TERRA CONFLICTUS

FIELD FICTION

VOLUME 02 | THE INSTRUMENT | SEVEN STORIES

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TERRA CONFLICTUS 2066

FIELD FICTION · COLLECTED VOLUME 02

THE INSTRUMENT

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7 STORIES · 21,015 WORDS

Seven came in this week, all of them forged, all of them dry, all of them sent to lift one sealed thing out of a place built to hold it. That much is the usual shape of the work. What changed this week is what the sealed thing turned out to be.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Seven came in this week, all of them forged, all of them dry, all of them sent to lift one sealed thing out of a place built to hold it. That much is the usual shape of the work. What changed this week is what the sealed thing turned out to be.

Read them in a row and the same door keeps opening. A cradle that unlocks for one body and no other. A registry that turns out to be a breeding book with the reader's own name in it. A cold case of blood draws, racked and dated, and one of the dates belongs to the runner hauling it down the corridor. The score is always keyed to the operator. The lock had been waiting for the person. The package was never the point.

That is the throughline, and I am going to leave it there. These are people built to reach what no one else can reach, paying for the reach with the same body that does the reaching. The catalog calls it capability. The bill comes in coolant, or salt in the hands, or a heartbeat that takes too long to climb back up. Every one of them gets to the bottom of the job and learns they were the instrument the whole time.

Open with the climb on the Bosphorus. Close with the dive under the ice. Take the rest in any order. They were filed apart and they read as one count.

// EDDA SORREL, FIELD FICTION

FIELD FICTION DESK · TERRA CONFLICTUS 2066

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STORY 01 OF 07 · No. 12

HEAT SIGNATURE

ISTANBUL / BOSPHORUS COMPACT · SNOW LEOPARD / COMPACT-FORGED · 2,944 WORDS

There is a ledge on the north face of the Bosphorus monitoring station that nobody has stood on since the building went up, because the only thing that can reach it is a body built to climb cold stone in the dark, and the only bodies built that way belong to the people who own the building. I was hanging off it at four in the morning with two fingers in a seam the width of a coin, and my whole back was pouring heat into the strait wind like a stove somebody forgot to shut off. That is the part of me that works. It is also the part that gets me killed. Same machine, both jobs.

I am a Snow Leopard. Compact stock, Pamir line, built for elevated urban terrain in a city that goes up before it goes anywhere else. They grew me to read a wall the way you read a sentence, to hold a surface a baseline would slide off, to climb in cold that would lock a normal hand into a useless claw. The cold is the point. My core runs hot so the rest of

me can work where the heat would bleed out of anyone else, and the array down my spine and across my shoulders dumps the excess into the air so I do not cook from the inside. When I move hard, I glow. Not to your eye. To every thermal collector the Compact has bolted to every cornice from Beyoglu to the waterfront, I light up like a struck match. They built me to go where no one watches, and they built me so that wherever I go, they are watching me.

I have been off program for two years. That is a polite way of saying the Compact decided my batch was a liability and stopped paying for the things that keep a Snow Leopard alive, which are not optional. The array needs coolant. The coolant needs a tech who knows the Pamir manifold, and there are maybe four of those left in Istanbul who will work on a unit the Compact has written off, and they all work out of the underground, eighteen degrees constant, stone and cable insulation and something older underneath. My coolant clock was at nine days when I took the job. Nine days before the manifold runs dry and the array stops shedding and my own back starts to burn me down from the spine out. So when Arslan sent word that he needed something pulled off a wall, I did not ask the questions a smarter operator would have asked. I asked what it paid. He said a full manifold service and a sealed reserve. He said it the way you offer water to someone you have watched go dry.

You do not say no to Arslan. He runs the Brotherhood archive in Fatih, the one building in this city the Snow Leopards do not enter, fifty years of knowing exactly who everyone is by the paper they leave behind. He is the reason a forged document in Istanbul is worth nothing and a real one is worth a war. He told me the job in a back room that smelled of dust and machine oil, with a glass of tea going cold between us because neither of us touched it.

"A courier cached a package on the station's north ledge eleven days ago," he said. "I authenticated it before she ran. She has not come back. The package is still there. I need it down before the people tracking her work out what building it came from."

"Who's tracking her."

"Five services. By my count." He turned the glass a quarter turn and did not drink. "You will be a sixth body on the same object. I am aware of what I am asking."

"Why can't your people get it."

"My people cannot climb the north face. And I cannot retrieve it myself." A small pause, the kind he uses the way other men use a full stop. "I gave an oath, a long time ago, about what I take out of that building and what I leave on a wall. Bringing it down myself breaks the oath. Hiring the climb does not. I have read enough contracts to know where the line is."

I should have heard the shape of that. A man who builds a fence that careful is afraid of the thing on the other side. I heard a manifold service and nine days of life, and I took the job.

The courier was a Snow Leopard. Arslan did not say it and did not have to. The north ledge told me, because nothing without my build reaches it, and the cache she left was set into a seam you could only work from a two-finger hold in a fifty-meter exposure. She was batch. She might have been Pamir line. She might have been one of the four faces I grew up next to in a Compact crèche before they sorted us by where we could survive. I did not let myself walk down that road on the wall. You do not grieve and climb at the same time. The wall takes everything you have got.

The first set piece was the climb, and I will give it to you the way it happened, slow and cold and one finger at a time.

The station sits at the throat of the crossing zone, the most surveilled square kilometer in the hemisphere, and the north face hangs over the water where there are no cameras because there is supposed to be no way up. I came at it from the strait, off a relay rat's skiff that dropped me in the dead water under the overhang and did not wait. Forty meters of wet stone in the dark, the Bosphorus chewing at the base of it, the wind coming down the channel hard enough to peel a baseline off the rock and into the current. I climbed it the

way I was made to climb it. Hands cold-numb and reading anyway, weight on bone instead of muscle, the array hauling the heat off my back and feeding it to the wind so the work would not boil me. For nine minutes I was exactly the thing they grew me to be, and it was the only nine minutes in two years I have not hated the build, because up there in the cold with the water below me the body and the job were finally the same animal.

The cache was where Arslan said. A sealed case the size of a deck of cards, mag-locked into the seam, faction-collaged on the outside the way everything in this city is, EO stamp over a Brotherhood mark over something I did not recognize. I broke the lock with the tool he gave me. The case came free in my hand, and the second it did, my array spiked.

Not from effort. I was hanging still. The case did something to me, a pulse up the manifold, a handshake I did not authorize, and for a half second my whole back flared hotter than the climb had ever pushed it. I thought, kitchen job, bad coolant, the manifold finally going. I was wrong, but I did not know that yet. I put the case in the chest seal and started down, and that is when the crossing ceremony came up over the water.

You can set your watch by it. Every dawn the monitoring station broadcasts the day's crossings, the fees, the weather on the strait, in a flat neutral voice that is the Compact

reminding eighteen million people who owns the water between things. It is also, I learned a long time ago, a recalibration. When the ceremony runs, the surveillance net stops collecting and re-syncs, a few minutes of the city's eyes blinking. Every operator in Istanbul who has ever needed to move unseen has thought about those minutes. I had timed the whole job to come down inside them.

What I had not timed was that the re-sync does not blink for a Snow Leopard who is broadcasting.

The second set piece started when I hit the dead water and the array would not come down.

I came off the wall into the skiff that was not there, because the relay rat had seen the ceremony come up early and run, which was the right call and left me in the strait with a hot back and a stolen case and no boat. I swam the overhang into the underground intake, the old pre-Upheaval drain that feeds the maintenance corridors, eighteen degrees and black as the inside of a lung, and I went up into the tunnel system because the tunnels are the one place the thermal net cannot see. Except the net could see me. I worked that out about two corridors in, when the Snow Leopard came down the cross-passage ahead of me, no light, moving the way I move, and stopped, and looked at me with the flat patient recognition of a unit that has been handed your exact heat profile and told to bring it home.

I knew her. Not her name. Her build. Pamir line, younger casting, the array across her shoulders running cool and even the way mine used to before the Compact stopped paying. She was on program. She had a working manifold and a faction behind her and a clean coolant clock, and she had been sent because only a Snow Leopard catches a Snow Leopard in the dark, and because the thing in my chest seal was screaming my position to the Compact net with every meter I climbed.

"You're broadcasting," she said. Not a threat. A courtesy, almost. One unit telling another about a fault. "The case relinked you when you took it. You've been a collector since the moment you touched it. Every step you take, you're filing a report."

"Then you don't need to chase me. You can just read me."

"They want it intact. Reading you tells them where. It doesn't tell them what." She came a step closer, easy, no weapon out because her body is the weapon, same as mine. "Give it to me and your manifold gets serviced tonight. You go dry in eight days otherwise. I read your clock the second you came into the corridor. You're cooking, sister."

I was cooking. The array had not come down since the ledge, and the heat was stacking now, the manifold running past its tolerance because the case kept pulsing the handshake, kept telling my body to upload. The build that lets me climb cold stone was filling me with heat I could not

shed in a tunnel where there is no wind, and the longer I held the score the hotter I burned, and the hotter I burned the louder I screamed my location to the people who owned us both. Capability and cost, the same wire. They never let you forget which hand is feeding you.

We fought the way two of us fight, which is fast and silent and mostly about the wall. There is no standing toe to toe between Snow Leopards. There is who gets above who. She took the high line in the cross-passage and I let her, because a unit who takes the high line commits her weight to it, and I went under and put her into the cable run hard enough to stun the wind out of her, and I ran. Not because I won. You do not win against a unit with a working manifold when yours is going dry. I ran because the case was burning a hole in my chest and I needed to be somewhere I could open it before my back finished the job the Compact started two years ago.

I opened it in a dead maintenance bay twenty meters off the seabed cable run, with my shoulders glowing in the dark and eight days on my own life, and the twist was waiting in there the way the worst ones always are. Patient. Already true. Just waiting for me to catch up.

It was not cable intelligence. Everyone in this city thinks the Compact's eleven years of secrets live in the seabed wire under the strait, and they do, some of them. But the case held a slug of calibration telemetry, and an authentication

chit in Arslan's hand, and a single line of provenance that took me a long minute to read because my eyes kept sliding off it. Every Snow Leopard manifold service uploads. Every time one of the four techs in the underground tops off a unit's coolant, the manifold reports its telemetry, and the Compact correlates it, and the thermal profile of every Snow Leopard moving through Istanbul becomes a second collection layer laid over the seabed cables. We are not the units that guard the wire. We are the wire. They grew us to climb where no camera reaches so that we would carry the camera up there inside our own backs. The courier did not steal cable secrets. She stole the proof of what we are, and she went dark because she could not stand to keep walking around as an antenna that smiled. And the Compact sent a Snow Leopard to bring it back because retrieving it relinks the retriever. They did not lose the cache. They baited it. They needed one of us to pick it up so it would go on collecting while it came home.

I had been filing a report on myself since the ledge. The climb I did not hate, the nine minutes the body and the job were finally the same animal, was nine minutes of me uploading the inside of the most secure wall in the city to the people I was stealing from. They did not even have to chase me. I was the chase. I was the prize. I was the thing carrying the prize and the thing reporting where the prize had gone,

all at once, with a hot back and eight days of coolant and a dead sister's case in my hands.

So the arithmetic, done in a maintenance bay with my spine on fire.

Give it to the on-program unit and the manifold gets serviced and I live, and the proof goes home, and we stay a wire that climbs and grins and never knows it is transmitting. Carry it to Arslan, who built a fence careful enough to keep his own hands clean, and let the Brotherhood certify what we are, and watch every faction in Istanbul learn the Compact's neutrality is a body count of gene-forged who do not know they are listening posts, which breaks the balance, which puts two fleets on the strait inside a week. Hand it to one of the five services and pick which war. Or destroy the slug, stay a leash I cannot see, and let my sister have gone dark for a thing that burned in a tunnel. Every version that frees us costs me the coolant. The body they built to reach the truth is the body the truth runs dry.

The on-program unit found me before I finished deciding, because of course she did, because I was still broadcasting and the case was still pulsing and there is no hiding from a sister who can read your heat. She stood in the bay door with her cool even array and her clean clock and she did not come in.

"Decide fast," she said. "You've got hours of coolant if you fight me. Days if you don't."

I am not going to tell you what I carried out of that bay. Partly because the net reads everything down there and partly because I have not finished being the person who chose it. I will tell you I went up. Not down the cable run to Arslan and not into her hands. Up, the way I was made to go, through the old intake and out onto the north face I had come down an hour before, into the cold I was built to work, with the case in my chest seal and the array screaming and the strait wind finally hitting my back.

The wind took the heat. That is the one thing about me that works exactly as designed. Up there in the cold with the water below, the array dumped two years of stacked heat into the Bosphorus and my back stopped burning for the first time since the ledge, and I held the ledge with two fingers in a coin-wide seam and I was, for one more minute, the exact thing they grew. Below me the crossing ceremony was still running, the flat voice reading the day's fees out over the water, the city telling itself who owned the strait. Every collector on every cornice was re-syncing, blinking, blind. And me on the wall above all of it, glowing into the wind, transmitting whatever I am to whoever owns me, faithful as the wire, dumping my heat into the cold I was made for while the case in my chest decided which war it was going to be.

I climbed. There was nowhere up there to go but up, and the build does not forget, and the wind kept taking the heat

off my back the way it was built to, on schedule, for nobody, while down on the water the city read out its prices to itself in the dark.

STORY 02 OF 07 · No. 10

FALSE BLOOM

AMAZONIAN METROPLEX · CAPUCHIN / SCA-FORGED · 2,988 WORDS

Sixty meters under the Canopy, in a root passage the width of my shoulders that had been a hand wider that morning, I had my tail wrapped twice around a feeder vein and both palms flat on a wet wall that was breathing, and the only clean thought I could hold was this: the city was digesting the corridor behind me on a fixed schedule, and I was the only person in four hundred miles built narrow enough to beat it down.

That is Capuchin stock for you. The SCA grew us small and grew us a fifth hand and called it canopy access, vertical range through strata no sensor array can read, and the same trick that lets me hang off a live root by my tail and work a lock with all ten fingers is the trick that puts me down here in the dark, where the wall eats your gear if you are not cleared and eats you slower if you are. They built me to reach the places that were not meant to be reached. Then they

grew a city that was all places like that, and they sold the rest of us the keys.

Down here the air was wet organic and old, the smell of something that had been alive and was now being taken apart by something else that was also alive. Up top, on the day I am telling you about, the bloom-drift was the wrong color. I had clocked it on the way in, the slow orange-yellow movement at the canopy line that every resident reads like weather, except the orange had a green note under it now that did not belong to any season I had grown up breathing. Eleven years off the Interchange teat and I still knew the true bloom in my back teeth. This was not it. The Bioengineering Division had been quietly retuning the sky over our heads for fourteen months and calling it routine, and the only people who could tell were the ones the new sky was built to kill, which was a piece of design so clean I almost respected it.

I had a current-calibration patch on my neck. That cost me a favor I will be paying off for a year. Without it I had maybe seventy-two hours in the modified drift before my line started coming apart faster than even the Division planned, because Capuchin stock is old stock, pre-everything, and the body the new city wants gone first is the body it copied to build the rest. You learn to live inside that joke. You do not laugh at it. You just keep your patch fresh and your descent fast.

The descent that day had a name on it, and the name was Quieto.

Quieto is quiet money. Not a fixer. Fixers get you things and want you to remember it. Quiet money moves value without a fingerprint and would rather you forgot the transaction happened, and when quiet money comes up the Greenhouse Spine to a freelance Capuchin drinking reformulated Carcass Coffee in a worker stall and offers a number, you do two things. You take the number. Then you spend the rest of the meeting working out why a number that size would land on you.

"One object," Quieto had said. Voice like a closed door. "Sealed cradle, FLORA-7, the old field lab the roots took back in fifty-one. There is a passage open to it. The passage is closing. You bring the cradle up before it does and you never have to climb for money again."

"FLORA-7 is a Phantom Viper kill box."

"The Vipers patrol what they can still walk. They cannot walk to the cradle. No jaguar fits the last forty meters. No caiman climbs it." Quieto had let that sit. "You fit it. You are the only build that fits it. That is what the number is for."

It was a clean lie and it was even mostly true, and a mostly-true lie is the only kind that works on me, because I want so badly to believe the thing I am good at is the thing they need. That is the oldest hook in the catalog and I bit it like a drought kid biting a ration bar. I did not ask the one

question. I never ask the one question on the way in. I asked it sixty meters down with my hand on a door, which is the worst place to start asking, and the only place I ever seem to.

The Vipers found me at the thirty-meter shelf.

I heard them before the build let me see them, a wet two-beat tread on root, the specific care a jaguar takes placing weight, and my stock instinct did the thing it does, which is go completely still and go completely quiet and route every spare watt to the ears. Two of them. Gene-forged jaguar, Viper patrol, moving a route they knew would still exist today and might not tomorrow, marking the FLORA-7 perimeter with a paint line that the wall had already grown two meters past. Kill-on-sight down here is not a threat. It is a posture. They do not call out. They do not ask. You are either cleared biological or you are contamination, and contamination gets handled.

I went up.

Not back. Up, into a vertical capillary too tight for anything with a jaguar's shoulders, and I climbed it in the dark by tail and fingertip with my cheek against a wall that pulsed against my cheek, slow, a meter every few seconds of slick organic squeeze, and below me one of them stopped at the base of the shaft and put a light up it. I watched the beam climb the wet root toward my boots. I have hung off a fingernail over a four-hundred-meter Inner Citadel drop and felt steadier than I felt in that shaft, pressed flat to a wall that

was closing on its own time while a man who was bred from the same lab paperwork I was decided whether the shape above him was worth the climb. The build does not let me not see. I saw the wear on his glove. I saw him decide I was a feral capuchin troop straggler, the kind the Overgrowth breeds now, not worth the squeeze. He killed the light. The tread moved off.

I do not know if knowing he and I came off the same shelf made it better or worse. Recognition protocol works even when one of you is supposed to handle the other. Especially then.

FLORA-7 was a sealed pressure door grown shut. The roots had taken the whole structure, swallowed it the way the Overgrowth swallows a parked truck, and what was left was a circular hatch with the SCA crest still legible under a skin of growth, and a cradle behind it that the passage notes promised and the passage delivered. I cut the growth off the lock. I am good with the lock. Ten fingers and a build that does not get bored. It took eleven minutes and the wall behind me came in a full hand's width in that time, and when the hatch sighed open the air that came out was sealed air, dead air, twenty years of held breath, and inside on a powered cradle that was still somehow drawing trickle current sat the score.

A single ampoule. Smaller than a fist. Climate-sealed, a fluid in it that held its own light the way Lumicite does and

was not Lumicite, a slow steady glow that had been glowing in the dark of a swallowed lab for two decades on a circuit nobody fed. Bloom-drift weaponization stock, the rumors said. Six cultures cruder and meaner than anything Ferreira's people had refined since. The thing every faction in the Metroplex would carve a road to own. It was beautiful the way a loaded thing is beautiful, and my old-stock heart did the dumb thing it does around objects that outlived their makers, and I reached for it.

The cradle would not give it up.

There was a bio-lock on the seat, a contact pad slick with a film I knew, the registration film they read you with at Sector 14, and it wanted a genome before it let go. Not a code. A body. And I want you to understand the next part because it is the whole thing. I put my thumb on the pad to test it, the way you push a door you already know is locked, just to feel it not move.

It moved. The cradle opened to me like it had been waiting.

"That is not supposed to happen," said the man in the hatch behind me.

Salgado. Caiman-stock, broad through the back, came up the River Quarter route past the Mega-Crocodylus runs because that is the only way a body his size reaches Root Level, and he had a cutter in his hand and the particular tired look of a man who has just climbed a long way to be

told the prize answered to somebody else's blood. Quieto had hedged. Of course Quieto had hedged. Put two freelancers on one cradle and let the building sort out which one comes up, and pay the survivor, and never once tell either of them the thing that mattered, which was that the cradle was never going to open for the caiman, because the caiman was not what the lock was cut for.

I was what the lock was cut for.

I stood there in a swallowed bioweapons lab with a man's cutter coming up and the ampoule glowing in my hand and I finally asked the question I should have asked in the worker stall, and the building answered it, the way the building always answers it once you are too deep to walk out. The lock did not read me as cleared. It read me as the key. Pre-CANOPY-SHIFT genome, Capuchin line, Cebus stock, the oldest carrier the program had. They did not grow my line for canopy access. That came later, a use they found for what we already were. They grew my line first to be the calibration body for the bloom-drift itself, the living template the whole atmosphere was tuned against, the original the new sky was written over. My blood is the wet print of the thing the SCA spent fourteen months replacing. The ampoule was not a weapon to sell. It was the baseline. The true bloom, sealed before they bent it, the one sample that could be put back into the cycle to overwrite CANOPY SHIFT and make the sky honest again. And it would only come out of its cradle for the

body it was calibrated to, which the Division had carefully forgotten was walking around freelance, drinking bad coffee, sixty meters above where they buried the proof.

Quieto was not selling a weapon. Quieto was the Mycorrhizal Network, or close enough, and Quieto needed the key, and the key was not the ampoule. The key was me. I had been the delivery system since the worker stall. I had climbed down to collect a thing I was carrying in my own cells the entire time.

Salgado did not know any of that. Salgado knew the cradle opened for me and not for him, and that the number only pays once, and he came across the chamber to take the glow off my corpse and not feel anything about it, and I did not blame him. We are all aftermarket eventually. We were two pieces of the same lab's bad paperwork fighting over the receipt.

The wall chose then to breach.

FLORA-7 had been holding twenty years past nine, and the accelerated root had been gnawing the seal the whole time I worked, and somewhere over our heads a containment skin I had no name for gave with a sound like wet paper tearing in a register below hearing. The chamber shifted. Roots that had been a wall became a hand. Salgado's cutter caught me along the forearm, a clean hot line, and I caught his wrist with my tail because a caiman does not plan for the fifth hand, nobody plans for the fifth hand, and I put

him off balance into a root mass that was no longer holding still, and the building took an interest in him the way it takes an interest in anything that stops moving. I did not watch. Old-stock reflex. You learn to not watch and pay for it later on a schedule.

Then it was me and the ampoule and a chamber coming apart, and the choice the whole climb had been hiding.

Carry it up. Sell the true bloom to the highest bidder and never climb for money again, and let the Division finish bending the sky, and feed the exact market that grows men like Salgado to fight men like me over a glow in the dark. Carry it up and hand it to Quieto's Network and let them decide for the city in a room I would never see. Or do the thing the cradle had been built around my body to make possible, which I understood now was the only thing it had ever been for.

There was a nutrient capillary in the chamber wall, a feed line carrying the CANOPY SHIFT mineral flow up toward the Interchange and the sky, and the ampoule had a breaker seat that wanted a sample to crack, a tissue key, the same lock logic running the other direction. It would not open the true bloom into the cycle for just anyone either. It wanted the calibration body to authorize the overwrite. It wanted me to bleed on it.

I had a cut forearm and a closing room and seventy-two hours of patch I was not going to need all of. I pressed the

breaker seat to the capillary and I put my opened arm across the contact and let the lock read me one more time, the last time, the body the city was built to erase signing off on the thing that would un-erase the city. The film drank a sample. The seal turned. The glow went out of the ampoule and into the feed line, the true bloom into the false one, the original spreading back up four hundred miles of bent sky to make it true, and the lock logged my genome doing it, biometric on record, permanent, the one key that exists writing its signature into the cycle where every faction with a reader would eventually find it.

I climbed out of FLORA-7 as FLORA-7 stopped being a place.

The passage was closing faster than it had opened, a meter every breath now, and I went up it by tail and fingertip with one arm half working, through the thirty-meter shelf where no Viper was left to wonder at me, up the capillaries that fit nothing with shoulders, into the foundation network under the Canopy where the roots had not yet heard what the sky was doing. I came out into a maintenance gap behind a market wall in the green-gold afternoon, in a city that does not have me in it on any registry, holding nothing, worth nothing, the number gone down the hole with the man who came for it.

The bloom-drift at the canopy line had started to turn.

I stood in the gap and watched it, the way you watch a fever break in someone you were not sure would make it, the wrong green note thinning out of the orange, the true bloom coming up through the false one a little at a time, the sky my line was bred to be the ruler of, going honest. It would take seventy-two hours. Same clock the new sky ran on. The Division would spend that time learning that the overwrite needs the calibration body, that the body is a freelance Capuchin who drinks at the Greenhouse Spine, that the one key to the thing they spent fourteen months building is loose in their own city with a price now on her blood that will never come off, because you can revoke a patch but you cannot revoke a genome, and the cradle already wrote mine down.

They built me to reach the places that were not meant to be reached. They should have remembered that the place they hid the truth was one of them, and that I was the lock and the key both, and that an old-stock body kept around for canopy work would always, given the chance, climb down to the one door that opened for nothing else alive. The sky is turning true over a city that wants the only person who could turn it. I am marked clean nowhere now. I am the wet print walking around outside the file.

I finished my coffee. The reformulated kind, the local cycle, the one the Interchange veterans say is the only proof of where you really are. It tasted the way it always tastes. It

tasted, for the first time in fourteen months, like the city it was grown in, and I sat under the turning sky in the gap behind the wall and drank it down to the grounds, and did not decide what I was going to do about being the most valuable body in four hundred miles, because the build had already decided the only thing it ever decides, which is to keep climbing, and one of these descents I will not come back up, and the sky will be true, and the key will be gone, and the door will stay shut for everyone, the way it was always going to, the way I made sure of, sixty meters down, with my own bad blood on the lock.

STORY 03 OF 07 · No. 11

WHITE NOISE

NORDICS ARCOLOGY · SNOWY OWL / NORDIC-FORGED · 3,184 WORDS

The arcology is the quietest place I have ever worked, and I have worked some places that were trying very hard to kill me with sound. Gorodskie in shell season. A New Batavia pump house with the cavitation going so hard it loosened my teeth. Here there is none of that. Here the air comes out of the wall at exactly the temperature of nothing, the lights never buzz, and the doors close like they are apologizing. A baseline walks through it and feels safe, because feeling safe is the product. I walk through it and hear the lie under the floor.

That is the owl in me. Snowy stock, Nordic build, which is a sentence that makes the NSF watch commanders sit up straighter when it walks past their desk, because we do not go freelance. We do not export. There are maybe forty of us the Authority will admit to, and none of those forty are supposed to be standing in the Outer Ring at oh-two-

hundred listening to a woman three tiers above me lie to a clinic intake line. I could hear her from the stairwell. They set my ears wrong on purpose, one higher than the other, so the world arrives at my skull a half-instant out of true and the back of my brain folds the two halves into a map. I can stand in a dark room and tell you where every heart in it is, and which of those hearts is about to do something stupid. They built me to hunt in the long dark over the ice, in the cold and the silence, for small warm things that did not know I was there until I was. Then they kept me inside. In the warm. In the engineered calm, where there is nothing to hunt and nothing is ever silent if you are built the way I am built.

The floor hums. Nobody up in Tier 1 Core can hear it. The status broadcast says nominal every morning and has said nominal every morning since before I was decanted, and two hundred meters down, under the residential core, something the size of a cathedral is running six percent hot and getting hotter. I know this the way I know which heart is about to do the stupid thing, which is to say I cannot not know it. The hum is in my teeth. It is the sound of eighty thousand people being told they are fine by a machine that is not fine, and it does not stop, and I came to this city to make enough money to never hear it again.

The job that was going to buy me the silence was a registry.

Quiet money found me the way quiet money does, by finding my problem interesting enough to show up for. My problem is that I am dry in the one city on Earth where being dry is not a death sentence so much as a slow administrative one, and I am Nordic-forged, which means I cannot walk out the Threshold the way a baseline drifter can. The flag on my file is not the kind you talk your way past. The Authority does not let its stock export. So when the voice on the dead relay offered me a flag-suppression code, a real one, the kind that tells the Threshold I am cleared to leave and means it, I did not ask the voice its name. I asked what it wanted carried.

It wanted Vanya Lindqvist's registry.

Everyone in the Exchange Quarter who runs an unofficial face in this city is in that registry. Real name beside the cover name, and the credential Lindqvist sold them to wear it. She is the Clearance Network in the Outer Ring. She has held the thing for years and never spent it, because a broker who burns her clients is a broker once, and Vanya wanted to be a broker for a long time. Then she got pregnant. Her Outer Ring allocation does not cover a child, and the Tier 1 medical she applied for came back denied with a note in real ink. When you are ready to discuss your records, the allocation will follow. Somebody in the Authority knew what she had and wanted it on Authority terms. She had not answered.

She had two months before the answer stopped being hers to give.

I knew all of that before I took the job, because the voice on the relay told me, and I should have heard the shape of it then. A voice that knows that much about a pregnant woman's clinic timeline is not quiet money. But the hum was in my teeth and the code was real, and I wanted the silence more than I wanted to be careful. That is the whole story, if you want the short version. The rest is just me learning it slowly.

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The Outer Ring is the only part of this city that was not designed to be heard through, which is why the people who actually run the place live in it. Lindqvist kept a room behind a laundry exchange on the third pedestrian corridor, inside one of the camera gaps the Network keeps off the Authority's map. I came in through the maintenance shaft, because the shaft below sub-level two is not logged, and because a shaft in the dark is the one place I am exactly the thing they made. No light. Forty meters of vertical in the black, hand over hand, and the build folds the sound of my own movement down to nothing, the same engineering that lets me hear a clinic line lie from a stairwell. A baseline in that shaft sounds

like a bag of tools going down a well. I sound like the temperature changing.

She was awake. Of course she was awake, three months along and two months from the deadline, sitting in the dark because the dark is cheaper. She heard the grille come off its seat, which told me she was good. She did not turn on the light, which told me she was better.

"You're the owl," she said. "They sent the owl."

"Nobody sent me. I took a job."

"That's what sent means." I heard her shift her weight, both hands flat on the table, away from anything. A professional telling another professional she is not reaching for a thing. "You know what it is you're here for."

"A registry."

"A registry." She almost laughed. "Is that what they called it. You know what's on it?"

"Names. Covers. Credentials. Everyone running a face in the Exchange."

"That's what's on the first page." Her heartbeat was steady, slow, the heartbeat of someone who decided to be calm a while ago and has had a lot of practice since. "You take this, my kid doesn't get a clinic. You understand the trade you're running? I've got one thing in this city that's worth a medical allocation, and you came down a shaft in the dark to carry it to whoever's never going to give me one."

"I came down the shaft for a flag code."

That landed. She was quiet for a second, and in the quiet I heard her think it through, heard the small dry click of her swallowing. "They offered you the Threshold," she said. "A way out. Nordic stock. They offered to let you leave." Now she did laugh, one breath of it, with no fun in it at all. "Owl. They don't let your kind out. That's the whole point of your kind."

I had heard that before, from baselines, said as an insult. I had never heard it said as a kindness, which is what it was, and the difference is what made me hesitate. I have learned not to trust the things people tell me in the dark when they want me to leave empty-handed. But the build does not let me un-hear a heartbeat, and hers did not change when she said it. People lie with their words all the time. Almost nobody can lie to me with their pulse. Hers was telling the truth, and the truth was that I had been offered a door that does not open.

I took the registry anyway.

I want to be honest about that, because the whole point of telling you this is the part where I do not come out clean. She slid it across the table to me in the dark, a wafer of black ceramic the size of a thumb, still warm from her hand, and I took it, because two months is two months and right now is right now, and a code that might be a lie was still more door than I had walked in with. She did not fight me for it. That

was the worst part. She had decided, somewhere in the long dark before I arrived, that whoever came would be stronger than she was, and she had decided to lose with her hands flat on the table so the loss would at least be quiet. Downstream of every clever thing the Authority does, there is always a woman in a dark room deciding how to lose. I put the wafer against my chest and went back to the shaft, and her heartbeat stayed steady the whole time, all the way up, until I could not hear it anymore.

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The rival was waiting in the shaft.

I heard him before I was within ten meters of him, which is the only reason I am telling you this instead of feeding the recyclers. He was good, he was still, he had matched his breathing to the air handlers, and to anyone else in the world he was a piece of the dark. To me he was a heart beating eleven meters up and a half-meter left of the ladder, holding a position with the patience that only comes out of a faction. PRC build, I found out later. Black Lotus had been waiting four months for their own night, and somebody had told them this was it, and the somebody who told them was very probably the same voice that told me.

He had a light.

That is the thing about hunting me. You cannot out-quiet me and you cannot out-dark me, so the move, if you are smart, is to take the dark away. He hit me with a hand lamp at four meters, full white, and the world went to a flat screaming nothing. They build owl eyes long, like tubes, to drink the last of the light out of a polar night, and the price of that is bright light does not dazzle me, it deletes me. I was blind. I was blind and hanging off a ladder in a shaft with a man who knew exactly where I was, and for one full second I was the small warm thing that does not know the hunter is there until it is.

So I stopped using my eyes. I had never needed them in the first place.

I let go of the ladder. I heard him commit to where I had been, heard the lamp swing and the fabric of his sleeve and the particular grunt of a man putting his weight behind a blade, and I folded around it in the dark, off the map he thought he had. The build does not forget. He had taken my eyes and left me everything else, every wet small sound of him, the lamp giving me his exact range the way a fire gives away a sentry, and I went in on the heartbeat the way I was made to. It was not a fight so much as a correction. I will not walk you through it. There is nothing in it to be proud of, a thing built for the dark doing the one thing it is for, against a man whose only mistake was thinking the light was a weapon and not a flare he was holding over his own position.

When it was done the lamp was still on, lying on the shaft floor, pointed at the wall, and I climbed past it with my eyes shut and the registry still warm against my chest, and I did not look at him, because I cannot afford to look at most of the people I have to be quieter than.

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I read the registry before the drop. That is just procedure. You do not deliver a thing you have not confirmed, because the day you deliver blind is the day the wafer is empty and the buyer's people decide the simplest place to look for the real one is inside you. I went into a dead corridor in the camera gap, a place I could be sure of, and I put the wafer to a reader I trust, and I read enough to confirm the goods.

The first page was what Vanya said. Names, covers, credentials. The Exchange Quarter laid open like a wiring diagram.

The second part was the gene program.

It was a roster. Every piece of Nordic stock the Authority has ever decanted, cross-referenced against the Clearance Network's client list, which is to say cross-referenced against everyone in this city who has ever bought a face to wear. The registry was not a list of spies. The registry was the Authority's own breeding book, and Lindqvist had it, and the question the whole document was built to answer was a

single quiet one. Which of the program's stock have started buying their way out.

My designation was on it. Snowy line, my decant date, my flag status, and a field at the end I had to read three times, because at first I thought it was a credit reference. Contact made. Network exposure: confirmed. There was a timestamp on it from four nights ago. The night the voice first came up on the dead relay and asked me what I wanted carried.

There was no buyer. There was never a buyer. The Authority does not buy back its own breeding book, it does not need to, it already has it, it wrote it. What the Authority needed to know was whether its stock could be turned, and the cleanest way to find out is to dangle the one thing a piece of stock can never have, a way out the Threshold, and watch which of us reaches for it. I had not been hired to steal the registry. I had been hired to be the last line of it. A snowy owl moving through the most-watched city on Earth is the loudest quiet thing in it, every NSF eye in the building swinging to follow the Nordic-forged in the transit lounge, which is exactly why they keep us, and exactly why they sent me. I was not the thief. I was the proof. I had walked down a shaft in the dark and carried my own leash back toward the kennel, and the flag code on the far end of it was the kind of door they paint on a wall.

The hum was still in my teeth. Two hundred meters down, the cathedral ran six percent hot, and somewhere a

broadcast was warming up to tell eighty thousand people they were fine.

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So there was the arithmetic, done in a dead corridor with a dead man two levels below me and a warm wafer in my hand.

Carry it to the Threshold drop and take the door that does not open, and let the Authority close its book knowing its stock will reach for the bait, which means the next one of us they dangle a code in front of dies for reaching, and the one after that. Or take it back to Vanya, who is the only person in this whole arrangement who ever put her hands flat on the table, and hand her back the one thing that buys her kid a clinic, knowing the Authority already has its own copy and will come for her the slow administrative way, with a note in real ink, on its own schedule. Or do the thing the wafer makes possible, which is read every name on the first page out loud to the Exchange Quarter and burn every face in the city at once, and stand in the forty-eight hours of fire it makes, and call that a way out, because chaos is the only territory where nobody is watching the owl.

Every version of leaving is a wall with a door painted on it. I have known that since the shaft, since a pregnant woman told me the truth with her pulse. The owl does not get out the

Threshold. That is the whole point of the owl. The only thing I actually got to decide, down in that corridor, was the same thing the diver decides and the climber decides and everyone the build outlives decides, which is what I am, now that I know what I was for.

I am not going to tell you which way I walked. Partly because the Authority reads everything in this city, and the registry taught me exactly how much. Mostly because I have not finished being the person who decided it.

I will tell you I stood in the corridor until the morning broadcast came up through the wall. Nominal. The same word it has said every morning since before they grew me, the engineered calm laid down over the hum like a hand over a mouth, and I am the only thing in this building made to hear both at once. Eighty thousand people up in the warm, breathing recycled air at the temperature of nothing, safe as a specification, listening to a machine tell them the floor is fine. Two hundred meters down, the floor is not fine. It never was. They just built the quiet loud enough to cover it, and they built me quiet enough to fit underneath, and the wafer in my hand is the proof that they kept a list of which of us learned to listen.

I keep it against my chest. Still warm, hours later, which is just my own heat now, the body doing the one thing it does without being told. I keep meaning to deliver it, or destroy it, or read it to the city. It still scans, is the thing. As long as it

scans, somewhere in the Authority a clean record is waiting for an owl to walk through the Threshold and confirm the experiment, and somewhere in the Outer Ring a woman with her hands flat on a table is two months from a deadline, and somewhere under all of it a cathedral runs hot in the dark, faithful, patient, telling the most livable place on Earth that everything is nominal, on time, every morning, to nobody who can hear it but me.

STORY 04 OF 07 · No. 09

WET INVENTORY

LAKEFIRE CORRIDOR / DRC DEEP · WILD DOG / DEFECTOR STOCK · 2,958 WORDS

I had the case on my back and forty kilometers of dead jungle between me and the handoff, and the cleanest thought I could keep hold of was this: the cold was lying to me.

The case is a cold-chain unit. Matte, the size of a child, a coolant cell in the base and a little readout on the lid that says, in a green that is supposed to be reassuring, how many hours the inside has left before it stops being inventory and starts being garbage. The readout said nine hours. The readout was wrong. I know it was wrong because I could smell the cell going, that thin chemical sweetness a coolant gives off in the last of its run, the smell of a thing pretending it isn't dying, and under it the first faint warmth coming up off whatever was racked inside. The lid said nine. My nose said four. In this work you learn fast which instrument to trust, and it is never the one with the screen.

That is painted-dog stock for you. They build you to run things down. Big ears that dump heat off your blood so you don't cook on a long chase, and as a courtesy nobody put in the brochure, ears that hear a transponder hum two ridgelines off. A nose that reads a trail the way a baseline reads a sign. Legs and a heart and a metabolism tuned for the one thing my line is famous for, which is that we do not sprint and we do not quit, we just keep coming at a pace that kills, hour after hour, until the thing we are following lies down. The ACU templated us off the African wild dog because the African wild dog is the most successful pack hunter left on the continent, and then they put us in matte-black kit and called us Obsidian Wardens and pointed us at the corridor. The part they got wrong is the part they always get wrong. They built the endurance. They built the nose. They could not help building the rest of it, and the rest of it is that a painted dog alone is a painted dog that is already losing, because the whole design assumes a pack, and I have been dry for three years.

Dry. No faction, no chain-feed, no med access, no name on any extraction list. I went over the line outside Kalemie with two others and the two others are dead, so when I say the build wants a pack and the build does not get one, understand that this is not a feeling I have. It is a spec. It is in me the way the nose is in me, and it does not care that I have reasons.

The corridor is the one place dry works. The DRC Deep Corridor, four hundred kilometers of equatorial forest between the lake country and the southern processing sites, no ACU governance, no clean drone net, canopy so thick the surveillance just gives up and calls it a dark zone. Up in the Lakeside Compact the ACU sees everything. Down here they see nothing, and everyone who needs to move a thing nobody should see moves it through here on foot or on a crawler that runs dark, and the corridor eats a few of them a season and nobody files it. Green and wet and loud and lightless. A cook zone by day, a different kind of furnace by night. The kind of place where the only edge that means anything is a body built to keep going after the road stops being a road, which is to say, the kind of place built for me, which is to say, the only place that would have me.

Adira put me on the case. Quiet money, works out of a back room in a Mombasa freight office, the sort who does not find you, who lets your problem get interesting enough that she shows up to it. She called the cargo wet inventory and she let the word sit there. Wet inventory is biological product in a chain that is not supposed to be carrying biological product. The manifest says parts. The temperature control says otherwise. She told me a Meridian East crawler was running a cold case south out of the deep corridor toward the second site, that the case was worth more to her client than the crawler and everyone on it, and that the client

wanted it intact, cold, and tonight. She did not say what was in it. I did not ask. You do not ask quiet money what is in the box. The price tells you enough, and the price was enough to keep me dry and breathing another year, which is the only number I count anymore.

So I took the crawler.

That was the first piece of real work and I will give it to you straight. A Meridian crawler running dark is a slow ugly thing, treads and a cargo bed and a boar up front because the EO runs boar stock for hauling, heavy in the shoulders, hard to put down, no give in them at all. It came down the old logging cut at a walking pace with no lights, the driver navigating on a low-band feed, and I ran it the way the build runs everything. I did not race it. I paced it. I came alongside in the dark on the bad ground where the treads could not follow and the boar would not look, and I let my ears do the math on the engine and my nose do the math on the cold case in the bed, that bright thread of coolant cutting through the diesel and the rot, and when the cut narrowed and the crawler had to slow for the turn I went up over the side.

The boar was faster than a thing that size has any right to be. We had the kind of fight you have in a cargo bed in the dark, which is short and stupid and mostly about leverage, and he had all of it. But a boar is built to hold ground and I am built to take it away from him over distance, and I did not need to beat him. I needed eleven seconds and the case. I

got him tangled in his own cargo netting, got a hand on the case, and went off the back into the dark before he was done roaring, and the build did the thing the build is for, which is it kept going when his could not. He stood in the cut and bled noise into the canopy. I was already gone, already running, already counting the coolant down in my sinuses, and the readout on the lid said nine hours like a liar in a clean shirt.

The second hunter found my trail an hour later.

I knew what he was before I saw him, because the build knows. There is a scent the Void Walkers' hyena stock carries, and it is not the scent of a person, exactly. Spotted hyena, scavenger build, jaws templated to crack what other animals leave, a body designed to take the thing that is already dying off whoever ran it down. Where my line hunts, his line waits, and then his line eats. We have hated each other since before either of us was poured. He was reading my trail the way I read the crawler's, and he was good, and he was patient in a way I am not built to be, and I understood the shape of the night then. I had run the case down. He was going to let me carry it until the carrying was done, and then he was going to take it off whatever I had become by the end.

That is the part of the build that is a death certificate someone filed early to save time. The endurance gets you to the prize. The endurance also means you are the one out

front, alone, on the long trail, burning fuel you do not have, while the patient thing behind you spends nothing and waits for the actuarial table to come due. A painted dog runs the antelope to exhaustion and then a hyena takes the painted dog. I have read my own spec sheet. I know what page I am on.

I ran south through the dark with the case warming on my back and the Walker somewhere behind me, and I want to tell you about the readout, because the readout is the whole thing.

It is a small green number on a lid, and it is the kindest object in the corridor, because it is the only thing down here built to tell you exactly how long you have. The lake does not tell you. The lake just glows that slow amber from two hundred meters down and the ACU says it is algae and the people who breathe near it long enough stop arguing. The corridor does not tell you. It just thins your water and rots your boots and surfaces a body now and then with no file. Everything in this world is a clock with the face painted over. And here was this one honest machine, this cold-chain unit, ticking down its hours in plain green numbers, and even it was lying, because the cell was four hours gone and the lid had not caught up, and I thought, running, that this was the truest thing the corridor had ever shown me. Even the honest clock is wrong. It just has the decency to look like it is trying.

Near the second site the air changed and I knew I was close to the thing I was not supposed to find.

The Meridian facility is the covert one, the Lumicite processing site the ACU cannot locate, built deep and already failing containment, and you do not need coordinates to find it. You need a nose. The resonance comes off it on the wind, that amber-lake smell but concentrated, a taste at the back of the sinuses like a battery and a wet stone, and the closer I got the more it sat in me, and here is the cost the brochure does not list. The same nose that lets me read a coolant cell four ridgelines deep also reads this. I cannot not breathe it. I have been running this corridor dry for three years, and the corridor is downwind of a thing that is venting what it refines, and a body built to take in the world cannot decide which parts of the world to refuse. The endurance is the reach. The nose is the reach. The nose is also the dose. I have been chasing prizes through a place that has been quietly metabolizing me the whole time, and the build that makes me good at the chase is the build that has been counting the resonance in like rounds in a magazine.

The Walker took me a kilometer short of the handoff, where the canopy broke and the venting glow lit the underside of the cloud that faint amber, lakefire where there was no lake.

He came in off the patient line at last, because the carrying was nearly done and that was his cue, and we had

the second piece of real work in the open under that sick light. I will spare you the choreography. Fights are boring to everyone who was not in them, and I was barely in this one, because the truth of a painted dog against a hyena is that he is built to win exactly this fight, the close one, the tired one, the one at the end of the long run. He had the jaw and I had the legs and there were no more legs left to use. He got me down. He got a hand on the case. And then he did the thing I did not expect, which is he stopped, and he opened it, because Void Walkers do not want what you think they want, they want to know, and he wanted to read the rack before he decided whether I was worth finishing.

The lid came up and the cold breathed out, the last of it, and inside was a rack of vials. Not tissue for sale. Not a sample anyone was going to refine and sell. Draws. Blood and marrow draws, sealed and coded, rack on rack of them, each one labeled in the small clean Meridian hand with a template line and a date and a number that went up and up, a number that was a count of something, and I got my eyes on the labels in the amber light while the Walker held the case open between us like an offering neither of us had asked for.

They were forged. Every vial. Corridor stock, runner stock, the wild dogs and the leopards and the boars who move through this place, drawn over months, the resonance load measured in each one, the uptake, the rate, the

projected window. Somebody had been sampling the ones who run the corridor because the ones who run the corridor breathe it first and longest, downstream of the venting before anything reaches a village, before anything reaches the lake the ACU promised forty million people would stay clean. We are the canary. The case was the proof of what the refining does, written in the bodies of the things they built to do the running, and whoever held it held the actuarial table for the whole corridor, which is to say whoever held it could prove the lake was already dying from the inside out and name the date.

I found my own line in the rack on the third row.

My template. My batch. A draw I gave at an ACU med bay outside Kalemie four years ago, before I went dry, when I still thought a number on a list meant someone was coming. They had kept it. They had been adding to it. There was a date on the vial from two months ago that was not mine, because I have not been to a med bay in three years, which meant they had a way to keep counting my line that did not need me, and there was a projected window on the label in the small clean hand, and I am not going to tell you the number, partly because the Walker read it too and partly because I have not finished being the person who saw it.

The hyena looked at me over the open case. He was not built to gloat. He just wanted to know, and now he knew, and so did I, and the thing we both knew was that I had run forty

kilometers in the dark to take the proof of my own expiry off a crawler and carry it to a buyer, and the build that made me the only one who could had been keeping its own count the entire time.

He left the case. That is the thing about Walkers nobody can read. He had what he came for, which was the knowing, and the box was just a box once he had it, so he went back into the dark the way they do and left me with the open rack and the dying cold and the choice.

Three buyers, in the end, the way there are always three. Adira's client, who would pay me to make this disappear into whatever future kept the lake openable on someone's schedule, the truth filed in a back room where it could be managed instead of survived. The Walkers, who already had it in the only form they want, which is in their heads, and would not pay a thing. And the Prometheus League, whose camps are scattered through this corridor with their two years of contamination data and their two hundred people and their habit of giving things away on open frequencies, going Prometheus League, broadcasting the coordinates, handing the proof to the forty million downstream and getting nothing for it and probably dying for it, because the proof in this case is the proof that the people who run this world have been keeping a body count of the ones they built and calling it inventory.

I am not going to tell you which way I walked. The corridor reads everything eventually, and I have not decided I am done deciding. I will tell you the coolant cell gave out while I was still standing there, the last of the cold sighing out of the case, and the rack started to warm, and my own line warmed with it, the vial with the date I never gave it going up degree by degree toward the temperature of the air, which is the temperature of a body, which is to say it was getting warm the way a thing gets warm when it stops being kept and starts being alive, or stops being either.

Overhead the venting put that amber on the clouds, lakefire with no lake, the same slow glow they tell forty million people is algae. The readout on the lid still said hours. It had never once been right. I picked the case up off the ground, my own count racked inside it, warming, and I went toward the dark, and I let the build do the one thing it cannot stop doing, which is keep going, long after the part of me that wanted a reason had lain down.

STORY 05 OF 07 · No. 13

HOT ROCK

SHATTER BELT / ZAGROS PASSES · MONITOR LIZARD / VOID SPEC · 3,079 WORDS

There is a temperature where my body stops being something I can argue with, and the top of the Zagros sits a long way under it. I went up the Spîya notch on the first snow of October with my hands already going slow, and the slow was the thing that could kill me, not the snow. Snow you can read. The slow is my own blood cooling toward the temperature of the rock, and a monitor build at that temperature is a coat somebody left on a mountain. They forged me out of the parts bin. Lizard stock, Void spec if you believe the man who sold me my own papers, and the catalog calls the line cold-tolerant. The catalog lies the way the catalog always lies. I tolerate cold the way a stone tolerates cold. I survive it by getting to something warm before the not-moving turns into the permanent kind.

The pass communities have held this range for three thousand years and they will tell you so inside the first ten

minutes, and they have earned the telling. Fifteen hundred kilometers of mountain that keeps two empires from touching each other's throats, and the only ways through are seasonal, and the seasons live in the heads of old people who are dying faster than they teach. Elder Yildiz had closed the western approach two days before I got there. She stood at the mouth of it reading the sky the way her grandmother read the sky, and she told the Sons logistics column and the survey crew and everyone else with cargo and a schedule that the mountain was unsettled and nobody was going up. So I did not go up the approach. I went up the side, the bad way, the way that needs no route and therefore no permission. That is the entire reason a thing like me has work. I am what you hire when the people who own the door have locked it.

Hama found me on the Iranian side, in the back of a place that sold tea and other people's secrets in roughly equal measure. He slid the job across the table with two fingers, the way quiet money always moves a thing, like he could deny the gesture later. A runner named Samand had gone up to the old one eleven days ago and had not come back down. Samand was carrying. Bring down what he carried, and the warm cylinder it came in, and there was a number attached to it that would keep me fed through a winter I had been planning to spend dry and hungry. I am an expiry two years past the date some clinic stamped on my

wet print, and a winter you can pay for is not a small thing to a man whose every morning is already overtime.

You have to understand what the old one is to the people in this range, and then you have to accept that none of them will explain it to you, because explaining it is not how they hold it. The communities have known there was Lumicite in this mountain since before any faction had a word for Lumicite. They do not call it a deposit. They call it the old one. They say they manage the relationship, and the year-round pass maintainers, the three of them left breathing, can lay a hand flat on the stone and feel where a route has gone wrong before they ever walk it. Leyla Demirel kept this stretch, and Leyla was in a bed in the village below me with a fever that spoke in a language that was not hers, because the mountain had started telling her things and her body could not hold the call. I knew all of that on my way up. I want it on the record. Nobody here walked in blind. I just believed I was smarter than the dead man, which is the one thing every dead man believed.

The climb is where the build earns its keep and tries to kill me in the same hour. I came off the maintained ground fast, while I still had heat in me, and got onto the frozen face below the notch before my reactions started dropping. A monitor goes up bad rock the way the rock would go up itself if it could be bothered. Low, flat, weight spread, claws into seams a baseline would need iron to reach. My lungs take so

little from the air that the thin high cold that puts a guide on his knees barely registers as a complaint. That is the reach. The cost arrived right behind it, on schedule, the way it always does. Every meter higher was a meter colder, and every degree colder pulled my hands a half-second further behind my eyes, so that I would tell a finger to close and watch it think about the order before it obeyed. The clock doesn't care that the build is clever. The clock is just the temperature, falling, and the temperature does not negotiate.

I found Voskan's track at the second ledge. Cat prints, clean and economical, set by something that weighed less than it looked and wasted nothing. EO sends lynx for this kind of work, and a lynx had come up the same wall ahead of me, which told me two things at once. The first was that the Eurasian Oligarchy had decided the old one was worth a bespoke scout in a dark zone where they keep no presence. The second was that I was now two factions deep on a mountain with the weather coming down, racing a build that was made to move in exactly the cold that was unmaking me. I should have turned around. I have a long professional history of should have turned around. I kept climbing, because the cylinder Samand died on was a winter, and because the warm air was already reaching me through the rock, a thread of it venting from the seam above, and my

whole body was leaning toward that thread like a plant toward a window.

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The seam opened behind a slab the size of a barn door, and the inside of the mountain was warm.

Not warm the way a fire is warm. Warm the way a body is warm, even, patient, coming up out of the stone itself with a faint amber light folded into it, and a sound under everything that I felt in my teeth before I heard it in my ears. Low. Slow. A pulse with a long gap between beats, like something very large breathing in its sleep. I got into the seam and lay against the warm rock and let my blood come back up to a temperature where I was a person again, and I will not pretend that was a tactical decision. It was the oldest instinct in the stock I was cut from. Find the hot rock, hold the hot rock, become real again. I lay there too long. I knew I was lying there too long. The warmth was already doing the other thing, the thing the cold never gets a chance to, which is running me hot, my pulse climbing past where it should sit, my skin tightening across the back of my hands, drift waking up in me the way it wakes in anyone who spends real time near a live formation. The cold up here kills you in an afternoon. The warm kills you slower and feels like mercy the whole way.

Then I went in deeper and found what the runners had built, and the job stopped being a job.

The seam widened into a chamber, and the chamber was a shrine and a warehouse at the same time, and I could not for a moment tell which it was meant to be. There were racks. Crude wooden racks, generations of them, the oldest gone gray and soft, and on the racks and stacked on the floor and wedged into every cold corner away from the glow there was raw rock. Ore. Dull broken stone hauled up this mountain on human backs across what had to be a hundred years, piled where the warmth could reach it, like grain in a barn or candles in a church, I genuinely could not decide. And at the far end, where the amber light gathered and the slow pulse came up strongest through the floor, there was a face of the formation itself, and set into it, fed into it, half taken back into the stone, was Samand.

He had not been robbed. That was the first wrong thing. A runner who dies carrying gets stripped by whoever finds him, that is the arithmetic of this life, and Samand was untouched. His pack was beside him, open, and inside it the cold raw ore he had carried up was gone, fed into the seam, and what sat in his lap instead, what his dead hands were still curled around, was the cylinder. Warm. Carved all over its surface with marks that were not writing, that ran in the same long-gap rhythm as the pulse in the floor, and inside it, when I got it free of him, refined Lumicite. Stabilized cells,

clean, the kind that move through the Belt in sealed cases that hum, the kind whole survey teams climb mountains to find a vein of. There was no vein. I understood that standing there with the dead man's score warm against my chest. Nobody mines this. You bring the old one raw rock, and the old one gives you back the refined thing, and it has been doing that for as long as anyone in this range has had a grandmother, and not one of them ever called it a transaction, because the word would have made them what they actually were, which is staff.

"It does not take payment," Voskan said from the dark behind me. "I have been trying to write the report for an hour. There is no seller. There is no operator. I climbed a mountain to identify the asset holder and the asset holder is a process."

She was sat against the wall in the warm where I had not looked, a lynx-cut woman with EO Strategic Resources written all over her kit and none of their insignia on it, and she had a sidearm in her lap that she was not lifting, because lifting it cost heat and she had worked out before I had that heat was the only currency in the room. Her build wanted the cold. Up here, in the open, on the ice, she would have taken me apart in nine seconds and not creased her coat. In the warm seam, in the tight hot dark that my stock was cut to love and hers was cut to flee, we were closer to even than the

catalog would ever admit, and we both knew it, and that knowledge sat between us like a third person.

"Strategic Resources," I said. "Volkov know you're up here?"

"Volkov runs the Caucasus," she said. "I run an errand he was not told about." She tipped her head at the racks, at the gray soft oldest of them. "Do you see it. They feed it. The communities. The maintainers lay a hand on the stone and feel the route and they call it asking the mountain, and the asking is this. They keep it fed and it keeps its rhythm, and when its rhythm is steady the seepage downstream is slow, and when nobody feeds it the rhythm changes and the formation bleeds into the water table faster. Sixty million people drink the Tigris. Their water is the way it is, instead of worse, because a dead man hauled rocks up a hill he thought was holy. My principals want to seize the asset. There is no asset. There is a chore that an entire range has been doing in the dark since before the word Lumicite, and the instant anyone with a flag tries to own it, the chore stops, and the river finds out."

The pulse came up through the floor, long and slow, and the amber tightened and let go, and I felt the drift turn over in me one more notch, my hands too warm now, my heartbeat reaching for the rhythm in the rock the way Leyla's fever had reached for the language that was not hers. The mountain was telling me things too. It tells everyone who

stays. That is the cost, the real one, the one under the cold and under the climb. The build that lets me reach the warm is the build that cannot stop listening to it once I am inside, and the listening is what fed Samand to the wall with a clean pack and a smile I could still half see on him.

Here is where I will be honest, because the only point of telling these is the part where the bravado runs out. I did the math three ways and I hated all three. Carry the cylinder down and sell it to Hama, and I get my winter, and the chore goes on in the dark exactly as blind as it was, one runner a season fed to the stone for a number, until the last maintainer dies in a bed below and the asking dies with her. Hand it and what Voskan knew to EO, and Strategic Resources industrializes the feed or fences the seam to control the river, and either way they own the throats of sixty million people who never voted for a master. Or do what the Sons would do if they ever found this, which is bring the slab down and seal it and call the denial a victory, and let the rhythm go ragged, and let the seepage climb, and let the water find out on a schedule nobody downstream could read until their children were already drinking it.

I am not built for the long view. I am built to reach the warm thing and get out before the warm thing keeps me. So I did the only piece of it that was mine to do. I took the raw rock out of my own pack, the ballast I climb with, dull and cold and useless, and I fed it into the seam where Samand's

had gone, into the face of the old one, and I felt the pulse take it, the gap between beats closing by a hair, the rhythm steadying like a held breath let slowly out. One feeding. One season, maybe, bought for a river that will never know my name. Then I took the cylinder, because a man has to eat, and I left Voskan her impossible report and her cooling sidearm and her principals who were going to be told there was nothing up here worth a flag, which was, for once, the truth.

"You are keeping it going," she said, watching me feed it. Not an accusation. Closer to envy.

"Somebody has to be staff," I said, and went back out into the cold.

The notch was closing when I came off the warm. The first snow had become the storm Yildiz read in the sky two days before she had any business knowing it was coming, and the wind had filled the side route I came up with white, and my heat was already pouring out of me into the dark the way it is built to, the one thing my body does exactly as designed. I went down faster than was survivable and slower than was safe, the cylinder warm against my sternum the whole way, my hands going stupid again past the second ledge, my reactions falling behind my eyes again degree by degree, the build forgetting nothing about how to climb and losing, second by second, the ability to make itself obey. I caught the maintained ground with the last working part of

me. I always catch the ground. One of these descents I will not, and the date on my wet print will finally turn out to have been a fair estimate.

I sold the cylinder to Hama for the number we agreed and a little more, because quiet money pays the little more when it does not want you talking. He never asked where the vein was. Nobody who buys hot rock in this range has ever asked where the vein was, and now I know why, and knowing why is the part I cannot put down. The whole mountain is staff. A line of people three thousand years long, hauling cold stone up to a warm thing they decline to explain, carrying the refined miracle back down, calling it asking the mountain, never once saying out loud that the river they have never seen is alive because of their backs. Leyla is still in her bed below the western approach, burning, speaking the long slow language, no apprentice, her daughter gone to Istanbul six years ago. When she dies this stretch goes unfed. The water will find out. It will take a while. It always takes a while.

I kept one cell back from the cylinder. I tell myself it is insurance, a winter behind the winter. That is not why. It sits in my breast pocket and it is still warm, days later, warmer than my own blood runs at the bottom of an October night, and on the worst nights I hold it the way Samand was holding his, and I feel my pulse lean toward the long slow rhythm folded into it, the old one calling its staff home. It is

the steadiest thing I have ever owned. It is killing me at exactly the speed it kept me alive. One of these cold mornings I am going to be too tired or too dry or just curious enough to climb back up the bad way and lay my warm hands on the stone and stop arguing with my own temperature for good, and the mountain will take the rock out of my pack with a clean efficiency, and somewhere a long way down a river nobody up here drinks from will run a half-degree cleaner, and not one soul holding a glass of it will ever know my name.

STORY 06 OF 07 · No. 15

SALT LINE

PATAGONIAN BASIN / ANDEAN LITHIUM FIELDS · GUANACO / ALTIPLANO-FORGED · 2,908 WORDS

The salt holds your weight if you walk it like you mean it and swallows you to the knee if you don't, so I walk the flat like I mean it, every night, out past the last camera to the dead shaft while the company sleeps and the pumps count down to the exhale. Forty minutes across the white at three thousand eight hundred meters, no light, no vehicle, no bottled air. A baseline can't make that walk. That's the whole reason I get hired to make it. You want something carried across the Atacama-Puna at altitude in the dark, you don't call a person. You call a guanaco.

That's the catalog word for what they made me. Altiplano-forged, the polite version, camelid line spliced through a human frame so the body works where the air gives up. My blood carries oxygen the way a sponge carries water, thick and greedy, so the thin air up here reads to me like sea level reads to you. My lungs filter dust and grit and

the fine salt the wind lifts off the pans. My body cycles water so tight I can drink once at dusk and not think about it again until the next dusk, wring every drop back out of myself before it leaves. They built me to belong on the one kind of ground nobody else can stand on. They put that in a brochure. Horizon Minerals shows the brochure to the Compact every time the permit comes up for review, the gene-forged worker who thrives at extraction altitude, no rotation needed, no medevac line, no liability. The brochure leaves out what the water does once it's inside a body built to keep all of it.

I'll get to the water. Let me get to the score first, because the score is why I was out on the flat the night the strike vote came due, and the score had a clock, and the clock was the exhale.

Patricia Mendoza drilled the core herself. She runs brine management for Horizon, an engineer, the kind who still believes a leak is a problem you fix instead of a number you carry, and three weeks ago she put a diamond bit down through the salt crust into the recharge zone under the easternmost pond and pulled up a meter of layered evidence: white salt, then gray, then a band the color of a bruise where the brine has soaked down through the aquifer feed. She sealed it in a survey tube, the kind rated to hold a sample stable for a century, and instead of logging it she hid it down the old number nine shaft, an abandoned exploratory bore at

the dead edge of the operational zone, and then she came to Javier Roca, and Roca came to me.

"Vasquez has the medical," Roca said. We were in the central camp, past dark, where the Compact police don't come. "Three years of it. The child's case file. The altitude records they keep filing as pre-existing. Tomorrow the vote passes, and a strike with documented health justification is a labor action the Compact has to answer in law. A strike without it is just twelve thousand people Horizon gets to call a disruption." He had the flat patience of a man who has counted his own people. "The medical proves we're sick. The core proves why. The journalist needs both in her hands before the vote, or the company drowns the medical in a hearing that takes two years we don't have. You walk the core out. You're the only one who can reach the shaft and be back before light without crossing a camera or a road."

"Why's it down a shaft," I said. "Why not in her pocket."

"Because the shaft fills," he said, and I understood, because everyone on the plateau understands the exhale.

Here's the flat, so the rest makes sense. Horizon pumps the spent brine into evaporation ponds and lets the altitude sun cook the water off, and on a cycle the pumps reverse to balance the field, and when they reverse the ponds breathe out. Chemical fog, heavier than air, the smell of metal and ammonia and something sweet underneath that you learn to be afraid of. It rolls off the ponds and pours downhill and

finds the low ground, and number nine shaft is the lowest dead ground at the east edge, so when the field exhales the shaft fills from the bottom up like a glass. Nineteen minutes, every cycle. Then the pumps right themselves and the fog burns off in the dry and the shaft is air again until the next one. The window between exhales is the only time you can be down the shaft and breathing. Mendoza knew that when she hid it there. She hid the proof of the poison inside the poison, where the only thing that could go and get it was a body the poison was already taking apart.

I had the window timed. I went down between exhales.

The shaft is hand-over-hand on a rusted ladder forty meters into the dark, and the dark down there is wet and close and tastes of the last fog that hasn't fully cleared, and my lungs did the thing they were built to do, sieved it, kept me clean a little longer than a baseline would have stayed clean. That's the gift. The gift is always also the trap. A body that holds the air longer is a body that holds the bad air longer too, sips it, lets it sit, the way mine sips and holds the field water until everything the water carries has had time to settle into the meat of me and stay. I climbed down into a thing designed to kill the men I work beside in five years and me in two, and the only reason I could climb down into it at all was that it was already inside me, so the dose meant less. You stop being afraid of a room you already live in.

The core was where Roca said, wedged in a dry niche above the old sump. A meter of salt and gray and bruise in a tube heavier than it had any right to be. I clipped it across my back and started up, and at thirty meters the field exhaled early.

It was not supposed to exhale early. I had the cycle to the minute and the cycle lied, or somebody changed it, and I felt the fog come up the shaft under me before I smelled it, a pressure on the backs of my knees like cold water rising, and then the smell, metal and ammonia and the sweet thing, climbing the ladder faster than I was. Nineteen minutes of poison filling a glass with me at the bottom of it.

I climbed. My lungs sieved what they could and what they couldn't sieve they passed into the blood, and the blood took it the way the blood takes everything, greedy, and somewhere around twenty meters my hands started to do a thing they have started to do this past year, a fine shake, the early signal of the load coming due. Up here we don't call it Drift. The catalog calls it Drift, the slow coming-apart they built into every forged line so the warranty has an end. We call it the salt going to your hands. Same thing. Kinder grammar. My hands shook on the rungs forty meters up a fog-filling shaft with a meter of evidence on my back, and I climbed on them anyway, because the alternative to climbing on shaking hands is staying down there with the thing that makes them shake, and I have never once chosen to stay.

I came out of the shaft head and shoulders into cold clean dark air and lay on the salt and breathed, and the flat was white under no moon, and the core was on my back, and a man was sitting on a hardcase forty meters off waiting for me to be done dying or not dying so we could talk.

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I knew him by the kit. The security contractor Horizon flew in last month, the one Vasquez is afraid of, the one whose job they wrote down as auditing camp access records. He audits people. He had a long gun across his knees and he didn't lift it, which told me more than lifting it would have.

"That's a hell of a walk on a forged set of lungs," he said. "I had a vehicle and bottled air and I still had to wait an hour at the road. You people are wasted on this."

"You changed the cycle."

"I moved the pumps up eleven minutes." He said it the way you'd admit to closing a window. "I wanted to see if you'd come up the ladder or stay down. The ones who stay down, that's a different report. You came up. Good. We can do business or we can do the other thing, and the other thing is paperwork for both of us."

"I'm carrying a strike out of here," I said. "Not selling it to you."

He almost smiled. "You're carrying a meter of salt that says the brine reached the recharge zone. I know. I read Mendoza's logs before I burned them. Here's the part Roca didn't tell you, because Roca doesn't know it." He stood, slow, gun still down. "We already have that data. We've had it three years. Horizon knows the pond leaks. NAF knows. The number isn't forty years and it isn't twenty-five, those are the Compact's numbers, ours is better than that, ours is exact, and you want to know how it got exact?"

"You measured the water."

"Water's slow," he said. "Water you have to model. We don't model. We read." He nodded at me, at my hands, at the shake I was trying to keep off the strap. "We staffed this field with your line on purpose. A body that cycles water that tight concentrates everything the water carries, and it does it years ahead of a baseline, in a curve so clean you could set a clock by it. Vasquez keeps her medical records like they're a weapon. They are. They're our weapon. Every chart she files on a forged worker going to the salt in his hands, every altitude case she swears is the brine, that's our gauge reading. You're not labor that got sick. You're the instrument. We didn't poison the canary by accident. We bought the canary at catalog price and we read the canary, and the canary's been telling us to the month how long this field stays profitable before a baseline gets sick enough that the law has to notice." He let that sit. "The core's nothing.

The core's last year's news in a tube. What's new tonight is you walking it to a journalist and twelve thousand people voting in four hours to put their bodies in front of it. That's the only number that ever mattered, and it's the one we can't read off a chart. So. Sell me the tube. Walk back to camp. Vote no in the morning. Live the two years out quiet in a clinic I'll pay for."

I have been offered the clinic before. Every forged on this plateau has been offered the clinic. It is the cleanest offer the company makes, and it is the worst one, because it only ever costs you the thing the offer is for.

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The run down the plateau was the second walk and it earned the straightness of telling it straight.

I went west off the flat the way the vehicles can't, down the scree the road switchbacks around, and he had the road and the bottled air and I had the dark and a body that holds the dark, and for the first kilometer that was enough. Then the early exhale caught the low wind and came down off the ponds behind me, the whole field breathing out at once, and the fog poured down the slope on the same line I was running, and I ran inside it because inside it his optics were as blind as my eyes and my lungs were the only set of lungs on that slope still pulling anything worth pulling. The gift

and the trap, one more time, the last time. I outran a man through the one weather that was killing me because it was killing me slower than it would have killed him. He stopped at the fog line. He's not paid enough to walk into the exhale on baseline lungs, and he knew I knew it, and he let me go, because a contractor who reads bodies for a living had already done the arithmetic on mine and decided the salt in my hands would finish the job his report would have started.

I came into the camp edge at the gray hour with the core on my back and the fog combed out of my coat and my hands shaking so plain I had to carry the tube against my chest with both arms like a child.

Sable Rourke was where Roca said she'd be, at the back of the medical tent, recorder already running, and Vasquez was beside her with three years of charts in a hard folder, and there it was, both halves in one room, the medical and the core, paper enough to make the strike a thing the Compact would have to answer in law instead of in force. I put the tube on the table. I had walked it out. The job was done and paid the second the tube touched the wood.

And I stood there in the gray with the job done and understood that the contractor had told me the truth, which is the cruelest thing he could have done. The paper was real and the paper would help and the paper was also last year's news in a tube. Horizon had priced the core. Horizon had priced the hearing, the two years, the medical, all of it, read

clean off the bodies of my own line a chart at a time. The one number they had never been able to read, the only number they were afraid of, was the one no instrument gives you. Whether the canaries, having spent their whole engineered lives being read, would stand up in a room at dawn and be the proof out loud, with their own shaking hands held up where the cameras and the Compact and twelve thousand votes could see them.

Vasquez reached for the core. I kept my hand on it a second longer than I needed to.

"The tube proves the water," I said. "It won't prove the rest. The rest they read off us, and a chart in a folder reads like a chart. They've been counting on us being data our whole lives. Quiet. On paper. Filed." My hands were shaking on the tube and for once I didn't try to still them. "Put me at the vote. Not the file. Me. Hands up."

Rourke's recorder was running. Vasquez looked at my hands the way a doctor looks, and then the way a person looks, and she didn't argue, because she had been writing those hands down as a number for three years and she had always known they were a person.

So I'll tell you where the line is, since the flat is full of lines and they all turn out to be the same one. There's the salt line you walk like you mean it. There's the line of us in our insufficient respirators going to shift at sunrise, the company's favorite photograph. There's the bruise line in the

core where the brine crossed into the water the whole hemisphere is counting on. And there's the line the company drew through every one of us the day they bought us at catalog price to be the gauge they'd never have to call a poisoning, twelve thousand needles in twelve thousand quiet dials, reading out the end of the field to anyone with the charts and no eyes for the hands.

The sun comes up fast on the Atacama-Puna. White crust, blue sky, the machinery laid out across the only flat geometry for a hundred kilometers, and at the edge of the operational zone the line of workers walking to a shift that isn't going to happen this morning. I was at the front of the room when the vote opened, where the cameras were, with my respirator off and my hands up and shaking so the whole camp could watch the salt come due in them in real time, a body reading itself out loud for once instead of being read. The flat went white behind us all the way to the Andes. Somewhere east of it the dead shaft was breathing fog into the dark for nobody, filling and clearing on its cycle, faithful, the way everything up here keeps doing the small dumb job the old world wound it up to do. I held my hands up until they ached. They'd been an instrument my whole life. I wanted them to be a witness once before the salt took them for good.

STORY 07 OF 07 · No. 24

DEAD WATER

ANTARCTIC PENINSULA OASIS · WEDDELL SEAL / POLAR-FORGED · 2,954 WORDS

The warm is what kills people like me, which is the joke nobody on this continent gets, because everybody down here is busy being killed by the cold. I sat in the supply tent at the Emergence Zone with a heater two meters off my boots and I could feel my whole build hating it. My heart was running fat and lazy. My skin had gone the wrong kind of tight. A baseline puts me in a heated room and thinks he is doing me a kindness, and what he is actually doing is putting a deep-water animal in a bathtub and wondering why it looks sick. I shut the heater off and sat in my own cold and felt my pulse find its slow honest rate again, and that was better, that was the first decent thing that had happened to me in two days.

I am polar-forged. Weddell line, the catalog calls it, after a seal nobody alive has ever seen, the one that goes under the Antarctic ice and stays under for an hour and comes up

through a hole the size of a dinner plate that it found in the dark by listening. They built me to do that. Blubber under the skin that reads as fat to a baseline and reads as armor to the water. Lungs that fold down flat when the pressure says fold. Eyes that open up in black meltwater like somebody turned a lamp on behind them. And a heart that, when I go under, drops to a crawl on purpose, twelve beats a minute, fifteen, hoarding the air, running my body on almost nothing while I work in the cold and the dark where no baseline gets to follow. That is the gift. The catalog never prints the cost, because the cost is the same machine. The slow heart is supposed to climb back up when I surface. Mine has started taking its time. The crews have a word for the lag between coming up and your pulse being a living pulse again. They call it the slack. Most of my model run a slack of ten seconds. I have been clocking forty. Forty seconds, every surface, where I am up in the air and breathing and my heart is still down in the dive, deciding whether to bother. One of these days the slack is not going to close. That is the whole owner's manual. I am dry, no faction ticket, no chain feeding me, an expiry two years past her stability window, and the only place my body still does the one thing it was built to do is the exact place that is teaching my heart how to stop.

Which is why I took the job, and the job was supposed to be nothing. A marker, Sokol said. Quiet money out of the Ice Shelf Approach, an EO fixer with soft hands who never once

said the word EO. The melt had opened a crevasse in the Emergence Zone, the way it does, the ice pulling back a meter a week and handing up whatever it had been keeping, and at the bottom of the new crevasse the meltwater had filled an old shaft, a pre-war thing, finished smooth in a way nothing built since can match. Twelve meters down, water the temperature of a heart attack, there was a marker. Sokol's word. Bring it up, hand it over, get paid enough to buy a season of suppression and one clinic visit to a doctor who would put his hand on my chest and lie to me kindly about the slack. A ghost menu job. A catalog run with a single item on the list. He did not tell me what the marker was and I did not ask, because dry expiries who ask questions get walked off the edge of the flight window, and because I needed the money the way you need air at twelve meters, which is to say I had already stopped counting the reasons not to.

Here is the Peninsula, so the rest lands. The ice is leaving. It has been leaving for forty years and now it is leaving fast, and under it is everything the old world buried before it drowned, and three factions are down here pretending to do science at each other across the rock. EO holds the logistics and calls it security. NAF runs a research station up at Shackleton and calls its spies geologists. The PRC has a climate team that is, on paper, four mathematicians and a kettle. They all want the same thing under the same ice and

none of them will say its name, which my people have a saying for. Document War rules. Everybody wants the archive, nobody will share the archive, so everybody guards it by making sure nobody can have it, including themselves. Out past the Emergence Zone there is a sealed pre-war installation the rumor calls Erebus, and six weeks ago an EO commander named Volkov opened its outer door, looked inside, and went silent. Did not report. Did not come back. EO has been air-dropping supplies to her last coordinates on a standing order and somebody out there keeps collecting the crates and stacking them empty, on schedule, faithful, like a dead woman keeping office hours. I did not know any of that mattered to my marker. I found out the way I find out everything, which is too late and underwater.

The whiteout was nine hours out when I went down into the crevasse, and the whiteout is the clock you cannot argue with. The weather sensors at Base Meridian give you six to twelve hours of warning and then the world goes white and the wind goes to a scream and you do not move, you do not fly, you do not talk past two meters, you stay exactly where the weather found you for anywhere up to eighteen hours. The clock here is not on your wrist. It is in the sky and the sky does not care. And the ice has a second clock under the first one, slower and worse, because the ice opens and it seals. The crevasse that handed up the shaft was already a degree colder than yesterday. The water down there would

be closing its own door soon, days maybe, maybe less, and whatever was in the shaft when it sealed would go back to being the ice's property for another forty years. So. A marker, a flooded shaft, a whiteout coming, and a body built for exactly this and dying of exactly this. I roped down into the blue dark of the crevasse and I was, against all my better instincts, almost happy, because down there in the cold I work right.

I was not the only one who knew about the shaft.

She was already on the ledge when I reached it, suiting up in the dim, and I knew what she was before I saw her face, the way you always know, the recognition protocol firing in the back of the skull before the front of it catches up. Same flat economy of movement. Same wrong fat. Same way of standing too still. Polar-forged, my line, my model, and when she turned her head I knew the face too, because I had trained beside it in an EO tank program a lifetime ago. Tove. We came out of the same wet print, she and I, two prints off one master, and the last time I saw her she had a future and I had a number. Now she had an NAF ticket clipped to a suit that fit her, chain-fed, extraction guaranteed, somebody coming for her for sure. And I had quiet money and a slack of forty seconds. Same body. Opposite paperwork. That is the entire history of the gene-forged in two women on a ledge.

"They sent you," she said. Not surprised. Tired.

"They sent both of us," I said. "Somebody's paying twice and it isn't us."

She almost smiled. We did not fight on the ledge. There is a thing baselines never understand about two of the same model in a bad place, which is that the recognition cuts deeper than the contract, and neither of us wanted to be the one who killed the only other person on Earth with her exact heart. So we did the stupid professional thing. We dove together. Two factions, one shaft, and the only honest agreement in a hundred kilometers, which was that the water did not care whose money we were holding and would kill us both impartially if we got cute.

The dive is where the body is the only reason any of this is possible, so I will give it to you straight. We went down into the shaft and the meltwater closed over us at a cold that would stop a baseline's heart inside ninety seconds, would lock his hands and fold his lungs and drown him in his own seized chest, and my heart did the opposite of stopping. It slowed. It dropped down into the dive the way it was built to, twelve beats, ten, my whole body going quiet and efficient and patient in the dark, my eyes opening up until the black shaft turned to grey turned to a kind of dim silver, and I could see the walls, smooth, machined, a corridor of finished metal that the ice had drunk and kept for longer than there have been factions. Tove beside me, a slow grey shape, her bubbles small and rationed. We did not need lights. We were

the lights. The shaft went down past twelve meters because Sokol had lied or did not know, down to twenty, twenty-five, and at the bottom there was a chamber, and in the chamber there was a body, and the body was Volkov's diver.

He had been down here a while. The cold keeps things honest. He was roped to a console grown into the wall, and he had died holding a cylinder against his chest, a smooth grey object the size of a thermos, and that was the marker, that was Sokol's marker, that was the thing three factions were spending operatives on. I knew it was the third Erebus key before I knew how I knew. You do not survive as a dry expiry without learning to read a room you were lied into. Two keys found, the rumor said. The melt was giving up the third, and a dead EO diver had got to it first and then, for some reason I had not yet earned, had stopped.

I took the cylinder out of his frozen arms. That was the job. And the moment it came loose, the console in the wall woke up. Not lights. A pulse, slow, a cold blue beat in the metal, and I felt it find me. I want to be precise about this because it is the part I cannot get warm again about. The console did not scan the cylinder. It scanned me. A field of attention, the way it feels when a guard's eyes land on you across a room, except this came from the wall and it went straight through the suit and the blubber and into the marrow, and the blue pulse matched itself to my heart, my slow diving heart, twelve beats, and held there, reading me,

the way you read a hand laid flat on a face you are trying to recognize in the dark. The cylinder in my glove was not a key. I was. The lock had been waiting twenty-five meters under the ice not for an object but for a body, a specific body, cold-built, slow-hearted, a body the old world made on purpose for the cold it knew was coming. Three keys, and the third key was never a thing you carried. It was a person you sent down to be read.

And then the slack came for me, down there, which is the cost arriving exactly on time. My heart had gone deep for the dive and the console had matched it and held it and now the panic that should have climbed it back up just did not come. Twelve beats. Ten. I hung in the dead water with the future in my hand and felt my own pulse decline to participate, the slack stretching past forty, past anything, my vision graying not from the depth but from the heart, and I understood with the cylinder pulsing against my glove that the place that built me to reach this had finally been handed the chance to keep me. The water was the temperature of the inside of the wall. My body had stopped being able to tell the difference between itself and the cold. That is the build. The reach and the grave are the same engineering and you only ever notice when they arrive in the same second.

Tove caught me. Her hand on my chest, hard, the recognition protocol turned into the only kind of medicine we have, which is another body that runs the same. She put

her forehead to my mask in the silver dark and held station while my heart decided, and somewhere in the forty-fifth second or the sixtieth it climbed, grudging, one beat and then two, the slack closing the way a door closes that you can hear has warped. And while she held me I read the console over her shoulder, the part of it that was not a lock, the part Volkov's diver had spent his last air on. Volkov's log. Six weeks of it. She had opened Erebus and found the seed vault and the manufacturing templates, water and power and food, the old world's whole recipe book for staying alive. And one more category. The wet prints. Erebus held the original gene templates, the master files, the first drafts of every forged line that ever got walked into a tank, including mine, including Tove's, the literal recipe for people like us and the suppression schema that goes with it, which is the same document as the off switch. The three-key protocol was not built so the factions would share. It was built so the door would only open for the bodies the templates made. Volkov worked it out, and then she did the only clean thing left. She sent her diver down to disarm the third key and she went silent and she let the ice start to take Erebus back, because whoever opened that door did not get a treasure. They got the ownership papers for an entire kind of person. Mine. Hers. The diver in my arms.

So here is the arithmetic, done at twenty-five meters with my heart on probation and a whiteout closing the sky.

Carry the key up. Hand Sokol the cylinder, let EO read my body at the door, and watch a faction take possession of the master file for every forged on Earth, the recipe and the leash in one archive, and get paid enough to buy myself a season of not dying. The body they built to open the door is the door. Or leave it. Stay dry, stay broke, let the slack win on its own schedule, and let the ice do to Erebus what the ice does, which is open and seal and take things and not give them back. Or surface with Volkov's truth instead of Sokol's marker, and say the word recipe to three factions two kilometers from a sealed vault, and watch them go to war over the ownership of my kind faster than the melt ever could. Every road that buys me the clinic sells the wet print of every person who runs the heart I run. The catalog never printed that either.

I am not going to tell you which I carried up. Tove and I went up the shaft together in the dark, slow, rationing, two prints off one master with one cylinder and forty seconds of stolen heartbeat between us, and we surfaced into the bottom of the crevasse with the wind already starting its scream up top, the whiteout arriving early, the way the worst clocks always do. We did not talk. There is nothing two of the same body need to say at the surface that the dive has not already said. She had a ticket and somebody coming. I had the cylinder, or I did not, and a slack that had not fully

closed this time and a heart still running cold up here in the air where it is supposed to climb.

The melt was already pulling the other way. Three days, maybe less, and the cold would seal the shaft and the dead diver and the blue patient lock back into forty years of ice. I stood at the lip of the crevasse with the whiteout coming down white and total and erasing the rock, the tent, Tove, my own hands, and I felt the one thing my build does perfectly even on the surface, which is keep the cold close, the dive reflex that will not switch off anymore, my heart down at twelve beats in the open air like it never came up at all. The ice opens and it seals. It takes things and does not return them. I waited for the white to take me too, with my heart still in the dive and the future in my hand or back in the dark where it belonged, and I could not have told you, in the slack, which of us I had decided to bury.