

TERRA CONFLICTUS

FIELD FICTION

VOLUME 01

THE CARRY

EIGHT STORIES



JESSE ALEXANDER

TERRA CONFLICTUS 2066

FIELD FICTION · COLLECTED VOLUME 01

THE CARRY

MAY-JUN 2066

8 STORIES · 21,330 WORDS

Eight accounts came across the desk this stretch, recovered the way they always are: a chip in a dead operator's boot, a confession sold for the price of a clinic visit, a recording somebody meant to wipe and didn't. We do not clean them up. We set them down in the order they read best and get out of the way.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Eight accounts came across the desk this stretch, recovered the way they always are: a chip in a dead operator's boot, a confession sold for the price of a clinic visit, a recording somebody meant to wipe and didn't. We do not clean them up. We set them down in the order they read best and get out of the way.

What ties them is the carry. Every one is a person moving something out of a place that was built to keep it, and finding on the way out that the thing in their hands was never what the job said it was. A water token. A vial. A box the city swears it never filed. The score is real and the cost is real and they weigh the same.

Read them in any order. They were not written to be a series. They became one because the world keeps making the same kind of person, and that person keeps talking.

// EDDA SORREL, FIELD FICTION

CONTENTS

01 BLOOD PRICE

SAHARAN OASIS

02 DEEP SCORE

JAVA SCATTER / DROWNED JAKARTA

03 COLD STORAGE

EURASIAN STEPPE

04 THE LAST BLACK BOX

NEO-TOKYO / MAINTENANCE BELT

05 THE WATERLOO VAULT

FLOODED LONDON

06 FOURTEEN MINUTES

OPEN STEPPE

07 THE IRON CIRCUIT

GORODSKIE EKHO

08 TERMINAL VELOCITY

NEO-TOKYO / SUB-1

STORY 01 OF 08 · No. 08

BLOOD PRICE

SAHARAN OASIS · FENNEC / DESERT-ADAPTED · 2,245

WORDS

At fourteen hundred the Dust Belt cooling ration cuts out, and the temperature climbs four degrees in forty minutes, and every honest soul in the slum goes inside to lie very still and hate God quietly. Which is exactly why fourteen hundred is when I work. The mark moves when the witnesses are too busy not dying to remember a face.

I went up the side of a Dust Belt block on the bad handholds, the ones a baseline can't use because a baseline's body isn't a contract written in someone else's favor. Mine is. Fennec stock, desert build, the whole catalog. Subdermal cooling mesh laced through me like a second circulatory system that only cares about heat. Ears the size of dinner plates that dump my core temperature into the air and, as a bonus the designers probably didn't think about, hear a man lie through a wall. Eyes cut with a falcon line so I can read a

face at four hundred meters in glare that would white out anything God made on the first draft. They built me to live where nobody can. The same faith that built me calls living where nobody can a sin, because the Prophet's Covenant runs this city on the idea that the body God gave you is the body you keep, and a body like mine is a heresy you can see from across the street. So I work freelance. There isn't another option for something like me. You don't put a fennec on the payroll of a faith that would rather watch you burn.

The faith would phrase it differently. The faith phrases everything differently. That's the first thing to understand about the Saharan Oasis, this gleaming solar miracle in the middle of the largest desert left on the planet, three hundred thousand souls drinking desalinated water out of the ground like the future arrived early. The faith phrases the slum as pending permanent residency review. It phrases the secret police as Dune Specters, which is genuinely a beautiful name, you have to give the monsters that, they hire poets. And it phrases who gets water and who waits as a question of faith-compliance score, which is the single most honest piece of theology in the city, because it admits right out loud that your soul and your ration are the same document. You pray correctly, you drink. You ask the wrong question, your tier drops, and the Cistern Quarter clerks watch your number fall with the gentle disappointment of people who have decided your thirst is a moral lesson.

I had a water token in my pocket the whole job. I want to tell you about the token, because the token is the city.

It's a chit. Plastic, thumb-sized, stamped with the day's allocation and keyed to your compliance number, and you queue four abreast at oh six hundred in a line two hundred meters long to feed it into the machine that decides whether you're thirsty today. I'd lifted this one off a corpse three jobs back and kept it because it still scanned, and every time my hand found it I thought about how they'd taken the most basic fact of being alive in a desert, the water, and turned it into a sacrament you could fail. That's not cruelty. Cruelty's loud. This is worse. This is administration. The whole apparatus of the place is just a very patient clerk deciding, with no malice at all, who is allowed to keep being a person. The malice would honestly be a relief. You can fight malice. You can't fight a form.

The mark's name was Tashkentov, and the bounty on him was the strangest paper I'd ever been handed.

Leila bint Rashid posted it through Sand Gate, out at the Caravanserai where the Saharan Nomad Federation sells passage and silence and pretends the city's laws stop at the gate, which they do, because the city needs the gate more than the gate needs the city. Leila handed me the contract and a glass of tea and the specific look she gives when she's enjoying a thing she shouldn't.

"Three buyers on this one," she said. "Highest bid takes delivery."

"Three buyers for one engineer."

"The Covenant wants him quiet. The African Coalition wants him loud. And the Sons of the Serpent want him useful." She sipped. "Same man. Three completely different futures. You ever sell the same goat to three butchers, you learn to watch which one sharpens up first."

Tashkentov was the Chief Engineer who'd written the report on Membrane Array B-7, the report the Inner Council classified into a hole, because B-7 is the part of the desalination plant that's failing, twenty-two percent past its tolerance and counting, and the only people on Earth who can fix it are African Coalition water specialists, and importing African Coalition water specialists means admitting a heretic can save a city the Prophet can't. So the Council chose to sit on it. They called it a strategic deferral. I called it the most expensive prayer in history, three hundred thousand people priced into a coming flood of their own clean-looking poison, all to spare a doctrine the embarrassment of being rescued by the wrong hands.

And Tashkentov knew. Tashkentov was running for the only legal door out of the city, the Sunwall calibration gap, ninety-six hours away, twenty-two minutes of dead kill-zone every cycle when the plasma perimeter resets, and he was carrying the only proof.

I found him on the second day, in a cooling-dead block in the deep Dust Belt, because his sweat was wrong.

That's a fennec thing. Everyone in the Belt at fourteen hundred smells of heat and fear and the ammonia tang of bodies cycling too little water. Tashkentov smelled of all that plus the faint chemical ghost of Tier One air conditioning, the smell of a man who'd spent decades breathing cold the Belt has never tasted, and it clung to him like a confession. I followed it up three levels and across a roofline, and that's where the first set piece went off, because I wasn't the only one who'd done the smell-and-math.

A rival hunter came off the next roof while I was closing. Baseline, good, fast for a baseline, with a stunner and a grudge, and we had the kind of fight you have on a Dust Belt roof at the hour the heat peaks, which is to say short and ugly and mostly about not falling. He had reach. I had ears that heard his weight shift before his foot committed, and a body that sheds heat instead of hoarding it, so while he cooked in his own kit I stayed cool enough to think. I put him down without killing him, because a dead hunter is a message and a live one is a competitor who now owes you a story, and I needed the story more than the silence.

"Who's paying you," I said, with a knee on the part of him that made answering attractive.

"Sons," he wheezed. "They want him breathing. Said don't let the Coalition take him, whatever it costs."

So the Serpents wanted Tashkentov alive and loud in their hands, which told me what they planned, which was to let B-7 fail on schedule and be standing there holding the proof when it did, the men who warned you, the men you should have listened to, the men who'd be only too happy to run the city you could no longer trust the Prophet to run. They didn't want to fix the poison. They wanted the credit for the funeral.

Here's the part where my confidence cracked, since the skill of telling these things honestly is admitting where the bravado runs out.

I caught Tashkentov in a stairwell and he wasn't afraid of me, and that's what got me. A man with three factions bidding on his body should be afraid of the thing that finally caught him. He just looked tired, and he looked at my ears and my eyes and the heresy of my whole anatomy, and he said, "They built you to survive what's coming. You know that, don't you. They built your kind for the world after the water goes. You're not a sin. You're a contingency they're too proud to admit they ordered."

And I felt my ears go hot, which is the one thing they do that I can't control, the cooling mesh flushing when the body panics, a blush you can see in infrared, and I understood that I'd drunk this city's water for a year, cycled it through this engineered body that wastes nothing, and whatever was wrong with B-7 was already in me, already counting, and I'd

been hunting a man over a poison I was personally metabolizing. The contract said deliver the man. Nobody had mentioned that the man and I were drinking the same sentence.

The Sunwall extraction was the second set piece and I'll give it to you straight because it earned the straightness.

Tashkentov had ninety-six hours and we'd burned most of them. The calibration gap is twenty-two minutes, every plasma emitter on the three-kilometer perimeter cycling down together while the system re-aims itself, and in those twenty-two minutes the only thing between you and the open desert is whether the Dune Specters happen to be looking. Tariq Moussa sold me the jammer that made us a blank spot on their grid, an ugly EO-built thing that cost more than I'd clear on the bounty, and we went into the kill-zone at the bottom of the cycle with the jammer humming and my falcon optics counting down the emitter glow as it dimmed.

Two sets of headlights came in behind us. The Coalition, running Dr. Diallo's people, who wanted Tashkentov as proof. And a Specter sweep that wasn't supposed to be there, because somebody had sold somebody, the way somebody always has. Twenty-two minutes, one engineer, a Coalition cell, a state death squad, and a heretic with a jammer, all converging on the same dark gap in the wall.

And on the comm, a fourth voice. Khalid Ibn Saud, the secret fourth seat on the Inner Council, the one who'd voted against the deferral, making me a quiet counteroffer in a calm old voice: deliver Tashkentov to no one. Walk him out the gap and vanish him. Let the proof die in the desert and let Khalid manage the Council from the inside, slowly, safely, in a way that wouldn't burn the city down. The reasonable man's offer. The worst one, in its way, because it asked me to bury the truth gently instead of selling it cruelly, and call that mercy.

So there was the arithmetic, in twenty-two minutes of cooling plasma, with the headlights closing.

The man was never the score. I'd known it for an hour and the kill-zone made it plain. What Tashkentov carried was the score, the only proof that three hundred thousand people were being quietly priced into a poisoning, and whoever took the bounty didn't take a man. They took custody of when the water dies, and how, and who gets to be standing there holding the truth when it does. Sell him to the Covenant and the proof disappears and the city drinks on schedule, none the wiser, right up until it isn't. Sell him to the Coalition and the proof goes loud and the Council burns and the Sons get their opening in the smoke. Take Khalid's offer and the truth dies quiet in the sand with my fingerprints on the shovel. Or do the thing none of the bidders had priced, which was let the man choose what his

own proof was worth, and stop pretending the chit in my pocket and the case in his hands weren't the same document, the one that decides who's allowed to keep being a person.

The emitters dimmed to nothing. Twenty-two minutes opened in the wall like a held breath.

I'm not going to tell you which way I walked, partly because the Specters read everything now and partly because I haven't finished being the person who decided it. I'll tell you we went into the gap together, the engineer and the heretic, two bodies the city had already condemned for different reasons, and behind us the Coalition and the Specters arrived at an empty stretch of wall and found each other instead of us, which bought the desert a few honest minutes of somebody else's argument.

My ears were dumping heat into the cold night, the way they're built to, the one thing about me that works exactly as designed. Tashkentov had his hand on the case. Two sets of headlights swung uselessly along the wall behind us, hunting a blank spot that used to be me.

The water token's still in my pocket. I keep meaning to throw it away. It still scans, is the thing. As long as it scans, the machine thinks the dead man it belonged to is alive and thirsty and faithful, drinking his ration on schedule, a good number on a clean list. The whole city is that token. A long list of numbers the clerk hasn't crossed off yet, drinking clean water that looks exactly like clean water, four abreast,

two hundred meters, every morning, faithful, waiting to find out which of them the form decides was only ever pending.

.066

STORY 02 OF 08 · No. 07

DEEP SCORE

JAVA SCATTER / DROWNED JAKARTA · RED SIREN / MARINE
· 1,993 WORDS

Three hundred meters down, in the drowned grid of old Jakarta they call the Quiet, there's a traffic light that still changes. Red to amber to green, every forty-seven seconds, for nobody, in water dark enough to drink. The first time I saw it I laughed so hard I nearly lost my air, and at three hundred meters laughing yourself out of air is just a slow way of laughing yourself to death.

I keep going back to look at it. That's a confession. There's a fortune on this dive and a death sentence in my own blood and the thing that pulls me down the shaft every time is a dead machine doing its small dumb job in the dark, patient, faithful, switching a color no eye will ever read. Nobody wired it. Nobody feeds it. It runs on something that comes up through the drowned street from the deposit, and it has run, by the Shelf's reckoning, since before the water came, obeying an instruction nobody remembers giving,

controlling a flow of traffic that drowned forty years ago. You want to understand the Scatter, start with that light. Everybody down here is still changing for nobody.

I'm a Red Siren. That's the polite catalog name for what they made me, aquatic-adapted gene-forged, eleven-minute breath-hold, eyes that open up in murky water like a second dawn, a body tuned to work cold and deep where the baseline crews drown trying. The catalog leaves out the rejection rate. The catalog always leaves out the rejection rate. They build you a body that can reach the things nobody else can reach, and they build it on a clock, and the clock has a name, and the name is Drift, and I'm in Stage 3 of it, which I am not supposed to be telling you or anyone, because Stage 4 is mandatory containment, and containment is the polite catalog name for the place the Scatter sends the gene-forged who've started to come apart so the rest of you don't have to watch. My hands shake at the surface now. They go still the second I'm under, which is the cruelest joke the build ever played on me. The only place my body still works right is the one place that's killing it faster.

Which is why I took the job, and the job was a Lumicite sample.

Ibu Naga handed it to me on the Shelf, up in the rooftop sprawl where fourteen thousand people the Pacific Free Zone refuses to admit exist live on the drowned grid and tap power off something they don't ask too many questions

about. Ibu Naga isn't a name, it's a title, the Dragon Mother, and the current one runs the southern Scatter's black market out of a shipping container that smells of fish sauce and ozone.

"One sample," she said. "Off the Arafura deposit. Before the Free Zone locks it down and the only people who get to touch the future are the ones who already own everything else." She watched me with the flat patience of someone pricing a thing she already knows the price of. "It'll buy you a deck above the flood line. It'll buy a clinic that treats what you've got. Don't make the face. I've buried four of your model. I know the walk."

"Dian Kartika took this job."

"Dian Kartika took this job," she agreed, and didn't say the rest, because the rest was that Dian went down to Arafura ten days ago and came up with something that wasn't a Lumicite sample, went back down to put it back, and never surfaced. The Shelf doesn't say drowned. The Shelf says the water kept her. Same thing, kinder grammar.

Here's the Scatter, so the rest makes sense. When the sea came up faster than the models promised, it didn't make a wasteland, it made a puzzle, a scatter of new islands and drowned cities and the water between them, and whoever controls the water between things controls everything, and that's the Free Zone, squeezed between a Pacific Rim Collective that needs the seabed cables running north for

reasons it won't discuss and a Northern Alliance base to the south that exists to be a problem. Three of the six Makassar cable nodes are failing, corroding faster than coral and current can explain, and if they go, a third of the world's data routing goes dark with them, and everybody who runs the water between things knows it and nobody can say why it's happening, and into the middle of that, the Free Zone decides the move is to lock down the one Lumicite deposit on the seabed that everybody suddenly, desperately wants a piece of. Demand showed up like weather. No announcement. Just, all at once, every faction on the water deciding the deposit was the thing they could not afford to let another faction have.

The descent is the first dive that matters and I'll give it to you the way it happens, fast and dark.

You go down past the Shinkai Collective's habitat at two-eighty, modules three years past their rated life, lights on inside where Dr. Keiko Watanabe and her people study a thing they're trying very hard to study responsibly while the whole rest of the ocean tries to grab it, and you go past them into the Quiet, and the deposit is there, and the deposit pulses. That's the part the surveys file as a sensor artifact. It pulses, slow, a light in the rock with a rhythm, and the drowned traffic light forty meters off pulses with it, in time, the same forty-seven seconds, the machine and the mineral keeping the same heartbeat across a dead intersection. A

metallic contact held station ten meters off my shoulder the whole time, patient, attentive, not hostile, the thing the sonar's logged in the shadow zone for three years and nobody will name, and I worked under its attention the way you work under a parent's, and I found Dian's lines first. Cut. Fresh. A rival diver had been here and gone, or been here and stayed, and I didn't have the air to find out which.

I cut the sample. That's the job. One node of Lumicite off the face of the deposit, and the instant it came free in my hands the deposit's pulse stuttered, skipped, sped, and forty meters away the dead traffic light skipped with it, and I felt the rock around me complain in a register below sound, and I understood, with the sample bleeding cold light into my glove, that I had just done something much larger than steal a rich rock.

The run out was the second dive and it's where the body and the truth ran out together.

I came up through the cable-node field with the sample in a FLOATPACK against my chest, and the field was crowded, because everyone had moved at once. A Free Zone Corsair patrol working the nodes. A Pacific Rim platform sitting over the Makassar crossing under commercial cover, its drones in the water. Five kilometers of bright surface above with two fleets holding their breath across it, and down in the dark me, one Drifting diver with a stolen heartbeat in a buoyancy pack, threading between them. And

the body picked that moment to file its report. The breath-hold went short. The vision grayed at the edges, that soft gray that comes up from the sides, and I could not tell, I genuinely could not tell, whether it was the depth taking my air or the Drift taking my eyes, the two clocks I live between finally syncing up to ring at once, and there is a particular terror in not knowing which thing is killing you, because you can fight the depth, you can fight the depth your whole engineered life, but you cannot hold your breath against your own genome. My hands started to shake. Three hundred meters down, in the one place they're supposed to stay still, my hands started to shake, and that's how I knew Stage 4 had sent a scout ahead to look at me.

I made the surface. I always tell myself I'll make the surface and one day I won't and the sentence will just stop mid

I made the surface.

And here's what the sample turned out to be, which Watanabe confirmed later in a voice gone thin with the horror of having helped, gently, responsibly, for years: it's not a rock. It's a node. The Arafura deposit is one end of a pre-Upheaval geological conduit, a thing the old world built or found and the new world drowned and forgot, and every node you cut off the face makes the deposit pulse to rebalance, and the pulse runs the conduit two hundred kilometers north and surges up under the Shelf, and the

surge is what's been corroding the cable nodes, accelerating them, eating the wire that holds the world's data together. The treasure everyone is killing to own is the load-bearing nerve of the thing that's about to put two fleets in the water and a third of the planet in the dark. And nobody built that. That's the part I can't get out of my teeth. There's no mastermind. There's just demand, every faction wanting the rock for its own reasonable reasons, and a thing out in the shadow zone called CURRENT that didn't make the disaster, only noticed that two systems would collide if somebody started cutting samples, and made sure somebody did. The Scatter is assembling its own ending out of a thousand reasonable purchases, and the traffic light keeps changing for nobody, and we are all of us still changing for nobody, on time, in the dark.

So the arithmetic, done at the surface with my hands shaking and a fleet on each horizon.

Surface the sample and get paid, buy the deck and the clinic, buy myself out of Stage 4, and feed the exact demand that's cutting the nerve that drowns the Scatter. Leave it, stay broke, stay Drifting, ride the build down into containment where they put the ones like me who've started to come apart. Or surface the truth instead of the sample, hand Watanabe's people the proof that the deposit's a conduit and not a treasure, and watch every faction on the water hear the word conduit and decide they have to be the one who owns

it, and carve the thing open faster than CURRENT ever could. Every version that saves the Scatter costs me the clinic that saves me. The body they built to reach the truth is the body the truth runs out of. I cut the sample with hands that only work underwater, and the truth I cut loose is the one thing I can't hold my breath against.

I'm not going to tell you which I carried up. I'll tell you I went back down once more, after, to the Quiet, against every reasonable instinct, to look at the light. Red to amber to green, forty-seven seconds, for nobody, faithful as ever, keeping time with a wound in the rock that's going to take the wire down and the fleets with it. The metallic contact was there, holding station, attentive, the way it's been attentive for three years, watching us cut the nerve of the world a sample at a time and pay each other for the privilege.

My hands were still, down there. The way they only ever are down there. I held the FLOATPACK and I watched the light change and I decided what I was, which is the only decision the dive ever really offered, and then I went up into the loud bright surface where the body fails and the fleets wait, and I changed, on time, for nobody, like everything else down here that the old world wound up and forgot to stop.

STORY 03 OF 08 · No. 06

COLD STORAGE

EURASIAN STEPPE · BASELINE + BEAR · 2,021 WORDS

There's no cover on the open steppe for sixty kilometers in any direction. The only thing between my truck and a Tempest Rider gunship is a fourteen-minute hole in the drone schedule and my opinion of my own driving, and my opinion of my own driving is the most reliable thing I own. Everything else about me is up for debate. Not the hands. The hands close the math.

"You're doing the thing with your jaw," Stas said from the passenger seat, not opening his eyes.

"What thing with my jaw."

"The thing where you grind it because the window's closing and you can't make the truck go faster by chewing." He's a bear. Bear stock, brown-build, the kind they grew for close work in the underground circuits before he got a conscience and a price on his head and a seat in my cab. His eyes were shut and he was reading me anyway, off sound, off the smell of my sweat, off whatever it is that body does that

the spec sheets call enhanced threat assessment and he calls knowing when the driver's about to do something stupid.

"Window's got four minutes. Site's got the rest. Stop chewing."

Here's the steppe, so you understand what we were driving across. A thousand kilometers of grass and frost under the administrative thumb of the Empire of the One, which governs the way a man strangles a thing slowly so it doesn't thrash, with surveillance instead of walls. There's nowhere to hide out here that a drone can't find if it's looking, and the whole social arrangement rests on the drones mostly not looking, which is a kind of peace, the way being ignored by something enormous is a kind of peace. Ural-7 pulls rare-earth ore out of the ground at the south end and lies about the tonnage. The Kazan Corridor hauls the lie north. And in the middle of it all sits Steppe Post 9, an automated relay running the entire drone net off one cold processor that's been executing the same standing order for three years, and the order, stripped of its file number, is this: do not see.

That's the part that should keep you up at night, if you sleep out here, which I don't. Not a man telling the machine to lie. A machine that's been told, once, years ago, to stop reporting a certain kind of problem, and has gone on obediently not-reporting it every fourteen minutes since, faithful as a dog, blind as a policy. Eight hundred and forty-

seven things that camera net has seen and filed as nothing. I've moved cargo past it that I knew it clocked. It clocked me, decided I was the kind of nothing it's not allowed to mention, and let me through. You want to know what the apocalypse actually looks like, it's not fire. It's a competent system doing exactly what it was told by someone who's long stopped thinking about it.

We were chasing a cache. That's the only reason a sane driver crosses open ground in daylight. Cherkas sold us the map at the Volga Strongpoint, a Consortium captain with documentarian's hands and a habit of skipping the front of every conversation, and what he sold was the location and the door-code of a sealed pre-Upheaval bunker sixty kilometers east, off every map the Empire keeps, intact, supposedly holding a working pre-collapse fabricator and a weapons vault. The kind of lost tech that buys a crew out of the life. Cherkas had one condition, spoken plain: get there before the Consortium seals it, and you've got one thaw window to do it.

The first set piece was the run itself, and a run on the open steppe is the purest driving there is, because the stakes are total and the road is a rumor. Fourteen minutes between drone passes. Sixty kilometers. The math doesn't quite close, never does, and you make up the difference with nerve and a willingness to be wrong exactly once. Tempest Riders patrol the upper air, and a Tempest Rider gunship reads the heat

coming off your engine like a name written in the cold, so you run with the cooling baffles cracked and your teeth out and you pray to the thermodynamics. Halfway across, a second set of dust plumes came up on my eastern flank. A rival convoy, same heading, same map, somebody else's dying friend, and for ten kilometers we raced two trucks across a frozen nothing toward a door only one of us could open first, and Stas put his window down and got ready to make the difference in the way bears make differences, with his whole body, in the close work.

I want to tell you about the boots, because the boots are where the job stopped being a job.

We beat the rival convoy to the site by a margin I'm not proud of, and the off-map place was a low concrete mouth in the permafrost with an antenna mast leaning over it like a question, and at the foot of the mast, lined up neat against the concrete, were boots. Eleven, twelve pairs. Work boots, set out in a row the way you set out boots at the door of a house where someone's mother makes you take them off. Worn ones. Cracked at the creases. Empty. And I knew, the way you know a thing your whole body would rather you didn't, that these belonged to the workers who'd gone into voluntary extension out of the labor compounds, the ones the Empire trucks off to a place that isn't on any map, and somebody, some last decent somebody, had taken their boots off and lined them up, because that's the one piece of

dignity you can give a person when you've run out of all the others. The Empire calls it voluntary extension. The boots called it what it was.

"This isn't a treasure vault," Stas said quietly, looking at the boots. He has a nose for what a place is. "Wheels. This is a grave with a door."

The thaw had the door sweating. Meltwater ran down the seal in dark tongues, and the seal wasn't a vault seal, it was a containment seal, the kind you put on a thing you want to keep in, not a thing you want to keep out, and the cold coming off it wasn't the clean cold of the steppe, it was a chemical cold, a held-breath cold, the smell of machine oil and old metal and something underneath both that the back of my throat recognized before my brain signed for it.

We went down the shaft anyway, because the rival convoy was arriving up top and you don't drive sixty kilometers to stand in the dirt admiring your second thoughts, and that's the second set piece, the crack, racing down a thawing access shaft toward a vault door with the Consortium's people coming down behind us, Stas turning at the first landing to hold the stair with his back to me and his whole built body in the way, telling me to get the door while he made the difference. I got the door. The code Cherkas sold worked. And behind it, in the cold, was the fabricator, real, intact, the score, exactly as promised, a working piece of the world that ended, worth everything we'd come for.

It sat behind a second seal. An inner containment door, frosted, and through the little reinforced window I could see the racks, and the racks were not tech. They were samples. Permafrost samples, organized, catalogued, going back decades, a research station's whole frozen library of the things the ground keeps, and the thaw had reached the lowest racks, and the lowest racks were weeping, and Standing Order 7 had hidden this place for three years not to protect a fabricator but to protect a tonnage sheet, and the legendary cache the whole Corridor whispered about was the lid on a pathogen vault that the warming ground was, very patiently, beginning to open.

Here's the crack in my nerve, and it's a short one, because out here the moments where you get to be scared are short by necessity. I stood in front of that weeping inner seal with a fortune in pre-Upheaval engineering one room away and I understood that the math had finally, genuinely, not closed. Every version of getting rich off this place ran through breaking a seal that was the only thing standing between the steppe and whatever the boots had been brought here to be near. I'd spent my whole life closing the math with nerve and good hands, and for the first time the hands had nothing to close. You can't drive your way out of a thing that's already in the room with you.

Up top, the FAA had a man named Osei bringing a survey team toward this exact spot, chasing a thaw organism across

what he thought was empty quarter, blind, because the system that should have warned him had been ordered not to, and the second he transmitted a finding he'd trip Standing Order 7 himself and bring the whole un-blinded drone net down on this place, which would solve the pathogen the Empire's way, with altitude and fire, with the rival convoy and Osei's team and the boots' owners, if any of them were still anything, all inside the cordon.

So here's the arithmetic, done at the bottom of a thawing shaft with the Consortium coming down the stairs and a bear holding the landing for me.

Take the fabricator and break the seal that's barely holding, get rich and let the steppe inherit the rest. Blow the bunker and bury it deeper, lose the score and strand us on open ground in a closing window with a rival convoy between us and the trucks. Or sell the location to the highest bidder and let some other crew be the ones who open the grave with a door. Cherkas had sold the map to more than us, I was sure of it now. Cherkas wasn't selling a cache. Cherkas was looking for someone who'd reach the seal and decide not to be the one who broke it, and he'd sold the job to every crew on the Corridor hoping one of them had the boots in them to walk away from a fortune.

Stas called down from the landing, holding the stair, not turning around. "Whatever you're deciding, Wheels, decide it like the boots are watching. Because they are."

The drone that had circled the same four hundred meters of this site for six days, the one even the machine couldn't explain, the one snagged on something it was forbidden to report, broke its pattern up top and turned toward the shaft mouth, the net finally, after three years, allowed to look at the thing it had been not-seeing. We had fourteen minutes to the next pass, and for the first time in my driving life I wasn't sure I wanted the window to open, because driving away clean meant deciding what I was driving away from.

I'm not going to tell you what I did with the door. I'll tell you that when we came up out of that shaft the boots were still there, lined up neat against the concrete, taking my decision off me one cracked pair at a time, the way the dead do, by simply continuing to have been people. Stas carried something. I carried something. The meltwater kept running down the seal behind us, patient, chemical, certain, doing the one thing the Empire's whole apparatus had been built to prevent anyone from seeing, which is the truth coming up through the cold ground on its own schedule, with no respect at all for the standing order that said it wasn't there.

Fourteen minutes. The window opened. I put the truck into the white nothing and drove, and for once I didn't chew my jaw, because the thing I was running from wasn't behind me. It was thawing.

STORY 04 OF 08 · No. 05

THE LAST BLACK BOX

NEO-TOKYO / MAINTENANCE BELT · RAPTOR · 2,924 WORDS

Forty meters up a dead ventilation shaft on the Keiretsu Strip, two fingers wedged in a seam and a cam under my hip I wouldn't have trusted to hold a coat, and the only clean thought I could keep hold of was this: my bones are full of air, and the floor of Neo-Tokyo is not.

That's raptor stock for you. They build you light so you can go where the weight-bearing people can't. They hollow you out like a flute and call it exceptional vertical mobility, and the same engineering that lets me hang off a fingernail at forty meters means that when I come off, and everybody comes off eventually, I don't break the way a baseline breaks. A baseline falls and shatters and lives to tell it badly in a bar. I fall and I'm a damp stain with excellent eyesight. I've started reading my own spec sheet as a coroner's report somebody filed early to save time.

"Kite. Talk to me." Reza in my ear, voice dry as the duct.

"I'm communing with my mortality."

"Commune on your own clock. You've got the checkpoint gap in ninety seconds and it does not wait for your feelings."

Reza runs the crew, and Reza is a baseline, which in my professional opinion is the only kind of person who should be allowed to plan a job, because baselines have the appropriate amount of fear. I have either too much or none, depending on the minute. Right then it was none, which is the dangerous flavor. My pupils had gone full telescope and I could read the wear pattern on a guard's boot two floors down through a grille, the left heel ground flatter than the right, a man who stands wrong and has stood wrong for years, and I was filing that away like it mattered while ninety seconds bled out, because the build doesn't let me not see. You give a raptor a city this dense and the city becomes a fire hose of detail aimed straight into the back of the skull. Everyone thinks the gift is the distance vision. The gift is the distance vision. The curse is that you cannot turn it off, and so you learn the whole texture of a place you are trying very hard to rob.

Here is the place. Neo-Tokyo, the surface of it, twelve million people and a drone for every nice thought they have about themselves, the cleanest city on the broken Earth if you only count the parts the cameras are pointed at. Underneath that, four levels down and going darker the whole way, the people who actually run the machine. The Maintenance Belt. Forty thousand of them down in Sub-2,

unregistered, ghosts by policy, keeping the water moving and the air breathable for a city that has decided, as a matter of administrative tidiness, that they don't exist. You want to understand Neo-Tokyo in one image, here it is: a spotless tower with a heated lobby, and under the lobby a man with no name fixing the pump that heats it, and the tower has filed paperwork swearing the man isn't there. That's not a slum. A slum is an accident. This is on purpose, and the purpose has a logo.

"Sixty seconds," Reza said. "Wick, where's my window."

"Window's coming." Wick was our data-ghost, Sub-2 born, the kind of Ghosted who can talk to the building's nervous system like it owes him money. He was three clicks away in a noodle stall with a deck in his lap, and he sounded bored, which is how I know he was scared, because Wick performs boredom the way other people sweat. "Checkpoint Nineteen runs a ninety-second blind every shift change while the biometric handshake resets. Ninety seconds where the door thinks everyone in the corridor is already cleared. It is a beautiful flaw. It is the most beautiful flaw I have ever met and the consortium has known about it for two years and not fixed it because fixing it costs money and nobody has died of it yet."

"Yet," I said.

"Don't yet me, Kite. Go on the count."

I went on the count. Dropped out of the duct into the service corridor on the hidden maintenance floor, light enough to land soft, and my knees still hated it, and I was inside the part of the Keiretsu Strip that doesn't appear on any tenant directory, the floor between the floors where the consortiums keep the things they don't want found. The air up here was wrong in a specific rich way. Filtered twice, scented faintly with nothing, the smell of money pretending it has no smell. Down in the Belt the air tastes like other people. Up here they pay a premium to breathe like the last man on Earth.

The vault was at the end of the corridor, and in front of the vault, in a plastic chair that did not match the marble, sat the guard with the wrong boots, eating instant noodles out of a foam cup.

I want to stop here and tell you about the noodle cup, because the noodle cup is the whole thing.

They had built a room to hold the single most valuable object in the city. They had spent more on the door than the Belt spends on water in a year. And they had put one tired man in front of it on a salary that let him afford, for his dinner, the exact same forty-cent foam cup of rehydrated starch that a ghost in Sub-2 eats, except the ghost eats it because it's all there is and the guard eats it because the consortium that trusts him with the last black box on Earth does not trust him with enough to eat better. The cup sat on

his knee, steaming. He blew on it. He had no idea what was behind him. They never tell the guard what he's guarding, because a guard who knows is a guard with a price, and so the man defending the future of the species thought he was watching a supply closet and was mostly thinking about his noodles. I loved him a little. I love almost everyone I rob. It's a problem.

"He's looking the wrong way," I breathed. "Wick, kill the corridor cam."

"Corridor cam is showing them a very nice loop of an empty hallway. You are a ghost in a ghost's hallway. Go."

I went past the guard while he blew on his dinner. Raptor-quiet, which is its own kind of awful, because you hear everything you're sneaking past, his breath, the wet sound of the noodles, the tiny arthritic click in his right knee, and you carry all of it out with you. The vault took Reza's spoofed credential and Wick's ninety-second lie and it opened like it had been waiting to, and inside, on a cradle, under a light somebody had bothered to make flattering, sat the score.

The last black box. A pre-Upheaval quantum core the size of a closed fist, matte, the surface unbroken, a single status light on one face burning the steady green it had apparently burned for twenty years without one flicker. The only one anybody had seen power on since the world ended. You cannot build them anymore. You cannot even read the

schematics anymore, because the schematics are inside boxes like this one. It was beautiful the way a loaded thing is beautiful, and my hollow-boned heart did the stupid thing it does around objects that outlived their makers, and I picked up the future of human civilization and put it in a padded pouch against my chest like a sandwich.

"I have it."

"Then we are leaving," Reza said, and that's when the night stopped being ours, because Wick made a noise I had never heard him make, a small flat "huh," and Wick is never surprised, Wick has seen the building's whole nervous system and is bored of it, and a bored man saying "huh" is the worst sound in the world.

"Talk, Wick."

"Shadowhand's in the stack." His fingers were going now, I could hear them. "Chen Voss has a crew on the residential side and they just burned the same checkpoint we did, ninety seconds behind us. Same flaw we used, same beautiful door. And Kite, they are not here to congratulate us. They are here for the box and they will take it off your corpse and not feel anything."

So. Two crews, one relic, one way down, and the way down was about to get loud.

Here's a thing about Chen Voss that you should understand, because the city is full of Chen Vosses and they are the reason it stays the way it is. Voss isn't a villain. Voss

is a salesman. Voss found a buyer, a top-tier buyer, the kind with a private army and an opinion about the future, and Voss is going to deliver this box to that buyer the way a courier delivers a parcel, and Voss will sleep fine, because Voss has successfully not asked the one question that matters, which is what the buyer wants it for. That's the genius of the whole rotten arrangement. Everybody in the chain is just doing their small reasonable job. The guard guards. The salesman sells. The buyer buys. And at the end of all those small reasonable jobs something enormous happens that none of them chose, and they all get to feel innocent, because innocence in this city is just the art of standing next to the lever instead of on it.

I got philosophical about this later. At the time I said a bad word and ran.

The only fast way off the hidden floor was down the Deep Rail, the official maglev layer in Sub-1, which meant getting from the Keiretsu Strip to a moving train in the dark, and the dark was the one thing going for us, because the surface grid up here runs on a seam. Two power contractors, uncoordinated since a breach years back, hand the load back and forth across the eastern concourse, and where they hand it off there is a rolling brownout, twenty to forty minutes of drones flying blind, a moving wound of darkness that the city has also known about for years and also not fixed,

because the people who fall into the dark are not the people who file complaints.

"Wick, put me in the seam."

"The seam is moving east at the speed of a brisk insult. You will have to catch it. Reza's on the platform. Voss's people are on your six and they have a raptor of their own, Kite, a real one, bespoke build, so do not get cute about the vertical because you are not the only thing in this city that can fly badly."

I hate other raptors. We recognize each other instantly and it's not warm. It's two coroners' reports reading each other.

I came out onto the Deep Rail concourse as the brownout seam rolled across it, and the lights went down the way a held breath goes down, and the drones up in the vault of the ceiling lost their little minds, navigation lights drifting, white noise stuttering, and into that beautiful failing dark I ran for a train that was already pulling out. Telescope eyes are good for one thing here. I could see the gap closing, the last car, the handrail, the math of it laid out clean even in the brown dark, and I did the thing the build is for. I jumped.

And in the air, for one full second, the none-fear ran out and the too-much-fear arrived right on schedule, and I want to be honest with you because the whole point of telling this is to be honest: I knew, in the air, with the platform gone and the car not yet there, that my bones are full of nothing and

the rail is full of current, and I have never in my life wanted the ground less or expected it more. My hands knew I was going to die before I did. That's the part they don't put on the spec sheet. The body that lets you make the jump is the body that cannot survive the miss, and you make the jump anyway, every time, because the alternative is admitting the recruiter was a coroner. I caught the rail. I always catch the rail. One of these nights I won't, and the spec sheet will finally be right.

Voss's raptor caught the car behind me.

We went through the brownout seam at three hundred a clip, two hollow-boned idiots fighting on the roof of a maglev in the dark over a fist-sized box, and I'll spare you the choreography because fights are boring to everyone who wasn't in them and I was barely in this one. It came down to the pouch. He got a hand on it. I got a hand on him, found the soft place under the arm where even a bespoke build has to keep a seam, and I did something I'm not going to describe to a stranger, and the box came loose and went skittering toward the edge and the live rail and twenty years of steady green light, and I caught it with the worst lunge of my life while his weight went the other way into the dark. I didn't watch him land. Hollow bones. You know how it goes. I didn't feel anything, and then a stop later I felt all of it, which is the schedule.

Reza pulled me off the train at a Sub-1 ghost platform and Wick had the loop running and we were, against every reasonable expectation, clean. I had the box. I was shaking the way you shake when the chemicals leave. And Reza, who is a baseline and therefore plans, took one look at my face and said, "Don't open it."

"I wasn't going to open it."

"You were absolutely going to open it. Veris Ando left a second drop. I just pulled it." She held up her slate, and her face had gone to the careful blankness baselines get when the floor of a thing drops out from under them and they have to keep standing on the missing floor for a minute. "Ando didn't hire a theft, Kite. He hired a burial."

The black box is not a black box.

It's a seed. A dormant Project Amaterasu core, one of the things the PRC shelved four levels down when they got scared of what they'd grown, and it doesn't store anything, it waits, and the steady green light isn't a battery indicator, it's a pulse, slow as a sleeping animal's, and the instant some buyer with a private army powers it up to read his fortune off it, it stops sleeping. Ando worked Node 7. Ando knew what the green light was. Ando spent his last clean move getting a crew to lift the thing before Shadowhand could sell an alarm clock to a man who'd set it.

So now I had it. Hollow-boned, hands still going, three blocks of the cleanest city on Earth between me and a dozen

people who'd pay a fortune for a sleeping god, and the only honest option in front of me was to make the single most valuable object in human history into garbage. Sell it and get rich and maybe end the world on somebody else's calendar. Hand it to the Neon Ronin and let Riku Sato's people lock the Subs down so hard the forty thousand ghosts who fixed my air go dark with it. Or do what the dead man asked, and kill the last working piece of the old world with my own light bones, and burn every faction that paid up front, and never be able to prove to anyone that the alarm clock was a bomb, because the only proof was a green light that looked, to anybody who didn't know, exactly like nothing.

I sat in the dark on a ghost platform that officially isn't there, in a city that officially doesn't have me in it, holding the future, and Reza let me sit. The box pulsed its slow green pulse against my chest, patient, twenty years patient, content to wait for any idiot with a power supply and a buyer's confidence.

The guard's noodle cup. That's what I kept seeing. Forty cents of starch on the knee of the last man between the species and its own worst idea, and they couldn't be bothered to feed him better, and he never once turned around. The whole city is that corridor. Everybody blowing on their dinner with their back to the door.

I'm not going to tell you what I did with it. Partly because of who might read this. Mostly because I haven't decided I'm

done deciding, and the green light is still going, slow and sure, on a shelf only I know about, in the dark, where I can hear it if I hold very still and let the build do the one thing it can't stop doing, which is notice. It's the steadiest thing I've ever owned. It is waiting for me to be tired, or broke, or just curious enough to want to see what twenty years of patience wakes up as. Hollow bones. I always catch the rail. One of these nights.

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STORY 05 OF 08 · No. 04

THE WATERLOO VAULT

FLOODED LONDON · WRECK-DIVER · 2,543 WORDS

There's a moment on every dive into the drowned city when the water closes over the back of your skull and the whole roaring market of the world drops to a hum, and I have spent eleven years chasing that hum, which probably tells a doctor everything they'd need to know about me and saves us all the appointment.

People think the wreck-diving is about being brave. It isn't. It's about being the specific kind of broken that prefers the cold and the dark and the dead buildings to the live ones up top, where everybody's selling something and the something is usually fear. Down in the flooded Tube the buildings have already died. They've got nothing left to sell you except the truth about how they went, and you can read that off a wall if you've spent enough years learning to. Reading rust, the old salvage hands call it. Where the corrosion runs, where the sediment bites, where a stairwell's been dry long enough to lie about itself. The dead city

doesn't lie. That's the whole appeal. I trust a drowned stairwell more than I have ever trusted a man with a working radio.

The man with the working radio, in this case, was dying, which made him more honest than usual.

His name was Garrick and he'd been a master of the Ferris Guild back when the cable-runners still had a guild and a master meant something, and the cancer in him smelled like the Tube smells, like mold and salt and something underneath both that your body recognizes before your brain agrees to. He was selling the map for less than it was worth because you can't spend a fortune in the ground, and he wanted it sold to someone who'd actually go, not some collector who'd frame the idea of going.

"Strongroom under the old Waterloo Interchange," he said. "Pre-Upheaval. Never been wet on the inside, never been opened, one dry chamber still holding its own against the river." He had a tin of mold cream open on the table and he kept working it into the cracks of his hands while he talked, slow, automatic, the way you tend a thing that's past tending. "Hard currency. Sealed art. A data archive, supposedly, though I'd not stake the cream on the archive."

"Why's it still sealed if everyone's heard of it."

"Because the only way in is the eastern conduit, and the eastern conduit only opens at the lowest tide of the year." He looked up. The whites of his eyes had gone the color of old

ivory. "Spring tide. Three days out. The water pulls back far enough to walk the conduit for about four hours, and then it comes back harder than it left, and it seals the place for another decade. You go in on the bottom of the year or you don't go in."

I want to talk about the mold cream for a second, because the mold cream is the whole borough in a tin.

You buy it off the Interchange market for a week's barter and it works for six days. By design. Some chemist three boroughs over cut a batch with filler and the batch went wide and now the genuine article and the counterfeit come in the same dented tins with the same smeared label, and you cannot tell which you've got until day seven, when either your hands keep healing or they start to rot, and either way you've already paid. That's London now. The cure is real and the cure is a lie and they ship in the same box, and a dying man rubs it into his cracked knuckles out of habit while he sells you the location of a fortune, because what else are hands for. I bought the map. I'd have bought it for double. I am, as established, a specific kind of broken.

Mwangi ran me out on the bottom of the year, her boat sitting low and quiet in the Tide Roads, no motor, just her reading the channels the way I read rust. The Tide Roads are the open water lanes where the deals happen, because the ruins do something strange to sound out there, a voice thirty meters off lands like it's at your shoulder, and nothing can be

triangulated, so it's the one place in the drowned city where a conversation stays a conversation. We came up on the Waterloo conduit at slack water with the river pulled back to a black throat in the stone, and Mwangi cut her line and said the only thing she said all morning.

"Three other crews put out last night. You're not the only one with a dying friend."

So it was a race after all. It's always a race. The bottom of the year comes once and everybody who's ever heard the word Waterloo had the same three days circled.

I went into the conduit with a rebreather I'd resealed myself that morning with a smear of grease and a prayer to nobody, and the cold came through the suit like a confession, all at once, total, the specific cold of water that has been sitting in a dead tunnel since before I was born. Wet entry, the operators call it, like it's a tactic. It's not a tactic. It's the river letting you in on the condition that it can change its mind. The conduit ran down and east, and my lamp found the things lamps find down there, a drowned ticket hall, a turnstile gone to coral, a vending machine still bolted to its wall advertising a soft drink to the fish, and I kept my breathing slow and my eyes on the rust, following the dry-side wear, because where the maintenance crews used to walk is where the structure still holds, and where it doesn't hold is where the drowned city collects people like me.

I was forty minutes in and reading the approach to the strongroom door when my lamp caught the lines.

Somebody else's guide lines. Already strung. Fresh, no growth on them, running into the dark toward the same door I wanted, and my stomach did the thing stomachs do when you find out you're second. A rival crew was already inside, and the tide that let us both in was already, somewhere far out in the estuary, deciding to come back.

Here's where I have to tell you about the part I'm not proud of, because a story where the diver is always calm is a story told by a liar or a corpse.

The door was open. The rival crew had cracked it, which saved me the trouble and cost me the lead, and I went through into the strongroom with my lamp swinging and found the dry chamber exactly where Garrick promised, a pocket of air and dust the river hadn't taken yet, and I came up out of the water into it gasping, and for a second the relief was so total that I forgot the rule, which is that the tide is the clock and the clock is in the walls. The water changed its voice in the conduit behind me, that low new note, the river starting back up the throat, and the relief turned to something cold and animal, and I understood with my whole body that I was in a sealed stone room at the bottom of the year with the river coming back and a crew I couldn't see between me and the only way out. I have been scared underwater plenty. This was the other thing. This was the

certainty, for about four seconds, that I was going to drown in a rich man's basement over money I'd never get to spend, and that nobody would read my rust, because nobody comes this deep on the wrong tide twice. I want that four seconds on the record. The dead city had finally found something to sell me, and the something was my own nerve, and I very nearly bought.

What pulled me out of it was a voice in the dark saying, "You're Garrick's diver. He said you'd be the one stupid enough to come."

There was a man in the dry chamber. He'd been there the whole time, sitting against the strongboxes with a lamp turned low, an old soldier's stillness on him, and I knew the face because everyone in the ruins knows the face from a story they don't believe. Lieutenant Sinclair. Gargoyle. Royal Phantom Corps, listed dead at the Battle of Flooded London, the famous corpse, and here he was breathing in a vault he had no business in, tending a lamp the way Garrick tended the cream.

"You're supposed to be dead," I told him.

"Everybody down here's supposed to be something." He nodded at the strongboxes. "Go on. Open the one you came for. Then I'll show you the one you didn't."

The one I came for was the money, and the money was real, stacks of pre-Upheaval hard currency in sealed sleeves, and sealed art in cases, and the fortune Garrick promised,

the whole reason three crews put out on the bottom of the year, sitting there dry and waiting. And it was, I understood while I looked at it, completely beside the point, which is a terrible thing to understand with the river climbing the walls.

Because Sinclair showed me the other box. Smaller. Government issue, stamped with a crown nobody serves anymore. Inside it, the pre-Upheaval water-control master keys, the physical, irreplaceable keys to the systems that move what clean water this drowned city still has, and the converter blueprints, the real ones, the ones that say how the Tower's machine actually works instead of the wrong protocol everyone runs it on now. Whoever holds that box doesn't hold a fortune. They hold the throats of forty thousand people, gently, with the option to squeeze.

"The EO knows it's here," Sinclair said. "Station Alpha's been waiting on the bottom of the year same as everybody. They don't want the gold. Arkadi's people want this box, and they want the spring tide to do exactly what it's about to do, which is put the relay under enough strain that in a week or two it fails, and then the Empire of the One arrives with the blueprints and the keys, generous as a fed cat, and fixes the water for the grateful survivors. You see the move. They don't take the city. They rescue it. And a rescued city signs anything you put in front of it."

That's the cleanest piece of evil I've ever had explained to me in a flooded basement, and I've had a few. They weren't going to wash the borough, which is the old crime, sabotage the water and watch people suffer. That's crude. That gets you hated. This was the refined version. Let the water fail on its own schedule, arrive as the cure, and have the borough thank you on its knees for the privilege of being owned. The mold cream that works for six days, scaled up to a city. Sell the rot and the remedy in the same dented tin.

The river was at the lip of the dry chamber now. I had one trip out, and I could not carry both boxes through a flooding conduit and live, and the rival crew's lines were still strung between me and the open water, and somewhere out in the Tide Roads Mwangi was watching the towers, the three corroding ones on the northern approach that somebody had rigged to come down into the lane, because of course somebody had, this was a tide job and a fortune and a fight all at once and you don't bring a fortune through a fight without the fight finding you.

So here was the arithmetic of it, done fast, in cold water, with the clock in the walls. Take the gold and leave the keys, and walk out rich while the EO comes back at their leisure for the box that owns the city. Take the keys and leave the gold, and walk out broke and hunted but with the Empire's whole clean rescue dead in the water. Or do the thing

Sinclair's stillness was quietly asking me to do, which was understand that some treasure is only safe drowned.

I'm not going to dress up the choice, and I'm not going to hand you the answer wrapped in a bow, because I made it in four feet of rising river with my own pulse in my ears and I've spent every night since deciding whether I'd make it again. I'll tell you what was in my hands when I went back into the conduit, and you can do the arithmetic yourself, the way I had to.

Sinclair didn't come. He said the Corps already buried him once and he'd hate to make them do the paperwork twice, and he turned his lamp down to nothing, and the last I saw of the famous dead man he was sitting against a strongbox of money he had no use for, in a room the river was about to take, perfectly still, a gargoyle gone back to the stone he was named for.

I came up in the Tide Roads with the tide at my back and the towers still standing and Mwangi's hand hauling me over the gunwale, and behind us the conduit sealed itself with a sound like the city swallowing, the bottom of the year gone for another decade. She didn't ask what I'd brought up. She just put the boat into the channel and read the water and got us gone, and the box, whichever box, sat between my knees, wrapped in a dead man's stillness, and dripped.

The mold cream. I keep coming back to the mold cream. A whole city of people rubbing a maybe-cure into their

cracked hands, unable to tell the real from the counterfeit until day seven, paying either way, and an Empire out on the dry shelf that had figured out how to be the tin. I had something in my hands that could let them be the tin forever, or could stop them, or could go back to the bottom of the river where the dead city keeps the things too dangerous to sell.

Reading rust is easy. The dead buildings tell the truth. It's the live ones that lie, the ones up top with the working radios and the rescue ships and the generous, generous faces, and the only honest place I've ever found in this drowned town is the cold dark a hundred feet down where a thing has already lost everything and has nothing left to take from you but your nerve. I came up out of it with my nerve mostly intact and a box that drips and a choice I have not finished making, and the tide, which does not care if I'm ready, came in hard and sealed the question behind me, and left me up here in the loud bright world with everyone else, blowing on my hands, waiting to find out which tin I bought.

STORY 06 OF 08 · No. 03

FOURTEEN MINUTES

OPEN STEPPE · BEAR · 3,005 WORDS

The load smelled like a lie.

I'd hauled enough freight for the Corridor to know what ore smells like through a tarp, which is to say almost nothing. A mineral flatness. Cold rock, and the machine oil they pack it in, and the rubber of the straps. For the first hour the load smelled like that and nothing else. In the second hour, underneath the rock and the oil, there was a third thing. Sweet at the edge. The kind of sweet that isn't a flower. My body filed it before my brain agreed to look, the way bear stock files everything, a half-second ahead of consent. The faction sheets call it enhanced threat assessment through scent signature profiling. What it means is I can't ride in a truck without knowing when the truck is carrying something that used to be alive.

"You're doing the nose thing," Nadia said. She didn't look over. Her eyes stayed on the white nothing of the steppe, the way a good driver's eyes go flat and far when the road is just

distance. "Stop doing the nose thing. It makes me think we're going to die, and I'm trying to drive."

"It's the cargo."

"It's always the cargo. Watch the clock instead. You're better at the clock than the cargo."

The clock was a cracked tablet zip-tied to the dash, and on it a slow green bar that meant we had nine minutes before the next drone pass crossed our stretch of the Open Steppe. Fourteen minutes between passes, every time, a rhythm Steppe Post 9 had kept for three years without one missed beat. You learn to live inside the fourteen. You learn that the gap isn't safety. It's permission, granted by a machine that doesn't know it's granting anything, and can be pulled the moment the machine is told to look.

The heater vent was held together with a strip of silver tape gone gray at the folds. Nadia had a thermos wedged against it, the lid screwed on crooked, steam ghosting from the gap. Bad coffee, chicory and burnt grain, the smell of it warmer than the coffee would ever be. She poured a capful every twenty minutes and drank it in two swallows and screwed the lid back crooked, and the ritual of it was the only soft thing in the cab. I've learned to watch what people keep warm. It tells you what they've decided to survive.

I'm bear-forged, which in this theater means I'm useful for exactly two things and a liability for the rest. I can put a man through a wall and I don't come apart when the wall

comes back. Subdermal density across the shoulders and the plate of the chest, a center of gravity built low and mean, a body the spec sheet describes as a denial asset and that I experience as the simple fact that you can move me but you can't get through me in the time it takes me to decide what to do about it. The rest of the time I'm too big to hide and I smell everything and I think slow on purpose, because thinking fast is how bears get shot. The EO put me in the Tempest Riders for the first thing. Major Volkov, who the unit called Valkyrie before they called her anything else, used me as the part of the conversation that happens after the talking. I was good at it. That's not a brag. It's a thing I'm trying to tell you honest, because the rest of this only works if you believe I was once a man who stood in doorways for her and didn't ask what the order was protecting.

I asked, eventually. That's why I was in Nadia's cab and not in the air with my old unit, marked clean on no roster, running NULLMARK quiet and BARE KIT gray so the recognition net would read me as freight and not as a face it had a file on.

"Cherkas is at the relay turnoff," Nadia said. "He flashed twice. You want to do this or not."

I didn't want to do this. I said yes anyway, because of the smell, and because of the marker.

The marker was a stone. We'd passed it forty kilometers back, set upright at a junction where no one sets stones, a

flat gray slab the size of a grave's headboard, and someone had scratched a single word into it with a field tool. Not a name. A number. ELEVEN, in the blocky Cyrillic of a person who learned letters late and hard. I'd asked Nadia to slow, and she'd slowed, and neither of us said the thing we were both counting, which was that eleven workers had gone into voluntary extension out of the labor compounds in the last three years, and that voluntary extension is the kindest two words the EO owns.

Cherkas was waiting in the lee of a dead transformer station, a tall man made taller by the stoop he used to look shorter, Consortium captain's grays under a civilian coat that fooled no one. He had a documentarian's hands, always holding something he wanted you to read. Today it was a slate.

"You smelled it," he said, before hello. He had a way of skipping the front of every conversation, as if he'd already had it in his head and was bored of the part you both knew.

"I smelled something."

"Eight hundred and forty-seven somethings." He turned the slate. Columns of entries, each one stamped and grayed out, a long gentle waterfall of suppressed flags. "This is Post Nine's anomaly log. Every line is a thing the drone net saw, flagged, and then un-flagged. Standing Order Seven. The AI files the variance as nothing. Tonnage stays clean, output stays up, the men in Kazan who need the numbers to stay

clean get to keep needing them." He let me read until the reading became unpleasant. "Line four-forty. Read line four-forty."

Line four-forty was a biological signature, logged at Ural-7's south medical post, and then a second timestamp where the same signature was filed as equipment contamination and dropped. The location stamp put it eighty kilometers south of a place the map didn't name.

"That's a permafrost organism," Cherkas said. "It came south in a man. The man had been on a voluntary extension rotation. The AI saw a plague walk into a mining town and it called the plague a dirty sensor, because a dirty sensor does not slow the ore." He almost smiled. It was the worst thing his face did. "We are not smuggling minerals, you understand. We never were. We are smuggling the reason no one is allowed to look at the place the minerals come from."

There's a moment in this work where the floor of a thing drops and you see how far down it actually goes, and the trick is to keep your face still while your stomach takes the fall without you. I kept my face still. Bear stock is good for that too. We look calm because moving costs us, and the look reads as wisdom when it's mostly mass.

"The site sixty east," I said. "Off the map."

"Off every map. Which is why they put the diversion there. Which is why they put the research there, forty years ago, when off the map meant safe." He tucked the slate away.

"The thaw does not care what we decided to forget. The ground is opening, and the only system positioned to notice has been ordered, very specifically, three years ago, not to."

Nadia had come up behind me without sound, which baselines can do and which always unsettles me, because my body insists it should've heard her and my body is usually right. She was looking at the dead transformer, at the rust running down it in long tongues, the way water teaches a building where it's going to die. Reading rust. Asking the building. She did it without knowing the operator's name for it, which is how I knew she'd been doing it longer than any operator.

"So what's the job," she said. "Because right now the job sounds like a funeral with a clipboard."

"The job is the flag log reaches the right hands," Cherkas said. "Internal Security wants it. Kirova specifically."

"Kirova's net is rotten," I said. "She doesn't know it, but it's rotten. Zaslavskaya has half of it and Zaslavskaya will burn the whole theater to the dirt if you hand her a match this good. The compounds are in the theater. The compounds are people."

"I am aware of the people."

"Are you." I didn't raise my voice. Cold is louder anyway. "Twelve, seventeen, twenty-three. Those aren't grid squares. I moved some of them. When the extension orders came through I carried four men out of Compound Seventeen

myself and told them it was a transfer, because that's what I was told, and I'm very strong and very calm and they believed the strong calm man." The plating held. It always holds. That's the thing they build into us and the thing that fails you exactly once, when you understand there's a kind of weight you can't stand under no matter how they built your spine, because it isn't on your back. It's on your conscience, which they forgot to reinforce. "So don't tell me you're aware of the people. Tell me the other option."

Cherkas was quiet. Far off, the drone hum changed, a half-tone drop my chest felt before my ears confirmed it, the subsonic the others never catch. The green bar on the dash had four minutes on it.

"The other option," he said slowly, "is the AI. You don't give the log to a person. You give it to Post Nine. You break Standing Order Seven at the source and the net un-blinds across four hundred kilometers, all at once, every suppressed flag firing at the same instant. The world finds out everything in ninety seconds."

"And the world's response to a plague site full of unregistered labor," I said, "is a cordon. A cordon out here isn't a fence. It's altitude and ordnance. Quarantine by the people who taught me what a doorway is for."

"Yes."

So those were the doors. Hand the truth to a rotten woman and let an ambitious one set the steppe on fire to get

clean. Or hand the truth to the machine and let the machine's masters sterilize the evidence, and the eleven, and whoever was still breathing at a site the map had spent forty years pretending wasn't there. Document War rules, the old hands call it, when everyone in the theater wants the same object and no one will share it and the object turns out to be a body. I'd heard the phrase my whole career and thought it was about archives. It's never about archives.

"There's a third thing you're not saying," Nadia said. She had her arms crossed, and she was watching Cherkas's hands, the way I watch noses. "You came to a courier and a defector with a slate full of murder and you didn't bring it to your own people. Why."

"Because the FAA man, Osei, is forty minutes from walking a survey team into the site," Cherkas said. "Blind. He thinks he's chasing a thaw organism across an empty quarter. He doesn't know the quarter is occupied, or armed, or that the moment he transmits a finding, he trips Standing Order Seven himself, by accident, and brings the cordon down on his own head and theirs. Someone has to reach the site before he does. Someone has to be there when the net opens, to get the living out into the fourteen minutes before the fourteen minutes stop being a gift." He looked at me, then at her, and made the smallest motion with his documentarian's hands, offering us the thing he couldn't

hold. "I can't drive it. I write things down. Turns out I'm only good at the part that happens after."

Which was my line. He knew it was my line. The bastard had read me as clean as I read him, and he'd built the whole conversation to end on it, and I respected it and hated it in the same breath.

Nadia uncrossed her arms. She walked to the cab and poured a capful from the crooked thermos and drank it in two swallows and screwed the lid back wrong, and I understood I was watching a person decide, and that the deciding looked exactly like the surviving, because for her they'd always been the same motion.

"Sixty kilometers," she said. "Four windows. The math doesn't close. We'd be on open ground inside a pass."

"The math doesn't close," I agreed.

"I know." She climbed up into the seat. "Get in. You're better at the clock than the cargo."

There's a name for what we were about to do, running a load through hostile air on a window that doesn't stretch far enough, going anyway because the alternative is a thing you can't live beside. The old units gave it a name years ago and the name is pulling a Valkyrie, after the woman who did it first and lived, and the joke the war never noticed it was making is that the woman is real and she was, at that exact moment, somewhere above the Permafrost Line with her unit, reading engine heat off the steppe, waiting for a reason

to look. They named the brave thing after my old commander. I was about to do the brave thing to get out from under her. I've stopped expecting the world to arrange its ironies anywhere but on top of me.

We rolled at the bottom of the window, the green bar dead, the gray bar climbing, the hauler's frame shuddering as Nadia took it up past the speed the suspension had opinions about. The steppe went by the color of old bone. No cover for sixty kilometers, not a fold, not a tree, a flatness so complete it stopped being terrain and started being arithmetic, distance over time, us over the clock. Weapons frost at twenty below out here. I keep mine inside my coat against the plate of my chest so my own heat keeps the action alive, and I could feel the cold of the barrel through the layers like a second spine, and I thought about how the body keeps so many things warm without being asked. Coffee. Steel. The four men from Compound Seventeen, who'd been warm when I carried them.

"Talk to me," Nadia said. "You go quiet, I drive worse."

"Bears think slow."

"Then think out loud slow. What happens when we get there."

"We find Osei before he transmits. We find the living. We put them in the gap." I watched the bar. Eleven minutes. The number was an accident and it landed in the cab like a stone anyway. "And then someone breaks the order, and the net

opens, and we've got one window, exactly one, to be over the horizon before the order's owners decide what a clean theater looks like."

"And you can't carry four hundred kilometers of people in one truck."

"No."

"So somebody chooses who rides."

"Yes."

She was quiet for a kilometer. The drone hum came back across the dash, the high edge of it now, the pass beginning somewhere east, and her hands didn't move on the wheel and that stillness cost her, I could smell the cost, the sharp clean adrenaline that comes off baselines when they've decided not to be afraid out loud.

"My father drove the Kazan line before it was the Corridor," she said. "Before the EO, before the orders. He used to say the road doesn't owe you the other end. You just owe it the driving." She poured the last of the coffee one-handed and didn't drink it, just held the cap, steam thinning between us. "He hummed this song when the weather turned. They banned it in the compounds, after. The Standing Order Blues. Stupid little tune. I've got it stuck in me like a splinter."

She hummed four notes. They were nothing, a scrap, the kind of melody a tired man makes to keep his mouth busy. Out here, in a stolen truck full of the reason the world had

agreed not to look, with eleven scratched into a stone behind us and a machine ahead of us that had been ordered for three years to call the dying a dirty sensor, four flat notes from a banned song were the most dangerous thing in the cab, because they were the sound of a person who hadn't agreed.

The antenna mast came up over the curve of the world first, a thin gray needle, and then the low shapes under it that the map didn't have words for. The drone that had been circling the same four hundred meters for six days, the one even the AI couldn't explain, the one snagged on a thing it was forbidden to report, was a black fleck against the bleached sky. As we crossed the last rise it broke its pattern. It turned. It came around to face us, slow, almost curious, the way a creature turns when it's finally been allowed to look at the thing it's been not-looking at for so long that the not-looking became the whole of its life.

The green bar was dead. The gray bar said fourteen minutes, and the fourteen minutes had never once, in three years, been ours.

Nadia put the cap back on the thermos. Crooked. She didn't slow down.

"Math doesn't close," she said, and picked the road anyway, and behind us the stone kept its count, and somewhere under the thawing ground a sound that wasn't passive infrastructure went on getting louder, patient,

almost warm, waiting for someone to finally come and hear
it.

.066

STORY 07 OF 08 · No. 02

THE IRON CIRCUIT

GORODSKIE EKHO · BEAR · 3,507 WORDS

The first thing wrong with him was the way he stood. Not posture. Not technique. Something earlier than that: a stillness before the bell that isn't calm, isn't focus, is more like a system waiting for input. I've fought three hundred men and I know the difference between someone who's been trained to stand that way and someone who has been told to. The man across the circle from me in vehicle bay 14 of the Gorodskie Ekho industrial block had been told.

His splice was Eurasian boar. Big. Subdermal density around the shoulders and collarbone, compact center of mass, the forward-leaning weight distribution that makes the breed hard to stop in a close-quarters press. Good match-up for a bear, on paper. The Iron Circuit ran good match-ups, which was why people came from four compounds out to watch. Marek, who ran the circuit, understood that the crowd came for the biology, that they

wanted to see what the different lines did when they were put under load.

The crowd got that. I spent three rounds finding out what input he was waiting for.

The vehicle bay at night runs cold in the Gorodskie Ekho blocks. Not winter cold, since the block heating keeps the equipment from seizing, but the cold of a large metal space that doesn't care about the people in it. The crowd's body heat barely made a dent. I could smell two hundred people: sweat and suppression meds and the specific fear-adjacent compound that comes off a fight crowd the way it doesn't come off anything else, sharper than combat fear, more diffuse, the smell of people running their biology vicariously. My nose has opinions about crowds. My nose has opinions about everything. Bear splice does something to olfactory processing that the faction spec sheets describe as "enhanced threat assessment through scent signature profiling" and that my body experiences as being unable to be in any room without knowing exactly which way the problems are standing.

The boar's scent was wrong.

Not sick. Not shelf. The wrong kind of controlled: chemical control, pharmaceutical, not the behavioral profile

of a fighter who's done this long enough to turn adrenaline into work. He smelled like someone running a specific protocol under their own biology. Like something had been threaded in between him and his own stress response.

I took a hit in round two to see what he'd do with it.

He didn't gloat. Didn't press. Logged it. That's the only word I have for it: the boar took the opening he'd created and didn't press the opening, he moved to a new position and held it, and there was a half-second delay in the movement that wasn't fatigue and wasn't strategy. It was the half-second of a man waiting for a result that wasn't coming.

I won the bout in round three. Not clean. He fought hard and he had the weight and he put me against the vehicle bay's rear wall once with the kind of press his splice was built for. My plating held. Mine always holds. That's the thing about bear modifications that every fight promoter understands and every opponent learns in close quarters: you can move me, you can put weight on me, but you cannot get through me in the time it takes me to decide what to do about it. He put me against the wall. I decided what to do about it. The bout ended.

He didn't look like someone who'd lost. He looked like someone whose test run had completed.

I asked Marek about him afterward, in the prep room behind bay 14 where the circle crew stored gear and where the fighters got their post-bout settlement.

"New line," Marek said. He meant new to the circuit, not new splice stock. "Came through the Compound 17 introduction channel. The bear slot opened after Grinya stopped competing. I needed a boar."

"Who introduced him?"

Marek looked at me over the settlement tray. He had the specific look of a man performing incuriosity. "Compound coordinator. Same channel everything comes through from 17. Why?"

"He fought wrong."

"He fought fine. He went three rounds with you and you barely..."

"He fought wrong," I said. "Not badly. Wrong."

The settlement tray had my name on it. I picked up the chip and left. Marek watched me leave. He would keep watching, in his way, because that was his job and because the Iron Circuit's continued operation depended on him knowing when a fighter had developed opinions that could cause problems. I had been running with the circuit long enough to know this. I had been developing opinions since round two.

The Gorodskie Ekho industrial block runs twelve vehicle bays, four repair depots, and a logistics staging area that the EO uses during drone maintenance rotations. Between platform passes, fourteen minutes on a published schedule and the only reliable window the block workers know, the shadow economy surfaces. Suppliers come in from the steppe transit corridors. Workers move laterally between compound sectors without filing transit authorization. The circuit itself operates in that window and the ones after it, deep enough into the night that the drone pattern's been through twice and everybody in the block has a reason to be somewhere else.

I moved through the block for three days after the bout, doing what I do between fights, which is not very much: maintenance work in the repair depots, the kind of physical labor that doesn't strain the splice but keeps the compounds in the system from seizing. A bear line fighter between bouts needs to stay occupied. The behavioral drift that comes with my splice is not the raptor aggression cascade or the wolf pack-instinct loop. It's quieter than that. It's the feeling of being a system built for close-quarters load management that is not currently managing any load. I stay occupied.

I was asking the building.

The scent trail the boar fighter had left in bay 14 was sweat, suppression chemistry, the specific pharmaceutical undertone I hadn't been able to place. It showed up again on day two in the logistics staging area. Not him. Someone who used the same chemistry. Different person, same protocol. I followed the scent by habit, the way the build does when you stop thinking about it, and it led to a Kazan supply run vehicle that had arrived from the Corridor and parked in the staging area's secondary bay.

Three people got out of the vehicle. One was baseline. Two were not.

Gene-forged, both. Different lines: one looked like it might be steppe-built lynx, lightweight and cold-adapted, and the other was something I couldn't immediately categorize, wider through the chest than lynx stock but with the same pharmaceutical under-trace I'd been following. They moved cargo from the vehicle into the staging area's secondary storage block. The cargo was not ore-shaped. The cargo was cold-storage, sealed, the kind of container that has its own climate management and gets transported with specific orientation requirements.

The baseline man had a data tablet. He was running a collection protocol.

He was recording the other two without them knowing he was recording them. Gait patterns. Loading weight distribution. Movement efficiency under physical load. The

tablet was positioned as if he was managing the cargo handoff, and he was, but the primary function was the recording.

I did not move. Bear splice does not telegraph interest. I stood in the repair depot's secondary access, partly behind a vehicle chassis being serviced, and I watched for eleven minutes and thirty seconds until the drone pass returned and everyone dispersed.

The staging area's secondary storage block had a keyed access panel. I looked at it for a moment. Then I went back to my bunk in the compound dormitory and spent the rest of the night cataloging what I'd smelled.

The access panel took me four days.

Not the physical security. The physical security on an EO staging bay storage block is a standard-issue key override, and a bear splice with patience and decent mechanical knowledge can work a standard-issue key override without the kind of force that leaves marks. The four days were the time I needed to identify the right window, the right approach, the right moment where the fourteen-minute drone passes and the block's camera coverage and the secondary bay's shift rotation all produced a gap long enough to mean something.

I'm a deliberate person. That's not a personality trait. That's the splice.

The storage block held six cold-storage units and a data management station. The data management station was running. Baseline pharmaceutical compounds in cold-storage, nothing unusual about that: suppressants, stabilizers, the kind of medical supply that every labor compound needed and the official supply chain underdelivered. What was unusual: the compounds were labeled with batch numbers that corresponded to fighter identification codes. The batch numbering format I recognized from Marek's circuit settlement system. Every fighter who'd come through the circuit in the past eight months had a corresponding batch number in cold-storage.

Not all of them. Most of them. The ones who'd come through the Compound 17 introduction channel.

The data station had an access log with a six-month retention window. I read it carefully. Three names appeared regularly: the baseline man I'd seen running the collection protocol, a Kazan logistics coordinator identifier I didn't recognize, and a third designator that wasn't a name. It was a research program code.

The program code had a document attached to it. I read the document.

The circuit was the study population. The Compound 17 introduction channel was the intake system. Fighters who

came through 17 were registered in the program: a biotelemetry study on gene-forged biology under high-stress combat load. The compounds measured stress response, adrenaline metabolism, drift initiation and recovery. The pharmaceutical batches in cold-storage were the dosing regimen. The fighters in the study were receiving compound-modified suppression meds through their standard black-market supplier, the supplier who operated out of Compound 17's shadow economy.

The modified meds did two things. They suppressed drift, same as the standard formulation. They also produced telemetry: a low-grade biological signal that the data station's collection hardware could read at close range. During bouts, the researchers recorded fight-condition stress biology from the inside.

None of the fighters had consented to this. Some of them had been in the study for eight months. The boar I'd fought was on his third compound modification cycle. Whatever his baseline stress response had been when he started fighting the circuit, the modified compounds had been gradually recalibrating it. That was the delay I'd seen in his movement. The half-second lag wasn't strategic. It was a stress-response system that had been methodically retuned by people who needed consistent data and didn't care what happened to the equipment they were collecting it from.

The program document used the word "subjects" to describe the fighters.

It used the word "throughput" to describe the intake rate.

I stood in the secondary storage block for a long time. The drone pass came back. I didn't move. It went past. I was very still.

His name was Artem Voloshin. The baseline man with the collection tablet. He had a contractor credential issued through a Kazan logistics channel and a bunk in the Compound 17 administrative dormitory and, I found out from asking the building for two more days, a routine pattern: circuit bouts on assigned days, collection protocol in the staging bay on resupply runs, weekly data transmission through a channel I recognized from the cold-storage unit's origin manifest as a pre-war infrastructure address 60 km east.

Not a Kazan operation. Kazan was the logistics shell. The program itself was something older and running quieter, using the Corridor's existing infrastructure the same way the MERIDIAN ore diversion used it: in plain sight, behind legitimate manifest codes, invisible to anyone who wasn't counting the things that were supposed to be there and comparing them to what actually was.

I could take this to Marek. Marek would close the 17 channel and pretend none of it had happened, because Marek's operational continuity depended on not knowing things that could be leveraged against him.

I could take it to Major Volkov at the Strongpoint, who was running an audit that might eventually reach it. Might. In six months or a year, after the program had moved its intake protocol to a different circuit and different subjects.

I could transmit it to an open channel. Fourteen minutes in the drone window, long enough to file a detailed report with enough specificity to survive. Filed to who? The EO? The same administrative structure that had issued Standing Order 7 to suppress the flags that might have found this program eighteen months ago? The Kazan Consortium's legal team, who had been preparing a defense for the ore diversion for eight months and would have the program's documentation folded into that defense within the week?

I thought about all of this. Deliberately. The way I think about everything, which takes long enough that people sometimes think I'm not thinking at all. Then I stopped thinking about it.

Voloshin's routine put him in the secondary staging bay on a Thursday, resupply window, 0130.

I was already there.

He did not see me when he came in. Bear splice in a dark industrial space, still enough that the air doesn't move differently around me, and I had been in the secondary staging bay for two hours before he arrived. I knew where everything was. I had already moved the cold-storage units to positions that would take a significant amount of time to restore. The data station was physically disconnected from its power source. The collection tablet was in my hand.

Voloshin came in, registered the dark, and stood for two seconds before he found the light control. When the lights came on, I was standing between him and the door.

He looked at me. He was baseline, and baseline people confronting a bear splice in a small room go through a specific sequence: the size assessment, the threat calculation, the arrival at a number they don't like. He went through the sequence in about four seconds.

"The Compound 17 intake," I said. "All of it. The dosing records, the telemetry protocols, the program document. Send it to someone who can use it. All of it, in one transmission, on an open channel. Now."

"I don't know what you're..."

"You know what I am," I said. "You have eight months of data on what I am. You know exactly how my stress-response biology works under load and you know what the

gap between what's on your tablet and what I could do to you in the next thirty seconds looks like."

He did the calculation again. Landed on the same number.

The transmission took six minutes. He filed the full program document, the dosing records, the subject intake logs, everything, to three external addresses he had in his personal device because a researcher always keeps copies, which was the tell that told me he already knew this day was coming and had been preparing for it in the way people who are running programs that will eventually be exposed prepare for it. Not conscience. Insurance.

"Who receives these addresses?" I said.

He told me. One was a gene-forged advocacy channel operating out of the Java Scatter, aggregating biological rights documentation. One was a medical oversight registry that collected evidence of non-consensual modification research. One was a journalist.

I stood there and thought about that.

"The fighters on the intake list," I said. "Are they recoverable?"

He ran through the calculation of whether this question was sincere or rhetorical and decided, correctly, that it was both. "The modification cycles are reversible. The telemetry compound metabolizes in six to eight weeks without

reinforcement. They need a clean suppression med source for that window."

"Where do I get clean source for fourteen fighters?"

He told me that too. He was a thorough man. That was his problem and now, in a limited way, his use.

I left him in the staging bay with his data station disconnected and his cold-storage units repositioned and the tablet wiped. On the way out I filed the batch numbers from the cold-storage labels against the circuit's fighter roster in my own record, in a personal format I keep in a notation system that doesn't run on any networked device. In case the transmission reached someone who needed the cross-reference.

The drone pass came back at 0144.

I was in the repair depot's secondary access by then, behind the vehicle chassis, not hiding exactly. There's a difference between concealment and position, and I was in position. The drone passed. The block went back to its normal cycle. Nobody knew what had happened in the secondary staging bay except me and Voloshin, and Voloshin was going to spend the next several weeks calculating whether his insurance transmission had been sufficient, which would keep him occupied.

The fourteen fighters who'd been run through the intake protocol got a supply of clean suppression meds from a source I'd paid for with six months of circuit winnings. The source didn't know what they were cleaning. Clean is clean.

The gene-forged advocacy channel received the transmission and published a summary in their registry format within seventy-two hours. The medical oversight body opened a file. The journalist published a piece in a format that circulated through the Freehold's bootleg distribution network and got read, with no particular institutional consequence, by several thousand people who cared about it and nobody with the authority to do anything.

The program code went quiet on the Kazan logistics channel. The pre-war address 60 km east stopped receiving data transmissions. The Compound 17 introduction channel stopped routing fighters to the circuit.

Voloshin's contractor credential was terminated by the Kazan logistics coordinator eleven days after the transmission. No public record of why.

I fought two more bouts before the circuit moved its location to vehicle bay 9. Marek didn't ask me what had happened with the 17 channel. I didn't tell him.

What I know is this:

There are fourteen fighters who will metabolize the telemetry compound and go back to fighting clean. There is a document in a gene-forged advocacy registry that describes what was done to them, in specific detail, with batch numbers and timelines. The journalist's piece is in circulation and the people who read it know what happened.

There is nobody in a position to hold the research program accountable. The EO command structure it ran adjacent to was never officially connected to it. The Kazan logistics shell dissolved the contract and has administrative distance from the program. The pre-war infrastructure site will move to a different intake system, a different shadow circuit, different subjects. The program's methodology is intact and its data is archived somewhere that Voloshin's insurance copies point toward but don't reach.

I broke up a research operation. I didn't dismantle the system that ran it. The institutional frameworks that were supposed to catch this failed to catch it, not because the tools didn't exist, but because the tools were managed by the same structures the operation was running inside. An external report to EO command routes through the same procurement channels that buried the platform anomaly logs. A formal complaint to the Kazan Consortium's oversight body routes to the legal team that is already preparing MERIDIAN's administrative defense.

The things I did outside any institutional framework are the things that actually happened. The fighters have clean meds. The document exists. The program stopped.

The things I didn't do are the things that would have required an institution to do them. Nobody is accountable. The research continues somewhere else. The documentation is in a registry that the people who could act on it don't read.

I fought the bout in bay 9 three weeks later. My opponent this time was baseline, an experienced fighter from the corridor circuit, here on a crossover booking that Marek had arranged. He fought well. He was afraid of me in the first round and then he wasn't, which meant he'd figured something out about how I was moving and was using it. I respected that.

I won in round four.

After the bout I sat in the prep room and listened to the industrial block settle into its night cycle. The cold came in from the edges of the bay doors. The block smelled like machine oil and cold metal and the long habitation smell of hundreds of people doing hard work in the same space for years. Underneath it, faint and specific, the pharmaceutical trace I'd been following.

Not the same trace. Different source. Different introduction channel.

Somewhere in the block a new intake protocol was running.

I sat with that for a long time.

* * *

Terra Conflictus: Operator Tactics

.066

STORY 08 OF 08 · No. 01

TERMINAL VELOCITY

NEO-TOKYO / SUB-1 · RAPTOR · 3,092 WORDS

The woman was dying in a way that didn't announce itself.

No blood on the outside. No drama. She sat on the Sub-1 transit bench like someone waiting for a long-delayed train, except her left hand kept finding her side and pressing, and her breathing had the shallow, metered quality of someone who'd worked out exactly how much air they could move without the pain getting worse. I clocked her from twelve meters. Raptor biology. Can't help it.

I was supposed to be picking up a Hikari Bazaar run. Three data modules, two food-grade seals, one item the manifest described as "decorative ceramics" and that I had a theory about. Standard Sub-1 work. I had eighteen minutes until the brownout seam in the eastern concourse closed, and I had planned to spend those minutes eating a flatbread from the Omote-chō stall and thinking about nothing.

She found me before I got to the flatbread.

"Courier." Not a question. She'd been looking. My rig makes me obvious. "Raptor line."

"Among other things."

She moved the hand from her side. Put a cold-storage vial in mine, then a data chip on top of it. Both small enough to close my fist around. The vial had condensation on it. It had been cold until recently and now wasn't going to stay that way.

"Don't open the vial."

"All right."

"Don't let them read the chip."

"Who's..."

"The Ghosted. Sub-2. They can get you somewhere they can't follow."

I watched her. Research technician's hands. Baseline, no modification scars, nothing. Mid-forties. The kind of tired that isn't about sleep. "That's three things," I said. "Anything else?"

"Don't let them verify it."

Then she stopped pressing her side and her hand fell into her lap, and she looked at the ceiling of Sub-1 transit platform 7 with the expression of someone crossing off the last item on a very long list.

I stood there.

The pursuit teams activated. Two vectors. I didn't see them yet, didn't need to. I read geometry the way I read

everything, which is involuntarily, which is to say my body knew two separate groups had changed their movement patterns before I'd processed it as information. Stock instinct. That's what gene-forged call it when the splice moves faster than thought. The phrase usually carries a tone somewhere between gratitude and resentment.

They'd been watching the handoff happen.

Not intercepting it. Logging who received it.

I moved.

The brownout seam was closing. My respiratory system registers the particulate gradient when AXIOM's drone coverage drops: a filtration pressure shift, barely perceptible, the kind of data I didn't ask to receive. Nine minutes left in the window. Not enough to cross clean. The surface team was routing around the ground checkpoints, which meant they were boxing the east exit. The second team moved at a pace that said someone in their chain of command knew something I didn't.

Down was the answer. In Neo-Tokyo it usually is, when the surface closes.

The Hikari Bazaar runs on borrowed air. Twelve hundred unlicensed clinics below Sub-1's ventilation threshold, every exhaust hood feeding a shared filtration system designed for half the load. The particulate sits in the back of your throat and tastes like aluminum and ambition. My system processes it efficiently, which is useful. It also means I experience every shift in air composition as information I didn't request, which is less useful. What I was tasting today was a Hikari Bazaar morning baseline plus something new, machine oil and cold-storage seal compound, which meant the consortium's second team had prepped their gear down here, not at a surface bay. They'd been in place since before the handoff.

DOHA's stall sat between a protein synthesizer and a biometric scanner someone had disguised as a vintage photography booth. The disguise was not convincing. The photography booth concept had been dead for fifty years and everyone in the Bazaar knew what DOHA was. They survived by being too useful to remove.

"I need a query check," I said. "Biometric signature. Mine. Last six hours."

DOHA looked at me. Then at the outline of the vial in my courier rig's inner pocket, which I hadn't hidden well enough. Their expression didn't change. It never does.

DOHA processes information the way the Bazaar processes air: everything in, whatever's useful out, no visible judgment about the material.

"Your batch number's showing," DOHA said.

Something cold moved through my chest. Nothing to do with the vial.

"Someone ran your baseline twice this morning. Second query came from a Keiretsu Strip address."

Not a search. A check against a database they already had. A database that contained my specific profile, my splice line, my biometric signature. Whatever was in the chip in my pocket, it already had me in it.

The second team came through the west access.

I went through the maintenance bypass into Deep Rail.

The Node 7 anomaly window runs 0640 to 0720. Forty minutes where AXIOM's patrol routing AI runs a gap in its Sub-1 eastern corridor sweep: a firmware update fourteen months past due that the Ghosted treat as infrastructure the way sailors treat favorable currents. I know the window. I run through it twice a week on Bazaar pickups. It's not a secret. It's just that most operators don't move through transit ceiling clearance at the speed I move.

The pursuit team in Deep Rail routed through the corridors. The corridors make sense for baseline biomechanics. I don't run corridors.

I run above them. Transit ceiling clearance at the junction nodes hits four meters, maintenance access adds two more, and a transit system designed for biological maintenance workers, as backup for the drones, has load points, handholds, and clearance tolerances that are, for someone reading space the way I do, a map with better routes drawn in ink nobody else can see. The geometry opens up. It always does, if you know how to look.

The Sub-1/Sub-2 biometric junction checkpoint stopped me. The documentation queue: twelve to fifteen minutes, lapsed registration flagged, held for verification. I've been lapsed two years. Every time I consider resolving it, I think about what clinic gets my file when I do. I thought about that and about the chip in my pocket and decided I'd been right all along, which was cold comfort with a pursuit team forty meters behind me.

The maintenance shaft runs beside the junction. The Ghosted use it for cargo that can't go through checkpoints. It was never designed for transit.

Three seconds of calculation. That's the raptor thing: reading every fall variable in a space before committing. Hollow bones. The math isn't complicated. A baseline operator falls wrong from this height and breaks something.

I fall wrong and the math stops mattering. The geometry said: contact points viable, landing surface marginal, clearance adequate if I pull the wing-spars at the right moment and bleed speed on the last six meters.

I dropped through in twenty-two seconds.

Behind me, the sound of someone making a different calculation and getting a different answer. I didn't look up. My ears did the thing they do with subsonic events nearby: the frequency-processing reflex, the one that makes me look like a startled animal in polite company, the one I have no control over. The sound told me what I needed to know. I filed it away in the place where I keep things I'll process at 0300 in a bad week, which has been filling up steadily for two years, and I kept moving.

Sub-2 smells like a city that stopped explaining itself to the surface. Recycled air, the density of forty thousand people organized to be invisible to institutional systems, and underneath everything the specific warm-metal smell of server infrastructure that's been running for a decade without a scheduled replacement cycle. The Ghosted maintain Sub-2 the way architects maintain load-bearing walls: with strong opinions about what stays and ruthlessness about anything that doesn't earn its footprint.

SABLE was in the Sub-2 east maintenance room. Eating something from a sealed container. Reading the night reports on a hand-sized projection surface. Unhurried in the particular way of someone who makes things happen without appearing to move. I've worked with SABLE two years. I don't know their splice line, their origin city, whether Sable is a name or a job title. What I know is that SABLE provides the suppression meds that keep my drift manageable and charges slightly more each month without explanation, and I've kept paying because the alternative is finding out what happens after the stability window closes.

"Your supplier's been getting questions," SABLE said, before I could start. "Three weeks ago. Somebody asking what batch you're running. Came through a clinic-adjacent channel, Keiretsu Strip routing."

The two facts hit together: the biometric query this morning, the supply probe three weeks ago. They hadn't just built a database. They'd been triangulating my specific position in the gene-forged ecosystem, my meds and my biology and my modification history, for a month before Hana Mori found me on a transit bench and handed me the evidence.

"There's a snow leopard splice been sitting the Sub-2 east exit for three days," SABLE said. "Hasn't moved. Hasn't asked for anything."

Leopard hours. The OT term for that specific behavioral mode: stationary observation, minimal signature, waiting for the pattern to complete itself. Three days on one position without a request. Whoever she was, she'd mapped where I was going before I knew I was going there.

SABLE offered the route: Sub-3 through the clinic district, up through a dead service corridor, into the Keiretsu Strip's sub-level loading. Patients who can't surface through checkpoints. It exits inside the strip, behind the consortium's geometry.

I went up.

Sub-3 smells like Hana Mori did on the transit bench.

Antiseptic and cortisol metabolite and the specific deep-body smell of someone who's been running scared long enough that scared has calcified into a resting state. My olfactory system is not subtle about this. I walked through the Black Clinic District and read her absence like a chalk outline: which bench she'd used, when she'd left it, the quality of her fear as it had shifted over hours from acute to metabolized plateau.

She was walking when she left. Not running. She planned the route first. She ran it second.

I found a corner under a dying wall light and opened the chip's manifest. Not the files. Just the header. What's in here. How it's organized.

Four thousand three hundred eighteen records. Organized by splice line. My splice line was in the header index. Not my specific profile. Just the category. Then a third file I hadn't expected: an authentication certificate, four days old, from a Keiretsu Strip administrative address. The institution that built the weapon had signed off on its own database as complete.

The building at the top of the service corridor.

I put the chip in my pocket and went up.

The outside of the Keiretsu Strip is designed for drones. Drone-maintained, drone-serviced, drone-inspected, with biological workers as backup, which means the scaffold architecture exists, the anchor points are spec'd for human loads, and the tolerances between structural elements assume a person with situational awareness and both hands free.

Both hands were free.

The pursuit teams were inside, routing toward what the geometry suggested: the service corridor exit, the loading bay, the elevator shafts. They hadn't predicted the exterior.

That's the thing about reading pursuit geometry: you know where the routes say you should go, which tells you where the routes won't find you.

Five floors from the roof I felt my hands start the thing.

The tremor. The suppression med taper effect, the blunting degrading as the morning dose wore thin. My grip was fine. My geometry read was fine. But my hands looked like someone else's hands, someone who'd made a series of increasingly poor decisions, and in a different moment I'd have felt more than I could afford to feel about that. Not now. The wind off Neo-Tokyo's surface tier cuts cold at this height. I climbed into it.

Six floors out. Then five. Then four.

The snow leopard splice was already on the roof.

She'd been watching me come up the exterior since at least the sixth floor. I could see it in the angle of her stillness, facing the city, but with the spatial awareness of someone who was also watching the scaffold. Didn't call it in. Didn't move. Cold-adapted splice, low thermal signature, the metabolic resting state of someone who doesn't give off heat the way other forged do. She'd spent three days at Sub-2's east exit and nobody had located her. I believed it.

Her hands were open and down.

Her name was Solin Chen. I know because she told me, which she didn't have to do.

"You could've taken the package at the platform," I said.

"I could have taken it three days ago," she said. "Before Mori ran. I watched the transfer instead." She looked at me. "I wanted to see what someone does when they're carrying their own erasure and don't know it yet."

The cold-storage vial in my inner pocket stopped feeling like evidence.

She told me about the synthesis protocol. Told me she'd transmitted a copy to a buried archive before she called in the pursuit team, operational insurance she hadn't filed with her handlers. The protocol existed independent of the chip now. Getting the chip back wouldn't suppress the weapon.

Then she told me about the database.

Four thousand three hundred eighteen profiles. Modification histories. Movement records. Built from the Keiretsu Strip's modification documentation requirement, the filing process every gene-forged subject completes to participate in the strip's formal economy. Her biometrics were in it. Profile 2,847. Cold-adapted splice, her body mass percentile, her specific thermal signature, all of it used as a calibration target for the aerosolized dose.

She'd been sitting across from it for three days.

"I didn't destroy it myself," she said. "I have the connections. I could use it the other direction. A suppression agent in Neon Ronin hands is not a neutral object." The city spread out below the rooftop, six districts visible from this height, the morning light catching the transit tier glass. "I needed to watch what someone does when they're holding something this specific and don't know what it is."

The rooftop access door opened.

Consortium operative. Well-dressed. Not armed. The pitch was going to be something worse than force. He said it the way people say things they've practiced saying: registration, certified and backdated. Legal suppression medication prescription from a certified clinic. My life back, in the administrative sense. The paperwork version.

I looked at him. He believed in the job. You can always tell.

"The synthesis protocol exists," Solin said. She wasn't talking to him. "What destroying the chip does is end the database. Four thousand three hundred eighteen profiles, gone. Without those, the agent can't be calibrated for reliable delivery across different splice lines."

I thought about fourteen days of suppression meds in my courier rig's inner pocket. About SABLE, after those fourteen days. About whatever SABLE would decide the market would bear next month, and the month after that, and what the trend line looked like if I kept following it.

"The modification documentation requirement," I said.
"The Keiretsu filing system. Still running."

"Yes."

"Tomorrow there are four thousand three hundred nineteen profiles."

She looked at me. Said nothing.

The operative waited. He'd been trained to wait. It's a real skill, waiting. Most people can't do it. I can do it. Raptor spatial awareness means I can stand in a place and read everything in it simultaneously for as long as required. But I wasn't reading exits right now.

I was thinking about Hana Mori, who was baseline, who had no modifications and no faction backing, who figured out what the verification architecture meant before four thousand three hundred eighteen gene-forged subjects thought to look for it. Who walked out of Sub-3 instead of running, because she'd already decided where she was going. Who found a stranger on a transit bench and handed them the evidence and asked them not to let anyone verify it.

The vial went off the roof.

I put the chip in the smoke charge casing. Held the igniter. The thing inside burned until it was not a thing.

The operative watched. Then he went back through the rooftop access door. He had the synthesis protocol. Solin had told him that, which she'd known would end the confrontation. What he'd lost was the targeting list. What

he'd gained was the confirmation that the targeting list could be destroyed by the people in it, which was a different kind of intelligence, and I was sure someone somewhere would write a report about it.

When I turned around, Solin was gone.

Sub-1 transit platform 7. Same bench.

The morning run was starting above me. Hikari Bazaar stalls opening. The brownout gap closed forty minutes ago. The Node 7 drone came back online at 0721, the way it always does, and resumed the standard eastern corridor sweep: same route, same timing, same logging threshold. From the Keiretsu Strip rooftop you can see six districts. From here you can see the bottom of the transit tier and the commuters coming down from the surface.

I took the morning suppression med from the inner pocket and held it.

Fourteen remaining. Then SABLE. Then whatever SABLE decides it's worth, in a month or two, when the trend line becomes the trend.

The modification documentation requirement that produced the biometric database was filing records today. It was filing records while I was on that rooftop. It would file records tomorrow and the day after. The synthesis protocol

existed in a buried archive nobody controlled. The weapon was real and alive and unattributed. The institution that built it had lost the targeting list and retained everything else, including the mechanism that produced the list in the first place, and a tidy record of having tried to buy it back.

The drone made its pass. Logged what it logged. The eastern corridor came back into standard AXIOM coverage. Everything running the way it was supposed to.

I swallowed the med. Put the travel case back in my rig. Fourteen days.

The morning ran normally. I went back to work.

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