

TERRA CONFLICTUS

FIELD FICTION

VOLUME 05

SURPLUS STOCK

SEVEN STORIES



JESSE ALEXANDER

TERRA CONFLICTUS 2066

FIELD FICTION · COLLECTED VOLUME 05

SURPLUS STOCK

31 AUG - 6 SEP 2066

7 STORIES · 21,997 WORDS

Seven this stretch, one a night, seven nights running. The daily desk has not managed that since June and I want it on the record before I start complaining.

EDITOR'S NOTE

Seven this stretch, one a night, seven nights running. The daily desk has not managed that since June and I want it on the record before I start complaining.

Every narrator in this volume is surplus. Cave survey stock the SCA stopped resupplying once the city grew its own maps. Thermal survey stock a PRC program dropped when the sensor packages came in cheaper. Steppe haul, closed when the trucks came back to the corridor. Contamination recovery, buried line, riot line discharged at the gate. The one baseline in here is a trauma tech whose whole trade exists because repair was never in the budget line for a body with a date on it. Nobody terminated any of these people. The orders stopped, the paperwork did the rest slowly, and they are all still walking around with a skill that only ever had one buyer.

Five of the seven then run the same machine, and I am not going to dress that up as a theme. A discontinued specialist goes under something on a clock her own body is keeping, brings up a sealed object, and finds a number inside it that an institution had been keeping off its own paper. Thirty months of water turning in a brass drum. Forty thousand people sorted out quietly across four spring censuses. Eleven stones at a road junction. A strain designation that

matches the stock card in her own chest pocket. A pencil column on a clipboard beside a document furnace. I have put the closest of them as far apart as seven slots allow. None of them gets to publish either, which is the other half of the machine. The number ends up with a technician on the B shift, or under a floor plate, or in an audit that will happen without her.

Pass Fee is the outlier and that is why it sits late. The thing worth keeping there is not a number at all. It is thirty years of knowing which stone holds at the third turn, and it changes hands at a tailgate in about forty seconds, delivered to the only person standing there. Read them in the order printed. It opens in a culvert at minute two of the Memorial speech and closes with a woman who has lost most of her hearing, watching the morning drift come along the canopy line, looking exactly the way it always looks.

// EDDA SORREL, FIELD FICTION

CONTENTS

01 **BELOW LINE**

FLOODED LONDON / TOWER QUARTER

02 **SHORT BREAK**

KALEMIE / COPPER QUARTER

03 **BLANK STOCK**

NEO-TOKYO / DEEP RAIL

04 **FOSSIL WATER**

SAHARAN OASIS / THE OLD WELLFIELD

05 **HEADCOUNT**

EURASIAN STEPPES / KAZAN SUPPLY CORRIDOR

06 **PASS FEE**

SHATTER BELT / ZAGROS PASSES

07 **SOUND SHADOW**

AMAZONIAN METROPLEX / ROOT LEVEL

STORY 01 OF 07 · No. 39

BELOW LINE

FLOODED LONDON / TOWER QUARTER · HYENA /
CONTAMINATION RECOVERY STOCK · 3,197 WORDS

The Memorial speech runs thirty-one minutes and four seconds, and it has run thirty-one minutes and four seconds every year since somebody typed it, because the entire point of the thing is that it never changes. Same text in every district. Same pauses in the same places. The Resistance stands its garrison in the Tower yard and reads the 2062 dead in the same order at the same speed while the ruins listen, and the ruins listen because attendance is mandatory and because there is nothing else to do at that hour.

Thirty-one minutes and four seconds is also the only window in the year when nobody at all is standing over the Tower Quarter lower archive.

I was in the culvert at minute two.

The culvert is a hundred and ten meters of pre-Upheaval storm drain running from the Tide Road under the old wharf

into the Tower's lower services. It is a tidal corridor. Walkable hallway for forty minutes either side of slack, drowned pipe the rest of the day, and this year the anniversary hour sat close enough to high water that the walkable part was already past my knees. The water in there is not water. It is thirty years of soak, brine and sediment and whatever the old city kept in its cellars, and it grows the black. Thames black. Rot. Mold pathogen, if you are an EO doctor writing a survey. Whatever you call it, it takes a baseline's lungs in six weeks and a good set of filters in twenty minutes.

I do not wear filters. That is the whole reason anybody in the ruins talks to me.

Contamination recovery stock, hyena line, built in 2049 under a Tidal Authority sanitation contract for post-flood decontamination of exactly this kind of site. Immune system tuned so hot it eats anything that comes at it. A gut that processes what would kill a room. No disgust reflex left at all, which is a social death worse than the fevers. Front-loaded build, all shoulder and neck and jaw, so I drag more than I weigh and bite through a corroded clamp that would take a baseline a hacksaw and a prayer. And a skull nobody has ever failed to read. People clock my label in a second, then do the arithmetic on what a body like mine is for, and then they stop looking at me the way you stop looking at a drain.

The Tidal Authority does not exist. Its law is preserved in sealed archives, which is a lovely phrase for dead. I am a piece of equipment whose employer is a filing cabinet, and four years ago the people who inherited the city put me in the one place equipment like me goes.

That would be below line. Ground floor is storage or sacrifice, third floor and above is life, and everything between the water and the third floor is the part of the Belt that is technically habitable and functionally not. Fifteen degrees colder. Rot endemic. Permanent Flooded Zone Reassignment is what they call it on the paper, and they hand it down for salvage ownership violations, which is what I got, because I pulled a pump housing out of the Drowned Tube and took it to the Interchange and the Resistance decided after the fact that the housing was institutional. Their definition of institutional expands with political need. So does the floor you sleep on. No floor captain will take you once you have been sent down. They do not have to refuse you. They just stop knowing your name, and after a while so do you.

Deshi found me at the Interchange on market day, standing where the fish gets sold because it is the only stall where my presence does not cost the vendor customers.

He is a small tidy man with a Tower Quarter maintenance credential he has been polishing for eight months, and he did the thing the polite ones do, looking

straight at my face the whole time to prove he could. "The 2062 damage report," he said. "Lower archive, infrastructure section. Royal Phantom Corps letterhead, filed by a Lieutenant Sinclair before the engagement. Paper. It was never scanned."

"The lower archive is sealed."

"Three months ago. Voss called it an Infrastructure Assessment Quarantine and locked the whole environmental section, staff included." He let that sit. "The mold containment barrier in there failed this week. Nobody with lungs is going in until they can vent it, and they cannot vent it until the spring census gets them the fan money, and that is next year."

"So you want the rot room."

"I want what is in the rot room." He put a folded card on the crate between us. Ferris Guild stamp, Dov's initials, and under it a permanent Belt rating with a cable-access window attached. Not water. Not scrip. A guild-stamped piece of paper that would put my feet on the rope bridges legally and my bed above the flood line for the rest of whatever I have.

I want to be honest about the moment I took it, because it is the only part of this that is actually mine. I did not weigh it. I did not ask what a man with a maintenance credential wanted with a four year old engineering file. I picked the card up before he finished sliding it over. They had built a lock out of weather, and I was the one key in the city, and for

the first time in four years somebody was paying me for the body instead of sentencing me with it.

The grate at the Tower end is Victorian iron with a modern clamp somebody added around 2050 and then forgot. Salt has been working on that clamp for sixteen years and I finished it in eleven seconds with my back teeth, which sounds like a boast and is only a description of what a bone-processing jaw does to a hinge that has been soaking since before the Battle. It came apart with a sound like a cough. I went through the grate into the lower services with the water at my thighs and the whole hundred-ton weight of the Tower sitting on my head.

Above me, faint through two floors of stone, the speech reached the seventeen from the north garrison. Everybody knows the speech. You could set a watch to it, and I had.

Minute six.

The lower services run under the keep and open onto the archive stair, and the archive stair is where you learn what a failed containment barrier actually means. It means the black is not on the walls anymore. It is the walls. The stone had gone soft and furred and pale grey-green, and the air on the stair was so thick with spore that my hand lamp made a solid cone of it, a beam you could have leaned on. There was

a Resistance notice bolted at the top, laminated, spelling out the quarantine and the penalty for entry. Somebody had stapled a paper respirator to the frame under it. Joke or kindness, I could not tell you.

I went down the stair breathing normally. That is the part I have never been able to explain to anyone above the line. It smells like a wet cellar. Bad smell, not a frightening one, and my body has never once cared, and the not caring is what makes me useful and also why the wardens at the Interchange will not take money out of my hand. Nobody wants to stand next to the thing that lives in the room where you would die. They are not wrong. I would feel it too.

The infrastructure section was the third bay in, and it had already started coming down. Steel shelving is fine in a dry room. In three months of unvented soak the uprights go to lace, and the section had leaned into itself and dumped four decades of borough council paperwork into a knee-deep slurry. I have been in plenty of rooms where history is stored badly. This one was digesting it.

Sinclair's file was where the old system said it would be, fourth run, a green board box marked TOWER QUARTER CONVERTER, STRUCTURAL, and it was intact, because it sat on the third shelf and because whoever boxed it in 2062 wrapped it in the kind of oilcloth they do not make anymore.

Somebody was already holding it.

He was crouched in the aisle with the box open on his forearm, a hand lamp in his teeth and a half mask over his face, and he came up fast when my light hit him and I knew the shape of him before I knew the man. There are maybe nine of us in the ruins. You learn the silhouette.

"Tolan."

He took the lamp out of his teeth. "Marrow."

We were sentenced the same week, four years back, and for a while we shared a stairwell in Tower 11 and an understanding about not talking. He is the older build, 2044, first run of the line, and he had gone original the way the early ones do. His immunity had been walking backward for two years. That was why he had a mask on in the one room in London where our whole design purpose is not needing one, and why he had come here on a filter clock.

"How long have you got on those," I said.

"Long enough."

"Tolan."

"Twenty-two minutes." He said it flatly. "Nineteen now. Who is paying you?"

"Who is paying you?"

Neither of us answered, which was its own answer. He was working for the station. There is only one buyer in the ruins who hands a below-line body a set of good EO filters and a job, and it is the people on the high ground who need this file to stay lost rather than found.

He went for the aisle mouth and I went for him, and it was not a fight anybody would pay to watch. Two heavy people slipping in paste in the dark. He got an elbow into my throat, which was smart, and I got a fist in the strap of his mask, which was smarter. Then the shelving decided. Nine meters of rotted upright let go all at once and came over us like a wave, and I did the only thing my build has ever been good for, which is take weight. I got my shoulders under the run and held it long enough for him to roll clear, and while I was doing that I found out what the fevers have been costing me, because both hips lit up like a struck match and something in my left one made a noise. The immune system they gave me does not distinguish between a spore and my own cartilage. It has been eating me since I was twenty. I am thirty-six. The joke below line is that I am running someone else's firmware and the someone else has not paid maintenance since 2049.

The shelf came down across the aisle and the box went into the slurry and both our lamps went with it, and for four seconds the lower archive was as dark as the inside of a closed mouth.

Then his light came back on, low, and he was sitting in the water two meters from me with the file against his chest and his mask hanging off one strap.

He had maybe fourteen minutes. Without the mask he had considerably less, and both of us knew exactly what his

lungs looked like now, because his are what mine will be in nine years.

"Read it," he said.

"What?"

"You will not believe me." He was breathing shallow, which does not help, which he knew. "Read the annex."

Minute twenty-one.

I opened the oilcloth in the water with his lamp in my mouth. The report was there, close typed, the converter damage laid out in the flat furious voice of an engineer writing at two in the morning about something that was about to be somebody else's problem. That was Deshi's prize, and I could feel through the paper what it was worth.

Clipped to the back of it was a second document on newer stock, and the newer stock was why the section got sealed three months ago, and it had nothing to do with Sinclair.

It was the Spring Maintenance Census. Four years of it, the whole scheduled public ritual where the Resistance measures every building and logs every cable and makes no decisions. That is what they tell you. No decisions are made during the census. It is pure data collection.

Cross-referenced against it, in a table somebody had built with real care, was the relay tolerance model and the inundation contour for the projected spring event. And cross-referenced against that was the reassignment log. Every Permanent Flooded Zone Reassignment for four years, by name, by tower, by floor.

Here is the part I read three times with the water coming up my back.

The reassignments do not sort by offense. I checked. There are people down here on a first salvage flag and people upstairs on their fourth, and the disciplinary column is noise, it does not predict anything. What predicts it is the column beside it, which is a tolerance score, and a tolerance score is a number describing how long a given body can be expected to remain alive in a below-line environment. High tolerance goes down. Low tolerance stays up. That is the entire model. That is the whole law.

And the annex was dated before the reassignments. They built the table first.

The last sheet was towers and floors in one column and a figure in the next, and the header on the figure column said EXPECTED RETAINED. It took me a while, sitting in that water, to understand that retained does not mean rescued. It means still there afterward. It is not an evacuation plan. It is a projection of who will still be alive on the floors they are not coming back for, and the reason my building has a good

number next to it is that my building is full of bodies like mine.

I have spent four years believing I was being punished. I was being placed.

They will not have to leave us. We are already left. When the bore comes over the Belt and the upper floors have room for a fraction of forty thousand, nobody will have to stand up and decide who drowns, because the deciding was done quietly over four spring censuses by people who never once had to say it out loud, and it will look on the day like weather.

"You knew," I said.

"I guessed." Tolan's voice had gone wet. "Two weeks ago. Bell in Tower 7 has been moving sleeping platforms since June and she would not tell me who told her. So I asked the station for filters and a job."

"The station wants this buried."

"The station wants it in a drawer at Alpha where it is worth something." He almost laughed and it came out wrong. "Everybody wants it in a drawer. That is the only market there is."

Minute twenty-six. The lower archive had gone from knee to hip while we sat there, because the tide does not care what you have just found out about yourself, and Tolan had four minutes of filter and no filter on, and I had a green board box worth a permanent Belt rating.

I have thought about that aisle a lot. I would like to tell you it was hard. It was not hard, and that is not because I am good. It is because a body built to drag weight through contaminated water does not experience the choice as a choice. I got him under the arms and I went up the archive stair backward with his heels knocking every tread and the file jammed inside my jacket against my ribs, and both my hips screamed the entire way, and somewhere around the top I started making the sound. The stock does that. Under load, under fear, the vocal architecture they gave me opens up and produces a noise like somebody enjoying themselves enormously, and there is no off switch on it, and I have made that sound at funerals. I went through the lower services and out the grate into the culvert laughing my head off with a dying man on my back.

We came out onto the Tide Road at minute thirty. Above us, across the water, the garrison in the Tower yard was arriving at the last line of the speech, which is the same last line every year, about the ones who stayed.

Deshi paid. He is decent in the way that people who want a good thing very badly are decent, and when I handed him the report with the annex no longer clipped to it he did not ask where the second document had gone, which told me he

had known there was one. He shook my hand and his hand did not hesitate, and I noticed that the way you notice weather.

I have not used the card.

Tolan is in a clinic on the Slab that Clara James runs out of a converted plant room, and he will not be leaving it, and when he asked me from the cot whether it had been worth it I said yes, because the truth was long and he was tired. The annex is wrapped in his old oilcloth under a floor plate in a room I do not sleep in. I have thought about Bell in Tower 7, who is already building platforms and does not need me to tell her. I have thought about the man in the green coat, who pauses three seconds before a borough he is about to cut. I have thought about nailing it to the announcement board at market, and about what forty thousand people do with a number when there is nothing to be done with a number.

Mostly I have thought about the fact that going above the line does not take my name off the table. It just moves it to the column of the people they expect to lose.

There is a stain on the wall of my room, chest height, brown at the top and black at the bottom, where the water sits when the spring tide comes in and where it has sat every spring since before I was sentenced here. I got back at four in the morning with the rot still in my clothes and I put my hand flat on it, and the wall gave a little under my palm, soft

as bread, the way stone goes when it has been in soak long enough to stop being stone and start being a suggestion.

Then I stood there in the dark in that cold room and I could not stop laughing.

STORY 02 OF 07 · No. 44

SHORT BREAK

KALEMIE / COPPER QUARTER · CAPE BUFFALO / ACU RIOT
LINE STOCK · 3,209 WORDS

They billed me as MBOGO, which is what the Copper Quarter calls anything with a horn boss and no reverse gear, and they printed the purse in months.

Not francs. Not scrip. Months. Fourteen of them for a main event win, struck off a Copperbelt contract term by a clerk at a manifest window who stamps the chit exactly the way she stamps a cargo certification, because it is the same window and the same stamp. That is the joke at the bottom of Kalemie. Meridian East moves eighteen percent of the Copperbelt out the back door on paper the ACU has never once looked at hard, and a woman who wants a year of her life back has to get hit in the head in front of four hundred people to get a slip off the same printer.

I signed for six fights. I was three in when the promoter started shortening the break.

The shed used to roast ore. They pulled the furnaces out in the fifties and left the floor, iron plate laid over a heat well that has not been cold since before the Drought, and in the wet season the whole building sweats like a lung. Lubunga hung the ring lamps low so the crowd could see sweat and blood in color. He understood that men who spend eleven hours a day breathing acid drainage in a copper adit will pay to watch two engineered bodies find out which one the room was built to kill.

The room was built to kill me. I want that clear up front, because everything after depends on it.

ACU wrote me for a riot line. The section language is crowd denial asset, which is a beautiful phrase for a thing that stands in a doorway and does not move while four hundred people decide whether they want the doorway more than they want their ribs. Cape buffalo stock. Fused cervical plate from the base of the skull down through the shoulders, dermal boss across the forehead thick enough that a baton comes off it like rain off a hood, mass laid low and dense so that shoving me is a project you have to schedule. I have been hit by a truck. The truck came off worse in the paperwork.

Here is what the section language does not say. A body that size in a basin that humid cannot lose heat. I have almost no skin surface for the volume I am carrying, my sweat is thin and useless, and under load my core climbs like a bad debt. Four minutes of real work and I am eating myself. Six and my vision goes white at the edges, and then the white comes in, and then I am a very large animal standing in a room full of light with no idea what the light is for.

So the ACU issued me a water truck.

That is not a metaphor. Riot sections in the Corridor rolled with a bowser and a cooling crew, three baselines with hoses and ice sleeves and a chilled saline line, and the spec called them integral. Integral. We were one machine with two payrolls. I held the doorway and they held my temperature, and the day the Wardens decided a line of horned women in visors looked worse than forty years of community relationship, they dissolved the sections. The crews went to civilian contract. I went to whatever I could find.

They built me half a machine and gave the other half to somebody else. Then they took her away and told me I was surplus.

Her name was Mwadi Kabeya. She ran the bowser behind my section for six years. She had a way of coming in from behind on the count, hand flat on the back of my neck at the

exact spot where the plate ends and the blood runs shallow, so that the cold went straight up into my skull and the white went out of my eyes, and she never once said anything encouraging, which I have always considered the greatest professional courtesy I have ever received.

When the section dissolved she took a works contract in the Copperbelt. Eighty-one months. She was forty-four and she signed it because outside the works there is no water registration, and without water registration there is no clinic, no ration, no transit paper, and the Mombasa Road at night. The ACU has a word for that, and it is not a punishment, because the ACU never punishes anybody. They withdraw everything that makes staying possible and let you notice.

Sixty-two months left when I signed for the card. Fourteen a win. I could do the arithmetic on my fingers, and I have very few good fingers.

The first two fights were shelf stock the promoter bought cheap out of the Mombasa Road contractor pool, and I ended both the way I end things, which is one collision and a conversation with the floor. A fight that lasts nineteen seconds does not sell drink. That made me a problem.

He came to the bench after. Faustin Lubunga, sixty, soft in the middle, with the specific gentleness of a man who has never had to raise his voice in his life.

"Beautiful," he said. "Terrible business. What do I sell at nineteen seconds? Four hundred men rode a truck ninety minutes and now they are angry at me."

"Then match me properly."

He looked genuinely delighted. I have thought about that look many times since.

"That," he said, "is exactly what I intend to do."

Her name was Nsenga and they billed her as RELAY. Wild dog stock, ACU pack template, the pursuit build. Fifty kilos wet. Ears like sails, and the lean frame the Wardens use to run a man down across nine kilometers of scrub and still have breath to read him his transit status at the end of it.

A dog like that cannot hurt me. She knows it. Everyone in the shed knows it. She has no mass and no leverage, and if she stands still inside my arms for a quarter second she goes out of the building on a door.

She has no intention of standing still.

The rules were three rounds of five, decision on the judges, one judge being Lubunga's brother-in-law. Break of ninety seconds. That number came out of an ACU medical

annex written for gene-forged contact events. It is barely adequate, and it is the only reason a body like mine can be in a ring at all. Ninety seconds is a chilled sleeve on each arm, a saline line, and a hand on the neck.

The corner crews were loaned out of the works infirmary, because Lubunga is not paying for medics when the Copperbelt has medics on contract and a welfare office that likes the card. They come in coveralls and dust hoods, because the shed's air is full of copper fines that will take the skin off your throat, and they do not talk. By the time the bell goes for the break my eyes are white and my ears are packed with my own pulse, so what a corner is to me is not people. It is hands. Cold on the arms, cold on the neck, a thumb pushing my chin up so somebody can look at my pupils.

I never once looked at their faces. I had ninety seconds, then sixty, then forty-five, and in that time the entire content of my consciousness was the temperature of my own blood.

Round one taught me the fight in about forty seconds.

She did not engage. She circled left, always left, into my bad eye, and when I closed she was not there, and when I turned she had already crossed behind me and touched my kidney with a hand I barely felt. Nothing she threw was designed to hurt. Everything she threw was designed to

make me turn. Turning is expensive. Turning a body like mine is a whole industrial process, hips and plate and mass, and she was billing me for it four times a minute and paying nothing herself.

I got her once. Late in the round I read the left and cut the ring instead of following her, and I got a forearm across her chest and drove her into the corner post hard enough that the ring frame rang like a dropped pan. The shed came up off its feet. She went down. She was up before the count started.

That was the exchange that taught me. Not because I hit her. Because of what she did after, which was nothing. She did not clinch and she did not stall. She resumed circling left at the same rate, and I saw her ears come up and dump heat into the room, and I understood that she was running a schedule and I was on it.

The bell went. I sat. The cold came onto my arms and then a flat cold palm went up the back of my neck under the plate and the white went out of my eyes and I could see the ceiling.

At sixty seconds somebody hit the bell.

I got up because that is what the bell does to me. Then I sat back down, which is not a thing I do, and I said, loud, into a room I could not see properly, "That is thirty seconds short."

Lubunga was at the ropes. Not shouting. He never shouts.

"House rule," he said. "Posted at the door."

"It was ninety in the first two."

"It was ninety when you were ending fights in nineteen seconds." He leaned on the ropes, and he was not cruel about it, which was the worst part. He was explaining. "The annex is ACU. Nobody sanctions this card." He nodded at the crowd like a man showing you his farm. "Ninety seconds is four hundred men in a hot shed with nothing happening. I cannot sell nothing happening. I am not doing this to you. I am doing this to the evening."

I have fought men who wanted me dead. That is easier. A man who wants you dead wants something, and anything a person wants is a handle. Lubunga wanted a room that stayed loud between rounds, and my temperature was a cost that fell on the part of the balance sheet where I live.

Round two was the worst four and a half minutes of my professional life, and I have stood in a doorway in Lubunga's own district while eleven hundred people who had every right to be angry tried to come through it.

Thirty seconds of missing cooling does not sound like much. It is not thirty seconds. It is the difference between

starting a round at a temperature your body can climb from and starting it already climbing. I came out at a deficit and never got it back. By the middle of the round the shed had gone gold and grainy at the edges and my legs were doing arithmetic they had not been asked to do.

She knew the exact minute. That is when RELAY came inside, and it turned out she could hurt me after all, because she was not aiming at anything armored. Soft line under the arm, back of the knee, hinge of the jaw. Small fast damage, the kind that does not end a fight and does not stop accumulating either.

I put her down again. I do not remember doing it. There is a gap in the round on my side, and I am told that in it I caught her coming in and threw her into the ropes and then stood over her swaying, hands at my sides, unable to see her.

The bell went and I found the stool by memory.

Ice on the arms. Saline. And the hand, flat and cold, coming up the neck from behind and finding the spot under the plate without hunting for it, first try, in the dark, the way you find a light switch in your own house.

I noticed it and did nothing, because I was busy being a temperature.

At forty-five seconds they hit the bell.

Here is what I did in round three, and it is the only thing I have ever done in a ring that I am proud of.

I stopped chasing.

I planted on the cold seam at the center of the ring, the one plate in that building the heat well does not run under, the plate the roasting crews used to eat lunch on. I did not move off it. Not one step. Whatever she did on my left, whatever she touched, whatever she said, and she did say things, I did not turn.

I had four minutes of life left in me and I spent none of it turning.

She circled. The crowd started to boo, and Lubunga came off his chair, because a buffalo standing still in the middle of a ring is exactly the nothing happening he had told me he could not sell. Good. I was not selling. I was cooling. Standing still I produced almost no heat and RELAY produced all of hers, and out on the perimeter her big ears were dumping it into a room already at forty-one degrees and packed with four hundred bodies. Her build assumes open ground and moving air. There was no air in that shed. There had not been any since 1958.

She had to come in. The judges were Lubunga's and a decision on points goes to the fighter who was working. Around three minutes she committed.

She came low on the left, for the knee, which was correct, and I did not turn to meet her because turning was the thing I had spent the whole round refusing to pay for. I dropped. I let my whole mass go down and forward onto the leg she was reaching for, and the boss of my skull came through the space her head was arriving in, and I felt the short crack that a fused cervical plate transmits straight into your teeth.

The floor took her. I stayed down on one knee because I could not have stood up if the building had caught fire.

I did not hear the count. I heard my own blood, and a long tone, and somewhere far off a room coming apart.

Then the cold came onto the back of my neck, and this time I caught the wrist.

I do not know why. I was not thinking. I have gone over it a hundred times and the only answer is that a body remembers what kept it alive before the mind gets a vote. My hand went up and closed on that wrist and it was the wrist, the thin one, the left one, with the ridge of scar where a bowser coupling took the tendon in a bad year, and the two smallest fingers that never sat right afterward.

I turned around on the stool.

She had the hood down by then. Copper dust in the creases of her face, works coveralls, an infirmary band on the

sleeve with a contract number I could have read at four hundred meters on a good day and could barely resolve at forty centimeters with my eyes full of white.

"Sit down," Mwadi said. "You have fifteen seconds."

The medic bay was a shipping container behind the shed with a bench, a lamp, and two crates of saline that came up the Mombasa Road in somebody's off-manifest cargo. I sat with sleeves on both arms and made her show me.

She did not argue. She has never argued. She pulled the slate out of her coverall and turned it around.

Contract renewal. Sixty months, Copperbelt works, medical grade. Her thumbprint. The date was eleven weeks and two days back.

I signed Lubunga's card on a Tuesday. She renewed on the Thursday. My first fight was the following Saturday.

"Why," I said.

"Because the card takes its corner staff off the infirmary loan list," she said. "You have to be contracted to be on the loan list. My term was ending in the spring." She put the slate away. "The spring is after your six fights."

"Sixty months."

"Sixty months."

"I have been fighting to buy out sixty-two."

"I know what you have been doing." She started unwrapping my left hand, quickly and slightly too hard, the way she does everything. "You were going to fight that card whether I was in the building or not. So the only question in front of me was whether the hand on your neck belonged to a nineteen year old from the works who has never touched riot stock and does not know where the plate ends."

"You could have told me."

"You would have quit."

"Yes."

"There it is."

I sat in a container behind a roasting shed with fourteen months in my glove and the woman I had been buying them for holding my wrist. Nobody had lied to me. Lubunga told me exactly what he was doing to my temperature and why. The works told her what sixty months cost. The ACU wrote the pair of us, dissolved the section that made us function, and left us to find each other through a window that charges rent on the search.

I had thought I was pulling her out. She had been on my neck the whole time.

The manifest window opens at 0530, the same hour as the Dawn Water Quality Broadcast, so you queue in the dark

listening to a woman with a very calm voice read out numbers about a lake that glows amber for reasons nobody at Marine Sciences will put in writing. Accurate numbers. Wrong numbers to be reading.

I put the fourteen months on Mwadi Kabeya's term. The clerk stamped it without looking up. It changes nothing about where she sleeps or who she works for or whether she is in that container tomorrow. It takes fourteen months off the far end of a term that ends in 2071, a year I am not confident either of us will see. I did it anyway. There was nothing else to do with a number like that.

Then I signed for six more fights.

Lubunga cut the break to forty seconds for the new card. He posted it at the door, and he came by the bench to tell me himself, gently, the way he does, so that I would not hear it first from the bell.

I sat on the stool at the end of round one of the seventh fight with my eyes gone to white and the shed roaring and my blood climbing, and I felt the cold flat palm come up the back of my neck out of the dark and find the spot under the plate on the first try.

I put my hand over it and held it there until the bell.

STORY 03 OF 07 · No. 42

BLANK STOCK

NEO-TOKYO / DEEP RAIL · PIT VIPER / PRC THERMAL
SURVEY STOCK · 3,045 WORDS

I read the annex through forty centimeters of concrete before anybody touched a door, and the thing I got wrong I got wrong in the first ninety seconds, standing in a freight alcove off the Sub-1 eastern corridor with my hands jammed under my arms and my whole body going slow and stupid in the cold.

That is the trade. I am pit viper stock out of a PRC thermal survey program that ran nine years and produced four hundred of us and then decided the sensor packages were cheaper. The pits sit under my cheekbones in two shallow hollows a baseline reads as scars. They give me the room as temperature instead of light. A hand that touched a keypad ten minutes ago is still on the keypad, four fingers of it, fading at the edges like a word somebody is rubbing out. A man on the other side of a wall is a soft orange smear that breathes. I can walk a dead corridor in full dark and tell you

which of the sixty cables in the tray is live, because the live one is a degree and a half warmer than its neighbors and a degree and a half is a shout.

The rest of the trade is that I do not make my own heat well enough to argue with a tunnel. Deep Rail sits at eleven degrees year round and the maglev spine pushes air down it all night. I run wraps on my forearms and my thighs and I dose before a job and the dose costs what a week of surface rent costs, and even with all of it, after two hours down there my fingers stop being mine. They still close. They just close later than I ask them to.

That is the whole of me. A woman who can see through a wall, standing in the coldest part of the city, going numb.

The annex read the way Ueda said it would read. Long room, one occupied corner, a stack of warm bodies that turned out to be the recirculators, and one live sitting shape at the desk end that I filed as the night steward on his chair, which is what the schedule said would be there. The far corner along the east wall came up warm and wide and formless, and I called it a heat exchanger, because every records level in Neo-Tokyo has one and because it was the only thing in that room my pits could not hold a shape on. Warm and shapeless means nothing to a thermal build. It is the one blind we have. You cannot read past a fire any more than you can look past a floodlight.

I said, clean, and we went in.

The client was the Ghosted, which in practice meant a woman named Sen who does their outside business from a noodle counter in Hikari Bazaar and never once in three years let me pay for my own tea.

"They are rebuilding you," she said. "Not you. Us."

Civil Authority runs forty thousand people in the Maintenance Belt who do not exist. That is not a slum problem or a poverty problem. It is a filing decision. Sub-2 keeps the water loop turning and the air scrubbers honest for twelve million people upstairs, and the city has never registered a single one of them, because the day they register is the day the city owes them something. The Ghosted have made a whole politics out of that hole. As long as Civil Authority cannot name the forty thousand, it cannot process them, and if it cannot process them it has to negotiate with them. The absence is the leverage. It is the only thing they own.

Three years ago somebody in the Coherence Bureau started closing the hole. Not with a raid. With clerks. A quiet reconstruction project in an annex off the Sub-1 freight spur, six people at desks, rebuilding forty thousand identities by hand out of the paper trash that a person leaves even when the system refuses to see them. Clinic slips. Ration stubs. Transit fragments. Water-loop shift chits. You cross-

reference enough garbage and a name falls out of it, and once the name is on a card the person is real, and once the person is real the Isolation Registry can take them one at a time and nobody upstairs ever has to say the word processing out loud.

"Forty-one drawers," Sen said. "That is where it stands. We do not want a copy. We want the drawers gone."

"Gone is heavy."

"Gone is four hundred and nine kilos and it fits on a maintenance flatcar. I asked."

Kem had asked, actually. Nkemi Adeoye drove Deep Rail freight for eleven years before Node 7 took over routing and the Transit Authority found it did not need eleven-year motorwomen anymore. She could put a flatcar anywhere on the eastern spur and make the log say it had been there all night. She planned it and she drove it and she did not care about the politics, which I respected, because Kem is the only person I have ever worked with who will tell you her price out loud on the first meeting.

Vask breached. He is a big lifted ox of a man out of some Keiretsu Strip contractor stable that went under, and he is good, and he has one method. Vask's method is that a room is safe when the people in it cannot do anything. He does not enjoy it. That is the part nobody believes. He is not a sadist, he is an accountant, and a body that will not sit up later balances his ledger cleaner than a body that will.

And Ueda was our way in and our clock. Records clerk, grade three, four years on the Coherence desk, Sub-2 born and passing so well upstairs that he had a surface apartment with a window in it. He had been feeding Sen the annex schedule for eight months. Then somebody flagged an access pattern on his badge and Civil Authority scheduled him for a Memory Protocol Audit at oh eight hundred on the fourteenth.

That is the punishment nobody down here jokes about. They sit you in a chair and they go through your head with a cognitive assessment and they find things you do not remember installing, and refusing is treated as confession. Ueda was not going to walk out of that room still a person who had a secret. Everything he knew about us, about Sen, about the annex, was going to come out of him at a quarter past eight in a voice he would not recognize as his own.

So we had the night of the thirteenth. Not because of a tide or a shift or a lock. Because a man in an office had put a name on a schedule, and a schedule is a clock with a person standing behind it, and you can hate a person.

We went in at oh three hundred, under the Node 7 maintenance ritual, when the Sub-1 maglev locks down for thirty minutes of update verification that mostly does not

happen. Ueda badged the freight lift. Kem held the car dark on the spur two hundred meters east. Vask carried the cutter and I walked point, because in a records annex at three in the morning I am the only one who can see.

I want to be honest about how good it was for the first hour, because the rest of it is not good.

The annex was rows. Steel card cabinets on rails, forty-one drawers of finished work at the north end and eleven hundred drawers of raw stubs behind them, and the whole thing smelled like paper and machine oil and the particular dust that only comes off old card stock. I walked the rail line and read the cabinets and they were all the same dead eleven degrees except one, and that one drawer rail carried a live sensor loop that put maybe a third of a degree into the steel. Half a degree of difference across a two meter rail. Nothing on any panel. Nothing Vask could have found with a scope in an hour. I could see it from six meters away the way you would see a lit window in a dark street.

"That one is wired," I said. "Everything north of it is wired to it."

"Show me where it stops."

I put my hand flat on the rail and walked it until the warmth quit, and it quit at the ninth cabinet, and Vask cut the cage on the tenth and we came at the finished drawers

from behind. That is the whole reason they hire builds like me. Not for the fights. For the half degree.

The desk end had the steward on it, and he was asleep, and he was not the steward.

He was old. That was the first thing the pits gave me, because old bodies burn differently, thinner at the hands and feet, the heat pulled back into the trunk like a man rationing. He had a foot heater under the desk and his ankles were the brightest thing in the room. Seventy, maybe more. Cardigan. Reading glasses folded on a stack of blank card stock. There was a name tape on his coat and Ueda read it and went the color of the walls.

"Hoshino," he said. "That is the archivist. He is not on nights. He has never been on nights."

"He lives here," Kem said in my ear, from the car. "Look at him."

She was not wrong. There was a kettle. There was a cushion tied to the chair with lamp cord.

Vask set his bag down and took out the short bar and did not say anything, because with Vask the not saying is the announcement.

"No," I said.

"He has seen the clerk's face."

"He is asleep."

"He has seen the clerk's face," Vask said again, patient, the way you repeat a number to somebody who is bad at

arithmetic. "In four hours the clerk sits an audit. In five hours Civil Authority owns the clerk's whole head. Then this one gets shown a picture and says yes, that is the boy who was here on the thirteenth with three others, and every single person in this room is on the Registry by Friday. Including her." He tipped his chin at nothing, meaning Sen, meaning Sub-2, meaning the forty thousand. "You want to spend a life. Fine. Spend his or spend theirs."

The bad thing about Vask is that he does the arithmetic out loud and the arithmetic is usually right.

I got between him and the desk anyway. Not out of goodness. I have taken money to do worse than what he was proposing and I will not stand here and pretend otherwise. I did it because the old man had a cushion tied to his chair with lamp cord and something in me would not move.

"Bind and hood," I said. "Kem, how long do we have on the car."

"Anomaly runs oh six forty to oh seven twenty. Patrol density drops thirty percent in the eastern corridor and Node 7 files it instead of flagging it. After twenty past, I am a freight car sitting where no freight car is scheduled."

"Then we load."

Vask looked at me for four seconds and then he put the bar away, and I made the mistake of thinking that was the end of the argument.

Four hundred and nine kilos, forty-one drawers, one hundred and ten meters of corridor and a freight lift with a door that had to be held.

I would like to tell you I carried my share. By the fourth trip my fingers were done. The wraps were spent, the dose was four hours old, and eleven degrees of moving air had taken the ends of me the way it always does. I dropped a drawer at the lift threshold and it came open and the cards fanned out across the plate in a long slow spill, and I went down on my knees in the dark to sweep them back and my hands would not do it, they just pushed the cards around like a drunk trying to deal.

Kem came up and did it for me. She did not say anything about it. She has never once said anything about it.

But I had my face down at plate level with the pits open and forty thousand rebuilt human beings spilled out in front of me, and I noticed the thing I should have noticed an hour earlier.

The cards were all one temperature.

Card stock takes heat off a hand and holds it a long time. A drawer that clerks have been working, pulling, refiling, cross-checking six days a week for three years, that drawer has weather in it. Warm ranks and cold ranks. Ghost prints

on the tabs. I have read a filing cabinet before and told a client which of his people had been in it that week.

These were flat. Dead flat, eleven degrees, top to bottom, edge to edge, the way stock is when it comes off the pallet and nobody ever touches it again.

I put the light on them. Names, dates, water-loop assignments, all in good clean bureau hand. I pulled twenty cards out of the middle and read them and they were fine. I pulled twenty more from the drawer behind and four of the names were the same names. Different birth years, different sectors, same names. I went back four drawers and found them again.

Forty names. He had been writing the same forty names for three years, in eleven different hands, on stock that had never been filed because filing it would mean somebody might look it up.

I went back into the annex and I stood in the middle of the floor and I read the east corner, the warm shapeless one, the heat exchanger, and I walked at it until I was close enough that my pits blanked out entirely and I had to use my eyes like a baseline.

Document furnace. Bureau issue, flue running up into the ventilation stack. Ash pan out, half full, still hot enough to hurt. Beside it a tally sheet on a clipboard, in pencil, in a careful old hand, with a column for the day's intake and a column for cards produced and a running total at the bottom

that had been kept honestly for three years and did not come close to matching anything.

Received: 40,412. Entered: 1,606.

He had burned the rest. Every clinic slip, every ration stub, every fragment of forty thousand people that came down that spur for three years, one nightly load at a time, and then he had sat at the desk and written out forty names again to keep the drawer count climbing so that nobody upstairs would ever come down and ask why the project was behind.

He was not the guard on the score. He was the reason there was no score.

And my build had told me that corner was an exchanger, because a thermal build cannot read past a fire. The one thing in Neo-Tokyo I was constitutionally unable to see was the only true thing in the room.

Vask had already gone up.

I found the old man on the lift plate. Vask had done it while I was on my knees with the cards, quietly, the way he does everything, and he was not sorry and he was not proud and when I came at him he let me hit him twice and then held my wrists until I stopped, because my hands were too cold to close properly and we both knew it.

We ran the flatcar out at seven oh two, inside the anomaly, and Node 7 filed us instead of flagging us, and Kem put us on the Sub-2 interface at seven forty with four hundred and nine kilos of blank stock.

Sen paid in full. She had a crowd for it. Somebody had strung lamps across the interface platform and there were maybe two hundred people down there watching the drawers come off the car, and a woman I did not know put her hand flat on the top drawer and started crying, and a man was telling his kid, that is us, that is all of us, they had us in there and now they do not.

I did not correct anybody. I want that on the record. I stood on a freight platform in Sub-2 with the warmest crowd I have ever read in my life and I let them have it.

Ueda sat his audit at eight. He came out at eleven and he was pleasant to everyone and he did not know me on the platform two days later, and Sen says that is the best outcome available and Sen is probably right.

The Coherence Bureau closed the annex within the week. A three-year reconstruction project loses its entire finished product in one night, and you do not quietly reassign the staff. You audit. They will go through that room with instruments, and they will pull the ash pan, and they will find a clipboard with a pencil column on it in a careful old hand, and they will finally learn the number that Hoshino spent three years keeping them from learning.

Then they will start again, with clerks who are not him.

I went back up to Sub-1 a week after. Stood on the far platform across the spur with the maglev pushing cold air down the corridor and my hands already going, and I opened the pits and read the annex through the wall the way I did the first night.

The east corner is at eleven degrees now. Same as the floor. Same as the rails. Nobody has run that furnace since the thirteenth, and from where I was standing there was nothing in that room warm enough to hide anything behind.

STORY 04 OF 07 · No. 41

FOSSIL WATER

SAHARAN OASIS / THE OLD WELLFIELD · SANDFISH / PCU
BURIED LINE STOCK · 3,213 WORDS

There is a temperature at which sand stops behaving like ground and starts behaving like water, and everything I am for a living happens on the far side of that line.

Four in the morning on the north face of Dune Twelve, thirty kilometers past the Sunwall, and the grain was cold and loose and full of air. That is the hour. You get it once a night. Before dawn the slip face is a slope of dry marbles that will take you down inside itself if you know how to ask, and by ten it has packed and heated into a thing that holds you at the chest and cooks you while you argue with it. I went in headfirst with my arms flat along my ribs, chin tucked, and I did not swim so much as shiver, one long wave running skull to heel, the sand parting at the wedge of my face and closing behind my feet without a mark.

Nobody taught me that. It is not a skill. It is a shape.

They call the stock sandfish, which is a joke the catalog made and then kept, and if you want the honest version it is on a PCU Water Authority form from 2051 under the heading Buried Line Inspection, Subsurface Access Template. Fine keratin plate over the whole body, overlapping toward the tail so I go one direction easily and the other direction not at all. Valves in the nostrils and the ears that shut like a hand closing. A third lid, milky, that comes across the eye and lets me keep it open in a medium that would sand a baseline's cornea to frost in nine seconds. Blood chemistry that lets my core run up to forty-two degrees and hold it, because down in the grain there is nowhere to put heat and the only container available is me.

They built forty of us to crawl inside the buried conveyance of the old fossil field and report on the pipe without anybody having to dig it up. Then the field was declared exhausted, the program closed, and we went out into a city with no further use for a body shaped like an inspection tool. Some got kitchen work. Most got the Dust Belt and a review that never stops pending.

I dig. Off the books, for whoever pays, and I have taken twenty-two years of quartz into my sinuses doing it. My batch does not die of anything dramatic. We die of the glass. I cough at night and it sounds like somebody shaking a bag of salt.

That night I was going down after a case.

Leila bint Rashid gave me the job at Sand Gate, in the back of a stall that sells calibrated weather and nothing else, which is the only kind of stall in that market where a conversation stays in the stall.

"Bou Fadil Six," she said. "The old pump house. There is a maintenance case in the control room, gray, about so long, with a Water Authority seal on it. You bring me the case. You do not open the case."

"Bou Fadil is under a dune."

"Bou Fadil is under thirty meters of dune. That is why the fee is what it is."

The fee was two things. Exit clearance, real, stamped, with a seat on an SNF caravan west and no tribunal hold on my name. And a course of lung lavage at a Shade Market clinic the Authority does not license and does not close. Six sessions. They put warm saline into you and take the glass out in gray milk, and it buys a person like me maybe three more years of standing up.

"Who is the client?"

"You have never asked me that."

"I am asking because it is Bou Fadil."

Leila is a careful woman who turned down the Sons of the Serpent four months ago and did it so politely they still

send her greetings. She looked at me the way she looks at a caravan she is deciding not to guarantee.

"The client is paying in exit clearance," she said. "Draw from that what you like."

I drew from it that the client was inside the wall. I took the job anyway. That is the whole of my character and you may as well have it now.

The window was the wall. The Sunwall kill-zone sensors calibrate every ninety-six hours, the calibration runs twenty-two minutes, and the schedule is a thing two Dune Specter sergeants know and Faith Administration does not. Twenty-two minutes of blind approach lane. Long enough to cross the open ground and get under. Not long enough to cross it twice.

On my way out Zohra was closing her forecast stall, and she told me the wind without looking at any instrument, the way she does.

"Southeast by noon," she said. "Hard by two. It will move the face you are going into."

"Then I will be out by noon."

"Yes," she said, in the voice of a woman who has heard that sentence its whole life.

The vent stack was the way in, and the vent stack was a hole the width of my shoulders forty years under a moving dune.

I found it by touch. Down in the grain there is nothing to see and nothing to hear except the low grinding of the dune itself walking south at eleven meters a year, and you navigate by pressure and temperature and the dead stillness that stands over buried concrete. Sand above a void feels tired. I quartered the face for six minutes with my core climbing, found the tired place, and went down it.

The stack was choked to within two meters of the grating. I cleared it with my hands, which is not clearing so much as fluidizing, working the grain until it flowed past me and up. My scales took the abrasion the way they were built to. My hands are not scaled. Then the grating, corroded to lace, and then the drop.

I came out of the ceiling of the pump house at Bou Fadil Six and landed on forty years of nothing in a wash of sand and a noise like a bag being emptied, and lay there on my back with my ears still valved shut, listening with my body.

The floor was humming.

Understand what that means. Bou Fadil is a ghost grid. The field was drawn down and abandoned before the Upheaval finished and sits on the Authority's own maps as decommissioned. The whole reason three hundred thousand

people believe in this city is that we do not drink ancient water. We make water. Twelve desalination towers on the southern wall turning brine into proof that the Prophet's way works.

The floor was humming. I put my palm flat on it and felt a lift pump running under my hand at a speed I could have named to within fifty revolutions, because reading pipe through concrete is the other half of what I am.

I opened my ears and stood up and got the light on.

The control room was intact and dry and beautiful the way rooms are when they were closed properly. Dust like flour on the console. The gray case sat on the desk with the Authority seal on it, and I put my hand on it and did not pick it up, because through the wall came the sound of water moving in a hard pipe under pressure, and there is no sound on this earth a person from this city cannot identify.

I went and looked.

The gallery ran forty meters, half of it drifted with sand from a failed roof panel, and along the ceiling ran the master conveyance, one meter of steel with a skin of cold sweat on it in a room at thirty-eight degrees. Live. Drawing. It came up through the wellhead stack and it did not go west toward the ruins of the old distribution grid. It went north, into a bore nobody has drawn on any map I have ever paid for, on a heading that runs under the kill zone and comes up, if you continue the line, on the intake side of Southern Processing.

Not the output side. The intake side. Where the sea water is supposed to come in.

And halfway along that pipe, in a cradle, sat the master meter, and on the master meter sat the totalizer.

It was the size of two fists. Brass, sapphire window, a drum of engraved wheels turning on a worm gear off the flow spindle, cumulative volume since commissioning, mechanical because in 2029 somebody decided the one number that mattered should not be editable from an office. The wheels were turning while I watched.

I am not going to tell you the total. I will tell you the part I did the arithmetic on twice, with my thumb on the sapphire, because I did not believe it the first time. At current draw, the Bou Fadil field has about thirty months in it.

Thirty months. The city does not have a membrane problem. The city has a membrane problem and a drought clock, and the drought clock is the one nobody is filing about, and it is thirty months long, and it is turning in a brass drum in a room under a dune with nobody in it.

Then somebody hit me at the knees from behind and put me into the drift. The room was not empty.

He was better than me in sand and worse than me everywhere else, which is what you get from a man out of my own batch who never once had to fight for work.

A fight underground between two of our stock is nothing you would pay to watch. No noise. No air. Two bodies pushing through a medium that closes instantly, working by pressure change, each of us trying to get behind the other's scales, because we go one way easily and the other way not at all and the grain will lock you if somebody turns you against your own grain. He got me once. My plates stood up and caught and the drift bit down on me like a hand.

So I went deeper instead of fighting up, dropped a meter to where the sand was cool and heavy and he had to follow me into weight, and when he came I was already turned, and I took his wrist and let the drift do the rest. Then I dragged us both out onto the concrete and we lay there gasping and shedding grain like two fish on a dock.

His name was Idir. Batch of forty. Number eleven to my number nine.

"You are supposed to take the case," he said, when he could. His chest sounded worse than mine. His sounded like a bag of salt with something wet in the bottom of it.

"I am taking the case."

"Then take it and get out."

"Idir. There is water in that pipe."

"Yes," he said. He said it the way you say a thing you have said in your head every day for a decade. "There has been water in that pipe since before either of us was decanted."

He read the drum. That was the job the Authority kept two of us on after the program closed, one in the north field and one here. Quarterly. Down the vent, read the totalizer, photograph the sapphire window, carry the number up, file it on a form. Eleven years. Forty-four filings.

"Who reads the form?"

"It goes to Water Authority Records. It has a number. It is a real form." He wiped his face and the sand came off him in a sheet. "Once, four years ago, a supervisor wrote back to ask if the instrument was faulty."

"And?"

"I filed that it was not faulty."

There is no room where a man in a good coat decided to lie to three hundred thousand people about their water. There is a form. The form goes to Records, and Records is not a person, and the number on it would cost somebody their appointment to act on, so it gets deferred, quarter after quarter, the same way they deferred the membranes. The city is not being deceived. The city is being filed.

"Give me the case," Idir said. "I will put the case where they can find it and I will say a dune came in on the stack,

and you will go west and cough for three more years and that is a good outcome, Hafsa."

I picked up the totalizer instead.

It came off the spindle with four bolts and a spanner from my belt, and when it left the meter the wheels stopped, and the pipe over my head kept drawing anyway, uncounted, which I found I minded more than I expected.

Then the day beat me, the way it was always going to.

I had gone in at four and it was ten past nine when I stood in that gallery with two kilos of brass in a pouch against my sternum. My core was at forty-one and a half with nowhere to put it. The calibration window had closed hours ago. Above my head the face of Dune Twelve was packing and heating, and Zohra's southeast wind was due at two to move the whole slope onto the stack I came in through. Going up was not an option. Going up was a slower way of dying.

So I took the other pipe.

The old conveyance west, the abandoned line to the dead grid, one and a bit meters of pre-Upheaval concrete running four kilometers to a sump north of Sand Gate. Dry for forty years. Between it and the live north line there is a bypass with a hand wheel on it, because in 2029 they built

everything to be worked by a man standing in a room with no power.

I told Idir what I was going to do. He did the arithmetic before I finished the sentence.

"That is nine thousand cubic meters," he said. "Maybe more, before the header trips."

"It is that or I cook."

"I know."

I put my shoulder into the wheel and cracked the bypass and the sound that came out of the floor was the sound of the world's oldest water finding a new way to go. It hit the dry line like a fist in a sleeve. I went in on my back with my arms crossed over the pouch and my valves shut and the third lid down and I rode four kilometers of concrete in the dark at a speed I do not want to know, and the cold of it went through me and took my core down eleven degrees in ninety seconds, and I want to be honest with you about the fact that for those ninety seconds I was the happiest I have ever been.

Thirty thousand years old, that water. Rain that fell on green Sahara when there were hippos in it. It carried me out of a hole and into the light at the sump and it kept coming after me, and it stood on the pan in a sheet a hundred meters across, steaming, going up into a southeast wind at a rate you could watch.

Idir did not come out. He had gone back along the gallery to close the wheel, because eleven years of reading that

number every quarter had made him the only man alive who could not stand to watch water be thrown away, and he shut it, and then the header tripped and backed the surge into the pump house and put four meters of water in a room he was standing in. He was built for sand.

Sand remembers, we say. It does. It surfaces things on its own schedule, and it will surface him eventually, and when it does he will be a Water Authority employee found at his post.

Leila met me at the caravanserai with the exit clearance in her hand, and she looked at what I was carrying and knew immediately that it was not a gray case.

"The instruction changed yesterday," she said. "The client wants the item destroyed on receipt. Witnessed. That is the fee, unchanged."

"Destroyed."

"That was the word."

So that was the job. I was not hired to steal the number. I was hired because I was the last body in the world shaped right to go down and bring that drum up so it could stop existing. Two of us left who could reach the room, and one of them had a bag of salt in his chest and a form to file. They were not hiding water. They were tidying an instrument.

I did not sell it to her. I want to say that with no music on it. I did not sell it because Idir was in four meters of water under a dune and because I had left nine thousand cubic meters steaming on a salt pan while the Dust Belt runs Tier Three on forty-eight hours notice, and a person who has done that has to do something afterward or become somebody they will not enjoy being.

I took the drum into the city on a maintenance credential that was two years dead and gave it to a water chemistry technician on the B-7 shift named Yasmin Khalifa, who had run an unauthorized sediment comparison the week before and no idea what to do with the result. I did not make a speech. I put a brass instrument in her hands and told her what spindle it came off and what the wheels meant, and I watched her face do the thing faces do when a rumor turns into a reading.

A rumor gets you a tribunal. An instrument gets you a maintenance log.

There was no exit clearance after that, and no lavage, and there are now precisely zero freelance sandfish in this city who have not been personally identified by the Water Authority, which is a small number and it is me.

I went back out to Dune Twelve on foot, at night, in the cool. I lay down on the face where I had gone in and put my ear against the grain, past where the day heat stops, three

meters down where it is always the same temperature it was in 2029.

The lift pumps were running. I could feel them in my jaw, steady, four hundred and something to the minute, drawing thirty thousand year old rain north under the kill zone into the intake side of a plant that tells a city it makes water out of the sea.

Nothing counts it now. The drum is on a bench in Southern Processing with a technician's handwriting next to it, and the field does not know that and would not care. It drank all night with my ear against it.

Thirty months. I lay there until the sand went cold enough to hurt.

STORY 05 OF 07 · No. 40

HEADCOUNT

EURASIAN STEPPES / KAZAN SUPPLY CORRIDOR · SAIGA /
EO STEPPE HAUL STOCK · 3,199 WORDS

The only cover on the open steppe is the dust somebody else is making, and you have to be built wrong to use it.

I was forty meters off the tailgate of a Kazan maintenance hauler doing sixty on packed dirt, inside its own plume, running. Understand what that means. That plume is a solid column of pulverized loess and salt crust and three years of dried ore fines, and a baseline in that column is blind in four seconds and coughing blood in ninety. I was in there because it was the only thing between me and a sky with a Strato-Raptor in it, and because the thing on the front of my face is not a nose. It is a machine.

Saiga stock. EO steppe haul, batch out of the Kazan program, built to move cargo across four hundred kilometers of nothing without a vehicle and without a road. They gave me a nasal chamber the size of a fist, coiled, wet, lined with

turbinate bone in folds you could lose a coin in. It warms freezing air before it reaches the lung and it drops the temperature of summer air before it cooks me. It takes a dust load that would scar a normal chest, holds it in mucus, and dumps it out the front of me in gray strings while I run. That is the whole design. Everything else about me, the legs, the sixty-hour endurance, the ribs, is downstream of the nose. I am a life support system for an air filter and the air filter is a life support system for whatever crate the EO wants moved.

They ran us on the corridor for eleven years. Then the corridor got vehicles again and we got severance, which in EO language is a form.

The hauler I was chasing had manifest codes on the door that said maintenance supply, and it was running dark on the third-shift road out of Ural-7, and the road out of Ural-7 at that hour does not go anywhere that needs maintenance supplies. It goes east, to a place that is not on the map, past a junction where somebody has arranged stones in a pattern the convoy crews read and do not discuss. The pattern says eleven.

The score was in the back. One case. That was all I had been told and all I had asked, which I want on the record, because later it mattered a great deal that I had not asked.

Yeva Smirnova gave me the run in the repair depot at Ural-7, in the section where the cameras have been failing for eight months. Everyone in that compound knows about the blind spot. Nobody has fixed it, because fixing it means filing that it exists, and filing that it exists means somebody upstairs has to explain eight months. That is the whole EO in one sentence. The thing gets to keep happening because acknowledging it costs more than it does.

She had fourteen months of not leaving and sixty seconds of nerve, and she spent both on me.

"Third shift loads a cold case Thursdays," she said. Her hands were on a drill housing she was pretending to inspect. "It goes on the second vehicle, not the first. It rides in a cradle bolted to the deck. The men who load it wear gloves that are not maintenance gloves."

"How long has it been going?"

"As long as the ore has." She turned the housing over. "I am not asking you to be brave. I am asking you to take a thing off a truck and put it in a hand that is not theirs."

"Which hand?"

"Raskov will tell you. I do not want to know."

Raskov was the fixer at the Kazan Supply Corridor end, a logistics coordinator with a title so boring it had to be false, and Raskov paid in the only currency worth anything on that

steppe. Not scrip. Transit. A clean authorization, a name that scans at the Volga checkpoint, a seat on a westbound convoy that actually departs. Off the steppe.

Understand my situation. Steppe haul stock is not shelf. We were a program, the program closed, and there was no plan for what a saiga does when the trucks come back. Some of my batch went onto the compound count sheets and are still there. Some went freelance and are dead. I ran cargo nobody would sign for, up and down a corridor I had been engineered to survive, for people who paid me because I could cross ground that costs a vehicle a manifest entry. I had a stock card in my chest pocket with my template and my batch on it, and eleven years of dust in a chamber that was never meant to run this long.

I wanted the seat west. I would have taken worse jobs for it. I had.

The intercept happened at kilometer nine on the eastern vector, in the gap.

The published patrol schedule says fourteen minutes between passes. Three vectors on that steppe run twenty-two, and all three are the ore road, and the extra eight minutes are not an accident of geometry. Somebody programmed the drones to be somewhere else. The

platforms still fly the route. They just do not say anything about it, which is a strange thing to do to a machine, and if you spend enough nights out there you start to notice that the platforms have gotten odd about that road. They slow over it. They turn three degrees toward things and then correct. They have been watching something for three years and holding it in.

I came up on the second vehicle from the blind quarter with the plume over me. It had a fixed ladder on the offside and I took it at speed, which is the part I am proud of and the part that nearly ended it, because saiga legs are built for distance and not for jumping. My landing was more of a collision. Something in my left wrist made a sound. I got the tarp lace open one grommet at a time with the road going under me at sixty.

Inside: crates with maintenance codes stenciled on them, strapped down at the wrong weight, and behind them, bolted to the deck in a cradle, the case. Half a meter, ribbed white polymer, a handle on top, a small display on the end face reading a temperature in blue. Minus sixty-one. A cold case in a country where the ground stays frozen for free, which meant it needed cold that the ground could not give it.

I got it out of the cradle with a bar and I went off the back of that truck into the dark with it against my chest, and I hit the steppe and rolled and ran, and at eight hundred meters I went down flat in a wheel rut and stopped moving, because

the gap was closing and residual heat gets you flagged even when nothing is looking at you yet.

The truck did not stop. That was the first thing that was wrong. You take a case off a vehicle like that and the vehicle stops, and men get out, and there are lights. This one kept its speed all the way to the horizon like it had been told the cargo was somebody else's problem now.

The second thing that was wrong was the wind. It had been out of the northeast all week, dry, with that mineral bite it gets off the frost line. Lying in the rut with the case cooking a cold spot into my sternum, I took a breath and the air came in warm and heavy and full of water.

A front. Out of the west, off the Volga bend, the kind that shows up more every spring now that the treeline has walked ten kilometers closer than it stood when I was on contract.

You need to know what warm wet air is to a saiga. Everyone thinks the build fails in cold, because everything on that steppe fails in cold. Cold is fine. Cold is what the chamber was for. The chamber is a wet dark warm space the size of a fist that I carry in front of my brain, and it is not sterile, it was never sterile, no chamber like that ever is. There is a resident population in there. On my stock card it is one line of type under the heading COMMENSAL FLORA, NON PATHOGENIC, a designation with letters and a number, and in eleven years I had read that line maybe

twice, the way you read the small print on a thing you already own.

In a wet spring the resident population stops being resident.

They call it the die-off. Nobody in the EO calls it that on paper. At Compound 17, four springs ago, nine haulers out of a crew of twelve went down inside four days, fever and foam and drowning on dry ground, and the compound filed it under equipment-adjacent losses because the men who fill out those forms are not doctors and the form did not have a box for what they saw. I knew two of them. It is a fast thing. It is not a merciful thing.

So I was lying in a rut on the open steppe with a stolen cold case, eight minutes of gap left, and a wall of warm water coming at me at thirty kilometers an hour, and my own body starting to feel like a room somebody had left a kettle on in.

Zaslavskaya found me at the culvert.

There is a pre-war foundation at kilometer fourteen, half sunk, rebar showing at the lip like ribs, and under it a concrete box culvert that somebody poured for a river that is not there anymore. It is one of three places on that stretch of steppe where the old world comes up at an angle. The tool

marks in the soil around it were less than a week old. I noted that and I did not have time to care.

She was already inside. Sitting on the dry side with her back to the wall and a sidearm on her knee, not pointed, which is its own kind of message.

"Put it down where I can see it," she said.

Kirova's people all have the same voice. Flat, patient, the voice of somebody who has read your file and found it short. Except Zaslavskaya was not Kirova's anymore, and would not be for another few weeks in Kirova's understanding of the world, and she had come out to a culvert alone on the strength of that gap in the reporting.

"You want the ore road," I said. "This is not the ore road."

"I want what is in your arms."

"It is a refrigerator."

"It is the only piece Research Division has not classified into a hole, because it is not a document. You cannot upgrade the clearance on an object. You have to move it or destroy it, and both of those leave a record, and they have spent three years doing neither." She shifted her weight. Her boots were wrong for the ground, city tread, no bite. "Give it to me and I will put you on a convoy myself."

Everybody on that steppe was offering me a seat west. I should have wondered why the seat was so cheap.

I put the case down. Then I hit her.

It was not a good fight. I have read the sort of account where the forged operator moves like water and it always reads like a brochure. I am a runner. My hands are for carrying. She was trained, I was faster over the first meter, and that was the entire margin I had. I got her wrist against the concrete, the sidearm went into the standing water at the low end of the culvert, and after that it was two tired people in a pipe.

And halfway through it my chest went wrong.

Not tired. Fever. It came up through me in about forty seconds the way it does, the chamber gone from filter to swamp, every breath dragging warm wet air over a population that had just been told the season had changed. My vision went soft at the corners. There is a particular horror in feeling your own maintenance interval expire during a fistfight. She got an elbow into my throat and I could not tell whether the gray coming in was the elbow or the fever, and that is the joke at the center of my design. The nose is why I can cross the steppe. The nose is the timer.

I got a knee up. I got her off. I got the case and I got out of that culvert into the first fat drops of the rain, and I made two hundred meters before I understood I was not going to make four hundred, and I went down in the grass on my side with my arms around half a meter of ribbed white polymer.

The display on the end face said minus fifty-two and climbing. I had ripped it off a live cradle. Nothing in the world was feeding it anymore.

I opened it because it was going to spoil anyway. That is the reason I gave myself lying in the wet grass with the rain coming sideways, and it was even partly true.

The lid took a bar. Inside, under a layer of vacuum insulation, in a foam rack, forty-eight glass ampoules seated upright with frost smoking off them into the rain, and every one of them printed with the same line of type.

I knew the type before I could read it. I knew it the way you know your own handwriting across a room.

I got my stock card out of my chest pocket with hands that were not working properly, held it up next to an ampoule, and matched them character by character in the dark, with the rain on the plastic and my temperature climbing.

COMMENSAL FLORA, NON PATHOGENIC. Same letters. Same number. Underneath it on the ampoule, in smaller type, something the stock card did not have: PASSAGE 14. WARM HUMID CHALLENGE.

Forty-eight of them, packed for transport, riding east on a maintenance manifest three times a week for three years, along a road the drones have been told not to report.

Here is what I put together lying there, and nobody told me any of it. I have never had a conversation with anyone at Research Division. I have never met Mikhailova, whose name I only know because a compound medic at Ural-7 has been sending her treatment notes through a channel that is not supposed to exist. I worked it out from a stone marker, a count sheet, and a jar.

The organism that started showing up in worker records eighty kilometers south of the frost line is not walking south out of the permafrost. It is riding south in us. It was in us when we came out of the program, listed as furniture, one line under a heading nobody reads. It does nothing at all for eleven years on a dry steppe. It goes lethal in warm wet air, on a schedule you can predict from a weather map, and every year the treeline walks north the map gets warmer and wetter.

That is not a defect. A defect gets a recall. This got a passage number, which means somebody has been culturing it forward, generation on generation, selecting for the response.

And sixty kilometers east there is a site that is not on the map, with pre-war infrastructure under it and a hum in the ground, and eleven workers who went out there on

permanent rotation extension and have not come back, and somebody has put stones at the junction to keep the count. You do not need guards at a place like that. You do not need walls or a wire or a contract. You need a workforce that cannot leave, and cannot outlive its usefulness, and comes with the mechanism already installed.

I had been carrying it in my face for eleven years and calling it the reason I was employable.

So. The arithmetic, done in the rain with a fever coming up and a rival crawling out of a culvert two hundred meters back.

Sell it to Raskov and take the seat west, which is what I came for, and the ampoules go into the same pipeline they came out of and the count at the junction keeps going up.

Give it to Zaslavskaya, who is nobody's now, and watch her turn forty-eight jars into leverage on whichever office pays for silence, because leverage is not evidence, leverage is a thing you hold so you do not have to use it.

Or put it in the hand Smirnova meant, the medic at Ural-7 with her unclassified treatment notes, or the woman at the frost line with her alert that nobody answered, or the FAA team in the taiga who have been following a drone that has been following something on the ground. Prove it. And

the day it is proved, every saiga on that steppe stops being a hauler and becomes a biological liability with a documented transmission vector, and the EO has a procedure for liabilities with documented transmission vectors, and it is not treatment. It is a compound with a fence and a headcount that only goes down.

Every version where I save the batch ends with the batch in a fenced compound. Every version where I save myself ends with forty-eight jars going east. The build that got me to the truck is the build the truth is filed under.

I got up. My legs still worked, which they will do long after the rest of me does not, because that is what they were for.

The rain came on hard out of the west and the grass laid over flat and the whole steppe smelled like a wet chamber, which is a smell you do not forget once your own body has taught it to you. Somewhere above the cloud a platform was flying a road it has not been allowed to talk about since before I went freelance, holding three years of things it noticed and could not say. I stood in the open with a cracked case against my chest and forty-eight ampoules going warm at a rate I could read on a little blue display, and I breathed in, slow, through a machine somebody built to keep me alive in exactly the kind of weather that was going to kill me.

Minus forty-four. Minus forty-one.

The stones at the junction were eight kilometers behind me in the dark, saying eleven, the way they had been saying it since somebody knelt down out there and made the count for nobody in particular, in case anybody ever came along who could read.

STORY 06 OF 07 · No. 43

PASS FEE

SHATTER BELT / ZAGROS PASSES · BASELINE / FORGE
MEDIC · 3,033 WORDS

There is no faction on this planet that will pay a baseline to keep a gene-forged alive. That is the whole of my trade, stated as an absence. The programs build them and the programs bury them, and between those two events they issue a suppression script and a stability window and a form you sign that says you understand what you are. Repair is not in the budget line. Repair was never in the budget line, because a body with a shelf life is not a patient, it is inventory with a date on it, and you do not send inventory to a doctor. So the work fell to people like me. Baseline, unlicensed, carrying a case of compounds that no faction pharmacologist will admit exist, going up and down the dark roads to put forged bodies back together for cash, because the alternative is that the bodies come apart in front of people who love them.

I am not sentimental about it. I charge four hundred a day and expenses, and the expenses are the part that hurts.

I was two and a half thousand meters up the western Zagros in the first week of October, in a village called Sarıkaya, because Elder Yildiz had sent word down the mountain that she wanted a healer with forged medicine in her hands and no faction stamp on her paper. That second condition is why she got me instead of somebody better. The pass communities have watched outside help arrive for three thousand years and they have learned exactly what it costs. Every time they take a hand, an obligation comes in behind it, wearing the same coat. A baseline freelancer with a case and no letterhead is the cheapest hand they can accept. I understood that I was being hired for what I could not do to them later. It is not a flattering way to get work. It is honest, which is rarer.

The patient was Leyla Demirel and she was fifty-eight years old and she was one of two people left alive who could keep a winter route open through the Zagros.

You should understand what that means, because it is a piece of infrastructure that does not look like infrastructure. The passes close in November. Everyone knows this. What everyone does not know is that three of them never used to, because three families spent centuries learning how to read a slope and cut a drift and move a route ten meters east in a season when the mountain asked for it. No manuals. No

survey. Knowledge that lives in hands and gets handed sideways from a mother to a daughter over thirty years of walking the same stone. One of those families ran out of daughters in 2059 and that route is gone. It did not fail. Nobody blew it up. There was simply no one left who knew, and a road that nobody knows is just a shape in the rock. Leyla had the second route. Her daughter Nesrin went to Istanbul six years ago to work in a Compact records office and has not come back, which is a reasonable decision that I would have made myself, and which happens to be the load-bearing fact of everything that followed.

The illness was resonance. That is the polite way the Zagros communities say that the mountain is doing something to a person. There is a Lumicite formation under the range, the communities have known about it for longer than any faction has known the word, and the people who spend their lives up on the high stone at altitude take a dose of something the rest of us do not. Fever. Weight loss. Perceptual events. Leyla could tell me where the ice was thin on a slope she had not seen in four months, and she could not tell me what day it was, and both of those are the same symptom.

I had been in her house nine hours when the trucks came up the approach.

Two vehicles, running dark, which on that road at night means either professionals or the dead. They stopped forty meters below the house and the headlights came on together, which is a thing you do when you want the people inside to know how the evening is going to be organized.

The house was stone, two rooms, a fuel stove, a shuttered window on the valley side and a slot window on the mountain side and a hatch in the back wall where they load kerosene into the store. Leyla was on the cot in the back room with a core temperature of forty point one and a wet cloth on her. And in the front room, because Elder Yildiz had put him there four days earlier when she closed the pass and stranded him, was a Sons of the Serpent courier named Tarik Nesin.

Sand viper stock. You can tell without asking. The pits under the eyes, the way the pupil sits, the utter stillness of a person who does not fidget because the build does not see the point. He was twenty-six and he was carrying a case of black zone antibiotics that were three weeks late and dying in the cold, and he had spent four days being extremely polite to an old woman who would not let him through, because the Sons have a standing order about the pass communities that amounts to: they own the mountain, we are guests, do not ever forget it.

Tarik went to the shutter and looked and came back and said, "Six. Two of them have gone left, uphill." Then he drew a pistol I had not known he had.

I want to be exact about the next twenty seconds because I have been over them more times than is good for me. He opened the shutter to get an angle. Somebody outside saw the movement. There was a burst of fire that took the shutter apart and put a round through the meat of Tarik's left side above the hip, and he went down on the flags and I was on him before he stopped sliding, and that is how the night began: with me holding a wound closed with the heel of my hand and thinking, professionally, this is a good bleed but not a fatal one, and thinking underneath that, in the part of the mind that keeps the real ledger, that we had just gone from a negotiation to a siege because a twenty-six-year-old opened a window.

Then a man outside called up the slope, in Turkish first and then in very careful English, and asked whether anyone in the house was hurt, and said that he was sorry, and that he was coming no closer, and that his name was Hadi Serez.

Serez talked to me through a hole in a shutter for five hours and he never once raised his voice.

That is the part that gets under the skin. I have dealt with warlords and with the specific breed of PCU line officer who thinks a medic is a kind of tool, and I would take twenty of them over one polite man with a contract. He told me who he was in the first minute. Collection agent, contracted through a broker in Kirkuk, working an acquisition for PCU Northern Command medical, a program officer named Yusra Behnam whose name he offered up unprompted because he wanted me to understand that this was documented work and not banditry. He wanted Leyla Demirel. He said the word patient. He said transport. He said that his people had a physician in Basra and a course of treatment for exactly what she had, which was probably true, because the PCU medical directorate has been trying to buy Zagros pharmacology for nine years and knows more about resonance exposure than anyone in this house did.

I told him he could have her when the mountain fell on him.

He said, "That is a reasonable position. I have until four." And then he explained the four, which is the thing I keep coming back to. There was a truck at the pass head, a scheduled recovery run down to the black zone, and it logged its route at four in the morning, and after four his contract was closed and his crew stopped being paid and he could not promise what men who had stopped being paid would do about a house they had already shot at. He did not say it as a

threat. He said it as a scheduling problem, the way a man tells you the last ferry goes at six. That is the machine you are actually inside of out here. Nobody in this world will kill you because they hate you. They will kill you because the paperwork closes and the alternative is an unrecoverable expense.

I went to work, because working is the only thing I know how to do with fear.

Here is the arithmetic I was running, and I ran it out loud to nobody for five hours. One patient at forty point one with a fever I could break if I had fluid, and I had two liters. One patient bleeding, forged, sand viper stock, which means his baseline body temperature sits low and his metabolism is built for a desert night and not for a stone house at two and a half thousand meters in October. One stove. Eleven liters of kerosene in the back store, which is on the far side of a hatch that opens outward into a yard that two men were watching from uphill. Heat is the resource. Heat was always going to be the resource. Cooling one patient and warming the other out of the same eleven liters is not medicine, it is allocation, and allocation is the oldest and ugliest thing my profession does. Everything else we call ethics is decoration on top of who gets the fuel.

At half past midnight Tarik put his hand flat on the wall and said, "Two."

"Two what."

"Two of them out there. Warm." He kept his hand on the stone. The pits do not read through a meter of mountain rock, but they read a stove flue and a wall that has been leaned against, and he had been sitting in the dark long enough to be a very good instrument. "There were six. Now there are two, and there have been two since about eleven."

I told him he was concussed and cold and to stop talking. That was the correct clinical read and the wrong answer, and I would like it on the record that he did not argue with me, because he was raised by people who taught him to defer to a healer, and I was wrong, and it cost us.

At one in the morning I went out the fuel hatch for the second med case.

I had left it on the mule, in the shed, thirty meters across a frozen yard, because when I arrived at four in the afternoon this had been a house call. It is not a heroic thirty meters. It is a crawl on scree with a case strap in your teeth, in the dark, on a slope that wants to send every stone you touch downhill to announce you, and I had no build for it. No night eyes, no pits, no reflex package. Just a baseline body and the knowledge that a person can move very slowly for a long time if the alternative is unacceptable. They put four rounds into the shed wall when I was coming back. Not at me. Above me. I did not understand that until much later either.

The second case had a liter of chelating agent and it broke Leyla's fever at ten past three.

She came up out of it the way they do, in pieces. First the eyes tracking. Then the hands. Then she asked me, in English, who I was, and I told her, and she said, "Good, you came," and closed her eyes again, and something in my chest went sideways, because I had come at the request of Elder Yildiz and nobody in this house had told me otherwise for eleven hours.

I went through her chest for the community's own medicines, because I wanted to know what she had already been given.

It was on top of the folded shirts, in a tin, and it was a transit chit and a folded contract paper and a receipt from a broker house in Kirkuk. The chit was a pass fee, paid down, one adult passenger, western approach to the black zone road, dated for that night. The contract was an acquisition instrument for consultancy, medical care, and instruction, with a stipend clause naming Nesrin Demirel of Istanbul as the recipient, signed in a shaking hand that had still been careful about the loops. And clipped behind it, on the same broker's letterhead, in the same clerk's handwriting, was the engagement that had hired me. Four hundred a day and

expenses. A baseline medic with forged pharmacology, to travel to Sarıkaya, and to attend the descent.

She had bought me too. I was the second half of her plan. She was not being taken off this mountain, she was leaving it, and she had hired a doctor for the road down the way you would hire a car.

I stood in a stone room holding the paper that proved I had spent the night defending a woman from her own arrangement, and out through the ruined shutter I could see two sets of headlights sitting patiently in the cold, and I finally heard what Tarik had told me two hours before. Two men. Since eleven. Four rounds into a shed wall and none into me. Nobody had been besieging this house. Six men had come up a road expecting to collect a passenger who had paid her fee, a courier with a pistol had opened a window on them, and after the shooting stopped, four of them had walked back to the trucks to wait, because there was nothing to storm. The only thing standing between Hadi Serez and his scheduled departure was a foreign doctor with a case and an opinion.

The old woman never got to explain it. She had been at forty point one for two days. And every time she surfaced far enough to try, I had put her back under, competently, correctly, for her own good, because that is what I am for. My hands did that. The build I do not have could not have done it better.

I opened the door at twenty to four and Hadi Serez took his hat off, which I could have done without.

I told him he could have her. I told him the price was eleven liters of kerosene replaced out of his truck and one of his men carrying the Sons courier's antibiotic case down to the black zone road on his own fuel, and he said yes to both before I finished the sentence, because it cost him nothing and he had a schedule. That is what my night was worth on the open market. A tank of fuel and a delivery. I have thought about invoicing the broker for the difference.

Leyla walked out on her own feet for the first four steps and I carried her the rest. She weighed nothing. At the tailgate she got a hand into my collar and pulled my ear down to her mouth and told me where the winter road runs when the north face loads up, which is not where the summer route runs, and which stone you put your weight on at the third turn, and how you know the day. Thirty years of it, compressed into about forty seconds, delivered to the only person standing there. I am a baseline trauma tech from a city on the wrong side of the mountains. I do not know this range. I have no idea what to do with what she gave me and she knew that when she gave it to me, and she gave it to me anyway, because the alternative was that it went down the road in a truck with her and stopped.

Elder Yildiz was at the approach when they drove out. She did not say anything to me and she has not since. She was reading the sky, the way she does, the way her mother did, and I think she had known about the chit for a week and had closed the pass in the hope that the mountain would settle the matter for her. The mountain does not take sides. That is the one thing everyone up here agrees on and the one thing they all keep testing.

I went back inside and burned four liters of Hadi Serez's kerosene on a sand viper who had gone torpid on my floor with his core down at thirty-two and his hands curled up like a dry leaf. He came back. It took until nine. The first thing he said was that he had told me there were two of them, and the second thing he said was nothing at all, for about an hour, which was decent of him.

Just before dawn, while the stove was still coming up, I sat with my back against the cold wall and watched the ridge through the hole in the shutter, and there was a light out on it. Amber, low, moving slow along a line where there is no trail and never has been. The communities have been logging it for two years. Yildiz watches it without alarm and will not discuss it. I watched it cross the whole north face while the fuel burned, and it never hurried, and it never came down, and it did not want a single thing from me, which by then made it the only thing on that mountain I could stand to look at.

STORY 07 OF 07 · No. 38

SOUND SHADOW

AMAZONIAN METROPLEX / ROOT LEVEL · BAT / SCA CAVE
SURVEY STOCK · 3,101 WORDS

Sixty meters under the Canopy, in a passage that had been a meter wider the day before, I put out a call and got nothing back.

That is Root Level in one sentence, so hold onto it. I make a sound and I read what comes home. Down there the walls are alive and wet and they return nothing at all. Root mass drinks a call the way dry sand drinks water. You throw a note into it and the note does not echo, does not even die properly, it just stops being a thing that happened. What does come home is the old city. Pre-Upheaval concrete, rebar, tile, the steel bones of whatever stood on this ground before the SCA grew four hundred miles of living architecture on top of it. Hard surfaces sing. Living surfaces swallow.

So I do not see Root Level. I see the dead thing inside it. I move through the Metroplex's guts by listening for a

drowned town, and where the drowned town is gone, I am in a hole in the world with my hands out.

The trade word for that hole is a sound shadow. I have been standing in one for most of my life.

They built my line in 2049, cave survey stock, the batch the SCA ran when they were still deciding what to put a city on. Somebody in Bioengineering wanted maps of the sub-surface and did not want to pay for drones that the ground would eat, so they made forty of us instead: light bones, big ears, a throat that puts out a call at frequencies you would feel in your teeth and not hear, skin on the arms so thin you can see the market lights through it. We went down and we listened and we came back up and told them where the voids were. Then the city grew its own maps, root by root, and the program closed. You do not decommission people. You just stop resupplying them and let the paperwork do it slowly.

I am thirty-four. My warranty ran out at twenty-six. I eat every four hours or my hands start to go, because they gave me the metabolism of a thing that weighs ninety grams and then hung it in a body that weighs fifty-one kilos, and nobody in the Division ever wrote down what that costs a person over a lifetime. I carry paste tubes in a chest rig like ammunition. Some nights I dream about being hungry, which is a stupid dream to have when you are already hungry, and I wake up and eat and lie there listening to the building I live in grow.

The job came through Julio Marquez, who sells root-mass samples off a stall in the Canopy market and other things off the back of it.

"One case," he said. "Blue tag, steel, forty by thirty. Third room, left side. In and out."

"In and out of where."

He did the thing with his mouth that traders do when the answer is expensive. Around us the market was doing its midday business under green-gold light, everybody wearing a drift chip on the wrist and pretending not to check it.

"Black Site Three," he said.

"There is no Black Site Three."

"That is the appeal." He slid the map chip across the crate. "Da Silva's patrol map, current as of this morning. Vipers have kill-on-sight down there, but you knew that. The buyer says the route to the site closes in thirty hours. After that the passage is root and you would need a saw and a week."

"What is in the case?"

"Records," Marquez said. "Old Division metrology. Nothing that bites."

"Nothing that bites is what people say about the things that bite."

"Odete." He was not smiling anymore. "The pay is thirty days of current-calibration patches and a River Quarter berth out to the coast. Nobody outside the Division has

current-calibration patches. Think about what that tells you about the buyer, and then think about whether you want to be in this city breathing last year's chemistry when the next big bloom comes through."

I thought about it for about as long as it takes to read that sentence.

Here is what you need to know about the Metroplex and then I will get on with it. Everything here runs off one nutrient cycle. Every building, every wall that grows, every farm tower in the Greenhouse Spine, every engineered thing in the outer jungle that eats your equipment if you are not cleared, all of it drinks from the same mineral flow out of the Interchange at Sector 14. Fourteen months ago somebody changed the mixture. Nobody announced it. The farms started growing three percent faster and the Division said improved cultivars, and the agricultural workers who have been growing those cultivars for twenty years said nothing out loud and started keeping scrapings in jars at home. Down below, the roots heard the same change and went mad with it. Four hundred percent. The city's own foundation is now eating toward things the city buried and forgot, and the only people who have run the numbers are a customs inspector, a Viper sergeant nobody will listen to, and an analyst working for a buyer who has gone quiet.

That is the ground I went into. A city that is alive, being fed something, growing toward its own graves.

I went down through the Greenhouse Spine foundations at 0140, because the night crew there tolerates a certain amount of traffic and the automated atmospheric monitors are looking up at the towers, not down at the floor.

Forty meters of vertical, then the drop into the capillaries, and the temperature comes up on you like a hand on the back of the neck. Wet heat. The smell down there is the inside of a mouth. The nutrient capillaries run along the ceiling in bundles thicker than my waist, and where they have been running the modified flow you can see orange residue crusted at the seams, which is the same residue three agricultural workers filed reports about and got three answers of within engineered parameters.

I put out a call every eight or ten steps. The bundles came back soft and gone. Concrete came back at forty meters, a clean bright wall of it, an old parking structure the roots had swallowed whole in the fifties. I went along it by ear with my hand on the surface, and the surface was warm, and something under the surface moved slowly enough that you could tell yourself it was water.

Vipers found me at the second junction.

Two of them, jaguar stock, which is the SCA's best infantry and everybody knows it. They came without lights because they do not need lights, and I heard them at ninety

meters because they were breathing and their kit was wet. I got flat into a root fold and made no sound at all, which is a thing my line does very well, and they walked past me close enough that I could smell the anti-fungal on their boots.

They stopped. The one in front went to a painted line on a root surface, put a hand on it, took a measurement, wrote it in a log.

"Two more since Tuesday," he said.

"Report it."

"I have reported it four times." He said it the way you say a thing you have stopped expecting anything from. "First three came back natural variance. The fourth has not come back at all."

That was da Silva. I have thought about him a lot since. He was standing at a wall that is being eaten, writing down the rate at which it is being eaten, for a command that has filed his handwriting under nothing. He was six meters from me. He is a man with kill-on-sight authorization and a headache, and if he had turned his head I would not be telling you this.

They moved on. I gave it four minutes and went the other way, and that is when I picked up Pia Rocha.

I did not see her. I heard the shape of her: a hard return at thirty meters where the map said there was nothing hard, moving when I moved, stopping when I stopped. Somebody wearing enough salvaged plate to sing back to me. She was

good and she was quiet and she was tracking my route because my route was the only route.

Rocha was a Viper for eleven years before they put her out. Freelance now, market district, ambush work. The forged from her stock go still in a way that reads as calm and is not calm. We had been on the same job twice before without knowing it, which in this business is called getting paid twice, and it usually ends with one of the two of you learning about it in a way you do not walk off from.

I did not challenge her. You do not challenge a jaguar in a tunnel. I went faster instead, which was the wrong decision, because at hour six my hands started shaking and I had to stop and suck down a tube of paste in the dark while listening to somebody patient close the distance to twenty meters.

Black Site Three was where the map said the map ended.

The passage narrowed to a throat, and past the throat there was a void that came back hard on every frequency I had. Concrete box, eleven by nine, buried under a hundred years of somebody else's plan. The door was steel and had been painted white a long time ago. No keypad. No panel. A grille where a panel should be, and behind the grille, an acoustic seal.

They did that in the forties. Before biometrics got cheap, before anybody trusted a network, the SCA sealed the sites it did not want in a system with a lock that opens to a sound. Not a code. A voice. Specifically, the survey line's voice, because we were the ones who found these voids and mapped them and were expected to be the only ones who ever came back.

I stood in front of a door built by people who assumed my body would still be in the inventory when it mattered, and I put out the call, and the door thought about it for four seconds and opened.

I want to be honest about what I felt, because the honest version is worse than the heroic one. I did not feel like a thief. I felt useful. Eight years past my shelf life, standing in a hole nobody has a designation for, being exactly the thing I was made to be for the length of one sound. Then the door came open and the feeling curdled, because being made for a purpose means somebody made the purpose first.

Inside: three rooms, dry, a dead air that had not moved since 2052. No weapons. No cultures. No lab.

It was a metrology station.

Racks of glass. Ampoules in foam, hundreds of them, each one dated and stamped and signed off by a technician whose signature had gone brown. Reference standards. The certified record of what the Metroplex's air was made of, sampled quarterly from the year they turned the city on,

sealed and stored so that anyone who ever needed to know what normal looked like could open a drawer and hold normal in their hand.

The case with the blue tag was in the third room, left side, exactly where Marquez said. Steel, forty by thirty. Twelve ampoules, the last twelve, 2050 to 2052. The baseline.

I opened it in the dark because I do not carry a case out of a black site without knowing its weight and its sound. That is not caution, it is a habit from a job in the River Quarter where a sealed crate turned out to be sealed for a reason. I ran a call over the open case and got back the small clean chorus that glass makes, twelve voices, and one of them I lifted out and put in my chest rig against the paste tubes, because a runner who does not keep a sample is a runner who has nothing to say later.

Then Rocha shot the lock off the outer door, and the room was concrete on all six sides.

You have to understand what a gunshot is in a hard box to a body like mine. It is not a noise. It is a physical event that happens inside your skull. I went down before I decided to go down. Something warm came out of my left ear and my sense of up went with it, and the whole architecture I navigate by, every hard surface, every clean return, the entire drowned town I had been walking through for nine hours, went to white.

Deaf, in a sound shadow, with a case in my hand.

She came in fast. I did not hear her. I felt the air change and I threw myself sideways into a rack, and glass went everywhere, forty years of certified quarters breaking on the floor of a room nobody has a name for. I got a hand on her wrist and could not hold it. She put me into the wall and my ribs did what hollow bones do, and I remember thinking, with total calm, that my line was rated for climbing and listening and not for this.

What saved me was that she wanted the case and I did not.

I threw it past her, out through the throat into the passage, and she turned to follow it, because everybody turns, and I went the other way on my hands and knees into the living dark where nothing sings.

I crawled out of Root Level by touch, in silence, in a body that had lost the one sense it was built around. Four hours. I counted the junctions with my fingers on the wall, and I found the warm bundle of the capillaries and followed it upward because the flow always runs toward the Spine, and twice I put my hand into something that came off my glove in a strip. My hearing came back in pieces, low first. By the time I saw the tower lights I could hear my own breathing and nothing above it.

Rocha got the case out. She had the shorter route and both her ears. That was always going to happen.

The handoff was at a boatyard in the River Quarter at 0400, and I went because I wanted my patches and because the deal was Marquez's deal and Marquez's name was on it.

I came in along the water where the tolerance corridor runs. There was a launch tied off and four men who were not boatmen, and there was Rocha with a bandage on her forearm and the blue-tag case at her feet, and there was a barrel.

They pay in cash at that hour and they do not talk. One of the men opened the case, counted, and closed it. Then he carried it to the barrel, which was one of the chemical burn drums the harvesters use for contaminated root-mass, and he put the whole thing in, and another one poured, and it went up green.

Glass in a fire does not break the way you think. It goes quietly.

Rocha looked at the barrel and then she looked at me, and I watched the arithmetic arrive on her face about half a second after it arrived on mine. Two runners, two streams, one buyer. Nobody had ever wanted that case moved. They wanted it in one place at one time, held by people who could be paid, and then not existing anymore.

Because you cannot prove the air changed without the air.

There is a customs inspector at Sector 14 with forty-seven dated soil samples in a locker and eight months of numbers she is afraid to finish. There are three variance reports closed as within parameters. There is a woman in the Greenhouse Spine with fourteen months of residue scrapings in sealed jars in her apartment. Every one of those is a measurement of a difference, and a difference needs two numbers. Take away the certified before and all of it is one woman's opinion about dirt.

They did not hire us to steal a thing. They hired us to be the last two people who ever touched it.

I got paid. I want that in the record. I took the patches and the berth chit off a man standing next to a barrel with somebody's whole century burning in it, because I am eight years past my warranty and I need to breathe, and if you think you would have done otherwise you have never priced your own air.

Rocha walked out the other way and neither of us said anything. There was nothing to say that would not have been a receipt.

I did not use the berth.

At 0558 I was in the line at the Sector 14 agricultural boundary with two hundred other people in the wet heat,

holding my patch out for inspection like everybody else, waiting for the four minutes at the dawn changeover when the sensor coverage goes thin and the inspectors are handing over their arrays. My ear was still leaking. I had one ampoule in my chest rig, 2051, third quarter, signed by a technician named R. Aguiar who is probably dead.

She was working the third station. Eleven years at that boundary, tired the specific way you get from being right too early. I put the ampoule on the counter and pushed it across with two fingers and did not say anything clever, because I had lost most of my hearing and would not have heard her answer.

She read the date on the glass. Then she read it again. Then she put her hand flat over it, which is what a person does when they are hiding something and also what a person does when they are holding on.

Above us the drift was coming along the canopy line, orange and yellow and slow, moving the way it moves every morning of every year, the whole city looking up at it out of long habit and reading nothing in it at all.

It looked exactly the way it always looks.

