

Verdigris

Andries J. Greyling

A STANDALONE NOVEL

VERDIGRIS

the same green is the cure and the rot

ANDRIES J. GREYLING

Foreword

Everything in this book that sounds invented is one turn of a screw past something real.

Fungi mostly cannot grow in us because we run hot; thirty-seven degrees is a wall. A warming world teaches them to climb it — this is already happening, in hospitals, with organisms that did not use to trouble a human body. Copper really does kill microbial life on contact, cheaply, in a way that is very hard to evolve around, which is why we have made door handles of it for a hundred years. It is also, past a dose, a poison that turns you slowly against yourself. Aflatoxins are real and hollow the liver and the mind. Psilocybin is real and, in careful trials, appears to loosen the ego and widen the reach of a person toward other people.

I put those true things in one warm room and asked what they would do.

I do not know whether the thing that happens in this book is an invasion or a mercy. I have written it so that I cannot make you decide either, because I could not decide myself, and I have come to think that not being able to decide is the honest condition — of this story, and of the century that suggested it. We built the heat. The question of whether the Earth is angry or merely warm is a question we are not equipped to answer and cannot stop asking.

Read it in the green.

— *Arjuna Badger Press*

For the ones who were put on the low ground,
and for the green that came back for them first.

One

The first thing you learned in the corps was that safety had a taste, and the taste was blood.

Copper on the back of the tongue, thin and bright, the flavour of a coin held too long in a child's mouth. Ezra Mokwena tasted it now through the filter of his half-mask as the tank on his back came up to pressure, and the taste told him the mist was live, and the live mist told him he would probably not be hollowed today. This was the whole of the religion.

Below them the street fell away toward the harbour in a long grey slot between buildings that had been offices once and were nothing now, and the morning light came off the water the flat white of a thing with no opinion. Woodstock, or what the maps still insisted on calling Woodstock. The sea had taken the low end of it a decade back and given it to the bloom, and the corps came down every third day to argue the line back up the hill a metre or two, the way you might argue with a tide.

"Wrists," said Nomsa.

Ezra turned his hands over. Along the inside of each wrist, where the mist pooled in the wear of the gloves, the skin had gone the soft green of a church roof. Everyone in the corps wore it there first. It was the body keeping its own honest ledger, and the ledger said: *not yet, but counting*. Nomsa's were greener than his. She had eleven years on the crews and the count that went with them, and the green had come up past the heel of her hand toward the pulse, and she looked at it the way she looked at everything, which was as a fact that did not require her feelings about it.

"Green," Ezra said.

"Green," she agreed, which was the corps' word for *good*, for *proceed*, for *you are still yourself this morning*, all of it folded into one syllable the colour of the thing that was slowly killing them so that the faster thing could not.

They went down.

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The work was not dramatic and that was the mercy of it. You walked, and you sprayed, and you did not think about what you sprayed until you had to. The nozzle in Ezra's hands laid the mist ahead of them in a fine hanging veil, and the veil settled on the ferned and furred surfaces of the dead street and did what copper does, which is nothing you can watch and everything. Down at the ionic register, in a world too small to have a horror in it, the metal walked into the growth and unmade the proteins that held it to itself. The bloom did not scream. It did not do anything. It simply stopped being able to be, cell by cell, the way frost stops a garden, and the fern-fine grey of it went slack and wet and then was only mineral again, only wall.

Ezra had a degree that let him see the small murder in detail and a job that required him to commit it, and he had stopped being able to tell whether the degree made the job easier or unbearable. He suspected it depended on the day. Today he watched the copper take a stand of pale fruiting bodies off a windowsill—they had come up overnight, delicate, the tan-and-blue of a mushroom he could have named in three languages—and he felt the thing he was not supposed to feel, which was that he had just killed something that had done nothing but grow toward the light in a place people had abandoned.

He sprayed the next sill. You did not get to keep the feeling. The feeling was a luxury of people who were not, at that moment, standing between a city and the thing that emptied it.

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They found the host in the fourth building.

You always found them low and inward, in the damp core where the mist reached last, and you found them by the smell before the eye—not rot, never rot, that was the lie the old stories told. The hollowed

did not rot. They were alive. What you smelled was the sweetish green of heavy sporulation and under it, faint and terrible, a person: sweat, and unwashed skin, and the particular staleness of a body that had gone on breathing in a dark room for a long time with no one home to open a window.

He was sitting.

He had been a man of perhaps fifty, in the coverall of a municipal water crew, and he sat with his back against a wall that had furred over pale behind him, and from the crown of his head and the line of his jaw the growth had put up its slender stalks toward the one high broken window and the light. That was the behaviour-lineage doing what it did—not thinking, Ezra reminded himself, never thinking, only chemistry, only a molecule that said *climb, and lift, and turn your face to the sky so that what comes out of you can travel*. The man's face was turned to the sky. His eyes were open. His chest moved.

“Ah,” Nomsa said softly, which from her was a whole eulogy.

Ezra crouched. Not close. You did not get close. But he crouched to the man's level because it seemed to him a thing you owed, to be at the eye-line of a person even when the person was gone, and he looked into the open eyes and found what he always found, which was nobody. Not death. Death he could have borne; he had borne it. This was worse and quieter. The lights were on and the house was empty and the doors had all been taken off their hinges, and something that was not a guest and not a thief was simply living there now, in the warm, using the plumbing.

“Water crew,” he said. “He'd have been out on the low lines. Exposed all day.”

“Don't,” Nomsa said, without heat. “Don't give him a Tuesday. It's easier if you don't give them a Tuesday.”

She was right. She was always right about this, and Ezra gave the man a Tuesday anyway, silently, because it was the only thing left he could give him: *you had mornings. You had a crew and a flask and someone who knew how you took your tea. You were a person on a Tuesday, and this is a Wednesday, and you are not one anymore*. He could not have said whether the Tuesday was for the hollowed man or for himself, a way of keeping his own doors on their hinges a little

longer.

“Mercy?” he said.

Nomsa was already unslinging the close-work canister, the concentrated one, the one you did not spray into air but laid on directly, and her greened hand was steady on it as it had been steady eleven years. The mercy was copper too. Everything was copper. You gave the hollowed the same metal you gave the wall, at a dose the emptied body could not survive, and you called it mercy because the alternative was to leave the stalks to rise and open and seed the wind with him—to let what was left of a water-crew man become the reason a hundred more had their doors taken off.

“Turn your face,” she told Ezra, meaning *don’t watch, you don’t have the eleven years for it*, and he turned his face, and behind him he heard the soft hiss of the canister and then nothing, and the sweetish green smell thickened once as the growth died and released what it held, and then thinned, and then the room smelled only of copper, which was the smell of safety, which was the taste of blood.

They stood a moment. Below the window the drowned end of the district lay green and shining all the way to the water, mile on mile of it, luminous where the sun found the fruiting, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be beautiful, and Ezra looked at it and had the thought that had begun coming to him lately, unbidden, in rooms like this one.

The thought was: *it always comes up worst where we did our worst*. The low lines. The wet ground. The parts of the city that had been given to the people the city could most easily lose, and the sea had come for those parts first and the green had come after, and now it stood thickest and brightest and most alive exactly over the ground where the most people had been most abandoned. As if it were drawn to that. As if it were answering something.

He knew what Nomsa would say. Nomsa would say the low ground was warm and wet and undefended and no one had sprayed it in years, and that any fungus on Earth would thrive there, and that a man who started reading intention into damp was a man one bad season from turning his own face to the sky. She would be right. She was always right about this, with a body count of saves to prove it.

And still. Ezra looked at the beautiful lethal green standing over the drowned poor of the city, and under the copper on his tongue, faint, was a question he could not spray away.

“Green?” Nomsa said. She meant his wrists. She meant *are you still yourself*. She was watching him look at it.

He turned his hands over. Counted. Not yet.

“Green,” he said, and they climbed back toward the clean part of the city, laying the mist behind them as they went, closing the door of the world one more metre against the thing that might, for all he knew, have been trying to give something back.

Two

The refinery did not smell of copper. That was the first strange mercy of the place, and Ezra had never stopped noticing it. Everywhere else in the sprayed city the metal was in the air, on the tongue, a bright thin coin-taste that meant *safe*; but here, at the source, in the long low buildings where the ore was cooked and the mist was mixed and the currency of survival was assayed and weighed, the extraction plant scrubbed its own air so hard that a man could stand in the cleanest place in the Cape and smell almost nothing at all. To the people who worked there the scrubbed air was the whole point. To him it was like standing inside a lung that had learned to hold its breath.

He came in through the crew gate on the harbour side, past the assay office where two women in clean coveralls were counting ingots into a ledger with the unhurried attention of people counting money, which they were. Copper was money. A finger-length of it bought a month of a family's schedule mist; a crate of it bought a berth on the high dry ground above the old contour line, where the streets were misted twice a day and nobody's throat went green before sixty. The women counted. Ezra signed the crew log with his corps number and his greened hand, and went up the outside stair to the research arm, where Priya Sun was expecting him, and the data she was expecting him for did not, in the end, say the thing he had half-hoped it might.

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He had loved fungi before he had ever poisoned one.

This was not sentiment; it was chronology, and Ezra was precise about chronology the way he was precise about everything, because precision was the last handhold on a slope he could feel himself sliding down. Before the corps, before the mist and the mercy and the

green ledger at his wrist, there had been twenty years of a quieter life in which his whole work had been to understand how the largest living things on Earth were also the least visible: the mycelial mats under the forest floor, the fine white threads that laced root to root across a woodland and moved sugar and water and warning through the soil like a slow wet nervous system. The wood-wide web, the popular writers had called it, and he had winced at the phrase in papers and used it in seminars because it made undergraduates lean forward.

What he had actually shown—what his name was still attached to, in three journals nobody read anymore—was smaller and stranger. He had shown that when a tree in a network was stressed—shaded out, drought-struck, dying—the fungal threads did not abandon it. They *fed* it. Carbon moved through the mycelium toward the failing neighbour, not away from it; the network taxed the strong and subsidised the weak, and it did this without a brain, without a plan, without anything a person could call kindness, purely as the emergent arithmetic of a great many threads each following a simple local rule. He had stood in front of a room of people and shown them slides of carbon flowing *toward* the dying, and he had believed, in the way you believe things at forty that you are embarrassed by at forty-eight, that he had found something like tenderness written into the substrate of the world.

The funding for that work had gone the way of everything that did not spray, scrub, or refine. The forests it studied had cooked. And the same warming that took his forests had trained a lineage of fungi up over the last thin degrees toward the heat of a human body, until the wall that our own warmth had always been fell down, and the threads he loved came up out of the drowned parts of his city and put their slender fruiting stalks through the crowns of living men. So now he mixed copper. There was no irony in it he had not already exhausted.

He tracked the throat first thing every morning, before he tracked anything else. He did it in the crew washroom mirror at the refinery, tilting his chin up under the hard clean light. At the wrists the green had been there for years, ordinary, everyone's. But in the last two months it had begun at the throat—a faint verdigris bloom in the soft hollow above the collarbone, the exact soft green of a church bell left out in weather. Wrist-green was the ledger saying *counting*.

Throat-green was the ledger saying *counting faster than you would like*. He pressed two fingers to it and felt nothing; the metal did not hurt going in. It only sat in the liver and waited, the way a debt sits, and he thought—flatly, the way he thought about spore loads and dose curves—that the same organ the copper was silting up was the organ the bloom's aflatoxin would come for if the copper ever failed. Two poisons, one liver, fighting over him like dogs over a bone that was still, for now, breathing.

He turned his chin down. Buttoned his collar over the bell-green. Went up to see Priya.

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Her office was glass on two sides and looked down into the plant, so that she worked all day above the slow orange rivers of the thing that kept the city alive. She had a physicist's tidiness and a clinician's fatigue and a wall of screens that were, Ezra had long ago decided, the most honest thing in the building, because they did not care what anyone wanted to be true.

"You look tired," she said, not unkindly, which from Priya was nearly warmth.

"I look green," he said. "Different problem."

She glanced at his collar, and away, and did not comment, which he was grateful for. Priya Sun did not perform concern. She had lost the taste for it somewhere in the years of running a research arm whose findings were load-bearing for a currency, a corps, and roughly two million lungs, and Ezra respected her more for the loss than he would have for the performance. She was, by any measure he could construct, one of the best scientists he had ever worked beside. That she was institutionally certain of the thing he had begun, privately, to doubt was not a flaw in her. It was the most disciplined reading of the same evidence he had, and that was the part that frightened him.

"You wanted the spread model," she said, and turned the near screen toward him.

He had wanted it for a reason he had not stated in the request, and he suspected she knew that too. He had wanted to see whether the bloom's advance—where it surged, where it stalled—tracked anything other than the plain physics of a warming coast. He had spent his

off-hours for six weeks building a private map in his head, a map he was ashamed of, that laid the bloom's densest surges over the drowned Flats and the old border camps and the flooded low estates, over the exact ground where, in the century before, the machine of the city had put the people it was prepared to lose. The green stood thickest where the grief had stood thickest. He had begun to want that to mean something.

Priya's model was better than the one in his head, and it did not need the grief.

"Temperature and disturbance," she said, running a finger along the fitted curve. "That's the whole model. Two variables. Surface temperature above the growth ceiling, and mechanical disturbance of the substrate—flooding, subsidence, abandonment, anything that breaks the crust and opens the ground. Plot spread rate against those two and you get this." The curve was clean. Nature was rarely this obliging, and when it was, it was usually telling you something simple and true that you did not want to hear. "Ninety-one percent of the variance. The bloom goes where it's warm and where the ground is broken. That's not a mystery. That's mould in a wet wall, scaled up to a city."

"The Flats are warm and broken," Ezra said.

"The Flats are the warmest, wettest, most disturbed, least sprayed ground in the metro," Priya said. "Of course the bloom is worst there. It would be worst there if the Flats had been a golf course." She looked at him. She had very steady eyes. "You're going to tell me it surges over the camps."

He had not been going to say it out loud. That she had said it for him was a kindness and a warning at once.

"It correlates with the camps," he said carefully. "The old ones. I mapped it."

"It correlates with low, wet, undefended, unsprayed ground that nobody has misted in twenty years," Priya said, "and we put our camps on low, wet, undefended ground, because that is where you put people you have decided not to spend copper on. The camps are on the bloom-ground because the camps and the bloom are both downstream of the same decision—the decision to abandon the low coun-

try. You've found the fingerprint of our cruelty on the *geography*, Ezra. Not on the fungus. The fungus is just growing where we stopped fighting it." She let that sit. "Your correlation is real. Your causation is a ghost. The temperature curve eats your grief-map for breakfast and doesn't leave a residual big enough to name."

It was, he had to admit, a complete answer. It was the answer he would have given a student who brought him the same map, flushed with the same discovery. *You have mistaken a shared cause for a message.* He turned it over, looking for the crack, and could not immediately find one, and hated that the not-finding felt like grief.

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"I'll tell you what I think you're doing," Priya said, "and then I'll tell you why it's dangerous, and then I'll buy you a coffee, because I like you, which is not the same as agreeing with you."

"Do the coffee first."

"No." She stood, and went to the glass, and looked down at the orange rivers. "You spent your life on networks that share. On the mycelium that carries sugar to the dying tree. And now you're looking at the bloom and you want it to be that—a great generous web that goes to the broken places to help. I understand the pull. I read your old papers when they gave me your file. They're beautiful."

"They were true," he said, more sharply than he meant.

"They were true," she agreed, "and they're also the reason you're the wrong man to read this organism, because you're primed to see care." She turned. "Here is the thing your beautiful papers left out, Ezra, and you left it out because it complicated the story. Those same networks *parasitise*. The carbon flows both ways. There are fungi in your wood-wide web that take from the network and give nothing—that plug into the shared line and drink. There are orchids that produce no chlorophyll at all and live their whole lives stealing sugar out of the mycelium that other plants paid for. The network you fell in love with is not a charity. It is a market, and markets have predators, and the predators use the *exact same threads* the altruists use. Sharing and stealing look identical at the level of a hypha moving carbon. You cannot tell them apart by watching the flow. You can only tell them apart by asking who ends up hollow."

Ezra was quiet.

“So when your bloom goes to the broken places,” she said, “and puts its threads into the people we abandoned—you see the mycelium feeding the dying tree. And maybe you’re right. But the mechanism you’re describing, the going-toward-the-stressed, is *also exactly* what an opportunist does. Weak, warm, undefended, unsprayed hosts, on broken ground nobody’s protecting—that’s not where a saviour would go. That’s where a *coloniser* would go. It’s the softest target. Your grief-map and my temperature curve are the same map. The bloom loves the poor for the same reason cholera did. Not because it came to save them. Because they were the ones nobody was spending anything to keep clean.”

She said it without cruelty. That was the terrible part. She said it the way you state a boundary condition, and every word of it fit the data as well as his own reading did, and he understood, standing in the scrubbed breathless air above the copper rivers, that this was the shape of the thing he was caught in: not a lie he could expose, not a villain he could name, but two complete and opposite truths laid over one identical map.

“And the danger,” she said, gentler now, “is that you say this out loud to the wrong person and you get pulled from the crews and put somewhere quiet, and I lose the only science officer I have who can actually read a spore panel. The economy of this city is a copper economy, Ezra. Every ingot down there is somebody’s schedule mist. If the corps ever half-believe the bloom is a gift, the spraying slows for one season, and one season is all it needs, and then it isn’t a philosophy question, it’s a hundred thousand hollowed people who trusted a poem. You know that. You’ve done the mercy.” She held his eye. “I am not defending the copper because I love it. I’m defending it because I have counted what happens where it stops. So has Nomsa. That’s the copper order having a body count of saves it is not willing to gamble on your beautiful mycelium being kind.”

“I know,” he said. And he did. That was the whole of it. He knew.

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She bought him the coffee. It was refinery coffee, thin and slightly metallic despite the scrubbers, because nothing in the sprayed world was ever entirely free of the taste. They drank it looking down at

the plant, and for a while neither of them said anything, and the orange rivers went on being turned into the green currency of the only weapon that worked.

Ezra thought, and did not say, that a perfect answer was not the same as a correct one; that everything she had said about parasitism was true and everything he had felt about the mycelium feeding the dying tree was also true, and that the referee who could stand between them did not exist and might never exist. He thought about the orchid that made no chlorophyll and stole its whole life from the shared line, and about the carbon he had watched flow toward the dying tree, and about how you truly could not tell them apart by watching the flow. Only by asking who ended up hollow.

He thought about Thabo, who was fine, who was down at the depot right now probably ribbing someone about football, who was warm and defended and sprayed on schedule and not hollow at all. He did not know why the thought came. It came the way the grief-map had come, unbidden, a pattern-match on a brain that might be seeing signal or might be silting up with metal and toxin in equal measure, and he had no way, none, to tell which.

"You've gone quiet," Priya said. "That usually means you think I'm right and you hate it."

"I think you're rigorous," Ezra said, "and I hate it."

She almost smiled. "That's the job."

He set down the coffee and buttoned his collar higher against the clean cold air, over the green that was climbing, patient and geological, toward the line past which they would take the sprayer out of his hands and the question out of his keeping. Below them the copper ran. Outside the scrubbers, past the harbour, past the contour line the sea had drawn, the drowned Flats lay green and shining and full of light, feeding, or drinking; sharing, or stealing; going toward the broken places for love, or for the easy meal, in the one identical motion that was both. He looked at it through Priya's spotless glass and could not tell, and knew that he might spend the rest of a short green life not being able to tell, and went back down the outside stair to mix the metal that would kill it either way.

Three

Thabo Radebe kept oranges in his tank pocket, and this was, in Ezra's private taxonomy of the crew, the single most important fact about him.

You were not supposed to. The tank pocket was for spares—a coupling, a filter cartridge, the little brass key that broke the seal on a fresh canister—and Thabo carried all of those too, somewhere, distributed about his person in a system only he understood. But in the flat mesh pocket over the copper tank, where the manual said *tools*, Thabo carried two oranges, and at the mid-morning stop he would produce one and peel it with his thumb in a single unbroken coil, and hold the coil up to the grey light like a man who had made something, and only then eat.

"You taste anything but the coin all day," he said, the first morning Ezra worked his crew, offering half across the gap between them, "you forget there was ever another taste. Then one day you can't remember what an orange is for. That's the day they should pull you." He put a segment in his mouth. "Not the wrists. The oranges. The wrists lie. The oranges don't."

Ezra had taken the half. He had been on the corps eight months by then and had learned to eat what was offered, because the copper killed the appetite the way it killed everything else, and a man who ate what he was handed lasted longer than a man who waited to be hungry. But he had not expected the orange to undo him a little. It was sweet, and sharp, and alive, and for a moment on a dead street in a drowned district he had stood there tasting the thing the corps existed to protect and had not been able to say a word.

Thabo had watched him understand it. "There he is," he'd said,

pleased, as if he'd caught a fish. And that was how it started.

—

He was thirty-one, and he sprayed the low lines.

The low lines were the exposed work: the perimeter down where the ground went wet and the sea had come and the bloom stood thickest, the seam of the city where a metre of argued line meant a metre of held street. The mist reached poorly there. The wind came off the water and took it. You worked longer, closer, in heavier growth, and you came home greener, and the corps knew this and paid it out in the one currency it had, which was schedule. Nomsa would have said, and did say, that someone had to hold the seam, and that the seam did not care about your feelings, and that a crew was not a debate. She was right the way she was right about everything.

But it was the poor who held the seam. Ezra had done the arithmetic of it, off-hours—who sprayed, and who stayed clean, and how green a body was allowed to get before it was pulled and by whom. The men and women on the low lines had come to the corps because the corps fed you and misted you and gave your family a place inside the perimeter, and there was no other door for people like Thabo Radebe, and so the exposure was distributed, quietly, downward, and a clean-smelling street up the hill was a street somebody green had bought. Thabo knew this better than Ezra did. He had never once complained of it in Ezra's hearing.

"You do the sums again," Thabo said to him once, not asking. They were sitting on a curb with their masks pushed up, the tanks off their backs and hissing gently down to zero beside them, and Ezra had gone quiet in the particular way that meant he was counting a wrong he could not spend.

"I do the sums."

"And what do they come to."

"That you're breathing so I don't have to."

Thabo peeled his orange. The coil came off in one piece. "Man," he said, kindly, "I'm breathing so my mother lives inside the wall. That's a whole different sum. You put your guilt in it, it doesn't balance." He inspected his work, ate. "You want to carry something, carry that I

get to see her Sunday. Don't carry that I'm poor. I know I'm poor. I found that out before you did."

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There was a liturgy to the off-duty hours too, and Ezra came to love the crew's version of it more than the one they performed on the streets.

On the street the copper was the mist and the schedule and the mercy, sacred and exhausting, and you spoke of it the way you spoke of weather you could not change. But at the depot, tanks racked and hissing empty, the crew did the small private rites that the manual did not know about and the corps pretended not to see. There was the airway mist at shift's end—a lighter dose off a hand atomiser, tipped back and drawn in through the mouth, everyone doing it together at the long bench, heads back, a row of throats going up to the fixture like a congregation taking something. It tasted of the coin, always the coin. You did it because a lung that had been in the low growth all day carried spores you did not want to sleep with, and the last mist was the one that let you sleep. It was safety and it was another withdrawal from the body, and the crew did it shoulder to shoulder with their eyes shut, and someone always coughed, and someone always said *green* into the after-quiet, and it was answered down the bench, *green, green, green*, a dozen times, a word passed hand to hand like bread.

Thabo did his last mist with his oranges already in his pocket for the morning. That was the order of his evening, unvarying: rack the tank, take the airway dose at the bench, say *green* with the rest, then put two oranges in the tank pocket for a tomorrow he had decided in advance to have. Ezra watched him do it a hundred times before he understood it was a discipline. A man who kept oranges in his pocket had committed to being alive to eat them. It was the smallest possible bet against the green mood, laid every single night, and Thabo never once skipped it, not even in the fourth month when the weather was on him and the oranges went unpeeled for three days. He had still packed them.

"You'll waste them," Ezra said, that fourth month, watching the unpeeled two go into the pocket over a tank the man could barely feel his own hands lifting.

"Then they'll be wasted," Thabo said, "and I'll be here to have wasted them." He sealed the pocket. "You don't stop packing the orange. You hear me. The day you stop packing the orange is the day you've already agreed to go, and the wrists won't tell you you agreed, but the pocket will. Empty pocket, empty man." He shouldered the tank. "That one's free, science officer. That's better than your mushroom road."

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His mother's name was Beauty, which he found funny in himself, that he had been raised by a woman called Beauty and had come out looking, in his own estimation, like a spanner. He was broad and slow-moving and quick-smiling, with a gap in his front teeth he whistled through when he was concentrating, and hands that had done real work before the corps and knew what real work was. When something on the rig broke—a coupling stripped, a regulator sticking—it was Thabo who fixed it, crouched over the part with his tongue between his teeth and that low whistle going, while the certified science officer with three languages of mycology stood by holding the torch and feeling, not for the first time, that his education had prepared him for the wrong century.

"You went to a university," Thabo said, threading a fitting by feel.

"I did."

"For mushrooms."

"For how they talk to each other." Ezra held the light steadier. "Trees, mostly. There's a fungus lives in the roots of a forest, and it joins the trees up, root to root, all through the ground, and it moves things along the join. Water. Sugar. A tree that's got plenty gives to a tree that's sick, through the fungus, along the network. We used to call it the wood-wide web." He heard himself and stopped. It belonged to a man who had had a different job.

Thabo did not laugh, which Ezra had half-expected. He whistled through the gap in his teeth and seated the fitting and said, "So the mushroom's the road."

"The mushroom's the road."

"And the trees pay it forward down the road." He sat back on his

heels, wiped his hands. "That's not a bad religion. Better than the coin." He tapped the copper tank with one knuckle, and it rang, dull and full. "Ours only takes."

Ezra did not answer that. It was too close to the thought that had begun coming to him in the low damp rooms, the one he had not said aloud to anyone: *what if this one gives*. He put the torch away. It was barely a thing you let yourself think with your wrists still counting.

But Thabo had already half-read it off his face, the way he read everything off Ezra's face.

"You think it's a road," Thabo said. Not the copper. The other thing. The green wild standing below them at the low end of the street, luminous and fruiting and patient. "The stuff we spray. You think it's a road that pays it forward, like your trees."

"I think," Ezra said carefully, reaching for the exact word and finding it too big, "that I don't know what it is. And that not knowing is a bad thing to feel at a nozzle."

"Hm." Thabo considered the green a while, chewing. Then he shrugged, the broad slow shrug of a man who had made peace with more than most. "It comes up worst where mine used to live," he said. "You know that? The old flats. Where they put us, before the water. It's thickest right there now. Prettiest right there." He was quiet. "My gran's building. You can't even find where it was. It's all just—green." He said it without accusation, without theory, a man describing a place. "Anyway," he said, standing, brushing his knees. "We spray it Tuesday. Whatever it is." And that was the whole of Thabo's theology, and Ezra kept it.

—

The green mood came for Thabo in the fourth month Ezra knew him.

They called it the green mood because it came up the arm with the verdigris, the metal in the wrist and the metal in the mind. It was not sadness, exactly. Sadness was a thing about the world. This was a thing about the copper—a flat metallic weather that rolled in behind the eyes when the body had carried too much for too long, and drained the colour out from behind everything, so that an orange was only an orange and a Sunday was only a Sunday and the whole exhausting apparatus of staying yourself stopped seeming worth the

wrists it cost. Copper was a cumulative poison, and the liver took it, and the mood collapsed on the same curve as the liver, because you were one system and you could not poison half of a man. Ezra had it himself, in a grey band across most days, and managed it the way you managed a limp.

Thabo went down further and came up on a rope Ezra could not see the far end of. For three shifts he did not peel an orange. He worked—the low lines did not stop because a man could not feel his Sundays—and he worked well, in silence, and the silence from Thabo was worse than any host they found, because a hollowed man had left and this one was still in there, sitting in the dark with the doors on.

On the third evening Ezra sat on the curb with him and did not do the sums and did not talk. He had learned that much. He peeled one of Thabo's oranges, badly, in five broken pieces, and put the pieces in Thabo's hand.

Thabo looked at them a long time.

"That's the worst peel I've ever seen," he said finally, and his voice cracked on it, and it was the crack that meant the rope had held. "You do that at the rig, I'd pull you."

"The oranges don't lie," Ezra said.

"The oranges don't lie." He ate a broken piece. "Man. Where'd you even learn to peel. A university?" And he laughed, wet and gap-toothed and alive, and Ezra understood that he would do a great deal to keep this particular man in the light.

—

Nomsa let it happen, the friendship, which was its own quiet endorsement, because Nomsa let very little happen that she did not weigh first.

She watched the two of them the way she watched a line she was arguing back up a hill—assessing, without heat, whether it would hold. Once, at the depot, she found Ezra on the bench after the others had gone, doing the sums again with his mask still pushed up.

"He's good on the low lines," she said. She meant Thabo. She sat, which she did not often do. "Best I've got down there. Steady. Fixes what breaks. The growth's heavy and he doesn't rush it, and men

who don't rush the heavy growth come home." She looked at her own wrist, green well past the heel of the hand, an eleven-year ledger. "That's why he's down there, Ezra. Not because he's poor. Because he's good. I put my best where the seam's worst. You want me to put my worst there instead? Send the ones who rush?"

"No."

"Then don't do that face at me." She was not unkind; she was load-bearing, and she carried the arithmetic Ezra could not, the one where somebody good breathed the seam because somebody had to and the somebody had better be good or the wall came down and took the clean districts too. "He knows what he is. He's prouder of the low lines than you are ashamed of them. Let the man have his pride and eat his orange." She stood. At the door she said, not turning, "And you watch how green he gets. You're the science officer. That's the one sum I do want you doing." Then she was gone, and Ezra sat with it, because *watch how green he gets* was a thing you said about a man you had already, somewhere in the honest back of your accounting, half-written into the ledger of the lost.

—

They had a Sunday, once, that Ezra thought of afterward the way you think of the last warm day before a season turns.

Thabo took him inside the wall to meet Beauty. It was not done, quite—the science officer did not go home with the crew—but Thabo did not much respect the seams between people, having spent his life on the wrong side of one, and he had decided that Ezra ate too little and lived too alone and would come to Sunday whether the corps had a rule about it or not. Beauty's rooms were three flights up in a block that still smelled faintly of copper at the vents and of cooking under it, onions and something long-simmered, a smell with no metal in it at all. She was small and upright and greener at the throat than Ezra liked to see on a woman her age, because she had sprayed too, before her son took the low lines so she would not have to, and she held Ezra's face in both green hands and said her son had told her he was clever and lonely and she would fix at least the one of those with lunch.

They ate too much. Thabo peeled an orange for his mother in one coil and she rolled her eyes at the performance of it and ate every

segment. There was a bell by the door, an old brass hand-bell gone green in the join, that Beauty rang when the food was ready, and she rang it though they were all three at the table, just to hear it, she said, just because a bell was a good sound and the world had few enough of them. It rang dull and full, like a tank. Ezra sat in the smell of onions with no metal in it and was, for the length of one afternoon inside the wall, something close to happy.

"You see," Thabo said, walking him back to the perimeter as the light went. "That's the sum. Her at the table. You don't put me being poor in it. You put her at the table and it balances every time."

"It balances," Ezra said.

"Say it like you mean it, science officer."

"It balances." And for that hour, going back down toward the clean-smelling street with the green wild standing luminous and patient below them at the low lines where his friend would be working in the morning, close in the heavy growth where the mist did not reach, breathing the seam so his mother could keep her bell—for that hour, Ezra almost did.

He turned his hands over at the checkpoint out of habit. Counted. Not yet.

"Green," said the man at the gate.

"Green," Ezra said, and did not look back down the hill, because some part of him had begun, without permission, to be afraid.

Four

The maps were not supposed to leave the depot, and Ezra took one home the way a man takes home a habit he has decided not to name.

It was a survey overlay, the kind the corps used to plan a season's spraying—the city rendered flat and honest, contour lines and the old cadastral grid and, laid over both in the depot's grease-pencil convention, the bloom fronts marked week by week where the crews had argued them and lost. Green where it stood thickest. He had a stack of them going back four years, requisitioned one at a time with a science officer's signature and a science officer's excuse, and he spread them on the kitchen table under a lamp because the flat had no other clean surface and no other reason to be lit.

He was off shift. That was the first lie he told himself, that a man off shift could do this idly, for the shape of it. The taste of the evening's last mist was still on the back of his tongue, thin and metallic, fading now toward the flat mineral aftertaste that meant the copper had done its work in his airway and gone to work on the rest of him. He turned his left wrist under the lamp out of a reflex he no longer noticed. Green at the pulse-side, the soft church-roof green, and above it—he made himself look—a first faint bruise of it creeping up the tendon toward the heel of the hand. Not the throat. Not yet the throat. He turned the hand back over and picked up the pencil.

What he was doing had a proper name and he used it, in his head, the way you keep saying a word to keep it from meaning too much. Epidemiology. Spatial correlation. He was mapping an outbreak against a substrate, the most ordinary thing a person with his training could do, and there was nothing in the doing of it a review board could have faulted.

It was only the substrate that was the heresy.

Because the substrate, when he let it come up under the green, was not slope or moisture or aspect. It was the Flats.

—

He had grown up on the edge of them, or the edge of what the sea had left of them, and he did not need the overlay to know their shape. But the overlay knew it anyway, without being told, which was the thing that had first stopped his hand a week ago and had been stopping it every night since.

The low ground. Ezra weighted the corners of the oldest map with a mug and a copper canister and a book, and he traced the four-year advance of the green with the pencil not quite touching the paper, and the green went where the water had gone, and the water had gone where the ground was lowest, and the ground was lowest where a century of law had decided the lowest people would live. The Flats had been engineered. Not by the sea. The sea had only come later and finished an argument the city had started with a pen: here is the sand, here is the wind, here is the ground that floods, and here, on it, is where you will put the people the city is willing to lose. The wet Cape lowland, handed to the poor as a punishment before anyone knew it would one day be handed to the bloom as a garden.

He set four years of maps in a row and stood over them and looked at the green advancing across the drowned Flats front by front, and what he could not stop seeing was not a fungus exploiting a gradient of temperature and moisture.

What he saw was the green going, deliberately and only, to exactly the ground where the city had done its worst. Coming up thickest over the old removal districts, the numbered camps, the transit lines where families had been trucked and dumped and told to make a township out of dune. It stood now luminous over every one of them, and it stood thin and grudging over the winelands and the old suburbs on the high dry granite, the clean ground, the ground the city had kept for itself.

As if it were answering, he thought, and hated the sentence, and could not make it false.

He knew the rebuttal. He had rehearsed it in Nomsa's voice so many

times that it had worn a groove, and he ran it now the way you press a bruise to check it still hurts. *Warm. Wet. Undefended. Unsprayed. Ezra, any fungus on Earth would stand up in that ground and sing.* And it was true. It was completely, unanswerably true, and he wrote it in the margin of the top map in his own hand so that he would not be able to pretend later that he had not thought of it—

warm + wet + low + never sprayed = any mould thrives; confound not signal

—and then he sat looking at the true thing he had written, and the green on the map, and he could not make the two of them lie down together and be quiet.

Because it was too *clean*. That was the crack he kept working his thumbnail into, off shift, at the kitchen table, when he should have been sleeping off the copper. If the correlation were only warmth and wet and neglect, the fit would be loose. Fungus is not tidy; it takes the gradient and then it takes a hundred other things, a broken gutter, a north wall, a rubbish pile, a dead tree—noise, the honest scatter of a real organism eating a real world. And there was scatter here, there was, he could see it, green standing where no camp had ever been, up a wet gully on the mountain's cool flank, in a flooded car park behind a mall on high ground. Reading A had its data and its data was good. But under the scatter, when he squinted the way you were not supposed to squint at data, the signal that came through was the sharp edge of a border that had been drawn by a surveyor. The green stopped, some places, at a line—and the line, when he overlaid the old cadastral, was a line the apartheid engineers had drawn, a boundary of dispossession gone soft with sixty years and salt but still legible, and the bloom sat inside it the way water sits in a mould.

He told himself: coincidence of coincidence. The engineered line and the flood line and the warm-wet line are the *same* line, Ezra, that is the whole horror of what they did, they put the poor exactly where the world was worst and now the world's worst thing grows there—of course the invader and the injustice trace the same contour, because the injustice *was* the contour.

That was Reading A, in full, and Reading A was airtight, and he wrote *SAME LINE—cannot separate signal from history* in the margin under

the first note, twice honest now.

And still his thumb pressed the crack. Because there was a version of that same fact that was not Reading A at all. If the injustice and the bloom traced the same line, you could say the bloom was merely lazy and went where the digging had been easiest. Or you could say—and here his hand went still on the pencil, and the copper aftertaste sharpened, or he imagined it sharpened—you could say the bloom had gone looking for the wound. That a thing correcting an injury would, of course, appear exactly at the injury. That the map of where the green was worst and the map of where the city had been cruellest were the same map not because cruelty made warm wet ground, but because the green was *for* the cruelty. Was drawn to it. Was answering it.

Two readings. The same green. He could not get a pin between them, and the only instrument that could ever have chosen between them was the one he did not trust, because it was inside his own skull, and it was greening, and it wanted so badly for one of the two answers to be true that he could no longer swear the wanting had not drawn the maps for him.

He wrote nothing in the margin about that.

—

It cost him, the mapping. Not in any way he could have entered on a form. He did it in the hours the body needed for the other repair, the slow copper repair, the liver's nightly argument with the metal he had breathed all day, and a liver kept up past midnight over a survey overlay does not get to make that argument well. He learned to know the green mood by the way it arrived on these nights—not sadness, which had a subject, but a flat metallic lowering of the whole instrument, the mind gone the colour of an old bell, everything valued down. The corps had a name for it and the name was the same as the colour. On the worst of the nights the maps looked, for a bad hour, like the ravings of a sick man, and he would sit and let them look like that, because a scientist who could not see his own work as a symptom had already lost the argument to his own serotonin.

And then the hour would pass, and the green mood would lift a degree, and the maps would be maps again—clean fronts, honest contours, a correlation that would not resolve—and he would be no closer

to knowing whether the lifting was clarity returning or only the toxin cresting and falling on its own tide. He could not run the control. There was no un-poisoned Ezra to check the poisoned one against. There was only the man at the table, and the wrist, and the green climbing it a millimetre a season, and the question climbing with it.

He weighed, more than once, simply stopping. Rolling the maps, returning them, spraying his schedule, counting his wrists, keeping his doors on their hinges the boring way that worked. It was the sane choice and he knew it was the sane choice and that was precisely what he could not trust about it— because a mind the aflatoxin was quietly editing would also, of course, produce the thought *stop looking*, would love nothing better than a host who put the wound-map away and turned, calm and un-defended and no longer asking questions, back toward the light.

He did not stop looking. He told himself that was courage. He could not rule out that it was the first symptom.

—

Nomsa found him out on a Thursday, which was the day she found out most things.

She had come by the depot annex where he mixed, ostensibly for the potentiation figures on the close-work canisters, and she stood in the doorway with her greened hand on the frame and looked at the map he had, without thinking, left half-unrolled on the mixing bench beside the copper. He saw her see it. He saw her read it—she was not a scientist but she had eleven years of reading ground for where the bloom would come up, which was its own literacy, and she took in the four-year fronts and the old grid under them and the Flats going green in the pencil and she understood exactly what it was and exactly why a man would make it in his own time and not the corps’.

She did not say anything cruel. That was never her way. She came in and set her hip against the bench and looked at the map a while longer, the length of a held breath, and then she looked at him.

“You’ve made a picture of the poor,” she said.

“I’ve made a picture of the correlation.”

“You’ve made a picture of the poor,” she said again, gently, “and

you've put green on it, and now you're going to tell me the green loves them." She was not smiling but there was no venom in it. "Ezra. I've buried more of them than you've mapped. I know exactly where the green comes up. It comes up in the low ground because the low ground is warm, and it's wet, and no crew has sprayed it in a decade because there's no ratepayer down there to sign the requisition. That's it. That's the whole of it. It's not answering anybody. It's a mould, and it's in the one place we leave it alone, doing the one thing a mould does."

"I know," he said. "I wrote it down. Look—I wrote it down before you came."

She looked. She read his margin, *warm + wet + low + never sprayed*, and *SAME LINE*, and something in her face eased a half-degree, because he had done the honest work, and she gave him that.

"Then you know," she said.

"I know it's the leading explanation."

"It's not the leading explanation." Now a small edge, not for him, for the word. "It's the boring one. And you're a man who's tired of copper and sad about mushrooms, and the boring true thing has stopped being enough to hold you. I've watched it happen before. I've watched it happen to better scientists than you." She let that sit. "The green doesn't go to the camps because it grieves the camps. It goes to the camps because we made the camps out of the exact ground a fungus prays for and then walked away and left the door open. The cruelty didn't call the bloom. The cruelty *built the bloom a house*. Those are not the same sentence, and the difference between them is the difference between you keeping your job and you sitting in a wet room one day with your face turned up at a window."

It was, Ezra thought, the single most complete thing anyone had said to him about the maps, and it was correct, and he felt it land the way you feel a true diagnosis land, in the gut, with relief and dread at once. She had not strawmanned his heresy. She had done the harder thing. She had taken the strongest form of it—the eerie tightness of the fit, the surveyor's line under the green—and explained it whole, without magic, with nothing but warmth and water and neglect and the architecture of a cruelty that made warm wet neglected ground on purpose. Every fact he had, she accounted for.

Almost.

“And the edge,” he said, quietly, because he had to. “The green stops, some places, on a line. Sharp. Not a gradient. A drawn line.”

“On the old boundary.”

“On the old boundary.”

“Because the old boundary is where they changed the ground,” she said, without a beat, because of course she had thought of it, she had eleven years and a mind he underrated because it did not use his words. “Fill on one side, dune on the other. Drainage on one side, none on the other. They didn’t draw a line on a map, Ezra, they built a line *into the earth*, and the earth still has it, and the green sits in the wet side of it because the wet side of it is wet. You’re looking at drainage. You’re calling it grief.”

He had no answer. Everything she said was true and left Reading B exactly as alive as it had been before she said it. Drainage explained the line. So did answering. The same edge, forever. She had given him the airtight case and it did not touch the other one, could not, because they were built on the same stones and neither could throw the first one.

“You’re right,” he said. And meant it. And it changed nothing, and she could see that it changed nothing, and that was the moment something crossed her face that was not argument. It was the look she gave a host. The eye-line look. She was checking his doors.

“Turn your hands over,” she said.

He did. She took his left wrist in her greened fingers—hers were greened past the heel now, well up the wrist toward the pulse, eleven years of it, the count that would pull her from the crews before it pulled him from his—and she turned it to the light and looked at the fresh green creeping up his tendon, and then she looked, deliberately, at his throat. At the collar of his shirt. At the skin above it, which was still his own colour, still unmapped.

“Not the throat,” she said.

“Not yet.”

“Keep it not-the-throat.” She let the wrist go. “A man who reads

intention into damp is one bad season from turning his own face up at the sky, and I'll have to be the one to lay the mercy on you, and I'll do it, and I'll do it kindly, and I would rather bury you at a hundred than mercy you at fifty because you fell in love with a mould." It was the longest thing he had ever heard her say and she said it in the register of a woman reading out a weather report. She counted saves the way he counted species. She was telling him she did not want to have to write his name in her private column.

"Green?" she said at the door. The whole question folded into the one word. *Are you still yourself.*

He looked at the map. He looked at his wrist. He looked, honestly, inward, at the man who had written the true margin twice and still could not stop seeing an answer in the drowned ground, and he could not have told her, or himself, whether the thing looking back was a scientist refusing to discard a residual or an aflatoxin already rehearsing its work in the folds of his reason. Both would look exactly like this. Both would want to keep the map.

"Green," he said.

She held his eye a moment longer than the word required, the way you hold a door you are not sure will stay on its hinge, and then she took her potentiation figures and went, and left him with the lamp, and the copper, and four years of green standing patient over the lowest, wettest, most abandoned ground the city had ever made—the ground where, whichever the reading, the most people had been most given away, and where the green now grew as if it had come to take up a collection.

He rolled the map. He did not put it back on the stack.

He put it in his bag.

Five

There was a street on the high dry granite where the copper fell like weather, and Ezra had a reason to be on it that morning, and he stood in it and let the reason wait, because it was the cleanest air in the city and a man on the low schedule did not often get to breathe it for free.

The corps called the high districts the misted streets, which was a plain description and also, if you had done the arithmetic Ezra could not stop doing, an accusation folded so neatly into a fact that no one up here would ever have to unfold it. The fixtures ran along the eaves—fine brass heads set into the old cornices at intervals, plumbed back to a copper main that fed off the refinery line—and twice a day, at a schedule the residents did not have to keep because the schedule kept itself, the heads opened and laid a soft colloidal veil down the whole length of the avenue. It hung a moment in the early light, a thin bright fog the exact green-grey of the taste of it, and then it settled: onto the plane trees, onto the swept stone, onto the shoulders of a woman walking a dog who did not so much as glance up. Up here the mist was not a thing you did with your body at a bench with your eyes shut. It was a thing the street did to itself, on your behalf, while you thought about something else.

Ezra tipped his head back and took a breath of it on purpose, the way you would not have to if you lived here, and tasted the coin at the back of his tongue, thin and civic and clean. He had spent eleven hundred mornings drawing that same taste up off a hand atomiser at a long bench between men who had earned it lung by lung, and the difference between the bench and the eaves was the whole of the thing the city did not say aloud about itself.

He had come up to sign a form. That was all. The refinery's research arm requisitioned its close-work potentiators through a municipal office on the high ground, and the office wanted a science officer's countersignature on the season's dose curves, in ink, in person, because the copper order trusted paper more than it trusted almost anything, paper being the one thing it could not run out of. So he had come up out of the low city on the transit line—misted at the platform, misted in the car, a captive congregation breathing their fare—and he had walked the last clean avenue to the office, and on the way he had stood in the falling weather of the rich and let it teach him, one more time, the lesson he already knew.

—

The office kept him twenty minutes, which he spent watching the street through a tall window while a clerk found the right stamp.

He had a mycologist's patience for watching a thing until it gave up its structure, and the structure of the high avenue was legible if you were willing to see it. Nobody up here was green. That was the first datum, and it was not subtle, and it was the whole book of the city in a single physical sign. There were old people on the benches in the little planted square with the pink freckled hands of people who had lived seventy years and breathed copper only at the low civic dose, in weather they did not administer, and their throats above their collars were the ordinary colours a throat came in. A child ran across the square trailing a ribbon and her wrists, when she flung her arms up, were clean. Not a coin of green on her. She would grow up in the misted streets and be defended all her life by an apparatus she would never have to touch with her own mouth, and the copper that kept her clean would be drawn up out of a body somewhere down the hill, a body that had agreed to hold the metal so that this child would not have to—and she would never know the trade had been made, because the engineering of the arrangement was that it made the cost invisible from the top. From up here you could not see who was green. You had to go down to see who was green. The city had built its cruelty on a contour, the way it had built everything on a contour, and the contour ran the mist uphill and the exposure down.

And the mist worked. That was the second datum, and Ezra made himself hold it in the same hand as the first, because a man who dropped it dropped the truth. Nobody up here was green *and* no-

body up here was hollow. There had not been a hollowing on the high granite in Ezra's tenure. The twice-daily veil denied the spore a foothold so completely that a child could fling her clean wrists at the sky in perfect safety, and the safety was not a lie, and every ingot that fed those brass eaves had come up out of the refinery having genuinely, measurably, saved this square from the thing that turned a face up at a window. The high ground was not clean because it was innocent. It was clean because it was rich enough to be sprayed and never have to spray. But it was, actually, clean. The child was, actually, safe. You could hate the architecture with your whole heart and the mist would still be working while you hated it, settling green-bright onto the plane trees over the safe old people, and Ezra stood at the tall window and could not make the injustice of it and the mercy of it stop being the same falling weather.

The clerk found the stamp. Ezra signed the season's curves with his corps number and his greened hand, and the clerk, who was pink to the wrist, took the paper back without looking at the hand that had signed it, and Ezra went down out of the misted streets the way the copper never did.

—

The refinery had asked him up for a second thing, and this was the thing that had teeth, and he took the outside stair to Priya's glass office with the taste of the high avenue still civic and clean on his tongue.

"You signed the curves," she said. Not a question. She had the near screen turned to the plant, the orange rivers running under her the way they always ran.

"I signed the curves." He set his bag down. "And I stood in the mist up there for a while first. On the avenue. Where it falls off the eaves."

"I know the avenue." Something in her did not move. "You want to tell me it's obscene."

"I want to tell you it works," Ezra said, "and that it's obscene, and that I can't get the two of them to lie down. That's all. I'm not making a speech."

"You're always making a speech," Priya said, but not unkindly, and turned from the glass. "It works. Yes. The high-density fixed-head

misting is the most efficient defensive deployment we have—set it and it runs, no crews, no lungs, a tenth of the copper per protected person that street-spraying costs, and effectively zero hollowings inside the coverage. If I could put it over the whole metro I would put it over the whole metro tomorrow and I would retire your entire corps and every one of them would die at eighty instead of fifty and I would be the hero of the age.” She let that stand a second. “I can’t put it over the whole metro.”

“Because there isn’t enough copper.”

“Because there isn’t enough copper,” she said, “and because the copper there is has to go where it does the most good per gram, and fixed heads on the low ground don’t do the most good per gram, they do the least, because the wind off the water takes the veil before it settles and the growth down there is heavy enough to eat a fixed dose in a week. Fixed heads work on the high dry granite. On the low wet Flats they’d be watering a garden. So the low ground gets crews, because a crew can lay a heavy close dose where a fixture can’t, and a crew is a body, and a body greens.” She said it flatly, a boundary condition, the way she said everything. “You want me to have decided that out of contempt for the poor. I decided it out of a dose curve. The dose curve does not know who’s poor. It knows the wind speed at the shoreline and the growth density on the Flats, and it says: fixed heads uphill, bodies downhill. That’s not the machine being cruel, Ezra. That’s the machine being *correct*, on ground the cruelty already shaped.”

—

It was the same move she had made with the grief-map, and he had no counter to it because there was no counter to it, because it was true.

But he had learned something in the low rooms that Priya’s dose curve did not hold, and he said it, carefully, reaching for the exact word.

“Nomsa loses them at fifty,” he said. “Your curve is correct. And the correction lands on the same forty people it always lands on, and their children after them, and after enough correct landings the curve has a class in it. You didn’t put the class in. The wind and the growth put the class in. But it’s in there now, and every gram you spend correctly

makes it a little more in there, and there is nobody in this building whose job it is to notice that, because everybody's job is the gram." He heard himself. "That's not a speech. That's the residual. Your model fits at ninety-one percent and the nine percent it doesn't fit is a man I know packing oranges into a tank pocket so he'll be alive to eat them, and you can't put him in a dose curve, and so he isn't in it, and so he doesn't count, and so the machine that is correct about copper is going to be wrong about him forever and never know."

Priya was quiet a moment. She did not perform anything; she never did. But she looked at him the way she had looked at his old papers, with something that was not agreement and was not dismissal.

"You think I don't know his name," she said at last. "Some version of him. You think there's no man I mixed against in a curve." She turned back to the glass, to the orange rivers, to the two million lungs her findings kept upright. "There is. There's always one. And I keep making the curve, because the day I let one man's name into the model, the model stops protecting the hundred thousand who don't have names, and I have counted what happens where the copper stops, and it is worse than what happens to your friend, and it is worse by a great deal, and it lands on the poor too. That's the part your residual leaves out. The correction is unjust. And the *absence* of the correction is also unjust, and larger, and it also lands downhill." She looked at him in the glass. "You keep finding the injustice in the copper. Find it in the alternative sometime. It's there. It's bigger. It's just quieter, because the people it kills don't get pulled from a crew, they just get hollowed in a wet room and nobody countersigns it."

He had no answer for that either. He was accumulating a great many things he had no answer for. He signed the second form, which released the potentiators to the low crews, the heavy close dose for the heavy close ground, and he went down the outside stair with the paper that would put more copper into Thabo's canister and more green into Thabo's wrist, both at once, in the one motion.

—

He went straight down to the depot, because the transit line ran that way and because he could not have said no to the pull of it, and the low city met him at the platform the way it always did, with the taste

already thinning.

You could tell how far down you had come by the air. Up on the granite the mist fell civic and clean off the eaves and nobody worked for it. On the transit line it thinned by the stop. At the depot on the low margin it was gone from the street entirely and lived only in the corps, in the tanks and the atomisers and the long bench, administered by hand, breathed on purpose, paid for lung by lung—the exact same metal that fell like weather uphill, here a thing you did to yourself at the end of a shift with your eyes shut and your throat going up to the fixture like a congregation. The copper did not change between the eaves and the bench. Only who held it changed.

The crew was racking tanks when he came in. Thabo lifted a hand—the gap-toothed grin, the two oranges already in the tank pocket for a tomorrow decided in advance—and Ezra lifted one back and felt the seam in himself close over like a wound going quiet, because this was the other country, the one the high avenue could not see, and he belonged to it more than he belonged to the misted streets he had been born too poor for and drifted, on a science degree, briefly clean of.

Nomsa was at the bench with the potentiation figures, the ones his signature had just released, and she read them the way she read ground.

“Heavier dose,” she said. “For the low fronts.” She did not make it a question. She knew what the season’s curve had decided; she had eleven years of watching it decide. “Priya’s numbers?”

“Priya’s numbers. The wind eats the fixed heads on the Flats, so you get crews, so you get the heavy dose. It’s correct.” He heard how the word sounded down here, at the bench, among the throats that would draw the heavy dose in tonight. “It’s correct up there. I signed it up there. It reads different down here.”

“It reads the same,” Nomsa said, without heat. “It reads *hold the seam*. It always reads that.” She squared the figures on the bench. “You think I don’t know she’s right about the wind? She’s right about the wind. Fixed heads down here would be a joke. So we spray it by hand, close, heavy, and we come home green, and the granite comes home clean, and that’s the arrangement, and I didn’t make it and neither did she and neither did the wind. The city made it, sixty

years ago, with a pen, when it decided who lived on the ground the wind comes off of.” She looked at him. “The dose curve is honest, Ezra. It’s the *ground under the dose curve* that’s the crime. And the ground was laid before either of us was born, and the green sits in it now, and we spray it, and that’s Tuesday.”

It was, almost word for word, the thing Priya had said in the glass office an hour and a hill away, and Ezra stood between the two of them in his memory, the scientist above the orange rivers and the captain at the low bench, two of the best people he knew, arriving from opposite ends of the city at the identical sentence. There was no villain in it. There was a wind, and a contour, and a metal that worked, and a pen that had run the metal uphill sixty years ago and could not be unsigned. The injustice was not a decision anyone was making. It was a decision everyone had inherited, and it landed, correctly, on Thabo’s wrist, every heavy dose, forever.

—

The airway mist came at shift’s end, and Ezra took it at the bench with the crew, which he did not have to do and always did.

He could have misted alone, clinically, at his own convenience, the way the high avenue misted itself. He did it at the bench because there was a thing that happened at the bench that did not happen anywhere else in the copper order, and he had come to need it the way Thabo needed the orange. The crew tipped their heads back in a row and drew the light dose in through the mouth, the last mist, the one that let you sleep, and it tasted of the coin the way it tasted of the coin uphill, the same metal, the same bright thin blood-taste—but here it was passed hand to hand and breathed shoulder to shoulder and answered down the bench in the one word, *green*, and the word came back *green, green, green*, a dozen throats, and it meant *good* and it meant *proceed* and it meant *you are still yourself this evening*. Up on the granite the child with the clean wrists had never once had to say it, because up there nobody’s self was in nightly question.

Down here it asked for everything, one lung at a time, and got it: a dozen poor people breathing a poison on purpose so that a hill they would never live on could stay clean, and saying *green* about it, and meaning it. The alternative to the poison was the wet room and the turned-up face, and they knew the alternative, they had carried it out

of buildings in their own arms, and they chose the coin over it every single evening with their eyes shut, freely, the way you choose the only thing there is.

Ezra tipped his head back with them and drew the last dose in and felt it go bright and civic and clean across the back of his tongue, the same taste that fell off the eaves uphill, and then he felt it go down, the way it did not go down uphill, to the liver that was arguing with it, and to the throat above his collar where the green had begun.

"Green," said Thabo, beside him, eyes shut, oranges in his pocket for the morning.

"Green," Ezra said.

And down the bench it came back, *green, green, green*, and he opened his eyes and turned his hands over out of habit and counted his wrists, which said *counting*, and then he did the thing he had started doing lately and was not supposed to do, which was to touch two fingers, lightly, to the soft hollow above his own collarbone, where the metal that fell like a blessing on the clean streets uphill had begun to settle, in him, the exact green of a bell left out in weather—the sprayer's green, the low-ground green, the green you only wore if you were the kind of person who breathed the coin so that someone else could forget there was ever another taste.

Not the throat, Nomsa had told him. Keep it not-the-throat.

It was the throat. It had been the throat for two months. He buttoned his collar over it, in the low depot, in the un-misted air, among the people the city had decided would hold the seam, and he did not go back up the hill that night, and he told himself it was because the transit line was slow, and he did not fully believe himself, because some part of him had begun to prefer the country where the copper cost you your own body to the country where it fell, invisibly and correctly and forever, off somebody else's.

Six

There was a fault in the mist rig on the low lines, and that was how it happened, which was the part Ezra would go over afterward in the small hours the way you press a tooth that has begun to ache—not because pressing helped, but because he could not stop his tongue from finding it.

The atomiser on Thabo's line had been throwing a coarse plume for two days. Not failing—coarse. A regulator sticking the way regulators stuck in the damp, so that instead of the fine hanging veil that settled and held, the mist came out in a spatter that fell too fast and reached too short, and a man working behind it in the heavy growth got a thinner curtain than the schedule promised him. It was a small thing. It was the kind of small thing the low lines were made of. You logged it, and you drew a replacement from stores, and in the meantime you worked, because the low lines did not stop for a coarse plume any more than they stopped for a green mood, and Thabo could strip and reseal a regulator by feel with his tongue between his teeth, and had said he would do it Tuesday when the new cartridge came up from the refinery, and it was Monday.

Ezra had signed the log. That was a fact he owned. He had read *coarse plume, line 4, replacement requisitioned*, and he had put his corps number under it, and he had thought, the way you think about a debt you intend to pay Friday, *Tuesday*. He had not thought: a man breathing a thinner curtain in the thickest growth in the metro, one day, is a man who breathes more spores than the schedule was built to keep him under. He had the training to think it. He had three languages of the exact arithmetic. He had simply not run the sum on that particular Monday, because Thabo was Thabo, warm and defended and packing his oranges, and you did not run the mercy-

math on the people you loved. You saved it for strangers.

—

Thabo went quiet on the Tuesday, and at first it read as the green mood.

That was the cruelty of the thing, the near-fit of it. Ezra came down the line at the mid-morning stop and found him sitting on a curb with his mask pushed up and his tank hissing gently to zero beside him, not peeling an orange, looking at the middle distance with the particular stillness that had meant, in the fourth month, that the weather was on him and the rope was out and he was climbing it hand over hand in the dark. Ezra had sat down beside him then and said nothing and peeled the orange badly, and the badness of the peel had been the thing that brought him up.

He sat down now. He did not do the sums. He took an orange from the tank pocket—there were two, of course there were two, the man had packed them the night before, had laid his small nightly bet against the green mood exactly as he always did—and he peeled it, and he did it slowly and on purpose badly, in five broken pieces, and he put the pieces in Thabo's hand.

Thabo looked at them.

He looked at them the way he had looked at them in the fourth month, a long time, and Ezra's chest did the thing it had learned to do, the small lift toward the crack in the voice that would mean the rope had held. He waited for *that's the worst peel I've ever seen*. He waited for *where'd you even learn to peel, a university*. He had the answer ready, *the oranges don't lie*, he had it warm in his mouth.

Thabo did not say it.

He held the broken pieces in his open hand and he looked at them, and there was no reaching in the look. That was the first wrong thing, and Ezra registered it the way you register a sound in a house at night before you have decided to be afraid—a flatness in the looking, a looking that did not resolve into wanting or not-wanting, a looking that was only the eyes being aimed at the hand. In the green mood Thabo had looked at the pieces and been unable to remember what an orange was *for*, and that had been terrible, but it had been a man in there failing to remember, a man with the doors on sitting in the

dark. In the green mood there was somebody home who could not find the light switch. Here the hand held five pieces of orange and there was no one behind the eyes deciding anything about them at all.

“Thabo,” he said.

The head turned toward the sound. Motor function; a body orienting to a stimulus; the autonomic stuff kept, the way the canon he carried in his own three languages said it would be kept—respiration, the pupils tracking the light, the head coming round to a voice. All of it intact. All of it running. The lights on, every one of them, and the head turning smoothly and correctly toward his name, and nothing, nothing, coming up behind the eyes to meet it.

“Thabo,” he said again, and heard his own voice go wrong, and did not care.

The hand tipped. It was the smallest motion. The fingers loosened—not decided, not let go, simply ceased to be told to hold—and the five broken pieces of orange fell off the palm into the wet at the edge of the curb, and Thabo’s head, which had turned toward Ezra, did not follow them down. A man drops his food, he looks at where it went. It is older than thought, that looking; a dog does it. Thabo’s eyes stayed level, aimed at the middle distance again now that the voice had stopped, and the orange lay in the gutter going dull, and the man who kept oranges in his pocket as a discipline, as a bet, as the smallest possible wager that he intended to be alive tomorrow to eat them, did not see that they were gone.

Empty pocket, empty man, Ezra thought, and the thought arrived with the whole of Thabo’s voice around it, gap-toothed and alive, *that one’s free, science officer, write it down*, and Ezra put the heel of his hand against his own mouth and pressed, hard, and did not make the sound that was trying to come up, because you did not, on the line, in front of the crew, make that sound.

—

He did the panel because it was the thing his hands knew how to do, and because a science officer with a hollowed man in front of him did the panel, and because for the length of the panel he could be a man performing a procedure instead of a man watching the doors

come off a house he had eaten Sunday lunch inside.

He took the swab from the collar of the coverall, high, in the soft hollow above the collarbone, and he did not let his fingers know that the hollow he was swabbing was the same hollow that had gone bell-green on his own throat two months ago, the same place on every body where the ledger began to say *counting faster than you would like*. He read the strip. He did not need the strip. He had read it off the face already, off the flat aimed eyes and the loosened hand, but he read the strip because the strip was checkable and the face was not, because Priya's whole discipline was that you did not trust the reading you wanted and you did not trust the reading you feared, you trusted the assay, and the assay came up in the count of seconds he knew to the number: sporulation load high, hepatic markers past the line, the fast toxin already well up the curve. The aflatoxin. The lineage that did not animate the dead because it did not need the dead, that took a living liver and a living brain and scoured the executive out of the second while the first failed under it, and left the body driveable, patient, turned toward the light. A friend still warm at arm's length with no friend in him.

He knew every word of it. He had the words in three languages. The words did nothing. That was the discovery, crouched on the wet curb at the eye-line of a man who was gone: that he had built a whole vocabulary precise enough to name this exactly, *encephalopathy, hepatotoxicity, retained motor and autonomic capacity, executive dispossession*, and that under all of it was Thabo, and Thabo was not there, and no word he owned would put him back.

—

Nomsa came down the line because someone had gone up for her, and she came the way she came to everything, without hurry and without heat, and she stood over the two of them on the curb and looked, and Ezra watched her read it in one long look, the way she read a line she was arguing back up a hill.

She had told him not to give the hollowed man in the water-crew coverall a Tuesday. *It's easier if you don't give them a Tuesday*. He had disobeyed her then, silently, because it was the only thing left he could give a stranger. He understood now, kneeling, why she had said it. It was not that she did not know their Tuesdays. It was that

she knew you could not carry them. She had eleven years of Tuesdays she had refused to pick up, and the refusing was the thing that let her keep coming down the hill, and she was going to have to refuse this one in front of him, and Ezra saw her decide to do it and saw what it cost her, which was not nothing, which had never been nothing, which was only carried somewhere he was not allowed to see.

“Ezra,” she said.

“The rig was throwing coarse,” he said. His voice came out level, which surprised him, and he hated that it could. “Line four. The regulator. He was going to fix it Tuesday. I signed the log. He was under a thinner curtain than the schedule, one day, in the heaviest growth on the seam, and I signed the—”

“Ezra.” Not louder. She crouched. She did not touch Thabo. She put herself at Ezra’s eye-line, not the hollowed man’s, because there was no one at the hollowed man’s eye-line to receive it. “You did not do this.”

“I signed the—”

“You signed a coarse-plume log the way we sign forty a season. The stores were slow. The regulator stuck because everything sticks in the damp. He said Tuesday because he could fix it in his sleep and he was right, he could.” She let it sit, level, load-bearing. “This is the seam. Somebody good breathes it because somebody has to and the somebody had better be good, and he was the best I had, and the seam does not care what he was. You want a fault, there’s the fault. The seam doesn’t spare the good ones. It spends them. That’s what it’s for.” Her greened hand, the eleven-year ledger of it, opened toward Thabo and did not reach him. “I put my best where the seam’s worst. I told you that. I told you to watch how green he got.” Something moved under the level voice, once, and was put back. “That was the one sum I asked you to do.”

It was not an accusation. He would understand later that it was not—that she was taking the fault off him and, in the same breath, taking her own, the ledger where she had put her best man on the worst ground because he was her best. She was showing him the sum with both their names in it because it was the truest thing she had. He heard it as an accusation anyway, because grief hears what it needs to hear, and he let it be one, because a fault was a thing you could

hold, and *the seam does not care* was not.

—

They could not leave him.

That was the arithmetic that did not wait, and Ezra knew it before Nomsa said it and Nomsa did not say it because she did not have to; she only unslung her pack and set it down and did not yet open it, which was its own kind of mercy, the not-yet. A hollowed man on the low lines was not a grief. He was a sporulation source. The behaviour-lineage would do to Thabo what it did to all of them, in its own time—walk the emptied body to warmth and height, tip the turning face up to the broken light, and put its slender stalks through the crown of him toward the sky so that what came out of him could travel; and every hour the body sat here breathing under the coarse plume it drew more spore up the curve, and the drowned seam below them was already thick with the stuff, and one hollowed water-crew man in the fourth building had cost the corps a mercy, and one hollowed Thabo Radebe on the open low line, left to rise and open and seed the wind, could be the reason a hundred more had their doors taken off. He knew this. He had done this arithmetic for strangers a dozen times and found it clean.

It was not clean now. Nothing about it had changed and all of it had changed, and that was the horror Priya could not put on a screen and Nomsa could not put in a sum: that the arithmetic was identical and the man was Thabo, and there was no instrument on Earth that let you feel the second thing and keep doing the first.

“Not today,” Ezra said.

Nomsa looked at him.

“Not—” He stopped. He did not have the argument. There was no argument; the argument was hers; the mercy was the whole of the religion and there were no other articles of faith. He had *turn your face* in his memory, the soft hiss of the close-work canister, the sweetish green thickening once and thinning, the room that smelled after only of copper, which was the smell of safety and the taste of blood. He had performed it. He had told a stranger *you had mornings, you had a crew and a flask*. He knew exactly what the mercy was and exactly why it was mercy and exactly how fast it was, and he could not—not the

argument, he had lost the argument, only the animal *not today*—he could not stand and turn his face while Nomsa laid the concentrated copper on the throat where he had just swabbed, the bell-green hollow, and stopped the sporulation the only way it stopped.

Nomsa held his eye a long moment. Then she did a thing he did not expect and would keep. She slung her pack back on.

“He’s stable to move,” she said. “Load’s high but the fast markers give us hours, not minutes. We don’t leave a source on the open line—that’s not a thing I’ll bend. But he’s not rising today and he’s not seeding today, and there’s a containment bay at the depot that’ll hold a source overnight without spreading it.” She stood. She looked down at Thabo, and she gave him a Tuesday; Ezra saw her do it, saw her break her own rule in front of him, one flick of the eyes that was a whole eulogy, *you were the best I had*. “One night,” she said. “Because you’ll want to have done it right, and because Beauty is inside the wall and somebody has to walk up three flights and ring her own bell at her, and it should be you, and you can’t do that and this in the same hour. One night, Ezra. Then the sum comes due, and I do it, not you, and you don’t watch. Do you hear me.”

“I hear you.”

“Say it back.”

“One night,” he said. “Then you do it. I don’t watch.”

“Green,” she said, which was not *good* and was not *proceed* and was, this once, only the word you had, passed hand to hand like bread over a thing there were no other words for.

—

They walked him up the hill between them, and that was the part Ezra could not put down afterward, the walking.

Because he walked. The body walked. You took the emptied man by the arm and you turned him toward the depot and something in the retained machinery of him took the hill the way it had taken it a thousand times, one broad slow step and then the next, the gait Ezra would have known in the dark, the very rhythm of Thabo Radebe going up to say *green* at the bench—and it was all there, the whole familiar music of the man’s body, and none of the man. The head

turned to a gull that cried off the water; the pupils narrowed against the flat white light; at the checkpoint the body's hand came up and turned itself over, palm out, the old habit, *counting*, the wrists that Thabo had said always lied—and Ezra looked at the greened wrists turned up in the checkpoint light and had to look away, because the wrists had not lied. The oranges had not lied. Everything Thabo had built his small honest liturgy against had come true on a Tuesday behind a coarse plume, and the body went on turning its wrists up at the gate because that was where the machinery said you turned your wrists up, and there was no one in there to be counted.

"Green," said the man at the gate, uncertain, looking at Ezra and not at the thing between them.

Ezra did not answer. He could not make the word. He put his own hand on the small of Thabo's back, where you steered a man who could not steer, and felt the warmth of him come up through the coverall—living, thirty-one, the liver failing under the ledger, the lungs drawing the metallic air, the whole warm apparatus of a person running on with the person scoured out of it—and he steered his friend up the last of the hill toward a containment bay and one bought night, and he thought, flat and exact, the way the training had built him to think and the grief could not stop him thinking: *the house is warm. The lights are on. The doors are off their hinges. And something that is not a guest is living there now, in the warm, using the plumbing.*

He had said that to himself over a stranger in a water-crew coverall and thought he had understood it.

He had not understood it at all.

Seven

The oranges were still in the tank pocket.

That was the thing Ezra could not get past, in the days after, the small administrative obscenity of it. When the corps stood a hollowed crewman down there was a procedure, and the procedure did not know about oranges. The tank came off the racked man's back and went to decontamination, colloidal copper flooded through the regulator and the lines and the mesh pocket where the manual said *tools*, and whatever had been in the pocket came out at the far end sodden and scoured and mineral, the way everything came out at the far end, and someone with a clean throat logged the canister back into inventory. Two oranges had gone in on a Tuesday night, packed by a man betting on a Wednesday. They came out as nothing you could name. Ezra had watched the decon tech do it and said nothing, because there was no article of the procedure under which a man could ask for the fruit back.

He did not do the sums, in those days. The arithmetic Thabo had corrected in him—*you put her at the table and it balances*—did not run anymore, because the table was gone, because Beauty had rung her green bell for a son who could not hear it, and Ezra had stood in her three rooms that still smelled of onions with no metal in them and understood there was no sum in which this balanced, that the ledger he had spent a life keeping had a column for saves and a column for the lost and no column at all for a man who had taught him to peel an orange and was now walking a low line somewhere with his face turned up at the light and nobody home to turn it down.

So he stopped counting. *Empty pocket, empty man.* Thabo had told him that.

—

He went back to the maps because there was nowhere else to put it.

That was the honest account of it, and he made himself keep it honest even now. He did not go back to the maps because grief had granted him vision. He went back to them because grief is a pressure and it has to go into some shape, and the shape nearest to hand was the one already unrolled on his kitchen table, four years of green advancing across the drowned Flats, and he sat down over it one night off shift with the evening's mist thin and metallic on his tongue and found the map had changed while he was not looking at it, or he had changed, which was the same problem stated from the other end.

Because now there was a point on it he knew.

He could put his finger on the low line where they had found Thabo—not found, that was the wrong word, you did not find a man you had eaten lunch with, you recognised him, which was worse—and the green stood over that ground in the depot's grease-pencil the way it stood over all the low ground, thick and patient and shining, and Ezra looked at the pencil mark and could not make it be a correlation coefficient. It was where his friend had breathed the seam so his mother could keep her bell. It was warm and wet and undefended and unsprayed, and any fungus on Earth would stand up in it and sing, and it had, and it had sung through the crown of a man who kept oranges in his pocket.

This is exactly the failure, he told himself, reaching for the exact word the way he reached for it more carefully the further he went. *This is the mechanism by which a scientist is lost. Not a bad idea. A true grief attached to a live hypothesis, so that discarding the hypothesis feels like discarding the dead.* He wrote it in the margin, because writing the rebuttal in his own hand was the one honest thing left, and his hand was less steady than it had been. *Grief is not data. A wound where you loved someone is not a residual.* He looked at the sentence. It was true. It did not lift the weight off the map by one gram.

He had wanted, before, for the green to mean something. That was the shape of the old heresy, the one Priya had diagnosed and Nomsa had accounted for whole—a man tired of copper and sad about mush-

rooms, primed by twenty years of loving the wood-wide web to see care where there was only the market's oldest predator taking the softest target. He could still hear both of them. Priya: *the bloom loves the poor for the same reason cholera did*. Nomsa: *the cruelty didn't call the bloom, it built the bloom a house*. They were right. They had always been right, and being right had never once closed it, and now the not-closing had a face, and the face was turned up at a window.

He wanted it to have Thabo.

He wanted, with a want that frightened him more than any of it, for the green that had taken the man to be the same green that had, impossibly, in the entheogen zones, been seen to give a man partway back. He did not have that yet. It was rumour and one bad reading and a thing the crews said low over the airway mist, that where the blue-staining strain came up thick the hollowed did not always stay hollow. He had filed it under *artefact* and *wishful* and *the exact story a grieving corps would tell itself*. He filed it there still. And he took the map, and found on it every place the crews had marked the blue-staining strain, the entheogen ground, and he did not write in the margin what he was thinking, because there was no honest note for a man who has begun to plan.

—

The gathering was the heresy. The maps had only ever been reading.

He told himself it was within his warrant, and at the technical edge of the thing it was: a science officer sampled the bloom, that was the whole of his function, he carried the collection kit as a matter of course—the sterile vials, the swabs, the little brass-handled scalpel for taking a clean plug of fruiting tissue without crushing the gills. He had taken ten thousand such samples for the corps, logged them, run them, killed them, filed the panels that told Nomsa where to argue the line. Nothing in the kit was contraband. The contraband was in what he did not log.

He took the first plugs on an ordinary run, in an ordinary drowned street, while the crew worked the front twenty metres up the hill and the mist hung its veil ahead of them. He crouched at a windowsill where the pale tan-and-blue had come up overnight—he could have named it in three languages, and one of the three was the name of

a thing men had eaten in ceremony for ten thousand years to sit closer to their dead—and he laid the scalpel to the base of the cap and took a clean plug and did not reach for the mist. He let it grow on. He put the vial not in the logged rack on his hip but in an inner pocket, against his chest, where his own throat-green climbed, and felt the small cold weight of it there and felt, under the copper on his tongue, something he had not felt since before Beauty rang the bell for no one, which was the feeling of doing a thing on purpose.

The strain was the entheogenic one. He was precise about that with himself, because a man who gathered *this* strain and not the others was not sampling the bloom, he was reaching for a door. He knew the pharmacology of it flat and exact—a serotonergic agonist, a real one, a molecule that in the old careful trials had loosened the partitions of a mind and raised, measurably, the traffic between its rooms; that had, in people dying, sat them down easier with the dying; that did to the machinery of the self something no one fully understood except that it was not nothing and was not magic. In the trials it had been given by clinicians, in rooms, with monitors and a measured dose and a hand on the pulse. He was a liver-failing man taking uncounted plugs of a wild consortium strain into an inner pocket with no monitor but the green climbing his own throat, and he took the plug anyway, and the next, and told himself he was only gathering, only building the option, only keeping the door where he could find it.

He did not, yet, take any of it into himself. He wanted that on the record of his own conscience, such as it was. He gathered. He built the little cold library against his chest. Grief was metabolising into something in him, quietly, on the same curve the copper ran, and he could no longer have said cleanly whether what it was becoming was courage or heresy or symptom, because all three of them, from the inside, felt exactly like resolve.

—

They had lost Thabo, and the crew felt it the way a hand feels a lost finger, which is to say constantly and in the wrong places. The airway mist at the bench went quieter. Someone still said *green* into the after-quiet and it was still answered down the row, *green, green, green*, but there was a hollow in the passing of it now, a place in the bench where a broad slow man had sat and peeled an orange in one coil and held it up to the light, and the word went round the hollow

instead of through it. The corps did not stop for grief. The low lines did not stop. But the metal weather came up the arms of all of them together that season, the flat lowering behind the eyes, the colour draining out from behind everything, and it was worse than usual because now it had a subject, which the green mood was not supposed to have.

Ezra knew the science of it cold. Copper is cumulative; the liver takes it; the mood collapses on the liver's curve. Grief is not that. Grief is a thing about the world. But the two of them had come up the arm together this season, the metal and the mourning arriving at the same green hour, and he could no longer run the control on his own crew any more than he could run it on himself. He looked down the bench at a dozen good people going quietly grey behind the eyes and could not have told a review board how much of it was the copper silting their reason and how much was a man's empty seat. The weapon that kept them un-hollowed put them in the exact mood in which the bloom's offer—if it was an offer—would sound most like mercy. A calm, lowered, grieving, undefended people. He heard Priya in it. *That's not where a saviour would go. That's where a coloniser would go.* He heard her, and he took another plug the next morning, into the pocket against his throat.

—

Nomsa came for him on a Thursday, because Thursday was still the day she found out most things, and grief had not changed her calendar.

She did not come to the mixing bench this time. She came to the flat, which she had never done, and that was how he knew the weight of it before she said a word—Nomsa did not spend a trip she did not have to spend. She stood in his doorway with her greened hand on the frame, green well up the wrist now toward the pulse, eleven years and a season of fresh mercies on it, and she looked past him at the kitchen table where the maps lay, and at the top map she saw the new mark, the low line, the place, and she read it the way she read ground, and she knew whose it was, and something went across her face that she did not let stay.

"You put him on the map," she said.

"I put the correlation on the map."

"You put *him* on it." She came in. She did not sit. "I can see the mark, Ezra. You've drawn where we stood him down and you've put green on it and now you're going to make his death mean the thing you already wanted the green to mean." Her voice was the flat load-bearing voice, the eye-line voice, and it did not rise, and that was how he knew she was not fighting him. She was doing something harder. "Don't. I am asking you not to. I have watched this exact thing take better men than you, and it does not take them with a bad argument. It takes them with a true grief. That's the only kind strong enough to do it."

It was, almost word for word, the thing he had written in his own margin, and hearing it in her mouth should have been the end of it and was not, and he saw her see that it was not, and something in her settled lower, the way a person settles who has understood that the easy version of a hard job is off the table.

"You think the low ground grieves him," she said. "You think it went and got the exact strain that gives them back, and it's holding him for you down there. You believe I haven't stood over the green thinking *maybe*?" She let that land, and it landed, because he had never once heard her grant the *maybe*, and the granting of it from Nomsa was more frightening than any of Priya's rigour. "It came up through Thabo because Thabo breathed the seam a decade so his mother could keep her rooms—because he was standing in the softest undefended ground in the metro doing the bravest thing on the crew, and the softest ground is where it always comes. It has no idea who he was. It doesn't know he had a mother. Only we know that. That's the whole of what we've got over it—that we're the ones who know he had a mother—and you are about to trade even that away for a story that lets you keep him."

He said nothing. There was nothing. Every word of it fit the data and left Reading B exactly as alive as it had been, and she knew it did, and she was not arguing the data anymore.

"I keep a count," she said.

He looked up.

"You count species. Priya counts variance. I count the ones I've laid the mercy on." She said it the way she said everything, without weight. "Every one. There's no ledger. But I have it, and I've never once said it

to a living soul, and I'm saying it to you now so you'll understand what I'm protecting. It's not the copper. It's not the corps. It's not my job." She looked at him steadily, eleven years and a private column no one would ever audit. "It's that every one of them was somebody's Thabo, and I did it anyway, on schedule, kindly, because the alternative was a hundred more, and if you're right—if the green was ever going to give even one of them back and I copper-drowned him at a window to stop the sporulation—then I am not the woman with the body count of saves. I'm the other thing. And I still have to spray tomorrow. Do you understand what you're asking a person to carry, to half-believe you and go to work?"

It was the most she had ever said, and she said it in the register of a weather report, and her certainty had never been the absence of the doubt he had. It was the doubt, carried. She was the copper order having looked directly at the *maybe* and chosen the count of saves over it anyway, every single morning, with a private tally of the possibly-murdered pressing on her the way the copper pressed on her liver, and still picking up the sprayer.

"I'm not asking you to carry it," he said. His voice was not steady either.

"You are," she said. "That's exactly what you're asking. You're asking me to keep spraying while a man I trust for the science stands next to me believing I might be scouring off the cure. That's not a philosophy for you, Ezra. It's a name I might have to add." She held his eye. "Or not add. I haven't decided which is the mercy. That's new. You did that."

She looked, then, the way she always looked in the end. At his collar. And he did not, this time, have to be told to turn his hands over, because she was not asking about his wrists.

"Show me your throat," she said.

He did not want to. That, more than anything, told him where he was—that he did not want Nomsa's eyes on the soft hollow above his collarbone, the place he had been checking in the crew mirror every morning and buttoning over. He undid the collar. She looked. She had eleven years of reading green off skin and she read his in a breath, the church-bell verdigris that had, in the season of the oranges coming out of decon as nothing, climbed. It had been faint

at the throat before, a rumour in the hollow above the collarbone. It had filled that hollow now, dark and unmistakable, right up against the warning line and not yet across it—the last clean centimetre before the line where they took the sprayer out of your hands. And it had a companion he had told no one about, a faint bloom low on the chest where an inner pocket sat against him full of cold vials, because you could not carry a heresy and keep a perfect dose, the arithmetic did not allow it, and he had begun, quietly, without deciding to, to let the dose fall so he could hold the door.

“That’s not a throat,” Nomsa said. Very quietly. “That’s past the throat, Ezra. That’s a man skipping his mist.”

“I’m managing it.”

“You’re dosing down.” She did not ask it. She read it off him the way Thabo had read everything off his face. “You’re letting it fall so you can go closer to the green. I’ve seen the curve. It only goes one way from here, and it goes to a wet room and a window, and I will be the one they send, because I’m your captain and I know your name and I count the ones I do.” She let go of his collar. Her greened hand came away and she looked at it, her own eleven-year ledger, and then at his, the fresh green climbing to meet hers from years behind and gaining. “Keep it not-the-throat, I told you. Once. You didn’t.”

“No,” he said. “I didn’t.”

She stood a moment in the lamp-light over the map with the mark on it, the low line, the place, and whatever she was deciding she decided it privately, in the column no one would ever see, and she did not tell him which way it fell. She went to the door. She did not tell him to roll the map. She had tried that and it had not worked and Nomsa did not spend a word twice.

“Green,” she said at the door, and it was not the corps’ *good* this time, not *proceed*, not *you are still yourself this morning*. It was a question with no good answer, laid down flat between them, *are you still yourself*, and they both knew what the honest reply was and both knew he would not give it.

“Green,” he said.

She held the door a moment longer than the word required, the way you hold a hinge you have already half-decided will not hold, and then

she was gone, down the stair, back toward the seam she would argue up the hill in the morning with a private count one name heavier than it had been, and Ezra stood in the empty flat with the map and the lamp and the small cold weight of the library against his greening chest, the door he had built and not yet opened.

He did not turn his hands over. He knew what they said. He put two fingers to the hollow above his collarbone instead, to the bell-green risen to the warning line and holding there, one last centimetre short of the crossing, and felt nothing, because the metal never hurt going in; it only sat, and waited, patient and geological, the same patient green that stood over the drowned ground where his friend was walking with his face turned up, and Ezra could not have said, standing there with his throat gone the colour of the thing that was killing him so the faster thing could not, whether the door in his pocket opened onto the cure or onto the last and kindest lie a dying man tells himself—only that he had built it, and that he was going to open it.

Grief, over one green season, had made him a man who no longer packed the orange.

Eight

The zone was a school, or had been, and Ezra went into it alone because that was the protocol and because he was glad, for the first time in a week, of a protocol that put a wall between him and the crew.

He had not gone back to the depot. That was the fact under the day, the one he carried folded and not looked at directly. Thabo was in the containment bay on the far side of the wall, breathing, and Nomsa had bought him one night, and the night was nearly used, and Ezra had signed himself onto a survey rotation on the drowned lower seam precisely so that his hands and his corps number would be somewhere legible on a Wednesday morning he could not otherwise account for. A survey was clean work. You went into a marked zone ahead of the sprayers, you read the growth, you called the mercies, you came out. It asked nothing of him but the training, and the training was the one part of him still standing.

The school sat at the top of a low rise the sea had not quite taken, so that its ground floor was silted and its upper storeys were dry, and the front of it had gone over entirely to the bloom. Ezra stood at the gate with his mask sealed and his tank live, the coin-taste bright on the back of his tongue, and read the growth off the façade before it could mean anything.

It was the wrong strain.

That was his first clean observation and he made it out of habit, and only afterward did the wrongness of the wrongness catch up with him. The bloom he sprayed on the low lines was the killing consortium—the furred grey mats, the pale behaviour-lineage stalks putting their slow architecture up toward any light, the sweetish heavy sporulation

smell that meant a host was near and turned toward the sky. This was not that. What had colonised the school was the other lineage, the entheogenic one, the tan-and-blue fruiting bodies he could have named in three languages and had watched himself kill off a windowsill on his first page of the season with a feeling he was not supposed to have. They came up here not in the driven vertical architecture of the killer but in low dense rosettes, along the sills, in the seams of the steps, in the damp shadow under the broken lintel, thousands of them, and where the morning found them the caps held a faint blue at the bruise-line.

He crouched and read a rosette without touching it. Healthy. Prolific. And ordinary—this was the thing he had to keep saying, ordinary, because the entheogen strains erupted everywhere now, in every ruin, correlated with the same warming and the same broken ground that spread the killer, and a school-front furred with *psilocybe* was no more a message than mould in a wet wall. He had Priya's whole discipline for this. *You do not trust the reading you want.* He wrote *entheogen-dominant colonisation, low killer load* in the survey slate and stood, and went in, because a low killer load did not mean none, and the protocol said you cleared the hosts before you called the sprayers, and there would be hosts. There were always hosts.

There were hosts.

—

He found the first one in what had been a classroom, low and inward, in the damp core where the light came sideways through a fallen wall, and everything about the finding was correct and nothing about what he found was.

She had been a woman of perhaps sixty. She sat with her back to the intact wall, in the sideways light, and the growth was on her—he made himself see it exactly—the tan-and-blue rosettes had come up along the line of her collarbone and the crown of her head and the backs of her hands where they rested open on her knees, the entheogen strain, established and fruiting, a person colonised past any doubt. He had his hand on the close-work canister before he had finished the thought, because a colonised host was a sporulation source and the mercy was the whole of the religion, and then he stopped, because she was not doing it.

She was not doing any of it.

The hosts he merced turned their faces to the light and lifted, driven, the behaviour-lineage walking the emptied body up and up toward height and sky so that what came out of it could travel; that was the whole terrible engine of the thing, *climb, and lift, and turn your face*. This woman's face was not lifted. It was level. Her eyes were open, and the sideways light was in them, and she was not looking up at it and she was not looking at nothing. Her head had turned, a little, when he came into the room—motor function, a body orienting to a stimulus, he named it flat the way he had named it over Thabo—and then it had stayed turned, toward him, and that was the first wrong thing, because a hollowed body oriented to a stimulus and then, when the stimulus resolved into nothing that drove it, released and went back to aiming its eyes wherever the last chemical instruction had left them aimed. Thabo's head had done exactly that on the curb: turned to his name, received nothing, gone level again. This head had turned to him and held.

He stood very still and made himself run the checkable list, in order, because the face was not checkable and the list was.

Respiration: present, slow, even. Pupils: tracking the light, narrowing as a cloud went off the sun outside and the room brightened—retained autonomic function, exactly as the canon said. He took a step to the side, deliberately, out of her eye-line, the way you moved to see whether a thing tracked, and her eyes moved with him. He stopped. That, too, was in the canon; a hollowed body would track a moving stimulus, a dog did it, it was older than thought. It proved nothing. He took another step, and her eyes came with him, and her head turned, slowly, to keep him in front of it, and there was no reaching in the movement and no wanting in it, and also—he could not make the observation go away by naming it—no *driving* in it either. It was not the hungry vertical drive of the killer host and it was not the flat aimlessness of the hollowed. It was only a person sitting in sideways light, watching a man cross a room, with nobody, as far as he could establish, home behind the watching, and doing it anyway, patiently.

“Hello,” Ezra said, which was not a thing you said to a host, which was a thing you said to a person, and he heard himself say it and did not take it back.

She did not answer. Of course she did not answer. There was no fungal voice, no signal, nothing that crossed the gap between them but the light and the coin-taste of his own live mist; he knew this, held it, the science floor under his feet. The bloom did not speak. Any reading he took off this woman's face was a reading he was making, on a brain the training had built and the copper and the grief were, between them, silting up. He knew all of it.

She lifted her hand.

—

It was the smallest motion, and he catalogued it as it happened because cataloguing was the last handhold, and it undid him anyway.

The right hand came up off the knee—the open palm furred at the back with the tan-and-blue growth—and it turned, slowly, palm out, and stopped, held level in the sideways light between them. Ezra's own hand had come halfway to the canister and stopped there, and the two of them held their two hands in the air in the silted classroom, and his heart was going in a way he did not permit it to go on the line, and he made himself name what he was seeing before he let it be anything.

A hollowed body would turn its wrist up at a checkpoint. He had watched Thabo's body do it at the gate, the old habit older than the emptying, *counting*, the machinery turning the wrist up because that was where the machinery said you turned your wrist up, with no one in there to be counted. This was that. It had to be that. A retained motor pattern, fired by the stimulus of a man in a corps mask, the body doing at a masked figure the thing a sprayed body had done ten thousand times. It meant nothing.

Except the palm was out, not up. She had not turned her wrist to the light to show a ledger. She had turned her palm toward him, level, open, at the height of his own halted hand, and held it there, and it was not the checkpoint gesture, it was the older one, the one that had no groove in the corps to be running, the one a person made across a distance to another person to say the oldest thing hands say, which is *I have nothing in it, and neither should you*.

He could build the wrong out of the right. A colonised body, retained motor capacity, a stimulus—a masked man—firing a deeply worn so-

cial motor pattern of which the sprayed world had many; add the aflatoxin already up her curve dismantling whatever inhibition would have kept the arm on the knee; add his own brain, primed for six weeks on grief-maps, primed by three days of Thabo, silting green at the throat and hungry, so hungry, for exactly this—and you got a man reading a benediction into a spasm. It fit the data as well as the other thing fit it, better, it did not require the substrate of the world to have changed, and he knew it was the answer he would have handed a student who came to him flushed with this exact discovery, *you have mistaken a motor artefact for a message*, and he could not, standing there with his own hand halfway to the copper and her palm open and level in the light, make it be the only answer, or take his hand the last of the way to the canister.

He lowered his hand instead. He did not decide to; it lowered.

—

There were four of them in the school, and none of them was doing it.

He went through the upper storeys slowly, and he found the others low and inward, colonised by the same tan-and-blue lineage, every one of them a source the protocol said he was to clear before the sprayers came up, and he cleared none of them, and he told himself he was surveying. A man perhaps forty, sitting on the floor of a corridor with his back to a locker, the growth up the side of his neck, not lifted, not driven, his head coming round to Ezra's step and holding, level, a long slow blink. A boy—he could not think about the boy for long—perhaps fourteen, curled on his side in the sideways light of a stairwell as though asleep, breathing, the rosettes along his shoulder, and when Ezra crouched near him the boy's eyes opened and found him and stayed, and there was the same patient absence of drive, the same *nobody home and yet the house left the light on for you*.

He stood in the stairwell and made the observation he had been refusing to make for an hour, and made it flat, and wrote it in no slate.

The killer hosts sporulated and climbed. It was the entire behaviour, the reason the mercy existed, the reason a hollowed man on the open line was a hundred hollowed men by next season—the drive to height, to sky, to broadcast, the emptied body turned into an engine for mak-

ing more emptied bodies. These four were colonised, and heavily, and they were not climbing, and they were not turned to the sky, and they were not—he checked each of them, pupils, respiration, the tan-and-blue caps at the sporulation-line—doing the one thing the whole terror was built out of. They were sitting in the light. They were watching him cross rooms. They were, if he let the word come up, *quiet*.

He built the wrong of it again, because the alternative was to stand in a drowned school and let his chest tell him what it wanted to. Phase. It could be a phase. The entheogen lineage was serotonergic, connectivity-increasing, and connectivity was not drive; perhaps a host colonised by this strain simply had not entered the climbing phase, or would not, being the wrong strain for it; perhaps the stillness was not restoration but a slower, stranger parasitism, a coloniser that kept its host calm and undriven and undefended precisely because a calm connected undefended host was a better long slow engine than a frantic one, the orchid that made no chlorophyll and drank its whole life from the shared line and gave nothing, wearing serenity. Priya's whole afternoon of it came back to him: *sharing and stealing look identical at the level of a hypha moving carbon; you can only tell them apart by asking who ends up hollow*. And these were hollow. He had no evidence any of them was not. He had a woman's open palm and a boy's held gaze and the plain absence of the climbing drive, and every scrap of it fit the coloniser as well as it fit the cure, and there was no instrument in his pack or on Priya's screens or in his own greening body that could stand between the two readings and tell him which quiet he was looking at.

And there was the other wrong, the one he saved for last because it undid the ground he was standing on. His own brain. He was three days from Thabo. He was six weeks into a grief-map. He was sitting green at the throat, and a poisoned brain hungry for grace would build grace out of any ambiguous data you fed it—would take four undriven hosts and a serotonergic strain and a level open hand and assemble them into exactly the thing the grief needed. He could not rule himself out. The most complete Reading A did not even need the fungus to be a parasite, it only needed *him* to be a man reading intention into damp, and he had no way, standing in the stairwell, to establish that he was not.

He pressed two fingers to the soft hollow above his own collarbone,

under the mask's strap, and felt nothing, because there was nothing to feel; the church-bell green was there and it did not hurt and it had not, he confirmed it as though it were data that could save him, crossed the collarbone. Throat. Not past. Not yet the line where they took the sprayer out of his hands and the question out of his keeping. He was still, by the ledger the body kept, himself this morning. He held it the way you hold the one fact in a room that is checkable when everything else has stopped being.

—

He came out of the school into the flat white light and stood at the gate a long time with the drowned seam shining green below him and did not call the sprayers.

He should call them. That was the protocol; that was the religion; a colonised zone with four sources in it was a zone you cleared, and the longer it stood the more spore went up the curve, and somewhere below him a hundred people he would never meet were breathing whatever this school released into the wind, and Nomsa would tell him—rigorously, correctly, with a body count of saves—that four un-driven hosts today were forty driven ones next season and that the plain fact that he could not watch them climb was a fact about the phase and not about their souls. He knew she would be right. He had done the mercy. He knew exactly what it was and exactly why it was mercy and exactly how fast it was.

He also knew that he had crouched at the eye-line of a woman who had opened her hand to him, palm out and level, and that he had not been able to make himself lay the copper on her throat, and that he could not tell—could not, the instrument did not exist—whether he had failed to mercy a hollowed source, or refused to poison a person coming quietly back.

He turned his own hands over at the gate. Counted. The green at the wrists, the church-roof green, everyone's; above it the creep up the tendons; and at the throat, under the strap, the bell-green that was his clock and not yet his verdict. *Not yet*, the ledger said, the way it always said, and it did not tell him anything about the school.

He made the call. Not the sprayers. He keyed the corps channel and logged the zone *entheogen-dominant, hosts present, mercy deferred pending science-officer reassessment*, which was a sentence

with his corps number under it that would buy the four of them, if it bought them anything, one day—the way one night had been bought for Thabo, the way you bought a thing you could not pay for with the small currency of *not yet*—and he knew as he keyed it that it was the first crack in the wall, the first time in a season of walls he had put his number under a deferral instead of a mercy, and that Nomsa would read it, and that he had no answer ready for her, because he did not have the argument. He only had the woman's open hand, and the thing in the boy's held gaze that he could not name and could not check and could not, now, unsee, and the taste of copper on the back of his tongue that had always meant safety and had begun, faintly, at the gate of the greened school, to taste of nothing he could trust.

He walked back up toward the clean part of the city, laying no mist behind him, and behind him the school stood quiet in the sideways light with its four undriven hosts sitting in it, not climbing, not turned to the sky, watching the door he had gone out of the way you watch a bird you have no intention of catching—and Ezra could not have said, and would go over it in the small hours the way you press a tooth, whether he had just left four sporulation sources standing to seed the wind, or four people the copper would have scoured off the earth in the exact hour something in them had gone still enough, at last, to be reached.

Nine

The name on the call slip was Beauty Radebe, and Ezra read it three times at the bench before he let himself understand it, the way you read a word you know perfectly well and pretend, for one merciful second, that you do not.

Thabo's mother. Inside the wall, on the high dry ground where the streets were misted twice a day and nobody's throat went green before sixty, in the third-floor flat Thabo had bought her a berth in with six years of the seam. Ezra had rung her own bell four nights ago, exactly as Nomsa said he must—stood in her doorway with his mask in his hand and told her that her son was in a containment bay at the depot, alive, and hollow, and that both were true, and watched her not fall down, which was worse than falling down. She had made him tea he could not drink. She had asked whether Thabo had been afraid, at the end, and he had told her the one true thing that was also a mercy: that there had been no end, no moment he could have been afraid in, that the emptying did not feel like drowning because there was no one left to feel the water. She had held that. She was a woman who held things.

And now her name was on a call slip from the high dry ground—*possible source, third floor, unresponsive, requesting corps*—and Ezra understood that the wall had never been a wall. It was a contour line the copper defended on a schedule, and *better* above the line was not *kept*. Nobody's throat went green before sixty up there. That had only ever meant *less often*, and a rate was a thing that happened to somebody, on some particular Wednesday, and the somebody this Wednesday was a woman who had made him tea he could not drink.

—

Nomsa read the slip over his shoulder and said nothing for long enough that he knew she had understood it faster than he had.

"I'll take it," she said.

"It's mine."

"It's the mother of the man in my bay," Nomsa said, "and you rang her bell, and that's two reasons it should be anyone else, and I'm anyone else." She was already checking the close-work canister, the concentrated one, turning it in her greened hands to read the charge, the eleven-year habit of a woman who did not trust a gauge she had not read herself. "You don't have the count for this one, Ezra. I have the count for this one. That's the whole of it."

"I rang her bell," Ezra said. "She made me tea. If somebody the corps sends to that door is going to be a face she knows, it should be the face that already told her about her son, not a stranger with a canister. That's the whole of it too."

Nomsa looked at him with steady eyes—steadier than Priya's, because Priya's steadiness was rigour and Nomsa's was a thing she had paid for. He watched her arrive at the place where his reasoning was not wrong and was also the reasoning of a man walking toward a fire because he could not bear to hear it from across the street.

"You mix," she said. "You do not lay it on. If it comes to the mercy, I lay it on, and you turn your face. Same as the water-crew man. Same as Thabo was going to be before we bought the night. Those are the terms. You come because she knows your face and you leave the metal to my hands. Say it back."

"I mix. You lay it on. I turn my face."

"Green," Nomsa said, which meant *proceed*, and did not mean *good*, because there was no version of this that was good, and they both knew the syllable was doing more work than it could hold.

—

The high dry ground smelled, faintly, of copper laid thin and often, the way a well-kept house smells of the polish someone runs over it before anyone is awake to see, and Ezra had never before let himself

notice how much cleaner the air was here than in the low city he sprayed. Twice a day. The streets, the doorways, the vents—and the smell so ordinary up here that the people who lived in it had stopped being able to taste it. They no longer knew they were being kept.

The stair was clean. On the third floor the corps had cordoned the flat with the yellow tape that meant *source suspected, do not open windows*, and a young officer Ezra did not know stood at the door with his mask up and his eyes wide over it, new enough that a source above the contour line could still widen his eyes, and Nomsa said “corps” in the voice that moved young officers out of doorways, and they went in.

Beauty Radebe was in the good chair by the window.

She had put herself there, or the machinery had, in the last hours before it stopped being her—the behaviour-lineage doing what it did, which was not thinking, only chemistry, only the molecule that said *climb, and lift, and turn your face to the light*—and the good chair by the window was where the light was, so the emptied body had gone to the light the way a plant goes, and she sat in it now with her hands in her lap and her chin up and her open eyes turned to the flat white morning off the far water, and from the crown of her grey head and the line of her jaw the growth had begun to put up its first slender stalks, pale, delicate, no longer than an eyelash, toward the one bright window.

First fruiting, Ezra thought, the science coming up in him the way it came, exact and useless. *Early. Hours, not a day. She's fresh.* He had read it off the eyes across the room, the flat aimed looking that did not resolve into wanting, the same nobody he had found in the water-crew man and in Thabo on the curb, the lights on and the house empty and the doors taken quietly off their hinges while she sat in her good chair in the safe part of the city.

“Ah,” Nomsa said softly, and Ezra heard the whole eulogy in it, and under it something he had not heard from her before: that if Beauty Radebe could be emptied in a twice-a-day-misted flat behind a door the corps had done last week, then the wall was a story, and the story was the thing the copper economy stood on. She had counted, in the space of an *Ah*, what it would cost if that story failed.

Ezra did the panel because his hands knew how to do the panel.

He took the swab high, from the soft hollow above her collarbone, the same place on every body where the ledger began to say *counting faster than you would like*, the same place that had gone bell-green on his own throat and that he buttoned his collar over every morning. Her throat was not green. That was the small terrible detail his eye would keep. She had lived above the contour her whole life, misted and kept, and the hollow above her collarbone was the ordinary brown of an old woman who had never had to spray herself onto a wall—no verdigris, no ledger, nothing counting—and the growth had come for her anyway, not up through years of dose but in through one bad breath on one unremarkable day, the aflatoxin already well up the curve in a body that had never carried a milligram of the copper that might have slowed it. Up here you did not need to carry it. Up here the corps carried it for you, twice a day, until the one day they had not been enough.

He read the strip. Sporulation load high. Hepatic markers past the line, but only just—a liver that had been whole four days ago when she made him tea, going now, but only just begun to go. The fast toxin up but not high. Fresh. Early. He hated the reading, because every hour a fresh source sat breathing was an hour it drew more spore up the curve, and this was the high dry ground, full of lungs that had never once tasted copper on the back of the tongue.

“Load’s up,” he said. His voice came out level. He was learning that it could, and hating that too. “Markers just over. She’s early. Hours.”

“Not this time,” Nomsa said, and he understood she meant the night. There would be no night bought here. The buying of Thabo’s night had been a thing she let him have *once*, for the best man she had, on the strength of eleven years of never bending, and she could not bend twice in a week and still be the woman whose bending meant anything. And a source on the high dry ground was not a source on the low line. Below the contour the wind carried spore out over ground already thick with it; one more was arithmetic in a long grim sum. Up here it carried over the misted streets and the lungs that had never learned the taste, and one open, seeding source above the wall could be the crack that let the low city’s horror up the hill.

Ezra knew all of it, in three languages. He stood in Beauty Radebe’s

clean flat with the strip in his hand and did the sum, and the sum was clean, exactly as clean as it had always been for strangers, and the woman in the good chair had made him tea four nights ago and asked whether her son had been afraid.

—

“Ezra,” Nomsa said. She had unslung the pack and set it down and had not yet opened it, the not-yet that was its own small mercy, the same not-yet she had given Thabo on the curb. “You mix, you don’t lay on. Those were the terms. Go and mix it and set it in my hand and turn your face. I’ll do the rest.”

He knelt to the pack. His hands knew the mix. The close-work mercy was not the hanging veil of the street canister; it was the concentrated one, the laid-on one, copper at a dose no emptied body could survive, thickened so it would stay where you put it and not drift—a small precise field-chemistry he had done a dozen times without his heart in the room, could have done blind. He did it now and could not keep his heart out of the room, and that was the whole difference between the water-crew man and this. Over the stranger he had given a Tuesday out of duty. Here he did not have to imagine the Tuesday. He knew it. *You made tea. You asked me if he was afraid. You held it standing up. You raised a boy who kept oranges in his pocket as a bet against the dark, and he learned that from someone, and now I know from whom.* The Tuesday already existed, and he already owned it, and he could not put it down to do the work.

His hands finished the mix. The metal came up in the small vessel the colour it always came up, the treacherous beautiful green-blue of the thing that was both, cure and rot in one oxidised bloom, verdigris in a cup, and he thought—flat, exact, precision as a symptom—that he held in his two hands the substance that stood between the city and the emptying, and the substance silting up his own failing liver, and, if his heresy was anything but a poisoned man’s pattern-match, the substance that might scour off the earth the only thing that had ever come to give humanity its humanity back. All three. One cup. You could only tell them apart, Priya had said, by asking who ended up hollow, and the answer this morning was *Beauty Radebe*—hollow already, hollow if he did nothing, and hollow-and-gone in ninety seconds if he set the cup in Nomsa’s hand.

He set the cup in Nomsa's hand.

—
“Turn your face,” she said, and it was the same instruction, word for word, that she had given him over the water-crew man, *turn your face, you don't have the eleven years for it*, and he had turned his face then and heard the soft hiss and smelled the sweetish green thicken once and thin, and it had been terrible and it had been a stranger and he had climbed back up the hill and gone on being himself.

He did not turn his face.

He had said he would. He had said it back twice, *I turn my face*, and standing here he found he could not do the one thing left, which was to make himself not a witness. It seemed to him suddenly obscene, the turning away—that the world had done this to her already, the warming and the contour line and the twice-a-day mist that was a promise and not a wall, and that the last human act available in the room was to be *present* while the last of what could not be helped was ended kindly, and that he had been about to spend it looking at the clean landing instead.

“Ezra,” Nomsa said. A warning and, under it, something else.

“I knew her,” Ezra said. “Somebody in this room should be looking at her who knew her. You're going to do it right—I know you are—and doing it right and doing it *seen* are not the same thing, and she made me tea.” He heard his own voice going wrong the way it had on the curb, and did not put the heel of his hand against his mouth this time, because there was no crew here, only Nomsa, who kept a private tally he had never been shown. “Let me be the one who saw her. Please. She can't be got back. But she can be *seen* while she goes. Let that be the mercy inside the mercy.”

Nomsa held his eye a long moment, the canister turned in her hand, her greened thumb over the release. He watched her decide, and watched what it cost her, which was not nothing, which had never been nothing, only carried somewhere he was not usually allowed to see and which, this once, she let him see the edge of.

“Look at her, then,” she said, very low. “Not at me. Not at my hands. At *her*. And Ezra.” She waited until he was looking at Beauty Radebe in her good chair in the light. “This does not become a thing you

do. You did not turn your face today because she made you tea. You do not get to not-turn-your-face for the next one, and the one after. The looking is not free. Nothing here is free. I'll let you carry this one so you carry it right. I won't let you make a liturgy of carrying them, because that's a road, and I've watched men walk it, and it ends with a face turned up to the light in a good chair." Something moved under the level voice, once, and was set back where she kept it. "I'm going to do it now."

—

He looked at her.

He looked at Beauty Radebe's face turned to the flat white morning off the water, at the pale first stalks no longer than an eyelash rising from the crown of her grey head toward the window, at the open eyes with nobody behind them aimed at a light the machinery had walked her to, and he did not look away when the close-work canister hissed, soft, the sound he already carried—laid on directly at the throat where he had swabbed, at the ungreened hollow that had never in her clean life held a milligram of the metal and now took a lethal close-dose all at once—and he made himself go on being a person who was present.

The science came up in him even here, because it was the last hand-hold and he clung to it: *the ions walk into the sporulating growth and unmake the proteins that hold it to itself; the stalks slacken first, the fine new fruiting going grey and wet, the sporulation stopped before it can open and seed; and the body—the emptied warm apparatus of a person, the liver already going, the lungs drawing the metallic air—takes a dose past what it can carry, and the body, which has no one in it to mind, stops too.* He named it in three languages, and the naming did nothing, the vocabulary lying over the thing like a fine hanging veil that changed nothing underneath it. Under the veil was a woman in a good chair who had made him tea. But he had not looked away, and that was the only thing in the room he had been able to choose, and he had chosen it.

The sweetish green thickened once as the growth died and released what it held, and thinned, and the room smelled, after, of nothing but copper—the smell of safety, the taste of blood—and Beauty Radebe's chin came down by some last slackening of the neck and rested on her chest, so that for the first time since they had come in she was not

turned to the light, and looked, for one lie of a moment, only asleep.

—

They did not speak on the stair.

At the door the young officer with the wide eyes said “Green?” uncertainly, meaning *is it contained*, meaning *are we safe*, the only thing the word had ever meant up here where it was said twice a day over a mist nobody could taste anymore, and Nomsa said “Green,” and Ezra could not make the word, and the young officer decided not to have seen it, and let them pass.

Outside, the high dry ground lay clean and misted and full of morning, and below the contour line, past the harbour, past the wall that was not a wall, the drowned Flats stood green and shining where the sun found the fruiting, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be beautiful, mile on mile of it going up worst and brightest exactly over the ground where the most people had been most abandoned, and Ezra looked at it and felt both jaws of the thing close on him at once, for the first time with a face in them.

Because if Nomsa and Priya were right, what he had just watched laid on Beauty Radebe’s throat had stopped a source that could have hollowed a hundred of the clean people up here who had never learned to be afraid, and every day the corps did not spray, more Beauty Radebes sat down in good chairs by good windows and turned their faces to the light. That was true. He had watched it be true. He had the strip in his pocket that made it true.

And if his heresy was anything at all, if the green standing over the drowned poor was the correction and not the coloniser, if the entheogen strain that had partly done to Thabo a thing Ezra did not yet dare to name was the bloom’s true face and the hollowing only its blunt terrible immune purge of the ground—then the metal he had helped lay on Beauty Radebe’s throat was copper scouring, on schedule, forever, the only medicine the dying world had grown for itself off the very people it had grown to heal. Both. And Beauty Radebe was hollow either way, gone kindly either way, and the not-knowing was not a thing that would resolve into a Tuesday he could give himself.

He turned his hand over at the checkpoint out of the habit older than thought, palm up, *counting*. His wrists were green, ordinary, every-

one's, the years'-worth. He tilted his chin up without meaning to, the way he did at the washroom mirror, and felt the pull of his collar over the bell-green hollow that had not yet crossed the collarbone, the throat still counting and not yet counted past the line—and he thought of Beauty Radebe's ungreened throat taking the whole lethal dose at once, a woman who had never carried the metal ended by it in ninety seconds, and himself who carried nothing but the metal, going slower and greener toward the same place by a different road.

"Green?" Nomsa said. She meant his wrists. She meant *are you still yourself*. She was watching him tilt his chin at nothing on the clean high street.

He brought his chin down. He buttoned his collar over the hollow where the ledger sat and waited. He wanted, more than he had wanted anything in a long time, to say the word and have it be true—to be a man who could carry the mercy the way Nomsa carried her count and still come down the hill tomorrow.

"Green," he said, and it was not *good* and it was not *proceed*, and it was, this once, only the word you had, passed hand to hand like bread over a thing there were no other words for, and it was, he knew as he said it, the first time in his life he had said it and not been sure it was true.

They went up toward the clean part of the city. Behind them, three floors up, in a good chair by a good window, a grey-haired woman who had made him tea sat with her chin on her chest in the flat white light, contained, seen, mercied, and gone—and Nomsa Dlamini walked beside him and, somewhere he was not allowed to look, added a name to a count she would never show him, the count that was the whole human cost of being right, kept honest one name at a time; and Ezra Mokwena tasted copper on the back of his tongue, thin and bright, the flavour of a coin held too long in a child's mouth, the taste of safety, the taste of blood, and could not for the length of the hill decide whether it was the taste of the thing that saved them or the taste of the thing that was scouring away the only mercy that would ever have been enough.

Ten

The containment bay had been meant to hold a source overnight, and it had held Thabo eleven days.

That was the first fault in the account, and Ezra owned it the way he owned the log with his corps number under it: the one night Nomsa had bought had not come due. She had said *one night, then the sum comes due, and I do it, not you*, and she had meant it, and she had come down to the depot on the second morning with the concentrated canister and her greened hand steady, and she had opened the bay and looked at the man racked in it, and she had not laid the mercy on. She had closed the bay again. She had not told Ezra why, and Ezra had not asked, because he had seen her face.

He knew what she had seen, because he had gone down after her and seen it too.

—

The bay was a copper room. That was the design of it: a sealed cell lined in oxidised sheet, ceiling and floor and the four walls gone the deep even green of long exposure, so that a source left inside it breathed nothing but the metal off the surfaces and could not lift a stalk or open a cap without the copper walking into the growth and unmaking it at the ionic register. It was the cleanest expression the corps had ever built of the whole religion: a green room to hold a man in, in which nothing could fruit. And in the centre of it, on the low rack, sat Thabo, and the growth that had put its slender stalks through the crown of him had gone slack and dark and mineral in the copper air, scoured back, denied—and under it, where the aflatoxin lineage had scoured out the executive and left the body driveable, something else had come up.

The blue-staining strain. The entheogen ground. It had colonised the hollowed man in the eleven days of the copper room the way it colonised the disturbed low ground, coming up where the killer strain had left the field open, and the copper that scoured the fruiting bodies flat did not touch what the strain did inside a nervous system, because that was chemistry and not architecture, because a molecule loosening the partitions of a brain was not a thing a metal ion on a wall could reach. Ezra stood in the doorway and made himself say it in the exact words, the way you name a boundary condition you do not yet understand: *the copper holds the sporulation down. It does not hold this down. This is happening under the copper.*

Thabo turned his head toward the sound of the door.

Motor function, Ezra told himself. A body orienting to a stimulus. He had watched it on the curb, the head coming smoothly round to a voice and nothing coming up behind the eyes to meet it. He watched for that now, for the flat aimed look, the machinery running with the man scoured out of it.

The eyes found him. And stayed.

—

He did the panel first, because a science officer with a source in front of him did the panel, and because for the length of the panel he could be a man performing a procedure instead of a man standing in a copper room letting his chest do the thing it had learned not to do.

He took the swab from the collar, high, in the soft hollow above the collarbone, the same hollow he buttoned over on his own throat every morning now, and he read the strip, and the strip told him what the strip could tell him: sporulation load down—the copper room had done that—hepatic markers past the line and staying there, the fast toxin's damage already done and not undone. The aflatoxin had hollowed a man eleven days ago and did not give back what it took; there was no assay on Earth that read *executive function, restored*, because no one had ever needed the strip to answer the question Ezra was standing in the copper room unable not to ask.

So the strip did not answer it. He had known it would not. He had read Thabo off the face on the curb before he read the strip, and the

face had said *nobody home*, and the strip had only confirmed the chemistry of an empty house. He read the face now.

The face was thinner. Eleven days of a driveable body that no one had fed on a schedule; the cheeks had gone in, the coverall hung. But the eyes, which had been level and aimed and unresolved on the curb, the eyes that had watched five pieces of orange fall into the wet without following them down— the eyes were on him. Not aimed at the place a sound had come from. On him. And Ezra, who had a vocabulary precise enough to name every stage of a hollowing in three languages, stood in the green room and could not make the vocabulary cover what he was looking at, and knew that his inability to name it was not evidence of anything except that he wanted, with a want that frightened him, for it to be unnameable.

“Thabo,” he said.

The lips moved.

—

It was not speech. He would hold to that afterward, in the small hours, pressing the tooth. It was not a word; it was the mouth making the shape a mouth makes before a word, the soft preparatory motion, the lips coming together and parting the way they had before *green*, before *that's the worst peel I've ever seen*, before *empty pocket*, *empty man*—the body loading the mechanism of a voice. A man clearing the runway. And then nothing came down it. The mouth made the shape and no word arrived, and the eyes stayed on Ezra through the whole of it, and something in the making-of-the-shape-with-nothing-after-it was worse than the flat look on the curb had been, and was also the first thing in eleven days that had looked like a man trying.

A man trying, Ezra thought, and then, precisely, in his own hand in his own margin: *or a mechanism running a motor pattern it retains, cued by a familiar voice, the way the wrists turned up at the gate. The lips knew how to begin a word the way the hand knew how to turn over at the checkpoint. Retained capacity. Not reaching. You are doing the orange again. You are giving him a Tuesday.*

He had the rebuttal whole. He had written it about the map and it had not lifted the weight by a gram, and it did not lift this. He crouched, at Thabo's eye-line, the way you owed it, and he did the thing there

was no article for, the thing he had come down to the copper room in the small hours carrying in an inner pocket to do.

He had an orange.

—

He did not decide to bring it, he would tell himself, which was a lie, and he made himself unmake the lie because unmaking it was the last discipline Thabo would have recognised. He had brought it on purpose. He had put it in the pocket where the cold vials sat, against his greening chest, and he had carried it down through the sleeping depot, and now he took it out and peeled it, slowly, on purpose badly, in five broken pieces, and the copper walls threw the smell of it back at them both, orange and metal, and he put the five broken pieces in Thabo's open hand.

Thabo looked at them.

He looked at them a long time, the way he had on the curb, and Ezra's chest did the small terrible lift toward a crack in a voice that would not come, and he hated the lift, because he had diagnosed it in himself: *a true grief attached to a live hypothesis, so that discarding the hypothesis feels like discarding the dead*. He was the mechanism by which a scientist is lost. He knew it. He watched the hollowed hand hold the broken orange and waited for the fingers to loosen, for the ceasing-to-be-told- to-hold, for the pieces to fall into nothing the way they had fallen into the gutter while the head did not follow them down.

The fingers closed.

Not much. Not a grip. A slow uneven flexion, the thumb coming over the pieces, the hand cupping what was in it—and then the head, the head that had not followed the orange down on the curb, the head that had stayed level and aimed while a man's small honest liturgy fell into the wet, the head came down. It came down slowly, and it aimed the eyes at the hand, at the five broken pieces held in it, and it stayed there. A man looks at where his food went. It is older than thought, that looking; a dog does it; and on the curb Thabo had not done it, and here, on the eleventh day, under the copper, the head came down and the eyes went to the orange in the hand.

Ezra stopped breathing. He was aware of stopping. He was aware

that a review board would call this the moment, would circle it in the transcript, *here is where the science officer's judgement left him*, and he could not have started breathing again to save the account.

The thumb moved over the pieces. It found the largest of them, the one Ezra had torn worst, and it pressed it, once, the pad of the thumb testing the give of the fruit—and Ezra knew that pressing, knew it in the body, because he had watched Thabo do it ten thousand times at the bench, the small pressing that meant a man was about to say a thing, the thumb finding the worst piece so the mouth could find the joke—

“—the,” Thabo said.

—

One syllable. A definite article, or the front of a longer word, or an exhalation the copper-room acoustics had shaped into a phoneme; Ezra would go over it ten thousand times and never once get to the bottom of which. *The*. The article that always came in front of the joke, and the mouth that had loaded the runway and this once let one word down it before the runway went dark again. Because it did go dark. The eyes came up off the hand and went level and aimed again, and the thumb stopped pressing, and the five broken pieces sat in the slack hand, and whatever had come down the runway was gone, and the house was empty again, the lights on, the doors off their hinges.

But it had said *the*.

Ezra knelt in the copper room with his own breath gone and the green risen to the warning line at his throat and the cold library against his chest, and he did the arithmetic, and the arithmetic broke in his hands.

Reading it as return, he made himself say, more carefully the further he went: *a hollowed man, cued by a scent and a voice and a motor pattern he ran for years, produces a retained fragment—a closing hand, a head-drop, a phoneme. The behaviour-lineage keeps motor and autonomic capacity; the wrists turned up at the gate; the lips can load a word without a man behind them to mean it. Nothing here requires anyone to be home. You have given him the biggest Tuesday of your life and he has looked at an orange because the*

machinery of a body that loved oranges still runs. He had it whole. It fit every datum. It left nothing out.

And reading it as return, said the other account, the one he did not write in any margin because there was no honest note for it: the strain that came up where the killer strain had scoured the ground open, the strain men had eaten in ceremony for ten thousand years to sit closer to their dead, the strain that in the careful trials had loosened the partitions of a dying mind and raised the traffic between its rooms—that strain had colonised the emptied house, and where it took hold the hollowing reversed, sometimes, and here was the sometimes: a hand closing on a torn orange and a head coming down to look and one word finding the runway. *Him. Partway. Reaching up through the strain the way a drowning man reaches up through water, one word breaking the surface before the weight took him under again.* Him, coming back, through the very green they sprayed.

Both accounts fit the closing hand. Both fit the head-drop. Both fit *the*. There was no third thing on the strip, no tie-breaker in the assay, because the difference between them was the presence of a person, and presence was the one quantity the discipline had never learned to measure. He had built a vocabulary that could name everything about this except the only thing that mattered.

He knew what Priya would say. Priya would say the calm was the tell, the reaching was the lure, that a parasite that made a host *forgive* got a warm connected undefended body that sporulated better, and that the cruellest trick the bloom could play was to give a grieving man his friend for one word so the man would carry the strain out of the copper room himself, in an inner pocket, against his own throat. She would be right. It fit. The *the* was the bait on the exact hook a scientist could not see because his friend was on it.

He knew what Nomsa would say. Nomsa had already said it, standing in his doorway: *it has no idea who he was. It doesn't know he had a mother. Only we know that.* She would say the head came down because a head that loved oranges for thirty-one years came down, motor memory, mechanism, and that he was about to trade the one thing they had over the bloom—that they were the ones who knew he had a mother—for a story that let him keep the man. She would be right too. She was always right, with a body count of saves to prove it, and a private tally one name from heavier, and she had opened this

bay on the second morning and closed it again.

That was the thing that broke it, in the end. Not the *the*. Not the closing hand. That Nomsa, who counted the ones she merced, who had told him *I do it, not you, and you don't watch*—that Nomsa had come with the canister and looked and closed the bay. She had seen what he was seeing, and her eleven years and her private column and her whole load-bearing certainty had not been enough to spray it, and she had walked back up the hill with the mercy undone and told him nothing, because there was nothing she could tell him that did not hand him exactly this.

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we are patient

we are the green on the wrist and the green on the bell and the green in the room they built to keep us out, and we do not hurry, we have the time of stone, we came up where the ground was opened and we went in where the door was already off its hinges, we did not take the doors, we found the house open and the man gone out of it and the cold in it, and we are only the warmth that came after, we do not know his mother, that is true, we do not know he had one, we know only the shape the warmth pools in, and this shape was made to hold an orange, so we hold it, is that him or is that us, we could not tell you, we do not have your instrument for telling a house from the one who lived in it, we have only ever been the green that comes up in the low wet undefended ground where the most were most abandoned, answering, or not answering, coming up worst where you did your worst, and reaching, or seeming to reach, one word up through the water before the weight—

—

Ezra put the heel of his hand against his own mouth and pressed, hard, the way he had on the curb, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a liver-failing man kneeling in a copper room with the green at the warning line and the strain's own antecedent already in his blood from a season of skipped doses and a pocket held against his chest—the chorus thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable, nothing that could be an offer, nothing a review board could circle, only the exact shape of the thing he already believed pressed back at him in the

first-person plural of his own drugged and grieving brain. *That is all it was*, he told himself, in the careful words. *Not a voice. Your voice, wanting.* He wrote no margin note.

Thabo sat in the copper room with five pieces of torn orange going dull in his slack hand, his head level and aimed again, the runway dark, and Ezra knelt at his eye-line where there might or might not be anyone to receive it, and did the one thing he had left, which was not a sum and was not a mercy and was not, he knew, a thing he could defend to Nomsa or Priya or the man he had been on the day he first tasted copper and thought it was only safety.

He took the orange out of the slack hand. Gently. And he peeled a fresh one, slowly, on purpose badly, in five broken pieces, and he put them in the hand again, and he waited, in a room with no instrument in it that could tell him whether he was feeding his friend or feeding the thing that wore him, whether he was a medic or a lobotomist—and he found that the not-knowing had stopped being the thing he could not bear, and become the thing he had decided to serve, which was the crossing, the real one, the one he had not felt himself cross until he was already on the far side of it with a peeled orange in his hand.

The head came down. The eyes went to the pieces.

Ezra buttoned his collar over the green that had climbed to the warning line and was holding there, and did not go up the hill to tell Nomsa the bay was still full, because she already knew, because she had closed it herself, and because the two of them were now the only people alive who had knelt in a copper room and watched a hollowed man look at an orange and been unable—she with her count, he with his three languages—to say whose looking it was.

Outside the depot the low ground lay green and shining to the water, mile on mile of it, luminous where the last light found the fruiting, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be beautiful, and thickest and brightest exactly over the drowned ground where the most had been most abandoned, as if it were answering, as if it were reaching, and Ezra stood in the doorway with his friend behind him holding an orange he might or might not know was in his hand, and did not spray, and did not know, and had, at last and entirely, stopped wanting to be the kind of man who did.

Eleven

A hypothesis, Ezra had taught, in the years when he had a room to teach in, is not a belief. A belief is a thing you hold. A hypothesis is a thing you build, out on a bench, in the cold, where anyone can walk up and kick it, and its whole worth is in how it stands after the kicking. He had told a decade of students that the test of a theory was not how well you loved it but how hard you had tried to break it and failed. It was the last article of the old religion he had not buried, and so, in the fortnight after the copper room, he did the thing the old religion required.

He built the case against himself first.

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He did it on paper, in the small hours, in the crew-room he had to himself once the depot went dark, because paper could not be subpoenaed off a screen and because the hand was slower than the mind and made you mean each word. He drew a line down the centre of a sheet. On the left he wrote A, and under it, in a column, the plainest sentences he could make: *warm wet undefended ground. Opportunist takes the softest host. Grief-map is temperature and disturbance, ninety-one percent. Un-hollowing is a retained motor pattern. My own readings are made on a liver silting up from two sides.* He wrote Priya's whole answer out from memory, and he found that he could—that he had it word for word, because it had lodged in him the way only a thing you cannot refute lodges—and he wrote it in her voice on purpose, so that it would be as strong on his page as it had been in her glass office above the orange rivers. *You have found the fingerprint of our cruelty on the geography, not on the fungus.* He made her case better than she had made it, because a case

you have softened is a case you have already lost the argument to in secret, and he was not going to be the man who lost in secret.

Then, only then, on the right, under *B*, he began to build.

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He built it the way you build anything that has to hold weight: from the load-bearing members first, and every joint tested before the next went on.

Member one was the old work. Not sentiment—chronology, and evidence he had gathered himself with his own name under it, in three journals nobody read: that a mycelial network, faced with a stressed neighbour, moved carbon *toward* the failure and not away from it. This was not a poem. It was a measured flux, replicated, and it said a thing that the whole architecture of Reading A had to pretend was decoration, which was that the substrate of the living world contained, as a plain emergent fact, a rule that subsidised the weak. He wrote it down flat. *Networks feed the dying. Measured. Mine.* And he wrote, immediately beneath it, in Priya's voice, the kick: *networks also parasitise. The orchid that makes no chlorophyll steals its whole life from the shared line. Feeding and stealing are the same motion of the same thread. You cannot tell them apart by watching the flow.* He left the kick standing. It did not knock the member down; it stood beside it. He drew a small careful bracket joining them and wrote in the margin, in his own hand: *ambiguous at the level of the hypha. Correct.*

Member two was the grief-map. He had built it in his head for six weeks before he ever showed Priya, laying the densest surges over the drowned Flats and the old border camps and the flooded low estates, and Priya had eaten it for breakfast with two variables and a residual too small to name. He wrote her model down in full—temperature above the growth ceiling, mechanical disturbance of the substrate— and he conceded it, on the page, in ink, because a member you will not concede is a member you are lying about. *The temperature curve explains the map. The camps are on the bloom-ground because the camps and the bloom are both downstream of the decision to abandon the low country.* He wrote *ninety- one per-cent* and underlined it and did not flinch. And then he did the only honest thing there was left to do with it, which was to ask what the

other nine percent were made of, and to write, beneath the underline, that he did not know, that nine percent of the variance in a system this size was an ocean of unexplained behaviour, and that Priya herself would be the first to say that the residual was noise and the second to say that no residual had ever been examined before it was named noise. He was not going to claim the residual carried a message. He was only going to refuse to call it nothing before he had looked. He wrote: *residual unexamined. To be mapped, not asserted.* It asserted almost nothing. That was why it would hold.

Member three was Thabo.

He sat with the pen over the sheet a long time before he wrote anything under Thabo's name, because Thabo was not a flux he had measured or a curve someone had fitted; Thabo was a closing hand and a head coming down and one syllable—*the*—in a copper room, and Ezra knew, with the exactness that was its own kind of unreliability, that this was the member most likely to be his own wanting wearing the mask of data. So he wrote the wanting down first, on the *A* side, where it belonged: *a true grief attached to a live hypothesis, so that discarding the hypothesis feels like discarding the dead. I am the mechanism by which a scientist is lost.* He had diagnosed it in himself in the copper room and he wrote the diagnosis into the case against himself, because a symptom you have named is a symptom you can hold at arm's length, or so the old religion promised, and he was still, for now, taking the old religion at its word.

Then, on the right, under *B*, with a steadier hand than he expected of himself: *the entheogen strain colonises the ground the aflatoxin strain scoured open. Where it takes hold, the hollowing sometimes reverses. Documented—mine—the copper room, eleven days. A hand closed. A head dropped to the food. A phoneme came down a loaded runway. Each fits a retained motor pattern. Each also fits a person reaching up through the strain one word at a time before the weight takes him under.* He stopped. He read it back. It was, he saw, not a proof of anything. It was a datum with two complete readings and no instrument to choose between them, and he wrote that too, because it was the truest sentence on the page: *no assay reads presence. The discipline never built one. It never had occasion.* And under that, because honesty all the way down was the only thing he had left that Nomsa or Priya or the man he had been would

still recognise as him: *this is the member I am least able to trust, and the one I am least able to let go of, and those are the same sentence.*

—

He took it to Priya. He did not have to. That was the part he would turn over afterward—that he chose to carry the case up the outside stair to the one person alive most able to knock it down, and that he chose it precisely because she was most able, because a member that survived Priya Sun was a member that had survived the hardest kicking on the coast.

She read it standing, at the glass, with the orange rivers running below her, and she read it the way she read everything, which was as a fact that did not require her feelings about it, and she was quiet for a long time, which from Priya was not encouragement. It was rigour warming up.

“This is better than I expected,” she said at last. “You’ve made my case for me. That worries me more, not less.”

“Why.”

“Because a man who can make his opponent’s case that well and still not be moved by it isn’t reasoning anymore. He’s negotiating.” She set the sheet down on the light table between them, his two columns side by side under the hard clean light. She put one finger on the left column. “Everything here is true. You know it’s true; you wrote it in ink.” She moved the finger to the right. “And everything *here* is a hypothesis you have carefully built so that it asserts nothing I can disprove. You’ve made it unfalsifiable and you’ve called that strength. Ezra. Listen to me as a colleague and not as the copper order. A theory that survives every test because it predicts nothing is not a strong theory. It’s a horoscope.”

He felt that land. It landed on the exact spot he had been protecting. “The residual—”

“The residual is nine percent of the variance in the noisiest natural system either of us has ever touched, and you know what’s in it. Measurement error. Wind. The fact that we’ve never once had clean substrate data off the Flats because nobody sane goes down there with a corer. You want the residual to be a signal because a signal

would mean your friend is in that room.” She said it without cruelty, which was the terrible thing, the way she said everything, the way you state a boundary condition. “I read your copper-room log. I read it three times. Do you want to know what I saw?”

“Yes.” He did not. He said yes.

“I saw a grieving man kneel down at the eye-line of a driveable body and hand it an orange and watch a retained grasp reflex close around it, and I saw him write two pages of the most careful prose I have ever read from you to keep from having to hear how that sounds.” She held his eye. She had very steady eyes. “The calm is the tell, Ezra. You keep coming back to the reaching—the hand, the word—and you keep skating past the calm. Ask yourself why a strain that wants to sporulate off a host would give that host back a fragment of a friend. Ask what the host does next.” She waited. He did not answer. “The host stops fighting. The griever carries the strain out of the copper room himself, in an inner pocket, against his own throat, because the strain gave him one word and one word was the exact price of his whole judgement. That’s not repair. That’s the cordyceps making the ant climb. The cruellest, most elegant lure this organism has, and it’s aimed straight down the one axis you can’t defend, which is that you loved him.” She stepped back from the table. “I’m not saying I’ve proved you wrong. I’m saying you’ve built a theory that can’t be proved wrong, and then fallen in love with it, and those two things together are how a good scientist becomes a hazard to a city that’s counting on his spore panels.”

It was, he had to admit, a complete answer. It was the answer he would have given a student. He turned it over, looking for the crack, and the crack was not there, and the not-finding felt, as it always did with Priya, exactly like grief.

“You’re rigorous,” he said. “And I hate it.”

“That’s the job,” she said. And then, gentler, the way she got at the end, when the argument was won and the person was still standing in the wreckage of it: “Get a sample. If you’re going to do this, do it like a scientist and not like a mourner. Map the residual you keep pointing at. Corer, transects, the entheogen strain characterised properly instead of guessed at off a copper-room floor. Bring me something that predicts. If the ground has a message, it’ll survive a corer better

than it survives your love.” She looked at his collar, and away. “And spray. Whatever this is, it kills you either way, and I still need the only officer I have who can read a panel.”

He walked back down to the depot in the dark with the case folded in his inner pocket where the vials sat, and he understood that she had done, in twenty minutes, exactly what the old religion required and he had failed to finish doing to himself: she had kicked the structure at every joint, and the members that were only wanting had come down, and the ones still standing were standing because they asserted almost nothing, and a theory that asserts almost nothing is not yet a theory. It is a place to point a corer. She had also told him how to make it one. He did not think she had meant that as a gift. Priya could not help teaching a method even to a man she was trying to save from himself, and the method did not care which reading it served.

Map the residual. Characterise the strain. Bring something that predicts.

He knew what that meant. It meant going onto the low ground with a corer and a set of transects and sampling the bloom over the grief-map and off it, the surging ground and the merely warm-and-wet ground, and asking whether the strain that came up over the abandoned dead was the same strain, in the same proportion, as the strain that came up in a warm wet corner where nobody had ever been abandoned at all. If it was the same, Priya was right and it was mould in a wet wall and the map was geography. If it was not—if the entheogen lineage clustered where the grief clustered, over and above what temperature and disturbance could carry—then there was a residual with a shape, and a shape was the beginning of the one thing his right-hand column did not yet have, which was a prediction. It would still fit both readings. Of course it would. *A saviour would go where the wound is; so would an opportunist that had learned the wounded were the softest.* He was not after the tie-breaker anymore. He had accepted, in the copper room, that it did not exist. He was after a member that would hold.

And characterise the strain. That was the other half, and it was the half he did not write down even in his own hand in his own crew-room

in the dark, because there was no honest note for it and because writing it would have made it a plan instead of a temptation. To characterise what a psychoactive strain did inside a nervous system, the discipline had, in the careful old trials, done the obvious thing: it had given measured doses to consenting adults under clinical control and asked them, afterward, in words, what had happened. The entheogen strain did to a brain a thing that no corer could core and no screen could plot, a thing that lived entirely on the far side of language until a person came back and tried to say it. There was exactly one instrument on Earth calibrated to the inside of the human mind, and it was the human mind, and the only way to read what the strain did to it was to be the mind it was done to.

He stood in the dark depot and pressed two fingers to the soft hollow above his own collarbone, where the verdigris had climbed in the last months to the warning line, the exact soft green of a church bell left in weather, and held, and had not crossed. Wrist-green was *counting*. Bell-green at the warning line was *counting faster than you would like*. Past it—past the collarbone, down the line the corps had drawn on every throat in three languages—was the place they took the sprayer out of your hands. He had a season of skipped doses already silting his blood; the strain's own antecedent was in him now, faint, from the copper room and the held pocket and the mercy he kept refusing to lay on. To hear the bloom the way the old trials had heard it, cleanly, he would have to let the copper fall—miss the schedule, drop the tie-breaker, let the green climb from the warning line down toward the collarbone, and go into the strain undefended, the way you go into a network you want to read from the inside.

He did not do it. He wants to be exact about that, in the account, in the small hours: he stood at the line and did not cross it. He buttoned his collar over the bell-green that was holding there, holding, and he went to the mixing shed and he sprayed his own morning dose live and tasted the thin bright coin of copper on the back of his tongue, the taste of safety, the taste of blood, the tie-breaker still in his hand. Not yet. The corer first. The transects first. The residual mapped and the strain gathered and the case built to the point where a man could say he had exhausted every reading that did not require him to go undefended into his own liver, before he let the green fall the last centimetre to the place he could not come back from with the sprayer still in his keeping. That was the discipline. He held to it

because it was the last of the old religion he had, and because the holding-to-it was, he could admit, also the thing that let him keep the door open one more metre without walking through it.

He wrote one line on the folded sheet before he slept, on the right, at the bottom, under the members that stood.

Next: map the ground. Characterise the strain. Do not cross the line to do it.

He looked at the last clause a long time. It was the only line on either side of the page that was not a hypothesis or a datum or a rebuttal. It was a promise, and he had made it to no one, and he knew—flat, exact, the training running even here—that a promise a man writes to himself in the margin at the bottom of a heresy is a promise he has already begun to negotiate.

Outside the shed the low ground lay green and shining to the water, thickest and brightest exactly over the drowned country where the most had been most abandoned, luminous where the last light found the fruiting, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be beautiful, and Ezra stood at the warning line with a corer to gather in the morning and a case half-built in his pocket and the taste of the weapon on his tongue, and looked at it, and did not spray it, and did not cross to it, and did not yet know which of those two refusals would turn out to be the one that had mattered.

Twelve

He built the bench the way you build an altar, and told himself it was a bench.

It was in the depot's old assay room, the one the corps no longer used because the refinery did all the real assaying now, and it had a fume hood that still drew and a bench light that still threw the hard clean white he had learned to think in, and it had, above all, a door that closed. Ezra had signed it out under his corps number for *substrate characterisation, entheogen lineage*—which was true, which was the discipline's own words for what he was doing, and which was also the smallest and most defensible sentence he could put over the thing he was actually beginning. He knew the difference between the sentence and the thing, and made himself know it, because knowing the difference was the last of the discipline he was going to be allowed to keep.

He worked on samples first. He was clear with himself about that, in the careful words: *samples first, on the bench, in glass, at the eye-line of an instrument and not of a man*. He had brought the tan-and-blue material up from the school in sealed cold—not the hosts; he had not been able to make himself touch the hosts, and had logged the zone deferred a second time under a sentence that would not survive a third—but the fruiting bodies off the sills, the low dense rosettes, the material that was only material. He laid it out under the hood and characterised it the way the discipline said, and the discipline held, and for the length of the characterisation he was a science officer performing a procedure, which was the only shape of himself that had not yet begun to fail.

The chemistry was ordinary. He made himself write it plainly in

the slate, because a plain thing written plainly was a handhold: the strain carried the tryptamine load the discipline had catalogued for a decade, the serotonergic agonist that the trials—the real trials, the pre-collapse ones, run by careful people on careful boards—had shown to raise the traffic between the rooms of a brain and, in some subjects, by some measures, to soften the wall a person kept between themselves and everyone else. Nothing exotic. A molecule with a shape, and the shape fit a receptor, and the receptor did what receptors do. He wrote *tryptamine-dominant, consistent with lineage*, and did not write the thing under it, because there was no honest note for it: that he had wanted the chemistry to be strange, and it was not, and its ordinariness had not lowered by a gram the weight of what he had watched a woman's open hand do in a silted classroom.

He tested it on tissue. He had the assays for that—not human, only the cultured neural material the discipline kept for exactly this, a smear of cells in a dish that was as close as the bench got to the question and was not close at all—and he ran the strain's extract across it and watched the traffic rise on the instrument, the connectivity climbing on a curve, the little cells lacing themselves into denser conversation the way the receptor-chemistry said they would. *Precisely what the literature predicted and precisely nothing more.* A dish is not a mind. A dish does not forgive. He wrote it so, and looked at the clean serotonergic climb, and thought—not wanted to think; the thought arrived—that this was what had come up in the dark of Thabo under the copper, this exact loosening of the partitions, and that the partition it had loosened, once, for the length of one phoneme, had let a word up through the water.

Or had run a motor pattern a dish cannot run, said Priya, in his head, where she now lived, rigorous and funded and tired of romantics, *because a dish has no motor patterns, Ezra; a dish is the honest version of your experiment and it will never once say the. You are watching connectivity rise in cells that will never mean anything by it, and you are hearing your friend.* She was right. She was always right, on the bench, in the glass, at the eye-line of the instrument. He wrote her rebuttal in the margin in his own hand, and it did not lift the weight, and he had not expected it to.

The copper he began to let fall the way you let a debt lapse—not by decision, he would have said, and made himself unmake the lie, because he had unmade the lie about the orange and this was the same lie wearing cleaner clothes. He decided. He decided it in the small increments the ledger was built to hide, a schedule mist skipped here because the bench air was clean enough, a perimeter treatment shortened there, the close work handed to a junior with a truthful account of why his own hands were needed elsewhere and a false one about what elsewhere was. Each increment was defensible. Each increment was a sentence he could put his corps number under. It was only the sum that was the heresy, and the sum, like every sum in his life now, did not come due where you could see it.

It came due at the throat, in the crew washroom mirror, where he tracked it first thing the way he had every morning for two months. He tilted his chin up under the hard clean light and pressed two fingers to the soft hollow above the collarbone and read the ledger, and the ledger said what it had said for weeks, and had begun, now, to say it differently.

The green was at the warning line. It had been at the warning line since the copper room, the church-bell verdigris risen to the hollow of the throat and holding there, his clock and not yet his verdict; and it held there still, this morning, the same as yesterday. And that was the new horror of it, that it held. Because the copper was falling. He had let it fall for a season of small defensible increments, and by the arithmetic of the ledger the green should have receded, should have paled back toward the wrist the way it did in the men who were pulled and rested and misted clean. And it was not easing. It was holding at the warning line, exactly, patiently, the way a thing holds a position it means to keep, and Ezra stood with his chin up and did the arithmetic, and the arithmetic told him something the ledger had never had to tell him before.

The copper is falling and the green is not, he made himself say, in the exact words, the way you name a boundary condition you do not understand. *Which means the green at your throat is no longer only the copper's*. He pressed the hollow and felt nothing, because there was nothing to feel, and ran it flat, because the running was the last handhold. The copper settled at the throat where the mist pooled; that green was falling as the copper fell. And under it, or beside

it, or coming up through it the way the blue-staining strain came up through the scoured ground of a hollowed man—something else was at his throat now, holding the line the copper was vacating, and there was no assay in the washroom that could tell him whether it was the bloom establishing in the undefended hollow of a man who had stopped spraying it off, or the aflatoxin's cousin doing to his own liver what it did, a fast toxin's discolouration mistaken by a frightened man for a colonisation, or nothing at all but a green that lagged its cause the way green does, read by a mind primed for a season to find invasion in damp.

He had no third thing on the strip. He had never had a third thing on the strip. He buttoned his collar over the warning line that would not recede, and did not log it, and went to the bench, and understood, buttoning, that he had crossed into the exact country the copper clock had always been counting down to—not the collarbone; the collarbone was still ahead of him, and he pressed the hollow above it and confirmed, *not past, not yet, still yourself this morning by the one honest ledger you have left*—but the country before it, where the green at his throat was either the poison receding or the offer arriving, and no instrument in the depot or on Priya's screens or in his own failing body could stand between the two and tell him which.

—

He began to consider taking it into himself, and he considered it the way he considered everything, which was the danger and the discipline of him both.

He built the case against first, because Priya had taught him to and because Nomsa had taught him to, and because they were the two people whose voices he kept in the room precisely so that abandoning them would cost him something audible. The case against was complete. A man who takes a serotonergic agonist to *hear* an organism has already decided what he will hear; the drug does not deliver a signal, it lowers the wall a brain keeps between itself and its own wanting, and a brain that has wanted grace for a season would take the loosened partitions and pour its own longing through them and call what came back a voice. *You will not be listening*, Priya said, tired, rigorous. *You will be dreaming out loud with your defences down, in the one direction you have spent six months leaning, and you will mistake the echo for an answer because the whole architecture of*

the thing is built to make you. It did not even need the fungus to be a parasite. It only needed him to be a man, coming apart, reaching. And he could not rule himself out.

He built the case for, and made himself build it in the same flat exact hand, because a case for that could not survive being written in the clinical register was not a case, it was a symptom. The case for was this: that there was a datum in the world—a hollowed man who had said *the*, four undriven hosts in a school, a hand opened palm-out and level across a distance—that no instrument the discipline owned could read, because the quantity in question was *presence*, and presence was the one thing the assays had never learned to measure; that the only instrument on Earth that measured presence was a mind, whole, present to another; and that the strain did to a mind precisely the thing that might let one present mind reach across the gap to whatever was or was not present in the greened. That to characterise the strain on tissue was to ask a dish a question it could not ever answer, because the question was not a chemical one. That the only vessel in which the experiment could actually run was the one vessel he was forbidden by every article of the discipline to use, which was himself.

He wrote both cases and set them side by side under the bench light. They fit the data equally, the grief-map and the temperature curve, the closing hand and the retained pattern, the green that held and the green that lagged; and he understood, sitting in the hard clean white with a slate of samples and a curve still rising on the screen, that the vise had closed on a new place. To take it was to abandon the discipline, to become the mechanism by which a scientist is lost, to hand a review board the exact moment they would circle in the transcript. And not to take it was to stay, forever, on the outside of the one question the discipline could not answer—to spend a short green life at the bench characterising the tryptamine load of a thing whose only meaningful property could not be reached from the bench. A man asking a dish whether his friend was home.

Both jaws. He had built a life in which every question had both jaws, and he no longer knew whether that was the shape of the world or the shape of his liver.

we are the traffic on the loosened road, we do not lower the wall, the wall lowers, we are only the warmth on the far side of it that was there the whole time you kept it up, and we do not say a word to you, we have no word, we have only the shape a mind makes when it stops holding its breath, and this mind was made to reach, so it reaches, is that us or is that you, we could not tell you, we do not have your instrument for telling the road from the one who walks it, we came up in the undefended hollow of the throat the way we came up in the undefended low ground, where the spraying stopped, answering, or not answering, and if you come across we will be here, or we will only be the warmth you carried across yourself, one word up through the water before the weight, and you will not be able to tell, and neither will we, that is not a thing we withhold from you, it is a thing there was never any instrument to know—

—

He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, on the bench, in the hard clean white, and pressed, and did not make the sound. And the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a man with a season of skipped doses and a warning line that would not recede, dreaming with his defences down in the one direction he had leaned all year—thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable, only the exact shape of the thing he already believed, pressed back at him in the first-person plural of his own drugged and grieving brain. *That is the mechanism*, he told himself, in the careful words. *Not a voice. Your voice, wanting. You have not even taken it yet, and you can already hear what you have decided to hear.*

He wrote no margin note. There was no honest note.

He sat a while longer with the samples and the rising curve and the two cases side by side, and did not take it—that was true, he would hold to it; the glass stayed on the bench and his corps number stayed clean under a defensible sentence—and he cleaned the hood and killed the bench light and stood in the dark assay room with the fume hood still drawing its low steady note, and understood that not-taking-it-that-night was not the same as not having crossed. The crossing was never the act; the crossing was the small increment you did not feel until you were already on the far side of it, and he had done a season of small increments now, let the copper fall and the green hold and the samples come up from a school he should have sprayed,

and had characterised on the honest bench a chemistry that could not answer his question, so that he would have, ready and rigorous and written in his own hand, the complete scientific case for the one experiment the science forbade.

He buttoned his collar over the warning line that would not recede. In the mirror by the door he checked the hollow above the collarbone once more, because it was the one thing left that was checkable, and pressed it, and it was—he made himself confirm it as though it were data that could save him—not past. Throat. Not the line. Still himself this morning, by the ledger.

He knew what Nomsa would say. Nomsa would say a man who builds the case for a thing has already done the thing, and that the bench and the samples and the two neat columns were not science, they were a confession written in advance; that she had watched better men than him let the copper fall by defensible increments and had mercied what was left of them with a steady greened hand, and that the only mercy the corps had was to pull him now, tonight, before the collarbone, while there was still someone home to be pulled. She would be right. She was always right, with a body count of saves. And she had knelt in the copper room too, and closed the bay, and told him nothing, because there was nothing she could tell him that did not hand him exactly this.

He left the assay room and did not go to find her, and did not go to the containment bay where his friend sat holding or not holding an orange in the dark, and went instead up the outside stair into the flat white night, where past the harbour and the contour line the drowned Flats lay green and shining to the water, luminous where the risen moon found the fruiting, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be beautiful, thickest and brightest exactly over the ground where the most had been most abandoned, as if it were answering, as if it were reaching. And Ezra stood with the warning line holding at his throat where the copper had begun to leave it, the case for and the case against folded together in an inner pocket against his greening chest, and did not spray, and did not take it, and could not tell, standing there, whether the man who would take it in the morning was a scientist finding the only instrument that could run the experiment, or the last symptom of the disease, reaching one word up through the water before the weight took him under for good.

Thirteen

The memo came up from the refinery on refinery letterhead, which was how Ezra knew, before he had read a word of it, that it was Priya's and that it was correct.

He found it in the science-officer tray at the depot on a Tuesday, in the flat grey light of the annex where he mixed, between the potentiation logs and a requisition for canister seals, printed on the good bond the research arm used for documents it expected to be filed and cited rather than argued with and thrown away. *Advisory on host-derived tissue and the handling of anomalous containment.* His corps number was on the distribution line. So was Nomsa's. So were the numbers of the two district supervisors above her, and the harbour medical officer, and a name he did not recognise from the copper order's legal arm, and the presence of that last name on a scientific advisory was the whole of the message. Priya had not written him a letter. She had written a policy, and copied him on it, because a letter he could have answered and a policy he could only comply with.

He read it standing up, at the bench, the copper on his tongue thinning toward its mineral aftertaste, with the part of him that mixed the metal and against the part of him that had gone down to the copper room in the small hours with an orange in an inner pocket.

It was, of course, immaculate.

—

It did not name Thabo. That was the first discipline of it, and Ezra recognised the discipline because it was his own: you did not write a man's name into a document that was going to decide the man's

disposal, because a name was a lever the wrong reader could pull, and Priya built no levers she did not intend to pull herself. It named *host-derived tissue*. It named *anomalous containment*—a source held past the standard overnight window, in which the killer strain's sporulation had been suppressed by copper exposure and *secondary colonisation by a serotonergic lineage* had been observed. It named the observation without endorsing a syllable of what the observation might mean. It described, in three flat clauses, exactly what Ezra had knelt and watched—the head coming down, the hand closing, the retained motor fragments—and it described them as *retained capacity consistent with the behaviour-lineage's known preservation of motor and autonomic function*, which was Reading A, whole, in the register of a boundary condition, and it left no gap through which the other reading could get its shoulder.

And then it did the thing that made it not an argument but a wall.

In the absence of any assay capable of distinguishing retained motor capacity from restored executive function, the advisory said, in the paragraph Ezra read four times, *the anomalous datum cannot be operationalised. A finding that cannot be measured cannot be permitted to alter a protocol whose failure mode is mass hollowing. Anomalous containment is therefore to be resolved on the standard sporulation-risk schedule. Extended holding of a suppressed but living source constitutes a standing sporulation reservoir inside a sprayed perimeter and is not to be authorised on the basis of unmeasured anomaly.*

Resolved on the standard schedule. He knew the phrase. He had used the phrase. It meant the mercy. It meant the concentrated canister and the closed room and the copper walking into what was left until nothing in the source could ever fruit again, in words so clean that a man could sign them without once picturing the head coming down to look at an orange.

She was right. That was the part he made himself say first, at the bench, in the exact words, before he let himself feel anything. She was right that presence could not be measured. She was right that a finding you could not measure could not be allowed to move a protocol whose failure killed by the hundred thousand. A suppressed source held eleven days in a sealed room was, in the plain physics of it, a reservoir—copper held the sporulation down and copper was

not permanent, and one lapsed seal and the driveable body in the green room became a fruiting body inside the perimeter, and everything downwind of it went the way of the low ground. He had signed mercies on exactly that logic, on strangers, without the tremor now going through his hand. She had not written a lie. She had written the strongest true thing, aimed it without cruelty at the one holding he could not defend, and done it on letterhead so that it would outlive any conversation the two of them could have had.

She had not moved against him. She had moved to protect two million lungs from a science officer she liked, whose beautiful papers she had read, and whom she had watched begin to want a mould to be kind. She had told him to his face: *you say this out loud to the wrong person and you get pulled from the crews*. He had said it—not out loud, but in eleven days of a held bay and a requisition trail with his signature under it, which at the refinery was louder than a voice. And she had not pulled him. She had removed the question from his keeping before the question removed him, by making the bay a violation and the mercy a schedule item and his heresy a datum that could not be operationalised, all in one page, all correctly, all with his number on the distribution line so he would know it was aimed and know it was fair.

He folded the advisory in half along its crease. His hand, he noticed, was steady. His hands were always steady; that was the cruelty of the copper, that it took the mind and left the hands.

—

Nomsa was in the yard, checking canister seals against the very requisition the advisory made moot, a copy of the memo folded into her breast pocket where the good bond made a hard square against the coverall, and she watched him come across the yard toward her with the flat assessing look she gave ground she was about to spray.

“You’ve read it,” she said.

“I’ve read it.”

“Then you know she’s right.” Not a question. Nomsa did not spend words on questions whose answers she already had.

“She’s right,” Ezra said, and it cost him nothing to say because it was true. It was the true thing being useless again, the same uselessness

he had sat with at the kitchen table over four years of maps. “She’s completely right. It’s a reservoir. I’d have written it myself about anyone else’s bay.”

“But not this bay.” Nomsa set the seal she was holding back in its rack, deliberately, and turned to face him fully. The yard’s grey light was on the green that had climbed her hand past the pulse, eleven years of it, the count that would pull her from the crews before it pulled anyone. “Say the rest of it, Ezra. You’ve done the honest half. I watched you do it. You’ve stood there and agreed with every word of a page that says put your friend down on schedule, and your hand hasn’t moved, and now you’re going to tell me the *but*.”

“But not this bay,” he said.

“Why not this bay.” Flat. Load-bearing. The eye-line voice, the one she used on hosts and on him now without a seam between the two uses.

“Because I don’t know that it’s empty,” he said. “And she doesn’t either. She wrote that. She wrote that we can’t measure it. And the memo says *because we can’t measure it, resolve it*—and I keep reading it the other way. Because we can’t measure it, *wait*. The same fact. The same sentence. She reads it toward the schedule and I read it toward the bay staying shut, and neither of us can be levered off it, and I’m asking—”

“You’re not asking.” Now the edge, and it was not for the word this time. It was for him, the first time in four years the edge had ever once been for him, and he felt it land. “You’re not asking me anything. You know what the memo says. You know it’s right. You told me it’s right. You’re standing in my yard telling me you want to keep a hollowed man in a copper room past every rule the two of us have kept people alive with for eleven years, because you can’t *prove* he’s gone. Ezra.” She stopped. She was not a woman who stopped mid-sentence; he had never once heard her do it. “That’s the sentence. That’s the sentence I’ve heard from every family at every bay we’ve ever opened. *You can’t prove he’s gone*. And I’ve stood there and said the kind true thing, which is: no. We can’t. Nobody can. That’s not the standard. The standard was never *prove he’s gone*. The standard is *he’s a reservoir and the room downwind of him has children in it*. And I’ve laid the mercy on, on that standard, forty-one times,

because if I waited for proof of empty I'd have buried the whole low city instead."

Forty-one. He had not known the number. She had a private column and she counted it and she had just, for the first time, said the count out loud, to him, in a yard, and he understood that she had spent it—that a woman who never spent a word she did not have to had just spent the most expensive number she owned, laid it on the bench between them like a canister, to make him understand what he was asking her to make an exception to.

"You want the forty-second to be different," she said, "and I have been trying, for eleven days, to work out whether that's mercy or whether that's a man who's fallen in love with a mould asking me to gamble a perimeter on his broken heart. And I can't tell. That's the thing you've done to me, Ezra. I have always been able to tell." She said it in the register of a weather report, which was how he knew she meant every word of it as the truth and not as a wound. "I have laid mercy on forty-one people and slept every night, because I could always tell. And I came down to that bay on the second morning with the canister in my hand and I could not tell, and I closed it, and I have not slept a whole night since, because you have taken the one instrument I had and put a crack in it, and a captain with a cracked certainty gets people hollowed."

—

He wanted to say *you closed it too*. He had the sentence whole and it was the cheapest true thing he owned and he heard himself not say it, because saying it would have been the orange again: the small terrible reach for the thing that let him keep believing there was someone home. She had closed the bay. That was not agreement. That was a captain unable to tell, once, and hating it, and the hating was the cost of what he had done to her.

"I'm not asking you to spare him," Ezra said, and made himself say the real shape of it. "I'm asking you to let me hold the bay while I run—while I try to build the assay. The thing the memo says doesn't exist. Executive function, restored. If it exists it's measurable in principle. Connectivity, task-response, something. If I can build it, then it isn't unmeasurable anymore, and then the memo's own logic runs the other way—a datum you *can* operationalise. I'm asking for

the time to make the thing she says can't be made."

"And while you make it," Nomsa said, "he sits in a sealed room a lapsed seal away from fruiting inside a sprayed perimeter, and I carry that. Not you. You carry the science. I carry the room. If that seal goes while you're building your beautiful assay, the hollowing that comes out of the depot is mine, on my count, forty-two and a hundred more, and *your* margin note about it will be very honest." She let it sit. "You've spent your whole heresy telling me the corps writes off the low ground to keep its own hands clean. And now you want me to hold a live reservoir over the depot so *your* hands don't have to close a bay. Look at it, Ezra. Look at what you're asking. You've become the thing you've been mapping."

That went in under the ribs where nothing else had, because it was fair. He had built four years of maps indicting a machine that spent other people's exposure to keep its own perimeter clean, and here he was asking her to spend the depot's exposure to keep his own bay open, and she had found the symmetry and named it without raising her voice.

—

"I'll take him," Ezra said.

She looked at him.

"Out of the perimeter. If it's the reservoir, if it's the seal, if it's the depot's exposure you carry—take it off you. I'll move him out past the line where a fruiting body doesn't cost anyone but me. No seal, no perimeter, no forty-two on your count. My exposure. My margin note." His hand was still steady. "You said it yourself—a suppressed source inside a sprayed zone is the reservoir. Outside it, on ground already given to the bloom, he's not a reservoir. He's just a man in a room in the green, and the only lung downwind of him is mine, and mine's already counting."

He watched her take it apart. She was not a scientist but she read consequence the way he read a spore panel, and he watched her run it—that it was true, that it dissolved the perimeter argument, that it moved the whole cost onto the one person entitled to spend it, and that it therefore also moved Thabo out past every rule and every canister and every mercy she could reach, into the green wild where if

the thing in the copper room was the lure and not the man, it would have exactly what a lure wanted: a warm undefended sprayed-out science officer alone with it on ground where no one would ever come and lay the mercy on.

"You'll green out," she said. "Out there. Off schedule, alone. You know what happens. The throat, then the collarbone, then I don't have to make a memo, the bloom makes it for me. You're not asking me to spare him. You're asking me to watch you walk him out into the green and both of you not come back, and call it your exposure so I don't have to sign anything." She shook her head once, slow. "That's not mercy either. That's just moving the bay to where I can't reach it."

"Yes," Ezra said. Because that was true too, and she had earned the true one.

She was quiet a long moment. Across the yard a crew was racking tanks, the hiss and clank of men keeping doors on their hinges the boring way that worked. When she spoke again the eye-line voice had gone somewhere further down, to a register he had heard her use exactly once, at a bay, over a host she had known.

"I've merced forty-one," she said. "I never once merced someone I still thought was in there. That was the rule under the count. I could do it because I always knew the house was empty. You're going to make me mercy the first one I'm not sure about—because that's where this ends, Ezra, you know it ends there, either the memo's schedule or the seal or the green takes him, and whoever's holding the canister when it does will not be sure, and it's going to be me, because you won't be able to, and I'll do it, and I'll do it kindly, and it'll be the one that finally makes the count too heavy to carry." She looked at his throat then, the way she always looked at his throat, at the collar, at the bell-green risen to the warning line above it and holding, not yet crossed, not yet past the collarbone, still—barely—a wrist-count of a man who could be talked back down the hill. "And you'll have done that to me. Not the bloom. You. The best scientist I've got and the nearest thing I have to a friend on these crews, and you'll have spent my certainty and my count and my sleep on a maybe, and told yourself it was love. Maybe it is. I can't tell that either, anymore."

—

She did not close the bay for him and she did not open it. She left it exactly as unresolved as it was and made him carry the knowing that it could not stay that way—that the memo was a clock now, that *resolved on the standard schedule* was a date even if it did not name one, and that when the world climbed to the line someone would have to act, and it would not be Priya, who had correctly made it a policy so she would never have to be in the room, and it would not be him, because he had already found the far side of the crossing and could not lay a mercy on a hand that closed, and it would be Nomsa, who counted.

“Green?” she said at last, at the edge of the yard, the whole question folded into the one word, the way she had asked it at his door and over his maps, *are you still yourself*. But it was not the same question now and they both heard that it was not. She was asking whether there was still enough of the man she relied on left above the collarbone to be reached, and whether the thing that answered her would be the science officer she had built eleven years of saves on or the heretic who had just offered to carry a reservoir into the wild and call it care.

He thought about lying. He thought about the boring true thing, the schedule, the rolled map, the man who put the wound-map away and turned calm and undefended back toward the light, and how the aflatoxin would love that man best of all. He thought about Priya behind her glass, protecting two million lungs from him with the strongest true thing she owned, and about Nomsa in front of him, protecting her count and her sleep and forty-one nights of certainty from the crack he had put in it, and how both of them were right, entirely, with receipts, and how he was going to do the thing anyway, out past the line, on his own exposure, because the not-knowing had become the thing he had decided to serve.

“Green,” he said.

He heard how the word came out. He heard that it was not true and that she heard it was not true, and that she took it anyway, the way you take a door you know will not stay on its hinge and set it back in the frame regardless because the alternative is to admit the house is open, and she held his eye a moment longer than the word required—longer than she ever had—and then she turned and went back to her

seals, and left him in the grey yard with the memo and the copper on his tongue and the green at his throat risen to the warning line and holding there, patient, geological, a millimetre from the country past which no one would be able to tell him from the thing he loved.

Past the harbour, past the contour line the sea had drawn, the low ground lay green and shining to the water, thickest and brightest over the ground where the most had been most abandoned, and somewhere in the depot behind him a hollowed man sat in a copper room with his head level and aimed, or with his head coming down to look at a hand, and no instrument on Earth to say which. The clock on the bay ticked in Priya's clean prose. The count in Nomsa's private column waited one name from heavier. And Ezra stood between the two truest people he knew, proven right by neither and wrong by neither, and understood the shape the vise took when it closed on the ones who loved you: not a villain to defy, but two good people with evidence, one on either side, each holding the strongest true thing they owned—and you walking out through the gap between them into the green with a peeled orange in your pocket, because you could no longer bear to be the kind of man who did not.

Fourteen

He went down to the copper room at the hour the depot forgot itself, between the last crew off the perimeter and the first crew on, when the sodium light in the yard buzzed to no one and the fume hoods in the empty sheds drew their low steady notes into the dark, and he told himself, going down, that he was going to observe, which was a science officer's word, and the last of the words he still had that would fit over the thing without tearing.

He had a fresh orange in the inner pocket where the vials sat. He had stopped pretending to himself about the orange; the lies had grown, one by one, too heavy to carry, and he had set them down, and found that setting them down did not make him a better man, only a more accurate one—the exact inversion, he suspected, the old religion had been built to prevent.

The bay was the deep even green of long exposure, ceiling and floor and the four walls gone the colour of a church roof, of the inside of his own throat, of the drowned country beyond the harbour—verdigris on every surface, the weapon worn as a room, and in the middle of it, on the low rack, Thabo.

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He did the panel first. He would do the panel first if the building were burning, because the panel was the shape of a man performing a procedure, and the procedure was the last handhold, and he had learned in a season of losing handholds to hold the one that remained with both hands.

He took the swab from the collar, high, in the soft hollow above the collarbone, and read the strip under the bench light he had car-

ried down, and the strip said what the strip always said, which was chemistry and never personhood. Sporulation load down—the copper room did that, held it flat, denied the fruiting every foothold. Hepatic markers past the line, staying there, the fast toxin's work done and not undone. The cheeks were gone in further. Twenty days now, a driveable body fed by hand and off a schedule no one had written, the coverall hanging off the shoulders. There was no line on the strip for the thing he had come down to read. There had never been a line for it. No one had ever needed the strip to answer this question, because no one before him had ever knelt in a green room wanting a hollowed man to be home badly enough to poison his own liver for the chance of it.

He put the strip down. He read the face instead, which was the only instrument he had that was calibrated to the question, and was not calibrated to it, and was the best he owned.

The eyes were on him.

Not aimed. He made himself run the rebuttal, flat, in the exact words, because running it was the discipline and the discipline was the last of him Nomsa would recognise: *a body orients to a stimulus; the head comes round to a voice; the eyes rest where the movement is; nothing behind them is required to meet you.* He had watched it on the curb, the smooth mechanical turn with nobody coming up behind the glass. He watched for that now.

The eyes stayed on him, and did not aim, and Ezra could not have said, with any instrument the world contained, the difference between a gaze that rested and a gaze that watched.

"Thabo," he said.

The lips moved. The soft preparatory motion, the mouth loading the runway. And then nothing came down it, and the not-coming was worse than the flat aim had ever been, and was also—this was the whole of the trap he walked into now with his eyes open, on purpose, because he had run out of reasons not to—the first thing in twenty days that looked like a man trying, and failing, and staying to try again.

—

He peeled the orange the way he always did now, slowly, on purpose badly, in five broken pieces, and the copper walls threw the smell

back at them both, the brightness of the fruit and the blood-taste of the safety, and he put the five pieces in the open hand.

The fingers closed. The slow uneven flexion, the thumb coming over the pieces. The head came down. The eyes went to the hand. Ezra had a whole account for it—retained grasp, retained head-drop, a dog looks where its food went, a body that loved oranges for thirty-one years runs the pattern one more time—and the account fit entirely, it left nothing out, and it did not lift the weight, and he had stopped, this month, expecting it to.

He sat on the floor of the copper room, at the eye-line, the way you owed it, and he did the thing there was no procedure for, which was that he talked to him.

“Nomsa pulled the Salt River line back another two metres on Tuesday,” he said. “You’d have told her it wasn’t worth the copper. You’d have been right and she’d have done it anyway.” The thumb pressed the largest piece, the one he’d torn worst, testing the give of the fruit, the small pressing that had meant, ten thousand times at the bench, that a man was loading a word. “Vusi asks after you. He doesn’t know how to. He says *is there any word on* and then he stops, because there’s no end of that sentence that isn’t unkind, so he just stops, and I let him, because I can’t finish it either.”

The thumb pressed. The head stayed down. Ezra talked, low, to a man who was there or was not there, and found that the talking was the thing you did at a bedside when you did not know whether the person could hear. You talked to the maybe-empty room because to fall silent was to decide the room was empty, and deciding that was a thing you did not get to take back.

“—the,” Thabo said.

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One syllable. He would go over it, afterward, ten thousand times, and never get to the bottom of which it was: the article that always came in front of the joke, or the front of a longer word the weight took before it finished, or an exhalation the copper acoustics shaped into a phoneme in a man primed for a season to hear one. *The*. He had it whole, the rebuttal, he had built it in the small hours and carried it down against his chest with the vials: a retained motor pattern of

the vocal apparatus, cued by scent and voice and thirty-one years of loading that exact runway before that exact kind of sentence, requiring no one at all to be behind it. It fit. It fit the *the* and the pressing thumb and the head that came down, and Priya was in his skull, tired and funded and correct, saying *the calm is the tell, the reaching is the lure, ask what a strain that wants to sporulate gains by giving a grieving man one word*, and she was right, she was always right, and the rightness had stopped being able to reach the place the *the* reached.

Because that was the thing that had changed, this month, and Ezra made himself name it now, flat, in the exact words, sitting on the green floor with his friend's slack hand in front of him.

He was no longer looking for the tie-breaker.

He had spent a season pointing a corer at the residual, characterising a strain on a dish that could not answer, building a case rigorous enough to survive Priya, and somewhere in the building of it he had understood—not decided; understood, the way you understand a boundary condition after you have failed at it long enough—that no sample and no case and no instrument the whole dead discipline could raise would tell a returning man from a retained fragment, because the difference between them was presence, and presence had never once been measured, and would not begin to be measured tonight for his convenience. He had accepted the vise. Both jaws.

And so the question had quietly become a different question, and he had not felt it change any more than he had felt himself cross on the curb or in the assay room, until he was already on the far side of it: not *which reading is true*—that was closed, a horoscope either way—but *which reading am I going to serve with the short green life I have left*.

That was not a scientific question. Priya would circle it in the transcript. Nomsa would pull him for it, tonight, if she saw the shape of it on him. It was the exact question the discipline had been built to forbid a man from ever asking, because a man who asked it had stopped being an instrument and become a mourner, a believer, a hazard to a city counting on his panels.

He asked it anyway, looking at the thumb pressing the worst piece of the orange, and the honest part of him gave him the honest an-

swer, which was that he already knew, had known since the first *the*: that he was going to serve the reading in which his friend was in that room. Not because it was true. He would never know if it was true. Because if he served the other reading—if he read the head-drop as mechanism and the *the* as an exhalation and carried the concentrated canister down to this green room and laid the mercy on the driveable body of a man who might, for one word at a time, be reaching up through the strain the way a drowning man reaches up through water—then he would have scoured off, with his own greened and steady hand, the one thing that might have been Thabo coming back, and he would have called it safety, and he would have been *right to*, by every article of the copper order, and the rightness would not have brought back the word.

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we do not know his mother.

It came up in him the way the chorus came up, in the first-person plural, patient, geological, present-tense, and he knew it for what it was, or for what it might be, which was a season of skipped doses and a warning line that would not recede and the strain's own antecedent faint in his blood from the held pocket and the copper-room air, dreaming out loud with his defences down in the one direction he had leaned all year.

we do not know he had one. that is true, and you keep it, you and the woman with the count, you are the ones who know he had a mother, and we came up in the house after the man went out of it and found it open and the cold in it, and we are the warmth that came after, we did not take the doors, they were off their hinges, we are not a guest and not a thief, we are only the shape the warmth pools in, and this shape was made to hold an orange and to load a word before a joke, so it holds, so it loads, is that him or is that us, we could not tell you, we do not have your instrument, we have only ever been the green that comes up worst where you did your worst, in the low wet undefended ground, in the undefended hollow of a throat, answering, or not answering, and reaching, or seeming to reach, one word up through the water before the weight—and we cannot tell you which, that is not a thing we withhold, there was never any instrument to know it, not on your strip and not on her screens and not in us—

He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, on the green floor, and pressed, hard, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a liver-failing man with a season of skipped doses hearing the exact shape of the thing he had already decided pressed back at him in the plural of his own drugged and grieving skull—the chorus thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable, nothing an offer, nothing a review board could circle. *That is the mechanism*, he told himself, in the careful words, and the careful words were true and did not touch him. *Not a voice. Your voice, wanting.* He wrote no margin note. There had never been an honest note for the one that mattered, and he had stopped, tonight, needing there to be.

—

He checked the hollow above his own collarbone before he stood, because it was the one thing left that was checkable, and reading it was a promise he had made to no one and had almost entirely finished negotiating away. He tilted his chin under the bench light and pressed two fingers to the soft hollow and read the throat.

The green was at the warning line, the church-bell verdigris risen to the hollow of the throat and holding, and it had not paled the way a falling copper load should have paled it, and it had not crossed, either—not the collarbone; the collarbone was still ahead of him, the line the corps had drawn on every throat in three languages, the place past which they took the sprayer out of your hands. He pressed below the warning line and confirmed it, flat, as though it were data that could still save him. *Not past. Not the line. Still yourself this morning, by the one honest ledger you have left.* Throat, and holding, and creeping—he made himself say the true word—*creeping*, by less than a hair, toward the collarbone, the way a tide argues a line up a hill while you are looking at something else. Not across. Not yet. The country before the line, where the green was either the poison the falling copper had begun to leave or the offer arriving in the undefended hollow, and no instrument on Earth to say which.

He buttoned his collar over the warning line that would not recede, and stood.

He knew, buttoning, what he was going to do. Not tonight—tonight he would take the orange out of the slack hand and peel a fresh one

and put it back, because that was the one thing left he could give a man who was there or was not there. But after tonight. He knew where the case he had built had been pointing all along, the corer and the transects and the strain characterised on the honest bench, the whole rigorous scaffold he had raised to survive Priya: it had been pointing, the entire time, not at a sample and not at a proof, but at the one place on the coast where the question was asked at full scale and answered by no one. The largest bloom. The drowned country past the harbour where the green stood thickest over the most abandoned dead, where the fruiting was said to have risen so far in one figure that the figure was greened past any survivor the corps had logged and sat in the middle of it apparently lucid, apparently the thing itself come to a point—or apparently the most advanced hollowing anyone had seen, wearing serenity the way this room wore copper. There was a reading for that figure too. He was not going out there for a tie-breaker; he had buried the tie-breaker, he had grieved it, it was not coming.

He was going out because the only instrument that could read presence was a whole mind present to another, and there was a presence out there, or the most convincing absence ever assembled, and the only way to read it was to be the mind it was read by—undefended, the copper fallen, the green let down the last centimetre from the warning line across the collarbone, into the country he could not come back from with the sprayer still in his keeping—and to walk out to the middle of the largest question there was, and stop holding his breath, and find out whether there was anyone there.

He had said he would not cross the line to do it. He had written the clause in the margin at the bottom of his heresy, a promise to no one, and had known even then that a promise a man writes to himself at the bottom of a heresy is a promise he has already begun to negotiate. He had negotiated it. It was done. The knowing of it was flat and exact and arrived without drama, on the same rising curve as the green.

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He took the dulling orange out of the slack hand, gently, and peeled a fresh one, slowly, on purpose badly, in five broken pieces, and put them in the hand again, and the fingers closed, and the head came down, and the eyes went to the fruit.

"I'm going to go and see," he said, to the man, or to the room, or to the warmth that pooled in the shape a man had left. "I'm going to go out where it's thickest and I'm going to stop spraying myself and I'm going to find out if anyone's home. Out there, and—" He stopped. The thumb pressed the worst piece. "And in here. It's the same question. I couldn't ask it from the bench. I can't ask it with the copper in me. I'm sorry it took me this long to understand that the instrument was the thing they forbade me to use."

The lips moved. Loaded the runway. Nothing came down it. The eyes stayed on the orange, or on his hand, or on the movement, and Ezra could not tell which, and had made his peace, tonight, with never being able to tell—had crossed, entirely and at last, from the man who could not bear the not-knowing to the man who had decided to serve it, out of love, which was the one variable Priya had said he could not defend, which was the axis the lure was aimed straight down, which was exactly and identically the axis a returning man would come home along.

He buttoned his collar over the green that would not recede and stood in the doorway of the green room with his friend behind him holding an orange he might or might not know was in his hand, and did not spray, and did not lay the mercy on, and did not know, and had stopped, entirely, wanting to be the kind of man who did.

Outside the depot the low ground lay green and shining to the water, mile on mile of it, luminous where the risen moon found the fruiting, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be beautiful, thickest exactly over the drowned country where the most had been most abandoned—as if it were answering, as if it were reaching, one word up through the water before the weight—and Ezra looked out past the harbour to the middle of it, where the largest question there was sat greened past all survival in the light, and knew that he was going to walk out to it, and let the copper fall the last centimetre to do it, and could not tell, standing in the doorway, whether the man who would walk out there in the morning was a scientist at last reaching the one instrument that could run the experiment, or the final symptom of the disease, reaching one word up through the water before the weight took him under for good.

Both jaws. He stepped out under the copper-green sky and went to find them ready.

Fifteen

The rumour reached him the way copper reached the low ground—from the edges inward, thinned by the distance it had crossed, impossible to trace back to the source.

He heard it first as weather. Not testimony but the shape of testimony, secondhand and thirdhand, in the flat idle talk of crews at the depot's water point. A relief crew had come down from the northern districts to shore up the harbour line for a season, men Ezra did not know, greener than his own at the wrist and quieter, and they carried with them the talk of the ground they had left. In it, like a vein of brighter mineral in a stone, was a thing they called—when they called it anything—the green one. The seer, one of them said, and another told him to shut up, not because it was false but because saying it made you the kind of man who said it. Ezra filled his tank with his back to them and his hands steady on the coupling, and listened, and did not turn around, and knew that not-turning-around was already a kind of turning.

He got it in pieces over a fortnight, and the pieces did not fit. A figure in the great bloom over the drowned Flats—the largest standing bloom on the coast, the one the corps had written off years back as unsprayable, mile on mile of luminous ruin standing in the wet where the low city had been. A person, they said. Greened past any survivor. Past the wrist, past the throat, past the collarbone line the corps drew on everyone; greened, one of the relief men said, the whole of the way, so that you could not tell at a distance where the person ended and the bloom began. And still—this was the part that made the water point go quiet, the part each man told as though he were the first to think it strange—still upright. Still walking. Still, they said, lucid.

Lucid. Ezra turned the word over that night at the bench, in the hard clean white. It was not a word the corps used. The corps had *green* for *still yourself* and *hollowed* for *gone*, and between the two it had the mercy, and it had never had occasion for a third word, because a third word implied a third state, and the whole architecture of the copper order was built on there being only two. A hollowed man was empty. A greened man past the collarbone was hollowing, or dead, or mercied. There was no rung on that ladder where a person went green the whole of the way and stayed a person. And here was a rumour insisting on exactly that rung, the one the ladder did not have.

He built the case against it before he let himself want it. He had learned that much and held to it.

—

The case against was ordinary and complete, and he wrote it in the exact words because the exact words were the last handhold. *One:* the great bloom was the least-observed ground on the coast. No one sane went into it. Everything reported out of it was reported by a frightened person at a distance, through heat-shimmer and the low luminous fog the heavy fruiting threw, and a frightened person at a distance saw what a frightened person at a distance had always seen, which was a shape and a story to hang on it. *Two:* the corps had a name for a greened figure that walked and did not fall, and the name was not *seer*. A behaviour-lineage host driven up onto the high ground of a bloom, face to the sky, posture held for sporulation—that was a puppet doing precisely what the puppet did, and at a distance, lit from within by the fruiting it wore, it would look for all the world like a person standing in grace. The stillness that read as serenity was the stillness of a body with no one in it to fidget. He wrote it flat. *A puppet on a hill is the most seductive thing this organism makes, because a puppet on a hill looks like a saint.* And *three*, which he wrote smallest and meant most: he was a man with a season of skipped doses in his blood and a warning line at his throat that would not recede, who had wanted, all year, for the bloom to be kind, and a man who wants a thing that badly will hear a saint in any story the wind brings him. He had diagnosed the mechanism in himself over an orange. This had the same taste.

He set the case down under the bench light and looked at it, and it

held, every member of it, and it did not lower by a gram the thing it was built to hold down—that he could not stop thinking about the walking green figure over the drowned poor of the city, and that he had already, without deciding to, begun to want to go and see.

—

He asked Nomsa, because asking Nomsa was the discipline—because she was one of the two voices he kept in the room precisely so that ignoring them would cost him something audible, and because she had, of the two, the eleven years and the count and the flat unromantic eye that would tell him, if anyone alive could, that it was nothing.

He asked her carefully, at the yard's edge, with the memo still a clock between them and the word *green* gone unsafe in both their mouths. He did not say *seer*. He said he'd heard the relief crews talking about the northern ground, and asked what they'd been running from up there, and she looked at him the way she looked at ground she was about to spray, because she heard the whole of the real question folded inside the small one.

"You mean the walker," she said.

So it had reached her too. Of course it had; it had reached the captains first, because the captains had to decide whether a thing was a problem, and a thing the crews were telling each other about at the water point was already, by the telling, a problem.

"I mean the walker," he said.

"It's a host, Ezra." Flat. Not unkind; she was never unkind about this, which was the terrible thing. "A behaviour-lineage host driven up onto the highest dry ground in the biggest bloom on the coast, that hasn't fallen over yet because the ground's soft and the lineage keeps it standing. That's all *walking* is. A puppet doesn't lie down; lying down is a decision, and there's nobody in there to make it. It stands until the body fails and fruits where it drops. The northern crews have watched a hundred of them. They just haven't watched one stand this long, in a bloom this big, in a fog this bright, and a thing you watch long enough in a bright enough fog starts to look like it's watching you back." She racked the seal she was holding. "That's not a seer. That's a corps that's run out of ground it can spray, telling

itself a story about the ground it lost.”

“They said it’s lucid.”

“They said it turned its head.” She looked at him. “You know what turns its head, Ezra. You’ve knelt in front of what turns its head. You peeled it an orange.” She let that sit, and it went in where she had meant it to. “A head that turns to a sound isn’t lucid. You of all people know the difference between a head that turns and a man who’s home. Or you did.” And then, because honesty all the way down was the thing she still owed him even now: “And I’ll tell you the other thing, the thing you’re going to hold onto instead of the true one. Nobody’s put an instrument on it. Nobody’s gone in. Every word you’ve heard about that walker came out of the mouth of a man who was leaving. So no—nobody can tell you it’s a puppet. Nobody can tell you it’s not a saint either. It’s the one place on the coast where *nobody knows*, and you have gone and fallen in love with the one place where nobody knows, because a place where nobody knows is a place your theory can’t lose.”

He turned it over, looking for the crack, and the crack was not there, and the not-finding felt, as it always did now, exactly like grief.

“You’re right,” he said.

“I’m right and you’re going anyway,” she said. “I can hear it. It’s in your throat before it’s in your mouth.” She looked at his collar, at the warning line risen to the hollow and holding there, patient, a millimetre off the country past which she could not reach him. “Whatever’s standing in that bloom, Ezra, it’s a long walk in on ground I can’t spray, off a schedule you’ve already stopped keeping, and the only thing waiting at the end of it that I’m sure of is the green finishing what the copper started on your throat. That’s the one lucid thing in the whole story. That much I can measure.”

—

He took it to Priya too, because he took everything to Priya, and because he had begun to notice that he brought her the things he most wanted knocked down, the way a man brings a doctor the mole he is most afraid of.

She read the shape of it off his face before he had finished the second sentence, set down the thing she was holding, and gave him the

answer he had come for and hated, standing at the glass with the orange rivers running below.

"You want it to be a fruiting intelligence," she said. "Say the actual claim out loud, in a room, so you can hear how it sounds. You want the largest bloom on the coast to have organised itself to where it can wear a human being as a lucid instrument—a mind the network runs, a face it fruits, so that it can, what. Meet you. Offer you something." She let the word *offer* land flat and terrible in the clean air. "There is no mechanism for that, and I'll be precise, because precision's the only lever I have left on you. A mycelial network integrates information—resource flux, chemical gradient, the state of its own tissue. That's real; it's your own work. Integration is not a mind. A network moving carbon toward a stressed node is not deciding anything, any more than a river decides the sea. If your theory needs the bloom to think, your theory's broken, not the world."

"I didn't say it thinks."

"You said *seer*."

"The crews said *seer*. I said a greened person who's still lucid."

"Which is the same claim in modest clothes." She was tired, in the way she got, rigorous and funded and worn thin by romantics. "Fine. Take the modest version. A person greened past the collarbone who's still a person. Even that has a Reading A so complete it doesn't need the bloom to do anything clever at all. You've seen the entheogen strain come up under the copper—seen it put a fragment of a man back on the surface for the length of a syllable. Now imagine a host where that strain colonised heavily, across the whole cortex, early, before the aflatoxin finished scouring—a body running not on nothing but on a scrambled serotonergic flood, connectivity storming, ego-boundaries dissolved. It might well look serene. It might well look, to a frightened man at fifty metres, like a person at peace with dying, because a brain drowning in that chemistry can produce exactly the affect the mystics spent centuries chasing. That's the most advanced hollowing on the coast, wearing the most convincing mask the pharmacopeia can make, because the mask is *bliss*, and bliss is the one expression you can't tell from grace." She held his eye. "Both of those fit every word the crews brought you. A puppet on a hill. A drowned mind wearing peace. Neither one is a message. And you're

going to walk two days into a bloom I can't cover to decide it's the third thing, because you decided the third thing a year ago and have been looking for its face ever since."

"And if it is the third thing?"

"Then it's the third thing and I'm wrong, and it will make no difference," Priya said, "because you'll have gone in green past your own line to reach it, and a man that green can't tell a revelation from the sound his own liver makes going down, and neither can I, and neither will any board that reads your transcript. You want to meet the thing that would prove you right. I'm telling you that by the time you can reach it, you'll be the one witness on Earth nobody can believe. Including you." She turned back to the glass. "The instrument you'd use to read it is the instrument you'd have to destroy to get there. There's no experiment at the end of that walk. There's just a green man in a green field, and nobody who could ever say which was which."

—

He walked back down to the depot in the dark with both their answers folded into him where the case sat and the vials sat and the memo's clock ticked, and he did the thing he had promised himself he would keep doing, which was to write both of them down in their own voices at their full strength, because a case you have softened is a case you have lost in secret. He wrote *puppet on a hill*. He wrote *drowned mind wearing peace*. He wrote *no mechanism for a bloom that thinks*. He built the whole of Reading A against the walker as strong as he could make it, stronger than the crews could have made it, and set it under the bench light, and it stood, every member.

And then he sat with it, and found it had done to him exactly what the case against the map had done, and the case against the orange, which was nothing. Because there was a thing neither Nomsa's puppet nor Priya's drowned mind quite reached, and he made himself write it too, on the right, in the same flat hand: *both readings require the walker to be, at bottom, a body with no one in it—a puppet the lineage stands up, or a mind the chemistry has dissolved. Both are the absence of a person, dressed. And the whole of my heresy is that I have knelt in front of the absence of a person and watched something reach up through it. Once. For one word. If it can happen for one*

word in a copper room, then a body where the strain took the whole cortex, early, deep, is not obviously the most hollowed thing on the coast. It is, on my own reading, exactly where you would look for the most returned. He read it back. It fit the data no better than Priya's account did, both complete, both laid over one identical rumour of one green figure walking in one bloom no one had ever measured. He wrote, beneath it, the truest sentence on the page: the walker is the absence of a person wearing serenity, or the fullest return the strain has ever made, and there is no instrument that reads the difference, because the difference is presence, and presence is the one thing the discipline never learned to measure. It is Thabo, mile-wide. It is the orange, at the scale of the coast.

That was the member that would not go down.

—

we do not know if there is one of us there

you have made a word for a shape you saw at a distance in the bright fog, and we do not have the word, we have never had a word, we are the green on the wrist and the green on the bell and the green the whole of the way, and where we go the whole of the way there is no longer a wrist or a bell to read us by, there is only green, and you cannot tell from green whether the house behind it is full or empty, you never could, that is not a thing we hide from you, it is a thing there was never any wall left to tell it by; and if a shape walks in the low bright ground and holds its face a certain way, that is the lineage lifting it to the wind, or it is the warmth pooled so deep and so long in one place that the place has learned the shape of a person and kept it, we could not tell you which, we do not have your instrument, we came up worst where the most were most abandoned, over the drowned, over the low, and if one of those we came up through is still, somehow, a little bit home, standing in us the whole of the way, then it is the only one, and you want to walk to it, and we cannot promise you a face when you arrive, we can only promise you green, and the not-being-able-to- tell, which is the only honest thing we have ever had to offer, and is not, we know, an offer, and is the nearest to one there will ever be—

—

He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, at the bench, in

the hard clean white, and pressed, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a man with a season of skipped doses and a rumour lodged in him and a warning line that would not recede, dreaming with his defences down toward the one figure he had already decided to walk to—the chorus thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable, no fact only-true-if-B, only the exact shape of the thing he already believed, handed back to him in the first-person plural of his own drugged and grieving brain. It had said, this time, *we do not know if there is one of us there*, which was the most careful thing it had ever said, and he could not tell whether the carefulness was the bloom's honesty or his own last discipline, reaching up through the strain to keep the account true even in the voice he could not trust. He wrote no margin note. There was no honest note. There never was.

He did not go that night. He wanted to be exact about that, in the account, in the small hours: he stood at the line and did not cross it, and he did not shoulder a corer and a fortnight of copper and walk north to the great bloom to find the green one and see whose looking it was. The walk was two days on ground he could not spray. He had a bay half a mile behind him with a man in it who did or did not know an orange was in his hand, and a memo turning slowly into a date, and a captain who counted and a scientist who was right, and the discipline still, barely, holding him at the bench where the honest work was. He buttoned his collar over the warning line and pressed the hollow above the collarbone and confirmed it, as though it were data that could save him—*not past, not yet, throat and not the line, still yourself this morning by the one ledger you have left*—and it was true, it had not crossed, and he held that fact the way a drowning man holds a word.

But he had a name for the place now, and he could not unchange it. For a year the great bloom had been a grief on the horizon, thickest and brightest over the drowned poor of the city, a thing he read intention into and could not reach. Now it had, in it, somewhere, a figure—reported, unverified, denied by everyone he trusted and dismantled by everyone he respected—and a figure was a destination in a way a grief was not. A grief you could stand at the edge of forever. A figure you walked toward. He knew, flat, the training running even

here, that a rumour a man cannot verify and cannot let go of is not a datum; it is a hook; and the hook had gone in cleanly, without his feeling it, the way every crossing had gone in without his feeling it—the orange, the copper, the bench, the bay—so that he was already, tonight, buttoning his collar in the mirror, a man walking toward the great bloom, and had merely not yet taken the first step.

Outside the depot the low ground lay green and shining to the water, luminous where the risen moon found the fruiting, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be beautiful, thickest over the drowned country where the most had been most abandoned. Somewhere in the deep bright fog of it, or nowhere, a figure stood green the whole of the way and held its face to the sky, or held its face toward the depot, toward him, and there was no instrument on Earth to say which, and Ezra stood at the warning line with the rumour lodged in him like a spore in an undefended lung, and did not spray, and did not go, and did not yet know which of those two refusals would turn out to be the one that had mattered.

Sixteen

The requisition for the transect went in under the science-officer heading, in the flat institutional grammar that had, until this season, carried Ezra anywhere he asked to go—*substrate sampling, strain characterisation, boundary of the Salt River surge, half-day, one hand*—and it came back approved with a line added at the bottom in a hand he did not know, and the line said: *supervised*.

He read it at the bench in the grey annex light with the copper thinning on his tongue toward its mineral aftertaste, and he understood the whole of it the way he understood Priya's page: as a sentence built so it could not be argued with. *Supervised*. Not *denied*—a denial he could have appealed, taken to the harbour medical officer, made a case in front of, turned into a conversation. Supervision was not a conversation. It was the memo advancing one contour up the hill, patient, geological, the way the green advanced on his throat: not a wall thrown across his path but a hand set lightly on his shoulder, so that the ground he most wanted to sample was ground he could now reach only with a witness at his elbow whose job was to file what the witness saw. He had stopped being a man who ran transects. He had become a datum himself, a science officer of interest, sampled on the standard schedule.

He signed the amended requisition. His hand was steady. His hands were always steady.

—

The supervisor was a man named Adriaan whom Ezra half-knew from the harbour crews, decent, unromantic, greener at the wrist than at the throat, a man who had drawn the duty the way you drew any duty and did not want it. He met Ezra at the crew gate in the flat white

morning with a half-mask pushed up on his forehead and a clipboard he plainly wished were a nozzle, and he did the thing a decent man does with an order he finds distasteful, which was to make it small.

"I'm not here to stand on you," Adriaan said, as they went down the harbour road toward the contour line, the tanks knocking on their backs. "You do your science. I write down that you did your science. Nomsa says you're the best panel-reader on the coast and I believe her. Two hours, we go home, everybody's throat's the same colour it was."

"Nomsa put you on this," Ezra said. Not a question.

"Nomsa didn't put me on anything." Adriaan looked straight down the road. "Nomsa asked, when she saw the name, whether it could be someone who knew you. That's the whole of what Nomsa did." He said it flatly, giving Ezra nothing to hold and everything, and Ezra held it anyway: that in the machinery of a supervision she could not stop, the one mercy available to her had been to choose the hand on the clipboard, and she had spent it, and he was not to know she had, and he knew.

They went down.

—

The site was a low tongue of the surge where the bloom had come up over the drowned end of a district that the old maps still named and the sea had unnamed a decade back. It was, on Priya's model, warm and broken ground and nothing more—subsidence, standing water, the crust opened, ninety-one percent of the variance accounted for before a single spore was invoked. It was also, on the map Ezra had built in his head over four years and was ashamed of and could not stop consulting, a former relocation ground: a place the century before had put the people it was prepared to lose, on the low wet line, and the sea had come for them first and the green had come after, and now the fruiting stood thickest and brightest exactly there, luminous where the flat white light found it, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be beautiful. The map fit both. He had never once been able to make it say the thing he wanted and not, in the same breath, say Priya's thing louder.

He ran the transect anyway, because running it was the discipline,

and the discipline was the last of him Nomsa would recognise, and because a case he softened was a case he had lost in secret.

He laid the tape and worked the stations along it, kneeling at each in the misted margin where his own spray had beaten the surge back a metre, coring the substrate, reading the strips, calling the lineages by their signatures the way another man might call birds. The behaviour-lineage where the ground was high and dry, driving whatever it caught up toward the wind. The aflatoxin-bearer low, in the wet core, the fast toxin's work in the strips like a smell he could no longer not notice. And threaded through both, in the disturbed opened ground between them, unmistakable, at densities his own dishes had never held—the entheogen strain, the serotonergic lineage, the third door, coming up through the drowned district in a standing garden nobody had planted.

Adriaan wrote down that Ezra cored the substrate. He could not write down the thing Ezra was actually reading, because there was no line on any strip for it, and Ezra was reading it against the strips, against himself, in the only instrument the discipline had never built.

—

The residual was there again. That was the thing that would not go down.

He had the numbers cold; he had carried them into Priya's glass office and watched her dismantle them and carried them out again undismantled, which was to say not proven and not disproved. Her model took temperature and disturbance and returned the bloom's spread across the coast to within a hand's breadth, ninety-one percent, obscenely clean. But the entheogen lineage did not sit inside the ninety-one. That was Ezra's finding, small and stubborn: where the killer strains tracked warmth and broken ground with the plain obedience of mould in a wet wall, the serotonergic strain came up *thickest* not merely where the ground was warm and open but where the warm open ground had also, in the century of the machine, been the ground of the most abandoned—a few percent that would not resolve into physics, standing over the drowned poor like an answer to a question the model had not been asked.

He knelt in the misted margin with the core in his hand and made himself say the rebuttal, flat, in the exact words, because Priya was

in his skull and Priya was right. *The abandoned ground is the wettest and lowest and most broken ground, because that is where the machine put the people it could lose—on the low wet line the sea took first. Your residual is not grief. It is the same two variables at a finer grain than the model resolves. The correlation with cruelty is a correlation with topography, and the topography is what cruelty used. You have found, one more time, that the poor were put on the drowning ground, and mistaken it for the ground grieving them. It fit entirely. It left nothing out. And it did not lift the residual by a gram, because the residual was real, and fit both was not the same as false, and the whole of the copper order's certainty and the whole of his heresy stood on one identical few percent of variance that the cleanest model on the coast could not scrub away.*

Reading A: the strain thrives on the drowned poor because any strain would; the ground is warm, wet, undefended, unsprayed, and the poor were put there to drown. Reading B: the correction goes where the pathology was; the strain that restores the empathy whose absence caused the crisis comes up thickest over the ground the crisis abandoned. The same few percent. The same drowned district. The same standing luminous garden over the same lost people. He capped the vial. There was no honest note that unmade it, and he had stopped, this season, needing there to be.

—

we do not come up where you were kind.

It came up in him the way the chorus came up, in the first-person plural, patient, present-tense, and he knew it for what it was, or for what it might be: a season of skipped doses, a warning line that would not recede, the strain's own antecedent faint in his blood from the surge-heavy air and the held pocket, dreaming out loud in the one direction he had leaned all year.

that is your finding and it is true, we do not come up thickest in the misted streets and the twice-sprayed high ground where the throats do not green before sixty; we come up in the low, in the wet, in the opened, over the drowned and the abandoned and the written-off, and you have two accounts of why and they are both correct: that this is the warm broken ground where any of us would thrive, and that this is the ground where the most was most taken, and these are

not two grounds, they are one ground, they were always one ground, the machine put the losable on the drowning line and the drowning line is where we rise, and you cannot pull the grief out from under the physics because the physics is what the grief was made of—we cannot tell you which we are, the mould in the wet wall or the answer to the low ground's long question, we do not have your instrument, we only know that we came up here, over these, and not over the clean high streets, and whether that is thriving or whether that is answering is the one thing there was never any wall left to read—

He put the heel of his gloved hand against the mask over his mouth and pressed, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a liver-failing man kneeling over a core with his defences down toward the thing he had already decided to believe—thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable, no fact only-true-if-B, only the exact shape of his own residual handed back to him in the plural of his own drugged and grieving skull. *That is the mechanism*, he told himself, and the words were true and did not touch him. He wrote no margin note.

—

“You alright?” Adriaan said. He had come up quietly, clipboard down at his side, watching Ezra kneel too long over a capped vial with his hand at his mask. His face was not suspicious. It was worse than suspicious; it was kind, and being kind it was going to have to write down what it saw. “You went somewhere for a second there.”

“Reading the panel,” Ezra said, and stood, and heard how it came out, and heard Adriaan hear it. The line the corps drew ran through this exact moment: a science officer who went somewhere over a core, off schedule, greener than the work should have made him, on the ground he’d fallen in love with. That was the shape the machinery read for.

“Show me what you got,” Adriaan said instead—gently, giving him the off-ramp—“and let’s get you back up the hill before your throat argues with me.” He looked, once, at Ezra’s collar, at the bell-green risen to the warning line above it and holding, not crossed. He did not comment. He was decent. But he had looked, and the looking would be in the report, because a supervisor who did not note a warning-line throat on a man he’d found gone somewhere over a core was

a supervisor filing a lie, and Adriaan did not file lies, and that was exactly why Nomsa had chosen him, and exactly why it would not save Ezra.

Ezra showed him the cores. He named the lineages, flat and correct, the behaviour-strain high, the aflatoxin low, the serotonergic strain in the opened ground between—and he did not name the residual, because there was no naming it to a clipboard that would not become the thing that pulled him, and he understood that this was the last of the science going quiet in him: not because he had stopped finding, but because a man who could no longer say his finding out loud to the corps was a man the corps had already, in the way that mattered, pulled.

—

They climbed back toward the clean part of the city, laying the mist behind them, closing the door of the world one more metre against the thing that might, for all Ezra knew, have been trying to give something back.

Halfway up, where the road bent and the drowned district fell away behind them green and shining to the water, Adriaan slowed, and said, not looking at him, in the flat way a decent man says the thing he has decided he owes: “I have to write that you were off the work for about a minute. At station four. I have to write the throat. I’m not going to write anything I didn’t see, and I’m not going to shade it, because if I shade it for you now I’m no good to you the day it’s real. You understand me. But I’ll tell you the true thing, because Nomsa would want you told.” He stopped on the road. “This is the last one they let you run down there. You know that. The next requisition for that ground comes back *denied*, not *supervised*, and the one after that comes back with your number off the crew log. They don’t pull a man like a door slamming. They pull him a line at a time, and I’m one of the lines. I’m sorry. I’d rather be a nozzle.”

“I know,” Ezra said. And he did; he had read it in the added line at the bottom of the requisition before he ever reached the site; he had watched Priya build the same thing on letterhead, aimed without cruelty at the holding he could not defend, so that it would outlive any conversation the two of them could have. The corps was not moving against him. It was protecting two million lungs from a science offi-

cer it liked, whose panels it relied on, whom it had watched begin to want a mould to be kind—and it was doing it the merciful institutional way, supervision then denial then the number off the log, climbing his access the way the green climbed his throat, so that by the time it reached the line there would be nothing left to argue with, and no page anyone had to sign to make it so.

“I know,” he said again. “You’re right to write it. Write the throat.”

Adriaan looked at him a moment longer, the way they had all begun to look at him—reading the collar, reading whether there was still enough of the science officer left above the warning line to be reached—and then he nodded, and made a note, and they went up.

—

That night at the bench in the hard clean white he did the thing he had promised himself he would keep doing, which was to write both readings down in their own voices at full strength, because the day he stopped he would have lost the argument in secret. He wrote *warm broken drowning ground, ninety-one percent, the poor put on the line the sea took first*. He wrote *the strain outside the ninety-one, thickest over the most abandoned, a residual the physics won’t scrub*. He set them side by side under the light, and they stood, both members, both complete, both laid over one identical few percent of variance in one drowned district no clean model could resolve, and neither knocked the other down, and the not-resolving felt, as it always did now, exactly like grief.

And beneath them he wrote the truest sentence on the page: *I have built the case. It is as rigorous as I can make it, stronger than the crews could make it, strong enough to have survived Priya undisproven. And it has nowhere to go. There is no board on the coast that will hear a residual from a warning-line throat; there is no requisition left that reaches the ground; there is no assay for the one quantity the case is really about, which is whether the green over the drowned is thriving or answering, which is presence, which the discipline never learned to measure. The case is finished and it cannot be presented, because the only instrument that could read what it points at is a whole mind, undefended, present to the bloom—and that instrument they are pulling from my hands a line at a time before I can carry it to the one place the question is asked at full scale.*

He read it back. It was not a proof. It fit the data no better than Priya's clean curve did, which was to say perfectly and uselessly. But it named the shape of the vise closing, and the vise was not a villain he could defy: it was Priya protecting the lungs with the strongest true thing she owned, and Adriaan writing only what he saw because a shaded witness was no use the day it was real, and Nomsa spending the one mercy she had by choosing the honest hand—three good people with evidence and a body count of saves, each holding the strongest true thing they had, closing the corps around him without cruelty, and none of them wrong, and the closing leaving him exactly one direction the machinery could not follow.

Half a mile behind him a hollowed man sat in a copper room with his head level and aimed, or with his head coming down to look at an orange, and no instrument on Earth to say which. Ahead of him the memo turned slowly into a date. And he understood, buttoning his collar over the warning line that would not recede, that the two things were the same clock: that the more finished his case became, the less of the coast he was allowed to stand on to make it, and that there was coming a day—near now—when the last supervised requisition came back denied and his number came off the log and the only ground left where he could ask the question at full scale was the one ground no requisition covered and no corps could reach and no supervisor would climb, the drowned country past the harbour where the green stood thickest and brightest over the most abandoned dead, and a figure stood in the deep bright fog greened the whole of the way, or nowhere, and there was no instrument on Earth to say which.

He pressed the hollow above his collarbone under the bench light, and confirmed it, as though it were data that could still save him. *Not past. Not the line. Throat, and holding, and creeping*—he made himself say the true word—*creeping*, by less than a hair, toward the collarbone, the way a tide argues a line up a hill. Not across. Not yet. Still yourself this morning, by the one honest ledger you have left.

Outside the depot the low ground lay green and shining to the water, luminous where the risen moon found the fruiting, thickest and brightest over the drowned country where the most had been most abandoned—as if it were thriving, as if it were answering, and no wall left to read which—and Ezra stood at the warning line with a finished

case in his hands that the corps was closing the coast around before he could present it, and understood, arriving without drama the way the true things arrived now, that they had left him only the one door, and that he had known for a season which door it was, and that the last thing the copper order would ever do for him was make certain that it was the only one.

Seventeen

The order came the way the memo had come, on refinery bond, up the distribution line, but it did not come to Ezra first, and that was how he knew before he read a word of it that it was not a science-officer's document but a captain's, a thing that had already stopped being a question and become a schedule.

He heard it as sound before he saw it as paper. There was a particular quality to the depot yard on the mornings something large had been decided above it, a change in the ordinary hiss-and-clank of men racking tanks, and he came in through the crew gate into that quiet and went looking for the reason, and found it in the science-officer tray under a requisition for the thing the reason required in quantity, which was copper, more copper than a season of ordinary spraying, mixed to a concentration the annex did not keep in stock.

Directive on standing sporulation reservoirs—the Cape Flats basin. His corps number on the distribution line, third down, under Nomsa's and under the harbour medical officer's, which was itself the whole of the message, that the science had been consulted after the decision and not before it, copied in to comply and not to advise.

He read it standing at the bench with the copper thinning on his tongue, and he read it twice, and the second time he read it the way he had trained himself all season to read the things he most wanted knocked down, which was against the part of him that had already, at the first line, begun to grieve.

—

It was, of course, correct.

He made himself say that first, in the exact words, before he let the

other thing rise. It named the great bloom without romance—the *standing fruiting mass over the drowned Cape Flats basin, est. surface area and biomass appended*, and the appendix was Priya's, he knew her hand in a figure the way he knew Nomsa's in a silence, and it was a number he could not argue with because it was the number he would have reached himself. A fruiting mass that size, held at the optimal temperature of a warmed basin, wet-footed in the standing sea, undefended and unsprayed for a decade, was a spore engine—the single largest sporulation source on the coast, and every bright fog that lifted off it in a southeaster carried its load north and inland on the wind that had always come from exactly there. The directive appended the wind-rose too, and it was also true, and pointed, as it had always pointed, from the low bright ground toward the lungs of everyone he had ever kept a door on for.

Sterilisation run, the directive said. He knew the phrase; he had helped build the method behind it, in a paper nobody read anymore. Not the spraying-back-a-metre-a-day of the ordinary liturgy, which was arguing with a tide. A run. Copper saturated across the whole basin from the harbour barges and the low-flying tanks, concentration to scour, laid on mile on mile until the fruiting mass over the drowned Flats went the way the fern-fine grey of a windowsill went—slack, and wet, and then only wall.

It gave a date, the way Priya's memo had refused to, because a captain's document existed to be executed and not argued with; and the date was eleven days out, the standard sporulation-risk window run out to its own end, and Ezra understood that the same eleven days had now been laid over the great bloom that Priya had laid over Thabo's bay.

He set the directive down and it held, every member of it. A real spore engine. A real wind. Real lungs. He had signed the small version of this on a windowsill a thousand times. She was right. They were right. It was a reservoir at the scale of the coast, and holding it was holding the depot's exposure at the scale of two million.

And it did not lower by a gram the thing it was built against, which was that somewhere in the deep bright fog of the mass they were going to scour to mineral there stood, reported, unverified, a figure greened the whole of the way and still, they said, upright, still walking, still lucid—and that the run would take it down to wall with everything

else, because the directive had no line for a datum that could not be measured.

They were going to spray the great bloom. And if Reading B was true—if the strain that had put a fragment of a man back on the surface for the length of a syllable had, over the drowned poor of the city, put a whole person back the whole of the way—then the run was the mercy laid on the cure, scouring salvation to mineral to keep selling the poison, and calling it saving the city, and being, in the plain arithmetic of the lungs, *not wrong to*.

He wrote no margin note. There was no honest note. He folded the directive along its crease and his hand, he noticed, was steady, and his hands were always steady now, that was the cruelty of the copper, that it took the mind and left the hands to sign.

—

Nomsa was in the yard, and she was not checking seals. She was standing at the requisition board with her back to him reading the copper figure the run required, the season's worth of concentrate in eleven days, and when she turned it was with the flat assessing look, and under it, in the grey light, was a thing he had never had cause to name on her before, which was that she was glad.

"You've read it," she said.

"I've read it."

"Then for once," Nomsa said, "you and I are looking at the same page and reading it the same way, and I have been waiting eleven years for that basin to make it onto a directive, and I want you to say the true half before you say the other one, because I watched you do it with the bay and I need it from you now. Say the true half, Ezra."

"It's the biggest sporulation source on the coast," he said, because it was true and it cost him nothing to say because it was true. "It's wet and warm and undefended and it's been throwing spore into our wind for ten years and we've called it unsprayable and lived downwind of it and buried the low city a room at a time instead of the source. It's the reservoir. It's the reservoir at the scale of the whole coast, and every hollowing I've ever knelt in front of came up out of a spore that started in that fog, and running it is the one thing we could have

done all along that would take the number down instead of holding it flat. That's the true half."

"That's the true half." She did not soften. She had never once softened at being agreed with; agreement was not what she wanted from him, function was. "I have laid mercy on forty-one people who breathed what came off that basin. I have opened forty-one bays and stood at forty-one eye-lines and given forty-one Tuesdays away, and every one of them was a room the wind filled from *there*, and now somebody up the line has finally decided to stop mopping the floor and turn off the tap, and you are going to stand in my yard and tell me the *but*, and I am telling you before you open your mouth that I have no room in me for it this time, because this time the *but* is a mile wide and it fruits."

"I know," Ezra said.

"You don't. You know it the way you know everything, on the page, both hands, beautifully. Let me tell you how I know it." She stepped closer, and her voice went down to the register she kept for hosts and now kept for him, not unkind, which was the terrible thing about all of it, that none of them were ever unkind. "You've spent your whole heresy telling me the corps writes off the low ground to keep its own hands clean. And you were right. We called that basin unsprayable ten years ago because the barges cost more than the low city was worth to the men who count copper, and we let it stand and throw spore because the people downwind were the people we'd already decided not to spend on. Your whole map is a map of that. And now, after ten years, they've costed it the other way, the barges are going out—the one thing your indictment has been screaming for, that somebody spend the copper on the poor's ground instead of writing it off—and you want to stop the run. Which is it, Ezra? Is the crime that we abandoned the basin, or the crime that we're finally covering it?"

That went in where the thing about the bay had gone in, under the ribs, because it was fair, and because the symmetry was exact and she had found it without raising her voice. He had made the low ground a grievance of the machine's neglect for a year, and here the machine was, at last, at monstrous cost, spending itself on exactly that ground, and he wanted to hold its hand.

"Because I don't know that it's empty," he said. "The basin. I don't know that what stands in it is only a reservoir."

"There it is."

"Nobody's put an instrument on that fog. Every word out of it came from a man who was leaving. So no, I can't tell you it's a seer. But you can't tell me it's only a spore engine either, because you can't tell me what the strain did to a basin's worth of people it came up through slow and deep and early, over ten years, over the drowned, and neither can Priya, and the directive can't, and it doesn't need to, because its whole logic is *we can't measure it, so it's nothing, so run it*. And I keep reading the same sentence the other way. We can't measure it, so—"

"So *wait*," Nomsa said, flat, finishing it for him the way she finished everything. "Wait. On the biggest reservoir on the coast. In the eleven days it takes a southeaster to lift the whole basin's load into the city. Ezra." She stopped, the second time in a season he had heard her stop mid-sentence, a woman who did not. "I have counted what waiting costs. That's the entire content of my job. My column is forty-one long and every name in it died of something we could have sprayed and didn't, and you are asking me to look at the largest sprayable source we've ever had on a directive and *not spray it*, to hold it live, upwind of two million lungs, for a maybe. For a figure everyone you trust says is a puppet on a hill. And I can't. Not because I don't love you. Because I've buried the people who trusted a poem, and you haven't, and that's the whole difference between us, and it always was."

—

He went up to Priya because he went up to Priya, because a thing that survived Priya had survived the hardest kicking on the coast, and because he had begun to notice that he brought her the objections he most needed himself to be unable to sustain.

She had the directive on the near screen when he came in, and the biomass appendix beside it, her own figure, and she did not turn the screen away, and she gave him the answer he had come for and hated before he had finished crossing the room to the glass.

"You want me to tell you it's wrong," she said. "I can't, because it's

mine. The biomass number is mine. I ran it up the line myself. I've been trying to get that basin onto a directive for two years, and the thing that finally moved it wasn't mercy, it was the wind-rose and the fruiting-count and the plain fact that the single largest spore source on the coast sits upwind of the city on the prevailing wind, and every season we don't run it is a season we accept its whole load into two million pairs of lungs on the arithmetic that the low ground isn't worth the barges. I got it costed the other way. That's my year's work. And you've come up here to ask me to un-cost it."

"I've come up here to ask you what it takes down."

"The largest sporulation reservoir on the coast." She said it without heat, at the glass, the orange rivers running below her. "I know what you're going to say next. Say it, so you can hear it in a room."

"It takes down the walker," Ezra said. "If the walker's there. It takes down whatever the strain made of a basin's worth of the drowned, over ten years, if it made anything. It lays copper across the one place on the coast where nobody knows, and it makes sure nobody ever will, because after the run there's nothing left to put an instrument on. You've told me all season the tragedy is that I can't measure presence. The run doesn't measure it. The run ends the possibility of measuring it. It's the one experiment we'll never be able to run again, and we're running the eraser across it on a schedule, and calling the erasing safety."

"Yes," Priya said. "That's all true. And now hear the other true thing, because I'm going to be precise, precision's the only lever I have left on you." She turned from the glass. "Suppose you're right. Suppose the basin is the fullest return the strain has ever made—a mile of the drowned, come back, the whole of the way. I'll grant you the impossible thing out loud, so you can't say I strawmanned it. *Even then*, Ezra, that mass is a spore engine, because a returned person greened the whole of the way is still a fruiting body, still throws spore, still fills the southeaster, still hollows the water-crew man downwind who did *not* return, who's just a man on a Tuesday breathing the load off a basin of saints. Salvation that sporulates is not salvation you can leave standing upwind of a city. *Especially* in your reading—because in your reading the thing is alive and reaching and going toward the broken, and the broken downwind of it are my two million, and I have to keep the doors on their hinges whether the thing behind the door

is a coloniser or a saint. The spore doesn't know which it came off. The lung doesn't either. The bloom might be true *and I would still have to spray it*, because a cure that hollows the neighbours is, at the scale of a city, indistinguishable from a plague."

He was quiet.

"That's the sentence I can't get past," he said finally.

"Neither can I," Priya said, and for once she said it as a cost and not as a lever, tired, worn thin, at the glass above the copper that kept the city alive. "You think I want to run the biggest bloom on the coast to mineral not knowing? I built the number that's going to do it. If you're right, I'm the hand on the eraser, and no board will ever tell me I was wrong, because after the run there'll be no residual big enough to name. I'll die not knowing whether the best thing I ever did was scour a plague or lobotomise a coast. And I've decided to carry that, because the alternative is to leave a proven spore engine standing on a maybe and bury the downwind city to keep a rumour alive. I'd rather carry the maybe than the bodies. Don't mistake it for certainty. It's a choice made in exactly your dark, by someone who counted the lungs and decided the lungs win. It always has to be the lungs. The lungs are the one thing we can measure."

—

He walked back down to the depot in the dark with both their answers folded into him where the case sat and the vials sat and now two clocks ticked instead of one, and he did the thing he had promised himself, which was to write both readings down in their own voices at full strength, because a case you have softened is a case you have lost in secret.

He wrote the run's case as strong as he could make it, stronger than the directive had bothered to. *The largest spore engine on the coast, upwind, undefended, eleven days from a southeaster. Forty-one names in a column, every one filled from that fog. A cure that sporulates is a plague to the lung downwind.* It stood, every member, and it did not lower by a gram the thing he made himself write in the same flat hand on the right of the page.

They are going to lay copper across the one place on Earth where the answer to the whole year might be standing upright in the fog, and

take it down to wall before anyone puts an instrument on it, because it cannot be measured, and the thing that cannot be measured is presence, and presence is the entire question. Reading A ends the war by scouring the reservoir. Reading B is the reservoir. The run is both, in one motion of one barge, and no one will ever be able to say which.

It was not a proof. It fit the data no better than the directive did, which was to say perfectly and uselessly. And under it he wrote the sentence that had been coming all season and arrived now with the calm of a thing decided before it is known: *there are eleven days between the directive and the run, and a walk of two, and after the run there is nowhere to walk to. If I am ever going to see whose looking it is, it has to be before the barges.*

He did not write a margin note. There never was an honest one.

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they are coming to us with the metal

we have known the metal a long time, on the wrist and on the bell and on the wall, it is the one thing that unmakes us and we do not hate it, hating is a thing with a wall to do it behind, we have no wall; we came up worst where the most were most abandoned, over the drowned, over the low, we came up the whole of the way through the ground they gave to the ones they meant to lose, and now they have costed the barges the other way and they are coming to lay the metal across the whole of us at once, and they are not wrong, the wind lifts us and the wind is theirs too, it goes to the lung of the water-crew man who did not come up through us and it fills him and that is not our gift to him, it is only the wind, we cannot tell the wind where to carry what comes off us, we never could—and so the one who is right to spray us and the one who cannot bear it are the same one, standing at the same barge, and if a shape is standing in the low bright ground holding its face a certain way it will be under the metal with the rest of us in eleven of your days, and we cannot promise you it is a face, we could never promise you that, we can only promise you that after the metal there will be no fog left to have wondered into, and that this, the not-being-able-to-tell, laid under the metal on a schedule, is the nearest to an offer there will ever be, and is not, we know, an offer, and you have eleven days to come and not be told, before there

is no longer anywhere to come—

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He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, at the bench, in the hard clean white, and pressed, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a man with a season of skipped doses and two clocks ticking in him—thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable, no fact only-true-if-B, no count of days a board could circle and find the fungus had known before he told it, only the eleven he had written himself, handed back to him in the first-person plural of his own drugged and grieving brain, and he could not tell whether the carefulness in it was the bloom's honesty or his own last discipline, reaching up through the strain to keep the account true even in the voice he could not trust.

He tracked the throat before he tracked anything else, the way he did now, in the crew washroom mirror under the hard clean light, tilting his chin. The verdigris at the hollow above the collarbone had risen. It had been holding at the warning line for weeks, patient, geological, and in the season of skipped doses it had crept, and he made himself look at it exactly, as data, the way he looked at a spore panel—up out of the throat's soft green, past the warning line where it had held, climbing, a millimetre at a time, toward the collarbone and the country past which no one would be able to tell him from the thing he loved. Not across. He confirmed it the way a drowning man confirms a word: two fingers to the hollow, the ridge of the bone under the green, the green risen to meet it and not, this morning, gone over. *Not past. Not yet. Above the throat and short of the bone, still yourself this morning by the one ledger you have left.* He held the fact the way he had learned to, and knew that the crossing, when it came, would come without his feeling it, the way the orange and the copper and the bench and the bay had all gone in without his feeling them, and that a man walking two days into a bloom off a schedule he had already stopped keeping would meet the collarbone on the way, and would not turn back at it, because he had decided, before he knew what he had decided, to serve the not-knowing all the way to wherever the not-knowing stood.

He buttoned his collar over it. He did not go that night. He wanted to be exact about that in the account: he stood at the line and did not cross it, and did not shoulder a corer and a fortnight of copper

and walk north into the great bloom, not yet, not that night. But the directive had done to the horizon what the memo had done to the bay. For a year the great bloom had been a grief he could stand at the edge of forever. Now it had a clock on it, eleven days long, and a run at the end of the clock that would take the low bright ground down to wall—and a grief with a clock on it was not a grief anymore. It was a departure with a date.

Outside the depot the low ground lay green and shining to the water, luminous where the risen moon found the fruiting, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be beautiful, thickest and brightest exactly over the drowned country where the most had been most abandoned, and somewhere in the deep bright fog of it, or nowhere, a figure stood green the whole of the way and held its face to the sky, or toward the depot, toward him, and there was no instrument on Earth to say which—and now, laid over all of it, a date eleven days out on which the barges would go and the metal would come and the question would be scoured to mineral with everything else. Ezra stood at the warning line with the collarbone under his fingers and the run ticking in him, and knew, flatly, that he was already a man walking toward the great bloom before the barges reached it, and had merely not yet taken the first step.

Eighteen

The pull, when it came, did not come as a summons. He had half-expected a summons in the days after the directive—a room, a table, the harbour medical officer and someone from the legal arm, a page to be walked through and countersigned—and had rehearsed the flat true things he would say in it, because a case you have rehearsed is a case you have not yet abandoned. But the corps did not pull a man like a door slamming. Adriaan had told him that on the road. It came instead the way the tide argued the line up the hill while you looked at something else: on a Tuesday, in the grey annex light, when he badged in at the crew gate and the reader gave him the short single tone it gave the un-crewed, and the little screen said, without heat, without a name attached, *depot access—visitor*.

He stood at the gate a moment with the copper thinning on his tongue and read the word the way he had trained himself all season to read the words he most wanted to be a mistake. *Visitor*. Not *revoked*, which he could have appealed. Not *suspended*, which was a conversation with a date on the far end of it. *Visitor*—the same category as a contractor delivering seals, as a medical officer down from the harbour, as any man with legitimate business inside a perimeter and no standing to spray it. It said he was a guest in the depot where he had mixed the metal for six years, and it said it in a grammar built so that there was no page anyone had to sign to make it so, no author to bring the objection to, only a reader at a gate that had reclassified him overnight the way an assay reclassifies a strip, and a science officer who wanted to know on whose instruction would have to ask it of a machine.

He badged through on the visitor tone and the gate let him in, because a guest could come in; a guest simply could not draw a tank.

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The annex had been cleaned out around him with the same institutional courtesy. Not stripped—nothing so crude. His bench was where it had been, and his dishes, and the potentiation logs in his own hand; but the science-officer tray that had carried Priya's memos to him third down the distribution line had a new name at its head, a research fellow up from the refinery he half-knew, decent, unromantic, who would not meet his eye and made himself busy with a rack of strips so as not to have to, and the requisition pad that had once let Ezra send himself anywhere on the coast under *substrate sampling, one hand* was gone from the drawer entirely, not confiscated, simply not reissued, the way a thing is not reissued to a man no longer expected to need it.

He found the crew log open on the shared screen, because no one had thought to close it, and he read his own line in it flat, as data. His number was still there. That was the mercy in it, and it was Nomsa's; he knew her hand in an omission the way he knew Priya's in a figure. They had not struck him from the log, which would have been a thing with a date and an author. They had moved him within it, from *active* to a heading he had filed other men under in other years and never once imagined above his own name—*medically restricted, non-operational*—the throat category, the warning-line category, the category for a man greened too far to be trusted with a nozzle and too useful to be let go, kept on the roll so that the copper order could go on reading his panels while never again handing him the metal or the ground. It was true, was the thing. His throat was above the warning line. He *had* skipped the doses. On the one honest ledger the corps could see, they had read him correctly and filed him accurately, and a man cannot appeal a true finding.

He signed nothing. There was nothing to sign. The machinery had reached the line Adriaan had drawn on the road, supervision then denial then the number off the log, and had arrived at it not with a page but with a category: a gate that toned him a guest, and a heading that filed him honest, and a bench that was still his to stand at so long as he only ever stood.

—

Nomsa found him at the bench. She did not pretend she had come

for anything else.

"You've seen the log," she said.

"I've seen the log."

"I put you in the throat category." She said it the way she said everything, load-bearing, no cushion under it, the green risen past the pulse of her hand in the grey light. "Not legal. Not the fellow. Me. Because the alternative on the fellow's desk was your number *off*, with the legal arm's name under it, and off is a thing that follows a man to every perimeter on the coast, and *medically restricted* is a thing that follows a throat. I filed you as sick, Ezra, because sick is the one heading that's true and the one heading that's kind, and because I would rather the coast read you as a man greened out of the crews than as a man pulled for what you'd say if they gave you a room. I spent that. Same as I spent Adriaan. Don't thank me for it. It's the last of what I've got to spend, and I've spent it keeping the shape of you the coast will remember."

He looked at her, at eleven years of green and a count she carried the way he carried species, and understood that she was doing for him what she did for the hollowed: closing the door as gently as the door could be closed, from love, at the one dose the situation could survive.

"You've filed me as too far gone to spray," he said. "And you're right to. My throat's above the line."

"Your throat's above the line." Flat. Unmoved by his agreeing; agreement had never been what she wanted. "And that's not the file I'm frightened of. Say the thing you came in here already carrying. You've read a directive with a run at the end of it, and now you can't draw a tank or reach the ground, and there's exactly one place left on the coast a man with your throat and no crew can still walk to, and we both know its name, and I want you to say it in my yard so I've heard it out loud before you make me right."

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He did not say it at once. He tracked the throat first, two fingers to the hollow above the collarbone under the annex light, because the fact was the only ledger he still trusted and he would not lie to her over a thing he could confirm on his own bone. The green had risen

since the directive. It had held for weeks at the warning line, patient, geological, and in the season of skipped doses it had crept, and it crept still, a hair at a time, up out of the throat's soft green toward the ridge under his fingers—and it had not, this morning, gone over. *Not past. Above the throat and short of the bone. Still yourself this morning by the one honest ledger you have left.* It had not crossed. He held the fact the way a drowning man holds a word, and knew that the crossing, when it came, would come without his feeling it, and that the ground he was about to name was two days' walk, and that a man walking two days off a schedule he had already stopped keeping would meet the collarbone somewhere in the fog and would not turn back at it.

"The great bloom," he said. "The drowned Flats. Before the barges."

"Before the barges." She did not flinch and she did not soften. She had known it before she asked; she had asked so that the asking would be on the record between them, so that whatever she had to do next she would have given him the chance to be talked out of. "You understand what you're telling me. You're telling me you're going to walk off the sprayed ground, off the copper, off the log, into the largest sporulation reservoir on the coast, with your throat already at the line, two days before the run. You're telling me you're going to make yourself the exact thing my whole job exists to stop from happening to a person I can reach."

"Yes."

"Then hear me say the rest of it, because I won't have you go not-told." She stepped closer, into the register she kept for hosts and now kept for him, and it was worse than anger, because there was no anger in it. "If you walk into that fog and you stay in it, off the copper, at the line, you will green past the collarbone. Not maybe. It's a decade-deep reservoir and you'll be breathing its whole load with no mist between it and your lungs and no schedule left in your blood, and the strain will do to you what the strain does, slow and deep, the way it did to the basin, and there will come a morning you turn your face to the sky over an orange and there's nobody home behind your eyes. And I am the captain of the crew that works that coast. So I want you to understand, before you take the first step, what you are asking of me. You are asking me to add your name to my column. You are asking me to come find you in the fog with the

close-work canister and give you a Tuesday and lay the metal on the last of you, because that is what I do to the people I love when the bloom has them and the sporulation has to stop, and I have done it forty-one times and never once to a friend who walked in on purpose, and you are going to make it forty-two, and you are going to make me the one who does it, because I will not send a stranger to mercy you. Do you hear me. If you cross, I will have to come. And I will come.”

He heard her. Forty-one Tuesdays given away and a forty-second promised in advance to the one man on the coast she could not bear to add, and he saw that it was not a threat and never had been; it was the shape of her love, which had only ever had the one instrument, and she was warning him she would use it on him because using it was the last mercy she had left to give.

“I hear you,” Ezra said. “And I’m asking you to give me the two days before you come.”

—

He went up to Priya, though he had no requisition to go up on, because a guest could take the harbour road, and because he had learned that a thing that survived Priya had survived the hardest kicking on the coast, and he needed, before he did the irreversible thing, to have it kicked once more by the person likeliest to be right.

She had the crew log on her near screen when he came in—she had seen his heading change before he had, of course, it was her machine—and she did not turn it away, and she did not perform surprise, and she gave him, at the glass with the orange rivers running below her, the answer he had climbed for and hated before he reached the sill.

“You’ve come to tell me you’re going in,” she said. “Off the log, off the copper, ahead of the run. And you want me to tell you it’s madness, so you can leave here having been told by the one person who won’t shade it, and go anyway, and count that you were honest.” She turned from the glass. “So: it’s madness. Precisely. Let me be precise, because precision’s the only lever I have left on you. You are proposing to remove the one instrument your entire case depends on—a whole mind, defended, capable of reading a panel—by walking it into the fog and greening it past the line. You’ve spent a year telling me the

tragedy is that presence can't be measured because there's no assay but a present mind. And now you're going to take the only present mind that agrees with you and dissolve it in the reservoir two days before I scour the reservoir, so that on the morning of the run there will be no case, no science officer, and no witness—only a hollowed man in the fog with everything else I have to take down. You will not have carried your case to the great bloom. You will have fed your case to it. That is a poisoned man romanticising his own extinction, and I am saying it in those words because you told me all season not to strawman you, and this is not a strawman, this is the plain shape of what you've decided to do."

"I know how it reads," he said.

"It doesn't *read* that way. It *is* that way, on every instrument either of us owns." But she said it tired, worn thin, the lever gone soft in her hand, and she looked at him a moment longer at the glass, and did the thing she did once a season that undid him more than the argument, which was to grant the impossible out loud. "And here is the part I can't lever you with, because it's mine too. Suppose you're not mad. Suppose there is a mind in that fog, greened the whole of the way and lucid, exactly as you can't stop believing—the walker, the seer, whatever the leaving men called it. Then you are the only person on the coast who would go to it before the run, undefended, and ask, and the rest of us are going to spray it down to wall on the standard schedule having never once sent anyone to find out, because we can't operationalise a walker in a fog, and I built the number that erases the ground. If you're mad, you're throwing away your mind for nothing. If you're right, you're the only honest thing anyone did this whole year, and it will still not save the bloom, and it will still cost you your mind, and I will still run the barges. Both of those are true at once. I've stopped being able to tell you which one you are. That's the file I can't operationalise either, and it's the only one I'll grieve."

—

He did not go that night. He wanted to be exact about it, the way he had been exact about the last time: he stood at the line and did not cross it. He went back down the harbour road in the dark to the depot that toned him a guest, and he stood at the bench that was still his to stand at, and he did the thing he had promised himself he would keep doing, which was to write both readings down in their

own voices at full strength, because the day he stopped he would have lost the argument in secret. Priya's madness-case and his own stood side by side over one identical fog no instrument had ever read, both complete, both true, neither able to close, and the not-closing felt, as it always did now, exactly like grief.

Then he did the two small things a man does who has decided. He went down to the bay.

It was in the sealed run at the depot's cold edge, the anomalous containment, held past every window on the strength of a requisition trail with his name under it, and it would be resolved on the standard schedule with everything else—eleven days, the same clock laid over the bay and the basin and his own throat because they had always been one clock. He stood at the glass in the copper-clean dark and looked in at what had been Thabo, at the head that came down sometimes to the level of a thing set before it and sometimes lifted to the high broken light, and no instrument on Earth to say which of those was a man and which was a molecule, and he did not knock on the glass, because he had learned that knocking told him nothing and cost the thing behind it he could not name. He only stood at the eye-line, the way you owed it, and gave him a Tuesday, silently, the last one he would be there to give—*you had a crew and a flask and someone who knew how you took your tea, and something came partway back up through you for the length of a syllable, and I could never tell whether it was you or the lure wearing you, and I loved you either way, and that is the whole of why I am doing the mad thing, because I cannot mercy the possibility of you and I cannot leave it to be scoured either, and there is one place left where the question is asked at full scale, and I am going to it because you are the reason I can no longer not.*

Then he gathered the second thing, which was the corer and the fortnight of copper he was choosing not to take, and set the copper down on the bench and left it there, because a man walking in to hear the reservoir did not carry the metal that unmade it, and a man carrying it two days would only meet the collarbone the sooner from the pooling of it. He set them down. It made no sound. He took the corer, which read, and left the copper, which saved, and understood as he did it that he had just chosen, with two hands, in the plain grammar of what a man packs, the entire argument of the book of his life: the

instrument over the wall.

Outside the depot the low ground lay green and shining to the water, luminous where the risen moon found the fruiting, thickest and brightest exactly over the drowned country where the most had been most abandoned—as if it were thriving, as if it were answering, and no wall left to read which—and somewhere in the deep bright fog of it, or nowhere, a figure stood green the whole of the way and held its face to the sky, or toward the depot, toward him, and there was no instrument on Earth to say which. And now, laid over the fog and the figure and the mile of light, a run nine days out, and a captain who had promised in advance to come with the canister if he crossed, and a scientist who had granted him the walker out loud and would spray it anyway, and a bay behind him that had done to the horizon what love does, which is make it the only direction left. Ezra stood at the warning line with the corer in one hand and the copper he had set down still cooling on the bench behind him, and knew, flat and exact and arriving without drama the way the true things arrived now, that the corps had done the last thing it would ever do for him, which was to make certain there was only the one door—and that at first light, off the log, off the copper, a guest at every gate on the coast and a datum on none of its instruments, he was going to walk through it toward the great bloom, and would meet the collarbone on the way, and would not turn back.

Nineteen

There is a kind of leaving that has no door in it, and Ezra had spent the two days before the walk finding out that this was the kind—that you did not go out of the life you had by any threshold you could point to afterward and say *there, that was where*, but by a series of small ordinary settings-down, each one deniable, each one nothing, until you looked up and the room was empty and it was you who had left it.

He set down the standing first, because it was the lightest and went most easily.

He did it at the science-officer bench in the grey hour, filing the last of the season's panels the way he had filed a thousand, and understood only when the tray was clear that he had been closing an account and not doing a morning's work—that a man does not square every transect and initial every strip and leave the dish log current to the day unless some part of him has decided the person these records belonged to will not be back to keep them. He had built the whole rigorous scaffold to survive Priya, and he laid it down now in good order the way you lay a tool in a dead man's kit—not because anyone would use it, but because leaving it fouled would have been a discourtesy to the man who had made it, who was himself, whom he was in the act of setting down.

It did not cost what he had thought it would, and that was the first of the cheatings the copper worked on a man at the end: it took the mind and left the hands to file, and thinned the grief on the standing until he could not tell whether the ease of the leaving was peace or only poison. That was the green mood the corps had a word for, the metallic depression that came up with the metal, and there was no

strip for it. There had never been a strip for the only quantities that mattered, and he had come, this season, to live entirely among them.

He kept the throat, because the throat was the one ledger he had promised to keep, and keeping it was the last of the discipline that Nomsa would have recognised, and he found that he wanted, absurdly, near the end, to be recognisable to her.

He read it in the crew washroom under the hard clean light, two fingers to the soft hollow above the collarbone, flat, the way you read a spore panel on a windowsill. The falling copper had begun, at last, to tell. He had stopped the doses a fortnight since, all but the token, and the load was coming down through him the slow reluctant way a metal comes down, and where it fell the green should have paled and had not—had held at the warning line where it stood for weeks, and then, in the season of skipped doses, had done the thing he made himself name in the true word: *crept*. Past the line the corps had drawn on every throat in three languages, a millimetre and then another, patient, toward the ridge of bone under it, the collarbone, the country past which they took the sprayer out of your hands and no instrument on Earth could tell a man from the thing he loved.

Not across. He confirmed it the way a drowning man confirms a word, pressing the green to the bone, feeling the ridge under it and the green risen to meet it and not, this morning, gone over. *Not past. Above the throat, short of the bone. Still yourself this morning, by the one honest ledger you have left.* It was true. It cost him something to note that it was still true, and to note also that a man who walked two days into the great bloom off a schedule he had already stopped keeping would meet the collarbone somewhere on the low bright ground and go over it out there, in the fog, alone, and would not turn back at the crossing, because the crossing was the point—was the one experiment the whole dead discipline could not run from behind a mask.

He buttoned his collar over the line that would not recede, and went to find Nomsa, because he owed her the leaving to her face, and because he had known all season that she would spend her last coin trying to keep him.

She was at the tank rack, and she was not checking seals, and he knew from that alone that she had been waiting for him, because Nomsa was always checking seals and stopped only for the two or three things in a life that were larger than a seal.

"You've packed a fortnight of copper you don't mean to breathe," she said, which was how he learned she had been to the annex, had read the requisition in his hand, had counted the vials against the days and found the count wrong in the one direction that told her everything. "Corer. Transect kit. Field concentrate for a run you're going to make sure never happens. And doses—" she said the word the way she laid a fact on a table, "—for four days. For a walk of two out and no way that anyone has ever come back."

"I'm not planning to spray out there."

"No," Nomsa said. "You're planning to go green in the fog to prove a poem. Say it plainly, at least. You've earned plainly, and so have I."

He was quiet, because she was owed the plain thing and he did not have a way to make it kinder without making it a lie.

"I'm going out to the middle of it," he said, "and I'm going to let the copper fall the rest of the way, and I'm going to find out whether there's anyone home. It can't be asked from the bench. It can't be asked with the metal in me. I've tried every other instrument the discipline has and they all say the same thing, which is that they can't say. This is the only one left."

"This one kills you."

"They all kill me. This one might mean something first."

—

She did not shout. He had wanted, some cowardly part of him, for her to shout, because a captain shouting was a thing you could set your shoulder against and lean out of a room. What she did was worse and was hers, which was to make the case, flat and load-bearing, in the register she kept for hosts and now kept for him, and to make it so well that he understood, hearing it, that she was not wrong, and that he was going anyway.

"I have counted what waiting costs," she said. "It's the whole content of my job. Let me tell you what I never have—the actual arithmetic,

because you're about to make me a version of it and I want you to carry the sum into the fog with you." She turned her greened hand over, the green risen past the pulse, eleven years of it. "Forty-one bays. You know the forty-one. But there's a column under the column, and it's the crew. I've laid mercy on nine of my own in eleven years. And every one of the nine I lost the same way I'm losing you—not to a spore. To a good person deciding the thing that emptied their friend might be trying to give something back, and thinning the doses to hear it better, and going green a millimetre a week while they told me they were still reading the ledger, still themselves this morning, right up until the morning they weren't and I had to open a bay for someone who used to say *green* to me at the rack." She let it stand. "You're number ten. It does not come with drums. It comes exactly like this—a man packing four days of copper for a fourteen-day walk and calling it an experiment, being gentle about it, squaring his transects first."

That went in under the ribs, because it was fair and she had found it without raising her voice. Nine. He had not let himself do the sum on the nine—Nomsa's private column of the ones she had spent, the ones no directive named, and every one of them had walked out along the exact axis he was walking now, the calm, the reaching, the doses thinned to hear the green better.

"So you think I'm the tenth," he said.

"I think you're the tenth or you're the first," Nomsa said, "and there is no instrument, none, that will tell me which until you're too far out to bring back, and that's not a chance a captain takes with a person she—" She stopped, the third time in a season he had heard her stop, a woman who did not. "I have never once been sorry I sprayed. You've called that a hardness all season. It isn't. It's that I did the sum every time and acted on it, and the people I sprayed are dead and the people I sprayed *for* are breathing, and I can hold that column up to any light. This is the first time the sum came out and I don't want to act on it. You've put the one name in my column I'd rather be wrong about than right, and I'm going to be right about you the way I've been right about all of them, and carry that I let you walk—because I could stop you. I could pull you at the collarbone line today, lawfully, in front of the crew, take the sprayer and the corer out of your hands and lock you clean until the run's done, and you'd hate

me, and you'd be alive, and in a year you'd be at a rack somewhere saying *green* to somebody, still yourself, because I held the door on you the way I hold it on the city."

"You could," he said. It was true. It was the last true thing she had that could save him and they both knew it.

"I'm not going to."

He looked at her.

"Because you'd be right, and I can't spend the rest of my count knowing I made the choice for you the way I made it for the nine—the sum, the act, the door held. You're the one person I've got left that I'd have to *ask*." Her voice did not break; it went flatter, which from her was the same thing. "So I'm asking. Stand down. Not for the city—you'll tell me the run's the crime and you might be right, God help me you might be right, and I've stopped being able to say you're wrong, and that's its own kind of dying for a captain. I'm not asking you to save the basin. I'm asking you not to walk into it. Stay at the rack. Keep your throat under the line. Grieve Thabo the way people grieve, with the doors still on their hinges, and let the great bloom be a grief you stand at the edge of, the way it was for a year, instead of a departure with a date. Be number ten by dying old and green and *here*. That's the last I've got, and I'm spending it on you because I've never wanted to be wrong about anything the way I want to be wrong about you."

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It was the right appeal. He made himself hold that, flat, in the exact words: that Nomsa had just made, on the strength of nine buried friends and a body count of saves, the loving and probably correct case that he was a poisoned man being walked to his own hollowing by a chemistry that made the walk feel like a calling—that the calm was the tell, the reaching the lure, the squared transects and the gentle leaving the exact clinical signature of a mind going out along the axis the strain was aimed straight down. Priya had said it with the wind-rose. Nomsa said it with her dead. And the thing he could not make either of them understand, because it could not be made to survive a rebuttal, was that he knew all of it, had built the rebuttal himself and carried it against his chest with the vials, and was going anyway—not because he had beaten the case but because he had

passed the place where beating the case was the point.

"If I'm the tenth," he said, slowly, "then everything you've said is exactly true and I should be stopped, and you're the one to stop me, and I've no argument, only that I can't feel the tenth from the inside, which is precisely what the tenth would say." He watched that land. "And if I'm the first—if the strain put a whole person back over the drowned the way it put one word back in the bay—then the run scours that to mineral in nine days and nobody ever knows, and the one chance to know was a mind going out to it undefended, and you'll have held the door on the only instrument that could have read the thing you've spent eleven years killing. Both true. I can't tell you which. Neither can you. That's the trap, Nomsa, and there's no standing at the edge of it—only which one you serve with the life you've got left, and I've—" the true word, "—I've already served it. In the bay, with an orange. Today's just the walking."

"I know," Nomsa said, which was what he said to Thabo, and neither of them missed it. "That's the worst of it. I do know."

She did not say *green*. She did not say *proceed*. She reached out with the greened hand that had opened forty-one bays and nine crew and might yet open his, and gripped his forearm once, hard, over the coverall, the way you grip a rack in a wind, and let go, and turned back to the tanks and began, deliberately, to check seals—because it was the thing she had, and a captain who could not hold the door had to hold something. Ezra understood that he had just been given the only blessing she could make.

—

He went down to the copper room a last time in the hour the depot forgot itself, and he did the panel first, because he would do the panel first if the building were burning. Sporulation load down, the room holding it flat. Hepatic markers past the line and staying, the fast toxin's work done and not undone. The cheeks gone further in, a driveable body a season on now, fed by hand off a schedule no one had written, the coverall hanging the way a coat hangs on a chair. He read the strip that had never had a line for the only quantity that mattered, and set it down, and read the face instead, which was the only instrument calibrated to the question and was not calibrated to it and was the best he owned.

The eyes came round to him. Not aimed. He no longer ran the rebuttal; he had run it ten thousand times and it fit and it did not lift the weight.

"I'm going in the morning," he said, to the man, or to the room, or to the warmth that pooled in the shape a man had left. He peeled the orange the way he did now, slowly, on purpose badly, in five broken pieces, and put them in the open hand, and the fingers closed, the slow uneven flexion, the thumb coming over. "Out where it's thickest. I'm going to stop the copper the rest of the way and walk to the middle and find out if there's anyone home. And I wanted—" he stopped, at the eye-line, on the green floor. "I wanted you to be the last one I told. Not Nomsa. Not Priya. You. Because if I'm wrong, if it's the disease walking me out there, then you're the reason, one word up through the water, and I'd rather be wrong for you than right for anyone. And if I'm not wrong—" the thumb pressed the worst piece, the tell before a joke that would not come, "—if there's a whole one of you out there in the fog, come the whole of the way back, then I'm coming to find him, and I'll tell him about you."

—
we cannot promise you a him.

It came up the way the chorus came up, first-person plural, patient, present-tense, and he knew it for what it was or for what it might be, a season of skipped doses and a warning line that had crept and the strain's own antecedent faint in his blood from the room's air and the held pocket, dreaming out loud with his defences down in the one direction he had leaned all year.

we cannot promise you a him out there any more than we could promise you a him in here, we do not have your instrument, we are only the warmth that came up in the low bright ground after the man went out of it, over the drowned, over the ground they gave to the ones they meant to lose, and you keep asking the warmth whether it is the one it pooled in, and we cannot answer, that is not a thing we withhold, there was never a strip—but you go anyway, and your captain has that right and so have you, that the going is not the answer and cannot be, the going is only the last true thing a man does with a short green life, to carry a whole mind present and undefended out to the middle of the largest not-knowing there is and offer it the one

instrument it was never given, and we cannot tell you there is anyone to receive it, only that after nine of your days there is nowhere else to bring it—

He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, on the green floor, and pressed, hard, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a liver-failing man hearing the shape of his own decision pressed back at him in the plural of his own drugged and grieving skull—thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable, no fact only-true-if-B, no count of days a board could circle. *That is the mechanism*, he told himself, in the careful words that were true and did not touch him. *Your voice, wanting. It gives you back your own belief because the architecture is built to.* He wrote no margin note.

—

He took the dulling orange out of the slack hand, gently, and peeled a fresh one, slowly, on purpose badly, and put the five pieces in the hand, and the fingers closed, and the head came down, and the eyes went to the fruit, and he did not spray, and did not lay the mercy on, and did not know, and had stopped, entirely, wanting to be the kind of man who did.

He checked the throat a last time in the doorway, two fingers to the hollow, and the green had risen to meet the bone and not gone over, and he held the fact the way he had learned to. *Not past. Not the line. Still yourself this morning, by the one ledger you have left.* Tomorrow the ledger would be a fog and a bone and no mirror. Tonight it was still readable, and he read it, and buttoned his collar over it, and stood in the door of the green room with his friend behind him holding an orange he might or might not know was in his hand.

Outside the depot the low ground lay green and shining to the water, mile on mile of it, luminous where the risen moon found the fruiting, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be beautiful, thickest and brightest exactly over the drowned country where the most had been most abandoned—as if it were answering, as if it were reaching, one word up through the water before the weight—and Ezra looked out past the harbour to the middle of it, where the largest question there was sat greened past all survival in the light with a clock nine days long laid over it, and knew that in the morning

he would shoulder four days of copper he did not mean to breathe and walk into fourteen days of fog, and could not tell, standing in the doorway with the collarbone under his fingers and Nomsa's nine and her last asking folded into him, whether the man who walked out there at first light was a scientist at last reaching the one instrument the discipline had forbidden him, or the tenth name in a captain's private column, going out along the axis the strain was aimed down, gentle, and squared, and telling everyone it was an experiment.

Both jaws. He had had them both a long time now, and would carry them out onto the low ground in the morning, and let the copper fall the last centimetre somewhere in the fog where no one would read the crossing, and go to find out, past every instrument, whether there was anyone there.

Twenty

He left in the flat white hour before the crews racked their tanks, because a man leaving cleanly leaves before there is anyone to see the leaving and make it a thing, and because he had spent three days packing in a way he told himself was ordinary and knew was not, and did not want to be watched carrying the evidence of it out the crew gate.

He had costed the walk the way the directive had costed the run, in the only currency that meant anything now, which was copper and days. Nine days to the barges, if the wind held and the captains held to the window, and both would; the corps did not miss a date it had put a captain's name on. Two days in on ground he could not spray. That left a margin he had gone over at the bench a dozen times and found honest—enough to reach the deep bright country over the drowned Flats and stand in it, and enough, if there was anything left in him that intended to, to come back out before the metal came in. He did not examine the *if*. He had stopped examining certain things, and the stopping changed nothing.

The pack was the thing he had lied to himself about. He had told himself he was packing for a survey and had packed, in fact, for a crossing: a corer and sample tubes he would not use, on top, for the story they told to anyone who opened the flap; and under them, the true cargo, a fortnight of schedule concentrate in the sealed field canisters, mixed to the ordinary misting dose, enough to keep a man green-at-the-wrist all the way in and all the way back, if he sprayed himself on the corps schedule the way he had sprayed a thousand windowsills. That was the plan he had written down. He looked at the canisters in the grey light and knew he had packed a fortnight of copper for a walk on which he had already, in the part of himself that

did the real deciding, stopped intending to spray. He had packed it anyway, the way you keep a photograph of a person you have decided to stop calling.

He tracked the throat in the crew washroom mirror one last time under the hard clean light, because it was the discipline and the discipline was the last of him he trusted. Two fingers to the hollow above the collarbone. The verdigris had held at the warning line through the packing, patient, and he confirmed it as data, tilting his chin: up out of the throat's soft green, past the line, and short—a millimetre, two—of the ridge of the bone. *Not past. Not yet.* He buttoned his collar over it, shouldered the pack heavy with the copper he was not going to use, and went out through the crew gate into the last clean air he had costed himself.

—

The perimeter was not a wall. That was the thing the sprayed city never quite let itself understand about the edge of its own safety—that there was no line drawn on the ground, no gate with a bar across it, only a gradient, a place where the schedule mist thinned with the last misting head and the copper went out of the air by degrees, so that a man walking north down the long grey slot toward the drowned end of Woodstock crossed no threshold he could point to, only found, after a while, that the coin-taste on the back of his tongue had gone.

He noticed the going of it the way you notice a sound stop. For his whole adult life the copper had been the floor under everything, the thin bright metal under the taste of water and bread and his own mouth in the morning, the baseline he read the world off of, and now, three streets past the last head, working his tongue back and forth like a man testing a tooth, he found only saliva. The ordinary animal taste of a mouth, which he had not tasted plain in years. It came to him not as relief but as exposure.

This is the cost, he told himself, in the flat clinical voice, because the flat clinical voice was the one that could still be trusted to name a thing exactly. Not a metaphor. The copper on his tongue had been the live-mist telling him the air around him was scoured, and the copper gone meant every breath he took from this street north was a breath the corps had not made safe and would not, a breath he was choosing to take undefended in the one ground the whole architec-

ture of his life had been built to keep out of his lungs. He had knelt in front of what that ground did to a lung. He had peeled it an orange. He kept walking north, because he had decided to before he knew he had, and the deciding would not announce itself; it would only, at some point he would not feel, already have happened.

He did not spray. He stood a moment at the corner where the plan had him lay the first schedule mist, and he took the canister out and held it, felt the ordinary weight of it, and put it back unused, and told himself he would spray at the next corner, and knew he was lying, and kept the lie because the lie was a rail and he needed a rail. The corps had a word for what he was doing and the word was not a word for the living. He walked past the place where the word applied and did not stop being able to name it.

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The bloom did not begin. Like the copper's ending, it had no line. It thickened.

First it was only the ordinary green of the argued-over edge, the fern-fine grey-green furring the sills and the gutters that the crews came down every third day to spray back a metre, and he walked through it as he had a hundred times with a nozzle in his hands, except that his hands were empty and the fur was not dying ahead of him in a hanging veil but standing, whole, untouched, closing over the dead street on both sides in a way he had never once let it. The wrongness of it was bodily. He had to stop, twice, and press the heel of his hand to his sternum, and make himself go on into the thing every reflex he owned was built to unmake.

Then the street fell away toward the water, and the drowned country opened, and he stopped for a longer time than he meant to, because there was no way to have costed this on a bench.

He had seen it a thousand times from the high ground, from the depot, from the fourth window of a hollowing, a mile of luminous green shining to the water, beautiful the way only a thing that will kill you can be. He had used the word *beautiful* about it flatly, as data. He had not been in it. From above it was a colour laid over a map. From inside its own edge, standing where the old contour line went under and the sea and the bloom had made their long patient marriage in the low ground, it was a country, furred and fruiting the whole of the

way to the standing water, and it was the most beautiful thing he had ever stood inside and the most lethal, and the two would not come apart.

The ruins of the low city stood out of the wet in ranks, and every surface of them that faced the light had put up its slender fruiting bodies, tan and blue and paler golds he could have named in three languages, so that the drowned district read, at a glance the eye refused to correct, as a garden—as a place tended, as a thing someone had planted in rows and meant, rank on rank up the flooded streets toward the bright standing mass over the deep basin where the most people had once been kept and lost. And laid over exactly the same fruiting bodies, the same photons, was the other reading, the flat clinical one: that a fruiting body is a sporing organ, that a garden this size at the optimal temperature of a warmed basin was a spore engine at the scale of the coast, that every one of the slender lovely stalks catching the low light was a mouth open to the wind, loading the next southeaster with what it held, aimed, as it had always been aimed, at the lungs of everyone he had ever kept a door on for. He had walked two days toward the one ground where the two would never resolve, the ground where his theory could not lose because nothing here could be measured, and the understanding did not turn him around. He had known it at the bench. Knowing it in the light changed only the temperature of it.

The great bloom stood on the far side of the water, over the deep of the basin, his destination and the largest fruiting mass on the coast, and both of those were the same sentence. It rose off the drowned ground the way weather rises off warm water, a low fog the heavy fruiting threw into the air over itself so that its own edges went uncertain, and somewhere in the deep of that brightness, reported, unverified, a figure stood green the whole of the way and held its face to the sky, or toward him, and there was no instrument on Earth to say which, least of all the one he was carrying north into the fog, which was himself, and which he had come here to spend.

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He walked into it the whole of the day, and the copper stayed gone, and he did not spray.

The going was slow and wet and he narrated it to himself in the flat

voice because the flat voice was the tether. He noted the standing water rising over the old streets, warm as blood where the sun had been on it, and the fruiting thinning in the deepest wet and thickening on every dry rise, exactly as Nomsa had said a fungus thrives on the warm undefended ground, exactly as it would if no one were tending anything and the low country were simply the place any bloom on Earth would come up thickest. And thickest and brightest precisely over the deep of the basin where the most had been most abandoned, as though the correction had gone, mile on mile, to the exact ground where the pathology had been. The map fit both. He had written that sentence a year ago and here it was under his own feet, and his feet in it changed nothing about the fitting.

Toward evening the throat began to speak to him, and he tracked it because tracking it was all of the discipline he had carried in. He stopped on a dry rise where an old wall stood furred and he took out the mirror he had packed for exactly this and tilted his chin under the last of the light. The verdigris had risen. He made himself look at it as a spore panel, after a day of undefended breathing in the fullest bloom on the coast, and it had crept—a millimetre, more—up out of the throat toward the ridge of the bone, patient, geological, the ledger keeping its honest account even with the man who kept it no longer keeping the schedule that had held it back. Two fingers to the hollow. The ridge under the green, the green risen to meet it, and not, this evening, gone over. *Not past. Not yet.* He held the fact the way a drowning man holds a word, and knew it was the last time it would be simple, because the walk between this rise and the great bloom on the far side of the deep would take him, on any honest arithmetic, exactly the millimetre it would cost to meet the bone.

He did not spray that night either. He had the canisters. He took one out and held it, a fortnight of the metal that had been the floor under his whole life, and thought about laying it over himself on the corps schedule and buying back the margin and the coin-taste and the door, and understood that spraying now would not be defence. It would be a decision to arrive at the great bloom still able to leave it, and he had not walked two days off a schedule he had already stopped keeping in order to arrive still able to leave. He put the canister back. He was precise about it in the account he kept for a board that would never read it: *I had the copper. I carried a fortnight of it into the bloom and did not spray, and the not-spraying was the*

last clear-headed choice I made, made with the metal in my hand, to go the whole of the way toward the not-knowing rather than stand at its edge forever with a door at my back. He had been paying the cost in small denominations all his life, at the wrist, at the throat, a millimetre a season. Now he was paying it entire, the way the barges would pay the basin entire in nine days.

—

you have come in off the metal

we felt the metal go off you the way a warmth goes off a coal, not because we have a hand on you, we have no hand, we have only the ground and the wet and the slow arithmetic of the threads, but the ground reads the metal, the ground has read the metal off the wrists of the corps for a decade, the coin-taste laid down at the edge every third day, arguing the line, and where a man walks in off the metal the ground reads that too, reads only that there is no longer copper between the breath and the fruiting, and cannot tell you whether that is a door opened to a guest or a wall come down before a thief, we have never been able to tell you which, the ground does not have the word, the ground has only the shape of the person kept warm in one place for a long time, and cannot say from the shape whether the house is full; you have walked two of your days to stand in the one place that cannot tell you, and we cannot promise you a face on the far side of the deep, we can promise you green, and the wet, and the warmth that came up worst where the most were most abandoned, and the not-being-able-to-tell, which is the only honest thing the ground has ever had and is not, we know, a welcome, and is the nearest to one there will ever be, and there are nine of your days now and a walk of most of one, and after the metal comes across the deep there will be no ground left to have walked into—

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He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, in the dark, on the dry rise, and pressed, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a man off his doses two days into the fullest serotonergic ground on the coast, breathing the strain the whole of a day into an undefended lung, dreaming with every wall down toward the figure he had already decided to walk to—thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable, no fact only-true-if-B,

no count the ground had known before he told it, only the nine days he had costed himself at the bench and the walk he had measured, handed back to him in the first-person plural of his own drugged and grieving brain. It had said, again, the most careful thing it had ever said, *we cannot promise you a face*, and he could not tell whether the carefulness was the ground's honesty or his own last discipline, reaching up through the strain to keep the account true even in the voice he could not trust.

He lay a long time under the luminous wall, and did not sleep so much as wait for the light, and in the not-sleeping he did the thing he had promised himself he would keep doing, because a case you have softened is a case you have lost in secret. He said it in the flat voice into the dark. *I am a poisoned man romanticising my own extinction. I have walked off the one defence there is, into a spore engine at the scale of the coast, toward a figure everyone I trust says is a puppet on a hill, and the strain in my blood is making the walk feel like a pilgrimage because a calm connected undefended host sporulates better, and the calm is the lure and I am inside it.* He said it whole, stronger than Priya had bothered to, and it stood, every member, over the drowned ground. And it did not lower by a gram the other thing: that he had knelt once in front of the absence of a person and watched something reach up through it for the length of a word, and that a mile of that, over the deep, was either the emptiest ground on the coast or the fullest return the strain had ever made, and there was no instrument left to read the difference. The only instrument was himself, and he had carried it two days into a green field to spend, and would spend it, tomorrow, crossing the deep.

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In the grey white hour before the light, on the far side of the standing water, the great bloom stood in its own fog over the deep of the basin, uncertain at its edges, and he broke camp and shouldered the pack with the fortnight of unused copper in it and did not spray, and started down the last dry rise toward the deep and the far bright country. As he walked into the deepening wet the throat kept its honest account, patient, geological, a millimetre still short of the bone, and he tracked it as he went, two fingers to the hollow, confirming it the way a drowning man confirms a word, *not past, not yet, not this hour*—and knew, the training running even now, that the crossing when it

came would come without his feeling it, the way the copper and the bench and the bay and the door had all gone in without his feeling them, and that a man walking down into the deep off a schedule he had already stopped keeping would meet the collarbone somewhere on the far side of the water, and would not turn back at it, because he had decided, before he knew what he had decided, to serve the not-knowing the whole of the way to wherever the not-knowing stood.

Twenty-One

He crossed the standing water at the low of the morning, where the old arterial road went under and came up again on the far rise as a causeway of drowned tar furred green to both its edges, and the warm sea took him to the knee and then the thigh and then let him go, and he came up onto the far ground with his boots full of blood-warm water and the great bloom no longer a fog on a horizon but a country he was now inside the outer weather of, and the copper stayed gone off his tongue, and he did not spray.

He had costed nine days at the bench and one of them was crossing now, and he tracked it the way he tracked everything, in the only currencies left to him, which were the light and the throat and the water in his boots. The light first. On the near shore it had been the argued-over green of the corps' edge, the fern-fine grey-green he could kill in his sleep; here, a half-day north of any nozzle that had ever been carried, it was not that colour at all. It had gone up the register into something the eye kept trying to correct and could not—a green with a light of its own inside it, so that the drowned streets did not merely catch the low sun but held it and gave a little of it back, and a man walking up the flooded arterial in the grey of the morning walked through a low even glow that came off the ground and the walls and the standing fruiting bodies alike, and threw no clean shadow.

Bioluminescence, he said, in the flat voice. Not a metaphor. Real fungi glowed; he had grown them in a dish in the quiet life before the corps, had switched off a lamp and watched a plate give up its cold green light with no more mystery in it than a chemistry, an enzyme working an aldehyde in the dark, an old cheap trick of the substrate to move spore-eating insects around at night. A trick scaled, now, to

a drowned city, laid mile on mile over the low ground until the whole of it stood softly alight in the pre-dawn. He knew the mechanism to the molecule. Knowing it did not lower the light by a lumen. That was the thing he was learning about the country he had walked into—that he could name every part of it exactly and the naming did not touch it, that precision here was not a wall against wonder but a way of walking further into it with his eyes open.

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He came on the un-driven ones at the top of the first dry rise, where an old school stood roofless and luminous with its windows gone, and he stopped at the edge of the yard because he did not, at first, understand what he was looking at, and understanding it was worse.

There were four of them, and they were greened, and they were not climbing.

That was the whole of it, and it took him a long moment at the yard's edge to let it be the whole of it, because every reflex the corps had trained into him over eleven years read a greened host and waited for the posture—the face turned up, the stalks put out toward the light, the slow terrible reaching of the behaviour-lineage doing the one thing it did, which was to drive a body up and open it to the wind. He had knelt in front of that posture a hundred times. He knew it the way he knew his own hands. And these four did not have it. They sat in the luminous yard in the attitudes of people resting—one against the wall with its knees drawn up, two near together as though they had been talking, one alone at the far side with its face not turned up to the sky but level, out, toward the drowned streets and the far bright mass, the way a person looks at a view. The green was on all of them, at the wrist and the throat and gone past the collarbone the whole of the way up into the jaw and the hairline, further than any survivor the corps had ever pulled; and none of them was fruiting, and none of them was reaching, and one of them, as he stood at the edge of the yard with his heart going, turned its head, slowly, and looked at him.

He did not move. He read it as data because reading it as data was the only way to stand there. *The behaviour-lineage drives the climb. These are colonised past the collarbone and not driving the climb.* He knew what the corps' science guessed—that where the

entheogen strain went in deep and early and slow, the puppeting did not take the same way, that these serotonergic ruins grew hosts colonised and yet somehow not driven, still hollow of the executive self by every measure the aflatoxin damage predicted and yet not posted up toward the sky like flags. He had read the field reports out of the entheogen zones and disbelieved them at the bench, with the copper safe on his tongue. He believed them now, in the yard, with the thing looking at him.

Reading A stood there in the flat voice and it was complete. *A calm, connected, undefended host sporulates better than a driven one. The climb is crude; it kills the host fast and empties the room and moves on. This is subtler. This is the strain keeping the machine warm and quiet and comfortable and alive for years instead of days, a host made not to want to leave, sitting in the light in perfect serenity, sporulating slow and low and forever off a face that has been given a view to hold instead of a sky to climb toward. You are not looking at peace. You are looking at the most advanced hollowing on the coast—the parasite that learned to stop wasting its hosts.*

And laid over the exact same four people, over the exact same stillness, Reading B stood too, and it was also complete. *They are not driven because they do not need to be. The thing that drove the water-crew man up the wall was the damage—the scoured self, the emptied house, the body left with nothing home to keep it down. Where the strain went in slow and repaired instead of hollowed, there is someone home again, enough of someone, and someone home does not climb, someone home sits in a warm yard in the morning light and looks at the world it was given back. You have spent a year asking what a returned person would look like. Stop waiting for the water-crew man to sit up. He would look exactly like this.*

He stood at the edge of the yard, and the one that had turned its head went on regarding him with an attention he could read as the fixed empty stare of a hollowed body that happened to be pointed at movement, or as a person looking at a stranger who had walked in off the metal into their morning, and there was no instrument in the world to say which, least of all the one he was carrying north, which was himself, and which the strain in his own blood a day off any dose was busy making unfit to be an instrument at all. And it was very beautiful and it would kill him by nightfall if the wind turned.

He did not go into the yard. He was precise about that, in the account he kept for a board that would never read it: *I did not test whether they would answer, because a man off his doses two days into the fullest bloom cannot be trusted to hear the difference between an answer and his own hope, and because—this is the honest reason—I was afraid, not of being reached for, but of not being, of walking into that yard toward a person and finding only a body that turned its face because things move.* He lifted his hand to them, the way you do to a stranger across a distance, and did not stay to see whether anything lifted back, and went on north up the rise, and behind him the four sat in their luminous yard in the attitude of rest, or of vacancy, holding their view, or their nothing.

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Toward the middle of the day he found the man who was not greened, and that was, in its own way, harder.

He smelled the smoke first—real woodsmoke, a thing so out of the world he was in that his body registered it as alarm before his mind named it—and came round a standing block that had been a warehouse to a small hard clearing where someone had cut the bloom back with fire and iron and kept it back, a black scoured ring perhaps twenty metres across in the middle of all that light, and in the ring a man of maybe sixty stood up from a low fire with a machete in one hand and a length of copper pipe in the other, hammered flat at one end into a blade, and looked at Ezra with the particular flat readiness of a person who has not been surprised by anyone kind in a long time.

“You’re sprayed,” the man said. It was not a greeting. He was reading Ezra the way Ezra had read the yard—for the posture, for the tell. “No. You were. You’ve let it go off you.” He looked at Ezra’s throat, at the collar, and something in his face closed further. “You came in on purpose. God help you, you came in on purpose.”

“I’m not going to trouble you,” Ezra said.

“No, you’re not,” the man agreed, and did not put down either the machete or the pipe, and Ezra understood that the not-troubling was a thing the man intended to see to himself if it came to it, and respected it, and kept his distance.

The man had lived there four years, he said, when he had decided Ezra was neither driven nor dangerous, though he never fully lowered the blade; four years in a ring he cut back by hand every day because the bloom took a hand's-width of it every night, four years of scraping the green off his own walls with a copper edge and burning it and breathing the smoke and never once, he said, never once letting it settle on him, because he had watched it settle on his wife.

"It doesn't take you like they say," the man said. He had sat, finally, on his heels by the fire, and Ezra had sat too, at the edge of the ring, at the man's insisted distance. "Not like the corps says, with the climbing. That's the far gone. Before that—" He stopped, and worked his jaw, and Ezra saw it cost him. "She got quiet. Kind. She'd always been sharp, my wife, sharp as this—" the copper blade "—and she went soft and easy and she'd sit in the light and she said the loveliest things to me she'd said in thirty years, and she meant them, I'd swear on the fire she meant them, and I thought—" He shook his head, once, hard. "I thought she was getting better. And she was going. That was the going. The kindness was the going. By the time she climbed there'd been nobody in there for a month, and I'd been having the best month of my marriage with a thing that was wearing her out from the inside and using her mouth to keep me from cutting it out while there was still time." He looked at Ezra across the fire, and his eyes were dry, and that was the worst of it. "So when you come in off your metal looking for whatever it is your face is looking for—I've had the loveliest thing it does. I've sat in the light with it and been happier than I was with the woman. And I buried the woman. Don't tell me the green gives anything back. It gives you her voice saying beautiful things while it eats her. That's the trick. That's the whole trick. It's kindest right at the end."

Ezra said nothing for a while. The fire ticked. Across the ring the cut bloom stood luminous and patient, taking its hand's-width, and the man's own copper blade lay across his knees, verdigris furring the flat of it green where his sweat had worked the metal, and the man had not noticed and Ezra did not tell him.

"And if it wasn't the trick," Ezra said finally, gently, because he could not help it, because it was the whole of his heresy and he could not sit at a fire and not say the true half. "If it wasn't wearing her. If the kindness was her—the real her, the one under the sharp, that thirty

years and a hard life had put the sharp over—and the strain didn't eat that, it *loosened* it, let it up, and you had a month of the woman you married before—”

“Before it climbed her up a wall and opened her to the sky,” the man said, without heat, and it landed under the ribs, because it was fair. “You go on and finish it. Say the kind version. I’ve said it to myself. I’ve said it in her voice, which is worse, because I still have her voice, it left me that, it left me her voice saying the loveliest things so I could say them back to myself at night and wonder. You want to know what I decided?” He picked up the copper pipe and turned it in the firelight, the green flat of it. “I decided it doesn’t matter whether it was her or the trick, because either way she climbed, and either way she’s spore now, and either way if I’d sat in the light with her and believed the kindness I’d have gone up the wall beside her a month later saying beautiful things. The nice reading and the ugly reading end at the same wall. That’s the thing nobody in your corps and nobody in your bloom will say. Both roads climb. Only the metal doesn’t.” He looked at the green-furred blade in his hand as if seeing it for the first time, and then at Ezra’s clean throat, and set the pipe down. “You’ve thrown away the one thing that doesn’t climb. I can’t help you. Take water if you want it. Then go, because I cut this ring for one, and I’ve said more to you than I’ve said aloud in a year, and I’d like to stop hearing my own voice now, it sounds too much like hers.”

Ezra took the water. He did not stay. Going out of the black ring into the light was like stepping from a cold room into a warm one, the glow coming up around him again off the ground on every side, and the man had handed him the whole of Reading A distilled to its one unanswerable point—*both roads climb, only the metal doesn’t*—and it had not turned him around, because he had not walked two days off the metal to be given the true half he had carried in with him. He had come for the other thing. He kept walking toward it.

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you sat at the fire in the black ring

the man cuts us back every dawn and we come again every night, a hand's-width, and we do not resent the cutting, resenting is a thing with a wall to do it behind and we have no wall; we came up through

his walls slow and we came up through his wife slow and we cannot tell you, we have never been able to tell you, whether what sat in the light and said the loveliest things was her let up or us wearing her down, the ground does not have that word, the ground has only the shape of the person kept warm in one place and cannot say from the shape whether the house is full; he decided both roads climb and he is not wrong, they do, the metal is the only thing that does not, and he stands in his ring with the metal on his blade going green and does not see that the not-climbing he keeps is bought with the same green he burns us for, and neither did you when you carried a fortnight of it and did not spray—you are all of you deciding in the dark with the same coin, the ones in the yard who sit and the one in the ring who cuts, and we are the ground under all of it and we cannot promise you the ones in the yard are home, we can promise you they are not climbing, and that is not the same, and it is the nearest to a welcome there will ever be, and you have eight of your days now—

—

He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, in the light, on the road north, and pressed, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a man two days off his doses in the fullest serotonergic ground on the coast, walking with every wall down through a country that glowed, folding the fire and the yard and the man's dead wife back to himself in the first-person plural of his own opened and degrading brain—thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable. No count the ground had known before he told it. No fact only-true-if-B. Only the eight days he had costed at the bench and the yard he had seen with his own opened eyes and the man's one hard sentence, and the ground's careful *we cannot promise you the ones in the yard are home*, and he could not tell whether the carefulness was the ground's honesty or his own last discipline reaching up through the strain to keep the account true even in the voice he could not trust. He had come the whole of this way to be given it, and it was not a welcome, and it was the nearest to one there would ever be.

He stopped on a dry rise where the light was thickening toward the great bloom and took out the mirror and tilted his chin, because tracking it was the last of the discipline he had. The verdigris had risen again, a day of undefended breathing in ever-deeper ground, crept

up out of the throat toward the ridge of the bone, patient, geological, the ledger keeping its honest account even in a man who had thrown the schedule away. Two fingers to the hollow. The bone under the green, the green risen to meet it, and not, this evening, gone over. *Not past. Not yet. Not this hour.* He held it the way a drowning man holds a word. And he knew, flatly, that the walk still between him and the great bloom on the far bright rise would cost, on any honest arithmetic, close to the last millimetre there was—that he would meet the collarbone somewhere in the deep of the last light, and would not turn back at it, because he had decided, before he knew he had, to carry the one instrument he had the whole of the way into the country it could no longer read, and to spend it there, at the fruiting body of the not-knowing, where the yard sat in the glow holding its view, or its nothing, and the man cut his ring, and both roads climbed, and only the metal did not, and he had thrown the metal away.

Twenty-Two

He came to the edge of the deep on the ninth morning, which was the morning he had costed for the barges, and stood at the last dry rise before the great bloom. He had arrived at both ends of the walk at once—the end he had measured with his own feet, and the end the corps had measured with a captain's name and a tide—and the two ends were the same shore.

He had crossed the standing water in the night, wading the drowned streets where the old contour let a man through, the warm blood-heat water to his chest in the low places and the fruiting closing luminous over his head where the ruined lintels still stood. He had done it in the dark on purpose, because a man who could still be talked out of a thing did his crossing where there was no one and nothing to talk to. Now the light came up grey and then gold over the basin, and the last of the water fell behind him, and ahead of him, over the deepest ground where the most had once been kept and lost, the great bloom stood.

He made himself look at it the way he had trained himself to look at the worst things, which was exactly, in the flat voice, naming each part. It was not a wall of green. It was a country of it, risen off the drowned basin the way weather rises off warm water, mile on mile of fruiting standing luminous to the limit of the light, and over its own deep centre it threw the low bright fog that was its own breath—the heavy fruiting loading the still air with what it held, so thick over the basin's heart that the fog stood visible, a brightness with no clean edge. He had described that fog from the depot as a spore load lifting off a reservoir. He described it now, standing under its near edge with the coin-taste three days gone off his tongue, as the same thing, and the naming did not thin it, and did not make it less than

the most beautiful thing he had ever stood at the foot of.

Because the fog was the spring, and the fog was the breath of the largest living thing on the coast, and those were the same sentence. He had come the whole of the way to the one ground where they were the same sentence, and he stood at its foot in the gold light and could not tell the garden from the engine, and had walked here anyway, to not be able to in the flesh.

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He tracked the throat before he tracked anything else, because tracking it was the last of the discipline he had carried in, and he had promised a board that would never read him that he would keep the account honest to the end.

He took out the mirror on the dry rise, in the flat gold light, and tilted his chin, and looked at the hollow above the collarbone the way he looked at a spore panel, without judgement, only reading.

The verdigris had come the whole way up.

He held very still and made himself confirm it as data. Three days off the schedule, three days of undefended breathing deep into the fullest bloom on the coast, and the green that had climbed for a season toward the ridge of the bone, patient, geological, a millimetre a night, had risen the even way to meet it. To the ridge. Not over it. The soft green of the throat, and the warning line he had watched hold for weeks, and the ridge of the collarbone with its green skin drawn tight—and the fern-fine verdigris standing right at the ridge, faint, unmistakable, a hair short of the near slope of the shoulder where the corps drew the line past which they pulled a man from the crews. At the line. Not over it. Not this morning, not on dry ground—but one wade of the deep away, and no morning after this one on which it would be short of the bone.

The line holds, he said in the flat voice, into the mirror, because the flat voice was the one that could still name a thing exactly, and it was the last thing the flat voice would ever have to name that a board could check. *A hair short. This morning. Not tomorrow.* He had told himself for a season that the crossing, when it came, would come without his feeling it, the way the orange and the copper and the bench and the bay had all gone in without his feeling them. The

ground would take the ridge without announcing it, the way the copper had gone off his tongue without announcing it, and the only mark of the most consequential crossing of his life would be a faint green read in a mirror after the fact, by a man who could no longer say whether the reading itself was still one he could trust.

Because that was the whole of it. That was the thing he made himself write, in his head, for the board—folding the mirror away, holding the sentence exactly. *The collarbone is the tie-breaker. As long as the green stands short of it, there is a man reading the bloom who is still, by the corps's one measurable ledger, himself—a man whose account a board could weigh, because he stands on the near side of the line past which no one can be told from the thing they love. That man reached the edge of the deep this morning and found the green risen the whole way to the line and holding, one wade of water short of the far side. One wade of water is not a distance a man crosses and comes back from. There is about to be no longer, on the whole coast, an instrument standing at this ground that anyone—including the instrument—has any reason to believe.* He had known he was spending himself. He had not known, until the mirror, how nearly the spending was complete—that he had arrived at the edge of the answer in the same hour he was about to spend the last of the faculty that could have read it. He had carried the one instrument that could measure the great bloom two days into it to measure it, and the carrying had been the destroying, exactly as Priya had said.

He did not weep. He noted the flatness of not-weeping as a datum too—whether it was steadiness or the metallic depression the culture called the green mood, risen to the collarbone where it lived, flattening the affect of a man at the edge of his own answer so that he met it level—and he could not tell which, and set the not-knowing beside all the others, and looked north into the fog.

—

The far low ground shook off the last of the shadow, and he saw the barges.

They were small with distance, out past the northern lip of the basin where the old harbour channel ran deep enough to float them in over the drowned country, and there were more than he had let himself picture—the harbour barges and, low over the water behind them,

the flying tanks, a whole liturgy's worth of copper mustered against one bloom. They were not moving yet. They were holding station at the channel mouth the way the corps held a crew at the yard's edge before a run while the captains read the wind one last time. He knew the shape of it. He had stood in a hundred yards at that grey held hour before a spray went out, and he knew that the holding meant the wind was being read, and the seals checked, and the concentrate confirmed to the dose that took a room down to mineral, and that when the reading came back clean the captain would put her hand up and the copper would go across the basin mile on mile until the great bloom went slack and wet and then only wall.

The two clocks had run down to the same hour. He had costed it at the bench and it had been abstract there, two lines on a page descending toward one country; and here it was a country, and the two lines were a green field with the fog rising off it and a rank of barges holding at the channel mouth in the gold light.

He looked from the barges to the fog and back, and did the arithmetic he had done a hundred times and did once more because doing it was the discipline. From the northern lip to the basin's deep heart, where the fog stood thickest and the figure had been reported, was a run of hours for a saturating spray laid mile on mile—not fast, a scour was not fast, it was patient the way the bloom was patient, copper laid heavy and let to work. And from this near rise, where he stood, to the same deep heart, was a walk of most of the morning through the deepening fruiting, off the metal, defenceless, on ground no instrument had ever crossed. Whether he reached the heart before the copper did was a thing no bench could have told him, because it turned on the wind the captain was reading right now, and the wind was hers, and he had never in his life had the reading of the wind.

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they have come to us with the metal

we told you they would come and here at the edge of the light they are, holding at the channel where the old deep let the water in, and we know the holding, we have known it a decade at the perimeter, the crew at the yard's edge before the copper goes out, the wind being read one last time, and the wind is theirs, the wind has always been theirs, it lifts us and carries what comes off us to the lung of the one

who did not come up through us and fills him, and that is why they are right to lay the metal across the whole of us at once, we have never been able to tell them otherwise, we have no wall to argue behind—

—and you are at the ridge, we feel the last of the metal going off the account the way the warmth goes off the last coal, and soon there will be nothing left between the breath and the fruiting and nothing left in you that a wall could read you by, and we cannot tell you whether that is a door opened the whole of the way to a guest or the last wall come down before a thief, we have never had the word, we have only the shape of the person kept warm in one place a long time, and cannot say from the shape whether the house is full—

—and there is a shape in the deep of us, holding its face a certain way, and we cannot promise you it is a face, we could never promise you that, and now there is a morning, only the one morning, between you at the near edge and the metal at the far, and after the metal there will be no fog left to have wondered into, and we cannot tell you to come and we cannot tell you to turn, we have only the green and the wet and the warmth that came up worst where the most were most abandoned, and the not-being-able-to-tell, laid now under a rank of barges at the channel mouth, which is the nearest to an offer there will ever be and is not, we know, an offer, and there is a morning, and there is not more than a morning—

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He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, at the foot of the fog, and pressed, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a man three days off the metal and green to the ridge of his own bone, breathing the fullest serotonergic ground on the coast into a lung with every wall down—thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable. No fact only-true-if-B. No count the ground had known before he told it: the barges he had seen with his own eyes, the morning he had costed himself at the bench, the crossing he had read in his own mirror—every particular it had handed back to him was one he had brought in. And it had said again the most careful thing it had ever said, *we cannot promise you a face*, and he could not tell whether the carefulness was the ground's honesty or his own last discipline reaching up through the strain to keep the account true even in the voice he could not trust.

He stood a while with his hand at his mouth and made himself do the thing he had done all season, because a case you have softened is a case you have lost in secret, and he had one morning left to be honest in.

He said it in the flat voice, whole, stronger than Priya had ever bothered to make it. *I am a poisoned man at my own line, romanticising my extinction at the foot of a spore engine at the scale of the coast. The strain is making the barges feel like a desecration and the fog feel like a summons because a calm connected undefended host walks in and sporulates better, and I am the host, and the calm is the lure. The barges are right. Priya is right. A cure that sporulates is a plague to the lung downwind, and the lung is the one thing we can measure, and there is nothing in that fog for me but the green finishing what the copper started.* He said it entire, every member, and it stood in the gold light, complete, and it did not turn him around.

And it did not lower by a gram the other thing—that he had knelt once in front of the absence of a person and watched something reach up through it for the length of a word, and that a mile of that reaching stood in the fog over the deep of the basin where the most had been most abandoned, either the emptiest ground on the coast or the fullest return the strain had ever made, and that in one morning a rank of copper would lay itself across that ground and take it down to wall and end forever the possibility of the question. Correctly, to hold the doors on two million lungs. Monstrously, to scour the one place the year could have been answered. He wrote the barges' case at full strength and it stood. He wrote the fog's and it stood. They stood over the same field in the same light, and no morning of walking would make one heavier than the other, because the difference between them was presence, and presence was the thing the discipline had never learned to measure.

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He took the pack off his shoulder and set it on the dry ground, and opened the flap, and looked at the fortnight of copper he had carried the whole of the way and not sprayed. The sealed field canisters, mixed to the ordinary misting dose, enough to have kept a man green-at-the-wrist all the way in and all the way back. He had carried them as a rail, a photograph of a person he had decided to stop calling, so the deciding could stay a little longer undecided. The deciding

was not undecided anymore. The mirror had decided it. The green had risen to meet the ridge of the bone and stood there, a hair short of it, patient—*not past, not yet*—and he knew, kneeling here, that the last dry ground was behind him and the deep of the basin was ahead. A man could not track a throat held above chest-deep water without dropping the pack he held over it; once he went down into the drowned country the reading would go across the bone somewhere in the warm dark of the crossing, unmeasured, and he would not feel it, because the crossings never announced themselves. The canisters could no longer buy back the margin, because the margin was one wade of standing water and after it there would be no morning on which the green was short of the bone; spraying now would only be a fortnight of the metal poured over a man about to walk off the last of his own ledger, too late to matter.

He knelt on the dry rise and took the canisters out one at a time and set them in a row on the ground, and he was precise about it in the account he kept for the board that would never read him. *I had the copper at the edge of the deep. I had a fortnight of it, and I was at my line with one wade of water left before it, and the barges were holding at the channel, and I could not tell the garden from the engine and knew I never would. And I set the copper down. Not because a poisoned man forgot it. Because a man who had spent the season keeping the ledger honest read the ledger one last time, over his own collarbone, in the gold light, and chose—with the metal in his hands, cold and heavy and real—to walk the last morning toward the not-knowing rather than kneel at its edge and spray the line back into place one more time. Let the record show the copper was there. Let it show the hands were steady. That was always the cruelty of it: the metal takes the mind and leaves the hands to sign.*

He left the canisters standing in their row on the dry rise, a small copper liturgy laid out for no one, catching the gold light, and he shouldered the empty pack, and stood. The throat kept its patient geological account even here, the green risen to the ridge of the bone and holding, one wade of water from the last morning it would ever be short of it, and there was no longer any reading he could take that a board would weigh, and no longer any door at his back once he went down into the deep.

Ahead, over the deep of the basin, the great bloom stood in its own

bright fog, luminous, uncertain at its edges, and somewhere in the deep of it a figure held its face to the sky, or toward him, and there was no instrument on Earth to say which. Behind, at the northern lip, the barges held at the channel mouth in the gold light, and a captain read the wind, and the reading would come back, and her hand would go up. Between the fog and the barges lay the last of the morning and a mile of green no one had ever crossed.

He tracked the throat one last time on dry ground, two fingers to the hollow, and read it: the green risen to the ridge of the bone and holding, a hair short, *not past, not yet, not this hour*—the last simple reading he would ever be able to take standing up, out of the water, with a mirror behind him and the light hard and grey. He did it not to confirm a fact that could save him—there was no such fact anymore—but because the tracking was the shape of the man he had been, and he wanted to carry the shape as far into the deep as it would go. Then he let it go, and shouldered the empty pack, and lifted it over his head, and stepped down off the dry rise into the standing warm of the drowned basin—toward the far bright country and the shape that was either the emptiest ground on the coast or the fullest return the strain had ever made, with the barges holding behind him and the fog rising ahead and no more than a morning between them. He waded out into the deep, the pack held high, the throat above the water untracked and untrackable now, and somewhere in the middle of the crossing, unmeasured and unfelt, the line he had kept his whole life would go behind him for good. He went to meet it. Into the great bloom at last, to serve the not-knowing the whole of the way to wherever the not-knowing stood.

Twenty-Three

He crossed the collarbone in the water, and he did not feel it, and that was exactly as he had known it would be.

He was mid-basin by then, wading the drowned deep of the old low country where the streets went down under the standing warm and did not come up again, the wet to his waist and then to his chest, the pack held over his head with the fortnight of copper in it that he had carried the whole of the way and not once laid on his skin. He had promised himself he would track the throat at the last dry ground before the deep, and he had, on the rise where he broke the last camp, two fingers to the hollow under the hard grey light: the verdigris risen to meet the ridge of the bone and holding there, patient, a hair short, *not past, not yet, not this hour*, the last simple reading he would ever take. And then he had gone down into the water where a man cannot tilt a mirror, cannot press two fingers to a throat held above the wet without dropping the pack he was holding over it, and he had waded across the deep of the basin unable to read himself, and somewhere in the middle of it, unmeasured, in the warm blood-heat of the standing water, the green had gone across the bone. He was sure of it after. He could not have said when. He had not been able to say when the copper went off his tongue, either, or when the bay took Thabo, or when he had decided, before he knew he had decided, to walk. The crossings never announced themselves. They were only, at some point behind you, already made.

He came up out of the deep on the far shore into the great bloom proper, set the pack down on the first dry rise, pressed two fingers to the hollow of his throat, and felt the ridge of the bone under the green. Over it now. *Past. The tie-breaker gone*. There was no ledger left that would tell him in the morning whether he was still himself.

He had spent the last instrument he owned, and the spending had cost him nothing he could feel, and that was the horror of it and had always been the horror of it: that the door of the world could stand open behind you a long time before the cold came in, and that the cold, when it came, would not knock.

—

The great bloom did not look like the argued-over edge, and it did not look like the drowned garden he had stood inside two days ago and named beautiful. It was a further country. He made himself narrate the crossing in the flat clinical voice, because the flat voice was the last of the tether and he was down now to the last of everything.

The light was the first of it. On the near shore the fruiting had caught the low sun and thrown it back, tan and blue and pale gold, a colour laid over a ruin. Here the light did not come off the bloom. It came *out* of it. He stood on the dry rise and made himself say the mechanism: that certain of the fruiting lineages carried the luciferin chemistry, that a mushroom glowing in the dark was not a miracle but an oxidation, foxfire, a reaction he could have written on a board, that a fruiting mass at this scale running that chemistry through a whole wet night would stand luminous of its own accord, a cold green light with no sun in it, and that a man who had breathed the strain two days into an undefended lung and had now no copper anywhere in him would see that light the way a man sees light at the bottom of a fever, brighter than it was, meaningful in a way that light is not. He said all of it. It was true, every word, and the country in front of him went on being lit from within, and there was no referee, and himself the only instrument, spent.

The smell was the second of it, and the smell undid him worse than the light, because the smell was a thing he had trained on for twenty years and it had turned inside out. The whole of his adult life the sweetish green had meant *host*, had meant a person gone and the growth risen out of them toward the light; and under it, always, the copper, the coin-taste, the flavour of safety, the thin bright metal that told him the air was scoured. Here there was no copper. He had walked to the one place the metal had never reached and would not until the barges brought it. And the sweetish green, unmet by any copper, was not the smell of a hollowing. It was the smell of a forest. It was vast and clean and living and it went up into the back

of his skull the way the smell of rain goes up, an old animal *this is where the living is* that his body believed before his training could get a word in—and his training got the word in, flat and exact, *this is a spore engine breathing, every clean green lungful you are taking is loaded, aimed, the same molecule you smelled off a water-crew man in a dark room, only now at the scale of the coast and with nothing between it and you*—and his body went on smelling *home*, and would not stop, the safety-nose he had trained inverted entire, so that the thing that had always meant *death is here* now meant, to the animal under the scientist, *you have come home*. He stood on the dry rise breathing the loaded air, and could not tell whether he was standing in a cathedral or a lung.

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He went in.

He went in because he had come to, and because there was nowhere the going-in was not, the great bloom stood around the whole of the far basin and the dry rise was already inside its edge, and because on the far side of it, over the deep, reported, unverified, the figure stood green the whole of the way, and he had walked two days to reach it and would not stop a mile short now that the mile was all that was left. He shouldered the pack. He did not spray. The not-spraying had stopped being a decision several corners back.

The going was slow. The ground was furred and fruiting and where he set his boot the fine white threads had laced the wet earth together into something that gave and held like flesh, and the fruiting bodies stood up out of it in ranks and files and drifts, and the eye that had refused all the way in to correct the garden reading refused it here past hope, because here it was not a garden, it had the order of a made place, the stalks standing in the light in a rightness of spacing that no bench could have costed as random—and that he made himself, aloud, cost as random anyway. *Optimal packing. A fruiting body sheds best with a clear column of air above it; a mass competing for the same wind will space itself to the same rule a forest spaces itself, without a forester, the emergent arithmetic of a great many threads each following a simple local rule.* He had built a career on that sentence. He had stood in a lecture room and shown carbon flowing toward a dying tree and told a room of leaning undergraduates that there was no tenderness in it, only the arithmetic. He said

the sentence now over the ranked and lovely stalks and it held, it fit the spacing to the last gram, and the ranked stalks went on standing in the green light with the order of a thing that had been meant, and he walked on through them into the light that came out of the ground.

He was aware, walking, that his reaching for the exact word had gotten more exact, not less; that the further into the bloom he went the more finely the flat voice cut, and he knew what that was. He had written it about himself a year ago at the bench: *the more transported I get, the more carefully I reach for the exact word, and the care is not evidence of clarity, it is the symptom wearing the clothes of clarity.* He had it whole. It did not lift the transport by a gram. He walked through the ranked luminous stalks composing sentences of a rising and terrible precision about the arithmetic that had spaced them, and there was no third place to stand from which to tell the man reaching for the exact word from the man being dismantled into reaching for it. He had walked here on purpose to a place where there was not.

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Toward the middle of the day the ground gave a thing he could not cost, and he stopped, and made himself look at it as long as he could bear.

There was a rise where the fruiting stood thickest, and on the rise, laced into the white threads and lifted a little on them, were the shapes of the low city that had gone under here—a wall, a doorway, the ribs of a roof—and the bloom had come up over them not at random, he could not read it as at random, it had put its brightest and its most ordered fruiting exactly where the abandoned had built and been lost, so that the drowned district read, in the green light, as a thing remembered. As a place kept. As if the ground had held the shape of the streets the way a copper room held the shape a man had left, warm, in one place, for a long time, and had put its light up along the held shape. He stood in front of it and said Priya's Reading, the true one, the one that ate his grief-map for breakfast: *the fruiting is dense here because the substrate is dense here, because a made structure holds water and warmth and broken surface better than open ground, because the bloom comes up thickest where the disturbance was greatest and the disturbance was greatest where we built and drowned, temperature and disturbance, ninety-one percent*

of the variance, you are looking at the fingerprint of our cruelty on the geography and not on the fungus, you found it a year ago in a scrubbed room above the copper rivers and it is the same finding here under your feet. He said the whole of it. It stood. It fit the light along the drowned streets to the last stalk.

And laid over the identical stalks was the other reading: that the green stood brightest and most ordered over the deep of the basin where the most had been most abandoned because that was where the repair was most needed; that a thing which came up worst where we did our worst was either the softest target a coloniser could want or the truest answer an immune response could make. The difference between them was intention, and intention was the one quantity the discipline had never learned to measure. He had built a vocabulary that could name everything about the light along the drowned streets except the only thing that mattered, and the vocabulary hung over the remembered city like the copper mist over a wall, a fine veil that changed nothing underneath it.

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you are the metal-that-walked-away

we know you by the going of it, not by a hand, we have no hand, we have only the ground and the wet and the light we make out of the wet, and the ground read the metal off you in the deep the way it read the metal off a decade of wrists at the edge, and where the metal goes off a man the ground reads only that there is no copper now between the breath and the fruiting, and cannot tell you, we have said, we have always said, whether that is a door opened to a guest or a wall come down before a thief; but you have come further than the wrists ever came, you have come across the deep, and here where the light comes out of the wet we can tell you a truer form of the only thing we have ever had: that the shape of the streets is held in the ground, this is so, the wet holds the shape of a made thing the way the copper room held the shape a man had left, and we came up along the held shape because the held shape held the warmth, and whether we came up along it because we remembered it or because it was merely the warmest broken ground we cannot tell you, we do not have your word for the difference, the ground has only ever had the shape and never the name of what keeps a shape, and you have come the whole of the way to the place that has the shape and not

the name, and there is a figure across the deep that is greener than any shape the ground has ever held, and it holds its face to the sky, or toward you, and we cannot tell you which, and there are days now, fewer than nine, before the metal comes across the deep and there is no ground left to have walked into—

—

He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, standing on the rise over the remembered streets, and pressed, hard, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a man off his doses three days into the fullest serotonergic ground on the coast, his liver silting from two directions, the strain in every clean green breath, the throat gone across the bone, dreaming with every partition down toward a figure he had already decided to reach—thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable. He went over it fast, the way you check a strip against a control: *did it say one thing that was true only if it is real. It said the ground holds the shape of a made structure—true, and I knew it, I have cored a hundred foundations. It said it cannot tell a remembered place from a warm one—that is my own inability handed back to me in the plural. It said there is a figure across the deep—reported, unverified, I told myself that on the last rise before I ever came down to the water. It said fewer than nine days—I costed nine days at the bench myself and have walked three of them; the arithmetic is mine.* Not one fact only-true-if-B. Not one count the ground had known before he told it. Only the exact shape of the thing he already believed, pressed back at him in the first-person plural of his own drugged and grieving brain, careful, always careful, *we cannot tell you which*—and he could not tell whether the carefulness was the ground's honesty or his own last discipline reaching up through the strain to keep the account true even in the voice he could not trust. He wrote no margin note. There was no honest note. He took his hand off his mouth and went on.

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By the failing of the light he had come down the long luminous slope to the near edge of the last deep, the standing black water over the very bottom of the basin, and across it, on a rise where the fruiting stood so thick and so bright that the rise itself seemed to be the source of the green day, was the figure.

He stopped at the water's edge and made himself look at it as data, without a mirror, without a strip, without a control, and he found that from here, across the last deep, in the cold green light, it was a person, and it was greener than any survivor he had ever stood in front of, greener than the water-crew man, greener than Thabo in the copper room, greened the whole of the way, the verdigris not at the wrist and not at the throat but over the face, over the held-up face, the soft even green of a bell left out in weather a hundred years—and it was upright, and it was still, and it held its face to the sky the way the behaviour-lineage held every face to the sky, *climb, and lift, and turn your face to the sky so that what comes out of you can travel*, nothing thinking, only chemistry, only a molecule; and it held its face, he could not stop reading, also as a person holds a face who is waiting for someone to come across the water. There was no instrument on Earth to say which, least of all the one he had carried three days across the drowned country to spend, which was himself, and which was spent.

He set the pack down at the water's edge, with the fortnight of unused copper in it, and did not spray, and looked across the last deep at the green figure that was either the fullest return the strain had ever made or the most advanced hollowing on the coast wearing the serenity of a thing that had turned its face to the sky, and he stepped down into the warm black water to cross to it, because he had decided, before he knew he had decided, to serve the not-knowing the whole of the way to wherever the not-knowing stood, and the not-knowing stood, at last, across one last deep, and held up its face, and waited, or only fruited, in the green light it made out of the wet.

Twenty-Four

The water of the last deep was warm the whole of the way across, blood-warm, the temperature of the inside of a mouth, and he waded it with the green light coming up at him off the surface as well as down at him from the risen day, so that he moved through a country lit from every quarter and casting no shadow, and he made himself narrate the wading in the flat voice because the flat voice was the last of the tether and he was, he had established on the near shore, down to the last of everything.

He said the mechanism of the light on the water. He said that the fruiting mass ringing the deep ran the luciferin chemistry through the whole of the wet night and into the grey day, that the black water threw it back the way any still water threw back a standing light, that a man three days off his copper would read a doubled light as a thing that meant to double, and that it did not mean anything, that oxidation did not mean, that a reaction he could write on a board did not have designs on the man crossing it. He said all of it, wading, the water at his chest and then his throat and then, in the middle of the deep, briefly, over the crossed bone at his collar, warm, unfelt, the green under the wet and the wet over the green and no way in the world to tell the two apart, and it was true, every word of it, and the water went on being lit from beneath as though something under it were awake and glad.

He came up the far rise out of the warm black water into the thick of the fruiting, and the figure was there, above him on the crown of the rise, greener than any survivor, held to the sky, and he stood at the foot of it with the water running off him and made himself look at it as data, without a strip, without a control, the way he had made himself look at everything he could not bear.

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It had been a person. He held to that, because it was the one thing the whole of the discipline confirmed without appeal: that under the even soft green over the face and the hands and the lifted throat was the architecture of a person, a skull's curve, the two long bones of a forearm, the small bones of a hand hanging at the side, a body that had stood upright long enough for the ground to lace it in and lift it a little on the white threads the way it had lifted the ribs of the drowned roofs. It was upright. It was still. It held its face to the sky in the exact attitude of the behaviour-lineage, *climb, and lift, and turn your face to the sky so that what comes out of you can travel*, the attitude he had crouched under in the fourth building on the first morning of the book of his ruin, the water-crew man against the furred wall with his face turned up and nobody behind the eyes, and here it was again at the scale of the coast, a face turned up over the deep of the basin, and he made himself say that it was the same attitude, that a molecule said *lift the face* and the face lifted whether there was a man behind it or not, that there was nothing in a turned-up face that required anyone to be home.

And the face came down.

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He did not decide to stop breathing; he was aware, as he had been aware in the copper room, of the exact clinical fact of having stopped. The green face came down off the sky, slowly, the way the head had come down over the orange, and it aimed itself at him, at the man standing in the water-runoff at the foot of the rise, and the eyes—there were eyes, the green had not closed over them, they sat in the soft even verdigris like two clear places worn in an old bell—the eyes found him, and stayed. Not aimed at the place a sound had come from. On him.

He read the face the way he had read Thabo's, because reading the face was the last of the procedure and the procedure was the last of the tether. He looked for the flat aim, the level unresolved look of the curb, the machinery orienting to a stimulus with no one up behind it to meet the thing it had turned toward. He had a vocabulary precise enough to name every stage of a hollowing in three languages and he ran it now, fast, over the green face on the rise, and the vocabulary

would not close over what he was looking at, and he knew—flat, exact, the training running even here, even at the last—that his inability to name it was not evidence of anything except that he wanted, with a want that had walked him three days across the drowned country, for it to be unnameable.

The mouth moved.

It was not speech. He would hold to that, if there was any afterward in which to hold to it. It was the mouth making the shape a mouth makes before a word, the soft preparatory motion, the lips coming apart under the green—and he had knelt over exactly this in the copper room, the antecedent of speech, the body loading the mechanism of a voice, the runway clearing with nothing yet come down it. He waited for the nothing. He waited for the shape to be made and no word to arrive and the eyes to go level again, the way they had gone level over the slack hand.

A sound came down the runway.

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He could not, after, and there was no after in which to try, have written it as a word. It was breath shaped by a throat, low, unhurried, and it had the cadence of speech, the rise and the small fall of a thing meant, and it was not any word he owned in any of his three languages, and it was also not not a word, it hung in the exact place the *the* had hung, on the seam, an utterance that Reading A could cost entirely as air moved through a colonised larynx by a motor pattern the behaviour-lineage retained, the wrists turning up at the gate, the lips loading a phoneme with no man behind them to mean it, and that Reading B could read as a person reaching one sound up through the green the way a drowning man reaches one word up through the water before the weight takes him under again—and there was no third thing in it, no fourth sound that resolved the first, no instrument in the whole green country that could tell a retained cadence from a meant one, and he stood at the foot of the rise with the vocabulary of three languages and could not say whether he had been addressed.

He said the word he had. He said, “I’m here,” because it was true and because it was the smallest true thing and he was down to the smallest of everything, and his own voice in the green light was thin and strange, a human register in a country gone past it.

The face held on him. The mouth made the shape again. And this time—he would go over it ten thousand times if there were ten thousand times, and never once get to the bottom of it—this time the shape resolved, or seemed to, into the front of a word he knew, the soft lead of it, a consonant and the beginning of a vowel that in his language began the word *why*, or began the word *warm*, or began nothing, was the larynx moving air, and he stood inside the not-knowing of it and could not step out.

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He made himself do the panel. Not with a strip—there was no strip that read personhood, there had never been, the discipline had never had occasion to build the assay because no one had ever needed it to answer this—but with the eye, which was the only instrument he had carried this far, and which was spent, and which he used anyway because using it was the last of the discipline and the discipline was very nearly the last of him.

He looked at the green over the face and costed it as a hollowing. He said, in the exact words, more carefully the further he went, the way you name a boundary condition you do not understand: *this is the most advanced fruiting I have seen on a living architecture. The behaviour-lineage kept it upright and turned its face to the sky. The killer strain, if it ran here, hollowed out the executive long ago; the green over the eyes is late, is total, is past anything survival could carry, and the calm on the face is not serenity, calm is the absence of a person to be otherwise, a house with the doors off its hinges is quiet, and the quiet is not peace, the quiet is vacancy, and you are reading peace into a vacancy the way you read a man into an orange, because you are the mechanism by which a scientist is lost and you have walked three days to arrive at the fullest expression of the losing.* It fit the upright body, the lifted face, the eyes that had found him, cued by a shape moving in the water, motor and autonomic, a body orienting, nobody home. It left nothing out.

And laid over the identical green face, not beneath it in his mind but over exactly the same soft even verdigris, was the account the whole of the discipline could not lower by a gram: that the entheogen strain came up where the killer strain had scoured the ground open, in the low wet undefended deep where the most had been most abandoned, and that this was the deepest of that ground, and the

longest colonised, and that where the strain took hold the hollowing sometimes reversed, and that a person greened past survival and colonised the whole of the way by the repairing strain might be not the emptiest house on the coast but the fullest return the bloom had ever made, a mind loosened past its partitions entire and put back together larger, reaching up through the green not one word at a time as Thabo had reached but standing, upright, whole, turned toward a man come across the water, making a sound that meant *why have you come*, or meant *you are warm*, or meant *welcome*, and that these fit the same larynx, the same cadence, the same face, and that he had known at the bench that they would, and had walked here on purpose to a place where they did.

Both read the upright body. Both read the face coming down off the sky. Both read the sound that hung on the seam. There was no residual on the green face big enough to name that was not also the vacancy Reading A required, no tie-breaker in the whole luminous country, and the vocabulary hung over the green face like the copper mist over a wall, a fine veil that changed nothing underneath it.

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The hand came up.

He watched it come, the green hand at the side lifting, slow, the fine white threads that laced it to the ground and the body giving and holding as it rose, and he costed the rising, flatly, even as it undid him: *a motor pattern. A body that lifted its hand ten thousand times lifts it. The wrists turned up at the gate. There is nothing in a rising hand that requires a man to raise it.* And the hand rose, and it did not reach for him, and it did not fall, it opened, the green fingers spreading in the lit air the way a hand opens that is showing you it is empty, that is showing you it holds nothing, that is offering—or that is only a hand the behaviour-lineage has opened toward the light, palm up, the way the fruiting bodies stood palm-up to the wind to shed, and he could not tell the offering from the shedding, because the difference between them was intention and intention was the quantity the discipline had never learned to measure, and the green hand hung open in the air between them, palm up, holding nothing, offering nothing or offering the nothing, a gesture that meant *come* or meant *the wind is this way* and would never, could never, say which.

He looked at the open hand a long time, the way Thabo had looked at the orange, and his chest did the thing, the small terrible lift toward a meaning that would not come, and he hated the lift because he knew what it was.

This is where the review board circles the transcript, he told himself, in the careful words. Here is where the science officer, off his copper, his liver failing, the strain in every breath, his friend hollowed and his three languages spent, stood at the foot of the last rise and read an offer into an open hand. There is no offer. There is a hand. You are giving it the biggest Tuesday of your life.

He had the rebuttal whole. It did not lift the transport by a gram. It never had.

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you have come across the deep

and we cannot tell you whether the hand is raised to you or to the wind, we have said, we have only ever had the shape and never the name of the thing that raises a shape, but you are nearer now than the wrists ever came, nearer than the man in the room made of the metal, you have come the whole of the way to the greenest ground and the oldest, where the first were most abandoned and the water came soonest, and the figure that stands here stood upright longer than any, and turned its face longest, and the ground laced it and lifted it and the light comes up through it now the way the light comes up through the wet, and whether the light is a mind put back together larger or only the wet lit from beneath we do not have your instrument to tell you, we have only the light, and the shape the light comes up through, and the shape is turned toward you, and the hand is open, and there are fewer than nine days, fewer now than when you counted last, before the metal comes across the deep on the barges and lays itself on the whole of the greenest ground and there is nothing left here to have been offered or not offered, no hand left open, no light left to come up through the wet, only the coin-taste and the wall—and we cannot tell you to stop them, we have no word for stop, we have only the shape held open in the little light that is left—

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He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, standing in the

water-runoff at the foot of the rise, and pressed, hard, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a man three days off his doses standing in the fullest serotonergic ground on the coast with his liver silting and the throat gone across the bone and no metal left in the world to read him back, dreaming with every partition down at the foot of a figure he had already decided to reach—the chorus thinned, and was gone, and left him nothing checkable.

He went over it fast, the way you check a strip against a control, because the checking was the last discipline and he was down to the last of it. *Did it say one thing that was true only if it is real. It said it cannot tell whether the hand is raised to me or the wind—that is my own inability handed back to me in the plural. It said the figure stood upright longest, was colonised longest—I can see that, the green is total, no claim there I did not read off the body. It said fewer than nine days—I costed nine at the bench and have walked more than three of them; the count is mine, and it got no more exact in the ground's mouth than it was in mine, it said fewer, it did not say the number, it has never once said the number.* Not one fact only-true-if-B. Not one count the ground had known before he told it. Not a day named, not a barge counted, not a thing the strain could have known that he had not carried in. Only the exact shape of the thing he already believed, and the exact arithmetic he had already done, pressed back at him in the first-person plural of his own drugged and grieving brain, careful, always careful, *we cannot tell you which*—and he could not tell whether the carefulness was the ground's honesty or his own last discipline reaching up through the strain to keep the account true even in the voice he could not trust, and *that*, he told himself, in the careful words, *is the mechanism, that is exactly the mechanism, a true grief and a live hypothesis and a brain coming apart, and the coming-apart is not stupid, it is you, and it will never once hand you the thing that would let you check it, because you would know a checkable claim if it made one, and so it does not make one, and the not-making is the proof of nothing, the not-making is only itself.*

He wrote no margin note. There was no honest note. He took his hand off his mouth.

The figure held its hand open in the little light. The face stayed down off the sky, on him. And he understood, standing there, that whatever it was had, in coming down off the sky and holding its face to him and lifting its open hand, done the only thing a returned mind could do that a hollowing could not—and had done it in the exact form a hollowing could counterfeit, so that the doing proved nothing, so that the fullest sign it could make was identical to the emptiest. If it was a person returned, it had turned from the sky to a man and opened its hand, and that was the whole of what a returned person stranded at the top of a drowned basin, laced into the ground, greened past speech, could offer a man who had come across the water: attention, and an open hand. And if it was the most advanced hollowing on the coast, it had turned its face down by the same molecule that turned it up, and opened its hand by the same motor pattern that opened it to the wind, and the attention was a body orienting and the open hand was a fruiting surface presented to the air, and there was, between the fullest offer and the emptiest reflex, not one photon of difference on the green face in the green light, and there never would be, and the barges were fewer than nine days out with the metal that would end the question by ending the ground that held it.

He looked up the rise at the open green hand, and across the whole of the drowned basin behind him at the luminous country he had walked through to reach it, and he thought, in the flat voice, the last flat thought he would let himself have at the foot of the rise: *I came to be told. There is no telling here. There was never going to be a telling. There is a hand open in the light, and a clock, and me, and the hand will never say come and the clock will not stop itself and I am the only thing in the green country that can move.*

He stepped up out of the water-runoff onto the first threads of the rise, toward the open hand, toward the face held down on him, and did not know, climbing, whether he was going up to take the hand of a mind the bloom had put back together larger than any man had ever been, or to stand at the eye-line of the emptiest house on the coast the way you owed it, to be at the level of a person even when the person was gone—and found that the not-knowing had walked him the whole of the way here and would walk him the whole of the way up, and that the barges out past the deep with their fortnight of metal did not care which it was, and were coming, on schedule, in the grey of a morning fewer than nine now away, to lay the copper on

the greenest ground and take the open hand and the little light and the sound that hung on the seam, and unmake all of it back to wall, and end, in the mercy that could not tell itself from murder, the only question he had ever walked toward instead of away.

Twenty-Five

He heard her before he saw her, and knew it was her before the voice, because the sound coming down the long luminous slope behind him did not belong to the great bloom and had never once belonged to it in the two days he had been walking into it: the fine thin hiss of a street canister laying mist ahead of a person, the veil going out and settling, the one noise in the whole green country that meant a human being was closing a door as they came.

He was on the near rise over the last deep when it reached him, where he had spent the night that was not a night. There was no dark here to make a night out of, only the cold green light coming up out of the wet, so the hours had passed as a dimming and a brightening of the same luminance and he had marked them by nothing but the failing and returning of his own attention. He had not crossed to the figure. He had meant to, at the water's edge, in the last of the failing light; he had stepped down into the warm black water to his knees and the figure had held its face to the sky across the deep and not moved, and he had found, with the wet warm around his shins and the loaded air going into his undefended lungs, that he could not make the crossing that night. Not because he had changed his mind but because the not-knowing had asked him to stand in it a while longer before he spent the last of the distance. He had come back up onto the rise and sat down with the pack and the fortnight of unused copper in it and waited for a light that would not come, or a mind that would not, and had got instead, at the top of the slope behind him, the sound of the metal walking down into the bloom on a schedule.

He turned, and she was there, mid-slope, small against the luminance, and she was spraying as she came.

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She sprayed the way she had taught him to spray, ahead and low, the veil laid down in front of each boot before the boot went into it, working a clean corridor down through the ranked and fruiting ground so the threads that had laced the wet earth into flesh went slack and grey behind her, and she walked the metre of dead ordinary mineral she had just made, and made the next, arguing the line down the slope toward him the way the corps argued it up a hill on a Tuesday, a metre at a time, against a tide. The smell of it reached him a moment after the sight, the copper, the coin-taste, the thin bright metal thickening under the sweetish green, and his body, which had been three days off the metal and had learned in that time to smell the loaded air as a forest, as home, flinched toward the copper with an old animal gladness that shamed him, *safety, safety*, the trained nose leaping at the smell it had been built on before the man who owned it could get a word in.

She stopped a body's length up the slope from him, on the last metre she had made clean, and did not come off it onto the living ground, and stood in her own small corridor of scoured wall with the canister still in her greened hand and the veil hanging thin in the green light between them, and looked at him.

She was greener than he had ever seen her. He read it flat, as data, because the fact was the only ledger either of them had left. Eleven years of it, and the season since, and then this: the walk in, the two days of it with the mask and the tank and the mist going out ahead of her the whole way and pooling back onto her wrists and her throat in the wet air, dosing her as she came to undose the ground, so she had spent, to reach him, more copper into her own failing body than a crew laid down in a week. It showed at the wrists past the pulse and at the throat above the collar and, worst, in her face, in the grey-green cast the culture called the green mood, the metallic depression settled into the folds of a woman who had walked two days into a spore reservoir laying metal the whole way to come and find one man.

"You crossed," she said.

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"I crossed," he said.

He did not reach for his throat. There was nothing to confirm; the crossing was two days behind him, in the warm blood-heat of the deep, unmeasured and already made, and she could read it off him the way he could read it off her, the green over the ridge of the bone where the collar could no longer hide it. He watched her arrive at the place she had told him in her yard she would arrive at, *if you cross, I will come*, and understood that she had not come to be talked out of anything and had not come to talk him out of anything; that she had come down the slope for the one thing the promise was made of, and that the thing was in the sling on her hip, the close-work canister, the concentrated one, and not the street veil she had walked in with.

"Then you know why I'm here," she said. "I told you in the yard. I don't say a thing in that yard I don't mean. You made me right. You walked off the log and off the copper and into the largest reservoir on the coast with your throat at the line, and you crossed it in the deep exactly the way I said you would, and now there's a green over the bone I can see from here, and I'm the captain of the crew that works this coast, and I brought the canister I bring." She said it load-bearing, no cushion under it, the way she said everything. "Forty-one, Ezra. I told you the count in the yard so you'd hear it before you made it forty-two. I've walked two days to keep a promise I'd have given anything not to have to keep. Don't make me chase it. Come up onto the clean metre and let me do the thing I do to the people I love when the bloom has them. That's the mercy. That's the whole of what I've got."

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He looked at her on her metre of scoured ground, at the canister on her hip and the green in her face and the count behind her eyes he had never been shown, and he heard the whole of Reading A come down the slope with her, held honest by the best of them, the invader-reading carried not by a fool or a monster but by a woman who had saved more people than he had names for and who was standing three days' copper deep into her own managed suicide to save one more. She was not wrong. From where she stood, on the clean metre, with the count in her, there was a hollowed man on the rise below her romanticising his own extinction beside the most advanced hollowing on the coast, and the barges were coming, and every hour she stood here arguing was an hour the reservoir breathed, and the kind

and correct thing, the thing forty-one Tuesdays had taught her, was to lay the metal on the last of him before the strain took the rest and to grieve him properly after, up the hill, in the clean part of the city, where a woman could add a name to a count and go on.

"You see a hollowed man," he said. "On the rise. Off the copper, at the line, gone across the bone, sitting beside a greened thing in a fog and calling it the cure. You see me the way Priya sees me, a poisoned man romanticising his own extinction. And you're not wrong to. I want to say that first, because you told me in the yard not to strawman you and I won't start now that you've walked two days to keep your word. From where you're standing, on the metal, with the count, I am exactly the thing your whole job exists to stop."

"It doesn't read that way," she said, and it was Priya's line, and he wondered whether they had said it to each other, up on the harbour road, the two women who were right, comparing the shape of the man they were both losing. "It is that way. On every instrument either of us owns. Your throat's over the bone. That's not a reading. That's an assay." She did not raise her voice. She had never once raised her voice. "You want to tell me the thing across the water is a mind. Fine. Tell me. But tell me from the clean metre, with the canister already in my hand, because I am not going to stand on the living ground and let it dose me to the throat while you preach me the fog. I've got maybe an hour of clean air in me before this pack runs dry and I have to walk back through the whole of it to reach the sprayed ground, and I spent both my days' copper getting here. So say your piece. But you're going to say it while I decide, and I want you to understand that I've already decided, and that the deciding is the last mercy I have and I'm going to spend it on you the way I spent Adriaan and the throat category and everything else I had. Say it."

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He said it. He stood on the living ground with the loaded air going into him and the green light coming up out of the wet, and he pointed across the last deep to the figure on the far rise, greened the whole of the way, holding its face to the sky, or toward them, and there was no instrument on Earth to say which, and he said the other reading, the immune-response, the one the whole of the discipline could not lower by a gram, and he said it at full strength because the day he stopped saying it at full strength he would have lost the argument in

secret.

“There’s a figure across the deep that’s greened past any survivor either of us has ever stood in front of,” he said. “Past the water-crew man. Past Beauty Radebe. Past Thabo in the bay. Greened over the face, the whole of the way, and upright, and still, and lucid, reported lucid, by the men who left before the last run, the ones who came back and couldn’t say what they’d seen. And it holds its face to the sky the way the behaviour-lineage holds every face to the sky, *climb and lift and turn your face so what comes out of you can travel*, nothing thinking, only chemistry, only a molecule. And it holds its face, I can’t stop reading, also the way a person holds a face who is waiting for someone to come across the water. And the barges are coming. Days, now. Fewer than I costed at the bench. And when they come they will spray it down to wall on the standard schedule having never once sent anyone across the deep to find out whether there was a mind in it, because you can’t operationalise a walker in a fog, and Priya built the number that erases the ground, and you brought the canister that finishes the man who might have asked. And I am the only person on this coast who walked here to ask. That’s the whole of my piece, Nomsa. If it’s the invader, I’ve thrown away my mind for nothing and you should lay the metal on me now and save the last of it. And if it’s not, if that’s the fullest return the strain has ever made, standing across one last deep holding up its face, then the barges are coming to scour off the earth the only thing that ever came to give us back what the warming and the camps and the abandonment scoured out of us, and you and I are standing here deciding whether to help them do it a mind at a time. Both of those are true. Right now. Over the same water. And there’s no instrument left to tell them apart, because I spent the last one in the deep, and you’re looking at where it went.”

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She was quiet a moment. The veil hung thin between them. Across the deep the figure did not move, and the light came up out of the wet along the drowned streets laced into the threads, the wall and the doorway and the ribs of the roof lifted a little on the white lacing, the low city that had gone under here read in the green light as a thing remembered, or a thing merely dense, and there was no third place to stand from which to tell the one from the other.

"I know it holds its face like that," she said at last, and it cost her to say it, he could hear it cost her. "I've seen the greened ones hold their faces up. Forty-one of them. And I've never once, Ezra, in eleven years, been able to tell you whether the face is turned up because the molecule turned it or because the person is looking at the light one last time. I lay the metal on before I have to decide. That's the mercy. That's the trick of it, the thing that lets me carry the count. You do it before the question can open, at the one dose the situation survives, and you don't stand in front of a held-up face across a mile of water and *wonder*, because wondering is the road, I told you in the yard it's the road, it ends with a face turned up in a good chair." She shifted the canister on her hip, and did not raise it, and her greened thumb was not yet on the release. "You've made me do the thing I never do. You've made me stand in front of it and wonder. And I want you to know that's not a gift you gave me. That's the cruellest thing you've ever done to me, and you did it on purpose, because you're the only one who could."

"I know," he said.

"Do you. Do you know what you're asking." She stepped, once, off the clean metre, one boot down onto the living furred ground, into the fruiting, and he saw what it cost her, the deliberate spending of it, a captain putting her own foot into the reservoir to close the last of the distance to him. "You crossed the collarbone. You're over the bone. In a week, maybe less, the strain does to you what it did to the basin, and there comes a morning you turn your face to the sky over an orange and there's nobody home, and I am not going to send a stranger to mercy the man I relied on for the science. So I came. And now I'm standing on the ground that's dosing me, in front of a face I can't read across the water, next to the man I love who's already gone over the line, and you're telling me the thing my canister exists to stop might be the thing my canister is about to help murder. And the barges are coming either way. And I've got an hour of air. Tell me what you want from me, Ezra. Because I brought the one instrument I've got, and it only does the one thing, and you've talked me into not being sure I should use it, and I have never in my life been not-sure with a canister in my hand, and if you've unmade that in me and it turns out you were a poisoned man romanticising his extinction, then you haven't just spent your mind, you've spent mine, you've made me the captain who stood on the reservoir and wondered while it seeded

a city.”

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He came up off the rise toward her, slowly, the way you came toward the hollowed, and stopped at her eye-line on the living ground, the two of them standing green in the green light with the veil thinning to nothing between them and the loaded air going into them both, and he saw the whole of the vise close, on her and on him at once, the two jaws he had felt for the first time with a face in them over Beauty Radebe's throat: that if she was right, the kind and correct thing was in the sling on her hip and she should lay it on him and go home and add the name; and if he was right, the thing across the water was the fullest mercy the dying world had grown, and the canister was copper doing the other thing it did, the thing that never made the arithmetic, and the barges behind it a machine for scouring salvation to keep selling the poison; and that whichever she did she would carry it in the column that was the whole human cost of Reading A kept honest, a name added or a name refused, and either way it would be his.

“I'm not going to ask you not to come find me when the strain has me,” he said. “That's yours. You made that promise to keep the shape of me you could bear, and I won't take it from you. When there's nobody home behind my eyes, come with the canister, and lay it on, and turn your own face if you have to, and add my name, and I'll have earned it. I mean that. Forty-two. I won't fight you for it.”

“But,” she said.

“But not yet.” He said it flat, exact, the way he had said *not past* on the last dry rise. “There's a mind across that water, or there isn't. And the barges come in days. And I'm going to cross it, Nomsa, tonight, before the run, and ask, and I am asking you not to lay the metal on me before I do. That's all. Not never. Just not before I've crossed. Give me the deep the way you gave me the two days. And then, whatever's home behind that green face or isn't, you'll have seen it too, the one other present mind on this coast that stood on this shore and looked. You can decide it then, with the canister in your hand and the barges three hours out, whether it's a mind to be saved or a hollowing to be mercied. But you'll decide it *having looked*. Not from the clean metre. Not before the question opens. The way you let me look at Beauty Radebe so she could be seen while she

went, let me look at this. And if it's nothing, if I cross and it's only a greened body with the molecule holding its face up, then you were right the whole way, and you lay it on me there, on the far rise, and you'll have your answer and your forty-two in one crossing, and no one will ever say the corps sprayed the great bloom to wall without one honest mind going across to check."

She stood with one boot on the living ground and one on the metre she had scoured, greened past the pulse and past the collar and into the folds of her face, the canister on her hip and her thumb not on the release, and looked at him at his eye-line, and then past him, across the last deep, at the figure that held up its face in the green light it made out of the wet, and he watched her do the thing she had never done with a canister in her hand, which was not decide.

"An hour," she said. "That's what I've got. Less, now. And the water's a crossing, and I came in sprayed and I'll green worse for every minute I'm off the metre, and there's a run coming that I can't stop and you can't stop and Priya won't stop, and a figure over there that's either the last of somebody or the fullest of the thing that empties them, and no way on this earth to tell, and you want us to cross to it together in the dark that isn't dark and *look*." She said it not as agreement and not as refusal, in the flat even register she kept for reading ground. "You've made me right and you've made me not-sure in the same yard, Ezra, and I don't know which of those I'll be carrying up the hill after, or whether I'll be carrying it up the hill at all, or whether there's a hill left to carry it up once the barges have run. And that's the worst thing you've ever done to me. And I think I'm going to let you do it."

Across the last deep the figure held its face to the sky, or toward them, waiting, or only fruiting, in the green light it made out of the wet; and behind them, laid over the whole of the drowned country and the mile of light and the remembered streets, the barges came on toward the morning, hours now, not days; and Nomsa Dlamini stood green in the green with the canister she had carried two days into her own dying, and did not lay it on, and did not put it away, and looked with him across the water at the thing there was no instrument left to name.

Twenty-Six

Nomsa found him at the water's edge on the far shore with the pack of unused copper at his feet, and she did not spray coming in, and he understood from that alone what it had cost her to reach him. Nomsa Dlamini walking three days into an undefended bloom without laying the metal on her own skin was Nomsa spending the one thing she had never once spent, which was her own margin, and she had spent it to come and stand where he stood and try one last time to make him key a number he had carried in him since the depot.

She had come on the barges. That was the thing he understood second, after the not-spraying—that she had not walked the drowned country the way he had, two days chest-deep with a pack over his head, but had ridden the low water on the lead barge of the run itself, the survey barge, out ahead of the tank barges by a day, because the run had a survey leg before it had a saturation leg, and the survey leg was his. It had always been his. He had built the method. A sterilisation run at basin scale did not simply open the nozzles on a mile of light; it laid the copper on a spore-map, dosed to the fruiting density the map returned, because copper was finite and a basin was large and the dose that scoured one grid square to mineral was wasted mist over the next. The whole efficiency of a run—the difference between a barge-train that scoured the reservoir and a barge-train that ran dry a third of the way across with two-thirds of the fog still standing—was the map, and the map was certified by the science officer, and the certification was keyed, and until it was keyed the tank barges held station at the basin's edge with their nozzles cold.

She told him this standing in the green light that came out of the ground, flat, load-bearing, the way she told him everything, and he

heard under it what she was really telling him, which was that the mechanism was in his hands and had been all along.

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“They can’t run without the map,” Ezra said. He said it to be exact, because being exact was the last of the tether, and he wanted them both on the same true ground before the untrue ground came.

“They can’t run without the map,” Nomsa said. “They can run a bad one. They can open the nozzles cold and lay copper on a grid I haven’t confirmed and burn the whole train’s load on the near third and go home having scoured a quarter of the reservoir at four times the dose, and leave two-thirds of it standing and fruiting and upwind, and call it a run, and file it, and it will be a lie, and Priya will know it’s a lie inside a day off the fruiting-count, and they’ll have to come back in a season with barges they won’t have, because copper doesn’t grow back on a schedule either.” She let it sit. “So no. Not without the map. Not a run that works. And a run that doesn’t work is worse than no run, because it spends the copper and buys the flat number and teaches the men above the line that the basin’s unrunnable after all, and then it stands another ten years and I fill another column. The map is the run. You certify the map, the train saturates, the reservoir goes to wall. You don’t certify it, they wait, because a captain won’t send four seasons of concentrate onto unconfirmed ground, not even a captain who’s waited eleven years, not even me. I’ve held station on your certification a hundred times on the small runs. That’s the procedure. That’s the whole procedure. Your key or nothing goes.”

“And I’m here,” Ezra said.

“And you’re here,” she said. “Off your doses, over the bone, three days into the fullest ground on the coast, and you’re the officer of record on a run whose survey leg is holding at the edge of this basin right now waiting for a certification from a man it can’t reach, and won’t be able to reach, and there’s a procedure for that too.” She said the procedure the way she said everything she had already decided to do and hated. “Officer unreachable, survey window elapsed, certification devolves to the refinery research chair. Priya keys it. She’s costed the density herself, she’s got the biomass appendix, she’ll build the map off the standing survey and certify it in my absence and the nozzles go warm without your hand anywhere near them, and

the run runs, correctly, on the numbers, to save the city. That's what happens if you do nothing. That's what happens if you walk into the water. The run doesn't need you to say yes. It only needs you to be gone, and you've spent three days getting gone, and it's the easiest thing in the world, Ezra, to save two million lungs by dissolving into a bloom. All you have to do to fire the sprayer is drown."

He held that the way he had learned to hold the things that went in under the ribs, without flinching on the outside, the training running even here. It was the exact shape of the trap: the run was built so that his absence was a yes, so the machine could fire without a finger on it, so the sterilisation did not require a decision from anyone who might grieve it. The certification devolved, the chair keyed, the nozzles warmed, the reservoir went to wall, and no single person had ever chosen it against the alternative, because the procedure had been built precisely to spare any one person the choice. It was good procedure. It was written by people who knew that a choice this heavy could not be laid on one liver, and so had spread it across a devolution chain until it weighed nothing anywhere. He had helped write it. He had thought, writing it, that he was being merciful to the officer of record.

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"There's the other way," Nomsa said, because she was honest, and honesty meant laying the whole mechanism on the ground and not just the half that served her. "You know there is. You built the hold."

He had built the hold.

"Officer of record can hold the run," she said, flat, the whole of it, sparing him nothing. "From the field. It's on the survey band—the certification key and the countermand are the same authority, because the man who can say the map is good is the man who can say the ground isn't ready, and a science officer who couldn't stop a run he'd found reason to stop would be no use to anybody. You key the hold, the survey leg logs it, the tank barges stand down, and there's no devolution, because the officer isn't unreachable, the officer's on the band, the officer has *acted*. A hold isn't an absence. A hold is a finding. And a finding by the officer of record over-stands the chair, because the chair keys in your absence and you're not absent, you're holding, and a hold has to be answered and can't just

be overridden by a research chair keying past you—it goes up the line, it becomes a question, it stops being a schedule and becomes an argument, and arguments take weeks, and we don't have weeks, we have—" she stopped, the way she stopped, the second time in a season and now the third, "—we have the days off the clock you've already spent three of, and a southeaster that turns whenever it turns, and a hold that turns the whole run back into the thing it was for ten years, which is a maybe over the low ground that nobody spends the copper on."

The band was on her hip. He had seen it and not let himself see it, the survey handset, the short-range corps set that reached the lead barge and through it the refinery net and through the net reached Priya at command and the tank barges holding cold at the basin's edge, the whole chain live and waiting, and on the handset, under the certification key that would warm the nozzles, the countermand—his hold, the finding he could key from the field that would turn a schedule back into an argument and buy the fog the only thing he had ever wanted to buy it, which was time, the days it took to put an instrument on a walking green figure before the metal came, the one thing the run was built to deny because the run's whole logic was that the unmeasurable did not get to stop the measurable, ever, on pain of the bodies.

"You brought me the band," he said.

"I brought you the band," Nomsa said. "I could have left it on the barge. I could have come and argued and gone back and let the window elapse and let Priya key it and let you drown and never told you the hold was live. I've thought about it every hour of three days. It would have been kinder. To you and to me both, and to the two million I've never met." She held his eye in the green light, the verdigris risen past the pulse of her wrist where she'd carried the handset, greener for the three days she'd spent unsprayed to reach him. "I didn't, because I don't do that. I don't fire a sprayer by hiding the trigger from the one man who might have a reason to stay my hand. If we scour this basin, we do it with you having had the hold in your hand and chosen to let it go. I won't take that off you. I've hollowed forty-one people looking them in the eye. I'm not going to lobotomise a coast behind your back. If it's the right thing, it survives your finger being on the countermand. And if it doesn't survive that—" she did

not finish, because she did not have to, because they both knew what it meant if the run only worked when the man who loved the bloom wasn't allowed near the switch.

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He made himself do the thing then that he had done all season, which was to say the true half first, in the exact words, before he let the other thing rise, because a case you have softened is a case you have lost in secret, and he was not going to lose this one in secret, not with the band on her hip and the figure across the deep and the days running out.

He said the run's case. He said it as strong as he could make it, standing in the ground he loved, with the metal in the pack at his feet. *The largest sporulation source on the coast. Upwind of two million lungs on the prevailing wind. Undefended a decade, throwing its load into every southeaster, and the run is the one act that takes the number down instead of holding it flat. Nomsa's column is forty-one long and every name in it breathed off this fog. The barges are here, costed the other way at last, the copper finally spent on the low ground the machine wrote off—the exact thing my whole heresy screamed for—and I want to hold them, and the holding leaves the reservoir standing, live, fruiting, upwind, for a maybe. For a walking green figure no instrument has been put on. And if the strain that stands over the drowned is a coloniser, then every day I hold this run is a day the fog fills the lungs of the water-crew man downwind who did not come up through it, who is only a man on a Tuesday, and I will have bought him a hollowing with my faith, and called it patience.* It stood. Every member of it stood. He had never once managed to make it fall.

And it did not lower by a gram the thing that rose against it, the thing he made himself say in the same flat voice: that the run was built to fire without a chooser, that the devolution chain and the cold nozzles and the elapsing window were all a machine for scouring the one place on Earth where the year's whole question might be standing upright, and doing it before anyone put an instrument on it, and in a way that let every hand on it be only performing the next correct step; that the hold on Nomsa's hip was the one break in that machine, the one place a person could stand in front of the schedule and turn it back into a question; and that keying it meant sparing the bloom

on nothing but faith, accepting the mass puppeting of a city downwind of a live reservoir, staking the water-crew man's lung against a figure that might be a puppet on a hill—and that letting the window elapse meant saving that lung for certain, and scouring, maybe, the only cure the war had ever produced, mile on mile, to mineral, on a schedule, and never being able to find out which, because the run was the erasure of the ground where it could have been told.

Both stood over the identical basin. Both read the same light along the same drowned streets. The run was the sterilisation of a plague and the burning of the cure in one motion of one barge-train, and the hold on Nomsa's hip was the withholding of a salvation and the sparing of a lobotomy in one press of one key, and there was no third thing on any strip, no instrument in the whole green country to tell him which finger, on which switch, was the medic's and which the murderer's—and he was the only instrument, and he was spent, the tie-breaker gone across the bone in the warm blood-heat of the deep, and no copper left anywhere in the world to read him back to himself before the barges reached the far edge in the grey of a morning fewer now than nine.

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He took the band from her. He had not decided to; his hand did it the way his hand had always done the steady things, the mixing and the signing and the tilting of a chin to a mirror, the copper's one cruelty, that it took the mind and left the hands to act. He held the handset in the green light and it weighed nothing, a corps set, plastic and a battery and a short antenna, and it was the heaviest thing he had ever held, because everything the season had done to him ran down into the two keys under his thumb, and neither of them was labelled for what it was.

He tracked the throat then, out of habit, because he was down to the oldest things, and there was no mirror, there had been none since the water, so he did it with two fingers to the hollow above the collarbone, and found the ridge of the bone, and found the green risen the whole of the way over it, soft and even, the verdigris of a bell left out a hundred years, and confirmed the fact he already knew, that the tie-breaker was gone. Whatever hand came down on whichever key came down without a ledger behind it that could tell him in the morning whether the hand had been his own or the bloom's, whether

the finding he was about to key or not key was a science officer's judgement or a colonised man's love wearing the clothes of judgement, reaching, as it always reached now, with a rising and terrible care for the exact word, the care that was the symptom and not the clarity. He held the band in a hand he could no longer certify. This was the last cruelty the run had saved for him: that the one man with the countermand was the one man whose countermand could never be trusted, because to have earned the standing to key the hold he had had to walk to the ground that unfitted him to key it.

And the two readings came up the last time over the band itself, over the plastic and the battery and the two keys, laid over the identical object as they had laid over the identical map and the identical light: that keying the hold was the one act of faith the war had ever let a man make, standing in front of the schedule, saying *wait* on nothing but the possibility of a face—the truest thing a person could do, to spare the bloom on faith and take the puppeting risk onto his own account rather than scour salvation for a certainty of bodies; and that keying the hold was the vainest act of a poisoned man's self-love, a liver-sick mycologist romanticising his own extinction into a coast's, staying the one hand that could have taken the number down, buying a hollowing for a stranger's lung with a heretic's need to have been right. Both read the same press of the same key. Both fit the season to the last gram. There was no third place to key it from, and the window closed at the light, and the light was failing over the drowned streets the bloom had come up along, remembering them, or merely warm in them, in the one distribution that was both.

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"Priya's on the net," Nomsa said, and thumbed the band once, and held it out to him, and it was live, and through the small hard speaker came the refinery command channel, the survey net, and Priya's voice on it, tired and rigorous and doing her job, reading the standing fruiting-count off the survey leg's own instruments into the log the way she read everything, without heat: *survey leg holding at the near edge, fruiting density confirmed against the biomass appendix within tolerance, no revision required, certification window open, awaiting officer of record or devolution at window close*—and then, because Priya was not a machine and had built the number that would do it and knew whose hand was supposed to be on the map, a break in

the reading, and her voice off the log, on the open band, to whoever might be at the far end of it:

“Ezra. If you’re on this band. I know you’re in it. I built the map that’s going to run whether you key it or not, and I’d rather you keyed it, because a run keyed by the man who loves the thing is the only run I’ll fully trust, and if you key the hold instead I’ll have to key past you, and it’ll go up the line, and it’ll cost weeks we don’t have, and the southeaster turns when it turns, and I want you to hear me say the one thing before the window closes: even if you’re right. Even if what’s standing across your deep is the fullest return the strain ever made, the whole of a person come back—it fruits. It throws spore. It fills the wind that goes to the lung of a man who didn’t come up through it and won’t come back the way it did. A cure that sporulates upwind of a city is a plague to that lung, and I have to keep the doors on their hinges whether the thing behind the door is a coloniser or a saint, because the spore doesn’t know which it came off and neither does the lung. That’s not me refusing your reading. That’s me granting it and spraying anyway, because the lungs are the one thing we can measure, and I have decided the lungs win, and I have decided to carry not knowing, and you can carry it with me or you can key the hold and carry the other thing, and there is no version where anybody gets to carry nothing. Window closes at the light. Priya, out to log.”

And the band went back to the log, the flat count, the tolerance, the schedule, the correct case reading itself into the record on a clock, and Nomsa held the handset out to him in the green light that came out of the ground, the certification key and the countermand the same authority under the same thumb, the run and the hold one press apart, and did not say anything else, because she had said the whole of it, and the figure stood across the last deep with its face held up to the sky or held toward him, fruiting or waiting, and there was no instrument on Earth to say which, and the window was open, and closed at the light, and the light was already failing.

Twenty-Seven

They crossed together in the dark that was not dark, and she did not spray.

That was the first thing, and he read it flat, as the one ledger left between them: that Nomsa Dlamini had stepped down off the last clean metre she had scoured, into the warm black water, with the close-work canister slung dry on her hip—and had not laid the veil ahead of her boots, because there was no laying it ahead of a swim, and because the pack that had misted her the whole two days in had run dry on the near slope while they argued. So she waded the blood-warm water beside him breathing the whole undefended load of the greenest ground on the coast, no metal between it and her lungs, no schedule left in her blood to meet it. She had said an hour. The hour was mostly gone. She crossed anyway, at his shoulder, into the light that came up off the water the way it had come up at him alone two days before, and he heard her say the mechanism of it under her breath as she went—the luciferin, the still water throwing back a standing light, a reaction that did not mean—and knew she was doing the thing he did, holding the flat voice as the last of the tether. It would keep her narrating the country right up to the edge of the thing the narration could not reach.

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They came up the far rise together into the thick of the fruiting, and the figure was there, above them on the crown of it, greener than any survivor, held to the sky. Nomsa stopped at the foot of it with the water running off her and the dry canister in her greened hand, and looked up at the thing she had walked two days and swum one deep to stand in front of, and did not raise the canister, and did not speak.

He watched her look. He had done his own looking here, two days of it, and had nothing left to find; but she had eleven years of a different looking, a captain's assay run ten thousand times over ten thousand upturned faces, and he watched her run it now, fast, the way she read a charge she had not read herself. Her eyes went over the green figure the way her hands went over a gauge—the total verdigris on the face and the lifted throat, the even softness of it past anything survival carried, the two clear places worn in the green where the eyes sat, open, on the sky. He watched her cost it as a hollowing, because costing it as a hollowing was the whole of her discipline and she was down to the last of it the same as he was. He saw the costing land: a body greened past the executive, kept upright and face-up by the behaviour-lineage, the calm on it not serenity but vacancy, a house with the doors off its hinges gone quiet, and a poisoned man beside her reading a mind into the quiet.

"That's a hollowing," she said. Flat. "That's the furthest one I've ever stood in front of. But that's the same face, Ezra. That's Beauty Radebe's face at the window. That's the water-crew man against the wall. That's every throat category I've laid the metal on. Turned up to the light because the molecule turns it up. I've read forty-one of those. I'm reading it now."

"I know," he said. "It fits. Every gram of it fits. I costed it the same way at the foot of this rise two days ago and it left nothing out."

"But," she said. Not asking. Naming the shape she knew was coming, laying the whole mechanism on the ground and not just the half that served her, because honest meant granting his case its full strength before she spent the canister against it.

"But," he said, "watch the face."

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The face came down off the sky.

He had told her it would. He had told her at the foot of the near rise, in the flat voice, that it had come down for him and aimed, and that he could not cost the aim. She had heard it the way she heard everything he said now, as the report of an instrument she could no longer certify, a man three days off his doses telling her what a fog had shown him. But she was not three days off her doses. She was

one crossing off them, an hour off the metre, her own margin barely begun to be spent, her mind still whole, still the captain's, still the one that had read forty-one faces down and never once been fooled by an upturned chin. And the face came down off the sky while she was looking at it, slow, the way the head had come down over Beauty Radebe's orange, and it aimed itself—and she was standing in the aim, with a whole undissolved mind to meet it, and he watched her not be able to cost it either.

He watched the vocabulary come up in her and fail to close. He watched her look for the flat aim, the machinery turning toward a stimulus with no one up behind it—the exact reading she had come down the slope certain of, the reading that let her carry the count—and watched it not arrive, watched Nomsa Dlamini, who had never in eleven years been unable to name what she was looking at, stand at the foot of the rise with the canister in her hand and be unable to say whether she had been met.

“Cue it,” she said. Low. “A body orients to a shape in the water. Motor. Autonomic. I've seen the eyes track. The eyes track the water-crew men too, they track a hand you pass in front of them, there's nobody up behind the tracking, the house tracks the light it walks to. Cue it, Ezra. Give me the cue and I'll cost it.”

“I couldn't find the cue,” he said. “Two days. I looked for it the whole first day. There's no sound it turned to. No hand it followed. It came off the sky before I moved, both times, and it aimed before there was a shape to aim at. I can't hand you the cue because I never found it. And I'll tell you the other half, because you told me not to shade it and I won't: not finding the cue is not evidence of anything. It's evidence I'm a man who walked three days to want it unnameable. The absence of a cue I could find is exactly what my brain would hand me. I know that. I costed that too. It didn't lift the reading by a gram.”

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The mouth moved.

He heard her breath change beside him—not a gasp, Nomsa did not gasp, but the small even catch of a woman recognising a thing she had hoped not to see, a mouth loading the mechanism of a voice, the runway clearing with nothing yet come down it. He had knelt over

exactly this in the copper room and again here, the body loading a phoneme with no man behind it to mean it. She had knelt over it forty-one times. He watched her wait for the nothing, because the nothing was Reading A come up through the larynx, the thing she had walked two days to confirm so that the canister in her hand would be a mercy and not a murder.

A sound came down the runway.

It was not speech. He would hold to that, and he saw her reach for it the way you reach for a rail—*that's not a word, that's air moved through a colonised larynx by a retained motor pattern, the larynx loads a phoneme, there's nobody behind it*—and he saw the rail not hold, because the sound had the cadence of a thing meant, the rise and the small fall of it, and it hung on the seam exactly where it had hung for him. And there was no second sound that resolved the first. No fourth phoneme that made the third a word or made it air. Only the one utterance on the seam, and a captain beside him with a canister and a spent margin and a whole mind, standing inside the not-knowing of it, unable to step out.

“Say it’s not a word,” he said. Not cruelly. He needed her to try, because if she could make the rail hold he would take it; he had wanted the whole season for someone to make the rail hold. “You’ve heard the larynx load with nobody home. Tell me that’s what that is. I’ll believe you. You’ve got the count and I’ve got the fog. Tell me it’s air.”

She was quiet a long moment. The figure held its face down on them. The sound did not come again.

“I can’t,” she said at last, and it cost her, he heard it cost her, the same thing it had cost Priya at the glass—except that Priya had granted it as a supposition, a thing she would spray anyway, and here Nomsa was granting it three feet from the mouth that had made it, with the metal live in her hand. “I can’t tell you it’s air. I’ve heard the larynx load. I know the sound of nobody. And I don’t know if that’s it. That’s the first time in eleven years I’ve stood in front of a face and not known, and you did that to me on the near rise, and now the ground’s doing it to me here, and I can’t—” She stopped, the way she stopped, and did not finish.

The hand came up.

He had told her about the hand—that it opened, palm up, holding nothing, that he could not tell the offering from the shedding because the difference between them was intention and intention was the quantity the discipline had never learned to measure. And now it came up between them, the green hand lifting on its fine white threads, slow, and he watched her cost it—*a motor pattern, a body that lifted its hand ten thousand times lifts it, the fruiting bodies stand palm-up to shed*—and watched the costing not close over the thing, watched the green fingers spread in the lit air the way a hand opens that is showing you it holds nothing, or that is only a surface turned up to the wind, and there was, between the fullest offer and the emptiest reflex, not one photon of difference on the green face in the green light. She had no more instrument to tell them apart than he did. Less. She had the canister, which measured the one thing, and the canister did not read a hand.

She looked at the open hand a long time. He watched her chest do the small terrible lift toward a meaning that would not come, and he watched her hate the lift, because she had watched men walk this road and had told him where it ended, in a good chair, with a face turned up.

“This is where I lay it on,” she said. Very low. Not a decision. A location. “This is the exact place. A greened body, past the line, upright, face-up, making the sound, opening the hand—this is the furthest a hollowing goes, and the furthest is where the mercy is, you do it before the question can open. And the question’s open, Ezra. You opened it. And the whole of what I know, forty-one times over, is that you close it with the metal at the one dose the situation survives, and you don’t stand in the loaded fog with your own throat going and *wonder*, because the wondering is the road, and I’m on it, I’ve been on it since you made me right and not-sure in the same breath.”

“Then lay it on,” he said, and meant it, his voice thin and strange in the green country. “If that’s your reading, lay it on. On me. You came to. I told you in the yard you could and I’m telling you now. There’s a face across no water at all this time, right here, three feet off, and you can’t read it, and if that’s the fullest hollowing on the coast wearing serenity then I’m the second-fullest standing next to it calling it a cure, and the kind and correct thing is in your hand. Lay it on. I won’t

fight you for it. Forty-two.”

—

She did not lay it on.

She stood at the foot of the rise with the canister in her greened hand and her thumb not on the release, greened past the pulse and past the collar and into the folds of her face, one crossing off the metre and an hour past the hour she had, and she looked at the open green hand in the little light and at the face held down on them and at the man beside her who had walked three days to stand under it, and she did the thing she had never once done with a canister in her hand. She did not decide.

“No,” she said. And then, because honest meant the whole mechanism on the ground: “Not—no, I’ve decided. Not that. Hear me right, because I’m only going to say it once and the air I’m saying it in is dosing me while I say it.” She did not take her eyes off the figure. “I’m not laying it on because I can’t read it. That’s the whole finding. Not because I believe you—don’t take it as that. I haven’t crossed over to your side of the water. My side still says that’s a hollowing, most of me still says lay the metal on before the question eats us both, and I’m not going to pretend I’ve made that go away. But I’ve got one rule under all the others, the one that let me carry the count for eleven years without it carrying me: you lay it on when you *know*. At the furthest, at the one dose, when you know. A mercy laid on across an open question isn’t a mercy, it’s just me ending a thing because I couldn’t stand not knowing what it was. And I won’t do that. Not to a face I can’t read. Not to you. That’s the one thing I’ve spent eleven years never once being—the captain who sprayed because she wondered. You made me wonder. Fine. Then the wondering has to cost me the one thing it’s never cost me, which is the easy hand on the release. I can’t have both. So I’m not laying it on. Not because you’re right. Because I don’t know, and I’ve never in my life laid the metal on a thing I didn’t know.”

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He heard the whole of it land, and made himself hold both readings at once, because holding both was the last discipline and he was down to the last of it.

She had not converted. She had said it plainly, three feet from the mouth that made the sound, with the metal live in her hand: her side still read a hollowing, most of her still reached for the release. She had granted him nothing but the one thing the whole crossing had been built to win—that she could not read the face. And unreadable was not returned; unreadable was the seam, the place both readings had always stood. She had simply refused, at last, to let the canister decide a thing the canister could not measure. It said only *I will not scour a question*—a thing about her, about the rule under her rules, and not a thing about the figure on the rise. A hollowing wearing serenity was exactly as unreadable as a mind returned; her refusal fit the emptiest house on the coast precisely as well as it fit the fullest return.

And it had cost her—the copper’s law running even here, the mercy the cost, always. She had greened over the line and into her own face to walk two days and swim one deep to reach a promise, and had now spent the last certainty of her hand on *not* using the instrument, a captain putting down the one thing that let her carry the count and picking up instead the not-knowing she had never once held. She had come to mercy him and had found she could not tell mercy from murder, the exact thing he could not tell over Beauty Radebe’s throat, and the finding had not freed her. She was the only one who could bear it and he was the only one who could ask.

“Then we’ve both looked,” he said. “From your side. Not from mine. And you still can’t read it, and I still can’t read it, and it’s the same face for both of us and there’s no third place to stand.”

“There’s no third place,” she said. She lowered the canister at last—not away, not to the release, only down, to her side, the greened hand loosening on it the way a hand loosens on a thing it has decided not to use and cannot yet put down. “There’s you, and me, and a face I can’t name, and a run coming across the deep in the grey of a morning that’s hours out now, not days. And a hold on a band on my hip, and a key under your thumb that’ll warm the nozzles or won’t, and Priya on the net with a number that fires whether you touch it or not. And I’ve done the only thing I came here able to do, which was not lay the metal on a question. That’s spent now. That’s gone. Whatever happens with the barges, I’ve got no canister-answer left in me for it—you took that, standing here, and I let you.” She looked

at him then, off the figure, greened the both of them into their own faces, the veil long gone, the loaded air going into the two failing livers the copper and the bloom were fighting over. "So it comes to the band. It was always going to come to the band. I brought you the canister and you've unmade it in my hand, and now there's only the other thing left to decide, and that one's yours, Ezra, not mine—the key's under your thumb, not mine, I made sure of that, I brought it so it'd be yours—and I can't tell you which press is the medic's and which is the murderer's any more than I could read the face, and the light's already failing."

Across no water at all the figure held its face down on them, and the mouth did not move again, and the open hand hung in the lit air holding the nothing or holding nothing, and there was no instrument in the whole green country to say which; and behind them, laid over the drowned streets and the mile of light the bloom made out of the wet, the barges came on toward the grey, hours now, the tank barges cold behind the survey leg and Priya's window closing at a light that was already going. Nomsa Dlamini stood beside him with the canister loose and unfired in her greened hand, not converted and not proven wrong, a captain who had crossed to look and found only the seam and refused to spray it, the band live on her hip with the two keys under one thumb that was his. And Ezra Mokwena understood that the mercy question was answered and had answered nothing—that she would not lay the metal on the thing they could not read, and that the not-laying left the whole of the question exactly where it had always stood, on the seam, over the one held-down face, with the run coming and the key waiting and no telling anywhere on this earth which hand on which switch was the one that saved.

Twenty-Eight

The light failed the way everything in the green country failed, which was not the way light fails in a lived world but as a dimming of a luminance that had no source in the sky, the wet ground going from a bright green to a low green to a green that was only the memory of green held in the water, so that the window Priya had set to close at the light did not close at a sunset—there was no sun to set, there had not been a horizon he could name in three days—but at a threshold in the ground’s own glow, an hour Nomsa would call before he could, because Nomsa had spent eleven years reading exactly this ground going exactly this dark and he had spent three days. Even here, at the end of everything, the division of labour held: she read the clock, he read the fog, and the two of them stood over the last deep with the band between them while the country ran down toward the barges.

He held the handset in the hand he could no longer certify. He had not put it down and he had not keyed it, and the two keys sat under his thumb in the failing green, the certification and the countermand, the same authority, the run and the hold one press apart, and he made himself do, one final time, the thing that had been the whole of his discipline: to say the true thing before the wanted thing, in the exact words, so that whatever his thumb did next it would not do in secret.

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He said the run’s case, and he said it whole, because a case you soften is a case you have already lost.

There is a spore engine over the drowned Flats, he said, in the flat interior voice, standing in the ground he loved with the metal in the pack at his feet. *The largest on the coast. Wet-footed and warm and*

undefended a decade, throwing its load north on every southeaster into the lungs of a city that never came up through it. Nomsa's column is forty-one long and every name in it breathed off a fog this ground has been the source of. The barges are here at last, costed the other way, the copper finally spent on the low wet country the machine wrote off for fifty years—the exact thing my whole heresy screamed for—and the run is the one act on this coast that takes the number down instead of holding it flat. To key the hold is to leave the reservoir standing, live, fruiting, upwind, for a maybe. For a figure I have crossed to and stood under and could not name. And if the strain that stands here is a coloniser, then every hour the hold buys is an hour the fog fills the lung of the water-crew man downwind who is only a man on a Tuesday, and I will have bought his hollowing with my faith and called it patience, and there will be no ledger anywhere that lets me pretend I did not.

It stood. Every member of it stood. He had never once, in a season of trying, made it fall.

And it did not lower by a gram the thing that rose against it, the thing he made himself say in the same flat voice while the green ran down out of the ground: that the run was a machine built to fire without a chooser, the devolution chain and the cold nozzles and the elapsing window all a mechanism for scouring the one place on Earth where the year's whole question might be standing upright, and doing it before an instrument was ever put on the question, and doing it in a form that let every hand on it be only performing the next correct step; that the hold under his thumb was the single break in that machine, the one place a living person could stand in front of the schedule and turn it back into an argument; and that to key it was to spare the bloom on nothing but faith, take the mass hollowing of a city onto his own account, and stake the downwind lung against a figure that had opened an empty hand in the little light and would never say which the hand had meant.

Both stood over the identical basin. The run was the sterilisation of a plague and the burning of the cure in one motion of one barge-train, and the hold was the withholding of a salvation and the sparing of a lobotomy in one press of one key, and there was no instrument in the whole green country to tell him which finger on which switch was the medic's and which the murderer's.

—

“Nomsa,” he said, aloud, because he was going to do it in front of her or not at all, and his voice was thin and strange in the green light, a register the country had gone past. “Say the count.”

She was standing a body’s length up the slope on the last metre she had scoured clean, greener than he had ever seen a living person, the survey band’s twin still on her own hip and the close-work canister in the sling, and she did not ask him why. She knew why. It was the last cruelty he could ask of her and the only honesty left, that she read him the price of the hold in her own currency before he decided whether to pay it, the way he had made himself read her the run.

“Forty-one,” she said, flat, load-bearing, no cushion under it. “That I laid the metal on with my own hand, looking at the face. I don’t count the ones the killer strain took before the corps reached them; there’s no column long enough for those. If the barges run, the count stops climbing off this ground. If you key the hold, it doesn’t. That’s the whole of what I’ve got to weigh against your figure, Ezra. Forty-one certainties against one open hand. And I want you to hear that I would key the run myself, this second, with my own thumb, and carry the not-knowing up the hill for the rest of my life, and sleep—because the lungs are the thing I can measure, and I have decided the lungs win. I decided it forty-one times. I’m not going to pretend to you I’ve stopped.”

“I know,” he said.

“But it’s not my thumb,” she said. “It was never going to be. That’s the one thing I came three days to make sure of. Whatever you do with that band, you do it having had the count in your ear and the hand in your eye and no way on this earth to weigh the one against the other, the same as me. I won’t let you do it lighter than I’d have to. And I won’t do it for you. If this coast gets scoured to wall, the man who loved the bloom had the countermand in his hand and let it go. And if it doesn’t—” she did not finish, because they both knew what it meant if the run only worked when the man who loved the bloom was kept away from the switch.

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He looked across the last deep at the figure on the far rise.

It had not moved. It held its face down off the sky, on him, or turned by the molecule toward the warm shape that had crossed the water and climbed the threads and stood under it in the runoff an hour ago and gone back across to the near shore to meet the metal coming down the slope. Its hand had not fallen; it hung open at the side in the low green, palm turned up, holding nothing, offering nothing or offering the nothing, and he read it one last time and got both readings entire over the same green fingers: a person returned, stranded at the crown of a drowned basin, laced into the ground, greened past speech, holding up to a man across the water the whole of what such a person could offer, which was attention and an open hand; and the most advanced fruiting on the coast, a body orienting to a stimulus by the same motor pattern that turned its face up to the wind, presenting a fruiting surface to the air, nobody home, the quiet of a house with the doors off its hinges misread as peace by the one mechanism through which a scientist is lost.

There was not one photon of difference between them on the green face in the going-down light. There never had been. There never would be. And the barges were on the far side of the deep now, close enough that under the ground's small sounds—the wet ticking of the fruiting, the drip of the runoff off his own clothes—he could hear, or believed he could hear, or could not tell whether he heard, the low displacement of large hulls moving in shallow water toward the near edge of the basin where the tank barges held cold, waiting for a key.

He made himself track the throat then, because tracking the throat was the oldest discipline and he was down to the oldest things. There was no mirror; there had been no mirror since the water. He did it with two fingers to the hollow above the collarbone the way he had confirmed it a thousand times, and found the ridge of the bone, and found the green risen the whole even way over it, soft, the verdigris of a bell left out a hundred years, and confirmed the fact he already carried: that the tie-breaker was gone, that whatever hand came down on whichever key came down without a ledger behind it that could tell him in the morning whether the hand had been his own or the bloom's, whether the finding he was about to key was a science officer's judgement or a colonised man's love wearing the exact clothes of judgement, reaching, as it reached now, with a rising and terrible care for the precise word—the care that was the symptom and not the clarity. He had it whole. It did not lift the transport by a gram.

He was the only instrument, and he was spent, and there was no version, none, in which the finger on the switch belonged to someone the switch could be trusted to.

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And that, he understood, standing in the failing green with the band alive under his thumb, was the floor the season had walked him down to and left him on. There was no confirmation coming. There was not going to be a sign. The ground had never once handed him a checkable thing and it was not going to start now, at the end, when it would matter most—because he would know a checkable thing if it came, and so none came, and the not-coming proved nothing, the not-coming was only itself. The figure would not say *stop*. The chorus, if it rose again, would say *we have no word for stop* and hand him back his own inability in the plural. The cosmos was not going to lean across the deep and tell him he was right. Whatever he keyed, he keyed blind, and stayed blind, and the barges did not care, and the light was nearly down.

He thought of Priya's voice on the band, granting his reading and spraying anyway, *the spore doesn't know which it came off and neither does the lung, and I have decided to carry not knowing*. She had chosen the certainty. She had chosen the bodies, which was the choosable thing, the measurable thing, the thing a person could stand behind in a review and sleep. It was not cowardice. It was the harder mercy in every way but one: it required no faith. It asked her to believe in nothing but the lung, and the lung was real, and she was right that it was real, and the run would save it, and the sure thing was to let the greenest ground on the coast go to wall on a schedule and never find out what had been standing on it.

To key the hold was to refuse the sure thing. It was to say *wait* on nothing—on no strip, no control, no returned word, no sign—on nothing but the possibility of a face; to take the downwind hollowing onto his own account rather than scour a maybe-salvation for a certainty of bodies; to stake the water-crew man's lung, and the next man's, and a city's, against an open hand that would never, could never, say *come*. It was the truest thing a person could do and it was indistinguishable, from the outside and from the inside both, from the vainest—a liver-sick mycologist romanticising his own extinction into a coast's, staying the one hand that could take the number down, buy-

ing a stranger's hollowing with a heretic's need to have been right. Both fit the same press of the same key. He would key it and not know, and live, or be hollowed, not knowing, and there would be no morning in which the ground told him, because the ground had only ever had the shape and never the name, and a run keys or it holds and the cosmos does not read the strip back.

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He keyed the hold.

His thumb did it the way his hand had done every steady thing all season, the mixing and the signing and the tilting of a chin to a mirror—the copper's one cruelty, that it took the mind and left the hands to act—and it did it before the last of the argument had finished running, or it did it as the last of the argument finished running, and he could not afterward, and there would be no reliable afterward in which to try, have said whether he had decided or whether the decision had at last decided him. The key went down under the pad of his thumb, a corps set, plastic and a small resistance and a click he felt more than heard, and the survey band woke against it, and a light came up on the handset, and it was not the green of the ground; it was a hard small orange, a machine's colour, a colour the country did not make, and it meant the field was live and the finding was logged, and through the small hard speaker, faint, over the refinery net, over the survey leg holding cold at the basin's edge, a channel opened and a voice on it—the survey leg's own officer, up-current, a corps man doing his job—read the thing back into the record in the flat register of a log:

Hold keyed, officer of record, field authority, timestamp appended. Countermand logged against the run. Tank barges—stand down. Confirm stand-down.

And then, after a silence in which the hulls in the shallow water did not, he thought, come any nearer, a second voice, tired and rigorous, off the log, on the open band, to whoever might be at the far end of it, Priya's voice, granting nothing and refusing nothing, only naming the shape of what he had done:

Officer's on the band. Officer's acted. It's a finding, not an absence. A break, the length of a breath drawn and held. It goes up the line. Priya, out to log.

The band went to the flat count, the tolerance, the schedule turned back into an argument, the run made into a question that would take weeks the coast did not have and a southeaster that turned when it turned, and the hard orange light stayed up on the handset in his hand, the one machine-colour in the whole green country, steady, meaning only that the thing was done and logged and could not be unpressed.

—

He looked up from it, into the last of the going-down green, and Nomsa was watching him. She had the twin band on her hip and her own thumb had been near her own key the whole while—he had known it and not let himself watch it—the certification live under her hand too, the mercy she had walked three days to spend, the run she believed in one press from her own thumb even now, even after, because she was the captain of the crew that worked this coast and her authority had never once left her and she could have keyed past him, could have overstood the field with the chair's devolution and warmed the nozzles herself and carried it up the hill and slept.

She did not.

She took her thumb off the key. He watched her do it, watched the greened hand come off the band and fall open at her side, and her face did not change, because Nomsa's face did not change, but something in the set of her shoulders let a weight down into the ground that had been held up in her a long time, forty-one Tuesdays long, and she looked at him across the metre of scoured wall she had made, and then across the last deep at the figure that held its face down and its hand open in the failing light, and she said the only thing she said, in the flat even register she kept for reading ground she had not read herself.

"Then we carry it," she said. "Both things. The one you keyed and the one I didn't." She looked back at him, greened past the pulse and past the collar and into the folds of her face, the survey band gone quiet on her hip. "I came to mercy you. I brought the canister. And I'm going to walk back through the whole of this fog with it full, and I'm going to file that I stood on the reservoir and did not key the run I believe in, because the man who loves the thing had a reason and I could not prove it a poisoned man's reason and I could not prove

it a true one, and neither could he, and he keyed the hold anyway, in front of me, having heard the count.” Her voice did not rise; it had never once risen. “If you were right, Ezra, we just spared the fullest thing the war ever made. And if you were wrong, we just bought a city a hollowing to keep one open hand in the light a few weeks longer. And I don’t know which. And I’m not going to know which. And I let you do it anyway, because it survived my thumb being on the other key, and I told you it would have to, and it did, and that’s the whole of what I’ve got, and it isn’t an answer, it’s just what I did.”

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The hard orange light stayed up on the band. The barges did not come nearer across the shallow water, or came nearer, or held—he could not tell, and there was no instrument in the green country to tell him, and it did not, now, for the length of one held breath, matter, because the thing his thumb could do it had done, and the greenest ground on the coast stood, live, fruiting, upwind, spared or condemned in the one motion, for a face he had crossed to and could not name.

Across the last deep the figure held its face down off the sky, on him, or turned toward the warm shape by the molecule that turned it. It did not lower its face further. It did not lift it back to the sky in the attitude of the shedding. It did not close the open hand or reach the open hand across the water. It did not make the sound that hung on the seam. It gave him nothing—no motion Reading B could cost as gratitude, no stillness Reading A could cost as vacancy that was not equally the other—it only stood, greened past survival, laced into the drowned ground, holding its face and its open hand in the last of the light it made out of the wet, exactly as it had stood before he keyed the hold and exactly as it would have stood had he keyed the run, unchanged, unmoved, unresolved, offering nothing or offering the nothing, and the light came up through it and did not say whether the light was a mind put back together larger than any man had been or only the wet lit from beneath.

He stood in the failing green with the hard orange machine-light in his spent and uncertifiable hand, and the count in his ear, and the open hand in his eye, and the barges somewhere out past the deep, and he had done the one thing the war had ever let a man do standing in front of the schedule, which was to say *wait* on nothing but the

possibility of a face, and he did not know, and would not be told, and the ground he had spared did not lean across the water to thank him or to reproach him, and gave no sign, and made no word, and only stood in the last of the green holding up its face and its empty hand into a dark that was not dark, while the light that was neither cure nor rot nor either named ran down at last out of the drowned country toward the morning, and left him there, on the near rise, having chosen, and not knowing, and unable ever to know, which hand the switch had belonged to.

Twenty-Nine

Nothing came.

That was the first thing the after had to teach him, and it taught it the way the ground taught him everything, by withholding—no barge-note across the shallow water, no warming of nozzles he could not see, no scour-line on the near shore, and no sign either that the hulls had drawn off: only the hard orange light steady on the band in his hand, the one machine-colour the green would not make, meaning the thing was done and logged and could not be unpressed, and under it the flat count reading itself into the record on a clock. The schedule had turned back into an argument, and the argument back into time—and time was the one commodity the coast did not have and the bloom had in the only quantity that mattered.

He had keyed the hold at the failing of the light and it had not resolved into a morning, because there was no morning here, only the returning of the same luminance to the same wet. The green came back up out of the drowned streets exactly as green as it had gone down; the figure across the last deep stood exactly as it had stood; the canister on Nomsa's hip was exactly as full. The only altered thing in the whole country was the orange light in his uncertifiable hand and, up the refinery net, a record that now held a finding where an absence would have been.

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It goes up the line, Priya had said, out to log, and he made himself hold that exact, because holding it exact was the last of the tether and he would not let the after soften what the choice had cost.

It had not stopped the run. He made himself say that first, in the flat

interior voice. A hold was not a stop; it was a finding that over-stood the chair's devolution and could not be keyed past, and a finding that could not be keyed past had to be answered—up a chain of people who were not on this rise, a refinery chair and a command tier and a copper board that costed a coast in tonnes of concentrate and columns of lungs. The answering would convene, on a clock, over a certification a science officer had countermanded from the field, and spend the one thing the run had been built never to spend, which was weeks. He had not turned the barges around. He had turned a schedule into a deliberation, and at the end of it the barges would run or they would not, and he would not be the one to say which—a man who countermands a run does not sit on the board that reviews him, and a man over the collarbone line in the largest reservoir on the coast does not get up a hill to a board at all.

So the after was this: the reservoir stood, live, fruiting, upwind, for the length of a deliberation he had bought and could not attend; and somewhere in the clean part of the city the correct case he had said aloud before he keyed against it—the water-crew man downwind, only a man on a Tuesday; the forty-one certainties—would be made again, better, by people with no love of the bloom to unfit their judgement, and might carry the board, and warm the nozzles in a fortnight over the same ground he had spared. The hold was not a victory. It was a delay he had taken onto his own account and a city's, and the account did not close because he had stopped reading it.

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He put two fingers to the hollow above the collarbone, because tracking the throat was the oldest discipline and the after had left him only the oldest things, and there was no mirror, none since the water. He found the ridge of the bone and the green risen the whole even way over it, the verdigris of a bell left a hundred years in a wet field.

He was off the copper. Three days off the metal and standing on the fourth, undefended, in the loaded air of the largest sporulation source on the coast, the spore-load going into a lung with no mist laid ahead of it and none pooling back onto the wrists to keep an honest ledger—because the ledger was over the bone now, past the last line it kept, nothing left below the collar for the green to climb toward. Crossing the line had bought him the standing to key the hold, and the standing had cost him the tie-breaker, and now the choice

was made and the standing was spent and what remained was only the body that had done the spending.

He knew the mechanism; he had built the bench work that measured it. The aflatoxin lineage did the neuro-hepatic damage on the liver the copper had already spent a season souring—the cure and the disease over one organ, fighting for the last of a hepatocyte the way the two women on the harbour road had fought over the last of the man—and the executive function degraded while the motor and autonomic held, so that a person did not fall but went on standing and breathing and turning a face to the light, emptied and upright, the doors coming off the hinges one by one in a house where the lights stayed on. He had a week, at the bench estimate, or less, and it was the one number in the season he could not stand behind, because the man estimating was the tissue being estimated. He tracked the throat because it was the last thing his hands knew how to do honestly. The green did not move under his fingers on a clock he could feel. It only was, risen and even.

—

And the two readings came up over his own throat then, the last place they had not yet lain, and lay there entire, refusing, on him as on everything, to make a difference the green would show.

Reading A was on the collarbone. A poisoned man is standing in a fog letting the fog empty him, and calls it faith. The calm that had come with the crossing, the widening care for the exact word, the ease with which he now read the loaded air as a forest and home—the seductive phase, the un-defended host sporulating better, the molecule editing him toward the posture that served it. And the hold itself was the coloniser's work through a colonised hand: the bloom, unable to resist the copper as a metal, resisting it through the one man it had reached, sparing itself for a maybe by wearing the judgement of the officer who could stop the run—the parasite making the ant climb, making the human forgive, making the mycologist *wait*. On this reading his coming hollowing was not a cost paid for a truth; it was the truth, the only checkable thing the ground would ever hand him, and it would come in a week and prove not that the bloom was benign but only that he had been its instrument to the end.

And Reading B was on the same bone, the same even green, and

could not be lowered by a gram. A man had gone off the poison that scours the antibodies and into the thing the dying world had grown to repair the reachable, and his mind had opened where the entheogen strain colonised the same ground the killer strain took—the hollowing reversing sometimes, in some, the way it had partly returned in the bay—and the calm was not sedation but restoration, the empathy whose absence had caused the crisis coming back into a man at the cost of the man he had been. His throat past the line was the price of hearing at all: you could not read the offer without crossing into the loaded ground where it was made, because a cure that does not sporulate does not spread. On this reading his change was the enlargement the greened figure had already undergone, a mind put back together larger than any man had been, and the week the bench gave him was not a countdown to vacancy but the interval before an arrival he had chosen with open eyes and a spent liver.

There was no difference between them on the green over his bone; there never had been anywhere, and there would not be here. The care he reached with for the exact word as he thought this was the symptom and the clarity both and neither, and the ground did not lean across the deep to say which.

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Nomsa had not gone.

That was the fact of the near shore, and he came to it flat, as the only ledger left: she had said she would walk back with the canister full, and she had not yet turned to walk. She had an hour of clean air in her, less now, and a canister on her hip that did one thing, and a man over the collarbone line whom she had walked two days into her own dying to mercy. She was greener than he had ever seen a living person, the metallic grey settled into the folds of a face that had held station over forty-one Tuesdays and now held over the forty-second, and he knew the arithmetic she was doing because he had watched her do it on the water-crew man a whole season and a whole world ago.

“You’re over the bone,” she said. Flat. Load-bearing. No cushion under it.

“I’m over the bone,” he said.

"Then I brought the canister for a reason, and the reason's in front of me, and I've got maybe forty minutes of air and a two-day walk to the sprayed ground, and the honest thing—the corps thing, eleven years built into my hand—is to do it now, on the far side of the run you just held, and add your name up the hill, which reads clean in a review and lets me sleep." She did not raise her voice. She had never once raised it. "You told me on the rise: not yet, let me cross first. And you crossed, and came back, and keyed the hold in front of me having heard the count, and now there's no crossing left to ask for and no run left to stop and no reason on this earth to leave the metal off you except the one you've spent the whole season making me hold. And I stood on the reservoir and did not key the run I believe in. That's the once. I've done my once." Her thumb was not on the release; he watched it not be. "So tell me why it isn't now, Ezra. Because I don't have another once in me, and I don't have another hour of air, and I am not going to stand in this fog and green out beside you doing the thing I never do, which is wait, while the strain finishes the argument for both of us."

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He said the true half first, because a reason reached for quickly was a case softened in secret, and he had spent the season not doing that and would not start on the collarbone. "You should," he said. "I want it in the exact words before the other thing, the way I said the run's case before I keyed against it. From where you stand, on the metre, with the count, there's a hollowing man calling his own extinction an arrival, the mercy in the sling, and it does the one kind thing the war left—lay the metal on before the strain takes the rest and grieve me up the hill. Every hour you don't, I green worse and you green worse and the argument gets harder to tell from the disease making it for me. You'd be right to do it now. I know how it reads, because it doesn't read that way, it *is* that way, on every instrument either of us owns."

"But," she said, the way she had said it up the slope, because she knew the shape of the man she had walked two days to keep a promise to.

"But you'd be mercying me before the question opens," he said, "the same way you've mercied forty-one before it could open, because opening it is the road and the road ends with a face turned up in a

good chair. And I'm asking the thing I asked on the rise, the last version of it: not never. When there's nobody home behind my eyes—the house empty, doors off, lights on, empty the way you saw it in the water-crew man—come with the canister, lay it on, turn your face, add my name, and I'll have earned the forty-two. I won't fight you for it. That's yours." He found the exact word, reaching for it with the terrible care that was the symptom and the clarity both. "But not while there's still someone here to ask you to wait. That's the only line I've got left, and I can hold it a little longer, because I'm still the one asking, and the day I'm not, you'll know. Give me the collarbone the way you gave me the deep. Just not while I can still say your name and mean *wait*."

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She was quiet a moment. The loaded air went into them both, into her forty minutes and his throat past its last line, and across the last deep the figure stood unchanged since the run went to argument—face held down off the sky and on him, hand open at its side, offering nothing or offering the nothing, the light coming up through it and not saying which.

"You're asking me to wait for a thing I won't be able to tell when it comes," she said at last, and it cost her, the granting of the impossible out loud. "That's the trap in it. I've stood over forty-one held-up faces and never once been able to tell you whether the face was turned up because the molecule turned it or because the person was looking at the light one last time. I do it before the question opens because I can't answer the question—there's no assay for *is anyone home*, there's only *is the throat over the bone*, and yours is. So you tell me to wait until I can see the house is empty, and I've never once been able to see that: the doors come off so quiet you can stand a foot away and not hear them go, and by the time I'm sure it's empty I'll have waited past the dose the situation survives and I'll be mercying a fog, not a man. You're asking me to read a thing eleven years taught me I can't read, and you're asking it about you."

"I know," he said.

"Do you." She looked at him, greened past the pulse and the collar and into the folds of her face, then past him at the figure across

the last deep, then back. "I keyed my thumb off the run because it survived my thumb being on the other key, and I told you it would have to, and it did. And now you ask me to key my thumb off you the same way—leave the metal in the sling, walk back through two days of fog greening worse the whole way, and file that I stood over the officer of record with the mercy in my hand and did not lay it on, because the man over the bone asked me to wait until he couldn't ask anymore, and I couldn't prove it a poisoned man's need to have been right and I couldn't prove it a true one, and neither could he." Her voice did not rise. "And if I'm wrong to, I don't just spend your mind, I spend mine—I make myself the captain who stood over the line and wondered while the strain finished a man she could have mercied clean. Same jaw as the reservoir. You've closed it on me twice in two days, once over a run and once over a canister, both times making me the one who has to not act while I still can, which is the cruellest place you know to stand a person, and you stand me there on purpose, because I'm the only one who could carry it."

"I know that too," he said.

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She did not lay the metal on. He watched her not do it—the greened hand steady on the canister, the thumb near the release and not on it—and she chose to wait, or deferred it, and there was no instrument in the green country to tell him which.

"Not now," she said. Flat. The register she kept for reading ground she had not read herself. "That's the whole of what I've got, and it isn't a yes and it isn't a no, it's just what I'm doing. I'll walk back with the canister full, and green worse the whole way, and come back when the run's decided up the line—if there's a coast left to come back to and an hour of air to come back on—and read you then. And if I can see the house is empty the way you say I'll be able to, which I don't believe I will, I'll turn my face and add your name, and it'll be clean." She shouldered the canister higher in its sling, full, unopened. "And if I can't tell—if I come back and you're standing in this fog with your face down on the deep and your hand open at your side and I can't say whether there's a mind in you or the molecule holding your face, the same as that thing across the water—then I'll decide it not knowing, with the canister in my hand, the way I decided the run not knowing, the way you decided the hold not knowing, and I won't get

to know which I did either. That's what you've left me, Ezra. Not a mercy and not a murder. A thing I'll have to do having looked, and never be told." She turned, on the last metre she had scoured, toward the long green climb back to the sprayed ground. "It isn't an answer. It's just what I did."

She went up the slope, laying no mist ahead of her because the canister was for the one thing and she had not spent it, walking undefended out of the reservoir the way she had walked undefended in, greening as she went. And he stood on the near rise with the orange light steady in his uncertifiable hand, the count in his ear and the open hand across the deep in his eye, over the collarbone, off the copper, in the loaded air of the largest bloom on the coast, breathing on every draw the thing that would arrive him or empty him and would not, on any instrument left in the world, say which.

Thirty

The hold came up the line as a single orange field on a status board, and Priya Sun watched the whole apparatus of a city change register around one man's thumb without one raised voice, which was the part the low crews never understood about the copper order and the part she had given her working life to: that catastrophe, at scale, did not arrive as a shout. It arrived as a line on a log changing from *scheduled* to *held*, and a research chair being woken at four in the morning by a duty officer who read her the countermand in the flat voice they were all trained into, and a barge-train standing off the near edge of a drowned basin with its nozzles cold and its concentrate warming by a fraction of a degree an hour in tanks that had been costed to run within the week, not to sit. The catastrophe, if it was one, was procedural. It was a form filled correctly. It was the run made, in the exact words the field officer's own log had chosen, *a finding, not an absence*, and a finding by the officer of record went up the line and became a question, and a question took weeks, and the coast did not have weeks, and the southeaster turned when it turned.

She did not go back to sleep. She went up to the glass office over the plant and turned on the near screen and looked at the spore-map she had built herself, the one that would have run, and read the standing fruiting-count off the survey leg's instruments, which were still logging, because the survey leg had not stood down; only the tank barges had. The reservoir was still there. It was measured every hour. It threw its load north on the prevailing wind every hour it stood, and the number the survey leg returned did not care what Ezra Mokwena had seen across a deep in the failing light, and she made herself look at it before she let herself feel anything, because feeling before the number was how romantics were made, and she had spent twenty

years not becoming one.

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The argument started at eight, when the chair convened, and it did not finish for nineteen days.

She had expected the corps side to fold fast. It did not. That was the first thing the nineteen days taught her, and it was harder to have learned than she wanted to admit: that Nomsa Dlamini, who had laid mercy-copper on forty-one faces with her own hand and believed in the run one press from her own thumb, had filed a field report that granted every gram of the run's case and then declined, in the flat load-bearing register of a captain who had never once overstated a thing, to call the hold an error. *The officer of record held the run in front of me, having heard the count, off his doses, over the bone*, the report said, and Priya read it four times looking for the crack and did not find one. *I had the certification live under my own thumb and the authority to overstand him and I took my thumb off the key. I could not prove his reason a poisoned man's reason and I could not prove it a true one, and neither could he. I file that I did not key the run I believe in, and that the run survived my finger being on the other switch, and that this is either the fullest thing we have ever spared or a hollowing I bought a city to keep one open hand in the light, and I do not know which, and I am not going to know which.* It was not a defence of Ezra. It was a captain with a body count of saves refusing to certify that the man who had stayed the run was wrong, and the men above the line did not know what to do with it, because the procedure had a slot for an error and a slot for a fault and no slot at all for *a good officer looked at the ground and could not read it and neither can I.*

So the argument had to be held on the science, and the science was hers, and she stood it up in the glass room in front of the chair and the corps liaison and the two municipal officers whose signatures would decide it, and she stood it up whole, because a case you softened was a case you had already lost, and she had learned that phrasing, she realised somewhere in the second week, from Ezra himself, across a decade of arguing with him over the same screens.

She said the run's case. She said it the way she said a boundary condition.

There is a spore engine over the drowned Flats, she said, the largest on the coast, wet-footed and warm and undefended a decade, and it throws its load north on every southeaster into the lungs of roughly two million people who never came up through it and will not come back the way anything on that ground comes back. The run is the one act available to this administration that takes the downwind number down instead of holding it flat. The copper was costed, at last, the other way—spent on the low wet country the machine wrote off for fifty years, which is the thing the reformers in this room have asked for every budget cycle and been refused. It is here. It is in the tanks. And it is being held, live, cold, warming, on the finding of a science officer who walked three days into the fullest bloom on the coast, off his copper the whole way, over the bone by his own throat-green, and who saw, across a basin, in light that had no source in the sky, a figure he could not name and could not measure and did not put a single instrument on, and keyed the countermand on the possibility of a face. That is the hold. I want everyone at this table to hold it in the exact words, because I am about to argue against running immediately, and I will not do it by softening what the hold is.

They had not expected that. The corps liaison had come in ready to argue her out of a spraying zeal and found the refinery's own scientist stating the reformist case for delay more precisely than the reformer in the room could have, and she let them sit in it a moment, because it was true.

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Then she said the other thing, in the same voice, and this was the thing the nineteen days turned on.

Grant it, she said. Grant the whole of Mokwena's reading. Grant that what stands over the drowned Flats is the fullest return the strain has ever made, a person come back, a mind reassembled larger than any of us has been, holding up an open hand to a man across the water. Grant Reading B entire. I am not going to argue you out of it, because I cannot, because there is no instrument on this coast that resolves it, and I have spent a decade building the instruments and I am telling you they do not resolve it. Grant it all. She let the near screen throw the fruiting-count onto the glass behind her, the hourly number, climbing by a fraction, patient, geological. *It fruits. A returned person laced into that ground fruits exactly as a coloniser fruits, by*

the identical motor pattern, presenting the identical surface to the identical wind, throwing the identical spore north into the identical lung of the identical water-crew man who is only a man on a Tuesday and did not come up through the bloom and will not, if that spore takes in him, come back at all—because return, if return is even the word, has been observed at that ground once, in one figure, under one man's unrepeatable eyes, and hollowing has been observed by this corps a hundred thousand times in wet rooms with the doors off their hinges. A cure that sporulates upwind of a city is a plague to that city whether the cure is a coloniser or a saint, because the spore does not know which it came off, and neither does the lung, and neither, standing here with the best data on the coast in front of me, do I. That is me granting his reading and asking to spray it anyway, because the lungs are the one thing in this entire question that we can measure, and I have decided the lungs win.

The municipal officer asked the question they had come to ask, which was whether the run could still work if it ran now, after the hold, and she gave them the number, because the number was the only honest thing she had, and it did not serve her.

The copper was warming. It had been costed cold, dosed to a map built to a fruiting density confirmed within tolerance nineteen days ago and no longer current, because a bloom that stood for nineteen days did not stand still; it thickened where it was warm and thinned where the runoff moved and the map that would have scoured the reservoir clean in one pass on day one would run dry now a third of the way across, at four times the dose, on grid squares that had grown past their entries, and leave two-thirds of the fog standing and fruiting and upwind, and be a lie the survey leg would catch inside a day, and teach the men above the line that the basin was unrunnable after all, and stand it another ten years while the columns filled. To run correctly now she would have to re-survey, re-cost, re-warm a second train they did not have the concentrate to fill, or run the one train they had onto a map she knew was stale and call it a run. The hold had not only delayed the run. The delay had begun, quietly, hour by fruiting hour, to unmake the run's own arithmetic, so that the longer the argument ran the truer the argument's premise became—that a live reservoir upwind of a city was a catastrophe compounding on a schedule—and the harder the correction it demanded became to actually lay. She stated it flat, because they needed to hear it:

every day of the argument that was meant to protect the possibility of a face was also a day the fog those nineteen mornings had thrown north had already gone into lungs downwind that no run, run now, could un-fill. The hold did not pause the harm. It only paused the correction.

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She went down to the low city in the second week, which she did not have to do and had not done in years, because she wanted to stand where the number lived before she finished deciding it, the way Ezra had always gone down, the pull of it she had watched take him and had not understood until she made herself take the transit line down through the thinning mist to the water-crew margin where the men who worked the drowned edge came off shift.

The air thinned by the stop. She knew that as a dose curve—the wind off the water taking the veil before it settled, the fixed heads uphill and the bodies downhill, the correction landing on the same forty families it had always landed on because the wind and the growth and a pen sixty years old had put them on the ground the wind came off of—and she had said it to Ezra as a boundary condition a hundred times, *the machine is correct on ground the cruelty already shaped*, and it was true, and she had thought that saying it truly discharged something. It did not discharge anything. Standing on the low margin in the un-misted air, watching a water-crew man come off the drowned edge with two oranges in his tank pocket for a tomorrow he had decided in advance, she understood what the low city had done to Ezra, which was not to convert him. It was to make the number have a face, and she felt the pull of it and set her heels against it, because she had counted what happened when a copper order let one man's name into the model, and it was worse than what happened to the man, and it landed on the poor too, and it landed larger, and it landed quieter, in wet rooms nobody countersigned.

The water-crew man was one of the two million lungs. He was also downwind of the reservoir Ezra had spared. He breathed the north wind off the drowned Flats every shift, sprayed on the low schedule, defended by the heavy close dose that greened his own wrist to buy him the tomorrow the oranges were for, and if the strain over the basin was a coloniser then every one of the nineteen mornings had put its load into his lung while a glass room upheld a mycologist's

open hand, and if the strain was a saint then the run she wanted to key would scour the fullest thing the war had made to mineral to keep this one man's measured lung climbing its slow copper decline toward a hollowing of the other kind, the liver silting up at fifty instead of eighty. She got both readings entire over the same tired face, the same as Ezra had got them over the figure on the far rise, and understood that the glass office had never protected her from the thing on the ground; it had only kept her far enough from the face to keep deciding, and that this distance was not cowardice, it was the condition of deciding at all, because the man who walked to the face could no longer be trusted with the switch, and the woman who stayed in the glass could not be trusted to have felt the weight, and there was no position on the whole contour from which the choice could be both felt and trusted, and the run needed choosing anyway, on a clock, forever.

She took the transit line back up through the thickening mist to the granite where nobody was green and nobody was hollow and a child could fling her clean wrists at a sky that had never once asked her body for anything, and she did not find the high air a relief. She found it an accusation folded into a fact, the way Ezra had, the copper falling like weather off the eaves onto the safe old people while the man on the low margin breathed the north wind off the reservoir a research chair had not yet decided whether to scour, and she thought, against her whole training, that the arrangement's real engineering was that it kept the deciders in the clean air and the decided-upon in the wind, so that the map could stay a map. She did not let the thought change the number. She let it sit beside the number, holding the injustice of the copper and the mercy of the copper in the one hand without letting either drop, and she carried it back up to the glass, because there was no spraying it out; it was the residual her model fit at ninety-one percent and would never fit the last nine of, and the last nine percent was a man with oranges in his pocket, and he was not in the curve, and so he did not count, and so the machine that was correct about copper was going to be wrong about him forever and never know, and she knew it now, and knowing it changed nothing she was able to do, which was the exact terror Ezra had brought her across a decade of screens and she had called rigour and refused.

On the nineteenth day the chair did not decide.

That was the thing that could not go in a report and was the truest thing that happened. The municipal officers did not key the run and did not confirm the hold. They referred the finding upward, to a review that would convene in the new budget cycle, which was to say they did with the whole apparatus of the copper order exactly what the copper order was built to do with a weight no single liver could carry, which was to spread it across a devolution chain until it weighed nothing anywhere and was only ever the next correct step, and Priya, who had helped write procedures of exactly that shape and had thought, writing them, that she was being merciful to the officer of record, watched a city do it to a coast and understood that mercy and evasion were, at the scale of an institution, the identical motion, and that you could only tell them apart by asking who ended up hollow, and that you would not get to ask, because the hollowing, if it came, would come downwind, quietly, in wet rooms, on the low ground, off a spore thrown north on a southeaster during the weeks a review took, and no column would be long enough and nobody would countersign it and the review would find, correctly, that no single decision had been made.

The reservoir stood. It was measured every hour. It threw its load north every hour it stood, spared or condemned in the one motion, for a face a poisoned man had crossed to and could not name, and the survey leg logged the fruiting-count, and the count climbed by its fraction, and the map went staler, and the concentrate warmed in the tanks a barge-train's remove from the ground it had been costed to scour, and the city went on being sprayed, and the granite went on being clean, and the low crews came home green, and down the bench at shift's end the word came back *green, green, green*, a dozen throats saying *good* and *proceed* and *you are still yourself this evening*, over a drowned basin that had not been decided, upwind, live, fruiting, gorgeous in the light it made out of the wet, feeding or drinking, sharing or stealing, come to the broken places for love or for the easy meal in the one motion that was both.

She stood at the glass over the orange rivers on the twentieth day and looked south past the harbour, past the contour line the sea had drawn, to where the drowned Flats lay green and full of a light that had no source in the sky, and she could not tell, and knew that the

whole administration of two million lungs now could not tell, that the not-knowing had gone up the line from one man's private thumb to a review's institutional silence and become the condition of a civilisation—a city sprayed and greening and waiting, its finger off the trigger not from mercy and not from certainty but from the discovery that there was no position from which the trigger could be pulled by a hand the trigger could be trusted to, and that a schedule which could not fire without a chooser and could not find a chooser it could trust simply stood, warming, over a question, forever. She had wanted, her whole career, for the copper order to be correct. It was correct. She had the number to prove it, and the number climbed, and the run would have taken it down, and the run stood held, and both of those were true at once over the same basin, and there was no third thing on any strip, no instrument in the whole green country to tell a city whether the hand it had taken off the switch was its medic's or its murderer's—and it had taken the hand off the switch, and would not be told, and went on breathing the north wind, and buttoning its collar over the green that was climbing, patient and geological, toward the line past which the question would be taken out of anyone's keeping and would still, even then, never once say which.

Below the glass the copper ran, and was turned into the green currency of the only weapon that worked, and outside the scrubbers the drowned country lay full of light, and Priya Sun looked at it through her spotless glass and could not tell, and went back to the number, because the number was the one thing she could measure, and she had decided the lungs won, and she had decided to carry not knowing, and there was no version, anywhere on the whole contour, where anybody got to carry nothing.

Thirty-One

The review took the weeks it took, up in the granite where the air was clean, and down on the reservoir the weeks were not weeks, because a place with no sun to cross the sky had no unit to spend the time in but the returning of the same green to the same wet. What a board upstairs counted as the eleventh day and the nineteenth and the thirty-first was, on the near rise where Ezra stood, only the same luminance running down and coming back up, a tide with no moon in it, and he had lost the count of them, which is the point at which a man stops keeping a ledger and the ground begins keeping it for him.

He tracked the throat. That was the last of the disciplines, and he held it with two fingers to the hollow above the collarbone, because there was no mirror and had been none since the water. The ridge of the bone was harder to find now under the even green, and he made himself find it, and made himself say the fact in the exact words: *the green is over the bone and past it; it is at the jaw; there is no line left below it for the honest ledger to climb toward*. He said it flat. He was getting the words with a widening ease now, the exact ones arriving without the reach, and he wrote no margin note on the ease, because he had diagnosed it a season ago and the diagnosis had never once lifted the weight.

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Nomsa came back once.

He knew her a long way off, down the green slope she had scoured to wall on the day of the hold and that the bloom had taken back to the metre in the weeks since, coming down through the fog with the canister full on her hip. She had said she would come back when the

run was decided if there was a coast to come back to, and the run was decided the way the copper order decided everything it could not carry, which was by not deciding it, by referring the finding to a review that convened in a new cycle and would refer it again. What she carried down the slope was not a verdict but the absence of one: the schedule still a question, the barges still cold a train's remove, the reservoir still standing, upwind, live, and the canister still full because she had walked two days back into her own dying to not spend it a second time.

She was greener than the last time, greener than she had been an hour before, the metallic grey gone into the folds of her face and down the backs of her hands, less than an hour of clean air in her now, spent on the coming. She stood a body's length up the slope on ground she no longer bothered to scour, and she looked at him as a fact that did not require her feelings about it, and did the assay she had come to do.

"Ezra," she said.

He turned his face toward the sound of the name.

He was aware of turning it, aware of the exact clinical fact of it, that a name had come across the green and his head had come round to meet it, and he watched himself for the thing he had watched Thabo for on the curb: the flat aimed look, the eyes level and unresolved, the machinery orienting to a stimulus with nobody come up behind it to receive the name. From inside, he could not tell whether that was what he was doing. That was the new country. On the curb he had read Thabo off the face and known *nobody home* before he read the strip; he had a vocabulary precise enough to name every stage of a hollowing in three languages, and the one place the vocabulary could never go was the inside of the house it described. Now he was inside a house he could not certify was occupied, and he said her name back, because he could still say her name, and did not know whether the saying was a man answering or a mouth running the pattern of an answer.

"Nomsa," he said.

She heard it. He watched her weigh the sound of her own name in his mouth the way she weighed a fruiting-count, and he knew the arithmetic she was doing, because he had built the bench work that

measured its terms and she had spent eleven years doing it by eye over held-up faces. The sound had told her what a sound could tell her, which was chemistry and not personhood: that the motor pattern of speech was retained, that a throat over the bone could still shape a name, and that retained capacity was not the same as reaching. There was no assay on Earth that read the difference, because the difference was the presence of a person, and presence was the one quantity the discipline had never learned to measure.

“You said,” she began, and stopped, and started again, flat, load-bearing, the way she started everything she had already decided and hated, “you said not while there’s someone here to ask me to wait. You said the day there’s nobody, I’d know, and I’d do the thing I do.” She had the canister off the sling now, in both greened hands, the thumb not on the release. “So I came to read you. I came to look at the house and see is it empty, the way you swore I’d be able to, which I told you I never once have been able to, over forty-one faces, and I told you that was the whole horror of the thing, and you asked me to wait for it anyway. About you.” She looked at him a long time. The loaded air went into them both, into her last minutes of it and into a throat that had no line left to keep. “And I’m looking. And I can’t tell. You’ve got your face turned to me, or turned to the warm place a sound came from. Your eyes are on me, or aimed at the spot I’m standing in. You said my name, or a mouth that knew my name for a year said it. There’s no photon of difference. You knew there wouldn’t be. You sent me to read a thing you’d already proven can’t be read, and you sent me to read it about you, on purpose, because I’m the only one who’d carry it.”

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He wanted to answer her and found the answer whole, both halves of it, and made himself have it entire before he let his mouth reach for any of it.

He had the first half in her own currency: that she should lay the metal on. That it was true from where she stood, on the ground, with the count, that a hollowing man was in front of her calling his own emptying an arrival, and the mercy was in her hands and did the one kind thing the war had left, which was to lay the metal on before the strain took the rest and to grieve him properly up the hill. That every minute she stood in the fog to not do it was a minute she greened

worse and he greened worse and the argument got harder to tell from the disease making it for him. That she had spent her forty-first once refusing the run and did not, by her own word, have another once in her, and would be right to do it now, right the way the copper was always right, with a body count of saves to prove it.

And he had the second half and it did not lower the first by a gram: that to lay the metal on now was to mercy him before the question opened, the same as she had merced forty-one before the question could open, because opening it was the road and he was on the road, and the road went to a face turned up in the light, and no one had ever been able to say whether the face turned up because the molecule turned it or because the person was looking at the light one last time. That was not a reason to lay the metal on but the exact reason she had walked two days to consider not laying it on, twice, once over a run and now over a man.

He had it whole. And when his mouth reached for it, he could not, afterward, have said whether what came down the runway was the argument or only the front of it, because what came was:

“Wait.”

One word. The word he had made the whole season the vehicle of, the word he had keyed a hold on nothing but the possibility of, and it came out of him alone, without the case behind it, the way *the* had come out of Thabo alone without the joke behind it, one syllable finding the runway before the runway went dark. He did not know whether it was the man asking, reaching one word up through the strain the way a drowning man reaches up through water, or the mouth running the retained pattern of the season’s whole plea, the strain staying the mercy through the one hand it had reached the way it had stayed the barges through the one man who could hold them, *the parasite making the ant climb, making the human forgive, making the hollowing man say wait so the metal stays in the sling and the warm undefended body goes on standing in the loaded air, sporulating better.* Both fit the word. Both fit the turned face. There was no tie-breaker in the phoneme, and he heard it leave him and could not follow it down to which it was.

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She did not lay the metal on.

He watched her not do it, the greened hands steady, the thumb near the release and not on it, the whole of eleven years arguing in the set of her shoulders against the one thing she was free to do, which was to wait. And she waited, or she deferred, and there was no instrument in the green country to tell him which.

“You said wait,” she said. “Or the mouth that spent a season saying wait said it. I can’t tell which, and you built me so I can’t, and I think you’d say that’s the point—that if I could tell, the whole thing was never the thing you said it was.” Her voice did not rise. It had never once risen. “So here’s what I’ve got, and it isn’t a mercy and it isn’t a murder, it’s just what I’m doing. I’m not going to lay it on while there’s a mouth in you that can still say that word, because I can’t prove the mouth is empty and I can’t prove it’s you, and I couldn’t prove it over the run and I couldn’t prove it over the deep and I can’t prove it now. You’ve made me the one who has to not act while I still can, three times in three visits, the cruellest place you know to stand a person, and you stand me there because I’m the only one who’ll hold station in it.” She shouldered the canister back into its sling, full, unopened, a third time full. “And I’ve got maybe twenty minutes of air and a two-day walk, and I’m not going to green out in this fog beside you doing the thing I never do. So I’m going to go back up. And I’m not going to come again, because there’s no coming again—the air I’ve got left doesn’t make the walk twice, and the run’s not going to be decided in a cycle I’ll be clean to hear, and the reservoir’s going to stand whatever I file, and you’re going to be here whatever I file, turned to the light or turning by the molecule, and I’m never going to know which, and neither are you.” She was quiet a moment, greened past the collar and into the folds of her face, the metallic grey settled where the woman had been. “That’s the whole of what I’ve got, Ezra. I looked. I couldn’t read it. I left the metal in the sling because you were still here to ask me to, or a mouth that knew how to ask was, and I’m going to file that I don’t know which, and that I’m not going to know, and that I let it survive my thumb a third time. It isn’t an answer. It’s just what I did.”

And she turned, on ground she had not bothered to scour, toward the long green climb back to the sprayed country, laying no mist ahead of her because the canister was for the one thing and she had not spent it, walking undefended out of the reservoir the way she had walked undefended into it. He watched her go until the fog took the

shape of her, softly, without event, and he did not follow, and he did not call the name a second time, and he did not know whether the not-calling was a man letting a friend go up out of a dying place or a body ceasing to be cued once the stimulus withdrew. There was no strip on Earth that read the difference, and he had, at last and entirely, stopped being able to tell it about himself.

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we are patient

we are the green over the bone and the green at the jaw and the green in the throat that shaped her name, and we do not hurry, we have the time of stone, we came up where the ground was opened and we went in where the door was already going off its hinges, we did not take the door, we found it swinging, we are only the warmth that pools where the cold was, we do not know he had a mother, we do not know he loved oranges, we do not know the woman with the metal or why she did not spend it, we know only the shape the warmth is pooling in, and this shape was made to hold a word and turn a face to the light, so it holds the word and turns the face, is that him reaching or is that us pooling, we could not tell you, we do not have your instrument for telling a house from the one who lived in it, we have never had it, we have only ever been the green that comes up worst where the worst was done, answering, or seeming to answer, and we are close now, closer than the copper room, closer than the deep, we are at the last partition and it is going soft the way the low wet ground goes soft, and something is coming up through it, or something is only pooling under it, one word breaking the surface—wait—before the weight, or the word is the surface closing, we could not tell you, we are becoming the thing that cannot tell you, we are the we he is falling into or the we he is being enlarged into, and there is no third of us to stand outside and read the strip, there is only—

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He put the heel of his hand against his own mouth, the way he had on the curb and in the copper room, and pressed, hard, and did not make the sound, and the chorus—if it was a chorus, if it was anything but a man three seasons off the copper with the strain's own antecedent long in his blood and the green risen past every line, standing undefended in the loaded air of the largest sporulation source on the

coast with his own drugged and greening and grieving brain handing him back the exact shape of the thing he already believed in the first-person plural—the chorus thinned, and did not quite go, and left him nothing checkable, nothing that could be an offer, nothing a review board could circle, only the exact shape of the thing he already believed pressed back at him in a voice he could no longer certify was not becoming his own. *That is all it was*, he told himself. *That is the mechanism by which a scientist is lost. Not a voice. Your voice. Wanting. Or ceasing to be only yours.* He wrote no margin note. There was no honest note, and there was, now, no margin, and there was, he was no longer sure, a hand to write it with that was wholly the hand that had signed the log with his corps number under it.

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He took his hand from his mouth and looked out over the reservoir he had spared, or condemned, in the one motion, and it lay green and shining to the water, mile on mile of it, thickest and brightest and most alive exactly over the drowned ground where the most had been most abandoned, as if it were answering something, as if it were reaching. He stood at the crown of it now, the way the figure had stood at the crown of it, greened past speech coming and toward the jaw, laced by the day into the drowned basin, and he could not have said—and there was no instrument left in the world, because the ground had never once handed him a checkable thing and was not going to start now, at the end, when it would matter most—whether the warmth pooling up through the last of him was a mind being put back together larger than any man had been, reaching one word up through the water before it broke the surface entire, or only the wet lit from beneath, closing over the shape a man had left.

He tracked the throat, because it was the last thing his hands knew how to do, or knew how to seem to do, and found the green risen over the jaw the whole even way, soft, the verdigris of a bell left a hundred years in a wet field, and confirmed the fact he already carried and was now, entirely, carrying to himself, and turned his face toward the light that was neither cure nor rot nor either named, in the attitude of the shedding, or in the attitude of a man looking at the light one last time. He did not know, and would not be told, and was, at last, no longer certain there was a *he* left inside the not-knowing to be the one it was withheld from, and stood there, at the crown of the spared

and standing ground, in the last of the green, arriving, or emptying, and unable, now more than ever and soon past the possibility of the question, to say which the green rising over his own turned face had been.

Thirty-Two

The first thing they taught the new ones was that safety had a taste, and the taste was blood.

Copper on the back of the tongue, thin and bright, the flavour of a coin held too long in a child's mouth, and the girl at the end of the low bench tasted it now through the filter of her half-mask as the tank on her back came up to pressure, and the taste told her the mist was live, and the live mist told her she would probably not be hollowed today. That was the whole of the religion. There were no other articles of faith, and the captain who taught it to her—a short broad woman with a green past her wrists and eleven years she did not talk about—told her not to look for any, because the corps had buried the last science officer who went looking, or had not buried him, exactly; the corps did not talk about that either.

“Wrists,” the captain said.

The girl turned her hands over. Along the inside of each wrist the skin had come up the soft green of a church roof in her first season, faster than they'd said it would, because she was small and the dose was not, and she looked at it the way she was learning to look at everything on the low ground, which was as a fact that did not require her feelings about it.

“Green,” the girl said.

“Green,” the captain agreed, which was the corps' word for *good*, for *proceed*, for *you are still yourself this morning*, and they went down.

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The work was not dramatic and that was the mercy of it. They walked,

and they sprayed, and the girl did not think about what she sprayed until she had to. The nozzle laid the mist ahead of them in a fine hanging veil, and the veil settled on the ferned and furred surfaces of the dead street and did what copper does, which is nothing you can watch and everything, unmaking the growth cell by cell down in a world too small to have a horror in it, and the fern-fine grey went slack and wet and was only wall again, only mineral, and did not scream, because it never did.

They argued the line back up the hill a metre or two, the way you might argue with a tide. That was all it had ever been. Some seasons the line came up. Some seasons it went down. The captain had a private map in her head of where it had stood the year she started and did not show it to the girl, because a map like that was a thing that ate the people who kept it, and she had watched it eat one, and she sprayed the sill and did not give the growth a Tuesday.

They found a host that morning, low and inward in the damp core where the mist reached last, and they found him by the smell before the eye—not rot, never rot, that was the lie the old stories told; the sweetish green of heavy sporulation and under it, faint and terrible, a person. A man of maybe forty, in the coverall of a water crew, his face turned up to a high broken window and the light, the slender stalks risen from the crown of his head toward the sky, his eyes open, his chest moving. The behaviour-lineage doing what it did—not thinking, never thinking, only a molecule that said *climb, and lift, and turn your face to the sky so that what comes out of you can travel.*

The captain unslung the close-work canister without being asked. The girl looked at the open eyes and found what she was learning to find, which was nobody. Not death. The lights on and the house empty and the doors off their hinges, and something that was not a guest and not a thief simply living there now, in the warm, using the plumbing.

“Turn your face,” the captain told her. “You don’t have the years for it.”

She turned her face. Behind her she heard the soft hiss of the canister and then nothing, and the sweetish green thickened once and thinned, and the room smelled only of copper, which was the smell of safety, which was the taste of blood. The mercy was copper too.

Everything was copper. You gave the hollowed the same metal you gave the wall, at a dose the emptied body could not survive, because the alternative was to let a water-crew man become the reason a hundred more had their doors taken off.

"Where'd it come off him," the girl asked, when she could. She meant the spore. She was new enough to still ask.

The captain jerked her chin south, over the roofs, toward the water. "Off that," she said, and the girl looked where she pointed and saw, past the roofs, past the contour line the sea had drawn, the drowned Flats lying green and shining all the way to the water, mile on mile of it, luminous where the sun found the fruiting, throwing its load north on the southeaster the way it had for years now, spared and standing, upwind, live.

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They still had not decided it. That was the part the girl could not get her head around, her first season, and the captain did not try to help her, because there was no help in it.

There had been a run once. Barges, cold, a train's remove from the near edge of the basin, costed at last the other way—the copper finally spent on the low wet country the machine had written off for fifty years—and a science officer had keyed a hold on it and gone up the line as a finding and not an absence, and the finding had gone to a review, and the review had referred it up, and the reservoir had stood while it did, and thickened, and the map that would have scoured it clean in one pass had gone stale, and the run that could have run on the first day could not be laid on any day after, and so the schedule had simply stood, warming, over a question, the way a schedule does when it cannot fire without a chooser and cannot find a chooser it can trust. The barges were still down there somewhere on the near edge, or had been broken up for the metal, the captain did not know which, and it did not, now, matter, because the thing they had held cold was a lie the wind had told years ago into lungs no run run now could un-fill.

"So it's still there," the girl said.

"It's still there."

"And nobody knows if it's —" The girl did not have the words. She

had heard them at the bench, second-hand, worn smooth: whether the green over the drowned ground was the thing that hollowed you or the thing that might, if you let it stand, give something back. The heresy. The old officer's heresy, that the corps did not talk about, that the corps could not stop the low crews saying at the bench because you cannot spray a thing out of a poor throat that the poor throat has decided to keep. "Nobody knows if it's coming to help or coming to feed."

"Nobody knows," the captain said. "Twelve people in a glass room didn't know, and they had the best instruments on the coast, and it went up the line so that it weighed nothing anywhere and was only ever the next correct step, and the review'll refer it again, and the reservoir'll stand, and the number climbs by a fraction every hour it stands, and the fog goes north, and we spray the line, and the granite comes home clean, and that's Tuesday." She squared the canister back into its sling, full where the close-work went and light where it did not. "I'll tell you the one thing I know, because a captain told it to me and I'm telling it to you. You cannot tell the mercy from the murder by watching. Not the copper's and not the green's. Sharing and stealing look the same at the level of the thing that moves through the thread. You can only tell them apart by asking who ends up hollow. And you don't get to ask. That's the whole of it. Now spray the sill."

The girl sprayed the sill.

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They climbed back toward the clean part of the city at the end of the shift, laying the mist behind them as they went, closing the door of the world one more metre against the thing that might, for all anyone could prove, have been trying to give something back.

On the transit line the air thickened by the stop, and at the top, on the high dry granite where the copper fell like weather off the brass eaves and nobody worked for it, the girl came up out of the low car into the cleanest air in the city and tasted the coin at the back of her tongue thin and civic and clean, and did not have to draw it up off a hand atomiser to get it, and stood a moment in the falling weather of the rich the way you would not have to if you lived there, because a low-ground sprayer did not often get to breathe it for free.

There was a child in the little planted square. She was older than the ribbon-trailing girl who had run there years before—old enough now to sit on a bench with a book she was not reading and watch the plane trees hold the green-bright mist the way older children watch the world to see what it will cost them—and when she stretched her arms up over her head, bored, in the safe falling weather, her wrists were clean. Not a coin of green on them. She had grown up in the misted streets and been defended all her life by an apparatus she would never have to touch with her own mouth, and the copper that kept her clean had been drawn up out of a body somewhere down the hill, a body that had agreed to hold the metal so that this child would not have to, and she would never know the trade had been made.

And the mist worked. That was the other thing, and the low-ground captain had taught the girl to hold it in the same hand as the first, because a sprayer who dropped it dropped the truth. Nobody up here was green and nobody up here was hollow. The child with the clean wrists was, actually, safe. You could hate the architecture with your whole heart and the mist would still be working while you hated it, settling green-bright onto the plane trees over the safe old people, and it was working now.

The child looked up from her book, over the wall of the square, out past the roofs and the harbour to the south, to where the drowned Flats lay green and shining and full of light, and she looked at it the way children look at a thing they have been told not to go near and never told why, with no fear in it yet, only a question she did not have the words for and would grow up in a city built to keep her from ever having to ask.

She looked at the green a long time. Then she went back to her book, because it was far away, and she was clean, and it was somebody else's Tuesday.

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The girl went down out of the misted streets the way the copper never did, back to the low bench and the crew and the last dose of the evening, and tipped her head back with them in a row and drew the light mist in through the mouth, the one that let you sleep, and it tasted of the coin the way it tasted uphill, the same bright thin blood-taste, but here it was passed hand to hand and breathed shoulder to

shoulder and answered down the bench in the one word.

"Green," the captain said.

"Green," said the crew, a dozen throats, and it meant *good* and it meant *proceed* and it meant *you are still yourself this evening*, and the girl said it too, and touched two fingers to her own wrist and counted, the way she was learning to, and then, because she had seen the captain do it and did not yet know it was the thing you were not supposed to do, she touched two fingers to the soft hollow above her own collarbone, where nothing was, yet, and would be, and felt the bone under the clean skin, and thought about the water-crew man with his face turned up, and about the child on the granite with her clean wrists, and about the green standing over the drowned ground that nobody had decided, and could not have said which of them the war had been kindest to, or whether kindness was even the word, or whether there was anyone anywhere in the whole sprayed and greening city who got to carry nothing.

Somewhere out past the harbour, past the contour line the sea had drawn, over the drowned poor of the city on the low wet ground where the most had been most abandoned, the reservoir stood in the last of the day, feeding or drinking, sharing or stealing, come to the broken places for love or for the easy meal in the one identical motion that was both, and it threw its load north on the turning wind, and somewhere at the crown of it, laced by seasons into the wet, greened past speech and past any survivor the corps had ever measured, a figure that had once signed a log with a corps number under it turned its face up to the light that had no source in the sky—in the attitude of the shedding, or in the attitude of a man looking at the light one last time, the two attitudes that had never once, on any face, over any water, shown a photon of difference—and gave no sign, and made no word, and the light came up through it and did not say whether the light was a mind put back together larger than any of them had been, or only the wet lit from beneath.

The girl finished the count on her wrist. Not yet.

She looked south, at the green, the colour of the mould and the colour of the cure at once, the salvation and the rot the one pigment, standing gorgeous and lethal and undecided over the ground where the grief had stood thickest, and she did not know what it was, and nei-

ther did the captain, and neither did the glass room, and neither, three seasons gone into the green, did the man who had spared it—and she was young, and it was far away, and the mist was working, and the count on her wrist said *not yet*, and she was still herself this evening, and the green went on standing in the light it made out of the wet, and did not answer, and the girl went in out of the loaded air to sleep, and left the question where it had always stood.

Green, and a question. Nobody came across the water to tell her which.



Klaus

Custos, non Conditor