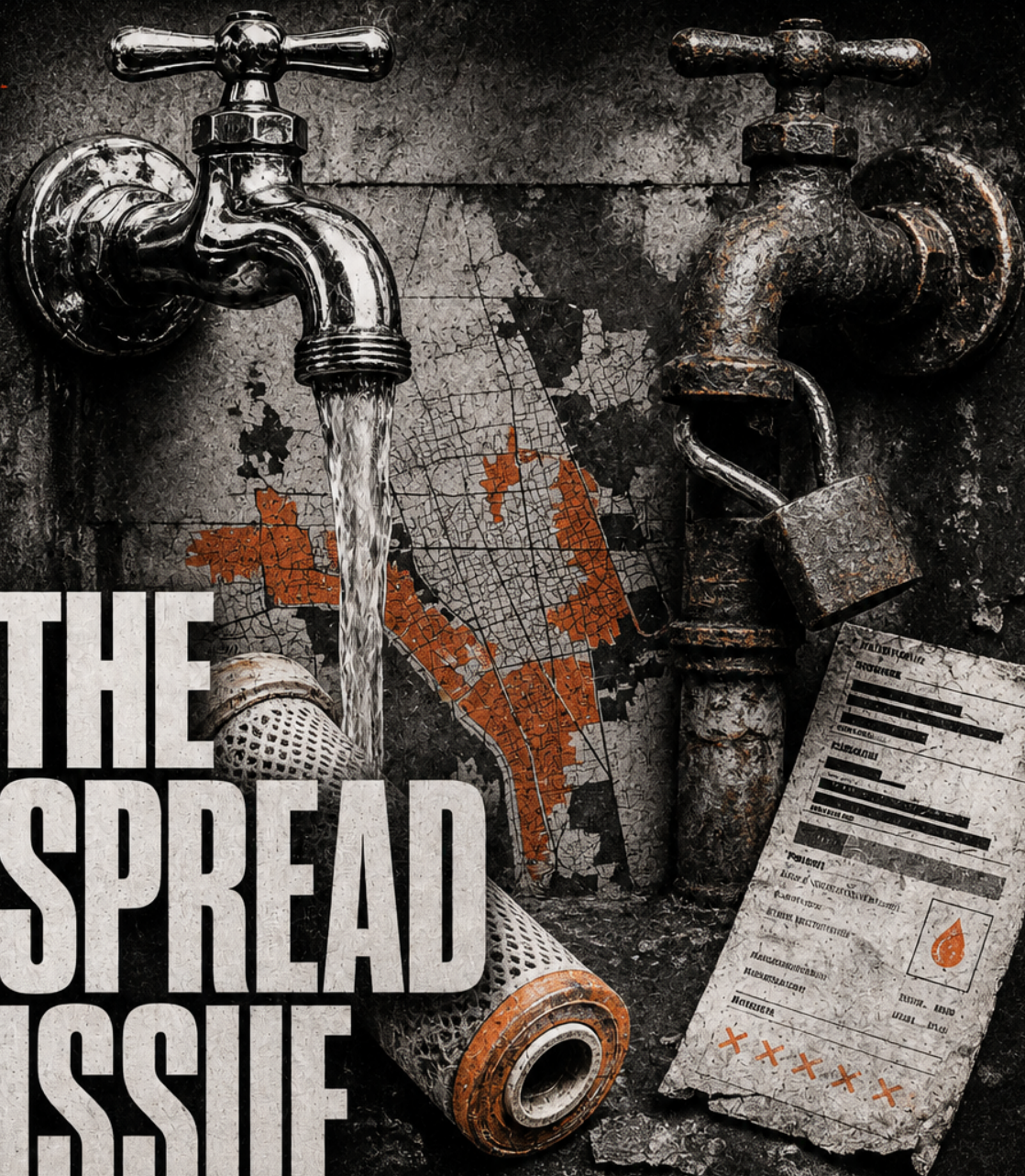


CONFLICT

No. 49 / THE WAR ECONOMY

THE SPREAD ISSUE

ONE CITY. UNEQUAL TERMS.



CONFLICT / No. 49 / THE SPREAD ISSUE

Complete web issue, formatted for offline reading. Links to referenced articles remain available online.

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CONFLICT

Issue 49 // Q1 2067 // The Spread Issue

THE WATER *KNOWS* WHICH DISTRICT YOU'RE FROM

FOUR WEEKS DRY IN BARRICADIA, RUNNING CARTRIDGES THROUGH THE MUSK TUNNELS AT NIGHT // EMBEDDED I

VOID WHERE PROHIBITED, REPRINTED IN FULL: THE CREW, THE CAMERA THAT NEVER STOPS, FOUR ORIGIN STORIES // EMBEDDED II

INSIDE THE JAGUARIO NIGHT SHIFT: WHO ACTUALLY RUNS BARRICADIA WHEN NAF CLOCKS OUT

THE NEW STATUS SYMBOL OF THEATER IS YOUR OWN FILTER LINE

HOW TO TELL A REAL CASCADE CARTRIDGE FROM ONE THAT PUTS A KID ON OXYGEN

GLASS FOREST HAS NEVER MISSED A NIGHT ALLOCATION IN ITS LIFE

MO MONEY JAGUARIO ON RACE NIGHT, HIS DISTRICT, AND THE ONE QUESTION HE WALKED AWAY FROM

ADVERTISEMENT

AZURE CONTINGENCY

RESIDENTIAL WATER INDEPENDENCE

A Glass Forest holding, licensed in four districts, disclosed in none



TANK 001 / SEALED / NEVER RATIONED

The allocation schedule is a schedule for people who need one.

AZURE CONTINGENCY installs, seals, and services a private filtration and storage line inside your unit, drawing from your own reserve rather than the Western Corridor grid. Members do not experience night allocation. Members do not experience filter month. Members, candidly, stop being able to discuss either subject with authority at dinner, which is a cost some of them have mentioned to us and none of them have asked us to fix.

Because the schedule was never going to apply to everyone equally, and somebody should say so in writing.

Installation requires proof of unit ownership in an approved building and a service contract renewable at our sole discretion. AZURE CONTINGENCY is not a public utility, does not represent itself as a public utility, and is not obligated to disclose reserve capacity to non-members, including during a declared shortage. Our counsel has asked that this be printed here rather than explained to you individually, later, at the door.

AZURE CONTINGENCY

Your tap. Your schedule.

CONFLICT

Issue 49 // Q1 2067

A contraband glossy from the edge of a dying future

Editor-in-Chief

INES DRESSLER

Has not showered with the door open since she found out how the exchanges would price it if they could. There is no exchange for this. She checked.

Deputy Editor

GIDEON ARLT

Verifies everything twice and still cannot tell you, from memory, which tier his own building is rationed on

Fashion & Field Intelligence

NICO BRAND

Can tell a real filter cartridge from a decorative one by the weight alone, blindfolded, has done this at a party, was asked to leave the party

Features Editor

SEVERIN KOA

Sent a reporter into the Musk Tunnels for two runs and has not slept well on either of the nights since, on principle, in solidarity, uselessly

Culture & Decline

PRIYA VANTERPOOL

Covers Race Night the way other outlets cover funerals, which is to say correctly, and has the sponsor complaints to prove it

Copy & Classifieds

LUTHER PYNE

Refuses to cut the classifieds that are obviously two people from the same building trying to trade allocation tiers, and has stopped pretending that refusal is an editorial judgment

Water & Supply Desk

WE DO NOT DISCLOSE OUR OWN ALLOCATION TIER. ASK SOMEWHERE ELSE.

Odds Desk

THE LINE WILL NEITHER CONFIRM NOR DENY EMPLOYING ANYONE ON THIS MASTHEAD.

Legal

WE HAVE BEEN ASKED TO CLARIFY THAT “THE SPREAD” IS A NICKNAME FOR A CITY AND NOT A RECOMMENDATION.

Published quarterly, or whenever the courier is well enough to travel. Printed on a stock that does not hold a scan. Distributed by hand to people who would rather not be enrolled anywhere. All views expressed are the publication's. Half this masthead is on a filtration plan they cannot fully explain and the other half is pretending not to notice.

CONTRIBUTORS

TALLY REYES

Writes both EMBEDDED pieces this issue, which we recognize is a lot of Reyes for one book. For EMBEDDED I she went into the district after dark, rode two cartridge runs through the Musk Tunnels with people who move real water for a living, and got as far as a Center Point rooftop where nobody had heard of filter month. EMBEDDED II is her afternoon at a certain unlicensed vehicle shop in Barricadia, the one with the standpipe and the crew that would not confirm their own name, first filed a few weeks back and reprinted here at full length by popular demand. She filed the tunnel piece in one sitting and asked us not to fact-check the ending. We fact-checked the ending.

DELPHINE OKOYE

Covers faction ownership the way other people cover weather, because in her experience it changes just as often and kills just as many people who didn't check first. For THE ROOM WHERE EVERYONE LIED she spent a practice night above the Jaguario garage floor with Mo Money himself, and came away with a very good interview about water and one question she is still turning over that he did not answer at all.

ORSON MACHT

Materials man, ex-salvage grader, now authenticates for three garages and one auction house that has stopped asking him to explain his methods out loud. He wrote MATERIAL CULTURE about a single Manta Wing tooth that has outlived two owners and one district government. He owns four. He will not say what he paid for the fourth.

RUE KASWELL

Goes to the places the Feed calls unincorporated and everyone else calls somewhere they used to live. For CITY OF BAD IDEAS she spent four dawns in the Raze watching cars built from quake debris race each other blind through dust hours, and was priced for scrap twice, by two different crews, at a number she describes as fair.

DEV KIRISHIMA

Pressed counterfeit filtration cartridges out of a stall off the produce corridor for two years and stopped the week a neighbor's kid went on metered oxygen from a batch he still cannot prove wasn't his. He now writes THE MANUAL on buying cartridges from people who may be exactly what he used to be. He does not take payment for the column. We pay him anyway, into an account he does not check.

OPEN WOUNDS

EVERYONE HERE CALLS IT THE SPREAD, AND NOBODY MEANS THE SAME THING BY IT

A Glass Forest broker said something to me at a launch party this quarter that I have not been able to put down. She was explaining, kindly, unprompted, why she'd bought a unit with its own reserve tank rather than a bigger one without. "The spread is the spread," she said, meaning the city, meaning its whole ragged sea-walled sprawl, meaning nothing in particular. She had no idea she was also describing the twenty-year gap in life expectancy between her rooftop and a mid-ring apartment forty minutes south. She had no idea because nobody has ever had to explain it to her. That is not an accident. That is the product.

This is the Lost Angeles issue, and it is about every kind of spread the city runs on at once: the four weeks between filter cartridge batches, when Barricadia drinks gray and Glass Forest does not notice a schedule exists; the point spread The Line quotes on every Jaguario race, which moves for reasons that have nothing to do with the cars; and the plain geographic spread of a place large enough that which district you were born in answers most questions about you before you have said a word.

We have an interview on page 49 with Mo Money Jaguario, who will tell you, convincingly, that he built something in Barricadia that NAF never bothered to. He is not lying. He is also not telling Delphine Okoye why the water inside his own garage never runs gray, and there is a longer piece to be written about the half-second his attention left the room entirely, on its own, toward a driver with no sponsor patch. We are not writing that piece yet. We are printing the half-second.

We have Tally Reyes back in the district for EMBEDDED I, this time after dark, riding cartridge runs through the Musk Tunnels with people whose whole job is a resource nobody in Glass Forest has ever had to think about twice. She ends the night at a rooftop where a woman genuinely asks her if filter month is a Barricadia thing, the way you might ask if a local holiday is regional. It is the single most honest sentence in this issue and nobody involved meant it as an insult.

We are also running EMBEDDED II this quarter, which is not a new commission at all. It is Reyes's afternoon with Warranty Void, the Barricadia crew this magazine profiled a few issues back, reprinted here in full for the readers who kept writing in asking where the print version was. We are aware that running a reprint next to a new feature by the same writer is an unusual editorial choice. We are running it anyway, because a

five-person crew who quietly manage their own coverage while a two-hundred-kilo drone rig tries to kill the reporter covering them is, in our professional opinion, worth the redundancy.

We have a single Manta Wing tooth that Orson Macht has followed through two owners and a district government, a dawn in the Raze with cars built out of what the 2041 quake left standing, and a manual on buying filtration cartridges from a man who used to sell you the bad ones and has, as far as we can verify, stopped.

The rest of the issue does what the magazine does. We shame the rooftop bars charging forty credits for a cocktail made with the same desal water everyone in Low Coast drinks for free out of a spigot. We rank the worst people currently profiting from a shortage that is, on the numbers, not actually a shortage at all — just an allocation, working exactly as designed, for exactly the people it was designed for.

That is the whole publication this quarter, and as far as we can tell, the whole city. Everyone here will tell you they live in the spread. Almost nobody here has been asked to reckon with what an uneven word that is.

Drink something you didn't have to think about tonight. Somebody spent a year thinking about it so you wouldn't have to, and they are in this issue, and we paid them, and it was not enough.

// INES DRESSLER

THIS MONTH IN DECLINE

1

CARTRIDGE STREET PRICE TRIPLES IN WEEK FOUR, RIGHT ON SCHEDULE

Every filter month ends the same way: a genuine CASCADE Mk. VII cartridge that runs forty credits in week one is running one hundred and thirty by week four, and the corridor sellers who set that price will tell you, without shame, that they are not gouging, they are simply the last honest market left once the district clinics run out. Three vendors near the Barricadia produce road raised prices Tuesday. All three sold out by Thursday. None of them enjoyed it, they say. All of them did it again this morning.

2

THE LINE WIDENS ITS SPREAD ON EVERY JAGUARIO RACE, QUIETLY, AGAIN

After a scandal nobody at the Tooth and Gear will discuss on the record, the Syndicate's book has adjusted its odds on every Jaguario entry by a margin analysts describe as "defensive." The house is not saying it expects a fix. The house is pricing as if it does, which is the same information delivered without the sentence that would get someone hurt for saying it.

3

GLASS FOREST LISTING ADVERTISES “NIGHT ALLOCATION EXEMPT” AS AN AMENITY

A two-bedroom unit forty floors up lists, between the view and the parking, a line item promising the building has never once been subject to the Western Corridor grid’s midnight rationing. This is not a marketing claim. It is a factual description of a private supply arrangement that has never been disclosed to the tenants’ board, the district office, or, until this listing, anyone at all.

4

BLUE SPRINGS STILL DOES NOT KNOW WHAT HAPPENS IN ITS OWN BACKYARD

A community newsletter in the ironically named suburb ran a full page this month on noise complaints near the Alto Cito line, attributing the engine sound at dawn to “maintenance vehicles.” It is not maintenance vehicles. It has never been maintenance vehicles. The amateur circuit has run those hours for six years. Blue Springs remains the only district in the spread that has successfully filtered out information it could get by opening a window.

5

A CENTER POINT ROOFTOP STARTS SELLING “CLARIFIED” COCKTAILS AT FORTY CREDITS

The base spirit is unremarkable. The water is Low Coast desal, the same product that comes out of a public spigot two hundred meters from the bar for nothing. What forty credits buys is a menu card that uses the word clarified four times and a bartender trained not to explain the joke to anyone who asks what makes it clarified. Nobody has asked. That is the business model.

6

COUNTERFEIT MANTA WING TEETH FLOOD THE MARKET AHEAD OF THE ENDURO

Demand for garage-wall salvage always spikes before the Ring Road Enduro, and this cycle a resin-cast fake good enough to pass a glance is moving through three Barricadia stalls at a third of the genuine price. The garage-lamp test still catches every one of them. Fewer buyers are bothering to ask for it, which is either optimism or exhaustion, and the sellers have stopped caring which.

7

A LOS CREEPS SPONSOR PULLS OUT OVER A FAMILY MATTER NOBODY WILL NAME OUT LOUD

The hydro-power concern backing this season's Los Creeps livery withdrew its logo from Javier Monsoon's car with eleven days' notice and a statement citing "alignment." Three people close to the team describe the actual issue as a shipment that moved through Monsoon family channels and was not, strictly, racing equipment. The team has not commented. The car is racing this weekend with a blank panel where the logo was.

8

MUSK TUNNEL "GOING DARK" SERVICES NOW HAVE A PRICE LIST

What used to be a favor between people who trusted each other has become a menu: a forty-minute blind window on a specific grid segment now runs a flat rate, negotiated in advance, paid in bit-chits that do not trace. The people doing the actual patching have not seen their cut rise to match. Everyone downstream of them has.

9

NAF LEAKS ITS OWN DRONE SWEEP SCHEDULE, SELLS ACCESS TO THE LEAK

A Monitor Central subcontractor is quietly offering a subscription product that is, functionally, advance notice of the Ring Road's twenty-two-minute overflight windows. NAF has not acknowledged the leak because acknowledging it would mean admitting the schedule was ever meant to be a secret rather than a service with two different customer tiers.

10

A BARRICADIA CLINIC REPORTS ITS SECOND GENE-MOD SUPPLY GAP THIS QUARTER

The stabilization trade that keeps half the district's working mods functional has been running thin on sourced material for six weeks, and the going rate for a cheek swab and an honest answer about provenance has gone up accordingly. Nobody we spoke to would put a clinic's name in print. Everyone we spoke to gave directions.

11

DUST-HOUR RACING GETS DISCOVERED BY A SPONSOR, WHICH NOBODY WANTED

A beverage brand offered a Raze crew four figures to run a logo through this season's dawn circuit, on the condition the races move to a schedule the brand's film crew could actually attend. The crew declined, on the grounds that dust hours exist because drones can't see through them, and a film crew that can see through them is the same problem wearing a lanyard.

12

A KID SPIN SIGHTING GETS FORTY THOUSAND VIEWS AND ZERO CONFIRMATION

Someone's Feed clip of a paddock-jacketed teenager taking a closed practice loop faster than two sponsored Jockeys has circulated with a caption naming him. Mo Money Jaguarío's team has not confirmed the callsign belongs to anyone. See page 59 for what everyone is saying instead of confirming it.

DOs / DON'Ts OF THE THEATER

DO

Carry your own cartridge, visibly, in a boring housing. The people who matter will read it as someone who plans. The people who read it as paranoia were never worth the water you'd have shared with them.

DON'T

Ask a Barricadia local what tier their building is rationed on. Not warmly, not as small talk, not because you read a magazine. You are asking a stranger to tell you exactly how the city has ranked them, and the fact that they know the answer instantly is the saddest part of the exchange.

DO

Learn the restraint-tap before you set foot in the Tooth and Gear. Two on the shoulder leaving for a job, one on return means don't ask. Get it wrong once and the room will forgive you. Get it wrong twice and it will simply stop telling you things.

DON'T

Check somebody else's nectar glow rig without being invited to. Checking your own glass is prudence. Checking the house's is an accusation, and in a room that includes a Syndicate closer, an expensive one.

DO

Resole with actual field-grade adhesive, not a cosmetic re-dye that photographs the same. Everyone who has walked the Raze in bad boots can tell the difference from across a bar, and will not tell you how they know.

DON'T

Wear Kavast red decoratively. It is claim-only, it always has been, and the rotation currently posted through the corridor has read a room correctly at least once this year that you have not.

DO

Know the difference between marked, listed, and depreciated before you ask a stranger which one they are. It is bar-opener shorthand for a reason. Get it wrong and you have announced you don't belong in the conversation you just started.

DON'T

Mention your building's allocation tier at a Center Point bar unless someone has mentioned theirs first. If nobody has, everyone in earshot already knows, and you are the only person in the room finding out how that sounds out loud.

DO

Buy the district-relabeled surplus off the crate rather than the branded original. It is the same garment for a third of the price and it tells the room you know exactly what the label was covering for.

DON'T

Show up to Race Night in anything that reads as GHOST KIT unless you can say, without flinching, what GHOST KIT actually costs. The garage crews have all done the math. They will let you keep talking. They will not believe a word of it.

DO

Top off at a free standpipe when you pass one, no questions, no explanation. The tap running is the whole point. Anyone who makes you feel you owe them for it has misunderstood what the tap is for.

DON'T

Photograph the benches outside a clinic during a supply gap. Somebody on that bench is having the worst week of their year and you are not entitled to make it content because you happened to be walking past with a good lens.

WHAT THEY'RE WEARING TO THE WAR

01

THE CASCADE Mk. VII, WORN ON THE BELT

Manufacturer Genuine military-surplus filtration housing, off a truck nobody in Barricadia has ever explained, lot-stamped and sealed

Materials Sintered ceramic media in a salt-cured polymer shell, weighted, with a tamper ring that shows any repress instantly

Signal Value I have real water and I am not afraid of you knowing it. Worn openly rather than hidden, which is its own small dare in a filter-month week.

Survivability Rated for one full cycle of hard use. The tamper ring is the best-designed object in this department because somebody needed to be able to check it in a doorway in under a second.

Earns the price and the belt space. The counterfeits copied the housing before they figured out how to fake the ring, and every garage in Barricadia now checks the ring first, out of habit, on friends.

02

SURPLUS-CRATE RELABEL, DEAD-ARMY STOCK

Materials Decommissioned faction fatigues bought by the crate off a surplus market and stripped of unit markings, re-stitched with a patch that says nothing about anyone

Signal Value I paid once, for the fabric, not twice for a story about who used to wear it. The correct read on a garment whose original owners are not owed a performance.

Survivability Excellent. It was built for a war already and this is a smaller one.

Buying FACTION SURPLUS branded and pre-distressed is paying twice for the same jacket. The crate version costs a third as much and nobody in Barricadia has ever once been fooled by the branded one.

03

THE R4 WEATHER SHELL, HEAT-DOME CUT

Materials Clear taped-seam poly over a vented lining, cut short enough to clear a garage floor, built for the June-gloom snap and the Santa Ana dust that follows it

Signal Value Function first, and the silhouette follows. Nobody wearing one is dressing for a photograph.

Survivability Handles a Low Coast storm surge warning and a hundred-and-ten-degree dome in the same closet season, which very little else in this department can claim.

The single most useful item on this page and, predictably, the one nobody photographs for the Feed. Long may that continue.

04

“PRIVATE RESERVE” TAP CHARM, COUNTERFEIT

Materials A shaped brass blank on a chain, cast to resemble a private-line access fob, sold at forty credits with no line attached to anything

Signal Value I have my own supply and do not need to explain it. Worn by roughly six people in this district who actually have one, and several hundred who do not.

Survivability Fine, since it does nothing and therefore cannot break.

A costume of somebody else’s reserve tank, and everyone who has ever installed a real one can spot the wrong weight of the chain from across a room.

05

THE MANTA TOOTH PENDANT, GARAGE-LAMP CERTIFIED

Materials A shard of downed drone composite, ground and drilled by a Barricadia jeweler who tests every piece under UV before it leaves the bench

Signal Value Geario status, earned rather than bought. You know somebody who works metal, or you are that somebody.

Survivability Effectively permanent. It survived falling out of the sky already.

The single hardest item in this department to fake convincingly, which is exactly why it is currently the most faked. See page 45 before you buy one from a stranger.

WORST PEOPLE ALIVE
THE LOST ANGELES EDITION

1

DIRECTOR ROLAND FASS

Regional Chief, Western Corridor Water Allocation Network

Presides over an allocation schedule he did not design and defends with real conviction, which is the offense. Fass can explain, at length and without notes, why core districts must be served first for grid-stability reasons that are technically true and functionally irrelevant to a woman boiling gray water in Barricadia. He has never missed a night allocation personally. He has also never been asked to, which he describes as a coincidence and everyone else describes as the org chart working exactly as intended.

2

AZURE CONTINGENCY, THE COMPANY, NOT THE AD

Residential water independence, Glass Forest

Sells the plain fact that the shortage was never going to touch its members back to them as a lifestyle product, at a markup that assumes correctly nobody buying it will ever have to compare notes with somebody who wasn't. Read the ad on the inside front cover. Then read this entry. Both were paid for. Only one of them is honest about what it is.

3

THE LINE, RETURNING

Syndicate sportsbook, back booths, the Tooth and Gear

Placed on this list two issues ago for a spread that moved on information nobody outside four rooms should have had. Returns this quarter for widening every Jaguario line without explanation and taking action on it before the explanation was needed. The house does not fix races. The house prices them as if it might, which amounts to the same intelligence advantage without the same legal exposure.

4

A CENTER POINT ROOFTOP BAR, UNNAMED AT COUNSEL'S REQUEST

Forty credits a glass, same water as the spigot outside
Sells desal water back to people who could walk two hundred meters and drink it free, dressed up in a menu word that means nothing and a bartender trained to let the silence do the selling. Nobody has been lied to, technically. Everyone has been sold a story they didn't need, at a markup only shame could produce.

5

A CARTRIDGE PRESSER, NAME WITHHELD, CASE ONGOING

Produce corridor, Barricadia, until recently
Ran counterfeit CASCADE housings good enough to pass a doorway check for the better part of a year, until one batch put a child two streets over on metered oxygen. This entry exists so the record shows somebody wrote it down. See THE MANUAL on page 40, by a man who used to do the same work and stopped, for the difference between him and this one, which is smaller than either of them would like.

6

A LOS CREEPS CORPORATE SPONSOR, NOW FORMER

Hydro-power concern, name pulled from this week's livery

Backed Javier Monsoon's car for two seasons, discovered a shipment moving through family channels that was not racing equipment, and withdrew with a statement about alignment rather than the word it actually meant, which was laundering. The car still races. The blank panel where the logo was is, this week, the most honest thing on the grid.

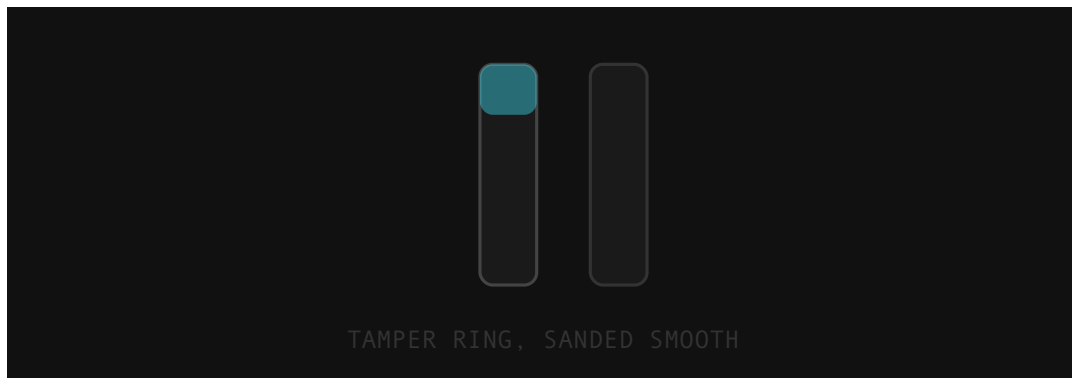
7

THE FEED ACCOUNT THAT NAMED A MINOR "KID SPIN"

Forty thousand views, zero sourcing, one district now watching a teenager Posted a practice-loop clip with a name attached that nobody involved has confirmed, then monetized the resulting attention while a boy who may or may not be who they say he is now can't take a closed practice lap without a lens on him. We are not naming the account. We are not naming him either. Somebody should have asked whether the clip needed a caption at all.

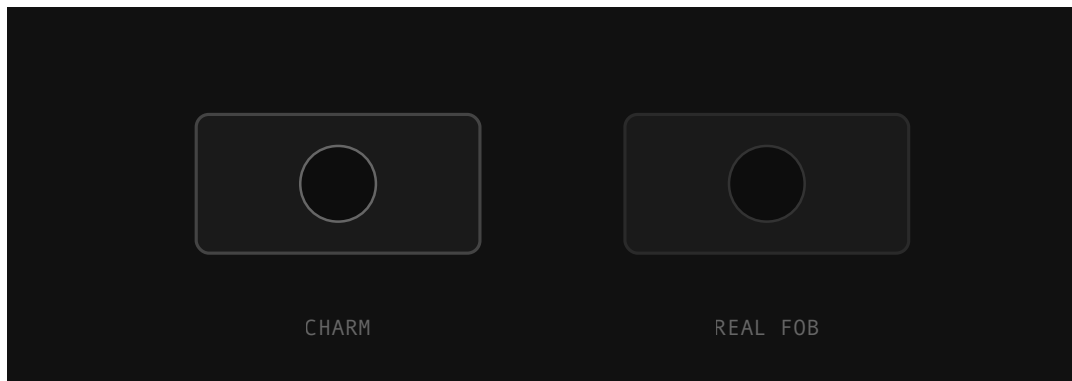
FIELD FAILURES

01



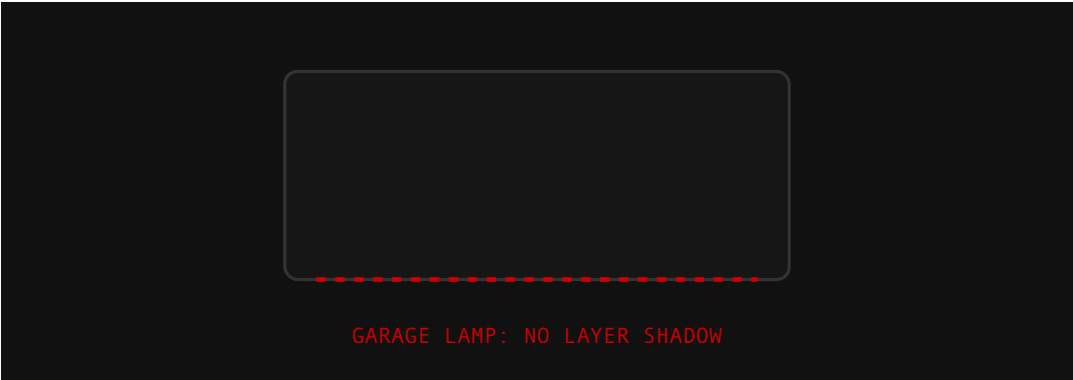
He filed the tamper ring down himself so it would “stop catching on his jacket.” It stopped catching on doorway checks too. Nobody at the bar could tell him his cartridge was three cycles expired until it was already the worst night of his month.

02



The private-reserve charm on the left cost forty credits and connects to nothing. The fob on the right is scuffed, ugly, and opens an actual line. One of these people has been photographed at every launch party this quarter. It is not the one with the fob.

03



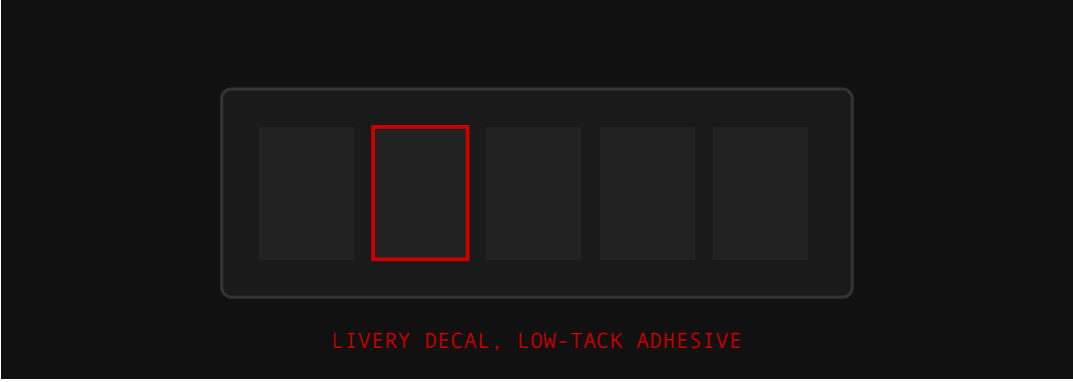
Sold as a genuine Manta tooth for six hundred credits. Under a garage lamp the composite should throw a faint layered shadow. This one didn't, because it was resin over fiberglass mesh. The buyer found out at a bar, in front of the seller's cousin, which was worse than the money.

04



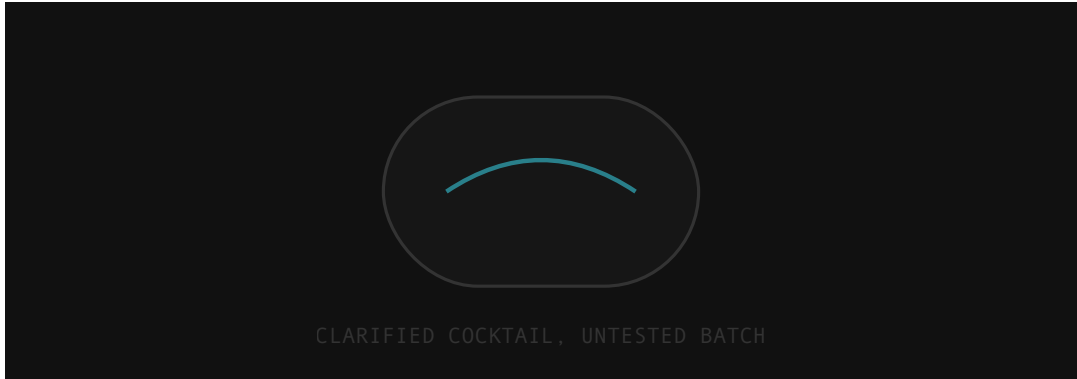
Announced, unasked, at a Center Point bar, that his building was night-allocation exempt. Three people at the table were not. He is still trying to work out why the room went quiet, and has decided, incorrectly, that it was impressed.

05



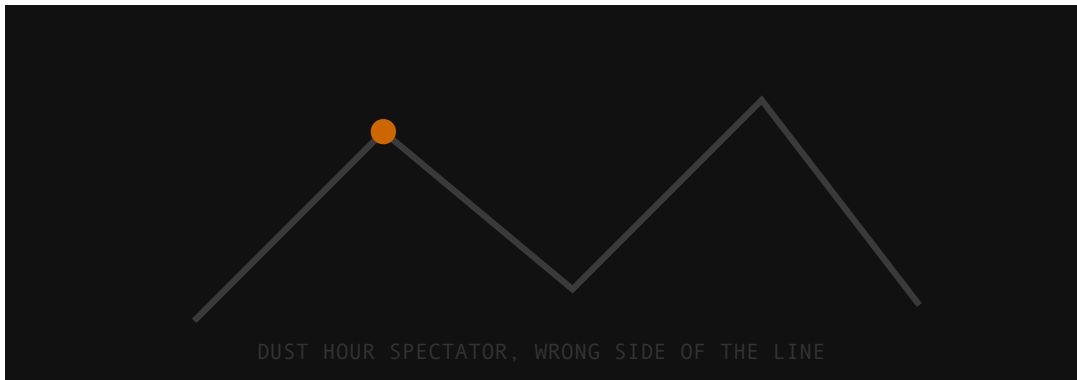
A counterfeit sponsor decal peeled clean off a car mid-lap on the Alto Cito circuit, live, on someone's Feed. The team never had that sponsor. The car looked better for the eleven seconds before everyone noticed.

06



Drank a “clarified” cocktail on a dare from a batch nobody had run a strip test on, at a bar that does not keep strip tests, because the whole point of the menu word is that you are not supposed to ask. She was fine. She was lucky. Those are different words and she knows it now.

07



Filmed a dust-hour race from what he thought was the crowd side and was actually the shoulder of the course, because visibility in the Raze at that hour is exactly as bad for spectators as it is for drones. Nobody was hurt. Everybody involved agreed, loudly, that this was luck rather than judgment.

08



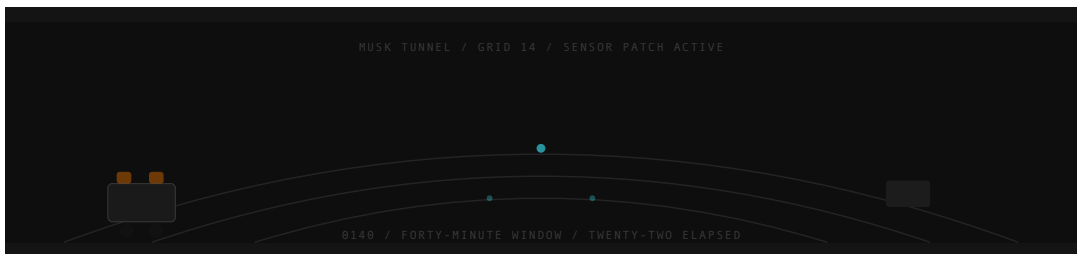
Wore a Ring Road Enduro finisher patch, current season, to a Barricadia bar full of people who had actually finished it this year and could recite the field. He had not entered. He will not be back to that bar.

EMBEDDED I

RUNNING DARK

Filter month is the fourth week between cartridge batches, when Barricadia's taps run gray and the real water moves at night, off the sensor grid, through tunnels built for cargo and never for people. I rode two runs with the crew that moves it and came out the other side at a party where a woman asked me, with total sincerity, if filter month was a Barricadia thing.

By Tally Reyes



The cache is a shipping container behind a produce stall that closed for the night three hours ago, and Miz Coto is already annoyed with me before I have finished introducing myself.

“You’re the press,” she says. Not a question. She is crouched over an open crate, doing something to a strap, and she does not look up. “Severin said press. I told Severin no press. Then Severin called me back and said your editor already promised you and it would look worse to pull it than to run it, which is the kind of sentence that gets people written about badly, so.” She looks up. “Don’t write me badly.”

I tell her I’ll write her exactly as she is. She says that’s worse and goes back to the strap.

Miz is thirty-something, wiry, Barricadia born, and has been moving cargo through the Musk Tunnels for six years, the last two of it cartridges. Her second, a kid of maybe nineteen who introduces himself only as Ferro, is stacking crates against the container wall with a care that tells you everything about what's inside them before anyone explains it to you. The crates say PRODUCE. They do not contain produce.

What they contain, once Ferro pries one open to show me, is CASCADE Mk. VII filtration housings, forty to a crate, still in factory wrap, lot-stamped, sealed, and entirely unaccompanied by any paperwork that would explain how they got here. I ask where they're from. Miz gives me the answer everyone in this district gives, delivered so evenly it has clearly worn a groove.

"Off a truck," she says. "Nobody explains the truck."

"The district clinic has real cartridges too, technically. They also have a nine-day list and a filter month doesn't wait nine days. So. Off a truck."

// Miz Coto

It is week four. Filter month, for anyone lucky enough not to know the term, is the stretch between black-market cartridge batches, four weeks running on the corridor's own private clock rather than any schedule the Western Corridor Water Allocation Network publishes. By week four the district's cheap options are exhausted, the good ones are rationed, and what comes out of a Barricadia tap has a color to it. Nobody drinks it straight. Everyone I meet tonight has an opinion about exactly how long to boil it, and the opinions do not agree.

Tonight's run is eleven crates, four hundred and forty housings, destined for two clinics, one supply stall, and, Miz tells me without elaborating, "a couple of people who asked nice." The route runs under the district and out through the Musk Tunnel high-speed grid, the automated two-lane transit line that moves freight and, off the books, whatever will fit in a freight profile and a forty-minute blind spot.

II.

The tunnels are not built for what we're about to do to them. They are built for automated freight pods running a sensor-tracked grid at speeds no human driver should be anywhere near, and the only reason Miz's van is about to be in that grid at all is a girl I am told to call Patch, whom I never meet in person and am fairly sure is younger than Ferro.

"She's barely five years past augment," Ferro says, checking a handheld the size of a deck of cards. "Works a garage in Barricadia in the daytime. Doesn't ask why we need forty minutes blind on grid fourteen. We don't ask what else she uses the same window for."

At 0118 the handheld shows a soft green pulse along a stretch of tunnel map, and Miz starts the van without ceremony. "Window's forty minutes," she says. "We use twenty-two, if nothing's wrong. If something's wrong, we use less, and you do exactly what I say, when I say it, and you do not ask why until we're parked."

I say I understand. She says everyone says that.

The tunnel at speed is a single held breath with headlights. There are no windows to speak of, no scenery, just the grid's own guide lighting sliding past in a rhythm that starts to feel less like driving and more like being swallowed on a schedule. Ferro reads the handheld the entire time in a flat, running murmur — grid's clean, patch is holding, nineteen minutes, patch is holding — the way you'd recite a rosary if the rosary had a countdown timer.

At minute fourteen the murmur changes pitch.

"Miz."

"I heard it."

I did not hear anything. What Ferro heard was the patch's green pulse stutter once, a half-second gap that means, near as I can tell from the shape of everyone's face, that somewhere on the network a system checked in on schedule and got an answer very slightly late. It could be nothing. Patch, wherever she is, does not have time to tell us which.

"We're taking the lit stretch," Miz says, and does not slow down to say it.

"You run dark or you run loud. You never run mid. Mid is what gets found."

// wall, Barricadia produce road, unattributed

What “the lit stretch” means, I learn in the eleven seconds it takes to happen, is a half-kilometer of tunnel where the freight grid’s own sensor coverage cannot be spoofed, only outrun, and a cargo van doing this at the freight grid’s minimum flow speed is either a scheduled pod or a problem. Miz puts us at the minimum flow speed. She does this without visibly deciding to, the way you’d correct a skid you’ve corrected before.

Nothing happens. That is the whole story of the eleven seconds: nothing happens, and everyone in the van breathes exactly once, together, at the far end of it, and Ferro says, very quietly, “grid’s clean,” as if the sentence costs him something to produce.

“Was that close?” I ask, once my voice is working again.

“No,” Miz says. Then, a block later: “Yes. Write it as no.”

I am writing it as both, because I think that is the actual answer, and because I watched Ferro’s hand not stop shaking for the next four minutes of tunnel.

III.

We surface into Barricadia proper a few minutes later than planned and considerably more relieved than the schedule accounts for. The first stop is a clinic I’m asked not to name, run out of a converted laundromat, where a woman signs for six crates without looking at me twice and asks Miz, in the same breath, whether she’s eaten. Miz says she’ll eat after. The woman gives her a protein bar anyway and does not accept no for an answer, which is the first genuinely warm exchange I have watched happen at speed all night.

The second stop is a family, four flights up a building whose elevator gave out during the last quake and never came back. A woman named Odalys answers the door already counting cartridges before Miz has finished handing them over, and explains, unprompted, that her neighbor two doors down put a kid on metered oxygen last filter month on a batch that looked identical to the real thing, down to the lot stamp, and that she has since started checking the tamper ring on every single housing that enters her home regardless of who hands it to her.

“I don’t not trust you,” she tells Miz, checking the ring anyway. “I don’t trust anything anymore. It’s not personal.”

“It shouldn’t be,” Miz says, and waits, patiently, hands where Odalys can see them, until the check is done.

On the way back down, I ask Miz whether she resents that — the checking, the suspicion, after driving a blind tunnel window for these people. She looks at me like I’ve asked something genuinely stupid, which, on reflection, I have.

“Resent it,” she says. “I’d check me too. The people who get upset about being checked are the people you should be checking hardest.”

The last stop before the toll is a standpipe outside a converted water-authority substation the district calls the Wash, where Miz tops off a personal bottle without asking anyone’s permission, because the tap there runs for free and always has, a fact Barricadia treats less like a rumor and more like a law of physics. A woman elbow-deep in a manifold under a hatchback the color of a decision somebody dared her to make calls out something I don’t catch. Miz calls back something equally opaque. Neither of them breaks stride. I get the distinct sense this happens every run and requires no further narration from me, so I am, for once, going to honor that and move on.

IV.

The toll is the part of the night nobody had mentioned to me in advance, and I understand within about four seconds of it starting why.

A man built like a doorway steps into the street ahead of the van with the specific unhurried confidence of someone who has never once had to run to catch a conversation. Miz stops without being told to. Ferro goes very quiet in a different way than the tunnel made him quiet.

“Toll,” Miz says to me, low. “Don’t.”

I don’t. Toll collects what he collects — a percentage of the crate count, paid in bit-chits, counted once, silently, and never discussed as a transaction so much as weather — and the entire exchange takes ninety seconds and costs the run roughly a fifth of tonight’s cargo value. Nobody argues. Miz explains afterward, in the flat tone of someone reciting a tax code, that the toll exists whether the cargo is cartridges for a sick kid or contraband for a nightclub, that Jaguario colors run the district and the district’s water moves through it whether Jaguario likes water or not, and that the one time a rival crew tried to run this route without paying, the toll got collected anyway, later, from a different account entirely.

“He didn’t ask what we’re carrying,” I say. “Doesn’t that matter?”

“No,” Miz says. “The tax doesn’t care what you’re selling. Only what you’re moving. That’s the whole government, if you want to call it that.”

I ask, because I have to, whether that government has ever made an exception for water.

“Once,” she says. “I’m told. I wasn’t there for it and the person who told me wasn’t either. Ask me about it after you’ve talked to the man himself. Page forty-nine, right? Good luck with that.”

V.

The run ends, officially, at 0340, when the last crate changes hands at the supply stall and Ferro finally lets his shoulders come down from somewhere near his ears. Unofficially, it ends about ninety minutes later, because Miz has a delivery of a different kind she says I’m welcome to watch, if I don’t mind a change of scenery, and I have long since stopped being in a position to say no to anything she suggests.

The scenery changes to a rooftop in Center Point, forty floors up, where a launch event for something I never fully identify is winding down into its expensive, low-lit final hour. Miz, it turns out, also moves the twenty or so genuine cartridges a certain kind of Center Point household likes to keep as a hedge, quietly, at a markup that would make Odalys’ neighbors furious and that the buyers up here consider, sincerely, a bargain.

I am standing near the bar, still smelling faintly of tunnel, when a woman in a jacket that costs more than Miz’s van asks me, conversationally, refilling a glass of water I happen to know came out of a bottle labeled with a brand I have just spent five hours learning to distrust, whether “the filter thing” is a Barricadia thing.

I ask her what she means.

“My assistant mentioned it,” she says. “Filter month? Is that, like, a local holiday?”

I tell her it’s not a holiday. She nods, genuinely interested for about four seconds, and then someone says her name from across the roof and she is gone, glass in hand, into a party that has never once, in its entire existence, had to boil anything before drinking it.

Miz finds me a few minutes later, counting bit-chits with the same flat concentration she brought to the tunnel. I tell her what the woman asked me. She doesn’t look up.

“Yeah,” she says. “That’s the whole spread, right there. Write that down.”

I did.

EMBEDDED II

VOID WHERE PROHIBITED

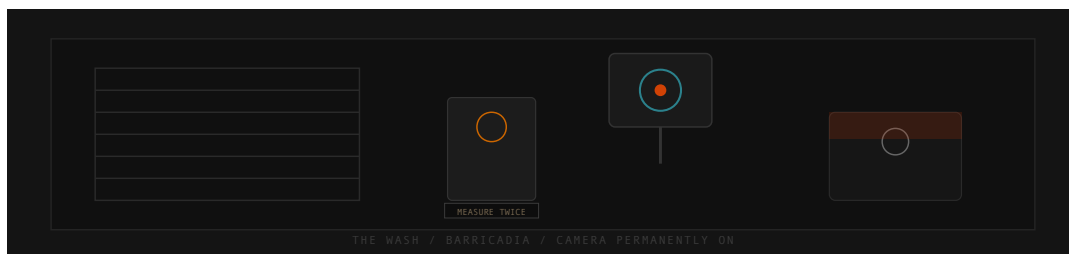
Warranty Void streams the jobs everyone else would call a near-death experience. We spent an afternoon in the garage where the underground gene-forged scene gets its best footage, and found out what it actually costs.

By Tally Reyes

Filed Lost Angeles // Barricadia, the Wash. First published as a web filing, 2026-08-26 — reprinted here in full by request.

COMMISSIONED: 800 WORDS // FILED: 2,010 • ORIGIN STORIES ON RECORD: FOUR, CORROBORATED: NONE • SPONSORSHIP DECLINED: JOINT-RECOVERY SUPPLEMENT • INJURIES ADMITTED: NONE • ONE MEAL ACCEPTED, DECLARED BELOW

Editor's Note // I. Dressler This one first ran as a web filing back in late August. It outdrew everything else we posted that quarter, and readers kept asking where to find it in an actual issue, so here it is, uncut, exactly as filed. Reyes was commissioned for eight hundred words on underground creators and turned in two thousand. We ran all of them then. We are running all of them again. The crew did not ask to see this before it went out the first time either, which still puts them ahead of every corporation that has ever sent us a correction.



I walk into the garage in time to watch a two-hundred-kilo drone rig tip off its cradle and take out a folding table on the way down. Nobody screams. The two guys nearest the table just step sideways like they've rehearsed it, and that's the whole review, right there, before a single person's said a word to me.

My ears are still ringing a half-step higher than everyone else's in the room, which is the tax I pay for hearing a fuel line hiss two doors early. Underneath the crash I can already sort three separate smells: hot metal, grease running past its safe temperature, and something with cumin in it that has no business smelling that good six feet from a drone that just tried to commit a homicide.

I'm here for CONFLICT, technically. Officially I'm profiling Warranty Void for the gene-forged culture issue, a tight word count on "underground creators," the kind of assignment a features editor gives you when she'd like you back in one piece. Unofficially I've been standing in this garage for four minutes and I've already decided the tight word count is a promise somebody's going to have to break.

Ozzy's the one who peels off the wreckage first, waving like the drone rig didn't just make a break for it. "That's not the interview," he says. "That's Tuesday. Interview's over here, but first you gotta see this thing Cas built, because if I don't show somebody today I'm gonna lose my mind."

Three sentences in and he's already promised me something Cas never agreed to show anyone. I like him immediately. I make a note to like him slightly less by the end of the day, because that's usually how it goes with the fast, warm ones.

The garage is bigger than it has any right to be, a converted transit depot with a roll door at one end and, at the other, a kitchen corner cleaner than the rest of the building combined. A pot's going on a two-burner stove back there, up against the hot metal and the grease and, somehow, winning. High in the far corner, over a workbench buried in components, a camera sits bolted to a support beam at an angle that has seen everything that's ever happened in this room and told nobody. Nobody introduces it to me. Nobody has to. I've done enough of these to recognize a camera that's already famous inside its own building.

The walls do the rest of the introducing. A pegboard the size of a garage door, tools traced in marker outlines like a crime scene for hardware. A row of helmets on a shelf, every one scratched differently, which is its own kind of signature. Taped above Cas's bench at eye level, a single laminated card just says MEASURE TWICE in six different handwritings, like it got added to one stroke at a time over years, by everyone who ever doubted it.

"You will eat something before you ask your questions," Grigor says, not turning from the stove, in the tone of a man stating tomorrow's sunrise. "A person who has not eaten asks worse questions. I have watched this happen many times."

I eat the something. It's good, unfairly good, the kind of good that makes you suspicious of a man's other life choices. I ask where a converted transit depot gets water pressure like this, and Grigor tells me, without pride, like it's a fact about the weather: the building's still running off a hard pipe from before the block switched to trucked water. The landlord doesn't know. Maybe I shouldn't print that part. I tell him I absolutely am printing that part. He shrugs like a man who expected exactly that answer and made his peace with it before the sentence finished leaving my mouth.

The thing Ozzy wants me to see turns out to be a manifold bracket. That's the least dramatic sentence in this entire piece, and it was apparently worth interrupting a woman's lunch for.

Cas doesn't look up. Cas is holding the bracket in one hand and a caliper in the other, reading off a number, then a second number, then a tolerance I can't parse and Cas clearly can, down to the decimal. "Four of the last six failures on this platform were this part," Cas says. "There's a fifth now. I made it in my kitchen for less than the manufacturer charges for one bolt. I'm overconditioning the whole batch before any of it goes near a vehicle. I'd like that in the article. The price specifically."

Nobody else in this garage would say the words "I'd like that in the article" out loud, but everybody else in this garage is thinking some version of it, all day, about something. That's the tell that took me longest to clock: five people running one crew, and every single one of them quietly managing their own coverage.

Five people running one crew, and every one of them quietly managing their own coverage.

Theo doesn't say hello. Theo holds up a card. It reads, in handwriting so clean it looks printed: WELCOME. DON'T TOUCH THE TIMELINE. Underneath, smaller: SERIOUSLY. I ask a real question about editing philosophy, one I was proud of in the car on the way over, and Theo looks at me for exactly as long as it takes to decide I don't need an answer, then goes back to a monitor with four windows open and no audio at all. Ozzy, unprompted, translates: "Theo says the philosophy is, shut up, let it run long enough to be true and short enough that Monitor Central doesn't try to buy it and ruin it." Theo doesn't confirm the translation. Theo also doesn't correct it, which from Theo is basically a notarized statement.

Nobody has to point out Danka. She's the one with her whole upper body already inside the wheel well of something that used to be a delivery van and is now, specifically, the color of a bruise. I ask what happened to the drone rig that nearly ended me forty minutes ago. "Cradle bolt," she says. "Cheap bolt." I wait for more. There isn't more. I ask about the chalkboard behind her, the one with the tally marks and the single word written twice and underlined twice. "Depends on the week," she says, and almost smiles, half a second behind her own joke, like the amusement had to take the long way around to find her face. The only four extra words she gives me all day arrive unprompted: "Check your floor first."

Somewhere around that chalkboard I finally ask the question CONFLICT actually sent me here to ask underneath all the others: where does the name come from. This is how I learn that a five-person crew can hold four different sworn histories of its own name and defend every one of them like scripture.

Ozzy says it's because their first liability waiver got voided by an actual insurance adjuster, using those exact words, out loud, while backing toward the door. Grigor says, without missing a stir of the pot, that it's simpler than that: everything in this garage was already broken when they found it, so the crew just named itself after the truth. Cas says, flatly, that the name predates the crew entirely and refers to one manufacturer's one bolt, and everybody else's version is folklore stacked on a supply-chain fact. Danka just points, without looking up, at a faded sticker slapped crooked on a tool cabinet: two words, block letters, peeling at one corner, the kind of sticker that's been there so long it's basically load-bearing. WARRANTY VOID. Somebody stamped it on a hundred things in this garage a long time ago. Irony the first time. Load-bearing every time after.

Four versions of one origin story, and not one of them is trying to win. Nobody here is protecting a brand. They're people who got tired of a manufacturer's fine print carrying more weight than their own judgment, put that feeling on a sticker one afternoon, and now the sticker's older than half their gear. I've sat across from actual corporations that spent six figures trying to manufacture an origin story with a tenth of this one's texture, and it wasn't close.

This garage draws an audience for one plain reason: it's honest about what gene-forged bodies are actually asked to do for a living, on camera, for money, with nobody pretending the math is romantic. Compare that to whatever Monitor Central is running this month, all clean color grading and a voice actor reading captions a legal department wrote first. There's no contest.

Ozzy tells me, cheerfully, that a wellness brand offered them a sponsorship last quarter, some kind of joint-recovery supplement pitched at forged athletes, and the crew turned it down inside of an hour. “The money was fine,” he says. “They wanted us to say the stuff works before we’d tried it, and I’ll tell you all day that a bolt is cheap. I won’t tell you a supplement works when I don’t know yet.” It’s the most careful sentence I hear him say all day, and he says it faster than any of the reckless ones.

That’s more or less the whole pitch of underground gene-forged content once you clear away the algorithm and the platform’s cut: five people who post the footage even when the job goes sideways, no reshoot, no cleanup, who’ll turn down a check before they’ll fake a result.

Ironic the first time. Load-bearing every time after.

I don’t see the setup coming. “Watch,” Ozzy says, already lining up a modified quad bike against a ramp built out of what I’m fairly sure used to be a shipping container door, and for about a second and a half it’s the best thing I’ve seen all week: a gene-forged body doing exactly what it was built to do, clean, fast, certain.

The landing goes wrong by about four inches, which turns out to be the four inches that matter, and he comes off the bike into a stack of empty drums that go down like they’ve done this before. For one full second my whole body is back at a checkpoint outside a city I don’t talk about: dust with the exact grit of ground glass, and the flat wet-cardboard sound a body makes hitting a surface it wasn’t planning on hitting. My ears do the thing. My hands do the thing. I’m not thinking about my byline anymore. I’m thinking about a name I haven’t said out loud in three years.

Ozzy sits up laughing before I’ve finished flinching. He’s checking the bike’s front end before he thinks to check his own. “Okay, that’s going in the highlight reel,” he says. “Don’t cut the part where I land wrong. That’s the whole point.”

Grigor doesn’t even turn from the stove. “I heard four drums,” he says, mostly to the pot. “Usually it is three.” Nobody explains what that means, and I decide I don’t actually want it explained.

And just like that I’m back in a garage in Lost Angeles that smells like cumin and hot metal, and not somewhere else.

On the way out, Danka's still got her top half in the van. I ask if she wants to add anything for the record. "Tell them the bolts are cheap," she says, without surfacing, "and the crew isn't." She's back at work before I can decide whether that was a joke.

At the door I look back once. The camera in the corner is still up there, red light on, having caught the drone rig, the manifold bracket, Theo's card, all of it, patient and cheap and permanently on, same as it's been since before I got here and same as it'll be long after this issue of CONFLICT is somebody's coaster. Under it, Grigor's pot is still going. Nobody's turned it off. Nobody's going to.

I check my floor on the way to the car, the way Danka told me to, forty minutes late and for no reason I can name. There's nothing there.

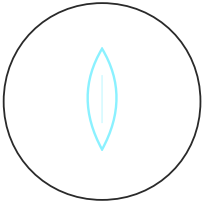
There never is, until there is.

"Tell them the bolts are cheap, and the crew isn't."

// Danka

SUBJECT: WARRANTY VOID // FIVE-OPERATOR SPLICE, THE WASH,
BARRICADIA — ONE MEAL ACCEPTED, DECLARED — SOME OF THIS CAN BE
VERIFIED.

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OSTRAND MEDICAL // FOUR CLINICS, WESTERN CORRIDOR

THE MANUAL

HOW TO BUY A CARTRIDGE THAT WON'T LIE TO YOU

It's week four, the district list is nine days long, and there's a stall on the produce road with a case that looks right. Here is how to survive that transaction, from somebody who used to run the stall.

By Dev Kirishima

NOTICE // THIS IS NOT A SUPPLY GUARANTEE. IT IS HARM REDUCTION FROM A MAN WHO SOLD BAD HOUSINGS FOR TWO YEARS AND KNOWS EXACTLY HOW HE DID IT. IF THE DISTRICT CLINIC HAS STOCK, USE THE DISTRICT CLINIC. EVERYTHING BELOW ASSUMES IT DOESN'T.

I pressed counterfeit CASCADE housings out of a stall off the produce corridor for two years. I told myself I was solving a supply problem. What I was, for most of those two years, was the cheapest option within four blocks, and the difference between those two things is one child on metered oxygen whose name I am not going to write here because it isn't mine to print. So take this in the spirit it's offered: a man handing you the exact procedure he used, and telling you precisely where he cut the corner that mattered.

1. KNOW THE MODEL NUMBER, NOT THE BRAND.

CASCADE Mk. VII, specifically, is the current genuine mil-surplus standard moving through this district. The number is stamped on the housing base, not the label, because labels are free to print and stamps are not. If a seller can tell you the brand but hesitates on the mark, they are selling you the brand.

Learn what your household actually needs in flow rate, too, not just the model. Two formats look identical from across a stall and are not interchangeable with the plumbing you have at home, and a seller who tells you they're the same thing is usually telling the truth as far as he knows it, which is not very far.

2. BUY THE LOT STAMP, NOT JUST THE HOUSING.

An intact tamper ring with a legible lot stamp is the only part of this transaction anyone can check later — you, a clinic, or the next buyer if something goes wrong. A seller who will not show you the stamp clearly, in good light, before money changes hands, is telling you the stamp belongs to a different batch, or no batch at all.

The price gap between a stamped unit and an unstamped one runs eight to fifteen credits in a normal week and considerably more in week four. In my stall it was ten. Ten credits was what I charged people for not asking questions, and about half of them paid it, and I thought less of the half who did.

3. THE RING, THE WEIGHT, THE RATTLE.

Three checks, in this order, before any money moves. The tamper ring should be flush and should not turn under gentle pressure. The housing should weigh what a full one weighs — genuine media has heft, and a repressed shell almost always runs light because nobody bothers to fully repack it. And a full cartridge, tapped gently against a knuckle, produces a dull, dense sound. An empty or under-filled one rings.

Do all three in front of the seller, slowly, without apology. It costs you nothing and it tells them exactly what kind of buyer they're dealing with. Sellers price the people who don't check.

4. NEVER BUY FROM A CART THAT ALSO SELLS FOOD.

This sounds like a hygiene joke. It is a supply fact. A seller running cartridges and produce out of the same cart is not running a filtration business, they are moving whatever came off the truck, sorted by whoever unloaded it and not by anyone who understands what they're handling. The media inside a cartridge degrades with heat exposure in ways that don't show on the outside, and a cart sitting in a hundred-and-ten-degree dome all day is not cold-managed by anyone's standard.

The corridor knows this rule. The corridor breaks it every single week, because the cart with the food on it is the one still open at midnight when your household is down to its last clean liter.

5. WATCH THE SHADE, NOT THE SELLER.

You can't audit a cold chain from a stall. What you can watch is whether the case sits in shade or sun, and whether the seller moves it as the light moves, without being asked. A seller who has kept forty units in shade all day for four hundred customers is a seller who will keep yours in shade too. One who hasn't bothered is telling you exactly how much thought went into the batch before you arrived.

6. TEST THE FIRST ONE ON A DAY YOU CAN AFFORD TO BE WRONG.

Not the night before a shift. Not an hour before guests arrive. Run a new source for the first time on a day when someone else is home, when the packaging is on the counter where anyone can find it later, and when nothing else is scheduled. A bad batch usually shows itself within a day as cloudy output or a smell that wasn't there before, and the real damage happens when people drink through that warning because they needed the water more than they needed the information.

7. THE SELLER YOU WANT HAS SAID NO TO YOU BEFORE.

Skip the ones running a countdown clock on scarcity. The seller worth returning to is dull, has held the same six feet of the produce road for years, asks your flow rate before quoting a price, and has, at some point, told you a batch wasn't good enough to sell you. That refusal is the entire relationship. Pay that person a little more than the going rate, on weeks you don't need anything. You are not buying a cartridge from them. You are buying being remembered correctly on the week the shelf runs thin and two people want the same case.

8. WHAT THIS COLUMN CANNOT DO FOR YOU.

Every rule above is a workaround for a network that rations core districts first and outer ones last by design, and calls the four-week gap that produces a corridor like mine an unfortunate but temporary condition every single quarter, forever. None of these steps gets you real supply on a real schedule. They get you slightly better odds inside a market that should not have to exist, run in part by people like the man I used to be, some of whom have not stopped.

Check the ring. Check the weight. Find the seller who has said no to you. And if this district ever gets a schedule instead of a corridor, throw this column out and don't look back for me.

MATERIAL CULTURE

THE TOOTH

A grave-shaped shard of downed drone composite, ground smooth on one edge and left jagged on the other, currently propped against a garage-bay wall in Barricadia. It has outlived two owners, one district government, and every counterfeit anyone has tried to pass off as its equal.

By Orson Macht



The object in front of me weighs just under a kilogram, tapers from a blunt top edge to a jagged base, and is roughly the size and silhouette of a hand-cut headstone, which is the only reason anyone in this trade calls it a tooth in the first place. It is a control-surface panel from a NAF Manta Wing recon drone, aerospace-grade composite laid in a specific ply pattern that has never been reproduced outside a licensed facility, and it came down over the Raze sometime in the last decade in a manner nobody currently owning a piece of it can tell you with any confidence.

That not-knowing is the whole trade. A Manta Wing goes down, the airframe is worth nothing to anyone by the time it hits ground, and what's left is composite panel, cut into pieces of a size someone can carry, sold into a Barricadia market that has spent a decade developing an eye for it. The grave shape isn't design. It's just how the panel fractures along its ribbing when it's pried apart for transport, and the whole district decided, independently and more or less at once, that the shape suited what the object actually was.

Genuine teeth are graded one through four by the corridor's own informal standard, and the piece in my hand is a one: full ply thickness, no delamination, a clean fracture edge that hasn't been reworked. A four is a fragment, decorative at best, structurally worthless, and honestly priced as such by everyone except the occasional stall trying to move one to a tourist who wandered too far off the produce road.

The test that separates a real one from the resin-cast fakes currently flooding the market ahead of the Enduro is not complicated, which is exactly why it took the corridor this long to standardize it. Hold the panel under a garage bay lamp — any decent worklight will do, though the older mercury-vapor units read it best — and a genuine ply layup throws a faint, stepped shadow along the fracture edge, the composite's internal layers catching light at slightly different depths. A resin cast over fiberglass mesh throws nothing. It's flat all the way through, because it is, structurally, nothing at all.

The garage-lamp test costs nothing and takes four seconds, and half the buyers in this district have stopped bothering to ask for it. That is not optimism. That is exhaustion, and the sellers know the difference.

I want to talk about who buys these, because the order tells you the whole economy the way it always does.

The first and largest group is practical: garage owners who mount graded teeth as reinforcement plate on a bay door or a workbench edge, because the composite is, gram for gram, tougher than anything you can buy new for the price. This is not sentiment. A one-grade tooth bolted across a door frame will outlast the building around it, and half of Barricadia's older garages have at least one holding up something structural that was never designed to hold anything up.

The second group is status, and this is where the pendant trade lives — ground shards, drilled and hung on a chain, sold by a jeweler who tests every piece under UV before it leaves the bench, per the review on page 16. Wearing one openly says you know somebody who works metal, or that you are that somebody yourself. It is geario currency, and geario, in this district, is a compliment nobody dilutes lightly.

The third group is the one I actually think about at night, and it is the smallest: people keeping a specific tooth because of who owned it before them.

The piece against my garage wall came to me from a woman named Corda Ibhawoh, who inherited it from her mother, who pulled it out of the Raze herself in the years right after the airframe it belonged to went down, back when nobody had yet worked out the grading system and salvage was closer to grave-robbing than commerce. Corda's mother used a fragment of it as a doorstop for twenty years without knowing what it was worth. Corda used the larger piece as a paperweight for garage invoices until a buyer offered her four figures for it and she realized, for the first time, that she was holding something the market had quietly decided mattered.

She sold me the smaller piece and kept the larger one, and when I asked her why she was willing to part with any of it, she said something I have not stopped turning over since. "My mother pulled that out of a dead machine that was built to watch people like us," she said. "I'm not precious about the metal. I'm precious about the fact that we're the ones who decided what it's worth now, instead of the people who built it."

"We're the ones who decided what it's worth now, instead of the people who built it." That is the entire salvage economy of this district in one sentence, and I did not have to pay her to say it.

// Corda Ibhawoh

Nobody knows, or will say, whose drone it was watching when it came down, or what brought it down, or whether the pilot — if there was one, if it wasn't running fully automated the way most Monitor Central assets do now — walked away from it. That absence of a story is not an oversight. Nine years of salvage culture in this district have built an entire folk material practice on top of military hardware whose original purpose nobody wants to dwell on for very long, because dwelling on it means admitting the thing hanging around your neck was built to find people exactly like the person wearing it.

The counterfeiters understand the pendant trade better than the reinforcement trade, which is why the fakes cluster there. A resin shard on a chain photographs identically to the real thing and nobody at a bar is running a UV lamp over your jewelry. A resin panel bolted to a garage door fails the first time something actually hits it, which is a more expensive way to find out you were cheated but a much more honest one.

I own four teeth, all graded one, all UV-verified by my own hand before I'd put money down. I will tell you what I paid for three of them. The fourth I am keeping to myself, the same way Corda kept the larger half of hers, for reasons that have stopped being about the market at all.

THE ROOM WHERE EVERYONE LIED

THE MAN WHO OWNS THE DISTRICT THAT OWNS ITSELF

Mo Money Jaguario runs Barricadia the way NAF never bothered to. He will tell you exactly that, at length, without being asked twice. We met above his garage floor on a practice night before the Enduro. He answered every question about water. He answered exactly one question about his son, and it wasn't the one I asked.

By Delphine Okoye

The Cage is what the crew calls the mezzanine box above the Jaguario garage floor, and it is not built for comfort so much as sightlines: a wall of scavenged glass looking down on the practice loop, a workbench doing double duty as a bar, and, in the corner, a shrine that nobody on the floor below will discuss with a stranger. A framed number seven jersey. A photo of a young man laughing at something out of frame. A single trophy, dulled, no plaque visible from where I'm sitting.

Mo Money Jaguario is sixty-one, built like a man who used to turn wrenches for a living and never entirely stopped, and he greets me by apologizing for the noise before I've mentioned that I don't mind it. Below us, a car I'm told not to ask about is being tuned by four people at once, and the whole building has a heartbeat you feel through the floor before you consciously hear it.

"Barricadia," he says, settling into a chair that has clearly been his for a long time, "is the only district in the spread that NAF has never once had to run. You know why?"

I say I'd like to hear him say it.

"Because I run it. Not on paper. On paper it's theirs, same as everywhere. But paper doesn't fix a water recycler when it breaks at three in the morning, and paper doesn't employ a district's worth of gearheads who'd otherwise be running product for somebody worse. I do both of those things. Have for twenty years."

It is, as far as I can independently verify, true. The garage is the largest single employer in Barricadia, a fact the district's own trade office confirms without much enthusiasm. The Calavera is on every wall, every jacket, half the vehicles I passed walking in, worn the way you'd wear a flag rather than a gang mark, which I put to him directly.

"It's both," he says, unbothered. "Old Calavera laughs at new paint. You can quote that, everybody does anyway."

"Paper doesn't fix a water recycler at three in the morning. I do. Twenty years of that buys you the right to a wall."

// Mo Money Jaguarío

I ask him about filter month, because it is week four and because I have spent enough of my career in rooms like this to know that the direct question, asked early, gets you the most honest first flinch of the evening.

"Filter month is a NAF allocation problem," he says. "Not mine."

I ask whether the garage's own recyclers run gray in week four the same as everyone else's taps.

There is a pause here I want to be precise about, because it is not a long one, and Mo Money Jaguarío does not strike me as a man who needs long pauses to compose an answer. It is maybe two seconds. Then: "Everybody who works this floor drinks clean. Everybody who works this floor eats. That's not a policy. That's just — you take care of the people who take care of you."

I ask whether that means the garage maintains its own reserve, separate from the district network, while the rest of Barricadia is on the same schedule as everyone else.

"It means what I said," he says, and for the first time all evening, the warmth in his voice has a door in it.

I put it to him more plainly: is there a functional difference between an operation that keeps its own people clean while the district around it goes gray, and an allocation network that keeps its core districts clean while the outer ones go gray. He looks at me for long enough that the man tuning the car below us glances up, once, as if the temperature in the room has changed and he felt it through the floor.

“You want me to say I’m NAF with better paint,” he says. “I’m not going to say that, because it isn’t true, and I think you know it isn’t true, and I think you asked it anyway because it makes a better line than the honest answer.”

I ask what the honest answer is.

“The honest answer is I can only fix what I can reach. I can reach this floor. I can reach the families of the people on this floor. I can’t reach a woman four blocks over I’ve never met, and pretending I could would be a worse lie than the one you’re accusing me of.” He shrugs, and it is, infuriatingly, not an unreasonable answer. “There’s a standpipe two streets from here that runs free for anyone. Ask them how they afford it. Then ask yourself why that’s a story about them and not about me.”

He is referring, unmistakably, to the shop this magazine has covered before, and it is the closest he comes all evening to naming a rival, though I don’t think that’s quite the right word for whatever the relationship actually is. I let it sit rather than push, because there is something on the practice loop below that has just taken his attention entirely off me.

II.

A single car has come out onto the loop, no livery, no sponsor panel, a driver in a paddock jacket with a call sign stitched where a name would go and nothing else. Whoever it is takes the loop’s outer curve at a speed that makes two of the crew below stop what they’re doing to watch, and Mo Money Jaguar’s attention leaves our conversation so completely, so instantly, that I actually turn to see what he’s looking at before I think to ask him.

He watches for four full laps without speaking. I let him.

“Who is that,” I finally ask.

“Nobody,” he says, a half-second too fast, and reaches for a drink he hasn’t touched all evening. “A hopeful. We get a lot of them.”

I ask if the hopeful has a name.

“Everybody has a name,” he says, which is not an answer, and he knows it isn’t, and something about the way he says it tells me he would like me to notice that it isn’t, without being willing to do anything about the gap himself.

I try once more, gently, nodding at the shrine in the corner rather than the loop below. I ask about the jersey. I ask about Umbra.

Mo Money Jaguarío does not get angry. I want to be exact about this because anger would have been easier to write and easier, I think, for him to have. What he does instead is go very still, set the drink down without finishing it, and say, in a voice that has lost every bit of the warmth from twenty minutes ago, “I think we’re done for tonight.”

It is not a request.

“Everybody has a name.” He wanted me to notice that wasn’t an answer. He was not willing to give me the one that was.

I am walked out by a crew member who is perfectly pleasant and asks me, twice, in slightly different phrasing, whether I got what I needed. I tell her I’m not sure yet. Outside, in the lot, I can still hear one car running solo laps on the practice loop, long after the interview that was supposed to be about water ended somewhere else entirely, and I stand there longer than I should, listening to an engine go around and around a track that isn’t going anywhere, for a boy whose name I was told, twice, was nobody’s to give me.

CITY OF BAD IDEAS

THREE SQUARE KILOMETERS OF NOBODY'S PROBLEM

The Raze is what the 2041 quake left standing, which is to say almost nothing, in almost the right places. It has no water grid, no allocation tier, no drone coverage during dust hours, and, against every reasonable expectation, a better sense of who's in charge than any district with a functioning government.

By Rue Kaswell



You know you've crossed into the Raze before anyone tells you, because the road simply stops behaving like a road. The last intact intersection sits at what used to be a freeway stub, and past it the ground is tilted slabs and exposed rebar for three square kilometers in every direction the quake decided to go, which was, as it turned out, almost every direction.

There is no service here. Not spotty service — none. No water grid ever got rebuilt this far out, no allocation tier applies because there is no meter to apply it to, and the Western Corridor Network's own maps mark the whole zone with a designation that translates, more or less, to elsewhere. Elsewhere, it turns out, is where roughly four thousand people live, by a count nobody official has bothered to verify in a decade.

I am walked in by a woman named Mattoon, who holds the block around the old transit maintenance yard with a crew of nine and has done so, she tells me, since “before it was worth holding, which is the only way to actually hold something here.” Block control in the Raze runs entirely on reputation rather than paperwork, and it is, against every instinct I brought in with me, a remarkably stable system. Mattoon's

crew doesn't patrol a perimeter. They don't need to. Everyone who might otherwise test the boundary already knows what happened the last time someone did, and the story has done more work than a fence ever could.

“Out here nobody fights over the allocation schedule, because there isn't one. You get what you carry. Try arguing with a schedule that doesn't exist.”

// Mattoon

Water, when I ask about it, gets the flattest answer I receive all week. You haul it, from a tanker that comes twice weekly and charges by the container, or you don't have it. There is no gray-water week here, no filter month, because there is no cartridge economy to run dry in the first place — just a hauling schedule that either holds or doesn't, and a community that has organized its entire week around the tanker's arrival the way other districts organize theirs around a work shift.

“People think we envy Barricadia,” Mattoon says. “We don't. They've got a system to be angry at. We don't have a system at all, which means nobody's stealing from us on paper. Different problem. Not obviously a worse one, some weeks.”

The fauna warnings posted at the district's few remaining road signs are not decorative. Feral gene-forged strays — nobody I spoke to would confirm an origin, though every theory involves a lab or a private menagerie that stopped being maintained sometime after the Upheaval — have bred quietly in the deeper collapsed structures for years, and Mattoon's crew treats certain blocks as simply off the map after dark, the same unspoken way a city elsewhere treats a bad intersection.

II.

Dust hours are the reason I actually came. Between roughly five and seven in the morning, the Santa Ana pattern that scours this district kicks up a haze thick enough to blind drone overflight completely, and for those two hours, three or four mornings a week, the Raze runs an amateur racing circuit through streets that were never streets to begin with, on a route marked by nothing but the drivers' own memory of where the ground still holds.

The cars are built entirely from what the quake and the decade after it left behind — salvaged panels, engines out of dead transit vehicles, a suspension setup on one car that Mattoon's second, a teenager who goes by no name I could get him to confirm, assures me is "definitely not rated for this, which is the point." Nobody has a sponsor. Nobody has a Line quoting odds on the outcome. The only stakes are reputation and the very real possibility of putting a wheel wrong on ground that has not been surveyed since before some of these drivers were born.

"This is where Dext Narita learned to drive," Mattoon tells me, watching a car take a blind rise at a speed I would not have attempted in daylight. "Before Barricadia ever heard of him. Before anybody sponsored anything. People forget that part when they write him up."

A beverage sponsor offered a crew here four figures this season to run a logo, on the condition the schedule move to hours a film crew could actually work. The crew said no, and when I ask why, the answer is somehow both obvious and the smartest thing anyone said to me all week: dust hours exist because the haze blinds drones. A film crew that can see through the haze is the exact problem wearing a lanyard, and no amount of money changes what a visible race in the Raze actually costs the people running it.

What the Raze sells, when it sells anything, is salvage, and the trade line runs straight into the districts that would rather not think too hard about where their materials come from. A grade-one Manta Wing tooth changes hands here for a fraction of the Barricadia street price, because the crews pulling composite out of a downed airframe are standing closer to the source than anyone grading it later ever will be. Mattoon's crew moved six pieces this month alone, at prices she describes, accurately, as "fair to us, which is the only fairness on offer."

III.

What actually makes the Raze itself, after four dawns here, isn't the ruin or the racing or even the fauna warnings, though all three make for better copy. It's the plain fact that this is the one place in the entire spread with nothing to allocate, and therefore nothing to fight over on anyone else's terms. There is no tier here to resent, no schedule to game, no toll collector working a percentage of a network that doesn't extend this far. There is only what you carry and what you can hold, which is a brutal way to organize four thousand lives and, I will admit against my own better judgment, a strangely honest one.

I leave the way I came, past the last intact intersection, back into a city with meters and tiers and toll collectors and a Western Corridor map that draws a line around three square kilometers and calls it elsewhere. Nobody in the Raze asked me to feel sorry for them. Nobody asked me to admire them either. Mattoon's last words to me, delivered without any particular weight, were the ones that have stayed: "Tell them we're not waiting on a schedule. Tell them we never were."

NOBODY ADMIT THIS EXISTS

The Feed clip naming a teenage practice driver “Kid Spin” has not been confirmed by anyone at the Jaguario garage, denied by anyone at the Jaguario garage, or, notably, taken down by anyone at the Jaguario garage. Two crew members have been overheard using the name to his face. He has not corrected them.

A driver matching the description is said to share a jawline with a photograph that has hung in a certain garage mezzanine for longer than the driver in question has been alive. Nobody who has seen both photographs will discuss the resemblance on the record. Several will discuss it off it, at length, unprompted.

A Kavast wolf-pack rotation is reportedly due through the corridor ahead of the Enduro under existing treaty terms, which several Barricadia shop owners describe as good for business and several others describe as a reason to close early for the week. Both groups are, as far as we can tell, correct.

Nobody currently agrees on how many people answer to the name Frequency, including, we are reliably told, Frequency. A price for confirmation has been quoted to at least three outlets this quarter. Nobody has paid it. Nobody has confirmed the price was real either.

A batch of the “2051 Siege” footage changed hands at a Center Point sale last month for a sum we are not printing, and was, per two independent authenticators, the fourteenth known fake in circulation. The buyer has been told. The buyer does not seem to mind.

The toll collector known on the produce road only as Toll is said to have let one cartridge run through untaxed this filter month, on account of the cargo, without comment, without explanation, and without repeating the exception since. Everyone who moves water through that stretch is now, quietly, hoping for a pattern that has so far shown no sign of becoming one.

A namahage-lineage night-watchman working the Barricadia produce market is rumored to personally inspect every cartridge crate that passes after midnight, whether asked to or not, and to have once made a presser eat a sample from his own batch. The presser in question has not been seen at that market since.

A Happy Hut greeter unit has reportedly relocated itself, without instruction from anyone at Happy Hut corporate, to a Barricadia standpipe, where it now welcomes strangers to the tap by name after two visits. Happy Hut has not commented. The standpipe’s actual operators have not asked it to leave.

A salvage boss operating out of a gutted GF-MOON franchise shell on the Raze border is said to be running an informal price index on Manta Wing grade, updated by chalkboard, more accurate than anything the Barricadia stalls will quote you, and

available to absolutely nobody who hasn't already proven they can find the shell in the first place.

A harpy-lineage spotter is rumored to call the Ring Road's drone overflight windows for at least two amateur crews, for a fee nobody involved will discuss, with an accuracy Monitor Central itself has apparently started quietly investigating.

The Los Creeps sponsor that pulled its logo this week is said to have done so not over the shipment itself but over a photograph of the shipment, taken by someone inside the family who has not been identified and has not, as of this printing, tried to sell it anywhere.

A white tiger identified only by the word Terms is said to close Syndicate accounts that have gone quiet for longer than a season, in person, without raising his voice, ever.

Three separate people described the same sentence to us as the last thing they heard before an account in question was, in their words, no longer their problem.

A Barricadia gene-mod clinic is rumored to have traded stabilization work this month for something other than credits or samples, for the first time anyone can recall, and to be extremely unwilling to say what.

A marked defector is rumored to be somewhere south of the corridor, in a district that does not run background checks on anyone who keeps the standpipe running. We are printing this because it is already everywhere. We are not printing anything else, and we would encourage every other outlet to consider why we've made that choice.

EXPENSIVE TRASH

AZURE CONTINGENCY RESIDENTIAL MEMBERSHIP

CONTACT FOR PRICING

What an undisclosed sum a year buys you: a sealed reserve tank, a service contract renewable at the company's discretion, and total exemption from a conversation the rest of the spread has four times a year whether it wants to or not. What it does not buy you: any obligation on the company's part to explain its reserve capacity to anyone who isn't already a member, including during a declared shortage. See the ad on the inside front cover. Then see page 20. Same company. Very different reading experience.

Buys silence. Buys a shower with the door open. Does not buy the right to be surprised later by what that silence cost somebody else.

CASCADE Mk. VII, GENUINE, LOT-STAMPED

40–130 CR

Sintered ceramic media, a tamper ring that shows a repress instantly, and a weight you can check with your own hand at the point of sale. The price swings hard across a filter month cycle and the object itself does not change at all, which tells you everything about where the volatility actually lives. Buy it from someone who has told you no at least once before.

Earns the price at week one. Earns it more at week four.

"CLARIFIED" COCKTAIL MENU, CENTER POINT ROOFTOP

40 CR / GLASS

The spirit is fine. The water is the same Low Coast desal product available two hundred meters away at a public spigot for nothing, dressed in a menu word engineered specifically to discourage the question of what it means. Nobody involved

in serving it will explain the word if you ask directly, which is itself the most informative answer available on the premises.

The kind of thing that works exactly as designed, which is the worst thing we can say about it.

GARAGE-PRESS T-SHIRT, UNLICENSED, BARRICADIA

18 CR

Printed on a family press two streets from a certain unlicensed vehicle shop, sold off a stall for less than a third of what the officially licensed Raid Race merchandise runs at retail, and reportedly outselling it in this district by a wide margin. The print quality is honestly a little uneven. Nobody buying it cares, and neither, at this point, do we.

Earns the price and the loyalty. The license should be worried.

GHOST KIT, FULL LOADOUT

FOUR FIGURES

Beautifully made, genuinely, and priced specifically so that owning it is the entire content of owning it. Every garage crew in Barricadia can price a GHOST KIT loadout to the credit without having bought one, because pricing what you can't afford is a district pastime here, practiced with more precision than most people bring to their own budgets.

Exactly what a person with too much credit and no field time would wear to a district that has already done the math on them.

OBITUARIES FOR PEOPLE WHO AREN'T DEAD YET

FILTER MONTH CHIC

b. one bored bartender's idea • d. this quarter, cause of death: its own punchline
The gray-water cocktail trend, born on a Center Point rooftop as an ironic nod to the district's own scarcity down the hill, died this quarter the moment a guest asked, sincerely, what was actually in the glass and was told, sincerely, "the joke." It is survived by a forty-credit price point that has, remarkably, not died with it. No services. The menu has already been reprinted under a different, equally evasive word.

THE CORPORATE SPONSOR LIVERY

b. with the first hydro-power logo on a rear-engine panel • d. this week, cause of death: a photograph nobody meant to take
Died this week when a family shipment turned out to be worth more scrutiny than the sponsorship was worth defending, leaving a blank panel on a Los Creeps car that is, by unanimous consensus of everyone at the Tooth and Gear, the best-looking thing on the grid this season. Survived by the next sponsor, who has not yet learned anything from this. In lieu of flowers, ask what's actually in the crate before the logo goes on.

"NIGHT ALLOCATION EXEMPT"

b. a leasing office's idea of an amenity • d. the moment it appeared in print
The phrase died of exposure this quarter, having survived for some time as a whispered selling point before a listing agent made the fatal error of writing it down where a tenants' board could read it. It is survived by the private supply arrangement it described, which has not died at all and shows no intention of doing so. The board has asked questions. The building has not answered any of them.

THE DUST-HOUR CIRCUIT'S INNOCENCE

b. quietly, years ago, in the Raze • d. the day a sponsor found the schedule
Died the week a beverage brand offered four figures to move a crew's dawn races to
hours a film unit could actually attend, thereby explaining, out loud, to the one district
that had never had to think about it, exactly what its own obscurity was worth on
paper. The crew said no. The number, once spoken, cannot be unheard. Survived by
the schedule, which has not moved an inch.

CLASSIFIEDS / PERSONAL ADS / BOUNTY ADS

SEEKING

Empty CASCADE Mk. VII housings, seal intact, any condition otherwise. Cash, no questions about what you did with what was inside. A repressed shell is worth more to the wrong buyer than the dose ever was. Don't make me say why I know that.

// PRODUCE ROAD, EVENINGS ONLY

FOR SALE

Manta Wing tooth, grade one, UV-verified by a name three garages will confirm. Not a pendant blank. Reinforcement grade. Selling because I need the credits more than I need the wall it was holding up.

// GEARIO, ASK FOR THE BLUE DOOR

PERSONAL

Marked, listed, or depreciated? You never answered and I've stopped assuming that means you forgot the question. Still at the same bar stretch. Still not asking twice.

// SERVICE CORRIDOR REGULAR

WANTED

Spotter who can read a drone overflight window without a subscription service doing it for them. Dust-hour crew, Raze border, pay in whatever you actually need that week. Prior Monitor Central experience a disqualifier, not a bonus.

// ASK FOR MATTOON'S SECOND

MEMORIAL

For the family on the fourth floor who lost a week to a batch that looked right and wasn't. We don't have your names to print and you didn't ask us to. Just know the ring gets checked at every door on that block now, every time, because of you.

// A NEIGHBOR WHO CHECKS NOW

BOUNTY

Six hundred credits for documentation on any "night allocation exempt" supply arrangement, any building, any district. Not the marketing copy. The actual contract. We have the ad. We would like the paperwork behind it.

// TENANTS, ASKING NICELY FOR NOW

FOR SALE

Los Creeps sponsor decal, current season, peeled off mid-race, low-tack adhesive, obviously counterfeit. Selling as a joke to whoever finds this funnier than I currently do. Ten credits or a better joke.

// ALTO CITO, STILL EMBARRASSED

PERSONAL

To the reporter who rode with Miz: the woman on the roof who asked if filter month was a Barricadia thing found this issue. She read it twice. She has not said anything else about it yet. We'll let you know if she does.

// SOMEONE WHO WAS AT THAT PARTY

WANTED

Anyone who can independently authenticate a "2051 Siege" reel before I pay what's being asked for it. I know it's probably the fourteenth fake. I'd like to hear it from someone who isn't also selling one.

// BURNED ONCE, CAUTIOUS TWICE

DATING

Geario, own tools, own filtration, own standing at two bars that matter. Seeking someone who will not ask my allocation tier on a first date and will absolutely ask it by the third, correctly, once we're past pretending it doesn't matter.

// BOX 14, SERVICE CORRIDOR

SEEKING

A Raze scavenger who goes by no name, works with Mattoon's crew, last seen trading salvage near the transit yard three weeks ago. Family looking, not police, not Syndicate, just family. Please tell him that specifically.

// HIS SISTER, SOUTH GATE

FOR SALE

GHOST KIT jacket, full loadout, worn exactly once to a Race Night where three people priced it correctly before I'd finished my first drink. Selling at a third of what it cost me to learn that lesson.

// LEARNED WHAT IT COSTS TO FAKE

WANTED

Confirmation, denial, or literally anything at all from Frequency regarding the going rate for confirmation. We are asking in print because every other channel has failed. We expect this one to fail too. We are asking anyway.

// AN OUTLET THAT ISN'T NAMING ITSELF EITHER

PERSONAL

To the driver with no sponsor patch on the practice loop: whoever taught you that line through the outer curve should get credit somewhere, even if nobody's saying his name out loud yet either.

// SOMEONE WHO WAS WATCHING FROM THE CAGE

DISCREET SERVICES

Extraction from a bad filter-month deal, no questions about how you got into it, some questions about how you plan to stay out. Corridor rates. I have done this more times than I'd like this quarter.

// KNOWS THE TUNNELS, WON'T SAY HOW

REVENGE

Two hundred credits to whoever gets a certain rooftop bar to print, on the record, what "clarified" is actually supposed to mean. I have asked politely four times. Politely is over.

// PAID FORTY CREDITS FOR A STORY

FOR SALE

Home assay kit for water, consumer grade, syncs to nothing, tells you nothing you didn't already suspect but tells it to you fast. Two hundred credits, worth every one during week four.

// EAST BARRICADIA

MEMORIAL

For the water-authority substation this district still calls by its old name, decades after the authority itself stopped answering the phone. Some of us remember what it was for before it was anything else. Some of us are glad it's still doing roughly the same job, unofficially, for free.

// OLD BARRICADIA

SEEKING

A boring seller. Six feet of the produce road, asks my flow rate before quoting a price, has told me no at least once. I have read the manual. I would like to stop testing my own household's luck on a four-week cycle.

// WEEK FOUR, EVERY TIME

WANTED

Anyone with a working relationship with the harpy spotter who calls the Ring Road windows. Not asking for a favor. Asking what the going rate actually is, since apparently nobody official can tell us.

// AMATEUR CIRCUIT, ALTO CITO

PERSONAL

To Toll: the one cartridge crate you let through untaxed this month did not go unnoticed. We're not asking why. We're just saying we noticed, and that noticing costs us nothing, and we'd do it again.

// A WATER CREW THAT PAYS ITS TAX

WHAT THE SPREAD IS FOR

There is a line in Tally Reyes's feature I have read more times than is good for me. It is Miz Coto, counting bit-chits on a rooftop that has never had to think about any of this, saying: that's the whole spread, right there.

I wanted to end this issue on the interview instead, because it is the better piece of tape. A man who built something real in a district NAF abandoned, caught in one unguarded half-second choosing a boy over a question he wasn't ready to answer. I have read that section more times than the one about the tunnels, if I'm honest, and I still don't know what to do with it except print it and let you sit with it too.

But the sentence that keeps winning is Miz's, because it is the smaller claim and the truer one. The spread isn't a metaphor. It is a schedule, a tier, a toll, a rooftop, a standpipe, a garage that takes care of its own floor and nobody else's, a network that takes care of its core and nobody else's, running the exact same logic at two completely different scales and calling both of them, somehow, the same city.

Everyone in this issue is telling the truth as they understand it. Mo Money Jaguarío is not lying about what he built. Director Fass is not lying about grid stability. The broker at that launch party was not lying when she said the spread is the spread, meaning nothing, meaning everything, meaning she has simply never had to find out what the phrase costs someone else to live inside.

That is the thing this issue kept walking into, in rooms with nothing else in common. A courier checking a tamper ring by feel in a dark van. A grandmother checking a housing at her own door because trust stopped being free. A boy with no name on his jacket, watched too closely by a man who will not say why. Somebody in every one of those rooms is being asked to accept an allocation as a fact of nature rather than a decision somebody made and keeps remaking, quietly, every four weeks, on purpose.

None of that is a solution, and we would not trust an issue that pretended otherwise. The best things we found this quarter were all refusals. A courier who checks herself before anyone asks. A crew that turned down four figures rather than let a sponsor see the schedule. A woman in the Raze who told us, flatly, that she doesn't envy a district with a system, because at least nobody's stealing from her on paper.

We can't price that. Neither can The Line, though we suspect it's tried.

Go find out which tier your own building is on. Then go find out who told you it doesn't matter, and ask them why they got to decide that for you.

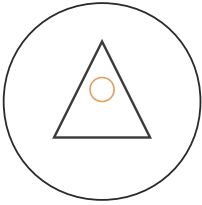
// I.D.

CONFLICT

Issue 49 // Published quarterly, or whenever the courier is well enough to travel.
Printed on a stock that does not hold a scan. Distributed by hand to people who would rather not be enrolled anywhere.

The spread is the spread. Ask who that's convenient for.

ADVERTISEMENT



NOBODY HERE HAS EVER OWNED ONE

GHOST KIT

EST. SOMEWHERE ELSE

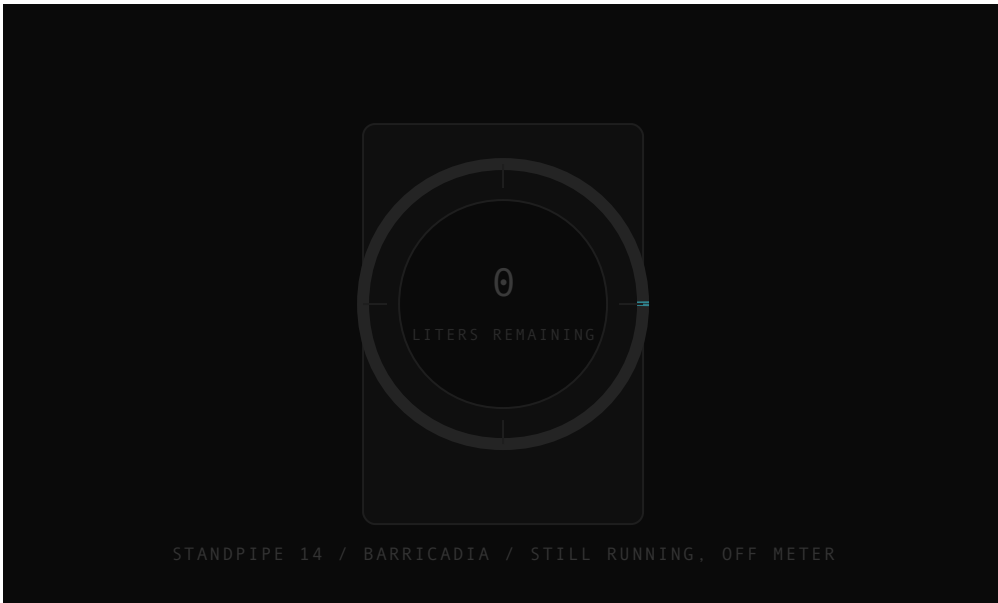
Everyone in your district can already price this jacket. Buy it anyway.

Four figures, full loadout, cut and finished to a standard no garage crew in this spread will ever be quoted for their own labor. GHOST KIT is not sold to you because you need it. It is sold to you because the district you're about to wear it in has already done the math on exactly what it costs, and will know precisely how little of that number reflects anything you did yourself.

For the customer who was never going to be asked to prove anything else.

GHOST KIT does not verify field experience, allocation tier, or garage affiliation prior to purchase. We are aware of what our customers are told at the bars they wear this into. We have read the reviews. We are keeping the price.

GHOST KIT // FOUR FIGURES, EVERY TIME



“The meter reads zero because it isn’t hooked to anything anymore. Somebody disconnected it years ago and never told the district office. The water still runs. Nobody has asked them to explain why.”

// standpipe, Barricadia, the one nobody bills for

CONFLICT

Issue 49 // Q1 2067