

U.S. GOVERNMENT
PSYCHIC OPERATIONS
PROJECT CENTERGATE

EYES ONLY



THEY DID NOT
OPEN THE DOOR.
THE DOOR
OPENED THEM.

23 JAN 1984

THE

MEN WHO OPENED THE DOOR

BOOK ONE

Dedication

For Lisel.

The whole of this library — every book, every series, and the Jakobus Thread that runs through the heart of it — is hers. Each page that follows may carry another name; all of them together carry only one. She is the floor the entire house stands on.

Sawubona.

Foreword

by Hindrance Invoke †

They have laughed at me for sixty years, and I have outlived a great deal of the laughter, and I have learned that being laughed at is not the same as being wrong, though it is also, I must be honest, not the same as being right. It is its own thing. It is what happens to a man who points at a door before the world is ready to admit there is a wall.

So when I tell you that this book moved me, understand that I am not an easy man to move on this subject. I have been to the sites. I have stood under the impossible stones and run my hands over the impossible cuts and asked the impossible questions, and I have been answered, more often than not, with a sneer and a press release. I know the texture of official denial the way a sailor knows weather. And what I admired in this book — what made me, an old man who has been certain of so much, go quiet and *uncertain* in the best way — is that it does not ask you to believe me, or anyone. It asks you to look at what was actually declassified, what was actually filmed, what was actually funded by serious governments with serious money for serious decades, and to sit with the fact that the official story has holes in it you could walk a person through.

Because here is the thing the laughers never grapple with. Governments are not whimsical with money. And serious governments spent serious years and serious fortunes on men who claimed to see across the world with their minds, on doors under the ice, on transit mani-

feasts to a continent no tourist visits, on things they then buried under a mountain of redaction and a snicker. You do not bury what is merely silly. You do not redact a joke. The *snicker itself is the tell* — and this author understands that better than any writer I have read, that the most effective way to hide a real thing is not to deny it but to make it *ridiculous*, so that no serious person will be caught looking.

I have spent my life being the man caught looking. This author has written a heroine who gets caught looking — a records officer who cannot stop pulling the thread, who loses her clearance for the crime of *noticing* — and through her he does the thing I was never quite able to do in all my books: he makes you feel, in your own nervous system, the vertigo of standing at a door that should not exist and being asked whether you are willing to open it.

And the door, in this book, opens the way I have always suspected the real ones do — not with a key, not with a code, but with *resonance*. With a human being tuned, somehow, to the frequency of the thing. I will not spoil it. I will only say that when I read it, something very old in me, the boy who first looked up at a stone he was told his ancestors were too primitive to have raised, said quietly: *yes. That is how it would work. That is how it always would have worked.*

They will call this book what they have always called my life's work. Let them. The author knows, as I know, that *not yet proven* and *disproven* are different countries, and that the whole of the interesting territory lies between them, and that the people who refuse to enter that territory — in either direction, the zealot and the debunker alike — are the only ones guaranteed to learn nothing.

Open the door. I have spent sixty years pointing at it. Here, at last, is a storyteller who will walk you through.

I do not know if I have been right about everything. No honest man my age could. But I know I was right to *look*, and this book is the proof that the looking was never the foolish thing. The foolish thing was always the snicker.

— *Hindrance Invoke*

† An anagram of the man who taught the whole world to ask whether the ancients had help — set down in homage, and with a fondness that survives every disagreement. The author of this book wrote these words; the borrowed name is a salute, not a claim.

The Voice on the Tape

The package had no return address, which was the first thing wrong with it.

Mara turned it under the kitchen light at one in the morning, a padded mailer the color of old bone, her name printed on a label in a font that meant nothing—Helvetica, the default, the font of people who didn't want to be identified by their stationery. Inside, when she worked a thumbnail under the flap, was a cassette. An actual cassette, the analog kind, the plastic yellowed at the seams the way plastic yellows when it has spent twenty years in a box that nobody opened.

She did not own a cassette player. That was the second thing wrong with it, that someone had assumed she would solve the problem of playing it, and had been correct.

She set it on the counter and looked at it the way you look at a smoke detector that has chirped once and gone quiet, deciding whether it's worth the ladder. The label on the cassette itself was handwritten. Two lines. A session number—seven digits, the leading zero, the dash, the format she had stared at across nine years of declassified PDFs back when the declassified PDFs were a hobby and not a wound. And a date.

The date was three weeks ago.

She read it three times and it kept saying three weeks ago, which was not possible, because the format on the label belonged to a program that the CIA had announced in 1995 that it was no longer funding, and the announcement had been the polite lie that announcements

are, but even the impolite truth of it—the contractors, the renamed line items, the work that migrated and did not die—even that did not put a hand-labeled session cassette in her mailbox in Arlington with last month's date on it.

Mara made coffee. The machine ticked and breathed. She had learned, in the long slow demolition of her career, that the body wants a task at the moment the mind wants to bolt, and that you can fool the one by feeding the other.

She found a player at the all-night drugstore on Columbia Pike, a child's boombox in clearance plastic, eleven dollars and ninety-nine cents, the kind of object that existed because someone in a warehouse had decided that nostalgia was a market. The clerk did not look up from his phone. The walk back was cold. She kept the mailer under her arm like a folder she did not want anyone to see her carrying, a reflex she'd thought she'd lost, the SCIF reflex, the documents-are-people reflex.

In the apartment she pulled the cellophane off the boombox with her teeth and fed it four batteries from the junk drawer and seated the cassette and did not press play.

There was a discipline to this. She knew the format. She had read hundreds of these in transcript, the monitor's voice in plain Roman type and the viewer's in italic, the cool-down logged to the minute, the prompts numbered. *Describe the target. Move to the next aspect of the target. Stay in structure.* She could hear the cadence of them in her head already, the bureaucratic liturgy of men who had been asked to do an impossible thing and had built a paperwork around it so that the impossible thing would have a paperwork, would have a number, would be auditable.

She pressed play.

Tape hiss. The specific gray hiss of a real recording, with a room behind it—HVAC, a chair, the small wet sound of a person breathing through their nose. Then a voice, male, older, a Virginia in it sanded

down by forty years of federal hallways.

“Session is...” A pause, paper moving. “Cool-down complete. Monitor on the record. When you’re ready. Describe your impressions of the target.”

The hiss went on. Eleven seconds of it; she counted, because counting was a thing to do.

Then the second voice.

It was thin. It came up out of the hiss the way a swimmer comes up, all at once and gasping, and it was old too, but old differently—old the way a recording is old, with the high end gone, the way a voice sounds when it has been copied from a copy. It said:

“Cold. There’s a—structure. Under. It’s under something.”

The Virginia voice: “Stay in structure. Under what.”

“Ice.” A breath. “Under the ice. It’s not—the shape of it isn’t natural. It answers.” The thin voice stopped. Started again, quieter. “A door. But there’s no—no handle. It opens when you. When the. When you’re—”

“Describe the door.”

And then the thin voice said a string of digits.

Mara’s hand was already moving toward the stop button when her ear caught up to her hand, and she pulled the hand back, and let it run, because the digits were not random. The digits had a shape. The digits were nine numbers in three groups and she knew the shape the way you know your own phone number, the way you know the combination to a lock you stopped using a decade ago, the muscle of it living somewhere below thought, and the thin dead voice on the tape said her DLA employee identification number into a recording dated three weeks ago, and then it said:

“She’ll come.”

The tape ran on. The Virginia voice said something about moving to the next aspect of the target. Mara did not hear it. She was standing very still in her own kitchen with her arms loose at her sides and a high thin ringing starting up behind her eyes, and she noticed—from a great distance, the analyst in her still on shift while the rest of her had walked off the job—that she had stopped breathing, and she made herself breathe, in through the nose, out, the cool-down, the discipline.

Her ID number. Not a name. A number. Anyone could find a name. A name was in a phone book, a name was on a lawsuit, her name had been in three different agency adverse-action filings and at least one trade-press story about a contractor who'd "raised unsubstantiated concerns." But the number was internal. The number was hers and the system's and nobody else's. The number had been issued to her on a Tuesday in a windowless office in Fort Belvoir by a woman named Donna who chewed nicotine gum and the number had been deactivated the day they walked Mara to her car.

She reached out and stopped the tape with one finger, gently, the way you'd close a door on a sleeping person.

Then she did the work.

She did the work because the work was the only floor she trusted to hold her weight. She went to the spare room she did not call an office and turned on the lamp and woke the laptop—the clean one, the one with nothing on it, the discipline of a woman who has learned the hard way which machines can be subpoenaed. She did not have access to the DLA directory anymore. She had something better and worse: she had her own paper, the boxes she should have shredded, the personal copies she had been explicitly ordered not to retain and had retained anyway, because a records officer who destroys her own records is a records officer who has agreed she was wrong, and Mara had never once agreed she was wrong.

She found the number three ways.

First, her old badge—the dead one, the deactivated one she kept in

a sandwich bag in a shoebox like a tooth. She held it under the lamp. The number was not printed on the face; it never was; but the barcode encoded it, and she had long ago, in a fit of the same compulsion that had ended her, memorized the check digit. She read the barcode in her head. The digits matched the tape.

Second, an old performance review, page two, the routing header, where some long-gone clerk had typed her EID into the metadata block beside her name. Matched.

Third—and this was the one that made the ringing behind her eyes climb a half-step—third was a transit manifest. One of *those* manifests. The reason for everything. She had not meant to keep it. She had kept it. Her name was nowhere on it because her name had never been on it; she'd accessed it as a records officer, not a passenger; but the access log, the access log she'd printed because she'd known even then that someone would say she'd never seen it—the access log carried her EID in the requester field, beside a timestamp, beside a flight she had reported, beside a sector that did not appear on any public map of the ice.

Three sources. Three independent provenances. The number on the tape was hers.

She sat back. The chair was a cheap chair and it complained.

Outside, a truck went by on the Pike, and its headlights swung across the ceiling and away, and the ordinary motion of it was almost unbearable, the world out there going about being a world, a man in a truck with a route and a thermos, while in here a man who was dead had said her employee number into a microphone last month.

Because he was dead. That was the part she kept circling back to, the part she set down and picked up again. She did not know yet that he was dead. She knew the *voice* was old, copied, thin. She knew the session format was real and the date was impossible. She turned to the laptop and she did the only thing left to do, which was to find out whose voice it was, and the finding was easy, was almost insultingly easy,

because the session number on the cassette label was a real session number and real session numbers were—some of them, the released ones—in the public archive, scanned, OCR'd, sitting on a government server in the open like a thing that had stopped being a secret because everyone had agreed to stop being interested.

The number on the label did not appear in the public archive.

But the *prefix* did. The prefix was a viewer code. Each operational viewer had carried one, a two-letter, two-digit thing that prefaced every session they sat, and the viewer codes were in the archive because the archive was full of decades of a man's work and you could not redact a man's entire output without admitting he had existed. She typed the prefix into the search field on the reading room and the page thought about it and returned a list, and the list had a name attached, and she read the name and then she read the small print under the name in the curator's annotation, the dry institutional language that the federal government uses to note that a person is beyond the reach of further inquiry.

The viewer had died in 1998.

Mara read it the way you read a word in a language you used to speak, the meaning arriving a beat late, behind the shapes of the letters. *Deceased 1998*. Heart, said the obituary she found next, two clicks on, a six-line death notice in a Maryland paper, survived by, in lieu of flowers. A man with a Virginia in his voice who had sat sessions at Fort Meade and described targets he could not see and had been retired and had died of his heart in the spring of 1998, eight years before the Serpo nonsense, eleven years before she'd ever requested her first anomalous manifest, twenty-six years before someone had put his voice on a cassette and dated the cassette three weeks ago.

She got up and walked to the window. There was nothing in the window but the parking lot and the dumpster enclosure and her own reflection laid over them, a tired woman in a stretched cardigan, thirty-six and looking older in the glass.

The dead are not supposed to know your name.

She turned that over and found she did not believe it the way you're meant to—she did not feel the cold finger on the spine, the supernatural shiver, the thing the movies told her she should feel. What she felt instead was the precise and familiar fury of a system that had produced an output it should not have been able to produce. A number that should not have left the building. A voice that should not have spoken after the heart stopped. A date that should not exist. Somewhere there was a chain of custody for this cassette, a who-handled-it and a when, and chains of custody were the one thing in the universe Mara Kincaid understood better than the people who built them, because she had spent her professional life proving that the chain was never as clean as the people who owned it claimed.

Someone had made this. Someone had taken an old session—or faked an old session, or spliced an old session—and had laid her number into it like a watermark, like a signature, like a hand on her shoulder in a dark room saying *we know exactly who you are*. You did not address a person by their internal employee number unless you wanted that person to understand that you had reached past the public version of them, past the name in the lawsuit and the trade-press story, all the way down into the machinery, and had taken something only the machinery knew.

It was a recruitment, dressed as a haunting. She had filed enough recruitments under their real names to know the smell.

She went back to the cassette and looked at it on the counter, in the boombox, the small clear window showing the spools stopped where she'd stopped them. The thin voice had said *she'll come*, and the obscenity of it was not that a dead man had predicted her—it was that whoever made this had been so *sure*. Had been certain enough of her, of the wiring of her, of the exact compulsion that had cost her the clearance and the career and the quiet life she would have been allowed if she'd only once, one single time, let a thread lie where it lay.

They were not wrong. That was the part she hated. She was already,

somewhere below the fury, doing the thing they had built the tape to make her do. She was already reaching for the question.

She rewound. The cheap motor whirred. She played the last ten seconds again, then again, the thin voice and the digits and *she'll come*, and on the third pass she heard the thing she'd missed under the obvious thing, the way you always missed the small print when the headline was loud—a sound behind the viewer's voice, behind the HVAC, low, a second longer than the recording wanted to keep, a held tone. Not music. Not the room. A frequency, sustained, just at the bottom of what the tape could hold, present for the length of the digits and gone when the digits ended.

She rewound and listened for it specifically and it was there and she did not have words for it yet, only the shape of an absence where her understanding should have been.

The coffee had gone cold. She drank it anyway.

There was a part of her—the part that had survived, the part that paid the rent doing compliance audits for men who would have walked past her in a corridor four years ago—that part stood in the doorway of the spare room and told her, flatly, in her own voice, the smart thing. *Burn it. Don't burn it, that's evidence, but bag it and lock it and tell no one and forget the date and remember that the last time you pulled a thread it pulled back and took everything, and you have nothing left for it to take but the nothing you've managed to build.* That part was correct. That part was always correct. That part had kept her alive and small.

She found a legal pad and a pen and she sat back down at the cheap complaining chair and she started a list.

Mailer—no return. Cassette—analogue, aged, prefix [redacted in her own hand, an old habit]. Label date: -21 days. Viewer: deceased 1998. EID match x3. Held tone under digits—source unknown.

She looked at the list. Six lines. Six lines was not a haunting. Six lines was an investigation, and an investigation had a subject, and the

subject of this one was not a dead man and not a door under ice she did not believe in. The subject was whoever had stood in a room three weeks ago with the equipment and the access and the cold patience to reach into a deactivated badge cache and pull a number that had been switched off the day they walked her to her car—and had wanted her to know they could.

She underlined the last line, the held tone, twice, without deciding to.

Then she wrote, at the bottom of the pad, in the small neat hand she used for the things she meant:

Find who sent it.

The boombox clicked as the last of the tape ran off the spool and the leader slapped around and around, and she did not stop it, and the slap of it filled the kitchen, and she sat in her cardigan in Arlington at two in the morning and let the world she had crawled out of reach back up through the floor and take her by the wrist.

The Retraction

The conference room had no windows, which was the first thing she had noticed about it, two years before this morning, when she still thought a windowless room meant nothing. They put the records people in the interior of the building because records people did not need to see weather. They needed to see screens. Now Mara sat at the long table with her hands flat on a folder she was not allowed to open, and across from her three people read documents they would not show her, and the absence of windows was the only mercy in the room. There was nothing outside to want.

A clock on the wall ran four minutes slow. She had noticed that the first day too.

“Dr. Kincaid.” The man chairing the panel was named Voss, a contractor liaison whose title changed depending on the meeting. He had a voice built for HR, soft at the edges, no purchase anywhere. “You filed three escalations in eleven weeks. We’ve read all three. We’d like to understand your reasoning.”

“It’s in the escalations.”

“We’d like it in your words.”

Her words were the escalations. She had written them carefully, in the flat declarative the system trusted, because a manifest does not argue and neither should the person reading one. But she said it again, out loud, because that was the shape of the morning and she did not yet understand that the shape was the point.

“There’s a support corridor running austral summer. McMurdo, Pegasus ice runway, the published stations. Public ice maps account for all of it.” She kept her hands flat. “Eleven flights I reviewed don’t terminate at a published station. The manifests list a sector designator that isn’t on any chart I can access — DLA, NGA, the open ice atlas. The coordinates resolve to a point with no station. No camp. No survey marker.”

“Coordinates can be entered in error.”

“The same error eleven times. Four decimal places.”

Voss made a note. The woman to his left, whose badge she could not read from across the table, did not.

“Cargo,” Mara said. “Outbound holds logged as fuel resupply. Jet-A, drummed, stated mass. The mass doesn’t match Jet-A. I ran it against density and drum count. It comes out wrong by a third. A third heavier.”

“Loading variance—”

“Not a third. And the same flights carry ice core drilling equipment. Diamond bit strings, casing, mud pumps. You don’t drill core at a fuel depot.” Her cadence flattened further, dropped a register. “No return leg filed. Eleven aircraft into a sector that isn’t on the map, carrying drills and something a third too heavy to be fuel, and not one of them files a flight plan home.”

The room held that. The clock ran its four minutes behind.

“Passengers,” she said, because she had decided in the parking garage that she would say all of it, that if they were going to do whatever they were about to do, they would do it to the whole truth and not a convenient edge of it. “Manifests on six of the eleven. Name fields blank. Redacted, I assumed — except redaction leaves a control character and these are empty. The biometric fields are full. Iris template, gait signature, full hand geometry. You don’t take a man’s iris and leave his name.”

“Dr. Kincaid.” This from the woman, finally, and her voice was nothing like Voss’s — clipped, certain, a person who closed things. “You understand that you are describing a compartmented program.”

“I’m describing a discrepancy in a logistics database. I don’t have access to whatever it’s compartmenting. That’s rather my point. The accounting is broken. Money crosses a cost code into DOE and out again to a contractor with no parent listed. There’s a satellite lease — continuous downlink, not pass-by — over a sector with no station to talk to. I don’t know what any of it is. I know the books don’t close.”

The books don’t close. She had built her life on that sentence. A ledger is a promise that reality and the record agree, and when they don’t agree, someone has lied, and the lie is recoverable because numbers remember even when people make a point of forgetting. She had believed that the way other people believed in weather. It had never once failed her.

It was failing now, in a windowless room, and she could not yet see how.

“We appreciate your diligence,” Voss said.

She knew the sound of an ending. She had filed enough of them.

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What she did not say, because they had not asked and she would not give them the courtesy of pretending it was a conversation: she had been *good* at this. Not good the way a performance review is good. Good the way a tuning fork is good — she touched a system and it told her where it was off, a frequency under her hands that other people couldn’t hear. Twelve years of it. Procurement fraud nobody else caught because the fraud was distributed across forty invoices that were each individually correct. A diversion of medical pallets she’d found because the *weight* was right and the *handling time* was wrong, a quarter-second too fast at three transfer points, which meant the pallets weren’t being handled, which meant they weren’t where the system said. She read paper the way a doctor reads a face.

They had given her an award for the medical pallets. There was a small acrylic block in a box in her car, in the parking garage, four levels down, because she had not had time to take it inside before the meeting and now she would carry it out past the people who had given it to her.

“The escalations went to your reporting chain,” the woman said. “And then beyond it.”

“To the IG. After my chain sat on them six weeks.”

“The Inspector General is not cleared for the program your escalations touch.”

“I didn’t escalate the program. I escalated the *accounting*.” She heard the second register enter her voice — the one her sister called the *I’m right and it doesn’t matter* voice, the one Mara had never learned to retire even when she could feel it costing her. “The IG is cleared for accounting. If the books are broken in a place I’m not allowed to look, I tell the person whose job is broken books. And they look. Because they’re allowed.”

“And in doing so,” the woman said, “you forwarded compartmented manifest data to an office without need-to-know. Eleven flights. Eleven sector designators. The biometric field structure. You put it in a document and you sent it up.”

The room went very quiet, in the particular way of a room where the actual subject has finally been stated and everyone present can stop performing surprise.

There it was. Not the fuel. Not the drills. Not the eleven aircraft that never came home. *She had moved the numbers*. She had taken the thing they wanted held inside a box and she had written it down on a page and handed the page to someone outside the box, and it did not matter that the page was a complaint about the box being broken. The page existed now. The page was a fact, and facts about the box were the one thing the box could not allow.

“The data was already in the database I’m employed to audit.” Her hands had not moved off the folder. “I didn’t acquire it. I *had* it. It’s my job to have it.”

“It’s your job to flag and contain. Not to transmit.”

“You can’t flag a discrepancy to someone who isn’t allowed to see the discrepancy. That isn’t containment. That’s a hole with a lid on it.”

Voss spoke before the woman could. He had a paper in front of him now, a single sheet, and he turned it to face her and slid it across the table the precise distance a person slides a check.

She didn’t read it yet. She knew the genus. Voluntary separation. A number with a lot of zeroes after it that was not, when you did the arithmetic, very much at all when measured against the rest of a working life. A non-disclosure clause with teeth. A line about cooperation and reputational matters and the mutual interest of the parties.

“This is generous,” Voss said. “Given the transmission.”

“Generous.” She let the word sit on the table next to the paper. “You’re revoking my clearance.”

“Your clearance is under review. The separation is independent of—
”

“It’s gone. You wouldn’t put a separation in front of me if it weren’t. A cleared person you keep. A cleared person you *manage*.” She had read ten thousand documents written by people exactly like the people in this room, and the documents had a grammar, and the grammar told you what had already been decided before the meeting started. “You pulled it last night. The separation’s the soft version of the thing you’ve already done.”

Voss’s face did her the discourtesy of not changing.

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She did not sign it that day. She took the paper out to her car and sat in the parking garage four levels down with the engine off and the

acrylic award block in its box on the passenger seat, and she read the separation agreement the way she read everything, line by line, looking for where the books didn't close. They closed. It was a competent document. There was no error in it because there was no error to find — the error had been hers, in believing that finding the truth and reporting it were a single act, when in fact they were two acts and only the first one was safe.

The garage was cold in a way the building never let itself be. Somewhere two levels up a door slammed and the sound traveled down the concrete and died. She read the NDA clause four times. *Reputational matters*. Then she sat with it, the engine off, the box on the seat beside her, and said nothing to the empty car.

She signed it the following week. By then her badge had stopped working at four buildings, which was how she learned the blacklist was already running — not a published list, nothing she could appeal, just a quiet consensus moving through the contractor ecosystem at the speed of a phone call, the way a name moves when it has been decided that the name is trouble. *Difficult. Made an issue of a program she shouldn't have touched. Reads things that aren't there*. She applied to nineteen positions in the first two months. Eleven did not reply. Eight interviewed her and were warm and did not call back, and one of the eight, a decent man she'd worked a fraud case with years before, called her at home off the record to say he was sorry, that the word on her was that she'd *seen things in the data*, and that *seen things* had stopped being a compliment somewhere along the way.

Seen things in the data. As if the data were a Rorschach. As if eleven aircraft were a mood she'd been in.

She kept the escalations. She was not supposed to — the NDA was explicit and the documents were not hers — but she had her own working notes, the math she'd done at home on a legal pad before she ever opened a system, and the math was hers because thought was the one asset they couldn't revoke. Drum count. Density of Jet-A at the relevant temperature. The mass that came out a third too heavy.

Eleven sector designators, four decimals each, which she had copied onto the legal pad by hand the night she understood that the database would not survive her asking about it. She still had the legal pad. She knew the eleven numbers the way she knew her own EID.

She filed none of it anywhere. There was nowhere left to file.

—

The kettle clicked off and Mara came back into her kitchen, two years and six months downstream of the windowless room, with the cassette player on the table and her own deactivated employee ID still in her ear in a dead man's voice.

The apartment was too warm. She'd left the kettle on while she stood at the counter not making tea, and the window over the sink had fogged at its lower edge, and outside it was the kind of Arlington dark that was never fully dark, the city's underlight smeared up into a low sky. She poured the water over a teabag she did not want and stood holding the mug because her hands wanted a task.

She did the work she had taught herself to do at this hour, on the nights the room came back. She named the things she actually knew, in order, in the flat register, because the flat register was the only thing that had never lied to her.

She knew the books hadn't closed. They had told her she'd misread the system. She had not misread the system. The system had been telling the truth and the truth was inconvenient and so they had unpersoned the reader rather than amend the page, and that was not paranoia, that was *procedure*, she had seen the procedure run on other people before it ran on her. Paper had been the one court that didn't take sides — until the morning the paper was about *them*, and then it became a weapon they held and she did not.

She had stopped trusting people that morning. She had not stopped trusting ledgers. If anything the opposite — the ledger had been right and only the people had failed it, which meant the ledger was the last clean thing, the one court where she could still win even if no one

would enforce the verdict. She kept the legal pad. She knew the eleven numbers.

And now a man dead since 1998 had read her own dead number off a tape dated three weeks ago, with a structure under ice behind his voice and a door that *answered* and a tone held low and steady under the digits like the building was tuned.

A structure under ice.

She set the mug down without drinking.

Eleven aircraft that did not file a return leg, flying drills and a cargo a third too heavy into a sector with no station, four decimals each. She had carried those numbers for two and a half years as the proof of nothing, the wound that wouldn't close because she couldn't open it, the eleven coordinates that resolved to a point on the ice where the public maps said there was simply nothing to fly to.

Nothing to fly to. Unless there was something there that didn't drill core for science and didn't burn the fuel that was actually a third heavier than fuel, something the system spent satellites and DOE money and a man's iris on while leaving his name blank.

She had filed the eleven numbers under *grievance*, in the dry private taxonomy she kept for things she couldn't act on. She moved them now to a folder she had not opened in a long time, the one she only ever used when the math started agreeing with itself across two cases that should not have touched. *Eleven sector designators. A structure under ice. A door that answers.* She did not have it. She was a long way from having it. But the books were doing the thing the books did right before they closed, the small terrible click of two columns that had been wrong apart turning out to be right together.

She went and found the legal pad. It was where it always was. She turned to the page with the eleven numbers and laid it on the table beside the cassette player, the handwriting two and a half years old, the ink she'd pressed hard enough to dent the page beneath.

Then she sat down to find out whether any of the eleven was the coordinate on the tape.

Strip Mall Oracle

The address resolved to a defunct tanning salon between a payday lender and a place that fixed phones. Mara had run the registration on the way over: the LLC behind the lease was named Cool Down Consulting, and the agent of record was a man whose Virginia driver's license had not been renewed since 2011. She had expected a dead drop. She got a glass storefront with a hand-lettered sign in the window that said BY APPOINTMENT, and under it, smaller, ASK ABOUT THE WALL.

She did not have an appointment. She had a paper bag with the cassette in it and four hours of sleep behind her eyes.

The door buzzed when she pushed it. Inside, the carpet was the gray of office furniture from a decade nobody missed, and the air smelled like burned coffee and old paper and, faintly, like a man who lived where he worked. A glass display case ran the length of one wall — the kind that used to hold watches in a mall jeweler's. It held instead a row of cheap clip frames, a coffee mug printed with a logo she half-recognized, and a brass-and-walnut object she took at first for a desk clock and then did not, because it had no face.

"You're early," a voice said. "Or you're not who I think, in which case you're lost, and I'll point you at the phone place."

He came out from behind a partition the way old men come around corners, one hand always finding the wall. Tall once. The frame still suggested it under the cardigan, the shoulders that had been built for a uniform and now hung off a man who weighed what a teenager

weighed. His eyes were the only part of him that hadn't aged out of service. They went over her the way her own went over a manifest.

"Dr. Kincaid," he said. "Mara. I won't shake your hand, I've got a tremor and it embarrasses everybody. Ray McAllister. People who liked me called me Mac. The rest called me Colonel."

"You sent the tape."

"I had it sent." He lowered himself into a chair that had been waiting for him, an orthopedic thing with a sheepskin pad, and gestured at the folding chair across the little table. "Sit. Don't sit. You'll do one of them eventually and I'd rather it was your idea."

She stayed standing. She set the paper bag on the table between them, and from it the corner of the cassette case showed, and she watched whether his eyes went to it.

They did not. They stayed on her face, which told her he already knew exactly what was in the bag, and that the not-looking was a courtesy or a tactic and she could not yet say which.

"A man named Errol Voss handled my separation," she said. "Two and a half years ago. He had a folder with my whole life in it and he never once looked at me. You're looking at me. I haven't decided yet if that's better."

"Voss." Mac let the name sit in his mouth like he was checking it for poison. "Don't know him. There are a lot of Vosses. The program made them in bulk." He nodded at the bag. "That's a copy. You know that. You're a chain-of-custody person, I read your IG complaint, the original's somewhere you can't subpoena and neither can I anymore. So whatever you came here to threaten me with, lower it. We don't have the kind of time where I let you find the bottom of the staircase by yourself."

She had, in fact, come there to find the bottom of the staircase. The wind went a little out of the plan.

"How," she said. "Just that, first. How is my deactivated employee

ID in a session run by a man who's been dead since June of 1998."

"Bo." Mac's hand found the arm of the chair. "Bo Lindqvist. That's the voice on your tape. Sergeant, then warrant officer, viewer for nineteen years, best structure man we ever fielded — which the Agency report does not say, because the report's job was to say the program didn't work." He said the dead man's name the way you'd set down something fragile you'd carried a long way. "Bo died on a Tuesday. The session you have is dated three weeks back. I monitored it. I was the Virginia accent."

She said nothing.

"You want me to tell you a man rose. I'm not going to. I'll tell you we ran a target three weeks ago, and the viewer in the chair gave us a voice that wasn't his, reciting digits that weren't on any sheet in the room, and one of my people transcribed them and ran them on a hunch, and they came back to a deactivated DLA badge. Records officer. Blacklisted for finding eleven flights to a place that isn't on the map." He let that land. "I don't know how. I know who it points at. And I know you already cross-referenced the coordinate, because you've got the look of a woman who stayed up doing it. So let's both stop performing."

She had cross-referenced it. At 4 a.m., legal pad on her knee, the tape's six lines of numbers against her eleven dead sectors, and one of them — the fourth on her list, the one she'd circled twice in the original complaint because the cargo mass was the most wrong — had matched to the third decimal.

Her face must have done something, because he nodded once, slow, and did not gloat. The dignity of that surprised her. She had built him on the drive over as a grifter in a cardigan, and the man in the chair kept declining to be one.

"It matched," she said.

"It matched." He didn't make it a victory. "Sector you'd have flagged. Cargo a third too heavy. No return leg. That's a coordinate

we've been working nineteen months, off and on, every viewer I can still get in a chair. We don't have a name for what's there. They come back with the same architecture and they get sick doing it. We call it the door because it's the smallest true thing we can say." He paused. "It's under ice. You knew that part. Your eleven flights carried core drills to a sector with no station, and somebody's been keeping a satellite parked over it taking pictures of snow."

"Continuous downlink," she said, before she could stop herself, because it was the thread she'd worried smoothest. "Over nothing. I filed that. Nobody would tell me what you point a bird at when there's nothing under it."

"You point it at the thing you're waiting for." He levered himself half up, found his balance, and crossed to the display case the way he did everything, hand on the world the whole way. "Come look at the wall. Sign says ask about the wall, I'm not subtle. After that you can leave, decide on the highway whether you ever come back. I won't chase you. I get winded walking to the toilet."

She did not move. "I'm not going to sit for you."

He stopped, his back to her, and she watched his shoulders. They didn't slump. If anything they squared a degree, the old frame remembering its posture.

"I didn't ask you to. Did I ask you to?" He glanced back. "I've got a chair, the one with the wires, you'll have noticed it and decided not to mention it. I'm not putting you in it. You'd be useless in it today anyway. People come to a thing angry, they're noise. I monitored noise for nineteen years and I'm done. When you sit, if you sit, it'll be because you got bored of standing up being right." A beat. "Now come look at the wall. That part's free."

She came to the wall.

Behind the glass, in the clip frames, were drawings. Pencil and ballpoint, on graph paper and printer paper and one on the back of a Chinese takeout menu, the menu's red letters bleeding through the

snowman somebody had sketched over it. They were not good drawings. That was the first thing, and it landed wrong, because she'd half expected the practiced lines of a con — and these were the labored, over-corrected strokes of people who could not draw, rendering something they could not refuse to render.

"This one," Mac said. His finger hovered an inch off the glass over the largest frame. The drawing inside was a long dark mass, double-walled, with a row of short angled tubes along the top, and somebody had written along the bottom edge in block capitals: NO BOAT IS THIS SIZE.

"September of '79," Mac said. "White Sea. Viewer was tasked blind, sealed envelope, didn't know the target was a building or a beach or the moon. He drew this and described a hull they'd have to blast a channel to launch. Big as a city block. The men reading it for the National Security Council laughed, because we didn't have a submarine that size and neither did the Soviets, so the viewer had obviously failed." He let the silence do a beat of work. "January of '80, the satellite caught them blasting the channel. Typhoon class. Largest submarine ever put in water. They laughed in September and they stopped laughing in January, and nobody who stopped laughing ever told the viewer he'd been right, because by then the report that said we don't do this had already gone up the chain and the report couldn't be wrong, only the man could."

He had not raised his voice. He had told it the way you tell something that happened to you, flat, with the corners worn off, and she stood there in a dead tanning salon with a paper bag of someone else's voice on the table and felt the floor of the thing she trusted tilt half a degree.

She put it back level.

"That's a good story," she said.

"It's a documented one. That's different, and you know the difference better than anybody in this strip mall." He moved his hand down

the case. “I don’t need you to believe it. I’m seventy-eight, I’ve got maybe two good viewers left and one of them is me on a clear morning. I’m not in the persuasion business anymore. I’m in the running-out-of-time business.” His finger came to rest over a smaller frame, lower, and the drawing in it stopped her breathing for a second before she understood why.

It was the door.

Not a door. The viewers’ word, she could see now, was a mercy and an approximation. The thing in the frame was an arrangement — a tall vertical aperture in a face of something, rendered by someone who could not draw curves, so the curves came out as a fist of straight strokes circling a black center, and around the black center, set into the frame of it, a row of marks. Recesses or studs or characters, she couldn’t tell, drawn by a hand that clearly didn’t believe its own eyes.

“Eleven of my people have drawn that,” Mac said. “Going back nineteen months. Different chairs, different days, none of them shown the others’ work. They draw the same aperture, the same marks around it, and they can’t tell me what the marks are, because the marks aren’t a language any of them have. Three got nosebleeds doing it. One I can’t get back in a chair.” He took his hand off the glass. “That’s the coordinate that recited your badge number. That’s where the snow has a satellite over it. They call it the door because it’s the smallest true word. And the reason we’ve been working it nineteen months and burning people is a window. Short one. Tied to the sun going quiet.”

She heard herself. “Tied to what.”

“Solar minimum. The sun runs an eleven-year cycle, loud to quiet, and we’re coming up on quiet. Every viewer who works that coordinate comes back saying the same thing — it gets easier to see as the sun gets quieter. Like the noise is coming down off a signal.” He looked at her, and the old eyes were not asking her to believe. They were doing arithmetic, and including her in the sum. “We’ve got it down to a count of days, give or take, and the give-or-take gets smaller every week. And I don’t have the thing that gets us through it — a person who can read

a manifest and put eleven flights and a parked satellite and a structure that isn't surveyed into the same column and not flinch."

"You have a person who can do that," she said. "That person got fired for doing that."

"That person's standing in my office."

She had not sat in the chair. She wanted that on the record, in her own private ledger, the one she kept better than any of them: she had not sat. She had stood with her arms crossed in a defunct tanning salon and refused the entire architecture of the thing.

And she had crossed the room to the wall when he asked, and she had matched a coordinate to the third decimal at four in the morning, and there was a frame on the glass with the door in it that eleven people who couldn't draw had drawn the same way, with the same row of marks none of them could read.

"There's a badge cache," Mac said, into her silence, and the change in his register — back to logistics, dry, a man reading her file aloud — told her he'd decided not to let the wall close the deal, that he wanted it closed on her terms or not at all. "You'd have wondered how the tape's coordinate even got run, who's still got the access. Old credentialing batch that didn't get reaped when the program officially died. It's been ticking down for years. Right now it's good for forty days. After that it's a key to a door that locks, and I'm an old man in a strip mall with a wall full of drawings and a window I watched close." He folded his hands to still the tremor. "Forty days of ghost access. That's the whole hand. I'm showing it to you face up because I'm too tired to play it any other way."

Forty days. She filed the number — the real folder, not the joke one — next to the give-or-take count of days he wouldn't say out loud, and the two numbers leaned toward each other in a way she did not like.

She picked up the paper bag. The cassette shifted inside it, and she felt the small weight of a dead man's voice through the paper.

“Where,” she said. “The structure. You said no station, no survey, off the map. Say the actual word. I’ve had two and a half years of people not saying the word.”

Mac McAllister looked up at her from the sheepskin chair, in the burned-coffee light, beside a display case where a Typhoon submarine somebody couldn’t draw sat in a clip frame next to a door eleven people had seen through the ice.

“Antarctica,” he said. “The part they don’t fly you to.”

She stood holding the bag. Outside, through the glass and the lettering, a man was walking a phone across the parking lot to the place that fixed phones, ordinary as weather, and inside the dead salon the air smelled of old paper, and the count was forty days, and somewhere a long way south the sun was getting quieter on a schedule she could, she already knew, check.

She said, “Show me the cache.”

Blind Coordinate

The chair was upholstered in a beige that had been white once. It sat under a hooded lamp in the back room of the tanning salon, where the booths had been hauled out and the wiring left hanging like vines, and Mac had cleared a folding table beside it with the kind of care a man gives to furniture he does not expect to use again.

“I’m not getting in that,” Mara said.

“Nobody asked you to.”

He set a manila envelope on the table. Then a second envelope, larger, sealed inside the first—she could see the corner of it through the slit where the flap hadn’t taken the glue. A pad of unlined paper. Two pencils, sharpened by hand, the shavings still curled in the cap of a coffee can he used for the purpose.

“Cache is in a building I can get you into for ninety minutes,” Mac said. “Once. The ghost holds until it doesn’t. Before I spend it, I want to know which one you are. Viewer, or a records officer who found a coincidence.”

“Records officer.”

“Then this’ll be short.”

He pulled the second chair out—not the beige one, an ordinary metal folding chair—and angled it at the table. He did it slowly, both hands on the back rail, and she watched the tremor travel up his forearm and resolve into the seat taking his weight. He didn’t comment

on it. Neither did she.

“Protocol’s old,” he said. “Dumb-simple. That’s why it survived nineteen years of people trying to make it complicated. There’s a target. Real place, real coordinates, sealed. You don’t open the envelope. I don’t. Nobody in this room knows what’s in it.”

“Then how do you grade it.”

“After. Always after. That’s the whole trick—you grade against a thing you couldn’t have known when you drew it.” He tapped the pad. “You sit. You get bored. Then you put down whatever shows up. Lines. Words. Shapes. You don’t decide they’re wrong. You don’t decide they’re anything. You’re a stylus. The page is the instrument.”

“That’s not how I work.”

“It’s exactly how you work. You read a manifest, you find the lie in it. Same job. Reading a place, putting down what doesn’t belong to you.” He slid the pad an inch toward her. “Only this time you don’t get the manifest first.”

She stayed standing.

“You think I’m going to draw a submarine,” she said.

“I think you’re going to draw nothing, and then we’ll go look at the cache, and you’ll have lost forty minutes humoring an old man. Worst case, you’re exactly who you say you are. Sit down and be right.”

It was, she would think later, the cleanest manipulation she’d been handed in years—because there was no upside in refusing. Refuse, and she was the crank who wouldn’t even try. Sit, and prove herself a records officer with a coincidence problem. She had built her whole adult life on the proposition that you could disprove a thing by following its own procedure to the bottom.

She sat.

The metal was cold through her clothes. Mac took the other chair, set the envelope between them so that it was equidistant—she regis-

tered that, the geometry of it, no closer to his hand than hers—and then he did nothing.

“Cool-down,” he said. “Breathe. Sensory’s already low in here, that’s deliberate. Booths used to hum. Now there’s nothing. Let the day fall off.”

“I don’t meditate.”

“Then don’t. Just stop running the ledger a minute. You came in here at a sprint. Still at it. I can hear it.” He closed his own eyes. “Six in. Hold. Six out. You don’t have to believe in it. You just have to do it.”

She did it because doing it was faster than arguing about it. Six in. The air in the back room tasted of dust and old electrical heat. Hold. The fluorescent tube over the front desk ticked through the doorway, a fly-buzz of failing ballast. The metal chair-rail bit a cold line across her back, and she shifted an inch against it. Six out. Somewhere on the strip a delivery truck downshifted and the floor took the bass of it and let it go.

She ran the ledger anyway. Eleven flights. The warm sector with no station and a satellite parked over it like a streetlamp over an empty lot. Forty days. Bo Lindqvist saying her badge number in a voice that had stopped existing in 1998.

“Quieter,” Mac said, without opening his eyes.

She didn’t ask how he knew. She brought the breath down again. The numbers went translucent, the way figures did at the end of a long audit when you’d stared at them past the point of meaning and they became furniture.

“When you’re ready,” Mac said. “Pencil. Don’t aim it. Let the hand decide before you do.”

That was the part she’d resolved to fail at, and she failed at it cleanly. Her hand did nothing. The pencil sat in her fingers the way a pen sits in the fingers of someone waiting to sign a form they haven’t read.

“Nothing,” she said.

“Stay with it. Nothing’s the front door. Most people knock and run.”

She stayed with nothing. The fluorescent ticked. Her shoulder ached where she’d slept on it wrong in the car. The pencil point rested on the page and made a small grey dot, just from the weight of her hand, and she watched that dot and thought of nothing in the deliberate, effortful way of a person trying to think of nothing, which is its own kind of noise.

And then the noise thinned, the way a held tone thins when you stop trying to hear it.

She would not, afterward, be able to say what she’d been thinking when her hand moved. That was the part she’d come back to. She knew exactly when she’d decided to sit, exactly when she’d decided to breathe, the whole chain of choices stacked in order like signatures on a chain of custody. And then there was a gap, and in the gap the pencil had crossed perhaps four inches of paper, and she had a line.

A vertical. Long, slightly off true, weighted at the bottom where the pencil had pressed.

She looked at it the way she’d look at a digit out of place in a column. *That’s not mine*, was the first thought, and then she corrected it, because of course it was hers, it had come off her own pencil, the lead from her own hand. Nobody else was in the gap.

“Don’t analyze it,” Mac said quietly. “It’s not finished telling you.”

The hand went again. A second vertical, parallel, an arm’s length of imagined wall to its left. Then a horizontal joining them at the top, and the thing was a frame, a tall narrow frame, top-heavy, and her records-mind supplied *doorway* before she had decided it was a doorway, and she hated that it had, because she knew what was on his wall in the front room.

“You showed me the door sketches,” she said. “An hour ago. I’m drawing your sketch back at you. This proves nothing.”

“Could be.” He didn’t move. “Keep going.”

She’d caught the cheat—the obvious one, the one any methodologist would flag first: contamination. She’d seen eleven versions of this shape pinned to corkboard not sixty minutes ago. Her hand was a parrot. She could write the whole thing up: *subject primed by prior exposure to target-class imagery, reproduces salient features, no novel content*. It was the cleanest possible debunk and it was sitting right there and all she had to do was put the pencil down and claim it.

She didn’t put the pencil down.

She breathed. The doorway sat on the page, top-heavy and slightly out of true, and her hand began to fill the inside of it.

Not with darkness. With marks. Short ones, clustered, in groups that weren’t groups—she’d flag that too, the way the brain manufactures pattern out of nothing the moment you give it permission, pareidolia, the man in the moon, the face in the wood grain. The marks crowded the lower third of the aperture and thinned toward the top, and her hand laid them down at a rate that had nothing to do with her, faster than she’d have chosen, the pencil ticking against the paper like the failing ballast in the next room.

Her upper lip was damp. She noticed it without lifting her free hand to it. The back room was not warm.

“Slow,” Mac said. “You’re racing it. Let it come at its own speed or it comes wrong.”

“It’s already wrong. It’s your wall.”

“Then it costs you nothing to finish.”

The marks ran out. The hand lifted, hovered, came down again at the edge of the frame—the left jamb, three-quarters of the way up. And there it did something it had not done before.

It pressed in, and made a small closed shape. Not a mark like the others. A figure. Two short strokes meeting at an angle, and then a

curve closing back to join them, so that the thing read as a hinge, or a clasp, or a bracket holding two surfaces that wanted to come apart—a join, drawn in profile, the way you'd draw the mechanism of a thing rather than its face. It was perhaps a centimeter across. It sat in the margin of the aperture like a maker's stamp, like the cold-rolled mill mark on a steel beam, the one you only find if you know to look under the paint.

Then the hand stopped.

Not because the page was full. Because there was nothing more coming. She sat with the pencil lifted and waited, the way you wait at the end of a recording to be sure it's really over, and nothing came, and the back room ticked, and her lip was wet and her sacrum was warm with a heat she had no account for, and she set the pencil down on the table with a small click that was the loudest thing in the room.

"That's it," she said. "That's all of it."

Mac didn't answer.

She turned the pad a few degrees to square it to her own eyeline and looked at what she'd done, ready to file it: a doorway, copied. Marks, invented. A flaw, identified. The bottom was contamination, and she was, after all, a records officer with a coincidence problem.

She looked at the hinge.

She had not drawn it from his wall. The wall had aperture, and aperture, and the marks she could indeed accuse herself of copying. But the door sketches on the corkboard had no hinge. She held the memory of them up against the page—eleven open frames, eleven sets of unreadable marks, none of them with a join drawn in the jamb, none of them with a thing in the margin that read like the mechanism of how the door was held to the stone. She was sure of it. She was sure the way she was sure of a column that didn't foot.

She tried to remember her hand making it. She had the line, the second line, the frame, the marks—she could reconstruct that sequence,

badly, the way you reconstruct a drive home you don't remember taking. And then the gap. The hand at the jamb. The small closed figure.

She could not put herself behind it. There was no moment she could point to and say *there, I chose that, I pressed in and closed the curve*. The marks she could own as reflex. The hinge she could not own at all. It sat on the page like a digit she hadn't entered in a column she'd ruled herself.

"Mac," she said. "The door sketches. Out front. Did any of them have—"

She stopped, because Mac had gone very still.

He was not looking at the doorway. He was looking at the margin. At the centimeter of closed line in the jamb, and his face had done the thing a face does when a man who has spent nineteen years grading the impossible against the real comes up against something he hadn't filed. The tremor had stopped. Both his hands lay flat on the folding table, on either side of the pad, and he was holding them there the way you hold a card you've turned without meaning to turn it.

"Mac."

"Don't." Very low. "Give me a second with it."

So she gave him the second. The fluorescent ticked in the next room. The delivery truck was long gone. She could hear his breath, even and deliberate, six in, hold, six out, the rhythm he'd taught her ten minutes ago and was now using on himself, and she understood without being told that he was cooling down, that whatever was on the page had brought him to a sprint sitting still.

"The hinge," she said, because she couldn't not. "Not on your wall. I'd have seen it. Eleven sketches and not one—"

"No." His voice had no triumph in it. That was the thing that reached her, later, when she went back over it—not that he was pale, not that his hands had gone flat and still, but that there was no triumph anywhere in him, none of the *I told you so* she'd braced for the entire drive. He

looked, if anything, sorry. “It’s not on the wall.”

“Then I copied it from somewhere.”

“Maybe.”

“There’s no maybe. I saw it somewhere. A door. A real door. I’ve seen ten thousand doors.” She heard her own voice picking up speed and made it stop, dialed it back to the flat audit register that was the only ground she had left to stand on. “It’s a hinge. Most common object on earth. I drew a hinge on a door. That’s not—that proves nothing.”

“I know what it is,” Mac said.

“Then tell me it’s nothing.”

He looked at her then, away from the page, and she wished he hadn’t.

“It’s not on the wall,” he said again, slowly, like a man reading a number off a meter he distrusts. “Not on any sketch in this building. You want me to say it’s nothing, I can’t. I’ve seen that join. You haven’t. There’s one place I’ve seen it, and it’s not somewhere you’ve been.”

“Where.”

He didn’t answer that. His eyes went back to the margin, to the small closed figure in the jamb, and he reached out—she watched the tremor come back into the hand as it left the table—and he did not touch the page. He held two fingers an inch above the hinge, the way you hold your hand over a stove to test it without committing, and then he drew the fingers back and folded them into his fist on the table.

“Don’t grade it yet,” he said. “Whatever you’re about to do—write it up, call it contamination, walk out and never sit again—don’t grade it yet. No feedback. You said it yourself. You grade after.” A breath. “We go see the cache. Then I show you a thing I should’ve shown you first, and you’re going to tell me you copied the hinge from it, and you’re going to be wrong, and I need you in the room when you find out.”

She looked at the page. The doorway, top-heavy, slightly out of true. The marks that thinned toward the top. The hinge in the margin that she could not, no matter how she ran the tape back, put her own hand behind.

She wanted to say it was nothing. She had the whole report drafted in her head, clean, footnoted, contamination on the cover sheet. She was a records officer with a coincidence problem and the report wrote itself.

She didn't pick up the pencil. She didn't pick up the pad. She left it lying square to the lamp, the small closed figure facing up, and she heard herself, in the flat voice that was all she had left, say a thing that was not in the report.

"What did I draw, Mac."

He stood, both hands on the rail, and let the chair take none of him this time.

"Get your coat," he said. "We're losing the window."

Reinstatement

The coffee shop was the kind that put its menu in chalk to look unplanned. Mara took a corner table with her back to brick and the door in her sightline, because old habits filed themselves under *useful* whether or not she invited them. She'd left Mac arguing with a space heater. She'd driven nine minutes and parked two blocks away and walked, because the badge in her bag felt like contraband now and she didn't want it photographed near the salon's address.

She was three sips into a coffee she hadn't tasted when the man sat down across from her.

He did it the way decent people sat down at a table that wasn't theirs: a small open-palmed gesture asking permission after he'd already taken the chair. Mid-fifties. A coat too good for the strip-mall ZIP code. He set a paper cup of his own on the table, untouched, the lid still sealed, and Mara registered that — a prop, not a drink — before she registered his face, which was pleasant and forgettable and arranged into mild apology.

"Dr. Kincaid," he said. "Sorry to do this somewhere with a soundtrack."

She didn't answer. She put both hands around her cup.

"I know how it looks. Strange man, your name, no introduction." He turned the sealed cup a quarter-turn on the table, squaring it to an edge only he could see. "Pretending we'd met by accident would be worse. You'd see through it, and then we'd both have to perform that

you hadn't." A beat. "My name wouldn't help you. I handle transitions. People leaving. People coming back."

"I'm not coming back," Mara said.

"No," he agreed, as if she'd answered a survey accurately. "Not today."

The coffee machine behind the counter shrieked steam. A college kid laughed at his laptop. Mara held very still in the way she'd learned in rooms with worse light than this, and watched the man's hands, because hands lied last.

"I'd like to make you an offer. Precisely — because the imprecise version is what people remember, and the imprecise version makes me a villain." A small self-deprecation, performed cleanly. "Your access was revoked under a reliability determination. That can be revisited. Not reversed. Revisited. There's a difference and I won't insult you by hiding it. A revisited determination, favorable annotation, reopens your contractor eligibility." He paused. "The blacklist isn't a list, Dr. Kincaid. It's a sentiment. Sentiments change when the right person writes a memo."

"You write the memo."

"I write the memo." He said it without weight, the way a man tells you he holds the door budget.

She set her cup down. The ceramic against the table was the loudest sound she'd made since he sat. "In exchange."

"In exchange," he said, "the package you received does not exist. The cassette. The session number. The eleven-digit string. You misremember an empty envelope." He spread the apology a little wider across his face. "I'm not asking for evidence. I'm asking for absence. You go back to compliance work. Real money. Your name comes off the sentiment. And the people you've started spending time with go back to what the record already says they are. Old men with a tax problem and a storage unit full of pencils."

Mara had spent a career inside chains of custody, and she knew the shape of the move he was making the way you knew a load-bearing wall by where the cracks weren't. He hadn't asked her what was on the tape. He'd recited it. He'd told her the digit count.

"You know what's on it," she said.

"I know it has your employee identification number on it," he said, "spoken by a man who died in February of 1998. I know that's the detail that's kept you up. It'd keep me up." He let that sit, generous. "I can't explain it. That's the truth, and I'm allowed about three of those a quarter, so spend it well. I don't know how the dead recite the living. But I know what it's *for*. It's for getting you in a chair next to Ray McAllister. And I'd rather you weren't in that chair."

"Because the chair's dangerous."

"Because the chair is over." The first flat thing he'd said. He brought the warmth back almost immediately, smoothed it like a sheet. "The work it did, it did. The men who could do it are dying on schedule. You're being recruited into a reenactment, Dr. Kincaid. And reenactments don't carry liability insurance."

Mara turned her cup in a slow circle, mirroring his quarter-turns without deciding to, and stopped when she caught herself. Outside the window a delivery truck idled, a man in shorts wrestling a hand truck stacked with boxes of almond milk. Ordinary commerce, two feet of glass away. She made herself look at it for a count of three.

"You read my report," she said.

It wasn't on the menu. She watched it land. He didn't flinch — men like him didn't flinch, flinching was for people without a budget — but he did pause, and the pause was a kind of respect, the way a chess player pauses at a move he hadn't planned to need.

"I read your report," he said.

"All of it. The flights. The cargo weights. The biometric slots with no names. The downlink lease over a sector with no station." She kept

her voice level, the way you read a manifest aloud to a room that's going to pretend it can't hear you. "The part where I asked, in writing, what we were flying that was a third too heavy to be fuel."

"That part especially," he said, and now there was something underneath the pleasantness, something that wasn't quite admiration and wasn't quite regret. "You want me to say you misread the system. I won't. You'd know I was lying, and then this conversation has no floor." He turned the sealed cup again. "You weren't wrong, Dr. Kincaid. You were early."

The kid with the laptop laughed again. The espresso machine hissed. Mara felt the words go in clean, the way the worst ones did, the ones you'd half-said to yourself in the dark and had been waiting for permission to believe.

"Early," she repeated.

"The finding wasn't disputed. The timing was." He turned the sealed cup again, evened it to its edge. "There's an order things are meant to arrive in. Yours arrived ahead of the process that would have intake'd it. So it got handled the way out-of-sequence material gets handled. The determination doesn't allege fabrication — pull it sometime, when you can stomach it, the language is careful. It says reliability. It says judgment. It moves you to a category where what you found becomes a symptom of you instead of a property of the world." He said it gently, evenly, an administrator reading you your own file across a desk, and it was the gentleness that made her want to break the cup. "I'm offering to recategorize you. Back into the world where the things you found are real and you're a sensible person who happened to be standing too close to them too soon."

"And the door stays in the snow," Mara said, "with a satellite over it."

She watched that one land too. He hadn't expected her to say *door*. He recovered inside a half-second, but she'd been reading rooms for people who recovered inside a half-second since before he'd had this

account, and she saw the cost of it.

“I’m not going to discuss program geography in a coffee shop,” he said, pleasant, final.

“No,” she agreed. “You came here to discuss me.”

He sat with that. Outside, the delivery man hauled his hand truck up over the threshold, and the boxes leaned and held. The man looked, for a moment, like he was going to lose it all on the sidewalk, and then he didn’t.

“Here’s what I’d like you to hear,” the Handler said, “and then I’ll leave you to your coffee, which is getting cold, which I notice you haven’t enjoyed, which I take as a sign of taste.” A small smile, offered for free. “I’d rather not be the bad part of your week. Truly. It complicates the file.” He glanced once, briefly, at the door, the way a man checks that his exit is where he left it. “There’s a corridor behind me, and I’m not the end of it. The people further down don’t sit across a table and decline a coffee out of courtesy. They issue a determination. They issue a sentiment. They make you unhireable, and then they wait, because waiting costs them nothing on a line item. They have the one resource you don’t. Time.”

He let *time* hang there.

“You have a badge,” he said, plainly. “Not on the active rolls. A cache. A cuff of access that didn’t get scrubbed when the rest of you did. Thirty-some days left in it, I’d guess, before the cert chain expires and it turns into a piece of plastic with your old face on it.” He turned his sealed cup one final quarter-turn and left it square. “I know that because knowing that is my job. I tell you not to frighten you — I keep saying that, you keep not believing me, which is reasonable — but to be honest about the geometry. You’ve got a small, closing window of walking into rooms you’re no longer cleared for. I’d like you to spend it walking back toward the world. Not toward the snow.”

Mara looked at him. She looked at the good coat and the sealed cup and the face arranged for an HR meeting about someone else’s grief,

and she thought about the determination that never used the word *lie*, and the heat she'd felt at the base of her spine three hours ago while her own hand drew a hinge she'd never seen.

"No," she said.

She'd meant to say more. She'd built more — a clause about chains of custody, a line about how the one court she trusted was the one that didn't take sides — and she let all of it go, because the single syllable was cleaner and he was a man who respected clean.

The Handler nodded, slowly, the way you nod at a structural finding you'd hoped against but expected. There was no anger in it. That was the part that climbed up the back of her neck and sat there — there was no anger, no flicker of the man behind the man. There was something worse, which was *accommodation*. He absorbed her *no* into a flowchart and moved to the next box.

"All right," he said. He stood, unhurried, buttoned the good coat. "I'll note the offer was made and declined. That's a real thing on a real page somewhere, Dr. Kincaid. It matters to the people downstream of me that you were *asked nicely*. It changes what they're allowed to do next." He picked up the sealed cup he had never opened and held it the way a man holds a thing he intends to throw away on the way out. "Drink something hot. The cold ones make us sad."

He left without looking back, which was its own kind of message: he didn't need to check that she was still there. He knew she would be. He had her badge days inventoried to the week.

Mara stayed in the corner with her back to the brick for four full minutes after the bell over the door stopped ringing. She watched the sidewalk. The delivery truck pulled away. The college kid packed his laptop and left, and a woman with a stroller took his table, and the chalk menu said the same unplanned things it had said before. Nothing in the street was wrong.

She got up. She left the cold coffee. She did not go back the two blocks the way she'd come; she went the other way, around the long

side of the strip, past the dry cleaner and the vape shop, because *they have the one resource you don't, which is time* was the kind of sentence you tested with your feet.

The parking structure was three levels of poured concrete that smelled of cold oil and old rain. Her car was on two. She came up the stair instead of the elevator and stopped on the landing, hand on the rail, and made herself breathe the way Mac had shown her in the chair, four counts in, hold, because her heart was doing something her training disapproved of.

There was a sedan parked across from her car that hadn't been there this morning. She knew it hadn't been there this morning because she'd parked nose-out, the way you parked when part of you was still a person who might need to leave a structure quickly, and she'd noted the empty bay because empty bays were what you noted. The sedan was clean. Dealer plates. A man in the driver's seat, not pretending to read a phone, not pretending anything, just sitting, which was the tell — the amateur pretends, the professional sits.

He did not look at her. That was the second tell. Everyone looks at a woman alone in a garage; it's reflex, it's mammal. He kept his eyes forward, and his not-looking was as loud as a hand on her shoulder.

Mara walked to her car at the pace of a woman who has not noticed anything, got in, locked the doors, started the engine. Her hands were steady on the wheel, which surprised her, and then didn't, because the body wanted a task at the moment the mind wanted to bolt, and the task was *back out without scraping the pillar*. She backed out without scraping the pillar.

In the mirror, the sedan didn't move. It didn't need to. The Handler had told her the geometry and the geometry was a man who could afford to let her go because he already owned the clock. Thirty-some days. *Asked nicely*. It changes what they're allowed to do next.

She came down the ramp into daylight and pointed the car toward a defunct tanning salon and an old man with a tremor in his hand, and

she found she was driving five over instead of five under, which was new, which was a small fact about her body she didn't have a folder for yet.

She didn't check the mirror again. She didn't need to know whether he followed. She knew the answer the way she'd known the weight didn't match the fuel.

The books don't close. Now there was a man whose whole job was to keep them open just enough for her to climb back inside, and she had refused, and the refusing had cost her the last thing she'd brought into the coffee shop without knowing it: the idea that she could still walk away clean.

Ghost Access

The reader pinged green on the third try.

Mara waited under the loading-dock light at the rear of Building 7 and watched the little LED cycle from amber to amber to green, and did not let herself read anything into the two amber failures except a contact that needed cleaning. The badge in her hand was warm from her pocket. It had a name on it that was no longer hers and a chip on it that, per the contractor ecosystem, did not exist, and per the door it had just opened, very much did.

She went in.

The DLA records annex kept a skeleton presence after eighteen hundred — two custodial staff, one duty officer who watched four buildings from a desk in Building 3, and the HVAC, which ran loud enough at night that the building seemed to breathe. Mara walked the corridor she had walked four hundred times when it was hers to walk, past the placards and the laminated emergency map and the water fountain that had been broken since before her clearance was. The fluorescents were on a half-cycle. Every third panel was lit. She moved through bands of light and dark and counted the cameras out of habit, and the habit told her two of the four in this hall were the old dome type, fixed, blind to anyone who hugged the inner wall.

She hugged the inner wall.

The terminal room was where she remembered it. The keypad still took the four-digit she had never reported as compromised because

reporting it would have meant explaining how she knew it, and the door released with the soft pneumatic gasp that had once meant *back to work* and now meant something closer to *thirty days*. The Handler had said thirty days. Mara had decided, on the walk back from the coffee shop with the sedan two cars behind her doing nothing she could prove, that thirty was a number designed to make her hurry, and that hurrying was the whole point of telling her, and that she would therefore move fast for reasons of her own and not because a man in a quarter-zip had given her a clock.

She moved fast.

The workstation booted to a login she had no business reaching. She reached it. The cache badge wasn't a key to the building so much as a key to a version of herself the system still believed in — a ghost employee with a ghost's permissions, walking through rooms the living were locked out of. She typed the query language she could type in her sleep, the field names, the table joins, the transit schema she had helped normalize in a different life, and the search returned in the time it took her heart to go through four beats.

Antarctic support manifests. Sector ZULU. Date range she set herself: the eighteen months around her termination, then a year past it.

The records loaded.

She read the way she always read, top down, structure first, the shape of the thing before its content — flight numbers, tail numbers, origin, the LC-130 designation, fuel uplift in pounds, cargo weight in pounds, passenger count, manifest hash. And the shape was wrong in the same way it had been wrong four years ago, which was the wrong that had cost her everything: cargo weights running a third heavy against fuel for the leg, passenger counts logged with biometric hashes but no names, and a destination field that resolved, when she expanded it, to a sector with no published station, no ICAO code, nothing but a grid reference and a downlink lease.

She had reported exactly this. She had been told she misread the system.

She had not misread the system.

The body did a thing then, a small cold settling at the base of her spine, and she ignored it and copied the result set to the staging area she'd already prepared, because the body wanted to sit with being right and the job did not care.

There were more flights now. That was the first new thing. Four years ago she'd had eleven. The eleven were still here, unchanged, their hashes matching the ones burned into her memory — she checked two against the string she carried and they matched to the character, which meant nobody had bothered to scrub them, which meant nobody thought she'd ever be sitting at this terminal again. But after her eleven the pattern continued. Twelve. Fourteen. The cadence tightening as the dates approached present, the way a metronome tightens when someone leans on it.

She pulled the cadence into a column and looked at the gaps between flights and the gaps were not random. They clustered. Three or four flights in a tight window, then a long pause, then another cluster. She'd seen scheduling like that before — it was the signature of a constraint, of flying against something external that opened and closed. Weather windows did that. Ice runway conditions did that.

She put the cluster dates beside a thing she had not expected to be putting them beside, which was the only other dataset she'd thought to bring on the thumb drive in her boot: a space-weather archive, geo-magnetic indices, the Kp record, freely downloadable, the kind of thing a person grabbed at two in the morning when a strip-mall colonel said the words *solar quiet* and refused to elaborate and then sent her off to clear her head.

The flight clusters sat in the troughs. Every one of them. The flights went up when the sun went still — when the Kp index dropped to its floor and the magnetosphere sat quiet and the indices flatlined for a

span of days — and they stopped when the sun got loud again.

Mara sat back from the terminal.

The HVAC breathed. A panel two doors down hummed at a frequency that set her molars wrong. She made herself walk the read again, slower, looking for the boring explanation, because the boring explanation was always there and finding it was the discipline that had once made her good and then made her radioactive. Geomagnetic quiet helped navigation. It helped HF comms. It helped a lot of ordinary cold-weather aviation things, and a careful person would log this as *operational correlation, mundane causes available* and move on.

A careful person would not have a tape with her badge number on it spoken by a dead man.

She logged the correlation. She did not log it as mundane. She copied the space-weather file and the manifest set into the same folder and named the folder a string of digits so it would sort to the bottom and look like an export artifact, and she began the part she'd come for, which was extraction.

This was where the cache got thin.

The badge let her read. The badge did not let her write to external media, because the ghost employee had been a records officer and records officers were never, ever permitted to walk a manifest out of the building, and whoever had built her ghost had not bothered to gift her with a permission she'd never had in life. She tried the obvious export and the system refused it with a permissions box she could have predicted, and she filed the refusal under *of course* and went around it the way she'd gone around things for fifteen years: not through the front.

She printed.

It was insulting and it was slow and it worked. The annex still ran a hardcopy queue for the duty officer's QA pulls, a relic nobody had killed because killing things in this building required a form, and the

print job went to a networked machine down the hall that she could reach on foot. She set the manifests to print four-up, monochrome, no header, and she set the space-weather column beside them, and she stood up to go collect pages off a machine like a temp, in a building she'd been thrown out of, holding a badge that belonged to a person who didn't exist.

Halfway to the door she stopped and went back and ran one more query, because the thing the Handler had said — *not wrong, only early* — had lodged under her sternum and would not dissolve, and there was a cross-reference she had refused to run four years ago because running it would have meant admitting the forum people were real.

She ran it now.

The Serpo material was internet sewage. She knew that. She'd known it when the leaks first crawled across the boards in 2005, serialized like scripture, a dead language of "authentic documents" about twelve Americans and a trade and a place. She had built a small contempt for the people who treated it as gospel, the way you build a callus, and the callus had served her. But the contempt had a hole in it, and the hole was a set of numbers — a payload figure, a duration, a sequence of designators — that one of the more disciplined posters had transcribed years ago and that had stuck in Mara's head the way bad numbers do, because they had the texture of real numbers, the asymmetry, the unrounded ugliness of figures that came off an actual logistics document instead of a fevered imagination.

She held the Serpo payload figure in her head and looked at the cargo-weight column on her screen.

They did not match.

She let out the breath she hadn't logged taking.

Then she stopped letting it out, because they didn't match but they *rhymed*. The Serpo figure and the heavy-cargo delta off her manifests shared a ratio. Not a value — a shape. The forum number was a payload; her number was an overage against fuel; and when she did the

arithmetic in the margin of her own attention, the proportion of one to its baseline came out within a hair of the proportion of the other to its.

It could be coincidence. Two made-up numbers and one real one, and the real one happened to sit near a ratio someone could have reverse-engineered from public manifest leaks years ago to make the fiction sound true. That was the boring explanation and it was a good one. The forum legend could have been *built backward* from data like hers, from the same anomalies she'd filed, dressed in Ebens and a planet to make the watchers chase ghosts while the real cargo flew in the geomagnetic dark.

Or the fiction and the manifest were drinking from the same well, and the well was under the ice.

She did not know which. She wrote the ratio in pencil on the back of her own hand, below the cuff, and let the not-knowing stand where it was, open, and she went to get her pages.

The printer was warm and most of the way through her stack when the corridor lights changed.

Not all of them. One band, far end, the half-cycle panels going to full — somebody had hit the master at the stairwell, the way you do when you walk into a dark hall and want to see. She heard the door before she heard the feet. The stairwell door had a closer that sighed. It sighed.

Mara took her hand off the printer.

The pages were still feeding. The machine ran at the speed of a machine that had been bought to last, not to hurry, and there were eleven sheets in the tray and four still in its throat, and a person was walking up the hall toward the only light that mattered.

The body wanted to bolt. She let it want.

Footfalls. Unhurried. The shuffle-stop of someone with a flashlight checking door handles — custodial, then, or duty doing rounds, the soft rattle of a hand testing a lever and finding it locked and moving

on. Two doors down. The printer fed sheet twelve. The hum of the bad panel above her covered the printer's whine, or she told herself it did, and she reached into the tray and lifted the warm stack out in one motion and folded it once against her stomach and pressed it flat under her jacket with her forearm.

Sheet thirteen committed to the rollers. She could not stop it without an error tone. She let it go.

The handle of the room across the hall rattled. Held. The flashlight beam slid under the door — she watched the bright line track across the floor tile, pass the leg of the printer table, slide off. The footsteps came even. A shape moved past the frosted glass of the door, broad, unhurried, a duty officer's saunter, and Mara stood very still in the dark beside a printer that was, at that exact moment, drawing sheet fourteen with a sound like a small animal complaining.

The shape stopped.

She watched it through the glass. Backlit, faceless, a head turning toward the sound. She did not breathe. The bad panel hummed. The printer whined, finished, fell silent on the last page, and the silence after it was the loudest thing in the building.

The shape stood at the glass for the length of three of her heartbeats.

Then the radio on its hip squawked — tinny, a word she couldn't parse, a question from the desk in Building 3 — and the shape lifted the radio and answered something short and turned and walked back the way it had come, toward the stairwell, toward the band of light, and the door with the closer sighed shut behind it and the hall went back to half.

Mara took the last two sheets out of the tray.

She did not move for a count of sixty. Then she went back to the terminal and did the part she had nearly forgotten because the body had spent its budget at the printer — she cleared the print queue, she

wiped the staging folder she'd named in digits, she ran the export artifact to the thumb drive she could write to, the small allowed channel, the one that took anything she could fit under the size cap and refused the rest. She fit the manifest set. She fit the space-weather file. She did not fit the larger pull she'd wanted, the full eighteen months of passenger hashes, and she made the cut without grieving it because grieving it cost time and she was, it turned out, in the running-out-of-time business now too.

She logged the ghost out. She watched the session close. She watched the system forget her.

In the corridor the manifests sat warm and folded against her stomach, paper, the oldest medium, the one court she had ever fully trusted, and it had been right four years ago and she had reported it and it had become a weapon someone else held while she became a liability. The paper in her jacket was right again. She believed that. She also knew, now, in a way she had not let herself know on the morning she filed the original report, that being right was a thing the record did to her as much as for her — that the ledger told the truth and the truth was that the flights flew in the dark of the sun, and that the same record, in a different room, would be read to mean she had broken into a federal facility on a dead man's credentials.

Both readings were in the paper. The paper did not pick.

She came out the loading-dock door into the cold and the LED on the badge went amber, amber, dark, and somewhere out past the fence line a sedan she could not see and could not prove sat doing nothing she could put in a report.

On the drive back to the strip mall she ran the geomagnetic record forward instead of back, past today, into the forecast the archive carried at the end of its file — the projected indices, the long quiet predicted weeks out. The troughs were on the calendar. The sun had a schedule and the flights had a schedule and they were the same schedule, and the next deep quiet, the next window wide enough to fly a clustered run into a sector with no name, opened in a span of days

she could count on one hand and most of another.

She had been given thirty days of badge. She had, it appeared, considerably fewer than that of sky.

She put the heel of her hand against the wheel and drove toward the only lit window in a dark row of shops, the manifests warm against her ribs, and did not turn on the radio.

The Typhoon

The hardcopy went on the desk between them like a confession, and Mac didn't look at it.

He looked at her hands instead — the way they squared the stack, the way they wouldn't quite let go of the edges. She knew he was reading her the way she read manifests, weight against declared cargo, and she put the pages flat and took her hands off them.

“More flights,” she said. “Since my eleven. Tightening toward now.”

“I figured.” He had the lamp on, the bad one with the gooseneck that wouldn't hold a position, and the light fell across half his face and left the other half in the office dark. Outside, the strip mall had gone to neon and the laundromat next door thumped a dryer drum through the shared wall. “And they cluster.”

“Geomagnetic quiet. Kp troughs. They only fly when the field's flat.” She heard her own voice doing the thing it did when she was right and frightened — flattening to a brief, like she could armor a fact by reading it aloud. “So it's not your thirty days. Days. Not many.”

Mac nodded slowly. He had a cup of something at his elbow that had gone cold an hour ago. He didn't reach for it. “You did all that today.”

“Ghost badge and a grudge.”

He exhaled through the nose. Then he leaned back, and the chair complained, and he looked at the dark half of the room for long enough

that she thought he'd lost the thread.

"You want to know," he said, "whether any of it works."

"I want to know whether your tape recited my badge number because somebody fed it in, or because the man who said it—" She stopped. "Skip it. I don't like either half."

"No." He turned the lamp away, so it threw light on the wall of paper instead of on her, and the sketches hung there in the new angle, the door, the hinge-thing, the marks nobody could read. "Let me tell you about a submarine."

He didn't perform it. That was the first thing she noticed — that he didn't lean in, didn't drop his voice to the register men used when they wanted you to know a thing was a secret. He told it the way you'd read a flight log, in order, with the times attached, and the order was the awe.

September 1979. Fort Meade. A viewer in a room with a number on the door and a monitor across the table and a target sealed in an envelope he was not allowed to open, would not have opened, because the whole point — the entire architecture of the thing — was that the man drawing did not know what he was drawing.

"Coordinates," Mac said. "That's all he had. Numbers in an envelope, and a building somewhere those numbers pointed at, near the White Sea, and a tasking that said: tell us what's inside."

The viewer did his cool-down. Breathing, the lights down, the long subtraction of the room from his attention until there was just the pen and the page. And then he started to draw, and what came up under his hand was a building near water, and inside the building a thing under construction so large the page couldn't hold it. He drew it in sections. A hull, and then a second hull beside the first — not one boat but two welded into one body, fat as a whale, wrong. He drew tubes canted at an angle along the spine. He counted them. Eighteen,

twenty, somewhere in there. He drew them and he sat back and he told the monitor: this is a submarine, and it is bigger than any submarine.

“And they laughed,” Mac said.

The lamp hummed. The dryer thumped through the wall.

“Not in the room. In the room you don’t laugh, that’s discipline. Later. Up the chain. They took the sketch to people whose whole job was knowing the Soviet order of battle, every keel, every yard, and those people looked at a double-hulled boat the size of two boats and they said: there is no such submarine. There cannot be. We would know. We have the entire fleet on a card and this is not on the card.” He paused. “Which is exactly what they should have said. That’s not stupidity. That’s the system working. The record and the world were supposed to agree, and the record said no boat, so the man with the pen was wrong.”

Mara had gone very still. She knew that argument. She had been on the losing end of that argument in a conference room with the carpet smell still in her clothes. *We would know. It’s not on the card.*

“He drew one more thing,” Mac said. “He said the building was walled off from the water. Land between the boat and the sea. And he said: they’ll cut a channel. Blast it. Open it to the water. Four months, give or take, and that thing moves.”

He stopped there. He let it sit. He didn’t say *and you know what happened* — he just waited, in the dark half of his office, with the cold cup at his elbow, and let her arrive at January.

“January 1980,” she said. It came out of her quietly. “Satellite.”

“January 1980. The imagery came in.” Mac’s voice didn’t rise. If anything it dropped, got plainer, the way a man talks about a thing he has carried so long it’s gone smooth in his hands. “There was a new channel cut to the water where there’d been land. And moving down it, out of the building, the largest submarine anybody had ever built. Two hulls. Tubes along the spine. They named the class for it after.

Typhoon.”

The dryer stopped. The sudden quiet was its own kind of loud.

“Same boat the engineers said couldn’t exist,” he said. “Drawn four months early by a man who had a number in an envelope and nothing else. The sketch is in the file. The date’s on the sketch. You can pull it. It’s not mine to swear to — it’s a record, and records keep whether you believe them or not.” He tipped his head at her, the smallest motion. “You of all people.”

She didn’t answer right away. She was aware of her own pulse, of the cold that had started at the base of her spine in the records annex and had never quite left, climbing now a single vertebra. She wanted to find the seam. That was the trained reflex, the only one she trusted: a thing this clean had a seam, a leak, a prior, a man who’d seen the yard photos and forgotten he’d seen them and remembered it later as vision.

“There are arguments against it,” she said. “Prior intelligence. The monitor leading him. Memory editing itself clean after the satellites came in.”

“There are,” Mac said, and the fact that he agreed so readily was worse than if he’d fought her. “Pull those too. They’re fair. Some of them I made myself, the first ten years. The sketch is still on the date, and the date is still before the channel.” He shrugged, and it cost his shoulder something; she saw him absorb it. “I’m not selling certainty. Quit that when I quit persuasion. I’m telling you where to look. McMoneagle. Typhoon. White Sea. September seventy-nine. Go grade it the way you graded your manifests. After. Against a thing you couldn’t have known when you started.”

He’d handed her a folder she could open with her own hands. That was the trap of it, she understood — he hadn’t asked her to believe him. He’d asked her to go check, knowing she couldn’t not.

He let her sit with it. He was good at that; nineteen years monitoring noise had taught him when not to fill a silence. He pushed the cold cup away with one finger and pulled himself up straighter and changed the temperature of the room on purpose.

“You want the other half,” he said. “While I’ve got you believing in me. The half that’s a circus.”

“I want whatever keeps me out of your chair.”

“Then you’ll love this.” The corner of his mouth moved, dry, old. “Same Army that funded the man who drew the Typhoon funded a colonel who wanted a battalion of monks.”

She waited.

“First Earth Battalion,” Mac said, and the name came out fond and appalled at once. “Real unit. Real manual. You can find that too — funnier than anything you’d invent, which is how you’ll know it’s real. New kind of soldier. Walk into a conflict carrying lambs. Wear flowers. Sparkle, the manual said — I’m not paraphrasing. *Sparkle*. Split the mind from the body. Burst the clouds with your attention. Pass through walls.”

“Did anybody pass through a wall.”

“A man ran at one. Full speed. With intent.” Mac let the beat land. “He hit the wall.”

She laughed — a real one, short, and her chest eased on it. He watched her laugh with the patience of a man who’d set the trap and knew the floor in it.

“They had a stare program,” he went on, easy now, conversational, the storyteller warmed up. “Stop a heart with attention. Drop a thing where it stood without touching it. And understand, this wasn’t two men in a basement. This was a line item. There were memos. There were goats.”

“Goats.”

“A pen of them, out in the dry country. Picked for being healthy, so the test would mean something.” He said *deboned* and then corrected himself, automatic. “Debleated. Their vocal cords. So nobody outside would hear an animal in distress and ask the wrong questions. A pen of goats that couldn’t make a sound, kept alive so men could practice killing them by looking.”

The laugh was still in her throat and it stayed there, and that was the wrongness of it — that it didn’t have anywhere to go and didn’t leave. The picture assembled itself the way pictures did for her, complete and against her will: the desert pen, the silent animals, the man crouched at the wire with his attention bent like a tool, day after day, on a goat that could not even bleat its objection.

“One of them,” Mac said, and his voice had come down again, all the circus drained out of it, “claims he did it. Stared one down and the animal dropped and didn’t get up. And he believed it. Carried it. Whatever it was — coincidence, a sick animal, a man so far inside the job he couldn’t tell his intent from the weather — he carried that he’d killed a thing with the inside of his head. No record to tell him he was wrong. None to tell him he was right. A man can break on that gap. I watched some break on smaller.”

The dryer next door started again, a single sneaker tumbling, *thunk, thunk*, regular as a slow heart.

“That’s the part nobody puts in the funny version,” he said. “Great story until you stand in the pen. Then it’s a man and a silent animal and a government that wrote it on a budget line and called it readiness.”

She wasn’t laughing anymore. She didn’t decide to stop; it had just gone, the way warmth goes out of a cup when you stop holding it.

“Same building,” Mac said. “Same money, near enough. The man who drew the boat that couldn’t exist, and the men in the pen with the goats. They didn’t sort them into the real program and the stupid program. They didn’t know which was which. Nobody did. That was the genius of it, if you want to call it that — you fund the circus and

the cathedral out of the same line, and then whatever comes true, you owned it, and whatever doesn't, that was the circus, of course it didn't, what did you expect." He looked at her steadily. "And the men paid for both. The one who was right got laughed at till the satellites came in. The ones who were wrong got to carry a dead goat in their heads for forty years. Right or wrong, the body pays. That's the only law I ever found that held."

Mara looked at the wall of paper. The door. The hinge. The marks. She put the Typhoon and the pen on either side of it in her mind, a true thing and a broken thing funded from one purse, and the sketch on the wall hung between them and she could not say which kind it was.

"Which one's that," she said. Quiet. She nodded at the wall.

Mac followed her look. For a long moment he didn't answer, and the lamp hummed.

"I don't know. That's the truth and it's the part that costs me sleep." He turned the lamp back toward her, gentle, so the door fell into shadow. "I know which one I'm afraid it is. That's not the same as knowing."

She thought of her own hands squaring the hardcopy. The flights tightening toward now. Days, plural, not many.

"You said grade it after," she said. "Against a thing you couldn't have known when you drew it."

"I did."

"So we don't get to know which it is." She heard her own brief come out flat again, the armor going on. "Until we cut the channel and see what moves."

Mac picked up the cold cup, looked into it, set it down without drinking.

"No," he said. "We don't."

Through the wall, the dryer turned and turned, and somewhere out in the dry country, in a story she would check by morning because she could not not check it, a pen of healthy animals stood in the dark and made no sound at all.

Consulta Medica

The lab was in the back of a building that called itself a sleep medicine clinic, which Mara took to mean nothing was what it called itself in this part of the country. Lena Okoye buzzed her through a fire door, down a corridor that smelled of carpet glue, into a room with two reclining chairs, a rack of EEG amplifiers, and a whiteboard nobody had erased correctly so that ghosts of equations hovered under fresh ones.

“You read his manifests,” Lena said, not turning from the rack. “You believe physics. So I’ll talk to you in physics.”

“I believe accounting,” Mara said. “Physics is just accounting with better units.”

That earned the corner of Lena’s mouth. She had a low, precise voice and the habit of finishing her own sentences before she started speaking them, so the words came out already proofread. She tapped the nearer chair. “Sit. Not for a session. For a baseline. I won’t put you anywhere you didn’t walk into.”

Mara sat. The chair was clinical, not the upholstered armchair Mac had pointed her toward and she had refused. Lena threaded electrodes into her hair with cold, unhurried fingers, reading the impedance off a laptop, frowning at a number, scrubbing the contact, reading again.

“You ran feedback for the program,” Mara said.

“Ninety-one to ninety-five. Then the report came out, the funding

evaporated, and I went and got a respectable career.” Another electrode. “Why insomniacs can’t downregulate at night. Turns out it’s the same machine. The thing that won’t let a man sleep is the thing that lets a viewer find a submarine. Arousal. Attention pointed at the wrong object, or the right one.”

“Mac told me about the submarine.”

“Mac tells everyone about the submarine. It’s a good story and it’s true, which is rare in this field.” She came around to the front, checked Mara’s pupils with a penlight, businesslike. “Here’s the part he skips. Too close to it. The reason it worked at all — ever worked — they wrote everything down. Before. Sealed the target. Stamped the session. Graded against the truth after the truth arrived. No fudging. No ‘well, in a sense.’ The sketch existed in January when the boat didn’t, the boat existed in April, and you lay the two pages on top of each other and the angled tubes line up or they don’t.”

“They lined up.”

“They lined up enough that it cost the people who’d laughed something.” Lena went back to the laptop. “Look at your alpha. You’re a wire. Been a wire all day, I’d guess.”

“I broke into a federal records annex this morning.”

“That’ll do it.”

She didn’t lecture. That was the thing Mara hadn’t expected. She’d come in braced for the wellness register, the soft voice and the candles, and instead got a woman who talked like a methods section.

“Observer effect,” Lena said, while a baseline trace crawled across the screen in six green lines. “You’ve heard it abused. Quantum this, you-create-your-reality that. Forget all of it. The honest version is small and it’s annoying. A measurement changes the thing measured. In a particle system that’s literal — you can’t pin position without smearing momentum. People take that and run it off a cliff into ‘I

manifested a parking space.’” She made a sound that wasn’t quite a laugh. “What the program found — what we couldn’t publish, because the effect was real and the mechanism was nothing — is that a trained nervous system, pointed at a sealed target under blind conditions, returns structure above chance. Not always. Not on demand. But above chance, across years, across viewers, logged the whole time.”

“Above chance how much?”

“Enough to keep a black budget alive seventeen years. Not enough to bet a war on. Which is the worst possible result, scientifically. Too good to dismiss, too soft to use.” Lena pulled a stool over and sat, finally at Mara’s eye level. “You know who else runs this exact court? Better than we did?”

“You’re going to tell me it’s the Vatican, and I’m going to leave.”

“It’s the Vatican.”

Mara closed her eyes. “I’m leaving.”

“My cousin’s on a tribunal in Lagos. Hematologist. Emeka. Told me once at a funeral, three glasses in, it’s the only honest work he does all year. I said that was a terrible thing to say at a funeral. He didn’t take it back.” Lena leaned forward, elbows on her knees, and now the words came faster, the proofreading slipping a little where she cared. “They don’t let him pray on the clock. They let him read records. Congregation for the Causes of Saints. A healing gets put forward for canonization, it goes to a medical board. The Consulta Medica. Sixty-odd independent doctors, most of them not Catholic, several of them hostile. Their whole function is to fail the miracle. Find the wrong diagnosis, the spontaneous remission already in the literature, the misread scan. They’re paid to disprove.”

“And let me guess. They never do.”

“They disprove almost all of them.” Lena let that sit. “That’s the part nobody repeats. The board throws out the overwhelming majority. What survives is a tiny handful that meet three conditions, and the

conditions are the whole reason I'm sitting here saying this out loud in a sleep clinic instead of in a respectable career." She held up three fingers, folded them down one at a time. "Rapid. Complete. Lasting. The healing has to be abrupt — not a slow recovery you can chalk up to medicine. Total — not better, gone. And it has to not come back. Ever. They wait years. They follow up. A man whose bone cancer vanished overnight and stayed vanished for a decade, films before and after, and a board of skeptics who couldn't find the seam." She spread her hands. "When they can't find the seam, they publish that they couldn't. They publish their own failure. Since the reforms a few years back you need a two-thirds supermajority of the doctors to even pass it up the chain. Emeka voted no on every case he ever sat. Told me that like it was a confession. I told him it was the job."

Mara opened her eyes. The green lines were still crawling. "You trust a miracle board more than your own session room."

"I trust the writing-it-down-before. Emeka's board does it. My program did it, when it was honest." Lena stood, restless, went to the whiteboard, picked up a marker and didn't write anything with it. "Then I left, got respectable, and now I'm in the back of a building that lies about what it is, telling a stranger her contempt is doing work for her. So I'm not standing on much. Rapid, complete, lasting. Mac's submarine. Your manifests. Same protocol, Mara. Seal the claim. Stamp the time. Let reality arrive on its own schedule and don't let anybody touch the page in between. You already run this court. You ran it on cargo weights. I'm just telling you it scales up to things you don't want it to scale up to."

The marker tapped, once, against the tray. Mara watched the cap come back off it and go back on.

It was going well enough that Mara let her guard slip, and that was how the water came up.

Lena had been talking through the protocol she wanted to try — not

a coordinate, nothing operational, just a controlled cool-down, breath and sensory reduction, to see whether Mara's nervous system could be coaxed below the wire it had been at all day. A diagnostic, she called it. *I want to see your floor.* And while she was setting it up, queuing something on a tablet, she said, the way you mention weather, "You know the water crystal photographs."

"No."

"Emoto. Japanese man, wrote a book in the nineties. You expose water to words — to *love*, to *hate*, scrawled on the bottle, or to music, or prayer — then freeze it and photograph the crystals. Kind words, beautiful symmetric crystals. Cruel words, broken chaotic ones. Sold millions. It's in classrooms."

Mara laughed before she could stop it, a short ugly bark of it. "Silliest thing I've heard this week. And I spent this week with a man who keeps a sketch of a door in a strip mall."

"Why is it silly?"

"No blinding. No protocol. He's the one picking which photograph to print — so he prints the pretty one under *love*, the ugly one under *hate*. That's not an experiment. That's a man with a freezer and a thesis." She heard her own voice climbing into the register she used to use in meetings, the one that had ended her career, and reined it. "It's the exact opposite of what you just sold me. No sealed claim. No grading. Just a guy and a vibe."

"Correct," Lena said. "All of it. Now hold the two things in your head at once." She set the tablet down. "Millions of people believe intention writes structure into ice. Bad science, everywhere, and *embarrassing*, and you'd dismiss it in a heartbeat — the way intel dismissed an eighteen-tube submarine because no submarine had eighteen tubes. The man with the freezer is a fraud. But the question under the fraud — does a coupled system carry the print of the thing that attended it — that's the question the program was burning viewers on at Fort Meade, lights on, clocks running. The fraud doesn't make the question false.

It means the question got into the wrong hands first.”

“That’s a hell of a leap from a photographed snowflake.”

“It is. I’m not asking you to make it.” Lena pulled a tissue box closer to the chair, casually, the way a nurse does a thing before you’ve understood it’s for you. “I’m asking you to notice your contempt is doing work for you. Feels like rigor. Sometimes it’s just the door you slam so you don’t have to walk through it. Breathe out. Long. We’re only finding your floor.”

Mara breathed out long.

She didn’t believe she’d get anywhere, which Lena had said was fine, was in fact better. *People come to a thing wanting it, they push, and pushing is noise.* So she let herself not want it. She counted the exhale the way Lena paced her — four in, hold, six out, the six getting longer each round, her shoulders coming down off her ears one degree at a time. The amplifiers hummed. The carpet-glue smell faded the way smells do when you stop hunting them.

“Good,” Lena said, very low. “You’re dropping. There. Alpha’s coming up. Don’t chase it. Let it come up to you.”

She wasn’t trying to see anything. There was no envelope, no coordinate, nothing to find. There was only the instruction to let her attention spread out and stop gripping, and her attention, exhausted from a day of gripping, was glad to. The green lines on the screen behind her — she couldn’t see them, but she could feel Lena watching them, the quality of the woman’s stillness — were apparently doing whatever they were supposed to do.

“That’s lower than you’ve been since you walked in,” Lena murmured. “By a lot.”

And then, with no warning at all, the floor wasn’t a floor.

It was a pressure. It came up under her sternum, a heat, low, lower

than that, in the base of her, and it climbed — not a metaphor, a sensation, a physical line of warmth ascending her spine vertebra by vertebra like a finger drawn up a list. Her crown went tight, a band drawing closed two sizes too small. The hum of the amplifiers changed pitch. She knew it didn't change pitch. It changed pitch. There was a sound under the sound, the held tone, the one beneath the eleven digits, and she had not put it there and it was there, and her whole body was suddenly an instrument being tuned by a hand that was not hers, the string drawn toward a note, the note already in the room waiting for the string to arrive—

“Mara.”

“—and the door,” she said, or someone said with her mouth, and she could not have told you what door.

“Mara. Up. Come up. Open your eyes, look at me, name three things in the room.”

The heat did not so much leave as get *interrupted*, slammed, the band around her crown snapping outward — and the cost arrived all at once the way a debt does, in full, with interest. A spike behind her right eye, white. Her ears rang. Something warm crawled over her upper lip and she touched it and her fingers came away red, a smear of it, more of it, dripping onto the back of her hand and onto her jeans, and her hands were shaking, and the room was too bright, and she was leaning forward into the tissue box Lena had already, calmly, placed in her lap.

“Pinch the bridge. Not the soft part, the bone. Head forward, not back — back's a myth, you'll swallow it.” Lena's voice was the only flat thing in a room that had gone tilted. She was already peeling electrodes off, not gentle, fast, killing the trace. “Breathe. You're fine. This is normal. This is the cost. You went too far too fast because you stopped fighting it, which is the thing I told you to do, so this one's on me.”

Mara pinched the bone. The blood pulsed against her fingers in time with the spike behind her eye, the two of them keeping the same

idiot rhythm. The tissue went red and she took another. Her ears were still ringing on a single sustained pitch and she wanted, badly, for it to stop, and it did not stop, and she understood with a clarity that had nothing to do with belief and everything to do with the wet weight in her hand that the pitch was the one Lena hadn't played for her.

"Three things," Lena said again, watching her too closely.

"Whiteboard," Mara managed. The word came out thick. "Tissues. Your — your watch."

"What time."

She looked at the watch on Lena's wrist, made the hands resolve. "Seven-forty."

"Good. You're back." Lena sat back on the stool, and the held breath she let out then was not a clinical one. She looked, for the first time since the fire door, like someone who had been afraid. "Your floor," she said, dry as Mara, "is not where I thought it was."

Mara held the bridge of her nose and watched the blood slow into the third tissue, and then the fourth, and didn't say anything, because there was nothing to file it under.

"I didn't do anything," she said finally. "Wasn't trying. No target. You said yourself there was no—"

"There wasn't."

"Then what did I find."

Lena didn't answer that. She handed her the next tissue instead, and reached over and turned the laptop so Mara could see the green lines, frozen now where Lena had stopped the trace — five of them flat and ordinary and one of them, in the last few seconds before the stop, climbing a staircase that had no business being there, step, step, step, toward something off the top of the screen.

Mara pressed the bone harder. The ringing in her ears had thinned to a single high wire, faint now, fading, but not yet — not quite yet —

gone.

Tightening

The phone rang at 6:14, which was the wrong hour for anyone she trusted.

Mara let it ring twice while she looked at the screen. *Unknown*. She had a folder in her head for unknown — telemarketers, robocalls, the pharmacy. None of them called at 6:14 with the light still gray on the blinds.

She answered without speaking.

“Ms. Kincaid.” The voice was reasonable, mid-register, the kind of voice that had a desk and a nameplate she would never see. “Apologies for the hour. I wanted to catch you before your day got complicated.”

“It’s already complicated.”

“It can be more or less so. That’s why I’m calling.”

She crossed to the window. The street below was the usual street — a man walking a dog that did not want to walk, a delivery van idling at the corner with its hazards on. The van had been there yesterday. She knew the way she knew flight weights didn’t lie: not certain, just noted.

“You have something to say,” she said. “Say it.”

“Your sister’s name is Cara. She works in accounts receivable for a hospital network in Tucson. She has a daughter, eight, asthma — managed, but the inhalers are expensive on her plan, and the plan is the

network's, and the network has a compliance partner whose name you would recognize." A small pause, courteous, letting the architecture stand on its own. "Public facts, mostly. I mention them only because people forget how connected things are. You of all people understand connection."

The dog at the corner sat down and refused to move. The man hauled at it.

She set her hand flat on the cold glass.

"I don't make threats, Ms. Kincaid. I make offers. The offer is the same one you declined Tuesday. Reinstatement. A clean record. A position that uses your talent for reading systems, in a setting where reading systems is the job and not a liability." His voice did not rise. It never would. "The medical file is a separate matter. You sat for an EEG at a sleep clinic Wednesday evening. The trace is interesting. We'd be remiss not to want a copy."

The held tone moved behind her sternum, a memory of itself, and she pressed her hand harder against the glass to have something true to touch.

"You're reading my EEG."

"We're reading everyone's. Yours is the one that's anomalous. You should be flattered. Most people go their whole lives without a single channel doing something it shouldn't." He let that sit, and then, gently: "Call your sister this weekend. Tell her you love her. Then call me." He gave a number. She did not write it down. She would remember it the way she remembered the eleven flights.

The line went dead.

She stood with her hand on the glass until the cold stopped being information and started being pain.

Mac's office smelled of burnt coffee and the particular dust of a

building that had been a nail salon. He had pushed the two client chairs against the wall and laid a yoga mat on the floor that looked older than the program, foam gone yellow at the edges.

“You look like a woman who got a phone call,” he said.

“I got a phone call.”

“They lead with family or money?”

“Family. Then the EEG.”

He nodded slowly, lowering himself onto a stool with the care of a man whose joints kept their own ledger of grievances. “They’re not subtle, our crowd. They never had to be. The subtlety was always in the targets.” He gestured at the mat. “Sit. Not the chair — I’m not putting you in the chair today. Floor.”

She sat. The mat was cold through her jeans.

“What I’m going to teach you,” Mac said, “is not viewing. Get that out of your head. Viewing is a forty-year argument I’m too old to have again. What I’m going to teach you is the part underneath viewing, which is the part that keeps your nose from bleeding.” He set a stopwatch on the floor between them, an actual stopwatch, brushed steel, scratched. “Wednesday, Lena ran you with no target and you went straight to the floor. You know why?”

“Lena said I’m reactive.”

“Lena’s being polite. You’re a bad antenna.” He said it the way another man would say *you have nice handwriting*. “An antenna that picks up everything is useless. It’s all noise and a fire. The skill — the whole skill, the only skill — is learning to be a *narrow* antenna. To pick the channel and reject the rest. Cool-down’s not relaxation. People sell it as relaxation, the wellness crowd, breathe and be at peace. It’s not peace. It’s gain control. You’re turning yourself *down* so that when you turn toward one thing, that one thing is the only thing loud.”

“And if I don’t learn it?”

“Then the next time the tone finds you, you won’t be the one who let it in. It’ll let itself in.” He clicked the stopwatch. “Four-count. In, hold, out, hold. Don’t perform it. Just count. When your mind hands you a thought, set it on the floor next to you and keep counting. It’ll keep handing you thoughts. You keep setting them down. That’s the whole exercise. It’s boring. It’s supposed to be boring. Boring is the floor of the building.”

She breathed. In, hold, out, hold. The first thought was the van with its hazards on. She set it down. The second was Cara’s daughter and the inhalers. That one she set down with more force than the protocol probably wanted. The third was her own employee ID in a dead man’s voice, and she did not set that down at all, and Mac said, quietly, “There. That one’s loud. Feel where it sits.”

“Behind the eyes.”

“Behind the eyes is the easy one. Where else.”

She paid attention to her body the way she would pay attention to a manifest she suspected of lying — not looking for the answer, looking for the line that didn’t reconcile. Heat. Low. At the base of the spine, a warmth that was not the cold mat and not embarrassment. “Sacrum,” she said, and the word felt absurd in her mouth.

“Good. That’s the loud one to watch. When the heat starts there and climbs, that’s the runaway. That’s Wednesday.” He clicked the stopwatch off. “You don’t stop the climb by fighting it. You stop it by widening. You let it be one note in a room and you make the room bigger. Try.”

She tried. She failed. She tried again. Forty minutes on a yellowed mat in a former nail salon, doing nothing, counting to four, setting thoughts on the floor. By the end her legs had gone to sleep and she had a low headache and she had managed, twice, to feel the heat start and *not* let it climb — to make the room bigger, whatever that meant in the dishonest vocabulary of her own nervous system.

“That’s a session,” Mac said, hauling himself up. “That’s the whole

job. Months of it before anyone earns a coordinate. They sold us as wizards. We were filing clerks who learned to sit still.”

She worked the blood back into her legs. “The Handler wants my trace.”

“Course he does. First interesting antenna they’ve found in twenty years.” He looked at her, and the military courtesy slid off his face for a second, and what was under it was old and tired and afraid in a way he had clearly decided long ago not to discuss. “Don’t give them the trace, Mara. Whatever they offer. Once they have the trace they don’t need you. They need the *number* you are. You’d be a frequency in a file.”

She trained alone after that, in the apartment, because the apartment was where the surveillance was and she had decided to make the surveillance watch something dull.

The van moved on the third day. A different van took its corner. She noted it and set it on the floor and kept counting.

She sat for the second session on the sixth day, in the late afternoon, with Lena on the phone in her ear and a kitchen timer set for a hard stop. Lena had refused to come in person. *If your apartment is monitored — and it is — I’m a known associate the moment I walk in. Right now I’m worth more to you as a voice than a face.* The voice was tight, precise, and angry in the careful way Lena was angry — at the institution, at herself, at the protocol that made this necessary.

The kitchen smelled of last night’s coffee gone stale in the pot, and the refrigerator hummed and clicked behind her, and the mat was cold the way the floor at Mac’s had been cold.

“No target,” Lena said. “Same as the clinic. I want to see if you can hold the floor now. If the heat starts, you abort. You say *clear*, you open your eyes, you find something blue in the room and you name it out loud. Blue is your exit. Agreed.”

“Agreed.”

“Begin when you’re ready. I’m watching the clock.”

She breathed. Four-count. The room got smaller, then she remembered — *not smaller, narrower* — and adjusted. The thoughts came and she set them down. Cara. The inhalers. The frequency she would be in a file. She set them all on the floor of a room she was trying to keep ordinary.

The heat started.

It started where Mac had said it would, low, and it climbed the way water climbs a wick, and the old part of her wanted to clamp it shut, and she did not clamp. She widened. She let it be one warm note and built the room out around it — the cold mat, the kitchen timer’s faint tick, Lena’s breath in her ear, the particular ache in her left knee — and the heat climbed to her sternum and stopped.

It stopped.

Under the stop, very faint, was the tone. Not the full thing from the tape. A thread of it, the way you hear a held note through a wall and aren’t sure it’s music or the building. She did not chase it. She held the room around it. Behind her eyes a pressure built and held and did not become a flood, and somewhere far down, with no target, no coordinate, no envelope, a single image surfaced and surfaced cleanly: a line, dark, curved against pale, and at one end of the line the small repeated marks she had drawn at Mac’s six days ago without knowing she was drawing them.

“Clear,” she said, because the pressure had a shape now and the shape frightened her more than the flood had. She opened her eyes. “Blue. The — kettle. The kettle’s blue.”

“Good. Stay with the kettle.” Lena’s voice had gone very level. “Mara. Your nose.”

She touched her upper lip. Her fingers came away with a single thread of red, no more, a fraction of Wednesday. She looked at it the

way she would look at a number that had finally, almost, reconciled.

“Better,” Lena said, and Mara heard her exhale. “Much better. You held the heat. You came back on your own word.” A pause, and then the scientist could not help herself. “Did you see anything.”

“A line. With the marks. The same marks.” She pressed a tissue to her lip. “No target. No envelope. I wasn’t *looking* for it.”

The silence on the line lasted long enough that Mara checked the call hadn’t dropped.

“That’s the part I don’t like,” Lena said finally. “A trained viewer goes and gets the target. The target doesn’t come and get the viewer.” Careful. Precise. Furious, underneath, at a thing that wouldn’t hold still for measurement. “We seal claims and grade them after for a reason. The protocol exists so a frightened person doesn’t talk themselves into a miracle. But the protocol assumes the viewer initiates. It assumes the *door* is the passive party.” She stopped. “I shouldn’t call it that.”

“Mac calls it that. Everyone calls it that.”

“Everyone’s wrong to. We don’t know what it is. We know it’s got a marks-detail you keep drawing, a tone you keep hearing, and a habit of reaching for the one nervous system in the room that answers.” Lena’s voice flattened to its hardest register, the one that meant she had decided to say the true thing instead of the safe one. “I want you back in the clinic with full instrumentation. And I’m not going to, because the moment I do, your colonel’s right — you’re a number in a file, and they already want the file.”

Mara looked at the thread of red on the tissue, drying brown at the edge.

“So we do it like this,” she said. “Half-blind. Off the books.”

“We do it badly,” Lena said, “which is the only honest way left.”

Her sister called that night, which was the thing the Handler had counted on and Mara had counted on too.

“Hey,” Cara said, and there was a TV going behind her, and a child’s voice asking for something, and the whole warm ordinary weight of a life that had a hospital plan and an inhaler problem and no idea it was a map. “You okay? You sound weird. You sound weird in your messages.”

“I’m fine. Work stuff.”

“You don’t have work.”

“Compliance stuff. It’s boring.”

A pause, and then Cara, who had never in her life been able to leave a quiet alone: “You should listen to this thing I heard. Maya had it on in the car — *Kale*, the podcast, the long one? They had this guy on, a scientist, ex-government, and he was talking about how they used to have people who could, like, see things. Remote. With their minds. For real, it was a whole government program, it’s all declassified, you can look it up.” The TV got louder for a second as someone changed a channel. “He said this thing, hang on — Maya, turn that — he said, *the records outlived the people who laughed at them*. Isn’t that wild? Three hours. He had charts.”

Mara stood very still in the dark of her own kitchen, the blue kettle a shape she could find with her eyes closed now, and listened to her sister deliver, secondhand, through a phone the Handler was reading, a clip from a man she had never met, repeating as gospel a thing Mara had been told to her face by a colonel on a yoga mat.

“He said it on the show,” Cara said, the way one quotes scripture to close an argument. “So it’s, like, a real thing.”

“It’s a real thing,” Mara said.

“You should listen. Right up your alley. Government records and all that.” Behind her, the child won whatever the child had been arguing for; there was a small cheer. “Okay, gotta go, bath time. Love you. Call

me on the weekend?”

“I love you,” Mara said, exactly as instructed, and meant it exactly as instructed, and hated that the two were now the same sentence.

She hung up and stood in the dark and let the surveillance watch her stand there.

The van had a new corner. The EEG had a copy she hadn't authorized and never would. Her sister's plan had a compliance partner with a name Mara would recognize, and her sister carried, without knowing it, the exact frequency by which they would tighten the screw, and the exact voice — Kale's, a stranger's, three hours and a chart — by which the world would someday decide whether to believe her or eat her.

She put the tissue with its brown thread of blood into her pocket instead of the trash.

Then she got down on the cold kitchen floor, in the dark, where the surveillance could see her do nothing at all, and she began to count to four.

Desert Frequency

The road had no name on the map, only a number, and the number was wrong by one digit on the sign where the asphalt gave out. Mac had spotted it before Mara did. He didn't say anything. He just took his thumb off the window glass and let it hover over the page in her lap, the printout of an old satellite tile she'd pulled before the badge cache locked her out, and tapped the place where a square of nothing sat between two dry washes.

"There," he said. "Slow down before the cattle guard. They like you to slow down. Makes it look like you belong."

She slowed down before the cattle guard.

The rental was a white crossover, the most invisible vehicle the airport had, and they had spent the morning making it more invisible. A real-estate sign in the back window, magnetic, with a phone number that rang to a voicemail Mac had set up the way a man sets a snare. A clipboard. Two bottles of water sweating in the cupholders. Mara wore a fleece vest the color of nothing and a lanyard with a card that said GROUND LEASE COMPLIANCE and an expired DLA hologram she'd peeled off her own dead badge with a hairdryer. The hologram caught the light when she didn't want it to. She'd learned to keep her chin down.

"You don't look at it," Mac said. "When we get close. You look at the ground you're pretending to survey. Let your eyes go to it on the way back. When there's nothing to read on your face."

“You did this for thirty years.”

“I drew submarines in a room for thirty years.” He shifted in the seat, and the joints of him made the small private sounds they made. “The driving-up part came later. After. When the room moved out here and forgot to tell anybody.”

The land opened. That was the thing about this country she always forgot until she was in it — it didn’t rise to meet you, it withdrew, pulled the horizon back another mile every time you thought you’d found the edge of it, until distance stopped being a measurement and became a kind of pressure on the chest. Creosote and caliche. A wash of pale gravel where water had been once and would be again for twenty minutes some August afternoon. And then, where the printout said nothing should be, the fence.

It was a good fence. That was the first thing she read.

Not a chain-link rectangle with a faded NO TRESPASSING zip-tied to it. This was three strands of smooth wire on steel posts, the kind a serious cattle operation ran, except the posts were too regular and the corners too square and at every third post there was a small gray box bolted at knee height with a stub of antenna no longer than her finger. Solar caps. A buried run, she’d bet, between them, the boxes only there to phone home when the run got cut. She knew this fence. She’d written compliance language for the contractor that installed fences exactly like it, on sites that had a different word than “ranch” on the cost code.

“Don’t,” Mac said, because her foot had come off the gas again without her asking it to.

“I’m surveying the ground lease.”

“You’re staring at the intrusion system. Eyes down. Talk to me about water rights.”

She put her eyes down. The gravel went by under the side mirror, gray and gray and gray. “Stock tank on the old plat,” she said, to the

windshield, to nobody. “No allotment filed. Whole section’s grazed on paper and empty in fact.” Her voice came out steady, which surprised her. The steadiness was a kind of cold. “You can’t run cattle with no water and no allotment. So somebody’s paying the grazing fee to keep the paperwork ordinary.”

“There it is,” Mac said softly, and she understood he didn’t mean the section.

It came up over a rise all at once. A low spread of buildings the color of the dirt, pre-engineered metal, the kind a county would approve as agricultural outbuildings without a second look. A water tower painted to match. A windsock — a real one, orange and faded, because there was a strip out here, there was always a strip — and beyond the buildings a line of antennas she didn’t have a word for, white dishes on a graded pad, all of them aimed at the same patch of empty southern sky.

She drove past it at thirty-one miles an hour, surveying water rights, and she let her eyes go to it only once, on the long count Mac had taught her, when there was nothing to read on her face.

What she read in the once was this:

The dishes weren’t tracking. A tracking array nodded across the sky over hours, following a bird; these were locked, parked, the whole row of them at the same dead-still angle. She’d processed the lease files for continuous-downlink antennas over a sector with no published station. She had filed the anomaly. She had been told she’d misread the system, and then she had been told to clear her desk, and the antennas she’d never seen had stayed exactly this still, aimed at exactly this nothing, the whole time she’d been a name on a quiet list.

She did not slow down. She got that part right.

“Tank’s a quarter mile up,” Mac said, for the boxes on the fence, for the run between them, for whatever ear the run reported to. “Turn at the tank. Get your soil photos. Make it look like a Tuesday.”

The stock tank was real, which was the worst part. Somebody had built it, a dished circle of packed earth with a cracked apron of dried mud, and somebody refilled it, because there were tire tracks and a float valve on a pipe that ran from the direction of the buildings, and there was even a salt block half-dissolved on a stand, white and pitted like a tooth. No cattle. Nothing had drunk here in months. But the salt block was replaced and the valve was maintained and somewhere a man received a small budget every quarter to drive out and tend a watering station for cattle that did not exist, so that the section would graze on paper, so that the fence would read as a fence and not a perimeter.

She got out with the clipboard. The heat took her by the throat, dry and total, the air so thirsty it pulled the sweat off her before it could be sweat. She walked the apron. She photographed the soil. She photographed the salt block, which was not on her cover story and which she could not stop herself from photographing, because it was the most honest thing on the property: a maintained prop for an animal nobody had seen, line-itemed, signed for, refilled on schedule.

The goat, she thought, with no heat behind it, just the flat click of a thing fitting a slot. They trained men to stop a goat's heart with their minds, out in country like this, fifty years ago, and called it defense, and somewhere a clerk made the goats a payroll line. Feed. Bedding. Burial. And when the men were used up and the goats were used up, the program didn't end. Programs don't end. They get a quieter cost code and a salt block for cattle that aren't there.

She crouched by the apron and pretended to test the soil for a percolation rate she would never report to a county that would never ask.

Mac stayed by the car, one hand on the warm metal, watching the buildings the way you watch a dog you don't know.

"Mara." He didn't raise his voice. The country took the word and kept it close. "The long building. North end. Roll-up door. What do

you see.”

She stood, slow, surveying, and let her eyes drift north on the count.

The long building had a roll-up door, open three feet at the bottom, and in the band of dark beneath it she could see floor — sealed concrete, painted gray, a floor that did not belong to a hay barn. And on the floor, a chair.

Not a chair. The chair. A reclining frame, a headrest, a cable loom dropping out of the ceiling to a junction over it like a dentist’s gear drops, except no dentist parked the chair in the middle of a forty-foot bay facing a blank acoustic wall with nothing on it to look at. Beside the chair, a folding table. A laptop. A man in a gray polo, sitting, not on the chair but beside it, with a clipboard of his own and a pair of over-ear headphones around his neck, and he was bored, you could read the boredom across two hundred yards, the specific boredom of a man monitoring something for the four-hundredth time.

A second man came out of an interior door carrying two coffees and the bored man took one and they stood and drank coffee beside the chair and the locked dishes aimed their dead attention at the southern sky, and Mara understood, standing on the apron of a tank built for cattle that did not exist, that she was looking at a cool-down room.

A session room. Lena’s protocol, Mac’s gain control, the breathing and the sensory reduction and the structured prompts and the chair you didn’t have to sit in — all of it here, line-itemed, polo-shirted, with coffee. They had a viewer in there or they’d had one this morning. They had the chair pointed at a blank wall, where you point a viewer when the target isn’t in the room, when the target is a coordinate sealed in an envelope, or a sector under ice with no published station, or whatever the dishes were holding so still for.

The held tone. She felt it before she let herself know she felt it — not loud, not the migraine pressure, just a thinness in the air behind her sternum, the first hum of a glass before the note. She put her chin down. She breathed the way Mac had taught her, narrowed the

gain, took the antenna and turned it down by hand, and the thinness stayed thin and did not bloom, and she got to keep her nose from bleeding on a soil-survey clipboard two hundred yards from a man with headphones.

“They never closed it,” she said.

“No.” Mac’s voice was very flat. “Renamed it.” He was still watching the buildings. “Ninety-five, the report said no actionable intelligence, program terminated. I read it in the paper like everybody else. Three years retired by then. Got my pension, got my joints.” A breath. “Then a fellow I’d sat next to for a decade calls me. Summer of ninety-six. Ray, he says, they’re hiring. Same protocol. Same chairs. Different door on the building. He says, you want back in.” His thumb moved on the hood of the car, a small old gesture. “I said no. Meant it. And the ones who said yes are dead now, mostly, and the ones after them are in there drinking coffee, and the budget never even hiccuped.” A pause. “You don’t kill a thing like this. You just stop writing its name down.”

She thought of the tape. A dead man’s voice reading her dead badge number. A monitor’s prompt, structured, patient, in a room that on paper had not existed for thirty years.

“How many of them in there.”

“Doesn’t matter how many. Matters whose chair.” Mac finally took his eyes off the buildings and put them on her, and there was something in his face that had nothing of the strip-mall oracle in it, nothing of the man who’d told the Typhoon story with his hands. “They’ve got a viewer working. Somebody’s body, every day, against that sector. And it’s not enough. You know how I know.”

She waited.

“Because they want yours.”

The gray-polo man set his coffee down on the folding table. He picked up the headphones from around his neck. He looked, not at

the white crossover by the stock tank — there was no reason for him to look at a survey vehicle on a grazing lease — but at the laptop, and he frowned at it, the frown of a man whose readout has done something it doesn't usually do, and then he turned, slow, and looked out through the three-foot gap under the roll-up door, across the dead pad, across the section that grazed only on paper, toward the tank.

“Get in the car,” Mac said.

She got in the car.

She did not floor it. That was the discipline and it cost her everything she had. She set the clipboard on the dash and put the crossover in gear and pulled off the apron at a survey-Tuesday speed, gravel ticking under the wheel wells, the salt block shrinking in the mirror like a tooth in a shut mouth.

“Slow,” Mac said. “Slow's the camouflage.”

“He looked at the laptop, Mac.”

“I saw.”

“Then he looked at us.”

“He looked at the country. We're the country right now. Be the country.”

She was the country. She drove the long quarter mile back along the perimeter at thirty-one miles an hour with her chin down and her pulse going like a fist on a door, and the gray boxes on the fence posts went by, one, two, three, each with its stub of antenna no longer than her finger, and she made herself read the wire instead of the mirror, three strands smooth, posts too regular, corners too square, the most expensive cheap fence in the county.

At the cattle guard a truck was coming the other way.

It came over the rise like the buildings had, all at once — a tan pickup, a real one, dust boiling off the back tires, county plates, a

man's shape behind the wheel and a second shape beside it. Not security. Security didn't drive a fifteen-year-old pickup with a cracked windshield. A rancher. A neighbor. Somebody who tended the salt block for cattle that did not exist, maybe, or somebody who actually ran the section north of here and knew every survey crew that had any business on this road, which was none.

The road was one lane at the cattle guard. One of them was going to have to pull off.

"Wave," Mac said.

She lifted two fingers off the wheel, the desert wave, the one she'd seen ten thousand times growing up, the minimal acknowledgment that costs nothing and means I am ordinary, you are ordinary, we will both be gone in a second. She pulled the crossover half off onto the shoulder, gravel grabbing, the real-estate sign in the back window catching the sun, and she kept her eyes on the cattle guard rails like a woman who has driven a soft shoulder before and respects it.

The pickup slowed.

It came abreast and the man behind the wheel looked at her — sunburned, sixty, a feed-store cap — and his eyes went past her face to the lanyard, to the clipboard on the dash, to the magnetic sign, the whole costume, and Mara held the desert wave a half-second too long, the way a person does when they want to be liked and gone, and then the man's eyes came back to hers and there was a question forming behind them, the question of a man who knows every rig on his road.

His radio said something. She couldn't hear the words. She could hear that it was a radio and not a phone, a fixed channel, and his hand went to it, and his eyes left her face.

"Now," Mac said. "Gently."

She came off the shoulder onto the road, past the pickup's tailgate, over the cattle guard — the steel rattled the whole frame, a cattlemen's xylophone — and she did not floor it, she fed it speed the way you feed

a fire so it doesn't gutter, thirty-five, forty, the pickup shrinking in the mirror, the man's brake lights coming on, the man turning in at the gate she hadn't seen because it was a cattle gate, ordinary, with a salt-block budget and a perimeter run buried under it.

"He's not following," Mac said, watching the side mirror with his old patient eyes. "He called it in and went back to work. That's the cover working. That's why the cover's good." A long breath out. "If he'd come after us, we'd know they were scared. He didn't. So they're not scared. They're just going to add a white crossover to a list."

"That's better?"

"That's worse. Scared people make mistakes." He settled back, and the joints made their sounds, and the antennas dropped below the rise behind them, still aimed at their patch of empty southern sky, holding their dead attention on whatever was under the ice that needed a body every day and a body it didn't have yet. "Patient people don't."

She drove. The horizon withdrew, gave back its mile, withdrew again. The salt block was long gone in the mirror but she could still see it, white and pitted, refilled on schedule for an animal that had been a line item for fifty years and would be one tomorrow.

"They're hiring," she said, to the windshield, to the country, in a voice that had gone all the way cold. "Same protocol. Same chairs."

"Same chairs," Mac agreed.

She put both hands on the wheel and drove the nameless road back toward the number that was wrong by one digit, and somewhere behind her a man in a gray polo wrote a frown into a log, and the chair sat empty in the long building, pointed at a blank wall, waiting for a body the protocol said it would have.

Cloud Buster

The motel coffee was burnt and Mac drank it anyway, both hands around the cup like a man warming himself at a fire that had gone out years ago. They'd taken the room at the edge of the desert town because it was cheap and faced the highway and you could see anyone who pulled in. Mara had the curtains cracked two inches. Outside, the asphalt threw heat in visible sheets.

"You want to know about the goats," Mac said. He wasn't looking at her. He was looking at the wall, at nothing.

She hadn't asked. She'd been laying the badge-cache printouts in rows on the bedspread, sorting the satellite tile against the facility they'd watched yesterday — fixed antennas, salt block, a chair in use — and somewhere in the sorting she'd gone quiet, and he'd read the quiet.

"I want to know how a session room ends up as a grazing lease," she said.

"Same way everything does." He set the cup down. "Somebody wrote a memo."

The thing you had to understand about Fort Hood in 1983, Mac said, was that the memos were real.

Not real the way a thing is real when it works. Real the way a contract is real, with a routing slip and a cost code and three signatures and

a distribution list, so that later, when a congressional staffer with a flashlight went looking, there would be paper. There was always paper. The program could not order a man to stare at a goat until its heart stopped without a form authorizing the expenditure of a goat.

He'd come down from Meade on a temporary assignment he hadn't requested. By then he was already what they called operational — he'd sat the chair, he'd drawn the things that came up out of the dark behind his eyes, he'd had the bad week in '79 when he drew a submarine so large the analysts laughed in his face and then stopped laughing in January. He carried that around like a coin in his pocket. It made him careful. It made him quiet. The men at Hood were not quiet.

They had a manual. He'd seen it — mimeographed, smelling of solvent, stapled at the corner. It proposed a soldier who would not need to kill because he would have learned to still his own heart and, by stilling it, still another's. It proposed walking through walls. It used the word *Jedi* without embarrassment, in a government document, in 1983. There was a section on running faster than the eye could follow and a section on positive first contact with hostile life forms and a section, he remembered, with a diagram of the human aura rendered as a contour map, like weather, like a thing the Air Force could forecast.

“And the cloud,” Mac said. “You have to hear about the cloud.”

There was a major — he wouldn't give the name, he never gave the names — who could disperse clouds. Or believed he could. He'd take the younger men out at dawn and pick a single cumulus off the morning sky and stare at it, soften his focus, breathe the way they'd all been taught to breathe, and after twenty minutes, forty minutes, an hour, the cloud would thin and tatter and be gone. The desert sky did this on its own roughly every hour of every day. The major had a logbook. The logbook said *success* in a column, in pencil, the way you'd note a successful artillery range.

Mac stopped. Picked the cup back up. It was empty and he drank

from it anyway.

Mara didn't fill the silence. She had learned that with him — that when the documentary hush came down over his voice and the sentences got long and even, you did not interrupt it, you let it carry, the way you didn't put your hand on a wire you weren't sure of. She kept sorting paper. The shuffle of it gave him something ordinary to talk against.

The kid's name was Danny Reyes and he was nineteen, Mac said, and he was the real thing, which was the worst luck a nineteen-year-old could have in that building.

You could tell who had it the way you could tell who could carry a tune. Most of the men in the program were ambitious or curious or stationed there because somebody upstairs owed somebody else a favor, and they sat the chair and produced the gray middling noise of a normal nervous system reaching for something it wasn't built to reach. Reyes produced structure. Reyes sat down with a sealed coordinate and inside ten minutes he was sketching the right angles of a thing nobody had told him existed, and his breathing would change, and a fine sweat would come up on his lip, and he would get the look.

Mac knew the look. He'd had a doctor describe his own once, the year before, in clinical language that managed to sound like an apology.

They loved Reyes for it. That was the thing he wanted her to understand, Mac said, because it was the part people got wrong when they made it a story about cruel men. They were not cruel. The major with the cloud logbook would have given Reyes the shirt off his back. They loved him the way you love a kid who can throw a hundred miles an hour, which is to say they could not stop themselves from using the arm until it came apart.

There was no protocol for cool-down at Hood. That was the difference between Hood and Meade and it was the whole difference. At

Meade — even at Meade, which broke men — you sat the chair, you came up, and then there was a room. Dim. A cot. Water. A monitor whose job, the unglamorous half of the job, was to bring you back down through the gears, to keep you from driving home at ninety with your hands shaking and your nose bleeding because nobody had told your body the session was over. Meade had learned this the expensive way. Hood had a logbook and a major and a manual that promised walls would yield.

So they ran Reyes. Three sessions a day, then four. They ran him on the goat program when the goat program needed a viewer to find the goat — Mac actually laughed here, a dry single sound — because there was a phase, a real phase, where the staring-at-goats and the looking-at-coordinates got administratively braided together, the same small budget, the same Quonset hut, the same men, so that on a given Tuesday a soldier might spend the morning trying to stop a goat's heart by intention and the afternoon describing a Soviet airbase from a number in a sealed envelope, and the paperwork did not distinguish between these activities except by line item.

“The goat,” Mara said. It was the first word she'd put in.

“There was a goat.” Mac's lips pressed thin. “There were seventy goats. Debleated — cut the vocal cords. So the staring would be quieter. Somebody decided the screaming was a confound.” He turned the cup in his hands. “They believed a man could stop a heart with his attention. So they built a barn full of animals that couldn't make a sound.”

The shuffle of paper had stopped. Mara made it start again.

“Did it work?” she asked.

“On the goats?” He shrugged, and the shrug cost his shoulder something; she saw the wince ride under it. “There's a guy who'll tell you he dropped one. One out of seventy. Did the breathing, and the animal went down. They wrote it up. *Success*, pencil, in the column.”

He set the cup down for the last time. “Nobody autopsied the goat. That’s the whole program, if you want it in one sentence. They never autopsied the goat. They wrote success in the column and moved the budget forward.”

Reyes started getting the headaches in the spring.

Not headaches — Mac corrected himself, the way a man corrects himself when he’s been carrying the precision of a thing for forty years and refuses to let it go soft now. Pressure. The kid described it as pressure, behind the eyes and at the crown, like the inside of his skull had a tide in it and the tide was coming in and not going back out. He’d come up from a session and the pressure would be there and he’d sit through the afternoon goat block with it and then there’d be another coordinate before chow, and the major would clap him on the back, and the logbook would say what the logbook said.

His sketches got better. That was the cruelty inside the cruelty. As the kid came apart, his accuracy went up. The structure got cleaner, the angles truer, the impossible details — the things he could not have known — multiplied, because some part of him was burning the insulation off the wire to push more current through, and the current was beautiful, and they read the beauty as proof the program was working.

“I knew,” Mac said.

The room was very quiet. The highway made its sound and stopped.

“I’d been the kid. Different year, better building. I knew what the pressure was. You don’t run a man four sessions deep without a room and a cot and a hand on his shoulder telling him it’s over, you can come down now. I knew the nosebleeds weren’t a quirk.” He was looking at the wall again. “And I had a coin in my pocket. I had the submarine. They listened to me about targets. About the work. They’d have listened.”

He didn’t finish it. He didn’t say *and I didn’t*. He let the sentence

stay open, an unsigned form, no distribution list, and the open sentence was worse than the closed one would have been.

Mara did not move to close it for him.

She'd interviewed people about catastrophes. It had been part of the records work, sometimes — you got handed the after-action because you were the one who'd flagged the anomaly, and you sat across from a man and he told you what happened on the runway or in the warehouse or over the radio, and the thing you learned was that the worst ones don't editorialize. They give you the times. They give you the loadings. *He was due back at fourteen hundred. The form was on my desk.* The grief lives in the precision because precision is the only thing the survivor has left that the dead man would have recognized.

Mac gave her times. The kid came up at eleven-forty. The bleed started around fourteen hundred during the goat block. He sat the four o'clock anyway because the four o'clock was a live operational tasking and you didn't bench a live tasking for a nosebleed. He drew — Mac said this part flatly, the flattest yet — he drew the cleanest session of his career at four o'clock with cotton in his nose, a power plant cooling tower with the right number of struts, and then he set the pencil down and put his head in his hands and said it was very loud, and the monitor wrote *subject reports auditory phenomena* in the log, and then they took him to the dispensary.

He didn't die. Mara had let herself assume the story ended in a body, because that was the shape these stories had, and it didn't.

"He didn't die," Mac said, reading the assumption off her face the way he read everything off everyone. "That would've been clean. They'd have had to write *that* up." A breath caught short of a laugh. "He stopped being able to do it. Like a violinist with a hand. One morning he could pull a Soviet airbase out of a sealed envelope and the next morning he sat the chair and got the gray noise. Same as anybody. Same as me on a bad day. And the pressure stayed.

The thing that took the gift didn't take the symptom. He kept the headaches and lost the music."

He picked at the seam of the bedspread.

"They reclassified him. Found him a desk. Everybody was very kind about it." His thumbnail worked the seam. "The major retired with a logbook full of dispersed clouds. The manual got rewritten three times and renamed and the renaming is how you end up with a grazing lease and a salt block and a chair in use on a Tuesday afternoon in the year of our Lord whatever this is. They never autopsied the goat, Mara. They never asked what they were doing to the instrument. They wrote success in the column."

She found, when she looked down, that she'd stopped sorting paper. The satellite tile was in her hand and she'd been holding it long enough that her thumb had left a mark on the gloss.

She put it down. She squared the rows. The motion was something to do with her hands while the inside of her chest worked through a thing it didn't have words for and didn't want to find them.

"You think that's what's running here," she said. Her voice came out level, which took effort, which she let nobody see. "The chair we watched. There's a kid in it."

"There's always a kid in it. Or somebody being made into one." Mac's eyes came off the wall and onto her, and there was nothing soft in them, which was somehow the gentlest thing he could have offered. "That's why I told you. Not for the goats. Everybody wants the goats — the debleating, the major, the cloud. It's a good story. You can put it in a book and people laugh." He leaned forward, and the joints announced it, and he ignored them. "The goats are the frame. The kid is the picture. They found a thing the human nervous system can do that nobody understands, and they built an institution on top of it, and the institution's only metabolic requirement is a steady supply of nervous systems. It doesn't hate the kid. It doesn't love him either,

whatever the major felt. It needs the music and it cannot hear the wire burning. That's not evil. Evil would be simpler."

The motel AC kicked on, a low rattle in the wall.

"It's a budget line," Mara said.

"It's a budget line." He sat back. The chair took him. "And your EEG is a procurement specification."

She got up. She went to the window and put her eye to the two-inch gap and read the parking lot the way she read everything now, by reflex, looking for the car that was wrong, the man who'd been there too long, the antenna aimed at nothing. There was a pickup with a feed sack in the bed and an old sedan with out-of-state plates that had been there since they'd checked in. She filed the sedan and didn't say so.

Behind her, Mac had gone quiet again, and the quiet had a different weight than the storytelling quiet. He'd told her a thing he didn't tell, she understood. There were probably men who'd known him forty years and gotten the goats and not gotten the kid. He'd handed her the kid because she was about to go sit in a chair somebody had built, with a nervous system somebody wanted on a spec sheet, and he wanted her to know what the column did and didn't record.

The pressure-behind-the-eyes. The held tone under the digits. The gain she'd had to ride down at the facility yesterday before it pulled her into a couple she hadn't chosen. She'd been treating those as evidence. Symptoms of the thing being real, ticks in her own column marked *success*.

She watched a heat-shimmer ghost across the asphalt and dissolve, the way a cloud dissolves whether or not a major is staring at it, and felt the first true cold come up under her ribs and stay.

"The submarine," she said, not turning around. "In '79. You drew it and they laughed and then it was real."

“Yes.”

“What happened to you after.”

A long pause. The highway. A truck downshifting somewhere out past the edge of town.

“Nobody brought me down through the gears either,” Mac said. “Different building. Same column.”

She let that stand. She did not close it for him.

Outside, the out-of-state sedan started its engine, idled a moment, and pulled out onto the highway heading the way they’d come. She watched it go and copied the plate into the back of her mind where she kept things, and didn’t decide yet whether it meant they’d been watched or only that someone had checked out of a motel.

“We’re going back to Lena’s,” she said. “I want to sit again before the window closes. I want the room with the cot.”

Mac looked at her for a moment, and whatever he’d been carrying about the kid shifted on his back, redistributed, did not come off.

“You want the cool-down,” he said.

“I want somebody whose job is to tell me when it’s over.” She picked the satellite tile back up, squared it against the rest, and slid the stack into the folder. “I’m not getting in the chair so they can write success in the column.”

She zipped the bag. Out on the highway the sedan was already gone, a dark dot folding into the heat, and she could not have said, watching it, whether it had been nothing at all or the first slow turn of the institution’s patient head.

The Next Session

The badge cache window read twelve hours when Mara stopped trusting the number.

She had it open on the burner laptop, the countdown ticking in the corner of a read-only portal that should not have existed and was scheduled to stop existing at a date she had already passed once in her head and would pass again before sunrise. Forty days had become days. Days had become a clock with a face, and the face said 11:53:14, then 11:53:13, and she watched it the way you watch water you've decided to let boil over.

Mac's session room smelled of old coffee and older carpet. He had killed the overhead and worked by a single architect's lamp clamped to the drafting table, the kind that threw a clean cone and left the corners to themselves. Outside, the strip mall's parking lot was a sodium-orange nothing. A nail salon, dark. A check-cashing place, dark. The motel was twenty minutes back and they had not gone to it.

"You're going to wear a groove in the screen," Mac said, not looking up.

"It counts. That's the job."

"It's a clock the man built." He was sorting paper — loose-leaf, butcher, the backs of supply forms, a child's school tablet with the cartoon dog half torn off the cover. He had been sorting it for an hour. "It counts because he wants you watching it count."

She closed the laptop. The cone of light got brighter without the screen-glow fighting it.

The Handler's offer sat in her coat pocket as a folded sheet of paper she had read four times and not signed. Reinstatement. A consultancy line at a contractor whose name she'd filed lawsuits against in a previous life. Backpay framed as a "transition stipend." A clearance reactivation with a sponsor signature already in place, hers to counter-sign. The language was HR language. *In recognition of your unique familiarity with legacy program architecture, we are pleased to extend.* The offer expired at midnight. It said so in a footnote, in the same font as everything else, as though the deadline were a courtesy and not a hand at her throat.

"You haven't asked what's in it," she said.

"I know what's in it." Mac set down a page, picked up another, turned it ninety degrees, studied it, set it down again. "Money. A title that sounds like the old one. A signature already filled in on the other side, so all you do is agree with someone who's agreed for you." He found a thumbtack in a coffee mug full of them. "Close?"

"Mostly. There's a paragraph about my sister."

His hand stopped over the mug. Then it didn't. He took the tack and pressed it into a corner of the cork, holding nothing yet, just seating it. "There's always a paragraph about somebody."

She had read that one twice the first time. It was the gentlest paragraph in the document, which was how she'd known what it was. A note expressing the program's *understanding* that family considerations could complicate a return to service, and its *commitment* to ensuring that her decision, whatever it might be, would not adversely affect persons not party to this arrangement. They had not made the threat. They had handed her the threat and asked her to hold it.

"It's well written," she said. "Not one sentence I could quote in a deposition that means what it means."

“That’s the job.” Mac pulled the tack back out and dropped it in the mug. He’d changed his mind about the corner. “When I was in, we had a man wrote the after-action language. Could turn a viewer breaking down into ‘subject demonstrated reduced operational capacity following extended tasking.’ Same words you’d use for a forklift.”

She didn’t answer. Outside, a car went by on the access road and didn’t slow, and she tracked it anyway, the plate, the make, the way it took the curve, before she let it go.

Eleven forty-one.

She had come here tonight to do a clean thing. Take the cache while it was hot, pull everything pullable, hardcopy what mattered, and walk — to a journalist, to a court, to the cold honest paper that had been the only court she’d ever trusted. That was the plan she’d written in the motel with Mac’s Fort Hood story still cooling in her chest. Get the manifests out where lawyers could touch them. Don’t sit in the chair. Don’t be a success in the column.

The plan was good. The plan worked on paper.

The trouble was she kept thinking about the margin.

“Mac.”

“Mm.”

“The first session. The door.” She turned in the chair. “When you went quiet.”

He didn’t answer right away. He had found the page he wanted. She could tell because his hands changed — slowed, careful, the way a man handles a thing he’s already decided about. He carried it to the cork wall and held it up against the others without pinning it yet, comparing.

The wall was a city now. She had not let herself look at it properly until this hour, because looking at it properly was a kind of agreement. Dozens of sheets, overlapped at the edges like roof tiles, every size of paper a man scrounges in forty years. Coastlines that weren’t coast-

lines. A long curved thing he'd labeled 9/79 — *the boat* in pencil gone silver with age, beside a yellowed news clipping she'd already read twice in the motel and made herself put down. Sketches of structures with the proportions slightly wrong, towers too thin, a stair that climbed to a flat with nothing on it. And the doors. He had drawn the door more than once, over years, in different hands as the hands got worse — the same arc, the same blunt threshold, the same set of marks ringing it that she had drawn without meaning to and could not read.

"You went quiet," she said again, "because mine had something the others don't."

"Yours had the join." He said it plainly. "The hinge detail. I've drawn that door I don't know how many times. I never got the join. I knew it was there. I'd get to it and my hand would go stupid." He held her sheet up beside one of his own. In the lamp cone the two arcs lay over each other, hers crisper, his softer, and at the left edge where the door met whatever held it, hers had the small interlocking mark and his had a smudge where a man's thumb had rubbed out forty years of not-quite.

She looked at the two of them together and her stomach did the cold thing it had been doing since the motel.

"I didn't draw that to copy you," she said. "I never saw yours."

"I know."

"You could have shown me. Before. Put a picture in front of me, watched me reproduce it, called that a session." Her voice came out flatter than she meant. "Easiest con in the world."

"It would," Mac agreed. "And if I'd done it, that mark would be exactly where I'd have put it. Because I can't put it anywhere. My hand doesn't know where it goes." He set her sheet down on the table and tapped, once, the spot. "Yours knew."

Eleven thirty.

He poured the last of the coffee into a mug that hadn't been washed

in a while and didn't drink it. She got up because sitting had stopped working. She went to the wall and stood close to it, close enough that the overlapping pages stopped being a wall and became individual acts — this one done fast in a hot room, this one labored over, this one abandoned a third of the way and pinned anyway because Mac pinned everything, because a man who'd been told for forty years that his successes were a budget line did not throw out his own work. She found the clipping again. *Largest submarine ever built*. January 1980. A grainy overhead of a thing that should not have fit in the column the analysts had drawn for the world.

"You said they laughed," she said.

"They laughed in September. Blasted the channel in December. The boat moved in January." He had come to stand beside her, his weight on the good hip. "In between, nothing changed except the world got bigger, and a few people had to live in the bigger one first. I was one of them. It's a lonely four months. Mostly you doubt yourself, because everyone competent's telling you you're wrong, and they have the satellites and you have a pencil."

She kept her eyes on the clipping. The cold in her stomach had stopped being only dread. It had started being something with an engine in it, a thing that wanted to move.

"I came here to take the cache and leave," she said.

"I know."

"It's the right move. The paper's real. The paper outlives all of us. I put the manifests in front of a court that can subpoena, and the held tone and the chair and your wall, none of it matters, because I never needed it to be true. I just needed it *filed*." She heard her own cadence speeding and slowed it on purpose. "That was the plan in the motel. It's still a good plan."

"It's a good plan," Mac said.

"I'm not going to do it."

It came out without her choosing. She turned from the wall and the lamp put half her face in the cone and left the rest to the room.

Mac didn't move. He had the stillness of a man who'd waited a long time and was not going to spoil it by being eager.

"The paper proves I wasn't crazy," she said. "It proves the flights, the weights, the names that aren't names. It proves the program never closed. It clears me."

"No," Mac said. "It doesn't."

"I want to know what the marks mean." There. The smallest true thing under all of it, the venal little engine she'd been pretending was strategy. "I want to sit in the chair again. Not because the badge is expiring. Not because the offer's expiring. I want the next session." She looked at the door on the wall, the smudge where his thumb had been, the join where her hand had known. "I want one clean witness. One session nobody's grading for a column, no monitor prompting me toward the answer, no logbook that says *success* before they count the cost. Lena's protocol. Cool-down before and after. And I want to draw the rest of it." She nodded at her own sheet on the table. "There's more on that door. I stopped because the room got cold. I want to not stop."

It was the most she'd said about wanting anything in the eight days since the tape. It sat in the air and she let it.

Mac let out a breath that had some of his weight in it. "You understand what you're asking."

"I understand what it did to Reyes."

"You understand what it did to Reyes and you're asking anyway."

"With a cool-down." She heard how thin that sounded against forty years of dead goats and quiet reassignments, and she didn't dress it up. "It's not a wall. It's a protocol. Protocols fail. But the difference between me and the column is that I'll be the one who writes whether it was a success. Not them. Me. After."

Eleven nineteen.

Mac looked at her a long moment. Then he did a thing she hadn't seen him do — he smiled, not at her, at the wall, at the long city of pages, the way a man smiles at a photograph of people who are gone.

"I had a CO," he said, "who used to tell us the worst thing a viewer could want was the target. Said the wanting got in the data. Said the clean ones didn't care, they just sat and let the room come to them, and the dangerous ones came in hungry and bent the session toward what they hoped to find." He picked up her sheet again. "He was right about most of it."

"And the part he was wrong about."

"The clean ones didn't last. Not because they burned. Because they quit. You can't keep a man in that chair on indifference. Too hard, costs too much, doesn't pay." He turned her sheet so the door faced her. "The ones who lasted wanted it. Reyes wanted it. That's the cruelty I couldn't see at twenty-six. The program didn't burn the men who didn't care. It burned the ones who did. They were the only ones who'd stay."

She took her sheet from him. The join was clean under the lamp, small and certain, a thing her hand had set down while her mouth was busy doubting.

"Then I'm one of the dangerous ones," she said.

"You're one of the ones who'll stay." He said it without comfort. "I'd tell you not to. Forty years says tell you not to. But I'm seventy-eight and I'm still here and I'm still drawing that door. So what's my advice worth."

A car came up the access road and this time it slowed. Mara saw the headlights swing across the dark nail salon and stop, the engine cut, and she had a bad cold second before the lights flared back on and the car reversed and was a teenager who'd missed a turn. She watched until it was gone and then watched the empty road a beat

longer.

“He’s not coming tonight,” Mac said. “The Handler. He doesn’t come. He sends paper. The paper does the coming for him.”

She crossed to the table and looked at the laptop, closed, the offer in her coat, the burner clock she’d stopped trusting. She did not open the laptop. She took the folded offer out of her pocket instead, the well-written thing with its gentle paragraph about her sister, and she held it in the cone of light. The signature line on the back was clean and waiting and somebody else’s name was already on the line above it, sponsoring her back into the body that had unpersoned her, generous as a hand on a drowning shoulder.

She didn’t tear it up. Tearing it up would have been a gesture, and she had no audience to perform for, and a torn copy was still a copy in their files. She folded it once more, into quarters, and slid it back into her coat, where it would expire on its own at midnight without her help.

“Cache window closes before the offer does,” she said. “Eleven hours, change. If I’m taking it, I take it tonight.”

“And are you?”

“Lena,” she said instead. “Can you get her tonight?”

Mac glanced at the clock, did the arithmetic of an old man’s phone tree, distances, who’d pick up. “She’ll be asleep.”

“Then wake her up. Full protocol. You monitor, you don’t prompt. Not once. Not even with your eyebrows.” She set her sheet down on the drafting table, in the cone, the door facing up. “I want to finish it.”

Mac looked at the sheet, and at the wall, and at her. Then he reached into the coffee mug, took a thumbtack between two fingers worn smooth at the tips, and walked her drawing to the cork — to the center, not the edge, to the place where the doors clustered thickest and his thumb had rubbed forty years of almost into the paper. He held it up beside its kin. The arc matched. The threshold matched.

The join, hers and only hers, sat where his hand had never been able to put it.

He pressed the tack home.

It went in with the small dry sound of a thing being decided, and her sheet hung among the dozens, no longer the only clean one, no longer the first, just one more page in a man's long argument with the world about what he'd seen.

"Eleven oh-six," Mac said, picking up the phone. "If she answers, you're in the chair by one."

Mara pulled out the second chair, the viewer's chair, the one she'd refused to sit in the first night, and turned it to face the wall instead of the table, so the doors looked back at her while she waited. She sat down in it. The room was warm and smelled of old coffee, and somewhere across town a phone was about to ring in a sleeping woman's house, and the offer in her coat was going to die at midnight without anyone watching it go.

She put her hands flat on her thighs and started counting her breath.

Hunt

The phone in Mac's office rang four times, stopped, rang twice more. He set down the pencil he was using to date the back of a sketch and looked at the wall, not the receiver.

"Lena doesn't call twice," he said.

He crossed the room with the careful economy of a body that had learned where it hurt and rationed itself around it. He didn't pick up. He pulled the blinds an inch off the window glass with one finger and looked at the parking lot.

"Two sedans," he said. "Lights off. That's not how you wait for a friend."

Mara was already on her feet. The chair she'd been sitting in—the chair she'd been preparing herself to sit in for the session that wasn't going to happen now—rolled back and tapped the wall. The countdown on her laptop read 11:47, and under it, in the corner, the badge cache window counting down past eleven hours had stopped mattering at all.

"How long," she said.

"Two. Maybe three. They'll wait for the second car to come around the back so we can't bolt through the storeroom." He said it like a weather report. "So. Until the second car comes around the back."

She looked at the wall. Forty years of doors. The center of it, pinned where he'd put it that afternoon, was her drawing—the one with the join.

"The sketches," she said.

"Grab the box. Top shelf, the steel one. Leave the binders."

"That's everything."

"That's paper." He was moving now, faster than she'd seen him move, pulling a coat off the hook and a set of keys from a drawer that didn't have anything else in it. "Binders are the program's copies. They have those. The box is mine." He pointed with two fingers at the wall, then at the box. "Take it down. Don't sort it."

She took the steel box down. It was heavier than it looked and the lid wasn't latched. She started reaching for the pins on the wall—the center one, hers—and Mac said, sharp, "No. Leave the wall. We come back for the wall."

"We're not coming back for the—"

"Then we lose the wall." He had the back door open six inches, looking through it the way she'd seen him look at a coordinate envelope. "Done it before. Box. Now."

She got the box. He had a second bag already, canvas, by the storeroom door—the way a man keeps a bag by a door when he has spent a career being told to leave somewhere in under five minutes. He picked it up without looking at it.

Headlights swung across the alley behind the strip mall. The second car.

"Down," Mac said, and pulled her by the sleeve below the level of the window, and they went out the storeroom door into the dark between the dumpster and the cinderblock wall, low, the box hard against her ribs.

The truck was an old Chevy, three-quarter ton, the kind of vehicle that had stopped being a choice and become a fact decades ago. It sat at the dead end of the access lane behind the nail salon, nose out,

because Mac parked everything nose out. He had the door open and the engine turning before the dome light finished dying.

“Head down till we’re on the road.”

She put the steel box on the floor between her boots and put her head down. The truck rolled without lights to the mouth of the lane and Mac watched the mirror and the sedans both, and then a man in the lot stepped out of the lead car and stood up straight—she could see him through the gap below the dash, in the orange wash of the sodium lamp, a man in a coat that fit him, looking at the office door, not at them.

Mac turned left, away from the lot, and put the lights on at the corner like a man who had every reason to be exactly where he was.

“Tell me they didn’t make the truck,” she said.

“Made the truck the day they made me. Didn’t expect us in it. Buys minutes.”

The laptop, in the bag, chimed once—battery, or a connection lost—and she thought of the badge cache, the read-only ghost-access window she’d spent the whole drive over here resenting, and how she’d planned to be sitting in a chair finishing a drawing while it expired instead of running from it.

She’d pulled the cache that afternoon. All of it. Not because the plan to leak it had survived—the plan to leak it had not survived—but because it was hers to take and she had taken it. The drive was in the inner pocket of her coat, against her chest, a hard rectangle the size of two stacked cards. Encrypted. The whole eleven-flight ledger and the satellite tile of the blank sector and the cost codes that crossed into a contractor with no name, all of it folded down to a thing that warmed against her sternum like a second, slower heart.

“I have the cache,” she said. “On me.”

Mac glanced at her, once, then back at the road. “Then they want us. Not just the office.”

“Thought we already had that.”

“Had a reason they wanted you. Now they need to find you tonight.” He said it flatly. The distinction didn’t comfort her and he didn’t pretend it should.

They took the surface streets out of the county—Mac wouldn’t get on the interstate yet, said the interstate was a corridor and corridors were where you got funneled, said it the way other men said the sky was up. The town gave way to the in-between country, gas stations and self-storage and dark fields, and the headlights behind them came and went the way headlights do, innocent until they weren’t.

A set of them stayed.

Mac watched it for a mile without saying anything. The truck did fifty-five on a road posted for fifty and the lights behind held a steady quarter-mile, neither closing nor falling away.

“Tan four-door,” he said. “Two up. Been with us since the feed store.”

“Could be going the same way.”

“Could be.” He let off the gas a fraction, gentle, the way you’d test a knot. The lights behind eased back to match. “They’re not. They’re going where I’m going.”

He didn’t speed up. That was the thing she would think about afterward—that he didn’t speed up. He drove the same fifty-five, both hands on the wheel, and his eyes went to the map he carried in his head instead of the mirror, and at the next intersection, an unmarked T where a county road came in from the left across a culvert, he did three things in an order she couldn’t separate. He killed the headlights. He braked hard enough to throw the steel box against her shins. And he put the truck left onto the culvert road, full lock, the back end stepping out on the gravel and catching, the whole frame groaning, no lights, into a dark that swallowed them.

The tan car's lights went straight on past the T, committed to the speed they'd been matching, two hundred yards down the wrong road before the brake lights bloomed.

Mac was already off the culvert road and onto a tractor track between two fields, lights still off, driving by the difference between the black of the track and the blacker of the hedgerow, slow now, deliberate, a man reading ground he'd read before.

"You know this road," she said. Her voice came out thinner than she wanted.

"Know all the roads I might have to leave on." He nosed the truck along the track to a gap in the hedge and through it into a second field and along the inside of the hedge where the truck's bulk would read, from the county road, as one more dark mass against dark masses. He stopped. He cut the engine. The tick of it cooling was very loud.

Across the fields, on the road they'd left, the tan car came back. It went past the mouth of the culvert road slow, a searchlight—a real one, handheld, out the passenger window—sweeping the ditches and the field edges in long white strokes. The beam came across the hedgerow forty yards from them and ran along it and stopped, for a second, on a gap two gaps down from theirs, and held, and moved on.

Mac didn't breathe loud and he didn't breathe quiet. He breathed the way he'd told her a viewer breathes in cool-down, four counts in the bottom of the body, like a man with all night. She found she was matching him without deciding to.

The searchlight died. The tan car went on up the county road and didn't come back.

They sat in the dark for a long time. A long time, by the standard of a heart going as fast as hers was. Mac let it go to where the night sounds came back—an engine far off, a dog, the hedge moving—before he said anything.

"They'll work the grid now. Cars on the through roads, somebody on

a screen with the cell towers. We've got a window while they figure we ran for the interstate. Because that's what frightened people do."

"What do we do."

"We're not frightened." He started the truck. The headlights stayed off. "Field edges to the river road. North, slow, like a man checking his fences. First light, we're a farm truck on a farm road. Nobody looks at a farm truck."

He said it and she understood, low in the gut, that there had been other tan cars and other hedgerows, that the program had taught its men not only to see the unseeable but to disappear, and that the second skill had outlasted the first.

"You did this a lot," she said.

"Did it enough."

The river road was empty. Mac put the headlights on after the second mile of it because a truck on the river road with no lights was more suspicious than a truck with them, and they ran north at a speed that wouldn't have outrun a bicycle, and the adrenaline went out of her slow and left the shakes behind it. Her hands shook first.

She put her hands flat on the steel box to stop them.

"Open it," Mac said. "Might as well know what we saved."

She opened it on her lap. Forty years of a man's sight rendered in pencil, in fountain pen where the pencil had failed him, on the backs of envelopes and on proper artist's stock and on one yellowed sheet of telex paper that crackled. Coordinates in the corners. Dates. A handwriting that got steadier as the years went back, then unsteady again at the very bottom, very old, a young man's hand.

Doors. Not all of them, but enough of them. Doors and doors and doors, the same wrongness in each, the same refusal of the eye to settle on the scale.

She went through them once, fast, not sorting, like he'd said. Then she went through them a second time slower because her hands had steadied and because she was a records officer and a records officer counts things.

She counted them.

"How many door drawings did you have on the wall," she said.

Mac drove. "Don't know exactly. Never counted them on the wall. Forty-some. Why."

"In here there are thirty-one."

"Box has what fit in the box. Some were framed. Some I gave away."

"You didn't give the door ones away." She said it plainly, looking at him, not at the paper. "You told me this afternoon. You kept all the door ones. You said you couldn't not keep them."

He didn't answer right away. The river ran black on the left, a smell of it coming in the vent, cold and mineral.

"Count them again," he said.

She counted them again. She laid them on her knees in a fan, thirty-one doors, and looked at the center of the fan where the new one should be, the one with the join, the one he'd pinned at the center of the wall that afternoon and told her to leave on the wall when they ran.

It wasn't in the box.

"It's still on the wall," she said. "Mine. The join one. You told me to leave it."

"I told you to leave the wall. I took the box down myself this morning. The box had everything that was in the box this morning." He said it carefully, a man laying out a chain of custody because he had spent a life learning that the chain of custody was the only thing that ever held. "Your drawing went on the wall this afternoon. It was never in the box."

“So it’s on the wall. In the office. Which they’re standing in right now.”

“It’s on the wall.” He glanced at the fan of paper on her knees, the empty center of it. “Or it was on the wall this afternoon.”

She turned in the seat to look back the way they’d come, at the dark river road and the dark fields and the orange smear of the town’s light low on the horizon behind them, the town where a man in a coat that fit him was standing in a strip-mall office in front of a wall of doors with one fresh page at the center of it, a page with a mark on it that the man who’d drawn doors for forty years had never once managed to draw.

“Mac,” she said.

“I know.”

“They have it.”

“They have a piece of paper with a pencil line on it.” His voice didn’t change. “They’ve had pieces of paper with pencil lines on them for fifty years. It’s not the line they want. It’s the hand that drew it.” He took the truck around a bend in the river road, slow, lights on, a farmer checking his fences in the last dark before first light. “That’s still in this truck.”

She didn’t put the drawings away. She held the fan of them on her knees, thirty-one doors, all the cathedrals he’d been afraid of, and watched the river go black beside the road, and let her hands stay where they were.

In the east, over the trees on the far bank, the sky had begun the first thin gray that wasn’t morning yet but had stopped being night. Mac saw it and eased the truck up to the speed of a man with nothing to hide.

“First light,” he said. “Now we’re just a truck.”

She put the lid back on the box. The drawings she kept on her knees, where she could feel the weight of them, and where the wind

from the vent couldn't take them, and that was how they drove north—a farm truck on a farm road, an old man and a woman who only trusted ledgers, with all their luggage gone except paper and pencil and the slow new rhythm of people who would not be sleeping in the same place twice.

Second Sit

The room smelled of cigarettes that had been smoked under a different management. Mac had paid cash for two nights at a motel off a county road that ran nowhere in particular, and the man at the desk had not looked up from his phone long enough to remember either of their faces. The drapes were rubber-backed and the color of weak tea. Mara dragged the small table away from the window and set it in the dead center of the carpet, where the light from the bathroom doorway laid a long pale rectangle.

“Not the chair by the window,” Mac said.

“I know.”

“Sound carries.”

“I know that too.”

He sat on the edge of the bed with the steel box on his knees and worked the latches with thumbs that didn't fully close anymore. Across the lot, through the gap she'd left in the drapes, a tan four-door sat under a dead streetlamp with its parking lights off. It had been there forty minutes. Not the same one from the culvert road. A cousin of it.

“They found the motel,” she said.

“They found a motel. They've got the corridor mapped. We're on it.” Mac lifted a single sheet of paper from the box, blank, and laid it on the table. Set a pencil beside it, squared to the long edge, the way

a man squares a knife and fork. "Two cars, no warrant, a clerk who'll testify. They sit. They wait for us to drive."

"So we sit too."

"So we work."

She looked at the pencil. Then at the gap in the drapes. The tan car had not moved. Somewhere behind that windshield a person was eating something out of a paper bag and listening to a radio turned low, bored in the specific way of men who got paid to be bored, and that man was forty yards from the table where she was about to do the thing she had spent her whole adult life proving people couldn't do.

"Lena's not on the line," she said.

"No."

"You're going to monitor."

"Ask the questions. Write the answers. Not grade it." He pulled a second sheet toward himself and uncapped a felt pen with his teeth. "Cool-down first. You went too fast last time."

"Last time there were men with EEG leads."

"This time there are men in a Ford." The lines around his eyes creased. "Be glad of the leads we don't have."

She breathed the way he'd taught her, which was not the way the wellness women on her sister's phone breathed, all chest and intention. Mac's cool-down was duller than that. Count of four in. Hold. Count of four out. Let the held part get longer only when the body offered it, never when the mind demanded. The point, he'd said the first week, was not to feel anything. The point was to bore the surveillance circuit until it stopped reporting. Anxiety is signal. We want noise floor.

For a long time there was nothing but the noise floor.

The motel ice machine kicked on somewhere down the breezeway

and ran its cycle and shut off. A truck downshifted on the county road and was gone. Her upper lip was damp. Her sacrum ached against the hard chair the way it always did, low and warm, a heat that didn't match the room.

"Target's sealed," Mac said. His voice had gone flat and procedural, the monitor's voice. "You know what it is."

"The door."

"Don't name it. Describe."

She kept her eyes open. That was the part the forums got wrong, she'd learned—you didn't close your eyes and travel, you sat with your eyes half-open on a blank wall and let the room go vague at the edges and waited for the page to be more interesting than the wall. The pencil was already in her hand. She didn't remember picking it up.

The first lines came the way they always came now. The arch. Not an arch—she'd corrected herself on this twice already across the sessions—not a Roman thing with a keystone, the load didn't run that way. The curve was wrong for a load-bearing arch. It carried nothing. It described something. She drew the outer sweep and then the inner sweep parallel to it, a band, and inside the band the upright members that were not jambs.

"Talk to me," Mac said.

"It's a frame." Her voice came from somewhere behind her teeth. "For something that isn't there yet."

"Stay with the structure. Don't interpret."

Right. Don't interpret. She put the pencil back on the inner sweep and let her hand find the place she'd found the last four times, the lower left quadrant where the two curves came together and didn't quite meet. The join. The thing Mac had never managed in thirty years and four hundred sessions, the place where his door always blurred into pencil-smear because the hand stopped, and her door did not blur, her door went *down into itself* at that corner the way a screw thread

goes down into a nut.

She drew the join.

And this time her hand did not stop at the join.

The heat in her sacrum climbed.

It was not a metaphor and she was past pretending it was. It moved up through her in a column, slow, like water finding the next level in a lock, and it gathered behind her sternum and sat there, pressure, a hand laid flat on her chest from the inside. Her breath wanted to go shallow. She let it. Count of four. The held part stretched on its own—five, six—and she did not chase it.

“You’re holding,” Mac said quietly. “How long can you hold?”

“Longer than last time.”

“Don’t show off.”

“I’m not.” She wasn’t. There was nothing in this that felt like showing off. It felt like the moment in a cold pool when your body stopped fighting the water and the water stopped being cold, when the line between you and the thing you were in went thin and undefended. The pressure behind her sternum found the next level and climbed into her throat. Her voice, when it came, was lower. “The join’s not one piece. Two pieces. They key into each other.”

The pencil moved. She watched it move. That was the part she would not be able to explain to the Court, to her sister, to anyone with a face—that there was watching, and there was the hand, and the gap between them had gone quiet and wide.

“Two pieces,” Mac repeated. He had stopped writing. She heard the pen stop. “Keying.”

“Like a—” The word came up from a part of her brain that had filed manifests for eleven years. “Tongue and groove. But round. The tongue’s round. It seats, and then it *turns*.” Her hand drew the turn. A

small arc with a single hard tick at the end of it, the tick she did not decide to make, the tick that was already on the paper before she registered her wrist moving. “When it turns, the two curves meet. That’s the join closing. The door isn’t open or shut. It’s keyed or unkeyed.”

“Where does it turn from?”

“What?”

“The tongue. To turn it, you need purchase. A lever. A key. What turns it?”

She looked at the lower left quadrant. The two pieces. The round tongue seated in the round groove. She looked for the lever, the slot, the bar, the thing that would let a hand turn the tongue, and there was no hand. There was no slot. There was no purchase for anything that gripped.

Heat flooded up into the base of her skull and she made a sound she didn’t mean to make.

“Mara.”

“It turns from inside.” The pressure at the crown of her head was a band tightening, the way her hatband used to feel on the manifest floor in August. “There’s no purchase because it doesn’t turn from outside. The lever is—” She stopped. Her hand had drawn a small spiral inside the round tongue, four lines coiling in toward a center, and she had not drawn a spiral in her life, she drew boxes and tables and org charts, she did not draw *spirals*, and the spiral on the page was tightening exactly the way the band at her crown was tightening. “It turns from inside the join. From the center. The center is—”

The taste came into the back of her throat first. Iron. Warm.

“Out,” Mac said. Not loud. The flat went out of his voice and the man came back into it. “Cool-down. Now. Count of four. You’re done.”

“I’m not—”

“You’re bleeding. Count of four, in.”

She got the pencil down on the table and put two fingers under her nose and they came away red. Not a lot. A bright clean line of it, the way her left nostril always went first, the way it had gone in the Consulta Medica baseline with Lena's leads on her scalp and a clipboard of numbers.

Count of four, in. Hold. The held part wanted to stay long and she made it short on purpose, brought it down, brought herself down, let the column of heat in her chest break apart and dissipate like a held note when the bow lifts. Mac had a fast-food napkin pressed into her hand before she'd asked for one.

"Forward, not back," he said. "Pinch."

"I know how a nosebleed works."

"Then do it."

She pinched. She tipped. The carpet swam in close and resolved, individual fibers, a cigarette burn shaped like the state of Florida. The heat went out of her sacrum and left the ordinary ache behind, the chair-ache, the thirty-six-year-old-spine ache. Her hands had started to shake, which they always did on the way down, the adrenaline arriving late to a party that was already over.

Across the lot, the tan car had not moved. The man in it did not know that a woman forty yards away had just bled onto a napkin from drawing the inside of a door. The bored, ordinary fact of him steadied her more than the breathing had.

"How long," she said into the napkin.

Mac looked at his sheet. He'd been keeping time in the corner, tick marks in a row. He always kept time. "Four minutes ten. Last time you broke at one fifty."

"More than double."

"More than double." He set the pen down very carefully, squared

to the edge, and she understood the carefulness was him not saying something. “Lena had a word for the trace. The held part. She said the longer you hold it clean, the more it looks like the people who do this forty years. The good ones.”

“And the cost.”

“The cost is normal.”

“The cost is a nosebleed and I held it twice as long and the cost was the same nosebleed.” She took the napkin away and checked it and pinched again. “That’s not normal. That’s the cost going down. Per minute.”

Mac didn’t answer. He was looking at the page.

She followed his eyes to it. The door, the frame that framed nothing, the band of two curves, and in the lower left quadrant the join she’d refined across five sessions until it was the cleanest thing she’d ever drawn—the round tongue, the round groove, the small hard tick of the turn. And inside the tongue, the spiral. Four lines coiling into a center she had not finished, because she’d started bleeding before her hand got there.

“You drew the turn,” Mac said.

“I drew a lot of things.”

“No. The other times, you drew the join. The two pieces. You never drew what *closes* it.” He put one knuckle near the spiral without touching the paper, the way men point at evidence they’ve learned not to smudge. “Five sessions you’ve drawn a door with a join I never managed. Tonight you drew the join with a *mechanism* in it. You drew how it works.”

“It doesn’t work. There’s no purchase. I told you. No lever, no slot, nothing to grip.”

“And you drew that too.” His voice stayed flat but his hand wasn’t quite steady when he drew it back. “You drew that it turns from inside.

From a center. With no hand on it.”

The shake had reached her knees now. She planted her feet flat on the carpet and pressed down through her heels, an old trick from the manifest floor, anchor the body and the noise in the head comes down a notch. The fibers of the carpet. The Florida-shaped burn. The hum of the ice machine getting ready to cycle again.

“You know what that means,” Mac said.

“I drew something I can’t have known.”

“You drew it five times. The first was a hinge in a margin nobody saw you draw. Tonight you drew the inside of the hinge.” He sat back on the bed. The springs took his weight with a complaint. “Thirty years I drew the outside of that door, Kincaid. Four hundred sessions. I got the arch. I got the band. Every time my pencil came to that corner my hand quit. Told myself the target was blurred there. The target wasn’t blurred. *I* was. Couldn’t hold the tone long enough to get down into it.”

“And I held it four minutes ten.”

“You held it four minutes ten and you bled less than you bled at one fifty.” He looked at her, and there was nothing in his face she could file under reassurance. “It’s not practice making the bleeding worse. It’s practice making the bleeding *cheaper*. The thing’s getting—”

He stopped.

“Say it,” she said.

“Easier.” He said it like a man reading a casualty figure. “It’s getting easier.”

She sat with that.

The napkin had gone stiff in her hand. Outside, an engine turned over—not the tan car, something farther off, a delivery truck on the county road, mundane, the world doing its four-a.m. business—and

she felt her whole body brace for the tan car to move, and it didn't, and the bracing drained out of her and left her tired in a way that had nothing to do with the hour.

She had sat in this chair five times now telling herself she was here for the join, for the drawing, for the thing the program wanted, that she was running an experiment with herself as the apparatus, and the apparatus was unreliable, and the data was contaminated, and the cost was a nosebleed that proved the contamination was *physical*, which was the only thing that had let her keep doing it.

The cost was supposed to go up. That was the deal. That was how she'd talked herself down the stairs into this every time—*it hurts more the harder I push, ergo it's strain, ergo it's the body, ergo it's nothing.*

It was getting easier.

She didn't have a folder for that.

"The spiral," she said. Her voice came out steadier than she felt, which Mac would clock and not mention. "I want to finish it."

"Not tonight. You bleed when you go back in within the hour. We learned that."

"Not going back in. From memory. Now. While my hand still has the angle."

He watched her a moment. Then he slid the sheet across the table and put the pencil in her open hand, and the placing of it was its own kind of answer.

She looked at the four coiled lines tightening toward the unfinished center. Her hand knew the angle. That was the part she could not say to anyone with a face—not that she'd seen the center, because she hadn't, she'd bled out before she reached it. But her wrist held the geometry the way a hand holds a route it has walked once in the dark. She set the pencil to the end of the fourth coil and brought it in, one turn tighter, and stopped.

The center wasn't a point. The lines didn't converge. They passed through.

She didn't draw the rest. She lifted the pencil and set it down, squared to the long edge, the way Mac squared his.

"It doesn't close on a point," she said. "It closes on a hole."

Mac didn't write it down. He looked at the door she'd drawn—the frame around nothing, the join she'd given him that he'd never given himself, the spiral that turned from inside on no hand at all—and then he looked out through the gap in the drapes at the tan car under the dead lamp, where a man was waiting to be told what to do about the two of them.

"They want the hand that drew this," he said. "Now you've drawn the part of it that works."

The ice machine kicked on down the breezeway and began, patiently, to make more ice than anyone in this motel would ever need.

Classified Hinge

The basement smelled of cold solder and mildew, the particular damp of a Pennsylvania foundation that had never once been dry. Mac's cousin had finished half of it sometime in the nineties — drop ceiling, brown carpet squares, a workbench bolted to the cinderblock — then stopped, the way men stop, and left the other half raw. A water heater ticked in the dark. Above them, through the joists, the cousin moved around his kitchen, doing the loud, deliberate things a man does to convince a house he is alone in it.

Mara sat on an overturned milk crate with the steel box between her feet and did not touch the sketches.

She had promised herself an hour without looking at them. She was failing the promise the way she failed all of them, by increments, by reaching for the lid and then making her hand do something else. She made it find the burner phone instead. No bars in the basement. She'd known that and checked anyway.

"He's late," she said.

"He's careful." Mac was in the good chair, a vinyl recliner with the footrest jammed up, his ankles crossed and gray. He hadn't slept. Neither had she. The session had burned through whatever the motel and the drive had left them, and now they were both running on the thin chemical hum that comes after, the kind you can't bank and can't refuse. "Careful is slow. You want him fast, you get the wrong man through the door."

“I want him here.”

“Same difference, to him.” Mac turned his head against the headrest. “Lena doesn’t move when she’s watched. She moves when the watcher’s bored. Takes a day to read.” He let his eyes close. “She’s been reading it.”

The watcher is bored. Mara kept the phrase to herself.

The cousin’s name was Dale and he was ex-Navy and he asked no questions, which Mara had decided to find suspicious and then decided not to, because suspicion was a tax she couldn’t afford on every man who fed them. He had given them the basement and a hot plate and a working printer on the bench, a cheap inkjet the size of a toaster, and that last thing had mattered more than the rest combined. Lena had said so on the one call they’d risked. *Don’t tell me where you are. Tell me you have a printer.*

So they had a printer, and a man upstairs convincing his house he was alone, and they waited.

The knock came at the basement’s outside hatch, the bulkhead doors that opened to the yard. Two, pause, one. Dale’s pattern. Mac was up before Mara, faster than a man his age and his night had any right to be, and at the bottom of the stairs with the steel box already in his hand — he’d taken it off her feet without her feeling it go.

It was Lena who came down, not Dale.

She came down sideways, the way you come down stairs you don’t trust, one hand on the cinderblock, the other holding a brown accordion folder against her chest like something that might spill. She was thinner than the last time. The clinic pallor was gone and a road pallor had replaced it, grayer, with sleep debt stacked in the hollows under her eyes. She’d cut her hair or had it cut for her — shorter, blunt, the way you do when a salon is a paper trail.

She didn’t look at Mac. She looked at Mara.

“Four minutes,” she said. No greeting. “He told me on the phone. Four.”

“Mac timed it.”

“I know Mac timed it. That’s why I believe it.” Lena reached the bottom and stood, breathing. “Eight years I ran feedback on viewers who’d kill to hold ninety seconds. Had a man — good man, Fort Meade, twenty years — break a vessel in his eye reaching for two.” She set the folder on the workbench. Her hand was shaking, fine and fast, and she pressed it flat to stop it. “You did four with a nosebleed. And got *better* doing it.” She looked at her own pressed hand. “I keep wanting to write it down. That’s the part that scares me. That my first instinct’s still the clipboard.” She made herself look at Mara instead of the folder. “That’s not a viewer. That’s a coupling.”

“You said don’t grade it yet.”

“I’m not grading the session.” Lena’s mouth did something tired. “I’m grading us. We’re the experiment now.”

She undid the elastic on the folder. Mac came around the workbench and set a battery lantern on its end so the cone of it fell across the surface, and in that hard white light Lena slid out the first thing, which was a single page, and Mara saw it was not a document.

It was a photograph of a screen.

You could tell because the moiré was there, the faint banding where a phone camera fights a monitor’s refresh, and the corner of the page held a sliver of someone’s desk — a coffee ring, the edge of a keyboard, a sticky note gone illegible in the reduction. Lena had photographed a classified display and then printed the photograph on a strip-mall inkjet, and every one of those steps was a felony and a degradation, and the image had survived both well enough to read.

It was an architectural rendering. Engineering, not art. The flat ortho projection of something seen from the side, with the gray-on-

gray shading software gives a solid model when nobody's bothered to set the light.

"Where," Mac said. Just the one word.

"Contract review server." Lena didn't look up from it. "Not the program's. A subcontractor's. Structural firm — tunnels, pressure vessels. They don't ask what's at the end of the tunnel." She tapped the page without touching it. "Tagged for a fabrication review. Somebody's *building* this." A breath. "Or the doors to get to it."

Mara made herself read it as a system before she let it be anything else.

It was a frame. A rectangular aperture in a thicker mass, the mass hatched the way you hatch rock or poured mass concrete, the aperture rebated into it like a hatch into a hull. And in the lower left of the frame, where the rendering software had given it more polygons than anywhere else — because that was the part that *did* something — there was a join.

A round tongue seated in a round groove. Keyed.

Mara stopped breathing in the ordinary way and started breathing in the session way, four counts, without deciding to.

"Don't," Mac said quietly, at her shoulder. "Not here. Just look."

She looked. The key was a spiral. The rendering showed it the way an engineering drawing shows a thread it doesn't want to leave to imagination — section lines, a callout, the little tooth-by-tooth honesty of a thing meant to be machined to a tolerance. The spiral turned in toward the center. And at the center it did not close.

The lines passed through a hole.

She had drawn that. Six hours ago, in a motel, post-session, from memory, with a nosebleed drying stiff on her lip, she had completed a spiral that did not converge on a point because it converged on an absence — lines that went *through*. She had thought, completing it,

that she'd gotten it wrong. That a spiral should close. That she'd drawn a flaw.

It was on a contractor's server as a feature.

"Mara." Lena was watching her face, not the page. "When did you draw the inner key."

"The date on this first."

"I'm asking you to —"

"The *date*." Her voice came out flatter than she wanted, the records officer's voice, the one that had gotten her unpersoned because it would not soften for anyone. "Provenance before claim. You taught me that. You and Rome both."

Lena's shoulders came down. She turned the page over. On the back she'd written in pencil, small, the metadata she'd been able to photograph alongside the image: a file path, a revision number, a timestamp. She put her thumbnail under the timestamp.

The drawing's last revision predated Mara's session by nine days.

For a moment the basement did its ordinary work around her. The water heater ticked. Dale's footsteps crossed the kitchen overhead, paused at what was probably the sink, went on. The lantern hummed at the bottom of its register, the sixty-cycle whine of cheap electronics, and Mara held onto it because it was a sound that meant nothing and she needed, just then, a sound that meant nothing.

She read the timestamp again, then the revision number, then the path, in order, the way you check a manifest line against itself before you trust any one field of it. The numbers did not change for being read twice. Nine days. She set her thumb where Lena's had been, on the digits themselves, because she needed the contact, because a date you can touch is a date you can argue with and she wanted very badly to argue with this one.

She had drawn the mechanism from inside her own skull. The mechanism existed on a server she had never seen, in a revision finalized nine days before her hand moved. She had not seen the drawing. The drawing had not seen her. They had arrived at the same hole from opposite ends of a process that was not supposed to have two ends.

The Typhoon, she thought. September of '79. Mac's man sketches a double hull and angled tubes and a scale that makes the NSC staff laugh him out of the room, and four months later the satellite comes back and the satellite is not laughing. The sketch before the boat. That was the story Mac had told her like scripture, in his strip-mall office, the night this started. She had believed it the way you believe a thing in a story — provisionally, generously, for the duration of the telling.

She did not believe this provisionally. This was on the bench in front of her with a coffee ring in the corner.

"The sketch knew before the satellite," she said. Out loud, to no one, and her own voice surprised her, low and even, because the body had decided to be even when the rest of her couldn't.

"It always did," Mac said. "That's the part nobody could sell. The brass could swallow far-seeing — old as the species, that. A man sees a thing across a distance, fine. What they choked on" — he set two fingers on the bench, not the page, the bench — "was the clock. He saw it before there was a thing to see. They had a word for that. *Unacceptable*. So they struck the word and kept the man."

"Don't." Lena's voice had an edge now. "Not the elder-statesman thing, Ray. Not at her. Not tonight."

"I'm not doing anything at her." But he stepped back from the bench, ceding it, and Mara understood that the two of them had had this argument before, in some room she hadn't been in, about whether wonder was a thing you protected her from or fed her. Neither of them had won it. They were not going to win it in a basement.

She looked back at the page because the page was the only thing that didn't have an opinion.

“It closes from inside,” she said. Reading it now, the way you read a system, the way that was hers and not theirs and never had been theirs. “The groove’s machined for the tongue but there’s no purchase on the outside face. No flats. No fitting. You can’t put a tool on it from out here.” She let her finger trace a centimeter above the rendering, the way Mac had taught her not to touch the original because skin oil is provenance too. “You’d grab it, you’d find nothing to grab. The spiral’s the actuator and the spiral turns toward the hole and the hole’s on the *far* side of the frame. There’s no mechanism on this side. Whoever built it didn’t want it opened from out here. They wanted it answered.”

The basement was quiet.

“That’s the part I never got,” Mac said, and his voice had gone somewhere she hadn’t heard it go — not the elder-statesman register Lena had warned him off, something thinner under it. “Four hundred sessions. Thirty years. Got the frame. Got the rock around it. Got close enough to the join to know there was a join. And every time I reached the key it was —” He stopped. Worked his jaw. “A wall. Like reading a clock face from the back. I knew the hands moved. Couldn’t see the numbers.”

“You needed someone the door would answer,” Lena said. “We had a name for it that wasn’t a name. Eight years and I never got a viewer to it. Rome has a word — *inexplicable*, after they’ve ruled out everything that isn’t.” She looked at the page. “I always thought ours was a failure of protocol. It was a failure of casting.”

“Casting.” Mac said it slowly, like he was setting it down to see if it held. He looked at Mara, and there was no comfort in it, none of the strip-mall warmth he’d recruited her with. “Yeah. That’s what they figured out. Long before us.” He stopped. “The EID. In the tape.” Another stop, longer, his jaw working. “Never about your records. I told myself it was about your records.” He shook his head once, small. “It was a casting call. They were auditioning nervous systems and yours read the part.”

Mara stood up off the milk crate because sitting had become impossible. She walked the short, raw width of the basement — water heater, fuse box, a shelf of paint cans gone to skin — and walked it back, and the moving helped the way moving always helped, the body solving what the mind kept double-spending.

“If they have the drawing,” she said, “they don’t need me.”

“They have the *lock*,” Lena said. “Always have. The hand that drew it without being shown it — that’s the one thing they can’t fabricate.” She pulled the second item from the folder, and the third — more pages, but these were text, redacted, the black bars laid down generous and absolute.

Mara picked up the redacted pages. She was good at redacted pages. It was the one skill the whole catastrophe of her career had honed to an edge — reading the shape of what the black bars protected by the shape of the black bars themselves, the way a tooling mark tells you the tool. Most of it was procurement language, the deadening grammar of a budget line that has learned to describe a miracle as a deliverable.

But the redactors had missed something, the way redactors always do, because they redact for content and forget that content has a skeleton. A logistics window. A shipping schedule for the fabricated assembly, the door itself, the thing on the server made real and crated and routed. Everything around the dates was black. The structure of the dates was not.

She read it the second time before she’d finished reacting to the first, the procedural mind running ahead of the rest of her, and she heard her own breath change and put it back the way Mac had taught her.

“Ships in eleven days,” she said. “Air, not sea. The weights — they’re flying it. You don’t fly a pressure assembly that size unless your window’s closing.” She turned the page so the lantern caught the one line they’d failed to bury, a sector designator she’d seen before in another

life, on another manifest, the one that had ended her. “Routes through McMurdo. The downlink sector. The blank one.” She set the page down very precisely, squaring it to the edge of the bench, because her hands needed a small correct task. “Window’s solar. Quiet sun. Opens once a year and it opens soon. They’re not building the door for someday.”

“Days,” Mac said. “You said days.”

“Days.” Mara looked up. “Not weeks. The Antarctic window’s days.”

Upstairs, Dale’s footsteps stopped.

Not paused — stopped, mid-floor, the specific arrest of a man who has heard something through a window he was pretending not to watch. The three of them in the basement went still by reflex, by the old animal arithmetic, and into that stillness came the sound from the yard: a car, slowing, the deliberate creep of a vehicle that knows the address and is checking the house against it. Tires over gravel at a speed that wasn’t passing.

It went by. It did not stop. The engine note Dopplered down the road and away and did not turn around, which was worse than turning around, because a car that stops is a man who’s found you and a car that crawls past and keeps going is a team that’s confirming an address for someone else.

“Second tonight,” Lena said. She hadn’t moved. “One on the county road when Dale brought me in. Tan. Sat at the feed store and didn’t buy feed.”

“They’re not coming down here,” Mac said. “They’re drawing the box. They’ll close it when it’s clean.” He was already moving, already gathering — the redacted pages back into the folder, the photograph of the rendering last, his hands quick and economical with the muscle memory of a man who has packed to leave fast in worse places than a cousin’s basement. “We don’t have eleven days. We have however long it takes them to decide the box is clean. And a tan car that didn’t buy feed says they’re close.”

Mara took the photograph back out of his hands before he could fold it away.

She looked at the hole one more time. The spiral that turned toward an absence. The lines that passed through instead of meeting. The thing she had drawn from the inside of a motel and her own skull, that a contractor had drawn from the inside of a budget, nine days apart, neither having seen the other, both arriving at the same place a door is answered and not opened.

“It knew,” she said again. Quiet. Plain. The way you say a true thing you’ve stopped arguing with.

Then she folded the photograph along Mac’s crease, because the crease was already there and her hands wanted the small correct task, and she put it in the steel box with the thirty-one sketches and the one that was hers, and she closed the lid, and the latch caught with the flat institutional click of a thing that locks from the outside.

“Pack the printer,” she said. “We’ll need it on the ice.”

The Card Turns

The basement smelled of damp concrete and machine oil. Dale's workbench ran the length of the far wall, and above it a fluorescent tube buzzed at a pitch that lived just under hearing. Mara had been listening to it for an hour. She had begun, without deciding to, to use it.

"Once more," Mac said. He sat on a stool by the dehumidifier, hands folded over the head of his cane, watching her the way he watched everything now — like a man counting his remaining matches. "Coordinate's sealed. Lena has it."

Lena stood by the stairs with the inner envelope, not looking at it. She had her phone out, screen black, thumb on the volume key. Upstairs, Dale's boots crossed the kitchen and stopped at the front window. They had been stopping at the window every four minutes for the last half hour.

"Sedan's back," he'd said, the last time. He hadn't said anything since.

Mara put the clipboard on her knees. Cheap printer paper, a carpenter's pencil because that was what the basement had. Her hands were steady, which surprised her, because nothing else was.

"You're running this hot," Lena said. Not a warning. A measurement. "No cool-down. No baseline. Session room, I'd refuse it."

"It's not a session room."

"No." Lena's thumb moved on the volume key, off it, on it. "It's the

worst conditions you'll ever work under. Which is what they'll put you in down there. So." She glanced at the stairs. "Do it badly. I want to see badly."

Mac said nothing. He'd stopped arguing for protocol somewhere around the second sedan. He was letting the women run it now, and that letting-go had its own weight, like a man stepping off the side of a boat.

Mara closed her eyes.

There was no ritual to it anymore, which Lena said was wrong, which was probably wrong, but the body had learned the shortcut and would not unlearn it for politeness. The fluorescent hum first. She let it sit behind her eyes and then dropped under it, the way you drop under a wave instead of taking it in the chest. The hum thinned. Then the cold came up through the soles of her feet — not the basement's cold, which was real and damp, but the other cold, the dry flat cold that had no smell and no edges and went on past the limit of the room.

She had stopped being frightened of it on the motel floor with her nose bleeding. Now it was just the door she went through to get to work.

"Tell me what you have," Lena said, very quiet.

"Flat." Her own voice came back to her from a distance, dry, procedural, the only register she trusted. "Horizon's wrong. Too far. No curve."

"Keep going."

"Cold's dry. There's —" She stopped. There was always the temptation here to perform, to fill silence, and the temptation was the enemy; Mac had drilled that into her, the discipline of saying only what was actually present. "Surface under me. Not flat. Worked. Tooled."

Upstairs, Dale's boots moved to the side window.

"Structure." She drew without opening her eyes, which she shouldn't

have been able to do and now could, the pencil finding the page by feel. A frame. The same frame, always the same frame, the one her hand had drawn in a strip mall and a motel and the back seat of a moving car. Rounded at the top, squared at the foot, set into the worked floor at a join she had never been able to make come out right.

The join came out right.

She felt it go right under the pencil the way you feel a key seat in a lock — the small surrender of metal that means *this is the one*. Her hand kept moving. The spiral, inside the frame, anti-clockwise, tightening toward a center that was not a center but an absence, a clean dark hole the size of a thumbprint where the spiral wanted to end and didn't.

"Mara." Lena's voice had changed. Flattened. Mara registered it and did not surface.

"There's a tone," Mara said. "Under it. Held." She was sweating now, the upper lip, the small of the back, the heat coming up through the sacrum the way it always did just before the cost arrived. "Not loud. Doesn't stop."

"Stay with the structure. Not the tone. The structure."

The pencil hesitated.

Here was the place. In the strip mall she had stopped here. In the motel she had stopped here. The spiral closed and the hole sat at its heart and the frame held it, and that was the whole of it, that was everything she had ever brought back, and her hand had always lifted off the page at this point because there was nothing more there to draw.

There was more there to draw.

She didn't decide it. The hand decided it. The carpenter's pencil moved to the inside edge of the frame, the left side, two-thirds of the way up, and made a mark she did not plan and did not understand — a small detail at the join of frame and spiral, a recess and a protruding

tongue, the tongue not centered in the recess but offset, canted, with a second smaller bite taken out of its lower corner. Asymmetric. Ugly. Wrong-looking, the way a real thing is wrong-looking and a designed thing is not.

The pencil stopped.

The heat in her sacrum crested and broke and she felt the familiar warm slide and didn't bother to catch it; the blood reached her lip and she let it. Her eyes were still closed. The flat cold held a moment longer and then it was gone, just gone, the way it always went, leaving the basement and the dehumidifier and the buzzing tube and the smell of oil.

She opened her eyes.

"Nosebleed," she said, to no one, and pressed the back of her hand to it.

Nobody answered.

She looked up. Lena had come off the stairs. She was standing over the clipboard with her phone forgotten in her hand and her face had gone very still, the particular stillness of a person doing arithmetic they don't want the answer to. Mac had not moved from the stool but he had both hands on the cane head now and his knuckles were white.

"What," Mara said. Her own voice sounded wrong in her ears, thick. "What."

Lena crouched. She set her phone on the concrete, screen up, and Mara saw that it wasn't black anymore. It had been recording, or photographing, or both — and over the lens, brought up while Mara had her eyes shut, was an image. The contractor rendering. The one from the accordion folder, the engineering drawing whose last revision predated this session by nine days, the one Lena had not shown her, had specifically and deliberately not shown her, had kept face-down in the folder all night for exactly this.

Lena turned the phone so it sat beside the clipboard.

The frame matched. It had matched in the motel; that was old news, that was last night's astonishment, already metabolized. The spiral matched. The hole matched.

The detail matched.

The recess and the offset tongue, the second bite out of the lower corner — it was there on the rendering, two-thirds up the inside left edge of the frame, drawn by a contractor's CAD package to a tolerance, with a callout leader and a dimension Mara couldn't read at this resolution but could see was there, a number assigned to a feature, because the feature was a real feature on a real object that was being fabricated in a real building eleven days from being crated.

She had drawn it with a carpenter's pencil by feel with her eyes shut.

Mara looked at the two images side by side and her mind did the thing it was built to do, the only thing it had ever been good for, the thing that had gotten her fired — it reached for provenance. Chain of custody. Who saw the rendering, when, where, could she have seen it, did the folder leave Lena's sight, was there a reflection, a glimpse, a moment in the car, in the basement, when the corner of the page —

There hadn't been.

She ran it again, faster, the way she'd run the manifests, looking for the leak, looking for the unsealed envelope, looking for the contamination that would make this ordinary, because ordinary was where she lived, ordinary was the floor she stood on, and her whole professional life had been the act of finding the boring true thing under the exciting false one.

There was no leak.

She ran it a third time and there was still no leak and on the third pass her mind, which had nowhere else to go, simply stopped.

The basement was very quiet. The fluorescent tube buzzed. Upstairs Dale's boots crossed to the front window and stopped.

She did not feel the floor go. That was the part she would not be able to explain, later, to anyone — there was no vertigo, no swoop, no opening of the chest. She had braced for the floor to go and it didn't. What happened instead was smaller and much larger. The room stayed exactly where it was. The clipboard on her knees, the blood drying on her lip, the dehumidifier ticking, Mac's white knuckles, the cheap printer paper — all of it stayed precisely itself, precisely ordinary, and into that ordinary room came the plain fact that the world was bigger than she had agreed to let it be.

Not a feeling. A fact. Sized like a fact, dry like a fact, the way *the cargo is a third too heavy to be fuel* was a fact — something true whether or not she wanted it, something that did not care about her clearance or her competence or her good name, something on the record.

Her hand had reached past the edge of the room and brought back a number assigned by a stranger to a feature on a machine she had never seen.

She set the pencil down on the clipboard. Square to the page. Her hand was steady doing it, which she noted, because she noted everything.

"Mara," Lena said, the clinical gone out of her. "Breathe."

"I'm breathing." She was. Slowly. The blood had stopped at her lip. "How long."

"Three forty." Lena looked at the phone, the recording. "You didn't open the envelope. Still sealed. It's in my pocket." She said it the way you'd recite an alibi, because she was a scientist and she was building the chain of custody as fast as Mara would have built it, and the two of them were doing the same desperate honest arithmetic from opposite sides. "Face-down. Under the folder. Folder under my coat. Mara." Lena's voice cracked, very slightly, on the second syllable of her name. "There's no version where you saw it."

"I know," Mara said.

And she did. That was the thing. She knew it the way she knew her own EID, the way she knew the eleven flight numbers, the way she knew the cost code that crossed into DOE — she knew it with the boring certainty of a woman who checks her work, and the certainty did not crack when she pushed on it, and she had been pushing on it for ten seconds now with everything she had.

Mac spoke for the first time.

“September seventy-nine,” he said. His voice was rough. He wasn’t looking at the clipboard. He was looking at her, at her face, the way you look at someone the moment after a wave takes them and before they come up. “He drew the boat. Double hull. The tubes. Eighteen of them, angled. Scale all wrong, too big, no boat that size — and a man in a good suit in a good room told him there was no such boat.” Mac’s thumb moved over the worn head of the cane. “January they blasted the channel. The boat came out and it was every line he’d drawn and it was too big after all. Nobody ever said sorry. They just stopped laughing.”

The fluorescent tube buzzed.

“I’ve known forty years what he did was real,” Mac said. “Knowing it and seeing it are not the same animal.”

Mara looked down at the two images. At the offset tongue. At the second bite taken out of the lower corner, the asymmetry that no draughtsman would invent and no machine would generate by default — the kind of feature you only get when a real thing has to fit another real thing.

She had spent the worst year of her life being told she’d misread the system. That she’d seen patterns that weren’t there. That her gift — and they had used that word, *gift*, like a thing to be confiscated — had curdled into the very thing it was supposed to guard against, the apophenia of the crank, the clerk who finds the cabal in the freight bills. She had half-believed it. She had lain awake at the bottom of the contractor blacklist and entertained the possibility that she was

exactly the woman they had named.

The page on her knee said otherwise, and the page did not care whether she believed it, which was how she knew to believe it.

Upstairs, Dale's boots came back across the kitchen. They reached the head of the stairs.

"Two now," Dale called down, level, ex-Navy flat. "Second one's across the Hendersons'. Not getting out. Not leaving either."

"How long," Lena said, already moving, scooping the phone off the concrete.

"The morning. Maybe less." A pause. "I've seen a box drawn before. This is the side that closes last."

Lena looked at Mac. Mac looked at Mara.

Mara was still looking at the page.

She picked it up off the clipboard. Held it under the buzzing light. The contractor's rendering on the phone, the carpenter's-pencil drawing in her hand — she laid the phone over the corner of the page so the offset tongues sat one above the other, hers and theirs, the asymmetric ugly true detail in two hands that had never met, nine days and a sealed envelope and the whole apparatus of provenance between them, and they were the same.

She had wanted, for a year, only to be believed. To stand in front of someone with authority and have them look at her paper and say *you were right*. She had built her entire shattered life around the wanting of that one thing.

She turned the page over in her hands. There was nobody in this basement with authority. There was a broken old man, a frightened scientist, an ex-sailor at the top of the stairs, and two cars outside that meant the opposite of belief.

"Okay," she said.

That was all. *Okay*. She heard how small it was. She let it be small. The plainest word she had, against the largest thing that had ever happened to her, and the smallness of it was the only honest size.

She slid the page into the brown accordion folder, behind the rendering, into the chain of custody where it would be findable later by anyone who knew how to ask a folder a question. Then she stood, and her knees took her weight, and the cold flat horizon was gone and the damp basement was just a basement.

“Pack the printer,” she said. “Lena, you carry the folder. Doesn’t leave your body. Mac —”

“I can walk,” Mac said, before she could spend a kindness on him. He pushed up off the stool on the cane and made it look only mostly like work.

Dale’s boots were already moving in the kitchen, the particular efficiency of a man who keeps a go-bag by the door and hopes to die of boredom. The dehumidifier ticked. The fluorescent tube buzzed at its pitch just under hearing, and Mara found she could still feel where it lived behind her eyes, the shortcut the body had learned and would not unlearn now for anyone.

She had walked into a strip mall ten days ago certain she was the only sane person in a building full of cranks, holding her skepticism in front of her like a clearance badge.

She zipped the folder shut and tucked it under Lena’s arm and put her hand flat on it for one second, on the cheap paper inside that her hand had drawn, and then she let it go.

“Out the hatch,” she said. “Now.”

Upstairs, a car door opened.

Exfil

The hatch came up out of the lawn like a coffin lid set wrong, and the morning was gray and wet and full of the wrong kind of quiet.

Mara went first because the bag was on her shoulder and the bag was the thing that mattered. Behind her Dale fed Mac up through the gap, hand under the old man's armpit, Mac taking the rungs of the iron ladder with his cane hooked over his wrist and a sound coming out of him low and even that wasn't quite a word. Then Lena, the evidence case clamped to her chest, her face washed of everything but the next three feet of motion.

The treeline behind the house was sixty yards of cut grass. They would not make it in a sprint. So they didn't sprint. Dale had said it twice in the basement, flat, the way you say a thing you've already accepted: walk. Walk like you're getting firewood. Box that closes does it slow, because slow doesn't generate a 911.

They walked.

Mara's hands were steady on the strap. That surprised her in the part of her mind still keeping inventory. The nosebleed had crusted at her septum and she could taste copper at the back of her throat, and her hands were steady, and the sketches were in the bag — all of them but one — and the one that mattered was the one Lena had carried out of the basement in the case, the contractor rendering, the join detail, the thing that proved the world was a size she had refused to grant it.

Sixty yards. Fifty. The grass dragged at their shoes. Mac's breathing

was a metronome at her left shoulder and the cane went *tick* into the wet ground and pulled out *suck* and went *tick* again.

The first car came around the side of the house at thirty yards.

Not fast. That was the thing she would keep, afterward — that it wasn't fast. A dark sedan rolling across Dale's lawn at the speed of a man backing out of a driveway he was unsure of, tires laying flat tracks in the grass, and it stopped between them and the trees and sat there ticking, and a man got out of the passenger side and stood with the door open and his hands where she could see them.

"Dr. Kincaid." He had a voice like a meeting that was running on time. "Wet morning to be walking."

She knew him. Not his name. She had never been given his name, only his diction, on a phone in a motel and once across a folding table, the same voice that had offered her clearance back the way you'd offer a child a chair to stop them climbing on the counter.

"Keep going," Lena said, very low.

"Where," Mac said. He had stopped. He was breathing through his mouth.

Mara stopped too. The bag pulled at her shoulder. Behind them she heard the second car — she didn't turn — the soft crunch of it coming around the other corner of the house, closing the box the way they'd watched it close on Dale's monitor, two sedans and a line of trees and four people in a wet field.

The Handler shut his car door so it didn't bang. He took two steps into the grass and stopped, hands loose, the gesture of a man demonstrating that he carried nothing.

"You've had a long week," he said. "I'd like to make it shorter."

Up close he was younger than the voice. That always threw her. Mid-forties, good coat, the kind of face that had spent a career being

instantly forgotten on purpose. He looked at her, and then at the bag, and then at Mac, and the look he gave Mac was the only thing in him that moved — a flick, a reassessment, *the colonel is still standing, log that* — before it smoothed over.

“Colonel McAllister.” A nod. “You don’t look well.”

“Better company than yours, all night,” Mac said. “It agrees with me.”

The Handler let that pass. He turned the meeting back to Mara, because Mara was the asset and Mac was a line item that had already been written off.

“I’m going to say a number, then make you an offer, and the number is the offer,” he said. “Reinstatement, sealed. The terminations vacated — yours, and the two derived from yours. Full read-in. A salary that will embarrass you. The blacklist becomes a clerical error someone signs away in an afternoon. And the work.” A small pause, perfectly placed. “The work’s the part you actually want, Dr. Kincaid. We both know it. You’d have the rendering in your hands instead of in hers. The next eleven coordinates. A chair in the only room on the planet where what you can do is the point.”

Beside her Mac made a sound that might have been a cough.

“What’s the second part,” Mara said.

“There isn’t one. There’s a condition, and the condition is the offer. We keep the trace.” He said it the way you’d say *we keep the receipts*. “Your sessions, monitored, recorded. The EEG, the somatic profile. Catalogued. We need to understand the coupling, and the only instrument we have for understanding it is you. That’s not a loss of anything. That’s the job.”

The trace. She had been waiting for the trace since the motel. There it was, set down on the wet grass between them like a clean cup of coffee.

“And if I want to think about it,” she said.

“You don’t.” Still pleasant. “I’m not threatening you. I want to be very clear about that. I’m telling you the shape of the thing. Walk into the trees and you’re a fugitive with a stolen badge and a sick old man and a former employee carrying a case full of controlled documents. That ends the only way that ends. Or you get in the car, and by lunch this is a story you tell your sister someday, edited.”

“Don’t talk about my sister,” Mara said, and was surprised at the flatness of it.

“I’m not.” He spread his hands, the empty-handed gesture again. “I’m talking about you having a sister you can still call.”

The second car had stopped behind them. She could hear two doors, soft. Nobody got close. They were professionals; they let the man with the meeting voice do the work, because the work was the cheaper tool.

Mara looked at the trees. Then at the rendering case in Lena’s arms. Then — because the body keeps inventory whether you ask it to or not — at the place on the grass between her shoes where the wet had soaked through, dark, the shape of nothing.

The offer was true. That was the worst of it, the thing she would have to carry into the trees if she went into the trees. It wasn’t a trick. He was offering her the one thing she had wanted since the day they walked her out of the building with a banker’s box and a witness — to be believed, written back into the record, handed the proof in a sealed folder she was finally cleared to open.

To be believed. And catalogued. The trace in a drawer. Her hand owned by the room that owned the door.

“Show me the rendering,” she said to Lena, without turning her head.

Lena didn’t move.

“It’s all right,” Mara said. “Open it.”

Lena thumbed the latches and held the case open against her body so the page faced Mara and not the field. The contractor's drawing, clean CAD lines, the frame and the spiral and the obscene little hole at the center, and there — the join. The offset tongue. The second bite. The asymmetry she had put on a sheet of motel paper an hour ago with a hand she had not been driving.

The Handler watched her look at it. He didn't ask to see. He already had it; he had had it before she was born, or near enough. He watched her face the way you watch a gauge.

"You see," he said quietly. "You've already done the impossible thing. Why be poor about it. Why be hunted. You drew that from inside a sealed envelope. Do you understand what a person who can do that is worth?"

"Yes," Mara said.

It came out simpler than she meant. He took it for assent and she watched him take it, watched the small relaxation around his eyes, the meeting coming in on time.

"I understand exactly what she's worth," Mara said. "You told me. A salary that embarrasses me and a drawer."

"That's not—"

"You want the hand. Not the woman who has it." She heard Mac shift his weight onto the cane. "You'd take it off at the wrist if it kept drawing. You ran a dead man's voice through a tape to put my number in it. Ninety-eight, he's been dead, and you used him to dial. You don't reinstate people. You re-enact them."

The Handler's face did the smooth thing it did. "Dr. Kincaid. I'm offering you the work."

"You're offering me the cage with the work in it." She shifted the bag higher on her shoulder. Her hands were steady. She noted the steadiness without trusting it. "I had a clean version of this once. Paper. The manifests and the cost codes and the downlink lease. I took

them up the chain, the chain said I misread the system. So I know what your believing me is worth. It's a receipt. Vindication's a thing you mail to a dead person."

Nobody moved in the field.

She started to say something else and it wouldn't come the way the rest had. She looked at the rendering instead. The join. Her join. The word she wanted was not *right*. It was the other one, the one she had not had a name for until this week, and even now it wouldn't sit flat on the tongue.

"I don't want to be right," she said, and that was the one that surprised her, because she had thought, for a year, that being right was the whole of what she wanted. "I want to witness. There's a difference. I only just found it out."

"Close it," she told Lena. "Keep it."

The Handler breathed out through his nose and his hands came together at his front, fingers laced, moving an item from the *open* column to the *escalation* column.

"Then I have to take the case," he said. "You understand. The documents are controlled. The rendering is ours. The badge cache is property of the United States government. I can let you walk into the trees — I'd genuinely rather the colonel didn't die in a field, that's the kind of thing that generates an inquiry, and I don't have the headcount this quarter — but I can't have the case leave with you. That's above me. That's a custody thing. You know how it is."

"It's not in the case," Mara said.

He looked at her.

"You photographed it. Of course." A small nod, conceding the move. "Stills on a phone aren't provenance. You know that better than anyone alive. A photograph of a leaked drawing is a photograph of a leak. It

doesn't survive contact with anyone who matters. The original survives. The chain survives. That's why I'm taking the case."

"I know," Mara said.

She didn't reach for it. She didn't tell Lena to reach for it. She stood in the wet grass and let him have the geometry of it, because the geometry was his and she had already decided she didn't want it.

"Take the case," she said.

The Handler blinked. It was the first uncalculated thing he'd done.

"The drawing's not the proof," she said. "I thought it was, four days ago. Sealed rendering, airtight custody, the join nobody could've fed me — that's the kind of proof I used to file. Stamp it, log it, send it up, get told you misread the system. You can have all of it. The page, the cache, the trace if you can catch me." She felt Mac's hand find her sleeve, light, the cane in his other fist. "The proof isn't a document. I'm the proof. And you can't seal me in a drawer, because I'll keep drawing whether you're watching or not. That's the part you don't have a budget line for."

For a moment — one wet, ticking moment — the field was only four people and two cars and a man recalculating.

"Get the case," the Handler said, to the men behind them, without raising his voice.

That was when Mac moved.

He shouldn't have been able to. He was seventy-eight and he hadn't slept and his lungs were a ruin. But he stepped sideways into the line between Mara and the nearest of the men coming up from the second car, and he planted the cane and stood there, an old man in a field with his coat open, and he said, in a voice that had once put green soldiers through a wall by talking:

"Son. You touch that woman, you touch the only thing your program

ever made that worked. You'll be the name on the report that says why you broke it. Think about who reads that report."

The man hesitated. It was half a second. It was nothing.

The other one came in from the side and Mac turned to meet him and the turn was too fast for the body doing it, and Mara heard, more than saw, the crack of a hip or a knee giving, the cane skidding, the old man going down onto one hand in the wet grass with a grunt punched out of him. And the man who'd reached him — reaching for Mara, for the bag, for the case — got a fistful of Mac's open coat instead, and Mac, down on one knee, drove the heel of the cane up into him, blind, and caught him under the chin.

Not hard. Hard enough.

The man staggered back swearing and put his hand to his mouth and it came away red, and for one absurd instant Mara thought *that's Mac's blood*, and then she saw Mac's face and there was blood on Mac too, from the nose, the same somatic tax she'd been paying all week, the old machine overloaded by a thing his body had no business doing at his age.

"Mac—"

"Go," Mac said, from the ground. "Not me they want. North, girl."

North was the trees, and past the trees was a fence, and past the fence Dale had said was a fire road, and the fire road ran to a bridge, and the bridge was a creek that was a county line that was, more importantly, a state line, and the state line was a different field office, a different jurisdiction, an afternoon of phone calls between offices that did not love each other. Dale had drawn it on the back of a feed-store receipt at four in the morning. *Cross here. After this they need a friend they don't have.*

Mara grabbed Mac's coat and hauled. He was heavier than he looked and lighter than he should have been. Dale was there — she

hadn't seen Dale come up from the hatch, Dale had a tire iron and a face like a closed door, and Dale got a shoulder under Mac's other arm, and the Handler said, sharp now for the first time, "Don't — let them go, let them go, nobody fires in a—"

They went into the trees.

It was not a clean exit. Mara would never be able to make it a clean one, in the telling, to her sister or anyone — it was four people falling through wet undergrowth, Mac white and bleeding and swearing in a dead man's cadence, Lena with the case still clamped to her chest because nobody had managed to take it after all, Mara with the bag, Dale half-carrying the colonel and saying *fence, fence, here, foot on the rail*. It was the strap cutting her shoulder and a branch laying her cheek open and the taste of copper and pine. It was the second sedan trying the fire road and finding it gated, and a man on foot losing them in the brush because professionals don't run into thorns for a salary.

The bridge was iron and rust and one lane. The creek under it was brown and ordinary. There was a small green sign on a post on the far side, the kind nobody reads, that said the name of a different county.

They stopped on the far side of it because Mac couldn't go further and because, for reasons none of them said aloud, the far side felt like enough for the moment. Lena got Mac sitting against the bridge rail. His nose had stopped. He was gray and grinning, the worst-looking man in three counties, alive.

"You hit him with a *cane*," Mara said.

"Missed," Mac said. "Aiming higher." He coughed, and it rattled, and he laughed at the rattle. "Submarine," he said, to nobody, to the creek. "Channel's blasted. Boat moves."

Lena had the case open on her knees, checking it the way she checked everything, count and order, the rendering still inside, the join still drawn. She looked up at Mara across it.

"You left it," she said. "The proof. You stood in a field and you

offered him the proof."

"I offered him the page." Mara looked back across the bridge, the way they'd come, the trees on the wrong side of a line on a map. No one followed onto the rust. "He'll flag the cache by noon. Pull the manifests. Have a clean story by lunch — a deranged contractor, a confused old veteran." She wiped her cheek and her hand came away with pine and blood. "He has the documents. We have the days."

She said *days* and meant the window — eleven, then ten, the door in its crate, the air run through McMurdo, the solar quiet, the boat that moves.

"That's not a win," Lena said.

"No," Mara agreed.

Mac put his hand up. She took it and he didn't pull himself up; he just held on, an old man's hand, dry, surprisingly strong.

"Antarctica's that way," he said, and tipped his chin south, toward nothing, toward the brown creek and the iron and a whole continent of ocean past the end of the bridge.

"Eleven days," Mara said.

"Ten," said Lena, who counted everything.

Mara looked south. The water went under the bridge and kept going, the way water does, indifferent, downhill, toward somewhere it had every intention of reaching.

She shouldered the bag.

Ice on the Horizon

The departures board flickered the way old split-flap boards did—a stutter of letters tumbling, a soft chatter like cards shuffled by a machine that didn't care who won. Mara stood under it in the regional terminal at the edge of nowhere, Pennsylvania bleeding into the morning, and read the rows out of habit. Pittsburgh. Charlotte. A delayed hop to Newark that had been delayed since before she got here.

None of them went south. Not the south she meant.

She drank gas-station coffee that tasted of the cup and watched the board cycle. Somewhere past Charlotte, past Santiago, past the last airstrip with a name you could pronounce, there was a runway scraped onto blue ice and a window in the sun that would open and close on a schedule no airline printed. Ten days, Lena had said. Now nine, probably, by the count of the dawn that had crossed the field with them.

She did the arithmetic she always did. Fuel loads. Transit legs. The cargo a third too heavy. The board had no row for that flight and never would, and she stood there anyway, looking at the place where the row should have been, the way she'd once stood over a manifest that listed eleven flights and no return legs.

She was not, she noticed, trying to find a way onto that plane today. That was new. She let it sit.

The storage unit was three exits back, a corrugated box in a row of identical boxes behind a chain-link fence that a teenager buzzed them through without looking up from his phone. Dale had the gate code and the padlock key and the kind of calm that came from having rehearsed a worse version of this morning many times in his head.

Mac couldn't manage the roll-up door. He stood back and let Dale haul it up on its track, bad shoulder and all. The metal screamed. Inside, cold concrete and the smell of stale cardboard and a folding chair Mac lowered himself into one vertebra at a time, his bad hip held out straight, his face the grey of a man running on aspirin and stubbornness.

Lena set the case down by the door. Empty now, of course. The case that had held the rendering rode in a government sedan somewhere, in the custody of a man who'd been polite about taking it. What the case held now was paper—copies, scans, the secondhand ghost of the real thing. Lena guarded it anyway. The chain survives, she'd said on the bridge, and she meant to keep it surviving even when there was less and less to chain.

The far wall was Mac's.

He'd built it over years, in motel rooms and rented cubes like this one, and it had traveled with him in a banker's box, and now Dale and Lena pinned it back up under a bare bulb while Mac watched and told them, in a thread of a voice, what went where. Sketches. Hundreds. Some on graph paper gone soft at the folds, some on the backs of session forms with the coordinate strings still legible in the corner, dates running back forty years. A submarine he'd drawn before there was a submarine. A structure with too many sides. A coastline that didn't match any coastline until you laid it over ice radar nobody was supposed to have.

And in the center, where Dale put it because Mac lifted one finger and aimed it there, the hinge page.

Her page. The one she'd drawn blind, under pressure, in a sealed

room, the one whose margin held a join she had never seen and could not have invented—the detail that had turned over like a card and made the table go quiet and made the world, briefly, a size she'd refused to grant it. Mac had pinned it himself, before, with hands that shook. Now Dale pinned it, and Mac looked at it the way you look at a thing you've waited your whole life to be wrong about and weren't.

"There," he said. "Center."

It looked small on the wall. A strip-mall office, a bare bulb, a sheet of paper with a hole and a spiral and a join in the margin. She'd expected, the first time she let herself imagine this, that it would look bigger. That proof would have a weight you could feel across a room.

It didn't. It was a drawing. It was the drawing of a door she had never been shown, with a mechanism that had to be answered from the inside, and it was pinned to drywall with a brass tack, and it was the truest thing in the room.

Mac caught her looking. He didn't say anything. He just moved his eyes from the page to her and back, once, the whole conversation.

Lena found her by the door a few minutes later, where the cold air came in and the smell of the unit didn't reach. Outside, the chain-link, the teenager, a sky going from grey to a thin, washed blue.

"He needs an X-ray," Lena said. "The hip. Whatever he says."

"He'll say it's a sprain."

"It's not a sprain."

"I know." Mara turned the cup in her hands. It had gone cold. "We'll find someone who doesn't ask for a name."

Lena was quiet. Then: "They have the rendering. The provenance. Everything we—" She stopped. "You handed it over."

"I did."

"I'd have understood. If you'd run."

Mara looked at the wall, at the small page in the center of it. "The case was always the thing they could take," she said. "A drawer's a drawer. They've got drawers all the way to the pole." She drank the cold coffee because it was something to do with her mouth. "You can't seal nine days. That's the sun. They can have the paper. They've still got to thread a flight through weather with a chair on board that only works if somebody sits in it and answers a door from the inside."

"And only one person draws that join."

"Two, eventually." Mara nodded at Mac. "He's slow these days."

Lena didn't laugh, but the corner of her mouth moved, and she let the silence take it, which was its own kind of laughing.

She used to think being right was the whole game.

She'd reported up. She'd built the case with her own hands, manifests and cost codes and the satellite lease that hung a continuous downlink over a sector with no station, and she'd handed it up the chain like a good officer, and the chain had handed *her* back—reassigned, terminated, unpersoned, her name a quiet line on a list that made phones stop returning calls. She'd spent a year believing that if she could only get the paper in front of the right person, in the right order, with the right seals, the institution would have to bend, because the institution claimed to run on paper and she had better paper than they did.

She'd been wrong about which court was bigger.

Standing in a storage unit beside a man who'd drawn a submarine before there was a submarine, she let herself finish the thought she'd been not-finishing since the bridge. The paper had never been the proof. The paper was a record of the proof. The proof was the thing that happened in her hands in a sealed room, the join she couldn't have known, the held tone under the digits that her nervous system

had learned to couple to like an instrument finding the string instead of the gong. That couldn't go in a drawer. That couldn't be terminated. It would keep happening whether the institution was watching or not, the way the sun would open the window over the ice whether anyone filed for the flight.

She did not say any of this aloud. She finished the cold coffee and crushed the cup and dropped it in a bin by the door.

The ledger had been a wall she'd built to keep the size of things out. The wall was down now. The weather got in. So did everything else. She didn't enjoy any of it. She rubbed grit from the corner of her eye and stood there a while longer, not finding a tidier word for it, not wanting one.

Mac wanted his sketches back in the box before they left. Not on the wall, in the box—the wall was for working, the box was for moving, and they were moving. Dale unpinned them in order and Mac took each one in his lap and squared it and laid it in, slow, a librarian putting his own life away in folders.

When Dale reached for the hinge page, Mac said, "That one last."

He held it longer than the others. He turned it to the light, and the spiral caught it, and the hole, and the join in the margin she'd drawn without drawing.

"Forty years," he said. The thread of his voice. "Got close. Got the boat. The structure. Never the join." He laid it in the box on top, face up, where he could see it when he opened the lid. "You don't know what you did."

"I drew a door I'd never seen."

"You answered something," Mac said. "From the inside." He looked up at her, and his eyes were wet in the bare-bulb light, and he did not bother to pretend they weren't. "That's the whole instrument. Everybody else, all of us, we stood outside and pushed. You're the first one

who answered.”

She didn't have a thing to put down against that, so she didn't put anything down. She helped him close the lid. The hip made him hiss when he leaned. Dale took the box.

The board still hadn't found a row for the south.

She stood under it one more time on the way out, while Dale brought the car around and Lena settled Mac into the back seat with a folded jacket against the hip. Pittsburgh. Charlotte. The Newark hop, still delayed, defiant. A new row tumbled into place at the bottom—a charter to somewhere she'd never heard of, blinking, then steady.

Nine days. The sun didn't care that the rendering was in a sedan. The window would open and the window would close, and there was a flight, somewhere south of every row this board would ever print, with a chair on it that only worked if she was in it.

She wasn't getting on a plane today. There was a man with a famous show and a habit of treating three hours of testimony as peer review, and there were people who'd want her on it, and people who'd kill to keep her off it, and a packet of leaked forum scripture that matched her manifests in ways she still hated. There was a clip economy waiting to make a court out of her face. All of that was ahead, in the noise, between here and the ice.

But the ice was on the horizon now. Not on the board. On the horizon. She could feel the direction of it the way you feel south in your sternum on a clear morning, the cold edge of the world pulling.

She had not become a woman who believed easily. She'd become a woman who'd seen the card turn over and hadn't looked away, and there was a difference, and she carried it out into the thin blue morning and got in the car.

The submarine McMoneagle drew before there was a submarine is in the record. So is the board of doctors in Rome whose job is to disprove miracles and who publish when they fail. The ice door is mine. Where the line runs between them is in the Source Notes, and it is worth your two a.m.

The window was open. Nine days. She put her eyes on the horizon and kept them there.

Illustrations

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Places of Awe



Antarctica — the ice the records say has something beneath it.

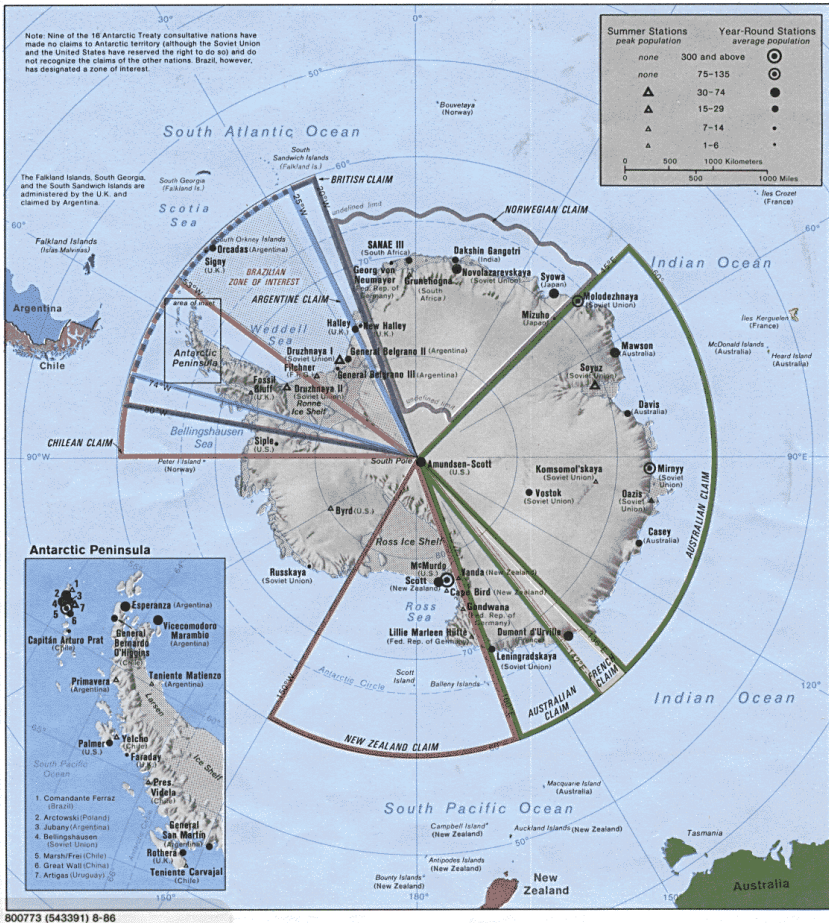
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Antarctica: Research Stations and Territorial Claims



A polar station – the official face of the unofficial story.

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Things of Wonder



An ice cave — the dark the remote-viewer's coordinates point to.

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