

TERRA CONFLICTUS 2066

FIELD FICTION // NO. 31 // NOVELLA //
CRIMINAL HANGOUT

PEACOCK HOLIDAY

066

SETTING · LOST ANGELES / BARRICADIA

SPLICE · RAVEN / B-ROLL

Theo Ashe films everything for the Warranty Void channel, an instinct installed by a state and repurposed for an audience, and one Saturday the lens finds the biggest story it will ever get: the missing heir to Fairwater Coastal, loose in Barricadia with a bounty climbing by the hour and one signature, due at nine the next morning, that will sign away a district's water for good. It would be the best cut of Theo's life. Some things need a witness instead of an audience.

PART ONE — GET THE PEACOCK OFF THE STREET

THE WHITE COAT

The market on a Saturday yields about ninety usable seconds an hour, and Theo harvests them from the top of a dead transformer box, knees up, elbows in, lens resting on one kneecap like it grew there. Channel B-roll. Stall awnings breathing in the heat. A filter dealer's hands doing the three-cup shuffle for an audience of none. Blessing Okonkwo's voice arrives from two rows over without losing any of its consonants, pricing a bolt of cloth and a grown man's excuses in the same sentence.

Below and to the left, Ozzy is working the family stall in full Saturday voice, which is three voices. He starts a sentence selling a tour shirt to a courier, hands the middle of it to a regular in market patter, and lands the end on a tourist in the smooth register he thinks of as corporate and everyone else thinks of as his mother's phone manner.

"Original run, you feel the ink, that's a raised cure, you don't get that from a heat press, Tomas, tell her about the wash test, forty washes, zero cracking, ma'am I will guarantee it in writing on the receipt I am legally unable to give you."

Theo files the line for the channel. Twelve seconds, keeper.

Then two people come up the row wrong.

Everyone in a market moves like water finding a level: drift, stall, eddy, drift. These two move like a survey. Gray tailoring with no district in it, heads sweeping metered arcs, and they hold their line when the crowd bends, so the crowd bends around them, and the

crowd notices that it has to. Twenty years of being built to notice things notices for Theo before Theo gets a vote.

They pan left, and that's when the white coat enters the viewfinder.

It comes through the crowd at a speed the coat was never cut for, worth more than everything else in frame including the stalls, and inside it is a person doing an impression of a person browsing. The impression is terrible. They pick up one of Ozzy's shirts and hold it backwards, label out, the way you'd hold evidence.

Ozzy does not miss a beat. Ozzy adds a beat.

"There you are." Full warmth, zero hesitation, a hand already turning the stranger by the shoulder to face the racks, coat swallowed under one of Marco's ink aprons in a motion Theo has watched him practice on drunk friends. "I held the medium. You said Thursday, you meant Thursday, I know what you meant, try it against your shoulders, not your chest, your shoulders."

The stranger, to their enormous credit, holds the shirt against their shoulders.

The gray tailoring reaches the stall. Pauses. Reads a market stall wearing its Saturday crowd: a matriarch's voice rolling in from two rows over, a kid in an apron bullying a customer about sizing, nothing that photographs like a runaway. They hold formation past the awning and are gone up the row, and the crowd unbends behind them with a sound like a held breath being spent.

The stranger sets down the shirt and looks at Ozzy with an expression Theo will later log as the exact moment the day went off its rails: pure, unguarded delight, from a face that learned its guard somewhere expensive.

"Thursday," the stranger says. "Of course. I'm so sorry I'm late."

*

* * *

Theo comes down off the transformer box, because the lens wants the face and the ladder of honest reasons for pointing it stops at the box's edge.

Up close the face does what faces almost never do to Theo: it files itself. Feed society coverage, the soft-lit kind that plays in arcology lobbies. *Allocation Hour*. A succession promo that ran verified-only, wall to wall, for a week in the spring: coastal desal assets, a family trust, an heir photographed at a gala the way furniture is photographed for insurance. Fairwater. The heir apparent of Fairwater Coastal is standing at the Okonkwo-Cruz stall in a borrowed ink apron, and exactly one person in this market knows it, and that person is holding a camera.

The artifact assembles itself in Theo's head without permission. Cold open: the sweep team parting the crowd. Title card, hand-lettered, italic lowercase: *the peacock episode*. Runtime four minutes. The channel's biggest number ever, and it isn't close, and the channel's numbers are the rent, the parts, Cas's firmware fund, all of it. Theo runs the whole cut start to finish in the time it takes to kneel and fake a battery check, and says nothing, and keeps rolling.

"Okay," Ozzy is saying, apron duty done, commerce reasserting itself. "The shirt's on hold, holds cost nothing, that's the last free thing today. What'd they want?" A nod up the row, where the tailoring went.

"To help me," the stranger says.

"Yeah, they had real helpful shoulders." Ozzy's eyes do the estimate. Theo watches it happen, the thing Ozzy does not know he does, the thing no one is allowed to point at: his hand drifts to the price gun on the stall table and clicks it once, involuntary, a cricket noise, and his mouth starts moving through the stranger's outfit top

to bottom. "Coat's a Verrell cut, that's forty-one hundred retail, lining pushes it, call it forty-two even. Boots are handmade, that's eight, eight-fifty. The band," and here the register changes, quieter, one degree less performance, "the band's not for sale anywhere, is it."

"Forty-two forty," the stranger says.

Ozzy stops.

"The coat. The lining's hand-finished, there's about two hundred in labor you're not seeing at the hem." They say it the way Cas states torque values. Then, as if confessing: "I got bored at a fitting once and asked."

The silence that follows lasts as long as a price tag takes to reload. Theo knows what it is. It's Ozzy meeting a stranger who does the math out loud, and deciding, on the spot, in the middle of a market that is currently being swept for this exact person, that they are coming home for dinner.

Two stalls down, a kid with a vertical phone is filming the crowd for the Feed, spray and pray, any face is a lottery ticket. The lens crosses the stall. Theo clocks it, and files that too, in the other folder, the one that isn't a cut yet.

"Okay," Ozzy says. "Here's the thing about today. Today has a vibe problem, and you're it. I know a place with terrible coffee and no cameras." He hooks a thumb at Theo. "That second part's a lie, there's a lot of cameras, but they're all theirs, and theirs don't call anybody."

The stranger looks at Theo for the first time. Looks at the lens, actually, first, and then finds the person attached to it, which is the correct order and almost nobody performs it.

"Do they not," the stranger says.

Theo, who has said nothing all scene, doesn't start now. Theo just shrugs the lens down, and the three of them go up the row against the grain.

*

NOW YOU ARE NOBODY

Eleven blocks, and Ozzy talks for ten of them, a guided tour with no admission fee and no exit. The stranger walks wrong for the district, too much center, not enough drift, and corrects it by watching Ozzy's feet, which Theo notes and declines to think about yet.

At the garage, Danka is outside, wiping her hands on a rag that makes them dirtier, and she takes one look at the situation and walks the block. All the way around. Comes back ninety seconds later from the other direction, having seen whatever the block had to say, and says, "Parking," to no one, and rolls the door up.

Inside smells like a swimming pool and dinner, which is how every person who leaves and comes back describes it, in exactly those words. The stranger stops two steps in and breathes it, audibly, and their face does the delight thing again, and Theo catches it, out of habit, in the folder that isn't a cut. Isn't going to be a cut. Is probably not going to be a cut.

Cas comes off the bench with the wand already in her hand, because a stranger crossed the threshold and there is a checklist for that. She runs it collar to boots, unhurried, reading.

"Your band is transmitting on six services," she says. "Location, biometrics, payment authority, three I would have to look up. It has been logged forty-one times since the standpipe corner. Two of those logs were queries, not routine, which means someone is pulling your trace by hand." She lowers the wand and delivers the diagnosis with no english on it at all. "You are a person made of alarms."

"They're for my safety," the stranger says.

"They are working," Cas says. "Everyone knows exactly where you are."

Then she holds out one flat hand, and with the other produces, from the second pouch she touches, a gray sleeve the exact size of the problem: waterproof, shielded, the sort of thing a person keeps stocked for reasons they decline to give. The stranger looks at the hand, and at the sleeve, and understands what's being offered, and works the clasp their own fingers have clearly never operated, and lays the band in Cas's palm like a surrendered weapon. It goes into the sleeve. The sleeve seals with a sound like a small door.

"There," Cas says. "Now you are nobody."

The stranger laughs, one bright note, and swallows it when nobody joins. It isn't a joke. It's Tuesday, for them. Wolf-eared and flat-eyed, Danka leans on Civilian's fender, arms crossed, and gives her verdict a beat late, one word, no heat in it.

"Peacock."

"Yes," the stranger says. Just that. Owning it, and Theo sees the beat land on Danka and register: one huff, gone.

"Wren," the stranger adds, to the room, first name only, offered like a card with one side blank. Cas visibly files the blank side. Nobody pushes. Theo, who could fill it in, perches on the back of the good chair and doesn't.

And then Wren says the thing that sets the clock on the whole day, still cheerful, the cheer of someone reading their own sentence aloud.

"I should say. Tomorrow at nine there's a stage with my name on it, and a document, and after I sign it my time belongs to people who bill it in six-minute increments forever. So." They look around the dead water plant, at the pipe runs and the tanks and the pegboard

outlined in paint pen, and for a second the guard comes all the way down. "I have until morning, and I'd like to see everything."

The silence in the garage lasts three seconds. Theo counts it, professionally.

Nobody says yes. Nobody decides anything, out loud, at all. What happens instead is that Grigor's voice comes through the kitchen doorway, slow and complete, backlit copper.

"Lunch is in forty minutes. Somebody show our guest where we wash up."

And a sixth bowl comes down off the shelf with a sound like a gavel.

Wren drifts toward the table, and toward the one chair that faces the door, and the room's temperature drops half a degree; Danka is already moving, and Grigor, without appearing to move at all, is somehow between Wren and the chair with a stack of bowls that need carrying, and Wren ends up seated with their back to the wall like family, and never knows what almost happened, and Theo gets none of it on camera because Theo's hands, it turns out, are not on the camera.

That's the part Theo sits with, after, on the chair back, in the gray of bay two, while the kitchen makes kitchen sounds.

Every artifact needs an ending, and the peacock episode is missing one. That's the note in the edit-room part of Theo's head, the part that was installed by a state and repurposed for a channel, the part that is always, always running. Cold open, sweep team, title card, the pricing bit, the wand bit, the bowl. It cuts like a dream up to minute three and then it needs the thing an ending is: a cost, landed on someone, on camera.

The honest version of the thought arrives underneath, flat and fast, in Theo's own inside voice, the one that never makes the cards:

Somebody's going to pay for this day. Frame it now or frame it never.

Theo frames nothing. Keeps the lens bagged through lunch. Tells nobody who's eating with their back to the wall. Files the whole hour in the folder that isn't a cut, and lets the fridge compressor and the Ring Road wash and Grigor's stove play the show's actual theme, and starts, quietly, professionally, without permission, to build the day an ending anyway.

.066

PART TWO — THE BEST DAY

NO CHIP

The problem with money, Ozzy explains on the walk back to the market, is that Wren's doesn't work.

"Your band pays for things by announcing you paid for things. Every tap is a flare. So today you're broke." He says it with the deep satisfaction of a man handing over a gift he made himself.

"Congratulations. You're no chip. First day's the hardest."

"I have a coat," Wren says.

"You have inventory," Ozzy says, and cracks his knuckles.

What happens over the next hour is, by any honest accounting, a crime spree conducted entirely through legal barter, and Theo shoots all of it, because it is the best material the channel has ever seen and the folder it's going into doesn't have a name yet. The coat comes off at a tailor's stall and becomes credit. The credit fissions. A share of it comes back as a dead-faction work jacket with somebody else's unit ghosts on the sleeves, and Wren puts it on like borrowed confidence, and then, one stall on, a share of it becomes boots that have already done somebody a decade of walking. At the fourth stall Ozzy performs the ceremony he clearly planned the whole route around: from under the family table, from his own stock, a GENE FORGED REUNION TOUR shirt, print lifted, colors half a register off.

"Authentic bootleg," he says, holding it out flat across both arms. "There's maybe two hundred of these in the spread and I printed all of them. This is realer than the real one. The real one's merch. This is culture."

"How much," Wren says, learning.

"For you? One coat lining." He's already cutting the hand-finished lining out of the tailor's deal with a stall knife and total moral confidence. "Two hundred in labor you're not even seeing at the hem. Somebody told me that."

By mid-afternoon the person walking between Ozzy and Theo does not photograph as a peacock. They photograph as a district kid with good posture, and the posture is going too, dissolving block by block into the market's drift, and Theo, panning off the crowd to reframe, catches themselves doing a thing they only notice because twenty years of training screams when a parameter moves: they've stopped shooting Wren like a subject. Center-punched, held at arm's length, observed. Somewhere in the last four stalls the framing went loose and close and warm, over-shoulder, inside the group.

Crew framing.

Theo files that under *problems, later*, and does not correct the framing.

The christening happens at the mouth of the alley off the cloth row, where a Jaguario kid is laying fresh flicker-paint over a mural that is itself over an older mural that is itself over quake scars, the whole wall a stack of survivals. Wren stands too close, watching the colors chase the brush, asks the kid what it's called, and gets, instead of an answer, a flick of the wrist, professional, deliberate, delivered deadpan: a stripe of wet flicker across the borrowed jacket's shoulder that will shift colors for as long as the jacket lives.

Ozzy inhales like a congregation.

"You can't buy that," he says, reverent. "People have tried."

*

· · ·

The queue at the standpipe is nine people long when they get back, because the heat has leaned into the afternoon and the garage runs ten degrees cooler than the street and everybody knows it. Wren joins the line.

Nobody asks them to. That's the part Theo nearly misses, changing a battery in the shade of the roll-up door: Wren walks past the open garage they are now, apparently, entitled to enter, and takes a place at the back of the queue behind a woman with two containers and a kid asleep standing up, because in Wren's world you do not skip a line you have not bought.

The queue notices. The queue says nothing. The queue moves up one.

Theo shoots it from the hip, sixty seconds, no cuts: the heir to the coast's water waiting their turn at the last free tap on it, and at the end of the minute a paper cup, filled, drunk slow, and Wren closing their eyes at the taste of the thing their family sells.

It is the best sixty seconds Theo has ever shot. Theo knows exactly two things about it before the lens is even down: that it would put the channel's numbers through the roof of the spread, and that it can never, ever run.

The murmur happens there, at the tap. Marisol Vega has come across the alley with her monthly folder under her arm, early for rent or late for lunch, and she stops at the head of the queue the way weather stops, and she looks at Wren for exactly as long as it takes a person to read a surname in a face. Sixty-one years in this district. Nineteen of them logging water figures in grease pencil for a co-op that a failed filter batch and somebody's allocation mathematics put in the ground.

Wren, cup in hand, looks back. Polite. Unknowing. Knowing something.

"The rent's the same," Vega says, to Grigor, who has appeared in the doorway with flour on his forearms, and she does not look at Wren again, and it lands on the alley like a verdict nobody heard the charges for.

So that's two, Theo thinks, flat, fast, from behind the bagged lens. Two of us in this alley know, and neither of us is telling.

"Cutaway," Theo murmurs, out loud, to nobody, at their own interior, and ducks back under the roll-up door.

*

The roof at four o'clock is the flattest, brightest, most illegal picnic ground in Barricadia, and Grigor sends them all up there with a hamper because the kitchen has reached the stage of the sauce where witnesses cause failure. Bay blankets. The Ring Road wash below like surf that learned to merge. Cas comes up last with a plate in one hand and the overflight schedule in her head, and she surveys the roofline once and says, "Seventeen minutes," and sits, and starts eating to a deadline nobody else respects.

The farce, when it arrives, arrives on schedule. It's Cas's voice that changes first, mid-sentence, no louder: "Overflight in forty seconds. Sensor cluster, light, optical only. Flat objects read as roofline. People read as people." A beat while the crew keeps chewing. "Flat is better."

What follows is four professionals and a peacock achieving flatness on a roof in fourteen seconds while holding plates, and it should be nothing, it's a Tuesday, the drones pass every twenty-two minutes and the crew has been not-being-people for years. What makes it the thing Theo will remember from the whole afternoon is Wren: spread-eagled between the hamper and the parapet, plate

balanced on their sternum, watching the drone's slow crossing with their whole face open, and laughing. Not at the absurdity. At the window. At living, for one rotation of a sensor cluster, on a schedule the drone doesn't know they're keeping.

"Forty-one times a day," Wren says, to the sky, while the cluster shrinks toward Center Point, "something logs me, and I have never once been allowed to hide from it. This is the first time it's a game."

"It is not a game," Cas says, horizontal, fork upright, eating. "It is a window with rules. The rules are just better than yours."

Wren turns their head against the roof to look at her. "Mine came with the genome," they say, lightly, the way you hand someone a knife handle-first.

Cas chews. Swallows. Considers the offered handle.

"Mine came with a batch number," she says. "The company is gone. The paperwork survived it." Then, precisely, closing the drawer: "The sauce is better than the bread. Tell Grigor the opposite."

The drone finishes its arc. Five people and a guest reinflate. Nobody says anything about the exchange, least of all the two who had it, and Theo lies there one extra beat with the lens bagged and the sky empty and thinks, in edit-room grammar, against all professional instinct: *no cut. Let it run.*

*

THE BOUNTY COUNTER

Dusk comes down on the market with the awnings and the first bar signs, and they walk back into it because Grigor needs onions at scale and Wren has never haggled and wants to lose at it, and that's where the day's floor gives way, in two movements, thirty seconds apart.

The first movement is silence. The allocation board over the cloth row, which has read the same three lines all day, flickers and re-sorts: WESTERN CORRIDOR ALLOCATION ADJUSTMENT, OUTER DISTRICTS, EFFECTIVE MONDAY 06:00, and then the number, and the number is smaller. The market doesn't gasp. Markets don't. It goes quiet in one breath, a whole street of hands pausing over a whole street of scales, everyone reading the same four words and doing the same arithmetic about containers and children and the week, and then the noise comes back up a tone lower and doesn't recover.

Theo watches Wren instead of the board, because Theo watches faces for a living, and Theo sees it clean: Wren isn't surprised.

Wren reads the board like a person checking a watch against a train they already knew was coming. And then Wren looks down at their own hands, one of which is holding the paper cup they never threw away, and says nothing, and looks up, and the guard is back, and the whole transaction takes two seconds, and one other person in the market catches it. Grigor, bag of onions against his chest like a sandbag, is looking at Wren with a stillness deeper than the bear head's standing stillness, which on Grigor is an expression, and the heavy jaw parts, slow, and closes, and he defers it. Hands Wren the onions to carry instead. Keeps the peace. Lets it fester on his watch.

The second movement is Ozzy's phone.

It's already out, it's always out, and his thumb stops moving, and his voice does the thing his voice never does, which is drop all three registers at once and come out with none.

"Hey. Hey. So the Feed's got a thing." He turns the screen. "The thing's got a number on it."

The clip is eleven seconds, vertical, spray-and-pray, timestamped this morning: a checkpoint queue, a crowd, and in the corner of it, for maybe forty frames, a white coat. Somebody's recognizer did the

rest. The bounty isn't official, isn't Brightline, isn't anybody: it's crowdsourced, a tip pool with a climbing counter, WHERE IS THE FAIRWATER HEIR, ten thousand names arguing in the replies, and the number underneath ticking up in real time.

"That's..." Ozzy's pricing engine kicks in before his tact does, involuntary, a cricket click of the mouth. "That's four Civilians. That's, no offense, that's a whole crew of augments, that's..." He stops himself with an actual physical effort, hand over his own sternum. "Why does the Feed think the Fairwater heir is in Barricadia?"

Nobody answers.

Because the answer is standing next to him holding onions, wearing his bootleg, flicker-christened, water-blessed, invisible right up until this second, and going, very quietly, the color of the concrete.

"Wren," Ozzy says. Slowly, for him. "Wren what?"

And it's Danka, who has said maybe eleven words all afternoon, who doesn't ask Wren anything. She turns and looks at Theo. Straight down the barrel of the lens Theo isn't even holding, with a wolf's talent for knowing where the watching is coming from, and reads the guilt at the exact depth where Theo keeps it filed, and her ears go flat, and she doesn't raise her voice at all.

"You knew."

Not a question. The market noise carries on around the little pocket of stillness the six of them are standing in.

"Since the stall," Theo says. First full sentence of the day. Flat, fast, nowhere to go but true.

The crew does the math Theo has been dreading since minute one, and it comes out exactly as bad as budgeted: not *you lied*, nobody says *you lied*, because Theo not-saying things is load-bearing and everybody knows it. What Danka says instead, engine-grammar,

level, each word its own piston stroke, is the other thing. The plan she can smell.

"You were cutting it."

A beat.

"The whole day. You were cutting it."

Theo doesn't answer.

"Channel stays dark," Danka says. "Nothing posts. Not a frame."

And Theo, who agrees, who has agreed since the standpipe, who dropped the best sixty seconds they ever shot into a folder that will never see the Feed, discovers that the beak won't say it. The beak of the person who was built for an audience parts on the sentence *I know, I already decided*, and what comes out, after a cut that ends before arriving anywhere sincere, is:

"Signal's better at the garage."

Everyone hears that it is not the same sentence.

They walk home in the dark with the onions and a fugitive, and the bounty counter climbs behind them all the way up the row, in every phone in every hand, like the tide coming in on a coast the family also owns.

PART THREE — RACE WEEKEND

CAMOUFLAGE PHYSICS

The argument happens at the garage over the remains of a cold dinner nobody sat down for, and Ozzy wins it the way he wins everything, by being right in a way that sounds wrong.

"The whole Feed is looking for one face. Where's the one room in the spread where every face is working? Where looking hard at somebody is the local sport and nobody believes anything they see because everybody came to be seen?" He spreads his hands like a dealer turning the river. "It's race weekend. The Tooth and Gear is wall to wall somebodies. You cannot find a hidden thing in a room where everything is performing. It's camouflage physics."

"It is the opposite of physics," Cas says. But she's already repacking her pouches in club order, touching each one in sequence, which means the plan has been approved at some level below where she argues.

They take Civilian, all six of them, which is a war crime against a car built for one person and her feelings. Wren gets the middle of the back seat, between Grigor and the cookware Grigor will not explain, and spends the ride learning what forty years of Ring Road wash sounds like through a rebuilt engine Danka tuned by ear. Danka circles the High Top block once. Parking.

Inside is bass you feel in your teeth before the door, nectar glowing faint blue in a hundred hands, Razborki's frequencies moving the mural walls, and a crowd packed to the density where movement is a contact sport. The crew's stretch of bar by the service corridor is holding, because it always holds; Grigor chose it in four seconds years ago for reasons involving sightlines and two exits, and

the room long ago stopped asking. Danka takes the end. Faces the door.

And Ozzy's camouflage physics work. That's the thing. They work instantly and they work too well.

Because the room reads Wren in about ninety seconds, and what it reads is not *fugitive*. Wealth recognizes stagecraft. Wren holds a glass they aren't drinking, receives strangers like a receiving line, laughs at the right depth, touches nobody first. The crowd's radar, which is never wrong about status and always wrong about facts, concludes that the crew has brought *somebody*, and the somebody theories start moving down the bar faster than the drinks. A new team owner. A Syndicate audit. A pop star between faces.

By the second round there's a book on it. Theo watches the price move through the wall the way the regulars say you can, a ripple in the corner where The Line lives, and hears the market form: *who is the stray at the Void's rail*. Odds posted. Ozzy, incandescent with joy, immediately tries to bet.

"You can't bet," Cas says. "You possess insider information."

"I possess a *hunch*," Ozzy says, hand on heart. "Legally distinct. No chip on me anyway." He waves at the whole room, at his own joke from this morning making its third lap, and the stranger next to him buys it a drink.

Theo shoots the room and understands, somewhere in the second battery, what their own hands are doing. Not the artifact. The artifact would want faces, the bet, Wren's laugh. What Theo's lens is quietly collecting instead is exits. Sightline to the door. The service corridor's swing pattern. Which shoulders in the crowd don't move with the music. Coverage, in the old sense, the sense the Protectorate meant, and it takes Theo half a set to notice the flip: they are not filming Wren for an audience anymore. They are filming the room for the crew.

The card that will never exist writes itself anyway, italic lowercase, out of pure habit: *alibi reel*.

*

. . .

The courier finds Theo at the dark end of the bar at eleven-forty, and she's maybe ten years old, and she recites, eyes half shut, a memory palace with a runny nose.

"Three things, no charge, courtesy of the house." A breath, sing-song. "One. The room your friend is standing in has twenty-one people in it who file reports, and four have filed. Two. A Kavast liaison logged a civil sighting with Monitor Central at ten fifty-one. By the book. He was thorough. Cited statute." Theo's stomach does something at the shape of that sentence, at the pedantry of it, at how easy it is to hear the voice that dictated the citation. "Three. The family's buyer reached the house tonight. The house knows where the package is standing. The house has not sold." The kid opens her eyes. "The house extends one hour, as a courtesy between professionals. The hour started at eleven-thirty."

Then, because the recitation isn't finished: "The house also says: you have a question. First one's priced the same as always."

Theo looks at the kid. The kid looks back with Frequency's patience wearing a child's face.

Ask who tipped the bounty and the price is one answer, and Theo knows, has known since the last time this dance happened, exactly which answer the house wants confirmed. The one about what wasn't stripped. The one about what Theo still catches, some nights, on the west wind, in the band nobody else hears. The house never threatens. The house prices. And the price of knowing who sold

Wren is confirming what Theo is, on the record, to an entity that files everything forever.

"No question," Theo says.

The kid shrugs, message delivered, and is gone into the crowd at kid height, and Theo stands there for the length of one bass drop doing arithmetic with a dry throat. Then goes to find the crew, and tells them about the hour, and tells them about the twenty-one and the four, and tells them about the liaison and his statute.

Does not tell them what the house offered to sell Theo, or for what. Files it in the folder that is getting very full.

*

The hour dies at half past midnight, and it dies in the service corridor, because that's where Wren is when it dies.

Not alone. Ozzy took them back there to breathe, two minutes off the floor, past the kegs and the crates to the propped door where the corridor gives onto the alley and the night air stands still and cool. So it's Ozzy who's mid-sentence, and Wren who's laughing at whatever it was, when the alley resolves into four people in gray tailoring standing at polite distances, arranged the way furniture movers arrange around a piano.

"Mx. Fairwater." The one who speaks is older, neat, tired in a filed-down way, and he says the name like a line item. "Ellery Quist, Brightline Assurance, contracted to your trust. This is a welfare recovery. No one is in trouble." A gesture, small, at the town car idling at the alley's mouth. "Your family is very worried, and the vehicle is very comfortable, and I'd be grateful if we could do this in the next ninety seconds."

And beside him, half a step back, stands the reason Wren has gone white. Tall, still, silver at the temples, moving not at all in a way that suggests enormous fluency in moving: the leopard. The household's. Wren's. You can read the whole biography in how Wren's breath changes: this is the person who taught them to swim, or to lie, or both.

"Mansa," Wren says.

"You're cold," Mansa says. Four decades of drawing rooms in two words.

What happens next happens fast, and it happens as farce, because this is Barricadia's night out and the district converts everything to spectacle at the speed of rumor.

Ozzy steps into the space between Wren and the piano-movers, mouth first, body second, brain a distant third. "Okay, whoa, hi, quick procedural thing, this alley's actually a licensed venue, there's a cover charge, it's steep..." and one of the gray suits moves to walk him aside, gently, professionally, and it turns out the suit is baseline and Ozzy is Ozzy, so for exactly one glorious second the check his mouth wrote is being contested. Then Mansa crosses four meters in a way Theo's eye can't parse into steps, takes Ozzy's collar and belt with the tenderness of someone bussing a tray, and sets him down on a crate, seated, unharmed, slightly folded, the way you'd put down something you intend to come back for.

"Stay," Mansa says, not unkindly.

Theo is in the propped doorway, and Theo is filming.

That's the terrible true thing about the next three seconds: the composition is perfect. The alley light, the town car's breath in the cold, Wren's face doing its arithmetic between two worlds, Mansa's stillness. The state built an eye and the eye is doing what it was built for, framing the exact moment the story needed, and one second passes, and a suit takes Wren's elbow, courteous as an usher, and a

second second passes, and Wren looks at the doorway, looks straight down the lens at the person behind it, and does not say help, would never say help, says nothing, and the third second passes.

Theo drops the camera.

Not sets it down. Drops it, on its strap, dead weight against the hip, and puts both hands on the propped door and screams down the corridor at the top of a voice nobody at the Tooth and Gear has ever heard raised, in flawless edit-room grammar:

"OI. THE ALLEY. IT'S KICKING OFF."

Camouflage physics, inverted: you cannot keep a hidden thing hidden in a room that came to see something. The service door coughs out bar-backs, then regulars, then a whole eddy of the floor with drinks still in hand, and the alley acquires an audience like a stage, and Razborki, who misses nothing that happens within frequency range of his booth, slides whatever he's playing into something with a spine in it, and somewhere behind Theo money is already moving, because The Line will book anything, and four gray suits in an alley versus the Void is suddenly tonight's undercard.

Quist surveys the developing situation with the expression of a man watching a clause activate. Discretion guaranteed. No public engagement. He has, Theo understands with sudden clarity, a contract that forbids exactly this, and it is costing him the recovery in real time, and he knows it, and his face files the loss without drama.

The town car's engine changes note. And then the alley's far mouth fills with pink.

Civilian arrives sideways through a gap between a dumpster and a bollard that no owner who loves a car would ever submit it to, paint singing against brick, one panel giving up a sound Danko will grieve tomorrow, and stops broadside across the alley like a drawn curtain, driver's window down, wolf ears flat, engine idling in a

language of pure intent. Two sizes too big. The exact wrong size to be argued with.

"We're closed," Danka says, to Quist, to the car, to the concept of the recovery entire.

Quist looks at the audience. At the car. At Mansa, who has not moved to counter any of it, who is standing beside Wren doing visibly, deliberately, nothing, and something passes across Quist's tiredness that might be arithmetic about his own team.

"Noted," Quist says. To Wren, with an accountant's bow: "The offer of the comfortable vehicle stands until six. After that it becomes a different kind of morning." And he withdraws his people like a tide going out, no scene, no charges, defeat filed under operating costs.

Mansa goes last. At the alley's mouth, level with Wren, quiet enough that only Wren and the doorway hear it:

"Not like this."

"Then say when," Wren says, to the leopard's back, and gets nothing, and the night swallows the tailoring, and the crowd, denied a fight, awards the decision to the pink car on style and goes back inside to settle bets.

*

DEPTH GRADUATIONS

The garage at two in the morning is one lit doorway in a large dark building, and nobody can sleep, and Grigor makes tea like it's a load-bearing activity.

It's Wren who asks what's back there, past the kitchen, where the dark is. And it's Grigor who takes the lantern, and doesn't ask anyone's permission, and leads them into the dead plant, down the ladder into the empty settling tank, because he is the only one who

uses the whole building and some rooms are for some conversations. Theo comes too. No camera. Nobody minds.

The tank swallows the lantern and gives it back off wet-cured concrete. Depth graduations climb the wall in stenciled meters, nineteen years of high-water marks penciled beside them in a dead treasurer's hand, and the acoustics do what the acoustics do: a whisper arrives everywhere at once, enormous, and so nobody whispers anything they don't mean.

"Somebody measured what they gave," Wren says, reading the wall. "Every month. For nineteen years."

"It was a water building," Grigor says. "It still is. The people who ran it wrote down what it held, and what it gave, and the difference." He sits on the tank floor with the tea between them like a hearth. And then, slow, complete, the question he has been carrying since a bag of onions: "At the market, the board changed, and you did not."

The tank holds the sentence up to the light for a long moment.

"Thursday," Wren says. "I found it Thursday."

And out it comes, level and quiet and enormous in the acoustics: the succession isn't a stage and a speech, it's a signature, and the signature isn't ceremonial. The trust requires a Fairwater name on the quarterly allocation schedule, has since the build-out, some ancient governance clause nobody ever repealed because the family likes what it implies. Every cut, every adjustment, every Monday 06:00 that lands on a district like a slow flood in reverse, carries a Fairwater signature, and tomorrow at nine, in front of the cameras, with the document already drafted and the schedule already attached, the name becomes Wren's. Monday's number is the first thing their signature will ever do.

"I read the schedule Thursday night," Wren says. "I read what my name is for. And I had a fitting Friday, and a rehearsal, and everyone kept telling me nothing happens if I wait, nothing happens if I ask

questions, nothing happens." A breath. "That's how I knew something does. So this morning I went for a walk."

Theo, in the dark at the tank's edge, does not reach for the camera, and it isn't discipline. That's the new thing, the thing worth logging: it isn't costing anything. Some things need a witness, and a witness is a different job, with different hands, and for one hour in a concrete tank Theo just does the other job, all the way down.

Grigor is quiet for the length of tea. When he answers, it's Compact-slow, warm all the way in, and it is not absolution, because he doesn't deal in it.

"Tomorrow you sign, or you do not sign. That is tomorrow's weight. Tonight you stood in the queue, and you carried the onions, and you drank the water." He refills Wren's cup, steam in lantern light. "The wall does not write down what the water felt about it, only what was given. Start there."

And the last thing, the thing Theo files against the heart where the crew keeps its paper: Wren, looking up the graduated wall toward the hatch and the dark and, eleven blocks over, a district asleep on a number that got smaller, asks the tank generally, "Why does the rent stay the same?"

Nobody answers. Vega's verdict sits in the room with them, unexplained, and the drip, somewhere off in the dead lines, keeps its own count, and wins.

They climb out toward four o'clock. Danka is awake in the kitchen, in the chair that faces the door, and by the stove Cas has already laid the route out in paint pen on butcher paper, because somewhere between the alley and now the crew has arrived, without a meeting, at the thing everyone knew at the sixth bowl: the day isn't over until the peacock is home, and home is on the far side of a membrane, and the membrane has eyes.

"Seven steps," Cas says. "It was nine. I removed two. Wheels up at four-forty."

.066

PART FOUR — THE RUN DARK

MARGIN

Four-forty, and the plan has seven steps, and Cas briefs it off the butcher paper with a straightedge she does not need.

"Steps one through three: surface to the Barricadia mouth, enter the tunnels on the maintenance credential, hold lane two behind the four-fifty freight convoy, which masks our axle count. Step four: the grid re-authentication node at the Center Point junction accepts the credential and we run dark to the core-side branch. Steps five through seven: surface, one drone window, the membrane. Questions."

"What was steps eight and nine," Ozzy says, from under a blanket in the back seat, "in the version with nine."

"Margin," Cas says, and folds the paper.

The tunnels at this hour are a throat that hums. Sodium light in strips, sensor pylons ticking past like fence posts, the freight convoy ahead of them a wall of automated cargo minding its own manifest, and Civilian tucked in its wake, running quiet, one damaged panel whistling a note Danka's jaw is clenched against. Wren rides the middle seat wrapped in Grigor's coat, watching the pylons, and Theo rides the far corner with the camera bagged in their lap, strap wound twice around a wrist, which is not where a camera lives when it's working. It's where a camera lives when it's luggage.

Step four kills them at the Center Point junction.

No drama to it. A pylon they've passed a hundred times holds its light half a second too long, and Cas's screen repaints, and the credential that was accepted at the mouth is now, per the node, seventeen days expired, because somewhere in the small print of a

firmware the city updated for public safety, grace periods stopped being a courtesy.

"Credential bounced," Cas says. "Node has flagged the lane. Lockdown protocol gives us..."

The screen gives her the number. The number is not a good number.

And then: three seconds of exact silence. The crew knows it, rides it, counts it the way you count a wave you intend to duck under. Danka's hands soften on the wheel. Grigor's arm settles across the seat back like a bulkhead. And Wren, who has known these people for less than a day, catches on mid-silence, and Theo watches them physically decide not to fill it, hold the decision, white-knuckled, honoring a ritual they were never taught.

"Contingency," Cas says, second three. "Dead branch, four hundred meters back, pre-lockdown gate, it will read us out as a maintenance return. It surfaces at the Raze margin. From there: overland to the Ring Road ramp, one window, nine minutes of it, and the membrane." A breath, precise as everything else about her. "The branch is unlit and unmaintained and I have walked it once."

"Parking," Danka says, already reversing at a speed reverse was not designed to discuss.

The dead branch is a tunnel the city forgot it dug, and Civilian takes it on faith and headlights, and then the world tilts up and they surface into the Raze margin, and the Raze at five in the morning is the moon with rebar. Tilted slabs. Rubble dunes. A horizon of ruin going gray at its eastern edge, and no drones, because there is nothing here to watch, and no road, because there is nothing here to drive on, and Danka drives on it anyway.

The car pays. Cratered terrain eats at the undercarriage in fists and the whistling panel graduates to a moan, and Danka threads slab to slab reading the rubble like a river pilot while Cas recalculates

aloud in complete sentences, unhurried, a metronome for the violence: "Bear left of the standing tooth. The window opens in six minutes. Speed is now more useful than the suspension." Grigor braces Wren with one arm and the cookware with the other. Ozzy, blanket abandoned, is narrating quietly to his own mother by voice note, mid-crisis, as canon and custom require: "...so we're off-road, ma, don't worry, it's fine, the car's making a new sound but Danka says sounds are information..."

And Wren laughs.

It arrives from underneath, ragged and real, shaken loose one crater at a time, and it doesn't stop, and it isn't panic. Theo knows the taxonomy of laughs the way Cas knows part numbers. This is the other one. This is a person being spent, for once, like everyone else gets spent: bruised on a bad seat in a dying suspension with strangers who came for them, costing something, paying it themselves.

They hit the Ring Road ramp with the window at nine minutes, and Danka pours what's left of the car onto the cleanest, fastest, most surveilled asphalt in the spread, and for eight of those nine minutes the run is beautiful. Empty lanes. The seawall lights strung out to the left. Glass Forest rising ahead out of its own glow, towers shadowing towers, and the whole city holding its breath in the gap between drones. Nobody speaks. The engine does.

They exit the window with fourteen seconds of it unspent, coasting into the checkpoint approach at a law-abiding crawl, and Cas looks at the fourteen seconds on her screen the way other people look at photographs of their families.

"Margin," she says, to no one, and allows herself to close the screen.

*

* * *

The core-to-outer membrane at five-fifty is a scatter of empty lanes and light like a refrigerator's, and there is exactly one figure standing on the core side of the pedestrian gate, and the gate, which should be shut until six, is open.

Mansa, holding it. Doing visibly, deliberately, nothing else.

Off to the side idles the comfortable vehicle, and beside it Ellery Quist is doing paperwork on the hood, actual paper, at ten to six in the morning, with great devotion, having decided not to look up for the next several minutes and to have a documented reason why. It is, Theo understands, the entire settlement: no recovery, no scene, no report of a gate that opened early.

Civilian stops. Six people get out of a car built for one, which takes a while and has never once looked dignified, and the goodbye happens the way the crew does everything.

Grigor hands over a cloth bundle that weighs like bricks and smells like the kitchen. "You will not eat today. They will schedule your eating. This is for after the schedule."

Cas unseals the gray sleeve and holds it out, and Wren works the band back onto their wrist, and somewhere in six services a person made of alarms comes back online at the exact threshold where being findable means being home. "Your firmware is a decade newer than mine and half as honest," Cas tells the band, by way of farewell.

Ozzy goes last, because he's been building to it all night. From inside his jacket, flat and stiff and laminated against a water building's whole opinion of paper: a receipt. Handwritten, both sides, five signatures at the bottom, the top line reading, in his best stall capitals, GUARANTEE, ISSUED IN WRITING, ONE (1) DAY, ALL SALES FINAL. The rest of it is dense and nobody reads it aloud

and Wren doesn't either, just holds it in both hands and reads the first lines and stops being able to.

"Forty washes," Ozzy says, thick. "Zero cracking. I said I'd put it in writing."

Wren laminates nothing, guards nothing, lets the whole face happen in front of six people and a checkpoint camera. Then they put the receipt inside their shirt, against the heart, where the crew keeps its paper, and nobody comments.

"You never posted anything today," Wren says. To Theo.

"Nothing to post," Theo says. "Slow day."

Wren studies them a moment, heir's eyes, the appraising look off the succession promos, and then does the worst possible thing and lets it soften. "The house told your courier there were twenty-one watchers in that room," they say. "There were twenty-two. Yours was the only one I never minded."

"Cutaway," Theo murmurs, and Wren, who has known them twenty hours, laughs, and lets it be the goodbye.

Danka says nothing at all. But as Wren passes her, Wren stops and says, gravely, "I'm told I still owe for parking," and it takes the whole beat, the full canonical beat, and then the huff arrives, once, and Danka reaches out and squares the collar of the borrowed jacket with two hooked fingers, one motion, done.

Wren walks the empty lane wearing a dead faction's jacket over a bootleg shirt, flicker-stripe shifting on one shoulder, a paper cup from a free tap folded flat in one pocket, and a laminated receipt against the heart, carrying bricks of food toward a tower with their name on it. At the gate, level with Mansa, they stop. The distance home does something to their spine; Theo watches the posture come back on like the band did, service by service.

"When," Wren says. Not a question mark in it. An appointment being made.

Mansa looks down the lane at the crew, at the car, at the paperwork still being devotedly not-looked-up-from, and then at the person they taught to swim, or to lie, or both.

"When you've signed," Mansa says, "and you own a pen worth the argument."

The gate closes. Quist finishes his form, initials it, and looks up at last, at Danka, at the panel moaning against Civilian's frame, and inclines his head half a degree: professionals, about margins. Then the comfortable vehicle swallows the gray tailoring and the membrane is just lanes again, and behind the eastern towers the sixth of the morning's twenty-two-minute windows opens on schedule over a city that never found out what it was looking for.

*

THE RENT ' S THE SAME

The garage, Sunday, nine in the morning. The kitchen screen is propped against the flour tin, and Allocation Hour is live from a Glass Forest stage that looks like the inside of a glacier, and five people who have not slept are watching it with the door rolled down.

The signature takes four seconds. Wren's hand doesn't shake. The document scrolls its schedule beneath the pen in a font too fine for the pool feed, and the anchors call it a generational moment, and it is, though not the generation they mean. Then Wren steps to the lectern, thanks the board, thanks the family, and looks into the pool camera with the guard all the way up, flawless, laminated, and says:

"I'm told a signature is only a name in the right place. I've had recent cause to study the right places." A pause exactly the length of a market breath. "The city was generous with its time. I intend to return it."

In the kitchen, Ozzy makes a sound like a kettle. Grigor turns the stove down. Danka, leaning on the doorframe, huffs one beat late. Cas watches the document scroll and says, "Frame-hunters will find the schedule in the feed by Tuesday," to no one, filing it.

Theo isn't watching the screen. Theo is at the bench with the day's cards spread out and the cut already made.

It assembled itself start to finish, four minutes ten: the sweep parting the crowd, the medium held since Thursday, the pricing bit, the wand and the sleeve, the queue, sixty seconds unbroken at the tap, the roofline going flat, the alley, the pink curtain drawn across it, the tank, the wall, the laugh in the Raze with the suspension dying underneath it. Title card, hand-lettered, italic lowercase: *the peacock holiday*. Final card. Stinger. Bumper. Out at 4:10. The best work of Theo's life, rendered, mastered, complete, and the truest shot in it is the one Theo didn't take, three seconds long, in a service corridor, and no audience will ever be able to tell them otherwise.

Theo drags the whole build onto the drive where the crew's unposted life lives, into the folder that has had a name all along, and ejects it, and wraps the cable, and the channel stays dark, and the silence of a head with nobody else in it sits there being, for once, on a Sunday morning that smells like a swimming pool and breakfast, not the worst thing. Five people are quieter and worse at it, somewhere behind the kitchen doorway, being loud.

Danka sets a coffee at the bench's edge on her way past. Reads the title card upside down, where it sits face-up on the spread. Says nothing. Huffs, a beat late, gone.

*

· · ·

Monday, six in the morning, the number gets smaller, exactly as scheduled, and Barricadia does what Barricadia does: containers come out, the queue at the alley standpipe doubles by seven, and the district settles in to drink what it can clean itself.

Tuesday, a courier finds the garage. The envelope is heavy stock, no sender, and it is addressed, in engraved lettering that cost more than the courier's shoes, to THE BARRICADIA RECLAIM CO-OP, RECLAIM SUB 3, THE WASH. An organization that has not existed for six years, at a building that officially does not clean water, under a name only the district uses.

Grigor carries it, unopened, eleven blocks, to a garage bar with teeth on the wall and one exit, and puts it on the table where Marisol Vega has sat on the same night of the month for twenty-five years, and stands there with his hands folded while she reads it. A standing allocation variance, effective immediately, renewed in perpetuity: independent water reclamation, Barricadia, exempted from adjustment schedules. No signature line. The authorizing code is new, and it is nobody's, and anybody could have issued it who happened to own a pen worth the argument.

Vega reads it twice. Folds it. Looks at the screen above the bar, where the race replay is running with the sound off, and then at Grigor, and for the length of one ceiling-fan rotation the last treasurer of the Reclaim Co-op is sixty-one years old with wet eyes in a quiet room, and then she puts the paper in her folder with the rent ledgers, where it becomes, like everything else in this district, infrastructure.

"Tell your crew," she says, "the rent's the same."

Wednesday, the heat leans in again, and the queue is nine people long by mid-morning, and a woman with two containers and a kid asleep standing up moves up one, and the cup is paper, and the

water is cold, and nobody in the line knows a single thing about the paperwork.

The tap runs.

.066