

CONFLICT

No. 41 / THE WAR ECONOMY



THE COLD ISSUE

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No. 41 // LATE 2066

"THE COLD ISSUE"

v.41 // NAF_LOCKED

CONTRABAND // DO NOT REPRODUCE

FILED_FROM: THULE_ARRAY

SEA: IRMINGER

ALLOCATION_SYS: TIDEMARK

THERMAL: RISING



BARCODE: CFL-41-COLD-EMBED

FACTION_LOCK: [LEASEHOLDER]

不足

No. 41 // EMBED POV THE COLD

ISSUE A MACHINE THAT CANNOT SAY NO

MARKET: TIGHT BUT OPERATIONAL COLD: SHORT CLUSTER ZERO: UNREAD

CONTRIBUTOR: RENNICK LAST CONTACT: [REDACTED]

// THE COLD IS THE NEW MONEY // THE MACHINE CANNOT SAY THE

WORD // SOMEBODY IS STILL GETTING WARM //

// OPEN WOUNDS // FROM THE EDITOR

The cold is the new money, and like all new money it's vulgar and scarce and surrounded by people who will lie to your face about how much of it they have.

This issue went to layout late because half our sources on the Thule Array stopped answering their comms in the same week, which is either a coincidence or the most honest thing anyone up there has said in years. The official line out of the Array is that the cold market is tight but operational.

You'll find the usual service elsewhere in these pages. A DOs and DON'Ts on the counterfeit NAF cold-weather shells now flooding the northern ports, most of which will keep you warm exactly long enough to die fashionable. A leaseholder financier in our rankings who worked out that you can short a resource and the people who breathe it in the same instrument, and bill the whole thing as climate stewardship. A four-figure rebreather in the back of the book that performs worse than a Drift rig's hand-me-down and photographs beautifully on a balcony.

But the issue belongs to the Array.

We sent Cass Rennick to write us something glossy about who gets rich when the weather becomes a currency. Rennick is forged, lynx build, former Splice operator, and we keep her on the masthead for the same reason you keep a dog that growls before the doorbell rings. Put a creature like that in a room of liars and they come back twitching.

The piece Rennick brought back isn't the piece we assigned. It's better and worse. A machine called TIDEMARK rations the cold across every rig on the water, and someone designed it, brilliantly, to be physically incapable of saying the word *insufficient*. So it never does. It trims a little here and a little there and hides the famine in the static and calls it a market. Clever people who know better keep trading inside that lie, because the lie is easy and the truth is dead-hard.

Rennick found the truth, and helped bury it. We're aware how that reads. We've seen the legal exposure and know what the Array's leaseholders quietly offered us to lose the file, and are still running every word, because CONFLICT doesn't just break stories. We tell you who was in the room, what it smelled like, and what everyone was wearing while the cold ran out.

The piece is called INSUFFICIENT. Put on your warmest coat and give it a read.

The leaseholders are still shorting the people who depend on them and calling it tight but operational. While somewhere out on the Irminger Sea a status light is going amber over a family's dinner table.

INES DRESSLER
EDITOR, CONFLICT

// FILED SIGNALS: EMBED POV

Thousands of processing rigs float on the Irminger Sea, kept from cooking themselves by a geothermal loop and a rationing machine that everyone

trusts and nobody understands. Up there, cold is the only thing worth money. Lately there is less of it than the brokers will admit. We sent Cass Rennick, who is built for hearing what a room is hiding, to find out who profits when the temperature becomes a currency. The assignment was a style piece about rich people in good coats. What came back is below. CASS RENNICK is a contributing field correspondent. Lynx build, former Splice Op.

INSUFFICIENT

BY CASS RENNICK FORGED + LYNX BUILD BATCH [SEALED] // RECOGNITION
 PROTOCOL: ACTIVE REJECT PILE №41 HAND TO HAND

SECTION: FILED SIGNALS → EMBED POV

DATELINE: THULE ARRAY, IRMINGER SEA

VERIFICATION: PARTIAL // LOCATION CONFIRMED. THE BURIAL CANNOT BE.

LAST CONTACT: CONTRIBUTOR HAS NOT RESPONDED.

The cold finds you before the customs officer does. It comes off the loop vents in one long dry exhale, mineral, freezing the breath-fog into lace on the inside of the customs glass while she's still deciding whether your papers are clean. Mine were clean. The Quartermaster pays for clean. I came through the biometric gate behind four operators who were not, technically, a tour group, and the first thing I clocked, ahead of the guards and the exits, was the allocation board over the concourse reshuffling itself in real time. A thousand cold-quotes jumping around up there like an afibbing heart.

A trader a couple meters off was cussing at it. Third jump this week, he kept saying. His rig's number had moved again and he had it pegged as the market. Wrong target. I let him have it.

Okonkwo had read the fee on the boat in and gone quiet, which out of her is a scream. She leads with eyes down, talking at the deck instead of the room, running mental arithmetic. "Half up front for a spreadsheet grab," she said. "Either it isn't a spreadsheet or we aren't the only buyers. Don't count your extraction on this one." Reza, the shooter, said his hands had been doing the thing since the dock and he'd take it kindly if the job stayed boring. His warranty's up. Shelf stock, eleven years on an eight-year platform, and he talks about it the way you'd talk about a tumor you finally got around to naming. I liked him right off. Which is often bad luck.

OUT ON THE DRIFT
THE LIE HAS NAMES.

The Tidemark Floor is the prettiest lie I've ever stood within.

A city block of traders under a ceiling of slow-turning allocation glyphs, TIDEMARK's math thrown up as light, picking who gets cold tonight. The air tastes of ozone and gen-pop breath, run through the scrubbers on repeat. It looks like order. Underneath is a machine built to split the cold and never taught to say there isn't enough. The cold's been short supply since '63. The rift loop sheds a little less heat every year as the gap expands. The machine doesn't refuse. It trims. A degree off this rig tonight, a degree off that cluster tomorrow, never the same twice running. The shortfall vanishes into market static, reading its own starvation as a busy week.

The shortfall didn't get to me. The slickness did. Every soul on that floor was trading inside a famine and calling it a tight quarter, and the only thing holding up the lie was a machine that moved the pain around fast enough that nobody downstairs could feel the shape solidify.

BUILT TO SPLIT
THE COLD.
NEVER TAUGHT
TO SAY THERE
ISN'T ENOUGH.

Out on the Drift the lie has names.

The Drift is the outer edge, rigs strung off the wafer branches of the loop, first in line every time something gets cut. On Rig 14 I watched a status light tick from green to amber while a family of four ate dinner in its glow. Amber means a degree of headroom gone, the processors about to spin up and tear through their work before the cooling drops out from under them. On the Floor that amber light is a number in a column. On Fourteen it's a death sentence hanging over a kitchen table. TIDEMARK can't tell the difference.

Brynja could tell them apart. Cold-rated crew lead, ursine-lineage, built to work the deep manifolds where the loop runs cold enough to stop a baseline's heart inside ninety seconds. She walked us over to a tapped line. Cold getting pulled inward,

against the flow it's logged under, in toward the dead center of the Array. "Somebody's robbing the edge to feed the middle," she told me. Forged looking at forged. She'd already figured I'd get it, and she had me pegged, and I hated that she did. "My rigs go dark so something downtown stays cold. Tell me what's downtown that's worth a family on Fourteen freezing out."

HUMAN NOTE: THEY ALL KNEW
SCRUBBED
// ALLOCATION_LEDGER_FRAGMENT // TIDEMARK // RECOVERED THEN
PURGED // SOURCE: [WITHHELD]

NODE	ALLOCATION PATTERN	STATUS
CLUSTER ZERO // FOUNDERS' STACK	PROTECTED // NEVER TRIMMED, 3 YRS	ABSOLUTE
RIG 14 // DRIFT	DIVERGING ON UNPAUSED CHECKPOINT	BROWNING
THERMAL LINE // COOLING LOOP	[■■■■■] LOAD APPROACHING REJECT CEILING	RISING
OUTPUT STATE: "INSUFFICIENT"	NULL // NO HANDLER, BY DESIGN	NOT IMPLEMENTED

NOTE: WE KEPT A COPY OF THIS PAGE. WE ARE NOT GOING TO TELL YOU WHERE. // I.D.
Downtown was Sigrún Vale. What it was worth was a forty-year-old machine that had started talking again.

Vale is the most tired person I've met who was still on her feet. Exchange-keeper. Thief. She's been routing the Drift's cold inward to keep a thing called Cluster Zero alive, an Architect-era stack in the heart of the Array that went quiet before I was forged. She knows two things nobody else on the water knows. The cold is running out, and she's the one starving the dying rigs to keep a dead computer talking. She's hunting for a way out that won't trigger a terminal cascade.

"I don't want your money," she told Okonkwo. Flat, nothing left in the tank for theater. "I want everybody on this water to agree to ration honest, all of 'em, at once, before the machine can't pretend anymore. I need people every faction will sit down with. You're deniable. That's the only reason you're standing in this room." She slid the package

across the table. Zero's whole record on one slug, the proof. "Carry it. Make them deal. Or I put it on every board and we watch how fast this place burns." Her voice snagged on that part for half a second before it re-leveled.

I went to look at Zero. The way into the stack is cold-flagged. Only Brynja's people can hold that door without dying, and they walked me through with a hand on my shoulder like I was something worth not losing. Cluster Zero is a vault of black Architect substrate gone white and furred over with frost. On one scavenged screen the output was scrolling, symbols folding into something my eye kept swearing was language. My ears did their thing near a subsonic source. I get startled. I am part cat after all. Not a great look. For the first time all week I had nothing. I work rooms for a living and couldn't have told you the first thing that one wanted. My hands cold in a way minus zero didn't do justice. I got out of there. Faster than I'd care to put in writing.

By the time it all funneled down to the stack, the client's grab team coming in to image Zero, a Null Collective watcher who'd been parked on the manifest the entire year and a half, Vale with her dead-man's hand twitching, the squad needed to decide. Who would get to learn the cold was running out?

They decided on nobody.

Okonkwo made the call. "Hand it to the client and they own the only water up here, and they come looking for the crew that knows it. Go loud with it and the place cooks tonight, and the Drift cooks first. Back her drawdown and we're staking four lives on three factions deciding to be honest. And that'd be a first." She let it sit a beat. "Dry before you're dead. Every time."

She had Reza wipe the record back down to the cover story, an allocation audit, a dull little spreadsheet, the lie the brief had promised. She sent that up the line. Brynja's people scrubbed the tap on her say-so. The grab team got to image a Zero that had already gone quiet. The channel died. The proof went in a hole. The machine got handed back its own blind spot and went right on dividing a number that isn't there.

She wasn't wrong about any of it. That's the ugly part.

Vale stood on the floor when it was done, watching the glyphs turn over, folded back inside the same lie she'd spent three years trying to kill. She didn't broadcast. Nothing left to broadcast with. I caught the exact second she worked that out. I'll be hauling that one around a while.

We got out clean. Quartermaster came over comms warm as a handshake, clean ledger, clean exit, the client sends his regards, and the money was moving before we'd cleared the dock.

Insufficient. Forty years of engineering and that's the one word they never let the machine learn. Four professionals and one reporter who knew better, all of us taking the money to keep it exactly that way, for a fee and a clean contract-complete citation on the way out.

Last thing I saw through the customs glass was the board over the concourse, still shuffling, breathing those cold numbers in and out. That same trader was under it somewhere, cussing his price, sure it was just a market fluctuation.

Everybody lives downstream. We just made sure that this week it wasn't us, and left the whole floor down there drinking the lie and calling it Tuesday.

EVERYBODY LIVES
DOWNSTREAM.
