed mouth, and a live Caine was the proof's own confession, and how the difference between revenge and redemption was whether you needed the man dead or needed the truth alive.

"No," Eric said.

He shot the sidearm out of Caine's hand. Then he crossed the platform and took the richest man in the cable trade by the collar and put him on his knees on the funicular deck, alive, for the observers, for the proof, for the record that would outlive every bullet.

"You don't get to be a martyr," Eric told him. "You get to be a witness. The market always eats, Caine. Tonight it's eating you, and I need you breathing for the meal."

Ko came up the platform last and looked down at the man who had spent a fortune to make two brothers kill each other.

"He took you alive," Ko said. "Years ago I'd have put you in the water and the tide would have kept the secret. I don't

rule that way anymore." He crouched to Caine's eye level. "You sold a city. The city's going to watch you answer for it, in the light, where I used to keep nothing. That's the worst thing left to do to you. So that's what we'll do."

It should have ended there. It nearly did.

The bead in Eric's ear, which had been full of the resistance and the salvagers and Chris calling phases, went briefly, impossibly clean. A new channel cut in over the top of it, agency-grade, the kind that only opens when someone with deep authority decides to be heard.

"Stand down, WARDEN." Marsh. Twelve dead calls and now the dead line spoke. "Hold Caine. Hold the proof. Monitor Central is inbound to take custody of the asset and the materials. You did good work. Bring it home."

Eric stood on the funicular platform with Caine on his knees and the drowned city below him, and the third exit the drift had been finding for two weeks finally resolved into a door he could see.

"The materials," Eric said into the channel.

"The grid-tech," Marsh said, and there was no apology in it, only the flat economy of a man stating a price. "What Caine was selling the bloc. The relay specs, the tuning. We

want a copy. We've wanted a copy since the day we put you on the island."

Chris's voice in the other ear, very quiet. "There it is. That's why he went dark."

It came up in Eric all at once, the whole shape of it, the thing that had been sitting at the edge of the room. The stand-down at the exchange had never been about protecting Caine. His own side had never wanted Caine stopped. They had wanted what Caine was building, wanted to own a copy of the instrument the bloc was wiring into the harbor, and a stateless freelancer who learned what the grid was for was a loose end you bury in a drowned city, not a man you debrief.

"You burned my people in the Scatter," Eric said. He was not asking.

A pause on the channel. The truth in the silence.

"The intel that walked your trainees into that building," Marsh said. "That was the price of finding out what the PRC was tuning the grid to do to the forged. We needed a forged advisor close to the program who'd survive and keep working and not ask why. You were never the rescue, WARDEN. You were the probe. The grid was always the mission. Saving a wife was the cover story we sold the cover story."

So that was the mission all along.

Eric stood very still. Below him a traffic signal eight meters underwater cycled green to red over a city the world

had drowned and forgotten. He had spent two years thinking he had voided his loyalty to survive. He had not voided it. Someone had spent it for him, and let him carry the grief for the spending.

"Marsh," he said. "Your asset's in custody. So's your copy." He looked at Chris. "Burn it."

Chris was already moving on the slate. "The grid-tech goes to the observers raw and complete," she said, "and to the resistance, and to every channel Mira opened. No copy. No master. Everyone gets all of it or no one gets to own any of it. You want it, Marsh, you can read it off the same broadcast as the rest of the world."

The channel went silent. Then it went dead, the dead line dead again, and this time Eric let it stay dead, because there was no one on it he wanted to call.

By dawn the handover was broken.

The cable landing went unsigned. The GCOA observers, too polite and too bought to inspect anything for two years, could not un-see a treason that had broadcast itself across their own festival, and politeness has a floor. The document that would have signed three million people's nervous system to the bloc went back into committee, which in the slow grammar of empires meant the free-port had bought

itself one more season of being free. Not safe. Free. The difference was everything and it was thin as tide.

Caine was taken in the light, a witness and not a martyr, his cable dynasty coming apart clause by clause the way he had built the absorption, downstream and unstoppable. Hua's machine stalled. It did not stop. Machines like that do not stop, they wait. But it stalled, and a stalled machine is a season of breathing room, and the harbor had learned to live on less.

Jet's account was settled in the long gallery and the harbor would remember the cost even if the broadcast forgot the man.

Eric found Ko at the funicular rail in the grey light with Mira beside him, the three of them looking down at the drowned town surfacing inch by inch as the tide pulled back, Old Jakarta returning the way it did every dawn, the street signs, the dead signal, the bones of a city the world abandoned and the harbor never did.

"You found a flock," Ko said. He did not look over. "Stateless man with no people. You ran my read and let Reza run the water and took the man alive when you wanted him dead." A pause. "You belong to something now. You should know what that costs. It costs everything, all the time, and it does not give it back. I would not trade it."

"Neither would I," Eric said, and meant it, and was surprised again by how heavy that was, and how good.

Mira held the transmitter. She was free, the chairman's wife become the operator of the evidence become, simply, a woman at a rail in the dawn who owed no man anything. She had one thing left to do with the proof, and she did it now, because the surface had been read and it was time to read what the surface was carrying.

The last layer decrypted at six-oh-four in the morning.

Mira watched it resolve on the slate and went very still, and Chris came to look over her shoulder, and then Chris said a word she did not usually say.

It was not the trafficking proof. The trafficking proof was the surface, the tenth of the thing that floated, and they had spent it already, broadcast it across a festival and broken a handover with it. Under it was something the cable was never built to carry and had carried anyway.

A frequency. A low standing wave, the kind a relay grid could be tuned to receive.

And a string of relay coordinates.

The coordinates were not in New Batavia.

"These are dated," Chris said slowly. "Look at the timestamp on the array. This isn't a plan for the grid. This is the grid already running, somewhere else, before Caine ever sold a clause of this one." She looked up. "After the Java

Scatter, Eric. These coordinates went live after they burned your people."

Eric looked at the frequency.

The grid in New Batavia had never been the instrument. It was a receiver. The handover was not the construction of an antenna. It was the construction of one more antenna, in a city full of drifting forged veterans, tuned to a standing wave that was already transmitting from a string of coordinates nobody on the Surface had ever read, in cities the absorption had not reached yet, on a frequency the cable was built to hear.

He stood at the rail of the funicular over the drowned town and he felt the drift in him, the third exit, the door at the edge of the room he had counted for two years and called fatigue. The guard instinct with no flock to guard. The body that startled at the edges of a room.

It had never been fatigue. It had never been a wound, or grief, or the build with no people. It had been a signal. He had been drifting toward it the whole time, the way a receiver drifts toward the carrier, and the war and the frame and the brother he was sent to kill had all been the visible tenth of something tuning him at the genome from a coordinate that was not on any map of this city.

The handover was never about the cable.

It was an antenna.

And Eric had been the signal all along.

Behind him the tide pulled back off Old Jakarta and the dead traffic signal cycled green to red over the drowned streets, patient, territorial, eight meters down, and somewhere out past the harbor on a frequency the world was never meant to hear, the thing that had written his drift kept transmitting, and waited for the next receiver to come online.

The Surface Game was won.

The Deep Game just started.

. . .

End of Reel Four. End of Season One.

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