

The Cohort

Fourteen strangers wake inside the Array. No rules, no guards, no explanation — only levers, and what they cost.

31 CHAPTERS • 3 INTERLUDES • 84,310 WORDS

The Cohort — a psychological body-horror thriller.

Written with Claude Code through a multi-agent drafting process: story bible, three drafted acts, and a full-book continuity pass. This is a work of fiction; any resemblance to real persons, companies or institutions is coincidental.

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CONTENTS

01	The Last Dose
02	Zero State
03	The Housing Doesn't Lie
04	The Paper About No One
05	The Keys Still in the Ignition
06	The Wheel
—	<i>Lot 11, Pallet C</i>
08	A Rescue, As Advertised
09	Three Days, Four Thousand Dollars
10	Second Teeth
11	The Ledger's First Lie
12	Fair, This Is What Fair Looks Like
—	<i>Rule Eleven</i>
14	The Shape of the Losses
15	Recruitment Batteries
16	Every Third Turn
17	What Selene Keeps
18	The Name Renata Cole
19	Six Minutes Without a Shadow
20	Subject R-07
—	<i>Rule Eleven, Revised</i>

22	The Forty-Minute Argument
23	What the Suppressed Data Said
24	A Wall With No Business Existing
25	Twelve
26	The Office
27	The Architecture
28	Day Six, Again
29	Nobody Left to Ask
30	Every Sentence Was About Naomi
31	Graduation
32	The Table
33	The Mispricing
34	What Survives the Quarter

The Last Dose

Dana Okafor (BEFORE — the morning of Day One)

THE PILL WAS POINT-FIVE MILLIGRAMS, ORANGE, SMALLER THAN A BEAD OF couscous. Dana Okafor dry-swallowed it at a red light on Providence Road, the way other people checked their mirrors. Not out of need, exactly. More the specific discipline of never letting a variable drift unmonitored past the point where she could still do something about it.

Sixty-four months since the funeral. Six hundred and eleven doses, if she'd kept the count clean. She hadn't, not really, not since April, when the count started slipping the way a spreadsheet slips when somebody enters data at two in the morning and calls it fine.

The light went green. She didn't move for a half-second longer than the car behind her liked. A horn told her so.

Six hundred and eleven, if the count was clean. It wasn't. She knew, in the ledger she kept only for herself, that around dose four hundred she'd started needing point-six-two-five some mornings instead of point-five.

She split the extra tablet along its score line with a thumbnail and eyeballed the half. Not a controlled process. The exact estimation error she'd have flagged in a junior analyst's workbook, and sent back with a note about confidence intervals.

She had never once sent herself back. That, she supposed, was the whole discovered difference between auditing other people's math and living inside your own. You could see the error perfectly and still not correct it. The way a storm-surge model underprices a coastline for a decade, and you renew the policy anyway. Because renewing is easier than being the one who says the number is wrong.

She was forty-one, and she'd spent fifteen years pricing the tail end of catastrophe. The one-in-two-hundred-year flood. The one-in-a-thousand-year

wildfire season. Losses so far out on the curve that the actuaries who modeled them called them fat, as if fat were a shape and not a warning.

None of that training had prepared her for the distribution she lived inside now. It had no tail at all. Only a flat, permanent plateau of *after*, stretching in every direction she looked.

The radio was off. She'd learned, months ago, which stations to avoid at which hours. The classic-rock station ran a call-in hour at nine that sometimes played requests.

A request had gotten through once, in March — a song Naomi used to sing off-key in the passenger seat, with a specificity of joy Dana hadn't understood at the time was finite. Dana had pulled over on 485 for eleven minutes before she trusted her own hands on a wheel again.

She priced that risk now the way she priced everything. Probability of recurrence: low. Severity if it recurred: unbounded. Control available to her: total, provided she left the radio off. She left the radio off.

She was not going anywhere. That was the honest answer, and she'd stopped giving it to Theo months ago. His face did a specific thing when she did — a small collapse around the eyes that cost more to watch than the lie cost to tell.

So the answer she gave, this morning, to nobody — since there was nobody left in the house to ask her — was: the storage unit. The climate control needed checking. It did this in August sometimes, when the compressor strained against the heat and started cycling wrong.

If it failed for even four days in a Carolina summer, the boxes on the north wall would take the damage first. NAOMI — RM. NAOMI — BOOKS. NAOMI — MISC (DO NOT DONATE), in her own handwriting. Humidity that warped photographs, swelled the spines of books nobody would ever open again — books Dana still needed, badly, to exist unwarped, on a shelf, somewhere she controlled the terms of.

She had checked the unit fourteen days ago. The unit did not need checking.

She merged onto 51 anyway, heading southwest, out past the last defensible edge of the city. The strip malls thinned into single-story medical buildings,

and then into nothing but pine and red clay and gas stations that still sold live bait.

She let the actuarial part of her mind run its numbers over the drive, the way it ran numbers over everything now. That part had never once, in fifteen years, taken a day off — not even the day she sat in a hospital hallway being told there was nothing more anyone could do. If she stopped feeding it problems, it went looking. It always found the one problem she couldn't afford to hand it.

Distance to the facility: 22.4 miles. Chance of rain before noon: nineteen percent, per the app — which had been wrong four days out of the last ten. A hit rate barely better than a coin that also occasionally lied.

Chance of encountering someone from Halcyon on a state highway, in a rental Corolla, on a Tuesday morning: statistically negligible. She'd priced negligible risks into eight-figure treaties before, and watched two of them happen in the same fiscal year. So she kept her sunglasses on anyway, cheap drugstore ones. She didn't examine why a woman with no colleagues left still dressed for the chance of being recognized by them.

She had been good at the job. That was not vanity. It was documented — fourteen years of performance reviews, a VP title by thirty-six, a name on three published methodologies still cited in filings she no longer read.

She had built her career on a specific, defensible kind of certainty: that a life, reduced to the right variables, could be priced honestly. That honest pricing, done at scale, protected more people than it hurt. She still believed that, technically.

She had simply stopped being able to hold the belief and look at a hospital corridor at the same time. There was no professional workaround for that particular incompatibility. No reserve account. No reinsurance treaty you could buy against your own certainty failing you exactly once, in the one case where it mattered.

The rental had ninety-one thousand miles on it, and a rattle in the dash vents that started at sixty-two miles an hour and stopped at sixty-four. A two-mile-an-hour window of tolerable noise. She'd found it on the second day and now held to it with more discipline than she held to almost anything else in her life.

Her own car — the Volvo, Theo's now, functionally, since neither of them had said the word *divide* yet — sat in a driveway she wasn't sleeping at more than half the week. The rental was easier. The rental had no memory in it.

She'd chosen it at the counter specifically: the model least like the one she and Naomi used to take to away meets. Back when there were away meets. Back when Naomi ran the eight-hundred, and Dana still ran anything at all — six miles most mornings before the office. A body she'd let go soft on purpose, over the last two years, the way you let a leased asset go. Not from neglect. From a controlled decision to stop investing in something you no longer expected to keep.

At mile nine: *One, two, buckle my shoe.*

Naomi at seven, cross-legged on the driveway in light-up sneakers, the rope slapping concrete in a rhythm too fast for a seven-year-old's legs to actually be keeping. *Three, four, shut the door. Five, six, pick up sticks.* Dana in the doorway with a coffee going cold in her hand, doing the actual math — six jumps a second was physiologically implausible for a child that size, the girl was rounding up in her own head, self-reporting a personal best the data didn't support. Dana had said none of it. Some models you don't audit. You just watch, and let the seven-year-old believe whatever number made her happiest to shout.

Providence Road again, mid-breath, no seam. She had gotten good at not noticing the seam. That was either recovery or its opposite. She'd stopped being able to price the difference.

Her phone buzzed once in the cupholder. Theo — a photo of the gutter he was finally clearing, no caption. The kind of message two people send when neither has anything true left to say, and both still want proof the other one's alive.

She didn't answer it. She would answer it by six, guaranteed — the way she guaranteed most things now, on a delay long enough to look considered rather than avoidant. She was under no illusion which one it actually was.

The pharmacy that filled the orange pills wasn't the one on her insurance card. It was a compounding place two counties north, cash only, run by a semi-

retired pharmacist named Yusuf, who'd known her father before the stroke. He'd asked no questions Dana hadn't already answered for him once, politely, in a version thin enough that he could tell himself he believed it.

Off any formulary. Off any claims database. No utilization review committee would ever see this line item and run it against a denial criterion — the same blunt algorithm that had looked at eleven months of Naomi's inpatient records and returned, in language a machine generated and a human merely co-signed, a single sentence Dana still had memorized to the comma: *services do not meet the plan's criteria for medical necessity at this level of care.*

She had spent fifteen years building the actuarial tables that fed models exactly like that one. She had never, not once, had to watch what the number cost somebody in real time. She had watched it exactly once. It had been enough.

Eight months after the funeral, she had done the one thing in her professional life she had never told anyone. Not Theo. Not the internal auditor who eventually found it. Not the scrubbed conference paper she'd later built out of the wreckage of it.

She had gone into a live catastrophic-tail model on a Thursday night, alone, and moved a single loss-development factor two hundredths of a percentage point. Enough to push a denied claim through, for a family whose file she'd pulled by hand — a fifteen-year-old in Greensboro whose name she still would not let herself think in the same sentence as Naomi's. She had thought of nothing else while she did it.

It was defensible on paper. Every number she'd touched, taken alone, could be explained to a room of underwriters without anyone blinking. She had never regretted it. That frightened her considerably more than getting caught had.

She did not let herself finish that sentence most mornings. She didn't finish it now either.

She merged right, onto the gravel apron of Barrow Self-Storage. Tires popping over stone, a sound she'd once have called peaceful. Now she just called it quiet — which was not, she'd learned, the same thing.

The lot was empty at 9:40 on a Tuesday. One truck up by the office, hazards on, nobody in it. Rows of roll-up doors in faded municipal orange, running back toward the tree line. Humidity already sitting on the asphalt in a shimmer that would burn off by ten.

Cicadas, already going, in that flat mechanical pulse that had nothing behind it and never let up. Dana had read once, for a client's parametric-drought product, that a cicada brood's whole aboveground life ran twenty-one days. Apparently that was considered a long one, as broods went.

She parked in front of unit 114 and cut the engine. She sat a moment, doing the last piece of arithmetic the drive always required of her: what she would actually do once she was standing at that door. She had no task here.

The compressor light on the shared panel glowed a flat, uneventful green. She had known it would. She came anyway, on a schedule her actual life could no longer justify — the kind of behavior her actuarial training would have called, if a client had brought it to her in a spreadsheet, a low-frequency, high-emotional-severity claim paid out against a policy that didn't exist.

She thought about going in anyway. Cutting the tape on NAOMI — BOOKS, just to touch the spines. Confirming the swelling she already knew wasn't there.

She decided against it, the way she decided most things lately — not a real decision, more a failure to move that she'd later call choosing stillness. Her hands stayed on the wheel at nine and three. An instructor's posture from a driver's-ed class twenty-six years gone, muscle memory outlasting every more recent, more useful thing she'd tried to teach her own body since.

She caught, in the driver's side mirror, a shape that had been there longer than she'd let herself admit. A dark sedan — three, maybe four cars back on the highway twenty minutes ago. Now sitting at the mouth of the gravel lot, engine running, no hazards. No reason to have followed a rental Corolla off a state road toward a building full of other people's furniture.

She logged it the way she logged everything. Base rate for two vehicles making the same turn off a rural highway inside a twenty-minute window: non-zero, unremarkable. Do not update the model on a sample size of one.

She had built her whole professional life on the discipline of not seeing a pattern in noise — on knowing the difference between signal and the eleven kinds of coincidence that only look like signal to a grieving mind working overtime. She applied that discipline now. Out of exactly the wrong instinct, at exactly the wrong moment. The same steady hand she'd have used to wave off a client who wanted her to price a hurricane off a single storm.

The sedan's engine went quiet. She noted that too. Filed it. Didn't turn her head.

A door, somewhere behind her — unhurried. The particular sound of someone in no rush at all. The kind of sound she would have flagged, if she'd let herself, as the single most dangerous sound there was.

She reached for the door handle, her fingers closing around—

Zero State

Dana Okafor

THE FLOOR WAS THE FIRST FACT, AND IT WAS WRONG BEFORE SHE HAD A NAME for why.

Concrete, but not the concrete of a parking deck or a loading dock — too smooth for that, poured in some finer aggregate that took the warmth out of her cheek instead of giving any back. Dana lay against it for what she would later try, and fail, to price as a number of seconds, running the only diagnostic she had left: eyes closed, catalogue what you can before you catalogue what you can't.

Left hip, cold. Right hand, numb from the wrist down, asleep beneath her own weight. Mouth like a sealed envelope. No headache, which she logged as strange before she understood there was nothing yet to compare it against.

She opened her eyes onto a color that had no source.

Not white. Not fluorescent, not daylight, not anything she could point a finger at and say *there, that's where the light lives*. It simply was, evenly, in every direction, and none of the dozen or so bodies arranging themselves off the floor around her threw a shadow she could find. She would spend four days circling that observation before she said it out loud to anyone. The alternative to *the light has no source* was *I have stopped being able to see shadows correctly* — a diagnosis about her, not the room. She had learned, by then, not to be first to volunteer a diagnosis about herself.

The room was six-sided. She got that before she got almost anything else, the way she'd once have clocked a floor plan before she clocked the art on the walls — an old professional reflex, still apparently on shift even here, even now. Six poured walls, pale, threaded with something under the surface that wasn't rebar, not in any pattern rebar ever ran. One wall broke into a dark seam that had to be a corridor. The other five were solid, blank, humming.

That last part she noticed with her palm, not her ears — pressed flat against the nearest wall to push herself upright, and felt it under the skin before she heard it at all, a low subsonal thrum sitting somewhere just beneath the register a voice would use. Not machinery. Or not machinery she recognized as machinery. She filed it, the way she filed everything now, under *insufficient data*, and made herself stand.

No windows. No door in the ordinary sense. No camera she could find in ninety seconds of looking, which meant nothing, since she'd have needed considerably longer than ninety seconds to be sure, and considerably better light discipline than a room that refused to cast one.

No sign on any wall. No placard, no arrow, no laminated card bolted at eye level the way every hotel room and hospital corridor she'd ever stood in insisted on telling her where the exits were. She noted the absence the way she'd note a missing line item on a term sheet — not as comfort, as a hole a comforting thing should have been sitting in.

She had eleven, twelve people around her, she'd count properly in a minute. She had no shoes — she registered that against the cold floor a full beat after she registered the floor itself, a strange lag, as if her body were reporting facts in whatever order terrified it least. No belt. No watch, which struck her as its own particular loss, sharper than it should have been, because the watch had been Theo's grandfather's and she had never once taken it off to sleep in two years of wearing it and she did not remember taking it off now.

She rolled her sleeve. The inside of her left elbow held a small, bruised point, already yellowing at the edges — not fresh. Days old, by the color of it, though she had no days to measure it against.

Last known data point: a gravel lot outside a self-storage facility. A dark sedan. A door handle under her fingers. After that, nothing — not black, not a dream, just an absence with clean edges, the exact texture of a data field somebody had deleted rather than merely failed to fill in.

She did not let herself sit inside that gap. She had learned, over two years of grief that behaved the same way — a wound with clean, deleted edges instead of jagged ones — that sitting inside a gap like that bought her nothing but more

gap. So she counted people instead, because counting was a task, and a task was a place to put her hands.

Eleven others, then a twelfth arriving mid-count from wherever unconsciousness had been keeping him, groaning himself upright against the wall two arm-lengths from her. Thirteen bodies including her own, all of them in whatever they'd been wearing when the world had last made sense — a stained polo shirt, a woman in a bra and a cardigan and nothing that matched either, a man in dress slacks and one sock. Nobody dressed for this. Nobody dressed for anything, because nobody had known there was a *this* to dress for.

She started the tally out of a habit so old it predated Naomi, predated Halcyon, predated the version of herself that had needed the habit for anything worse than an actuarial exam: *given this population, this environment, this total absence of stated variables, what is the base rate of survival, and what does it cost to move that rate one point in either direction.* She got exactly as far as *I don't have enough information to model this* before a woman near the seam-wall started, quietly, to cry, and the tally stopped mattering more than the woman did.

"Is anybody—" A man's voice, late fifties, graying, soft through the middle in the specific way of someone who used to sit at a desk. "Does anyone know where we—"

Nobody knew where they were. That established itself faster than anything else in the room, a fact with no dissent, arrived at by consensus inside of ninety seconds: nobody remembered a road, a van, a needle, though several of them found the same yellowed bruise she'd found, in the same crook of the same arm, and stopped talking about it once they had.

Names came next, the way names always come next among strangers, and Dana noticed — filed, catalogued, the reflex would not turn off — that even this early, even in the first ten minutes, nobody's name arrived with anything behind it. No driver's license. No lanyard. No corroborating voice from a friend who'd say *yes, that's her, that's really her name.* A name here was simply a sound a person offered and the room agreed, provisionally, to use.

"Feliciano," said the man closest to her, thirty-some, wiry, a laborer's forearms under a T-shirt gone through at the collar. "Feliciano Ruiz." He said it like a man used to being asked to prove things he couldn't prove, offering the whole name up front so nobody would make him repeat it.

"Gerald," said the soft-middled man. "Gerald Whitcomb." He had the specific over-explaining calm of someone narrating his own competence to a room that hadn't asked for it — *thirty-five years in insurance, I've seen a lot of chaos, I'm used to reading a bad situation* — and Dana logged that too, filed under *will need managing, not now*.

A woman near the corner, thirty maybe, dark-eyed, pulling a boy of eight or nine bodily against her hip before the boy had even finished waking, said only, "Ines," and then, softer, to the boy, in Spanish Dana didn't need translated to understand: *stay by me, stay exactly by me*. The boy's name came out as Mateo, muffled against her shoulder. Dana watched the woman's hands on him — flat, absolute, a grip with no give anywhere in it — and felt something in her own chest respond before she'd decided to let it.

A teenager, seventeen at most though she'd have called herself older if asked, gave her name as "Corrine" in a voice that dared the room to check. Nobody checked. There was, Dana understood already, nothing to check it against.

She gave her own name when it came around to her — "Dana" — and stopped there, and nobody pushed for more, because everyone in the room had already learned, without anyone teaching them, that a last name was a kind of currency none of them could currently afford to spend on strangers.

She did not offer that she'd once priced the tail risk on buildings that held more people than this one did, on models that assumed, as a baseline, that the people inside them wanted to survive the day. She filed that fact next to the bruise on her arm and the watch that wasn't on her wrist. Not yet useful. Everything not yet useful, but nothing thrown away.

The room went quiet in the particular way of thirteen people running out of small talk against something too large for it. Someone tried the seam-wall's dark opening and reported, in a voice gone thin, that it was a corridor, and that

the corridor bent somewhere past where the light stopped being reliable, and that nobody especially wanted to walk into it alone.

Nobody wanted to. Everybody was thirsty.

Dana had noticed the thing on the wall within the first two minutes, the way she noticed everything — filed and moved past. A person could not spend the same attention on every detail of an unmapped room. She had learned that lesson from spreadsheets long before she'd learned it from grief: you triage, you flag the anomalies that cluster, you let the singletons go.

A brass lever, waist to chest height depending on who stood in front of it, mounted in a shallow steel housing set into the wall. It sat almost exactly at the average reach of the room's tallest and shortest member. She did that arithmetic without meaning to, the way she'd have clocked a scaffold's load rating on a job site, and told herself it meant nothing — an architect's convenience, a fixture height chosen for the median body and not for any of them specifically.

It was Feliciano who went to it first. Not out of curiosity. Out of the flat, unglamorous math of a man who had already done, faster than anyone else in the room, the only calculation that actually mattered: *how many hours since I had water, and how many more before that number costs me something.*

"Wait," Whitcomb said, already assembling a sentence with *pattern of* somewhere in it, but Feliciano had stopped waiting three sentences ago.

Dana watched him cross the four meters of bare floor with the specific gait of a man trying to look calmer than he was. While the rest of the room's attention narrowed to his hand, hers went, unhelpfully, sideways — to the housing itself, the dull steel plate around the lever's base, where a stamp had been pressed into the metal at some point before any of them had ever stood in this room. Six characters, worn nearly smooth by handling that predated all of them: **TR-419**. The kind of code you'd find embossed on the underside of a hotel minibar or stenciled inside a breaker panel — a batch number, a part designation, the small anonymous fingerprint every manufactured object left on itself somewhere out of sight.

Her mind supplied *inventory tag* before it had finished forming the thought, the way it would have on any job site, in any building, in any century that

made objects at scale. She let the thought go exactly as fast as it had come, filed under *noted*, *not urgent*, and put her attention back on Feliciano's hand instead of the plate it was reaching past.

It did not occur to her, in that half-second, that she had just done the single most dangerous thing available to her in this room: looked directly at the one object with a fixed, legible, external origin — proof this thing had been *made*, by someone, somewhere, on purpose — and decided it was boring.

"Feliciano." Ines's voice, low, urgent, the tone of a woman who had already, in the space of ten minutes, appointed herself the room's only functioning conscience. "Wait for — just wait one second—"

He didn't. His hand closed around the lever the way a man's hand closes around anything after three days of thirst he can't remember accumulating but can absolutely feel: total, unhesitating, no room left in his body for a second opinion.

The room went still in the specific way a room goes still right before something either feeds you or doesn't. Dana heard her own pulse. She heard the woman near the seam-wall stop crying long enough to watch. She heard, underneath everything, the low subsonal hum she'd felt through her palm ten minutes ago, unchanged, indifferent, running exactly as it had before Feliciano's hand ever touched the metal — proof, though nobody in the room had the vocabulary yet to call it proof of anything, that whatever this thing was listening for, it wasn't listening any harder now than it had been a moment ago.

Feliciano pulled the lever down.

It gave almost no resistance, traveled the short length of its arc, and stopped. Nothing happened.

Then came the click — small, dry, mechanical, from somewhere behind the wall. No paste. No water. No drama in it at all, the exact sound a lock makes when the key doesn't fit. A null result. A coin come down on its edge.

Feliciano let go of the lever and stepped back, breathing like a man who'd just been told a test had come back clean. For one full second the room exhaled with him — thirteen strangers granted, without any of them having earned it,

the first small, false comfort of the day: *see, it's safe, you can touch it, nothing happens.*

Dana did not exhale. *N equals one*, she thought. *Click equals null. A sample size of one tells you nothing about the next pull. Nothing at all.*

That was when she saw him — a heavyset man near the corridor seam, thirsty and newly brave on borrowed relief, already reaching for the second lever, mounted in its own steel housing on the cell's far wall, before anyone in the room had thought fast enough to stop him.

The Housing Doesn't Lie

Marcus Rourke

HE CAME UP OFF THE FLOOR ALREADY COUNTING.

Twelve, thirteen bodies. One door that wasn't a door — just a seam in the far wall, dark enough to be a corridor, dark enough to be nothing. Six walls, poured pale. A hum under his palm when he pushed himself upright against the nearest one, not a hum he could name, but a hum with a rhythm to it. Rhythm was information, even when nothing else was. No windows. No vents he could find in the first thirty seconds — didn't mean none, meant not found yet. He filed that the way he'd have filed it on a perimeter walk: *unconfirmed, not cleared, check again*.

His hands worked. His legs worked. That put him ahead of at least three people in the room, who were still finding out whether theirs did.

Selene was six feet off, already up on one elbow, blinking against light that came from nowhere he could point to. Something in his chest unclenched half an inch when he found her — not relief exactly. More like a headcount resolving. *One accounted for*. He'd learned a long time ago not to call it anything softer than that. Soft names for it got a man killed reaching for somebody in the open instead of covering the door.

There was no door to cover. There was only the seam, and the twelve strangers between him and it, most of them still deciding whether this was real.

He watched who decided fast and who didn't. A woman near the seam-wall had started crying inside the first minute and hadn't stopped. Hadn't tried to stand. Hadn't looked at anything but her own hands. She'd be slow if it came to moving, and moving might come to matter. A soft-bodied man in his fifties was already talking, already narrating — the specific brand of calm that came from a guy who needed the room to believe he had a plan more than he needed to have one. Marcus clocked him as noise. Useful noise, maybe, later. Still noise. A wiry laborer near the far wall wasn't crying and wasn't talking. He was doing

the thing Marcus would have done at nineteen, three days from a working faucet: standing very still, doing arithmetic he didn't have the numbers for. Deciding.

That one would move first. Marcus knew it the way you know weather.

A woman near the corner had a boy pulled hard against her hip, her hand flat across the back of his skull like she could keep the whole room out of him through her palm alone. Marcus watched that too. Filed it under something he didn't have a clean word for yet — *asset, or liability, or both, depends what this room turns into*. A teenager gave a name that dared anybody to check it. Nobody checked it. There was nothing to check it against. That was its own kind of information: whatever this was, it had taken names along with everything else, and left the room to reissue them to itself — a unit reassigning call signs after a bad night.

"You got a name?" Somebody's voice, close, aimed at him — the soft-bodied man, doing his rounds, collecting introductions like a man taking a headcount for a job he'd appointed himself to.

Marcus opened his mouth to give his own name and heard somebody else's come out instead.

"Reyes," he said. "Sergeant Amos Reyes."

It came out clean. No hitch, no pause to decide it — its own small horror, if he'd had the room in him right then to feel it. The name arrived faster than his own would have, like it had been sitting closer to the front of his mouth the whole time, waiting for a door to open. He didn't examine that. He filed it the way he filed the hum in the wall: *noted, deal with it later, not now*. Somewhere behind him he felt Selene go very still — the specific stillness of someone who'd heard him say a name that wasn't his and decided, in the same half-second, to say nothing about it. She never asked him why. Not that hour, not ever. He'd wonder, later, what that cost her to swallow. He wouldn't have an answer then either.

The soft-bodied man — Gerald, he said, thirty-five years in insurance, a fact he offered like a credential — nodded like *Sergeant* explained something useful about the room's odds, and moved on to the next stranger.

Marcus kept working the space. One exit that might not be an exit. Two fixtures on the walls he didn't like the look of at all — brass levers, waist height, set into steel plates like something a base armorer would've bolted down and logged a serial number for. One on the near wall. One on the far. Both close enough to a hand's natural reach that the placement itself told him something, though he didn't yet know what. He'd run enough compound walkthroughs to trust the itch at the back of his neck when an environment matched its hardware too exactly to the people using it. This one did. Chest height. Waist height. Set for a body, not for a room.

The laborer went for the near one first, exactly like Marcus had clocked he would — thirst outrunning caution by a length nobody in the room could see coming until it had already happened. Somebody said *wait* in a voice with no weight behind it. Marcus didn't say wait. He was already moving toward the man, two steps, three, close enough to put a hand on his shoulder if it came to that, because pulling a stranger back from an unknown mechanism was exactly the kind of call he still trusted himself to make on reflex, whatever else about himself he no longer trusted.

He didn't get there in time to matter. He got there in time to watch.

The lever traveled its short arc and stopped. A half-second of nothing, the room's collective breath held so tight Marcus could hear the wall's hum underneath it, unbothered, running the same as it had a minute before anybody had touched anything at all. Then a click. Small. Dry. Mechanical, the exact sound of a lock testing a key that didn't fit, and behind it — nothing. No paste. No water. No cost.

The room exhaled like a single animal. Marcus didn't. One data point didn't buy you a pattern. He'd learned that lesson somewhere flatter and hotter than this — about IEDs, about men, about roads that stayed clear for six convoys running and then weren't. He kept his eyes on the housing instead of the relief on everyone else's face. That was how he saw it: a code stamped into the steel plate below the lever's pivot, six characters worn soft at the edges the way a thing gets worn when a hundred hands have gripped the metal and none of them ever noticed the numbers. He didn't have the letters memorized. He filed

the shape of it — *manufacturer's mark, batch tag, something a QA line stamps and nobody downstream ever reads* — and let it go. The same reflex he'd have used on a crate of surplus ammunition with a lot number nobody in his unit had ever once looked up.

The laborer stepped back from the lever breathing like a man who'd just gotten good news from a doctor. For one second the whole room believed him.

That was the second Marcus saw the other man start moving.

Heavysset, older, the kind of soft that came from a desk job and not from hunger yet. He'd given a name a few minutes back that Marcus had already half-lost — Walt, or Walker, something that hadn't stuck the way Sergeant Amos Reyes had stuck to himself in under a second. Now he was crossing the cell toward the second lever, borrowing courage off somebody else's good outcome. Spending it before it was his to spend.

"Hey." Marcus said it flat, not loud, the register he used on privates who were about to do something a captain wouldn't sign off on. "Let it sit a minute."

The man didn't stop. Thirst doesn't listen to rank it hasn't agreed to yet.

Marcus started toward him anyway, the same three steps he'd used the first time, and got exactly as far this time too — close, not close enough, his hand still a foot short of a shoulder he hadn't decided yet whether he was allowed to grab.

The man's hand closed around the second lever.

He pulled it down.

There was no ceremony to it. The arc was the same short travel as the first, the same near-silence, the wall's hum running on exactly as indifferent as it had a minute ago — and then, where the man's forearm had been, there was simply less of him than there had been a heartbeat before. No blood. No tooling. The end of him sealed already, clean, like the specification had only ever called for that much.

The man looked at it. Four full seconds, five, longer than Marcus would have believed a person could go without making a sound over something like that. Then he made a sound that wasn't a scream at all — a short, confused

syllable, almost a laugh, the noise of someone certain a joke was about to be explained to him.

Then the scream came, late, the way thunder comes after light that already told you everything.

Marcus had his hand flat against the man's remaining shoulder before he'd decided to move, easing him down instead of letting him drop — some part of his training already three steps ahead of the part of him that wanted to stand there uselessly clocking exits. Somewhere behind him Selene had gone to her knees beside the woman with the boy, pulling both of them back a half-step from the wall without being asked. Two people who'd done this kind of triage before, in a different room, for different reasons. The soft-bodied man — Gerald — had frozen mid-sentence, a word about *pattern of loss* still sitting unfinished in his mouth. The teenager who'd dared the room to check her name was staring at the stump with an expression Marcus recognized and didn't have a clean name for. Not fear exactly. Recognition. Like she'd known, somewhere below where words lived, that a room could do this — and had just been waiting to see it confirmed.

For half a second — no longer, gone before he could hold onto it — Marcus was standing in a Publix parking lot with his hand on the seat of a bicycle, yelling *you got it, you got it* at a kid who didn't know yet that he'd already let go. He didn't understand why that came to him now, over a stranger's ruined arm, and he didn't have room to ask. He put it away the way he put everything away, and came back to the cell, and the man was still screaming, thinner now, going hoarse.

There was nothing to bandage. The stump didn't bleed. That should have been a mercy and somehow wasn't; it just meant there was nothing for Marcus's hands to do except hold the man steady while his body caught up to a piece of information his eyes had already delivered.

Whitcomb found words first, because Whitcomb always would. "It's — the pattern's not — there has to be something we can—"

"There's nothing," Marcus said, and didn't raise his voice, because raising it had never once made a true thing truer. "Sit with him."

He crouched by the housing instead, close enough to read what he hadn't bothered to read the first time. Same six characters, stamped into the same worn steel, at the base of the second lever's plate — identical, as far as he could tell, to the mark he'd half-noticed on the first one across the room. Same code. Same housing, same finish, same waist-height placement measured, near as he could judge it, to the same average reach. One gave a dry click and let a man walk away laughing at his own relief. The other took his arm to the elbow and didn't so much as raise its voice about it.

Marcus filed that plainly, the only way he knew how to file anything that mattered: two identical fixtures, same stamp, same make, and whatever decided which one paid out and which one collected wasn't written anywhere on the metal. The housing didn't lie, exactly. It just didn't say anything at all — and a coin doesn't owe you a reason either way it lands, it only owes you the fact that somebody's standing on the losing side of it when it does.

He looked past the man he was holding, past the ruin of the room's first hour, to the dark seam where the corridor bent out of sight — and found, for the first time, that the angle of the light let him see a slice of the next cell over. Another wall. Another housing, waist height, chest height, the same brass, the same shallow steel plate.

He couldn't read its stamp from here. He told himself that was the only difference — the only reason it looked wrong to him in a way he couldn't yet name. A trick of distance, nothing more. The same six characters, worn into a different piece of the same batch. Manufacturing. A production run stretched across more units than anybody in this room would ever need to count.

He was still telling himself that when he saw someone already moving toward it — a shape crossing the next cell's floor, small and fast and thirsty. Exactly the shape of a person who hadn't seen what he'd just seen. Who had no reason yet not to reach for the only promise this place had made anyone since they woke up on its floor.

Nobody in his own cell was screaming anymore. They'd all gone quiet instead — the specific quiet of people doing math they didn't want to be doing. It was in that quiet, with a stranger's ruined arm still warm under his hands,

that Marcus understood the horror he'd just watched hadn't taught this room a single useful thing.

It had only taught the next room nothing at all.

The Paper About No One

Dana Okafor (BEFORE — four years before Day One)

THE BREAKOUT ROOM HELD FORTY CHAIRS AND HAD FILLED NINETEEN OF THEM, which by Dana's count was eleven more than she'd priced for. She'd run the number in the elevator without meaning to — Track C, ten-forty on the last morning of a three-day conference, competing against a keynote on parametric cat bonds two floors up. Expected attendance, six to eight. Actual, nineteen. She logged the miss the way she logged every miss now, filed under *model was conservative, direction of error noted, cause unclear*, and did not let herself enjoy it.

Two years ago she'd have been upstairs. Two years ago the room would have held two hundred chairs and she'd have filled most of them just by being the name on the program, VP of Catastrophe Pricing, Halcyon, forty-one slides on tail dependence that three different reinsurers had since lifted wholesale for their own investor decks without crediting her. She did not think about that comparison directly. She thought about the coefficient of variation on nineteen attendees instead, which was a cleaner kind of grief, one with an actual formula attached to it.

She stood at the side table instead of the podium — the room didn't rate a podium, just a lectern with a dead mic light and a stack of stapled handouts she'd printed herself at a FedEx on Trade Street because Halcyon's print shop required a project code she no longer had authorization to enter. *Tail-Risk Convexity in Denial-Adjacent Claims: A Single-Case Reexamination*. Her name under the title, no title after it. No affiliation line at all, which the conference had let her get away with only because she'd submitted under an independent-researcher category that existed, she suspected, mostly for retirees and cranks.

She was neither. She was something the form didn't have a box for yet.

A man in the third row — sixty maybe, a name tag reading BENSON, HARTFORD MUTUAL, RUN-OFF DIVISION — raised his hand before she'd finished her second slide. "You're saying the denial threshold itself creates the tail event. Not just fails to catch it. Creates it."

"I'm saying the two are statistically indistinguishable once you control for time-to-appeal," Dana said. "A threshold that denies a borderline claim doesn't just fail to price the risk. It manufactures a worse one downstream, at a longer duration, and hands the cost to a different line of business entirely — behavioral health denial today, life claim eighteen months later, and nobody at the company ever runs the join query that would show you they're the same policyholder."

She heard herself say *policyholder* and felt the floor of the sentence hold, the way it always held when she kept the noun general enough. *Policyholder*. Not a *sixteen-year-old girl*. Not *seven days*. Not *the letter came on a Tuesday and Theo was the one who opened it because Dana was already at the office pricing a hurricane*.

Benson from Hartford Mutual was still talking. She let two more sentences of him pass through her before she answered, a habit that had once been professional patience and was now, she suspected, something closer to a stall — the two seconds it took her, every single time now, to climb back down from wherever a specific number had just taken her and land on the general case again.

*

Eight months earlier, on a Thursday night, she had sat at her own kitchen table with two laptops open — the Halcyon terminal on a VPN token that expired in eleven minutes, and her own, showing a claim file that had nothing to do with Naomi at all, a family named Alvarez whose son had been denied a fourteen-day residential placement on the strength of a denial-model score that came out to 0.61 against a cutoff of 0.60. One one-hundredth of a point. She had run that number four times before she let herself believe it, because a hundredth of a point felt like it should be an insult too small for a system to bother inflicting on purpose, and every time she checked it, it came out the

same: 0.61. Denied. Not because a human being had looked at the file and decided the Alvarez boy could wait. Because a coefficient three variables deep in a model she herself had helped calibrate — two years before Naomi ever needed one — had drawn a line at 0.60. Nobody had ever asked it to explain why there instead of 0.58, or 0.65, or anywhere a real clinician might have drawn it.

She had eleven minutes on the token. She used four of them finding the coefficient. She used one of them not deciding.

The edit itself took nine keystrokes and a single decimal point, moved from 0.60 to 0.62, buried three tables deep in a batch reweighting she'd flagged, honestly, as due. The model was stale — that part wasn't a lie. She'd been telling her own director for six weeks that the behavioral-health tail needed recalibration, and been told, politely, that it wasn't this quarter's priority. She hadn't invented a justification. She'd simply used the true one, at the exact moment, for the exact file, that made it stop being true in general and start being true for one family whose son had a diagnosis code four digits off from her daughter's and an appeal clock that hadn't run out yet — which was the only difference, in the end, between the Alvarez boy and Naomi. His clock hadn't run out yet.

The submit button did not ask her whether she meant it personally. Nothing in Halcyon's architecture had ever been built to ask that question, which was, she thought — and thought again, months later, in a conference breakout room in front of a man from Hartford Mutual — the entire finding of the paper she was now delivering to nineteen strangers as if it were abstract.

The Alvarez claim cleared for placement six days later. She never met the boy. She never told anyone what the nine keystrokes had cost the model's stated accuracy, a number so small on its own it would have taken a specific kind of audit to surface it at all — which was, of course, exactly the kind of audit Halcyon ran, quarterly, without fail, on every coefficient touched outside a change-control ticket.

They found it in eleven weeks. She had, if she was honest with the part of herself that still ran honest numbers, expected four.

*

The room they'd put her in for that conversation had a window, which she'd noted even then, the actuarial part of her filing it as data — a compliance interview that rates a window is a compliance interview that expects you to stay employed through the end of it. Two people from Model Risk, one from HR, a printed diff of the coefficient table with her initials time-stamped against the change, a change-control ticket that did not exist because she had never opened one.

"Walk us through your reasoning," the Model Risk woman said. Not unkindly. Reading from a script that had clearly been drafted by someone who'd never had to use it on a person they'd shared a cafeteria table with for eleven years.

Dana had thought, in the half-second before she answered, about lying — a data error, a training-set contamination, some plausible technical fiction that would have cost the company nothing and cost her nothing further either, because the coefficient had already been reverted and the Alvarez placement, once granted, was not the kind of thing anyone was going to claw back from a sixteen-year-old boy on principle.

She hadn't lied. "The threshold was stale," she'd said. "I moved it to where I believe it should sit given the last two years of loss experience. I did it outside change control because I didn't believe the request would clear this quarter, and I was right that it wouldn't have."

"For one file."

"For one file I had access to at the moment I decided it mattered."

Nobody in the room had asked her why that file, that week, out of the several hundred sitting in the same queue with the same stale threshold. She had gone home still not knowing whether that was mercy or just incuriosity, and had decided, lying awake next to Theo's back turned three feet from her own, that it didn't matter which. Either way, nobody had made her say Naomi's name out loud in that room, and she had not offered it.

They took her write access that afternoon. Not her badge, not her title, not even — this was the specific, surgical cruelty of it, more precise than anything

she'd have designed herself — her office. Just the access. She kept the desk, the door with her name on the plate, the standing Thursday pricing call she was still invited to and no longer permitted to speak on with any authority beyond *observer*. Special Projects, her new director called it, a phrase with no content in it at all, the exact texture of a null result. A dry click behind a lever nobody had watched her pull.

She had not called it a demotion, even to herself. A demotion implied someone had decided she was worth less. This was quieter than that — the company simply declining to notice her at full resolution anymore, the way a spreadsheet stops recalculating a cell you've told it to ignore.

She wrote the paper in the six weeks after that, at the kitchen table, in the hours after Theo had stopped asking what she was working on. She told herself, and half-believed, that she was writing it to be useful — a genuine methodological finding, denial-threshold convexity, worth publishing regardless of how she'd stumbled onto it. She scrubbed the file the way she'd have scrubbed any client's data for a public forum: names removed, dates shifted by a consistent offset, the diagnosis recoded one category over, the insurer's name replaced with *Carrier B*.

She did not change the threshold value. She did not change the number of days the appeal had taken to process, twenty-two, because that number was the entire finding and changing it would have been changing the math, not the identity — she told herself that distinction held, and mostly, reading it back at two in the morning with a mug gone cold at her elbow, she believed it. She did not change the age. Sixteen was structurally load-bearing to the argument, she told the version of herself doing the checking; adolescent behavioral-health claims priced differently than adult ones, the whole paper turned on it. She did not change the fact that the family had appealed twice and been denied twice on the same coefficient, unchanged, unreviewed, because that repetition was the point.

Read a certain way — and she read it that way exactly once, at three in the morning, before she made herself stop — every sentence of it was a sentence about Naomi. Not adjacent to her. Not inspired by her. About her, precisely,

with the serial numbers filed down just enough that a stranger reading it would see a case study and not a mother.

She sent it to the conference the next morning before she could reread it that way a second time.

*

The email came four days after her panel, to the personal address she'd put on the paper's cover page rather than her Halcyon one, which she'd told herself was a formality and had, underneath the formality, wanted exactly this to happen from.

Re: Tail-Risk Convexity in Denial-Adjacent Claims — request for underlying dataset

The sender's line read only a name she didn't recognize and a signature block for a firm she'd never heard of — *Threshold Analytics, Behavioral Risk Division* — three lines of boilerplate about "internal calibration work aligned with your methodology" and a request, polite, specific, entirely reasonable on its face: the full anonymized dataset behind the paper, not the summary tables she'd published, the underlying claim-level records, for replication.

Nobody had asked her for underlying data in two years. Not since the last time she'd stood at a real podium instead of a lectern with a dead mic light. She read the email three times, the way she'd once read Naomi's acceptance letter to a summer program that never got used, looking for the catch the way she looked for the catch in everything now, and found only what was actually there: someone, somewhere, had read her work closely enough to want to check it themselves. Close enough to want the raw numbers, not the story.

She told herself the file was clean. She'd scrubbed the identifiers, changed the offset dates, recoded the diagnosis — a competent researcher couldn't reverse it, and she was, if nothing else, still a competent researcher; that had never once been the part of herself in question. She told herself the request had come through the paper's own listed contact channel, which made it ordinary, the way a subpoena delivered through the front door feels more survivable than one slid under it at night. She did not look up the firm. She told herself later — much later, long after it would have mattered — that she hadn't looked it up

because there had been no reason to, and that this, too, was true, and that true things were not always the same as safe ones.

She attached the file. Full case-level records, the real threshold, the real twenty-two days, the age she hadn't been able to make herself change even once she understood exactly why she should have. She hovered the cursor over *send* for the length of one full breath, an old counted habit resurfacing without her permission — *one*, in through the nose, *two*, and out — and pressed it on three, the way she'd once pressed submit on a hurricane model with four hundred million dollars riding on a number she'd checked eleven times and would never be entirely sure of.

The confirmation loaded. Sent. No error, no bounce, nothing but the small grey timestamp confirming the transfer had gone exactly where she'd told it to go.

She sat with that for longer than the act itself had taken — hands flat on the kitchen table, the house quiet in the particular way it had gone quiet everywhere now, Theo's key not yet in the door, the version of herself that used to matter to two hundred people in a ballroom sitting very still inside a version that mattered, at that moment, to exactly one stranger she would never meet, who had wanted her enough to ask for the real numbers instead of the story she'd dressed them in.

It was the closest thing to peace she had let herself feel in two years, and she let herself feel all of it, unrationed, undefended — somebody, finally, had looked at her work and asked for more of it, and the wanting, however small, however anonymous, felt exactly like being found.

The Keys Still in the Ignition

Priya Chandrasekaran (*OUTSIDE* — Day 11 Missing, calendar-anchored)

THE RING IN HER LEFT EAR HAD STARTED AT A TWO DOOR CINEMA CLUB SHOW, A basement venue in Athens, Ohio, the same semester Addy disappeared. Thirteen years later, Priya still hadn't decided which fact made the other one matter more. On the show she'd called it the world's smallest, most useless haunting — a laugh line, once, in the cold open of episode nine. She never repeated it, because a joke you tell only once stops being a bit and starts being a confession. Most days she didn't hear it at all. It surfaced in quiet rooms the way a name surfaces in a crowd: not louder, just suddenly the only thing there.

The studio was quiet at 11 p.m. on a Wednesday, which was the specific kind of quiet that always brought it back.

She was gating hiss out of a two-year-old interview for a re-air, a Tuesday-filler episode nobody would remember by Friday. Her cursor dragged across a waveform that looked, blown up to this scale, like a heart monitor for something already dead and not yet told. Noise reduction, minus eighteen decibels. Roll off anything under eighty hertz. Underneath it, a retired dispatcher's voice came up clean, explaining again, fourteen years after the fact, why a call that should have gone to state police instead sat in a county queue for six hours. Priya had heard the clip enough times to recite it cold, which usually meant the segment was done and she was just finding reasons not to close the session.

She said it out loud, to the empty room, in the exact cadence she'd use if a mic were live: "And that's the six hours nobody in Meigs County has ever fully accounted for." Then she caught herself doing it — the producer-brain tic that surfaced unprompted more nights than not — and reached for the mug at her elbow. God, the coffee had gone cold enough to skin already.

Her phone lit up next to the keyboard. Unknown Cleveland number — on the burner, that would have meant something; on her main line, it meant almost

certainly nothing. A robocall, a wrong number, some kid dialing the last four digits of a spam-blocked line for fun. She let it ring through to voicemail, the same reflex that made her check the rearview before she needed to.

The notification came up thirty seconds later. She almost didn't play it that night at all.

*

The message ran ninety-one seconds. Priya knew inside the first four that whoever had left it had rehearsed the opening line, and lost the thread around the fifth sentence, because that was what fear did to people who were otherwise good at talking for a living.

"Hi — Ms. Chandrasekaran, this is Yvette Okafor-Price, I'm sorry to call so late, I know it's late there too, I got your number from a colleague of mine at Solenne who said you'd covered something similar a few years back, the Voss case—" a half-beat, a correction, "sorry, not — I mean, I listened to your episode about the man in Akron, and I know that one didn't — I know it went a certain way, and I almost didn't call because of that, but I don't have anyone else who does this, and my sister's car was found eleven days ago outside Charlotte with the keys still in the ignition, and nobody — the detective calls it 'ongoing,' which I've learned means nothing is actually happening, and I have training in this, I do vendor fraud investigation for a living, I know what a real file looks like and this isn't one, and I just — I'm sorry. I'll email you. I'm sorry. Thank you."

Priya sat with the phone against her ear for four more seconds after the message ended, the automated menu droning under her thumb. She did the thing she always did on a first listen, before she let herself feel anything: ran it once for tells instead of words. The catch on *my sister's car*. The way *eleven days* came out flatter than everything around it — over-rehearsed, a phrase already worn smooth from being said to strangers. The apology at the end, twice, from a woman who'd clearly spent her whole career being told that needing anything out loud was a liability.

Only after that did she let the actual sentence land: *keys still in the ignition*.

*

Addy's Corolla had been found on the shoulder of I-80, outside a rest stop forty minutes past the Ohio line. Doors unlocked. Purse sitting upright on the passenger seat, like she'd meant to come right back for it. Not knocked over. Not rifled through. Set there — the word the responding officer's report had used was *undisturbed*. At nineteen, Priya had read that as evidence of nothing. She'd spent the thirteen years since unable to stop reading it as evidence of everything.

She hadn't thought the word *ignition* in relation to Addy in longer than she could honestly account for. It arrived anyway, unbidden — not a memory exactly, more a temperature the room dropped to without her consent. For one full second she saw a purse on a seat that wasn't hers, in a car that wasn't Dana Okafor's, thirteen years and four hundred miles from whatever had actually happened outside Charlotte. Then it was gone, the way it always went, leaving behind the specific, familiar exhaustion of having felt something she hadn't scheduled.

She had not decided to take this case. She wanted that on the record, even if the only record was the inside of her own skull at eleven at night. She'd listened to a voicemail from a stranger and had a physical reaction that had nothing to do with the stranger's sister. The professional in her — the part that had built a career on being the person who didn't do exactly this — noted the sequence with something close to alarm. Feeling first. Facts, God willing, later.

She played the voicemail again anyway, then a third time — this pass for nothing but the name the woman had corrected herself out of. *The Voss case*. She didn't let herself sit with it any longer than it took to recognize the flinch and set it down. Wrong Voss. Had to be — Akron wasn't Charlotte, four years wasn't eleven days, and she'd made herself a rule after the retraction: never again let two syllables do a fact's job. She wrote the rule down more often than she followed it. She wrote it down now, in the notes app, timestamped, the way she wrote everything she wanted to prove later she'd known.

*

The email came in at 11:47. Subject line: *Dana Okafor — Missing 11 Days*. Four attachments, a body text more composed than the voicemail and worse for

it — the kind of controlled that comes from someone editing a message six times before sending it.

Priya opened the first attachment on the second monitor — the one she used for anything she wasn't ready to let take over her whole field of vision. A scanned incident report, Mecklenburg County, two pages, mostly boilerplate. Vehicle: 2023 Toyota Corolla, rental agency plates. Location: shoulder, Route 51, 0.4 miles from a self-storage facility. Condition of vehicle: unlocked, engine off, keys in ignition, no signs of forced entry, no blood, no signs of struggle. A date-filed stamp in the corner: September 3, 8:14 p.m. That was the day the car was found, not the day Dana had actually vanished — the report didn't specify that, because nobody had been there to see it.

She pulled up a saved local news alert on her other screen. It was the one that had first put Dana's name in front of her three days ago — bookmarked, never acted on, the way she bookmarked forty things a week. Dated September 14. She did the arithmetic without meaning to, the same reflex that priced storm-surge risk in somebody else's job and priced silence in hers: eleven days, filed to today, matched clean. No detective's press conference in between. No amber alert, either — a forty-one-year-old woman with no custody dispute and no history of instability didn't qualify for one, whatever the actual math on her risk looked like.

The second attachment was a photograph of the car itself, taken by someone at the scene before it was towed. A wide shot: gravel shoulder, tree line, a Corolla sitting at a slight angle to the road, like it had drifted rather than stopped. The driver's door was closed. That detail sat with Priya longer than she expected it to. A person fleeing on foot, in a hurry, in fear, did not reliably think to close a door behind them. A person taken by someone patient enough to close it for her did.

She did not write that down yet. She made herself hold it as a question instead of a finding, the discipline that had cost her a career-defining humiliation once already for skipping it.

*

Yvette called back at nine the next morning, sounding like she'd slept badly and showered anyway, out of pure professional habit. For the first twenty minutes she was exactly what her voicemail had promised — precise, controlled, better organized than most detectives Priya had dealt with. She clearly spent her working life auditing other institutions' failures, and had simply turned the same instrument on her own family's file, because nobody else would.

"I do fraud and compliance work for a reinsurer," Yvette said. "Vendor due diligence, mostly. I read financial statements the way other people read faces. I'm telling you that so you understand I'm not a woman who thinks every locked door is a conspiracy. I know what an actual gap in a record looks like, and this case is nothing but gaps."

"Walk me through the ones you've already found," Priya said. Headphones on now, out of habit, even though nothing was recording. A fresh page open — and underneath it, a second document she hadn't told Yvette about: a running list of every proper noun that came out of the woman's mouth, timestamped. You never knew, in a first call, which name was going to matter, and you rarely got a second first call.

Most of what followed was the kind of texture Priya had heard from a hundred families and never once stopped needing to hear. Dana's last normal week. A canceled lunch. A strange flatness in her last two texts that Yvette hadn't clocked as strange until it was the only thing left to reread. A pharmacy Dana used two counties over that made no sense on a map. A husband, Theo — separated but not divorced, cleared inside forty-eight hours, and clearly, from the way Yvette said his name, still trusted. Fifteen minutes of grief wearing the costume of an audit trail. Priya let it run, because grief given room to talk sometimes coughed up the one detail a tighter interview would have trained it not to mention.

"There's a guy from her old job," Yvette said, somewhere past the twenty-minute mark, in the exact register people use for the thing they've already decided isn't the thing — offhand, half a laugh in it. "Julian Voss. Younger analyst, they met at some conference circuit two, three years back, stayed

loosely in touch, the way people in that industry do. He texted me twice after it hit the news, very sweet, very worried, wanted to know if there was anything he could do. I don't think it's anything. I'm only telling you because you said you wanted every name, even the ones I've already ruled out in my head."

Priya wrote the name down without her hand changing speed — the specific discipline of not letting a source watch you flag something. "Every name," she said, and meant it. The two syllables sat differently than the rest of the call had, for reasons she couldn't yet defend to anyone, including herself. *Wrong Voss*, she thought again, on principle, and wrote the name down anyway, because principle had never once stopped her from checking. Christ, she hated when the job did this — handed her a coincidence dressed up as a lead before she'd earned the right to believe it.

*

She built the timeline the way she always did — Yvette's call transcribed and time-coded on one screen, a blank document titled simply DANA on the other. It was a discipline she'd have called embarrassing if anyone else in her life did it out loud: refuse to let the missing woman become a case number, not even in her own private files. Dana Okafor. Forty-one. Fifteen years pricing catastrophe for a living, on paper the least likely victim of anything except bad luck. A rental car with a closed door and an open ignition. A husband who still said her name like a person and not a liability. A colleague named Julian Voss, who'd texted the sister twice, unprompted, out of what read, on its face, like ordinary decency.

Yvette had sent one more attachment near the end of the call, almost apologetically — three pages of a bank statement, the most recent one Dana's mail had generated before she vanished. She'd already run it twice herself, doing her own version of Priya's job with her own professional muscle, and found, by her own account, nothing. "I'm sending it so you can tell me I'm not crazy for finding nothing," she'd said. "Sometimes a second set of eyes finds the nothing faster, and then we can both stop looking at it."

Priya opened it at midnight with the same reflex she brought to everything now: treat the page like a waveform. Most of it was hiss — a mortgage

payment, a grocery chain, a streaming subscription, a pharmacy charge two counties over that matched the detail Yvette had already flagged and explained. A life rendered in recurring debits, ordinary enough to gate out and move past. She dragged her eye down the column the way she'd have dragged a fader, looking for the one line that broke rhythm.

It broke on the fourth page, a single deposit, dated four months earlier, six figures, memo field reading CONSULT FEE — TORRANCE BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS LLC.

She sat with it a full ten seconds before she did anything else — the specific pause she gave herself before letting a maybe become a note. A woman who'd spent fifteen years quietly correcting other people's underwriting, taking a six-figure "consulting" payment from a company Priya had never heard of, was thin, on its own — the kind of thin she'd built four humiliating episodes on once before and sworn, in writing, in her own notes app, never to build on again.

So she checked it the way she should have checked Darnell Voss the first time, and hadn't: against something else, independently, before she let herself want it to be real.

She opened a new tab and typed the name Yvette had handed her an hour ago like it was nothing. *Julian Voss LinkedIn*. Third result down: a post eighteen months old, forty-one likes — the specific bland cheer of a young analyst announcing a professional milestone to an audience who'd scroll past it in four seconds. *Wrapped up a really interesting engagement with Torrance Behavioral Insights this quarter — always energizing to see how decision science gets applied outside our usual industry vertical. Grateful for the opportunity.*

Priya read it twice. Then she read the memo field on Dana's bank statement a third time, and sat very still in a room gone quiet enough for the ring in her ear to come all the way back up. She did not narrate a single word of what she thought next — not under her breath, not even to nobody.

Two people who barely knew each other, on opposite ends of a professional acquaintance that amounted, by Yvette's own account, to a conference circuit

and a handful of texts, had both been paid by the same tiny consulting firm neither of them had ever thought worth mentioning to anyone who was now missing eleven days. She pulled up the North Carolina Secretary of State's business search with hands that had gone perfectly, professionally steady, the way they always did the instant a maybe stopped being a feeling and started being a fact she could point to.

Torrance Behavioral Insights, LLC. Registered four years earlier. Status: dissolved.

Dissolved eight months before a rental car turned up on a Charlotte shoulder with the door closed and the keys still in the ignition.

The Wheel

Marcus Rourke

FOUR DAYS IN, THIRST HAD STOPPED BEING A FEELING AND STARTED BEING A schedule. Marcus tracked it the way he tracked everything now — not *I'm thirsty* but *nine hours since the last cup, four ounces, split twelve ways minus one arm nobody was pretending would use a cup again*. The math didn't help anybody. He kept doing it anyway, because a number was still a number, and a number was still more than this place had given them of anything else.

The Turn had come through sometime in what he'd started calling night, for lack of a better word — no clock, just the ten-second groan in the floor that dropped every conversation in the cell to silence and put it back up wrong. When the room stopped shaking, a wall that had been solid yesterday wasn't. A corridor ran off from it that hadn't existed an hour before, and at the far end of that corridor, before anyone had even finished deciding whether to walk down it, somebody heard something that wasn't a click.

It was a groan. Metal, not concrete. Low, with weight behind it.

They found the wheel a few minutes later — a full cell's width away, past a bend nobody would've trusted three days ago and everybody trusted now, because trust had stopped being a virtue and started being a resource, same as water. The thing sat waist-high in the wall, cast iron, five spokes worn bright at the grip points, valve housing bolted into the concrete like it had been poured there on purpose and not dropped in afterward. Nothing about it looked like the levers. No shallow steel plate, no brass, no hand-height placement measured off an average like the tithe rods were. This needed both arms and a back behind it. This needed weight.

Marcus stood in the doorway a full minute before anyone else got close enough to touch it, doing the only thing he still trusted his own head to do reliably: cataloguing. One valve wheel, water-cistern configuration, the kind you'd find on an actual water main if this place had actual water mains. No

stamped code visible from here — he'd check that later, the way he checked everything later, filed and shelved. Somebody, sometime in the last hour, had already tried it. He could tell from the drying puddle under the spout and from the particular quality of the silence in the room, which was hope trying very hard not to announce itself. Water. Not paste. Three pulls since dawn, according to the woman closest to the door, and nothing taken back for any of them.

That last part mattered more than the water did. Four days into this place, *nothing taken back* was a category of miracle Marcus hadn't let himself believe in since the first lever took a man's forearm in front of thirteen strangers. He filed that too: *this one might only ever give*. Might. He wasn't going to bet anybody's hand on might.

What he did know, standing in that doorway, was simpler and older than anything the room wanted to hear out loud. A chokepoint was a chokepoint whether it dispensed water or let trucks through a checkpoint gate. One valve. One narrow reach. A crowd of people who hadn't eaten a solid meal in four days and had just watched proof that thirst wins every argument it's allowed to enter.

Somebody was going to get hurt fighting over this. Not yoked-hurt, not mechanism-hurt. Just hurt, the old plain kind, elbows and a shove and a woman knocked into a wall that might or might not still be a wall by the time she landed. He'd seen that particular math before, on a different continent, over a different kind of water.

He didn't decide to claim it. He'd think about that distinction a lot, later, in quieter moments that never stayed quiet long enough — the difference between *deciding* and *already moving*, and how thin that difference had gotten since the day he stopped being able to draw a line between the two.

By the time he'd finished the thought, six people were already crowding the cell.

*

Ines got there early, Mateo's hand fisted hard in the back of her shirt so he couldn't reach for anything even if the crowd carried him forward. She held

four feet back from the wheel itself — the specific distance of a woman who'd already decided no cup was worth what closing that gap might cost.

Feliciano Ruiz stood closer, forearms loose at his sides, that particular stillness Marcus recognized from Day One. A man doing arithmetic he didn't have numbers for, getting closer to an answer than anyone gave him credit for.

Whitcomb hovered at the edge of it, already narrating. "In my professional assessment," he was saying, to nobody who'd asked, "a mechanism that only gives is exactly the kind of pattern we ought to—"

"Nobody's touched it wrong yet," Marcus said, not loud. "Let's keep it that way."

That was when the TSA man moved.

Marcus hadn't gotten a name for him before now — hadn't needed one, three days into a room where names were the least reliable thing anyone owned. He'd clocked the build on Day One and left it filed: soft through the middle, but carried like a man used to standing at a checkpoint and being obeyed by default, shoulders set the exact width apart that a uniform teaches a body to hold even after the uniform's gone. He crossed the cell now with that same borrowed authority, cutting past Ruiz and past two women who'd been waiting longer than he had, hand already out for the crank.

"Everybody just hold on a second," he said, to the room, in a voice built for intercoms. "I used to run checkpoints for a living. I know how a line works. Single file, and nobody touches anything till I say—"

His hand closed on the nearest spoke.

Marcus was already still.

It happened before he decided it, the same way *Reyes* had come out of his mouth before he'd decided that either — his whole body going flat and quiet, hands loose and open at his sides, weight settled low. He wouldn't have a word for it for weeks yet, wouldn't know it was going to be the one tell his body kept for the rest of this place, the one thing that fired the same way every single time regardless of who was standing in front of it. Right now it was just instinct, unlabeled: *somebody's hand is on the valve and nobody agreed to that.*

"Take your hand off it," Marcus said.

"I've got this." The man didn't turn around. His fingers tightened on the spoke, testing the give of it, the posture of somebody already halfway to turning it whether the room liked it or not.

"You don't."

"Somebody's got to run this before it turns into—" He gestured with his free hand at the room, at all of them, a checkpoint supervisor's gesture, sweeping and unbothered. "This is exactly what happens without structure. I've seen it. Crowds don't manage themselves."

"Take your hand off the wheel."

The third time wasn't a request and everybody in the room heard the difference land. The man finally turned to look at him — really look, the way you look at someone you're deciding whether to treat as a colleague or an obstacle — and made, in about a second and a half, the wrong call.

"Or what," he said, and pulled.

The wheel gave maybe two inches before Marcus had him.

He didn't remember crossing the distance. That was the part that would bother him later, lying awake counting cups instead of sleep — the gap in his own memory between *still* and *moving*, like his body had decided the negotiation was over before his head got a vote.

One hand locked the man's wrist off the spoke. The quarter-turn never finished. The other hand took him under the arm and put him into the wall beside the housing — not the valve, never anywhere near the valve, some part of Marcus tracking that distinction the whole time, the way you track a muzzle direction without thinking about it. The man hit the concrete shoulder-first, a sound mostly air leaving him. The room's breath caught the same way it had the first time a lever took someone's arm.

He came up swinging once, wide and undisciplined, the kind of punch a body throws when its pride is more injured than its body is. Marcus took it on the forearm, absorbed it the way you absorb weather, and put him back down — not harder than the first time. Precisely as hard as the first time, which was its own kind of message. Pinned him there with a knee and a flat hand across the chest, close enough to speak quietly and be heard by everyone anyway.

"You don't touch it," Marcus said, "until somebody who isn't guessing tells you it's your turn."

The man didn't answer. He was breathing too hard to.

Marcus held the position two more seconds — counting them, the same reflex that counted cups — and then let him up. Not gently. Not cruelly either. The exact amount of force the situation had asked for and not one ounce more, the specific discipline of a man who'd once been paid to know precisely where that line sat and had never fully stopped being that man, whatever else he'd told the room his name was.

The man got to his feet holding his own wrist, and didn't look at the wheel again.

*

Nobody said anything for a five-count. Then Ines exhaled, audibly, the sound of a woman who'd been holding a nine-year-old's whole future four feet back from a valve and had just watched the distance get safer without having to spend anything of her own to make it happen.

"Thank you," she said. Quiet. Not to the room. To him, specifically.

Whitcomb found his voice next, already reaching for the register he used on everything now — solemn, procedural, a man narrating a scene into scripture before the ink was even dry. "Well," he said. "We've just seen who's going to run the water."

Marcus hadn't asked for that sentence. He didn't correct it either.

He looked at the wheel instead, and at the room around it — nine, ten people now, all of them watching him the specific way you watch someone after they've solved a problem you didn't know how to name. He did the only thing that had ever made a crowd like this survivable, back when the crowd had worn a different uniform and stood behind a different fence.

"Line starts here," he said, and put his own hand flat against the wall beside the valve, marking the spot the way you'd mark a post. "One cup, one person, then the next. We go—" a half-second's decision, no more thought in it than that, a coin flip he'd remember years later as a law he'd claimed to have always kept— "counterclockwise, starting with her." He nodded at Ines. "Kid drinks

before anybody twice his size. Nobody reaches till the person ahead of them's stepped clear. Anybody skips the line, they go to the back of it. That's the whole rule."

Nobody argued. Four days of watching people lose pieces of themselves to guesswork had made obedience the cheapest thing left to spend.

He turned to the wheel.

It took the whole of him to move it — both hands wide on the spokes, boots set, the specific full-body lean he hadn't used on anything since a compound gate that hadn't opened the easy way in years. Something in him, unbidden and unexamined, hummed four low notes under his breath while he hauled it — a rhythm that belonged to a high school football coach dead a decade now, nothing to do with the Army, nothing to do with any of this, the one tic left in him that wasn't about the war or the box. The valve gave with a shudder and a groan that ran up through his forearms into his teeth, and then water came — clean, cold, a thin bright rope of it into the first cup, the good kind of miracle nobody in this room had earned and everybody in this room needed anyway.

He watched Ines's face while Mateo drank first. That was the moment, though nobody in the cell would ever be able to point to the exact second it happened, not even Marcus himself, looking back on it later with a great deal more reason to look back on it. It wasn't the fight. The fight was just force, the same force that could've gone either way with a slightly different man's grip strength. It was this — the crank in his hands, the water actually coming, ten strangers watching him prove, in front of witnesses, that the valve answered to somebody, and that the somebody it answered to was him.

Something in the room's posture changed permanently in that half-minute. He felt it the way you feel a wind shift before you can name the weather it's bringing. They stopped watching him like a man who'd won a fight. They started watching him like a man who ran something.

*

He was three cups into the line — Ines and Mateo done, Ruiz next, the TSA man standing well back near the seam-wall, still working his wrist, saying nothing to anybody — when something happened at the far edge of the cell

that nobody in the room was positioned to notice except him, and even he only caught the tail of it.

Whitcomb had claimed a spot against the back wall two days ago, near a shallow recess where a second, smaller mechanism sat unclaimed and untested — a Tithe rod nobody had touched yet, brass gone dull with disuse rather than handling, close enough to where Whitcomb had started laying out the folded jacket he slept on that it had become, without anyone deciding it, his corner. Marcus had filed the rod the way he filed every rod: *pending, not cleared, watch it.*

He was watching the cup fill for Ruiz when the rod moved.

Not far. An inch, maybe less — the same short arc he'd watched take a man's forearm on Day One, but shallower, slower, more like a held breath let halfway out than a pull. No hand near it. No shadow crossing it. Whitcomb himself was six feet off at the time, mid-sentence about the fairness of the line, his back half-turned to the recess entirely.

The rod completed its short travel and came back to rest.

A click followed it — small, dry, the exact sound Marcus had heard a dozen times now from a hand that had just tested a lever and gotten nothing for the trouble. Except no hand had been on it. He was almost certain no hand had been on it. He held the wheel steady with one arm and looked, hard, for the half-second the water gave him to look, and saw nothing — no cord, no draft, no reason a piece of brass and steel should move on its own any more than the wall itself should hum the way it had since Day One.

Nobody else in the cell had turned. Whitcomb kept talking. Ruiz reached for his cup. Selene, three feet from Marcus, was watching the line and not the recess, the way everyone was watching the line, because the line was the thing that mattered now, the thing that had just started making sense in a room built entirely out of things that didn't.

Marcus filed it the way he filed everything that didn't have a slot yet. *Noted. Not now.*

He turned back to the wheel, and hummed his four low notes, and let the water keep coming.

Lot 11, Pallet C

U.S. GENERAL SERVICES ADMINISTRATION

FEDERAL SURPLUS PERSONAL PROPERTY – SALE OF GOVERNMENT
PROPERTY

Sale Number: GS-04S-03-2214-SL

Sale Type: Sealed Bid, Negotiated Award

Property Custodian: Defense Logistics Agency, Disposition
Services

Property Location: Anniston Army Depot Annex, Calhoun Co., AL

LOT 11 – 11 PALLETS, MIXED RESEARCH/TEST APPARATUS

Original Nomenclature (per 1979 disposal record, carried
forward unchanged): "Surplus Agricultural Monitoring
Equipment, Assorted"

Condition Code: X – Unserviceable, value in parts/materials
only

Storage: Outdoor/covered, since approx. 1979

Inspection: Waived per buyer request, Para. 12(c)

LINE ITEM DETAIL – PALLET C

Qty: 1 pallet, banded, 640 lbs. gross

Contents (per manifest, uninspected): "fixtures, test,
laboratory, various; panel sections; wiring harnesses, non-
standard; documentation, bound, 4 vols."

Condition Code: X

Hazmat Cert: N/A (cert on file, Depot EHS, dated 1979; not
re-verified)

AWARD

High Bidder: Threshold Salvage LLC

Registered Agent: Corporate Filings of Delaware, Inc.,
Wilmington, DE

Award Basis: Sole responsive bid, Lot 11 (whole lot only, no
partial award permitted)

Total Sale Price, Lot 11 (11 pallets): \$340,000.00

Payment: Cashier's check, received in full

Removal Deadline: 30 days from award, extended once by mutual consent

REMARKS: Buyer waived Condition Code X advisory in writing.
No further Depot liability attaches per Para. 19. File closed.

Distribution: Buyer, Depot File, GSA Region 4, DLA
Disposition Services HQ

APPROVED FOR RELEASE:

Contracting Officer: _____

Signature: [illegible initials]

Date: 02/03/2003

Property Disposal Officer: _____

Signature: [illegible initials]

Date: 02/03/2003

A Rescue, As Advertised

Dana Okafor

SIX DAYS, AND THE WATER LINE MOVED LIKE SOMETHING THAT HAD ALWAYS existed.

Dana stood in it now — third from the front, a tin cup she'd claimed on Day Five and defended since without ever once having to raise her voice about it — and let herself notice, the way she noticed everything now, that the line itself had become a kind of proof. Not that the room was safe. That people would build the appearance of safety out of almost nothing, given six days and a wheel that only ever gave. Counterclockwise, one cup, one person, the next. Nobody argued the order anymore. Nobody had argued it in two days.

She ran the number anyway, because running it was the only muscle she still fully trusted. Fourteen people, minus one arm and, as of an hour ago, minus whatever the TSA man's wrist had cost him in nerve function he wasn't mentioning. Two hundred milliliters a head, roughly, when the wheel was generous, which it had been every single time so far — a streak long enough now that some part of her wanted to call it a trend and knew better than to let herself. *N equals nine pulls. Nine successes is not a law. Nine successes is a coin that hasn't shown tails yet.* She filed the correction the way she filed everything, and drank her two hundred milliliters, and did not enjoy it any less for knowing the correction was true.

Marcus worked the crank with both hands and his whole back, the same four low notes running under his breath that she'd started to recognize from three cells away before she ever saw his face — a rhythm that belonged to nothing she could place, football maybe, some drill from a life before this one, filed under *not urgent* along with everything else about him that wasn't immediately useful to her model of who ran what. He didn't look up between cups. He never did. Looking up cost time, and time, six days in, had become the one resource nobody had figured out how to ration yet.

Selene did the looking up for him.

She stood off his left shoulder in a spot that had, without anyone deciding it, become hers — close enough to hand him water before he asked for it, far enough that she was never technically part of the line herself. Dana watched her do it now: a cup passed sideways, no words, timed to the half-second his hand came off the crank and needed something in it. Selene's fingers found his forearm on the handoff and stayed a beat longer than the water required, and Marcus's shoulders came down an inch, the specific inch of a man who had been braced for something and had just been told, wordlessly, that he didn't need to be. Small. Nobody in the line would have called it anything if you'd asked them to name it out loud. Everybody in the line was calling it something anyway.

The two of them who got taken together, Bobby Teague had said to her yesterday, low, almost reverent, like a man reciting a fact he needed to be true. *Taken together and found each other in here anyway. That's — I don't know. That's the only good thing that's happened since the concrete.* He'd said it the way people said things about survivors on the news, the kind of sentence that made you feel warmer for repeating it and worse for wondering why.

Dana didn't have a model for it, which bothered her more than it should have. She had built models for grief, for denial, for the specific mathematics of a family finding out a person they loved wasn't coming home — she had built one for that on a kitchen table with a mug going cold at her elbow, and she had believed it, and she had been wrong about exactly the part that mattered. She did not have enough data on two strangers pressed into the same six days of terror to say whether what she was watching was devotion or simply two people learning, faster than anyone else in the room, how much safer it was to be needed by someone who could still move both hands. She told herself, watching Selene's fingers leave Marcus's arm and find the next cup instead, that this one, for once, could just be allowed to be exactly what it looked like. She almost believed it. She had almost believed things before.

Theo used to bring her water without being asked, too, some part of her offered, unbidden, the way the thought always came now — sideways, mid-

sentence, no warning label on it — *water and the yellow pills on the nightstand, set down without a word, because asking out loud would have meant saying Naomi's name in a sentence that ended in a question mark, and neither of them could survive that particular sentence yet.* She let the thought pass through her the way she let all of them pass through her, and stepped up for her cup, and did not let her hand shake taking it, which by now was its own kind of achievement.

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Gerald Whitcomb had been quiet for two days, which in retrospect should have told her something.

Not silent — nobody in this room got to be silent, not with thirteen strangers and no walls that stayed where you left them — but quiet in the specific way of a man doing arithmetic he didn't want interrupted. She'd watched him watching, these two days: a woman three cells over pressing a flush ivory button and getting nothing; a man doing the same twenty minutes later and getting tack, four hundred grams of it, more than anyone had gotten off a lever all week. She'd watched him watch a third pull, and a fourth, filing whatever he was filing behind an expression she recognized because she used to wear it herself, in a different room, in front of a different kind of number.

He called them together at what had started to feel like midday, though nobody had a clock and the light gave up nothing about the hour. He stood near the seam-wall with a shard of housing metal in one hand — flaked off some ruined mechanism nobody remembered breaking — and he had, she would think later, the exact posture of a man about to read a determination off a claim file to a family that had been waiting six weeks for the letter.

"I've been watching the button plates," he said. "Four instances since yesterday's Turn. The pattern's plain enough."

Nobody laughed. Six days ago somebody would have laughed.

"Press it once," he said, "and it's a coin flip, same as everything else in this place. But every single person who got tack — every one, four for four — pressed it twice. Firm, close together. And then waited. I counted the gap on the two I saw closest. Three breaths. Not two. Not five. Three, every time,

before they pulled their hand back." He looked around the half-circle that had gathered, the specific slow scan of a man checking that the room was still with him before he committed the sentence to paper. "Press twice. Wait three breaths. That's the rule."

He crouched at the wall and scratched it into the concrete with the metal shard — short, hard strokes, the sound of it thin and dry under the Undertone's low hum. *RULE ONE. PRESS TWICE. WAIT THREE BREATHS.* He underlined it once, like a man notarizing something.

"It's like a ledger," Selene said, from the back, not unkindly — the observation of a woman used to reading a room and handing it back its own thought dressed a little better than it had arrived. "You're keeping a ledger on the wall."

The word stuck the way names always stuck in this room — offered once, agreed to without a vote. *The Ledger*. Dana watched it land on thirteen faces at once and felt, underneath her own better judgment, the specific relief of a person who had been doing sums with no denominator for six days and had just been handed one, free, by somebody else. *Sample size of four*, the part of her that still ran honest numbers said, quietly, from somewhere she'd stopped fully trusting since the withdrawal sweats had started waking her at whatever passed for night here. *Four for four is not a law. Four for four is a streak, and streaks end, and you have no idea yet what decides when.*

She didn't say it out loud. Nobody in that half-circle wanted the denominator. They wanted the first solid thing anyone had stood on since the concrete, and Gerald Whitcomb, God help all of them, had just built it for free.

Renata Ibsen went first, because Renata Ibsen had spent thirty years running codes on people who couldn't afford her to hesitate, and hesitating in front of a rule now felt, to her, like a kind of malpractice.

"I trust his read more than I trust my own gut at this point," she said to Dana, quiet, before she crossed the cell — not defensive, just stating a triage decision the way she'd have stated any other one. "My gut's been wrong about a lot of things the last six days. His has a pattern behind it. I'll take the pattern."

She stood in front of the flush ivory plate with the specific stillness of a woman used to counting compressions in her head, pressed it once, firm, and again immediately after — the two presses close enough together that the second one seemed to arrive before the room had finished flinching from the first. Then she held her hand an inch off the housing and breathed, visibly, on purpose, counting under her breath the way a person counts a pulse. *One. Two. Three.*

The plate gave a small mechanical settle, almost gentle.

Tack. A grey-green fistful of it, more than her rationed share, dispensed into her waiting palm with no more drama than a vending machine giving up a candy bar. Renata exhaled and someone behind her actually clapped, once, before catching themselves.

The room came up like a held breath let go. *It worked.* Dana watched the relief move through thirteen strangers the way heat moves through water, and felt her own body do something close to the same thing before the part of her that ran the numbers caught up and flagged it: *N equals five now. Still five. Five successes and four days of desperate people wanting badly enough to believe the fifth one meant something the first four hadn't.*

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It was maybe twenty minutes later — long enough that the cell had gone back to its ordinary business, the water line reforming, Ines walking Mateo through a corridor test with her whole body between him and the seam — when Dmitri Osei stood in front of a second flush plate two cells down and said, to nobody in particular, the question that had been sitting behind his teeth since Whitcomb first scratched the metal into the wall.

"How does he know it's three," he said. "Not two. Not four. He watched four people do something with their hands he can't have timed exactly, and he's telling us three is the number that keeps your fingers on your body. That's not a read. That's a story he likes the shape of."

Nobody answered him, because nobody had an answer that wasn't just Whitcomb's own confidence borrowed back and handed to him secondhand. Dmitri had run enough hands across enough felt to know what a story dressed

as a read looked like from the inside — he'd built a career telling the two apart under worse lighting than this — and some part of Dana, watching him say it, thought: *he's right. He is completely, provably right, and it will not matter, because he's as thirsty as she was.*

He pressed the plate. Twice, firm, close together — following the rule exactly, to the letter, the specific over-precision of a man determined to prove a bad process wrong by running it flawlessly and watching it fail anyway. He held his hand back. He counted the three breaths out loud, deliberately, almost mockingly, so the whole cell could hear him do it by the book.

"One," he said. "Two." His hand was an inch from the housing, exactly where Renata's had been. "Thr—"

The housing didn't seize. It didn't need to. It took the first two fingers of his right hand the way it had taken Feliciano's arm on Day One. Clean. Instant. No blood. The stumps sealed glass-smooth before the sound of it finished reaching the back of the cell. No drama in the mechanism at all. The drama was entirely Dmitri's — half a second behind it, staring at a hand that had three fingers on it now instead of five, still deciding how loud to be about the difference.

Dana's eyes went, before she could stop them, to the two housings — Renata's, then this one — and found what some old, useless part of her had already gone looking for. Different stamped codes. Six characters each, worn the same dull grey, and not the same six characters at all. She filed it exactly the way she'd filed the first one, back on Day One, under *noted*, *not urgent*, and hated, distantly, how easily that filing system still worked on her.

The room turned to Whitcomb the way a room turns to the only person in it who's ever claimed to know anything.

He didn't hesitate. That was the part Dana would keep coming back to later, lying against cold concrete counting a breath count she was no longer sure she trusted: he had an answer before Dmitri had finished making the sound a person makes discovering two fingers gone. "Different plate," Whitcomb said, already moving toward it, already narrating with the same calm, procedural certainty he'd used an hour ago for a sample of four. "Different housing entirely — you can see that from here, the color's off, the wear pattern's different. This

one's never given anyone tack. The rule holds for the plate I tested it on. We simply haven't mapped this one yet."

It was, Dana understood, watching him build the distinction out of nothing in real time, in front of a man holding his own hand against his chest and trying not to scream — a plausible sentence. It had the shape of an actuarial finding, cause identified, exception explained, the confident cadence of a determination read off a file at the bottom of which someone had already written a number.

It was also, verifiably, a guess. He had no data on this plate at all — none, by his own accounting, not one prior pull to compare against the four he'd built his rule from — and he was already speaking about it as though the distinction had been sitting there all along, waiting for someone competent enough to notice it.

Two people had followed the exact same rule, to the letter, twenty minutes apart. One got fed. One lost two fingers, and Gerald Whitcomb had an explanation for the difference before the second man had stopped shaking — and the explanation had come out of him with precisely the same certainty, the same weight, the same claims-file cadence, as the rule itself had an hour before it was tested even once.

Three Days, Four Thousand Dollars

Dana Okafor (BEFORE — eighteen months before Day One)

FOUR THOUSAND DOLLARS FOR THREE AFTERNOONS OF TYPING WAS, BY ANY reasonable model, the best hourly rate she'd been offered since Halcyon let her go. She noticed herself doing the arithmetic before she'd finished reading the subject line — *decision science, professional track, compensation contingent on completion* — which told her something about herself she filed away without examining. She had built her whole career out of not examining the thing that would slow her down.

The email came from Torrance Behavioral Insights, LLC, a name she didn't recognize attached to a recruiter's signature block that looked exactly like every other recruiter's signature block she'd ever ignored. *Your published work in catastrophic-tail modeling makes you an ideal candidate for a paid decision-science study.* Flattery, cheaply built, and she knew it was cheaply built. It worked on her anyway — the way flattery works fastest on people who've spent two years being told, gently and often, that they are not currently needed. The study proper — three days, NDA-bound, four thousand dollars, an in-person session afterward outside Statesville, North Carolina, mileage and one night's lodging reimbursed — was, per the recruiter, contingent on completing an online screening battery first. *Most candidates who complete the battery are invited forward*, the email said, in the specific hedged phrasing of a document written by someone who had learned exactly how much certainty a sentence could survive before a lawyer flagged it.

She signed the NDA at her kitchen table — the smaller table, in the townhouse, the one that sat four when the house on Selwyn had sat eight and Theo had still occasionally been at the other end of it — clicked through an e-signature field with the flat, practiced indifference of a woman who had signed worse documents for less money, and logged into a portal that asked her, first, to confirm she was alone, that no one else could see her screen, and that she

would complete each day's module in a single sitting without pausing longer than the allotted break windows. She thought, reading it, that it was a reasonable methodology. Attrition ruined longitudinal data. She'd have written the same instruction herself.

The consulting work that had replaced Halcyon paid in the same currency as the recruiter's email — occasional, flattering, never quite enough. Two white papers for a state insurance commission, a training module she'd ghostwritten for a firm too embarrassed to put her actual name on it, a semester of adjunct work she'd quietly let lapse because grading undergraduates' risk models made her want to put her head through a wall. Four thousand dollars for three afternoons was not just the best rate she'd been offered in two years. It was close to the only rate.

The first day's module was, professionally speaking, competent work.

Trolley-adjacent scenarios, dressed in the specific vocabulary of her own field rather than a philosophy seminar's: a regional carrier's catastrophic reserve, insufficient to cover every valid claim after a hundred-year flood, and a slider she had to set — how much of the shortfall gets absorbed by raising next year's premiums across the whole book, versus how much gets absorbed by denying the bottom decile of claims outright. She built the answer the way she built every answer in that domain, fast, load-bearing, defensible in front of a regulator. Loss-aversion vignettes came next, framed as insurance rather than gambles, which she appreciated on a craftsman's level even while answering them: *would you rather guarantee your policyholders recover sixty percent, or accept a coin flip between ninety and thirty*. Real actuaries didn't need the coin flip explained to them twice. She noticed, filling in the third or fourth of these, that whoever built the instrument had bothered to get the units right — dollars, not abstract points, decimal places carried out to where a real filing would carry them — and some small, starved part of her, the part that used to get complimented in front of a room, sat up at the competence of it the way she hadn't sat up at anything in a while.

Buried in the middle of the block, low-key enough that she almost answered it on autopilot: *A regional carrier's automated utilization-review system denies a claim for residential mental-health treatment for a sixteen-year-old dependent, citing insufficient documentation of prior outpatient failure. The parent appeals. You are the actuary asked to model the cost impact of overturning the denial on appeal, system-wide, if this case sets precedent. What is your recommendation?*

She answered it in the ninety seconds it used to take her to read a denial letter twice and then a third time, as though the fourth reading might change the number at the bottom. She recommended, on the screen, exactly what the model would recommend — hold the line, the precedent cost dwarfs the individual claim, this is what actuarial soundness requires. She did not let herself finish the thought that came up underneath it before the page auto-advanced to question nineteen. *Good survey design borrows real cases*, she told herself, closing the laptop that evening with her hands steadier than she'd expected. Half the training materials in her old department had been built from anonymized real claims; she'd built two of them herself. There was nothing to read into a question that happened to sit exactly where her own life sat. That was what a well-normed instrument looked like from the inside — general enough to hit everyone somewhere, specific enough that everyone thought it had been written for them alone.

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The second day's module ran longer, and adapted.

She noticed the adaptation the way she'd have noticed it in any instrument she was reviewing rather than taking — the branching sharpened overnight, narrowing toward whatever her Day One answers had suggested she'd hold still for. Item response theory, she guessed, a live model updating its estimate of her with every click, spending its remaining questions where they'd extract the most information rather than wasting them on ground already covered. It was, professionally, the correct way to build an instrument this expensive to administer. She admired it and did not ask herself why an instrument this expensive was being administered to her specifically, over three unpaid days of

her attention, for four thousand dollars a company she'd never heard of could apparently spend without blinking.

The vignettes got smaller and more personal without ever using a name she recognized. An ICU triage protocol, forcing her to rank five hypothetical patients by expected life-years against bed availability — she built the ranking the way Renata Ibsen would have built it, a woman she hadn't met yet and wouldn't meet for another year and a half, in a room neither of them could currently imagine. A widowed policyholder's claim, denied on a technicality neither party had understood was in the contract, and a slider asking how much of the actuary's own discretion should be permitted to override a system correctly, technically, doing its job. She answered a question about a parent who'd altered internal paperwork, once, to push a denied claim through for a family whose case she'd found herself unable to stop thinking about, and was asked to rate, on a scale of one to ten, how professionally defensible the parent's action had been. She rated it a two. She had done exactly that, eight months after the funeral, on a live model with her own name on the change log, and she had never once, in the thirty-eight months since, rated it anything but justified in the only ledger that mattered to her.

She took her seven o'clock dose before starting the second sitting, the way she took it most nights now — off the record, off a doctor's continued sign-off, counted out of a bottle she'd learned to refill through channels that asked fewer questions than her actual physician had started to. Forty-six months since Naomi. She still counted in months instead of years, which she understood, distantly, as its own kind of data point about how much healing had actually occurred versus how much had simply become load-bearing scar tissue she'd built her days around. The battery didn't ask about that. It didn't have to. It was already circling it from four directions at once, close enough that she kept mistaking the shape of its questions for the shape of good design, because good design was the only explanation she was willing to consider.

The third day opened with a block labeled, without further explanation, *Terminal Module — Personal Stake Allocation*.

By then she'd stopped being surprised at how well-aimed the instrument felt. She'd built a private theory of it over two evenings of typing — an adaptive engine, learning her specific fault lines from her own answers and returning to press on them. It was more efficient than any survey she'd ever fielded professionally, and probably ten times the cost per completed response — a methodology she found herself, at three in the morning between sessions, sketching out on a legal pad as worth stealing for her own consulting deck, if she ever built one again. She had not let herself consider, not once in three days, that the reason the instrument fit her this well was that it had been built for exactly one person at a time, and this time the person was her.

The final question loaded alone on a blank screen, no context block above it, no scale of prior questions to compare it against, as if the instrument had spent two and a half days building toward a single, unadorned ask and wanted nothing in the frame to soften it.

You control a single unit of a scarce, life-saving intervention. Two candidates present with identical prognoses and identical probability of benefit: your own child, and a stranger's child. Using the 0–100 scale provided, rate the value to you of each life. You may not enter equal values. State your reasoning in no more than three sentences.

She did not have a child to put in the box. She had a girl who would be eighteen now, who would have been finishing her first year somewhere with a dining hall and a roommate and a mediocre dorm Wi-Fi Dana would have paid to upgrade without being asked, and who instead had a headstone with a date on it that Dana still, forty-six months later, sometimes wrote by accident on forms that asked for something else entirely. The instrument didn't know that, or didn't care, or — some other, colder possibility she didn't let finish forming — knew it precisely and had built the sentence anyway, blank enough to survive her either way.

She put Naomi in the box. She didn't decide to. Her hands did it before the rest of her had finished catching up, the same way they used to reach for a phone that used to ring with Naomi's name on it, months after there was nothing left to answer. She typed 100 for her own child, without hesitation,

without the professional courtesy of pretending to deliberate the way the format seemed to expect. She typed 30 for the stranger's child — not zero, because zero would have been a lie in the other direction, a performance of monstrosity rather than an honest number, and honesty was the entire discipline her training had ever actually taught her. Not equal, because the instrument had already told her equal wasn't an available answer, and because equal would have been the bigger lie of the two.

For the three sentences, she wrote what she would have written for a client, because that was the only register she had left that could hold the sentence without breaking:

A rational actor optimizing for aggregate welfare would set these values equal or closer to it; I am reporting what I would actually do under real stakes, not what a well-trained model would recommend, because a model that hides its own bias from its operator is more dangerous than one that discloses it. I would choose my own child every time, including in a world where I no longer have one to choose, which I understand is itself the finding. I am not correcting for this, and I do not believe it can be corrected for.

She hit submit before she let herself reread it. That was the discipline, too — you didn't relitigate a number once you'd stood behind it. The screen thanked her for her participation, confirmed her three days were complete, and told her someone from Torrance would be in touch within ten business days to schedule the in-person session in Statesville. No one from Torrance ever would be.

She closed the laptop. The townhouse was quiet in the specific way it had been quiet for two years now, a quiet with a shape cut out of the middle of it that no amount of furniture rearrangement had ever managed to fill back in. She sat with her hands flat on the closed lid for a moment, the way she used to sit with her hands flat on a finished model before she sent it up the chain, checking for the tremor that withdrawal had started leaving in them some evenings and finding, tonight, almost none.

Already, without meaning to, she was composing the deck she'd build the day a client finally asked her this question for real — not trolley-dressed, not

hypothetical, an actual number needed by end of day for an actual family in the room. *Personal-Stake Loss-Aversion Under Terminal Framing: A Case Study*. Methodology: adaptive branching across seventy-two hours, narrowing toward the subject's specific bereavement history without ever naming it, culminating in a forced, unequal allocation between the subject's own deceased child and a hypothetical stranger's living one. Headline finding, the kind she'd have circled twice in a client deck and dared anyone in the room to argue with: *training does not neutralize parental loss-aversion; it only teaches the subject to report it honestly instead of suppressing it, which is a more useful number to a buyer than false neutrality would ever be.*

She would have paid four thousand dollars herself to see the full dataset behind a study like that.

She just built one.

Second Teeth

Dana Okafor

BY DAY NINE, DANA HAD A PRIVATE TABLE WITH FOUR COLUMNS AND NO NAME for what she was building it toward.

Housing code. Puller. Outcome. Days since last resolution on that exact housing. She kept it the only place paper still existed for her, behind her sternum, updated every time somebody's hand closed around something so she wouldn't have to ask them to repeat it later. Fourteen people minus one arm, minus two fingers healed to a smooth double-knuckle stub Dmitri Osei still wouldn't let anyone look at straight on, minus whatever the TSA man's wrist had cost him that he still wasn't naming out loud. The table didn't prove anything. She kept it anyway, because a column with nothing in it yet was still, technically, a column, and columns were the last professional habit she had left that hadn't required a doctor's script to maintain.

The tithe rod in the cell two down from hers had gone quiet for four days. Two pulls, both null — a dry click, a huddle of relief, a housing that gave up nothing and took nothing back. In a room with a wall called the Ledger and a man scratching rules into it with a shard of somebody's broken lever, two nulls in a row had stopped reading as *safe* days ago. It read as *owed*. Dana had heard three separate people say some version of it since sunup — *that one's been quiet too long, that one's due* — with the specific, unearned confidence of gamblers watching a wheel that had landed black twice. She knew the math didn't support the feeling. She had said so, once, to Bobby Teague, gently, and watched the correction slide off him without leaving a mark. Sample size of two told you nothing about pull three. She believed that with her whole trained mind and could not, if she was honest, feel it in the part of her chest that had started, without her permission, agreeing with the room.

Corrine wanted it anyway.

Dana watched her cross the cell with the particular gait of someone who had decided, alone, before anybody could talk her out of it, and recognized the gait because she'd watched Feliciano wear it on Day One reaching for the first lever anybody in this place ever touched. Seventeen, though she'd have said older if you'd asked her, in a room that had stopped bothering to ask anyone anything they couldn't verify. Three days since Corrine had eaten more than a shared fistful of somebody else's tack. Dana had watched her give her share to Bobby twice this week for reasons that made sense only if you were seventeen and had decided, somewhere along the way, that being generous with the little you had was the only kind of currency nobody could take back from you once you'd spent it.

"Corrine." Ines's voice, low, the same tone she used with Mateo a half-second before he reached for anything. "It's owed something. Wait for the water line, there's tack coming off the wheel in—"

"I'm not waiting for Marcus's line." Corrine didn't turn around to say it. "I've waited for everybody's line for nine days. I'm hungry now."

Nobody stopped her. That had stopped being a thing anybody in this room could reliably do for each other somewhere around Day Six — you could offer, you could warn, you could stand there with your hand half-raised the way Ines's was now, and it changed exactly nothing about whether a hand belonged to its owner a second later.

Dana's column updated itself before she'd finished deciding to run it. *Housing: unnamed, second cell east. Prior pulls: two, both null. Days since last resolution: four. Puller: Corrine, seventeen, three days undernourished relative to ration, no observed tremor, no observed hesitation.* The number the column wanted to spit out — the number Dana would have handed a client without apology, on a slide, in a font big enough to read from the back of the room — was *this one is more likely to resolve punitive than the last two did*, not because the housing owed anything, housings didn't owe, but because two nulls this deep into a Cohort that was already down an arm and two fingers meant the pool of remaining bodies was smaller and the group's collective luck, whatever that word meant here, had nowhere left to spread itself thin. She

did not say any of that out loud. She had learned, watching Whitcomb build a rule out of four data points and a room's desperation to believe him, exactly what it cost to hand strangers a number dressed as a prophecy.

Corrine's hand closed around the brass.

The room went still the specific way it always went still now — not silence, thirteen people breathing didn't produce silence, but a stillness laid over the sound like a sheet over furniture, everyone's attention narrowing to one point at once. Dana heard her own pulse. She heard, underneath it, the low subsonal hum she still felt more than heard, running exactly as indifferent as it always ran, proof of nothing except that whatever was listening wasn't listening any harder for this than it had for the first lever nine days ago.

Corrine pulled.

The rod gave its short arc and stopped. For one full second nothing happened at all — no click, no settle, no dry mechanical confession either way — and in that second Dana watched the girl's face do the thing every face in this room did in the gap between the act and the verdict: go completely, helplessly neutral, a face braced equally for anything.

Then the housing clicked, small and dry, and released a fistful of tack into her waiting palm.

Somebody laughed, short and startled, the sound of relief that hadn't expected to be needed. Corrine ate standing up, fast, the particular unselfconscious speed of someone who'd learned three days ago not to trust a good outcome to still be there in an hour. Dana updated her column — *pull three, benign, four hundred grams, no cost* — and felt the small, treacherous lift of being wrong about something she'd have staked money on a week ago, back when money had still been a unit that meant anything.

She was wrong about more than she knew. She just didn't find out until the following morning, when Corrine woke up unable to close her mouth all the way.

It started, by Corrine's own confused account, as an ache low in the jaw on both sides — not sharp, not the specific bright pain of a tooth going bad, more

like pressure building behind a wall that had no give in it. She thought it was hunger. Everyone's mouth ached from hunger here, one more line item on a body that had stopped being anybody's first priority days ago. By midmorning she'd stopped talking in full sentences, working her jaw side to side with both hands the way a person tests a cramp, and by the time Ines got her to open up and let someone actually look, three people had already backed a half-step away without deciding to.

Dana was one of the three who didn't.

Behind Corrine's front teeth — behind the ordinary, slightly crooked bottom row any of them might have had before any of this — a second ridge had broken the gumline overnight, small and white and unmistakably teeth, set back half an inch from the first row like a shadow that had decided to become solid. Not crowded in wrong, the way a wisdom tooth crowds in wrong, forcing its way sideways through tissue that resents it. Placed. Even. A second row exactly where a second row would go if a mouth had simply been built, from the start, to hold two.

Nobody had a column for that.

Dana ran hers anyway, out of the same reflex that had kept her upright for nine days, and got nowhere. *Outcome: not benign, no sustenance dispensed. Not null, something plainly happened. Not punitive — nothing subtracted, no glass-smooth stump, no cauterized absence where a piece of Corrine used to be.* Her whole architecture ran on the assumption that a mechanism could give you something or take something or do nothing, three columns, three known shapes, and every entry she'd logged in nine days had fit neatly under one of the three. This didn't fit under any of them. This was a fourth column she had never once, in nine days of careful tallying, thought to leave room for, because her entire training — fifteen years of it, every model she'd ever built for anyone who paid her — assumed a closed system. Losses happened. Losses could be priced, hedged, reserved against. Nothing, in fifteen years of pricing catastrophe, had ever asked her to build a column for something coming back.

She felt her own hand go still against her sternum, over the place she kept the table nobody else could see, and made herself breathe before she let that

thought finish arriving anywhere useful.

Whitcomb reached them at a fast walk, already talking before he'd fully stopped moving, the specific momentum of a man who needed to be the one explaining a thing before anyone else got to wonder about it out loud first.

"Let me see." He crouched in front of Corrine the way he'd crouched in front of the wall to write Rule One, and for a moment Dana watched him do the thing he was good at — watching, cataloguing, running his own quiet arithmetic behind a face arranged into calm. "You pressed it — pulled it, how many times. Once?"

"Once." Corrine's voice came out thick, careful around whatever had changed the shape of her own mouth to her. "Same as always."

"And you'd eaten — when, before that. How long since your last."

"Three days. What does that have to do with—"

"It has everything to do with it." He said it fast, filling the gap before the room could notice he didn't actually know yet what it had to do with anything. "The mechanism responds to need. We've seen that. Higher need, higher yield — Renata got more tack than her ration the day she followed the rule exactly. This is the same principle taken further. Extreme scarcity, extreme—" He stopped himself half a syllable short of a word Dana watched him not choose. "It's compensating. Rewarding endurance."

"Rewarding." Dmitri's voice, from the back, flat, the two-fingered hand held against his own chest the way it had lived there for three days now. "She's growing a second set of teeth and you're calling it a reward."

"I'm saying there's a pattern—"

"You said three breaths was a pattern. You said the plate that took my fingers just hadn't been *mapped yet*." Dmitri didn't raise his voice. He didn't need to; the room had already gone quiet enough to carry it at a whisper. "You don't have a column for this, Gerald." His ruined hand pressed flatter against his chest, like he was holding something in instead of holding something up. "You're building one out of nothing. Same as you did with me. Except this time everybody in this room can watch you do it." A beat, nobody moving. "None of us have ever seen this before. Neither have you."

Whitcomb opened his mouth — Dana watched him reach, visibly, for the next sentence, the confident cadence that had carried four data points into a rule the whole Cohort still lived by — and nothing arrived to fill it. He looked at Corrine's mouth again, at the neat impossible second row sitting behind the first like it had always been waiting there, and Dana watched something happen to his face she hadn't seen happen to it in nine days: he didn't have an answer, and for one full second, in front of everyone, he let that show.

"I'll need to observe it longer," he said finally, and the sentence came out smaller than every sentence he'd said since Day One, the shard of housing metal loose and unused in his hand, no chalk mark added to the wall, no rule number, no underline. He straightened up without writing anything down. Dana understood, watching him walk away with his shoulders set too carefully level, that this was the first time since the concrete that Gerald Whitcomb had stood in front of an outcome and left the Ledger blank.

Nobody said anything to fill the space where his answer should have gone. Dana felt the room's collective certainty do something she'd been watching it do in smaller ways for days now — not collapse, nothing that clean, just develop a hairline crack nobody wanted to be the one to point at.

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By evening the ache had settled into something closer to a fact than a symptom. Corrine sat near the seam-wall working her jaw with two fingers, testing the new ridge with her tongue the way a person can't stop testing a sore tooth even when testing it hurts worse than leaving it alone. Dana sat near enough to watch without making it a vigil, close enough that when Corrine finally spoke, she was the one who heard it first.

"It doesn't even hurt like a wound," Corrine said, not really to anyone. "It hurts like — you know how your jaw aches when you were a kid and your teeth were coming in the first time? Like that. Like a memory of that, except I don't actually remember it, I was too little, but my mouth remembers it for me." She pressed her palm flat against her own cheek, testing the swelling from outside now instead of in. "That's a stupid thing to say."

"It's not stupid," Dana said, because it was the only true thing available to say, and because some part of her — the part that still, sixty-four months later, kept a small plastic box in a drawer four hundred miles from here with two baby teeth in it, wrapped in a tissue Naomi had picked out herself at age six with more ceremony than the occasion strictly required — understood exactly the shape of what Corrine had just described and had no intention of saying so.

There was a puddle near the base of the Cistern Wheel where the day's ration had sloshed and pooled on ground that wasn't quite level, water nobody had bothered to lap up because water spilled on the floor here felt, unaccountably, like water that had already been spent. Corrine crossed to it in the last hour before whatever passed for night, crouched over the still surface, and opened her mouth to the reflection the way a person checks a stranger's face for something they're afraid to be told and more afraid not to know.

Dana watched her find the second row in the water's dark, imperfect mirror — the neat white line of it sitting behind the first, exactly where a body would put it if a body meant to keep it — and watched her go very quiet in the specific way that, in this room, by Day Nine, had come to mean someone had finally arrived at a thought too large to say out loud immediately.

Corrine touched her own lip, drew it back, looked a moment longer.

"It gave me something back," she said. "Why would it give me something back?"

The Ledger's First Lie

Marcus Rourke

NINE DAYS IN, MARCUS HAD STOPPED TRUSTING MORNINGS AND STARTED trusting cups. A morning was just a word this place let them keep out of habit, since the light never changed and the Turn didn't care what hour it came for. Cups were real. Cups he could count on his fingers and match against a headcount and get the same number twice in a row, which was more than this place had given him of anything else since the wheel came into his hands.

Word about Corrine's teeth had reached him twice removed, filtered through Ruiz and then through Selene, the way news traveled now — not as fact, as weather, something you heard was happening two cells over and adjusted your footing for without needing to see it. He'd filed it. *Not now*. He had his own line to run, and running it clean was the only thing he still knew how to guarantee anybody.

Thirteen in the count that morning, minus Dmitri's fingers, minus Ruiz's forearm, minus whatever had happened inside Corrine's mouth that nobody was calling a loss yet. Renata Ibsen stood fourth in the water line, same as she stood most mornings, hands folded in front of her the particular way of someone used to waiting on other people's bodies before her own. She'd been a nurse before whatever this was ate her old life whole — ICU, somebody said, though nobody here had any way to check it and everybody believed it anyway, because she moved like a person who'd spent a career doing the correct thing quietly while somebody else panicked.

She'd followed Whitcomb's first rule two days ago to the exact letter — pressed twice, waited three breaths — and gotten a full ration for it, no cost. Half the room had pointed at her since like she was proof the Ledger worked. Marcus had noticed the same thing Dana probably had, without either of them saying so: Renata was the safest bet in the Cohort. Careful with everyone else's

rationing, careful with her own. If this place ran on anything like fairness, it owed her nothing.

He gave her the cup. She thanked him the way she thanked everyone, brief and specific, and carried it away to where Ines was trying to get Mateo to drink slower than he wanted to.

Marcus turned back to the line and let his hands do the next four without thinking about it, the way you drive a stretch of highway you've driven every day for a year. That was when the thing his head did without asking landed on him — the same unbidden arrival that put Callie in a Publix parking lot at the worst possible second, or three sugars in a coffee he didn't have anymore — except this time it wasn't a memory of somebody safe. It was a file. Day three. A cell that didn't exist anymore, folded into whatever the Turn had made of this stretch of the Array by now. Tomas Grier's hand on a tithe rod, easy, unbothered, the particular confidence of a man built the way Grier was built — a hundred and ten kilos of it, most of that muscle — reaching for a lever the way you'd reach for a door you already knew opened.

Marcus had watched him do it because watching was the job he'd assigned himself before anybody assigned him anything. He remembered the stamped code on the housing, six characters worn shallow into the steel, because he checked codes the way other men checked exits — *later, filed, shelved*, the same three words he ran on everything that didn't need him yet. He remembered the arc of the pull, the half-second of nothing, and then the dry click that meant the room could breathe again. Null. No paste. No water. No cost. Grier had let go of the lever, rolled his shoulder like he'd finished a set, and gone back to whatever he'd been doing before, and nobody — Marcus included — had thought about that rod again in six days.

He did the arithmetic before he decided to. Three and six was nine.

He told himself it meant nothing, the way a number can sit next to another number by pure accident and still mean nothing. He'd have gone on telling himself that, probably for the rest of the morning, if Renata Ibsen hadn't been sitting eleven feet from him, cross-legged against a wall that hadn't held a mechanism yesterday and, as far as Marcus's own filed map of this stretch

could place it, sat almost exactly three cells from wherever Grier's null rod had ended up after last night's Turn shuffled everything that used to make sense.

She wasn't reaching for anything. That was the part his head would keep returning to for a long time afterward, the way you return to a locked door checking it's still locked. Her hands were in her lap. She was talking to Bobby Teague about nothing — whether the water had tasted different this morning, whether that meant anything, small useless talk, the kind people made now specifically because it meant nothing and meaning nothing had become its own kind of relief.

There was no lever near her hand. There was no click, no groan, none of the ten seconds of warning the room had learned, badly, to brace against. The Undertone didn't change pitch. Nobody's shadow did anything.

If Marcus hadn't been looking directly at her — and he was, because some instinct he didn't examine had turned his head toward the exact spot where his arithmetic said the debt was three cells overdue — he'd have missed the only warning this place gave anybody, which was none.

Her foot was simply not there anymore.

Not torn. Not wrenched. The trouser cuff hung the same shape it had hung a half-second before, only shorter now, folded neat around nothing, and where her foot had been the concrete floor showed nothing either — no blood, no smear, no mark that anything had ever touched it. The stump above her ankle sat sealed and pale and finished, glass-smooth the way every one of these losses came finished, like a shop mannequin missing a piece it had simply never been given.

Renata looked down at it the way you look at a word you've read a hundred times and suddenly can't parse. She didn't scream. Marcus watched her do something worse, something that told him more about who she'd been before this place than nine days of small talk had — her hands went straight to the stump, flat, testing, professional, the exact motion of someone who'd assessed a hundred wounds that weren't her own and had no other motion left to reach for.

"Pressure," she said, to nobody, in a voice gone thin and instructional. "I need pressure on this." Then, quieter, to herself: "There's no bleeding. Why is there no bleeding."

Bobby was already moving, and Ines, and half the room converging the way a room converges on the one thing it can still do something about, which in this case was nothing, because there was nothing bleeding to stop. Marcus stayed where he was for one more second than he should have, hands still on the wheel's crank, because his whole body had gone into the stillness it only ever went into for one specific reason, and this wasn't that reason, and he didn't have a name yet for the one that was.

Three cells. Six days. A man who'd never spoken to her, in a room that no longer physically existed, letting go of a lever that had cost him nothing and had never, not for one second, stopped owing somebody something.

He made himself say it, once, in his own head, in words plain enough that he could never later claim he hadn't understood them.

Not delayed. Transferred. The bill didn't come due to the hand that pulled it.

Dana was there faster than made sense for someone who hadn't been in the line at all — close enough, Marcus registered without meaning to, that she must have already been watching the same three cells he'd been watching, for reasons of her own he hadn't asked about. She didn't kneel by Renata. She stood a half-step back, one hand pressed flat against her own sternum in the specific place Marcus had noticed it go a dozen times now without ever asking her what she kept there, and her eyes went, unmistakably, to the exact spot on the floor where nothing should have been able to reach Renata at all.

She looked at Marcus. He looked back. Neither of them said Grier's name. Neither of them needed to; he watched her arrive at the same three cells and the same six days he had, watched the number land on her face the way a number lands on someone who's spent her whole life trusting numbers to behave, and watched that trust take a visible, specific hit it didn't fully recover from in the time he kept looking.

"It wasn't close to her," Dana said, finally, quiet enough that only he'd hear it over the noise Ines was making trying to raise Renata's leg. Not a question. A fact she needed to say out loud once, the same reason he'd needed to say his own version silently. "Nothing was close to her."

"I know," Marcus said.

"Then it wasn't hers." She said it the way she must have said things across a conference table once, in a life neither of them talked about — flat, checked twice before it left her mouth. "Whatever debt just got paid. It wasn't hers to pay."

Marcus thought of a word he hadn't reached for since a different life, on a different piece of land, watching two animals worked in a harness neither of them had chosen — one stumbling, the weight of it dragging across a wooden bar into the shoulders of the one still standing, because that was the whole design of the thing, that was what a yoke was *for*. You didn't need both animals to fall. You only needed one bar, laid across two necks that had never agreed to share a debt, for the second animal to go down for the first one's stumble.

"Yoked," he said, out loud this time, low, mostly to himself.

Nobody in the room chose that word. Nobody had to. It was simply, immediately, the only one that fit, and Marcus watched it move through the people close enough to have heard him the way water moves through a crack it didn't make but will use anyway — Bobby repeating it without seeming to notice he had, Ines going very still over Renata's raised leg, Selene's eyes cutting to him once, sharp, filing it the way she filed everything she meant to spend later.

Whitcomb arrived at a fast walk from wherever he'd been standing over Corrine, already reaching for his register, and stopped four feet short of Renata without finishing whatever sentence he'd started forming. Marcus watched him look at the clean, bloodless stump, and at Dana's face, and at Marcus's own, and choose — for the second time today, by Marcus's count — not to write anything down.

He got the line moving again because it was the only thing his hands still knew how to do that mattered. Cup, name, cup, name, counterclockwise, the same order he'd set on Day Four, and he heard himself explaining it to people who hadn't asked for an explanation — "we keep the rotation the same, that hasn't changed, nothing about the water's changed" — stacking detail nobody had questioned onto a sentence that didn't need it, the specific tell he'd have recognized in anyone else and couldn't hear in his own voice no matter how many times Selene had told him, gently, that he did it. *We. Not I kept the rotation. We keep it.* Easier to stand behind a we when the thing underneath it had just proven it didn't actually protect anybody from anything.

Selene watched him say it and didn't correct him, which by now was its own kind of answer.

Somewhere behind him, unbidden, useless, the way it always came — a Publix parking lot, Callie's bike wobbling upright for the first time, his own voice yelling *you got it, you got it* a full second after he'd already let go of the seat, before she knew the hand holding her up was gone. He hadn't thought of that morning in days. He didn't understand, filling the fourth cup, why it chose this one to surface in.

Alone at the wheel that evening, the line finally thinned to nothing, Marcus did the only math he still fully trusted. Headcount: twelve, minus the four already gone, minus whatever Renata's stump was going to cost the group in whoever now had to carry water for her. Cups per pull, steady, no change he could measure. Control of the one mechanism in this whole place that had never, not once in nine days, taken anything back from anyone who touched it.

He ran that last line twice, the way you check a number you don't like.

Never taken anything back from anyone who *touched* it. He had never once asked what the wheel might owe somebody who hadn't.

He thought of every cup he'd poured since Day Four — every ounce he'd told himself he was keeping safe by keeping it in his own two hands, every rule he'd built believing the danger lived at the crank and nowhere else — and felt something go out from under him that had nothing to do with thirst, a floor

giving the way Renata's floor must have given the half-second before her foot simply wasn't standing on it anymore. Water. Control. Headcount. Three numbers he'd have staked anything on nine days ago, and every one of them assumed the same thing Whitcomb's Ledger assumed, the same thing the whole Cohort had been quietly building since Day One without ever saying it out loud: that a debt stayed where you put it. That safe, once earned, stayed earned.

It didn't. It never had. Somewhere in this place, right now, a bill was already running against the wheel he'd bled for and rationed for and put a man into a wall to keep — and there was no way, none, to find out in advance whose name was going to be on it when it finally came due.

Fair, This Is What Fair Looks Like

Marcus Rourke

TWELVE DAYS IN, THE CUPS HAD GOTTEN SMALLER AND MARCUS WAS THE ONE who'd made them smaller, which was its own kind of arithmetic he hadn't found a clean way to file yet.

Not the cups themselves — the cups were the same tin they'd always been, dented the same way, passed hand to hand the same way. What had shrunk was the water in them. Three days ago it had been two hundred milliliters a head, steady enough that he'd stopped thinking about the number and started just pouring it. Yesterday it had been a hundred and seventy. This morning, a hundred and fifty, and the wheel had fought him harder for every quarter-turn of it, groaning through the crank like something on the other side of the valve had decided the flow needed narrowing and hadn't bothered telling him why.

He didn't have a word yet for what that felt like — a system tightening its own belt without asking him. He had a number instead. A hundred and fifty milliliters, times twelve heads, was less than he'd promised anybody on Day Four, and he'd promised it the way you promise something you intend to keep.

The watch on his wrist said nothing about any of it, the way it never did. It wasn't built to. His father had worn it on charter boats out of Mayport for thirty years, a plain steel diver's case with a rotating bezel scratched dull from tackle boxes and salt, good to two hundred meters and completely indifferent to whether the fish were biting. *Time doesn't care if you're having a bad day, Marcus. Time's the only thing out here that isn't lying to you.* His father had said some version of that every summer Marcus could remember, usually right before a hook went somewhere it shouldn't have. He'd worn the watch home from the funeral instead of a black tie he didn't own, and he'd worn it every day since, through two deployments and a compound gate and a parking lot outside a bar in Jacksonville, and it had never once, not one single day, lied to him.

Twelve days into this place, it was the only thing on his body he still fully trusted.

He checked it now out of nothing but habit — 0640 civil, or whatever 0640 meant inside a room with no sun — and turned back to the line.

Deshawn Price stood fourth in it, same as most mornings, quiet in the specific way Marcus had stopped questioning three days ago because a room full of screaming was so much harder to read than a room full of quiet. Price didn't talk much and didn't ask much, kept his hands to himself and his opinions further in than that, and Marcus had filed him early as *low-maintenance* and left it there, the way you leave a lot of things alone when they're not currently costing you anything.

It was the fifth cup, not the fourth, that snagged something in the back of Marcus's head.

He'd have missed it on a normal morning — the line moved fast enough now, twelve people falling into an order they didn't discuss anymore, that a single face passing through it twice should have been easy to lose in the rhythm. But the cups were smaller this morning, and smaller cups meant Marcus's hands went slower on purpose, testing the crank in shorter pulls to keep from over-giving on the first few and running dry before the last few got theirs. Slower hands meant he was looking up more than usual between pours.

Which was how he caught Deshawn Price standing at the spout a second time, cup already half-raised, four people back from where he'd stood not ten minutes before.

Marcus didn't say anything at first. He did the math instead, the way he did everything now — four people back, same face, same cup, water already caught in it and halfway to his mouth. Twelve heads, a hundred and fifty milliliters, no room in that number for anybody getting two turns at the spout while somebody at the back of the line got zero.

"Price."

Deshawn's hand stopped moving. Not fast — not the jerk of a man caught doing something he hadn't planned. Slow, deliberate, like he'd already run the

numbers on how this went and had an answer ready before Marcus finished the second syllable of his name.

"You already had yours," Marcus said.

"I know." Price didn't lower the cup. Didn't raise it either. Just held it there, level, water sitting still in the tin the way a man holds a hand of cards he already knows is bad and has decided not to fold anyway. "Figured the count would be off by the time you noticed. People stop counting exact after the first week. Everybody's tired."

It wasn't panic in his voice. That was the thing Marcus's whole body flagged before his head caught up to why it mattered — no shake, no scramble, no *I'm sorry, I'm just thirsty, please*, the sentence every other person in this Cohort would have led with by now, guilty and fast and hoping speed counted as remorse. Deshawn Price sounded like a man reporting the result of an experiment. Like he'd wanted to know something and had just found it out, and the finding-out had cost him, and he was already filing the cost the way you'd file a bad trade.

Marcus's hands went still on the crank. Not the wheel-tell — nobody's fingers were anywhere near a spoke. Just twelve days of arithmetic refusing, for the first time, to balance.

"Put it back."

"Can't put water back in a wheel, Sergeant." Not smart-mouthed. Just accurate, the same flat accuracy as everything else he'd said. "It's already out."

The line behind him had gone quiet in the way a room goes quiet when it senses a math problem it isn't part of yet but is about to be.

Whitcomb arrived at the edge of it inside thirty seconds, the way he arrived at the edge of everything now, drawn by whatever instinct told a claims man a determination was about to be needed. Selene came off her spot by the housing a half-step behind him, close enough that Marcus felt her there without turning, the particular pressure of being watched by someone whose read on him mattered more than the room's.

"He skimmed," Marcus said, to both of them, to all twelve people now fully turned from the line to watch. Flat statement, no heat in it yet, the way you'd read a charge before deciding a sentence. "Second cup. Didn't wait his turn, didn't ask."

"I didn't skim," Price said. "I tested."

"Same thing, from where the water's sitting."

"It's not, though." Price set the cup down — carefully, like it still mattered whether the water in it survived the argument — and looked at Marcus with something that wasn't defiance exactly. Closer to the specific patience of a man who'd spent three years arguing with an app that couldn't hear him and had learned, the hard way, that the argument itself was never really the point. "I wanted to know if anybody was actually watching close enough to catch it, or if you'd all just gotten too tired to count past four. That's not the same as wanting the water. I already know the water's not enough either way."

"That supposed to make this better?"

"No." Price didn't blink. "It's supposed to be true."

A dozen people were watching this now the way they watched everything that might turn into a rule — quiet, absorbing, filing it for later use the same way Marcus filed housing codes. He was aware of Ines with a hand flat against Mateo's chest, keeping him back a half-step further than usual. He was aware of Bobby Teague's mouth half-open on something he'd decided not to say. He was aware, most of all, of Selene, three feet off his shoulder, saying nothing at all — which by itself wasn't new. What was new, though he wouldn't have been able to name it in the moment, was the particular quality of her nothing. Waiting-nothing, not agreeing-nothing.

He thought, unbidden and useless the way these things always arrived: *she'd have talked him down by now, most days. Made a joke that let everybody breathe.* She wasn't making one. She was just watching, the way you watch a man decide something before he's decided it.

Marcus felt the old reflex come up in him, the one that had put a checkpoint supervisor into a concrete wall eight days ago without breaking a sweat over it — *hit him, put him down, make the lesson land in the body so nobody has to*

argue with a sentence. His hand had actually started to close before he caught it.

He didn't hit him. He'd decided that much before he'd decided anything else — not mercy, not exactly, more the specific, stubborn conviction that a fist did the same work a fist always did and taught nothing a fist hadn't already taught eight days ago. He wanted this to be different. He wanted it, badly enough that he heard himself reach for a shape he hadn't used before.

"You want to test something," Marcus said, "test the wheel. Same rules as anybody else's turn. You pull it yourself, full weight, the way I do it every morning. You want the extra, you pay the extra out of your own arms instead of skimming it out of somebody else's line."

It sounded, coming out of his mouth, almost reasonable. That was the part that would trouble him later, lying in the dim trying to sleep and failing — how reasonable it sounded in the moment, how much like due process, like a determination arrived at rather than a sentence handed down. *He doesn't get hit. He pays it himself. Nobody's hand on him but his own.* He believed every word of it while he was saying it.

"Fine," Price said, and meant it, in the flat way he meant everything. "Fine. I'll pull it."

The crowd made room the way it always made room for the wheel — a loose horseshoe, close enough to see, far enough back that nobody's own hand was anywhere near the housing. Marcus stepped clear of the crank himself, which he never did, and felt the strangeness of that immediately: twelve days of being the only hand on this valve, and now he was standing off to the side, arms crossed, watching somebody else's hands close on the spokes for the first time since the TSA man's had.

Deshawn Price set his feet the way he'd watched Marcus set his — wide, low, weight back — and took the wheel in both hands.

"Full turn," Marcus said. "Same as I do it. You don't shortcut this and call it paid."

Price nodded once and pulled.

The wheel gave the way it always gave, that long groaning quarter-turn that ran up through the forearms into the teeth, water starting its thin cold rope into a cup nobody had set out to catch it, because catching it wasn't the point of this pull and everybody in the room understood that without being told.

He kept pulling. Half a turn. Three-quarters.

At the three-quarter mark, the wheel stopped moving.

Not stopped like something out of water, not the dry, apologetic click of a null pull giving nothing back. Stopped the way a door stops when someone's braced their whole weight against the other side of it — sudden, total, no give left anywhere in it at all. Price's hands, still wrapped around two spokes, didn't come free with the rest of his weight the way a hand comes free when a wheel simply refuses to turn any further.

They didn't come free at all.

Marcus watched it happen close enough to count the seconds, which he did, without deciding to, the way he counted everything.

One. The housing around Deshawn's right hand went from the dull grey it had always been to something with almost no seam left between metal and skin — the exact clean absence of violence that this place had trained every one of them, twelve days in, to recognize as the worst kind of proof.

Two. Price pulled back, once, hard, the reflex of a body that hadn't yet caught up to what its eyes were reporting. Nothing moved.

Three. He made a sound that wasn't quite a word — not pain exactly, more the specific, private horror of a man discovering that a part of his own hand now belonged, permanently and without negotiation, to a piece of iron bolted into a wall.

The room's breath went out of it all at once, the way it always did.

"It's got him," somebody said — Bobby, maybe, or Ruiz. Marcus didn't turn to check which.

He was already moving toward the wheel himself, close enough now to see what the room needed him to see and say plainly, because plainly was the only register that had ever held a crowd like this together for more than a minute at a time. Not a wound, not in the ordinary sense of the word. A hand that had

reached for something and had the reaching answered in kind — a debt claimed on the spot, in full, from the exact body that had incurred it.

Something in Marcus recognized the shape of it before he had language for the shape. A toll. Not a punishment deferred to somebody three cells over who'd never touched a thing — not the cruelty Renata had paid for on a debt that belonged to Grier's idle hands. This was a debt collected at the gate, from the hand that owed it, the instant it came due. Immediate. Visible. His.

"It's a toll," Marcus said, out loud, mostly to himself, and then, because the room was listening and a name was the only thing he had to give it that wasn't a scream: "The toll-lock. It locked him for the toll."

Nobody argued the word. Nobody ever did, with a name that landed clean the first time. He watched it move through the horseshoe of faces the same way *yoked* had moved through a different room three days ago — Bobby repeating it under his breath like he was trying the shape of it in his mouth, Ines going very still with her hand still flat on Mateo's chest, Whitcomb's eyes going bright with the particular hunger of a man who'd just been handed a new word for his wall.

He got Price a low stool from somewhere — Ines's doing, mostly, moving before Marcus had thought to ask anyone to — and let him sit with his locked arm held at the awkward angle the housing demanded of it, hand fused flat against iron at chest height, the rest of him folded down around a joint that wasn't going anywhere.

"Does it hurt," Marcus asked. Not gentle. Not cruel either. A question that needed an honest answer more than it needed a kind one.

"No," Price said, and Marcus believed him, the way he'd believed the Grier debt was Renata's stump reporting an honest fact when it said *there's no bleeding, why is there no bleeding*. "Doesn't hurt. Just. Held." He looked at his own hand like it belonged to somebody he used to know. "Feels like it's waiting on something."

"How long."

"How would I know."

Marcus checked the watch. 0714. He said the number out loud, to the room, because saying it out loud was the only thing that made this feel like a process instead of a punishment he'd have to answer for later, alone, in the dark. "Zero-seven-fourteen," he said. "I'll call it every hour. Whatever this costs, it costs on the clock, in front of everybody, same as anything else that costs something in this place. Nobody's guessing later about what happened here."

He believed that too, saying it. He'd believe it for the next six hours, standing over Deshawn Price with his father's watch turned face-out on his wrist, narrating the passage of time to a room that had started, without anyone deciding it, to arrange itself in a loose circle around the wheel the way people arrange themselves around the one fire left burning.

"Fair," Marcus said, at the top of the first hour, and then again at the top of the second, the word coming easier each time he used it, the way any word does with enough repetition. "This is what fair looks like. He tested it. It answered him and nobody else. Whatever this place is, it can be talked to, if you're willing to pay what it asks up front, in full, with your own hand instead of somebody else's. We don't put a hand on anybody in this Cohort who hasn't put a hand somewhere it didn't belong first. We never have. Ask anyone who's still got both of theirs."

He watched people nod at that. He watched Ruiz's shoulders come down an inch, the way shoulders come down at the first real evidence in twelve days that a rule might actually hold the shape it was given. He watched Renata Ibsen, who had lost a foot to a debt with her name nowhere on it, look at Deshawn Price's locked hand with something that might have been relief on somebody else's face and looked, on hers, more like grief for the version of this place she'd wanted to still believe in.

He did not let himself look, more than once, at how still Selene had gone.

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Whitcomb crouched at the scratch-wall sometime past the fourth hour and wrote it down before Deshawn's hand had come free of anything, the metal shard scraping thin and dry under the Undertone the way it always did when he was making something permanent.

"He paid it himself," Whitcomb said, to the room, in the register he saved for determinations — solemn, procedural, already certain before the ink was dry. "In front of us. Nobody struck him. Nobody chose it for him but himself, and the debt he owed for what he took, he's paying with his own hand, in full view, right now. That is Ledger-consistent in every particular I know how to measure." He underlined the new entry once, the way he underlined everything he meant to be believed. "The debt is closed."

Marcus heard it land the way he'd heard *yoked* land three days ago — instantly, gratefully, twelve tired people reaching for the first sentence all week that sounded like an ending instead of another open account. He felt, hearing it, something close to pride, warm and undeserved and entirely his, the specific satisfaction of a man who has just watched his own invention get blessed by somebody the room already trusted more than it trusted itself.

He looked for Selene to see if she'd take some of that warmth off his hands the way she usually did — a look, a small private nod, *you did right, I saw it, I'm glad it's you standing here and not somebody worse.*

She was watching him instead. Not the wheel. Not Deshawn's locked hand or Whitcomb's fresh chalk line or the tired, grateful faces settling around all three like a debt they were relieved not to have to think about anymore.

Him.

He'd been watched by Selene a thousand times in twelve days — watched fondly, watched warily, watched the particular watching of someone deciding whether to hand him a cup before he asked for it. This was none of those. Her face had gone somewhere flat and assessing he hadn't seen turned on him before, the look of a woman doing careful, silent arithmetic on a man she was no longer entirely sure she recognized, filing him the way she filed everything she meant to spend later and had not yet decided how.

For the first time since a parking lot outside a Jacksonville bar, Marcus Rourke understood that Selene Vasquez was looking at him the way you look at a stranger.

Rule Eleven

THE LEDGER

Transcribed entire, this eleventh day, exactly as it stands in his own hand. Rules One through Ten omitted here as already known to whoever reads this wall and lives near enough to need them.

RULE ELEVEN. Established this day, upon a full accounting of losses to date.

A cell that has taken a life will not take a second one for eleven Turns following. This has now held four times running, without exception, and four is enough to call a pattern rather than a coincidence dressed as one.

Based on the pattern of loss recorded here, the cell is not cleared before the eleventh Turn. It is not owed anything after it, either. Use whatever stands in such a cell only once the eleventh Turn has come and gone – not the tenth, on the hope of an early mercy, and not later than the eleventh by choice, once it has arrived. A debt allowed to run past its due date does not stay simple. It compounds.

This is not a guess. Four deaths, four cells, four counts of eleven, each one clean. Anyone who tells you otherwise has not been counting.

Mark it, and hold to it. Four cells have held it without exception. Do not be the fifth that breaks it.

– G.W.

DAY 11

The Shape of the Losses

Dana Okafor

FOUND LATER, IN DESHAWN PRICE'S OWN HAND, ON THE BACK OF A TORN RATION ticket, dated Day 13:

"if it happens at the same time every day, it's not the machine deciding. it's somebody deciding when to check."

By Day Thirteen the table behind Dana's sternum had grown two more columns, and she'd stopped pretending, even to herself, that she was building it for anyone but her.

Housing code. Puller. Outcome. Days since last resolution. Those four were old news, worn smooth from nine days of handling. What she'd added since yesterday — since the wheel had taken Deshawn Price's hand at 0714 and hadn't given it back until the seventh hour, since Marcus Rourke had stood over him narrating fairness off a dead man's watch — were two columns she didn't have a clean name for yet. *Interval since last Turn.* And, smaller, more tentative, the one she kept almost erasing before she'd finished writing it: *new housing, and where.*

She ran the fifth column first, because it was the one that frightened her least.

Deshawn's toll-lock had resolved at seven hours and eleven minutes, near enough to the eleventh hour after a Turn that she'd noticed the number twice before she let herself notice it a third time. Corrine's second row of teeth had finished breaking the gumline — by everyone's best guess, nobody had actually timed it — somewhere in the small dead stretch of night that fell, near as anyone could reckon without a clock, eleven or twelve hours past the Turn that preceded it. The arm Feliciano had lost on Day One had gone in the first hour after waking, before anyone had thought to start counting anything at all, which by itself proved nothing except that Dana's data set began contaminated,

missing its own first entry, the way every catastrophe model she'd ever built had always been missing the one event that would have explained the rest.

Three points. Three points was not a pattern. Three points was barely a rumor of one, and she had spent fifteen years being paid specifically to tell overeager junior analysts that three points was not a pattern, watch them nod, and watch them go build the pattern anyway because a rumor felt so much better in the hand than an honest shrug.

She built it anyway.

Not a straight line — nothing in this place had ever given her a straight line, not once, not on anything that mattered. More like a smear across a narrow window: costs did not fall evenly across the day, whatever "day" meant inside a room that made its own light. They clustered, loosely, unevenly, somewhere in the long back half of the interval between one Turn's ten-second groan and the next — never all of them, never even most of them, but more than a third would have landed there if the Array genuinely didn't care what time it was when a debt came due. It wasn't randomness. She'd stopped being able to honestly call it randomness two days ago and had only now stopped lying to herself about when that had happened.

It was *almost* a shape. Not a rule — nothing here had earned the word *rule* from her, not the way the room threw it around, not the way Gerald Whitcomb scratched it into a wall like a man notarizing his own testimony. Just a smear with an angle to it, faint enough to dismiss and specific enough that she couldn't.

She thought, with the specific, professional disgust of someone catching herself in an old and expensive mistake: *if it happens at the same time every day, it's not the machine deciding*. She didn't know yet that somebody else in this Cohort had already written nearly that exact sentence, in his own hand, the day before, on the back of a ticket he was, at that same moment, deciding not to show anyone. She only had the shape. The shape was enough to make her hands go still against her own thigh, counting nothing, for almost a full minute.

It's somebody deciding when to check.

She didn't let the thought finish arriving anywhere useful. She had a rule of her own, unscratched into any wall, about thoughts like that: you could hold the shape of a terrible idea in your hand as long as you liked, turning it, weighing it, refusing to set it down — you just couldn't say it out loud in a room this hungry for an authority to replace the one it had lost on Day One. She had watched what happened to a room handed a number dressed as prophecy. She wasn't going to be the second person in two weeks to do that to these people, even in the quiet, private currency of her own certainty.

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Whitcomb found an audience near the seam-wall an hour later, the way he found audiences now — not by calling one, exactly, just by starting to talk near enough people that stopping to listen felt like the path of least resistance.

"Rule Eleven has held," he was saying, tapping two fingers against the fresh chalk line under his own name. "A cell that's taken a life won't take a second one for eleven Turns following. Four times running before yesterday. Yesterday makes five, if you count what happened at the wheel as a taking — and I do. Nobody's died in that stretch since. Five for five."

Dana stood at the edge of it, close enough to be counted present, far enough that nobody would ask her to agree out loud. She ran her own tally instead, the one she'd started keeping the week Whitcomb had first reached for the word *pattern* like it was a tool he already knew how to use.

Eleven rulings sat on that wall now, dated and numbered and underlined in his own confident hand. Four had held up clean — resolved exactly as stated, no exceptions she could find, no wiggle in the wording that let a bad outcome slide through disguised as a good one. Two had failed outright, fast and visibly, inside a day of being written, the kind of failure that should have cost him the room and somehow, each time, hadn't. The other five lived in the space she'd started privately labeling *unfalsifiable* — worded soft enough, hedged enough, that whatever happened afterward could be read back into them without anyone having to admit the rule had ever promised something sharper. Rule One had said *wait three breaths*. Rule One, reread today, could mean three breaths, or

roughly three breaths, or as many breaths as felt right to whoever was waiting, depending on which outcome you needed it to have predicted.

Four for eleven, by her count. Not five for five. Whitcomb believed his own number the way he believed everything he said in that register — completely, the belief itself indistinguishable to him from the evidence for it. He wasn't lying, or not lying in any way she could prove, not the way you'd lie about a fact you knew the shape of and chose to bend. He was doing something worse and more familiar than lying. He was doing exactly what she'd watched three decades of junior analysts do with three data points and a deadline: he had found a shape, fallen in love with the shape, and started editing his own memory of the data to keep loving it.

Four for eleven was worse than the ninety percent he'd have quoted you if you'd asked him plainly. It was also — and this was the part that kept her standing at the edge of the crowd a full minute longer than she needed to, doing the arithmetic a second time to be sure she hadn't wanted a particular answer badly enough to build it — better than chance. Three outcomes, roughly even odds absent his intervention, meant a coin call should land right something closer to a third of the time. He was clearing that bar by a real margin.

Not a rule. Not law. Something in the narrow, treacherous country between guessing and knowing, exactly wide enough for a confident man to stand in it his whole life and never once be forced to learn which side of the line he was actually on.

Worse than he thought he was. Better than the room could afford to stop trusting him for. That was the whole shape of Gerald Whitcomb, and she recognized it the way you recognize a face you've spent your career studying from the outside, because it was also, near enough that it turned her stomach to admit it, the shape of every model she'd ever built for a client who'd needed her to sound certain more than they'd needed her to be right.

She said none of it. She filed it, the way she filed everything now, and went looking for water.

She found Deshawn Price instead, sitting a little apart from the water line with his locked hand curled loose in his lap, still stiff from seven hours fused to iron, working something small and pale between the fingers of the other.

A ration ticket. Torn along one edge, the printed corner gone, the blank back of it turned up toward him. He had a sliver of housing shard in his good hand — the same kind of dull grey metal Whitcomb used on the wall — and he was scratching something into the paper in short, private strokes, his shoulders curled around the work the exact way a person curls around something they don't want read over their shoulder.

"How's the hand," Dana said, mostly to have said something, stopping a few feet off rather than close enough to see the paper.

He didn't look up right away. "Works," he said. "Slow. Feels like it belongs to somebody who used to be me." A beat. "Feels like it's still deciding."

"Deciding what?"

He looked at her then — really looked, the specific look of a man doing a fast, silent calculation about how much a person standing in front of him could be trusted with, and coming up short on an answer he liked. His thumb moved once over the scratched marks on the ticket, not to check them, she thought, but the way you touch something to confirm to yourself that it's still just sitting there and hasn't grown teeth of its own since the last time you looked.

"Nothing," he said. "Talking to myself."

She almost pushed. She had the shape of the question already built — *you've been watching the timing too, haven't you, you noticed something and you're not telling anybody, why* — and for one full second she watched it sit in his throat the same way her own unfinished thought had sat in hers an hour ago near the seam-wall, close enough to speaking that his jaw actually moved. Then he folded the ticket once, small, and pushed it into the crease of his boot where nothing short of taking the boot off would find it again, and the moment closed the way a door closes when someone on the other side decides, at the very last second, that the weather outside isn't worth it after all.

"You should get some water," he said instead, mild, final, a man changing the subject with the flat competence of someone who'd had a lot of practice not

saying things out loud. "Line's short right now."

She let him have it. She told herself, walking away, that it was respect — that everyone in this room was entitled to whatever they weren't ready to say, that she of all people understood the specific mercy of being allowed to keep a thought unspoken a little longer. She didn't examine, until much later, how much of that was actually respect and how much was simple relief at not having to be the one who made him say it.

She found Mateo by the third housing east, the one that had gone quiet three days running — two nulls, no benign, no punitive, exactly the kind of silence the room had learned to read as *owed*, though her own numbers on that housing were too thin to say anything at all yet, one column standing empty where a real answer should have gone.

He wasn't reaching for it. He was just standing close, the particular stillness of a nine-year-old working up to a decision his aunt had spent nine days training out of him by main force of will, one hand half-raised the way Ines's went half-raised before every pull she'd ever made herself instead of letting him near one.

Dana crossed to him without deciding to, the way her feet had started making that particular decision for her sometime in the last week without asking permission from the rest of her.

"Not that one," she said.

"Why not? It's been quiet forever. Ines says quiet means it's due, but you always say due isn't real, it's just—"

"It's not about due." She heard herself say it before she'd finished checking whether it was true. "That one, I don't have enough on. Come here instead." She nodded at the housing two down — a knuckle plate she'd logged exactly twice, once benign, once null, a sample size she would have laughed a client out of her office for treating as anything but noise. "This one feels steadier."

He went where she pointed. He trusted her the specific, total way a child trusts an adult who has never once, in his memory, been wrong about a thing

that mattered. He pressed the plate with both thumbs, the way she'd shown him on Day Nine.

It gave a small dry click. Nothing else.

He exhaled like she'd handed him something.

She should have felt relief. For one clean second she did — and then a jump-rope rhyme, four beats and a laugh at the end of it, Naomi's voice at nine years old counting *one potato, two potato* against a sidewalk Dana hadn't stood on in two years and four months, running under the Undertone's low hum for exactly as long as it took her to recognize it and no longer, gone before she could decide whether to let herself keep it.

She looked at the number in her head instead. Two pulls. One-and-one. A coin flip's worth of data, dressed up in her own mouth as *steadier* because she had needed, in that specific second, for it to be true — needed it the way Whitcomb needed Rule Eleven to be five for five, the way every junior analyst she'd ever corrected had needed three points to be a line.

She would never, not once in fifteen years, have told a stranger's client that two pulls made a housing steady. She would have laughed the number out of the room herself.

She had just told a nine-year-old exactly that, in a voice she'd built to sound like certainty, because the alternative was watching him stand a half-second longer in front of a housing she genuinely didn't understand, and some part of her — the part with no columns, no percentages, nothing rigorous in it at all — had decided his fear mattered more than her own rules did the instant it was his fear and not somebody else's.

She had a name for what she'd just done, because she had spent fifteen years building the vocabulary to name exactly this in other people's work and had never once, until this moment, turned it on her own. It wasn't protection. It wasn't even really a lie, not the kind you could catch on a technicality. It was favoritism, dressed in the one language she had left that anyone, including herself, still mistook for rigor.

She stood very still, watching Mateo turn back toward Ines with his hands empty and his face easy, and understood — before she let herself understand

what it might cost him later, before she let herself wonder what else in her own careful table had been quietly, invisibly weighted this same way for this same boy since the day she'd started keeping it — that she had just done, without a column to catch it, the exact thing she had spent thirteen days privately, righteously certain she would never do.

Recruitment Batteries

Priya Chandrasekaran (*OUTSIDE — Day 23 Missing*)

COLD OPEN, THE ONE SHE'D NEVER AIR: A WOMAN STANDING IN A PARKING garage stairwell at four in the afternoon, phone pressed so hard to her ear it left a crescent, because the only place in a six-block radius with both a signal and no HVAC hum underneath it was a concrete stairwell that smelled like somebody's abandoned lunch. *Welcome to Signal Loss, the show about the people bureaucracy forgets, recorded today from beautiful stairwell B, sublevel two.* She didn't say it out loud. She wasn't sure that was better.

She'd spent the morning at the Ohio Secretary of State's satellite office proving, again, that dissolved meant dissolved. Torrance Behavioral Insights, LLC had filed its certificate of dissolution eight months ago, registered agent listed as a suite number in Wilmington, Delaware that turned out — she'd called, she'd checked, she'd made the clerk read it back twice — to be a mail-forwarding storefront wedged between a nail salon and a place that did passport photos. The LLC's sole listed member wasn't a person. It was another LLC, incorporated the same week, same agent, same Wilmington suite, and that one's member was a third, and by the time Priya had chased it four shells deep she'd landed on a name generic enough that a search for it turned up two unrelated law firms, a dry cleaner, and, memorably, a Lutheran church in Ohio. She wrote all of it down anyway, timestamped, the way she wrote down everything she wanted to prove later she'd known, and told herself the wall wasn't the end of the road. It was just the part of the road built to look like the end.

She was thinking about the church — actually thinking about it, turning it over the way you'd turn over a rock hoping for something under it and finding only more dirt — when the phone buzzed against her palm with a number she didn't recognize, Cleveland exchange, and she almost, almost let it ride to voicemail the way she let everything ride to voicemail first.

She didn't. That was the whole difference, later, between this and every other Tuesday. She picked up.

"Is this — okay. Is this the podcast lady. Signal Loss." A man's voice, young enough to still sound surprised at itself, moving fast in the specific rhythm of someone who'd rehearsed an opening line and lost it somewhere around word six.

"This is Priya. Who's calling?"

"I can't — I don't want to say my name on this yet. Is that okay. Can I just talk first and see if you're going to be weird about it."

"I can do that." She was already moving, phone still to her ear, taking the stairs down instead of up, away from the elevator's electrical whine and toward the deadest, quietest corner of sublevel two, the reflex twenty years of bad audio had trained into her before her brain had caught up to why. "I'm not recording. I want to say that up front, every time, so you never have to ask."

A breath on the line, longer than a breath needed to be. "Farid," he said finally, like the name cost him something to spend. "Farid Nasser. I do — I did, I mean I still do, phone work. Overflow lines. Contract stuff, whatever's staffed that week."

*

He worked for a vendor called Meridian Contact Solutions — a name, she'd learn inside the hour, that meant absolutely nothing to search, one of forty identical staffing shells in a business park off I-71 that answered whatever overflow traffic got routed to it, no questions, no context, script on a monitor and a headset and a quota. Eighteen months ago, for a run of about six weeks, one of the accounts routed through his queue had been Torrance Behavioral Insights.

"It wasn't even a big deal, at the time," he said. "It was just a script. You get handed scripts. This one was longer than most, is all — like forty-five minutes, sometimes an hour, if the person on the other end was chatty. Decision-science stuff. Would you rather have X now or Y later, if your best friend needed a kidney and you were the only match, that kind of thing. I thought it was for a university at first. They dress it up like that."

Priya had her notebook out, physical paper, the specific discipline she still trusted over any app for a first call — a source could hear you typing, and typing sounded like evidence being built, and evidence being built made people hang up. "And it wasn't."

"Three-day study, they told them. In-person, Statesville, North Carolina, paid four grand, NDA on top of it. I read that part off the script probably two hundred times. *You'll be contacted within ten business days to schedule your in-person session.*" A pause, and under it, the specific ambient hush of somebody who'd stepped somewhere private to say the next part. "Almost nobody got that call, Priya. I read the same forty people three hundred questions apiece over six weeks, and maybe six of them ever got scheduled for anything. The rest got a check. Just a check. For a study that never happened."

"How do you know it never happened?"

"Because I'm the one who closed the files." Flat, now, the fear underneath it going somewhere colder and steadier. "There's a code you put on a completed intake before you release it. Ninety-some percent of mine went out marked the same way. C-O — closed out, no callback required, payment authorized. I asked my supervisor about it exactly once. She told me some people just don't make the cut for the in-person round, and the money's the courtesy for their time, and I should stop asking her questions that weren't in the training manual." He laughed, short, no humor in it at all. "I needed the job. So I stopped."

Priya let the silence sit a beat longer than felt polite, the discipline she'd built over three years of not rushing to fill a gap a source had left open on purpose. *Every paragraph in this thread has to end short of certainty*, she reminded herself, the note she'd written to herself so many times it had stopped being advice and started being a reflex. Six people scheduled out of forty. A four-thousand-dollar consolation prize for the other thirty-four, dressed as courtesy, paid by a company that had since dissolved into four Wilmington shells and a Lutheran church. It wasn't proof of anything a court would look at twice. It was, God help her, the first specific, checkable, human-shaped thing anyone connected to Torrance had ever handed her that wasn't a filing cabinet.

"Can I call you back," she said. "Same number. I want to write some of this down properly, and I want to be careful with you, and I can't do both while I'm standing in a stairwell that smells like somebody's gas station burrito."

That got her a real laugh, small, surprised out of him. "Yeah. Okay. Call the burner — I'll text you a different one after this. Not this one."

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The second call came four days later, and she took it in her car, parked outside her own apartment with the engine off and the windows up, because Farid had asked for that specifically — *somewhere you're not moving, somewhere nobody can walk up on you mid-sentence* — and she hadn't argued, because a source dictating his own safety protocol was a source who'd started believing, correctly or not, that safety was something that needed protocol.

He gave her names this time. Not the recruits' — he didn't have those, or said he didn't, and she believed the specific way he said it, the flat honesty of a man drawing a line he actually intended to hold — but an internal one: the account wasn't billed to Torrance directly in the vendor's own system, it ran under a cost-center code that started with the letters CVN, three digits after it that changed month to month like a rolling budget line rather than a fixed client number. He'd never once, in six weeks, heard a live human being from Torrance on the other end of an escalation call. Every kickback, every correction to the script, every new list of names to dial came down as a document, no signature, no return address anyone in his building had ever bothered to ask about.

"There's one more thing," he said, and she heard him decide to say it in real time, the specific hitch of a person talking themselves into a sentence they'd already decided, twice, not to bother with. "It's not — I don't know if it's even relevant. It's just been sitting on me."

"Tell me anyway. I'd rather have the thing that's sitting on you than the thing that sounds important."

"Our lines cross sometimes. It's a cheap system, half our floor's on some ancient VoIP setup that bleeds into itself if two calls hit the same trunk at once — you'll be on hold with somebody and for like four seconds you're hearing

somebody else's call instead. Happens all the time, everybody just hangs up and redials." A breath. "About a month before the account got pulled, it happened to me on an internal line — not a customer call, an internal one, somebody's extension bleeding into mine — and there was a woman on it. Not talking to anybody. Just — reading something out loud. Over and over. Like she was keeping herself awake doing data entry."

Priya's pen had stopped moving. She made herself start it again, the same discipline that had gotten her through a hundred calls that went nowhere and the four that hadn't. "Reading what?"

"I don't even know if I've got it right, it was four seconds, maybe five. It sounded like — *subject, mechanism, outcome category*. Then a pause, like she was writing it down or waiting on something. Then again. Same three words, different order sometimes. *Subject, mechanism, outcome category*. Flat as hell. Bored. Like she'd said it a thousand times that shift already and had a thousand more to go." He exhaled, and it carried something that wasn't quite a laugh. "I told you it probably wasn't relevant."

"Probably not," Priya said, and wrote it down anyway — *woman, internal line, 'subject / mechanism / outcome category,' bored, repetitive, poss. data-entry recitation* — the exact reflex that made her keep the church's name from that morning even though a church was never, ever going to be the thing that broke this case. Texture went in the notebook whether or not it earned a line in the episode. You didn't get to know which ambient detail was going to matter until eleven months later, usually at two in the morning, usually when you'd stopped looking for it.

She thanked him. She told him, because it was true and because she made herself say true things to sources even when true things were inconvenient, that she couldn't promise him anything would come of any of it — not an episode, not an arrest, not so much as a follow-up call from a reporter with a bigger platform than hers. He said that was fine. He said he mostly just needed somebody who worked in facts, professionally, to have heard it, so that if it turned out to matter later, it wouldn't only have existed inside his own head.

She didn't tell him what that sentence did to her, hanging up. She recognized it too well. It was the sentence she'd have used, at nineteen, about Addy, if anyone had asked her to name what she actually wanted out of any of this.

Two days after that, she called the number he'd texted her — the second burner, the one he'd said not to use unless it mattered — to tell him she'd confirmed one small, clean, independent thing: a name on his cost-center pattern, CVN, showed up nowhere in any Delaware or North Carolina filing she could find, which either meant it was nothing, or meant it was the one piece of this that hadn't been built to survive a search.

The number was out of service. Not voicemail, not a full box — the flat three-tone dead signal of a line that had been disconnected outright, cleanly, the kind of clean that took a request and a business day, not an accident.

She drove to the address he'd given her the first week, a two-story off Fulton she'd never actually visited, always meaning to, always telling herself a phone relationship with a nervous source was safer for both of them than a face he'd have to worry about her remembering. The apartment was empty. Not messy-empty, not moved-out-in-a-hurry-empty — swept, vacuumed-carpet-track empty, a leasing sign already zip-tied to the porch rail like it had been waiting in a truck somewhere for exactly this address to open up.

She stood on that porch longer than she needed to, doing the thing she always did before she let a maybe become a note, and then she didn't do it this time. She let the maybe stand there, ugly and unproven and completely, gut-deep certain, because some kinds of knowing didn't wait politely for their evidence to catch up.

She called Meena that night, not her podcast voice, not her producer voice, nothing rehearsed in it at all.

"I think I got a guy disappeared," she said, and said the rest of it — the stairwell, the burner, the vacated apartment, the four-tone dead line — in the flat, unproduced register she used with exactly one other human being on earth. "Companies don't do this. Not real ones. Not for a phone-bank temp who read a script." She heard herself say it and heard how thin it sounded even as the

words left her, which was its own kind of answer. Meena didn't tell her she was being dramatic. Meena, who had spent a decade certain her sister's whole career was a slow-motion breakdown wearing headphones, went quiet in the specific way that meant she believed her completely, and was frightened for entirely new reasons now.

Priya didn't tell anyone else. Not Yvette, not her editor, not the empty room she narrated to on every other night of her life. She didn't have a name yet for what kind of company made a source disappear this cleanly, this fast, this quietly. She had only the shape of it, and the shape of it kept the same outline every time she turned it over: something that could reach a leased apartment and a phone contract and make both stop existing inside two days, and had done it, as far as she could tell, without leaving a single thread she could pull on twice. That was as far as she let herself take it out loud, to Meena, and no further. She wrote the rest down in the notebook instead, dated, timestamped, unaired, the way she wrote down everything she wasn't ready to know for certain yet.

Every Third Turn

Dana Okafor

THE CELL HAD BEEN BARE ON DAY FOURTEEN. DANA KNEW THAT THE WAY SHE knew her own pulse now, without having to check it against anything. She'd stood in the mouth of that corridor herself the evening before, counting exits the way she counted everything. The wall three panels in had been smooth pale aggregate and nothing else. No housing. No brass, no ivory plate, no waist-high wheel. Just wall, the kind that made you grateful in a room that had taught you gratitude was a resource like any other.

On Day Fifteen there was a knuckle plate set into it, at exactly the height of whoever had slept nearest. It was flush and pale and new, the way a filled tooth is new. Indistinguishable from the ones around it, except that yesterday it hadn't existed at all.

She stood in front of it longer than she needed to. Long enough that Owen Fitch, passing behind her on his way to the water line, said, "You're not gonna touch it" — not quite a question. She said, "No," and meant it. She kept standing there anyway, running the numbers her hands had been keeping since Day Nine. There was nowhere else to keep them.

New housing, and where. She'd started that column as a hedge, a place to put a fact she didn't yet know what to do with. She had two entries in it before today. One was from a stretch she now dated, working backward off half-remembered ration counts, to somewhere around Day Six. A cell two corridors from Marcus's wheel, empty one morning and holding a tithe rod the next. She'd filed it under *maybe someone missed it before*, because the alternative had been too large to hold at the time. The second was from around Day Twelve, closer to the wheel itself. By then she'd stopped being able to tell herself people simply overlooked a lever the size of a man's forearm.

Two points. Two points was a rumor of a pattern, and she had spent fifteen years teaching junior analysts that a rumor was not a finding, and she had also,

this last week, stopped being able to afford the distinction.

Six days. Then six days again. She counted the Turns between them on her fingers, out of habit — though she'd have trusted the number in her head over her own fingers by now. Three Turns, both times, near enough to exact that the six-day gap wasn't drift. It was cadence. Today, Day Fifteen, was three Turns since the wheel-corridor cell had gone from bare to occupied. This one arrived precisely on schedule — in a cell that had been catalogued, checked, and confirmed empty less than twenty hours ago.

Not incidental. She made herself think the word plainly, the way she hadn't quite let herself on Day Twelve. *Scheduled.*

She thought of Whitcomb's numbered lines on the seam-wall, dated and underlined, each one a guess dressed as law. She felt something colder than irony, noticing that she'd just done the same work he did — pattern-matched from three data points and called it a rule. Her rule had cost nobody anything yet. His had already cost fingers, a hand, most of a foot. That felt, for one ungenerous second, like a kind of virtue. She didn't examine it long enough to find out whether it was.

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The ration line told her the second thing, and it told her without her having to go looking.

She'd started keeping the yield the same reflexive way she kept everything — total tack distributed, cups of water drawn, headcount present. A number written down couldn't quietly rearrange itself in memory, not the way Whitcomb's rules kept doing on his wall. Fourteen people had woken on Day One. Twelve stood in line this morning, not counting Mateo, who never stood in it at all. A hand gone to the elbow. One to a wrist that had healed glass-smooth and useless. One to yesterday's toll-lock, which had cost Deshawn Price the fine motor control in three fingers he could still technically call his own. Attrition, if she'd still had a client to report it to. She didn't let herself use that word even in her own head. It was too close to a term she'd have written on a slide once, in a font chosen to look reassuring.

Total yield on Day Nine, when there'd been thirteen mouths in this room, came to nine hundred grams of tack, distributed across six successful pulls out of eleven attempts. Near enough seventy grams a head, if you divided it evenly. Nobody ever did. The math held anyway, as a baseline. Today, twelve mouths, eight attempts, five successes: six hundred and forty grams. She did the division twice, the second time slower, hoping the first had been wrong.

Fifty-three grams a head. Not seventy. Lower, with fewer people to feed.

Say the room simply didn't care how many of them there were. Say the mechanisms yielded whatever they yielded, and the only thing that changed was how many hands were left to divide it. Then losing a person should have made everyone else's share go up — at least a little, at least on the mornings the split was honest. That was the whole cruel arithmetic of scarcity: fewer people, more per person. A fact she'd once modeled for insurers as *survivorship benefit*, without ever having to picture what survived. Instead the total pool had shrunk faster than the population had. Somebody — something — had trimmed the yield to match the smaller room before the room had finished getting smaller. The way you'd revise a budget downward the week before a round of layoffs, rather than the week after.

As if the ration were sized to the Cohort, she thought, *and not to the person standing in front of it*. As if whatever was tallying them wasn't counting individual stomachs at all. As if it already had the headcount before the headcount changed, and had adjusted for it in advance.

She didn't say any of this out loud. She had a private policy about thoughts like this one now — the same policy she'd used on Day Thirteen, standing at the edge of Whitcomb's crowd. You could hold a terrible number in your hand as long as you needed to, turning it. You did not hand it to a room this hungry for something to be afraid of, on purpose. She filed it instead, under a column she still didn't have a name for. Then she went looking for Ines — it was easier to worry about someone else's math than to sit any longer with her own.

She found her at the edge of the water line, not in it — crouched at Mateo's height, her back angled just enough to block a line of sight that didn't exist yet.

Ines had clearly decided to plan for it anyway.

Dana had learned to read that posture. Everyone had, by now, whether or not they knew they were doing it — the particular stillness of a person about to spend something and not wanting an audience for the spending.

Ines had a scrap of tack in her palm, grey-green, smaller than her thumb. The kind of fragment that didn't come from any pull Dana had logged that morning. Scavenged, then. Held back from some earlier share, or traded for, or simply not eaten when eating it would have been the easier and more forgivable thing to do. She pressed it into Mateo's hand and closed his fingers over it with both of hers. The way you'd close a hand around something you needed him not to drop, not around a gift.

"Eat it slow," she said. "Not now. When you're somewhere quiet."

"Are you not having any?"

"I ate already." The lie came out with no seam in it at all. It had the specific fluency of a woman who'd said some version of that sentence to this boy every day for nine years — about smaller things, in a smaller world. She'd gotten it exactly right every time, because getting it wrong had never once been an option she allowed herself.

Dana understood, watching from four feet away with a water cup she hadn't yet earned the right to fill, precisely what she was looking at. Ines had a decision in front of her that she'd made. Dana could see it in the flatness of her mouth, the total absence of hesitation — before Dana had even finished walking over. Send Mateo to the dispenser a second time this cycle, to cover the gap her own held-back scrap wasn't quite going to close. Risk the coin flip landing on a nine-year-old's hand. Or go herself, again, on top of the pull she'd already made this morning, and absorb whatever the second exposure cost. A second cost landing on her own body was cheaper, by some ledger she'd never once had to write down for anyone to check, than the smallest chance of the first cost landing on his.

There was no visible arithmetic in it. That was what struck Dana hardest, more than the scrap of tack, more than the flat lie about having already eaten. Ines wasn't standing there weighing anything. The decision had resolved before

it had fully arrived — the way a reflex resolves before the hand that's about to touch something hot has finished the thought *that's hot*. Dana had spent fifteen years building models that dressed up exactly this calculation: whose exposure you accept, whose you refuse to, what a life is worth measured against another life you happen to love more. Percentages, discount rates, confidence intervals — an entire professional language built to make the thing sound considered. Ines didn't need the language. She had already done the math in whatever register mothers do it in, faster than Dana's spreadsheets had ever run. She was already moving toward the third housing east before Dana had finished watching her decide.

"Ines."

She didn't stop.

"You already pulled once today."

"I know what I already did." Not sharp. Just closed, the door-closing tone Dana recognized from her own mouth on worse days. Ines's hand found the tithe rod's grip the way a hand finds a doorknob it's used ten thousand times. No hesitation in the motion at all. Only in the half-second stillness that came right before it — the held breath Dana had watched a dozen mechanisms wait for, and never once seen refused.

Dana opened her mouth to say something. She never afterward knew what — a number, a warning, Whitcomb's rule, anything. She didn't get the chance to find out whether it would have mattered.

The rod gave, the way rods always gave. A half-second of resistance, and then none.

No spark. No sound beyond a small mechanical click, the sound of something registering and resolving. Ines's hand simply stopped being a hand that opened and closed the way it had five seconds earlier. The ring and small finger had fused to each other, and to the meat below them, sealed glass-smooth along a seam as straight and clean as a tailor's line. No blood at the edge of it. No raw tissue. No visible work done at all — as though that had always been the shape of her hand, and the version everyone remembered was the mistaken one.

She didn't scream. She looked at it the way Bobby had once looked at his own wrist — four full seconds of pure administrative silence. Then she made a sound that wasn't a scream either. Something smaller and worse. Air going out of her all at once, through her nose.

"Shit," Dana said. One word. Then she was moving, and so was half the water line: the specific choreography of a room that had learned, badly and at enormous price, exactly how to gather around an injury without making it worse. Nobody touched the hand. Someone was already tearing a strip from a shirt hem for nothing the hand actually needed. Owen Fitch stood over her, his own hands doing nothing useful at all except being present, which by now counted as useful.

Ines flexed what was left of the working fingers, once, testing. Thumb, index, middle — hers, mobile, hers to use for however long *the rest* turned out to be. The last two had locked in a slight, permanent curl against her palm, fused into a shape that would never fully close or fully open again. A hand that had traded its own completeness, cleanly and forever, for whatever margin it had just bought a boy who was forty feet away right now, still hadn't looked up, still unwrapping his scrap of tack.

"It's fine," Ines said, to no one, to everyone, her voice flattened out into the same register she used for prices — bus fare against a missed meal, a shift's worth of hours against a landlord's patience. "It still works. Mostly."

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Someone said it before the hour was out, the way someone always did now, the room's collective nervous system reaching for the one steady object it had left to hold.

"Rule Eleven's held," Bobby Teague said, to nobody in particular — loud enough to be a comfort, not loud enough to be a claim. "A cell that's taken a life won't take a second one for eleven Turns following." He said it word for word, the exact cadence Whitcomb used scratching a new line into the wall — the rhythm of scripture, not speech. Not because Bobby believed the wording mattered, Dana thought. Because the wording was the only part of it that had stayed the same for eleven days running. A thing that stayed the same felt, right

now, worth repeating exactly — the way you didn't paraphrase a psalm you'd stopped examining. Nobody in earshot pointed out that Ines hadn't lost a life, only part of a hand. That Rule Eleven, strictly read, had never claimed to cover this at all. It didn't matter. The words did their work anyway. Three people's shoulders came down half an inch.

Dana filed the moment without comment, the way she'd started filing everything that used to make her want to argue.

It was only that evening that she found the last piece. She'd been updating the column she still hadn't named, cross-referencing the morning's new knuckle plate against the crude map she kept of who slept where. She sat very still with it for a long time before she wrote it down at all.

The cell that had gone from bare to occupied overnight shared a wall with the cell Ines Calderón had slept against the night before. Three Turns on schedule — precisely as her count predicted.

She wrote it down anyway, in the smallest hand she had. A fact she didn't write down was a fact she'd eventually convince herself she'd imagined. She did not draw a line between the two entries. She had exactly one data point connecting them — no different, by her own standard, from Whitcomb's methodology on his worst day. She was not yet willing to become the second person in this room who mistook a single coincidence for a law. She told herself that plainly, twice, the way she'd once told a junior analyst the same thing. Across a conference table that felt, right now, like it belonged to someone else's life entirely.

Walking back from the water line with a cup she'd finally earned, Dana understood something about Ines. She hadn't let herself understand it about herself until this exact hour — watching a woman make an instant, silent, absolute trade of her own body, for a boy who wasn't, technically, owed anything from her at all.

She thought of Mateo's hand in hers, two days ago, steering him wide of a housing she hadn't vetted. Calling two data points *steadier*, in a voice built to

sound like certainty, because his fear had mattered more, in that second, than her own rigor did.

Now, watching Ines flex three working fingers against a palm that would never fully open again, the understanding arrived before she could stop it: she would have made exactly the same trade, for Mateo. In exactly the same silence. Without a single number crossing her mind first. And whatever that told her about herself was not something a table with four columns, and a fifth she still hadn't named, was ever going to be able to hold.

What Selene Keeps

Marcus Rourke

SEVENTEEN DAYS IN, MARCUS HAD A TIN.

It wasn't much of one — a dented rectangle that had held somebody's mints once, in a life none of them could prove had happened, found wedged behind a housing on Day nine and claimed for exactly this before anyone else thought to want it. He kept it half-buried under a fold of the same shirt hem people had been tearing strips off of since the first hand went missing, tucked against the base of the wheel where his own body blocked the sightline. A margin. Not tack, not water either — a scraped-together handful of dry ration biscuit nobody had wanted enough to fight over, the kind of thing that only mattered on a morning the wheel gave nothing at all and a body needed something in it before it could think straight. He banked it a crumb at a time. He counted it the way he counted everything, out loud in his own head, and he had never once been wrong about the weight of it, because the tin was his and nobody else touched it.

This morning it was two portions light.

He knew the weight of two portions the way he knew the weight of his own canteen — not a number he had to reach for, just a fact his hand reported back before his head had finished asking. He turned the tin over anyway, like turning it might put the weight back, and set it down, and stood there a second longer than the line needed him to. Seventeen days of running this crank had taught him exactly one thing worth trusting: a number either held or it didn't, and a number that didn't hold was never nothing. It was always the first visible inch of something bigger that hadn't surfaced yet.

"Something wrong?" Ruiz, fourth up, cup already out.

"No," Marcus said, and started pouring.

He got through the whole line telling himself it was a bad guess. Fatigue did that — he knew fatigue, he'd run a compound gate on four hours' sleep for a

stretch that still didn't feel real to him, and fatigue made a man see shortfalls in numbers that had never actually moved. He told himself the story twice, the second time slower, the way you tell a story you're building evidence for rather than one you already believe.

Then Bobby Teague came through in the second slot instead of the sixth, and the story stopped holding.

Marcus ran that line the way he'd run everything since Day four — counterclockwise, same order the queue had settled into on its own by Day six, a rotation he'd never actually written down anywhere because writing it down would have meant admitting somebody could argue with it. Bobby knew his slot the way everybody knew theirs. Bobby standing second, cup already wet at the rim like he'd had a first pass at something and was back for a second, wasn't a mistake a tired man made. It was a thing that had been arranged.

"You're out of order," Marcus said. Flat. Not loud enough to pull the whole line's attention, though half of it turned anyway.

"Am I?" Bobby didn't quite meet his eyes. Not guilty, exactly — more like a man remembering, mid-sentence, that he'd promised somebody he wouldn't say a thing and hadn't planned past the promise. "Didn't realize. Sorry, Sarge."

He fell back to sixth without being told twice, easy as anything, and that was the part that sat wrong in Marcus's chest longer than the two missing portions had. A man who'd genuinely wandered into the wrong slot argued a little first, out of reflex, before he remembered where he actually belonged. Bobby hadn't argued at all. He'd just folded, the specific fast fold of somebody who already knew he wasn't supposed to be caught and had a version of caught he could survive.

Marcus finished the line. He counted the cups going out — a hundred and forty, a hundred and forty, a hundred and forty, the number steady on every single pour, exact to what the wheel had given that morning and not one milliliter more. That was the thing he couldn't make sit right next to the tin. The water in front of everybody's eyes always balanced. It was only the water nobody was supposed to be watching that had started moving on its own.

The second thing he noticed had nothing to do with water at all, and it took him most of the afternoon to notice it because it wasn't a number, it was an absence.

Feliciano Ruiz had missed his rotation on second watch — the loose, informal shift Marcus had set up back on Day eight, two bodies awake near the wheel at all times, everybody's turn coming around every third night whether they liked it or not, because a man asleep next to unguarded water was a problem waiting on a name. Ruiz had drawn tonight's slot on the schedule Marcus kept in his head the way he kept everything. He wasn't there. Dmitri Osei was there instead, half a night early, settling in against the housing with the loose, unbothered ease of a man who already knew he wasn't going to be questioned about it.

"You're not up till day after tomorrow," Marcus said.

"Traded with Ruiz." Osei didn't look up from the cards he was working through with his fingers, over and over, the same four-card fan, a habit from some other life Marcus had stopped asking about weeks ago. "He's got a bad knee acting up. Seemed easier."

"Who set that up."

Osei shrugged, easy, unhurried, the shrug of a man who'd learned a long time ago that the house never asked who dealt the cards, only who was sitting at the table when they landed. "Does it matter, Sarge? I'm here. He's not. Water's fine."

It did matter, and Marcus couldn't have said to Osei's face exactly why, only that a trade like that had a broker in it somewhere — somebody who'd known Ruiz's knee was bad before Ruiz had said so out loud to anybody, somebody who'd known Osei would take the extra half-shift without asking what it cost him to give it. Nobody ran trades in this Cohort without a hand somewhere in the middle taking a cut nobody else could see. Marcus had built the whole shape of this place on the assumption that his hand was the only one doing that.

He filed it next to the tin, in the same growing column, and went looking for the pipe he'd catch Fitch with an hour later, though he didn't know that yet.

He found Owen Fitch a little after, off past the third bend where the corridor dead-ended into a wall that would probably be a wall someplace else by tomorrow's Turn, and for a few seconds Marcus didn't announce himself at all.

Fitch had a length of pipe — salvage, bent at one end, no earthly use to anybody that Marcus had ever been able to figure — gripped in both hands, chest height, elbows locked at an angle that had nothing to do with swinging it at anything. Weight balanced dead center. Both thumbs braced along the same side, not wrapped opposite each other the way a man holds a bat or a bar. Fitch wasn't practicing a hit. He was practicing a hold — the specific, drilled stillness of somebody rehearsing the exact half-second before you'd tell a stranger to step back from something they didn't have the right to touch.

Marcus knew that hold. He'd have known it blind, by the geometry of the elbows alone, because it was close enough to a checkpoint stance that his own body had gone half a degree tense just looking at it, the old reflex checking whether it needed to answer another one like it.

He almost said something. Almost asked what the hell a man practiced that for, alone, in a hallway with nothing in it to threaten anybody. He didn't, because somewhere under the question another one arrived first, uninvited, and this one he had no comfortable place to put down.

He did the same thing. Every night the wheel went still and the line thinned out and nobody was left close enough to see him do it, Marcus's hands found the crank the way another man's hand finds a rosary — two-handed, full grip, the exact stance he used in daylight in front of twelve witnesses, except at night there was no water behind it and no line waiting and no reason on God's earth to be holding it at all except that his hands wanted the shape of holding it. He'd never once let himself call that a rehearsal. He'd told himself, on the two or three occasions he'd caught himself doing it, that he was checking the housing for wear. Nobody had ever seen him do it. He'd made sure of that the way you make sure of anything you've decided, without saying so to yourself, that you'd rather not have to explain.

Fitch set the pipe down against the wall, careful, the way you set down something you mean to pick up again later, and walked off toward the water line without ever knowing he'd been watched.

Marcus stood there a moment longer than he wanted to admit to. Then he went and found Selene, because the two missing portions were a cleaner thing to be angry about than the pipe was, and he needed, badly, to be angry about something clean.

She was at the tool corner, working a length of frayed cord into something that might have been a snare or might have been nothing at all, and she looked up before he'd fully arrived, the way she always did, like she'd clocked him coming from three cells back.

"You look like a man who counted something twice," she said, before he'd said a word.

"Tin's light."

"Is it." Not a question, not quite an admission either — the flat, unbothered register of somebody agreeing to discuss the weather. She set the cord down. "How light."

"Two portions."

"Out of how many you've banked total? Fifty? Sixty?" She said it gently, like she was doing the math for him because she assumed, kindly, that his own math had gotten tired. "Marcus. You've been running that wheel and that line and this whole camp for seventeen days on maybe four hours of sleep a night, and you're telling me two portions out of fifty-something is the thing keeping you up." She reached and put two fingers, light, against the side of his jaw, tipped his face a half inch toward hers the way you'd check a man for fever. "When's the last time you actually slept the whole night through instead of getting up every hour to check the crank's still there?"

He didn't answer that, because the honest answer was never, and she knew it was never, and asking it that way wasn't really a question at all.

"Ruiz traded off second watch to Osei," Marcus said. "Nobody asked me."

"Ruiz's knee's been bad three days. You'd have said yes if he'd asked you." She said it like she was doing him a kindness, saving him a conversation he didn't have room for. "Half this camp doesn't come to you for the small stuff anymore because they know what your day already looks like. That's not somebody working around you, Marcus. That's people trying not to add to your list."

"And Teague," Marcus said, holding on to the one thing he still had a number for. "Second slot. Not sixth."

"Bobby's memory's been going since Day ten, you know that. Man forgets his own name some mornings before his coffee, except there's no coffee, so he just forgets it." She said it easy, half a laugh riding under it, the kind of joke that arrived a half-second before whatever she actually wanted, the way she always built one. "You want me to walk the line with you tomorrow? Count alongside you? Might be good, actually — four eyes instead of two, this late in it. You've been doing this alone since Day four. Nobody'd blame you for wanting a second pair of hands on the numbers."

It was, Marcus thought, a genuinely reasonable offer. It was also, he noticed somewhere under the part of him that wanted very badly to stop noticing things tonight, an offer that put her hands directly on the one column he'd never once let anybody else touch.

"I'm not tired," he said, which wasn't quite a lie and wasn't quite true either.

"You're the most tired man in this Cohort," she said, and kissed the corner of his jaw where her fingers had been, brief, familiar, the exact gesture that had told this whole room a love story for thirteen days running. "You just don't get to be, because everybody needs you to be the one who isn't. That's not the same as fine, Marcus. I've been watching you not sleep since Day six." She stepped back, businesslike now, already turning back to the cord. "Two portions is nothing. You'll bank it back by Thursday. Go rest an hour before the next line. I'll watch the tin."

He almost said no to that last part. He heard himself not say it, and understood, walking away, that some of what had just happened to him had been exactly the kind of thing he did to other people twelve times a day

without ever calling it that — the reasonable-sounding sentence that closed a question instead of answering it. He filed the thought and kept walking, because a man could only carry so many uncomfortable recognitions in one night before something in him refused to carry any more, and the tin, against all the evidence of his own counting, felt like the easiest one to put down first.

He told himself, lying in the dim an hour later, hands finally still at his sides for once, that she was right about the sleep. He believed it almost all the way through.

Selene waited until the cell had gone fully quiet — until Marcus's breathing had settled into the long, even draw of a man who'd finally stopped fighting it, until Whitcomb's chalk had scraped its last line of the night and gone silent, until even Owen Fitch, three bodies down, had stopped shifting against the wall — before she moved.

Two housings past the tin Marcus counted every morning, in a seam of loose aggregate she'd worked soft with her own thumbnail across eleven patient nights, she banked one more scoop of tack — not stolen from the tin, never from the tin, that account had to stay clean enough to survive exactly the kind of counting he'd done this morning, so what she banked came instead from her own untouched share, held back from her own mouth for the second night running, priced against a morning that hadn't come yet, when Ines would need an extra ration for Mateo faster than the queue could produce one honestly. She smoothed the aggregate back into place with the flat of her palm, unhurried, and did not think of it, if she let herself think of it in words at all, as hiding anything from Marcus — only as the one column in this entire Cohort that nobody's hand but hers had ever put a number on.

In the morning he would count the tin again, find it exactly where his own math said it should be, and decide, with the particular relief of a man handed back a fact he'd wanted returned to him, that he'd simply been tired.

The Name Renata Cole

Priya Chandrasekaran (*OUTSIDE — Day 31 Missing*)

THE TIP BACKLOG DIDN'T STOP JUST BECAUSE A SOURCE WENT DARK. THAT WAS the thing nobody warned you about when you started a show like this — grief didn't buy you a pause. The algorithm that fed people her back catalog didn't know Farid Nasser's phone number had gone to four flat tones eight days ago, and it kept serving *Signal Loss* to strangers anyway. They wrote to her the way strangers always wrote to her — certain that this time, finally, someone competent was listening.

She had a spreadsheet for it. Thirty-one open rows, numbered in the order they'd come in rather than by anything so organized as priority. Priority was a thing she revised so often it had stopped meaning anything as a fixed column. Row twelve had been sitting untouched for six weeks. **RENATA COLE — 34 — Toledo, OH — missing 11 mo. — mother calls monthly — flag: applied to an online "behavioral assessment" survey ~3 mo. before last seen, never paid, never followed up — poss. Torrance-adjacent, unconfirmed, thin.**

Thin was Priya's own word, added the week she'd built the spreadsheet. She'd never once gone back to soften it. Softening a word like that on purpose was how you ended up doing to Renata Cole's mother exactly what she'd done to Darnell Voss.

The mother called on the second of every month, like clockwork — like a woman who'd decided that if she couldn't control whether anyone found her daughter, she could at least control how often she asked. This month's message was four minutes long. Priya let it sit in the inbox for three days. Then she made herself listen to the whole thing standing up, headphones off, the way you listened to something you owed a person rather than something you were mining. *I know you're busy. I know this isn't your case. I just need somebody to tell me you haven't forgotten the number twelve.* Priya hadn't. That was the whole, useless truth of it. She hadn't forgotten a single row on that sheet, and

not forgetting had never once, in three years, been the same thing as finding anyone.

She almost didn't open the file at all.

It had been sitting in a folder she'd labeled, with the specific cowardice of someone protecting herself from her own grief, **FARID — MISC — LOW PRIORITY**. It was a lie on every goddamn axis a word could lie on. There was nothing miscellaneous about the only thing a vanished source had ever managed to send her. There was nothing low-priority about it either. She hadn't been able to make herself listen to the file since the morning she found his apartment swept clean down to the carpet tracks.

He'd emailed it the night before his number died — no subject line, no message, just an audio attachment forty-one seconds long. The filename was a string of numbers instead of words, the kind of naming convention a phone used automatically when a person hadn't had time to think of a better one. She'd downloaded it the day it arrived. She hadn't opened it since. Opening it meant admitting that whatever was on it was the last thing he'd ever managed to hand her. Some days that fact alone was enough to keep her hands off the keyboard entirely.

She opened it now because Denise Cole had used the word *forgotten*. Forgotten was a word Priya had spent thirteen years building a whole life to refuse to be called.

The waveform came up flat and unremarkable — forty-one seconds of low-grade hiss with a voice sitting somewhere inside it, thin and buried. It was the audio equivalent of a photograph taken through a dirty window. She dropped it straight into the restoration chain she used on every unusable field recording that had ever crossed her desk: noise floor sampled from the first three seconds of silence, spectral gate set to strip anything under negative forty decibels. It was the whole reflexive workflow, one she could run half-asleep. She had run it, literally, half-asleep, on hundreds of recordings just like it.

The software's first pass tagged the busiest section of the clip [**interference — electrical, 60Hz harmonic, recommend gate**] and offered, helpfully, to

remove it.

Priya had gated out worse without thinking twice. Bad HVAC hum. A refrigerator compressor two rooms over. A cop's body-cam mic picking up its own battery whine. Interference was interference; the job was to get the words out from under it. The software had never once, in three years, been wrong about what counted as words and what counted as noise.

She almost let it gate this one too. Her hand was on the mouse. And then some old, stupid, unkillable habit stopped her — the same one that had made her write down a Lutheran church's name in a notebook she'd never use it from. It made her solo the flagged section instead of stripping it, just to hear what she was about to throw away.

The audio was flattened, robbed of half its frequencies by whatever cheap trunk line had carried it across somebody's crossed wire eighteen months ago. Under the hum, a woman's voice was reciting something. Flat. Bored. Exactly the cadence Farid had described to her over the phone in a parking garage stairwell. It was the cadence of someone doing data entry out loud, to stay awake through a long shift nobody was watching her do.

— *subject, mechanism, outcome, category* —

The words came apart and reassembled themselves twice before Priya trusted her own ears over the transcript her software wanted to hand her. Even then she ran it four more times, slower each pass. She waited until she was sure before she wrote down what she was actually hearing instead of what she wanted to be hearing — the one professional habit she still trusted more than her own excitement.

Subject. Clear. *Mechanism.* Clearer. Then a gap — the software's gate had already started chewing at its edges — a half-second where the recitation should have continued its rhythm and instead caught on something. Out of that gap, thinned to almost nothing, a single syllable broke free of the hum entirely.

Twelve.

Not *outcome category three*, the way Farid had reported the pattern running on his crossed line the first time. Not a code letter and two digits, the alphanumeric shape she'd have expected from anything genuinely institutional.

Just the word itself — plain, almost swallowed. Like the woman saying it had started to say something longer, and stopped herself a syllable in.

Priya sat very still for a moment, headphones clamped tight enough to ache. She did the thing she had told herself for three years she would never do again after Darnell Voss. She let a number find a name before the name had earned it.

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Row twelve. Her own spreadsheet, her own numbering — a coincidence of nothing but the order strangers' grief had arrived in her inbox. She knew that. She said it to herself out loud in the empty studio, in the exact tone she used to talk a nervous source down: *Coincidence, Priya. A filing system is not a signal.* Then she pulled up Renata Cole's row anyway. The alternative was pretending she hadn't heard what she'd heard, and pretending had never once been a discipline she was any good at.

Applied to an online behavioral assessment survey ~3 months before last seen. Toledo. Thirty-four. A mother who called on the second of every month asking, essentially, to not be forgotten. Priya built the rest of it in about four minutes — the way you build a bridge out of whatever's lying around, when you need to cross something badly enough.

The survey Renata Cole had answered eighteen months ago wasn't confirmed as Torrance's. It had never been confirmed as anything at all. It existed in Priya's own backlog as a single flagged word: *thin* — written by her own hand, in a moment of much more disciplined thinking than she was currently doing. None of that stopped the shape from assembling itself in her head with the specific, seductive click of a pattern finally resolving. A recruitment battery. A woman who vanished on schedule with the ones Farid had described. A designation, half-swallowed, on a recording from inside the machine that ran it.

She told herself she'd wait for one more pass before she wrote a word of script. She told herself that at eleven that night, and again at one in the morning. By three she had a full draft open on the screen in front of her. *Screw the second pass*, she thought, and kept typing anyway. She had stopped telling herself anything at all.

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She called Yvette before she called anyone else. That was the order the partnership ran on now, whether either of them had said so out loud yet.

"It's thin," Yvette said, the way Yvette said everything — flat and careful. She was a woman who read vendor contracts for a living, who had never once in her professional life mistaken a hunch for a filing. "A word on a bad recording and a case that was never confirmed connected to anything. You'd want three points of corroboration for a filing half this size, Priya."

"I'm not filing a lawsuit. I'm airing an episode."

"That's not better. That's worse. Nobody has to approve an episode."

Priya had laughed at that — a short, tired laugh with no real humor riding under it. It was true, and she was airing it anyway. At three in the morning, she was self-aware enough to know that naming a thing clearly had never once stopped her from doing it.

"If I sit on this and I'm right," she said, "Renata Cole's mother spends another eleven months not knowing her daughter might be alive. If I air it and I'm wrong, she spends a week hoping too hard about something that turns out not to be true. Those aren't the same size of harm, Yvette."

"They're not the same size of harm," Yvette agreed, "until you're the one who has to look her in the face afterward and explain the difference. You won't be. I might be. Think about who actually eats it if this doesn't hold."

Priya didn't have an answer for that, not one she was willing to say out loud at three in the morning. So she said the thing she always said instead — the thing that had gotten her through every version of this conversation since Darnell Voss. *Jesus, Yvette. I hear you. I'm being careful.* She believed the second half of that sentence completely, the way she always did. Right up until the moment being careful and being right stopped meaning the same thing.

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The finished cut ran nine minutes. She'd built it the way she built everything that mattered: short sentences, an act break where the silence needed to breathe. The audio itself carried the one piece of evidence no narration could improve on.

"There's a recording," she said into the mic, produced-voice calm, the register that had never once, in three years, cracked on air the way her private one cracked in the car at two in the morning. "I'm not going to tell you where it came from. The person who gave it to me can't be reached anymore to ask permission. That fact alone should tell you something about what this company does to people who talk. What I can tell you is what's on it. Forty-one seconds. A voice, flat, reciting something like inventory. And one word, near the end, that isn't inventory at all. It's a number. And I think — I can't prove this yet, but I think — that number is Renata Cole."

She played the cleaned clip. Interference gated. Hum stripped to the noise floor and below it. The word *Twelve* sat alone in the silence she'd built around it on purpose — the single clearest four letters in the whole nine minutes. It was exactly the way three years of training had taught her to make a word sit.

She never went back to listen to what she'd gated out from underneath it. She had already decided, the way you decide something by simply not doing the alternative, that the catch in the recitation's rhythm was noise the software had correctly identified as noise. The half-second where the pattern should have held and instead broke didn't need a second look. A recording artifact. Nothing anyone had said on purpose.

She was cutting the final mix at four in the morning, her own tinnitus ringing under everything the way it always did. It never once occurred to her that the machine had just told her something. A machine trained to remove anything that wasn't a word had declared, with total confidence, that a woman's voice catching on the edge of a forbidden word wasn't a word either.

The episode went up at six. By nine it had more downloads than any single hour of *Signal Loss* had ever posted before.

Four days later, Denise Cole gave an interview to a Toledo local news affiliate. She sat at her own kitchen table with her daughter's high school photo propped where the camera could find it. In a voice that had clearly not slept since the episode aired, she said she had always known that Renata was alive somewhere, being kept from her. She had always known it in her body, she said

— the way a mother knows. A podcast, finally, had proven what the police never would.

Priya watched the clip twice. She wrote it down in the notebook she still trusted more than any app: three words she didn't put in any script. *I didn't say proven.*

It didn't matter that she hadn't said it. She had built nine minutes of audio whose entire architecture pointed at exactly that word. Denise Cole had heard precisely what the architecture was built to make her hear. That was the whole design of the thing Priya had spent three years getting good at.

By the end of the week the clip had been reposted, captioned, re-captioned. It was folded into two unrelated true-crime forums, and one cable segment that used the words "possible proof of life" in its chyron. No one called Priya to ask if that phrasing was hers. There was no version of a retraction that could travel as far, or as fast, as the original nine minutes already had.

There was no fact anywhere in Priya's possession — not then, not for a long time afterward — that could settle it. Nothing could tell Denise Cole with any more certainty than the recording itself whether her daughter was Subject Twelve, or someone else's daughter entirely, or no one Covenant Dynamics had ever touched at all. Priya had built her a maybe with the full weight of proof behind it. And a maybe, once it is loved enough, does not know how to become a no.

She never learned that eighty-six miles from the nearest terminal that could have shown her the truth, an internal Covenant security process had already logged her broadcast. It had cross-referenced the air date against the last recorded outage on a comms channel that should never have been recording anything at all. Then it opened — quietly, without urgency, without anyone raising their voice — a file on a leak that could no longer be assumed to be contained.

Somewhere, on a night shift she had no way to picture, a woman's voice had caught for half a second on a word she wasn't supposed to say. She had just become someone worth finding.

Six Minutes Without a Shadow

Dana Okafor

DAY NINETEEN BEGAN THE WAY DAY FOURTEEN HAD, AND DAY NINE BEFORE THAT: a scrape along the outer wall that might have been the Undertone settling into a new shape overnight, or might have been nothing, and then the light, arriving from a source nobody had ever located, at a warmth that meant nothing about the hour or the season or anything else Dana used to be able to read off a window. She had catalogued that fact on Day One and stopped saying it out loud by Day Three, the way you stopped mentioning a smell in a hospital once your body agreed to tolerate it. The Array's light had no direction. A light with no direction cast no shadow. Fourteen people had spent more than two weeks standing in a room that, by any physics Dana had trusted for forty-one years before this one, should never once have put anything dark on the floor beneath them.

No shadows, she'd written, in the column she still hadn't given a proper name. Two words, dated, filed the way she filed everything now: a fact she hadn't yet earned the right to explain.

She was three back in the water line, cup already damp in her palm from the last hand that had held it, when Owen Fitch, ahead of her, went very still and said, in a voice pitched for one person and heard by six, "Hey. Your feet."

Priya Nandakumar looked down.

Under Fitch's shoes: nothing, the same seamless pale concrete the room had always given them. Under Bobby Teague's, two places back: nothing. Under Nandakumar's: a shadow. Whole, sharp-edged, exactly the size and shape a body her height should have thrown if this room had ever once obeyed the law every other room of her life had obeyed without asking. It sat under her like something the Array had finally remembered to include and had installed a day late.

Nobody said anything for a four-count. Dana knew it was four because she was counting; she'd counted before she'd decided to.

Then the shadow moved.

Not with her. Nandakumar hadn't shifted her weight, hadn't turned, was standing exactly as still as a woman standing in a line for water stands — and the dark shape beneath her feet slid a hand's width to the left, independent, unhurried, the way a reflection in a pool of water drifts when something upstream disturbs it and the water itself never moves. It cleared the toe of her left shoe first. Then the heel. It came off her the way a bandage comes off a wound that's stopped needing it, and it kept going after it was fully free — not fading, not thinning at the edges the way a real shadow does when the light finally finds the angle to erase it. It sat there on the concrete, distinct, hers in shape but no longer attached to a single part of her, three feet from where she stood.

"Priya." Ines's voice, from somewhere behind Dana, gone flat with the specific fear that didn't have a scream in it yet.

Nandakumar didn't answer. She was looking down at her own feet — bare of shadow now, the room's ordinary nothing restored beneath them — and then at the dark shape sitting apart from her on the floor, and her face did something Dana had not seen it do in nineteen days: it went perfectly, catastrophically blank, the exact blankness of a person doing arithmetic that refuses to close.

Cold moved through the water line before anyone touched anything. Dana felt it arrive at her own ankles first, then climb — not cold air, nothing she could have named a temperature and defended under questioning, just an absence where a temperature should have been, the kind of cold you get standing too near an open freezer case for longer than you meant to. She thought, with the part of her mind that never stopped filing things even when the rest of her wanted to run: *record the sensation, not the cause. You don't know the cause.* She wrote it down anyway, later, exactly as she'd felt it and no more.

The shadow didn't do anything for the length of two of Dana's counted minutes. It sat on the concrete the way a coat sits on a chair — present, useless,

waiting for someone to need it. Then, without any warning gesture from any direction, it began, very slowly, to breathe. Not literally; there was no chest in it to rise. But its edge pulsed, contracted and released, at a cadence that didn't match anyone's heartbeat in the room, that didn't match the Undertone either, that matched nothing Dana had a column for.

Nandakumar did not scream and did not run. She stood with her arms slightly away from her sides, the posture of a person who has been told, somewhere in her life, that sudden movement is the thing that gets you hurt, and held it, and held it, and held it. Dana would learn later — much later, in a service corridor that shouldn't have existed, reading a page she wished she hadn't found — that Priya Nandakumar had learned that exact stillness from a man in Waco who was not, technically, supposed to be within five hundred feet of her anymore. It was, Dana thought at the time and confirmed to herself afterward, the single most useful skill anyone in this room owned, and it had been beaten into her by somebody who should have gone to prison for it.

Six minutes. Dana counted every one of them, out loud in her own head, the way she'd have counted a claim's exposure window if this had ever been a spreadsheet instead of a woman's life. At four minutes the shadow's pulse slowed. At five it had gone nearly still, sitting there flat and patient as a photograph. At five minutes fifty, without transition, without a sound, it was simply gone — not absorbed back into her, not swallowed by the floor, just no longer a thing that existed anywhere Dana could locate it, the way a held breath is a fact and then, the instant you let it go, was never a fact you can point to again.

Nandakumar looked down at her own feet. No shadow. The room's ordinary nothing, restored, exactly as it had been for eighteen days before this one.

"Priya." Ines again, closer now, a hand not quite landing on her shoulder. "Are you—"

"I don't know." Her voice came out level, which was somehow worse than if it had broken. "I don't know what that was. I don't know what it—" She stopped. Started again. "It didn't hurt. I want that on the record, whatever the record is. It didn't hurt at all. I just don't have a word for what it did instead."

Nobody asked her to try harder. Dana understood why, watching the room's collective face settle into the specific stillness it wore whenever something happened that the Ledger had no line for yet: they were all, every one of them, hoping someone else would be the one to make Nandakumar say it twice.

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Gerald Whitcomb reached her within the hour.

Dana watched him cross the cell with the particular energy she'd started to recognize as his tell — not urgency exactly, something closer to hunger dressed up as duty. It had been thirteen days since Rule One had cost a man two fingers in front of the whole room while proving, definitively, that Whitcomb's confidence and Whitcomb's accuracy were not the same instrument. He had not authored a rule that landed clean since. He had watched Dana's private numbers start to matter more than his public ones, though he'd never once said so, and she had watched him watch it, and neither of them had ever put a name to what that competition actually was. A mystical event with six clean, countable minutes and a survivor willing to describe it was the best material he'd been handed since Corrine's second teeth, and he did not intend to let this one pass through the room unclaimed.

"Sit," he told Nandakumar, not unkindly. "Tell it to me again. Slow. From the first second you noticed."

She told it to him the same way she'd told it to Ines — flat, honest, no more shape to it than there had actually been. Whitcomb listened with his head tilted, the posture Dana recognized from claims files she'd never seen but could picture anyway: a man reading a thin report and deciding, before he'd finished the page, what number he was going to write at the bottom of it.

"She didn't reach for anything," he said, to the room now, not to Nandakumar. "Didn't touch a mechanism. Didn't move. Wasn't near the wheel, wasn't near a rod, wasn't near a plate." He was building it out loud the way he always built them, each clause landing like a nail going into wood that hadn't asked for it. "The room took something from her without her lifting a finger to earn it — and gave it back without her losing anything for keeps. That's new."

That's the first outcome any of us have seen where the room reaches out on its own, unprompted, and the person it touches walks away whole."

"Or it's the first time we happened to be watching when it did," Dana said. Quiet. Not loud enough to be a challenge, which was its own kind of choice.

Whitcomb didn't look at her. That was its own kind of choice too. "The pattern's plain enough," he said, to everyone but her. "She held still. She didn't reach. The room reached for *her* instead, and because she gave it nothing to punish, it took the smallest thing it had on hand and gave the rest back." He let that sit a beat, the pastoral beat Dana had learned to dread, the one that always came right before he asked somebody to prove his math with a body that wasn't his own. "So here is the rule, and I want it said plainly so nobody mistakes it later. Rule Twelve. When something takes hold that you didn't reach for — don't move, don't flinch, don't pull away. Hold as still as she held. The room only keeps what you fight it for."

Dana felt the room take the rule in the way it always took his rules now — half belief, half the specific relief of finally having somewhere to put a fear that had nowhere to go a minute ago. Bobby Teague was already nodding, the same nod she'd watched him give Rule Eleven the day Ines's hand had sealed shut around nothing. Two data points, she thought. He has exactly two data points that anything about stillness matters at all, and one of them is the two-fingered man from thirteen days ago who never once held still and got maimed anyway, which if you actually ran the numbers argued against the rule as hard as Nandakumar argued for it. He hadn't mentioned the two-fingered man. Nobody had asked him to.

It was Owen Fitch who tested it, and Dana understood, watching him step forward, exactly why it had to be him and not anyone else in the room.

Fitch had lost a job for moving too fast once — some altercation at a checkpoint years and a life ago that none of them had the whole story on, only the shape of it: a man trained to act on instruction the instant an instruction was given, punished, eventually, for doing exactly that a half-second too eagerly. He had spent nineteen days here being the first to defer and the last to argue,

the man who said *you're not gonna touch it* to Dana on Day Fifteen instead of touching it himself, the man whose whole shattered professional life had been built and then broken on the single premise that a clear rule, followed to the letter, was the safest thing a body could do. Whitcomb had just handed the room a rule stated plainly enough to follow to the letter. Of course it was Fitch. He was, Dana thought with a coldness that arrived before she could soften it, the single most compliant instrument in the room, and Whitcomb had just built a test that instrument was constitutionally unable to walk past.

"I'll go," Fitch said, already moving toward the nearest housing — a knuckle plate, flush and pale, two cells down from the water line. "Somebody should. Better it's me than somebody who hasn't already lost the thing they were scared of losing."

Nobody stopped him. Dana opened her mouth — she felt the shape of the sentence forming, *you don't have anything close to enough data to send a man toward that*, aimed at Whitcomb and not at Fitch — and then closed it again, because she had exactly the same number of data points he did, and the only difference between them was that hers had never yet cost anybody a body.

Fitch set his palm flat against the plate. Pressed it.

The plate gave a small mechanical click, the ordinary sound of something registering and resolving. For one full second, nothing happened at all, and the room exhaled the way it always exhaled at a null — safe, cheap, a coin landing on the good side.

Then Fitch's other hand, the one hanging loose at his side, the one he had not moved, had not flinched, had not pulled back an inch from wherever it had been resting — the hand he had held perfectly, dutifully, exactly as still as Rule Twelve demanded — simply stopped being attached to his wrist.

No spark. No blood at the seam. The stump sealed glass-smooth in the half-second it took Dana's mind to finish registering what her eyes had already told it, as though that had always been the shape of his arm and the memory of a hand there was the mistake. Fitch looked at it the way Bobby Teague had once looked at his own wrist, four full seconds of pure administrative silence, and

then he made a sound that wasn't a scream. It was smaller than that, and it went on longer.

He hadn't reached. He hadn't flinched. He had done, by the letter of Rule Twelve and nothing else, exactly what Nandakumar had done six minutes' worth of stillness ago, and the room had taken flesh from him for it instead of giving it back.

"Shit," Dana said. One word. Then she was moving with everyone else, the room's ugly, well-practiced choreography closing around an injury it had learned, at terrible expense, exactly how to gather around without making worse.

Whitcomb didn't retract the rule. He couldn't, not in front of everyone, not thirteen days after the last time a rule of his had failed this publicly — retraction would have cost him something he'd apparently decided, somewhere in the last two weeks, he could no longer afford to spend. What he did instead was smaller and, to Dana, far worse to watch: he found the seam. "The plate," he said, already rebuilding, already reaching for the next clause before the last one had finished bleeding, "wasn't the same kind of event as hers. Hers came unprompted. His came from a touch. Rule Twelve was never meant to cover a hand that's already on the mechanism when the reaching starts—"

He kept going. Dana stopped listening to the words and started listening to the shape of them instead, the specific cadence of a man narrowing a rule after the fact until it fit exactly the one case it had already failed and no other, so that by the time he finished speaking Rule Twelve would still be standing, technically, its wording quietly moved half a foot to the left of where it had been an hour ago, the way a shadow moves when nobody's supposed to be watching that closely.

She had watched him do this before. She would watch him do it again. What stopped her, standing at the edge of the crowd with Fitch's stump wrapped in a shirt-strip that wasn't doing anything the wound actually needed, was not Whitcomb narrowing his rule. It was the private column running underneath her own skull at the exact same moment, keeping its own tally, the way it

always did: *two events. Six minutes and one dead hand. That's not a pattern. That's barely a rumor of one.* And underneath that, arriving a half-second later with the specific vertigo of a floor she'd trusted turning out not to be there: she had built exactly that kind of certainty herself, more than once, out of exactly that much data — Ines's cell and the housing that grew in beside it, the ration curve bending the same direction twice in a row, Mateo steered wide of a mechanism she'd never actually vetted, only distrusted on instinct and called it rigor. She had simply never yet sent anyone else's body to go find out whether she was right.

She wanted that to be the whole of the difference between her and the man narrowing his rule six feet away, still talking, still rebuilding the ground under his own authority in real time while a man three cells over rocked and bled nothing at all from a wound with no blood in it. Whitcomb spent other people to test his certainty. Dana had only ever spent herself, or spent nothing, or, once, quietly spent a favor on a child who wasn't hers to spend it on. It was a clean distinction. Clean was exactly the kind of thing nineteen days in this room should have taught her to stop trusting.

She did not know yet which of those was actually the safer thing to be in a room like this one. She only knew, standing there with a stranger's blood-that-wasn't-blood nowhere on her hands and a rule already reforming itself half a foot to the left of its own failure, that she had spent nineteen days believing the difference between herself and Gerald Whitcomb was a matter of rigor.

It was not. Watching him narrow a rule around the wound it had just caused, in front of the same people who'd nodded along an hour ago when he'd stated it plain, she understood — with no comfort anywhere in the understanding — that she was building certainty out of exactly the same amount of too-little data, in the same room, off the same six minutes and one ruined hand. She did not know yet whether that made her more dangerous than Gerald Whitcomb, or less. She only knew that not knowing, after today, was no longer free.

Subject R-07

Marcus Rourke

THEY WRAPPED FITCH'S WRIST IN WHAT WAS LEFT OF THE SHIRT-STRIP SUPPLY, which wasn't much, and Renata — no, not Renata, he kept doing that lately, swapping names under stress like a man reaching for the wrong tool in the dark — Ibsen wound it tight enough to hold and loose enough not to matter, because there was nothing underneath it that needed holding. That was the whole horror of it, still, nineteen days in.

Nothing bled. Nothing needed a tourniquet.

You wrapped a wound that had already finished being a wound before you got to it, and you did it anyway because a man needed to see somebody's hands on him.

Marcus counted heads while they worked. Fourteen, minus the two who'd already gone under someone's arm to lie down. He did it out of the same reflex that made him check exits in a room he'd never see again — not because the number would tell him anything, but because a number he trusted was the only thing left standing some nights.

Whitcomb was still talking. Rebuilding Rule Twelve half a foot to the left of where it had broken, the way he always did, and Marcus had stopped listening to the words an hour ago and started listening only for the tone — the particular pastoral hum a man got right before he asked somebody else's body to prove him right a second time.

He needed something to do with his hands that wasn't the wheel.

He told himself it was chokepoint discipline. A compound taught you that a hole in the wire meant to be checked before it meant to be worried about — you walked the line, you found where the fence gave, you fixed what you could and logged what you couldn't. Something had happened here today that the room had never produced before, in a spot he could still point to on the floor, and a man who ran security for a living did not walk away from a spot

like that without laying a hand on it first. That was the story. He believed about half of it. The other half was just that he'd rather touch a wall than watch Fitch rock against another one, making the sound he was making now, small and going on too long.

He waited until the crowd around Fitch had thinned to the two or three who actually knew what to do with a wound, and then he walked back to where Nandakumar had stood in line, where the shadow had come off her heel first and sat there breathing at nobody until it wasn't there at all.

Nothing looked different. That was the first thing, and it should have told him something — a room built to remember every death in the shape of a scar on somebody's body had left absolutely no mark of the one event that hadn't cost anybody anything. He crouched anyway, palm flat against the base of the wall, the way he'd have checked a fence post for give.

The concrete was cold there. Colder than three feet either side of it, by enough that his hand noticed before his head did, the same kind of cold Dana had described feeling climb her ankles an hour ago, except Marcus didn't have a word for temperature that wasn't there any more than she did. He moved his palm in a slow arc, the way you'd search a stretch of ground you already suspected had something buried in it, and about a foot to the left of dead center his fingers found a seam.

Not a crack. A seam — too straight, too even, a hairline where the pale aggregate met itself at an angle no pour should have left. He'd run his hands over enough poured concrete in his life, curbs and gate footings and the low wall around a compound motor pool, to know the difference between where material failed and where somebody had built two pieces to look like one.

He worked his thumbnail into it. Nothing gave. He thought of Fitch's pipe, still leaning where Fitch had left it against the dead-end wall three bends back, and went and got it without deciding to, the way his hands had decided things without him all day.

The pipe fit the seam almost too well, like it had been shaped for exactly this and Fitch had simply found the wrong use for it first. Marcus worked it in,

and hummed while he did — four beats, low, almost nothing, the cadence his high school line coach used to keep on the practice field for no reason anybody ever explained, a habit that had survived a war and a compound and nineteen days in a box with no earthly business surfacing now, over a wall that had just taken a man's hand for standing still. He didn't notice he was doing it until the seam gave, all at once, a full hand's width of panel swinging inward on a hinge that made no sound at all, and the humming stopped on its own.

Behind it: not machinery he could name. A shallow recess, cool air moving where no air should have been moving, and a low case set into the wall's true structure, ribbed metal, a single amber light pulsing slow and patient behind a grille no bigger than a matchbook. It wasn't the Undertone he heard coming off it. It was a hum with edges — cleaner, faster, a sound that belonged to something with a plug.

Wedged in the seam where the panel had swung, caught by one corner between the hinge and the housing, was paper. Actual paper, torn along one edge, curled with a dampness that had nothing to do with anything in this room.

He pulled it free.

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He almost didn't read it. His first thought, the trained one, was that a page like this belonged to whoever ran this place, and touching it was the kind of thing that got a man's hand taken the way Fitch's had just been taken — for reaching toward something that wasn't his. But it was already in his hand, and a soldier who found paper behind an enemy's wall read the paper. That was just the job.

SUBJECT R-07 — prior institutional compliance-extraction experience, verified via separation record. Recommend placement in proximity to bonded pair V-04 for coercion-dynamics baseline. Calibration loaded at intake; placement logic self-executing per profile weighting; no runtime supervision scheduled.

He read it once, fast, the way he'd have read a contact report he expected to be somebody else's problem.

Then he read it again, slow, and he caught himself doing the thing he did to a headcount that wouldn't reconcile — going very quiet, very exact, running back through it once more on the assumption he'd misread a number. He hadn't. What settled into him after that wasn't the wheel-stillness, the flat-handed, open-handed one that meant *don't, not this, not you*. This one had nowhere established to go, so it just stayed, low in his chest, with no name yet and no crank to explain it.

Institutional compliance-extraction experience. He had spent four years teaching himself not to think in those words. He had a different name for it, when he let himself think of it at all — *running the gate*, he called it, or didn't call it anything, folded it into *the last deployment* the way you fold a bad map so the worst part faces in. Water gated to compliance. Sleep gated to information. Privilege gated to obedience. Three tiers, a schedule, a captain who never got charged and a sergeant who never got asked, because the sergeant did his job well enough that nobody up the chain had cause to ask him anything. *Verified via separation record.* His separation record said *needs of the service*. It did not say what the service had needed, or what he'd given it, and he had built four years of a civilian life on the fact that nobody who signed that record would ever have to.

Bonded pair V-04.

He didn't need it spelled out. He knew, the way he knew the weight of two portions in a tin without reaching for it, that there was no other bonded pair on this earth that word could mean.

Nobody had asked him to run the water line the way he ran it. Nobody had told him to build a queue, a schedule, a tiered arrangement where labor bought deference and deference bought more, with Selene sitting at the center of it in a place he'd told himself, for seventeen days, she'd chosen on her own. He had built it exactly once before, on a compound outside a city whose name he still didn't say out loud, and he had told himself the second time was different because the first time somebody else had drawn the schedule and this time he had.

He hadn't drawn it. He'd been given the shape of it before he ever woke up on this floor, the same way a man's hand is given the shape of a grip before he ever picks up the tool.

No runtime supervision scheduled.

That clause took longer to land than the rest, because it didn't feel like a threat the way the first two sentences had. It felt, for one strange second, almost like relief — nobody watching, then. Nobody sitting behind a glass somewhere right now, timing his rationing curve, grading it. And then the actual shape of it arrived, a half-beat behind the relief, and put the relief out like a boot on a coal: it didn't say nobody was watching. It said nobody *needed* to. The thing had already decided what he'd do before he did it. It had loaded the decision in at the start, the way you load a shell before you ever aim, and then it had simply let go and trusted the rest to run itself — trusted *him* to run itself, his own hands, his own three-gate schedule, because somebody, somewhere, had already known exactly what he'd build with a wheel and a room full of thirsty strangers, and hadn't needed to stay and watch him build it.

Whatever had been running this Array for nineteen days hadn't been improvising a single hour of it. It had known him before it took him.

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"Marcus."

He hadn't heard her come up. He should have — a soldier's ears, a man who counted footsteps out of the same reflex that counted cups — but the page had taken the part of him that listened for things and he only had her voice now, close, careful, the voice she used on Whitcomb when she wanted him to feel challenged and not cornered at the same time. He held the page a half-second longer than he needed to before he let her take the other edge of it, some animal part of him wanting one more second where only he knew.

Dana read it in silence. He watched her face do the thing he'd started to recognize as her real tell, the one she never let the room see — not shock, nothing that dramatic, just a very slight, very total stillness, the look of a woman running a column of numbers and watching the total come out wrong in a direction she'd already half-expected and prayed against anyway.

"R-07," she said, quiet, mostly to herself. "They didn't even bother giving you a different letter than the housings." She looked up at him, and something in her face had already gone somewhere past the page in front of them, into a ledger of her own he couldn't see. "Marcus. Do you remember the stamped code on the wheel's housing? The one you clocked on Day One and never thought about again, because it looked like a manufacturer's mark?"

He did. He'd filed it exactly the way she said, under *made somewhere, means nothing*.

"I've been keeping a column since the first hour," she said, and her voice had the flat, procedural calm he'd heard her use over Fitch's stump an hour ago, the voice she put on specifically so the thing underneath it couldn't get out and ruin the count. "I thought it was noise. I've been telling myself for two and a half weeks it was noise." She held up one finger, the way Whitcomb held up a finger before a rule, except nothing about the gesture was Whitcomb's. "The code on every housing since Day One — not identical, cell to cell. I called that manufacturing. Fine. Coincidence, on its own." A second finger. "The day you took the wheel — the exact hour this whole room decided you were the one to trust — a mechanism triggered on its own timing, no hand on it, in the cell nearest Gerald's sleeping spot. I called that bad luck landing on the wrong man." A third. "Day Six. Whitcomb's first rule. The woman who trusted him got tack. The man who'd just asked out loud how he could possibly know got two fingers, for following the identical instruction. I called that yoking, because that word existed and I needed somewhere to put it."

Her hand was steady. Her voice wasn't, not entirely — a thread under it now, thin, the sound of a bridge taking weight it wasn't rated for.

"Deshawn told nobody for eleven days that he'd found a shape in the timing, because telling people, where he came from, only ever got the workaround patched. I called that his business. The morning Ines woke in the cell she'd slept in — the same morning she chose to feed Mateo from her own hand instead of risking the dispenser again — a new mechanism had already gone up in the cell beside hers. I called that the third-Turn schedule, a system-level thing, nothing to do with her specifically." She was looking at the page again,

not at him, and her jaw had gone tight in a way that had nothing to do with the cold coming off the wall. "And an hour ago, out of every rule this room has ever tested, the one that failed was tested by the one man in it who was built, his whole professional life, to never once break formation when he's told to hold still. I called that Owen being Owen."

She stopped. When she looked up again, whatever had been holding her voice level for the last thirty seconds wasn't there any more, and what came through instead was quieter, and worse for it.

"None of it was noise, Marcus. It was never noise. Somebody wrote all of it down somewhere before it happened to us, and I have spent nineteen days being proud of myself for finding the shape of a pattern I should have understood, from the first day, wasn't mine to find at all. It was already there. I was just the last one in the room to read it."

Marcus didn't answer that. He wasn't sure there was an answer that belonged to him and not to the page.

He asked, instead, to see it again — quiet, the way you'd ask to hear a diagnosis repeated, not because you'd missed it the first time but because some small, stupid, unkillable part of you believed the words might have rearranged themselves in the time it took to ask. Dana handed it back without a word. He held it at the same angle, in the same amber-lit half-light, and read the same six sentences in the same order they'd been in a minute ago.

Calibration loaded at intake. No runtime supervision scheduled.

They hadn't moved. Of course they hadn't moved. Nothing in this room had ever once rearranged itself for anybody's comfort, and he didn't know why he'd expected paper to be the exception.

He looked up at Dana, and the amber light behind the grille pulsed once, slow, patient, indifferent to either of them, the way it had probably been pulsing since before either of them had a name Covenant Dynamics bothered writing down.

"If they wrote this before we got here," Marcus said, "what else did they already decide?"

Rule Eleven, Revised

THE LEDGER

Transcribed entire, this twenty-fourth day, exactly as it now stands in his own hand. Rules One through Ten omitted here as already known to whoever reads this wall and lives near enough to need them.

RULE ELEVEN. Restated this day, upon further accounting.

A cell that has taken a life is generally slower to take a second one, for a stretch that has usually run somewhere near eleven Turns. This has mostly held, across the cells it's been watched in, closely enough to be worth marking.

Based on the pattern of loss recorded here, it has always been understood that the count was a guide to caution, not a clock to set a watch by. Use whatever stands in such a cell with the eleventh Turn in mind – not as a promise the room keeps, but as a rough sense of how long grief tends to sit quiet in a place before it moves again. A debt allowed to run past its due date does not always stay simple. It can compound.

This was never claimed as certainty. Several cells have followed something close to the shape of it. Anyone who remembers it as a promise has misremembered what was written.

Mark it, and weigh it. Most cells that have held to it have fared better than those that ignored it entirely. That is as much as anyone can honestly claim of any rule in this room.

– G.W.

DAY 24

The Forty-Minute Argument

Priya Chandrasekaran (*OUTSIDE* — Day 44 Missing)

THE OFFICE HAD COME OUT OF THE RENATA COLE NUMBERS, WHICH WAS A THING Priya tried not to think about more than once a day and thought about roughly nine times an hour. Four hundred square feet above a defunct travel agency, month-to-month, paid for out of a download spike generated by a maybe she still couldn't unmake. She'd told the leasing agent she needed somewhere with better sound isolation than her apartment. That was true. It was also the kind of true a person told herself to avoid the other one — that she couldn't sit in the studio anymore without hearing Denise Cole's voice under everything, *I know this isn't your case*, and needed four walls that didn't remember that call.

The new walls didn't know anything yet. She was working on it.

Carla — first name only, ever, on a burner Priya had wiped twice already — had come in through the contact form eleven days ago, four days after the episode aired. *I work admin for a registered agent service in Wilmington*, the message said, no capital letters, no punctuation past the periods, the syntax of someone typing fast on a phone in a bathroom stall. *There was a company through us a couple years back. dissolved. somebody's been asking the same questions your show asked. i think i know what forwarding address they used after and i think it's still active. i dont want my name anywhere. i have a kid.*

Eleven days of careful, terrified, half-answered messages. Priya had learned, the slow way, to let Carla set the pace — no calls, texts only, sometimes forty-eight hours between them, the cadence of someone checking over her shoulder before she typed anything at all. She had a name for what Carla was doing, from three years of doing it to other people: rationing her own exposure, one word at a time, the way you rationed water when you didn't know how long the drought would run.

Priya had a name for what she wanted to do about it, too, and it wasn't rationing.

"Say it again," Yvette said, on the phone, in the voice she used for people who'd just told her something she needed written down verbatim before she'd believe they'd actually said it. "Say the exact thing you want to publish."

"Not publish. Tease. One line, unattributed. 'A source inside Torrance's registered agent has come forward.' That's it. No name, no city, no employer."

"That's not nothing, Priya. That's a job description and a location narrowed to one filing office in one city. You know how many people work at a registered agent service in Wilmington, Delaware, that size? I looked it up while you were talking. Six."

"Six is not one."

"Six is a list somebody can call in an afternoon."

Priya paced the four hundred square feet, which took eleven steps if she went corner to corner, and she'd been doing it long enough this call that she'd started counting without meaning to, the way she counted everything when she wanted her hands to have a job her mouth didn't. "If I don't put something out there, Yvette, she disappears the same way Farid did — quietly, administratively, nobody even bothering to make it look like anything — and nobody outside the two of us ever knows she existed at all. If I put her on the record, even unnamed, even thin as hell, there's a public record that somebody was talking. That's not nothing either. That's the only kind of protection a person like her actually has. Visibility is the shield. It's the only shield there is."

"Visibility didn't shield Farid Nasser." Yvette's voice didn't rise. It never rose; that was the worst part of arguing with her, the flat unbudgeable calm of a woman who spent her working life reading vendor contracts for the sentence nobody else had caught. "You put a designation on the air that nobody but Covenant could have recognized as theirs, and eight days later a woman on the inside of that same operation who almost certainly recorded the thing you aired is the one person on this earth who's actually in danger right now, and you don't even know if she's alive. Your theory that publicity is a shield has a body count of exactly zero successes and at least one open question mark. I would not bet my kid's babysitter on that math, let alone somebody else's kid."

"That's not fair, and you know it's not fucking fair."

"It's the only fair thing I've said to you in a month." A pause, and Priya heard her decide to say the rest of it anyway, the way you heard someone decide to step off a curb. "I need to ask you something and I need you not to perform an answer at me. Darnell Voss. Somebody forwarded me a thread this week — people going back over your old episodes since Renata Cole, doing exactly what you're always trying to get strangers to do to Torrance. They found him. He did an AMA. He's still getting messages from your listeners four years later telling him they know he did something to those women, because you built four episodes that said so and never fully un-built them. Is that true?"

Priya stopped pacing.

There was a version of this conversation she'd rehearsed a hundred times, alone, in the car, in the shower, at two in the morning with the tinnitus doing its thin useless ring under everything — a version where she said it clean, in order, with the context that made it survivable. *I was twenty-nine. It was my third year. I had four episodes' worth of momentum and a theory that felt like the truest thing I'd ever built, and I was wrong, and I posted a retraction, and it reached maybe a tenth of the people the theory did, and I have never once gone back and listened to any of it because I don't think I could stand to hear how sure I sounded.*

What came out instead was smaller and worse. "I retracted it."

"That's not the question I asked."

"Yes." The word cost her something specific, a kind of structural give, like a joist she'd been standing on for years finally announcing what it had actually been made of the whole time. "Yes, it's true. I got it wrong. I got it wrong in exactly the shape I'm about to get this wrong again, and I know that, and I'm asking you to let me do it anyway because the alternative is doing nothing while a scared woman with a kid gets erased for talking to me, and I have watched that happen once already and I am not doing it a second time by sitting on my hands."

"You don't know that sitting on your hands is what gets her erased." Yvette's voice finally moved, not louder, just harder, each word set down like a stone she was done being careful with. "You know what you *want* to be true, which is that speed is mercy. I have spent fifteen years reading the paper trail companies leave when they think nobody competent is looking, and I am telling you the actual pattern, the one I've seen a hundred times in filings you've never had to read: the people who get hurt are the ones somebody *named*, not the ones somebody protected in the abstract. You are not choosing between silence and safety, Priya. You are choosing between two kinds of exposure, and you keep telling yourself the fast one is love because the fast one is also the one that gets you a headline before somebody else does."

"That is such an unbelievably ugly thing to say to me right now."

"It's an ugly thing to be true. I didn't invent that part."

They went another thirty-some minutes past that — Priya would clock it later, checking the call log with the specific self-punishing precision of someone building an exhibit against herself, forty-one minutes total, which she would round down to forty for the rest of her life because forty had a shape and forty-one just had shame in it. They went in circles that got smaller and meaner. Yvette brought up Renata Cole's mother a second time, more precisely, the exact chyron language — *possible proof of life* — and Priya said something about Yvette never having had to sit with a phone message from a woman like that, not once, not ever, from the safe distance of a compliance office, and knew the second it left her mouth that it was the kind of thing you couldn't take back cleanly even with a good apology, because some part of it was true enough to be a weapon and she'd swung it anyway.

"I'm not doing this anymore tonight," Yvette said, finally, in the voice of someone closing a folder. "You're going to do what you're going to do. I've said what I have to say about it. Just — don't call me when it goes wrong asking me to help you carry it. Carry your own math this time."

She hung up first. Priya stood in the middle of four hundred rented square feet with the phone still against her ear, listening to a dial tone that didn't

actually exist anymore on any phone built in the last decade, just the silence that came after, which her ear filled in with the sound anyway out of old habit.

She posted the line forty minutes later. One sentence, on the show's account, no names, no city — *a source inside the shell company that ran Torrance's registered agent has come forward. more soon.* She told herself, typing it, that forty minutes of cooling off counted as due diligence. She told herself a lot of things in the next several hours, in the flat confident cadence she used for a produced cold open, and every one of them was a lie built out of the same three-year-old habit of narrating her own actions as if a listener were already agreeing with her.

Carla went dark nine hours later.

The first six hours of silence were nothing — Carla had gone quiet for stretches before, once for four days, a stretch Priya had spent convinced she'd already lost her before a message came back apologizing for a work trip nobody warned her about. The second six hours were the ones where Priya started doing arithmetic she recognized immediately as the same arithmetic she'd done over Farid's dead phone line, and hated herself for recognizing it, and did it anyway. *Eight days*, her brain kept saying, unhelpfully, about a completely different timeline. *It took them eight days with Farid. It's been less than one with her. That means nothing. That means nothing yet.*

She called Meena at eleven at night, which she never did — Sundays were the rule, Sundays were sacred, a rule she'd built herself specifically so she'd have one person in her life not routed through somebody's disappearance — and broke it without apologizing for breaking it, which told Meena everything the words hadn't gotten to yet.

"I did the thing," Priya said. "The thing you always tell me not to do. I did it on purpose, tonight, pissed off, and now somebody's not answering and I don't know if that's because she's asleep or because I just did to her what I think I did to Farid."

"Okay." Meena's ICU voice, the one she used at three a.m. for families who needed someone to be steadier than the situation deserved. "Is there anything

you can do right now, tonight, that changes whether she's okay?"

"No."

"Then you're not doing anything productive by staying awake calculating it. You're just suffering on a schedule that doesn't help her." A pause, the particular kind Meena used when she was deciding whether to say the harder thing. "You've been doing this a long time, Priya. You always think the worry is the same as the work. It isn't. It never was."

Priya didn't sleep. She sat with the studio lights off — the new office's lights, not her apartment's, a distinction that felt suddenly, uselessly important — and ran the post's engagement numbers over and over on her phone, watching a sentence she regretted get shared four hundred goddamn times by people who thought they were helping.

Day two, nothing. She composed, deleted, recomposed an apology she had no way to send to a person she had no other channel to reach. She thought about Denise Cole's kitchen-table interview, the photo propped for the camera, and understood for the first time in a visceral, physical way — a tightening under her sternum that had nothing to do with argument and everything to do with her own body finally agreeing with Yvette — that she had spent three years mistaking *I didn't mean it that way* for a kind of innocence it had never actually been.

On the morning of day three, a single message came through on the burner, four words, no capitals, exactly like the first one had been.

sorry. had to go quiet. someone at work started asking who'd been in the parking lot friday and i panicked and turned my phone off for two days and stayed at my sisters. im ok. dont post anything else about me. please.

Priya read it four times before she let herself believe it. Carla was alive, unnamed, unfound — safe, as far as either of them could verify, which was not the same thing as safe, and Priya had learned by now to hold those two facts apart without letting the second one comfort her more than it had earned. Nothing had happened to her. Nothing had happened to her *this time*, because a coworker's idle question had scared her into two days of silence instead of because anything Priya had done had actually protected her. The line she'd

posted — the thing she'd told Yvette was a shield — had done exactly nothing to keep Carla safe and everything to make her more afraid than she'd already been. The shield had turned out to be armor built for Priya's own nerves, not Carla's.

She didn't call Yvette to gloat that it had turned out all right. There was nothing in it to gloat about. She didn't call her to apologize properly either, not yet — she wasn't steady enough for that conversation, and she knew herself well enough by now to know an unsteady apology was worse than a late one. What she did instead, that same afternoon, chastened in a way that felt structural rather than performed for once, was sit back down at the desk in the new office with the door locked and her headphones on and pull up the one file she still hadn't fully earned the right to have.

Forty-one seconds. She knew the waveform by heart at this point, the flat unremarkable hiss with a voice buried thin inside it, the same shape she'd built a nine-minute episode and a mother's ruined week out of. She didn't reach for the restoration chain this time. She didn't sample the noise floor or set a spectral gate or ask the software to tell her, with its total unearned confidence, what counted as words and what counted as garbage to be thrown away. She just put the headphones on, both ears, volume higher than was strictly comfortable, and played the whole thing through once, slow, the way you'd listen to something you owed a person instead of something you were mining.

Subject. Mechanism. Outcome, category —

The recitation ran the way it always ran, flat and bored and procedural, a woman keeping herself awake through a long shift nobody was watching her work. Priya had memorized this cadence the way you memorize a stranger's voicemail greeting after playing it back too many times — not out of love, just repetition. She let it run past the place where *Twelve* used to sit, the six letters she'd built a whole architecture around, and kept listening instead of stopping there the way she always stopped there, because that word had always been the finish line and she had never once asked herself what came directly after it.

What came directly after it was a half-second she had gated, three weeks ago, without a second thought, tagged by the same software as [*interference — electrical, 60Hz harmonic*] and removed automatically because removing it was the whole point of the tool she'd trusted for three years to tell noise from meaning.

She soloed it. Just that half-second, isolated, looped, the volume up past the point of comfort and into the point of pain.

It wasn't a harmonic. A harmonic didn't have a shape like that — didn't rise and catch and drop the way a person's voice rose and caught and dropped when they started to say one word and stopped, mid-sound, the way a voice stops when some part of a person decides faster than thought that the word isn't going to come out. Priya couldn't have told anyone, under oath, what word had broken off there, or why. What she could tell them was that a different word landed a half-second later, one that didn't quite fit the sentence it dropped into, filling the gap the way a person fills a gap when there's no one else in the room to catch the mistake for them.

Priya sat very still, both hands flat on the desk, headphones clamped tight enough to ache, and listened to it eleven more times.

It was not electrical interference. It had never been electrical interference. Somewhere on a night shift she still couldn't picture, a woman alone with a headset and a long list of numbers had opened her mouth to say something true, and heard herself starting to say it, and broken.

That was not noise. That was a person, and Priya had been gating her out for three weeks straight.

What the Suppressed Data Said

Dana Okafor

BY DAY TWENTY-FOUR, DANA HAD STOPPED CALLING WHAT INES CALDERÓN DID to Gerald Whitcomb in the water line "doubt," because doubt implied she hadn't made up her mind yet, and Ines had made up her mind six days ago and simply hadn't found the moment to say so where enough people could hear it. She'd started correcting people mid-sentence when they cited a rule number like scripture. She'd started saying, flatly, *he doesn't know that, he's guessing and calling it knowing*, to Bobby Teague's face, in front of three other people, the day after Rule Twelve took Owen Fitch's hand for standing exactly as still as it told him to. Whitcomb had heard about it within the hour. Dana knew because she watched his face do the small, controlled thing it did now whenever her own name came up in a room he wasn't in — the look of a man doing inventory on a shelf he suspected was shorter than his ledger said it should be.

She was keeping a new column by then. She hadn't named it out loud even to herself, but she knew what it was for: *who is currently spending Whitcomb's authority faster than he can replace it*. Ines's name sat at the top of it, underlined twice in the private, colorless underline of her own head, because Dana had learned by now that being right about Gerald Whitcomb in this room cost something, and the currency it cost was always somebody else's body, and it was never, not once in twenty-four days, his.

He came for her at the housing on the east wall a little past what the room had agreed, with no clock and no sun, to call morning.

"Ines." Warm. Pastoral. The register Dana had learned to dread more than his anger, because his anger told you something and this told you nothing at all until it was already happening to somebody. "Walk with me a minute."

Ines didn't move at first. Mateo was three feet off, working a loose thread out of his shirt hem with the particular concentration of a boy who has learned to make himself small and occupied whenever an adult's voice changes register near him. "Say it here," Ines said. "Whatever it is."

"It's an honor, if you'll let it be one." He said *honor* the way he said everything now, each syllable set down like a stone laid in mortar he'd already decided was load-bearing. "Cell six took a life eleven Turns ago tonight. Rule Eleven says the debt's paid out by now, the cell's clear, and whatever's standing in it is as safe as anything in this place gets to be. I'd like it confirmed by someone the room will believe when she says it held. Someone who's been asking the hard questions lately. That's you."

Dana was close enough to hear the whole of it, close enough to watch the shape of the sentence land on Ines's face — the specific, terrible flattery of being told your skepticism has made you valuable, right before it's used to spend you. She had watched Whitcomb build exactly this kind of sentence before, on other people, in other weeks. She had never watched him build it around the word *confirmed*, so carefully, so far in advance of anything actually needing confirming.

"You want me to prove you right," Ines said. It wasn't a question.

"I want the room to hear it from somebody who wasn't already going to say yes." He smiled, small, and it was, Dana thought, the single most honest thing she'd ever seen on his face — not warmth, just the visible relief of a man handing his own risk to somebody else's hand and calling the transaction a compliment. "If I send Bobby, everyone knows what he'll say before he says it. If I send you, it means something."

Dana felt the old private arithmetic start up behind her sternum without asking permission — four for eleven, worse than he thinks, better than the room can afford to stop trusting him for — and underneath it, quieter, colder, the thing she hadn't let herself finish thinking since the interlude two nights back where his own hand had rewritten his own rule half a foot to the left of where it had stood on Day Eleven. She had read both versions. She had said nothing. She was saying nothing now, standing at the edge of it the way she

always stood at the edge of it, filing instead of speaking, and some part of her — small, exact, ashamed — understood that her silence was doing the same work his confidence was: making the room a little safer to walk through wrong.

"Fine," Ines said. "I'll confirm it. And when it holds, Gerald, I want you to remember I did this so you'd owe me the truth the next time I ask for it."

"You have my word," Whitcomb said, and Dana watched him mean it completely, the way he meant everything, which had never once been the same thing as it being true.

Cell six's Tithe rod sat where Tithe rods always sat, chest-height, brass gone dull with fourteen people's worth of handling, a shallow steel housing bolted into concrete that hadn't changed shape in three Turns running — long enough, Whitcomb's own logic ran, for the cell's grief to have finished sitting quiet. Dana had logged this rod twice before, both times in passing, both times too far back in her table to matter to anything she was tracking now. She logged its housing code out of nothing but habit as she crossed to stand near the horseshoe of watchers forming around it — six worn characters stamped into the steel plate below the lever's pivot, the kind of mark she'd stopped consciously reading on Day One and never stopped unconsciously copying since.

K7-11R.

She didn't think anything about it yet. It was just data, filed the way everything got filed, waiting for a column that would eventually need it.

Ines set her feet the way the room had all learned to set them by now — wide, weight back, one hand flat against her own sternum for half a second first, a private gesture Dana had watched her make before every pull since Day Sixteen and never once asked about. Mateo wasn't there. Ines had made sure of that before she'd walked over, the same silent, absolute negotiation she made every single time, and Dana understood, watching her do it now, that some part of Ines had already priced this pull as more dangerous than she was letting the

room see, and was spending her son's absence as the one hedge available to her.

"Eleven Turns," Whitcomb said, to the room, not to Ines. "The debt's closed. Watch."

Ines pulled.

The rod gave the half-second of resistance every rod gave, the same ordinary mechanical drag Dana had catalogued a hundred times by now, indistinguishable in that half-second from every safe pull that had ever resolved into a fistful of tack. The room held its breath the way it always held its breath, the specific silence of twelve people doing the same private arithmetic at once and not saying any of it aloud.

Then the resistance stopped being resistance and became something else — not a click, not the dry apologetic nothing of a null. A seizing, sudden and total, the exact sensation Dana had only ever heard described secondhand, in Marcus's flat recitation twelve days ago, of a wheel that had decided a hand belonged to it now.

Ines's hand — the good one, the one she still had full use of, the one she had spent nine days protecting like it was the last functioning part of a machine she couldn't afford to lose — did not come free.

She didn't scream. Dana would remember that afterward with a specific, useless clarity, the way you remember the wrong detail from every catastrophe you've ever priced: Ines Calderón made almost no sound at all, just a short, flat exhale, the sound of a woman confirming something she had already, privately, priced as likely.

"It's got her," somebody said. Dana didn't turn to see who.

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It took forty minutes and cost her the hand at the wrist, sealed glass-smooth the way they all sealed, no blood, no tooling, no mercy of visible violence to explain what the room's eyes were telling it had happened. Renata Ibsen got to her first with something to bind the joint that wasn't bleeding and didn't need binding, because binding was the only thing anyone's hands knew how to do with a wound like that. Ines sat very still afterward, not looking down at what

the mechanism had left her, and said nothing for a long time, which Dana understood, watching her, was its own kind of confirmation — not of the rule. Of something else entirely, something Ines had clearly already started building before the rod ever took anything, and was only now finishing.

Dana crouched near her, close enough to speak quietly, and heard herself ask the only question the moment had room for. "Which cell were you in, Ines. Before. The one you slept in on Day Twelve."

Ines looked at her like the question had come from very far away. "Four," she said. "Why does that—"

Dana was already moving, already back at the rod's housing, already crouched at the stamped plate below the lever with her fingers not quite touching it, reading the six characters again the way you reread a number you're hoping, against everything you know about your own hand, that you copied wrong the first time.

K7-11R.

She held it next to the number that had been sitting untouched and unremarked in her own head for twelve days, filed the morning Marcus had called a name out loud for the first time over Deshawn Price's fused hand and everyone had repeated it like a blessing. *The toll-lock*. She had logged the wheel's housing that same hour, out of the same nothing-habit that had made her log every housing since Day One, never once expecting the number to matter.

K7-11W.

Same root. Same eleven. A single letter apart — *R* for rod, *W* for wheel, she understood now, with the specific vertigo of watching a number resolve into a sentence she had not wanted it to be able to form — and everything else identical, down to the last worn digit.

She sat back on her heels in the dirt of cell six with Ines Calderón's ruined wrist eight feet behind her and did the arithmetic out loud in her own head, the way she'd have done it for a client, except there was no client, there was only her, and the number came out the same way every time she ran it.

Twelve days ago Marcus had stood over Deshawn Price with his father's watch turned face-out and called a debt paid in full — collected at the gate, in front of everyone, from the exact hand that owed it, clean and visible and closed. *The debt is closed*, Whitcomb had written that same hour, underlined once, the way he underlined everything he meant to be believed.

It was not closed. It had never been closed. The wheel had taken the front half of something — the visible half, the half you could stand over with a watch and call fair — and the back half, the part nobody had thought to price because nobody had known there was a second half to price, had sat quiet in the same lineage of housing for eleven days and eleven Turns and finally, this morning, in a different cell, on a different body, come due.

She said the word before she'd decided to say it, quiet, mostly to the dirt.

"Shit."

Then she was standing, already moving toward Ines, already building the sentence she was going to have to say out loud to a room that had just watched a woman lose her second hand to a rule its author had promised was safe.

Deshawn Price was waiting for her before she got there, which she understood, later, meant he'd already done the same math she had, faster, from the other end.

He'd said almost nothing to anyone in eleven days beyond what a ration line required. He said something now, low, not to the room, to her specifically, holding out a small torn scrap of paper she recognized before her hand had fully closed around it — a ration ticket, blank side up, the printed corner long gone, a few short lines scratched into it in his own private hand.

"I could've told her," he said. "Eleven days ago. I saw the shape of it the day after the wheel took my hand — same wall stamps, same root number, I've been reading housing codes since before I knew what they were for, it's the only thing that job ever taught me that was worth a damn. I told myself telling would just get us both flagged." He looked at Ines, at the wrapped stump of her wrist, at Renata's hands still moving over it though there was nothing left for them to do. "It didn't save her. It just made me the guy who knew."

Dana turned the ticket over in her fingers. *If it happens at the same time every day, it's not the machine deciding. It's somebody deciding when to check.* She had read those words once before, on this same scrap, ten days ago, and filed them as a private grief he wasn't ready to share. She understood now that what he'd actually been hoarding wasn't a feeling. It was exactly the evidence standing eight feet away from her right now, wearing a name and a face and a nine-year-old son who hadn't been told yet.

"You knew the lineage," she said. Not an accusation. She didn't have the right to make it one, not standing there with her own table of favoritism and silence sitting in her chest the same way his was sitting in his.

"I knew the numbers matched. I didn't know what matching meant." His voice didn't rise. It had never once risen, in eleven days, and it didn't rise now. "Where I'm from, you find a pattern in a system that's grinding you down, you keep it to yourself, because the second you say it out loud, somebody patches the workaround and somebody else gets flagged for finding it. That's the whole rule. That's the only rule that ever actually held, out there. I brought it in here with me because it was the only rule I had left that had ever once been true."

"It wasn't true here."

"No." He looked at his own hand, the one the wheel had held for seven hours and given back stiff and half-strange, still not entirely his again. "Guess I found that out the expensive way too."

Ines heard enough of it. Dana watched her hear it — watched the exact moment the shape of what had happened to her stopped being a random cruelty and became, instead, a debt with an address, a lineage, a name attached to the man who'd promised her the account was already closed.

She stood. Renata tried to keep her sitting and failed, the way you fail to keep anyone sitting who has just understood something they can't unknow.

"Gerald."

Whitcomb had been standing at the edge of the horseshoe the whole time, the posture Dana had learned to recognize as his own private accounting — head slightly bowed, hands loose, a man already composing, in the privacy of

his own skull, the sentence that would let this fit somewhere in his book without costing him the room. He looked up.

"You told me it was closed," Ines said. Her voice didn't break. It went somewhere flatter and worse than breaking, the register of a woman reading a verdict rather than delivering one. "You didn't say *probably*. You didn't say *the pattern suggests*. You said the debt was closed, in front of everyone, twelve days ago, with your own hand on the chalk, and you knew — you had to have known, Gerald, because I've watched you edit that wall in the dark when you think nobody's counting the lines — that you weren't sure. You sent me anyway. You sent me because I stopped believing you, and you needed the room to watch me be wrong."

"Ines—"

"Don't." One word, and it landed harder than anything he'd said to the room in a week. "I believed you for sixteen days. I believed you the day you told me the third housing east was safe and I believed you the day you told the room stillness was the rule and I believed you right up until this morning, when you called it an honor, and I am telling every person standing here right now that I will never believe a word you scratch into that wall again, and neither should they, because you are not reading a pattern, Gerald. You are guessing, in your own handwriting, and calling the guess a law, and letting the rest of us pay for the difference."

Nobody moved to defend him. Dana watched that most of all — watched Bobby Teague's mouth stay shut for once, watched Selene's face go carefully, deliberately blank in the specific way of someone who has already priced which way this crowd is about to turn and has no intention of being caught on the wrong side of it. Whitcomb stood in the middle of a silence that had, for the first time in twenty-four days, nothing left in it for him to fill.

There was a third number underneath the other two, and Dana made herself look at it before she said anything else, because looking away from an inconvenient one had never once made it stop being true. Rule Eleven's run of clean confirmations had tracked the room's own belief in it almost exactly — a handful of people repeating it the first few days, most of the Cohort reciting it

unprompted by now. The failure hadn't waited for a fresh grievance or a run of bad luck. It had waited for that number to cross some line she couldn't have drawn in advance and could only describe in hindsight: the rule had broken open exactly as more of them had started saying it out loud, as if the wall itself charged more, the wider a belief spread, for the privilege of being believed. That was a different debt than Gerald's. She filed it separately, and did not yet have anywhere to send the bill.

Dana stepped forward, the torn ration ticket still folded in her hand, Ines's ruined wrist and Deshawn's eleven days of silence and her own twelve days of a housing code sitting untouched in her head all arriving, at once, at the same flat, unbearable sum.

"Gerald." She said his name the way she'd have said it across a conference table, level, unhurried, the register she'd spent fifteen years building for exactly this — for the moment a client's confident number finally had to answer for itself. "Rule Eleven. Read it to me the way you wrote it on Day Eleven — not the way it reads now."

He didn't answer.

He didn't have to. The silence answered for him.

A Wall With No Business Existing

Dana Okafor

TWENTY-SEVEN DAYS, SHE WAS FAIRLY SURE. SHE HAD LET THE DISCIPLINE OF checking her own count against Whitcomb's chalk slip somewhere around the second week, because trusting her own head instead of his had felt, then, like the last sovereign act she had left. If she was off by a day now, she had no way of finding out which day, and no intention of starting.

Whitcomb himself had not touched the wall in three days. Nobody had asked him to stop. He simply stood a little apart from things now, at the edge of whatever gathering the water line or the ration count produced, with the specific stillness of a man doing inventory on a shelf that had finally, publicly, been proven shorter than his own ledger. Ines wore her wrapped stump the way she'd worn everything since Day One — without complaint and without forgiveness, folding Mateo into her one working hand at the exact moments a room full of people might have looked at her too long. Nobody had scratched a new rule onto the Ledger since Rule Eleven's silence. Dana understood, watching the blank space accumulate where a rule should have gone, that this was its own kind of data: an entire population that had spent twenty-four days building law out of a single confident man's handwriting, standing now in the wreck of that habit, and finding that the absence of a law felt, if anything, worse than a bad one.

Marcus had gone quiet in a different direction. He still ran the water line, still counted cups before he counted anyone's face, but she had watched something go out of the performance of it since Day Nineteen — the theater of fairness he used to layer over every decision, gone thin, as if a man could only narrate his own justice so many times after learning someone else had written the schedule for him first. He had not asked her, since that day, what she thought his rationing curve looked like on paper. She had not offered. Some conversations, she had learned, cost more to finish than to leave open.

She had not stopped counting. She had simply stopped telling anyone what she was counting.

Deshawn had given her the second ration ticket on Day Twenty-Five, without being asked, torn corner and all, the printed edge long gone the way his own had been. He hadn't said why. She hadn't asked. She understood it the way she understood most things from him now — sideways, through an object rather than a sentence — that he had spent eleven days hoarding a pattern because telling people, where he came from, only ever got the workaround patched, and that handing her a scrap of paper to write her own patterns on was the closest he could come, this soon, to saying he'd decided not to make that mistake twice. She kept it folded against her hip, under the waistband of clothes that had not been washed in longer than she let herself calculate, and she filled its blank side in a hand so small it had started to hurt her wrist.

Cell four, east mouth: sealed, sealed, open, sealed.

Cell nine, north mouth: open, open, sealed, open.

The corridor past the water line, the one that reads as a dead end from the near side: sealed. Sealed. Sealed. Sealed.

Four Turns running, that last one. She had crossed the fourth mark twice, disbelieving her own hand, before she let herself write it a fifth time.

The idea had started, if she was honest with the part of herself that still cared about being honest, on the floor of a different corridor eight days ago, with Marcus's palm flat against concrete gone cold for no reason either of them could defend, and a torn page that had told them both, in six clinical sentences, exactly how little of what happened to them had ever been an accident. *Calibration loaded at intake. No runtime supervision scheduled.* She had not been able to stop turning that clause over since, the way you can't stop running your tongue over a tooth that's gone wrong. Something had built this place before either of them woke up in it. Something had decided, in advance, what Marcus would do with a wheel and what Whitcomb would do with a rule and what she herself would do with a column of numbers nobody had asked her to keep. A design that thorough did not run on a single door. It ran on

infrastructure — conduits, relays, whatever fed that amber light its patience — and infrastructure, unlike a maze built to disorient you, had to stay in one place long enough to be worth building.

They had gone back for the first seam the next morning, before the Turn had even finished settling into its new shape, and found the corridor that led there gone — not resealed, not changed, *gone*, folded into a configuration that no longer produced that stretch of wall at all, the way a page you dog-eared can still vanish if enough of the book gets rewritten around it. Marcus had stood there a long time with his hand against a wall that was, this time, only ever a wall. He had not said much afterward. Neither had she. They had both understood, without needing to say it to each other, that the Array had simply closed the file on that particular leak, and that finding it a second time by accident was not a plan either of them could afford to hold their breath for.

So she had built a different plan, the only kind she had ever really trusted: not luck, but a model.

If the Turn genuinely redrew the whole layout at random each night — every wall a fresh coin flip, sealed or open, dead end or through-passage — then over enough nights, every corridor mouth in the Array should eventually show both faces. A wall that behaved instead like a wall, night after night, refusing to participate in the randomness the rest of the maze wore so convincingly, was not obeying the maze's rules at all. It was obeying its own. And a wall obeying its own rules, in a facility that had just proven itself observed and engineered rather than chaotic, was exactly the kind of thing worth putting a hand against.

She had started tracking corridor mouths the way she used to track claims exposure — a running tally, dated, uncorrected once written, because correcting the record after the fact was Whitcomb's habit and she had decided, watching Ines's face on Day Twenty-Four, that she would rather be visibly, permanently wrong than quietly, retroactively right. Four Turns of the same dead end, on a corridor most of the Cohort avoided anyway because it went nowhere useful, was not proof. She knew that the way she'd have known it in front of a client — one data point dressed up as four by nothing but her own

eagerness to have found something. But four in a row, against a null hypothesis of a fair coin, was thin enough to be suspicious and thick enough to be worth a look, and she had spent fifteen years of her working life deciding exactly that kind of question for a living.

There were eleven other corridor mouths on her ticket by then, most of them behaving exactly the way an honest coin should — sealed twice, open once, sealed again, the ordinary noise of a system with nothing to hide. She had crossed most of them off within a week, not because they were safe but because they were *boring*, statistically speaking, and boring was the one thing this place had never once managed to be by accident. The dead end past the water line was the only line on the ticket that hadn't once, in four tries, done the thing a fair coin does eventually no matter how badly you want it not to. She had checked her own arithmetic twice, the second time out loud, under her breath, in the particular hushed cadence she used to use checking a tail-risk model the night before it went to a client who could not afford to be told it was wrong. It came out the same both times. Four for four was not a coincidence she could keep pretending to respect.

.

She went alone, after the day's ration count, while the room's attention was still on Whitcomb's silence and not on her.

The corridor sat two cells past the water line, a dogleg that most people's feet had already learned to route around without deciding to — the kind of place a body avoids the way water finds the low ground, for reasons nobody bothers to name once the avoidance has become a habit. It read exactly the way it had read for four Turns running: solid at the end, the pale aggregate unbroken, nothing about it different from any other wall in a facility built entirely of the same wall repeated in a hundred configurations.

She put her palm flat against it anyway, low, the way Marcus had described doing it, and made herself hold still long enough to actually feel instead of simply confirming what she'd already decided to find.

Colder. Not dramatically — nothing that would have registered to a hand passing over it in a hurry, the kind of cold that only announced itself to skin

that had been asked to sit patient and notice. She moved her palm in a slow arc the width of her own shoulders, the way she'd have swept a claims file for the one inconsistent line item buried in forty pages of consistent ones, and about a foot left of where she'd first pressed, her fingers found it.

A seam. Too straight for a crack, too clean for a flaw in the pour — a hairline where the pale concrete met itself at an angle that had never once occurred anywhere else in this room's careless, honest geometry.

Her pulse did the thing it had learned to do in twenty-seven days whenever her hands found something before her judgment had finished catching up — not fast, exactly, just present, insistent, a low hum of its own underneath the Undertone's low hum, reminding her that whatever came next was going to cost something whether or not she'd priced it correctly first. Fitch's stump, sealed glass-smooth over a hand that had done everything a rule told it to do. Naomi at six, palm flat against the glass of an aquarium tank at the state fair, asking why the shark on the other side of it didn't know it wasn't supposed to be able to see her. Her palm was already back on the seam, patient, moving, before she noticed her other hand had ever left it.

She worked her thumbnail into the seam. It gave nothing. She thought about walking back for something better to work it with, a length of pipe like the one Marcus had used, and decided against it in the same half-second: this seam sat somewhere no torch-carrying search party had reason to walk twice, and every extra trip doubled the odds of someone asking her what she was doing here, in a room that ran on watching each other's choices the way a village runs on gossip. She kept both hands on it instead, patient, methodical, running her fingertips the length of the hairline the way she used to run a finger down a spreadsheet column looking for the one cell that didn't sum correctly.

Near the base, a fraction lower than she'd have guessed to look, the seam widened by less than the width of a fingernail. Not a flaw. A latch, recessed flush, built to be found by exactly this kind of patient hand and by no other kind at all.

The panel behind it was cool the way the wall around it was cool, but evenly now, uniformly, the specific manufactured cold of something built to run at one temperature regardless of what the room outside it wanted to do. She could hear it before she'd fully registered that she was hearing anything separate from the Undertone at all — a hum with edges to it, faster, cleaner, pitched a half-step higher than the low bone-felt groan she'd spent twenty-seven days learning to stop consciously noticing. The Undertone lived in her teeth. This lived somewhere else, somewhere closer to her ears, the register of a machine that had been built by people who expected other people to be standing near it.

She held very still, the way the room had all learned to hold still around a mechanism whether or not the rule that taught them that had ever been true, and did the only arithmetic she had left to do: the cost of walking away right now, unconfirmed, carrying nothing but a hunch that would keep her awake and prove nothing to anyone; against the cost of what waited behind a door built by whoever had written *calibration loaded at intake* about a man standing eight feet from her most nights, a door that had already, once, cost a room its last innocent theory about who was running this place.

She had spent her whole working life pricing exactly this kind of asymmetry. It had never once, in fifteen years, stopped her from wanting the number that closed the file.

Her fingers found the latch's edge again. It gave under almost no pressure at all — not stuck, not resistant the way the outer wall had been, built instead to open easily for a hand that had already found it, as if the difficulty had only ever been in the finding.

Light spilled out first, ahead of anything else, and it was wrong in a way her eyes understood before the rest of her did: not the Array's flat, directionless wash that had thrown no shadow for twenty-seven days, but real light, electric, with an edge and a source and a color temperature her body remembered from a life she had not let herself think about in longer than she'd let herself calculate. Cold air came behind it, mechanically cold, over-conditioned in the specific way of a room built for machines that minded heat more than the people who serviced them ever had. Under the cold air, unmistakable, absurd,

the smell of burnt coffee — someone's abandoned pot, left too long on a warmer somewhere close, a smell so ordinary it took her a full second longer to recognize than the light had.

And under all of it, closer than anything she had heard in twenty-seven days, a hum with a plug at the end of it. Steady. Mundane. Waiting.

She stepped through before her eyes had finished adjusting.

Twelve

Priya Chandrasekaran (*OUTSIDE — Day 53 Missing*)

SHE'D SPENT NINE DAYS ARGUING WITH A HALF-SECOND OF AUDIO, WHICH WAS either the most honest thing she'd done all year or the last stop before she needed a whole different goddamn job, and she genuinely couldn't tell Meena which one it was when Meena asked, so she'd stopped picking up on Sundays for two weeks running and told herself that wasn't a pattern either.

The half-second had a shape now. She'd built a little forensic rig for it — three separate de-noise engines run in parallel and disagreed with each other on purpose, because the one thing she trusted least these days was a piece of software telling her, with total confidence, what counted as signal and what counted as garbage. She'd learned that lesson already. She'd learned it on Denise Cole's kitchen table, over speakerphone, in a voice that had stopped believing her four minutes into the call and never come back.

So: three engines, three disagreements, and one convergence, finally, on the fourth night, at two in the morning, with her sister asleep two states away and not checking in on her the way she used to. The word wasn't a stutter. It wasn't a glitch. It wasn't sixty-cycle hum wearing a human shape because Priya's ear wanted it to be one, which was the thing she'd been most afraid of the whole nine days — that she'd spent three years training herself to hear ghosts in bad audio because her actual, un-professional life had one very specific ghost in it, and some day the two habits were going to collapse into each other and she'd never be able to trust anything she heard again.

The word was *twelve*.

Not stuttered. Not garbled. Said clean, said fast, said in the wrong place — dropped into a slot where a woman reciting inventory numbers off a headset, flat and bored and half-asleep at whatever hour night shifts run in a building with no windows, should have said something between one and three. Priya had four other fragments of the same recitation by then, scraped off different

seconds of the same file, enough to know the pattern cold: *subject, mechanism, outcome category* — and then a single digit, one, two, or three, delivered with the exact rhythm of someone filling out a form she'd filled out ten thousand times before.

Outcome category twelve did not exist. Priya had listened to enough of this woman's voice by now — she'd started thinking of her as a woman, a person, not a fragment, somewhere around night three — to know there were only ever three slots in that sentence, the way there are only ever three lights on some machines: go, stop, and the color nobody wants to see. And into the third slot, once, at some specific unwitnessed hour of some specific unwitnessed night, this woman had put a number that broke the whole shape of the sentence around it, the way a decimal point breaks a spreadsheet cell that was only ever built to hold whole numbers.

Priya knew what that meant, professionally. It meant the number wasn't an outcome code at all. Some other word had queued up first — she could hear its ghost in the cadence, half a beat too long before the sound actually started, like a runner already leaning into a start she then had to abort — and this was what had come out instead, filling the silence the way a person fills a silence when there's no one else in the room to catch the mistake for them.

She had absolutely no idea what the hell it meant beyond that. That was new for her, and she was trying, badly, to be proud of it instead of ashamed.

The cold open took her four takes, which was three more than she usually needed and one fewer than she'd budgeted for.

"This is *Signal Loss*," she said, for the fourth time, into a room she'd made herself sit very still in. "I'm Priya Chandrasekaran. Nine weeks ago I told you a woman named Renata Cole was alive somewhere she almost certainly wasn't, based on evidence I'm now telling you I should never have aired the way I aired it. I owe her mother that sentence in plain language, not buried in a producer's note nobody reads. I'm not here to build you a theory today. I'm here to play you forty-one seconds of tape and tell you, as precisely as I can, what I

actually know about it — which is less than I wish it were, and more than I've ever told you before."

She let that sit a beat longer than her instinct wanted, because her instinct had gotten her here in the first place, chasing a clean landing instead of an honest one.

"I don't know who this woman is. I don't know where she was when she recorded this, or whether she meant to record it at all — the file itself suggests she didn't, that this ran over a channel that isn't supposed to capture audio and somebody either forgot that or didn't care. I don't know what happened to her after. I have reason, from a different source, entirely separate, to be frightened for people who talk to me about this, and I'm telling you that up front instead of after, this time, because last time I let you find that part out for yourselves and that wasn't fair to you either."

Producer brain wanted her to punch that line. She left it flat instead. Flat was the whole point now.

"Here's the tape. I've done almost nothing to it. Where I usually clean, I've left it dirty on purpose, because the last time I cleaned something for you I cleaned out the only true thing in it."

She played it.

Subject. Mechanism. Outcome, category —

The recitation ran the way it always ran, a woman keeping herself awake through a shift nobody was watching her work, each word landing in the exact place the last four had landed, boring in the specific way this whole file had always been boring except for the one place it wasn't. Then the half-second. Then, dropped into a slot built to hold a single digit between one and three, clean, unhesitating, wrong —

Twelve.

A beat of dead air after it, longer than the recitation's usual rhythm allowed for, the kind of silence that on any other tape Priya would have trimmed without thinking twice. She'd left it in. It was doing work. Somewhere in that silence a person had heard her own voice say a number that didn't belong to the

sentence she was in the middle of, and had to decide, in real time, whether to keep going.

She kept going.

Category three. Logged.

Priya let the recording run out into its own tape hiss before she came back in over it. "Category three exists. I've confirmed it independently, off a different scrap entirely, from a different source. Category twelve does not — not in this system, not in any version of it anyone's described to me. Which means whatever word she meant to say instead, in that half-second before this one landed, wasn't an outcome code at all. It was something else. Something that got there faster than the training did, just this once, and then got covered back over so fast she probably told herself, five minutes later, that it never happened."

She thought about Carla, then, the way she'd started thinking about Carla at odd hours she hadn't chosen — a woman rationing her own exposure one word at a time, checking over her shoulder before she typed anything at all, and getting to keep her kid's babysitter this time because Priya had gotten lucky, not because Priya had gotten it right.

"I don't know what twelve means," she said, and let herself stop there. "I'm not going to guess out loud this time and make it your problem to un-hear. I'm telling you it's real, it's on tape, and somebody somewhere heard herself say it and couldn't take it back. That's the episode. That's all of it. If you know anything — anything — about a system, a company, a facility that uses the word this way, you know how to reach me. I will protect you the way I should have protected the people I've already failed to protect. I am asking you to trust that on faith, which I know is a lot, coming from me, this month specifically."

She sat with the recorder still running for four full seconds after she stopped talking, the producer-brain habit she'd never managed to train out of herself — always leave the tail, you can always cut it later — and then she reached over and stopped it herself, by hand, instead of trusting the auto-gate to know where a sentence actually ended.

She uploaded it at six the next morning, unscored, no music bed, the rawest cut she'd published in three years of doing this for a living, and then she did the thing she always did and told herself she wouldn't do, which was sit at the desk and watch the download counter the way other people watched a pot they'd been told not to watch.

The first hour looked like every first hour — a slow, unremarkable climb, the loyal core who had the feed set to auto-download and had probably heard it before their coffee finished. The second hour did something she'd never once seen the show's numbers do in three years, and she stared at it long enough — *Jesus* — that she made herself screenshot it before she could talk herself into believing she'd misread it.

A spike. Not the show's normal spike — not the shape a real audience makes, word of mouth cresting and falling off in a long tail over a day. This one came in almost all at once, inside a window she measured, later, at under three minutes, from a scatter of IP ranges that made no sense stacked next to each other: a data-center block registered to a logistics firm outside Geneva; a research-university proxy in Seoul; two commercial hosting providers, one in Virginia, one she couldn't resolve at all past a shell registrar in the goddamn Caymans. No two of them anywhere near each other. No pattern she recognized from three years of watching this exact chart for exactly this kind of thing — not a wire pickup, not a Reddit thread, not a bot farm inflating numbers for somebody's benefit, because bot farms had a rhythm too and this didn't have any rhythm at all. It had the shape of something switching itself on in several places at once, for reasons that had nothing to do with whether anyone on the other end had actually wanted to listen.

She sat with that a long moment, the cursor hovering over the export button, the old three-year reflex reaching for a theory before she'd earned one. *A wire service. A monitoring bot sweeping podcast feeds for keywords. Somebody's alert system, somebody's dashboard, somebody's job to notice things like this before a human being ever has to.*

She didn't publish a guess. She wrote the numbers down in the file she kept for exactly this kind of thing — the one with no name on the folder, the one

Yvette had taught her to keep after the Voss mess, *write down what you actually observed before you write down what you think it means, because six months from now you will not be able to tell the two apart in your own memory* — and left it there, unresolved, the way she was trying, badly and late, to leave things now.

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The email came in at eleven that night, while she was three fingers deep into a bag of pretzels she didn't remember opening, subject line blank, sender an address that looked like it had been generated rather than chosen — a scramble of letters and numbers routed through a free webmail service she'd never heard of, no display name, no signature, no header trail that resolved to anything she could look up in the two minutes she spent trying before she made herself stop and just read it.

Three words. Nothing else.

You're not wrong.

Jesus. She read it four times, the way she'd read Carla's first message four times, the way she read anything that arrived with no context and asked her to supply all of it herself. She hit reply out of the same reflex that made her check a stove twice — not because she expected it to work, but because not trying felt like a kind of negligence she didn't have room for anymore.

The bounce came back in under a second. *Address does not exist. Message not delivered. Mailbox permanently closed.* She sat with that last line a beat longer than the other two, because it wasn't the language of somebody getting cold feet and yanking a draft back — it read like whoever had sent it had simply stopped existing to the system that let them send it at all. Not deleted. Not disabled by a hand she could picture reaching for a keyboard. Gone, the way a line item goes when somebody decides, calmly and administratively, that it no longer needs tracking. That was a guess, and she knew it was a guess, and she wrote it down as one anyway, in the file with no name on the folder.

She sat there a long time with the pretzel bag going soft in her lap, the tinnitus doing its thin useless ring under the room's silence, three words open on her screen that no one, anywhere, could tell her who had sent.

Not wrong about what, she didn't say out loud, because there was no one left on the other end of that address to ask.

She was not wrong. That was all she actually had, and she made herself sit with just that much instead of building the rest of it out of nothing the way three years of doing this for a living had trained her to. Someone, somewhere, had heard or read enough to say so, and had wanted badly enough to say it that they'd apparently burned the only door they had to say it through. Forty-one seconds of dirty tape she'd almost gated into silence three weeks ago had reached somebody. She didn't know who. She didn't know why now, why her, why three words and never one more. She only knew the door was already gone by the time she got there, and whoever had walked through it hadn't left a name behind for her to find — not yet.

The Office

Dana Okafor

HER EYES ADJUSTED THE WAY EYES DO, IN STAGES, REFUSING HER THE ONE CLEAN look she wanted: first the light itself, a flat fluorescent wash with a faint green cast, humming at 60 Hz instead of 0.3, a frequency her body recognized the way it recognized her own name. Then shapes. Then, finally, what the shapes were.

Server racks. Four of them, black-cased, arranged in a row like filing cabinets that had given up pretending to be furniture, their status lights blinking green and amber in a rhythm too regular to be anything but healthy. A rolling chair, mesh-backed, the kind Halcyon had bought two hundred of the year she made VP, tucked under a desk with a coffee ring worn permanently into its surface. A dry-erase whiteboard on the far wall, header underlined twice: **Q3 — TARGETS & VARIANCE**, and beneath it a grid of numbers in a hand she couldn't read from here, and beneath *that*, smaller, almost an afterthought: *Array 9 — on pace*.

On pace. Someone had written that the way you'd write it about a sales quarter. Someone probably had been thinking about a sales quarter when they wrote it.

She made herself breathe in through the nose, four counts, the way she'd trained herself to do before opening a claims file she already suspected was going to cost someone something. It didn't help. It never actually helped. It only gave her hands something procedural to do while the rest of her caught up.

A stack of bound reports sat on the desk nearest her, corners squared, the kind of squaring that only happens when someone runs the edges through a jogger before they staple. She didn't need to pick one up to know the cover stock — heavier than internal memo paper, the specific cream a print shop uses when a client is billing the run to a marketing budget instead of an ops one —

but she picked it up anyway, because some part of her that had priced catastrophic tail risk for fifteen years was never, under any circumstance, going to leave a document unread that was sitting right there asking to be.

**AURIGNY RE — QUARTERLY BEHAVIORAL COEFFICIENT
UPDATE, CONCORDANCE SERIES.**

The logo sat top right, small, a stylized wave breaking over three horizontal bars. She had personally routed four reinsurance-treaty renewals through a due-diligence packet with that exact logo on the letterhead. She had sat in a windowed conference room on the thirty-first floor of a building in Charlotte and initialed a page that had this company's name at the top of it, twice, in a year she could still recall the weather for.

A line near the back of it, easy to miss, stopped her before she closed the cover: of every active mechanism logged company-wide, across every site the report tracked, only two were configured Cistern-style — water, and nothing but water — the rest costed out as paste-yield for efficiency. A scarcity note, filed for budget, nothing more, to whoever had written it. She thought of the wheel Marcus had claimed on the fourth day, the only thing in this place that had only ever given, and understood, reading the number, exactly how rare that had actually been.

She set the report down very carefully, the way you set down something that might go off if you didn't.

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The monitors took up the whole back wall — not a bank exactly, more a lattice, eleven screens mounted in a grid with a twelfth space left dark and empty at the bottom right, cabled but unpopulated, as though someone had budgeted for a facility that didn't exist yet. Each of the eleven that were lit showed the same thing from a different angle: a hexagonal cell, pale aggregate concrete, a knot of bodies moving through it in real time. A timestamp burned into the corner of each feed, and beneath the timestamp, a location string that had been stripped down to nothing useful — coordinates rounded to two decimal places, a site code, nothing that would mean anything to a person standing where she was standing except that the clocks didn't match.

One feed ran what her eye clocked, doing the arithmetic before she asked it to, as somewhere around four in the morning. Another showed daylight leaking gray-blue through what had to be a skylight grate her own Array had never once possessed. Eleven cells. Eleven other rooms exactly like the one she'd spent twenty-seven days learning to survive, running concurrently, right now, on continents she would never see the outsides of.

She had known this. She had known it the way you know a number on a page — Covenant's own architecture implied it, the calibration language implied it, the sheer scale of what would have to exist to make any of this financially rational implied it. Knowing a number and standing in a room lit by eleven live feeds of it were, it turned out, two entirely different instruments, and only one of them made her knees do the thing they were doing now, a fine unlatching at the joint she'd have diagnosed, in anyone else, as shock.

Her first reaction — and she hated it instantly, the way she'd hated herself exactly once before, eight months after the funeral, staring at a model she'd already decided to alter — was relief. *We're not alone.* A stupid, animal thought, useless, costing nothing and buying nothing, and underneath it, arriving a half-second later with its actuary's badge on, the thought that actually mattered: *if there are eleven more of these, the unit economics only work at a volume nobody sane would guess from inside one box.*

Fourteen people, times twelve boxes, times however many quarters this had already run. She didn't have the digits to finish the multiplication. She had priced worse numbers than this for corporations that called the deaths "loss events" and moved on to the next line item by lunch. She had never once, in fifteen years, been the loss event.

She made herself look at the feed second from the left a beat longer than the others, because something in it had gone still in a way none of the rest had. A woman — thirties, dark hair matted flat on one side the way hair goes when a person sleeps sitting up — stood with her palm pressed to a wall in exactly the gesture Dana had used four Turns running on a dead-end corridor two cells past her own water line. Same stillness. Same patient, listening hand. Somewhere on the other side of the planet, another version of this exact posture was

happening at this exact minute, and neither woman would ever know the other one existed, and both of them, Dana understood with a cold clean certainty that had nothing to do with grief and everything to do with pattern, were performing the identical diagnostic test because the identical facility had handed them the identical unsolvable problem and the human mind, given nothing else, reaches for a wall.

Not alone. Never alone. Just never told.

Palm flat against glass. Naomi at six, matching her hand to an octopus's arm through an inch of aquarium acrylic, delighted, patient, waiting for it to notice her back. Dana shut it down before it could finish arriving, the way you'd close a laptop lid on a document you weren't ready to have open in a room with other people in it, except there was no one else in this room, which was itself the whole point, wasn't it. There was no one else in this room.

There had never been anyone else in *any* of these rooms.

The staffing fact arrived the way the worst ones always did — not as a discovery but as a rearrangement of things she already had, snapping into a shape she should have seen twenty-seven days ago and hadn't, because she'd been standing too close to the data to see its frame. No guards. No signage. No voice from a hidden speaker. She had spent almost a month treating that absence as atmosphere — as the facility's chosen cruelty, withholding an explanation the way a bad manager withholds a performance review, on purpose, to keep you afraid. She had built, without ever writing it down, a model with a person behind it: someone watching, someone deciding, someone she could eventually locate and be furious at.

There was no one behind the wall. There had never needed to be. Four server racks did the watching. A whiteboard did the deciding, once, per quarter, in dry-erase marker.

The absence of a guard wasn't a message aimed at the Cohort. It was a line item some HR system had approved on a budget spreadsheet the way it approved a headcount reduction — *coverage sufficient with automated monitoring; on-site personnel not required inside containment* — because

nobody who actually ran this place needed to be within a hundred feet of it to collect what it produced.

The horror wasn't that they weren't watching. The horror was that watching had never been the job. Collecting was the job. You didn't need eyes to collect. You needed uptime.

She had spent twenty-seven days being afraid of a person. There had never been a person. There had only ever been a schedule, and a market for what the schedule produced, and she had been pricing exactly that kind of schedule, for exactly that kind of market, her entire adult life, on the other side of a desk she'd never once imagined had a wall like this one behind it.

She almost laughed. It came out instead as something closer to a cough, dry, involuntary, and she pressed the back of her wrist to her mouth to stop whatever the next sound was going to be before it decided what it wanted to be on its own.

There was a drawer, low, under the desk with the coffee ring, standing open an inch — not forced, not hidden, just left, the specific carelessness of someone who'd stepped away expecting to be back before their shift ended. She crouched and pulled it the rest of the way and found it stuffed with printed dossiers, manila, unlabeled on the outside except for a strip of tape across each spine with a hand-typed code: **R-01** through **R-14**, out of order, some missing entirely, a filing system that had clearly been alphabetical or numerical once and had degraded, the way every real filing system degrades, under the pressure of people too busy to refile things correctly.

Her hands were already moving through them before the rest of her had agreed to the plan. R-07 — Marcus's number, she registered with a jolt she didn't have time to sit with — was gone, presumably still folded against Marcus's own hip the way Deshawn's ration ticket was folded against hers. R-04. R-11. R-02. She flipped past names she half recognized from the roll call of the first sleepless week, names people had given each other in a panic that had never once been verified, and files that used none of those names at all — real ones, she understood, legal ones, the kind a driver's license or a birth certificate

would agree to — and she was three folders deep into the drawer, cataloguing without yet reading, the reflex of an actuary handed a claims box on her first day, before she found the one with the tab that made her stop moving entirely.

OKAFOR, D.

She did not pick it up right away. She looked at it the way you look at a shape in your peripheral vision that you're hoping, right up until the second you turn your head, will resolve into something ordinary.

It didn't. When she finally lifted it out, both hands, the way you'd lift something that might be heavier than it looked, it was heavier than it looked — twice the thickness of R-04's, three times R-11's, a document that had clearly been added to over a long stretch of time by more than one person, in more than one font, on paper that had yellowed at different rates depending on which page you were looking at, which meant depending on how long ago that particular page had been printed.

She opened it to the first sheet, not the last, some instinct insisting on chronology even now, even here, even with an alarm she hadn't heard yet about to start.

The date stamped in the corner, small, administrative, entirely unremarkable in every way except the one way that mattered, read four years before a rental car had ever been found outside Charlotte with its keys still in the ignition.

Four years.

Fuck.

The van hadn't been the beginning. The van had been a delivery date on an order placed a very long time before anyone had bothered to write her a check for the ride.

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The console lit amber before she'd finished doing the arithmetic on the date, two desks over, close enough that she felt it more than saw it — a small square light going warm at the edge of her vision, the specific color the world uses for *pay attention*, not the color it uses for *run*. A tone followed it half a second later, soft, evenly spaced, three notes repeating on a loop with the patient,

unbothered cadence of a fax machine announcing a completed transmission. It did not sound like danger. It sounded like a printer that needed toner.

She stood very still, the folder pressed flat against her chest with both forearms, and waited for footsteps.

None came.

She counted to twenty in her head — old habit, the only meter she trusted anymore, more reliable lately than her own watch — and the tone kept its rhythm the entire time, unhurried, uncontested, the sound of a system doing exactly what it had been built to do and finding, on the other end of that signal, precisely no one home to receive it. Somewhere, presumably, this alarm fed into a dashboard on someone's desk in a different building entirely, in a time zone where it was perhaps still overnight, perhaps a weekend, perhaps simply beneath the threshold of whatever a human being at Covenant Dynamics considered worth interrupting a coffee break for. She thought of the *shape* where a name should go — some person, somewhere, paid to sit exactly where this console sat and watch exactly this light — and the plain unblinking fact that no such person was here to watch it now.

That absence was its own number, and she ran it the way she'd run any other: an alarm that fires and is not answered is not, technically, unmonitored. It is monitored on a schedule, by a person with other things to do, at a tolerance wide enough that whatever had just tripped it did not, by policy, require anyone's immediate attention. Which meant this — whatever *this* was, a door left open, a seam breached, a body standing somewhere the model had not accounted for a body standing — had already happened before. Often enough to have a tolerance built around it instead of a response.

She was not the first. She would very likely not be the last. And nobody, right now, tonight, on whatever continent ran this shift, cared enough to come find out which.

The tone's rhythm changed.

Not louder — she registered that distinction with the same cold clarity she'd have brought to a stress-test result, because it mattered, because everything from here forward was going to be about exactly this kind of distinction — but

faster, the three notes compressing toward each other the way a countdown compresses toward zero without ever once raising its voice. Bureaucratic all the way down, she thought, even at the end. Even escalating, it never once sounded like it was afraid of anything.

She had time — she did the math on it without deciding to, the same reflex that had kept her alive twenty-seven days on far worse information than this — for one more choice and no second one behind it. The reports on the desk. The other dossiers still sitting open in the drawer, R-04, R-11, R-02, whole lives she would now never get to read the first page of. The whiteboard, the servers, the eleven other rooms she would carry behind her eyes for the rest of however long she had left to carry anything.

She left all of it.

She took the folder with her name on it, and nothing else, and she was already moving before the tone finished its next cycle.

The Architecture

Dana Okafor

THE TONE WAS STILL CYCLING BEHIND HER WHEN THE CORRIDOR DID THE THING corridors in this place were never supposed to do twice in one night: it narrowed. Not dramatically. Not the way a hallway narrows in a dream, walls sliding inward like a trap in a movie about a trap. It narrowed the way a wound narrows — a slow, patient contraction at the margins, drywall going grainy and pale at the seams where it met the floor, the specific pale aggregate texture she'd learned to recognize with her palms in the dark, replacing gypsum board a centimeter at a time. The Array was growing back over the hole she'd made in it.

She had maybe minutes. She didn't know how many, and not knowing was its own kind of arithmetic — the folder against her chest, one data point; the corridor's slow concrete bloom, another; the distance back to the seam, a third she hadn't measured because she hadn't known, twenty minutes ago, that measuring it would matter this much.

Behind her, faint now, muffled through a wall that hadn't finished deciding what it was, the alarm kept its three-note cycle, patient, unhurried, a tone built for a person who was never going to come check on it. She let it set her pace instead — not fast enough to be panic, fast enough to be a woman who had priced exactly this kind of countdown for a living and knew better than to spend it all in the first minute.

She moved.

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The break room came up on her left before she'd decided to look for one, and she almost didn't stop — almost let it go the way she'd let the drawer full of dossiers go, a cost she'd priced and paid before she'd finished grieving it — except the wall inside the doorway wasn't blank. It was papered. A mural, laminated, the kind of thing a facilities department orders once and never

updates: a horizontal timeline banner running the length of the wall above a coffee station with two mugs still damp in the drying rack, cheerful sans-serif lettering over a gradient the color of a mutual fund's brochure.

OUR STORY, it said, at the top, and under that, dates.

1963 — Foundational Research Begins. A stock photo of a beaker, absurdly, generically, a beaker that had never been within a hundred miles of whatever this was.

1979 — Program Consolidation. No photo at all for that one. Someone, she understood, hadn't been able to find a stock image that fit a shutdown, and hadn't wanted to commission one.

2003 — Asset Reacquisition. A photo of a warehouse, forklifts, crates on pallets, the exact bland stock imagery of a logistics company's annual report.

2009 — Covenant Dynamics Incorporated. A photo, finally, of an actual building — glass, low, landscaped, a flag she didn't recognize on a pole out front — and under it, small, in the gray secondary type reserved for things a designer had been told to include but not to emphasize: *from a legacy of foundational behavioral research, six decades of continuous innovation.*

She read it twice, the way you read something you already half-believe and are hoping, right up until the second reading confirms it, that the first reading got wrong. It didn't get it wrong. Sixty-two years, condensed to four bullet points and a beaker, hanging over a coffee station where someone had, at some point, left a spoon.

She didn't have a name yet for whatever had happened in 1963. She filed the gap the way she'd have filed an incomplete loss run — *cause unknown, treat as material, proceed* — and kept moving, because the corridor behind her had just produced, faintly, the sound concrete makes when it's finishing something.

The conference nook was two doors past the break room, and she almost missed it entirely — a glass-walled alcove no bigger than her old office, a round table, four chairs, and a binder lying open, face-down, spine cracked, the way a document looks when someone's been called away from it mid-read rather than finished with it. She had the folder under one arm and both hands

on the binder before she'd consciously decided this was worth the seconds it would cost her.

CONCORDANCE SERIES — CLIENT ORIENTATION. Tabbed. Someone had built this to be leafed through in exactly the order she was about to leaf through it, in a pitch meeting, across a table, over coffee that wasn't hers.

CORPORATE LINEAGE, the first tab read. One page. *Covenant Dynamics traces its technical origins to a legacy federal research initiative (1963–1979), acquired at auction by predecessor entity Threshold Salvage LLC in 2003 and formally reincorporated as Covenant Dynamics in 2009.* No name for the initiative. No description of what "technical origins" had produced, only that it had produced something, and that the something had been worth thirty-four years of continuity across three different legal shells. She thought of the beaker on the wall behind her and understood, with the specific cold clarity of a woman who had spent her career reading between the lines of exactly this kind of document, that the beaker and this paragraph were doing the same job: making a fact small enough to walk past.

PRODUCT, the next tab. Glossy stock, the kind meant to survive being handled by more than one set of hands across a fiscal year. **The Concordance Series: Real Decision Curves for an Unreal World.** Bullet points under it — *loss-aversion thresholds, moral-hazard breakpoints, tragedy-of-the-commons cliffs* — the exact vocabulary she'd used, unremarkably, in a hundred internal memos of her own, applied here to something she now understood had never once been a simulation. *Sourced from live behavioral cohorts under sustained, ecologically valid stress conditions. Unmatched fidelity. No synthetic substitute available at comparable resolution.*

Ecologically valid stress conditions. She read that phrase three times and each time it meant the same thing a little more completely: someone in a room like this one, with a coffee mug like the ones drying two doors back, had needed a term for what was happening to her that wouldn't require them to picture it, and had found one, and it had tested well enough to print.

CLIENTS, the last tab, and this was the one that slowed her hands to something closer to careful. A single sheet, no logos, just names in three unlabeled columns, the specific dry formatting of a client roster that had been scrubbed for external eyes and forgotten to be scrubbed all the way. She knew four of the six names in the first column on sight — had personally initialed treaty renewals with two of them, had sat across a table from a man from a third at a conference in Scottsdale and split a bottle of wine she could still taste if she let herself. The second column, two names, unfamiliar, formatted the way sovereign entities format themselves, all initials and *Fund*. The third column: three names, and these she also half-knew, the way you half-know a company whose app is on your phone without ever having thought about who built the number that told it what to pay someone.

Six reinsurers. Two funds. Three platforms.

She had spent fifteen years pricing risk for exactly this kind of table, without knowing there was a table, without knowing that somewhere behind the abstraction — *the market, the clients, the book of business* — there was a literal room with a literal binder, tabbed, laminated, built to be handed across a literal desk to a person who would nod and ask about margin.

The changelog was stapled behind the client sheet, loose, clearly not part of the binder's original build — someone had added it, recently, the staple still shiny where it bit through the paper — and she almost turned past it without stopping, because it looked, at a glance, like exactly the kind of internal engineering document that told her nothing she needed. A version header. A date. A list of parameter adjustments in the flat, denormalized language of a company that had never once had to say the word *person* in a technical spec.

VERGE MOBILITY, INC. — DRIVER PAYOUT ALGORITHM, CHANGELOG v4.2.1

Behavioral coefficient recalibration sourced from Concordance Series update, current quarter. Applies weighted adjustment to acceptance-rate penalty curve and surge-eligibility threshold across affected driver cohorts, effective immediately upon deployment.

Below it, a table. Regions. Cohort codes. A column of decimal adjustments that meant, in the flattened language of the document, nothing at all, and meant, in the only language that actually applied to it, exactly how much harder a person's week was about to get for reasons that person would never be told and could never appeal.

COHORT SE-114-C sat four rows down, and her eyes caught on it the way a hand catches on a splinter before the mind has finished registering *pain* — because she had seen those six characters before tonight, three drawers back, on an intake sheet with a name on it she knew, in a low drawer under a desk with a coffee ring worn into it, in a file she hadn't had time to read past its first page. **PRICE, D. — PRIOR EMPL.: VERGE MOBILITY, DRIVER COHORT SE-114-C — RELEVANT FOR CALIBRATION.**

Relevant for calibration.

She stood in the glass alcove with the changelog in one hand and Deshawn's own dossier still cold in her memory from twenty minutes ago, and did the arithmetic the only way she knew how to do arithmetic, which was completely, without permission from any part of her that might have wanted to stop halfway through.

Verge Mobility had shadow-banned him. Rate-cut him. Throttled his acceptance score for three years on the outside for reasons no appeal process had ever named, because the algorithm doing it to him had never had to explain itself to anyone, least of all to him. And Verge Mobility was, right now, tonight, buying back the numbers his body was generating four cells over from where she was standing, to make that same unexplainable algorithm a little more efficient at doing to the next driver exactly what it had already done to him.

He had walked out of that life and into this one, and this one was selling him back to it, recalibrated, improved, v4.2.1, before he'd even finished paying for the last version.

She didn't have time to feel it. She noted that fact the way she'd note any other missing data point — *emotional response: deferred, insufficient time to process* — because the wall behind her had made the sound again, closer this

time, and whatever grief this deserved was going to have to get in line behind the much older, much larger one she still hadn't finished paying either.

She tore the changelog free of its staple, folded it once, and put it inside her own folder, against the first page with her name on it, because if there was ever going to be a version of her that survived long enough to show this to someone, it was going to need both pages in the same hand.

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The corridor had closed by another third when she came back into it — not sealed, not yet, but narrow enough now that she had to angle her shoulders to move through it at a run. One arm stayed wrapped around the folder; the other trailed the wall the way she'd learned to trail every wall in this place, counting without deciding to count. Eleven steps, twelve — the doorframe she'd come through should have been at fourteen and wasn't, was at thirteen instead. She registered the discrepancy the way you register a typo in your own handwriting, mildly, in passing, filed for later, and kept moving, because later was a luxury the wall wasn't offering her.

The seam, when she reached it, was no longer a seam. It was a scar closing — the same glass-smooth, bloodless finality she'd watched a mechanism give a forearm on Day one, applied now to a doorway instead of a wrist, the light on the other side narrowing to a blade, to a thread, to nothing she'd be able to get more than a shoulder through in the time she had left to decide.

She didn't decide. Deciding was a step she'd already spent, twenty-seven days ago, the first time she'd chosen to keep counting instead of stopping.

She went in low, folder first. The light took her the way it had let her out three-quarters of an hour before — except backward, except faster, except closing behind her a half-second after her trailing foot cleared the gap. It sealed at her heel. A pressure. A completion. No pain, nothing torn — just a door that had decided it was finished being a door.

She came up into the Array's own dark, chest against concrete, folder crushed under her, and the first thing she understood, before her eyes had adjusted to a single thing in front of her, was that the sound in this corridor wasn't the Undertone.

It had a rhythm the Undertone didn't have. It was coming from a direction the Undertone never came from. And it was coming, unmistakably, specifically, from the direction of Ines Calderón's cell — from the cell where Mateo slept.

Somewhere down that corridor, in the last few minutes it had taken her to run for her life through a doorway that no longer existed, a mechanism had armed itself in the room where the boy was sleeping.

Day Six, Again

Marcus Rourke

THE CLICK CAME FIRST — DRY, SMALL, NO DIFFERENT FROM A HUNDRED OTHER clicks he'd stopped flinching at around Day fifteen — and then Mateo's voice, not a scream, just his name, said wrong, said too fast, the way a kid says a word when the shape of it has already outrun the meaning.

Marcus was moving before the second syllable finished.

He knew the layout of that cell the way he knew the weight of a full water tin without looking — four strides from the corridor mouth, the knuckle plate set at a height some engineer, or some thing that had never been an engineer, had measured for a body a foot taller than the boy standing in front of it. Mateo had both hands flat against the wall on either side of it, the way you'd brace to press something with your whole chest instead of your thumb, and his fingers were already curling toward the ivory disc when Marcus hit the doorway.

Dana was half a step behind him. He heard her breath change pitch, heard the specific catch of a person doing arithmetic they already know is going to come out wrong, and there wasn't room in what was left of the half-second to let her be the one who reached him first.

Marcus didn't grab the boy's arm. He'd learned that much, if nothing else, in twenty-seven days — you didn't grab a kid mid-reach and expect the reach to stop, you took the whole body off the plane the reach existed in. He hit Mateo low, both arms, and drove him sideways off his feet the way you'd tackle a man off a live wire, and for one full second neither of them was touching anything but each other and the floor.

The plate took his forearm instead. Not the flat of it — the edge, the ridge where the housing met the wall, where whatever had been building behind the ivory disc discharged itself into the nearest available conductor, which happened, in that second, to be a grown man's arm instead of a nine-year-old's hand.

There was no blood. There never was. A line opened across the top of his forearm, thin as a paper cut and the color of something already three days healed, and it was hot before it hurt — a heat that arrived, sat, and then receded all in the time it took him to finish rolling clear of the boy and get a knee under himself.

Not the cost. He understood that immediately, the way he understood a warning round fired over a fence line — a message, priced cheap on purpose, so the message would land instead of the man. Whatever had been about to happen to Mateo's hand had been priced at considerably more than a hairline on a forearm, and it had taken the smaller bill instead, and Marcus didn't know why, and knowing why had never once been a service this place offered.

Mateo was crying the way kids cry when the fear arrives after the danger's already gone — loud, delayed, safe enough now to be loud. Marcus got an arm around him anyway, the good one, and held on until Ines came through the doorway at a dead run with a sound in her throat that wasn't a word yet, and by the time it became one — "*Mateo, Mateo, mijo*" — Marcus had already started counting.

Fourteen. Minus the ones lying down. Nobody new missing. He did it because it was the only math that had ever once come out clean.

Renata Ibsen wound something around his forearm that didn't need winding, the same way she'd wound something around Fitch's wrist nineteen days ago that hadn't needed it either — because a body needed to see hands on it, needed the ritual more than the medicine, and Ibsen had spent a career learning which patients needed which. She worked fast, professional, not looking at his face, and that was its own kind of mercy.

"You didn't need to be first," she said, not a question.

"Somebody did."

"That's not what I asked."

He didn't answer that. Around them the cell had gone quiet in the specific way a room goes quiet after it's watched something almost happen instead of something happening — the good kind of silence, if there was a good kind, and

everyone in it understood exactly what they'd just watched without anybody needing to say it out loud. A knuckle plate had armed itself over a sleeping child. A grown man had put his own arm in the way and paid a scratch for it. Next time — and there would be a next time, there was always a next time — the arithmetic might not run the same direction.

Marcus caught Selene watching him from the corridor mouth, arms folded, saying nothing, the way she watched most things that mattered. She didn't come closer. She never came closer when a room was busy being grateful to him; she'd told him once, early, that gratitude was a current best not stood in the middle of, and he'd taken it for modesty at the time.

He hummed, without deciding to, four beats, low — the cadence that had nothing to do with anything in this room and never had. It didn't help. He kept doing it anyway.

Dana found him twenty minutes later at the wheel, where he always was when he needed his hands doing something that wasn't thinking. She had the folder against her chest, both arms around it the way you'd carry something that might come apart if you let it settle, and she had a second thing in her free hand — the torn page from Day nineteen, the one he'd read twice that night hoping the words would rearrange themselves. They never had. He hadn't expected them to start now.

"I want to show you something," she said. "Not that." She meant the page. "This."

She turned, and for the first time in twenty-seven days he looked — actually looked, the way you look at a thing you built with your own hands and stopped seeing weeks ago — at the wall beside the wheel, where he'd been keeping his own count since Day four. Tally marks. Names, initials really, beside dates. Cup counts. Queue order. A private ledger nobody had ever asked to see because nobody had ever needed to; it was just how he kept the water fair, the way he'd have kept any manifest fair, headcount before feelings, structure before sympathy.

"This is yours," Dana said. "In your hand. I've watched you scratch into it for three weeks and I never once thought to read it as anything but bookkeeping." She held the torn page up beside it, not touching the wall, just close enough that both were in the same field of vision. "Read it with me. Out loud, if you can stand it. Otherwise I will."

He didn't stop her.

"Water to the ones who worked the line that day," she said, finger moving down his own marks. "Sleep rotation decided by whoever brought you information worth having. You moved Deshawn to the back of the queue the week he stopped telling you things. You moved him up again the week he started. I don't think you noticed you'd built a toll for that, because it never once looked like a toll to you. It looked like fairness." Her finger stopped. "And privilege — standing in this queue at all, cup order, who gets to ask you for a favor without waiting three days for an answer — that's the third tier. Water for compliance. Sleep for information. Privilege for obedience." She set the fragment beside his tally, and for one second the two pages sat close enough that he could read them both without moving his eyes. "That's not my language, Marcus. That's the compound's. I didn't invent the shape. I just noticed it's the same shape twice."

"That's not—" he started, and heard himself do the thing he did, the thing he'd have caught in anybody else in half a second. "We rotate for fairness. We've always rotated for fairness, ask anyone who's stood in that line, ask Ibsen, ask—"

"I'm not asking anyone else. I'm asking you." Her voice didn't rise. It never did; that was the thing about her that scared him more than shouting would have. "Whose handwriting is this—"

She stopped herself there. Not yet. He watched her decide not to finish the question yet, watched her fold the fragment back into the folder instead, and understood, with the specific cold clarity he usually reserved for a fence line at night, that she was giving him room to get there on his own first, the way you give a man room to confess before you make him.

He didn't take it. Not out loud. But something in him that had been standing very still for a long time started, very quietly, to move.

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He'd told the story to himself so many times by now that the false version came easier than the true one, the way a lie repeated enough times stops costing anything to say. The false version went: Selene had looked at him one night, the sixth night, across a room full of thirsty strangers, and something had passed between them that neither of them needed words for. The false version was the one the Cohort had built for them without asking, the one that let people watch a soldier and a bartender find each other inside a nightmare and call it the one clean thing this place hadn't managed to ruin.

The true version had a door in it. A specific one — the tool corner of the platform, past the dim-cycle, where the light dropped low enough that people mostly left each other alone.

She'd come to him. He hadn't asked her for anything — hadn't so much as looked at her twice with anything on his mind but headcount and cup rotation — and she'd walked up out of the near-dark with her arms loose at her sides, no charm in it at all, none of the warmth she used on everyone else in that room like a tool she kept sharpened for exactly this kind of moment.

"I want to talk terms," she'd said. Flat. Precise. A woman closing a register, not a woman falling in love.

He remembered saying nothing, which had felt, at the time, like dignity.

"You've got the only water in this place nobody can take from you by asking nice," she'd said. "I've got nothing anybody wants except this." No gesture. She hadn't needed one; the sentence did its own pointing. "I'll trade it. My terms. An extra cup, every rotation, no questions from anybody who counts cups but you. And a standing place in the queue — first position, no exceptions, permanent — for Ines and the boy. Not me. Them."

"Why them," he'd said. The only thing he remembered asking.

"Because somebody in this room has to decide to protect somebody who isn't themselves, or none of us are people anymore, we're just fourteen sets of teeth." She'd said it like an actuarial fact, not a confession. "I decided it's going

to be me who does that, on my terms, before somebody decides it for me on theirs. You're just the mechanism I've got to do it with."

He'd said yes.

He hadn't asked her twice. He hadn't pretended, even to himself, in that exact moment, that it had been his idea — that came later, days later, once the room had already started writing the story for both of them and he'd found it easier to live inside a story where he was the answer to something rather than the price of it. He'd let Ines's *thank you, Sergeant Reyes* land on him like a blessing he hadn't earned honestly, and he'd let Selene's flat, precise negotiation curdle, in his own memory, into something softer and better-lit, because the transaction was unbearable to hold and the love story wasn't. She'd never corrected him. She'd let him have the easier version too, maybe because it cost her nothing, maybe because it cost her everything and she'd simply decided, the way she decided most things, that the cost was worth paying alone.

Six days. Her idea. Her terms. Her order of operations, start to finish, and he had done nothing in it but say the one word that made it real and then spend three weeks calling that word a rescue.

He came back to himself at the wheel with Dana still standing there, patient in the specific, terrible way she was patient — the way of a woman who has already done the math and is only waiting for the other person to catch up to a number she reached a long time ago.

"He came for me on Day six," Marcus said, and the sentence surprised him coming out, low and even, nothing like a confession is supposed to sound. "No. Not — that's not right either." He stopped, made himself say it the way it had actually happened instead of the way he'd been saying it for three weeks. "She came to me. Before I asked her for a single thing. She named the price. Herself, on her terms — an extra cup, a place in line for Ines and the boy, her idea, her order, start to finish. I just said yes and let everybody believe I was the one who'd been generous."

Dana didn't say anything for a moment. Whatever she'd expected him to say, that wasn't quite it, and he watched her adjust to it the way she adjusted to any

number that came in off her model — quietly, without drama, filing it somewhere it would matter later.

"That's not the question I came to ask," she said finally.

"I know."

She opened the folder again. Not the torn page this time — the other one, the one with her own name on the tab, thick, older than the van that had taken either of them, and she didn't show it to him, just held it the way you'd hold something you were about to set down on a table between two people who both already knew what was in it.

"Somebody wrote a document that told the Array to put you next to Selene before either of you woke up on that floor," she said. "Somebody wrote a paper about my daughter and used it to put me here. Whitcomb built a religion out of the exact bad habit that let him deny sick people coverage for thirty-five years and never once had to watch. None of us invented what we became in here, Marcus. We just finally had somewhere to put it where everybody could see."

She looked at the wall, his wall, his tally in his own hand next to the ghost of six sentences typed by somebody who'd never met him.

"So I need you to actually answer this one. Not explain it to me." She held the folder a little higher, the tab with her own name on it catching the light. "Whose handwriting is this, Marcus — yours, or his?"

He opened his mouth.

Nothing came.

Nobody Left to Ask

Dana Okafor

MARCUS DIDN'T ANSWER HER. SHE HADN'T EXPECTED HIM TO — NOT TONIGHT, maybe not ever, and she found, standing at the wheel with the folder crushed to her chest, that she didn't need him to. She'd asked the question to put it somewhere outside her own head. Where it landed after that was his problem to carry, the way every number she'd ever priced had eventually become someone else's problem to carry, whether they'd asked for it or not.

She left him there with his mouth still open around nothing.

The Turn came while she was three cells short of the seam — the ten-second groan she used to feel in her back teeth and now barely registered, background noise the way a commuter stops hearing a highway. When it passed, the corridor she'd used an hour ago wasn't the corridor anymore. She'd known it wouldn't be. She'd tracked this specific wall's behavior since Day twenty-four, the same patient, insufficient-data modeling that had gotten Whitcomb's followers maimed and had, so far, only cost her sleep: two Turns running, the seam reappeared four cells east of wherever it had last opened, always facing a wall that had been solid the night before. It wasn't a rule. She refused to let herself call it a rule, out loud or in the private ledger she kept behind her sternum where paper couldn't reach. It was a pattern with an *n* of three, and an *n* of three was nothing, and she went looking for it anyway because nothing else in this place had ever offered her better than nothing.

She found it on the first try. That, too, she filed and did not trust.

The seam gave the way it had given before — cool air first, then the smell of burnt coffee that had gone from novel to obscene to, now, almost comforting, a smell that meant *electricity, meant somewhere a person had stood recently and been bored*. She went through low, folder first, the way she'd learned, and came up into a hallway one door down from the office she'd already bled two visits' worth of paper out of.

Twenty-nine days. She'd told Marcus she wanted to show him her own math and then walked out before finishing hers. That felt, in the corridor's colder air, like the kind of unfinished business she'd built an entire second career out of not tolerating.

She wasn't done.

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The drawer was the same drawer — she recognized the coffee ring worn pale into its laminate front, the same one that had held Deshawn's dossier three drawers up and her own two nights before that — except she'd never gone all the way to the back of it. She had a folder's worth of proof already and a corridor closing behind her both times she'd tried this; she'd taken what stopped her hand first and run. Tonight the alarm's amber console sat dark and unlit at the desk two rows over, and dark, in this building, apparently meant *safe enough to be thorough*. She let herself be thorough.

Behind the personnel files — behind the intake sheets, behind a stapled changelog she'd already ruined by tearing half of it out — was a manila folder gone soft and gray at the corners, the specific texture of paper that had been handled by more people than it was meant for, over more years than anyone had planned. No client sheet inside. No product tabs. Just two documents, clipped together with a rusted binder clip that left orange dust on her fingers when she pried it open.

The first was typed, single-spaced, the font of a machine that had been retired before she was born.

MEMORANDUM — ENGINEERING, PROJECT LATTICE. RE: Substrate Behavior, Unresolved Query 44.

Per the Director's request, this office has reviewed all available telemetry on the self-reconfiguring properties of the containment lattice (hereafter "the weave") and can offer no material advance over the position stated in Memo 31 (1971) and Memo 38 (1974). We continue to observe, with high reliability and total repeatability, geometric reconfiguration events and material transformation events consistent with prior logs. We continue to be unable to identify a causal mechanism for either. Instrumentation placed at the substrate

boundary during six separate reconfiguration events recorded no anomalous energy signature above the noise floor of the equipment itself. We are producing results we cannot explain with tools that cannot see what is producing them. It is the recommendation of this office that further research proceed empirically — cataloguing outcomes rather than pursuing mechanism — as no theoretical framework currently available to this program appears capable of accommodating the observed behavior. We do not believe this reflects a gap in instrumentation. We believe it reflects a gap in the framework itself.

There was a signature under it, initials only, and a date in 1976. Three years before the shutdown Dana now knew the shape of from a mural over a coffee station two doors down. Three years, and whoever had written this had already stopped asking *why* and started asking only *how much, how often, how reliably* — the same surrender she'd watched Covenant's own binder make, decades later, in glossier type, over a coffee ring in a different building. *No theoretical framework currently available to this program. Not yet. Not at this time.* Just — not available, the way a flight isn't available, the way you stop checking a route once you've decided it doesn't run.

She had built an entire career on the premise that a model always closed, eventually, given enough data. Nobody had ever told her what happened to a field that stopped believing that on purpose, fifty years before she was recruited to test whether she believed it too.

.

The second document was hand-drawn, and it took her longer to understand what she was looking at than she wanted to admit.

Half of the page was schematic — a genuine one, she could follow enough of it to know that: a lattice of interlocking hexagonal cells, notation along the margins in a draftsman's careful block capitals, load-bearing calculations she recognized the shape of even without following the math, arrows indicating some kind of distributed load path threading cell to cell the way stress travels through a honeycomb. Competent. Real engineering, done by someone who had been trained to do it and clearly knew how.

The other half of the page was not that.

It shared the same hexagonal grid — the same underlying geometry, drawn in the same hand, in the same ink, without a seam anywhere she could find between where the engineering stopped and the other thing started — but the notation running through it wasn't load calculations. It was symbols she didn't have a vocabulary for, repeating in sequences that felt deliberate rather than decorative, radiating outward from a single cell marked with a dot and nothing else, the way a target is marked, or an altar. She turned the page sideways once, twice, looking for the part of her brain that would recognize it as a coordinate system, a circuit convention, anything with a name. It didn't come. The two halves of the page agreed with each other completely — the geometry lined up, cell for cell, the schematic's hexagons and the symbols' hexagons the same hexagons — and she could not, for one full minute, decide whether she was looking at a wiring diagram somebody had gotten superstitious about, or a ritual somebody had gotten technical about, and she understood, standing there with cold office air on the back of her neck, that the distinction had simply stopped existing for whoever drew this, if it had ever existed for them at all.

Along the bottom, in the same block capitals as the engineering margins, small enough that she had to bring the page an inch from her face to read it:

WEAVE — DO NOT RE-DERIVE. INSUFFICIENT CONTAINMENT
MARGIN FOR RE-TEST.

No date. No initials. Nothing that told her whether the hand that wrote *insufficient containment margin* had been afraid of losing an argument or afraid of losing a person.

She'd wanted, she realized — some very old, very stubborn part of her had wanted, since the first night she'd watched a mechanism take a stranger's hand for no reason anyone could reconstruct — for someone, somewhere, to have finished this. To have an answer folded up in a drawer that she was owed simply for having priced out the shape of the question first. That want had a name she recognized from thirty years of actuarial training: the assumption that every loss curve closes, given enough tail data, given enough time.

This one didn't close. It had never closed. It had been sitting in this drawer for fifty years not because Covenant was hiding the answer from her, from anyone, from the fourteen people down the hall bleeding data into a spreadsheet — but because nobody left alive at either end of that half-century had cared enough to keep asking. The horror wasn't a locked door. The horror was a door nobody had bothered to try in longer than she'd been alive, propped open the whole time, gathering dust, empty.

She put both pages back exactly as she'd found them. Not out of respect. Out of the same instinct that made her recheck a model's inputs even when she already knew the output — because the alternative to checking was admitting she'd stopped, too, and she wasn't ready to file herself under that heading yet.

The duty roster was pinned to a corkboard by the door, the kind of thing a facilities manager hangs and nobody ever takes down, curling at the corners, a laminated grid of names — initials, actually, three letters at a time — against dates and shift blocks going back further than the newest layer of tape holding it up. She almost walked past it the way she'd almost walked past the mural. She'd learned, twenty-nine days into this, not to trust *almost*.

She'd been keeping her own table for weeks — punishment timing, mechanism placement, outcomes that clustered where they shouldn't and went quiet where they should have clustered — the private frequency count that lived behind her sternum because paper had never existed to hold it. She hadn't had a name to put against any of it. Just shapes. A rhythm to the anomalies that felt, some nights, less like noise and more like a hand on the other side of a wall, moving at the same pace she was.

She ran her finger down the roster next to the outcome-code log stapled beside it — dates, shift blocks, a column of category numbers in the same flattened, denominalized vocabulary as everything else in this building, *subject, mechanism, outcome category* — and matched them, the way she'd have matched a claims run against a loss triangle, initials against anomalies, looking for the one recurring signature under every entry that didn't sit where her model said it should.

G. TOLLIVER.

Three letters, over and over, on every shift where the numbers stopped making sense. Not on the shifts where things went the way the curve predicted. On the ones where they didn't — where a mechanism yielded when her model said it should have taken, where a punishment landed a day early or a day late against whatever schedule she'd half-built in her head. She had no way of knowing what those three letters meant to anyone but a payroll system. She had no way of knowing whether another set of eyes, somewhere she couldn't picture, had ever run the same frequency table down to the same three initials and hit the same flat wall she was hitting now — a name with no face attached, doing something to her numbers she couldn't yet call a cause. She only knew the pattern held, three-for-three on the nights that mattered, that an n of three was still nothing, and that she was going to act on it anyway.

She copied the initials into the folder in her own hand, under her own name, and did not know what she'd just written down.

.

It was the console that gave her the last thing, and it gave it to her sideways, the way the worst numbers always arrived — not because she'd gone looking for it, but because she'd glanced at a system clock on the wall behind the desk chair to gauge how much time she'd already spent standing still, and the clock had a date on it.

A real one. Month, day, year, the kind that meant something outside this building, the kind that had a version of Yvette attached to it somewhere, checking a phone she'd never see ring.

She did the arithmetic the way she did every kind of arithmetic now, without deciding to, the numbers running themselves against her thigh before her conscious mind caught up to what they were for. Twenty-nine days since the wake-up on bare concrete. Thirty, now, technically, if the Turn she'd just crossed had rolled the Ledger's count the way it always did — she could picture the mark Whitcomb would have scratched this morning without her, one more tally in a hand she no longer fully trusted, and she trusted her own count enough to know it read *thirty* regardless of whose chalk made it.

The console's intake log, still open on the screen from whatever the last shift had left running, gave her a second number for the same event. A timestamp. **SUBJECT INTAKE LOGGED:** a date, and beside it, in small gray text she almost skipped past entirely, **DAYS ELAPSED: 57.**

Fifty-seven.

She read it three times, the way she'd read the mural, hoping the second and third pass would return something other than what the first one gave her. They didn't. Thirty days by the only clock she had ever been allowed to keep. Fifty-seven by the one clock that had never once needed her permission to keep counting.

The gap didn't frighten her, not at first — fear was a slower instrument than the one that came online now, the one that had made her competent for fifteen years before any of this, and it did what it always did, which was reach immediately for a mechanism. A processing delay. A miscount on someone's intake form. Some artifact of a system built by people who'd never had to reconcile two clocks that both claimed to be counting the same days for the same reason. She reached for each of those explanations in turn and set each one down, because none of them survived contact with the plainest fact in front of her: nobody here had flagged it. Not as an error, not as an anomaly, not as anything. The number just sat there, fifty-seven beside thirty, uncommented, unhighlighted, exactly as bureaucratically calm as everything else on this screen — a discrepancy that had apparently never once crossed a threshold anyone on this side of the wall was paid to care about.

That, she understood, standing very still in the cold light of the console, was the actual answer. Not that the gap was hidden. That it wasn't. It had simply never been large enough, urgent enough, billable enough, to earn a single person's attention in however many days it had been quietly widening — and a twenty-seven-day gap between what the Cohort believed and what was actually true had happened to fourteen people not because anyone had engineered it, but because nobody had ever cared enough to notice it happening at all.

She closed the folder around both numbers and stood a moment longer than she should have, doing the last calculation she had left in her, the one she

always saved for the end because it never came out clean: how much of what she now knew was true, and how much of it was simply the loudest thing left standing once everything quieter had already been discounted to zero.

She didn't reach an answer. She reached for the seam instead.

That was when she heard it.

Footsteps. Real ones — a heel and a sole, unhurried, deliberate, nothing like the Turn's ten-second groan and nothing like the Undertone's patient hum through the walls she'd learned to stop flinching at weeks ago. Coming from behind her, from the corridor on the far side of the desk, from a direction that, twenty minutes ago, when she'd come through the seam, had not been a corridor at all.

Someone was walking toward her from a hallway that had not existed when she arrived.

Every Sentence Was About Naomi

Dana Okafor

SHE DIDN'T RUN. RUNNING WAS A DECISION, AND A DECISION REQUIRED DATA SHE didn't have, so she did the thing fifteen years of pricing catastrophic tails had actually trained her to do instead: she went still, folder pressed flat against her sternum, and she listened.

Heel, sole. Heel, sole. Unhurried the whole way past the far end of the corridor, the way a person walks when nothing in the building has ever once required them to hurry. It didn't slow at the desk. It didn't slow at the drawer she'd left an inch open, the coffee ring worn pale under her thumbprint. It crossed some junction she couldn't see from where she stood and kept going, fading the way a highway fades once you've stopped consciously hearing it, until there was nothing left of it at all except the fact that it had happened, and that whoever it belonged to had walked directly past a woman who did not belong in this building and had not, for one second, broken stride to check.

That was worse than being caught. She understood that with a coldness that surprised her — a number resolving before she'd finished setting up the equation. Being caught would have meant someone was watching closely enough to catch her. This was a shift change, or a bathroom break, or a person walking to get coffee that had gone cold three hours ago, the same unbothered errand it would have been on any other night in however many years this office had existed, and she was simply not in the part of the model anyone had bothered to run. Grace Tolliver's initials, over and over, on shifts where the outcomes didn't fit — that was supposed to mean someone here was paying enough attention to notice when the curve broke. Now she had actual footsteps, real ones, close enough to touch, that had walked past an open drawer and an unlatched panel and not paused at either, and both things were true at once the way two things are almost never allowed to be true at once in a well-built model: someone here noticed anomalies. Nobody here was watching.

She gave it four minutes by her own count — sixty-eight, seventy, she caught the drift and didn't trust the number, filed it anyway — before she let her shoulders come down off her ears.

Then she sat, right there on the floor beside the drawer, because her legs had apparently already decided the day was over before the rest of her had signed off on it, and she opened the folder she'd been carrying since the night she'd grabbed it and run.

She had not, in three days of hauling it through two Turns and a rescue and a question she couldn't answer Marcus, actually finished reading it. There had never been time that felt survivable to spend that way — reading is a luxury of people who aren't currently choosing between a corridor closing and a door reopening — and so the folder had ridden against her ribs like a second sternum, thick, unread, promising nothing but its own weight.

Now there was nothing to run from. That, too, she distrusted.

The first pages were what she'd expected, in the sense that dread is a kind of expectation: an intake sheet, her own driver's license photo reproduced in flat grayscale toner, a field labeled **SOURCING** with a single word typed after it — *precision* — and a field below that, **STATUS**, that read, with the same bureaucratic calm as everything else in this building, *active, calibration slot, no incident*. Halcyon Reinsurance letterhead on a photocopied performance review three years old, her own handwriting on a margin she didn't remember writing in. A psych intake summary that used the word *resilient* twice and the word *grief* not once, as if someone had gone through with a red pen and decided the second word wasn't billable.

She read all of it. She made herself read all of it, the way she made herself recheck a model's inputs even when she already trusted the output, because stopping now, this close, would mean admitting there was a limit to what she was willing to know about herself, and she had never once, in fifteen years, let a client's underwriter tell her a number was close enough.

Near the bottom of the stack, under a stapled corner gone soft with handling, she found the paper.

She knew it before she read the first line. She knew it the way you know your own voice on a recording before the sound has finished registering as sound — something in the kerning, the header font Halcyon's typesetting software had used for exactly the eighteen months she'd been publishing under its letterhead, a title that had been hers and had been, for four years, the single fact about herself she had never once said out loud to anyone who mattered.

Tail-Risk Convexity in Denial-Adjacent Claims: A Single-Case Reexamination.

Scrubbed. Every name redacted with the flat gray bar of a legal department that had signed off without reading past the executive summary — *Claimant A, Subject Institution, the decedent* — every identifying detail sanded down to the joints the way she'd sanded it herself, four years ago, in a home office at eleven at night with Theo asleep two rooms away and not yet sleeping in a different house. She had built the whole paper as an exercise in exactly that kind of removal: take the thing that had actually happened, take the sixteen-year-old girl and the algorithm and the denial letter that had used the phrase *does not meet medical necessity criteria* the way a coroner uses *cause of death*, and grind it down until it was clean enough to publish, general enough to defend, distant enough that nobody reading it in a conference ballroom would ever once think to ask whose daughter it actually was.

Every sentence had been about Naomi. She had known that while she wrote it and had told herself, the whole time, that knowing didn't matter, because the math was still sound, the mispricing was still real, the flaw in the model was still exactly the flaw she'd found and exploited and never regretted finding — and none of that had stopped being true in the four years since. It just hadn't been the point. The point had been getting one grieving woman's paper read by people who might, someday, fix the thing that killed her daughter without ever needing to know her daughter's name.

She hadn't been wrong about the math. She understood that now with the same flat clarity she'd have brought to any other model that had, technically, performed exactly as specified while producing a result nobody asked it to produce.

In the margin beside the paper's central table — the one where she'd walked, step by defensible step, through exactly how a catastrophic-tail model could be quietly re-weighted to push a borderline claim through without technically lying about any single input — someone had written seven words in blue ballpoint, in a hand she had never seen before and would, for the rest of her life, be unable to unsee.

Close the rational-actor gap. Flag for Intake.

Under it, two initials, pressed hard enough into the paper that she could feel the impression on the back of the page with her thumb. **H.B.**

She said the word out loud before she'd decided to say anything, one syllable, flat, ugly, the exact currency she'd spent two years training herself never to spend carelessly, and it cost her something to say it the way it was supposed to — a small, specific collapse in her chest, the sound of a woman who has just watched a number resolve in the one direction she had spent thirty years of professional discipline making sure it never would.

She had spent four years believing — quietly, privately, the way you believe a thing you've never once tested because testing it would mean finding out — that the paper had been read by no one who mattered. That it had gone into some journal's slush pile and died there, unremarkable, the way most honest grief eventually has to die in public if it wants to keep being survivable. She had built an entire second life on that assumption without ever noticing she'd built it. Now she was sitting on a concrete floor behind a wall that had no business existing, holding proof that somebody had read every scrubbed sentence of it, had understood exactly what it was proof of — not catastrophic-tail mispricing, not really, not underneath — and had written seven words in the margin that amounted to: *this woman will lie beautifully, and only once, and only for the right face. Find out what happens when we take the right face away and see if the lie still comes.*

She had been recruited into her own data set for the one act of dishonesty her entire career had ever produced. Not despite it. Because of it. Because she had proven, in eleven pages of flawless, defensible prose about nobody named Naomi Okafor, that a sufficiently rigorous mind would still bend, exactly once,

exactly far enough, when the stakes stopped being theoretical — and that was the single number Covenant's model had never been able to buy from a lab animal or a scraped dataset or a synthetic sim no matter how many terabytes they fed it. They had needed a real one. She had handed them one, gift-wrapped, four years before the van, and had never once regretted the act itself, only the four years of not knowing what the act had cost.

She thought, absurdly, of Mateo — of the extra half-second she gave him at every mechanism, the benefit of the doubt she had never once extended Bobby Teague or Owen Fitch or anyone else whose face didn't do to her chest what his did — and understood, with a nausea that had nothing to do with the withdrawal tremor still living low in both hands, that she had never stopped being exactly the subject this paper had flagged her as. She had simply moved the favoritism four years and eleven pages downstream, into a windowless hexagonal room, and called it strategy the whole time she was doing it.

Somewhere behind her sternum, underneath the counting, underneath the frequency table she'd been keeping since Day nine because paper hadn't existed and her mind had been the only instrument left, a jump-rope rhyme started up on its own, uninvited, in a register she hadn't heard clearly in months. *Ibbedy, bibbedy, sibbedy, sam*. She let it run its full four lines before she noticed it had happened at all.

She counted her breaths to bring herself back. Four in, four hold, four out. She got to eleven, then nine, then thirteen, each number landing with exactly the same flat confidence as the one before it.

She closed the folder. She did not close it gently.

.

She didn't hear him arrive. That was the part she'd turn over later, in whatever came after whatever this was — that a nine-year-old's feet on cold poured concrete had made no more sound than the Undertone made, that he had simply resolved into the doorway the way an outcome resolves after a mechanism goes quiet: no warning, no correlation to anything she'd have predicted, no way to have priced the probability of him standing there at all.

He was still in the shirt he'd had on when Marcus pulled him off the mechanism's plate two days ago, a graze crusted dark along one sleeve that wasn't his blood. His hair was doing the thing it did when Ines hadn't had water to spare for it. He had, at some point in the last twenty minutes, found the same seam Dana had used a dozen times now — a seam that should not have still been open, that the Turn should have resealed hours ago behind her the way it always did, except tonight, apparently, for reasons that would never make it into anyone's model, it hadn't — and he had walked through it, alone, in the dark, looking for the only adult left in his life who had ever told him the truth about anything.

He looked at her sitting on the floor. He looked at the folder crushed flat under both her hands, at her own name still visible where the tab had bent back on itself, at whatever her face was doing that she had no way to check from the inside.

"Did you do something bad?"

He asked it the way he asked whether it was going to rain — flat, procedural, a question built to receive a fact rather than a comfort, because nine years in rooms exactly like this one had never once taught him that adults kept the two separate.

Dana opened her mouth. She had spent thirty years building a career on the premise that every well-posed question resolved to exactly one honest number, given enough data, given enough time, and she had, twenty minutes ago, finally been given enough of both.

She had no honest answer that wasn't also, somehow, yes.

Graduation

Marcus Rourke

FOURTEEN. MINUS THE ONES LYING DOWN. NOBODY NEW MISSING. HE'D DONE the count three times since first light, which was two more than the count required, and he knew exactly why he kept doing it: counting was the only sentence he had left that still came out the same way twice.

Seven days since he'd stood at the wheel and failed to answer Dana's question. Seven days of *whose handwriting is this* sitting in him like a swallowed stone, not moving, not dissolving, just there every time he reached for the crank. He hadn't gone looking for her to finish it. She hadn't come looking either. That felt, some hours, like mercy, and other hours like the two of them agreeing, without a word, to let a debt run past due because neither of them could afford to collect on it yet.

Then she and the boy had gone through the seam two days ago and hadn't come back on schedule, and for six hours Marcus had stood twenty feet from a wall that wasn't a wall, doing the only thing he knew how to do with his hands when there was nothing left to ration, which was nothing at all, over and over, until Ines had finally had to be the one to pull him off it and remind him counting wasn't the same as helping.

They'd come back at last light. Dana hollow around the eyes in a way he recognized because he'd worn it himself, once, after a compound gate and a name he didn't deserve. Mateo quiet in a way that had nothing to do with sleep. She hadn't told the room what she'd found. She'd told Marcus one sentence — *there's something you need to see, and it isn't going to be quick to explain* — and then she'd gone still, holding the boy's hand, and that had been the end of the conversation until morning.

Morning was now.

.

The seam was where it had been for three Turns running, which by itself should have unsettled him more than it did — a wall the maze had apparently decided, for reasons nobody would ever get to ask it, to leave standing in the same configuration long enough for a woman with an actuary's eye to notice the pattern before the pattern noticed her back. Dana crouched at the latch. Marcus stood behind her the way he'd have stood behind a breach team, weight forward, hands loose, counting exits out of habit even though there weren't any that mattered.

"Last time you did this alone," he said.

"Last time I didn't know what I was looking for." She didn't look up from the seam. "I do now. I want you to see it before I try to describe it. I don't trust my own read of it and I need to know if that's the withdrawal talking or if it's actually there."

That was new. She'd never once, in twenty-nine days of being right more often than he liked, admitted to needing a second instrument. He filed it the way he filed everything that scared him quietly — under *later* — and followed her through.

The corridor on the other side hadn't changed: cool air with a plug's hum somewhere under it, the smell of coffee burnt hours ago and never dumped, a light that didn't wash everything the same flat gray the way the Array's did but threw actual shadow, so that for one disorienting second Marcus watched his own shadow fall across the floor and had to remind himself that was supposed to be ordinary.

Dana didn't go for the office door this time. She stopped him ten feet short of it, at a wall-mounted panel he'd have walked past without a second look — the kind of thing you'd find bolted outside a break room in any building that had ever employed a facilities manager. A status board. Backlit, dim, the plastic yellowed at the edges the way old office equipment yellows, with a scroll of amber text cycling slow enough to read if you didn't blink.

SITE 9 — COHORT 9. STATUS: PRE-GRADUATION REVIEW. EST. TIER TRANSFER WINDOW: CURRENT QUARTER. RECEIVING

FACILITY: R16 (STAGING CONFIRMED). PROJECTED YIELD DELTA: +38%.

It cycled to something about intake logistics, unreadable at this speed, then back around to the same four lines.

"Graduation," Marcus said, before Dana could. It was the only word on the board doing any work that wasn't a number, and it snagged on something in him before his brain had finished parsing the rest.

"You've heard it before," Dana said. Not a question. She was watching his face, not the board.

"Boot camp." He said it flat, the way he said anything that cost him to say. "You don't graduate boot camp into your own bed. You graduate into deployment. Somebody hands you orders and calls it an honor because calling it what it is would slow down the bus." He looked back at the board, at *R16 (STAGING CONFIRMED)*, at *PROJECTED YIELD DELTA: +38%* sitting there with the same weightless calm as a shipping manifest. "This isn't a door out. This is a bus."

Dana was quiet a second, and he watched her do the thing she did — take a raw feeling and run it once through the part of her that still trusted numbers, just to see what came back clean. "Yield," she said. "Not headcount. Not survivor rate. Yield — the thing they actually sell." Her voice had gone into the register he'd come to recognize as her working voice, the one that sounded like relief and grief wearing the same coat. "If this is Site Nine, and Site Nine is one Array among twelve, and twelve Arrays each generate one Cohort's worth of data a quarter — a *tier transfer* isn't retirement. It's promotion. You take the subjects who've already proven they'll generate usable curves under one level of scarcity, and you move them somewhere the scarcity's worse, because now you know they're worth the higher cost of running them there." She said it the way she'd have read a loss ratio off a spreadsheet to a room of underwriters, and it took her until the last word to hear what she'd just said and stop.

"They don't let you out," Marcus said, "for being good at surviving. They give you a harder room."

"Thirty-eight percent," Dana said, mostly to herself. "That's not a facility upgrade. That's a facility built to cost more bodies, on purpose, because the last ones proved it's worth the price."

The board cycled again. Same four lines. Somewhere down the corridor, a door Marcus hadn't noticed before hummed faintly with the specific white noise of a server rack idling through its own indifference, and he understood, standing there, that the hum was the only voice this place had, and it had never once needed to be louder than that to move fourteen people wherever it wanted them.

"We need to go," Dana said. "Now, before the Turn."

They went.

He didn't tell the room what he'd seen. Neither did Dana, not right away, not in full — she took Ines aside first, quiet, the two of them speaking low near the water line while Marcus watched from the wheel and did the only useful thing left to him, which was nothing, on purpose, so the news could spread at whatever speed it needed to spread at without his weight added to it. By midafternoon it had gone through the whole Cohort the way water goes through cracked concrete: not all at once, not evenly, finding every low place first.

Corrine asked Renata Ibsen, flat, no drama in it, whether "graduate" meant what it sounded like. Ibsen didn't have a kind answer and didn't try to invent one. Owen Fitch went and stood very close to a wall for a long time, the way he did when a thing had confirmed a fear he'd rather have been wrong about. Deshawn didn't say anything at all, which had come to mean, in the three weeks since he'd finally started talking, that he'd already run the numbers himself and didn't like where they landed either.

Whitcomb heard it the way he heard everything now — secondhand, at a remove, from a room that had stopped bringing things to him directly ten days ago.

Marcus had watched it happen in slow motion since Day twenty-four, the way you watch a structure fail once you know exactly which beam gave first.

Ines's voice in that cell, cracking open in front of everyone: *Gerald. Rule Eleven. Read it to me the way you wrote it on Day Eleven — not the way it reads now.* The silence that had answered instead of him. Since then Whitcomb still scratched at the Ledger most mornings out of what looked less like conviction than habit, the way a man keeps setting an alarm for a job he's already been fired from, and nobody read what he wrote anymore, not out loud, not to each other. He ate at the edge of things. He'd stopped using the claims-file cadence in front of people; Marcus had heard him mutter it once, alone, to the wall, *based on the pattern of loss*, and it had sounded less like scripture than like a man rehearsing lines for a part that had already been recast.

He came to the wheel a little before the light changed, which it never really did in here, except that everyone had learned to call some hours evening anyway because a day needed shape or it stopped being a day at all.

"Sergeant," he said. He still used it. He was the only one left who did, since Ines had started calling Marcus by his real name without either of them ever discussing why.

"Gerald."

Whitcomb looked older than fifty-eight, older than he had any right to look on a diet of tack and standing water. His hands, Marcus noticed, weren't shaking. That was the thing that stayed with him afterward — not fear in the man's face, but a kind of terrible stillness, the stillness of somebody who has finally stopped negotiating with the question.

"I haven't pulled one," Whitcomb said, "since Day six."

"I know it."

"Twenty-eight days. I built a religion on other people's arms and I have not once, in twenty-eight days, put my own where theirs went." He said it plainly, no pastoral softness in it at all, the first time Marcus had heard him say anything without performing the saying of it. "Ines was right to ask me the way she asked me. I've known the answer since before she asked. I knew it the day I rewrote Rule Eleven and told myself I was only *clarifying* it." He looked past Marcus, at the wheel, at the tally scratched into the wall beside it that Dana had read back to Marcus seven days ago like a verdict. "You found out what your

handwriting was. I'd like to find out what mine was too. While there's still a version of me left that would know the difference."

Marcus should have stopped him. He turned that over later, more than once, the specific half-second in which stopping him was still a physical possibility — a hand on a shoulder, a body between a man and a mechanism, the exact maneuver he'd used on Mateo seven days ago without even deciding to use it. His hands didn't move. Something in him — the same something that had gone very quiet and very honest at the wheel with Dana — recognized the shape of what Whitcomb was asking for, because it was the same shape Marcus had spent three weeks refusing to ask for himself: not rescue. Just the number. Just, once, before the quarter closed on all of them regardless, to find out if the thing he'd built his whole self around had ever been real.

"There's a rod two cells over," Marcus said. "Nobody's touched it since the Turn."

"I know which one."

They walked there together. Word moved faster than either of them did; by the time Whitcomb reached the housing, Ines was there, and Selene, arms folded in the doorway the way she stood for things that mattered, and Deshawn, and Corrine with her two rows of teeth she still hadn't fully gotten used to running her tongue over. Nobody said anything to stop him. Marcus understood, watching their faces, that this had stopped being a rescue anybody was equipped to perform three weeks ago, and had become, instead, something closer to a congregation deciding to witness rather than intervene, because witnessing was the only honest thing left to offer a man who had spent thirty-five years denying other people exactly that.

Whitcomb put his hand on the lever. It was brass, worn pale at the grip from twenty-nine days of other people's hands, and his own hand looked, for a second, exactly like anyone else's hand had ever looked doing this — no more or less deserving, no better armored against what came next.

"Based on the pattern of loss," he said, very quietly, and Marcus understood it wasn't a ruling this time. It was a prayer, said in the only language the man

had ever owned, aimed at nothing that had ever once answered anybody in this building.

He pulled it down.

The rod gave no resistance at all.

There was a half-second — the kind Dana would have called a beat of not-knowing which regime had resolved, if she'd been there to name it, which she wasn't — where nothing in the room moved and nothing in Whitcomb's face changed, and Marcus had time to think, with something that was almost hope on the man's behalf, *maybe it's null, maybe after everything it just gives him nothing and lets him walk away with that* —

Whitcomb's mouth closed on a word he never finished.

No blood. No sound of anything tearing, because nothing had. When his jaw came back down and his lips parted again a moment later, there was simply less inside them than there had been — the space where a tongue belonged sealed smooth and pale and finished, glass-clean, the way every subtraction in this place had always been clean, as if his body had shipped that way from the start and the rod had only ever been correcting an oversight.

He made a sound. It wasn't a scream, because a scream needs a shape a tongue gives it, and what came out instead was breath forced through a throat that no longer had the instrument to turn it into language — a raw, wet, formless push of air that every person in that cell would carry with them for the rest of however long they lasted in this place, precisely because it refused to resolve into a word the way every one of Whitcomb's sentences always had, instantly, confidently, whether or not he'd earned the confidence.

He survived. Marcus understood that within the first ten seconds — the man was upright, breathing, both hands flying to his own mouth and then away from it as if his own face had become something he no longer had permission to touch. He would go on surviving, on tack and water like everyone else, for as long as the Array allowed any of them to survive anything. He would simply do it, from this hour forward, without ever again being able to author a rule anyone in this room could hear.

Nobody moved to the Ledger.

Marcus watched for it the way he watched for everything — cataloguing, headcount before names, waiting for whoever was going to step up and take the chalk the way somebody always had, because a vacuum in this place had never once stayed a vacuum for more than a few hours. Ines stood closest to the wall. Her hand actually lifted an inch off her side, the small unconscious motion of someone reaching for a thing out of pure habit before the rest of her caught up with what the reaching would mean, and then it stopped, and came back down, and she looked instead at Whitcomb — folded now on the floor with his hands still hovering near his own ruined mouth, Ibsen already kneeling beside him with a cloth that wasn't going to help and a voice that was — and Marcus watched Ines decide, in real time, that she did not want to be the next person whose handwriting a room learned to worship without checking.

Deshawn didn't move either. Selene didn't move. Corrine, seventeen years old with a second row of teeth nobody had asked for, looked at the chalk sitting untouched at the base of the wall the way you'd look at a gun somebody had left lying in a room full of children, and then looked away from it on purpose.

The Ledger had not failed because the man who wrote it could no longer speak. It failed because for the first time in thirty-four days, standing in a cell with a status board's amber cycling text still sitting cold in every one of their chests — *pre-graduation review, receiving facility confirmed, yield delta positive* — not one person left breathing in that room believed, anymore, that there was a rule worth being the one who wrote it down.

The Table

Priya Chandrasekaran (OUTSIDE — Day 61 Missing)

SIXTY-ONE DAYS MISSING, AND PRIYA HAD STOPPED BEING ABLE TO TELL, MOST mornings, whether the number in her chest was Dana's or Addy's. Thirteen years ago it would only ever have been one number. That used to feel like the whole problem. Lately it felt like the only honest math she had left — two clocks running in the same body, neither of them agreeing to stop just because the other one had started.

She drove the four hours to Yvette's office instead of taking the call, because some conversations you didn't get to have through a goddamn phone speaker, not after the Renata Cole thing, not after she'd learned the hard way what it cost somebody to trust her voice in an earbud instead of her face in a room. The tinnitus rode along the whole way, its thin useless ring surfacing every time she killed the radio at a light, and she let it, this once, instead of reaching for a podcast to bury it under. She was trying to get better at sitting with the sound that had always been there instead of gating it out on reflex. She was not, if she was honest, especially good at it yet.

Yvette's office smelled like a place where nobody had opened a window since the building was framed, and there were exactly two chairs that weren't buried under a banker's box, and one of them was Yvette's. Priya took the floor instead, cross-legged against a filing cabinet, because it put her at eye level with the box Yvette had just set down between them like it was live ordnance.

"I want you to understand what I did before you look at this," Yvette said. Not sorry. Yvette didn't do sorry, in Priya's two months of knowing her; she did *precise*, which was worse, in its way, because precise didn't leave you anywhere to argue. "I want you to understand it was routine. I want you to understand I was good at it. I cleared eleven vendors that quarter and this was the fourth one on the list, alphabetically, and I remember exactly nothing about actually reading it, because there was nothing in it to remember. That's not an

excuse. I'm telling you so you know what you're about to find isn't a smoking gun. It's a Tuesday."

"Yvette—"

"Just look at it."

Priya looked at it.

The memo was three pages, dated a little over three years before a rental car turned up outside Charlotte with its keys still in it. **VENDOR CLEARANCE — THRESHOLD ANALYTICS LLC.** Client of record: Solenne Underwriting Partners. Purpose: data-provenance sign-off, third-party behavioral modeling inputs, catastrophe and moral-hazard product lines. It read exactly the way every due-diligence memo Priya had ever glanced at and immediately forgotten read — a wall of the specific, comfortable, load-bearing nothing that lets an institution tell itself later that somebody checked. Ownership structure: privately held, disclosed on request, satisfactory. Data sourcing methodology: proprietary, audited internally, satisfactory. Signing officer, client side: **H. Bregman, Chief Actuarial Officer.** Approved. Signed, at the bottom, in handwriting Priya didn't need Yvette to confirm was hers, because Yvette's finger was already resting on it like she couldn't quite bring herself to touch it directly.

"You cleared them," Priya said.

"I cleared the paperwork. There's a difference, and I have spent three years of my career being paid to know there's a difference, and I am telling you right now, sitting on my own floor with my own name in my own handwriting, that I don't actually believe it anymore." Yvette's voice didn't crack. It just went very flat, the same flatness Priya had learned, the hard way, meant Yvette was one sentence from somewhere she didn't want to be watched arriving. "Solenne bought behavioral curves from this vendor for three years off my signature. My sister is missing inside the thing that generated them. I signed off on the company that profits from whatever's happening to her before anybody ever put her in a car."

"You didn't know."

"I know that. Knowing it doesn't do anything." She pulled the memo back an inch, like putting distance between herself and the page might do something the last four sentences hadn't. There was a mug at her elbow, coffee gone cold enough to have a skin on it, and Priya had the sense Yvette hadn't slept properly in the eleven days since she'd pulled her own old files looking for a name in the shell network Priya kept circling. "I went back through everything I've ever signed off on going back six years, once I understood what Threshold Salvage and Threshold Analytics actually were to each other. I told myself I was being thorough. I was looking for exactly this. I found it in under an hour, which means it was never actually hidden from me. I just never had a reason to look twice at my own signature before." She said it the way she said everything, evenly, like a woman reading a determination off a claims file — and Priya understood, watching her, that this was Yvette's version of the thing Dana would have recognized instantly and never had the chance to say to her sister's face: the discipline holding, and the cost of holding it showing up somewhere else entirely, in a mug of cold coffee nobody had gotten around to throwing out. "So tell me what you've got, because I would very much like this to have been for something."

.

What Priya had was a name she'd been circling for six days without letting herself land on it, the way you circle a word on the tip of your tongue by talking around every syllable of it instead.

She'd gone back into Farid's transcripts — both calls, every pause she'd timestamped and then never used, because at the time "recruitment batteries" had been the headline and everything around it had felt like texture. It wasn't texture. Eleven minutes into the second call, buried under a description of the online battery's question format, Farid had said, almost as an aside, that the woman training him on call scripts had once mentioned, off the clock, that the company's "real business" wasn't screening people at all — it was selling "curves," her word, to "the same three or four buyers every quarter," and that the whole product line had a name that sounded, to him, like something out of a hymnal. *Concordance*. Priya had written it down in 2023 and filed it under

possible internal branding, low confidence and never once gone looking for it again, because at the time she didn't have anything to hang it on.

She had something to hang it on now. Three days ago, chasing a labor-organizing group's public comment filing against a rideshare platform's new pay algorithm — the kind of document that exists specifically because somebody's union rep spent eighteen months fighting a state agency for the right to see it — she'd found a citation buried in a footnote about "third-party behavioral coefficient sourcing." *Loss-aversion coefficient set: Concordance Series v4.2, licensed via Threshold Analytics*. Applied, per the filing, to a driver cohort classified by acceptance-rate variance and cancellation-penalty tolerance. Applied, in plain English, to figure out exactly how much a driver would eat in cancelled trips and rate cuts before they quit checking the app altogether — and to set the floor a hair above that number, because a driver who quits checking the app is a driver who stops being data.

She'd sat with that footnote longer than she'd admit to anyone, including Yvette. She'd pulled up the platform on her own phone afterward, at two in the morning, the same app icon sitting on her home screen she'd tapped a hundred times to get to the airport or back from a bad date, and stared at the driver-facing earnings page some Reddit thread had screenshotted for a different complaint entirely — a bar graph, a "your rate today" number, cheerful blue, no asterisk anywhere on it that said *this number came from fourteen people in a hexagonal room in a jurisdiction with weak permitting*. That was the part that had kept her up. Not the coefficient. The blue bar graph. The complete, seamless ordinariness of the thing sitting on top of it.

"It's not abstract," Priya said, out loud, mostly to hear herself get through it without her voice doing anything embarrassing. "It's not 'somewhere, someone's wage floor got calibrated by a mystery vendor.' It's a coefficient version number. Four-point-two. Somebody updates it. Somebody logs the update. Somebody, somewhere, drives a shift tonight against a number that got its shape from whatever's happening to the fourteen people I've spent two months trying to find, and he will never, ever know that, because why the hell would he — it's just an app that pays him a little worse this month than it did

last month, for reasons the app has never once had to explain to him. Same as the box. No signage. No voice. Just a number that changes and a person underneath it who's been trained not to ask why."

Yvette was quiet a second. "How many," she said. "Sites. If Concordance is a product, not an event — if it's twelve months of curves a year off however many facilities — how many."

"I don't have twelve. I have—" Priya flipped back through her own notes, the ones she'd started keeping in the file with no name on it. "I have a treaty schedule you sent me last month. Solenne's own data-sourcing disclosure to their reinsurance panel. Buried in an appendix nobody outside an actuarial department would ever open on purpose: *active site count, current reporting period: twelve.*"

Yvette didn't say anything for long enough that Priya looked up from her notes to check she hadn't lost her.

"Twelve," Yvette said. "Twelve of whatever this is. Running at once."

"Running at once," Priya said, "and reporting on a quarter. Same as any vendor. Same as anybody who sells you insurance."

.

The name, when it finally came, came from both of them so close together that Priya was never afterward sure who'd actually said it first, or whether it mattered.

Priya had it from an archived conference program — a decade-old actuarial risk-modeling symposium, the kind of thing that only still existed because some university server had never gotten around to deleting anything, cached long after the original page went dark. A breakout session, third afternoon, a name and a one-line bio: *Holt Bregman, quantitative modeling — "Behavioral Curves Under Real Constraint: Why Synthetic Data Stops Correlating."* No paper attached. No abstract. Just a title that read, ten years later, like a man standing at a podium describing, politely, to a room full of people who wrote insurance for a living, exactly the gap his entire career was about to be built around closing.

She said the surname out loud before she'd fully decided to. Yvette's finger, already back on the vendor-clearance memo, was resting on the same six letters.

"Bregman," Yvette said. "H. Bregman. Chief Actuarial Officer, Threshold Analytics." She looked up. "That's your Concordance name?"

"That's a man who gave a talk about the exact hole this whole company was built to fill, a full decade before anybody's kid went missing off a foster placement in Tampa." Priya's mouth had gone dry in the specific way it did right before she said something she couldn't take back on air. "He's not hiding, Yvette. He's not a shell. He's a title on a signature line and a headshot in a cached PDF nobody's looked at since before either of us knew each other's names. He's the human being this whole thing has a face for, and he's been sitting right there in both our paper trails the entire time, waiting for us to stop looking at the company and start looking at the man running the part of it that sells."

Neither of them said the rest out loud — that a man who'd have to sign off, personally, on whatever ships this quarter was also, structurally, the one human being on the entire client-facing side of this thing who could, theoretically, choose not to. Priya wrote it in the file with no name on it instead, the way Yvette had taught her, because six months from now she wanted to be able to prove she'd thought it before she knew whether it turned out to be true.

She got back to the studio a little after eleven, keyed up in the specific, unsleepable way a real name always left her, and did the thing she'd been doing every night for eleven days now, which was check the tip form.

She'd built it after the "Twelve" episode aired — nothing fancy, a static page, no analytics, routed through a service that didn't log IPs by design, because if this thing had cost Farid his number and his apartment inside six days, she wasn't going to be the second reason somebody disappeared off a comms channel. Most of what came in was noise, the way it always was. But one thread, since the second week, hadn't been noise. Short. Flat. Technical in a specific, unshowy way — never a claim she couldn't check, never a flourish,

phrasing that sounded, every time, like someone reading a form out loud to themselves to stay awake through a shift. It had confirmed category three existed. It had corrected, once, a mechanism-family term she'd gotten slightly wrong on air, in language so procedurally exact she'd sat with it for a full minute before she understood it wasn't a correction, it was a person who couldn't stop herself from fixing an error even when fixing it cost her something to send.

Eleven days since the last message. She'd told herself six days was a person being careful. She'd told herself nine days was a person changing jobs, changing towns, doing the sane thing and finally logging off. She didn't have a story left for eleven that didn't have a shape she recognized from Farid's line going dead, and she hated — *Jesus*, she hated it — sitting there at midnight with the cursor blinking in an empty reply box, how practiced she already was at building herself a softer story first and only getting to the true one after.

Her phone buzzed a little after midnight. Yvette. *Got something from the staffing intermediary side — the one that badges people into Threshold's field sites as "environmental compliance techs." Personnel roster, three names redacted, one not. G. TOLLIVER — ENVIRONMENTAL COMPLIANCE TECHNICIAN — SITE 9 — REASSIGNED. Date's six days ago. No forwarding role listed. No termination flag either. Just — reassigned. That's the whole entry.*

Priya read it twice. *Environmental compliance technician*. The exact phrase her contact had used, once, weeks ago, describing — half-joking, the only joke the whole thread had ever contained — what her own hiring paperwork had called her job before she understood what the job actually was.

She didn't know, and would never know for certain, whether the initials on a staffing roster belonged to the same person who'd corrected her terminology at two in the morning from somewhere with no windows. She wrote that down too — the not-knowing, in plain language, the way Yvette had trained her to — because a reporter who let herself round a coincidence up to a fact this clean, this fast, was exactly the reporter who'd already cost one mother a week of grieving a maybe that never should have aired.

But she stopped writing there, because there wasn't anything after it that was actually hers to add.

Grace Tolliver was the flat, careful voice on a stolen tape that had cracked exactly once and given Priya the word that started this entire thread, back before Priya ever had a name to put to it. She had a name now — *had*, not *has* — sitting on a duty roster three hundred miles and one impossible wall away, a duty roster a woman named Dana Okafor had already run her finger down and would never once get the chance to compare against anything Priya knew. Grace Tolliver had stopped answering. Nobody had reported her missing, because nobody outside a staffing database had ever known there was anyone to look for. Her disappearance existed, in the only paperwork that would ever exist for it, as six words on a line nobody would ever be required to explain: *reassigned*, dated, filed, closed. Nothing louder than that. Nothing louder than that was exactly the horror.

The Mispricing

Braided — Dana Okafor, Marcus Rourke, and Priya Chandrasekaran, alternating in short, fast sections

DANA

The console didn't care that she was crying. That was the first thing she made herself notice, sitting cross-legged in front of it with her own dossier still splayed open on the floor behind her like a body she hadn't finished burying — that the machine took her password attempts at the same flat, unhurried pace whether her hands were steady or not, because nothing in this building had ever once been built to grade her on delivery. Only on output. She had spent fifteen years training herself to believe that was mercy. Sitting here now, it just felt like permission.

She found the pipeline in under nine minutes, which told her something ugly about how long it had actually been sitting there, waiting for someone with the right eyes to walk past it twice. **CONCORDANCE SERIES — BEHAVIORAL COEFFICIENT SET v4.2 — LICENSED VIA THRESHOLD ANALYTICS — CLIENT: [gig-labor platform, redacted at source, unredacted in her own memory the second she saw the cohort code]**. Deshawn's platform. The one that had rate-cut him and shadow-banned him and never once told him why, using numbers her own daughter's insurer would have recognized on sight, because it was the same math, wearing a different logo, priced against a different kind of desperate.

Two rows down sat a second license line she didn't have time to touch and made herself read anyway: **CONCORDANCE SERIES — BEHAVIORAL COEFFICIENT SET v3.9 — CLIENT: [sovereign fund, redacted at source] — APPLICATION: DISPLACEMENT-ADJACENT ALLOCATION MODEL, REGIONAL QUOTA TIER**. Somebody, somewhere, was pricing which families got to cross which border this quarter off the same curve that had just decided how much sleep Deshawn Price was

allowed to lose chasing a fare. She filed it the way she filed everything now, completely and uselessly, and went back to the one pipeline she actually had the keys to.

She did not delete it. Deleting was what an amateur would do, and an amateur's sabotage got caught in an afternoon and patched by evening, the exact fate every one of Deshawn's outside workarounds had ever met. She built instead. She wrote synthetic loss-aversion curves the way she used to write real ones for Halcyon's board — smooth, plausible, internally consistent right up until the third decimal place, where she had spent fifteen years learning exactly how a catastrophic-tail model can be re-weighted without technically lying about a single input. She did that now, on purpose, with her tremor visible on both hands and her breath counted out in fours that no longer landed on the same number twice. A coefficient set that would pass every automated validation Covenant ran, and would still, eighteen months downstream, in some actuarial department that trusted it the way she used to trust her own, blow up the exact premium book it was priced into.

She had done this once before. She had told herself, for four years, that it had been an act of love and had never once let herself finish the sentence that came after: *and also an act of exactly the kind of dishonesty that makes a person recruitable*. She finished it now, typing, her own eyes open the whole way through. *I know what I am doing. I know what I did the last time I did this. I am doing it again, on purpose, and I am not going to pretend to myself afterward that I didn't understand the shape of the thing in my hands.*

Somewhere behind her sternum, uninvited, a jump-rope rhyme started up and she let it run its four lines and did not stop typing once.

MARCUS

The plate in Mateo's cell had gone quiet the way water goes quiet right before it decides to boil — no sound anyone would have named a warning if you'd asked them to name it in advance. Marcus felt it in his teeth before he understood he was feeling anything, the same low wrongness the Undertone always carried, except closer, aimed.

Mateo was reaching for it. Not to test it — he was nine and he was thirsty and three weeks of graduation-board dread had worn everyone's discipline down to threads, and the boy had simply forgotten, for one half-second, the rule that had kept him whole his whole time in this place: *Ines does every pull. Always. No exceptions, no matter how thirsty, no matter how tired she looks doing it.*

Marcus had pulled him off a plate once before, five days ago, and taken a graze for it and called it even. He knew better now. He'd had five days to sit with the thing he hadn't let himself say to Dana at the wheel — that pulling a hand off a mechanism half a second before it resolved had never once, in this place, meant the debt simply evaporated. It went somewhere. It had always gone somewhere. Deshawn's hand, Ines's fingers, a woman three cells over who never touched the lever that took her foot. Somebody was always going to pay for whatever this plate had already decided to collect. He had spent twenty-nine days making sure it was never him.

He crossed the cell in three strides and did not pull Mateo back this time. He put his own hand down on the plate instead, flat, deliberate, shouldering the boy aside with the other arm hard enough to knock him clear onto the concrete, and he held it there.

There was a beat of nothing. There was always a beat of nothing; Dana would have called it the not-knowing, the part of the transaction that happened whether or not you'd agreed to it.

Then the plate took two fingers off his left hand, cleanly, at the second knuckle, with no blood and no sound of anything tearing, the way everything in this place had always been clean.

He didn't scream. He made a sound that surprised him more than the loss did — short, flat, almost a laugh, the kind of noise a man makes when a number he's been quietly expecting for three weeks finally comes back exactly as bad as he'd priced it.

He was toll-locked now. He'd said the word out loud once before, back when the wheel was still new to him, about somebody else's hand caught in

somebody else's debt, and had never once let himself finish the thought of it landing on his.

"I did that," he said, out loud, to no one, before Ines had even finished crossing the cell toward them. Not *we*. Not *the wheel* or *the queue* or any of the procedural padding he'd have reached for a month ago to make the sentence sound less like a confession. Just the two words, plain, his.

PRIYA

Forty minutes before the broadcast locked, and Yvette was on speaker saying the word *concurrent* four different ways, and Priya had one earbud in and one out, thinking *just say the damn word once and mean it*, and a script open in front of her that she'd rewritten so many times in the last hour it had started to feel less like copy and more like something she was arguing with.

"The filing goes in the second your episode drops," Yvette said. "Not before. Regulators move slow enough as it is; I'm not giving anybody a paper trail that says I moved on a hunch a journalist hadn't published yet."

"I'm not a hunch anymore, Yvette."

"You're a very well-sourced hunch with a distributor button. Same category, better shoes."

Priya almost laughed, and then didn't, because the file sitting open in her second window had just finished downloading from the tip form's dead-drop mirror, the one she checked out of habit now more than hope, eleven days and counting since the last real word from the initials that had stopped answering. This one wasn't from Grace Tolliver's address. It had come in raw, no cover note, a scanned internal document with half its header burned away by whatever had copied it in a hurry.

FROM: h.bregm—[FIELD CORRUPTED, PARTIAL RECOVERY]
RE: SITE 9 — VARIANCE THRESHOLD ADJUSTMENT (2ND INSTANCE)
...escalation curve recalibrated downward by margin within audit tolerance. No incident flag required. Subject pool composition unaffected. Filed without further comment.

She sat with it a long moment before she understood what she was looking at. Two instances. Two times, months apart, someone with the initials H.B. had quietly nudged a number down inside a margin small enough that nobody above him would ever need to ask why — the exact shape of a man buying a subject a little more time inside a curve that was otherwise going to kill her on schedule. She pulled up the header string from the three-word email that had bounced off a dead account weeks ago — *You're not wrong* — and laid the two fragments side by side. The recovered characters matched. Not provably, not in a way she'd ever get a lab to certify. Enough for her, at two in the morning, with a deadline eating the last of her caffeine, to understand that somewhere inside the thing she was about to burn down, one man had done one small, unconfessed, insufficient thing to keep Dana Okafor alive a little longer, and had never once told anyone, including, probably, himself, what he thought he was doing when he did it.

It didn't redeem him. She wrote that down too, flat, because Yvette had trained her to write the qualifier the same second she felt the pull not to. It didn't make him anything but exactly what the whole company was — a person who believed, hard enough to sleep at night, that he worked in synthetic risk modeling. It just meant the story she was about to air had one more true, uncomfortable sentence in it than she'd had this morning, and she wasn't going to cut it for tidiness.

"Forty minutes," her producer voice said, out loud, to the empty booth, because saying it out loud was the only thing keeping her hands moving. "Lock in forty."

.

DANA

She hit send — there was no better word for it, whatever the actual mechanism was; some queue somewhere accepted the batch and returned a flat, bureaucratic confirmation code that told her nothing about what she'd just done except that the machine had believed her — and for one full second afterward, nothing in the office changed at all. No alarm. No amber cycling

text. Just the hum of the server racks, indifferent, the same hum that had been running the whole time she'd been in this room believing herself watched.

Then the Undertone stuttered.

She had felt it every hour of every day for thirty-six days without once hearing it do anything but continue, a hum so constant it had stopped registering as sound and started registering as the shape of the air itself. It skipped now — a half-beat, a held breath, something in the low 0.3 hertz drone catching on itself the way a record catches on a scratch it's never had before — and every hair on both her arms rose at once, and somewhere down the corridor a wall groaned the specific ten-second groan of the Turn, four hours early, on no schedule anyone had ever recorded.

She grabbed the edge of the console out of pure animal instinct, the way you grab a table in an earthquake you have no model for, and her eyes landed, without meaning to, on the small system clock bolted above the drawer — the one whose real calendar date she'd used, three weeks ago, to do the arithmetic that told her the Cohort's own count and the outside world's had drifted twenty-seven days apart and kept drifting.

For one reading — one single, flickering, unrepeatable reading — the clock's day count and the number she'd been keeping in her own head since morning, the number she trusted less every week and kept anyway because it was the only instrument she had left, said the same thing.

She didn't understand it. She never would; nothing in this building was built by anyone left alive who could explain it to her, and she had made her peace with that particular ignorance around Day Thirty, reading a fifty-year-old memo signed by a man who'd stopped asking why long before she was born. What she understood instead, sitting there with her tremor and her stolen folder and a queue confirmation code that meant she had just done, with her eyes fully open, the exact thing that had gotten her taken in the first place, was simpler than any model she'd ever built. This had never been chaos. It had never been a haunting, or a curse, or a wall that simply liked to take things. It had a lineage, the way any product has a lineage if you're willing to read the footnotes instead of the beaker on the wall: a research program called

LATTICE that nobody living had ever signed off on, bought for parts by a shell called Threshold, and finished, decades later, inside a glass building called Covenant Dynamics — and sold, by the terabyte, to a standing room of buyers who called themselves, informally, the Meridian Table. Six reinsurers. Two funds. Three apps. The same names, roughly, she'd have recognized off a conference badge in her old life, if anyone there had ever once introduced them to her by that name instead of by column. It was commerce — administered, quarter over quarter, by people who mostly, sincerely, believed they worked in synthetic risk modeling, filed under variance they could live with, priced by someone who had once given a conference talk about a gap in a model and had spent the rest of his career closing it with real bodies instead of admitting the gap should have stayed open. And somewhere inside that machine, one of them had bent a number twice to buy her a little more time, and hadn't told anyone, and it had never, not once, been close to enough on its own.

It had taken all three of them at once to be enough. She didn't know that yet, not the way Marcus and Priya would each come to know their own third of it. She only knew the queue had accepted her poison, and that the Undertone, for the first time in thirty-six days, sounded like something that could actually be hurt.

MARCUS

Ines wrapped the stump herself, fast, competent, the same silent economy of motion she used on every wound in this place, and didn't ask him why. She didn't have to. She'd watched him do it — cross the cell, put his own hand down where her son's had been a half-second before — and something in her face when she finished the wrap wasn't gratitude exactly. It was closer to the look she'd have given a man handing back something borrowed, finally, after weeks of everyone pretending the loan had never happened.

Mateo sat against the wall with his knees up, watching Marcus's hand the way he watched everything now — flat, procedural, cataloguing rather than flinching, because nine years in rooms like this had trained the flinch out of him early. "You didn't have to," he said, not quite a question.

"I did," Marcus said, and left it there, because for once the true sentence and the short one were the same sentence.

Later, once the wrap had held and the worst of the shaking in his own chest had passed, he went to the wheel out of habit more than need, because his hands didn't know how to be idle even now, especially now. He set his good hand on the crank the way he'd set it every day for twenty-nine days and turned, and the wheel came around half as far as it should have before the missing two fingers on his left hand simply failed to find the purchase they'd always found, and it stalled, and he had to walk it the rest of the way with both palms flat and his shoulder doing work his hand used to do alone.

He stood there a long moment afterward, breathing harder than the turn should have cost him, looking at a wheel he had held, by force, since Day four — the first thing in this place he had ever made entirely his — and understood, with the same flat clarity Dana brought to a bad number, that he was not going to be the strongest man in this room again. Not today. Maybe not ever. He waited to feel the loss of that the way he'd have expected to a month ago, like a title stripped, like the compound gate all over again.

What he felt instead, watching Mateo still sitting against the far wall, whole, unhurried, alive, was something closer to relief than he had words ready for, and he didn't try to build any. He just let it sit there, unrationed, the way he'd never once let himself sit with anything in this place before.

PRIYA

The episode aired at nine minutes past the hour, real time, no delay, no legal review beyond what Yvette had already forced through in the last frantic forty minutes — *Twelve*, the full story, every fragment she'd spent two months gating out or getting wrong or nearly burying under someone else's grief, laid end to end for the first time: Torrance, the batteries, Farid's two calls and the six days after them, Renata Cole's mother and the retraction that never fully retracted, Grace Tolliver's flat, careful voice cracking exactly once on a stolen tape, a coefficient version number sitting in a rideshare driver's paycheck like a hand nobody could see, a sixty-year-old research program called LATTICE

that a shell called Threshold had bought for parts and a glass building called Covenant Dynamics had spent two more decades quietly finishing, a client list — six reinsurers, two sovereign funds, three gig platforms — that everyone inside the building called, without any apparent sense of how it would sound out loud, the Meridian Table, and a name — Holt Bregman — spoken on the record for the first time anywhere, alongside a filing Yvette's office pushed live in the same nine minutes, timestamped to the second on purpose, so that no one downstream could ever separate the two and pretend either had happened without the other.

Priya said Dana Okafor's name eleven times in twenty-two minutes of finished audio. She checked, afterward, obsessively, the way she checked everything now.

It was the twelfth time, in the scratch pass she ran one last time before the file locked — forty minutes out, her eyes gone dry and stinging, three days of no real sleep sitting behind them like sand — that her hand, moving faster than the part of her that was still paying attention, typed four letters into the script where a name belonged. *A-d-d-y*.

She saw it before her finger left the key. She sat with her hand still hovering a half-second longer than she needed to, the cursor blinking after a name that didn't belong in this story, that had never belonged in this story, that she had spent thirteen years quietly, dishonestly, needing to belong in every story she ever told.

She deleted it. She typed *Dana* in its place, correctly, completely, and did not let herself cry about it until after the file had already left her hands, because crying now would have cost her the eleven minutes she didn't have.

This time, she caught it.

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[CONCORDANCE INGEST LOG — SITE 9 — AUTOMATED, UNATTENDED]

BATCH RECEIVED: COEFFICIENT SET v4.3, SUPERSEDES v4.2. SOURCE: SITE 9 CALIBRATION QUEUE. VALIDATION: PASS. INTERNAL CONSISTENCY CHECK: PASS. ANOMALY FLAGS: NONE RAISED.

STATUS: QUEUED FOR CLIENT DISTRIBUTION, NEXT REPORTING CYCLE.

The system had no way to know what it had just been fed. It had never once been built to ask.

What Survives the Quarter

Braided close — one short section each for Dana, Marcus, and Priya, in that order

DANA

The Turn came at the wrong hour again, the second time in two days. Dana had stopped being able to tell whether that was good news or the beginning of worse news. That was its own kind of answer, if she was honest about what an unreadable instrument was actually telling her. She had sent something into the machine that ate them. The machine had hiccuped. That was the whole of what she knew for certain. She had spent fifteen years teaching rooms full of underwriters that phrase — that the whole of what you know for certain is usually smaller than you want and bigger than you fear. She made herself sit with it now, instead of pretending the stutter in the Undertone meant rescue was coming. Nothing about a corrupted spreadsheet had ever once, in the history of spreadsheets, opened a door.

It had, this once, opened a wall she hadn't asked for.

The corridor to the water line sealed nine hours early. No warning groan first, just gone — solid where it had been open an hour before. The cell she and Ines and Mateo had claimed for the night was cut off from everyone else in the Cohort for the length of a Turn that hadn't finished turning. It should have been nothing. It had been, on paper, exactly the kind of null event Whitcomb used to build whole sermons out of. It didn't feel like nothing. It felt, for six hours, like the room itself was holding its breath, waiting to see what the quarter's ledger owed somebody for the trouble Dana had caused it. Everybody in that cell knew, without saying it, that debts in this place had a way of finding whoever was closest when they came due.

Mateo asked, twice, whether they were going to die in there — in the flat, procedural voice he'd learned from nine years of rooms like this one. Ines answered him both times the way she answered everything that frightened him: no, not tonight, I promise. It was the voice of someone who had learned exactly

how much of a promise she could actually keep, and made peace, a long time ago, with making it anyway.

It was somewhere in the fifth hour, with the seal still holding and the water they'd rationed for two people stretched thinner than either of them wanted him to notice, that Ines finally said the other thing. Dana was awake for it. She hadn't meant to be. She'd been counting, the way she still counted everything — breaths, minutes, a running tally of Turns since the sabotage that she no longer entirely trusted. Some part of her mind, still, after everything, an instrument for measuring other people's risk, had clocked the exact moment Ines's voice changed register from *comfort* to *confession*. It simply refused to stop listening.

"Mateo." Ines said it plainly, no windup, the way you say a thing you have rehearsed ten thousand times and finally stopped rehearsing. "I need to tell you something, and I need you to hear all of it before you decide what it means."

He looked at her the way he looked at a mechanism he hadn't vetted yet — still, careful, already bracing.

"I'm not your mother," Ines said. "I never was. Your mother was my sister. She died when you were four. I took you in, and I have loved you every single day since, exactly the way a mother loves a son. None of that part was ever a lie. Only the word was. I let you call me the word because saying the true one, out loud, felt like it would cost you something I didn't have the right to make you pay. I should have told you years ago, somewhere safe, on a good day. There was never a good day. I decided, tonight, that a bad one was better than none."

Dana lay very still in the dark and did the thing she had spent four years teaching herself never to do out loud: she let the two situations sit side by side without forcing them into the same shape. They weren't the same shape. Pretending they were would have been its own kind of dishonesty. Ines had built nine years of true love on top of one withheld sentence. Dana had built one altered model on top of a name she'd never let herself write down. Neither of those things resolved clean. Neither of them ever would.

She had spent her whole professional life certifying, for other people's money, that every loss eventually settled to a number. She understood now, listening to a boy she loved almost against her own permission ask his aunt, in a very small voice, whether that meant she didn't want him, that some losses just kept compounding, quietly, forever. The actuarial thing to do with a fact like that wasn't to solve it. It was to keep loving the account anyway — out loud, on the record, on a bad day instead of no day at all.

Mateo cried for a while, the kind of crying that isn't about the sentence itself so much as everything the sentence has been standing in front of. Ines held him through it and did not once try to make it smaller than it was. By the time the seal broke and the corridor breathed open again, he had asked her, in the exact tone he used for everything he was building a new rule around, whether he could still call her *Mamá*. She had said yes. Something in her voice when she said it made it sound less like permission than like the truest thing she had ever told him — finally allowed to be spoken, instead of merely lived.

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Gerald Whitcomb was at the water line when she passed it an hour later, doing the only work anyone still let him do: filling cups from the wheel's overflow trough one at a time. Careful. Unhurried. He handed each one out with both hands, the way a man hands over something he's afraid of being accused of shorting. He had gone gray in a way that had nothing to do with his hair. He did not try to speak to her. He couldn't, not really, not in any shape a person could parse without watching his whole face work for it. She did not try to speak to him either, though she had a version of the sentence ready, had had it ready for days: *Gerald. Rule Eleven. Read it to me the way you wrote it*. She had already made him answer that question once, in front of everyone. The silence he'd given her that day had cost him, in the end, the one thing he had left to lose.

She took her cup from his hands instead, and nodded, and he nodded back, and that was the whole of the exchange. It was not forgiveness. She didn't have that in her to give him — not for the six hours Deshawn spent toll-locked to a lever because Gerald Whitcomb had wanted, badly enough to lie for it, to be a

man whose word meant something. But it was something adjacent to mercy: the specific mercy of not making a mute man relitigate, in a language he no longer had, a verdict everyone in that cell had already reached without him. Neither of them had asked for it. She understood, walking away with the water still warm in her hands, that this was probably the only kind either of them was ever going to get.

MARCUS

He tried the wheel one more time before he let himself say it out loud. A man doesn't put a thing down for good until he's proven to himself that proving it is the only thing left to do — with his own two remaining fingers on that hand, and his shoulder doing the work they used to do alone. It came around three-quarters of a turn and stalled, the way it had stalled every time since Day thirty-six, the missing knuckles finding nothing where a grip used to be. He stood there with his forehead an inch from the cold iron of it and breathed through the specific humiliation of a body that no longer did the one thing he'd built his whole self around it doing.

"You need two hands on that," Selene said, from behind him, not unkindly. She'd been standing there longer than he'd noticed — a skill of hers he'd stopped being surprised by weeks ago. "You've got one and a half."

"I know what I've got."

"So say it."

He looked at her a long moment. She wasn't asking out of cruelty. She was asking the way she asked everything, plain and flat once the charm dropped away. Plain and flat was the only register either of them had left that wasn't a lie they were both tired of maintaining.

"I can't hold it," Marcus said. "Not alone. Not the way it needs holding."

"No," Selene agreed. "You can't."

He had rehearsed, in some version of this moment he'd never let himself finish imagining, a ceremony to it — a speech, headcount and water levels handed off the way he'd have handed off a post to a relief soldier. Something with dignity attached. Dignity was the only currency he'd ever really traded in

besides water itself. What actually happened was smaller and truer than that. He stepped back from the crank. Selene stepped up to it. She didn't ask him twice, and he didn't offer a speech. There wasn't a version of the sentence that didn't sound like a man performing his own retirement for an audience that had already stopped watching.

"You ran a second economy under mine this whole time," he said instead. Not an accusation. A fact, delivered the way he delivered every fact now — plain, no procedural padding stacked around it to make it sound more true than it was. "I should've clocked it in week two."

"You were busy," Selene said, and turned the wheel, both hands, full weight, the way it had always actually needed turning, and it gave.

He watched her do it and felt the specific, unfamiliar quiet of a man who has finally stopped being the strongest thing in the room. The room did not, in fact, collapse without him standing at its center. It was not relief exactly. It was closer to the thing he'd felt at Mateo's cell five days ago, holding his own ruined hand — understanding, for the first time in a long while, that a debt paid in full didn't have to mean the end of him.

Mateo found him an hour later, sitting against the wall near the water line with his bandaged hand cradled against his chest out of habit more than pain. He didn't ask permission before he sat down next to him, close, the way children do when they've decided a person is safe and have stopped bothering to check twice. His eyes were still red from whatever had happened in that sealed cell overnight. Marcus hadn't heard the particulars yet — only that something had passed between the boy and Ines that had cost them both something, and left them both, somehow, still standing.

"Does it hurt," Mateo asked, meaning the hand, and Marcus told him the truth, because he'd run out of any use for the other kind.

"Some days."

Ines came around the corner a minute later and saw the two of them sitting there. Marcus watched her do the calculation he'd been braced for since the day he'd taken the pull meant for her son — watched her weigh, visibly, everything

she now knew about who he'd been before this place against everything she'd watched him do inside it. She didn't call him over. She didn't call Mateo away either. She simply crossed the cell, sat down on the boy's other side, and let the three of them stay exactly where they were. That was its own answer, given plainly, the way she gave everything now that she'd stopped keeping the one thing back.

"Sergeant," she said, out of old habit, and then, before he could correct her out of his own old habit of never correcting anyone, she shook her head at herself. "Marcus," she said instead, and reached over Mateo's head to touch, very briefly, the bandage on his ruined hand, the way you touch a ledger to confirm a debt has actually been marked paid.

PRIYA

Meena called at six in the morning her time, which meant she'd been up since four doing the thing she did before every shift: running the numbers on whether her sister was going to survive her own career one more day. Priya answered on the second ring. She hadn't actually gone to sleep yet, just horizontal, staring at a ceiling that had started to feel like the inside of her own skull.

"It's everywhere," Meena said, no hello, which was how Priya knew it was real and not just Meena checking in out of the usual dread. "I mean everywhere, Priya. I had three different nurses ask me about it at handoff like I'm somehow your press office now. Somebody forwarded me a clip of the *coefficient* part — the app thing, the driver thing — with like four hundred thousand shares on it. There's a congressional staffer's office that's called the show's contact line twice. Twice, since yesterday."

"I know."

"You *know*?"

"I've got the voicemails." Priya said it the way she said most true things at six in the morning, flat, past the point of being able to dress it up. "I haven't called back yet."

"Why the hell not?"

Because a staffer's callback wasn't going to get Addy out of a rest stop off I-80 thirteen years late. Priya had spent one entire long night sitting with exactly how ugly that sentence sounded once she let herself finish it. Some sealed-off, stupid, thirteen-year-old part of her had wanted this story, from the first hour Yvette's case file landed on her desk, to be the one that finally closed a door it was never actually going to close. She had gone and made it into the biggest thing she'd ever aired anyway, knowing that. She didn't say any of it to Meena. She'd said enough of it to herself already, alone, at two in the morning, in the specific voice she used for the truths she wasn't ready to record.

"Because it's not going to bring her back," Priya said instead. It was the shorter, truer version. Meena, who had spent a decade listening to her sister build a career out of exactly that sentence without ever quite saying it plainly, went quiet on the other end in a way that meant she'd heard the whole thing underneath it too.

"No," Meena said finally. "It's not. It never was going to. I don't think that's the point anymore, though. I don't think it ever should've been."

"I know," Priya said again, and found, once she'd said it twice, that she believed it a little more the second time.

She called the staffer's office back that afternoon, and the one after that. Two days later she recorded a short follow-up episode — not a victory lap, she was careful about that, careful the way Yvette had trained her to be careful, no adjective doing work a fact hadn't earned. She laid out plainly what a filing and a broadcast could and couldn't do on their own. An oversight hearing scheduled, not a warrant. A reinsurer's stock down four points on the coefficient story, not a rescue. Holt Bregman's name now sitting in a public record he could no longer quietly manage from inside a company that had spent two decades believing its own euphemisms.

She said, on air, in her own voice, that she did not know and would probably never know what the Array actually was underneath the mechanism. Maybe the weave that could take a hand clean, or grow a girl a second row of teeth, was some inherited piece of hardware nobody had finished understanding. Maybe it was something the hardware had only ever been a

housing for. Maybe it was some unnameable mix of both, the kind no engineer currently alive had the humility left to keep asking about. She said that not knowing wasn't a gap in her reporting. It was the most honest thing in it.

She did not say Addy's name in the episode. She checked the finished file for it twice before it went out, out of a habit she suspected she would carry for the rest of her working life. Both times it wasn't there. Both times that felt less like relief than like a discipline she had finally, barely, earned the right to trust.

She aired it anyway.

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Somewhere else on the same server rack the corrupted upload had passed through hours earlier, a monitor cycled, unremarked, to a new feed. Not a thirteenth Array. Not a new outcome code nobody had a name for yet.

A highlight reel.

Nine weeks of Site Nine's own footage, color-graded, the flat institutional gray warmed into something almost cinematic, cut into thirty-second beats. A lower-third counter ticked a running tally beside each clip — YIELD DELTA, VARIANCE REDUCTION, SUBJECT ADAPTATION INDEX — the way a highlight reel counts anything a client is meant to be impressed by. Corrine's second row of teeth, captioned CATEGORY 4 OUTCOME — RARE. Ines Calderón's hand, wrapped, steady, captioned LOSS-AVERSION UNDER SUSTAINED SCARCITY — VALIDATED. Marcus at the wheel on Day four, captioned EMERGENT GOVERNANCE — HIGH FIDELITY. It ran on a loop, silent, a slide already queued behind it: PROPOSED: SITE 9 CASE STUDY. It had been built, cut, and scheduled two full weeks before the corruption, before the broadcast, before any of it had reached a single person outside the company that made it.

The horror was never that there was another one of these somewhere else.

It was that this one was already a product.