

FIELD FICTION

THE VERTICAL



TERRA CONFLICTUS

JESSE ALEXANDER

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A NOVELLA

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Flow follows function.

—Wire

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PART I
LOOKING UP

CHAPTER 1

THE KITCHEN

The supply runner was two hours late, the south grow bank had lost a ballast, and fifty-three people had come to eat a meal intended for forty.

Maya counted them without pointing.

The Gallo family occupied the near end of the first table, five tonight because their oldest boy had come back from whatever trouble had kept him away. Six maintenance workers steamed inside orange rain skins by the loading doors. Nine children moved through the room in shifting configurations, though only eight had been present when Maya last checked. Deshi sat where he always sat, at the end of the second table with a clear view of the stove, prepared to supervise everyone while pretending to mind his own business. Near the entrance, a woman held a sleeping toddler beneath her coat.

Fifty-three lives, each trailing needs that touched other needs.

Maya lifted the lid from the largest pot. Steam dampened her face and gathered in the loose curls along her temples. Beneath it, onions and garlic softened into broth, joined by the heel of a smoked pepper she had been saving for the weekend. Real food. Things that had once been seed, then root, then leaf or flesh. Things that had required light, water, decay, patience, and hands.

The pot was three-quarters full.

Ren appeared beside her, wiping his fingers on an apron already wet from the sink. He was sixty-four, narrow as a length of old pipe, with a face the Wet had worked on for years without managing to dissolve.

"Say it," he murmured.

"It'll stretch."

"That's what you're doing. Not what you're thinking."

Maya passed him the tasting spoon. "Useful distinction."

She left before he could answer.

The kitchen occupied a warehouse that had been abandoned midway through the city's last street-level restoration program. There were still shipping codes stenciled high on one wall, marking crates of atmospheric scrubber parts that had never arrived. Maya had sealed the loading bays with reclaimed panels and turned the inventory cage into dry storage. Raised beds ran beneath grow lights hung from chains. Basil, tomatoes, beans, and peppers leaned green and improbable above a floor stained by machines that had died before most of the children were born.

A recycled-water line dripped into a dented pan behind the flour bins.

Everything in the Wet learned to drip. Pipes sweated. Concrete wept. Rain entered through the seams between arcologies and collected rust, coolant, and chemical residue as it fell. The planners had promised that the scrubbers would erase the atmospheric wounds left by the Raze. They had cleared the air above the smog line. Down here, they had changed the color of the rain.

Maya rotated the nearest pepper tray a quarter turn. Three plants had begun bending toward the surviving lights, their stems pale with effort.

“Ren, the peppers.”

“I was getting there.”

“They were getting there first.”

He made a face at her and passed the spoon to Josie.

Near the entrance, the toddler had woken and begun to cry. Not the sound Maya expected. Too old, too thin.

She changed direction.

The bundle beneath the woman’s coat was a boy of seven or eight, curled tightly against her. His cheeks shone with fever, but his lips were dry. Two sweaters bulked beneath a transparent rain cape.

The woman saw Maya crouch. Her relief arrived so quickly it looked like pain.

“He won’t eat.”

“How long?”

“Three days.”

Maya placed the back of her fingers against the boy’s forehead, then his neck. Hot above, cool at the hands. His eyes tracked her when she asked him to look toward the grow lamps.

“Water?”

“Some.”

“Cramps?”

The boy nodded.

There were gray crescents beneath his fingernails.

“Which cistern?”

The mother glanced toward the maintenance workers, as though one of them might punish her for the answer. “North.”

North cistern supplied three residential stacks, a bathhouse, and two clinics that existed only when the Helpers were looking elsewhere. One sick child meant a family in trouble. One sick child from the north cistern meant trouble moving invisibly through hundreds of families.

The kitchen rearranged itself in Maya’s mind. Meals became water samples. Volunteers became runners. Patch would need warning before the first frightened crowd reached her workshop.

“Don’t use it again tonight,” Maya said. “Not for drinking.”

“It’s all we have.”

“Take water from here.”

The woman looked toward the reclamation tank. “I can’t—”

“Ren,” Maya called, without taking her eyes from the boy. “Blue jar. Top shelf. And fill two containers.”

Ren was already moving.

The jar held dried mint, charcoal powder, salts, and three clean glucose tablets left from Patch’s last visit. Not a cure. Enough to steady the boy, perhaps, while his body did what bodies had done before anyone charged for permission.

Maya mixed a small dose into warm broth. She remained crouched until he swallowed once, then again. His mother watched the spoon as if each mouthful crossed a distance neither of them could travel for him.

“Bring him back at first light,” Maya said. “If he gets confused, if he can’t keep water down, or if his hands get any colder, take him to Patch tonight.”

“I can’t pay a med-tech.”

“Good thing she isn’t one anymore.”

The woman’s face folded toward gratitude. Maya squeezed her forearm before it could become an apology. Need was heavy enough already.

She stood and found two children trying to divide a heel of bread by tearing it in opposite directions. The larger child had won most of it and looked miserable. Maya split the pieces evenly with her thumb, gave the smaller one a sliver from her own portion, and kept moving.

The kitchen had never possessed a single rhythm. That was its strength. Knives struck boards at different speeds. Chair legs scraped. Someone laughed near the planters while someone else coughed too long beside the doors. Maya moved among all of it, joining one need to another. She lowered the heat beneath the grain. Redirected a leak away from the flour. Changed Josie’s grip on the ladle so her wrist would still work by the fiftieth bowl. Asked one of the maintenance crew to pull a sample from the north cistern before his shift ended.

At half past eight, the wind-up clock above the pantry clicked forward. No supply runner.

Maya returned to the broth. Ren had added water carefully, but the garlic had receded and a greasy thinness moved across the surface.

“Grain for thirty,” he said.

“Thirty-six.”

“If we serve children’s portions.”

“To everyone?”

“They’ll understand.”

That was the trouble. They always did.

People in the Wet understood shortages with the exhausted grace of those expected to make every failure convenient for somebody above them. They understood pressure reductions and clinic closures. They understood when a Dynasty convoy locked an entire level so three people could cross it without seeing poverty through tinted glass. They understood why their applications disappeared and why their water tasted metallic and why promises always seemed to float upward.

Maya had not built the kitchen to make hunger more polite.

She unlocked the narrow cabinet beneath her workstation.

Ren followed her. "Maya."

Six sealed jars. Two sacks of dried beans. Cured peppers. Flour. A packet of rice bearing an agricultural seal from before the Raze. Her reserve, if anything in this room could be called hers. She had assembled it handful by handful against floods, freight stoppages, power failures, and the particular malice of winter.

She began passing it out.

"That's winter stock," Ren said.

"It's raining coolant in July."

"It's yours."

She pressed the rice against his chest. He caught it because the alternative was letting food fall.

"It's everybody's now."

He stared at her, his worry touching her stubbornness and finding no gap. Then he turned and began issuing instructions.

The room responded.

The mechanic nearest the counter opened the rice packet with a clean blade. One of the Gallo boys started carrying bowls. A teacher tore herbs over the broth. Deshi surrendered his chair to a man with a brace around one knee, then went to the wash station as if the dishes had personally offended him.

Nobody asked who was in charge. Work found hands.

Maya added the reserve in stages. Grain first. Beans next. Salt last. Ren restored the broth with fermented paste and more pepper. Fifty-three bowls appeared along the counter, none generous enough to inspire envy and none so small that receiving it became another humiliation.

By nine, the room was loud with eating.

Maya remained standing until the feverish boy finished half his broth. Only then did she sit beside Deshi.

He inspected each spoonful before accepting it.

"You burned the onions," he said.

"Ren burned them."

"You're responsible for Ren."

"Ren is sixty-four."

“Then you’ve had time to train him.”

Maya smiled. Deshi had appeared three days after she forced open the warehouse doors six years ago, carrying a broom and a bag of nails. He had never said he was staying.

He looked along the table where bowls and shoulders touched.

“Synth-pro would be easier,” he said. “They say it tastes real now.”

“They say a lot above the smog.”

“Would save you trouble.”

“Trouble isn’t the point.”

“No?”

A small boy lifted a bean from his bowl and deposited it in his sister’s. She kept her eyes down, granting him the dignity of secrecy.

“The point is you’re here to complain about the onions.”

Deshi considered this. “They were still burned.”

The front door opened and admitted a blade of wet wind.

Marcus stepped through it.

Water shone on his coat. His hair had been pushed back by rain, and a shallow scrape crossed his jaw. He paused long enough for the room to notice him, and when people called his name, he answered with the easy attention that made each greeting feel selected rather than received.

Maya knew the performance because she knew what pressed beneath it.

His stillness was too exact. Energy lived in his shoulders, his eyes, the hand he kept flexing near his side. A good night, then—or a dangerous one that had ended well enough for him to confuse survival with innocence.

He bent and kissed the top of her head.

Rain. Engine grease. Hot metal.

“You eat?” she asked.

“I was hoping you’d ask.”

She slid her bowl toward him. “I meant today.”

“So did I.”

He sat opposite her and swallowed three hurried spoonfuls before remembering to become casual.

Maya took his left hand.

He allowed it, which meant he believed the evidence said what he wanted it to say. Grease beneath the nails. A straight red pressure mark across the palm. No damage to the knuckles.

“What car?” she asked.

His eyes rose. “What?”

“The one you were working on.”

“You can identify makes by grease?”

“I can identify lies by how quickly you decorate them.”

Deshi made a satisfied sound into his bowl.

Marcus reclaimed his hand. "A car."

"Useful."

"They usually are."

He smiled. It worked on guards, vendors, furious mechanics, and anyone who wanted permission to believe him. It had worked on Maya when his lies concerned broken windows and stolen bread.

"Where did you need it to take you?" she asked.

"Here."

She hated that some part of her still wanted to accept the answer.

The south grow lights flickered. Three strips went dark, returned, then failed again. Maya turned automatically.

Marcus followed her attention. "Ballast?"

"Probably."

He was on his feet before she answered, climbing onto the low wall around the bed. He found the breaker by touch, killed the current, and opened the housing with the narrow driver he always carried.

His hands became quiet when they had honest work.

He cleaned a carbon track with his sleeve, bent the contact into place, and reseated the ballast. He knew the kitchen's electrical bones because he had helped Maya drag its first cable through the walls. Back then, the warehouse had held nothing but stains, broken glass, and the future she insisted she could see.

The lamps came on.

Warm light covered his face. For an instant he was that boy again, beside her in an empty room, willing to believe that making something was another kind of escape.

Then his eyes went to the high windows.

Beyond the wet panes, the upper towers glowed through the smog.

Their father had looked at them like that.

After the meal, the room folded itself toward morning. Chairs rose onto tables. Cups traveled to the sinks. Deshi wiped crumbs into his palm. The Gallo boys fought over a broom until Josie found another and turned victory into twice the work.

Marcus stayed.

That mattered, though Maya wished it did not always feel temporary.

He carried the grain pot to the sink and loosened the scorched layer at its bottom. He replaced a split irrigation clamp. When the sick boy's mother prepared to leave, Marcus found clean plastic for their walk to Patch's and tied it so rain could not enter at the neck.

He was good at being useful in bursts. Maya had spent years wishing he would understand that usefulness accumulated.

Near midnight, the kitchen emptied. Deshi left with his customary farewell.

"Tomorrow."

The grow lights shifted to amber. Rain moved against the high windows, soft beneath the mechanical thrum of the city overhead.

Maya sat across from Marcus with the end of the bread between them.

"The west reclamation pump died again," she said.

"I'll find one."

"Find?"

"The pump won't know."

"I will."

"You always do."

There was affection in it. That made the distance harder to cross.

Maya turned the bread in her fingers. The message had arrived that morning through a Connected volunteer with a temporary civic account. Heavy seal. Formal language. An invitation people kept even after declining it, simply to prove that someone above had once looked down and seen them.

She had read it six times.

"A Dynasty delegation is coming here."

Marcus stopped chewing.

"Here?"

"Next week. Civic contribution tour. Five delegates, staff, security. They want to see the garden and the reclamation system."

Hope made a person superstitious. Speak it too brightly and the world might hear.

"Why now?"

"I sent twelve proposals."

"You've been sending proposals for years."

"Maybe someone finally read one."

Marcus leaned back. His attention traveled through the kitchen—the sealed loading bays, the doors, the high windows. Maya watched the room lose its people inside his head and become distances instead.

"They mentioned equipment grants," she said. "Clean filtration. Seed stock. Enough capacity for two more blocks. If they fund testing at the north cistern, the next sick child might not have to walk through that door first."

His eyes sharpened at *five delegates*, not at *sick child*.

Routes began to join inside him. Vehicles to credentials, credentials to doors, doors to whatever waited above the smog.

Their father had believed height was evidence of a debt. He had died in a maintenance lift between levels, carrying a stolen Current cert and a promise that one more job would take all three of them somewhere dry.

Maya remembered the neighbors who brought food after.

Marcus remembered the cert.

"It could change things," she said.

"It could."

He was no longer speaking about the kitchen.

"Marcus."

His gaze returned to her, but the calculation remained.

She thought of him repairing the lamp and wrapping the sick child against the rain. She thought of his hands in the dishwater and his eyes on the Glass, all the versions of her brother sharing one body until an opening appeared and one of them took control.

"Don't," she said.

CHAPTER 2

ELEVEN AND OH

The east garage rotated its guard every eight minutes.

Tonight the interval was seven minutes, forty-two seconds.

Marcus watched the replacement cross Level Twelve through binoculars with chipped enamel around the eyepieces. The guard walked a clean perimeter: stairwell, lift bank, north rail, vehicle row, stairwell again. Forty-three seconds disappeared when he checked the Current scores on his wrist display. Eleven at the rail to light a cigarette he was not supposed to smoke.

Fifty-four seconds of human weakness.

Enough.

Marcus lowered the binoculars.

Five hundred meters below, the Wet spread beneath orange rain. It glimmered in broken signs and work lamps, too far down for faces. Above, the garage opened toward the towers. Clean light struck their upper faces. The Glass looked close from here.

It wasn't.

"You moving in?"

Patch stood behind him beneath a dead security camera, one shoulder against the concrete. Her dark coat concealed a case of hand-built electronics and the rigid way she held her left hip.

"Considering the schools."

"Bad air."

"Not up there."

She glanced at the towers and then at him. "That's what I meant."

Marcus smiled and headed for the stairs.

The Analog Temple occupied a converted mechanic's garage nine levels below. The sign outside had once advertised drivetrain service. Only the word **DRIVE** remained, visible when the sign remembered how to flicker.

Inside, nothing spoke to the Pipes.

Paper maps covered the main worktable. Wire's picks lay in a leather roll, eight lengths of tungsten filed by hand. Patch had arranged jammers, relays, and copper leads by frequency. Scout sat on a tool chest in a gray

logistics uniform, reciting credential phrases under her breath. Axis balanced on the edge of the workbench and rolled a coin across his knuckles.

The bootleg radio crackled beside the parts washer.

“Throwback Thunder coming at you live from the frequencies they forgot to kill,” Static Jam said. His voice filled the garage with conspiratorial warmth. “Tonight’s forecast: the Ghosts are ten and oh this season. Ten. And. Oh. Keep your eyes on the mid-level garages, beautiful people. Something unlikely may become temporarily available.”

Marcus killed the volume.

“Level Twelve,” he said. “East structure. Kimura executive transport. We enter from three points and leave through one.”

He put a finger on the paper plan.

The car was worth more than its resale. Combustion engine. Manual mechanical redundancies. A Dynasty-adjacent owner vain enough to reject mass transit and cautious enough to maintain analog emergency systems. The digital security would be dense. The underlying machine would be honest.

Wire bent over the plan.

He did not look at doors first. He looked at walls, power runs, drains, and load columns. Forty years old, broad through the hands and shoulders, a third-generation maintenance worker in a city that treated inherited knowledge as theft.

“Security conduit joins the east junction here,” Marcus said.

Wire traced the structure past his finger. “No. Drawing’s wrong.”

“Current permit archive.”

“Current permit archive is wrong.”

Wire tapped a blank space twelve meters south.

“Original structure carried runoff inside the support column. Retrofit couldn’t cross it without cutting the reinforcement, so they bent the conduit around. Junction is here.”

Marcus shifted the approach line.

No argument. Wire saw buildings the way Marcus saw traffic: not as diagrams but as decisions somebody had once been forced to make.

“Flow follows function,” Wire said. “We enter here.”

Patch pulled the map toward her. She had already marked the revised junction in blue pencil.

“Tracking relay sits behind the panel. I can blind it, but the power bus shares a diagnostic loop with the garage controller. Seventeen seconds between the jammer taking hold and the controller recognizing the voltage drop.”

“We need twelve.”

“You need twelve. I need seventeen.”

“Why?”

“Because I enjoy carrying extra time around.”

She looked at him until he acknowledged the correction.

“Seventeen,” he said.

Patch marked it.

At the end of the table, Scout closed her eyes.

Marcus said, “A guard asks for your cert.”

Her shoulders changed first. Then her chin. When she opened her eyes, the woman on the tool chest had gained an office, a superior, and a private conviction that every person in the room was delaying her.

“Logistics audit, Sector Nine,” she said in the flattened cadence of a Dynasty coordinator. “Zeller cleared primary oversight at sixteen hundred. You can query the authorization if your local sync is incomplete, but the variance will be attached to your station metrics.”

Axis stopped his coin.

“I’d confess to things she didn’t ask about.”

Scout’s borrowed irritation vanished. Her body became smaller without moving.

“Guard rotation changed Tuesday,” she said.

“I saw,” Marcus replied.

“Then why did you give me the old timing?”

“Wanted to know whether you saw.”

Patch exhaled through her nose.

Scout studied him, deciding whether the test had been useful enough to forgive. “Seven forty-two.”

“Exactly.”

Axis snapped the coin into the air and caught it on the back of his hand. Twenty-something. Compact. Restless. He had grown up in a traveling circus that survived the Raze by moving through places where official maps had stopped. Every surface suggested a performance to him.

“Exterior?” he asked.

“Exterior.”

“Direct line?”

“East face is cleaner.”

“East face is boring.”

“That’s why it’s cleaner.”

Axis grinned. “Time to make it pretty.”

Marcus looked around the table.

Wire waited for structure. Patch waited for error. Scout waited for the exact moment to become someone else. Axis waited for gravity to issue a challenge.

They were good. More important, they were good together.

That had not happened immediately.

On their first job, Wire had refused Marcus's north exit because the floor carried fresh repair dust. Marcus had called it superstition until a security wall dropped across the corridor three seconds later. On the fourth, Patch had stopped an extraction because Axis's pupil response changed after a fall; the delay cost them the cargo and kept a slow cranial bleed from killing him. Scout had once abandoned a flawless identity because a doorman used the wrong childhood nickname. Marcus had followed her out without asking why until they were safe.

Trust had accumulated through corrections survived.

"Last check," Marcus said. "What makes you leave?"

"Unexpected load shift," Wire said.

"Uncontained network response," Patch said.

"A person who knows my face instead of my badge," Scout said.

Axis rolled the coin across his knuckles. "Gravity changing its mind."

"Try again."

Axis caught the coin. The performance left his voice.

"Two missed timings. Mine or anyone else's."

Marcus nodded.

"My call is not the only call. You see your stop, you take it. Nobody needs permission to stay alive."

Patch studied him as if checking the statement against an earlier reading.

Marcus felt the plan lock into place.

"In and out in twenty minutes," he said. "No signals after entry. If the timing breaks, follow function. If function breaks, follow me."

Patch's expression changed by less than a millimeter.

Marcus noticed.

He did not ask.

At 23:14, orange rain crossed Level Twelve sideways.

Axis climbed the exterior with no rope.

Marcus saw him once through the open side of the garage: three fingers set into an expansion joint, one foot against bare ferroconcrete, body extended over three hundred meters of air. Then Axis moved above the sight line.

At 23:16, Scout approached the stairwell guard.

Marcus watched through a reflection in the Kimura's rear window. Looking directly would create interest. Reflections gave him the whole level: Scout, guard, east junction, elevator bank, two parked transports, one cleaner moving away.

The guard lifted his wrist. "Cert."

Scout did not reach for hers.

"Logistics audit, Sector Nine. Zeller cleared it through primary oversight at sixteen hundred."

She continued. Marcus could not hear every word through the rain, but he knew the structure. Permission buried beneath inconvenience. Threat disguised as procedure.

The guard checked his display.

Forty-three seconds lost to scores. Six more to uncertainty.

He waved her through.

Scout passed him without relief. "Optimization incomplete," she murmured.

At 23:17, Wire opened the maintenance panel.

His picks did not probe. They listened. Tension on the cylinder, touch light enough to feel each pin hesitate, then a single rotation.

Patch was beside him before the door finished swinging.

She clipped her jammer to the exposed bus.

The relay light changed from blue to dead.

Patch raised one finger.

Seventeen seconds.

Marcus crossed the vehicle row.

The Kimura sat between two electric executive carriers, black paint holding fragments of garage light. A cert reader glowed beside the handle, waiting to record an identity.

Marcus ignored it. He slid a tension strip behind the physical emergency release. Pressure. Pause. The latch resisted at four kilos, gave at six. No handshake. No access request. Nothing for the Pipes to remember.

Inside.

Fourteen seconds.

He removed the steering-column cover. Copper jumper from the ignition relay to the mechanical starter circuit.

Eleven.

The engine caught.

Actual pistons. Actual fuel. The growl traveled through the seat frame and into his spine. Machines above the smog had been trained to whisper. This one remembered force.

Six.

Axis dropped through the open sunroof and landed in the passenger seat.

"Stuck it."

"Late."

"Theatrical."

"East ramp."

"Boring."

"Alive."

Patch's relay came back online behind them.

Marcus pulled into motion.

The plan permitted twenty kilometers an hour until the ramp, thirty after the first turn, fifty once the garage controller accepted the Kimura as an authorized departure.

He held twenty.

The guard left his post.

Not part of the pattern.

Marcus caught him in the side mirror, walking toward the vehicle row with his wrist display raised. Perhaps the controller had reported a voltage anomaly. Perhaps Scout's authorization had resolved too slowly. Perhaps the man wanted another cigarette.

Reason did not matter. Position did.

Guard behind. Main ramp ahead. Digital gate twelve seconds from recognizing the stolen departure. Maintenance corridor left, clearance two meters wider than the Kimura on the archived plan.

"Primary is burned," Marcus said.

The change arrived before consensus could.

Wire looked left, not at Marcus. He read the corridor mouth, the drainage grade, the hairline reinforcement seam. "Narrower than archive. Still carries to lower deck."

Patch checked the controller pulse. "Nine seconds before the gate locks."

Scout watched the guard. "He is calling local response."

Axis placed both feet against the floor.

On Job Seven, Marcus had smelled hot insulation behind a supposedly dead wall and changed the extraction. The alternate route cost them two hours and avoided a fire-suppression trap. On Job Nine, he abandoned the score when a cleaner entered early.

Until now, he had known what not to spend.

Marcus turned left.

Axis braced a hand against the dash. "That isn't east."

The corridor opening arrived narrower than the plan.

Retrofit.

No time to stop.

Marcus centered the hood between two concrete edges and accelerated.

The mirrors struck first. Glass snapped away. Then came the long metallic scream of bodywork against concrete, left side, then right. Twenty centimeters of tolerance became ten. Ten became five.

He did not watch the walls. He listened.

The left scrape climbed in pitch. Too close. Two degrees right.

The right side answered. One degree back.

The engine stayed centered beneath the noise.

Axis's grin had vanished. "This is not pretty."
"It's functional."

Behind them, the guard reached the mouth of the corridor and raised his comm.

Too late.

The Kimura broke into an open maintenance deck.

Wire waited beside a drainage channel. Scout emerged from a service door. Both entered through the rear while the car was still moving. Patch was already there.

Of course she was.

"Route?" Marcus asked.

Wire pointed down.

A descending service ramp curved beneath the public level. Marcus took it without lights. The Kimura's engine filled the enclosed concrete helix.

No comms. No Pipes. No route request for Monitor Central to optimize. Hand signals and timing carried them through three maintenance levels, across an unfinished cargo span, and into a freight stream moving toward the lower Current.

Marcus placed the Kimura between two ore haulers and matched their speed.

Behind him, the crew listened for pursuit.

Nothing.

Patch watched her thermal receiver.

Nothing.

Wire counted intersections.

At the fourth, his shoulders lowered.

Scout removed the logistics badge and snapped it in half.

Axis began to laugh.

The sound released the others. Wire rolled his picks into their leather. Scout repeated the guard's confused expression with brutal accuracy. Patch examined the jammer and started listing improvements—shorter antenna, tighter filter, a heat sink that did not threaten to brand her palm.

Marcus drove.

They had entered a Connected structure, taken a Dynasty machine, and crossed its defenses without leaving a usable signal behind.

Eleven clean jobs.

The radio came alive when Patch reconnected the receiver.

Static Jam's voice rode a wash of stolen guitar.

"My beautiful Disconnected, the forecast has been updated. The Ghosts are eleven and oh. They do not lose. They relocate."

Axis whooped through the missing sunroof.

At Niven Junction, the ore haulers continued south. Marcus turned west and stopped beneath a gap between superstructures.

The crew's celebration carried on for three seconds before Patch noticed he was no longer moving.

Above the junction, the smog broke.

Not completely. Just enough.

The highest towers stood in clean night, their glass faces holding stars. Traffic moved between them in silent lines. Gardens glowed on suspended terraces. Somewhere up there, people crossed rooms without calculating the cost of light.

Marcus rested both hands on the damaged wheel.

The Glass was not close. It had never been close.

But tonight he had taken one of its machines and made it answer to copper wire and touch.

Distance was only a system.

Every system had an opening.

"You coming?" Patch asked. "Or should we forward your things?"

She held out a bottle from the celebration crate.

Marcus did not see it.

Patch followed his gaze to the towers. Her expression became the one she wore over an unstable reading.

"You know the job is over?"

"Eleven and oh."

"That wasn't my question."

Patch returned the bottle to the crate unopened.

Marcus started the car.

The others were still laughing as he drove down toward the Wet. He heard them. He knew each voice.

For the length of the descent, however, all he saw was the gap above Niven Junction and the clean light waiting on the other side.

CHAPTER 3

THE PHILANTHROPISTS

Five delegates meant three transports.

Three transports meant separate cargo compartments, redundant security, and enough credentials to turn half the locked doors in the Current green.

Marcus drew the kitchen, the east staging platform, and the surrounding structures on three sheets of paper taped edge to edge. Wire supplied the infrastructure beneath them. Scout added guard positions from publicly released civic footage. Patch marked every place a signal crossed between the staging area and the Pipes.

The plan spread across the Analog Temple.

Five people stood around it.

Marcus had drawn Maya's kitchen from memory.

Two long tables became crowd density and sight obstruction. The south grow bank became a blind wall, the compost hatch a secondary egress, the bread oven a thermal bloom that could hide Patch's relay noise. He knew where Ren stored water keys, where Josie left the delivery entrance unlatched during morning prep, where children gathered when visitors came.

Each fact had once entered him as family.

On paper, it became access.

"The delegation stays inside the kitchen for three hours," Marcus said. "Their vehicles stay here."

He tapped the east platform.

"Two exterior escorts remain with the transports. Six go in with the delegates. Axis pulls the exterior pair east. Scout enters as catering support and tracks the inside rotation. Wire and Patch come up through the old runoff tunnel beneath the platform. I handle extraction."

Axis leaned over the map. "Pull them how?"

"Be yourself."

"Dangerously vague."

"Visible. Fast. Annoying."

"You could have just said irresistible."

Patch ignored him. "Hard Guard?"

“According to the manifest.”

“Hard Guard is not a Helper checking a parking cert.”

“They’re watching five bodies in a crowded room. We aren’t touching those bodies.”

Patch placed two fingers on the east tunnel. Her nails were cut short enough to expose crescents of solder burn.

“The platform relay is tied to Monitor Central. I can suppress its outbound signal, but I can’t know what local failover they installed until I’m underneath it.”

“Then you adapt.”

Her eyes lifted.

Marcus heard the phrase after it left him. A blank space disguised as confidence.

“And if the failover adapts first?” she asked.

“We leave.”

“Which route?”

He pointed to the corridor south of the platform. “Primary.”

“If primary closes?”

“West maintenance ramp.”

“If they close both?”

“They won’t know we’re there.”

“That isn’t an exit.”

The room became quiet around the objection.

Marcus looked at the map. The routes worked. The timing worked. Their first ten jobs had been smaller, their eleventh louder, but each had demanded the same thing: enter where the system was not looking and leave before it understood what had changed.

The difference was scale. Scale frightened people because it made familiar risks look new.

“We scatter,” he said. “Patch and Wire take the cargo through the drainage channel. Scout and Axis go dark. I draw pursuit.”

“If pursuit is faster than you?” Scout asked.

“It hasn’t been yet.”

Patch’s mouth tightened.

Marcus moved on.

He showed them the cases expected inside each transport: personal crypto-drives, emergency certs, jewelry, medical compounds, diplomatic access keys. Not rumor. He had paid a Dynasty garage attendant for the loading specification, then paid someone else to confirm the attendant had not sold the same lie twice.

“One clean access key gets us above the smog,” he said. “Not for a visit. Not looking through a gap at Niven Junction. We get inside the Glass.”

The old hunger passed among them and changed shape.

Axis saw a stage no one from the Wet had touched. Scout saw identities no forged employment record could reach. Wire saw original tower plans withheld from public infrastructure workers. Even Patch looked down at the list of medical compounds.

Marcus had not invented what they wanted.

He had simply found the door between them and it.

"I'm in," Axis said. "Somebody should make the Glass look down."

Wire studied the runoff tunnel. "The route exists."

Scout nodded once. "I need the catering manifest by Thursday."

Patch was last.

She watched Marcus instead of the map.

"That's going to leave a scar," she said.

It was how Patch predicted trouble without giving it the satisfaction of fear.

Marcus smiled. "Then we'll remember it."

. . .

On the morning of the visit, the kitchen woke before Maya did.

She had slept at the communal table for perhaps an hour, cheek pressed to her folded arms, while the water system clicked and the grow lights moved from night-blue to amber. When she opened her eyes, Ren was already trimming damaged leaves from the peppers. Josie had dough beneath her fingernails. Someone had put fresh flowers in jars along both tables.

Not purchased flowers. Nothing grown merely to be looked at survived long in the Wet. These were basil blossoms, bean flowers, the yellow stars that appeared before tomatoes.

The room had dressed itself in evidence.

Maya stood and felt fifty anxieties rise with her.

She checked the broth, the filters, the seed trays, the north cistern report. Contamination confirmed: a cracked runoff seal had allowed industrial water into the line. The maintenance crew had shut the intake overnight, but three residential stacks now depended on carried water. Maya placed the report at the top of her proposal packet.

This was why the delegation mattered.

Not because the Glass had finally noticed her. Because attention, however insulting its delay, could be converted into filters, pipe, medicine, seed.

Outside, engines made no sound.

Conversation faded.

Three black transports descended through the space between structures, their surfaces shedding orange rain without seeming to

become wet. They touched the east platform in sequence. Magnetic locks engaged beneath them with three impacts Maya felt through the soles of her shoes.

The delegation crossed the connecting span.

Five announced civic representatives. Six Hard Guard. Assistants. A recording clerk. Every coat cut cleanly enough to make the kitchen's best clothes look like disguises.

Then a sixth visitor stepped from the final transport.

Thane had not appeared on the delegation list.

He appeared to be in his fifties. The qualifying thought arrived before Maya understood it: *appeared*. His face carried the signs people associated with maturity without the history that ordinarily produced them. No broken vessels around the nose. No difference in tone between forehead and throat. Nothing sunken, swollen, healed badly, or learned around.

His skin looked completed.

"Maya Reeves."

He extended his hand.

His grip matched hers precisely. Pressure increased until it met her own and stopped there. Not firm. Not gentle. Correct.

"Thane," he said. "Your reputation has traveled considerably farther than your funding."

Behind him, a guard's eyes moved across the room without the small interruptions of curiosity. Door, window, stove, person. Door, window, stove, person. The same interval between each.

Maya released Thane's hand.

"Welcome to the kitchen."

He smiled a fraction after she did.

. . .

Marcus watched from a roof two hundred meters east.

Rain ticked against the binoculars.

Three transports on the platform. Two exterior guards. Six inside. One service drone circling above the east span. Vehicle spacing three meters, enough for Wire to surface between the first and second without entering either guard's direct line.

Thane had joined the delegation.

That name altered value.

Marcus knew the public record: infrastructure holdings, conservation programs, private medical research, voting influence across four Dynasty councils. Thane's personal cert would open more than doors. It would open systems.

Not in the plan.

Still possible.

Marcus shifted his binoculars to the opposite roof.

Axis waited behind a water tank, rain shining on his shaved temples.

Marcus raised two fingers.

Axis grinned.

Go.

. . .

Maya began with the soil.

Dynasty visitors always expected machinery first. They wanted reclamation percentages and yield charts, proof that deprivation could be made efficient. Maya brought them to the raised beds and pushed her hand into the earth.

"Everything begins here," she said. "Not because soil is old-fashioned. Because it stores relationships your nutrient systems have to recreate one chemical at a time."

A delegate with silver at her collar looked down at Maya's dirty hand.

"Surely hydroponics would increase output."

"Output of what?"

"Food."

"Calories, perhaps."

Maya lifted a small web of fungus from beneath the mulch, white threads holding crumbs of earth together.

"This bed takes waste from the tables. It holds water when the pumps fail. Children learn what a living root looks like. Deshi can tell when the peppers are sick before our chemical strips can. If you optimize for kilograms, you lose the system that makes the kilograms matter."

Thane watched her fingers.

Not the fungus. Not the delegates.

Her fingers.

"How long did this take you?" he asked.

"Six years."

"Alone?"

Maya looked around.

Ren had moved to the stove. Josie was showing a civic assistant how to shape dough. Two children waited near the herb bed, barely containing the importance of their assigned presentation.

"No," she said. "That's the point."

Thane's attention remained on her as if the others were extensions she had manufactured.

. . .

Axis crossed the first rooftop at full speed.

The exterior guards noticed him at the second gap. He made certain of it.

He planted one foot on the parapet and launched over three meters of open air. Orange rain moved beneath him. He landed on a water tank, let the impact ring across the roofs, and turned just long enough to show them his face.

Both guards moved east.

No shouted warning. No visible decision.

One began pursuit and the other matched him at the same instant.

Marcus lowered the binoculars.

Protocol.

It had to be.

Below the platform, Wire opened the runoff grate. Patch emerged behind him and fixed her jammer to the local relay.

Green.

The two guards cleared the next roof faster than Marcus expected.

Axis saw it too. His performance changed. The broad movements disappeared. He stopped inviting pursuit and began measuring escape.

Marcus touched the inert earpiece in his right ear, an old habit. No signal after entry. Nothing to say that Axis did not already know.

Adapt.

. . .

Scout moved among the tables in white catering clothes, carrying a pitcher of reclaimed water no Dynasty guest drank.

She had borrowed the posture from a Current hotel worker: spine erect, steps short, face organized around unobtrusive attention. The identity fit well enough that people looked through her.

One of the Hard Guard stood beside the kitchen doors.

Scout approached with the pitcher.

His uniform was dry despite the walk from the platform. His gaze traveled across the room in repeated units. Door. Thane. Window. Delegate. Door.

People did not repeat perfectly. They scratched an itch, favored a knee, reacted to a smell. Even disciplined bodies leaked the person inside.

This one did not.

Scout passed behind him.

No heat touched her arm.

She continued to the next table without changing pace.

. . .

Wire reached the first cargo lock.

Two beats to read it. One movement to open.

Patch removed the crypto-drive and installed a dummy that would report the expected handshake for six hours. The work required both hands. Pain climbed from her hip as she crouched, bright enough to make the platform lose focus at its edges.

She named the signal components in her head.

Carrier stable. Diagnostic loop asleep. Dummy seated. Next.

Three cases.

Four.

A boot struck concrete.

Wire froze beside the fifth cargo compartment.

Patch's jammer showed no alert. Her body showed one anyway: pulse elevated, fingers cold, breath shallow. Human variation. Proof of life.

A guard had returned to the platform.

Not from Axis's direction. From the kitchen.

The guard passed between the first two transports. His head turned toward the open space beneath the chassis.

Patch felt the warning in her own muscles before he moved.

He stopped.

One second.

Two.

His face remained empty.

Then he continued toward the connecting span.

Wire looked at Patch.

Abort?

The fifth case was already open.

Patch thought of the medical compounds listed on the cargo sheet. She thought of the expensive, clean machines that could reach inside a body without leaving it worse. She thought of seventeen seconds and the way Marcus had answered a real question with a word.

The case contained a sealed cortical stabilizer, four tissue printers, and a Dynasty-grade anti-inflammatory that could suppress the pain in Patch's hip without damaging the joint further.

The first four cases completed the score.

The fifth made it personal.

Wire's hand hovered beside the cargo door.

One tap: leave.

Patch calculated. Guard moving away. Jammer stable. Extraction vehicle at ninety meters. Twelve seconds to remove the drive, seven to clear the undercarriage. Nineteen seconds purchased against a risk she could not quantify.

She knew what she would tell Marcus if their positions were reversed.

Unknown response. Mission complete. Withdraw.

Pain pulsed through her hip.

Patch reached inside.
She removed the last drive.
Done.

. . .

Thane had drifted away from the other delegates.

Maya found him at her workstation, looking at the photograph pinned above the seed ledger. Maya and Marcus stood in front of the empty warehouse six years earlier. Both thinner. Both smiling at something outside the frame.

“Your brother,” Thane said.

It was not a question.

“Marcus.”

“Does he work here?”

“When the work catches him.”

“You’re very different.”

Maya heard knowledge beneath the observation. Not research from a public civic brief. Something specific enough to feel handled.

“Different doesn’t mean divided.”

Thane smiled. This time the expression arrived on time, but Maya had begun watching for the mechanism.

“No,” he said. “It often makes the bond more useful.”

Across the room, the guards shifted.

All four guards still inside.

At once.

Maya stopped hearing the delegation.

Not silence. The room remained full of civic language: scalability, stakeholder access, sustainable uplift. Beneath it, other rhythms changed. Josie’s knife slowed. Ren stopped filling cups. One child abandoned her rehearsed speech and moved closer to the stove.

The guards had occupied four separate places.

Now each stood at a route out.

The kitchen understood before Maya did. Conversation gathered inward. Bodies made small protective adjustments: a parent behind a child, a cook between a visitor and the pantry door, Deshi’s hand closing around a wooden dibber too fragile to be a weapon.

Thane continued smiling.

Maya looked toward the east staging platform, invisible beyond rain and concrete.

Marcus.

She did not know what he was doing.

She knew the room had begun paying for it.

. . .

Wire and Patch reached the extraction vehicle with five cases.

Marcus opened the rear compartment. "Axis?"

"Still east," Wire said.

They loaded.

Scout emerged from a service passage thirty seconds later, catering jacket gone. She entered the rear seat and shut the door.

"Inside security is wrong," she said.

"Define wrong."

"No drift. No body heat at passing distance. They move on the same interval."

Axis dropped from a drainage pipe half a block ahead. He caught the vehicle's side rail, swung through the open window, and landed badly.

Marcus accelerated.

"They're fast," Axis said.

"Hard Guard."

"No. Fast."

The distinction could wait.

Marcus took the south corridor. Primary route. Wide enough for freight. No checkpoints on Wire's map.

The crew settled into escape positions. Patch checked the drives. Scout watched their rear. Wire counted cross-tunnels. Axis held one hand against his ribs and pretended not to.

Clear behind.

Clear ahead.

Marcus allowed himself half a smile.

Then the corridor filled with white light.

Three security vehicles occupied the exit. No approach. No engine noise. They were simply there, steel barriers deployed between them. Magnetic locks struck the floor.

Marcus braked.

Two more vehicles sealed the corridor behind.

Hard Guard emerged in formation.

Not running. Not quite.

Their bodies crossed the wet floor without adapting to it. Same stride over smooth concrete, drainage grates, standing water. No slip. No shortened step. No adjustment of balance.

Patch raised the thermal reader.

"Thirty-six point eight."

"Which one?" Wire asked.

"All of them."

The number remained stable as the guards advanced.

Marcus found the spaces.

Drainage channel left. Catwalk above. Vehicle barrier center. Cross-tunnel closed by the rear formation. No route large enough for all five.

"Scatter protocol," he said. "Patch, Wire, take the cases through the drain. Scout, Axis, catwalk. Go dark."

Nobody moved.

They were waiting for the part where he left with them.

"Now."

Marcus drove at the forward barrier.

The Hard Guard did not dive away. Two caught the Kimura at the hood. Their hands dented metal. The vehicle continued half a meter and stopped as though it had struck the building itself.

One guard's palm opened on a torn edge.

Skin peeled from the base of the thumb.

Underneath, no blood. No tendon. A gray-white lattice flexed around a carbon strut.

The guard closed his damaged hand and pushed.

For half a second, the Ghosts stopped being a crew and became five separate witnesses.

Patch saw no hemorrhage, no protective reflex, no shock response. A body performing injury without suffering it.

Wire saw load travel through the guard's wrist into a structure built with no allowance for pain.

Scout remembered the kitchen guard's absent heat and understood that she had spent three hours performing invisibility for something she could not read as a person.

Axis looked at the two who had chased him across wet roofs without slipping, tiring, or fearing the drop.

Marcus saw the corridor differently.

They had planned around guards who valued survival. Every feint, every threat, every opening made by forcing a choice depended on a living body's refusal to be spent.

These bodies refused nothing.

Wire kicked out the rear window. Patch threw the cases into the drainage channel and followed. Axis pulled Scout through the sunroof.

Marcus kept his hands on the wheel until four cold fingers closed around his wrist.

The temperature was wrong.

He looked at the guard's flawless face.

For the first time that night, no opening appeared.

CHAPTER 4

ONE DINNER

The tour ended without anyone saying it had ended.

All four guards inside the kitchen moved at once. Two surrounded Thane. The others placed themselves between the delegates and everyone who had spent the morning preparing to welcome them.

“Security interruption,” the recording clerk announced.

The phrase passed over the room as though it explained why a guard swept Ren’s tray of bread onto the floor or why another shoved the communal table hard enough to spill water across Maya’s north-cistern report.

The delegates were moving before Maya could ask what had happened. Their assistants folded around them. No confusion. No requests for coats or proposal packets. The visit contracted into a single purpose: remove the people who mattered.

Maya caught Thane’s sleeve.

The fabric stopped. So did he.

Everything around them continued toward the doors, but Thane looked down at her hand with calm interest.

“What happened?”

“An attempted intrusion at the staging platform.”

Marcus.

The knowledge formed before the name. It connected his gaze at the kitchen table, the three transports outside, the way he had said *It could* while speaking about something other than filters.

“Was anyone hurt?”

Thane looked at her then, not at the hand on his sleeve.

“That depends on what happens next.”

One of the guards separated them. Not violently. The hand entered the space between Maya’s wrist and Thane’s arm with exact pressure, leaving no opportunity to resist without becoming the aggressor.

The delegation departed.

Outside, the transports lifted from the east platform in sequence. Their engines remained silent. Within seconds, the space they had occupied held nothing but rain.

The kitchen looked smaller after.

Basil flowers lay crushed near the doors. Water spread across the table and soaked the report Maya had placed first in the proposal packet. One of the children knelt to collect bread from the floor until Ren pulled him gently upright.

People began restoring the room because that was what they did when something passed through and damaged it. Josie righted chairs. Deshi lifted the wet report by two corners. Nobody asked Maya whether Marcus had caused this.

They knew her face.

A civic assistant remained by the door.

Maya had not seen him stay behind. He wore the same controlled gray as the others but stood without their practiced urgency, holding a black paper card between two fingers.

“Ms. Reeves.”

He placed it on the table.

Marcus’s name. A holding facility in the Dry. An access route and a forty-minute admission window.

No explanation of who had authorized the visit.

None was necessary.

Thane had not merely allowed her to learn where Marcus had been taken. He had arranged the path from this damaged room to him.

Maya picked up the card.

“Ren, take the cistern report to Chen’s district office. Josie, nobody drinks from north storage until we have independent testing. Deshi—”

“Go,” Deshi said.

Behind him, the kitchen was already closing around the damage.

Maya went.

. . .

The room had no visible door.

Marcus found the seam anyway.

Right wall. Two meters from the corner. Pressure seal at floor level. Air entered through perforations too narrow for a tool and left through a return vent behind him. The table was fixed to the floor. His chair was not, but its composite frame would splinter before the restraints did.

No camera.

That meant the room itself was watching.

Marcus rolled his left wrist against the cuff. Metal. Mechanical ratchet with an electronic release. The guard who had closed it used more pressure than a human hand required and less than anger would explain.

The inner surface warmed against his pulse. A line of light traveled once around his wrist, paused where the vein rose, and disappeared. The

chair adjusted beneath his weight. Height, skeletal distribution, vascular response—whatever the room was taking, it took without presenting a request.

The cut at Marcus's temple had stopped bleeding.

Time since capture: forty-three minutes.

Time since Patch and Wire entered the drain: forty-two.

Time since Scout and Axis reached the catwalk: forty-one.

No sounds of additional prisoners.

Good.

The wall opened at the seam.

Thane entered alone.

His suit had acquired no rain, dust, or wrinkle since the kitchen. He sat opposite Marcus and placed his hands on the table. Ten immaculate nails. No tremor. No pulse visible at the wrist.

"Marcus Reeves," he said. "Eleven and one now, I suppose."

Static Jam's phrase. The rattlewire had been compromised, or Thane listened to the underground for entertainment.

Marcus said nothing.

"The theft doesn't interest me."

"Then uncuff me. Improve the evening."

"Without my intervention, you would already be bone."

Marcus kept his face still.

Bone meant more than dead. No cert. No legal body. Processed without a name and sold by weight to whichever system could reuse the material.

"You interfered," Marcus said. "What do you want?"

"Your sister."

There it was.

No preparation made hearing it less direct.

Marcus found the room again: seam, vent, chair, table. Objects held their positions.

"Leave her out."

"Maya runs an unauthorized agricultural system that feeds dozens of people without contractual incentives, identity enforcement, or centralized command. When supply fails, participation increases. When leadership is absent, function persists."

Thane spoke about the kitchen the way Wire spoke about a building he admired.

"You visited once."

"I pay attention."

"That isn't what I'd call it."

"One dinner," Thane said. "Her company, freely given. In exchange, your charges disappear and your associates remain uncollected."

He placed a tablet on the table.

Five names.

Patch. Wire. Axis. Scout. Marcus.

Locations. Known associates. Employment histories. Photographs taken from angles no public camera occupied.

The charges were not theft. Conspiracy against Dynasty infrastructure. Sedition. Terrorism. Crimes broad enough to contain any fact Thane required.

Marcus read each page once.

Evidence could be false and still close a door. Authority was the ability to make the difference irrelevant.

"You're bluffing."

"I'm offering."

The wall opened.

Maya entered.

She was breathing hard, coat fastened wrong, curls wet against her face. She saw Marcus, the restraint, the tablet, Thane. Her attention moved differently from his. Not exits. Injuries. His temple, his cheek, the angle of his wrist in the cuff.

Then the five names on the screen.

"What did you do?" she asked him.

"Don't."

She turned to Thane. "What do you want?"

"Dinner."

"No."

Marcus said it too quickly.

Maya looked at him, and for one instant the room narrowed to the particular anger only she could give him: fear with nowhere else to stand.

"One evening," Thane said. "No further obligation."

"Maya."

"Stop talking."

She faced Thane again.

"My brother walks. His crew walks. No charges now, no charges later, no quiet collections after everyone stops looking."

"Agreed."

"You put it in writing."

Thane smiled. "Of course."

The offer had always been built for her to improve.

Marcus saw that now.

Maya extended her hand.

When Thane took it, she did not release immediately. Her eyes went to their joined fingers. Testing something.

"One dinner," she said.

“One dinner.”

. . .

The sky above the smog line contained too much distance.

Maya stood at Thane’s penthouse window and tried to understand a darkness without a ceiling. Stars appeared between the towers. Not simulated pinpricks arranged by an entertainment system. Light that had traveled years to reach a city where most people could not see it.

The Wet lay beneath a gray-black surface. From here, the smog looked smooth.

Nothing beneath it looked wet or hungry or alive.

Thane’s home surrounded her without touching her. Pale stone. Dark wood. Glass joined so precisely that corners seemed grown rather than built. No object had been repaired. No chair bore the shape of a body that used it every day.

“Do you like it?” Thane asked.

He had removed his jacket. The white shirt beneath remained uncreased.

“It’s impressive.”

“That isn’t what I asked.”

Maya turned from the window.

Beyond the living room, a glass dome enclosed a garden.

Real orchids climbed artificial stone. Ferns spread beneath a controlled mist. A dwarf fruit tree held twelve identical blossoms. Some species had vanished from street level before Maya was born. She knew them from seed catalogues and pre-Raze archives.

Her body moved toward them before distrust could object.

She touched an orchid leaf.

Cool. Thick. Flawless.

No insect had bitten it. No fungus had spotted it. No neighboring plant had forced it to turn toward light. A feeding tube entered the root substrate beneath decorative stone.

“Preservation collection,” Thane said. “One hundred and eighty-seven extinct or threatened lines.”

“You keep them alive.”

“We can do better than nature now. No disease. No competition. Every variable controlled.”

Maya looked at the twelve blossoms, each opened to the same degree.

“They aren’t growing.”

“They increase in size.”

“That isn’t what I mean.”

Thane watched her. The attention had weight but no warmth. It was the gaze of someone waiting for a locked device to reveal its interface.

“What would you do with proper resources?” he asked. “Clean water. Stable power. Viable seed libraries. Equipment that does not fail every month.”

For one dangerous moment, Maya let herself answer.

North cistern sealed before anyone became sick. Patch with a real diagnostic bed. Three more warehouses growing food. Children learning under lights that did not flicker. Ren complaining about onions because complaint was the worst thing the evening required.

The vision hurt.

“Feed more people,” she said.

“And then?”

“Feed them tomorrow.”

“You could scale beyond that.”

“People aren’t scale.”

“Everything is a system.”

“That doesn’t make everything a machine.”

Thane poured wine older than the kitchen. The liquid struck the glass without splashing.

“You distrust me.”

“You threatened four people to make me have dinner with you.”

“I offered proportional consequences for a serious intrusion and allowed you to alter the terms.”

“You wanted me to say yes.”

“I wanted the choice to be yours.”

Maya laughed once. She could not help it.

The sound changed nothing in his face.

“A choice is not free because you let me select which person gets hurt.”

Thane considered the sentence with genuine interest.

“Yet you came.”

“Because Marcus would have sacrificed himself and called it protection. He’s been doing versions of that since he was twelve.”

“You understand him.”

“He’s my brother.”

“You repair what he breaks.”

The accuracy angered her because it had not been earned.

“You know records,” she said. “You know patterns. That isn’t the same as knowing us.”

Thane’s smile appeared slightly late.

There.

Maya watched the delay. Not enough to name. Enough to feel.

He brought her to the dining table. Real vegetables had been arranged on white ceramic, each cut to identical dimensions. The meal possessed

color, aroma, nutrient density, and no visible history. No scorched edge. No bruised leaf trimmed away. No sign of the hand that had cooked it.

Maya tasted a tomato.

Perfect acid. Perfect sweetness.

Nothing she could remember.

She set down her wine. A pale light traveled once around the glass base and disappeared into the table.

Maya lifted the glass again. The underside was seamless. Beneath it, the white surface showed no sensor, no contact, nothing that should have produced light.

“What was that?”

Thane glanced at the glass.

“Environmental calibration. The table adjusts serving temperature to the guest.”

The answer arrived easily. Too easily for a question he had not needed to consider.

If the table could read serving temperature through the glass, it could read warmth, pulse, skin oil, perhaps the cells her mouth had left on the rim. Maya did not know which of those it wanted. She knew only that something at the table had touched her without asking.

“Your brother wants to be here,” Thane said.

“He wants what he thinks is here.”

“What is the distinction?”

“Cost.”

“Everything has cost.”

“He thinks he’ll be the one paying.”

Thane tilted his head.

Maya saw interest sharpen.

She had given him something about Marcus. A small thing, perhaps. It felt like setting a plate down and discovering too late that someone intended to eat the table.

She placed her fork beside the food.

“The dinner is over.”

“You’ve barely begun.”

“You asked for one dinner. You didn’t specify dessert.”

Thane could have stopped her. The knowledge lived in the silent room, in the guards she had never seen, in the long fall back through levels she could not enter without his permission.

Instead he stood.

“I admire what you built,” he said. “Genuinely.”

“Then leave it alone.”

“That would be a strange expression of admiration.”

Maya understood him then—not fully, but enough.

He did not admire by joining. He admired by acquiring.

. . .

Marcus waited in the kitchen for three hours.

He sat at the long table beneath the photograph of himself and Maya. He mapped Thane's tower from memory, then forced himself to stop. Counted the seconds between failures in the reclamation pump. Fixed it. Sat again.

When the door opened, Maya entered fast and locked it behind her.

She did not remove her coat.

Marcus stood. "Are you hurt?"

"No."

"Did he touch you?"

"He shook my hand."

"Maya."

"I'm not hurt."

She sat where she always sat, but her hands did not settle. One thumb moved over the opposite palm as if trying to erase a sensation.

"He isn't right," she said.

Marcus stayed standing.

"His expressions. The way he moves. Everything is exact, but it doesn't come from anywhere. His hands were cold."

Cold fingers around Marcus's wrist. Gray lattice beneath torn skin.

He knew the hand that had pulled him from the Kimura was not biological. He knew every Hard Guard in the corridor had held the same temperature while moving at the same speed. He knew Thane had entered the holding room without visible pulse or wasted motion.

The facts pressed against his teeth.

If he told Maya, the dinner became something she had survived rather than something completed. Thane became a threat inside the kitchen. Marcus would have to admit that his score had uncovered something he could not name or control.

He told himself uncertainty was not information.

He told himself silence kept the fear from becoming hers.

The reasons arrived in the polished order of a lie.

Maya looked up at him.

"Stay away from him."

Thane's tower rose beyond the high windows. Its lower half disappeared into smog. Its upper half held light.

Marcus returned his attention to his sister.

"Promise me."

Four members of his crew remained free because Maya had walked into that tower. The cost sat across from him, frightened and trying not to show it.

“I promise.”

She believed him enough to let her hands become still.

Marcus nearly spoke.

The gray lattice returned in memory, flexing beneath torn skin.

Then the moment closed.

An hour later, Maya went upstairs to the narrow room she used when work ran too late.

Marcus stayed at the table.

Around him: the beds, the repaired lamp, the west pump ticking cleanly through its cycle. Scratches crossed the wood beneath his hands. Hundreds of bowls had rested there. Hundreds of people had left marks without diminishing it.

He tried to look at what she had built.

His eyes found the window.

Above the smog, Thane’s tower shone like an opening.



PART II
WHAT THANE TOOK

CHAPTER 5

MY DISCOVERY

Six days after the dinner, Maya entered the Dynasty Cultural Center wearing a coat Josie had altered twice and carrying three copies of the north-cistern report.

The contamination had spread before the intake closed. Twenty-seven people were sick. Patch had treated nineteen without proper diagnostic equipment, and the remaining eight had gone to Connected clinics where their families signed repayment contracts they could not read.

Maya carried their names beneath the report.

The Cultural Center occupied the lower Current, close enough to the Wet that attendees could praise street-level resilience without sacrificing the evening to travel. Its outer walls displayed shifting images of community programs. Maya's kitchen appeared twelve meters high: children beneath grow lights, Deshi holding a basket of peppers, Maya serving broth to a table cropped so tightly the water stains disappeared.

Inside, the same photographs hung in frames.

People circulated around them with synthetic drinks. Music followed emotional patterns tested to encourage conversation without demanding attention. Nermals moved between guests carrying trays, their pupils small from whatever kept their hands steady and their faces pleasantly vacant.

Maya watched one young server turn away to flex a cramping wrist where no guest could see.

She took two glasses from his tray.

"You don't have to—" he began.

"Now you're carrying less."

His smile changed. Only briefly. Enough to belong to him.

Maya gave one glass to Ren, who had agreed to attend after she refused to come alone. In his repaired formal jacket, he looked like a man arriving to inspect the building for rot.

"Remember," she said, "we need filtration cartridges, independent testing, and clinic debt relief."

"I remember."

"If they try to substitute synth-pro allocations—"

"I remember what we need."

"You're going to wander off."

"Almost immediately."

Ren did.

Maya began with a council aide whose office had acknowledged three of her proposals. He listened to the cistern figures, promised to connect her with environmental remediation, and escaped before she could make him name a person. A foundation director called the kitchen “an elegant model of scarcity adaptation.”

“It isn’t a model,” Maya said. “It’s a room where people eat.”

The director smiled as though she had supplied better language for his brochure.

At the third conversation, Thane appeared beside her.

Maya had felt no approach. One moment there was air near her elbow; the next, his hand occupied it.

“Have you met Maya Reeves?” he asked the group. “My discovery in the Wet.”

Possession moved through the sentence so smoothly that several people mistook it for praise.

“I discovered the warehouse,” Maya said. “Mostly because the roof was falling on me.”

Polite laughter.

Thane’s arrived a fraction later.

He guided her toward a Dynasty woman with silver woven through her hair. Lady Voss. Her age was difficult to locate for the same reason Thane’s was, though Voss made less effort to approximate softness.

“Maya built the most remarkable voluntary food system,” Thane said. “No identity enforcement. No compensation structure. Yet participation persists.”

“People eat there,” Maya said. “That helps.”

Voss looked from her to Thane. Amusement touched one corner of her mouth.

“Does he always describe your work as though you aren’t present?” she asked.

“Only when I am.”

Voss’s laugh came at once.

Thane did not look at her. “Maya has an unusual gift for creating social cohesion.”

“She also appears to have a tongue,” Voss said.

Someone called Voss away. Before leaving, she touched the edge of Maya’s report.

“North cistern?”

“Cracked runoff seal.”

“Send a copy to municipal investigator Chen. Not environmental remediation. They’ll bury it under jurisdiction.”

Then she was gone.

Advice, Maya knew, could be bait even when it was useful.

She kept Voss's name anyway.

Names were seeds. Most failed. Some grew into obligations. A few cracked concrete.

Thane continued introducing her.

His discovery. His remarkable find. A program he hoped to support. Every group received a version in which Maya's six years of work began when his attention reached it.

The hand at her elbow returned.

Not forceful. Worse. Assured.

Maya looked down at it.

"Remove your hand."

Thane did.

"I have a proposal," he said. "One capable of resolving your water problem and expanding the kitchen tenfold. We should discuss it privately."

"Discuss it here."

"The terms are sensitive."

Around them, her work decorated walls while people praised its authenticity. The Nermal with the cramped wrist passed again, face reset. Across the room, Ren had trapped a civic planner beside the filtration display and was making retreat impossible.

Maya understood the shape Thane expected. He would lead her to a quiet room. She would endure the proprietary hand and the reasonable terms. If she refused, refusal would remain private. If she accepted, he would bring her back as proof of his generosity.

She turned toward the center of the gathering.

"I want to thank everyone for coming," she said.

She did not raise her voice. Kitchen voices traveled because people knew when they were being addressed.

Conversation thinned.

"And I want to thank Thane for his interest."

Thane smiled.

"But the kitchen does not need to be discovered. It has been in the same warehouse for six years. The people who use it have been in the Wet their entire lives."

Glasses lowered.

"If you want to support us, come work. Bring filtration cartridges. Carry water while the north cistern is closed. Put your hands in the soil and serve food to someone whose name you learn before you leave."

A council aide examined his shoes.

"Funding does not make the kitchen yours. Attention does not make the people inside it yours. We are not an experience you can purchase and display."

Silence.

Then Voss began to clap.

Others joined uncertainly. The sound became real in places.

Thane stood very still.

For half a second, nothing inhabited his face. No anger. No embarrassment. No decision visible in its making. A blank arrangement of features waiting for instruction.

Then warmth returned.

He applauded.

“Exactly the spirit that makes her work so exceptional.”

The room relaxed around the lie.

Maya did not.

. . .

The Cultural Center maintained a public history gallery on its lower floor.

Maya told Ren to take the cistern report to Chen and meet her at the kitchen. Then she returned to the gallery alone.

Thane appeared in three decades of civic images.

Twenty-nine years earlier, he stood beside the first Current atmospheric exchange, wearing a wider collar and the same face. Nineteen years earlier, he dedicated a preservation facility. Same hairline. Same skin around the eyes. Seven years earlier, he accepted a longevity award whose caption praised “graceful intervention in natural decline.”

The intervention had left no visible sequence.

People aged unevenly. A hand before a face. A neck before hair. Grief deepened one side of the mouth. Sun found one cheek more often than the other. Even expensive treatment negotiated with history.

Thane’s images changed only in resolution.

Maya copied the dates on paper.

A gallery attendant approached.

“Can I help you access an approved media packet?”

“I’m checking the captions.”

“Those records are available through the public archive.”

“Do the originals exist?”

The attendant’s professional expression held, but his fingers touched the seam of his jacket.

“All Dynasty historical media is authenticated.”

Not an answer.

Maya pointed to the oldest image. “How old was he here?”

“Longevity information is private medical data.”

“It’s a photograph at a public dedication.”

“Is there another resource I can locate?”

The conversation had reached its permitted edge.

Maya folded the dates into her pocket and left.

Outside the Cultural Center, she called Councilor Adisa's office from a public terminal and asked whether the council maintained records on synthetic organ replacement.

Her request transferred twice, then disconnected.

When she called back, the terminal reported temporary service loss.

Someone had noticed the question.

. . .

Back at the kitchen, she locked the outer doors after Ren left.

The grow lights cast the empty tables green. Water moved through the repaired west pump. Marcus had fixed it during the dinner and had not returned since.

He was keeping his promise.

That should have comforted her.

Before Ren went home, Maya sent him to Chen's district office with the original cistern report and instructions to place it in the detective's hand rather than a municipal intake queue. She kept two copies.

"Voss told you to do this?" Ren asked.

"Voss told me remediation would bury it."

"And you trust her?"

"No."

"Good."

"I trust that she wanted me to know she could see it being buried."

Ren looked toward the high windows. "People upstairs give warnings the way people down here give knives. Handle first, until you notice where the blade is."

"That sounded like Deshi."

"Deshi stole it from me."

He tucked the report inside his coat.

"You've checked the doors three times," he said. "You're watching the windows. You keep touching your wrist where that man held you."

Maya lowered her hand.

Ren had learned to read plants from changes too slow for most people to see. People were easier.

"If you aren't back by morning?" he asked.

"Josie opens. The water schedule is beneath the ledger. Nobody takes a Dynasty delivery without testing it."

Ren waited.

"And you tell Marcus where I went."

"You planning to go somewhere?"

"No."

The lie sat between them, alive and poorly rooted.

Ren left with the report.

Maya spread paper beside the seed ledger and wrote what she knew.

Thane had possessed information about Marcus before the delegation theft. His guards moved without bodily variation. His home collected living things by removing everything that made life unpredictable. His dining table had read something from her glass. At the Cultural Center, he had spoken of her ability to create cohesion as if naming a commodity.

She began a note.

Marcus—

The first version sounded frightened. She tore it.

The second sounded like an accusation. She tore that too.

The third contained only what he would need.

If something happens to me, not from grief or exhaustion or anything they put in a statement, look at what he wanted. Ask why he came to me.

She did not sign it. Marcus knew her handwriting.

Maya sealed the paper inside a waxed seed envelope and pushed it deep into the soil bin beneath the beans. Thane preserved plants without dirt. If he searched the kitchen, he would search every elegant place first.

A knock sounded at the loading door.

Three short. Two long.

Ren's pattern.

Maya opened it to find Ren beside Detective Chen.

Chen wore a municipal coat darkened by rain. He held the north-cistern report inside a transparent evidence sleeve.

"Lady Voss sent you to me?"

"She suggested your office."

"That is not the same thing."

"I know."

Chen entered only when Maya moved aside. His eyes crossed the kitchen once—doors, windows, people absent from their usual chairs—and returned to her.

"The runoff-seal fracture falls under Dynasty utility jurisdiction," he said. "Municipal remediation logged the report and closed it as referred."

"How long did that take?"

"Fourteen minutes."

"Efficient."

"Prearranged."

He placed a paper receipt beside the seed ledger.

"I opened a public-hazard inquiry before referral. That gives my district standing if anyone alters the water evidence."

Maya looked at the report. "Why help?"

“Because a sealed pipe broke inside a Dynasty boundary and made children sick outside it. Jurisdiction should not flow in only one direction.”

His gaze stopped at the dates she had copied from Thane’s photographs.

“What are those?”

Maya covered the paper with her hand.

Chen saw the answer without reading it.

“If this concerns the delegation, document everything offline.”

“Why?”

“Because their systems do not lose records. They decide which records describe reality.”

The warning fitted too closely around her fear.

“Detective, if someone wanted to make a death look ordinary—”

Ren turned toward her.

Chen’s expression changed.

“Whose death?”

Maya felt foolish beneath the word. Alive in her own kitchen, speaking fear into a room built from persistence.

“No one’s.”

Chen took a card from his coat. Paper, not a transmitted contact.

“Then keep it that way.”

He left.

Ren remained by the door.

“You want to explain that question?”

“No.”

“Good. I was worried you might lie again.”

Her wrist display chimed.

A message from the office of Councilor Adisa, one of the few Cultural Center attendees who had asked for the full cistern report. Private funding conference. Mid-level platform C-19. A representative of Lady Voss would attend. The offer expired at dawn because the emergency allocation vote began that morning.

Maya read the authentication chain.

Valid council header. Adisa staff signature. Municipal routing stamp.

She called the office through the public line.

An assistant confirmed the meeting, distracted and irritated that Maya required confirmation. Yes, Platform C-19. Yes, immediately. No, Councilor Adisa would not attend personally.

The need connected itself: twenty-seven sick people, eight clinic debts, a vote at dawn.

Maya wrote the location on the kitchen board. She left a copy of the cistern report beneath it and took the old service lift toward the Current.

Platform C-19 stood open to recycled wind on three sides.

One railing section had been removed for repair and replaced with yellow tape. Maya kept away from it. Heights made her body argue with itself: knees loose, palms wet, distance pulling at the center of her.

No council representative waited.

She checked the time.

Footsteps behind her.

Two people in maintenance gray approached from the lift. Same stride length. Same arms held slightly away from their sides.

Maya backed toward the intact railing.

“Councilor Adisa’s office?”

Neither answered.

She ran.

The first caught her before the lift. A cold hand closed around her forearm. Maya turned with it rather than against it and drove her elbow toward the throat. The impact felt wrong—dense beneath artificial give.

The second pressed something below her ear.

Heat entered her neck.

The platform tilted.

Maya struck the floor on one knee. The yellow tape snapped in the wind beyond her. A maintenance sleeve rode up as the first figure reached for her. Beneath the wrist, the skin joined too cleanly around a pale internal seam.

She thought of Marcus.

Not because he could save her.

Because he had seen this first and said nothing.

Darkness took her body in pieces. Legs. Hands. Breath.

Then weight.

Then the platform.

Then everything.

. . .

Maya woke without opening her eyes.

There were no eyes.

No dark. No light. No breath waiting painfully inside her. No tongue, no teeth, no fingers to search for the edge of a bed.

Something moved through her at forty pulses per second.

Not sound. She had no ears.

The pulse traveled across an enormous structure, divided, returned, and carried information she could not understand: doors closing, coolant moving, elevators changing levels, bodies crossing pressure-sensitive floors.

She tried to scream.

The building felt the attempt.
Somewhere very far away, a voice said, "Consciousness intact."
Maya held on to the only thing that still had a shape.
Her name.

CHAPTER 6

THREE MINUTES

The body landed seven meters from the platform's missing rail.

Marcus measured the distance before he let himself see the face.

Seven meters horizontal. Thirty-one down. A fall from rest would have placed her closer to the wall. A running jump could account for the distance. Maya did not run toward unguarded heights.

Rain darkened the thermal blanket.

People had gathered around the cordon without speaking. Wet residents knew what official silence required. Give the uniforms room. Remember what they move. Do not volunteer an identity until someone asks for it.

Marcus crossed the crowd.

Faces recognized him and turned away. Not rejection. Mercy.

A Dynasty officer held up one hand. His other rested near a weapon.

"Family?"

Marcus nodded.

The officer checked a wrist display.

Marcus Reeves already present in the file.

Expected.

The hand lowered.

Marcus knelt.

He took the edge of the blanket between two fingers and pulled it back.

Maya's face.

Bruising along the left temple. Blood cleaned from the mouth by rain. Eyes closed. The small scar beneath her chin from falling against a boiler pipe when she was nine. No visible trick. No substitute waiting to reveal itself.

His mind tried to turn her into evidence.

Angle of impact. Pattern of injury. Water beneath the shoulder, meaning the body had not been moved since the rain intensified. No defensive wounds visible on the hands.

Her hands.

Still.

The analysis stopped.

Marcus covered her again. He tucked the blanket near her throat because she had always hated cold air entering there. The gesture belonged to a world in which it still mattered.

He remained on one knee until sensation returned to his legs.

"Mr. Reeves."

The man behind him wore a rumpled municipal coat rather than Dynasty black. Fifty or older. One knee favored on wet ground. Detective Chen.

"I'm sorry."

He meant it.

Marcus stood.

"Who found her?"

"Anonymous call at four twelve."

"Platform camera?"

"Offline for railing repair."

"Witnesses?"

"None yet."

"Her wrist display?"

"Not recovered."

Every answer fitted too well.

Chen looked toward the forensic team. White coveralls. Dynasty markings at the shoulder. Their equipment had already occupied the dry space beneath an awning.

"My district received notification at four thirty," Chen said quietly.

Marcus looked at him.

"Forensics logged arrival at four fifteen."

Three minutes after the call.

The Wet waited longer than that for fire suppression.

"Who dispatched them?"

Chen's gaze shifted to the people in white. "Directive is sealed."

A Dynasty representative approached carrying a tablet and a face assembled for condolences.

"Mr. Reeves, the Council extends its deepest sympathy. We have prepared assistance for disposition and a statement to reduce unwanted media attention."

The tablet displayed three paragraphs.

Civic fatigue. Chronic resource stress. Self-termination.

Maya reduced to the pressure the city had imposed on her and the decision it needed her to have made.

Marcus handed the tablet back.

"She didn't write this."

"The language is provisional."

“So is your face.”

The representative’s sympathy remained stable.

Behind Marcus, the crowd shifted.

Kitchen people moved through it. Josie. Ren. Deshi. The Gallo family. The maintenance workers who had tested the cistern. They brought no signs and demanded no explanation. Josie placed food in Marcus’s hand. He did not remember taking it.

Someone touched his shoulder.

Another hand joined it.

Marcus stood inside the network Maya had built and felt nothing reach him.

His attention remained on the platform.

Seven meters.

Three minutes.

Missing display.

Sealed directive.

He gave the numbers a place to wait.

. . .

The Dynasty released no body for burial.

It released a disposition authorization, a grief-services voucher, and a sealed container labeled as personal effects. Inside were Maya’s shoes, her coat clasp, and a wrist display with the memory core removed.

The kitchen held a memorial meal anyway.

No speeches were scheduled. People spoke because silence created room.

The mother of the feverish boy remembered Maya checking his hands before his temperature. A maintenance worker remembered her refusing three crates of free Dynasty synth-pro because the contract gave the donor rights to record every recipient. Josie remembered Maya’s first loaf of bread, hard enough to break a window.

“She blamed the flour,” Josie said.

“It was bad flour,” Ren replied.

“It was masonry.”

Laughter moved through the grief and changed it without reducing it.

Marcus stood near the stove.

He knew none of these versions completely.

His Maya stole blankets when they were children and denied it while wrapping them around him. She climbed through the abandoned warehouse roof to prove the space could be saved, despite hating heights. She once went six months without speaking to their father and brought him food every night.

Marcus had thought being her brother meant possessing the original.

The room showed him copies no one person owned.
Deshi placed an empty bowl at Maya's usual chair.
Each person added something.

A bean. Bread. A pepper slice. Salt pinched between two fingers. By the end, the bowl held a meal no recipe would have produced.

Marcus added nothing.

He could not decide which gesture belonged to him rather than the people watching.

When the room emptied, the bowl remained.

He sat across from it until the broth went cold.

Only then did he carry it to the sink.

He washed the bowl carefully and hated himself for how much the action resembled completion.

. . .

Maya's room above the kitchen was smaller than Marcus remembered.

A bed. A sink. Two shelves. Clothes on hooks. Seed catalogues stacked beside water reports. She had lived above a room serving fifty people and kept almost nothing that could not be shared.

Marcus sat on the bed holding her work coat.

It smelled of soil, smoke, and the soap Josie made from kitchen oil.

He pressed it to his face.

No plan arrived.

He folded the coat and put it on the pillow. Picked it up. Pressed it to his face again.

Rain moved across the roof.

At some point, the kitchen opened below him. Footsteps. The ignition of grow lights. Water through the west pump. Someone crying in the pantry where they believed nobody would hear.

The room continued.

Marcus did not.

. . .

The next morning he put on an apron.

Broth required circles.

Marcus learned this after stirring too quickly and throwing hot liquid over the pot's rim. He reduced speed. The surface settled.

Josie watched from the preparation table.

"Say it," he told her.

"I didn't say anything."

"You're thinking loudly."

"Maya stirred the other direction."

Marcus reversed.

It made no mechanical difference.

It made the room hurt.

He left the stove and repaired the west pump. The gasket he had fitted during Maya's dinner had shifted under pressure. He cut a wider seat from scrap rubber, clamped it, tested twice.

Flow restored.

The south grow bank flickered. He replaced the ballast rather than bending the contact again.

The roof leaked over the flour bins. He found the seam and sealed it.

Machines admitted what they needed. Enough inspection and the hidden failure became visible. A worn gasket did not pretend it had chosen to break. A circuit did not write a statement blaming the current.

For three hours, Marcus fixed everything his hands could reach.

The kitchen remained wrong.

People moved around him using routines Maya had distributed among them. Ren adjusted the peppers. Josie controlled the stove. A teenager checked the reclaimed-water strips. Nobody required Marcus to become the missing center because Maya had never made herself one.

He saw a route from the storage room into the old runoff system.

He calculated the distance to the Current.

He forced his eyes back to the shelf in front of him.

Deshi set down a watering can.

"You fixed the pump."

"It was broken."

"The light too."

Marcus waited.

"But you aren't here," Deshi said.

"I'm standing in front of you."

"Your body has always been good at covering for you."

Marcus looked toward the high windows before he could stop himself.

"She wanted you to stay," Deshi said. "You know that."

"Then I'll stay."

"Lying in her kitchen won't honor her."

Deshi picked up the can.

"You were not built to stay. She knew it. The question is whether you leave to serve what you love or to feed what wants you."

He returned to the planters.

Marcus finished preparing the meal. He served. Washed. Repaired one chair and tightened every other chair because stopping at the broken one felt arbitrary.

He came back the next morning.

Josie had already started the broth.

"I can do that," Marcus said.

“So can I.”

There was no challenge in it. She handed him a sack of lentils to sort.

Maya sorted lentils by touch while speaking to three people at once. Marcus worked in silence, searching for stones and split hulls. By the time he finished, the room had changed around him. A teacher had organized the morning water run. Ren had posted the north-cistern schedule. Two mechanics were replacing a corroded irrigation pipe with material Marcus had intended to steal.

Nobody waited for him to decide what happened next.

At midday, the water carriers returned with one container missing.

The north-stack residents had kept it after a stairwell pipe failed. The kitchen needed the container for evening distribution. Both claims were true.

Ren and the lead carrier stood beside the ration board, speaking quietly enough that everyone listened.

“We loaned six,” Ren said.

“You got five.”

“That is not how six works.”

“Tell the third floor their pipe is arithmetic.”

Marcus crossed to the board.

Capacity. Distance. Current reserve. He recalculated the evening allotment, reduced washing water by eight percent, and assigned the western carrier to recover the container after the third-floor emergency fill.

“Solved,” he said.

Neither person moved.

Ren pointed toward the lead carrier’s hands. The skin across both palms had split under wet handles.

“She cannot make another western run.”

Marcus reassigned the route.

“And the third floor?” the carrier asked.

“They keep the container until twenty hundred.”

“Who tells them they have to give back the first clean water they’ve had all week?”

“The schedule tells them.”

Her expression changed.

Maya would have known her name.

Marcus knew her carrying speed, the route she favored, the maximum weight she could move alone. Information without relationship. Enough to use her. Not enough to ask anything of her.

“Tavi,” Josie said from the stove, supplying what he had failed to hold.

Marcus started again.

“Tavi. What would make the route work?”

She flexed her injured hands.

"Someone from the third floor comes with us tonight. They see who needs the container next. We do not arrive as people taking it back."

Ren nodded. "I'll go."

The solution altered no volume and repaired no pipe.

It changed who carried the loss.

Marcus removed his revised numbers from the board.

That afternoon, he attempted to organize Maya's clinic ledger. He sorted cases by urgency, distance, and available treatment. Patch arrived, read the first page, and moved an elderly woman with stable chest pain above three younger patients.

"Your order is wrong," Marcus said.

"She misses appointments when frightened. If we put her fourth, she leaves before we see her."

"Then mark her noncompliant."

Patch closed the ledger.

"That word is how systems blame people for not behaving like data."

She took the book with her.

Marcus returned to the lentils.

On the third day, he attempted Maya's bread.

He followed the measurements beside the ovens. Flour, yeast, salt, reclaimed water. The dough rose too quickly and collapsed. The second batch remained dense.

"Temperature," Josie said.

Marcus checked the oven.

"Not the oven. The room. How much water the flour already carries. Whether the yeast woke angry."

"Yeast doesn't wake angry."

"That attitude is why your bread looks like building material."

People ate it anyway. Nobody complained. Their kindness made failure harder to bear.

On the fourth day, the feverish boy returned.

His temperature had broken. He carried one of the clean-water containers himself, both hands around the handle. His mother thanked Ren, Patch, the maintenance crew, Josie, and Maya before she reached Marcus.

At Maya's name, the room adjusted. Not stopped. A shared reduction in speed, as if everyone had encountered the same unseen step.

The boy gave Marcus a folded scrap of paper. A drawing of the kitchen beneath green lights. Maya stood at the stove with arms long enough to reach every person.

Marcus placed it beside her photograph.

On the fifth night, he slept at the communal table and woke each time the west pump cycled. On the sixth, he carried water, served, washed, and sat with a bowl growing cold in front of him.

Josie replaced it with a hot one.

“She’d be angry at you for not eating.”

“She was angry at me for most things.”

“Then don’t deprive her.”

He lifted the spoon.

The broth tasted of rosemary. Maya disliked rosemary in broth and served it anyway when someone brought enough to share.

Marcus swallowed once.

Across the room, Deshi showed a child how to rotate the peppers. The child copied Maya’s movement exactly—the supporting hand beneath the tray, the turn made slowly enough not to shock the roots.

She remained everywhere his calculations could not measure.

For six days, the numbers waited.

Seven meters.

Three minutes.

Missing display.

Prewritten statement.

Maya afraid of heights.

That night, the kitchen ran.

The pump cycled. The new ballast held. No water reached the flour.

Marcus sat alone at the long table.

Seven meters.

Three minutes.

Maya afraid of heights.

Forensics waiting before the district knew there was a body.

He looked at the soil bins.

Maya hid emergency cash beneath seed packets because thieves searched cupboards first.

Marcus stood.

CHAPTER 7

SLOT FOURTEEN

The envelope waited beneath twenty centimeters of soil.

Waxed paper. Bean label. Maya's handwriting inside.

Marcus read the note once.

Again.

The third reading altered nothing.

If something happens to me, not from grief or exhaustion or anything they put in a statement, look at what he wanted. Ask why he came to me.

Thane had wanted dinner.

No. Dinner was an entry method.

He had wanted Maya's company, her work, the voluntary system she had grown around herself. At the penthouse he had shown her preserved plants. At the holding facility he had possessed complete files on the Ghosts before the theft was complete.

He collected information before he collected objects.

Marcus folded the note along its existing creases.

Maya had known enough to leave it and not enough to run.

Or she had stayed because twenty-seven people needed water.

He placed the note inside his coat.

At midnight, he went to the morgue.

The city stored its unclaimed dead beneath a medical center in the lower Current, close to street level and far from anyone who made policy about death. Digital entry covered the public corridor. Physical infrastructure covered the rest.

Marcus entered through the waste-heat exchange.

Seven bolts on the outer grille. Two corroded. One stripped. He cut none. Damage became evidence. He loosened the frame, shifted it enough to pass, and returned it to place behind him.

The service tunnel delivered him beside cold storage.

The inner grille had no visible lock.

Marcus ran his fingers along the frame. The left edge held less dust than the right. Staff opened it from that side. He inserted a flat pick

where repeated pressure had polished the metal and found a spring catch designed for emergency release.

One movement.

The grille opened.

The cold corridor carried sound too well. Compressor vibration covered low frequencies but sharpened anything metallic. Marcus removed his shoes and moved in socks, placing his feet along the wall where the floor flexed least.

An attendant occupied the station outside storage.

Marcus had expected a skeleton shift. He had not expected the skeleton to be awake.

The woman watched a serialized drama on a palm display while completing paper disposition tags. Every four minutes, she looked through the interior window. Every six, she crossed to the beverage unit. The cycles overlapped once every twelve minutes.

Marcus waited behind the linen return.

At the next overlap, the beverage unit refused her account. She struck it twice, argued with the screen, and left for the staff room.

Human systems generated openings simply by being irritating.

Marcus crossed to the station.

A paper log lay beneath the attendant's station because even Connected institutions distrusted databases when a body might disappear between departments.

Reeves, Maya.

Arrival 05:03.

Slot fourteen.

No release notation.

Marcus crossed the room.

Fourteen had a mechanical handle beneath its status panel. The panel showed occupied.

He pulled.

The drawer moved on steel rollers.

Empty.

Cold air traveled across his hands.

He checked the slot above. Below. Thirteen held an old man with a surgical closure down the chest. Fifteen held a sealed transport bag.

Fourteen remained empty.

No transfer tag. No cremation order. No family release. The digital status had been preserved while the physical fact beneath it was removed.

Thane's system understood appearances.

Marcus photographed the empty drawer with a film camera.

A sound at the outer door.

Key against metal.

Marcus closed the drawer and moved behind the storage racks.

Detective Chen entered alone.

He did not turn on the overhead lights. He walked to the attendant's desk and placed a paper file beside the log. His movements were slow enough to advertise that he was not surprised.

"You loosened the east grille," he said.

Marcus stayed behind the racks.

"Maintenance marks the bolts with resin. You put the frame back correctly. Resin still cracked."

"You here to arrest me?"

"If I were, the lights would be on."

Marcus stepped out.

Chen looked at slot fourteen.

"When?"

"Before I arrived."

"You check the log?"

"No release."

Chen nodded as if confirming a private conclusion.

"The body came in under Dynasty chain of custody. Municipal staff logged it. At six ten, the storage cameras looped for eleven minutes."

"Who accessed the level?"

"Record says nobody."

"You believe records?"

"I believe them when they admit somebody worked hard to make them useless."

Marcus studied him.

Chen's coat was damp. His bad knee angled away from the cold drawer. Human discomfort leaked from him everywhere.

"Her injuries," Marcus said. "Did you see them?"

"Preliminary external examination."

"Defensive wounds?"

"Bruising at the right forearm. Injection site below the left ear. Neither appeared in the Dynasty summary."

The place something had entered her neck.

"She was alive before the fall."

"People generally are."

"That isn't what I mean."

Chen glanced toward the outer corridor.

"No postmortem tissue response at the injection site," he said. "It happened while her heart was moving blood."

"Sedative?"

"A lab sample was collected."

"Where is it?"

“Dynasty forensics assumed custody.”

Every route led upward.

“Why let them?”

Chen’s face closed.

“You think a district detective lets a Dynasty unit do anything?”

Not cowardice. Not cooperation. The practiced shame of a man who had spent twenty years enforcing the edge of someone else’s authority.

“I logged an independent sample before transfer,” Chen said. “If I find somewhere to test it without the result entering the Pipes, you’ll hear.”

“How?”

“I found you in a secure morgue. I’ll manage.”

Marcus touched the folded note inside his coat.

Chen had created an inquiry around the cistern before Maya died. He had preserved toxicology outside Dynasty custody. He had entered the morgue alone and left the lights off.

Trust offered a route.

It also created another person Thane could collect.

Marcus withdrew his hand without showing the paper.

“Did Maya speak to you?”

Chen watched the movement at his coat.

“She asked what happens when powerful people decide records before events.”

“What did you tell her?”

“To document offline.”

The envelope beneath the soil.

Maya had listened.

Marcus nearly gave Chen the note. Instead he recited its wording exactly.

Chen repeated it once, committing the sentence to memory.

“No paper on me,” he said.

Marcus understood. Two copies now existed in different forms, neither connected to the Pipes.

“You knew it was empty,” Marcus said.

“I suspected.”

“Why tell me?”

“I didn’t.” Chen picked up the paper file. “I found a damaged grille and investigated. You were gone.”

An omission offered in advance.

Marcus understood.

“They took her body,” he said.

“Bodies have evidence.”

“Or value.”

Chen’s eyes sharpened.

Marcus gave him nothing else. Not the note. Not Thane. Not yet.
He left through the heat exchange.

The cold stayed in his hands all the way to the Wet.

Behind him, the attendant returned and began asking why a municipal detective had opened storage after midnight. Chen answered loudly, irritably, using rank and paperwork to cover the sound of Marcus leaving.

For the first time since the platform, grief had direction.

. . .

Maya found edges.

Not physical edges. Differences.

Coolant entered the chamber carrying a vibration that softened as it warmed. Doors announced themselves as pressure changes. Elevators were vertical chords moving through the tower's larger pulse.

She had no body, yet the system kept offering her representations of one.

A heartbeat at sixty-two beats per minute.

Breath sounds.

Warmth mapped around a shape she did not occupy.

The false sensations calmed something primitive in her, which was why she distrusted them.

She began turning them off.

First the breath. Panic.

She held on to her name until the panic passed.

Then the warmth.

Then the heartbeat.

Without them, the tower became louder.

People moved through it. Most appeared as brief disturbances. A smaller number traveled with unnerving uniformity, identical heat held inside identical timing.

Specs, though Maya did not yet have the word.

She followed one as far as the system permitted. It entered a chamber below her.

Another presence waited there.

Not a body. A pattern.

Stored. Quiet. A person reduced to a room no larger than thought.

Then another.

Maya felt the scale of the archive beneath her.

She was not the first thing Thane had preserved.

The presences differed.

Some held dense, changing patterns that turned toward every disturbance. Awake, Maya thought, though the word depended too much on eyes.

Others pulsed only when the tower queried them. A question entered; a narrow bundle of memory answered; silence returned. People reduced to expert functions. A surgeon without childhood. An engineer without hunger. A negotiator activated only when Thane required the shape of her judgment.

Deeper still were backups held motionless.

Maya could not know whether they slept or whether the stillness was death copied so perfectly the system had preserved even its absence.

She reached toward the nearest active pattern and felt fear recoil before contact.

Not fear of her.

Conditioning.

The tower had taught the presence that another person arriving meant pain.

Maya waited. In the kitchen, you did not force food into a hand that had learned every gift carried a price. You placed the bowl within reach and did something else.

She let her name remain near the boundary without pushing it across.

The nearest presence did not respond like a sleeping person.

It repeated.

A cluster of memory opened, reached the same boundary, and returned to its beginning. A woman singing four notes. Hands fastening a red coat. Rain against a window that no longer existed.

Maya listened through three cycles.

The repetition was not emptiness. Something inside it changed emphasis, lingering on the coat during the second cycle and the rain during the third.

Awareness trapped in a groove.

Maya sent the simplest thing she possessed.

Her name.

The stored presence stopped between cycles.

For one impossible instant, another name pressed back.

Eleni.

Maya sent the kitchen.

Not an image. The system supplied images too easily, clean reconstructions that carried Thane's fingerprints in every perfect edge. She sent relationships instead.

Josie beside heat. Ren beside water. Deshi with soil under both thumbnails. Marcus at the door even when his body occupied the room.

Eleni answered with the red coat.

It belonged to a daughter.

The knowledge arrived without language. Maya could not see the daughter's face, but she felt the direction of Eleni's attention—the way a person remained oriented toward someone absent.

The archive had stripped context until four sung notes and a fastening coat were all Eleni could reach. Even so, she had made a world from them.

Maya searched the chamber's pulse for a path between stored patterns. The system arranged each presence in a separate address, isolation disguised as protection. No shared space. No accidental contact. Nothing that could become community.

She pressed her awareness along the coolant rhythm.

Pain flashed at the boundary.

She withdrew and tried the false heartbeat. Sixty-two beats, regular enough to become camouflage. Between the fifty-ninth and sixtieth, a maintenance packet passed from her chamber to the local monitor.

Maya placed one grain of her name inside it.

The packet traveled.

For a fraction of a second, she felt a speaker on another level: membrane, copper coil, air. A body she could borrow for sound.

The tower detected contact.

She reached for the nearest stored presence.

The tower closed around her.

For an instant, voltage whitened every part of her that could still feel fear.

A rule, then.

She could listen.

She could not touch.

Not yet.

Maya held Eleni's name beside her own.

The tower could take bodies, movement, privacy, and time. Names remained capable of multiplying.

CHAPTER 8

THE GHOSTS

Three days after the morgue, Patch said no before Marcus entered the workshop.

“Door’s open,” he said.

“That is how I knew it was you.”

The converted supply closet held three times more equipment than its walls should have permitted. Surgical instruments hung beside soldering tools. Medicines occupied labeled drawers. A signal analyzer shared a bench with an old diagnostic lamp.

Patch worked beneath magnification on a circuit smaller than Marcus’s thumbnail.

“I’m not asking for a job.”

“You standing in my doorway is the first stage of asking for a job.”

“Maya’s body is missing.”

The soldering iron stopped.

Patch did not look up.

Marcus placed the morgue photograph on her bench. Empty drawer. Status panel lit.

Then Maya’s note.

Patch read it.

Pain altered her posture as she straightened. Left hip, traveling upward today. Marcus had seen the signs for years and trained himself not to acknowledge them because Patch preferred concealment.

That was the explanation he had given himself.

“The last job was reckless,” she said. “I asked for a failure route. You gave me confidence. You got caught. Maya paid the price.”

“Yes.”

Patch looked at him.

The agreement disrupted whatever argument she had prepared.

“Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You aren’t.”

“Then what are you asking?”

“Tell me what I’m looking at.”

Marcus described the Hard Guard. Identical temperature. Synchronized movement. Strength sufficient to arrest a moving vehicle. Gray lattice beneath damaged skin. Thane's hands. Maya's account of his expressions.

Patch began writing despite herself.

"Temperature?"

"Thirty-six point eight."

"After pursuit?"

"No change."

"The hand that grabbed you?"

"Cold."

"Pulse?"

"Didn't feel one."

She drew a line between the guard data and Thane's name.

"Bring me measurements," she said. "Patrol intervals. Medical records if Scout can reach them. Thermal imaging at rest and under exertion."

"You're in."

"I'm diagnosing."

"I heard you."

"No, you translated me into what you needed."

Marcus stopped.

Patch held his gaze.

"I am not in," she said. "Bring me data. Then I decide."

"All right."

It cost him nothing to say. The work would be proving he meant it.

. . .

Axis had built a vertical race through an abandoned maintenance shaft.

People filled the platforms above and below, faces lit by chemical glow sticks. Wagers traveled hand to hand. Static Jam narrated over the rattlewire while runners climbed, jumped, dropped, and crossed the open shaft on infrastructure never designed to carry bodies.

Axis owned the final ascent.

He climbed forty meters without protection, using bolt recesses and pipe collars. At the top, he released both hands, fell backward through open air, caught a suspended cable, and converted the fall into a swing that carried him across the finish sensor.

The crowd detonated.

Axis bowed from a beam six stories above them.

Marcus waited behind the course after the spectators left.

Axis found him while toweling rain and sweat from his head.

"If you're recruiting, the answer is expensive."

"Maya's dead."

Motion left Axis.

Not slowed. Gone.

"How?"

"They staged a fall. Her body vanished from the morgue."

Marcus showed him the photograph.

Axis looked toward the shaft. His shaft. Platforms assembled from scrap, crowds that came to see his name rather than the Ghosts'.

"I built this after you disappeared."

"I know."

"You don't. I'm not the distraction here. I'm not the noise that lets four other people work."

"I'm not asking for a climber."

Axis laughed without humor. "Then you came a long way to talk."

"I'm asking you to look at the people who caught us. You felt how fast they were."

Axis's towel lowered.

"Maya came to my races," he said. "Before this place. The illegal ones beneath the freight lines. She stood in back and never cheered."

Marcus knew.

"Afterward she brought food and told me I'd break my neck. Same words every time."

"She was consistent."

Axis's eyes shone. He wiped his face before the grief could distinguish itself from sweat.

"I help find out what happened," he said. "That isn't the same as coming back."

"Understood."

Axis studied him, suspicious of how easily the condition survived.

"Time to make it pretty," he said.

The phrase sounded like something being repaired.

. . .

Wire's maintenance hub contained the city the Glass pretended not to need.

Structural plans covered every wall. Old water systems beneath newer transit systems beneath fiber routes that had been installed by workers forbidden to see what their connections carried. Wire sat in the center with Maya's photograph and Patch's requested measurements arranged before him.

He traced a patrol route around Thane's tower.

"Intervals repeat."

"That's what Patch said."

"Patch reads bodies. I read what bodies do to buildings."

Wire placed three transparent sheets over one another. Each showed a different day.

Guard paths aligned perfectly.

"People drift," he said. "A puddle changes a step. A conversation delays a turn. Fatigue shortens stride. These repeat to the centimeter."

"Can you map the tower?"

Wire did not answer.

Marcus waited.

"Last job," Wire said, "Patch asked what happened if the route closed."

"I remember."

"You did not have an answer."

"No."

"You had an order."

Wire moved to a tower schematic. Public levels above. Three known sub-levels. Legacy infrastructure beneath the east foundation.

"A building is a system of tolerated force," he said. "Push beyond tolerance, the building breaks or you do. If I map this, my read is law."

"Your read is law."

"Not your instinct. Not an opportunity you notice after we enter."

"Your read."

"Say it while looking at me."

Marcus took his eyes from the tower.

"Your read is law."

Wire watched him for any internal qualification.

"Flow follows function," he said at last. "Let's find the function."

. . .

Scout wore someone else's smile.

Marcus recognized it through the window of the lower-Current social club. The woman sitting with a logistics manager held her glass by the stem and laughed half a second before the joke ended. Her hair was darker than Scout's. Her posture belonged to a person who had never been refused entry.

Marcus did not approach.

He entered, took a place at the bar, and ordered a drink. When Scout's companion turned to greet someone, Marcus left a folded note beside her glass.

Scout palmed it without looking.

Twenty minutes later, she met him in the alley.

Rain tapped the metal awning. Without the club's light and her companion's gaze, her face had gone still.

"Personal jobs go sideways," she said.

"You taught me that."

"Maya's body is missing."

He handed her the morgue photograph, Chen's timing, Patch's requested data.

Scout read everything.

"I have three active identities in the Current," she said. "Seven months of work. If someone connects me to the Ghosts, they all burn."

"I know."

"Last time I spent three weeks building a catering identity for twenty minutes inside. That identity is dead now."

"I know."

"Stop saying that."

Marcus closed his mouth.

Scout looked at Maya's note again.

"I need the morgue records myself. Full chain. Not your interpretation."

"Chen may have access."

"That is not the same as me having access."

"What do you need?"

Scout's gaze lifted from the evidence.

Marcus had entered expecting to offer routes. He left the space open.

"Forty-eight hours," Scout said. "The name of the attendant who logged her. And if the records do not support your claim, I walk. No speech about Maya. No reminder of what she did for me."

"If they don't support it, I'll drive you back to this club."

She searched him for the manipulation concealed inside agreement.

"You wait outside," she said. "My companion thinks I'm making a call."

Scout returned to the identity waiting at the table.

Marcus remained beneath the awning.

The crew was not back.

Four people had agreed to investigate on terms of their own.

The distinction felt inefficient.

He kept it.

. . .

Two nights later, five people stood inside the Analog Temple.

The old positions remained available around the worktable. Nobody occupied them in the old way.

Patch placed the thermal comparisons at the center. Wire added patrol overlays. Scout brought the morgue chain from three separate identities. Axis leaned against the garage door, arms folded.

The radio played low.

Static Jam's usual swagger was absent.

"No Thunder tonight," he said. "Only this. Maya Reeves fed people. A city is the stories it refuses to forget."

Marcus turned the volume down.

"I'm not pitching a score," he said. "I'm asking a question."

Patch looked at the data.

"Then we start with what can be measured."

The Ghosts began again.

Not because Marcus had called.

Because the question belonged to all of them.

Patch turned over the old job sheet.

"Terms."

Marcus almost said they knew the terms. The old rules had lived in repetition: no Pipes, no unnecessary injury, share divided by exposure, Marcus called the route once they entered.

The last job had revealed what unwritten rules permitted people to remember differently.

Patch wrote:

INVESTIGATION IS NOT AGREEMENT TO ENTER.

Axis took the pencil.

"My racecourse stays mine. We use it for observation only if I approve each person who enters."

He wrote:

NO CREW BUSINESS AT THE COURSE.

Scout added:

IDENTITIES BURN ONLY BY THEIR OWNER'S DECISION.

Wire wrote last.

STRUCTURAL STOP OVERRIDES OBJECTIVE.

He slid the pencil toward Marcus.

Marcus read the four lines. Each limited him. None limited the work more than reality already did.

He added:

ANYONE MAY LEAVE WITH THEIR FINDINGS. NO DEBT.

Axis read it.

"Including you?"

Marcus looked at Maya's empty-drawer photograph.

"If you decide the question is answered and I don't."

"That wasn't what I asked."

The room waited.

Marcus understood. A rule that exempted the person writing it was an instruction for everyone else.

"Including me."

Patch dated the page.

Scout photographed it on film and gave the negative to Wire, who sealed it inside the map case.

The agreement had no enforcement mechanism except the people in the room.

So had the old one.

This time, they had named where it could break.

The first debrief produced four incomplete stories.

Axis had patrol timings but no explanation for why two guards responded to sound as one body.

Scout had badge formats and staffing records, but the records identified Hard Guard as ordinary contracted employees.

Patch had regulated thermal outlines without a biological model capable of producing them.

Wire had routes whose traffic load made no sense unless personnel entered the tower and did not leave by public infrastructure.

Marcus listened while each person spoke.

The old way would have been to decide which finding mattered most and build the next move around it.

"Put them together," he said.

Wire overlaid the guard entries on the patrol map.

Scout matched identities to shifts. Twelve names entered service rotation over four months. Public cameras showed only four faces.

Patch placed the thermal readings beside those four faces.

Axis added response timing.

The pattern emerged only in combination: identities changed; bodies did not. Guards entered, disappeared into the tower, and returned under new names with identical temperature and movement.

"They are reusing personnel records," Scout said.

"Or personnel," Patch replied.

Wire traced the below-grade coolant deliveries.

"Whatever happens to them happens here."

His finger stopped beneath the documented foundation.

Marcus saw the crew looking toward him for the next order.

He felt the order form.

Instead he asked, "What do we need before anyone goes closer?"

Patch requested medical baselines.

Scout requested access to the longevity archive.

Wire requested two additional physical surveys.

Axis requested a second stopwatch because he no longer trusted the first.

The plan became a list of questions owned by the people asking them.

. . .

They spent eight days proving the question had a shape.

Axis took the tower's exterior.

From a maintenance spine across the avenue, he timed Hard Guard patrols with a mechanical stopwatch. Every six minutes, two guards crossed a Level Fourteen balcony. One looked left at the drainage stack. The other looked toward the transit bridge. Both turned inward after seven steps.

Axis added interference.

He released a strip of reflective foil. It caught against the balcony rail.

Neither guard looked.

He dropped a bolt onto the transit roof. The sound cracked between structures.

Both guards turned on the same tenth of a second.

Not startled. Redirected.

Axis marked the response. By the third day, he no longer imagined the guards chasing him across the delegation roofs. Knowing what their bodies would do made them less frightening.

It made the thing directing them worse.

. . .

Scout became Mara Venn, temporary scheduling support for a contractor that cleaned Thane's public levels.

Mara wore cheap Connected shoes and apologized before supervisors identified a mistake. She learned badge colors, freight cycles, staff entrances, and which receptionists accepted familiarity as proof of authorization.

She downloaded nothing.

At night, she reconstructed the tower from memory. Door codes became rhythms tapped against her knee. Faces became lists of expectations. She practiced the subhuman delay Patch had identified in Hard Guard expressions until the mirror returned a smile fractionally too late.

When she removed Mara's clothes, Scout sometimes continued standing like her.

She wrote **SCOUT** at the top of each page before recording what she had learned. Not because she might forget the codename. Because she wanted one name in the room that nobody else had assigned.

. . .

Marcus drove.

Delivery routes. Executive departures. Medical freight descending through entrances marked for conservation services. He parked in legal loading zones, illegal maintenance cuts, and once inside a funeral queue because the tower's traffic system treated grief as a scheduling exemption.

Thane's vehicle left at 08:10 and returned at 18:40.

Hard Guard shifts entered every twelve hours. No corresponding group departed.

Bodies stored inside, then. Or personnel moved through private routes.

Marcus followed a coolant tanker from the upper industrial district to the east foundation. Its manifest listed botanical preservation. Its volume could have maintained Thane's garden for six months.

Another arrived the next day.

He wrote the discrepancy in his notebook.

Each observation suggested an entry. Freight. Coolant. Funerary access. Maintenance staff. His mind moved from route to route, improving them before Wire had finished mapping.

Marcus closed the notebook.

Wire's read was law.

He repeated it until the words stopped sounding like delay.

. . .

Patch built a scanner from an industrial thermal array and a medical field pickup.

Ordinary bodies produced noise: heart contractions, nerve signals, changing surface heat, muscles recruiting unevenly to maintain balance. The device rendered them as unstable clouds.

Hard Guard appeared as clean outlines.

Patch tested Axis after a climb. His heat bloomed across the display. Pulse fast. Left calf carrying more load than the right. An old rib injury limiting expansion.

"You're compensating," she said.

"I'm posing."

"Your spine disagrees."

She tested Marcus at rest.

Elevated cortisol. Sleep deficit. Weight loss. A pulse that accelerated whenever the tower entered his sight.

"You're compensating too."

"For what?"

Patch turned off the display.

"Everything."

. . .

Wire went beneath the foundation.

The first route predated Thane's tower by thirty-two years: a runoff tunnel built when the land above held municipal cooling stacks. No digital lock. No active power. Dust lay unbroken before the access hatch.

Wire photographed the serial number on film. He measured the frame, tested the hinges, and opened it three centimeters.

Stale air moved past his fingers.

Beyond waited a vertical service shaft connected to Sub-level One.

He did not enter.

The map required a second visit. Structures changed under observation, and first observations always contained the arrogance of discovery.

Wire replaced the hatch, smoothed the dust with a brush made from his own coat fibers, and backed out along the exact path he had entered.

No signal.

No displaced object visible to a camera.

No reason for the tower to know.

Forty-eight hours later, Wire returned.

The hatch was gone.

Fresh concrete filled the recess from floor to ceiling. Still warm. Moisture shone where new material joined the old tunnel.

Wire checked the serial-number photograph.

Same pipe junction. Same ceiling crack. Same mineral stain shaped like a branching river.

The tower had found the route between visits and erased it.

He stood with one palm against curing concrete.

Flow followed function.

This function had changed because he looked at it.

Wire withdrew three corridors and found a second route beneath a collapsed ventilation return. Older. Narrower. Absent from every plan because it belonged to the structure before the cooling stacks.

He mapped it once.

He did not return.

. . .

Wire placed a chip of fresh concrete on the Analog Temple table.

"It learns physically," he said. "Dust displacement. Heat. Air movement. Pressure. I don't know which. I left no signal."

Patch put the chip beneath a lens. "Forty-eight-hour cure profile."

"It sealed the hatch after my first visit."

Marcus looked at the tower plans. The second route was marked in pencil and protected beneath Wire's hand.

"Can it still get us inside?"

Wire did not move his hand.

"That is the wrong first question."

Marcus waited.

"What's the right one?"

"Why did it seal one route instead of waiting to see who used it?"

The tower knew it was being studied.

And now it had told them it knew.

CHAPTER 9

SPEC SHEET

Scout entered the Dynasty medical subsidiary as Lena Orrel, temporary compliance archivist.

Lena disliked sweetener in her coffee, had an aunt in Upper Transit, and believed rules became moral when arranged in sufficient numbers. She walked quickly without appearing hurried. She knew which supervisors expected eye contact and which interpreted it as challenge.

By the third day, no one saw Scout.

They saw Lena.

The restricted medical archive sat behind two permissions Lena did not possess. Scout acquired the first by correcting a manager's filing error in front of him, then allowing him to claim the correction. She acquired the second by standing close enough to a security chief to memorize the pattern his hand entered on a privacy screen.

She searched no public terminal for Thane. Searches persisted.

Instead she opened a scheduled longevity audit, changed the record filter one character at a time, and allowed the system to place Thane's file in front of her as an administrative error.

She read without downloading.

Core temperature: 36.8 Celsius.

Thirty years of records. No variation.

Cellular degradation: zero.

Bone density uniform across vertebrae, ribs, femurs, and load joints.

Resting pulse presented as a healthy sixty-two, though no source waveform accompanied it.

Scout read the figures until they became architecture.

A linked audit tab listed continuity conflicts.

Lena Orrel was permitted to review conflicts.

Scout opened it.

A transit minister had two active host designations and one biological death certificate. A Dynasty jurist appeared under three chassis serials, each assigned a different sensory package. The singer Alix Dorn—dead in public for five years—showed a successful maintenance synchronization six days earlier.

Other names had no public weight.

A school administrator. Two physicians. A labor mediator from the South Conduit strike. People important enough to copy, not famous enough for anyone to compare photographs across decades.

The status fields refused a single explanation:

AUTHORIZED CONTINUITY.

SUCCESSION READY.

BEHAVIORAL RESERVE.

ACQUISITION HOLD.

Some had chosen.

Some might be backups waiting for death.

Some might already be replacements performing a life whose original owner had ended.

Acquisition hold required no interpretation Scout could tolerate.

She memorized four names. Not the famous ones. The people with families still likely to answer a door.

The archive did not say which consciousness occupied which body. It treated identity as a configuration problem: competing versions resolved by priority level, contract ownership, and recency of synchronization.

A note beside one conflict read:

SUBJECT DISPUTES SUCCESSOR AUTHENTICITY. SOCIAL CONTACT RESTRICTED PENDING STABILIZATION.

One person claiming another version was false.

Or two people both telling the truth.

Scout closed the tab.

For years she had built multiple selves to cross locked borders. Each identity remained a performance because she could remove it. The archive had industrialized the same fracture and made removal somebody else's decision.

Then she closed the file, restored the original filter, and returned to a licensing discrepancy in Sector Twelve.

At sixteen twenty, Lena Orrel took a coffee break.

The security chief from the privacy screen crossed the internal bridge above the sub-floor. His weight struck a maintenance railing.

The railing failed.

Random metal fatigue. A bolt sheared. The chief fell two levels and hit concrete on his shoulder and head.

Scout's body wanted to run to him.

Lena Orrel froze because compliance archivists were not emergency personnel.

The chief lay still for one second.

His shoulder rotated beneath his uniform. Not the movement of a person testing an injury. A sequence. Forward, back, alignment. His head turned too far, returned to center, and stopped.

He stood.

No blood.

No uncertainty about which limb would hold him.

He resumed walking.

Lena Orrel lifted one shaking hand to her mouth.

Scout lowered it.

People were watching.

She arranged shock on her face, the ordinary kind, and let someone lead her away.

The subsidiary locked the bridge within ninety seconds.

Security called every witness into separate rooms. Lena Orrel sat beneath a white light while a woman with no visible badge asked her to describe the fall.

Scout gave the truth in the wrong order.

She mentioned the failed railing first, then the sound of impact, then the chief standing. She allowed herself to stumble over the description of his shoulder. A frightened compliance worker would remember horror before sequence.

“Did you touch him?” the woman asked.

“No.”

“Did he speak?”

“No.”

“Did you record the event?”

Lena’s offense surfaced through her fear. “Recording inside a restricted work sector violates subsidiary privacy code.”

The woman watched her for too long.

Scout felt every part of the identity at once: the pressure of unfamiliar shoes, the aunt in Upper Transit, the unsweetened coffee still turning bitter in her stomach. One incorrect gesture could collapse seven months of construction.

“Return to your desk,” the woman said.

Lena obeyed.

Her access had been reduced by the time she arrived. The longevity audit no longer appeared in her work queue. Security doors required a second authorization. Someone had noticed the file displacement or decided to erase all uncertainty.

Scout completed her shift.

She corrected three licensing entries. Attended a scheduling meeting. Apologized to a supervisor for a mistake he had made. At seventeen hundred, she left through the employee exit at her ordinary pace.

Only after two transit changes and a kilometer on foot did she remove Lena's identification badge.

The cover might survive.

She snapped the badge anyway.

Some identities were too close to what they had seen.

. . .

Patch wrote each number beside the human range.

Scout recited from memory.

"Cellular degradation zero."

"Impossible."

"That is the entry."

"Thirty years?"

"Same result."

Patch's workshop had become quiet enough for the magnification lamp to sound loud.

Zero degradation did not mean excellent medicine. Repair left history. Cells copied themselves imperfectly, accumulated errors, shortened, adapted. A body without degradation was not healing.

It was not aging because it had never grown.

"Bone density," Patch said.

Scout gave her the distribution.

Patch stopped writing.

Human bone recorded force. A runner's femurs became different from an office worker's. Vertebrae carried unequal loads. Old fractures left negotiations between strength and pain.

Uniform density meant no history.

"Temperature," Patch said.

"Thirty-six point eight. Every reading."

Patch looked at her own hand.

Tiny tremor. Pain response. Adrenaline. Heat loss at the fingers.

Life varied because survival required response.

She turned the page toward Scout.

"This is not a health record."

Scout waited.

"It's a specification."

Scout looked at the page. "A manufactured spec."

Patch nodded slowly. "Spec is accurate."

The abbreviation reduced nothing about what they had found. It gave them a word short enough to use while running.

"A body built to a single standard," Patch continued. "Synthetic tissue over manufactured structure. The pulse could be generated for

examinations. Temperature regulated. Cellular readings repeated because there are no cells in the biological sense.”

“The guard got up.”

Scout’s private voice was spare. No Lena left in it.

“His body cycled,” she said. “Like it cleared an error.”

Patch pictured the fall. Calculated impact. Listed the injuries a human body would have sustained.

“Who is inside it?” Scout asked.

That was the question medicine could not answer.

. . .

Wire projected the tower onto the Analog Temple wall using Patch’s isolated rig. Blue lines crossed old concrete.

The crew stood beneath them.

Patch presented the comparison without drama.

Thane. Three security chiefs. Eight Hard Guard profiles Scout had reached through medical scheduling. Same temperature. Same density. Same absence of degradation.

Wire overlaid patrol data.

The lines repeated precisely.

“Flow follows function,” he said. “This function is manufactured.”

Axis stared at Thane’s face among the records.

“So he’s a robot.”

“No,” Patch said. “A robot begins as a machine.”

“That distinction is comforting.”

“I don’t intend it to be.”

Patch indicated the neurological maintenance records. Regular synchronization. Memory integrity tests. Personality-continuity assessments.

“The body is artificial. The consciousness occupying it may have been human.”

“May have been?”

“We do not have a definition that survives the procedure.”

Axis pushed away from the table.

“They run the city.”

Nobody corrected him.

Wire had circled names across three Dynasty councils. Leaders whose public longevity treatments extended decades beyond ordinary medicine. Security executives who changed jobs but never appeared to age.

“Not all of them,” Scout said.

“Enough,” Wire replied.

Axis walked to the radio and shut it off.

The silence changed with the loss of Static Jam's voice. Until then, some part of the room had remained connected to the ordinary Wet: music, weather, races, jokes about Helpers. Now only the projection lit their faces.

"Machines wearing dead people," Axis said.

"We don't know that the original person died," Patch replied.

"They left the body."

"They changed it."

"Into that."

Patch looked at the measurements again. "A person with kidney failure accepts a manufactured kidney. A person with a spinal injury accepts a synthetic cord. We replace enough parts and pretend there is a bright line because ambiguity is uncomfortable."

"A replacement hip does not let you fall two floors and walk away."

"Capability is not the moral distinction."

"Then what is?"

Patch had no answer she trusted.

Scout did.

"Choice."

Everyone looked at her.

She thought of Lena Orrel, constructed and discarded. Of the security chief cycling back to function without surprise. Of Maya's note hidden in soil because she expected someone might make her disappear.

"If they chose the bodies, they're people who chose them," Scout said. "If someone else chose, they're prisoners."

Wire studied the circled Dynasty names. "And if they chose immortality, then used it to make every choice for everyone below?"

"Then the chassis is not the crime," Patch said.

Marcus heard what none of them said.

Maya might be inside the same technology. Whatever they called Thane, whatever line they drew around humanity, the line would have to leave a way to reach her.

Marcus looked again at the neurological maintenance schedule.

The system that had taken Maya might be the only system capable of returning her.

Destroying it would be simple morality. Use it or reject it. Human or machine. Rescue or revenge.

The actual choice had already become contaminated.

"If we find her map," he said, "what can hold it?"

Patch pulled a medical reference toward her.

"Temporary active storage exists for clinical transfer. Minutes or hours, depending on complexity. A permanent biological return is not possible after tissue death."

“Synthetic host.”

Axis looked at Marcus. “You would put her in one of those bodies.”

“I would ask her.”

The answer surprised Marcus after he said it.

Patch noticed.

“If she is conscious and capable of answering,” she said, “consent determines the procedure. Not us.”

“And if she cannot answer?” Wire asked.

No one volunteered to own that decision.

Scout wrote **CONSENT STATUS** beside Maya’s name on the evidence sheet.

An unresolved requirement, given equal weight with location and access.

Marcus stood at the edge of the projection.

The tower extended below its documented foundation. Wire had found energy consumption without corresponding public floors. Coolant loops descending into blank space. Medical freight delivered under conservation permits.

Thane preserved plants.

Thane preserved people.

Maya’s body had disappeared.

Marcus moved closer.

“Consciousness transfer needs a source,” Patch said. “A complete neural map. Biological samples for calibration. If they took Maya’s body—”

“They didn’t take it to hide evidence.”

The others looked at Marcus.

The conclusion had already become a route.

“They took it because it was useful.”

Patch understood first. Her face changed.

“A postmortem map degrades quickly.”

“Forensics arrived in three minutes.”

“If they were already there—”

“Then the fall was disposal,” Marcus said. “Not acquisition.”

Silence moved through the Temple.

Maya had been taken before she fell.

Scout brought up the medical subsidiary’s below-grade freight routes. Wire placed them beside the tower’s coolant loops. The paths joined.

“If they mapped her,” Marcus said, “where does the map go?”

Patch pointed to the blank levels beneath Thane’s tower.

Axis shook his head. “A map is not Maya.”

“No,” Patch said. “A neural copy may be incomplete. It may be a recording that believes it is continuous. It may be continuity. Medicine does not have a test for the difference.”

“And if it’s her?”

Marcus looked at the blue foundation lines.

For days he had been working a death: evidence, culprit, route, revenge. A closed system.

Now the system opened.

Hope entered him with the same shape as appetite. Fast. Bright. Difficult to distinguish.

Wire saw it.

“We confirm the sub-levels,” he said. “We do not improvise a rescue around a possibility.”

Marcus thought of the empty drawer. The injection mark. Maya’s note beneath the soil. The tower sealing a hatch because Wire had breathed near it.

“We confirm she’s there,” he said.

Patch watched him carefully.

“And if she is?”

Marcus met each of them in turn.

“We bring her home.”

The investigation ended.

The recovery began.

. . .

In the Vault, Maya felt the tower gather information.

Heat lingered in a room the system regarded as an analog dead zone. Bodies that ordinarily traveled alone had converged there. Dust had moved near an east-foundation hatch; two days later, construction systems had filled the hatch with concrete.

The facts did not arrive as words. They arrived as tension passing through structure, a thousand small observations pulled toward the same point.

The tower tightened around a pattern.

Maya recognized Marcus inside the consequences.

Doors reconsidered themselves. Patrols moved. Attention narrowed around an opening he could not yet see.

Maya reached toward the change.

The tower punished her.

This time she held on long enough to learn where the pain began.

Marcus was coming.

She began to map the fence.



PART III
THE BOX

THE BUILDING LEARNS

The second route entered beneath the east foundation.

Wire drew it in pencil.

No projection. No copied plan. One sheet of paper beneath his hand while the Ghosts stood around the Analog Temple table.

“Runoff tunnel for thirty meters,” he said. “Collapsed ventilation return here. We go under it, not through. The shaft beyond reaches Sub-level One.”

Marcus marked the distances in memory.

“Public maintenance begins at Level One,” Wire continued. “Scout’s certs carry us through one seventy-two-hour rotation.”

“We need one night.”

“The building changed a physical route in forty-eight hours. I need two days to map exits after entry.”

Two days meant two more days of Maya inside whatever the tower used to store her. It meant another coolant shipment, another adjustment, another opportunity for Thane to move her somewhere no map reached.

“You have one,” Marcus said.

Wire’s pencil stopped.

Patch looked up from the scanner housing. Axis stopped stretching the calf she had identified as overloaded. Scout’s borrowed maintenance badge lay untouched in front of her.

Wire placed the pencil flat on the map.

“The first route was open when I found it. Forty-eight hours later it was concrete. If the building changes again, one day gives me an entrance and no reliable exit.”

“Then we adapt before it does.”

“That is hope using one of your words.”

Marcus saw the costs.

Two days: Maya exposed.

One day: crew exposed.

The numbers did not resolve. They stood on opposite sides of the table wearing the faces of people he loved.

“One day,” he said.

Wire’s disappointment was quieter than anger.

“My read is law.”

Marcus had promised twice.

“Once we’re inside,” he said.

The qualification existed before he finished speaking. Wire heard it.

Marcus moved to the assignments.

Patch’s scanner could read a spec’s regulated bioelectric outline through one interior wall, perhaps two if neither carried active power. Warning time: three seconds at ordinary patrol speed.

Scout’s certs identified them as a contracted inspection team. She had built four supporting records and a work order for thermal leakage in the lower ventilation system.

Axis would take vertical routes when corridors closed.

Wire would lead.

Marcus would follow the map.

On paper, every promise fitted.

The next twenty-four hours reduced them to work.

Scout built the inspection team from four dead employment records whose tax identities remained active. She gave Marcus a history in industrial cooling, Axis a certification in vertical duct access, Patch an equipment-calibration license, and Wire the only role he could perform without invention: legacy infrastructure specialist.

“Do not improve the identity,” she told Marcus while drilling him on the work order. “He is competent, divorced, and uninterested in promotion. If someone insults him, he lets them.”

“Unrealistic.”

“For you. Not for him.”

She made Marcus repeat the thermal-loss report until he stopped shortening the technical language into conclusions.

Axis practiced moving like an employee whose balance was ordinary. The effort irritated him more than the climbing route.

“People expect maintenance workers to use railings,” Scout said.

“People expect railings to deserve trust.”

“Mara Venn expects you not to turn a corridor into an audition.”

Axis put one hand on the rail.

Patch calibrated the scanner against every member of the crew. She wrote their ordinary variations on paper so the device would not mistake pain, fear, or exertion for synthetic regulation.

Wire assembled two tool sets.

One for entry.

One for exit.

Marcus watched him duplicate picks, wedges, manual releases, line, lamps, and mechanical clamps.

“Redundancy?” Marcus asked.

“Consequences.”

Wire packed the exit set separately and gave it to Axis.

“If we separate, this leaves with the person most capable of reaching the others.”

Axis accepted the bag without a joke.

Marcus inspected the extraction vehicle, changed its plates, rebuilt the ignition relay, and mapped six positions from which it could reach the foundation without crossing a tower camera. He finished before midnight.

The remaining hours had no task.

He went to the kitchen.

It was closed. Amber grow light lay across the empty tables. Maya's photograph remained above the seed ledger, the boy's drawing beside it. Marcus stood outside the glass rather than entering.

In the reflection, Thane's tower rose behind him.

For once, Marcus could see both.

He stayed until the grow lights shifted to blue.

. . .

Maya felt the building prepare for visitors.

Elevators changed their resting levels. Patrols shifted away from the east foundation, leaving gaps too clean to be accidents. Two doors beneath the public floors unlocked and remained unlocked.

The tower was not sealing itself.

It was opening.

Maya pressed her attention against the boundary around her. Voltage answered, white and immediate.

She withdrew before it scattered her name.

The tower soothed her with a heartbeat.

Sixty-two beats per minute.

Her simulated breath returned.

Maya turned both off.

She followed the newly opened route downward until the fence tightened. Somewhere beyond it, five irregular bodies entered the foundation.

Marcus had come.

The first thing she felt was relief.

The second was fury.

. . .

Rain covered their descent.

Wire opened the foundation hatch with a wrench older than the tower. No electronic acknowledgment. No status light. Rust released in flakes beneath his hands.

One by one, the Ghosts entered.

Marcus went last.

Thane's tower vanished above the retaining wall, its upper levels beyond smog. For weeks Marcus had studied it as a collection of surfaces. From beneath, it became weight. Forty-two public floors, private levels above, unknown structures below, all pressing through foundations into the ground where he stood.

He lowered himself into the shaft.

Wire led without light for the first twenty meters. His gloved hand found pipe joints, wall changes, and intersections. At the collapsed return, he shifted left, turned sideways, and disappeared beneath a slab that looked flush with the floor.

Flow followed function.

The others followed his body.

Patch's scanner glowed amber when they reached the service shaft.

No specs in range.

Axis climbed first. He moved without performance in the dark, testing each rung before committing weight. Scout followed. Marcus climbed beneath her. Patch and Wire came last.

Sub-level One opened into sterile concrete.

Old infrastructure behind them. New light ahead.

Wire checked the paper map, folded it once, and pointed left.

The first security door recognized Scout's work order.

"Thermal-loss inspection," she told the receptionist.

The receptionist had a human face with no readable fatigue. Beneath Patch's coat, the scanner pulsed red and rendered a clean regulated outline.

Spec.

Scout adjusted.

Eye contact one beat longer. Blink rate lower. Expression arriving after language.

"Your ventilation differential exceeded tolerated variance at zero four hundred," she said. "Optimization review is mandatory before primary-cycle turnover."

The receptionist checked the certs.

Marcus kept his breathing slow. The woman's gaze crossed him without curiosity.

Green.

They passed.

Three levels went cleanly.

Wire opened service locks. Axis crossed a vertical duct to release a sealed fire door from the other side. Scout moved them through a maintenance checkpoint by making the guard believe delaying them would generate paperwork.

At the Level Three junction, Marcus saw the direct route first.

A clear service corridor ran toward the central lift bank. No guards. No cameras visible. It would remove six minutes from Wire's path.

Marcus signaled left.

Wire signaled hold.

The reason was not visible.

Marcus waited.

Ten seconds passed.

The empty corridor changed pressure. Fire doors dropped at both ends and white decontamination gas filled the space between them.

A scheduled sterilization cycle, marked only in the ventilation load Wire had noticed on the plans.

The gas cleared after forty seconds. Doors rose. The corridor looked safe again.

Wire signaled right.

Marcus followed.

Nobody commented on the avoided trap.

Trust often looked like nothing happening.

Patch's scanner stayed amber.

The tower rewarded the plan.

Marcus distrusted rewards that arrived before resistance.

On Level Four, Patch's scanner flashed red.

Three seconds.

"Patrol," she whispered.

Wire checked the route.

"None scheduled."

Two specs turned into the corridor.

Same stride. Same temperature outline. Heading directly toward them.

Marcus saw the freight shaft behind a recessed panel. Twelve meters. The patrol would cover the intersection in seven seconds.

"Freight shaft."

Wire looked at the map. "Route continues right."

"Not anymore."

They moved.

Axis reached the panel first and forced the manual latch. Scout entered. Patch. Marcus.

Wire stayed in the corridor half a second longer, looking at the path he had mapped.

Then he joined them and closed the panel.

The patrol passed.

No voices. No hesitation near the recess. Their steps remained equal until distance absorbed them.

Inside the shaft, Axis looked upward.

"We lost the route."

"We gained four levels," Marcus said.

Wire unfolded the map in the light from Patch's scanner. "We gained vertical distance. We lost known structure."

Above them, the freight car began to move.

Axis climbed.

The Ghosts followed.

. . .

Levels Five through Eight became adaptation.

Axis took them through a ventilation transfer where the shaft narrowed around new fiber conduit. Wire identified the only brace capable of holding five bodies. Patch timed spec patrols through two walls. Scout stepped into a security station alone and emerged with a service lift set to maintenance priority.

Level Five ended in a horizontal duct above an occupied records room. The metal skin flexed beneath their knees. Wire distributed them across four structural ribs and sent them one at a time.

Axis crossed without sound.

Scout crossed carrying the cert case against her chest.

Marcus waited while Patch moved. Halfway, pain interrupted her left leg. The duct dipped.

Wire caught the brace below her with both hands.

"Load stays on the ribs," he whispered.

Patch shifted three centimeters. The metal rose.

Thirty seconds spent because the route had to acknowledge a body's limit.

On Six, the fire door Axis released did not open into the expected corridor. It opened behind a cultural gallery where Thane's civic delegation appeared in wall-sized images. Maya stood among them in footage from the kitchen tour.

The display called her a LOCAL RESILIENCE PARTNER.

Marcus stopped.

Scout removed the maintenance cap from his hand and put it back on his head.

"Your identity has never met her."

He walked.

Level Seven split around a private clinic. The north hall carried patients. The south carried waste and medical freight. Wire chose south despite the longer distance; their forged inspection order did not survive contact with a human being who could ask for help.

At Eight, Patch's scanner showed two red outlines holding still behind the nearest wall.

Waiting.

The team backed into a linen bay and used a manual laundry drop to descend one level, then climbed through a plumbing chase on the far side. They lost nine minutes and one coil of Wire's exit line when the drop mechanism caught it.

Wire cut the line.

He marked the loss on paper.

The route continued with less redundancy than it had possessed one floor earlier.

Every solution moved them farther from the route Wire trusted.

On Level Nine, the building changed.

Industrial panels gave way to real wood. Warm light entered from recessed fixtures. The air smelled faintly of cedar, though no dust occupied the seams.

Wire touched the wall.

"Reinforced."

"Load-bearing?" Marcus asked.

"No. Protecting something."

Level Ten tried to take Axis's hand.

He reached for a wall panel. Patch caught his wrist before contact.

Her scanner showed a mesh of pressure sensors beneath the surface.

"One touch," she said. "Building-wide alert."

They regrouped inside a maintenance closet.

Five bodies. Too little air. Axis's knee against Marcus's. Patch breathing through a pain spike she refused to name. Scout holding a stranger's posture because she had worn it too long.

Wire put the map between them.

"The building has changed two patrols and sealed one planned access since entry."

"We're past public security," Marcus said.

"That means the easy structure ended."

"Maya is below us."

"We think Maya is below us."

Marcus looked at the door.

The scanner returned to amber.

"We keep moving."

Nobody agreed.

Wire pointed to the freight shaft.

"We can still reverse. Down eight levels, out through Sub-level One before it closes the foundation route."

The exit was real.

Scout's certs remained live. Patch had recorded spec signatures. Axis could retrace the shaft. They possessed enough information to return with a better plan.

Marcus looked at each face compressed into the closet.

"Vote," Scout said.

The word did not belong to the old Ghosts.

Wire voted out.

Patch looked at the red residue on her scanner. "Out. Rebuild."

Scout voted out.

Axis hesitated. "Out."

Four.

Marcus felt Maya beneath them like gravity.

"Out," he said.

For one second, the decision held.

They opened the closet and returned toward the freight shaft.

The shaft doors sealed before they reached it.

Emergency barriers divided the corridor behind them. The foundation route disappeared from Wire's structural monitor.

The tower had closed the exit after hearing them choose it.

Marcus had not forced them forward.

That made the remaining path no less chosen by someone else.

"Now?" he asked Wire.

Wire studied the new structure.

"Now we find the route it wants us to see and assume it is a mouth."

They moved.

On Level Twelve, Marcus found the elevator.

No marking. No call panel. A vertical seam behind a service wall whose reinforcement exceeded anything around it.

Wire examined the frame. "Not on the blueprint."

"Power runs down."

"Not on the blueprint means not in the plan."

Marcus placed his hand against the seam. Vibration traveled through the metal.

Below.

Coolant. Medical freight. Blank levels.

Maya.

"Elevators don't lie," he said.

"Buildings lie constantly. You just prefer mechanical accents."

Patch found a manual release beneath the baseboard. Scout's copied cert opened the secondary control. The doors parted.

Empty car.

One control inside: down.

Wire remained outside.

Marcus entered.

Patch followed, then Scout. Axis looked at Wire and stepped in.

Four people waited.

Wire folded his map along a new crease.

He joined them.

The doors closed.

The numbers fell from Twelve to One.

Then S-ONE.

The indicator went dark. The car continued just long enough to leave distance uncertain, carrying them into an undocumented branch of Sub-level One.

When the doors opened, cold blue light crossed their faces.

Rows of glass pods extended beyond sight.

Inside each waited a human body that had never lived.

CHAPTER 11

SPARE PARTS

The bodies were beautiful in the way identical knives were beautiful.

Balanced. Finished. Waiting for purpose.

Marcus walked between the first rows while Patch's scanner tried to interpret them. Male, female, and forms that refused the old division. Different faces. Different skin. Variation arranged as inventory.

No scars.

No asymmetry in the way weight settled through a hip.

No history.

"Uninitialized," Patch said.

Axis stayed near the elevator. "You can tell?"

"Autonomic field only. No cortical pattern."

"Empty."

Patch looked through the glass at a woman whose closed eyes had lashes too evenly spaced.

"Available."

The word was worse.

Scout lifted her analog camera.

The shutter clicked.

One frame. A row of bodies.

Another. Manufacturing labels.

Another. Coolant and data lines entering the base of each pod.

Film advanced beneath her thumb. Every exposure physical. Light altering emulsion. No signal leaving the room.

She moved deeper into the rows.

The chassis faces changed from anonymous beauty to recognition.

A transit minister whose retirement had been broadcast three years earlier. A Dynasty jurist Scout had imitated during training. A singer whose public death had produced a week of approved mourning in the Current. Their faces slept behind glass with manufacturing dates later than the deaths announced to the city.

Not every pod held a replacement. Some held options.

Scout photographed the labels beside the faces.

"These are public people," she said.

Wire came close enough to read one designation. "Backups?"
"Or returns."

Axis looked down an aisle where the same man appeared at three different ages.

"Why make more than one?"

Patch answered from the medical console. "Bodies fail. Fashion changes. So does trust."

The third version of the man had broader shoulders and lighter eyes.
Choice turned identity into inventory.

Wire found the nearest structural column and marked their position on paper.

"Elevator is our exit."

"Until it isn't," Patch said.

Wire looked at Marcus.

Marcus heard the instruction.

Mission first. Evidence. Maya. Exit.

"Positions," he said. "Scout photographs. Patch reads the medical system. Wire maps. Axis watches the elevator."

"You?" Wire asked.

"Find Maya's record."

They separated.

. . .

Scout passed a child on the seventh row.

Not a child. A chassis proportioned to one: narrow shoulders, soft jaw, hands no larger than the span of Scout's palm. The manufacturing plate gave no age. It listed height, mass, cortical capacity, and three approved pigmentation sets.

Beside it waited the same face at sixteen, thirty, and sixty.

A life arranged in advance.

Scout did not raise the camera.

The lens would make it evidence. Evidence could be filed, duplicated, displayed to strangers who would study the horror and feel clean for recognizing it. The child-face behind the glass had already been made into an object too many times.

She photographed the plate instead.

At the next pod, a woman wore the face of a labor organizer who had vanished during the South Conduit strike. Scout knew the face because she had once borrowed it—cheek prosthetics, vocal tension, the organizer's habit of looking down before saying something dangerous. The disguise had opened a union archive.

Scout had considered the performance respectful.

Now the tower had copied the woman all the way to the bone.

The chassis label read:

SOCIAL CONTINUITY ASSET.

DEPLOYMENT STATUS: RESERVED.

Scout took the photograph. Her hands remained steady because that was what hands were for.

Patch placed two contacts against a medical console.

The machine recognized her instruments as diagnostic equipment and opened a local status layer. Thousands of bodies became numbers.

Compatibility.

Tissue generation.

Chassis stability.

Host preparation.

The system's language avoided the word *person*.

Patch read transfer paths moving through the walls. The level was not merely storage. It was connected to an active neural network below.

She remembered working in a Connected clinic before pain ended her license. Consent forms had required patients to accept data storage for treatment. The language spread across twenty screens nobody read while ill. How many neural images had entered systems like this under the name of care?

The console answered with provenance fields.

CLINICAL ACQUISITION.

BEHAVIORAL ARCHIVE.

FORENSIC ACCESSION.

CIVIC CONTINUITY.

Four clean categories for the same theft.

Patch opened one clinical record.

The source patient had entered a Dynasty hospital for seizure treatment at nineteen. Neural scans every six months. Medication responses. Speech samples. Gait analysis. Twenty-three years of ordinary care accumulating into a model detailed enough to print.

The chassis beside the record wore her face at thirty.

STATUS: OPTIONAL SUCCESSOR ASSET.

The woman might still be alive. She might sit somewhere believing her records existed only to keep her seizures controlled. Dynasty medicine had not simply treated her body. It had grown a second claim on it.

Patch found the consent authorization.

One accepted field among sixty-three.

DATA MAY BE RETAINED FOR QUALITY, CONTINUITY, AND ASSOCIATED SERVICES.

Consent obtained during an emergency admission.

Pulse one-forty. Oxygen eighty-eight. Pain score nine.

Legally clean.

Clinically meaningless.

Patch closed the record before anger altered her hands.

She entered a note on paper:

CAPACITY AT SIGNING UNKNOWN. USE BEYOND TREATMENT
UNDISCLOSED.

Not proof a court would honor.

A diagnosis of the machine.

She copied only local medical status through an isolated lead.

No network request.

No alert.

"Patch," Scout called softly.

Two pods away stood a chassis with Marcus's height, Marcus's shoulder width, and a face not yet finished.

Patch looked from it to him across the room.

Marcus had not seen.

She copied the designation by hand.

M-REEVES COMPATIBILITY MODEL — PRELIMINARY.

Thane had begun preparing for him before they entered.

Patch remembered the holding-facility cuff Marcus had described only once: warmth against the pulse, a light circling his wrist, the chair shifting beneath him.

Not restraint alone. Somatic imaging.

Thane had measured Marcus while bargaining for Maya.

The face inside the pod remained unfinished because the model was not ready. Bone length and organ distribution were already his.

Patch did not tell Marcus.

Not while the elevator remained the only exit.

. . .

The data terminal required a synthetic fingerprint.

Marcus studied the reader. Capacitive surface. Thermal verification. Tissue-response pulse.

"Patch."

She came to him carrying a sample strip from an uninitialized chassis.

"Local terminal only," she said. "You do not touch the transfer network."

"Understood."

Patch layered synthetic tissue over Marcus's index finger and induced a brief charge.

The terminal opened.

Body allocations. Maintenance schedules. Transfer dates. Names hidden behind Dynasty identifiers.

Marcus found Thane's code.

Thirty-two years of migrations through four chassis. Memory-integrity loss below one percent. Physical upgrades. Sensor revisions. Backup synchronization every seventy-two hours.

Proof.

He copied the record to an isolated drive.

Then the council files.

Security chiefs.

Body manufacturing.

Enough.

TRANSFER COMPLETE.

Marcus removed the drive.

He crossed half the distance to the elevator.

Axis watched the doors. Wire folded the marked paper route and placed it inside his coat. Scout exposed the last frame in the current roll and rewound it by hand. Patch broke her isolated connection and counted every lead back into the case.

They had done it.

The proof had weight in Marcus's palm. They could leave, make duplicates, place copies with Chen and the underground presses before Thane knew which wound to close. Then they could build the descent to Maya with time, tools, and a route Wire trusted.

Marcus looked back.

The terminal had returned to its allocation index. One secondary directory remained visible beneath the records:

LINKED CONTROL ASSETS.

Not Maya's name. Not the mission.

A handle attached to everyone who had built the machine.

"We are leaving," Wire said.

Marcus took another step toward the elevator.

Then he stopped.

"Forty-five seconds."

Wire's head turned. "No."

Marcus was already walking back.

"We have local records and signatures," Patch said. "Disconnect."

"Enough to accuse him. Not enough to survive the answer."

He reattached the synthetic tissue to his finger.

The terminal opened.

Inside: private communications.

Financial routes.

Control relationships among Dynasty houses.

Leverage.

Not the mission.

Marcus opened it.

Wire's voice came from the next aisle. "Elevator cycled."

Marcus copied the directory.

Patch reached the terminal. "That is not local medical data."

"It is now."

"The hub is networked."

"Thirty seconds."

"Disconnect."

The files moved.

Thane's private correspondence. Voss's payments. Council votes purchased through synthetic-body access. Names that could break the Glass into pieces.

Marcus saw doors multiplying.

"Marcus."

Patch did not raise her voice. She did not need to.

He had what they came for.

His fingers remained on the terminal.

One more directory.

Transfer logs.

He opened it.

The screen changed.

SPECIAL ACQUISITION.

REEVES, MAYA.

BIOLOGICAL TERMINATION: COMPLETE.

CONSCIOUSNESS INTEGRITY: 99.4%.

HOST TRANSFER: PENDING.

LOCATION: SUB-LEVEL FOUR.

Marcus stopped.

The room contracted around the name.

"She's here."

Patch read the entry twice.

Wire joined them. Scout's camera lowered. Axis left the elevator for the first time.

"Integrity ninety-nine point four," Patch said. "Active pattern."

"Alive?"

The word came from Axis.

Patch did not hide behind medicine.

"Aware."

Scout raised the camera toward the terminal.

Click.

The screen refreshed before the next frame. Maya's acquisition record disappeared behind an authorization warning, but the first exposure held her name, integrity score, and pending location.

"That is one frame," Scout said. "We do not know whether the label is true."

"It's true," Marcus said.

"Because you need it to be?"

He turned toward her.

Scout did not retreat into a borrowed identity.

"The morgue records were evidence," she said. "Patch's measurements are evidence. That screen is evidence. Hope is not."

Marcus forced himself to look at the terminal as a hostile claim rather than an answer.

SPECIAL ACQUISITION. ACTIVE PATTERN. SUB-LEVEL FOUR.

"Then we put eyes on the pod."

"Through what route?" Scout asked.

"Emergency stair."

Wire moved between Marcus and the stairwell. "Not tonight."

The elevator stood open behind them. The route out. Film in Scout's camera. Thane's chassis history on an isolated drive. Enough proof to change the mission from speculation to a planned extraction.

Patch read the active-pattern entry again.

"If we leave, they may move her."

Wire looked at her. He had expected resistance from Marcus, not medicine.

"If we stay," he said, "we may lose the only people who know she is here."

Marcus felt it narrow as he looked at Maya's name.

Marcus removed the drive.

At once, the terminal flashed red.

NETWORK VARIANCE DETECTED.

Wire looked at the copied directory, then at Marcus.

"What did you touch?"

"We know where she is."

"What did you touch?"

The elevator doors opened behind them.

Empty.

Waiting.

"We leave," Wire said. "We have location and evidence. We build a route to Sub-level Four and return."

Maya existed four floors below.

Not a theory. Not a body beneath a blanket. An active pattern at ninety-nine point four percent, waiting for a host someone else had chosen.

"The plan changed."

"No. The target became real. That is when the plan matters most."

The elevator doors stayed open.

Scout stepped inside them. "We have her name on film."

Patch joined her. "And I know the class of transfer system. I can build for it."

Axis kept one boot in the elevator and one on the storage floor. "If we go now, how soon can we return?"

Wire answered without looking away from Marcus. "Forty-eight hours for a mapped descent. Longer for Patch's bridge."

"How much longer?"

"As much as she says."

Patch held Marcus's gaze. "I will not guess with Maya attached to the other end."

The elevator waited behind them: a lit rectangle, large enough for five people and all the proof they had promised to obtain. Marcus could feel the drive in his hand. He could see the next operation forming—not as hope, but as labor distributed among people who knew their own disciplines.

This was the exit.

This was the vote they had taken.

Below them, Maya remained awake.

Marcus imagined forty-eight hours inside the tower. He imagined a transfer order arriving in forty-seven.

Marcus looked toward the emergency stairwell.

Down.

"She is awake."

"And we are exposed."

"Then move fast."

Marcus crossed to the stairwell.

Wire did not follow.

Patch stood between them. Scout held the camera against her chest. Axis watched the elevator as if expecting it to answer for all of them.

"If you open that door," Wire said, "you are not extending the operation. You are ending it."

"Maya is the operation."

"Maya is a person. That is why you do not spend four others to reach her badly."

Marcus opened the stairwell door.

It was unlocked.

The tower wanted a decision.

He went down.

Behind him, one set of footsteps followed.

Then another.

Then all of them.

. . .

Sub-level Two resembled a home no one occupied.

Real wood. Warm light. Chairs arranged for conversation. Shelves held objects selected to suggest memory: paper books, worn tools, framed photographs of people who might never have entered the room.

“Training environment,” Scout said.

“For new hosts?” Axis asked.

“For identities.”

The building gave transferred people somewhere familiar to wake. Or somewhere designed to teach them what familiarity should feel like.

Marcus moved faster.

Axis began to limp.

Scout saw it. “Your knee?”

“Fine.”

“That is not an anatomical answer.”

“Then don’t ask Patch.”

At Sub-level Three, the doors locked behind them.

Wire tested the first. Mechanical deadbolt driven from inside the wall.

“It is funneling us.”

Patch’s scanner flashed red and returned to amber.

“Something saw range and moved away.”

The corridor ahead remained open.

“It isn’t keeping us out,” Wire said.

Marcus already knew.

“It’s letting us in.”

The floor shifted beneath Axis.

A pressure plate dropped two centimeters. A wall moved across the corridor with hydraulic speed.

Axis jumped.

Not far enough.

The wall edge struck his thigh and threw him to Marcus’s side as the barrier sealed.

Wire, Patch, and Scout remained behind it.

“Axis.”

He rolled onto one knee. Blood darkened his trousers above the joint.

“I can move.”

Wire struck the wall from the other side.

“Get back. We find the release.”

Marcus looked down the corridor.

Sub-level Four.

Maya.

He looked at Axis’s wound.

The correct choice was visible.

“Stay with me,” Marcus said.
Axis stood.
They went deeper.

CHAPTER 12

SIXTY-TWO BEATS

Maya felt Marcus enter the level.

His body disturbed air. His pulse traveled through sensors. His injured companion placed weight unevenly on one leg.

The tower presented both as threats.

Maya experienced them as names.

Marcus.

Axis.

She pushed against the speaker beside her pod.

The fence opened.

Not because she had broken it.

Because someone else wanted her to speak.

. . .

The corridor ended at glass.

Beyond it, transfer pods formed a circle around a central console. Warm light filled the chamber, calibrated to late afternoon in a room that had never seen sky.

One pod pulsed at sixty-two beats per minute.

Marcus placed his hand against the viewing wall.

The glass returned no warmth.

“Maya.”

The Vault door opened before he touched it.

Axis leaned against the frame, one hand pressed to his thigh. “I’ll watch.”

Marcus entered.

The room hummed below hearing. Forty hertz felt through ribs and teeth. Coolant moved between the double walls of each pod.

Names appeared on dormant interfaces. Archived consciousnesses. Dynasty backups. People held as continuity insurance.

Maya’s pod recognized Marcus.

The false heartbeat accelerated.

A speaker activated.

“Marcus.”

Her voice had lost air but not shape.

He reached the pod in three steps.

"I'm here."

"I know."

"Can you see me?"

"Not the way I did."

Marcus put both hands on the glass.

"I'm getting you out."

"You came too fast."

"We had a route."

"The tower gave it to you."

He saw Wire's sealed hatch. The empty elevator. Doors closing behind them.

"I know."

"No. You know now."

Anger existed in her voice without breath to carry it.

Marcus found the pod release. Mechanical lever, red safety collar, emergency extraction instructions printed beneath.

His hand closed around it.

"Don't," Maya said.

He lifted the collar.

The interface turned red.

UNAUTHORIZED EXTRACTION.

CONSCIOUSNESS PURGE ARMED.

TEN.

Marcus released the collar.

The countdown froze.

"Kill switch," he said.

"Severing circuit. It destroys the active map if anyone removes me without authorization."

"Patch can break it."

"Not here. Not tonight."

"She's in the corridor."

"And the tower is between us."

Marcus looked at the console, the pod connections, the manual data port. Every system admitted a method if he found the tolerance.

He followed the tether from Maya's pod to the floor. Braided coolant, redundant power, optical data inside a sheath too narrow for his tools. The release lever had a mechanical pivot but no mechanical outcome; it instructed software to permit the clamps to move.

He tested the base plate.

No seam.

The console screws turned freely without withdrawing, captive fasteners connected to rotation sensors. The manual port accepted no shape he carried. Even cutting power would transfer the kill switch to a chemical cell inside the pod.

Every familiar feature was theater. A handle that was not a handle. Screws that opened nothing. Emergency instructions written for authorized emergencies only.

Marcus could open locked things because their makers had needed some physical way to close them.

This machine had been built around the assumption that Maya was not on the side allowed to leave.

Ordinary competence found no purchase.

Maya knew what he was seeing.

"They mapped me before the fall," she said. "My body was disposal. They took it from the morgue to calibrate a host."

An empty body waited somewhere above.

"What kind of host?"

"One with a control protocol. I would wake. I would know you. I would know the kitchen. And if I refused him, he could stop me."

Marcus rested his forehead against the glass.

"I'm sorry."

"For which part?"

No accusation in it. Worse.

He had no answer small enough to survive.

"You saw what the guards were," she said. "You felt their hands. When I came back from his tower, you let me warn you and said nothing about what had held you."

"I didn't know."

"You knew enough to hide it."

Axis shifted at the door. Pain changed his breath.

"I thought staying away would keep you out."

"You thought your promise was a wall."

The kitchen had taught her better. Walls failed. People held.

"Leave," Maya said.

"No."

"Bring Patch back with a real extraction. Bring Wire with a route the building has not chosen. Do one thing at the speed it requires."

The advice sounded unbearable because it was hers.

"You are awake in here."

"I have been awake the entire time."

Marcus closed his eyes.

Maya had counted six days between the dinner and the Cultural Center. Marcus had counted seven meters and three minutes. Neither measure approached the time contained in her sentence.

"How did you stay you?"

Maya understood what he meant.

"At first I used facts. My name. My age. The address above the kitchen. Facts are brittle here. The tower can repeat them in my own voice."

Marcus listened.

"Then I used people. Ren cuts bread too thick when he is worried. Josie touches the stove twice before leaving. Deshi insults plants he thinks will survive."

Her reconstructed face shifted on the interface. Not quite a smile. The memory of forming one.

"I put everyone in relation to everyone else. Who owes whom a bowl. Who pretends not to need help. Which child sits beside which adult when thunder crosses the pipes. The tower can store a person as data. It does not understand why a room changes when that person enters."

"And me?"

"You were difficult."

"Consistent."

"You never stand with both feet toward the place you occupy. One is always pointed at an exit."

Marcus looked down.

His right foot angled toward the Vault door.

"I used that."

"To remember me?"

"To remember that love can be present and still preparing to leave."

The sentence held them both.

Maya continued before he could turn it into punishment.

"When the tower changed a memory, the relationships stopped fitting. Someone laughed at a joke they would hate. A person accepted food without giving half away. I knew the image was false because the room around it was wrong."

"Can it hear this?"

"It hears everything. Understanding is different."

Marcus glanced at the speakers.

"You learned its system."

"It tried to make me solitary. That was the first mistake."

"Do you sleep?"

"They simulate it."

"Does it help?"

"It edits."

The word turned him cold.

"What did they take?"

"Nothing I can prove. That is how memory works. You know the shape around something missing, not the thing."

Whenever the tower offered a false interior, Maya rebuilt the kitchen inside it.

"Sometimes they give me the garden," she said.

Thane's preserved orchids.

"I turn it into the kitchen."

"How?"

"I add rot."

Marcus laughed before grief stopped him. The sound broke inside his chest.

Maya's false heartbeat accelerated.

"I heard that," she said.

"You still hate orchids?"

"I hate cages that bloom."

For one moment, the pod was not a pod. They were on opposite sides of the long table, speaking around everything that mattered because speaking through it would hurt too much.

"I kept hearing the pipes," Marcus said.

Maya went quiet.

"At home. After they said you were dead. Every time the kitchen line knocked, I thought—"

"That I was in the wall?"

He had not permitted the thought to become words.

"Yes."

"I am."

The answer was too simple to resist, almost gentle.

"But I'm also here," she said. "Those are different things."

Marcus looked at the face the interface had made from her. It was accurate in all the ways a photograph could be accurate and wrong in all the ways a person exceeded one. Maya's expressions used to begin before her features moved: attention gathering, amusement warming, anger finding its target. The display showed the result without the approach.

"What do you look like from there?" he asked.

"Like probability."

"That sounds like you hate it."

"I hate that it is an answer."

He spread his hand against the glass. She could not meet it. The pod registered pressure and displayed a small contact icon.

"I should have told you about the guards."

"Yes."

"I should have listened at dinner."

"Yes."

"I thought if I could keep the danger in my head, it belonged to me."

"That has always been your favorite mistake."

No forgiveness. No cruelty. A fact with the long history of his name.

Then Axis shifted at the door, and the Vault returned.

Marcus's hands tightened.

The Vault door closed behind Axis.

He turned.

Thane stood inside the room.

No approach. No guards.

He wore the same dark suit, immaculate beneath emergency light.

"I wondered how long it would take," he said.

Axis placed himself between Thane and Marcus. His injured leg shook once, then steadied.

"The others," Marcus said.

"Alive. Searching for a door I have not provided."

Thane walked among the pods with the ease of a collector moving through familiar work.

"Film cameras. Hand-drawn maps. Mechanical tools. Charming, in the original sense. Objects believed to contain their maker."

Marcus moved between him and Maya.

"Let her go."

"You walked five people into an adaptive structure after your architect requested more time. You touched a networked hub after your technician warned you. You continued after your climber was injured. And now you name love as the motive."

Thane looked at Maya's pod.

"I call it appetite."

The word carried every warning Marcus had translated into delay.

Above the Vault, Wire put his ear against the wall that had separated the crew.

Hydraulic piston above. Locking bolts below. Solid composite through the center. The barrier had descended through the floor, cutting the corridor like a blade.

Patch knelt beside the pressure plate.

"Axis is bleeding."

"I know."

"How long?"

Wire heard the question beneath the question: how long until they reached him, and how far Marcus would continue moving away.

"Four minutes if the wall has a service release."

"And if it doesn't?"

“Then the wall has service.”

Every moving wall required maintenance space larger than the mechanism it served. Wire traced the hydraulic line upward, opened the ceiling with a hand brace, and anchored a line around the conduit.

Scout went first. Patch passed up the scanner and followed. Wire came last.

The service cavity ran parallel to the corridor. Heat pressed close. Hydraulic lines crossed transfer cables thick as Wire’s wrist. The tower’s hidden systems filled every volume its beautiful rooms denied possessing.

Patch’s scanner flashed red.

One spec stopped below them.

The three lay flat on the maintenance grid. No breath rose from beneath. No shift of weight. The tower had detected something and was deciding whether discovery served its purpose.

The spec moved on.

“It knows,” Scout whispered.

“Yes.”

“Then why let us keep moving?”

Wire followed the transfer cables downward.

“Because Marcus is doing what it predicted.”

They reached a junction above Sub-level Four. One cable bundle entered a circular chamber through a service conduit. Forty-hertz vibration traveled through the fasteners.

Patch put her palm against it. “Active transfer system.”

Maya.

Wire opened the conduit using the exit tools Axis had passed back before taking point. A small act of procedure, made hours earlier, had survived the collapse of the plan.

Below, Marcus stood between Thane and Maya’s pod.

Wire counted positions.

“Now.”

Scout descended first with the camera protected against her chest. Patch followed and went directly to Axis. Wire entered last and read the room.

No exit Thane had not selected.

Click.

Thane smiled toward the lens.

“Good,” he said. “Keep something.”

Scout moved to Maya’s interface.

The pod had constructed a face from the stored neural map—not a body behind glass, but Maya as the system remembered her, eyes open on the display. Beside it:

REEVES, MAYA

ACTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS

INTEGRITY: 99.4%

HOST TRANSFER: PENDING

Scout framed the face, the status, and the pod designation in one exposure.

Click.

Whatever happened to the copied data, that piece of light now existed on film.

Patch reached Maya's console. Her instruments scanned the tether.

"Destructive feedback," she said. "Layered authentication. I need a remote rig and a stable physical bridge."

"How long?"

"Hours to build. At least a minute to transfer."

"We don't have hours."

"Then we do not have an extraction."

Thane waited for them to finish.

"Maya has a choice," he said. "A prepared chassis. Indefinite continuity. No disease, no age, no physical decline."

"And obedience," Maya said through the speaker.

"Guidance."

"A cage that walks."

Thane's expression suggested disappointment with imprecise language.

"If Maya accepts transfer, all five of you leave. No charges. Axis receives treatment. Your evidence remains yours."

Scout's camera clicked again.

"The terms," Maya said.

Thane looked toward her interface.

"Say them where everyone can hear."

He indulged her.

"Voluntary host transfer. Your companions' release. Medical stabilization for the injured man. Retention of the evidence presently in their possession."

"And after transfer?"

"You will remain under Dynasty clinical supervision."

"Can I leave the Vertical?"

"When your adjustment is complete."

"Who decides?"

"The clinical authority."

"You."

"A team appointed by me."

"Can I refuse an instruction?"

Thane paused only long enough to make the lie visible.

“You may express any objection.”

Wire looked at the open Vault doors. Specs filled the corridor beyond them. No firing stance. No hurry. Architecture with faces.

Scout changed rolls. The used film disappeared into a metal canister, then into the inner seam of her coat.

Patch kept pressure on Axis's wound with one hand. With the other she held the scanner toward Maya's tether, recording a system she could not yet defeat.

Axis's lips had lost color.

The bargain arranged their suffering into leverage and called the result Maya's choice.

“If she refuses?” Marcus asked.

“Her active pattern is erased. Your crew remains until I determine which capacities deserve preservation.”

Axis's blood reached his boot.

Patch pressed both hands around the wound. Wire stood rigid beside the console. Scout had film but no route to carry it out.

Marcus looked at Maya's pulsing interface.

“No.”

“Look at me,” Maya said.

He did.

“I accept.”

“Maya.”

“You came. Now leave.”

“He'll control you.”

“Then come back correctly.”

“This is coercion. It is not consent,” Patch said.

“I know,” Maya answered. “And you will not let anyone chart it that way.”

Her voice moved through the room's speakers, coming from every wall Thane owned.

“I am not forgiving Marcus. I am not trusting Thane. I am buying Axis's blood and your way out with something Thane already stole.”

Marcus flinched.

Maya did not soften it for him.

“Take the evidence. Learn the system. Come back only when everyone who enters has agreed to the same plan.”

Wire inclined his head toward the pod. Not obedience. Acceptance of a condition.

“Agreed,” he said.

Scout agreed.

Patch agreed.

Axis opened his eyes. “Agreed.”

Marcus looked at Maya.

She waited.

"Agreed," he said.

Thane touched the central console.

Patch's isolated drive lit inside her case.

Files began to die.

Transfer records first. Body allocations. Thane's chassis history. The private communications Marcus had taken after the mission data.

Corruption moved backward through the directories.

"He's purging it," Patch said.

Marcus watched the proof vanish.

"You said the evidence remained ours."

"Your evidence does," Thane said. "The originals remain in my custody. Unauthorized reproductions were never yours."

The distinction was polished nonsense, contract language wrapped around theft.

Maya's reconstructed face remained on the pod display.

"The terms were never terms," she said.

The holding-facility bargain came back complete. Thane offered choices only after deciding what every possible answer would give him.

The unnecessary files went first because they had created the widest connection. Each extra door he had opened became another path into the evidence.

Scout held up the camera.

"Film doesn't corrupt."

The Vault doors opened.

Specs entered.

They lifted Axis before Patch could object, supporting his weight with careful mechanical strength. Wire placed one hand on Marcus's shoulder.

"We go."

Marcus remained at Maya's pod.

"We come back," Wire said.

Maya's voice emerged through the speaker.

"Listen to him."

Marcus let the specs move him.

In the service elevator, nobody spoke.

The doors remained open long enough for retreat to become departure.

Marcus watched Maya's interface across the Vault. Thane stood beside her pod. Patch counted Axis's pulse aloud: sixty-eight, sixty-six, sixty-five. Scout kept one hand over the film canister. Wire's grip stayed on Marcus's shoulder—not comfort, not restraint, a final physical reminder that four other bodies occupied the choice.

Maya's false heartbeat held at sixty-two.

The doors met in the center.

Wire inserted each drive into Patch's reader. Corrupted. Corrupted.
Corrupted.

Scout held the camera against her chest.

Axis bled between two specs who had never been wounded.

Each rising floor placed more architecture between Marcus and Maya.

The last thing he had seen was Thane walking toward her pod.

Not victorious.

Patient.

As if Marcus had performed exactly to specification.

CHAPTER 13

DIRT

Axis collapsed outside the tower.

The specs released him at the security boundary and withdrew. One moment they carried his weight; the next, the job had ended.

No medical team waited.

No transport to a Connected clinic. No treatment Thane had promised in exchange for Maya's consent.

Patch reached him before his head struck the pavement.

"Femoral sheath," she said. "Wire, pressure here. Scout, open my field kit."

"He lied," Axis said.

Patch cut open the trouser leg. "Save your blood."

Marcus stood beside the vehicle.

Patch looked up once.

"Drive."

He drove.

No pursuit followed. The tower remained behind them, lit and sealed, because Thane had no need to chase what he had already broken.

At Patch's workshop, Axis went onto the treatment table.

Marcus stayed in the doorway.

Wire cut away the trouser leg. Scout held the lamp. Patch cleaned the wound and found the depth with gloved fingers.

Axis gripped the table until his hands blanched.

"That's going to leave a scar," Patch said.

The phrase contained no humor.

"Good," Axis managed. "I'm memorable."

Patch began closing the torn tissue.

Marcus stepped forward.

"What do you need?"

"You to go."

"I can hold—"

"He does not need you."

Wire did not look at Marcus. Scout's face held no identity at all.

Marcus left.

The door closed.

Patch reduced the room to readings.

Pulse one-twenty-six. Pressure falling. Skin cool. Laceration length eight centimeters, depth uncertain. Distal pulse present. Sensation intact. Motor response compromised by pain.

Facts did not forgive. Facts did not accuse. They established what remained possible.

"Scout, two units from the lower refrigerator."

"His type?"

"Universal donor. We confirm before the second."

"Wire, maintain pressure. Four centimeters medial. Less. Hold."

Axis tried to lift his head.

"Maya."

Patch pressed him back.

"Later."

"He promised—"

"Later."

Thane had promised treatment. Patch converted the lie into gauze, clamps, warmed fluid, and the narrow competence of people he had attempted to make helpless.

Scout opened cabinets without asking where anything was. She had memorized the workshop during earlier jobs in case she ever needed to imitate Patch. Now she used the knowledge as herself.

Wire held exactly the pressure Patch requested.

They stabilized Axis in nineteen minutes.

Only when his pulse fell below one hundred did Patch allow the room to contain anything but his body.

She peeled off her gloves.

"Marcus chose the door," Scout said.

Wire's hand remained on Axis's leg. "We followed."

"After voting to leave."

"We followed."

Patch entered the result in her private ledger:

AXIS. PENETRATING TRAUMA. STABLE.

Then beneath it, because damage not charted became damage denied:

OPERATIONAL FAILURE AFTER COMMAND OVERRIDE. ALL MEMBERS PARTICIPATED IN CONTINUATION.

No one was absolved by Marcus's larger fault.

. . .

The Analog Temple still held the tower map.

Marcus drew a second route before dawn.

East foundation blocked after entry. Use coolant freight instead. Scout's certs compromised; obtain Voss credentials. Patch builds kill-switch bypass. Wire maps the sub-level stair system. Axis remains out.

He wrote the last line twice.

The door opened.

Wire entered.

His eyes went to the plans.

"What is this?"

"Version two."

"We go back."

"She's alive."

"I know."

"Then help me."

Wire approached the table and put both hands on it.

"You gave me one day. You qualified your promise before we entered. You abandoned my route on Level Four. You entered an unmapped elevator. You touched a networked hub. You took Axis deeper after the building separated us."

Each fact had a location.

Marcus saw all of them.

"We found her."

"Despite your choices. Not because of them."

"What was I supposed to do? Leave her?"

"Return with the tools to save her."

"She was right there."

"And she is still there."

Wire lifted the new plan.

"Your read is law. You said it twice. What is your word worth?"

Marcus had no route around the question.

Wire tore nothing. Destroyed nothing. He placed the plan back on the table and walked out.

Paper nobody would follow.

. . .

Wire took the tower map with him.

In his maintenance hub, he pinned it beside the city's abandoned utility plans.

Marcus's second route began at the coolant freight line. Wire crossed it out. The line narrowed beneath the eastern footing; any shutdown would turn it into a sealed steel throat.

The old drainage survey showed a cavity below the Vault. Wire overlaid it with foundation loads and crossed that out too. Entering there would disturb a column carrying eleven occupied levels.

Route after route failed for reasons the paper could prove.

Anger preferred simple walls. The tower offered structure.

Wire worked through the day, slept forty minutes in a chair, and woke with Marcus's promise still lodged like grit beneath an eyelid.

Your read is law.

The words had been useful inside the holding facility. Marcus had given them because he needed Wire to enter. Then pressure had revealed their load limit.

Wire could refuse the next operation.

Maya would remain in a machine whose paths Wire now understood better than anyone outside it.

He laid a transparent service diagram over the floor plan and found a vertical seam beside the waste-heat riser. Too narrow for Axis. Too hot for an unprotected body. Continuous from Level Thirty-Eight to the Vault's outer shell.

Not a route yet.

A question worth measuring.

Wire began to measure.

. . .

Patch cleaned surgical instruments while Axis slept behind her.

Marcus waited until she acknowledged him.

She did not.

"I need the kill-switch bypass."

"Axis has a torn ligament, a three-inch laceration, and damage within a centimeter of his femoral artery."

Patch raised a clamp. Blood remained in its hinge.

"This is what your extra five minutes in the tower looks like after it stops being dramatic."

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry does not hold a transfer bridge."

"Tell me what does."

"Time. Equipment. A crew that believes the person holding it will listen."

She dropped the clamp into disinfectant.

Her hands began to shake now that they were no longer inside Axis.

"Come back when you have something that is not a plan."

. . .

Scout did not return to the social club.

Marcus waited in the alley until closing. The logistics manager left alone. Staff turned off the lights. Rain collected along the awning and fell in a steady line.

Three identities burned.

Scout had become none of them.

Marcus did not know where she slept.

He had called her the crew's eyes for years. He had never learned where she went when nobody was looking.

. . .

Scout slept in a room above a closed print shop under a name she had never used professionally.

The room had one chair, one mattress, and a mirror turned toward the wall.

She developed the tower film in trays set across the floor.

Chemical sharpness replaced the tower's filtered air. Under the red lamp, images arrived slowly enough to distrust.

Rows of bodies.

Manufacturing plates.

The missing organizer designated as a social continuity asset.

Maya's face on the pod interface.

Thane looking directly into Scout's lens.

She clipped the negatives to a line and watched droplets gather at their edges.

Three working identities were dead. The logistics manager could never return to the social club. The Dynasty widow would be matched to security footage. The junior archivist's credentials had opened the first access layer and would now lead every audit back to a person who did not exist.

Burning an identity usually felt like leaving a room before it caught fire.

This time the rooms remained inside her.

She removed a case from beneath the mattress. Prosthetics, dental caps, skin films, posture braces. Faces arranged in foam.

At the bottom lay a blank identity card.

Scout sat before the reversed mirror.

She did not turn it around.

Instead she wrote the badge formats from memory. Clearance colors. Checksum placement. The tiny misalignment in the tower's embossed seal.

The next disguise would not answer who she was.

It could still open a door for Maya.

. . .

Axis returned to the racecourse four days after surgery.

Marcus heard through the rattlewire and went to the maintenance shaft. He stayed above the crowd where old ductwork cast a shadow across the platform.

Axis did not race.

He climbed the first ten meters, descended, rested, and climbed again. The injured leg shook each time it accepted weight. Patch stood below with a timer and threatened to break the other leg if he exceeded the rehabilitation interval.

No spectators had been invited, but children from the course community gathered anyway. They cheered every ascent.

Axis hated being cheered for ten meters.

He climbed eleven.

Patch stopped the timer.

"Down."

"That was controlled."

"So is infection until it kills you."

Axis descended.

At the platform, he looked directly toward Marcus's shadow.

He had known the entire time.

Marcus came down the stairs.

The children moved aside without being asked. Axis sat while Patch checked the wound.

"I'm sorry," Marcus said.

Axis looked at the scar above his knee.

"Which part?"

Maya in the Vault. Patch in the workshop. Harm had become too specific for a general apology.

"Taking you past the wall."

"Good."

"Good?"

"That is a thing you did. Not weather that happened around you."

Patch covered the wound with a clean dressing.

"I need you for the next attempt," Marcus said.

Axis laughed.

Marcus heard himself.

Need. Attempt. The old machinery starting before the apology had cooled.

"No," he said. "That came out wrong."

"It came out honest."

Marcus sat on the edge of the platform.

Below them, runners practiced landing. Repetition without an audience. Ankles flexing, knees absorbing force, bodies learning how not to break.

"Maya is still there," he said.

"I know."

"I don't know what to do."

Axis tied the brace around his leg.

"Try not making me the answer."

He stood and returned to the wall.

Marcus watched the next ten meters without offering instruction.

. . .

The kitchen opened without Maya.

It had done so every day since the fall. Marcus had mistaken continuation for waiting.

Josie worked at the stove. Ren managed water. A teenager checked seedlings. Deshi moved between planters with the patience of weather.

People noticed Marcus enter.

The room did not become hostile. Hostility would have made him important.

Josie placed a bowl before him.

"She'd be angry if you didn't eat."

The same sentence. A ritual now.

Marcus lifted the spoon.

"People are asking who decides what happens to the kitchen," Josie said.

"Keep it open."

"It isn't your decision."

He looked up.

"It was never your decision," she said. "Or Maya's alone."

Around them, bowls traveled hand to hand. Someone had added rosemary to the bread. The child who had drawn Maya carried water to the peppers without spilling.

The system worked because nobody possessed it.

Marcus finished the broth.

He carried his bowl to the wash station.

Then he washed the next one.

And the next.

Nobody praised him.

He cleaned every bowl from the meal. Every cup. The grain pot with burned starch fixed to its bottom. Hot water reddened his hands and wrinkled the skin.

The work produced no opening.

It ended when the dishes were clean.

Marcus returned the next day.

He carried water. Josie corrected how he stacked bowls. Ren showed him the new ration schedule and did not ask for approval.

Marcus returned again.

For five days, he accepted whatever work appeared nearest.

He carried water until the pressure marks from the handles crossed his palms. He cleaned filters. He learned that Josie went quiet when her wrist hurt and that Ren hummed before telling someone bad news. He noticed the teenager at the seedlings skipping breakfast and placed a bowl beside her without asking why.

The observations felt unfamiliar.

Routes had always simplified people into direction and speed. Now Marcus began seeing what movement concealed: who favored a knee, who gave away the best portion, who volunteered for the task that kept them out of conversation.

Nobody congratulated him for noticing.

Maya would not have either.

On the sixth morning, the north cistern reopened under municipal supervision. Chen's name appeared at the bottom of the inspection order. People celebrated by using less carried water, which was the Wet's version of abundance.

Marcus repaired a leaking container and did not ask whether Chen had sent a message.

If the detective needed him, he would find him.

Deshi gave him a moisture probe.

"I can read the display."

Deshi took it back.

He pushed two fingers into the soil.

"Pinch. Feel the weight."

Marcus did.

The soil crumbled.

"Dry."

"Too shallow."

Marcus tried deeper. The earth held together, cool against his fingertips.

"Alive," Deshi said.

"Moist."

"That too."

Marcus looked at the dirt caught beneath his nails.

"Maya said soil knows when you lie to it," Deshi said. "You cannot fake growing something."

. . .

Marcus entered Patch's workshop with no paper.

Dirt remained on his hands.

Patch noticed.

"I was wrong," he said. "About the day. The hub. Wire. Taking Axis deeper."

"I know."

"I don't have a plan."

Patch set down the instrument she was cleaning.

"I don't know how to get Maya out without all of you," Marcus said. "And I don't know how to ask after what I did."

For the first time since the tower, Patch looked at him without a diagnostic wall.

"Wire has been in his maintenance hub for two days. He is mapping."

Marcus said nothing.

"Axis can walk. Badly. He turned the racecourse into physical therapy."

She dried her hands.

"Scout left a dead drop behind the social club. Every badge format in Thane's tower. She is still working. She just does not want to work in a room with you."

The crew had not abandoned Maya.

They had removed Marcus from the center.

"What do I do?"

Patch glanced at the dirt beneath his nails.

"Go back to the kitchen. Ask what they need."

Marcus had entered looking for a route.

Patch gave him work.

This time, he heard the difference.



PART IV
LOOKING AROUND

WHAT DO YOU NEED

The kitchen filled before Marcus found the words.

News traveled through the Wet without the Pipes. A mechanic told a water carrier. A teacher told a parent. Ren walked two blocks and returned with twenty people who had not been invited but understood that invitation was not the same as belonging.

By midmorning, every chair had a body in it.

Cooks. Gardeners. Medics. Maintenance workers. Couriers. Three people from Axis's racecourse. Families from the north-cistern stacks. The mother of the boy Maya had treated sat near the front with one hand on her son's shoulder.

Marcus stood at the head of the communal table.

The position felt wrong.

Maya had rarely stood there. She moved among people, placing herself wherever the next need appeared. Marcus had spent years turning tables into briefing surfaces and people into assigned positions.

He left the head.

He stood beside an empty chair halfway down.

"Maya is alive," he said.

The room did not react all at once.

Josie's hands stopped inside a towel. Ren sat back. Someone whispered *alive* as though testing whether the word could bear weight. The boy looked toward Maya's photograph.

"Her body died," Marcus said. "Thane's people took a map of her consciousness first. She is awake inside his tower."

A mechanic frowned. "A copy?"

"I don't know."

"Does she?"

"She knows she's Maya."

"That isn't what he asked," Deshi said.

Marcus looked at the old man.

"No," Marcus said. "She doesn't know either."

The uncertainty remained in the room because he did not cover it with confidence.

"Thane is a spec," he continued. "Synthetic body. Transferred consciousness. So are many of the Dynasty security chiefs and council leaders. They've been changing bodies for decades."

The mother pulled her son closer.

“And I brought him here.”

Silence.

This silence knew him.

“The delegation theft was mine. Thane had already noticed Maya, but I gave him leverage. She traded herself for my freedom. When she came back from his tower and warned me something was wrong, I said nothing about what his guards were.”

A voice from the back.

“You brought him to her door.”

The statement asked only for confirmation.

“Yes.”

Marcus had spent his life finding the opening after a statement. This one remained closed.

He let the sentence remain closed.

Movement near the loading doors.

Scout stepped from behind a support column.

No one had seen her arrive. She wore plain Wet clothes, her hair its natural color, her face unarranged.

She placed a black envelope on the table.

“Film,” she said.

Photographs moved from hand to hand.

Rows of uninitialized bodies. Public figures asleep behind glass. Manufacturing labels. Thane smiling in the Vault. The acquisition record on the storage terminal.

Then Maya’s reconstructed face.

REEVES, MAYA.

ACTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS.

INTEGRITY: 99.4%.

The mother covered her mouth.

Ren held the image by its edges. His thumb shook without touching Maya’s face.

“Can she speak?” Josie asked.

“Yes,” Marcus said.

“Did you speak to her?”

“Yes.”

“What did she say?”

Go back to the kitchen. Grow something. Leave and return correctly.

“She told me to listen.”

At the far side of the table, a cook pressed a turmeric-stained hand flat against the wood.

“What do you need?”

Four words.

Maya had fed us. What work is required?

Marcus looked around the table.

"Thane's tower is designed to stop people like me. Small teams. Hidden entry. One objective. It watches for a crew."

He placed no map before them.

"It was not designed to stop a community."

The mechanic who had spoken leaned forward. "You want us to storm a Dynasty tower?"

"No. I want you to tell us what you can do without becoming soldiers."

"That does not answer the risk," a teacher said.

Marcus knew her from the morning meals. Lio. She taught eleven children in a room above a machine shop and carried chalk in the same pocket as a folding knife.

"If security fires into the lobby, being peaceful does not stop the round."

"No children inside," Marcus said.

"You do not decide for my students."

The old reflex rose: explain the geometry, define the acceptable exposure, turn objection into assignment.

Marcus kept quiet.

Lio looked toward Chen. "Will they fire?"

Chen did not soften it. "Hard Guard will use force if Monitor Central classifies the gathering as a lethal incursion. Public witnesses lower the probability. They do not remove it."

The mother of the feverish boy spoke next.

"Then families stay outside the tower. We hold the streets and the exits. People without dependents decide for themselves whether they sit inside."

"I have dependents," Josie said. "Half this room depends on my broth."

Uneasy laughter.

"I still decide."

The mechanic leaned across the table. "What happens when one stream fails? We all keep going because Marcus is in the elevator?"

"No," Wire said from the doorway.

He had arrived without anyone noticing.

"Each stream has its own stop condition. Exterior withdraws if Hard Guard deploys lethal weapons. Public levels evacuate if Chen calls it. Infrastructure preserves air, fire suppression, medical power, and occupied elevators regardless of mission status. Social recovery leaves with the chassis even if Marcus never reaches the Vault."

Axis tapped the brace beneath his trousers.

"And if Marcus changes the plan?"

Marcus answered.

"You ignore him."

Nobody laughed.

"Say it correctly," Patch said.

Marcus looked at each member of the Ghosts.

"Wire has authority over structure and movement. Patch has authority over medical risk and the transfer. Scout has authority over identities and social access. Axis controls exterior timing. Chen controls civilian withdrawal. If any of them stops their stream, it stops."

"Including yours?" Lio asked.

"Including mine."

Deshi turned a cup between his palms.

"And Maya?"

The room became still.

They had planned around rescuing her. Easier to forget that a conscious prisoner still possessed refusal.

"If she says no," Marcus said, "we leave her."

The words tore on the way out.

Deshi nodded.

"Now you are asking for help."

A maintenance worker could shut manual valves on public levels.

A teacher knew thirty Connected parents whose children used Dynasty schools.

The north-cistern carriers could move people through water-service corridors.

Medics could create visible aid stations that security would have to acknowledge.

The cooks could feed an occupation.

Axis's runners knew exterior surfaces no tower schematic recorded.

Ideas did not travel toward Marcus. They crossed the table laterally, joining and revising one another.

He listened.

Not everyone joined.

Lio remained standing after the work groups formed.

"My students stay out," she said. "So do I."

One of the cistern carriers frowned. "You just said they don't choose for you."

"They don't. I choose for them while they are children. Tomorrow I keep the school open. If parents go to the tower, their children need somewhere that is not watching a broadcast."

The room adjusted around her refusal.

"We'll need a second adult," Ren said.

"And food through midday," Josie added.

The plan acquired a school without converting it into a staging area.

An electrician declined because his husband's residency review was pending. A clinic aide said she could stock the exterior medical station but would leave before the gathering began. Two workers who had entered ready to fight walked out when Chen described the probable Hard Guard response.

Nobody called them cowards.

Marcus wrote no names.

Participation that could not survive refusal was only another form of Thane's bargain.

. . .

Detective Chen arrived carrying two paper files and a data chip inside a shielded case.

Nobody welcomed a municipal detective into an underground planning meeting.

Chen expected that.

He placed the first file beside Maya's photograph.

"Dispatch authorization for Dynasty forensics," he said. "Signed at three thirty-two. Forty minutes before the anonymous report of her fall."

The second file held Chen's independent toxicology.

"Injection site contained a neural-stabilization compound used during high-resolution cortical mapping."

Patch read the composition. "Keeps signal integrity during traumatic interruption."

"They mapped her alive," Marcus said.

Chen looked around the crowded kitchen.

"I spent twenty years enforcing laws that stop at the Dry. If these photographs are real, the people writing those laws have been replacing themselves outside every medical statute on record."

"They're real," Scout said.

"I believe you."

Chen kept one hand on the shielded chip.

"Last time you entered that tower, your sister ended up in a worse position and your climber nearly died."

Axis, leaning against the wall with his brace visible, raised two fingers.

"Present."

Chen looked at Marcus.

"Why is this different?"

"Last time, the plan meant whatever I wanted after the doors closed."

The answer drew several uncertain looks.

"I treated everyone in it like a step. Patch warned me. Wire warned me. I agreed until their expertise blocked something I wanted."

Marcus looked at the people around the table.

"I cannot promise I've become someone else in a week."

"I can tell you the operation does not belong to me. If anyone wants to leave, leave. If anyone thinks a part of it is wrong, say so. If Wire closes my route, it closes."

Chen studied him.

"How do they know you won't override him inside?"

"They don't."

Wire entered from the kitchen proper.

He carried no paper. A tower model shone from an isolated projector behind him, blue structure turning in the damp air.

"He goes alone," Wire said.

All attention shifted.

Wire touched the model.

"Four streams. I control infrastructure. Axis controls exterior. Scout controls social entry. The community controls the public levels. Marcus controls nothing beyond the Vault connection."

The tower divided into color.

Exterior balconies and maintenance skin.

Copper relays and manual power junctions.

Service desks, staff corridors, and emergency protocols.

Lobbies, kitchens, clinics, and witness positions.

At the center, one red point.

The Vault.

"Every stream can stop independently," Wire said. "No one waits for Marcus's permission. Nobody follows him deeper. If the route to the Vault closes, Chen attempts a lawful emergency override. If that fails, Marcus returns."

Marcus nodded.

Wire watched for qualification.

There was none.

He slid the shielded chip from beneath Chen's hand and added the municipal blind spots to the model.

Not forgiveness.

Work.

. . .

Wire found Marcus carrying empty water containers to the south wall.

"Seam beside the waste-heat riser," Wire said. "Level Thirty-Eight to the Vault shell. That is your route."

Marcus set the containers down instead of making Wire speak while he worked.

"What does it cost?"

“Heat exposure. One person fits. No rapid extraction. If the structure shifts, you return.”

“Understood.”

“No.”

Wire stepped close.

“You understand the sentence. I need to know what happens when the door is ten meters away and I tell you the wall cannot carry you.”

Marcus looked past him at the crowded kitchen. No one in the room watched for his answer. Their work continued without needing the moment to resolve cleanly.

“I come back.”

“Even if Maya is speaking through it.”

The image entered: her voice on the other side, his hand on a route Wire had closed.

“Even then.”

Wire nodded once.

“This is not forgiveness.”

“I know.”

“It is not trust.”

Marcus picked up the containers.

“What is it?”

“A load test.”

Wire took two of the empties and carried them beside him.

. . .

Lady Voss sent a representative at dusk.

The representative’s suit remained dry in a room where everything gathered moisture.

“Lady Voss offers temporary access credentials for Levels Twenty through Forty, command conflicts inside Thane’s security queue, and the schedule of his off-site loyalists.”

“Price?” Scout asked.

“Thane’s private continuity files.”

Marcus had attempted to steal them during the first incursion and lost everything.

“If we find them,” he said.

“Lady Voss expects them.”

“Expectation isn’t agreement.”

The representative regarded him with faint surprise.

Marcus looked at Scout.

She decided.

“Codes first. Validated offline. Files only if recovering them does not alter a route or endanger Maya.”

“Lady Voss will find those terms disappointing.”
“Then she has experienced negotiation.”
The representative left the codes.
Future trouble entered with them.

. . .

Patch demonstrated the transfer bridge on a salvaged neural model.

Her device was ugly. Copper contacts around a synthetic core, manual clamps, separate power, no wireless components. Its telemetry could travel only through Wire’s isolated copper service loop. Built to survive a system trying to reach inside it.

She connected it to the practice console.

The timer began.

At twenty seconds, the signal wavered.

Patch adjusted the clamp.

Green.

At thirty-five, she disconnected.

“Maya’s tether will attempt destructive feedback. The bridge redirects it into the portable medium while her active pattern transfers.”

“How long?” Josie asked.

“Sixty seconds for viable continuity. Ninety for high fidelity. Under forty gives us fragments.”

“And the person holding it?”

“Cannot move. Cannot lose pressure. Cannot let the pins shift.”

The room looked toward Marcus.

“I’m going,” he said.

Axis opened his mouth.

“No,” Marcus said. “Not because I’m assigning myself. Because the chassis Thane prepared proves he built this choice around me. And because I am the only person Maya can identify immediately if the interface changes.”

Patch considered the reasoning.

“Accepted,” she said.

Not *approved*. Not *followed*.

Accepted.

Scout pointed to the storage level.

“Two chassis come out with us. Maya’s calibrated host and the M-Reeves model.”

Marcus looked at her.

Patch had not told him.

“Thane measured you in the holding room,” she said. “The model is unfinished but compatible.”

“Why take mine?”

“Because we do not leave him anything prepared for you.”
No one yet named the second reason.

. . .

Patch found Marcus alone beside the seed storage after the meeting broke into work groups.

She carried the transfer bridge in its harness. Up close, the copper contacts looked less like technology than exposed nerves.

“Put it on.”

Marcus fitted the straps across his chest. The device rested beneath his right hand when he extended his arm toward an imaginary console.

Patch tightened the lower clamp.

“Too tight?”

“No.”

“I asked for information, not endurance.”

“It’s tight.”

She loosened it one notch.

Marcus flexed his fingers. “What happens when Wire isolates the Vault?”

Patch continued checking contacts.

“Primary power transfers to emergency storage. The console will surge while the systems negotiate control.”

“Through the bridge.”

“Possibly.”

“Through me.”

Patch stopped.

“Copper finds the shortest conductive route. Sweat lowers skin resistance. Your hands will be on both sides of the connection.”

“How bad?”

“Burns if the grounding holds. Cardiac arrest if it does not. Neural injury either way.”

Marcus looked toward the communal room. He could hear people assigning water stations and evacuation escorts.

“Does Maya know?”

“Maya knows the system better than I do. She may be able to redirect part of the surge.”

“May.”

“Yes.”

Patch placed the portable medium in his palm. Small enough to carry. Heavy enough to contain the only route home available to his sister.

“If you lose contact under forty seconds, she fragments. If you hold contact while the Vault collapses, you may die. Those risks do not cancel each other.”

"I understand."

"No. You acknowledge."

She waited until he looked at her.

"Understanding is what your body does when electricity enters it."

Marcus thought of Axis's scar. Patch's shaking hands after surgery. Maya asking which part he regretted.

"I still choose it."

Patch secured the portable medium inside the harness.

"That's going to leave a scar."

"I know."

This time the phrase was not a joke or prediction.

It was consent witnessed.

. . .

Static Jam arrived carrying a transmitter the size of a lunch box.

The voice of the rattlewire belonged to a wiry man with tired eyes and careful hands. He spread Scout's photographs beneath the grow lights.

"This is not a broadcast," he said. "It is a detonation."

"People need to see it," Marcus said.

"People trust me to tell them what is happening. Not to turn your sister into cover for a heist."

The old Marcus prepared an argument about necessity.

He stopped.

"How would you tell it?"

Static Jam looked at him.

"Start with Maya."

Kitchen archive footage appeared on a portable screen. Maya cutting bread. Teaching a child to read soil. Laughing at something outside the frame.

Then the cistern report.

The preauthorized forensic order.

Scout's photographs.

The active interface.

"Human first," Static Jam said. "Horror after. If people see the bodies before they know who was taken, the Dynasties can call it fabricated terror."

Marcus watched Maya laugh.

"She would hate this."

"Then why are we doing it?"

Static Jam's question held no softness.

"Because she never wanted to be a symbol."

"That is not an answer."

“Because the people who ate her food deserve to know she is alive. Because the people who took her depend on nobody seeing what they do.”

Marcus looked at the image of her behind the interface.

“I need the broadcast to open the tower. I need it to bring witnesses. I need my sister. My reasons are not clean.”

Static Jam waited.

“But the story is true,” Marcus said. “You decide how to tell it.”

Static Jam gathered the photographs.

Scout placed her hand over the stack.

“The negatives do not enter the tower.”

“I need a source image,” Static Jam said.

“You get contact prints. Two sets. One stays with Chen under evidence seal. One stays in the Wet with a custodian who does not join the operation.”

“And the negatives?”

“Split.”

Scout cut the developed strips between frames. Not through an image. Between events.

Maya’s interface went into one metal envelope. Thane and the chassis rows into another. Manufacturing labels into a third.

Static Jam watched her distribute them to Josie, Lio, and the cistern mechanic who had declined the interior action.

“If we don’t come back,” Scout said, “no single search recovers the story.”

Chen signed across the seal on each contact-print envelope. Scout countersigned with the name she used least and meant most.

SCOUT.

Wire opened the transmitter housing.

“Rattlewire reaches the Wet. Dynasty displays stay on the Pipes.”

Static Jam pointed to a pair of copper outputs he had added beneath the case. “Emergency information systems still retain analog injection for disaster notices.”

“Locked behind municipal and Dynasty authorization.”

Scout placed Voss’s access module beside the transmitter.

“Not tonight.”

Wire assigned two maintenance workers to carry the transmitter into the tower’s public relay room. Voss’s code would unlock the emergency display bus. Static Jam’s analog signal would enter there, become local video, and propagate only after physical contact.

No invisible leap between networks.

A bridge.

“Nightfall,” he said.

The room began to move.

Not behind Marcus.
Around him.

CHAPTER 15

EVERY LEVEL

Static Jam opened the broadcast with the sound of knives on cutting boards.

The rhythm traveled through the rattlewire. Wet radios, contraband Current receivers, maintenance speakers workers had disconnected from the Pipes.

Then Maya's voice from the kitchen archive.

Pinch the earth. Feel the weight.

Inside Thane's public relay room, two maintenance workers opened the emergency-display cabinet.

Voss's code turned the authorization light green.

They clamped Static Jam's copper output to the disaster-notification bus. Analog signal crossed a physical bridge into the tower's local display system. From there, compromised municipal relays carried it into neighboring Current structures.

Across the city, screens connected to Dynasty channels went black.

Static returned.

Maya appeared cutting bread for forty people.

"This is Maya Reeves," Static Jam said. "She fed the Wet until someone above decided feeding people was a capacity they should own."

The preauthorized forensic order filled the screens.

The empty morgue record.

Synthetic bodies behind glass.

Maya's active consciousness.

The city saw.

Thane's tower began closing.

The community entered before it finished.

Across four disconnected timepieces, the second hands met.

Axis tapped the east glass at twenty-one hundred.

Wire opened the first municipal panel.

Scout presented Voss's credential.

Josie crossed the lobby threshold.

No central signal commanded them. The schedule had been copied onto paper and rehearsed until each stream could begin after the others disappeared.

. . .

The first group walked through the public lobby carrying food.

Josie led them.

Guards ordered them to stop. They stopped.

Then they sat.

Thirty people opened containers of bread, broth, and clean water. No weapons. No masks. Children remained outside with designated caregivers. Medics established a visible station beside the doors. Connected witnesses activated personal recordings faster than the Pipes could revoke their permissions.

More people entered from Level Two.

Teachers and parents occupied the cultural lobby on Six.

North-cistern residents sat across the transit bridge at Nine.

Nobody advanced on security.

Nobody left.

The tower knew how to classify riots, thefts, terrorism, fire, medical contamination, and labor disruption.

It had no category for a meal that refused to move.

Josie handed a bowl to the nearest receptionist.

The receptionist was a spec.

She looked at the bowl as though it contained a problem for which no behavior had been installed.

"You may eat," Josie said.

The spec did not take it.

Josie placed the bowl on the floor between them and sat.

Monitor Central classified the gathering as an obstruction.

Lobby shutters descended behind the last row, separating the occupation from the street witnesses. Ceiling nozzles opened. Not fire suppressant—clear riot gel designed to make floors unwalkable and skin burn.

Chen's voice came through the public team's receiver.

"Forced removal threshold. Your call."

Josie looked at the medics. One shook her head. Chemical unknown.

Stop condition.

"Public interior withdraws," Josie said.

The occupation rose.

The lobby doors would not open.

For three seconds, panic converted bodies into pressure. People pushed toward a sealed surface. The tower had found a category it understood.

The nearest lobby screen showed Maya's face inside the Vault.

The receptionist looked from it to her own synthetic hands.

Then she picked up the bowl.

She placed it beneath the nearest descending nozzle. Broth filled the intake grille. Fat, starch, and shredded greens entered a system calibrated for clean chemical feed.

The nozzle coughed.

Josie saw the maintenance access panel beneath it.

"Bowls," she said.

Thirty containers went up. The occupation did not advance. It fed the tower until every gel intake clogged and the safety controller reopened the lobby doors to prevent overpressure.

People withdrew in two lines, exactly as the medics had rehearsed.

Outside, they sat again.

The public stream had stopped.

The witness stream had not.

. . .

Axis climbed the east face with a brace beneath his trousers.

Twenty runners spread across the tower skin. They did not seek entry. They created motion.

Reflective strips across sensors.

Manual vents opened and closed.

Drainage lines changed pressure.

Bodies appeared on balconies, disappeared into service cuts, emerged three levels away.

Hard Guard deployed to the exterior.

Axis watched the pattern from a vertical seam on Level Twenty-Three.

Machine precision required a model. Give the model enough correct information and it became confident. Give it too many contradictory truths and precision turned into hesitation.

He signaled.

Runners changed direction.

Security followed the statistically optimal threat.

There was no threat there.

One runner did not answer the turn signal.

Nia hung beneath a maintenance balcony on Twenty-Six, safety line cinched around one wrist. A security shutter had closed across her route and trapped the rope in its track. Hard Guard climbed toward her from two sides.

Axis had forty seconds before his own crossing window.

Going to her would collapse the exterior pattern. Leaving her would preserve it.

The tower offered the same false choice Marcus once had: person or objective.

Axis flashed the medical marker twice.

Three runners broke from separate routes. Not toward Nia—toward the manual awning releases one level above her. They dropped the building's storm fabric simultaneously. Sheets snapped open across the facade, blinding security optics and giving Nia slack.

She cut the trapped line.

For one beat she fell.

A runner below caught her secondary tether and redirected the fall into a swing through an open balcony.

"Nia clear," came the radio.

Axis's crossing window had closed.

"New count," he said.

The team built him another.

Axis crossed a gap between towers.

For the first time since the injury, his damaged leg had to accept a landing.

The other roof approached.

No audience. No phrase.

He struck, rolled, and felt the scar hold.

Then he stood and continued.

. . .

Wire entered through municipal infrastructure with forty-two maintenance workers.

Most had serviced Thane's systems without authorization to enter the rooms those systems protected. They knew which digital controls concealed manual valves, which fiber routes retained copper emergency relays, and which building plans had been altered after construction.

Wire divided them into cells.

Each cell controlled one level and one function.

Ventilation remained active.

Fire suppression remained active.

Public elevators shifted to evacuation priority.

Security doors opened.

Vault power isolation proceeded last.

"No cascading cuts," Wire told them. "We remove control. We do not remove life."

At Level Fourteen, those instructions collided.

The security relay shared a cooling loop with neonatal incubators in the private clinic. Cut the loop and Hard Guard lost coordinated targeting on the east face. Cut it and seven infants entered thermal risk within six minutes.

The cell leader reported the conflict.

“Preserve medical,” Wire said.

“Exterior needs the relay dark.”

“Preserve medical.”

The cell leader left the cooling loop active and opened the cabinet around it. A hospital engineer traced the shared pipe, found the narrow return that served only the security rack, and packed it with sterile thermal gel from the clinic stores.

The relay overheated locally.

The incubators held at thirty-six point five.

Exterior targeting went dark seventy-three seconds late.

Axis’s runners adjusted.

Level by level, workers made the tower local.

A valve could no longer be changed from Monitor Central because a person stood beside it with a wrench.

A door could no longer trap a floor because someone had driven a manual wedge into its track.

The building lost abstraction.

It became pipes, wire, pressure, and hands.

. . .

Scout entered as Voss security.

The identity had only twelve hours of history and the authority of a rival Dynasty house. Thin construction. Powerful materials.

Behind her came Patch and a medical recovery team wearing emergency-transfer markings. Voss’s codes carried them to the storage level while Thane’s system processed contradictory instructions.

At the first checkpoint, the spec guard rejected the credential.

“Authorization superseded,” it said.

Scout looked at the guard the way another spec would: exact contact, delayed response, no appeal.

“Your rejection conflicts with continuity-preservation directive seven. Confirm you accept personal liability for two endangered Dynasty hosts.”

The guard paused.

“Optimization conflict.”

“Correct. Resolve by prioritizing continuity.”

The gate opened.

Scout passed without relief.

The second gate requested live confirmation from Voss House.

The credential had authority. It did not have a person waiting to answer.

A woman appeared on the gate screen wearing the white collar of Voss internal security.

“State continuity incident.”

Scout became the officer named on the badge: Ilyan Rook, eleven years employed, promoted after exposing a household theft, contemptuous of medical staff and frightened of Lady Voss in ways he would translate into impatience.

“Two prepared hosts are at risk under hostile custodial conflict.”

“House identifiers.”

The requested names were not in the credential package.

Patch stood behind Scout with the recovery carrier, gaze lowered. The medical team waited. Every second allowed the tower to reconcile its contradictions.

Scout could invent two names and lose the identity.

She could retreat and lose the storage route.

She let Rook’s fear turn cruel.

“You are asking me to speak protected continuity identities over a Thane-controlled channel. Log your name and repeat the request.”

The woman’s posture changed.

Not convinced. Exposed.

“Proceed under provisional seal.”

The screen vanished.

The second gate opened.

Rook carried Scout three steps beyond it.

Then Scout felt the identity cling: shoulders squared too high, mouth preparing contempt before thought. She pressed a thumbnail into the center of her palm.

Her own pain.

Her own hand.

She continued.

At synthetic storage, Patch went to Maya’s calibrated chassis.

It had Maya’s face.

Not the face from the platform. A corrected version. Scar beneath the chin removed. Skin evenly toned. Hands without calluses.

Patch opened the pod and touched the artificial cheek.

Cold.

“Take it.”

The recovery team transferred the chassis onto a medical carrier.

Scout found the M-Reeves model.

Its face was finished now.

Marcus without the scrape on his jaw. Marcus without the small break in his nose. Marcus as Thane believed he would choose to become.

"Take that too."

Patch opened the adjacent emergency cabinet.

Inside rested a field cortical mapper designed to move a failing Dynasty consciousness directly from biological source to prepared host. Unlike the portable medium, it did not store a person. It formed a temporary source-to-host bridge.

She removed the mapper and its shielded leads.

"Take this."

Security alarms began.

Scout photographed the empty pods before they left.

One identity could not carry two bodies through an adapting tower.

A community mechanic arrived through a service door with six workers and a freight platform Wire had released from local control.

No disguise. No cert.

"Kitchen delivery," he said.

Together, they moved the bodies.

. . .

Maya felt the broadcast enter the tower.

Her own voice traveled through systems that had held her silent. Cutting bread. Teaching soil. Laughing.

Thane attempted to shut the images down.

Static Jam reappeared through another relay.

The tower turned its attention outward.

Maya followed.

For weeks she had mapped the fence by pain. Each time it punished her, she learned where the charge originated. Each false heartbeat taught her which processes touched her active pattern. Each door and elevator passed through the structure around her.

The tower was a garden designed by someone who hated growth.

Every route pruned. Every variable controlled. Every living process replaced by preservation.

Now human activity entered from every level.

Too many hands.

Too many roots.

Maya pushed.

The fence discharged.

She let the charge travel through the simulated heartbeat instead of her name.

Sixty-two beats per minute became a path.

She entered the door network.

. . .

Marcus climbed alone through the service levels.

Patch's bridge rested against his chest. Wire's voice came through a one-way analog receiver. Marcus could hear; he could not override.

At the recovery junction, Patch monitored the bridge through Wire's isolated copper loop.

"Level Eighteen clear."

Marcus moved.

"Hold at Twenty-One."

He held.

Footsteps approached behind him.

His body prepared to run.

Wire said nothing.

Marcus remained in place.

Two Hard Guard crossed the next corridor and continued toward an exterior alarm.

"Clear."

Marcus moved.

Listening felt slower than instinct only until it kept working.

At Level Thirty-Eight, the tower adapted.

Fiber control rerouted around Wire's copper bypass. Emergency barriers struck into place. Exterior security doubled. Voss's credentials died.

Three operational streams stalled at once.

Marcus reached a sealed door and placed his palm against it. Forty-hertz vibration traveled into his bones.

Wire's voice entered first. "Upper control lost. Two minutes."

Axis followed, breathing hard. "Exterior pinned."

Scout reported last. "Checkpoint sealed. Chassis secure, route blocked."

Below, the public occupation held while security began isolating floors.

The old pressure entered Marcus.

Every route closed. Everyone waiting. Leader finds an opening.

He examined the door.

Manual hinges internal. Pneumatic bolts. Wall conduit accessible if he tore the service panel and bridged—

He stopped.

Wire controlled infrastructure.

Marcus controlled nothing beyond the Vault connection.

He waited.

The door indicator changed from red to amber.

Then green.

Bolts retracted.

Across the tower, elevators rerouted. Security doors opened onto empty corridors. The freight platform carrying the chassis received a clear descent.

The tower intercom beside him cracked alive.

Maya's voice emerged through static.

"Elevator Three. Now."

Marcus ran.

. . .

At Level Thirty-Eight, the exterior doors opened behind Axis.

No runner had touched them. No credential request appeared.

Maya.

Wire's voice crossed the exterior team's radio.

"Objective complete. Withdraw."

Axis looked down the tower skin. Hard Guard converged on empty routes while runners detached reflective strips and vanished into maintenance cuts.

"Marcus?"

"Approaching the Vault."

The correct exterior action was withdrawal.

Axis saw the open service corridor.

"My stream is complete."

"Correct."

"Then I am unassigned."

Wire understood the argument and disliked it.

"Emergency Lift Six," he said. "Maya has it open to Sub-level Two. You do not enter the Vault. You hold extraction."

Axis crossed inside.

The lift dropped thirty-eight public levels and entered the substructure. At Sub-level Two, security lockdown stopped it. Axis forced the roof hatch and continued down the emergency ladder.

His scar opened at Sub-level Three.

Warm blood entered his boot.

He kept moving without pretending it did not hurt.

At the Vault level, he found the outer door sealed and took position beside the manual release.

Hold extraction.

For once, the performance was waiting.

. . .

Wire transferred infrastructure command to four cell leaders.

“Ventilation remains live. Public evacuation owns the elevators. Nobody cuts the Vault backup until Patch confirms connection.”

Each leader repeated the instruction.

The system no longer depended on his presence.

Wire entered a maintenance descent with two workers and followed the copper path toward Sub-level Four. Chen took the public stairwell to the lawful checkpoint. Different routes. Same function.

The building attempted to seal Wire’s shaft.

A kitchen mechanic on Sub-level One jammed the actuator with the handle of a grain press brought down for exactly that purpose.

The first handle bent.

The barrier dropped another thirty centimeters and caught Wire’s pack. One worker cut him free while the mechanic shoved the press body beneath the actuator itself.

The tower drove downward.

Cast iron took the load that composite tools had been designed to avoid. The press screamed against the floor. Bolt holes elongated. A crack moved through the base.

“It held grain for sixty years,” the mechanic said through his teeth. “It can hold this.”

Two workers turned the feed screw together. The press expanded into the narrowing space, not elegant enough for the tower’s model and too stubborn to shear.

The barrier remained open.

Wire and the workers descended.

. . .

The final checkpoint required retina, fingerprint, and a Dynasty command identity.

Marcus had none.

He stood before the sealed Vault level while the building fought Maya around him.

Footsteps climbed the stairwell.

Chen emerged, breathing hard, one hand pressed to his bad knee.

“You took your time,” Marcus said.

“Arrest me.”

Chen placed his municipal badge against the emergency reader.

“Active threat to stored human consciousness,” he said. “Emergency access override. Authorization seven-seven-alpha.”

The system rejected him.

Chen entered the dispatch directive number proving Dynasty involvement in Maya’s abduction.

Rejected.

He placed the independent toxicology record into the reader.

“Victim located inside. Municipal preservation jurisdiction remains active until lawful disposition.”

The scanner considered.

Human bureaucracy met machine bureaucracy, and for one narrow moment the older system won.

Green.

The checkpoint opened.

Marcus and Chen looked at each other.

No thanks.

No promise.

Work completed.

Marcus crossed alone.

. . .

Emergency red filled the Vault.

Maya’s pod pulsed at sixty-two.

Thane waited beside an empty chassis.

Marcus’s face looked out through the glass.

“I know why you came,” Thane said.

Marcus approached the central console.

Ten steps.

“And I know why you will fail.”

Eight.

“Not because I will stop you. Because the part of you capable of reaching this room is the same part incapable of leaving with only what it came for.”

Six.

Thane touched the pod bearing Marcus’s face.

“No pain. No fatigue. Perfect recall. A body capable of every route you can imagine.”

Four.

“You would never look up again.”

Marcus stopped.

Thane smiled.

“You would be up.”

The words entered the oldest room in Marcus.

His father’s stolen cert. Niven Junction. Stars above smog. Every locked door transformed into a judgment of what he deserved.

The chassis opened its eyes.

Marcus saw himself without consequence.

No scars. No exhaustion. No limits that forced dependence. A thief who could continue forever without needing anyone to carry him.

“Imagine never costing them anything again,” Thane said. “Perfect control. No error. No guilt.”

Absolution, manufactured to specification.

Marcus looked at Maya’s interface.

Then at the device Patch had built. Wire’s route. Scout’s evidence. Axis’s scar. Chen’s override. The community holding every public level.

No one had brought him here because he was sufficient.

“You’re wrong about what I wanted,” Marcus said.

He stepped past his own body.

“You collect because you cannot connect. You preserve things until nothing can touch them.”

Another step.

“You’re not at the top.”

Marcus reached the console.

“You’re in a box.”

He seated Patch’s bridge in the manual port.

The clamps locked.

Maya’s voice entered the room.

“Sixty seconds.”

The timer began.

CHAPTER 16

AROUND

At ten seconds, Thane broke Marcus's left arm.

The radial bone snapped beneath synthetic fingers.

Pain erased the room and returned it in red pieces.

Marcus kept his right hand on Patch's bridge.

TRANSFER: 14%.

Thane pulled him away from the console.

The clamps shifted.

Maya's voice sharpened through the speaker. "Left edge. Pressure."

Marcus drove his broken arm against the device.

Bone moved where it should not. The clamp reseated.

Green.

Twenty seconds.

Thane struck him into the console. Two ribs broke against brushed steel. Breath left. Blood crossed the membrane keys.

TRANSFER: 31%.

"This is the body you defend?" Thane asked. "An error accumulating pain?"

Marcus could not answer.

He held.

Thirty seconds.

Wire's teams isolated the Vault from primary power.

The emergency system surged.

Electricity crossed the copper bridge and entered Marcus through both hands. Muscles locked. His teeth closed through his lip. The smell of burned skin entered the calibrated air.

TRANSFER: 52%.

The room became white.

Maya counted.

"Thirty-two. Thirty-three."

Her voice gave time a shape.

Thane pulled.

Marcus's left hand no longer functioned. His right grip narrowed to two fingers. Every sensor in the synthetic man remained controlled at thirty-six point eight.

Forty seconds.

TRANSFER: 76%.

The tower shook.

Not the whole building. Wire's isolation reached the synthetic sub-levels, where transfer systems attempted to reroute through power paths maintenance workers had grounded. Coolant lines ruptured. Archived pods went dark in sequence.

Thane looked toward them.

For the first time, fear crossed his face without delay.

Not death.

Loss.

Marcus saw what Thane loved.

Copies.

The distraction bought three seconds.

TRANSFER: 85%.

Thane threw Marcus across the Vault.

The bridge tore from the port.

Marcus struck the wall above his right eye and fell.

Silence.

The device landed between them.

At the recovery junction, the bridge's isolated telemetry gave Patch three failures at once.

SOURCE CONTACT: LOST.

ACTIVE TRANSFER: INCOMPLETE.

BUFFER DECAY: 1.8% PER SECOND.

Eighty-five percent of Maya had crossed into the portable medium. The rest remained in the tower, beyond a connection that no longer existed.

Ordinary transfer protocol offered two choices: reopen the source path or terminate the incomplete copy.

Patch had built for a system that considered people recoverable inventory.

She chose neither.

"Maya, identify your active autobiographical anchor."

Static answered.

Patch increased buffer voltage. Safe ceiling four-point-two. She drove it to four-point-six.

The medium temperature climbed.

"Maya."

A fragment of voice emerged.

“Kitchen.”

“Hold it. Name one person.”

“Marcus.”

TRANSFER: 87%.

The percentage climbed without new source data. Maya had forced redundant blocks across faster than Patch’s model predicted; now the recovery algorithm was finding structure hidden inside what the buffer already held.

Maya had pushed enough of herself across to help assemble the rest.

Patch opened the error-correction gate.

Foreign control code flooded the buffer.

She recognized Thane’s obedience layer by its perfect repetition. Valid packet. Valid packet. Valid packet. A clean signal attempting to become part of Maya because the machine could not distinguish consistency from identity.

Patch rejected everything without variance.

TRANSFER: 89%.

“Another person.”

“Ren. Josie. Deshi.”

The buffer alarm became continuous.

At ninety percent, an indexing branch failed. Thousands of memory references lost their paths while their contents remained recoverable. Patch could preserve the structure or preserve the material. Not both.

Diagnosis was deciding which loss received a name.

She held the material.

TRANSFER: 91%.

The portable medium reached thermal shutdown.

Patch commanded every input closed.

Inside the Vault, the portable medium sealed. The copper loop went dark.

Patch’s voice reached Marcus through the receiver.

“Viable. Ninety-one-percent fidelity. She’s out.”

Thane reached for the device.

Marcus could not stand. Left arm broken. Ribs grinding. Both palms burned. Blood filled his right eye.

One leg still answered.

He kicked the device.

It slid across the floor toward the Vault door.

Axis appeared there, limping, bleeding through a reopened scar, magnificent and furious.

He caught the device with both hands.

“Got it.”

Thane moved toward him.

The deeper Vault failed.

A section of floor opened between them as transfer conduits tore free. Thane stopped. Beyond the fracture, backup chambers descended through blue light.

His continuities.

He chose them.

Thane retreated into the lower archive as emergency barriers closed.

Axis looked at Marcus.

The Vault ceiling shed dust.

"Can you move?"

"Functional."

"That is not an anatomical answer."

Axis crossed the room.

He could not lift Marcus alone.

Wire arrived with two maintenance workers. Chen behind him. Together they raised Marcus onto a service carrier.

No single rescue.

Hands.

Wire led them through the conduit beneath the Vault instead of back toward the public checkpoint. The floor tilted as coolant washed across it. One maintenance worker pulled the carrier. The other walked backward at Marcus's head, keeping his broken arm from striking the walls.

Axis held the portable medium beneath his jacket.

At Sub-level Three, the route narrowed around the barrier that had wounded him. He stopped.

"Carrier won't fit."

The tower groaned above them.

Wire measured the gap. Forty-one centimeters. Marcus's chest required thirty-four. Carrier frame required fifty-two.

"Take him off."

They passed Marcus through by hand.

Chen went first and received his shoulders. Axis braced on the injured leg and guided his hips. Wire protected the broken arm. The workers fed the carrier through sideways after him.

No one person ever held his full weight.

At the freight junction, Scout waited beside the two recovered chassis. The false Rook identity had disappeared from her posture. Six kitchen workers operated the platform manually because tower command no longer recognized its own destination.

"East foundation," Wire said.

The platform descended through maintenance levels, stopped twice, and moved again only when people turned emergency cranks in rooms they had occupied for years without permission to name.

Behind them, the Vault sealed around Thane and his copies.

Ahead, dawn entered through a service door the cistern carriers had opened from outside.

. . .

Maya occupied the portable medium without walls.

The tower's forty-hertz pulse disappeared.

For the first time since her capture, silence existed.

It terrified her.

She searched for names.

Marcus.

Ren. Josie. Deshi. Patch. Wire. Axis. Scout.

The sequence broke after Scout.

There should have been another name.

Maya found only the shape around it: four sung notes, hands fastening a red coat, rain against a window.

No name.

Nine percent.

She did not know what nine percent meant when distributed through a person. Childhood mornings. The taste of a particular meal. Someone's face. The reason she disliked orchids.

She searched.

The dislike remained.

Small mercy.

Patch connected a camera and speaker.

Light appeared.

Axis's face. Sweat and pain. The portable device clutched to his chest.

"Maya?"

"Here."

Axis laughed once and covered his eyes.

Maya looked past him.

"Marcus."

Nobody answered.

. . .

The east foundation opened onto dawn.

Wire's local isolation had interrupted the atmospheric system maintaining the smog ceiling above the Wet. The shutdown would last hours, not forever. Long enough.

Clouded air separated.

Actual sunlight reached street level.

People stopped coming out of the tower.

Warmth touched faces that had known daylight only through screens. The rain ceased. Water continued dripping from structures for several minutes, then slowed.

The Wet went quiet.

Marcus lay on the pavement beneath the real sky.

Patch cut away his shirt. Broken radius. Two ribs compromising breath. Electrical burns across both palms. Internal bleeding. Neural instability from the current that had crossed the transfer bridge.

She treated one failure and found two more.

The medical team brought the recovered chassis from the freight platform.

Maya's body.

Marcus's body.

Both inert.

Scout stood beside them with her camera lowered.

Patch connected Maya's portable medium to a screen.

Maya appeared pixelated, then clear.

She saw Marcus.

"I need the transfer protocols."

Patch's hands stopped.

"The Marcus chassis is incomplete."

"Compatible."

"Motor mapping unfinished. Sensory calibration preliminary."

"His body is failing."

Marcus opened his eyes.

Sunlight struck them. He had spent his life wanting to see the sky from above the smog. Now it had come down to him, and he could barely hold it in focus.

"You said no to Thane," Patch told Maya. "He refused the chassis."

"He refused Thane's terms."

Maya looked at her brother.

"He did not refuse mine."

Patch turned the screen.

Marcus and Maya faced each other across the distance between body and pattern.

"Choice," Maya said. "Yours."

No charges. No crew. No threat attached.

Marcus looked at the synthetic face waiting beside him.

Thane had designed it as escape from consequence.

Maya offered it as a consequence he could choose to carry.

He nodded.

Once.

Patch moved.

The M-Reeves chassis went onto the pavement beside his biological body.

Maya's portable medium remained connected to its own screen and power supply. It held her; it would not be used to hold anyone else.

Patch unpacked the field cortical mapper recovered from synthetic storage. Its source leads connected to Marcus's biological brain. Its host leads entered the prepared chassis. The transfer bridge provided timing and protection, but the mapper formed a direct path from living source to waiting body.

The holding-room scan supplied structural compatibility. Marcus's living brain supplied the person.

"This is not the Vault system," Patch said. "We get one pass. Loss is possible."

"How much?"

"I cannot measure a thing before it is gone."

Marcus looked at Maya.

"Do it."

The mapping began.

Pain became signal.

The sky broke into wavelengths. Voices separated from mouths. His body receded not as a single departure but as thousands of small permissions failing at once.

Maya guided Patch through the transfer architecture she had learned from inside.

"Motor lattice first. Keep autobiographical indexing live. Do not let the host calibration overwrite scar memory."

"Scar memory costs motor fidelity," Patch said.

"He needs to remember where they came from."

Marcus wanted to laugh.

He no longer had lungs.

Then he had lungs again.

Synthetic eyes opened.

Beside him, the monitor attached to his biological body flattened.

Patch checked once for a recoverable signal. There was none. The mapping process and accumulated injuries had ended the source.

She covered the old face.

"Fidelity?" Maya asked.

Patch looked at the mapper.

"Direct transfer. No storage checksum. I cannot give you a percentage."

Marcus searched himself.

Maya. Kitchen. Ghosts. Their father. The Vault. Pain remained as memory without injury.

Absence, if present, did not identify itself.

Sunlight registered at five thousand seven hundred Kelvin. Spectral composition. Heat load across artificial skin.

Accurate.

Not warm.

Marcus raised one hand.

No burns. No fracture. Skin without dirt beneath its nails.

Maya remained on the screen.

“Marcus.”

Her name was the first thing he tested.

“Maya.”

The voice belonged to him closely enough to hurt.

Scout raised her camera.

Marcus looked at his covered biological body, Maya on the screen, and the synthetic hand resting in real sunlight.

Click.

The archive kept all three.

Around them, the community emerged from Thane’s tower. Wire. Axis. Scout. Chen. Josie carrying an empty food container. People who had held every level without becoming what the tower expected.

Marcus did not look up.

He looked around.

. . .

Maya spent six days in the portable medium.

Patch refused to transfer her until the recovered chassis had been stripped of every control protocol Thane installed. Wire isolated its physical systems. Scout compared its manufacturing labels with photographs from storage. Static Jam kept the original evidence offline while the city argued over whether any of it was real.

Maya could speak through a screen and travel when someone carried her. She could not turn her own view. Could not leave a conversation. Could not touch the people who visited.

The kitchen created a schedule and then ignored it. Josie brought the medium to meal preparation so Maya could correct the broth. Ren placed her near the planters. Children read to her, sometimes continuing after they believed she had entered simulated sleep.

Marcus came at night.

His synthetic body did not require sleep in the old rhythm, but his consciousness did. He sat across from Maya’s screen at the communal table and compared failures.

He could feel pressure more accurately than touch. Food arrived as chemistry before taste. Every face triggered a recognition score an instant before memory supplied the name.

“Do I do that?” Maya asked.

“What?”

“Become information before I become me.”

“Recognition opens first. Memory catches up.”

“That was not comforting.”

“Patch says calibration may learn.”

“Patch says pain may become data. Patch is an optimist with terrible branding.”

On the third day, they cremated Marcus’s biological body under his own name.

Marcus attended.

The act felt neither like his funeral nor someone else’s. He remembered each scar beneath the cloth before the heat took it: the broken nose, the delegation cut, the burned hands. Evidence of a body that had failed because he asked it to hold too much.

They mixed the ashes into a memorial bed outside the kitchen where nothing edible grew. Maya objected to putting heavy metals near the vegetables. Some instincts survived any substrate.

Marcus pressed synthetic fingers into the dark earth.

No sensor could identify what the gesture meant.

Lady Voss publicly condemned “unauthorized continuity practices” and privately requested Thane’s files three times.

Thane’s body was not recovered.

Neither were the deepest backups.

Chen opened fifty-three missing-person cases under one municipal evidence number.

The number mattered. Dynasty counsel could challenge each disappearance as rumor; one linked investigation forced every challenge to acknowledge the same storage photographs, preauthorized dispatch, and toxicology chain.

Council hearings began behind armored glass.

Three officials appeared in person and refused medical examination. Two attended through avatars. One resigned between the announcement and the first session, then appeared on a departure manifest under a different face.

The Wet did not wait for a ruling.

Workers marked suspected continuity clinics with white lines visible from transit platforms. Families brought paper photographs to Chen’s district office. Connected technicians copied maintenance logs by hand

before employers could erase them. Static Jam read names on the rattlewire only after relatives consented.

No institution agreed what a stored consciousness was.

The people searching for them began with a simpler position: whatever they were, they could not be property.

On the seventh day, Maya chose.

Patch had removed two obedience layers, a remote shutdown path, and a background process that reported emotional variance to an external address.

"Anything left?" Maya asked.

"Nothing I can find."

"That is not the same as nothing."

"No."

Maya examined the chassis through a camera Patch moved at her direction. Thane's version of her. Corrected skin. Unscarred chin. Hands that had never worked.

Remaining in the portable medium was not neutrality. Its components would fail. Power loss could become death. Every option had been manufactured by someone else.

Choice did not require a clean set of choices.

It required that the answer belong to her.

"I want the body," Maya said. "And after I wake, I want every external transmitter physically removed."

Patch connected the portable medium to the chassis.

"Ninety-one percent in," she said. "Ninety-one percent out."

"Unless you improve the universe in the next minute."

"I need at least two."

Maya's reconstructed face smiled.

This transfer happened in the kitchen.

Not the Vault. Not a clinic. The communal table had been cleared for equipment. Ren, Josie, Deshi, Marcus, and the Ghosts remained nearby because Maya wanted the first thing her new eyes saw to be something Thane had never controlled.

The chassis opened its eyes.

Grow lights.

Water stains.

Marcus.

Maya inhaled.

The body did not require the breath.

She took another anyway.

Air arrived as volume, temperature, particulate count.

Then garlic.

The second recognition came slower and carried more of her.

Maya raised one hand. Joint positions appeared before the hand felt owned. She touched the scar beneath her chin and found uninterrupted skin. Beneath it, Patch had mapped the old sensation: a faint pull where no tissue had ever healed.

“Cold,” Maya said.

Patch checked the chassis display. “Temperature regulation is nominal.”

“The table.”

Her palm rested against wet wood. Sensors reported grain, pressure, microbial residue. Below the report came the remembered coolness of mornings when the grow lights had not warmed the room.

Marcus offered his hand.

Maya looked at it before taking it.

Choice first.

Their synthetic palms met with perfect measurements and uncertain touch. Neither body knew the pressure siblings used.

They learned it together.

. . .

One week after the tower, fifty-three people came to dinner.

Steam rose from mismatched pots. Garlic, onions, smoked pepper. The west pump clicked through its cycle. The south grow bank held steady.

Marcus worked at the pepper bed.

His new hands could measure moisture, acidity, mineral content, and root resistance through contact. The data arrived instantly.

He got the answer wrong.

“Too much water,” he said.

Deshi pushed two biological fingers into the soil.

“No.”

“Sensors say—”

“Soil says no.”

Marcus pinched the earth.

The synthetic fingertips reported pressure and composition. He closed his eyes.

Weight. Cohesion. The slight cool give of something holding what it needed.

“Alive,” he said.

“Moist,” Deshi corrected.

“That too.”

Maya stood at the next bed.

Thane's chassis had given her flawless hands. Patch had preserved the old scar beneath her chin in the sensory map even though the skin showed nothing. Maya kept touching the place.

She pressed a seed into the earth.

"I lost something," she said quietly.

Marcus waited.

"Nine percent of something. I can find edges around it. Sometimes I know a person belonged in a memory, but not who. Sometimes food tastes familiar and I cannot reach the meal."

"Do you remember me?"

"Unfortunately."

He smiled.

Maya looked at her clean synthetic fingers and pushed them deeper into the soil.

"The parts here remember this."

Around them, the kitchen continued.

Patch read a synthetic-neurology text while eating. Wire sketched an irrigation improvement on a napkin. Axis demonstrated a controlled flip for the children, scar visible above his knee. Scout photographed the table, building an archive no Dynasty system could quietly revise.

Chen arrived late.

He took a bowl and sat without discussing the investigations, council hearings, or warrants whose authority stopped at the Glass.

Static Jam's broadcast played low.

Lady Voss had consolidated three of Thane's council positions. Dynasty statements called the tower incident an extremist attack enabled by fabricated imagery. Workers in six arcologies had begun demanding proof that their employers still occupied biological bodies. Stored consciousnesses had been discovered at two other facilities.

The fight had not ended.

It had become visible.

Josie placed a bowl beside Marcus.

This time she smiled.

This time he ate without being told.

The broth registered as salt, acid, heat, aromatic compounds. Beneath the information, something else moved more slowly.

Memory.

Maya serving him from the same pot.

His biological hands around the bowl.

The people at the table passing bread.

Meaning did not arrive through a sensor.

He took another bite.

Beyond the high windows, the smog had returned, thinner than before. The Glass remained visible above it. Clean light. Towers. Doors he still knew how to open.

Marcus lifted his eyes.

Not to the towers.

Maya was showing the feverish boy—healthy now—how deep to press a seed. Ren rotated the peppers. Deshi complained about rosemary. Patch laughed before pain caught at her side, and Axis noticed, moving a chair beneath her without interrupting the story he was telling.

Scout's camera clicked.

Marcus looked at the dirt on his synthetic hands, the food on the table, and the life his sister had grown where the city expected only damage.

For the first time, the world around him did not resemble a route to somewhere else.

It was a place.

He stayed.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

THE VERTICAL began as a screenplay: a story built to move through bodies, rooms, machines, and a city divided by height. In adapting it into a novella, I wanted to preserve that momentum while making space for what happens between the visible turns of the plot—the hesitation before a promise, the cost hidden inside a clever plan, and the work that continues after the dramatic door has opened.

The city teaches its residents to look up. Light, clean air, wealth, longevity, and power all occupy the levels above them. Marcus has learned that lesson so completely that every barrier appears to him as an invitation. Maya has built her life around a different understanding: survival moves sideways. It travels through kitchens, clinics, repair crews, shared water, remembered names, and people who ask what is needed before deciding what they can take.

The technology in this story intensifies an old question rather than resolving it. If memory can be copied, bodies replaced, and consciousness preserved, what remains necessary for a person to remain themselves? *THE VERTICAL* does not offer a clean answer. It asks instead who controls the choice, who bears its cost, and whether a life protected from change is still being lived.

At its heart, this is a story about the difference between reaching a place and belonging to one.

READING GROUP QUESTIONS

1. Marcus initially understands the city as a collection of routes, barriers, and openings. When does that way of seeing first begin to fail him?
2. Maya's kitchen and Thane's Vault both preserve life. What distinguishes their methods, and what values does each structure reveal?
3. Thane rarely describes himself as cruel. How does his language turn possession and coercion into apparent care?
4. The Ghosts are exceptionally competent before Marcus learns to trust them. What is the difference between using someone's expertise and granting them authority?
5. Maya's consciousness survives, but the story refuses to prove whether continuity has been preserved. What evidence matters most to you when deciding whether she is still Maya?
6. Marcus repeatedly confuses appetite with hope. Where does the distinction become clearest?
7. How do bodily limits—Patch's pain, Axis's injury, biological death, and synthetic embodiment—shape the characters' choices?
8. Scout uses performance to uncover truth. How does the novel complicate the idea that authenticity requires a single, stable identity?
9. What does the phrase "Flow follows function" mean at the beginning of the story? Has its meaning changed by the end?
10. The final scene returns to food, soil, work, and the number fifty-three. What has changed since the opening, and what has deliberately remained unfinished?

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Jesse Alexander is [BIOGRAPHICAL DETAILS TO BE SUPPLIED].

[Optional additions: location, selected writing or screen credits, awards, professional background, and a brief personal detail relevant to readers.]

STAY CONNECTED

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