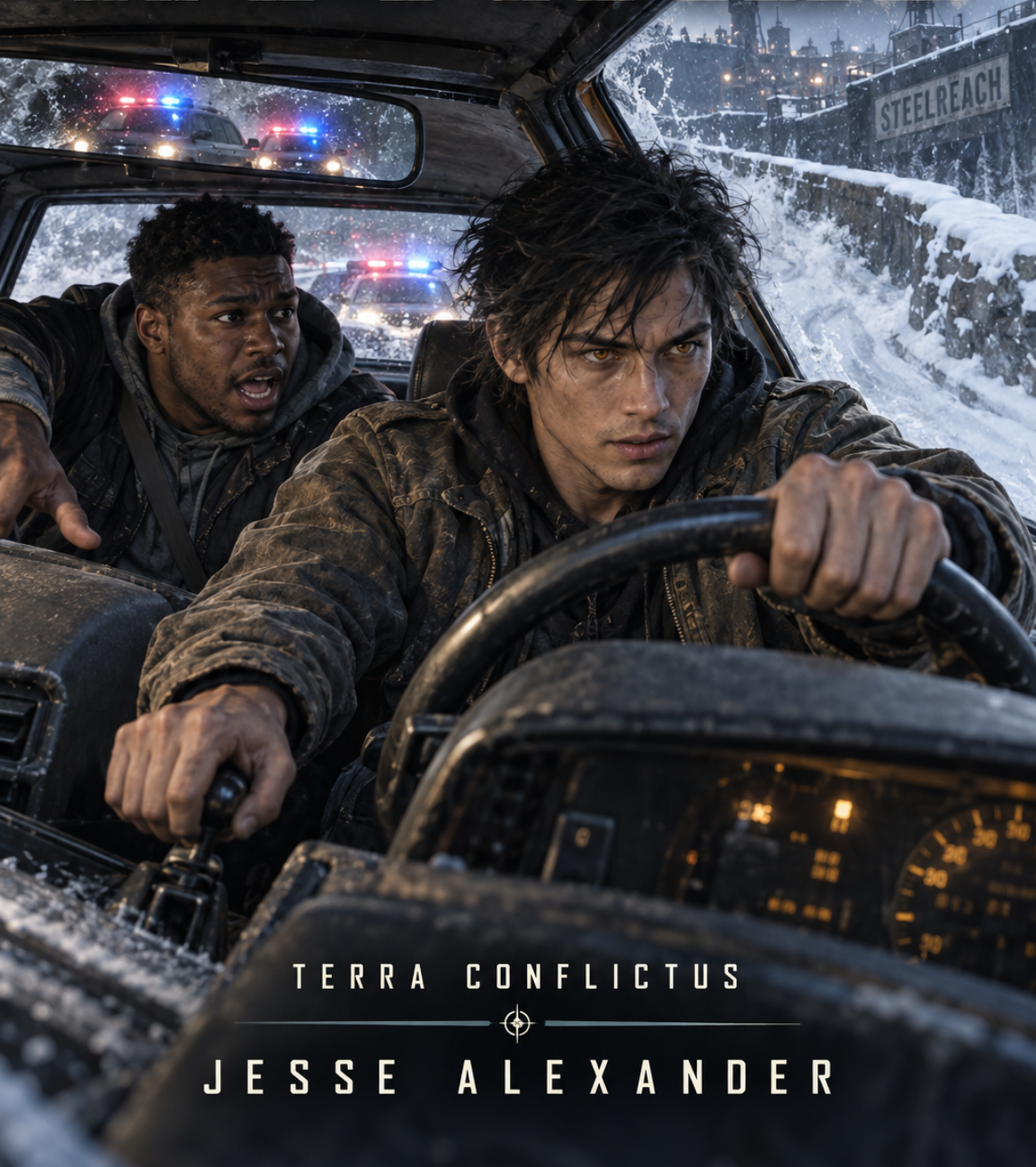


FIELD FICTION

# HOTWIRE



TERRA CONFLICTUS



JESSE ALEXANDER

*and never feels the antenna humming an inch from his own spine.*

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## PART ONE — THE CALL

### LITTLE ODESSA

**T**he Calix S-600 sat at the curb with its trunk open and two men loading it, and Chris Dolan watched them from the dark of a doorway and logged what he saw the way he logged everything, in clean order. Two men. Four duffels on the sidewalk, soft-sided, sagging in the middle the way a bag sags when it carries something dense. A pre-Upheaval saloon, armored, manual, no transponder light in the dash. A grid ghost, a machine that did not exist as far as Monitor Central was concerned, parked outside a shuttered fish house at one in the morning in the part of the spread the locals still called Little Odessa.

He had come down on a routine interdiction, a flag on a power draw, the kind of nothing he worked twice a week. He had brought Devlin because the kid was new and needed the hours, and Devlin stood beside him now breathing too loud, young enough to still find a stakeout exciting.

"That's a real car," Devlin said. "Like an actual one."

"Quiet."

The men hefted the third duffel into the trunk and the rear suspension dropped, and Dolan noted it. He had a good eye for load, twenty years of it.

They crossed the street under the dead streetlamps, badges out, and that was as far as procedure went, because the nearer man looked up and his face came apart, and both of them dropped the last duffel and ran. They ran into the fish house and Dolan went after them at a walk, because he already knew how this ended. There was always one door in a place like this. They had run into a box.

He found them at the back, between a dead chiller and a stack of crates that smelled of brine forty years stale, and they were not fighters. Emigre crooks, dock muscle a long way from the dock, and when Dolan came through the dark with his sidearm low and easy they put their hands up and began to beg in two languages at once, the EO bloc tongue and then broken NAF trade-speak, the way frightened men reach for any word that might work.

"Take it," the older one said. "Take it, is yours, we say nothing, we never here." He had a duffel in his hands, the one he had carried in with him, and he held it out across the dark like an offering. "Please. Is yours."

Dolan took it. The weight pulled his arm down, and the eye for load already knew, but he opened it anyway because procedure was procedure even now.

Bars. Stacked in rows, dull and yellow under the bad light, each one stamped and serialed and heavier than anything that size had a right to be. Gold. Not bit-chits, not a balance on a ledger that could be zeroed in a market panic.

Metal. The thing the Oligarchy turned its money into when it stopped believing the money would survive the night. He had heard the cold-trade desks whisper about the Zero, the bloc pulling its fortune out of the digital and into the physical, and he had filed it the way you file a rumor. And here it was in his hand, more wealth than he would be paid across three lifetimes, handed over by a man who thought he was buying his life with it.

Something moved in Dolan then. Not greed exactly, and not rage. The cold arithmetic of a man who had spent his career at the bottom of other people's fortunes. He thought, in the flat voice he would use to log a parking violation, that two armed felons resisting interdiction was a clean report, and a clean report had no witnesses in it.

He shot the older man first, because he was the one with the gift in his hands, and then the younger one before the body of the first had finished folding. Two rounds. Close work. The sound was very loud in the box and then very quiet.

Devlin came in behind him at a run, drawn by the shots, and stopped, and looked at the two dead men and the open bag and the bars catching the light, and Dolan watched the understanding arrive slowly on the kid's face. Devlin was new. He was looking for the version of this where it was good shooting, where the men had drawn, where his partner was the man he had ridden with and admired.

"Chris," Devlin said. "Chris, what is that. What did they have."

"Evidence," Dolan said.

"Did they draw. Did they have a piece, I didn't hear a, did they."

Dolan looked at him with something almost like kindness. The kid was twenty-four, a clean record and a girl in the arcology core, and none of it mattered, because he had walked in two seconds too early and seen the gold, and that made him the one thing Dolan could not have. A man who knew.

"They had a piece," Dolan said, and shot him.

He did it the way he did all of it, without flourish, one round, center mass, and Devlin sat down against the dead chiller with a look of mild surprise and stopped being a problem. Dolan crouched and worked in the dark, the way a man works who has thought it through long before. He took a cold piece from the small of his back, an unregistered thing he had carried for years against exactly this kind of need, and closed the older crook's dead hand around it and fired it once into the ceiling so the residue would read right, and laid it where it would tell the story. Two felons. A drawn weapon. An officer down.

He picked up three of the four duffels and went back through the dark toward the street, the bars dragging at his arms, already composing the call, when he came out the door

and the curb where the Calix S-600 had been parked was empty.

He stood there. He looked down the street. Taillights two blocks away, red and steady, a manual machine running smooth and unhurried into the spread, just a car driving off with its trunk full of the rest of the gold and a thief at the wheel who had no idea what he was sitting on. Dolan did not run. The grid could not see that car, which meant he could not call it in, which meant it was gone the way a stone is gone when it drops into the sea. He watched the taillights until they turned and were nothing.

Then he set three of the duffels on the sidewalk where backup would find them, neat, accounted for, part of the report. The fourth he carried into the shadow and slid up under his coat against his ribs, where it sat heavy and warm as a living thing, and he keyed his collar mic and called in two felons and a downed officer in the flat voice of a man reporting weather, and waited for the sirens with a fortune against his heart and a missing car out in the dark with the rest of it.

In Steelreach the snow came off the lake every night, and Zack Reyes had stopped hearing it the way you stop hearing your own blood.

He lay on his back under the front end of a Doru runabout in the dead bay of what had been Plant Nine, a trouble light hung off the strut above him, his breath going up in slow gray rope. The plant had built cars once, real ones, manual ones, the lines running three shifts. Then the contracts went autonomous and the lines went cold and the city kept standing because nobody could afford to leave, two hundred thousand people on a frozen lake. The snow never decided to fall so much as it never decided to stop.

"You're going to freeze to that floor," Dez said from the bench. "They'll find you in spring stuck to the concrete like a dropped wrench."

"Hand me the eight." Zack put his hand out from under the car. "The eight, Dez. That's the ten."

"How do you know what I put in your hand. You can't even see it."

"Because the ten's heavier and you always give me the wrong one."

Dez Calloway laughed, that big easy laugh that came up out of him like heat off a vent, and traded the wrench, and went back to the cold-trade slate where he was working the boards. They had been doing this since they were eleven, a Jockey and a Jumper before either of them knew the road had words for what they were, two kids who grew up four doors apart and learned to drive on the only machines left running in a city of dead ones. Dez found the cars. Zack

drove them. That had been the whole shape of it for ten years.

He came out from under the runabout and wiped his hands and looked at his oldest friend, twenty-two and built like a door and afraid of nothing, hunched over a glowing slate in the cold, and for no reason he could name a thing went through Zack that he did not have a word for, a warning the body sends and the mind refuses.

"There's a runner over in Hollow Flats," Dez said. "Little nothing. A Selka two-door, no-chip, somebody's grandmother's, parked outside long enough the snow's on it. We pull it tonight, move it Thursday, eat for a month."

"In the Flats."

"In the Flats."

Zack did not love the Flats. Patrol-heavy, embankment streets, snowbanks chest-high off the plows and nowhere to run when a sled boxed you. But it was a grandmother's runabout and the boards were thin and they did need to eat, and Dez was already up off the bench pulling his coat on, grinning, alive the way he was always alive, and Zack pushed the warning down where he pushed everything.

"One more," Dez said. "One more and we're flush till the thaw."

"You always say one more."

"And we always are." Dez tossed him the keys to their own rig, the gray one, the one that was theirs. "Come on, Wire. Drive me somewhere."

The boost went clean. It always went clean, because the boost was the part Zack could do in his sleep, the door, the column, the manual start, the cold engine catching on the third turn and settling into a rough idle nobody on the autonomous grid would recognize as a heartbeat. The Selka was a sad little thing, twenty years old, more rust than paint, and it pulled away from the curb soft as a sigh with Zack at the wheel and Dez calling the streets, and for four blocks it was nothing. Thursday money. A month of eating.

Then the patrol sled came off a side street with its strobes already up, and Zack felt the whole night change pitch.

He did not decide to drive. That was the thing he had never told anyone, the thing that lived in his hands and not his head. The raptor wiring took the wheel before the conscious part of him had registered the threat, and the street ahead went slow and bright and readable, every gap between the parked sleds a door that was open or closed. He took the first corner with the back end loose and gathered it on the throttle and was already reading the second before he chose to, the wiring laying the line down ahead of him like

the road was telling him where it went. Dez shouted numbers, left here, right at the dead light, the sled's on us, the sled's on us, and Zack drove on the redline through the cold streets of his own dead city, and somewhere under the engine, faint, far down, there was a hum he had been hearing his whole life and never named, the note that rose when the machine went past where it was built to go.

But the Flats was the Flats. One sled became two became three, and they knew the embankment streets too, and they pushed him where the snowbanks ran high and the exits closed one by one. He drove harder, the wiring sharpening, the judgment fraying at the same rate, going hot, the part of him that was supposed to be afraid burning off, and Dez was laughing now, the way he laughed at everything, this is it, Wire, this is the one they tell stories about.

The lead sled rammed them in the left rear quarter on the embankment turn and the world came off its axle.

The Selka went up the snowbank and over and the gray sky and the white ground traded places once and then again, and Zack's airbag fired into his face like a fist made of air, and the last clean thing he saw before the dark took him was Dez beside him with his mouth open and no bag at all coming up to meet him, because the Selka was twenty years old and half its safety was rust.

They pulled Zack out of the wreck in cuffs.

He came back to himself sitting in the dirty snow with his hands fastened behind him and the strobes going blue and red across the embankment, patrol officers everywhere, the Selka on its roof against the wall with the driver door peeled open where they had cut him out, and through it he could see Dez still in the passenger seat. Still in it. Not moving. Held there by the belt and the angle, his face turned toward the empty driver seat, like he was about to say one more, Wire, about to laugh.

Zack did not make a sound. That was the part the officers remembered and put in the report. The kid did not make a sound. He sat in the snow in the cuffs and looked at his brother through the cut open door and something in him simply closed, the way a door closes in an empty house, and he decided in that moment that he was done. Done with the wheel. Done with the thing in his hands that had been the best part of him and had just killed the only family he had. He would do his time and never touch a manual machine again, and the road could have everyone else, but not him, not after this.

They gave him nine months. He counted the days.

The detention block was an NAF private contract on the dead edge of Steelreach, a cold gray box, and Zack had been in it eleven weeks when the man came to see him.

They brought him to a room with a table and two chairs, and the man was already there, fortyish, easy in his body, a Monitor Central field jacket open over a soft middle, a cup of real coffee in front of him and another across the table that was, Zack understood, for him.

"Sit down, son," the man said. "It's good coffee. They give the real stuff to officers and they never finish it, so I bring it down. Sit."

Zack sat. He did not touch the coffee.

"Chris Dolan," the man said, and put a warm hand across the table, and when Zack did not take it he let it fold back, no offense in it, a man used to being patient with people who had reason not to trust a badge. "I work out of Lost Angeles. I read your file on the way up. Zack Reyes. They call you Wire. Repurposed raptor-stock out of a courier template that doesn't exist anymore, which is a polite way of saying nobody's coming to claim you. And they tell me you are the best manual hand anyone up here has ever put behind a wheel."

"I'm done driving," Zack said.

"I know you are." Dolan's voice went soft and kind, and it was, Zack would think later, the most frightening kindness he had ever heard. "I read about your friend. Dez. I'm sorry. I mean that. I lost a partner not too long ago myself, down in the spread, and I'll tell you, son, there is no clock on it. People say it gets easier. It doesn't. It gets quieter."

Zack said nothing.

"My partner got killed by car thieves," Dolan said, and the lie came out of him as smooth and warm as the coffee, no tell in it anywhere, because the man who killed the partner was sitting in the chair telling the story. "Good kid. Younger than you. There's a ring down in Lost Angeles running boosts out of the spread, organized, ugly, moving real machines to real money, and they put my partner in the ground, and the people I work for can't touch them, because the law down there is built to watch a grid and these people drive ghosts. You understand ghosts. You drive one."

"What do you want."

"I want justice for my partner," Dolan said. "And I want to give you a way out of this room. Here's the shape of it. You come to Lost Angeles. You go inside that ring, quiet, as a driver, because a driver is the one thing they always want and the one thing I can't grow. You help me put them down. And when it's done, you walk out with a clean record and a clean registry and a whole life, son, a real one, no detention, no flag, nothing. Nine months becomes nothing. You did

wrong up here and I am offering to make it like it never was."

It was a door. Zack looked at it the way a man underwater looks at light. He did not want it. He wanted to do his nine months and walk out a man who had paid and quit, and the idea of a wheel turned his stomach, because the last time he was behind one Dez had stopped laughing.

"I got my friend killed driving," Zack said. "I don't drive anymore. I'll do my time."

"You could," Dolan said, gentle. "Nine months. And then a flag on your registry for the rest of your life that says boost felon, which in this Federation, son, follows you into every room you try to walk into. Or." He spread his hands. "A clean life. For one job. For helping me give a dead kid some justice."

And the thing was, Zack was twenty years old, and the box was cold, and a clean record was a future, and the part of him that had closed the door in the snow whispered that maybe this was the first step on a straight road, that you did one last thing in the dark to walk out into the light. He would tell himself that for a long time.

"All right," Zack said.

"Good." Dolan smiled, a warm one, and stood and gathered his slate. "You won't regret it."

"What do I sign," Zack said. "There's paper, right. A lawyer, something on file. So it's real."

Dolan paused at the door with his coffee in his hand and looked back, and something passed behind the amiable eyes, something flat and procedural, gone again before Zack could be sure he had seen it.

"That's not necessary," Dolan said. "Paper just gives them something to find. This stays between us, son, that's how it protects you. No file, no flag, no trail. You and me." He smiled again. "That's better. You'll see."

The cell door opened a little later onto a future that did not exist, and Zack stepped through it, and he did not look too closely at the wrongness, because looking too closely meant going back to the cold box and the nine months and the flag. A man who only wants out will walk through a great many open doors without checking what is on the far side.

#### THE HOG

**L**ost Angeles came up under the transport like a wound that had healed wrong.

Zack watched it through the cabin port on the way down, twelve million people sprawled across a basin the ocean had walked into and the quake had flattened and the drought had cooked, the coast held back behind the seawall, the eastern spread crumbled into the Raze where the ground had dropped in forty-one, the arcology core rising clean and lit in

the middle and the outer districts running brown around it. He had never seen so much of anything. And over all of it the traffic moved like water, every machine on every road driving itself, a city flowing in silent agreement because that size only worked if the cars never fought. Zack understood, in his hands before his head, that one manual machine moving through all that was a wild animal walking through a turnstile, invisible because it was never built into the count. On the cabin feeds they ran the Raid Race, the legal version, the boost cleaned up and sold. He watched a Jockey take an apex to a roar of applause and thought about Dez, who would have laughed at how slow it was, and turned the feed off.

His apartment was in Barricadia, a stacked outer-district hive on the broken edge of the spread, one room with a window that looked at another window and a manual runner parked in the front room because there was nowhere else to put it and nobody on the grid would log it anyway. Dolan had left it. A beat-up two-door, no-chip, the kind of thing a man could drive a thousand miles and never appear on a map. A thin envelope of hard chits on the counter, an address for a day job, a line of handwriting that said settle in, I'll find you, and no name. Zack stood with his one bag and felt the size of the city pressing in on the one window.

The day job was at the Hog, and the ride there told him what the city thought he was.

He took the runner out at the bottom of the autonomous flow, a manual machine threading a river of self-driving sleds that gave him a wide berth they could not have explained. Then a low rice-burner came up on his flank with three more behind it, flicker-paint and aftermarket whine, a Yakotai-Chen street arm, and they boxed him for sport and ran him up onto the shoulder against a sound wall and held him there before peeling off and letting him go. A welcome. The spread telling the new animal where it stood.

He got to the Hog with his jaw tight and his hands very still.

The Hog was an install-and-alarm geario shop in a Barricadia strip, and out front was the mascot, a gene-mod boar, a real one, squat and tusked and penned and mean, a Boar-stock thing somebody had built for muscle and lost at cards, snorting at the chain-link. The woman who ran the place was Trixie, fifties, leather-handed, a cigarette going that the filter month had made illegal and she smoked anyway, and she looked Zack up and down and knew exactly what he was before he said a word.

"You're the one Dolan sent," she said. It was not a question, and she said the name low, automatically, the way

you say a thing you are not supposed to say out loud, and that was the first crack Zack saw, though he did not understand yet what he was looking at. Trixie was the leash on the leash, Dolan's snitch in Barricadia, and Zack had been parked in her shop so the cop would always know where to find him.

"I do installs," Zack said.

"You do whatever I tell you," Trixie said, not unkindly, and pointed him at the back bay, where a flicker-paint lowrider sat on the lift like a jewel.

It was Cubo's lowrider, and Cubo was a name even Zack knew, a Barricadia music-scene icon whose sled was famous on the surface streets, candy-deep flicker-paint and hydraulics that could make the thing dance, and Zack spent the morning lying half inside it running sound, and it was, he realized in the second hour, the first thing he had enjoyed since the snow. His hands knew this. Not driving, just the machine. He could do this for nine months and walk out clean and never touch a wheel.

Dolan came in a little before noon.

He came in easy, amiable, a man dropping by, leaned on the fender of Cubo's lowrider and made small talk with

Trixie, and only after a while drifted back to where Zack was working and crouched with a smile like he had good news.

"Settling in," Dolan said.

"It's fine."

"Good." Dolan looked around the bay and lowered his voice. "I've got something for you. Tonight. There's a Faraldo coupe sitting at a restaurant up in the Glass Forest, a real exotic, and the word I have is the ring is going to move on it tonight. That's our way in. You go up, you put your hands on that car before they do, you boost it, and you let them find you doing it. A driver that good walks himself right into the middle of them. That's how you get inside."

Zack looked at him. A small cold part the snow had made noticed the shape of the thing. "How do you know they're moving on it tonight."

Something flickered in Dolan, gone fast. "I'm a cop," he said, warm. "Knowing is the job. You let me worry about the how, son. You just drive."

And there it was again, the open door, the first step on the straight road, and Zack looked at it and away from it and said the word he kept saying.

"All right."

The Glass Forest at night was a forest of light, towers of living glass and Feed-media money on the good side of the spread, where the people who turned the boost into entertainment lived above the thing they sold, and Zack drove his rust-bucket runner up into it like a stain on a clean floor. The restaurant was the High Top, sixty floors up, a forecourt of impossible machines, and he parked two blocks down and walked up to case it on foot the way Dez had taught him, slow, bored-looking, a man with somewhere to be.

The Faraldo was there. Mid-engine, low, a deep arterial red, the kind of exotic that cost more than Barricadia made in a year, staged at the near edge of the forecourt the way they always put the best one out front. Zack walked it once, reading it. He was looking for the ring, the crew Dolan said would move tonight, and he did not find them. He found rich kids. Beautiful augmented children spilling out of the High Top in the small hours, laughing, lit, a knot of them by the Faraldo itself, and one of them, a lean baseline kid with too-good performance mods and a laugh that never quite landed on the ground, looked straight through Zack, the way the rich never saw help.

Zack did not know that face. He had no way to know the same kid had pulled a Calix S-600 off a curb in Little Odessa

for the thrill of it months ago, with a fortune in the trunk he never opened. He only saw a rich boy by a car. The boy moved off with his friends toward the doors, and the forecourt thinned, and the valet went inside to fetch somebody's machine, and for thirty seconds the Faraldo sat alone.

Zack went for it.

The door was unlocked because nobody in the Glass Forest locked anything, and he slid into the driver seat low and fast and had his hands under the column before the door had closed, and at that instant the passenger door opened and a body dropped in beside him, and the two of them froze, face to face, in a stolen car neither had meant to share.

It was the lean kid, the one who had looked through him. Up close he was Zack's age, grinning already, the grin only getting wider when he saw Zack's hands under the column.

"You have got to be kidding me," the kid said. "This is my car. I called this car. I have been watching it all night."

"Get out," Zack said.

"You get out. I was here first."

"You were not in the car first."

"I was in the parking lot first, which counts."

"It does not count."

"Everything counts," the kid said, delighted, like this was the best thing that had happened to him all year, and maybe it was. "Who even are you. I know everybody who boosts up

here and I do not know you. You smell like the surface." He leaned in, electric, a person who had never once paid for anything and had come to steal a car he could buy because the buying did nothing for him. "Tell you what. We argue later. Right now you want your hands moving, because the valet just made us through the glass, and in about four seconds this whole forecourt is going to start screaming."

The valet's alarm went up, a hard rising wail, and the High Top's security lit, and the kid in the passenger seat looked at Zack with shining eyes and said, "So. Can you actually drive this, surface, or do you just sit in them."

And the raptor wiring, which had been quiet since the snow, which Zack had walled away and promised the dead, woke all the way up.

He fired the Faraldo and dropped it off the forecourt before the security sled had cleared its stall, and the city came alive around him the way it had not since the Flats, and over Glass Forest the first Monitor Central drone unfolded out of its perch and dropped its shadow across the road.

"Drone, eleven o'clock high," the kid said, all the play gone out of his voice now, a scanner up out of his jacket Zack had not seen him draw. "It's got us flagged. Unregistered manual signature, the grid sees a hole in the count. It's going

to vector and call friends. You drive, I'll read it. Left at the spine, the spine has overhang, get us under structure."

Zack did not answer. There was no room in him for it. The wiring had the wheel and the road, and he took the Faraldo down off the Glass Forest spine in a long howling descent, threading the autonomous flow that flinched and parted around him, and he read each gap before he chose it, take the apex, run the line, send it. The kid called the drone and Zack drove the calls, the two of them snapping into a single machine, the rich boy's eyes in the sky, the surface boy's hands on the road.

"It's losing us under the overhang but it's calling a net, second one coming up the seawall side, do not go seawall," the kid said, and Zack was already not going seawall, already turning into the Musk Tunnels before the words landed, the wiring ahead of the talk, and the kid laughed. "Okay. Okay, surface. You can actually drive."

And under the engine, far down, in the place Zack had never told a soul about, the hum rose. The note that came when the machine went past where it was built to go. It rode under the howl of the Faraldo and bloomed in his chest, the thing in his cells the road woke, and he went hot, the fear burning off, and for the first time since the snow he was somewhere that did not hurt. He never named it. He drove on it.

"There," the kid said, and pointed, and ahead in the mouth of a Barricadia service alley a delivery truck sat with its rear ramp down and its cargo door open like a throat, dark inside, waiting, and Zack understood that this was the catch, exactly as Dolan had promised, and he had a half-second to decide if it was the trap he wanted.

He drove into it. He put the Faraldo straight up the ramp and into the dark at speed and stood on the brakes and the car shrieked to a stop inside the cargo box, and behind them the ramp came up and the door came down and sealed them into black, and a breath later Zack heard it through the truck wall, the rising scream of two Monitor Central drones passing overhead, hunting a ghost that had simply stopped existing.

In the dark of the truck, the kid was breathing hard and laughing.

"That," the kid said, "was the most fun I have had in my entire life, and I want you to know I have had a lot of fun."

The cargo lights came up amber and a man was sitting on a crate at the front of the box.

He was thirties, dry, neat, a working man's stillness about him, and he had been there the whole time, riding in the dark with them. He looked at the Faraldo steaming inside his

truck and at the two young men in it and did not raise his voice.

"Palmer," the kid said, climbing out of the Faraldo loose and easy. "Palmer, did you see that. Did you see the descent off the spine. I found him at the High Top, he was already in the car, I have never seen hands like that in my life." He turned and grinned back at Zack, no edge to it at all, just open delight, the thing that would turn out to be Jason Cavanaugh's whole soul. "I'm Jason. You should probably tell me your name now. We're partners. We just survived a thing together, those are the rules."

"Zack," Zack said, getting out slow, reading the man on the crate and the exits there were none of.

"Zack." Palmer said it like he was filing it. He looked Zack over the way everyone in this city looked at him, weighing the animal, but with something underneath the others had not had, like he had been sent to find exactly this. "You drove that off the spine through a two-drone net into the back of this truck on your first night in my city. Jason's right. I have not seen hands like that."

He got down to it without ceremony.

"I'll make you an offer, and I'd like you to hear the whole thing, because it's a real one. We run a special operation. We take sleds, the good ones, the un-networked ones, the grid ghosts, and we do not strip them. That's the part nobody believes. Everybody thinks a boost ring chops a car for parts.

We keep them whole. Every machine on the list comes out the far side exactly as it went in, because we are gathering a collection." He nodded at the Faraldo. "Two dozen of them. The best the spread has. A patron wants them, a serious patron, a man with bloc money, and when the list is full they all go out together to a Low Coast launch and up and gone, off the planet near enough. Tribute. A man who collects things, having his collection delivered."

"And you need drivers," Zack said.

"We need drivers who can take a ghost off the street clean and put it in this truck without ever showing up on Monitor Central's count. There are maybe four people in the spread who can do that. You walked into my truck on your first night doing it for fun." Palmer almost smiled. "We pay in hard chits. The work is steady until the list is full, then it is over and everyone walks away rich and quiet. That's the whole shape of it. There's no more to know."

There was, Zack thought distantly, a great deal more to know. He did not know about the gold or the Zero, did not know that one of the ghosts on the list was a Calix S-600 with a fortune sealed in the trunk, did not know that the man who sent him here had killed for it and would kill again. He knew only that this was the inside Dolan had pointed him at, and the road ran through it.

"All right," Zack said.

The truck let them out a half-mile from the Glass Forest on a dark Barricadia corner and pulled away with the Faraldo in its belly, and Zack and Jason stood on the empty street as the engine note faded, and above them a single Monitor Central drone swept a long white searchlight across a rooftop, crawling the night for a car that no longer touched any road.

Jason watched the beam with his head back, hands in his pockets, like a man watching weather.

"They'll sweep all night," he said. "They hate it when they lose one. It's the only time the grid ever feels anything." He looked sideways at Zack and the grin came back, warmer now, without the show. "You should come up to my place. Pool house nobody uses, the good nectar, a garage you would not believe. I've got a feeling you and me are going to be doing a lot of this, and I'd rather know the guy I'm doing it with. You hungry. You look hungry. Surface guys are always hungry." He was already walking, pulling Zack along the way he pulled everything. "Come on, Zack. Come see how the other half steals."

Zack stood a moment under the searchlight and looked at the back of this rich boy he had met an hour ago, who had decided in the back of a truck that they were partners and meant it the way a child means it, without a single angle

under it. And he felt, against the whole dark machine he was inside now, the cop and the ring and the leash and the lie, a small warm thing he had not felt since a dead car plant on a frozen lake, since the only other person who ever laughed beside him in a stolen machine. It frightened him more than the dark machine did, because it was real and everything else was a con, and he had just agreed to spend the realest thing he had left on people using him.

He did not look at the wrongness. He was getting good at not looking. A man who only wants out will walk a long way down a dark road on the strength of one open door and the first friend he has made since the snow.

"Yeah," Zack said. "All right. I'm hungry."

And he followed Jason Cavanaugh up off the corner and into the rest of it, the searchlight crawling the rooftops behind them, the leash invisible around his neck, the hum still faint under everything, a note the whole city was holding and only he could hear.

## PART TWO — THE FIRST TRIALS

THE GOOD LIFE

**T**he gate read Zack's runner before Zack saw the gate, and that was the first thing Glass Forest told him, that it had already decided what he was. A soft chime, a pause, a camera arm tracking down off a coral tree to taste his plate and his face and the no-chip wrongness of both, and the brushed-steel slab pulling back into the wall like it had better places to be. Jason's voice came off the dash speaker, where he had patched himself in two nights ago without asking.

"Don't slow down at the gate," Jason said. "They love it when you slow down. It confirms everything. Everybody up here is faking it, Wire. You just fake it worse, which reads as confidence."

Zack took the drive at the redline of what the runner had, which was not much, up under the coral trees and a lawn that drank more in a filter month than Barricadia drank in a year. The house when it came was glass, all of it, four stories stacked and cantilevered over a canyon kept cool and damp by something humming under the ground. There were nine

cars in the open garage and not one of them needed a driver. They needed an audience.

He parked the runner crooked across two slots, on purpose, because Jason had told him to, and Jason was already coming across the white stone with two cold bottles and a grin that had never once been billed for anything.

"Welcome to the worst place on Earth," Jason said, and handed him a beer. "You're going to love it."

The pool house was bigger than the Hog. Jason lived in it the way a kid lives in a fort, which was the thing Zack could not get over, that a man could own the whole glass mansion up the hill and a slice of the Feed constellation that beamed the Raid Race into ninety million homes, and choose to sleep out here surrounded by racing sleds he could have bought with the change in his account.

"You could buy any car you wanted," Zack said. He was on the long couch with his boots off, which he had not meant to do, the good life getting into him through the soles of his feet. "New. Legal. Off a lot, with the paper and a guy in a nice shirt shaking your hand. So why boost."

Jason was at the wall, swapping a charge cell on a stripped manual sled, the work quick and clean and bored. He did not turn around. "Because the second the guy in the

nice shirt hands you the keys it's over. It's just a thing you have now." He snapped the cowl, wiped his hands. "When you take it, you're awake. For about ninety seconds you are completely awake, and you cannot get that any other way. I've tried every other way. There is no other way."

Zack drank. He thought about the snow and Dez and the airbag that worked and the one that did not, and he thought, I would give every one of those ninety seconds back, every one, and he did not say it, because Jason was the first person since Dez who had looked at him like he was worth talking to, and you did not put a wound on the table on the first good night.

"I steal to get out," Zack said instead. Quiet. Plain. The way he always said it. "One score and out. That's the whole plan. There's never been another part of it."

Jason looked at him then, across the pool light coming up through the water and onto the glass ceiling in long blue ropes. Something went over his face that Zack did not have a name for yet, that he would only learn much later, when it was too late to do anything about it.

"Out," Jason said, like it was a word in a language he had heard of and never been to. "Yeah. Okay." And then the grin came back, because the grin always came back. "Drink your beer. We've got a thing in the morning."

The thing in the morning was the runner, which Emily Cavanaugh backed her sled into at nine-forty in the circular drive while Zack was crouched at the front wheel checking a tie rod the cobbles had not been kind to.

He heard the sled before the crunch, a low expensive whine of a machine that drove itself and had never once been told no, and then the crunch, fender into fender, his ancient steel folding against her unmarked composite, and a voice said, "Oh no," with absolutely no fear in it at all.

Zack stood up. The girl had her window down and a hand over her mouth and her eyes were laughing over the top of it, nineteen and bright and already bored of the apology she was about to give, dark hair shoved back off a face that looked too awake for Glass Forest, the way Jason looked too awake, the family resemblance landing all at once.

"That was completely my fault," Emily said, "and I'm not going to do anything about it, because the car has a thing that's supposed to stop it doing exactly this, and it didn't, and now I get to tell my father his hundred-thousand-chit autopilot lost a fight to a, what is that."

"A runner. It's manual." Zack put a hand flat on his own dented fender. "I drive it. There's no autopilot to lose. That's the whole point of it."

She went still for a second. Up on the pool-house balcony two of her friends had come out, Glass Forest girls in robes with drinks at ten in the morning, and one of them called down, "Em, is that the help," and the other one laughed, and Emily did not laugh.

"No," Emily said, not looking up at them. She was looking at Zack. "He's not the help." She put the sled in park with a hand, an actual hand, a thing those girls had probably never done. "Get in. I owe you a ride. The thing won't let me drive but it'll let me tell it where to go, the most freedom I get all week, so come be in my expensive prison and tell me about a car you steer with your hands."

Behind Zack, up at the glass, Jason had come out onto the high deck with a coffee, and he watched his sister pop the passenger door for the no-chip kid, and watched the kid stand there a second too long deciding, and watched him get in. Jason did not drink the coffee. He held it and watched the sled pull out under the coral trees with the two of them in it, and the thing that went over his face this time, nobody saw, because there was nobody up there to see it.

Dolan was in Zack's apartment when Zack got back to Barricadia that night, sitting in the one good chair in the dark with the night allocation off and the city's brown haze

coming through the window and a takeout box open on his knee that he had bought with Zack's money, from the looks of the receipt folded on the table.

"You're getting in late," Dolan said. Pleasant. He always sounded pleasant. The amiable Monitor Central man the outer districts almost trusted, sitting in a stranger's dark and eating his food and never once raising his voice. "Late is good. Late means you're inside."

"I'm inside." Zack stayed by the door. "Cavanaugh's running me up into the ring. The lieutenant's already used me on a lift. It's working."

"I know it's working. I watch." Dolan set the box down. "I came to tell you the next part. There's one car. When you find it and put it in my hand, your record comes back clean and you walk and we never talk again, which I think we both want." He smiled. It was a good smile. That was the worst thing about it. "A Calix S-600. Pre-Upheaval saloon, armored, no transponder, grid won't see it. Somebody in that ring has it or is about to. You bring me that. Just that."

"What's in it."

"Nothing's in it." Easy. Flat. The voice he would use to log a parking violation. "It's a car. It's evidence. You don't need to know more than the make and the model, and now you do, so we're square." He stood and put a hand on Zack's shoulder on the way to the door, warm, fatherly, and Zack

felt the whole weight of the leash in that one warm hand. "Everything else you're doing up there is just cover. The S-600 is the job. The S-600 is the door. Get some sleep. You look like the life's already getting to you."

He let himself out. Zack stood in the dark a long time and did not turn the allocation on.

Dominion Villas put its beach club on the last clean sand the seawall had spared, a long deck of bleached wood and cabanas over water that was the wrong color and nobody mentioned, and the Cavanaughs had a cabana the size of a Barricadia flat with their name on a brass plate that the salt kept eating and the staff kept polishing.

Jason's parents were the kind of rich that performed leisure like a job. The father had a Feed-host's gloss and a handshake he gave Zack while looking at someone else. The mother asked what his people did and Zack said cars and she said how wonderful and meant nothing by it at all, and the only thing either of them said that Zack kept was the father pointing a glass at the lot and telling a man beside him, "No, the Sovereign stays under glass. I don't care what they're offering. That car does not leave the family."

The Sovereign sat in a roped slot at the head of the club lot, a long low convertible the color of old wine, hand-built,

un-networked, the one machine the boy of the family had sworn off. Jason walked Zack past it and did not slow down and did not look at it, which told Zack more than slowing down would have.

"My dad's car," Jason said. "Don't."

"I wasn't."

"Everybody is, the second they see it. Don't." And that was all, and it sat between them like a stone, and Zack let it.

The man at the bar was watching them. Zack felt it the way the raptor wiring felt everything, a weight at the edge of the deck, and when he turned the man lifted a glass an inch, just at Jason, an easy hello.

"Soren," Jason said, and his voice dropped half a register, the bored gloss going careful. "Come meet a friend of mine."

Soren Vale was fifties and unhurried and dressed like money that did not need to announce itself. He shook Zack's hand the way a reasonable man would, firm and brief, and he had the calmest eyes Zack had ever looked into, calm all the way down, no bottom to them you could find.

"You're the one Palmer's been talking about," Vale said. Not a question. "The manual hand. He says you drove the Faraldo out of a Monitor Central net like the drones were standing still. That's rare. Maybe four hands in this spread could do what you did, and three of them work for me, and now I think four do." A small tilt of the head. "Jason found you. Jason has a gift for it. I found Jason at this very bar, two

years ago, this stool. A rich boy who had everything and wanted nothing, and I thought, there's a man who'll do the only honest thing left, which is do it for free."

He said it without weight, like a pleasant fact about the weather, and that was when Zack understood what he was standing in front of, because nothing Vale said had any edge on it and every word of it cut.

"Good to meet you, Zack," Vale said, and meant it, which was the worst part, and went back to his drink.

Later there was a hot tub and beers gone warm and the sun going down dirty orange over the wrong-colored water, and Emily on the far side of a glass wall in the club lounge, laughing at something, free for a second the way she was almost never free, and Zack watching her through the glass and not pretending he wasn't.

Jason settled into the water next to him and followed his eyes and did not pretend either.

"No," Jason said.

"I didn't say anything."

"You don't have to. The whole deck can hear it." He kept his voice light, which was how Zack knew it was not light.

"She's leaving in the fall. The Lyceum, up in the Nordics, the cold prestige box my parents picked out the day she was

born. She goes, she comes back somebody. That's her one shot at a life that isn't this." He nodded at the cabanas, the brass plate, the whole gilded weight of it. "She does not need a distraction. She especially does not need one with no chip and a record and a cop somewhere holding his leash."

"You don't know about a cop."

"I know about you. There's something behind you, Wire, everybody up here's got something behind them, I don't care what yours is." He turned and looked at Zack straight, and for one second all the gloss was gone and there was just the man under it, and the man was asking him for something. "She's the one good thing my family ever made. Leave her alone. Do that for me."

Zack looked at Emily through the glass. She caught him looking and she did not look away, and she smiled, slow, just for him, the way nobody up here smiled at the help.

"Yeah," Zack said. "Okay."

It was the first lie he ever told Jason, and they both heard it land.

The Toro sat under house lights in the third bay of an exotic dealership off the Ring Road, a low predatory thing with the showroom polish still on it, and the plan was clean until it wasn't.

They went in through the service court the way Jason had cased it, past a guard cage that was supposed to be empty on a filter-month night and was not. Zack was already in the Toro, already had it awake under his hands the way he woke any machine, when the cage light came on and a voice said hey and a shutter started coming down across the service exit, the only way out he had.

"Shutter," Zack said into the dark, calm, the calm that came down over him when it went bad. "My exit's closing."

"I see it." Jason's voice from somewhere up by the cars. "Go the other way."

"There is no other way. It's a showroom. It's glass and a closing door and me."

A beat. A long one. Long enough that Zack thought, he's gone, of course he's gone, why would he stay, this is a man who steals for fun and fun is over. And then there were running feet, and Jason came across the showroom floor at a dead sprint with a security man two strides behind him and gaining, and he did not run for the open service door he could have made. He ran for the Toro.

"Move over," Jason said, hauling the passenger door, falling in. "No. Don't move over, drive, drive, I'm in, go."

The shutter was three feet off the ground and dropping. Zack did not take it. He took the showroom. He put the Toro hard left across the polished floor, the raptor wiring laying the interior out before he chose it, the angles, the gaps, the

long glass front wall with one display window already cracked from some old quake the dealership had never bothered to fix.

"That window," Zack said.

"That's a window."

"It's already broken. It wants to go."

"Wire, that's a wall of glass."

He sent it. The Toro came off the showroom floor through the cracked display and the whole front of the dealership went to light and noise, and for one half-second in the breaking glass the engine note dropped under itself and Zack felt the thing he never told anyone about, the hum, low and warm and wrong, coming up through the wheel like the car was about to tell him something, and then they were in the street and the night allocation lights were strobing off the wet road and the hum was gone and there was just the drive.

Jason was laughing. Of course he was laughing. He had glass in his hair and he was laughing like a man baptized.

"You came back," Zack said, taking the Toro down a service ramp into the dark of the Musk Tunnels where no drone would follow. His hands were steady. His voice was not, quite. "The door was open. You could've made it."

"And left you in a glass box." Jason wiped blood off his ear, looked at it, grinned. "You're my hand. I don't lose my hand in a showroom." He put his head back and closed his

eyes and was, for ninety seconds, completely awake. "Tell me that wasn't good."

Zack drove. The tunnel ran black and empty around the one stolen machine, the grid blind to them, the city above sorting its obedient traffic into rivers it could see.

"That was good," he said, and hated how much he meant it.

After that there was a stretch where the good life ran at full burn and Zack stopped counting the days.

They lifted a Halcyon off a yacht-club valet and a pair of matched racing sleds out of a Center Point tower and a flicker-paint custom some EO money had parked where it should not have, and every one went into Palmer's truck and came back as a stack of hard chits, the clean kind, the kind that did not ask to see Zack's genome. He paid off the runner's repairs. He bought new boots and threw the old ones out and got them back out of the bin because the new ones felt like a costume. They nightclubbed in places that had a door and a list and Jason's name on it, and Zack learned you could buy a night where nobody knew what you were, and that he liked it, and that liking it was the trap closing, and he kept doing it anyway.

One night near the end of that stretch he stood on a club roof over the spread with a drink he had not paid for and the whole lit grid running below him, the obedient rivers of traffic, the Raid Race on a hundred screens, and Jason behind him telling a story to people who would forget him by morning, and Zack thought, clear and cold under the warm, the straight road. He could not see it anymore. The one clean score and out, the plan with no other part to it, was down there in the dark behind the lights, and the worst thing was he had not been looking.

He found it again on his way out, in the parking lot, when a girl in a sled with no autopilot smiled at him through the glass, and he understood that the straight road and Emily Cavanaugh had become the same road, and he had no idea where it went.

#### MULHOLLAND

**V**ale's estate sat above the Low Coast on the last cliff the surge had spared, and the sea came up out of the dark at the foot of it. He took the meeting on the terrace. The Bear-stock men stood at the edges of the light, enormous and patient and built to break a thing the size of a door, EO muscle on loan from Sorokin, and Vale did not look

at them because a man did not look at his own furniture. He looked at the list on the glass, two dozen machines, most struck through now, and at the one line near the bottom that was not.

"The Sovereign," the man across from him said. Sorokin's man, soft-spoken, a courier of wants. "Arkady would like the Sovereign confirmed. He has been patient about it."

"It's confirmed." Vale turned the glass face down, a small courtesy, the way you would close a book in front of someone who could not read. "Sentiment makes it slow. But it ships with the rest, and your patron gets his whole set." He let the quiet sit, the silence between his sentences where he kept everything. "Tell Arkady the collection completes on schedule. Every car he asked for."

"And the other matter."

"There is no other matter." Vale smiled, easy, calm all the way down. "There were only ever the cars."

The soft-spoken man left, and Vale stood alone on his terrace over the sea with a list of someone else's machines and a vault under the cliff full of someone else's gold, and felt, as he always felt, entirely justified.

Dolan was in the dark below the terrace wall, where the cliff path came up from the service road, and he watched the soft-

spoken man go and the boss go back inside. He was not supposed to be there at all.

He had followed a truck. That was all the work he ever did anymore, follow the trucks, build the map of where the boss kept the things he kept, because the kid was slow and enjoying himself up in Glass Forest, and a man could not wait forever on a kid who had started to like the life. A truck had come up the service road two nights running and parked in a sea cave the cliff house used for a garage, and the second night Dolan went down into it on foot when the driver went up for coffee, flat against the wet rock, the procedural calm coming down the way it had come down in Little Odessa with the gun warm in his hand.

There were duffels on the back seat of a sled in the cave. The little kind. The mini duffels, the same shape, the exact same shape, and Dolan's whole body knew it before his mind would say it, and he put two fingers on the zipper of the nearest and drew it back an inch in the dark.

Gold.

It sat there and gave back the little light there was, soft and heavy and certain, and Dolan looked at it a long time and did not feel triumph and did not feel anything you could put on a feed. He felt the old flat thing, the thing he had felt over the duffel in Little Odessa right before he turned and shot the only honest man in his life. He felt how reasonable

it would be to take one. He felt disgust too, clean and surprising, not at the gold and not at himself but at the kid, at Zack, deep in the good life laughing on club roofs while the door stood open right here. The kid was supposed to find this. The kid was up in Glass Forest learning to like champagne.

Dolan zipped the duffel shut. He did not take one. He was not a thief. He told himself that, flat, the way he logged a violation, and went back up the wet rock, and the only thing standing between Zack and the truth was Zack having too good a time to look.

The party filled the top floor of a Glass Forest tower and spilled onto a deck over the canyon, and Jason came through it like weather, and Zack followed him because following Jason had become a thing his body did.

"You have to see this," Jason kept saying, pulling him past people who wanted Jason and would not get him, "downstairs, you have to see this," and downstairs under the party was a garage, and the garage was a church.

Vintage racing sleds, twenty of them, more, the old manual machines from before the grid swallowed driving, kept by men with too much money and no nerve to use them, polished and roped and dead. Jason walked into the middle

of them with his arms out from his sides like a man walking into surf.

"They never drive them. Not one of these has been past forty in a decade. They buy them and put them under glass and let them die. And tonight there's a race, Wire. The real one. The one that isn't on a feed. Glass Forest to the seawall, every faction, the whole spread shows up for it once a year." He put a hand on the cowl of a low old silver thing that looked like it had teeth. "And we are going to take two of these dead cars and make them scream."

"These aren't ours to take."

"Nothing's ours to take. That's the whole sport." Jason was already in the silver one, finding the manual start, the only-awake of him coming on like the pool light. "Take the red one, it's got the better block, and follow me and do not lose me, because I have wanted to do this since I was nine years old."

Zack took the red one. It woke under his hands old and angry and glad, and he thought, one race, and then I find the cop's car and I am gone, and he did not believe the second part, and he went up the ramp into the night behind Jason with the canyon falling away below, and somewhere out ahead the spread lit up for the only race that had no cameras on it at all.

The start was a length of cracked overpass above the Ring Road, and the whole street had come.

Zack read them the way the raptor wiring read everything, without permission. Vale's people in a cluster of dark sleds, watching, not racing, a man does not race his own road. Sorokin's muscle in two heavy EO machines built for breaking, here for reasons that had nothing to do with the sport. The Barricadia lowrider crews in their flicker-paint. A Yakotai-Chen arm of the Asian Pact, low and silent. The Raze rubble-runners on machines made of three other machines, here to win it through the broken country no clean sled could take. Every faction in the spread on one cracked length of road, and a girl at the rail of a chase sled who should not have been there, and Zack saw her before Jason did and his stomach dropped, Emily, of course Emily, come to watch her brother do the thing their parents would die over.

Then the light dropped and there was no more reading anything.

The race was not a race. It was a war that happened to move in one direction.

They took the Ring Road at speeds it had been built to forbid, forty machines packed into four obedient lanes meant for cars that asked permission, the autonomous traffic peeling away in slow confused arcs as the pack tore through it like a knife through sleepwalkers. Zack drove inside the red car the way he drove inside everything now, the corners coming to him before he chose them, and ahead of him the silver car was Jason, weaving, brilliant, insane, taking gaps that were not gaps, and Zack's whole skill went to the one job of not losing him.

A rubble-runner went over the side at the first big sweeper, kissing the barrier wrong and going up and over into the canyon, and then a bloom of fire down there that the pack did not slow for, because slowing was how you joined them.

"Stay with me," Jason's voice in his ear, on the cheap comm they'd grabbed, joy and nothing else. "Here's the part nobody knows. Follow me off. Follow me off the road."

"Off the road where."

"Here."

And Jason took the silver car off the lit overpass and down an embankment into the Raze, into the flattened east, into the broken country, and Zack went after him because not losing him was the only plan he had left.

The shortcut nearly killed them both, which Zack understood, somewhere in it, was the entire point.

There was no road. There was the memory of road, slabs of old freeway tilted up out of the rubble, rebar like the ribs of dead animals, drops you could not see until the headlights found the far side, and Jason took all of it flat out, laughing, putting the silver car off ledges on faith, and the red car screamed and bottomed and held, and Zack's hands were everywhere at once, his whole spec drift wide open, the judgment going to nothing and the reflexes to everything, the body running outside its design envelope and loving it and being eaten by it in the same breath.

"You're going to kill us," Zack shouted into the comm, taking a drop blind, the red car going light at the top of it and slamming down hard enough to empty his lungs.

"Maybe." Jason's voice, far ahead, delighted. "Isn't it good. I've watched you, Wire, you go somewhere when you drive. I want to go there too. Drive."

And under the noise and the slamming and the fear, low, the hum came up through the wheel again, warm and wrong and certain, the engine note dropping under itself, the thing with no warranty and no word, and for a sick stretched second Zack was somewhere else, somewhere the rubble and the redline and the fear all went quiet and there was only the

note, and then the red car came down into the open and the seawall lit up ahead and the note was gone.

They came out of the Raze a hundred yards behind the leaders and Zack drove those hundred yards back in the kind of driving that does not have a name, the wiring all the way open, the red car threaded through the last of the pack one impossible gap at a time, and they crossed the line side by side, battered, smoking, alive.

It did not matter. They were disqualified before the engines stopped ticking. A man with rubble-runner's grease on him said the shortcut was a disqualification, everybody knew it, and Jason laughed and agreed and did not care, because Jason had never once in his life cared who won, only that he had been awake.

"Ditch them," Jason said, already out of the silver car, wiping the joy off his face into something he could walk away from. "These aren't ours. We leave them and walk. Em's here, I'll find her. You go that way. Don't run, walking is the whole trick."

He went off into the crowd looking for his sister, and Zack stood by the two ruined machines with his hands still shaking from the drive, the spec drift coming down slow off its high, the judgment crawling back into a body that had not

had any for ten minutes, and he thought, that is the most dangerous man I have ever met, and I would have followed him off that overpass a second time, and that is the trap too, and he turned to walk and Dolan's hand closed on his arm.

There was a cuff on his wrist before he saw the cop's other hand.

Dolan walked him fast and quiet off the seawall into the dark between two buttresses where no one was, and he did it gently, almost kindly, the amiable Monitor Central man steering a friend out of the cold, and the cuff was the only thing that said otherwise, the cuff and the cop's face, which was not amiable now. It was anxious. Dolan was afraid of something, and a man like Dolan being afraid was worse than a man like Dolan being cruel.

"You're having a good time," Dolan said. Quiet. The sea coming up the buttress behind them. "Champagne. Club roofs. Racing rubble with a rich boy. And the car's still out there, Zack. You've boosted nine other cars this month and not one of them is the one I asked for."

"I'm getting close to the ring. You said get inside, I'm inside, these things take time."

"There's no time for these things to take." Dolan's voice did not rise. It went flatter, and the flatter it went the more

Zack's stomach dropped. "You think there's a file with your name on it that says undercover, a record getting cleaner every day. There's no file. There's no paper. I never filed any. You asked for a lawyer in that detention block and I told you that wasn't necessary and you believed me, because you wanted to, because you wanted out."

The cuff was cold on Zack's wrist. The cop's words were colder.

"Every car you've boosted this month," Dolan said, "every single one, you boosted it. Not undercover. You. There's no protection on any of it. It's all evidence against you, the plates, the times, the takes, sitting in a place with your name on it, and the day I'm done with you is the day all of it walks into a courtroom and you go back in the cage for the rest of your life with nobody to tell the truth, because there is no truth, because there was never a deal."

There was never a deal.

Zack heard it land somewhere under his ribs, flat and final, the floor he had been walking on this whole time turning out to be a thing painted on the air. He had gotten a man killed in the snow and sworn off the wheel and let this amiable man with the warm hand walk him right back to it, and there had never been a road at all, only a cop who wanted one car and a kid he could throw away when he got it.

"You're not building a case," Dolan said, gentler now, almost sorry, which was the worst register of all. "You're a thief I can put in a cage with a word, and I will, tonight, unless you understand me. I want the S-600. I don't care what it costs you. You find that car and bring it to me and maybe, maybe, I let you walk. That was always the whole arrangement."

Zack begged. He heard himself do it and could not stop it.

"One more chance," he said, the cuff still on and the cop still watching with that almost-sorry face. "I'll get you the car. I swear to God I'll get you the car, just don't put me back in, I can't go back in, I'll deliver, I will deliver, just give me the chance."

"I know you will," Dolan said, and uncuffed him, easy, the metal coming off Zack's wrist like the whole thing had been a demonstration, which it had. "A man works harder when he understands his situation." He patted Zack's arm one more time, warm, fatherly, the leash dressed up as a kindness, and walked off toward the seawall lights and left Zack alone between the buttresses with the truth.

And in the begging Zack heard the whole shape of it at last. No deal. No case. No justice. He was a thing this man was using, a disposable hand pointed at one car, and the day

he delivered it was the day he stopped being useful, and a man with no use for you and a cage with your name on it was not a man who let you walk. He had known it for one cold second in that detention block, the catch he did not let himself hear, and spent every day since not looking at it, the way he had spent the good life not looking at the door, and now there was nothing left to not look at.

He stood there a long time. The sea came and went. The factions were dispersing into the spread, Vale's dark sleds already gone.

He could run. That was the first clear thought. Void his registration, go genomically stateless, vanish into the Raze, never touch a wheel again, the way he had wanted since the snow. But running was just another cage, and a man who ran from Chris Dolan ran for the rest of his life, and Zack had spent his whole life running and he was tired all the way down.

So he did the other thing. He decided to deliver. To find the S-600 and put it in the cop's hand, because the only road out he could still see ran straight through that one car, and a man trapped between a cage and a cliff takes the door even if it is on fire. The deal was a lie. Fine. He would use the lie. He

would let Dolan think the leash was working right up until the second it wasn't.

And the other thing, the thing that surprised him, that came up under the fear and the cold and stayed. He was going to keep seeing Emily. Whatever Jason said. Whatever the cop wanted. Whatever it cost, and it was going to cost, he could feel that the way he felt a corner before he took it. Because the reason to keep going had changed somewhere on that cracked overpass, somewhere in the dark of the Raze with the hum coming up through the wheel, somewhere through a sheet of glass with a girl who drove with her hands. It had stopped being the deal. It had become the door, the actual one, the one with a girl on the far side who wanted out of her gilded box as badly as he had ever wanted out of the rust.

He was not driving for the cop anymore. He had never really been. He was driving for the way out, and a man who knows what he is driving for is a more dangerous thing than a man who does not.

Zack walked back toward the lights of the seawall, where Jason was laughing with his sister by the rail, the two bright Cavanaughs lit up against the wrong-colored water, and Emily turned and saw him coming and her whole face changed, and Jason saw her face change and his did too, and the game, Zack understood, the game had just changed for everyone, and none of them but him knew it yet.

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## PART THREE — THE CRISIS AND TRANSFORMATION

GOING HOT

**H**e came up out of Glass Forest and into the spread with the windows down and Emily Cavanaugh in the passenger seat of his runner, and Zack told himself the whole way down the hill that this was a small thing, a stupid thing, a couple of hours and a bowl of noodles and back before anyone counted the minutes. He told himself that and his hands knew it was a lie. His hands had known since she opened her door and got in without asking where they were going.

The runner was a no-chip thing, a battered manual he had wired himself, and it ran rough off the line and smooth once it found its breath, and it carried them down out of the managed climate and the filtered air and into the real weather. The haze came up to meet them. Below the arcology core the spread sat under its own brown ceiling, the seawall a gray line west, the Raze flattened black to the east where the quake had taken everything, and in between the long low

burn of Barricadia, twelve million people's worth of light through the dust.

"It smells different down here," Emily said.

"It smells like food and engines."

"It smells like something's happening." She had her arm out the window, her hand riding the air the way a kid would.

"Up there nothing ever happens. Up there everything already happened to somebody else and they filmed it."

Zack ran the line down the old grade with the autonomous traffic flowing past them in both directions, every other machine on the road a sealed pod with nobody at the wheel, the grid moving its citizens around like a card dealer who never looked at the cards. His runner was the one thing on the road that argued. He felt the difference in his spine. He always did. One stolen-shaped machine steered by a hand in a river of machines that steered themselves, and the river did not see him, and that was the whole job and the whole life and the only freedom he had ever been able to afford.

"Jason know you're down here," she said. Not a question.

"No."

"He'd lose his mind."

"He warned me off you." Zack kept his eyes on the road.

"Said you're leaving. Said you don't need the distraction."

Emily was quiet for a second. The wind took her hair across her face and she let it. "He's not wrong about the leaving," she said. "He's wrong about the rest."

They were most of the way down the ring road when Zack saw the crew on the shoulder.

He knew the machine before he knew the men. It was the Yakotai-Chen sled, the Asian Pact street arm, the same low aggressive thing that had run him off the road his first week in the spread, boxed his runner into the gutter and laughed and gone, the city teaching the no-chip kid where he stood. Now it sat dead on the shoulder with its hood up and three of them around it in the haze, and one of them had his hands on his head the way a man does when the machine has beaten him.

Zack slowed.

"What are you doing," Emily said.

"They're cooked." He pulled the runner onto the shoulder twenty feet back and let it idle. "Stay in the car if you want."

She did not stay in the car.

The three Pact kids straightened when he walked up, and the tall one in front knew his face, Zack saw it land, the recognition and then the wariness. Bad blood was bad blood. But a dead sled on the ring road at night was a different kind

of trouble, the kind that did not care whose blood, and the tall one looked at the open hood and then at Zack and made the math fast.

"You run manual," the tall one said.

"I run everything." Zack leaned over the engine. It was a salvaged block, a good one, pre-Upheaval iron under a kitbash of grid-blind geario, and somebody had wired the start sequence clever and somebody had wired the fuel feed stupid, and the stupid had finally caught up. He could see it. He could always see it. The thing told him where it hurt the way a face told you. "Your feed's vapor-locked. You've got a return line pinched under the rail. Whoever built this ran it too hot too long."

"It just died."

"It didn't just die. It's been dying since you bought it." Zack put two fingers on the rail, found the pinch, freed it, and worked the line loose with a thumbnail. The fuel moved. He could feel it move, the system coming back into itself, the way you feel a held breath let go. "Crank it."

The tall one nodded and one of the others dropped into the seat and the sled turned over twice and caught, rough and then smooth, and the three of them stood in the engine wash and looked at Zack like he had done a magic trick. Maybe he had. In a city where every machine fixed itself or reported itself or both, a man who could put his hand on a dead engine and bring it back was a kind of ghost.

"What do we owe you," the tall one said.

"Nothing." Zack wiped his thumb on his jeans. "You ran me into the gutter on Vermont in March."

The tall one's face did something complicated. He remembered it too. "That was you."

"That was me."

For a second nobody said anything. Then the tall one laughed, short, and put out his hand, and Zack took it. "We owe you," the tall one said, and he meant it as the thing it was, a marker, a debt logged in the only ledger the spread actually honored. "You call, we come."

"I'll remember that."

He would. He did not know yet how much.

The roof of the building Trixie's cousin owned in Barricadia was tar and gravel and a water reclaimer the size of a coffin, and it looked out over the whole low burn of the spread, and Zack took Emily up there because it was the most beautiful thing on his side of the line and nobody up the hill would ever believe it was.

They had eaten at a noodle stand under the overpass, the real kind, the kind the Feed never shot, and they had drunk warm beer at a place called the Tooth and Gear where a gene-mod somebody played guitar badly and everyone loved

him for it, and now they sat on the roof with the haze catching the light from below and turning the sky the color of a bruise healing.

"This is the part I won't be able to explain to anybody," Emily said.

"What part."

"That it's better." She pulled her knees up. "That the noodle stand was better than anything at the club. That the bad guitar was better. They'd think I was slumming. They'd think it was a phase." She looked at him sideways. "It's not a phase."

"What is it."

She did not answer right away. Below them a manual sled went by on a far street, somebody running the line in the dark, and they both heard it and neither of them said anything about it, and Zack thought that was its own kind of intimacy, the two of them recognizing the same sound.

"I leave in six weeks," she said. "The Lyceum. Nordics Arcology. It's the coldest, best school in the bloc and my parents have wanted me to go since I was eight and I'm going because they want it." She said it flat. "I've never once wanted it. I've never once not gone."

"So don't."

She laughed, but it was tired. "You don't get it. You think out is a door you walk through. For you it is. You're the kid who steals to get out, Jason told me, that's your whole thing,

one more score and you're gone." She turned the warm beer in her hands. "Out isn't a door for me. It's a thing everybody decided I already have. I'm free. Look how free I am. I get to pick which cage with the better view." She set the beer down. "I'm so tired of doing what everybody else wants. I've been doing it so long I don't know what I'd want instead. That's the part that scares me. Not the Lyceum. That I'd get there and find out there's nothing under all the wanting-what-they-want. That it's hollow all the way down."

Zack watched her. The light from below moved on her face.

"Is that why you're here," he said. "With me."

"What do you mean."

"Because it's the one thing they don't want." He kept his voice even. He had to ask it and he hated asking it. "Because I'm forbidden. Because slumming with the no-chip kid is the loudest no you've got. If that's what this is, I'd rather know now."

She looked at him for a long moment, and he saw her decide to be honest, the way he had decided to be honest, the two of them taking the same step off the same ledge.

"At first," she said. "Maybe. At first you were the no they'd hate most." Her jaw tightened. "And then you fixed those guys' car for free because they owed you a beating. And you didn't tell me you were going to, you just did it, like it was nothing, like that's just what a person does." She shook

her head. "Nobody up the hill does anything for nothing. Everything is a trade. You did a thing for nothing in front of me and I stopped caring whether it was forbidden. I just wanted to keep watching you be like that. So no. It stopped being the no a while ago."

Neither of them said the next thing. They did not have to.

The apartment was downstairs, his apartment, the shabby Barricadia box with the runner usually parked in the front room and the leash he never talked about waiting in the back of his own skull, and they went down to it together and the door closed and the spread kept burning outside the window and for a few hours Zack Reyes was not undercover, not a thief, not a no-chip ghost the grid could not see. He was just a man with a person who had chosen him. It was the most honest he had been with anyone since Dez, and he knew, even inside it, that honesty was the most expensive thing in a city that ran on cons, and that he was going to be charged for it.

It came on him later, in the dark, with her asleep against him.

The hum.

He never knew what to call it and he never told anyone he heard it. It was not a sound, exactly. It came up through

the floor sometimes when a manual sled ran the line in the distance, came up through his own bones when he pushed a machine past where it wanted to go, and it had been getting clearer all season, sharper, closer, the way a voice gets clearer when you stop pretending not to hear it.

He lay there and felt his own wiring sit wrong in him. The raptor build, the courier template that promised a generation a way out of the rust and then folded, leaving kids like him with predator reflexes and no road to spend them on. The spec drift. The thing the scene called going hot, the reflexes sharpening every season while the judgment frayed at the same rate, the body running outside the envelope somebody had built it to. He felt it the most on the redline, when a corner came and his hands took the apex a half-second before his mind decided to, and underneath that half-second, every time, there it was. The zone. The hum under the engine. A note held somewhere just below the floor of the world, patient, the way the drowned signal cycles green to red over a street nobody drives anymore.

It scared him. He would not say that to anyone either. It scared him because it felt like being tuned to something, like an antenna in a storm, and a man who is the best driver in the spread does not get to admit that the thing that makes him the best is also a frequency he cannot turn off.

He held Emily and listened to the hum and did not name it, and somewhere in the listening he fell asleep.

He dropped her at the gate of Glass Forest in the gray before dawn, up out of the haze and into the clean air, and the goodbye got heavy at the door of the runner the way these things do, neither of them wanting to be the one who let go first, and that was the exact wrong moment for Jason to come around the hedge in his running clothes and see it.

He saw all of it. He saw it in one read, the way the rich kid read a corner he was not going to make.

"You're kidding me," Jason said.

"Jason." Emily stepped back from the car. "It's fine."

"It's fine." Jason came across the drive and he was not laughing, and Zack had never seen him not laughing, not like this, the energy that never stopped finding something true and ugly to be for once. "I told you. I told you both. I said one thing. One thing." He rounded on Zack. "I let you into everything. My house. My ring. My life. And you go behind me for the one thing I asked you to leave alone."

"You don't own her," Zack said.

"No. I don't." Jason's voice cracked on it. "She's the one thing in my whole life I wasn't gonna let this filthy business touch and you dragged her into the spread. Into Barricadia. Do you know what's down there. Do you know who's down there."

"I'm down there," Zack said. "I'm who's down there."

That landed. Zack watched it land, watched the friendship take the wound, the first real one, the kind that does not close clean. Emily was saying both their names and neither of them heard her. Jason stood in the drive with his hands open and shaking and the whole thing between them, the brotherhood, the one true thing in a season of cons, hanging there in the cold clean air of a place Zack did not belong.

"You're my brother," Jason said, and it was the worst thing he could have said, because it was true. "You're my brother and you did this anyway."

Zack did not have an answer for that. There was not one.

Jason wiped his face with the back of his wrist, hard, and when he turned back his voice had gone flat, all the heat banked down into something colder and more familiar, the work. "We've got a job tonight," he said. "Center Point. Palmer wants a sled out of an office tower and he wants it tonight and you and me are the ones running it." He looked at Emily and then he looked away from her, like looking cost him. "Be at the Hog at nine. Don't be late. We are not done." He pointed at Zack without looking at him. "You and me are not done. But the job is the job."

He walked off into the clean morning, and Emily looked at Zack with her arms wrapped around herself, and Zack looked at the place where the friendship used to be whole, and far below them the spread sat under its haze, burning,

waiting, and the hum was down there somewhere too, patient, holding its note.

N A R C

**T**he office tower at Center Point ran a private valet stack on the fourth subfloor, the kind of place that parked exotics for executives who never touched a wheel in their lives, and the sled Palmer wanted sat on level four under a soft light like a thing in a museum. Zack got them in clean. He always got them in clean. The tension came in the car with them and sat in the back seat the whole time, and that was the thing that went wrong, because Jason was not on the scanner the way Jason was always on the scanner. Jason was somewhere else. Jason was on the drive at Glass Forest.

"Drone shadow," Zack said. "You watching the drone shadow."

"I'm watching it."

"You're not watching it."

"I said I'm watching it." Jason had the scanner in his lap and his eyes were on the ramp ahead and Zack felt the whole night tilt, the partnership that had never missed a beat missing one, the two skills that locked into one machine coming apart at the worst possible second. They came up out

of the subfloor and into the open ground level and the grid saw them.

It saw them all at once. The exotic was logged, somebody had reported it inside ninety seconds, and the night above Center Point filled up with drones, the searchlights coming down through the haze in long white columns, the city remembering it had eyes.

"There it is," Jason said, and something in him woke up, the only place he was ever awake, the half-second before a corner. "Go."

Zack went.

He took the sled up the parking structure instead of down, against the logic of it, because down was where the grid would wall them and up was where nobody thought to. He ran the line up the spiral ramps with the raptor wiring reading each turn a beat ahead of him, the concrete columns flicking past close enough to lose paint, the drones screaming down the open face of the structure trying to get an angle, and there it was under the engine, faint, the hum, the zone opening up the way it did when he stopped thinking and let the build drive. He let it. He did not have a choice. Going hot was not a decision he made. It was a decision that made him.

"Top deck, top deck," Jason called, reading something on the scanner that was finally right. "There's a skybridge off

the top deck, pedestrian, runs into the mall. They can't fly the skybridge, it's enclosed."

"It's pedestrian. It's not a road."

"It's a road if you drive on it."

Zack came off the top of the structure and the skybridge was right there, a glass tube across the gap between the tower and the retail concourse, full of nobody at this hour, and he put the sled into it and the world went tight and bright and screaming, the glass walls a blur, the drones lost outside the tube unable to follow, and the hum came all the way up then, the floor of the world dropping out, the zone wide open, his hands miles ahead of his mind. They came off the skybridge through a glass storefront into the second floor of the concourse in a spray of safety glass and product, down the frozen escalator with the wheels chewing the steel edges, across the ground floor past dead kiosks and out the front concourse window into the strip in a long sliding arc that should have killed them and did not, because Zack's hands were not his anymore, they were the build's, and the build did not miss.

Up the strip there was a club, the High Top, light spilling out of it and a line down the block and a valet stand out front, and Jason said "the club, dump it at the club, we go through and out the back," and Zack put the sled nose-first into the valet stand and they were out of it before it stopped rocking, Jason flipping the keys at a valet who caught them

on instinct and stood there holding the keys to a stolen exotic with his mouth open, and the two of them went into the High Top through the front door at a dead run with the drones starting to find the strip behind them.

Inside it was loud and dark and full of bodies, the bass coming up through the floor, and Jason knew the place, of course he knew the place, Jason knew every place, and he cut through the crowd toward the back with Zack on his shoulder, and the plan was the back, the plan was always the back, out the service door and gone before the grid walled the block.

The back of the club let onto a terrace, and the terrace had a ledge, and over the ledge was a drop and a pool several stories below, the High Top's rooftop pool for the floor under it, lit up turquoise in the dark. Jason went up onto the ledge without slowing, the way he did everything, no fear in him because fear was the only thing that ever made him feel alive and he was already feeling alive, and he looked back at Zack with that grin, the real one, the one that meant the next corner.

"It's water," Jason called over the bass. "It's just water. Come on."

And Zack was three steps from the ledge, already moving, the build already gathering for the drop, when he heard the laugh.

He knew the laugh. He would have known it anywhere. He had heard it on a roof in Barricadia eight hours ago.

She was at a banquette near the back, in the worst light, and the first thing that was wrong was the dress.

It was not her dress. It was a Glass Forest dress, the kind the girls who ragged on him wore, the kind she made fun of, and she was wearing it and she was wasted, slack and bright-eyed and laughing too loud, and she was draped across the lap of a man Emily Cavanaugh would have crossed a room to avoid. EO. Eurasian Oligarchy money, the deadbeat kind, the bloc's spoiled inheritance slumming in a Lost Angeles club, two of them on the banquette and Emily between them with a drink she could not hold level, and as Zack stood frozen in the middle of the floor with Jason yelling his name from the ledge, the one with his arm around her turned her face up and she let him, she laughed and let him, and they were kissing, and it was the worst thing Zack had ever seen and he had seen Dez die in a passenger seat.

He did not remember crossing the floor. He was just there.

"Emily."

She came off the man's mouth and her eyes found him and for a second something moved in them, something that was not the drunk, something close to terror, and then it was gone under the slack and the shine. "Zack," she said, and she said it wrong, too bright, like a line. "Zack. Hi. You came to the party."

"What is this." His voice did not sound like his. "What are you doing. Who are these."

"Don't," she said. "Don't do the thing. Don't be like Jason." She laughed and it broke in the middle. "Everybody always wants me to be one thing. You wanted me to be your thing. They want me to be theirs." She gestured loose at the EO men, at the dress, at all of it, and her hand was shaking. "I'm just being what everybody wants. That's all I ever do. Right?"

The EO man with his arm around her stood up. He was big and soft and certain in the way money makes you certain, and he put a hand flat on Zack's chest. "She's with us," he said. "Run along."

Zack hit him. He did not decide to. The build decided. And then there were two of them, and they were bigger than him and there were two of them, and they put him into the banquette and then onto the floor, and the soft money turned out to be hard enough when there were two of it, and Zack took it because some part of him underneath the build

wanted to take it, wanted the outside to match the inside, and over the top of it he could see Emily on her feet now, swaying, both hands over her mouth, the terror all the way out from under the drunk now, real, and she said his name once more, broken, and then she bolted. Through the crowd, toward the front, gone, the dress that was not hers flickering in the strobe and then nothing.

He got up off the floor. The EO men let him. They had made their point or somebody else's point, and Zack would understand later, lying in a cell, that they had not been fighting to win, they had been fighting to hold him in that spot for exactly as long as it took, the way the men in the rebar in Steelreach had shot a foot high, deliberate, a thing built to look real and not finish, a thing staged. He would understand it later. Right now he understood nothing. Right now he went after her.

He came out the front of the High Top into the white and the noise, the drones overhead now, the strip lit up with their searchlights, and he saw the dress turning a corner half a block down and he ran for it, and the cruiser pulled across the sidewalk in front of him so smooth and so timed that there was no question, none, that it had been waiting.

Dolan got out of it the way Dolan did everything, calm, almost kind. "Zack," he said, like a man greeting a neighbor. "You're having a night."

"There's a girl. She went around the corner. I have to."

"There's no girl, son." Dolan put a hand on his shoulder, gentle, and turned him toward the open back door of the cruiser. "There's just you, and the car you boosted out of Center Point an hour ago that's all over the grid, and a long ride. Watch your head."

Jason was already in the back seat.

Wet to the waist from the pool, cuffed, jaw set, he looked up when they put Zack in beside him, and whatever had been left of the morning was gone out of his face. The door shut. The grid swallowed the cruiser into traffic and the searchlights swept the empty strip behind them, and the two of them sat in the cage in the back of Dolan's machine and did not say one word the whole way in.

They put them in the same cell, which was a choice somebody made, and Zack knew which somebody.

It was a holding box in a Monitor Central substation, gray and cold and lit too bright, one bench, one drain in the floor, and the two of them in it wet and bruised and out of road. Jason stood against the far wall with his arms crossed and

his wet clothes dripping on the concrete and he looked at Zack for a long time before he said anything.

"I told you," Jason said. "I told you to leave her alone."

"Don't."

"I told you what would happen and you did it anyway and now look." Jason's voice was climbing. "She's in there in a dress she'd never wear letting EO trash put their hands on her and that's on you, that's because you couldn't leave the one thing alone, the one thing I asked."

"You think I did that." Zack came off the bench. "You think that was her. You know her. You think she got up this morning and decided to go get wasted and let those animals." His own voice broke. "Something's wrong. Somebody did that to her. Somebody set that up to break me and it worked and you're standing there blaming me for it."

"I'm blaming you because it's your fault."

"It's not."

"It is."

And then they were on each other.

It was not a fight that went anywhere. It was two men who loved each other beating the thing they could reach because they could not reach the thing that was actually killing them. Jason got him into the wall and Zack got an arm free and they went down onto the concrete near the drain, all knees and elbows, no skill in it, none, just hurt going out in the only direction left, and they hit each other

until they could not lift their arms anymore, and then they lay on the cold floor a foot apart, chests heaving, blood in the drain, the two of them wrecked and exhausted and no further from the wound than when they started.

"I went back for you at the Toro," Jason said to the ceiling, his voice gone to nothing. "When the security had you boxed. I came back. Nobody comes back. I came back."

"I know."

"And you couldn't leave my sister alone."

"I know," Zack said. He was crying and he did not care. "I know. I'm sorry. I couldn't."

They lay there. Somewhere above them the substation hummed, and under the hum, if Zack listened, was the other hum, the one that was always there, patient, holding its note over the wreck of everything.

The door opened.

Dolan took them to a room with a table and three chairs and he sat across from both of them with a folder he did not need, because the folder was a prop, the folder was theater, and he set it down and did not open it and laced his fingers on top of it and looked at them with that mild, sorry, neighborly face, and Zack felt the bottom of the world get ready to go.

"I want to be straight with you both," Dolan said.

"Because you've earned that much. You've worked hard." He looked at Jason first. "Mister Cavanaugh. You should know who you've been running with." A small pause, no weight on it, the worst kind of weight. "Your partner here is mine. Has been since I pulled him out of a detention block up in the Western Corridor. He's been feeding me your ring for months. Every name. Every car. Every drop." He said it the way he would log a parking violation. "He's a narc, son. You let a narc into your house."

The room went very still.

Zack did not look at Jason. He could not.

"That's not," Zack started.

"It is, though." Dolan turned the mild face on him. "It's exactly that. And now I'm going to be straight with you too, Zack, because you've earned it more than anybody." He unlaced his fingers and laid his hands flat. "There was never a deal."

There it was. The thing.

"There's no paper. There never was. You asked me about a lawyer and I told you it wasn't necessary and you believed me because you wanted to." Dolan's voice stayed gentle the whole way down, and that was the horror of it, that a man could take everything from you in the voice you'd use to tell a kid it was bedtime. "There's no undercover arrangement on file. You're not building a case. Every car you boosted to keep

that cover you boosted on your own time, and every one of them is logged, and every one of them is evidence, and all of it points one direction. At you." He nodded at Jason. "At both of you, now. Conspiracy. Grand theft. The works. You're going away, the two of you, and you're going away forever, and there is not one piece of paper anywhere that says otherwise, because I never let there be."

Zack heard Jason breathing next to him, ragged, and could not turn his head.

"Unless," Dolan said.

He let it sit. He was good at letting it sit.

"There's a car," Dolan said. "A Calix S-600. It's in the ring's inventory and it's moving out of the spread tonight with the rest of the merchandise, and I want it. I've wanted it the whole time, and I'll tell you the truth, I don't care about any of the rest of it, the names, the ring, the tribute, none of it. I want that one car. You find it for me before it leaves the spread and you put it in my hands, and these folders never get opened, and you two walk." He stood up and squared the chair under the table, neat, a tidy man. "You've got till the cars move. That's not me being cruel. That's just the clock." He went to the door. "I'm gonna let you both out the back. Think it through on the drive. I've found you think clearer once you're moving."

He left. He did not gloat. He did not even raise his voice. He had burned the whole thing to the ground in the tone of a

man telling you the bus was running late, and then he had gone home, and that was worse than any rant could have been.

They drove south out of Center Point in Zack's runner with the windows up and the haze coming back up to meet them as they dropped out of the clean air, and for a long time neither of them said anything at all.

Zack ran the line on muscle memory, the build doing it, his mind a burned field. The deal was a lie. He had known since the midpoint, since Dolan dropped the floor on him in the cuffs, but knowing it and having the man say it across a table were two different sizes of the same wound, and the second size was the one that did not heal. There was never a deal. He had taken it because he wanted out, and the wanting was the thing they used, the wanting was the leash, and Emily was right, out was never a door for either of them, it was a thing somebody else owned and dangled.

"It doesn't make sense," Jason said.

It was the first thing he had said since the room. Zack glanced at him. Jason was looking out the windshield at the autonomous traffic flowing past, the sealed pods, the grid moving its cards.

"Why one car," Jason said. "Vale's got two dozen sleds in that inventory. Better ones. Faster ones. Worth more on any market you want to name. And the cop, who could pin anything on us, who's got us both cold, who doesn't care about the names or the ring or any of it, the cop wants the S-600." He shook his head slowly. "Nobody burns this much to get one mid-tier armored saloon out of a stack of exotics. Nobody. It doesn't make sense unless there's something in it."

Zack thought about that. He thought about the way Dolan had said the words. I want that one car. The flatness of the want, the size of it, the way a man would only burn his whole self down for a thing if the thing was worth more than the self.

"There's something in it," Zack said. "Has to be."

"Has to be."

"How are you so sure," Zack said. "There's a whole inventory. How do you know it's that car and not just the cop being crazy. How are you so sure there's something in the S-600."

Jason was quiet for a second. The haze closed over the runner as they came down into the spread, and the spread's light came up around them, the long low burn, twelve million people under the brown ceiling, and somewhere in all that light was a garage and a stack of stolen machines and

the one car the whole season had been reaching back to explain.

"Because I'm the one who boosted it first," Jason said.

Zack looked at him.

"In the beginning. Before the ring, before you, before any of this." Jason kept his eyes on the road. "There was a car parked on a curb in the EO quarter one night with the keys still warm, just sitting there, and I took it for the thrill of it. The way I take everything. I didn't know what it was. I just wanted the half-second." He swallowed. "It was the S-600. I'm the one who took it off that street. Everything since has been the world trying to get it back, and I'm the reason it's loose, and I never told anybody, not even you."

The runner came down off the grade into Barricadia, and the two of them rode the line into the burning city, wrecked, broken, the friendship in pieces and the romance in pieces and the deal exposed as the lie it always was, and between them now the one thing that could put a hand on a dead engine and bring it back. A secret. A car. A question with something hidden inside it.

"We have to get into that garage," Zack said. "We have to find out what's in it."

Jason nodded, slow, looking out at the spread.

"Yeah," he said. "We do."

## PART FOUR — THE RISE FROM THE ASHES

THE SOVEREIGN

**T**he booth at the back of the Tooth and Gear was where Palmer ran his loose ends, and Zack walked into it with Jason a half step behind him and the whole night still on them, the cell smell, the blood neither of them had washed off. Palmer looked up from a chit-reader and did not look surprised.

"You two," Palmer said. "I heard about you two."

"We want a gig," Jason said. He pulled a chair around backward and sat on it the way he sat on everything, like it was lucky to have him. "One more boost. Tonight."

"There is no tonight." Palmer set the reader face down. He had a dry voice, a paycheck voice. "The move is the move. Everything goes out tonight and the spread is clean by morning. Four months we have been here, and we are done." He spread his hands. "There is no list anymore. The list is a truck."

Zack felt the floor of it. Four months. A whole operation winding down to one departure, the car he needed riding out of reach in the dark with everything else.

"Then add a car," Jason said.

Palmer almost smiled. "Add a car."

"You have a manifest. You have a buyer who likes whole sleds and not parts." Jason leaned the chair forward onto two legs. "There is a Sovereign in this spread. The convertible. Pre-Upheaval coachwork, no chip, one of nine left on the planet. Your buyer has been asking about that car since the spread was a swamp." He let it sit. "I can have it on your truck in two hours."

Zack watched Palmer weigh the truth against the clock and find the truth heavier. A man at the end of a job does not turn down a trophy that walks in the door.

"Two hours," Palmer said. "The truck is at the Center Point loading apron. After that it is gone and you are nobody to me."

"We were always nobody to you," Jason said, and stood, and the chair fell over, and he left it.

Out on the street the autonomous traffic ran its clean silent rivers under the drone shadow, every car on it a node that knew where it was and reported it. Zack stood in the one body in the spread the grid could not read and felt the size of the thing closing.

"You know what you just did," he said.

"I added a car." Jason would not look at him.

"You added your family's car. The one you said you would never touch. The line. You drew it yourself."

"I know what line I drew." Jason started walking. "Come on. My parents eat late."

The restaurant was the High Top and it sat on a terrace forty floors up in the Glass Forest, all soft light and quiet money, and the Sovereign waited at the valet stand below it like a held breath. Long. Low. The skin done in a deep oxblood that the flicker-paint crowd would have killed for and the Cavanaughs had simply bought. No chip. No transponder. A car from before the grid, kept perfect, the way you keep a thing you love and never drive.

Zack stood across the apron in the dark and read it the way the raptor wiring read everything, the angles, the valet's sight line, the camera that fed Monitor Central and the second one that did not.

"They are up there right now," Zack said. "Your mother. Your father."

"At the window table." Jason said it flat. "Same table for twenty years."

"You can wait in the truck."

"No." Jason was already moving, low, fast, the augment reading the gap between the valet's turns the way Zack's raptor read a corner. "If I take it I take it with my hands on the wheel. Anything else is somebody else stealing my car. This way it is me."

They went across the apron in the dead beat between two arriving sleds, and Jason had the door before the valet finished his turn, and Zack slid into the passenger seat with the boost kit already open. No chip meant no handshake to spoof. It came down to the block, and the block was a thing from the old world that wanted to run. Zack found the ignition relay by feel, the way Dez had taught him a lifetime north, and crossed it, and the engine came up with a sound the grid had not heard in forty years, a low animal turning over, pure mechanical want.

Forty floors up, behind a window, two people were eating dinner and did not know.

Jason put his hands on the wheel of his family's car. For one second he did not move. Then he took the apex out of the valet stand at speed, and the valet shouted, and the camera caught a flicker of oxblood and nothing the grid could name, and they were gone down the ramp into the river of cars that parted for no one and did not know how to part for them.

"There it is," Zack said quietly. He had felt it come up under the floor, the hum, the note under the engine he had

never told a soul about, the thing he called the zone when he let himself call it anything. It came up now the way it always came up, at the edge of the redline, a frequency in his teeth. He pushed it down. There was no warranty on a word like that.

Jason drove. He did not say anything for a long time, and the not-saying was the loudest thing Zack had ever heard out of him.

The truck was a Syndicate hauler, the kind of box that moved the spread's tonnage every night and never logged a thing worth reading, and it sat on the Center Point loading apron with its ramp down and Palmer's people waving the Sovereign up into the dark of it. Zack drove it in. Jason walked it down to its chocks and ran a strap across the front axle and did it gently, and that was the tell, that he did it gently.

"Now what," Jason said.

"Now we are not on the manifest." Zack looked up into the spine of the truck, the cross-bracing under the bed, the cold grease smell of a working machine. "They count cars. They do not count us. So we are not cars."

He went under first. The raptor build had no fear of the underside of a moving thing, the way it had no fear of a

corner. It had only the read, the geometry of where a body could hang and where a body would be pulped. He found the long structural rib that ran the length of the bed and wedged himself up into it, boots hooked, hands locked, the whole weight of him hanging an inch off the apron. Jason came up beside him, silent and certain, the augment doing what it was bought to do, and the two of them hung there while Palmer's people closed the ramp over their heads.

The truck moved. The apron slid away below Zack's back at a hand's width, the road coming up at him, the grid's clean traffic flowing past on either side in long lit ribbons. He held on with the strength the program built into him for reasons it never explained, and beside him Jason held on out of nothing but the want to, and the truck carried them onto the Ring Road and into the deep of the city.

"You good," Zack said, mouth an inch from the steel.

"I am great," Jason said, and Zack heard him grin in the dark, and for one mile of held breath under a moving truck they were exactly what they had been before any of it, two thieves and one machine, nothing between them but the work.

The truck went down. Down a ramp Zack could not see, into a structure that swallowed the grid-light and the drone

shadow all at once, the engine note bouncing back close and hard off concrete. Down two more levels by the count of the turns, and then it stopped, and the ramp came down, and Zack waited under the bed until the last set of boots had walked away and then dropped to the floor of the lower levels of a downtown tower and looked at the vault.

Two dozen sleds. Maybe more. Lined in the low concrete dark under work lights strung on cable, every one a felony and a fortune, every one un-networked, grid-blind, the analog ghosts of a city that drove itself. Faraldos and Toros and a flicker-paint sled Zack half recognized from the Hog, exotics off every apron in the spread, kept whole, waiting on a launch out of the world. The smell of pre-Upheaval engine blocks and clean money.

"There," Jason breathed.

The Calix S-600 sat at the end of the line where the light gave out. Armored saloon, the doors thick as a vault, the deep dull skin of a car built to take a round and keep going, the most boring machine on the floor and the only one that mattered. The car Dolan had killed for. The car Jason had taken for fun and never understood. The whole leash.

They went to it low and fast between the rows, and Jason got the door, and inside it was just a car, leather and quiet and old. Zack ran his hands over it, reading it, and the car

gave him nothing, and that was the answer. A car this heavy carried something. He went to the trunk.

The latch was honest. The trunk was empty. Carpet and a spare and the smell of nothing.

"There is nothing," Jason said, and Zack heard the edge come into it, the whole ruined night riding on this one trunk being something.

Zack pulled the carpet. Under it the floor of the trunk sat a finger too high. He found the seam with his thumbnail, a panel set flush, machined to a tolerance no thief would ever look for, and got a tool under it and the false floor came up.

Duffels. Packed wall to wall, dark canvas, dense, the trunk full of them and the suspension sitting low because of it. Zack pulled the zip on the nearest one and reached in and his hand closed on cold weight, square-edged, heavier than anything that size had a right to be.

He drew it out into the work light.

A gold bar. Solid, dull, an oligarch's whole conversion in a single brick, a trunk full of its brothers under it.

Zack crouched there with the gold in his two hands and the hum came up under the floor of the car where there was no engine running, no redline, no reason, the same note he had heard his whole driving life, rising out of the metal in front of him. He felt it in his teeth and behind his eyes, the zone with no road under it, and for one cold second the gold was the least interesting thing in the trunk. There was

something under the metal. He could not have said how he knew. He knew.

"Zack." Jason was staring at the bar. "Zack, that is a lot of."

"Yeah."

Behind them, at the head of the rows, a man cleared his throat.

Palmer stood in the work light with two guards and a third coming up, and behind him, walking slow between the stolen sleds with his hands in the pockets of a good coat, came Soren Vale.

No anger in him. He looked at the two of them crouched over an open trunk full of his fortune the way a man looks at weather, something arriving that he had planned for and would handle.

"Put it back," Vale said. Mild. "Or do not. It hardly matters now."

Zack stood up slow with the bar still in his hand because his hand would not let go of it.

"You found the thing," Vale said. "I will give you that. Two boys the cop threw away found the thing a Federation and a bloc and a Syndicate all walked past." He stopped a

careful distance off. "Do you want to know what it is. People usually do."

Nobody said anything. Vale took it as a yes, the way he took everything as the thing he had decided it was.

"For nine years I washed a man's money," Vale said. "An oligarch. Arkady Sorokin. Bear-stock fortune three generations deep, all of it riding on a ledger he did not control." He spoke the way another man would explain a tide table. "Then the cold-trade started whispering about the Zero. A reset. A day when every digital balance in the bloc goes to nothing at once. You cannot imagine what that does to a man who is only numbers. Sorokin got frightened. He told me to pull his fortune out of the ledger and turn it into the one thing the Zero cannot touch."

"Gold," Zack said.

"Gold." Vale almost smiled. "I ran the conversion. Nine years of a man's wealth, out of the cloud and into metal, in my hands, on a floor exactly like this one. And I decided I was finished building other people's fortunes."

"You stole it," Jason said.

"I moved it." Vale corrected him without heat. "The oligarchy expects a tribute. Two dozen exotic sleds run to the launch, a hobby, a vanity. Everyone knows about the tribute. The grid knows. The cop knew. The whole city watched it move." He nodded at the S-600. "So I hid a fortune inside the one shipment the entire world already expected to leave."

The safest vault is the truck everyone is already watching drive away. By the time Sorokin finds his gold in one of his own cars, the gold and I will be in different hemispheres."

"Except Jason boosted it first," Zack said. "By accident. For fun. And blew the whole thing up."

For one second something moved behind Vale's eyes, the only crack the night gave them, the cost of four months chasing a car a rich kid took on a lark. Then it closed.

"Boys do," Vale said.

Jason moved.

He went for the guard's gun the way he went for everything, fast, certain it would work because nothing had ever not worked for him, the augment uncoiling, his hand on the weapon, and for half a second Zack thought it might.

Vale shot him.

It was almost gentle, the way Vale did it, a single round, no flourish, the most reasonable man in the room ending a problem. Jason stopped. He looked down at himself with an expression Zack had never seen on him, surprise, pure boy surprise, and then his knees went.

Zack caught him.

He did not decide to. The raptor decided, the read taking over before judgment could, and the gold bar dropped ringing on the concrete and his whole world narrowed to getting his brother into that car. He poured Jason across the seat and went over him into the driver's well and crossed the

relay he had already mapped, and the armored saloon woke up with the gold still in the trunk and a guard's first shot starring the windshield in front of his face.

"Send it," Jason said, wet, from the seat. "Zack. Send it."  
Zack sent it.

The S-600 came off the line into a wall of gunfire, and the armor that made it the most boring car on the floor made it the only car that could do this, rounds hammering the doors and skating off the glass, Zack low behind the wheel reading the rows of stolen sleds as a slalom, threading the vault at speed with Vale's whole crew firing into a car built to be fired into. He took the up-ramp blind, on feel. Behind him in the mirror Palmer was already moving for a sled, and the gold rode heavy in the trunk, and Jason bled on the leather, and Zack drove up out of the dark toward a city that did not know how to see him.

#### HOTWIRE

**T**he Ring Road opened up and Zack did the only thing left in the world to do, which was drive, and talk, because the talking was the only thing keeping the man beside him on this side of the line.

"Stay with me," Zack said. "Jason. Eyes."

"I am here." Jason's voice had gone thin, a leak in it. His hand was pressed to the wound and the leather under him was black. "I am right here. Zack, this is a great car. We should have boosted this one for us."

"We are going to the Center Point med tower. Eight minutes. You give me eight minutes." Zack took an apex through a cluster of autonomous sedans that flowed apart and back together behind him, a stone thrown into a clean river. "Talk. Keep talking."

"About what."

"Anything." Zack checked the mirror. A sled back there, running manual, running hard, no respect for the grid. Palmer. "Tell me about Emily."

Jason laughed, and it cost him, and it turned into something else. "You and my sister."

"Me and your sister."

"I told you off it because." Jason breathed. "Because you were the one thing that was mine. The cars I could share. The money. Her. You. I did not want to share you with her." The leak in his voice got worse. "That is an ugly thing to say out loud."

"It is honest." Zack drove. "She is the one thing I would get out for. You know that."

"I know that. That is why I." Jason's head rolled against the window. "Ask her. Ask her if she."

"Ask her yourself. In eight minutes. Stay with me."

The sled in the mirror grew. Palmer drove smooth, patient, no flourish, and he came up on the armored saloon's quarter and Zack felt the geometry of it before Palmer committed, the ram coming, and he could not outrun it loaded down with gold and a dying man, so he did the other thing. He let the sled draw alongside for the hit, and at the last instant Zack lifted and let Palmer's own speed carry him a half length forward, and then put the heavy nose of the S-600 into the back quarter of Palmer's sled at the apex of a long left and turned all that Syndicate patience into physics.

Palmer's car came around. It did the thing manual cars do when the grid is not there to save them. It left the road. It went off the elevated lane and through the barrier and out into the dark over the spread, and the last Zack saw of the man in the truck was a sled cartwheeling end over end toward the lights of Barricadia. Then nothing. Then the road clear ahead, and Jason not talking anymore.

"Jason."

Nothing.

"Jason." Zack had a hand off the wheel and on his brother's chest and he felt it, the wrong rhythm, the flutter, the engine missing. "No. No, you stay. Center Point. We are there. We are right there."

He drove the last two minutes harder than he had ever driven anything, going hot all the way into the med tower apron, and he came across the marked lanes sideways and

dragged his brother out of a car full of gold and carried him up the ramp shouting for a crash team. They came running. They had paddles out before the doors finished opening and a voice was counting and a tech was cutting cloth and the doors swung shut in Zack's face with Jason on the far side, gray, still, gone.

Zack stood in the white light with his brother's blood to the elbows and was certain, all the way down, that he had just watched the realest thing in his life die on a gurney.

Dolan was waiting at the med tower like he had been there all along, which Zack understood, later, he had. The cop came across the apron easy and amiable, his beat presence on, the nicest man in the spread, one hand loose at his side and the other behind his back.

"You found it," Dolan said. He was looking at the S-600, barely at Zack. "Kid. You actually found it."

Zack sat in the driver's seat with the door open and the gold in the trunk and his whole body emptied out. "It is yours. Take it. We are done."

"We are done." Dolan agreed warmly, and took a step, and the hand stayed behind his back, and the raptor that had no judgment left tonight still had the read, and the read said the cop was holding a gun.

There was never a deal. Zack had heard the words in an interrogation room a lifetime ago and they had broken him, and here was the proof of them walking across an apron with a pistol hidden behind a smile, closing the last loose end of a thing that was never a deal at all.

The phone rang.

It rang in Jason's jacket, the bloody coat Zack still wore the weight of against his own chest, and Zack answered because his hand moved before the gun could, and the voice on the line was calm and easy and never once raised.

"I have the girl," Vale said.

The world went very quiet.

"Emily Cavanaugh is with me," Vale said, in the voice of a man reading a tide table. "She is at the Low Coast launch. The gold is in the trunk of the car you are sitting in. Bring it before the transport lifts, and she walks out of here, and we are square. Do not, and she goes up with the tribute, and Sorokin's people find a girl in his cargo and ask me what to do, and I tell them." A silence, the kind he built on purpose. "You have until the launch window. It is short."

The line went dead.

Dolan was three steps away and the gun was coming around from behind his back, and Zack had no seconds, no choice, only the read and the redline and a girl at the seawall. He dropped the relay and the S-600 came alive and he was gone off the apron before the cop's weapon cleared, and

behind him Dolan's pistol came up clean and fired, and the back glass bloomed white and held, and Zack ducked under it and drove into the night with a dirty cop firing at his back and his brother dead behind a set of doors and the only person he would ever get out for waiting to die at the launch.

Dolan chased. Of course he chased. He came off the apron in a Monitor Central pursuit sled with the override lit and the grid bending out of his way, and Zack ran the loaded saloon through the spread with the cop closing, and he could not win this one alone. He had never won the big ones alone. He had won them with Dez, and then with Jason, and now he had neither, and so he reached for the only thing left, every kindness he had thrown into the dark all season not knowing it was a line he was paying forward.

He drove with one hand and worked the phone with the other.

Cubo first, because Cubo answered, because Zack had wired his lowrider and asked for nothing. Then the number Trixie kept for the Barricadia crews. Then the Yakotai-Chen contact, the crew that had run him off the road in his first week and that he had stopped and fixed on the worst night of his romance. Then the Raze, the rubble-runners who knew

every dead lane in the flattened east. He said the same thing to all of them, fast, no time to be proud.

"It is Wire. I need the road. A Monitor sled on my tail, running for the Low Coast. I have helped every one of you. I am calling it."

They came.

They came out of side streets and service ramps and the dead lanes of the Raze, flicker-paint and rubble-iron and the low growl of the lowrider crews, dozens of manual machines pouring onto the Ring Road into the one place the grid could not follow, and they did not touch Zack. They went for the cop. They folded in around Dolan's pursuit sled the way water folds around a stone, a lowrider on his quarter and a rubble-runner on his nose and the Asian Pact boxing his flank, and Zack watched in the mirror as the whole street scene he had spent a season helping turned itself into one machine and ran a Monitor Central officer off the road and pinned him in a knot of cars the grid could not even see to dispatch help to.

The last thing Zack heard was the cop's voice on an open channel, flat, procedural even now, calling for backup he had never once needed. The amiable man in the room asking the grid to come save him from the city he had spent his life leaning on.

Zack put the seawall ahead of him and drove.

The Low Coast launch facility ran along the engineered seawall where the old coast used to be, and the heavy-lift transport sat on it like something that had landed and meant to leave, a suborbital hauler with its cargo ramp down and the Oligarchy's tribute crawling up into it one stolen sled at a time. Floodlights. Bear-stock muscle in long coats. And at the center of it, hands folded, a small old man in a beautiful coat, Arkady Sorokin, overseeing the safe departure of a wealth he did not know had already been stolen.

Zack drove the S-600 straight up onto the apron into the floodlights and the guns came around on him from every angle and he did the only thing the night had left him. He told the truth.

"That car is full of his gold," Zack shouted, out the window, at Sorokin, at the muscle, at all of it. "Vale converted your fortune and hid it in your own tribute and he is going to fly it out and leave you with empty cars. Open the trunk. The gold you think is in your ledger is in there."

For one second the whole apron held.

Then Vale spoke, from up the ramp, calm, never loud, a man correcting a clerical error. "That is the thief," he said to Sorokin, easy, reasonable. "He boosted the car off the spread weeks ago. We recovered it tonight. He wants the metal for himself and is telling you a story so you will let him drive

away with it." He spread his hands the way he always did. "Open the trunk. The gold is yours. I am returning it to you, as I have returned all of it. This boy is the only thief on this seawall."

It was good. It was so good that Zack watched the muscle's guns settle on him and not on Vale, and understood he was about to die on a runway for telling the truth to people lied to so long the truth could not get a hand up.

Then the cops came.

They came in force, a phalanx of Monitor Central sleds with a helicopter throwing a hard white column down onto the seawall, and at the front of them, run to ground by the street and out of every story, came Chris Dolan, who had no play left but the badge, and the badge brought the whole institution down onto a seawall full of Oligarchy guns and stolen gold. A loudhailer ordered everyone to ground. The Bear-stock muscle did the thing armed men do when more armed men arrive, and the Oligarchy guns came off Zack and onto the cops, and the cops opened up, and the truth he had thrown into the middle went off like a charge under all of them.

Three sides. The Oligarchy, the law, and the truth standing in a stolen car between them. The seawall went to war.

And the transport began to taxi.

It rolled forward off its marks with its ramp still half down and its tribute half loaded and Emily Cavanaugh somewhere inside it, and Sorokin's people scrambled to send their fortune up and out of a fight they were losing, and the great craft swung its nose toward the open run of the seawall and began to build speed for a sky that would take everything aboard it past reach forever.

Zack did not think about the gold. He understood, in the clear cold place the redline opened in him, that he had never once thought about the gold, that it had never been the thing, and he put the S-600 in line behind the taxiing transport and drove up its lowering ramp into the belly of a craft trying to leave the ground.

Inside it was chaos and stolen sleds and Bear-stock loaders and Emily, strapped into a jump seat against the bulkhead, white, furious, alive, twisting against the belt the second she saw the oxblood gleam come up the ramp with Zack behind the wheel.

"Zack." She had the belt off and was across the cargo bay before a loader could grab her, into the passenger seat of the S-600 over the gold and the blood, her hands on his arm. "Jason. Where is."

"Later." He could not say it. He could not say it and drive.  
"Hold on."

The transport had taken too much. The crossfire had walked rounds across its skin and into something that mattered, and Zack felt the floor of the bay pitch and tilt as the craft hauled itself off the runway at a bad angle, climbing, wrong, the open cargo ramp at the back of it a falling square of seawall and floodlight and war.

He turned the car around in the rising bay.

"What are you doing," Emily said.

"Getting out." Zack lined the heavy nose of the S-600 on the open ramp and the runway dropping away below. "Same as you always wanted. Same as me." He looked at her once.  
"Hold on."

He floored it. The armored saloon came off the pitching deck and out the back of a climbing transport into thirty feet of open air, and for one long second the hum was everything, the note under the metal and the whole zone he had heard his entire driving life singing through the floor of a falling car, and then the S-600 came down onto the runway hard enough to fold its suspension and slide on three corners through a curtain of sparks, and Zack held the wheel and rode it out, and behind them the crippled transport reached for a sky it could not hold, and stalled, and came down onto the far end of the seawall in a long tearing wreck of an

oligarch's stolen fortune scattering across the runway in the floodlights.

The S-600 stopped. The engine ticked. Emily was breathing hard beside him and her hand was crushing his and they were both alive.

The cops worked the wreck in the gray before dawn, and Zack stood at the edge of it with Emily under his arm and watched a thing he could not have built on purpose if he had tried.

Vale was finished. They had him on the seawall in restraints, and the gold was everywhere, spilled out of split duffels across a runway in front of fifty Monitor Central officers and an oligarch and a drone-feed already running it live to the whole spread, a fortune nobody could un-see, a theft nobody could file dark. Sorokin's machine had stalled with its tribute on fire. The Surface of it lay cracked open in the floodlights for anyone to read.

And Dolan stood in the middle of his own people with nothing left.

Zack watched the cop understand it. Every officer on that seawall was looking at Chris Dolan as the man who had cracked the biggest boost ring in the history of the spread, and there was only one story the cop could tell that let him

keep the badge and the commendation and his neck, and it was not the true one.

Dolan came over. He did not have the gun anymore. He had the smile, the beat-presence, the amiable man in the room, and he put a hand on Zack's shoulder for the cameras and said, loud, warm, for the officers and the drone-feed both, "This is my man. Worked it from the inside for me all season. Undercover, deep cover, no paper because that is how deep it went." He squeezed Zack's shoulder. His eyes were flat and cold and they told the truth under the words, that the cop hated him, and would always hate him, for the freedom he was about to hand him by accident. "Cleanest record in the spread. He earned it."

There was never a deal. And now there was, because the only lie that saved the cop was the lie that freed the kid, and Dolan would spend the rest of his life knowing it.

Zack did not say anything. He had learned that from watching better liars than him. He let the cop have his commendation, and let the commendation hand him the one thing the cop had never meant to give, and stepped out from under the hand, and walked Emily off the seawall into the gray light with his record clean and his brother on a table across the spread, gone or not gone, he did not yet know.

Jason was dead for a full minute.

That was what they told Zack, later, when they let him back through the doors. The heart had stopped on the table and stayed stopped for sixty seconds, and then it had started again, the way a stalled engine catches on the last turn of the crank, and now Jason Cavanaugh lay propped in a bed looking somehow more awake than Zack had ever seen him.

"You should see your face," Jason said. His voice was thin and his color was bad and his eyes were lit like a man at the start of something. "I died. They told you. I was gone. A whole minute."

"You were gone." Zack sat down hard in the chair beside the bed. "Do not do that again."

"Are you kidding." Jason laughed, and it did not cost him as much as before, and that was somehow worse. "Zack. There is nothing on the other side of it. I went all the way out and there was nothing there to be scared of." He leaned forward, alight. "Nothing can touch me. I have already done the worst thing the world can do to a person and I came back. I am going to go further than ever. I am going to go everywhere."

Zack looked at his brother and waited for the slowing down, the close call that finally cools a man, and it was not coming. It was never going to come. The man who had never

wanted out had been all the way out and come back wanting in more than ever, and Zack loved him anyway, and was not going to follow him there.

"I am getting out," Zack said.

"I know you are." Jason said it without any sadness, which was its own kind of grace. "You always were. That is the difference between us. You drive to leave." He grinned. "I drive to stay."

Emily found Zack in the corridor outside, in the long gray hour when the med tower ran quiet, and she did not say anything either, which was one of the things he loved about her. She came and stood close, and he put his arms around her, and they held on in the middle of a hallway with her brother alive behind one wall and the whole season behind them.

"I am tired of doing what everybody else wants," she said into his shoulder. "I told you that on a roof. I meant it. I am not going to the Lyceum."

"Where are you going."

"With you. Wherever it is." She pulled back to look at him. "Out."

"Out," Zack said, and the word still meant something, and for the first time all season it was true.

When he pulled her in again, the back of his jacket rode up, and the thing he had carried off the seawall without quite deciding to shifted at the small of his back. A mini duffel, dense and square, the zip half open on a single bar of solid gold, riding against his spine where a coat hid it from everyone but the empty corridor. He had gotten out. He had not gotten out empty-handed. He was at peace with both, and held the girl and did not move.

The bar of gold sat in its duffel against the small of his back, and under the bar, machined into a hollow in the metal that no scanner had ever flagged and no thief had ever found, sealed in a seam below the seam, a sliver of something else lay quiet.

It was the size of a fingernail. It was not gold. It had been put there before the gold, by hands that understood the safest place to hide the cargo was under a cover that everyone would kill for, that a fortune in metal was the perfect disguise for a thing worth more than every fortune on the seawall, that the men chasing the gold would never once think to look beneath it.

It was Lumicite, and it was humming.

It hummed the note Zack had heard his whole driving life, the hum under every redline, the thing he had felt come

up through the floor of a stolen runabout in the Steelreach snow and through the dead block of an armored car in a concrete vault, the frequency in his teeth he had no name for and had called, when he called it anything, the zone.

The boost was never about the gold. The gold was the cover for the thing the gold was hiding. And the best driver in the spread, the no-chip kid who only ever wanted out, the raptor-stock courier who went hot at the redline and never told a soul, stood in a hospital corridor with his arms around the only thing he had gotten out for, and could not hear, an inch from his own spine, the antenna he had been all along still receiving.

The Surface Game was won.

The Deep Game had just started.

*End of Reel Four. End of Season One.*