

SALTED EARTH



BARNABY CROFT

Salted Earth

by Barnaby Croft

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Chapter 1

Normal Weekend

¹ The shower had passed and left a white fringe on the porch rail, a band marking the brief exposure. Aaron stood under the eave, checking the time on his phone, the seconds aligned with the pickup window specified in the custody order. He held a folded sheet of paper in his other hand. The inked grid listed blocks for homework, dinner, study hour, and lights out. The formatting matched the one he had used for months, bold times, empty squares ready for ticks, a protocol he didn't vary.

² Leah opened the door without letting it swing wide. She had a hoodie half-zipped, the sleeves pulled over her hands. Her eyes moved from the paper to the car to his face in the order of someone completing a check. There was a moment when neither set of muscles moved, he counted five silent beats and altered his stance to cover the interval.

³ "Right on time," he said. The statement carried the tone he used to confirm pallet arrivals at work. He lifted the paper to present it as neutral logistics. "I've set a schedule. Same as last visit. With a few small adjustments."

⁴ She looked past him to the porch rail. "What's that?"

⁵ He followed her gaze. The vinyl had absorbed none of the moisture. The ring was residue and did not evaporate. He ran a thumb along the line, then rubbed his fingers until the film thinned. It did not disappear.

⁶ "Advisories in force," he said. "They'll issue the safe-use update by Monday. Treatment plant says it's under control."

⁷ "My friends are going to a show tonight," she said. "Marta has tickets. It's outside. Just a small thing, not the arena."

8 "There are curfews in some districts," he said. "We're sticking to the plan."

9 "It's not a big concert. It's the last one before they cancel everything. What if this is the last one?"

10 "If there are advisories, we follow them. I can check the guidance."

11 "I don't need you to check. Everyone knows how to read a notice," she said. Her lips flattened. "I just don't want to sit and watch you tick boxes."

12 A metallic smell flowed from the porch drain where the downspout emptied into the small street channel. The drain cover was speckled with a pale crust. A neighbor in shorts and a faded team shirt stepped out with a coffee mug, then checked it with a sniff as if something had gone wrong in his kitchen. He lifted the mug toward Aaron.

13 "Tastes off," the man said. He raised the mug to his nose and inhaled again. "Chlorine and old coins. You noticing that?"

14 "Advisories pending update," Aaron said, repeating the line from the car radio. "Storm pushed stuff into the system. They're flushing."

15 "Them flushing isn't making it taste better," the man said. He took a hesitant sip, grimaced, and put the mug down on the porch rail. The rim left a new, faint ring as he set it down. He stared at the mark. "Huh."

16 Leah watched the circle fill in as the mug emptied. "Great."

17 Aaron's jaw tensed. "Get your bag," he said. "We have a plan for the weekend. We'll keep to it. Homework this afternoon. Dinner at six. After, we can watch something."

18 "Your plan," she said.

19 He rolled the paper between thumb and forefinger until it formed a tube and the printed cells curved out of sight. He kept his hand low by his leg. "Our plan," he said. The word carried effort.

20 A woman from the downstairs unit stepped out behind the neighbor with the mug, holding a plastic bowl for a small dog straining at a leash. She filled the bowl from the kitchen tap inside and set it down. The dog sniffed, licked once, and walked away, pressure on the leash toward the stairs. The woman lifted the bowl and tipped it into the gutter. A thin white ring remained on the plastic where the level had been. She rubbed it with her thumb. It remained. She looked at Aaron, seeking an explanation he did not have. He lifted a hand, fingers open, a gesture that said sorry without words.

21 Inside the doorway behind Leah, a voice asked if she had her phone charger. Leah didn't turn. "Yes," she said. Then, "Back on Sunday? Six?"

22 "Back on Sunday," he repeated. He kept his gaze at the threshold and did not look into the rooms beyond. The door stayed mostly closed.

23 Leah moved her gaze from the paper to his face and then to the street again. "Everyone's afraid," she said. "They're performing normal because it used to work."

24 "We don't abandon order at the first sign," he said.

25 "It's not the first sign. And this isn't chaos. It's deciding who you are if the rules stop holding. If I go tonight, I'm with my people. It's where it still feels real."

26 "Your people are here," he said.

27 She held his eyes. "They're not. Not the kind who keep me being me."

28 He adjusted his grip on the schedule. The porch drain burped air and then a deeper pocket emptied. Down the block a sump pump cycled with a rasp that raised the hair on his arms. The sound belonged to hurricane season, not this month.

29 He refolded the schedule to exact corners.

30 "Pointless," she said, and let the door widen.

³¹ He put the paper in his pocket, met her eyes long enough to confirm the exchange was finished, then turned to the street to orient to the traffic pattern they would enter. The route calculation compiled in his head and held, even with scrambled inputs. The white rings forming on the porch rail conceded that variability was no longer marginal.

³² They walked to the car. A city warning poster had been taped to the bus stop standard in the last hour. He scanned the QR code and watched his phone open a page that repeated what he had seen on the news the night before but with more absolutes. DO NOT DRINK RAINWATER. DO NOT CAPTURE RAINWATER IN UNLINED CONTAINERS. DO NOT ATTEMPT TO REMOVE CONTAMINANTS BY BOILING. The rainfall conductivity figure updated in real time in a small box for his district: 678 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$ at 06:09, 702 at 06:33, 719 at 06:41, units shown as microSiemens per centimetre ($\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$). A side tag showed pH trending lower, a deviation from baseline. He closed the page and drove.

³³ They took the canal road because it was faster. At the intersection by the lift gate, an older pump house sat low behind a chain-link fence. The pump cycled through a cough-to-run sequence without smoothing. The start-up chirp blew grit through the vent, then settled into a rough turning for ten seconds, then coughed again. A worker in a city vest stood by the access hatch with a clipboard, checking intervals with a grease pencil and crossing out numbers. Aaron couldn't make out the exact words as the man spoke into his handheld radio, but the cadence belonged to someone reporting intolerable metrics in a neutral register.

³⁴ "Seatbelt, door, key," Aaron said when they reached the car. He ran through the checklist.

³⁵ The wipers pushed a thin liquid across the windshield that didn't behave like water. It smeared, then separated, then left streaks that required solvent. He hit the washer fluid and visibility improved for several seconds, then the streaking returned, drying toward a chalk tone around the edges.

36 "That's new," Leah said. She watched the blade arc.

37 "Surface tension differences," he said. "Different particulates. It's not rain you drink. It's rain you wipe off. Interim advisory window."

38 She pulled out her phone. "You want to see something?"

39 "If it's not while I'm merging."

40 "You're already merged," she said. She held the phone at an angle where he could see without turning his head. People under a sky the color of wet cement tilted their heads back and opened their mouths. Within two seconds the first turned and spat repeatedly, then doubled over. The clip cut to another angle where someone filled a clear bottle from a drainage chain and the liquid went cloudy as it hit the plastic. Comments scrolled in numbers and warnings and arguments, then a meteorological overlay he couldn't parse while driving.

41 "We'll follow advisories," he said. "We don't drink from the sky. We don't drink from the tap until the all-clear. We do what they say."

42 "That's not working," she said, and looked out of the window.

43 The bus stop shelter's back panel carried a white haze consistent with glass etching prep. The people waiting inside kept their hoods up. The public bulletin board held a fresh printout: a block of municipal typography stating that recent precipitation events were under evaluation, that taste changes were a nuisance not a hazard, that boiling water was not necessary in this jurisdiction at this time. Leah read it as they rolled past, her head tracking the words.

44 He rolled the schedule tighter and slid it into his jacket pocket. He took the canal route. The canal's surface carried a sheen; filamentous bands moved in a pattern he couldn't classify as natural or waste. He adjusted his speed to the posted limit and took that as proof he remained inside a framework that still bound behavior.

45 They reached his building and he parked under a concrete overhang streaked white where the drain had overflowed in the last storm

and dried with residue. He pulled the key, took the schedule out to fold it square, then put it away when she looked at his hands.

46 "Temporary," he said again.

47 "That's your favorite word," she said, and slung the backpack over one shoulder.

48 Inside the apartment, the air carried the unused scent of a place with nothing out of place. The counters were clear, the table bare except for a placemat set square. He placed their keys in the bowl by the door and turned on the kitchen tap to rinse two glasses out of habit. The water ran clear and smelled of disinfectant. He shut it off after three seconds.

49 Leah leaned against the door frame and watched the move. "I thought the notice said it was fine."

50 "Fine for sanitation, not for drinking," he replied. He opened a folder and removed another sheet. This one had the weekend's blocks with spaces for notes. He put it on the table and anchored the corners with two coasters.

51 "You're serious with that again."

52 "It's happening how we set it," he said. He drew a line under Saturday and wrote times. "Math for an hour. English after. Break. Dinner at six. Curfew at nine."

53 "There's a concert. Marta and Rose and Jai are going. There's no school on Monday either because teachers are out."

54 "We're not going. Under the circumstances, it's not appropriate. We don't need additional exposure."

55 "It's outside."

56 "Outside with precipitation. If advisories change, we revisit. For now, no."

57 "You always say revisit. You never revisit."

58 The television came on with a low hum. He turned the volume down and enabled captions. A local news anchor introduced a water treatment expert who used "conductivity" in the first sentence and "halides" in the second. A ticker crawled under the images in capitals: DO NOT DRINK TAP WATER IF YOU ARE IN DISTRICTS 4, 7, 8. BOILING WILL CONCENTRATE CONTAMINANTS. USE BOTTLED WATER IF AVAILABLE. A small inset map shaded three areas in a darker tone. Another line followed: RAINFALL CONDUCTIVITY > 800 μ S/cm IN SOME DISTRICTS.

59 Leah stepped closer. "What does that mean?"

60 "Ions at a level that interferes with taste and treatment," he said. "It isn't safe to drink. Heating makes it worse because the water leaves and the dissolved solids don't."

61 "You were going to boil water."

62 "I wasn't going to drink it."

63 "You had the glasses out."

64 He put them back without answering. He moved to the sink and filled a pot halfway because dinner prep had been scheduled and he preferred to execute sequences once initiated. Halfway through the fill, the red banner on the television refreshed with a stronger warning: DO NOT INGEST TAP WATER UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE. DO NOT BOIL. HEAT DOES NOT REMOVE DISSOLVED SOLIDS. With her in the room, he shut the tap and emptied the pot into the sink. The clatter communicated adjustment without confession. He wet his lips without thinking; a chlorine-metal taste stayed.

65 She opened the window an inch and put a fingertip into the air. A drop hit the nail and beaded, then rolled. She touched tongue to the spot

and her face changed. She spat into the sink, turned the tap on to rinse the basin, then turned it off again.

66 "It's bitter," she said. "It's wrong."

67 "We don't drink from that," he said.

68 "Then what do we drink, Aaron?"

69 He knocked the grid off-balance with a finger, then realigned it. "We go to the store first thing. We get in before it gets crowded."

70 "The rush has been happening all week. They put limits on things already."

71 "There is supply. Distributors have reserves. The city will allocate. We'll buy what we are allowed and stay within guidelines."

72 She walked to the door, set the backpack upright with the straps forward, and hung a sweatshirt on the hook. She checked the bag again. He didn't ask what she carried. The fabric collapsed when she released it, soft items only.

73 The television shifted to a municipal official at a podium, a seal on the wall behind him and a small city flag to his right as a placeholder. He spoke in the language of stability. The captions carried phrases to hold the line: out of an abundance of caution; we are coordinating; testing is ongoing; safe for sanitation; do not ingest; bottled supplies are sufficient; trucks are en route; do not hoard. His tie sat slightly askew.

74 Aaron moved into the kitchen and put tins on the counter in a row. He clicked his tongue once to mark each and stacked them by category. He stacked tomato, beans, and tuna. The habit relieved pressure. He avoided looking at the sink. The air carried a pool-chemical edge. He cracked the window and then closed it again because the rain intensified and he didn't want residue on the sill.

75 At seven he set dinner on the table: dry pasta mixed with a jar of sauce he had and a small bowl of peas. He had used water from a gallon container he kept for emergencies, the last of it. He brought the bottle to

the table with the label facing forward. She ate without comment.

76 "I need to text," she said when the plates were empty. "They're making plans. They want the pier, not the concert."

77 "The pier is exposed. No."

78 "It's not raining there."

79 "It's raining here."

80 "You can't stop me from seeing my friends."

81 "I can say no and I am saying no. Message them that you're unavailable this weekend."

82 "Unavailable. That's a good one. I can say I'm unavailable because my dad has a spreadsheet."

83 "It's not a spreadsheet." He tapped the paper, one tap per word. "It's a plan."

84 "Same thing. It's pointless."

85 He picked up the paper and folded it twice. The corners met. He put it in his pocket like a receipt he would file later, a record of intent if not result.

86 "Homework. One hour. It matters."

87 "To who?"

88 "To you," he said. She looked away.

89 She sat at the table with her laptop and opened a screen of assignments. He watched the reflection of the news crawl travel across the back of the lid. She typed for a while and then stopped and stared out the window. The rain had slowed to a fine drift that left dots on the glass which dried to small pale rings as the vent air moved over the pane. He counted the seconds between keystrokes, trying to hear a rhythm.

90 He rinsed the plates without letting the water touch his skin more than necessary, then wiped the sink with a cloth sprayed with surface

cleaner. He checked the time and rotated the plan in his pocket with his thumb.

91 When nine approached he named curfew as a fact. She had headphones ready and avoided argument. She put them on and lay on the sofa with a blanket.

92 He switched the television to a public information channel with captions. Slides looped: red type against white backgrounds repeating the guidance. Do not ingest. Bottled only. Do not boil. He left the captions running. When his phone lit once on the table, he turned it face-down and squared the folded schedule beside it without comment.

93 He looked at the door and saw the backpack upright by the frame.

94 At ten he turned the lights off in stages and stood by the window. Sodium streetlamps added a yellow haze to the rain film on the pavement; cars broke the sheen and left dull tracks. The square blocks of the plan sat intact in his pocket, ready for check marks. The image moved without sound on the screen; he turned it off. The room darkened beyond useful function. He walked through the apartment by hand memory and lay down. He cleaned a tumbler, dried it, and left it upright on the sill to check for a ring in the morning. His mouth carried the chlorinated taste of a motel pool he remembered from a coastal town they had stayed in when she was small and feverish. He rinsed with the last mouthful from the emergency bottle and set the empty by the sink. The white ring on the inside of the glass remained after washing.

95 He slept in short segments. At grey light he rose and went to the sink, filled a glass, and poured it away. On the sill, the glass he had left showed a thin ring. He let water run over his hands for exactly five seconds and turned it off. He pencilled 07:00 at the top, squared the digits, then underlined.

96 He knocked on her doorframe. "We go now."

97 She came to the door with the backpack already in place.

98 After a night of advisory loops that never closed, he needed field values. Dawn increased functional visibility. The gutters along the canal road carried milky runoff that collected at low points before draining. A municipal truck with a tank moved in the curb lane at walking speed, spraying a light stream of neutraliser onto the road surface. The operator wore a hooded suit with clear plastic at the face and nitrile gloves taped at the wrists. He stood on the back step and monitored a handheld metre with a numeric display. Aaron watched from the apartment window as the man paused by a storm drain and dipped the probe into a puddle. The number settled at 920 $\mu\text{S}/\text{cm}$. A chlorine, metal tang lingered on his tongue. The man shook his head once, noted it on a wrist slate with a grease pencil, wrote no reduction, and moved on.

99 Two parents argued by their car about school. One had a child buckled in the back seat already; the other gestured toward the house, then toward the sky, then toward the radio app on the phone. The words rose in fragments. "It's Saturday." "Practice." "They said it was fine for being outside if you don't, " "It's not fine; it's not."

100 A fire engine moved through the intersection with the lights on and the siren off. The red paint had lost gloss along the flanks from abrasive dust. The driver made eye contact with each car before proceeding. The low-noise move conserved fuel.

101 On the rooftop across the street, a neighbor set a camping stove on a folding table and lit it. He heated a pot of tap water and poured it into a mug. He blew twice and sipped. His face changed and he retched, bending at the waist, hands on knees, the mug dangling from two fingers. He set it down and pushed it away and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand. He did it again and then went inside, leaving the mug.

102 Aaron pulled away from the window, put on jacket and boots, took his keys, and gathered two reusable bags.

103 Leah was at the door with the backpack on. Her hair was tied back. A small blister showed on her lower lip. She adjusted the straps once and watched the hall.

104 They took the stairwell. The concrete steps carried a powdery film that stuck to their boot soles and left prints on darker landings. The handrail had clear arcs through accumulated dust where hands had wiped. He avoided touching it.

105 The corner shop had its security grate halfway down. A courier van was parked across the sidewalk, blocking part of the entrance. A man in a courier jacket pulled a small case of bottled water from the back and carried it inside, then pulled the grate down and slid the lock. A line of five customers formed at once, looked at each other, then dispersed when the shop owner raised his palms behind the mesh. "Allocation only; no walk-ups," he said through the grate. Phones went back into pockets. A woman on a stoop down the block had three empty jugs by her feet and watched the municipal truck with expectation. It did not stop. The operator logged a value at the intersection and drove on.

106 "Aaron," Leah said.

107 He turned. A pump station at the corner had a small crew. One unscrewed a cover, looked inside, and shook his head; another replaced a filter cartridge. A clipboard on the housing had the change interval table; someone had drawn a line through two weeks and written one week, then through one week and written three days. The marks were functional. He took a phone photo. Data mattered.

108 "We'll go to the bigger store," he said.

109 "Which one?"

110 "Jefferson. They had stock yesterday. If we go now, we might, "

111 ", get some," she said.

112 "Before everyone goes," he said.

113 They reached the car. The windshield held the slick film from the first shower and a second layer from the drift. He used the washer and wipers together and visibility improved for safety. The film remained along edges beyond the blade path. He would need solvent.

114 He started the engine. The radio came on to static where a station had been last month. He scanned until he found voice listing affected districts and links. He kept the volume just above the fan noise.

115 "Seatbelt, door, key," he said.

116 "I'm not six." She clicked the belt. She checked her phone. "There's already a line at the Jefferson one. People camping by the overnight pharmacy door."

117 "Then we go."

118 She slid the phone into her pocket and looked at emerging queues.

119 He eased into the road with other cars already moving in the same direction. In the side mirror, the corner shop owner lifted the grate a fraction as the courier exchange finished. The line re-formed at a respectful distance, a service window without tickets. He recognized the shape. He had designed those shapes at work. The difference now was load exceeding capacity beyond any re-stringing.

120 He accelerated to the posted limit. The plan in his pocket folded against his thigh.

121 They ran alongside the canal before the road angled inland. Along the berm, cranes stood still and a barge sat low with containers from bottled drink chains, holding for days because tanks were full while distribution pressure stayed wrong. He marked the gap between full and available capacity.

122 At a median strip, a volunteer in a fluorescent vest handed out leaflets to drivers who rolled down their windows enough to take one without getting their seats wet. Aaron opened it at the red light and skimmed: symptoms; contact numbers; dialysis sites; formula points; the

complaint line for price-gouging.

123 Leah pulled at her lip and looked toward a woman with a cardboard sign that read clean water for trade. Two children stood beside the woman. She held up a sealed bottle half full and waved it.

124 "We'll stay within guidance, pending update," he said.

125 "Says who?"

126 "Says me," he said.

127 The Jefferson store came into view. The line of cars extended into the right lane for three blocks. No horns. People spoke into phones or stared straight ahead. He checked the clock. He wasn't late by the old metric. The metric had moved.

128 A digital city sign by the freeway on-ramp flashed alternately: DO NOT DRINK TAP WATER and DO NOT BOIL. The letters were amber dots. The second message scrolled. It grabbed attention with blunt force.

129 Along the edge of the parking lot, cones created an emergency access lane. A cone lay on its side where a car had clipped it. A child touched the cone from a rear window and then wiped his hand on his shirt. Aaron directed his eyes back to the path ahead.

130 A trolley boy pushed a long line of carts toward the entrance, shoulders hunched to take the load. He paused to pull a cart free when the third jammed and then lifted it and dropped it into alignment. No rain protection beyond a hoodie.

131 A man two cars ahead opened his trunk and revealed three empty coolers and four plastic bins. A guard in a yellow vest walked up and spoke. The man gestured, palms up. The guard pointed to the limit sign and its allocation rules. The man set two bins back in the car and closed the trunk. The guard moved on.

132 A gust moved across the lot and caught the tarpaulin over stacked pallets near the wall. The tarp flapped and then settled. Heads turned, then returned to immediate tasks. An employee in a vest watched the sky

for a second and then resumed work.

133 A car cut in from the side and tried to merge near the entrance. The cars there didn't make space. The cutting car hung halfway in and halfway out. The passenger leaned across and spoke with intensity. The driver laughed without humor and held his place, then steered back out and rejoined at the far end.

134 Leah unzipped the small front pocket of her backpack and removed gum. She offered him a piece. He accepted and chewed, then stopped because his jaw ached.

135 A siren started, short. It came from a block away. Both flinched. The siren cut off and then started again. A police cruiser rolled past with the officer's gaze forward.

136 The store doors opened for a moment as two employees exited with a cart stacked with boxes. The doors closed. They pushed the cart across a spill of milk that had not been cleaned. No one fell.

137 On the far side of the lot, people on foot formed their own line. Some held umbrellas. One held a plastic bin overhead as a shield. A young man wore a poncho cut from a garbage bag.

138 Aaron measured the minute lost to watching and accepted it added nothing to system repair, against a baseline he no longer trusted. He was a customer waiting to be served. At work he called them flows.

139 Leah glanced at his hand on the door switch. "Please don't lock the doors manually."

140 He looked; the lock was engaged. He released it and kept both hands on his knees until she looked at them and away.

141 The line moved. He rolled forward. The engine coughed and then smoothed. He had postponed service. The service center was closed now. That was how decay worked. He had told new hires that.

142 In the side mirror, a man with three cases of water balanced on his shoulder came out by the pharmacy door. He moved with minimal

wasted motion. A guard addressed him. He kept walking. Another guard stepped in front. Someone behind the guards shouted. The man held eye contact, laughed once, reached his car, put the cases in, got in, and drove away.

143 Leah's mouth tightened. He said nothing.

144 At the entrance, a guard lifted a megaphone. He spoke. The words sounded without power; the device needed batteries. He lowered it and used his hands again. Ten went in. Eight came out. The store was filling. Capacity mattered when load didn't decrease. He estimated the hour and had no parameter he could adjust.

145 "After this," he said, "we go home. We do homework. We stay inside."

146 "We share," she said.

147 "We follow advisories," he said.

148 He shut the radio off. The static stopped. The line advanced a car-length. He moved and held the gear lever. At the doors, a taped notice read Limits Enforced, the ink already smeared by residue.

Chapter 2

Do Not Drink

¹⁴⁹ The lot at Jefferson held still in a pattern that did not resolve. Cars filled lanes at wrong angles, drivers looking ahead with hands on the wheel, held in a pose of readiness that did not produce movement. Aaron brought the sedan to a halt in a slot that was not a slot, hazard lights on for nine seconds and then off because the clicking added nothing. He watched the entrance and mapped a route on foot, along the hedge, cut behind a column of trolleys, into the right-hand door where people carrying baskets came out with nothing in them.

¹⁵⁰ "We go on foot," he said. He shut the engine. No impediment noted yet along the left side.

¹⁵¹ Leah already had her backpack strap in her fist. "If we leave it, it might not be here."

¹⁵² "If we sit here, we get nothing." He locked the doors. He checked mirrors, objects, lanes, movement. He put the key in his left pocket to keep his right hand free. The folded weekend sheet pressed against his thigh where it belonged. It served no function here and still anchored him.

¹⁵³ They moved along the edge of the hedge where wet leaves held a granular film. The film rubbed off under his sleeve and left a white smear on the fabric. The air inside the trolley corridor tasted of old milk and disinfectant. A trolley worker dragged a capture chain across the line and coughed without covering his mouth. A woman near the door held two reusable bags open and watched the interior without blinking. No carts came out with anything in them. Those who emerged discussed return times out loud, trying to make them real.

154 Inside, the lights remained on but softer. The music had been turned off. The aisles meant for drinks showed gaps. On the right, the water aisle had been converted into a choke point using rope lines knotted through pallet corners and taped to shelf uprights. A low island cooler near the line showed a faint white ring along its metal lip. The rope had black smears where hands had pulled reef knots tight. Behind the line, pallets of bottled water remained wrapped in cloudy plastic, their blue labels visible but unreachable. A crew of five positioned themselves along the rope: two with radios at their collars and three with short knives with taped grips at their belts. One had a baton's weight in a gloved hand and used it for pointing.

155 He read the arrangement the way he read load plans: identify throughput, identify control. The rope was not decoration. The crew represented a new intake valve. A line of people pressed toward the space with their hands upright to show they meant to pay, a signal no longer matched to outcomes.

156 Leah stood on the balls of her feet, scanning. The left side of the rope met a shelf of crisps where the endcap had been stripped. A narrow gap had opened where the rope bowed under pressure and shifted against the shelf. She leaned into motion.

157 He caught her forearm at the tendon, a secure hold without pain. "Hold."

158 She looked at his hand and back to the gap. "We can get two from there."

159 "We don't move until we have a path out." He maintained the grip for two seconds longer than necessary and then released when her wrist flexed under his fingers.

160 At the front a man shouted about a promise. A woman's voice cut in higher. The guard with the baton stepped forward and pressed the baton horizontally against two chests at once. When the forward force reached a threshold, the baton's owner let himself be pushed back half a

step to absorb the load and redirect it. A gondola end panel flexed and popped its clips. A shelf dropped a notch and cases slid off in a slow spill. Another man tried to climb the end of a lower pallet stack. His overshoe slipped on shrink film. His foot went through. The film tore with a dry sound. He dropped knee-first onto a lower edge and screamed once, the sound cutting off fast. No one moved to help. Bodies streamed around him in two flows. He lay with one hand up and the other under his thigh, his mouth open in a steady, quiet line of air that never turned into a shout again.

161 The emergency exit alarm started in the back of the store, a steady electronic tone that should have been intolerable, and then cut out mid-note. Overhead fixtures cycled once and stabilized at a lower output; a small maintenance readout above the stock door showed 72%. The guards at the rope looked at each other, then at the radios at their collars. None of the radios made a sound. At a front register, the screen flashed AUTH FAILED in red. Two uniformed store employees who had been pretending to check a planogram near the snacks turned away in unison and disappeared down the cereal aisle.

162 The pressure at the rope slackened briefly when people looked up at the lights. Leah moved. She slipped through the narrow opening at the endcap where a shelf arm had been bent. A cart on its side nearby had spilled packaged soft drinks and foreign-brand glass mineral bottles that had not been priced with a yellow sticker yet. Two water bottles, sealed, lay on the floor near the tipped cart, the label scuffed but intact. She took them both, one in each hand, moving low to keep profile minimal.

163 "Leah," he said, not raising his voice. He moved after her, elbows in, the rope against his back and the heat of bodies exhaling disinfectant-scented breath. He stayed within a metre of her.

164 Ahead, the man who had fallen from the pallet stack tried to roll. His leg did not accept weight. He made the quiet line of air again. An older woman in a grey hoodie stepped over him without slowing. She kept her head angled toward bottles, attention fixed on water.

165 The crew advanced the rope line with small steps and knives on display. The blades were short and wrapped in tape to improve grip. The action wasn't meant to cut; it was meant to show cutting could happen. The baton man shifted to the right to pinch off the gap. Aaron backed with Leah into the corner formed by the end of the freezer cabinets where condensation had left a white fringe along silicone seals. Cold air leaked at his calves.

166 The crew clustered. Radios made bursts of static without intelligible content. Beyond the rope, someone shouted, "Who is in charge?" No one answered because the answer had changed from positional authority to whoever controlled the rope.

167 A man in expensive boots stepped onto a low stack of toppled cases near the rope. His boots communicated resources not yet exhausted. He had tattooed forearms and a jacket with no corporate logo. He took the higher position and waited. Heads turned.

168 "All right," the man said. He waited for heads to turn. They did. "Two per customer. Cash only. No change. You go out through the back. If you try for more, my people will move you. If you obstruct, my people will move you harder. Back corridor is an egress-only environment. Noncompliance triggers removal."

169 Leah's shoulders stiffened. Aaron kept his voice level. "That's him."

170 "Who?"

171 "Harker," he said.

172 The man on the cases looked at a guard and made a rolling gesture with his hand. The guard opened the rope near the middle enough for two people to pass at a time. Hands lifted money. The guard took it. People came out carrying nothing and raised their palms in explanation profiles: empty; not yet; later.

173 Harker smiled in the regulatory way of someone explaining a code requirement. "Back corridor for exit only. No re-entry. Keep the walkway clear."

174 Aaron watched the rate. Two a minute under ideal conditions. External pressure increasing. He was not designing flow here. He was inside it. He had a margin only if he moved now.

175 He stepped forward. "Two bottles and a clear path out."

176 The baton man looked him up and down and then at Leah. "Two and corridor is the policy, friend."

177 Aaron held out folded bills. The edges were clean. He had kept them in a drawer for emergency cash for years against a flat tire. Harker watched the hand rather than the face and then looked at Aaron's face after he had identified the denomination.

178 "Thank you," Harker said. It was bureaucratic politeness. "Policy accepted."

179 Leah brought the two scuffed floor bottles to the opening and set them down. The guard indicated two sealed PET bottles on the pallet. Aaron took one; Leah took one. Both bottles were sealed PET, one and a half litres each. He weighed his quickly to confirm fill integrity. Labels peeled at the edges from humidity. He accepted the weight as information.

180 As the rope lifted, Leah angled to the tipped cart at the endcap and hooked a third bottle, a glass foreign brand, by the neck. The nearest guard drove a gloved palm into her shoulder and swept the baton cross-body. She hit the tile and caught herself on an elbow.

181 "Her too. She goes with me," Aaron said, voice flat and short.

182 Harker looked at Leah and then at Aaron, and then at two of his men. "Make a lane."

183 The baton man scowled and stepped aside. Another guard lifted the rope to chest height. Leah stayed beside him and gripped her

backpack strap with the glass bottle tucked under her arm. Harker leaned slightly toward the guard nearest him. "Note him. Debtor. Jacket, face, haircut."

184 The guard nodded without writing anything down. He looked straight at Aaron long enough for recognition to set.

185 "Back corridor," the baton man said. He tapped Aaron's shoulder with the stick not hard, not gentle. "Keep moving."

186 The lane opened and took them through the stockroom to the bay. The guard at Aaron's back keyed the side door control and the roll-up door motor engaged. The slatted steel rose two hands and stalled. The motor hummed at a lower pitch, then stalled. Undervoltage, the controller steady near eighty volts. A man in a lit office behind glass held a clipboard and pretended to check a list. A second guard put both hands under the lower slat and lifted. The first guard hit the switch again. The door rose half a metre and then jerked and went higher.

187 On the other side, pressure had built. When the slats reached mid-chest height, bodies pushed into the opening. The guard tried to hold them out with the baton across the gap. The door jerked inward as someone outside fell forward. The slats flexed, and the bottom edge shot toward Aaron. It hit him below the ribs and drove him backwards into a steel post that anchored the door track. The impact was solid and localized. Breath left him fast.

188 Impact: left anterior rib. Function reduced. He put his right hand across his left side and found a place that hurt with a particular quality. Not bruised. Compromised. He did not get a full breath. Short inhalations stacked on each other in a step pattern. He started a count and lost it at three, then reset on the next breath. Leah turned to him and then to the opening. The door rose another two hands and the gap became a funnel. A crowd from outside pressed in, not to him but through the hole that represented something that might exist for them on the other side. In the movement, the glass bottle she had hooked slid from her grip when a

hand from outside caught her wrist and twisted. It fell to the concrete and broke into four large shards and a scatter of chaff. The water spread. A piece of glass sliced along the base of her thumb across the palm. She pulled her hand away and held it up to look at the bright line that had already bulged. Two sealed 1.5L bottles remained; three litres.

189 "Move," the guard said. There was no room for apology in the word.

190 Outside, three people blocked the way. A man with a stubbled jaw and a woman in a yellow rain jacket that shed water in beads, and another man who wore a baseball cap with the logo of a defunct team. "Hey," the first man said. His eyes measured the bottles. "We need one."

191 Aaron stepped into the space between the group and Leah. Posture and position. He brought one bottle to his chest and kept the other low. "We're leaving."

192 The man looked down at Leah's hand. Blood was there. "She's hurt."

193 "We're leaving," Aaron repeated. He kept his voice even. Pain flared when he expanded his ribs. He kept the cadence short. The woman in the yellow jacket made a small calculation with her mouth and turned her head. She saw another opportunity somewhere else, or she did not want to step into a situation with a girl. The second man looked over Aaron's shoulder toward the interior where the guards yelled at someone. He shrugged and stepped back.

194 A mounted police officer appeared at the corner of the loading drive, the horse's hooves clacking on the patches of dry concrete among wet patches that showed a chalk outline where puddles had been. The rider's posture was textbook: chin up, shoulders square. He took in the scene in a shallow arc and then turned the horse smartly, leaving the way he had come without broadcasting anything over the radio.

195 Behind them, someone slammed into someone else and a plastic crate of sports drink toppled. The bright liquid washed over the white

crust at the edge of the loading area and carried it in small rivulets toward the drain. The drain had a ring where water had dried recently. Someone shouted a name. Someone else shouted a number. Neither helped.

196 "Alley," Aaron said softly. He ran the quick check: street arrival rate exceeded door throughput; the alley reduced exposure within his breath-count window. Leah nodded once with her jaw set. She shifted one sealed bottle into her backpack, zipper closed in a straight pull that did not snag. With her other hand she reached into the small front pocket and pulled a folded, clean cloth, white with a blue border, and wrapped her palm, the movements compact and correct. She twisted the ends once to hold pressure.

197 Aaron repositioned the second sealed bottle against his chest in the crook of his arm and moved sideways along the brick wall. On the wall the waterline from the last rain had dried to a faint stripe. He kept his elbows close to trim rib movement. His breath came in fractions; he imposed a count: in two, hold one, out three. He leaned once for three seconds against the wall until the pain stabilized, then pushed off and kept moving.

198 They cut into the alley where dumpsters stood under a metal stair with white residue gathered along the bolts. A fight broke at the corner behind them over the plastic crate and moved as a cluster. Someone fell. Someone else's shoe slid and left a new pale streak on the surface. Aaron did not look back.

199 At the lot perimeter, the car remained where he had left it. A pickup with black paint idled across the intersection beyond, angled so it could move either direction. The logo on the door was a stylised drop of water with a jagged line through it. The driver watched the lane. When Aaron's sedan steered into the lane, the driver waited a beat and then pulled away without hurry. The recognition operated as surveillance protocol, not social acknowledgment.

200 "That's them," Leah said. "We were tagged."

201 He adjusted grip on the wheel to free the right hand for the gear lever. The movement triggered a sharp point of pain near his left ribcage. He shortened subsequent motions. "The corridor is official. They won't run at a checkpoint."

202 "You think they care about official?"

203 He watched the mirror and then the next intersection. "It isn't about care. It's about other eyes."

204 They passed a community centre with a banner strung from grommets above the doors: SAFE WATER DISTRIBUTION SITE. The doors were covered in OSB sheets with eight screws each and a city seal stamped on one corner. A paper taped to the centre board read, in small type, TEMPORARILY CLOSED PENDING SUPPLY. Beneath that, someone had written in marker, WHEN? An old schedule grid listing ration windows had been crossed out in heavy marker.

205 The freeway reader sign above the feeder road flashed its amber dots: DO NOT DRINK TAP WATER. DO NOT BOIL. The letters pulsed at a fixed rate. He turned onto the feeder. The car's engine note changed. He entered the route on the dashboard screen: weigh station, east spur, government corridor. The screen put a blue line along the map that matched the official lane. He defaulted to the map despite evidence. Two bottles. Three litres. One cut. One rib.

206 "Side roads," Leah said. "Take the canal road. We could cut past the warehouses and hit the feeder late."

207 "No," he said. "We stay with the corridor."

208 "You saw the centre."

209 "The centre isn't the corridor." He kept his jaw tight because if he relaxed it he feared he would say something like an apology and then she would think the corridor was optional.

210 She moved the wrapped hand in her lap and pressed the cloth tighter without making a sound. "You're hurt."

211 He shifted in his seat to find a position where his ribs protested less. "We'll get through the weigh station. The weigh station is the protocol."

212 The car slid into a lane where other cars already aligned, more orderly than the lot had been. Ahead, an overhead gantry marked lanes that used to weigh trucks. Cones made a funnel and then a serpentine he did not design, their bases marked by a pale crust. A municipal sign promised inspection and distribution. He held the bottle against the seat back with his left thigh to keep it from tipping when he braked. The seal line on the cap remained unbroken. He checked it once and then stopped checking it. Checking broke nothing and still cost attention.

213 The radio, when he tried it, returned static interrupted by a voice listing districts with mechanical precision. He lowered the volume until it was a texture rather than information. Leah sat with her wrapped hand and the backpack at her feet. The zipper moved once. He didn't ask what she checked. They had three litres. They had a plan of sorts. They had chosen a line that belonged to the city and not to Harker. For now, that was the choice he knew how to make.

214 Rain had stopped. The film it left behind would still be on every surface. He touched his tongue to the back molar and tasted chlorine-metal from the store. He adjusted his breathing again to the count that did not solve anything but made movement possible. He kept the car in the corridor lane, eyes on the sign with the directive, and ignored the pickup that appeared once more in the mirror before it fell back and took an exit that would allow it to reappear later if required.

Chapter 3

Checkpoint

²¹⁵ The weigh station sat under an old gantry that had weighed axle loads when trucks still carried things that mattered. The designated weigh-station corridor fed into it. Cones formed orange arcs across sun-faded asphalt. Chain-link and movable barriers had been arranged to create lanes that bent on themselves, a serpentine meant to slow approach and reduce pressure at the opening. The municipal sign at the headboard repeated two phrases in a cycling display: INSPECTION and DISTRIBUTION. Someone had wiped the sign with a treated cloth; dried water left a white fringe along the frame.

²¹⁶ Aaron eased the sedan along the painted line and then killed the engine when a volunteer pointed to a hand-lettered board: Engines off. Proceed on foot when directed. He watched the pattern. Two lanes allowed cars forward to a cut in the fence where folding tables, clipboards, and a drum of caution tape created the idea of a process. Beyond the fence, a paved apron rose toward the main highway; it doubled as a staging area for incoming loads. He tasted chlorine-metal in the back of his mouth that had not gone away since the store.

²¹⁷ Leah had already unbuckled. The white cloth with the blue border sat tight around the base of her thumb, the edges spotted now where she had pulled herself through the store crush. She pulled her backpack straps tighter and slid the zipper closed, double-checking with a glance only she saw.

²¹⁸ "We wait," he said, watching the lane release.

²¹⁹ The volunteer in the fluorescent vest stepped between two bumpers and handed red paper tags through windows. He tore the strip

against a cardboard backer with a practiced motion. A second volunteer lifted a megaphone that produced no sound; he lowered it and shouted: "Hold tags visible. One per household. Keep lanes clear."

220 A man walking back to his car held up his tag. "What does ninety-two mean?"

221 "Sequence," the volunteer said. "You're in the sequence."

222 "Sequence for what?"

223 "Distribution," the volunteer said. He did not add anything because there was nothing to add.

224 Aaron stepped out of the car when the volunteer's gesture shifted to on-foot movement and the lane ahead failed to move for thirty seconds. He counted those seconds without thinking, the count calibrating his breath. Left anterior rib still compromised; inhale on two, hold one, out on three. He kept his hand off his side because touching it did not alter outcome. Leah stepped out beside him and took in the boundary. Her eyes tracked the fence line down and across rather than up. She pointed with her chin at a place where the bottom rail had bent outward. Zip ties had been used to close a previous repair. Two had snapped. The chain-link gaped a hand's width.

225 "There," she said under the sound of idling engines shutting down.

226 "Process first," he said. He looked to the folding tables.

227 They moved with the others toward the cut in the fence. A volunteer distributed tags with a roll whose numbers went into the hundreds. Past one hundred twenty. Past one hundred eighty. The roll did not match the visible supply, which at that moment consisted of two pallet jacks under stacked crates that might have been water. The pallets were wrapped in opaque film that made count unreliable. Two pallets, about eighty crates, for tags already past one-eighty.

228 "How many trucks?" Aaron asked the volunteer with the roll.

229 The volunteer blinked. He had a sunburn across his nose where his mask had rubbed. "En route," he said. "Two are close."

230 Another volunteer adjusted a span of caution tape that had gone slack between a sawhorse and a traffic drum. He could not set the angle to make it hold both a lane and a prevention of pinch. Aaron watched how people pushed toward the opening where tables blocked the direct path. He saw the developing point of compression at a post with a rounded cap. Children at hip height would be forced into that angle if the rate continued.

231 "May I?" Aaron asked, already taking the end of the tape when the volunteer hesitated. The volunteer saw a man with a calm voice and no weapon and let go.

232 He pulled the tape tight across a gap and anchored it with a half-hitch around the post, then took the roll and sketched a tighter serpentine using a retaining wall as a fixed edge. He threaded the tape through the crowd with short lifts, asking people to raise arms while he passed under. "Left lane, hold. Right lane, hold."

233 Leah moved in parallel, watching where the tape created a visual instruction. She pointed out the bottom gap again between two barrier bases, just enough for a small body to go under if pushed. He registered it and kept working the line.

234 He set the release. "Two every ten seconds, left lane only," he said at a volume that carried without strain. He lifted the tape to guide three small boys with shaved heads and a woman with a cane out of the corner where force had started to angle. The boys looked up at the tape and then ducked under; the woman moved step by step, planting the cane carefully to avoid the white crust on the ground that made footing slick. Leah put her foot against the base of the barrier to give the woman a shelf for the cane tip when it skittered.

235 For nine minutes the new shape took. He counted them in sets of six releases per minute. The flow eased. The table crew took tags and

wrote numbers in columns next to preprinted district names. Radios at their shoulders produced bursts of static without clear instruction. A single siren rose far away, the old doppler note that meant someone was coming. It cut off mid-rise. A uniformed state guard with a state-guard patch on his shoulder made a slashing motion at his throat and lowered his hand. Fuel conservation meant fewer runs.

²³⁶ The sound of the trucks came as a low-frequency rumble under the wind before anyone saw them. Two flatbeds crested the ramp and rolled down under tarps that had not been tied properly. The tarps flapped, exposing gaps. People clapped, a disjointed sound of expectation. The flatbeds braked in front of the tables, brakes squealing and then releasing. The tarps lifted at the corners. Beneath them, space. A patchwork of crates and emptiness. The pallets one would expect to see were not there. Clapping broke into uneven shouts and shoe-scrapes.

²³⁷ Air changed. It was minor at first: the sound of clapping thinned; the intake of breath thickened. A woman near the front, who had been counting on her fingers with her tag in a damp palm, stopped counting.

²³⁸ Two state guards moved along the sideboard, checking tie-downs that had not been needed. One leaned close to the other, their masks nearly touching. "Shorted at origin," the first said. A man near the tables repeated it once.

²³⁹ The tables became the only concrete thing left and the line ceased to be a line and became a front. The caution tape bowed. The traffic drum skidded across the asphalt and left a white arc where water had evaporated in previous rains.

²⁴⁰ "Hold," Aaron said, again, but the word had lost its edge. A child's elbow pressed into the tape and the tape cut into soft skin. The boy blinked and did not cry because crying granted nothing here. Leah pressed her shoulder against the tape to make a broad surface so fewer edges cut.

²⁴¹ A crate slid from the nearer flatbed when a state guard tried to clear space for a forklift that had not arrived. He grabbed it with both hands, tossed it short, and it hit the pavement. The slats broke. Cardboard toppled and spilled across the surface. Everyone could see the blanks. No water. Not a single bottle in that box.

²⁴² The front surged. A state guard fired a shot into the air, the sound was hard and echoed off the gantry. People flinched and went forward anyway; the opening remained, and bodies moved toward it. Someone went down near the barrier; the mass compressed and bodies stepped over him.

²⁴³ Aaron hooked his arm around Leah's shoulders to make a structure that would prevent her from being turned and separated. Pain spiked along his left ribs; he counted through it. He had slung one of their reusable cloth bags across his chest earlier to free his hands. A hand he didn't see grabbed the bag strap and yanked. The seam tore sideways, fabric giving, a sound small compared to the weight around them. The sealed PET bottle dropped from the bag mouth. He reached for it, fingers grazing smooth plastic. A shoe came down, then another. The bottle collapsed in the middle with a snap of stressed plastic and spread water into the low points between aggregate stones. It ran in a line toward a crack. Another foot hit it again to no effect. They had started with two 1.5-litre bottles. One lay crushed under shoes. One remained. One bottle put range in hours, not days.

²⁴⁴ Leah's hoodie caught on something behind them, a hand or a hook on a fence edge. It resisted and then tore down the back seam, loose threads snapping. Her skin showed pale in a long line across her shoulder blades in air that carried a metallic taste. Aaron shifted his body to cover that line. He was not large, but size did not matter; position did. He made his shoulder the place where the next shove landed.

²⁴⁵ On the far side of the truck, a knot formed around a state guard whose vest webbing had grab points that were useful for carrying grenades and also for pulling a person down. Three men had his vest in

their hands, and he could not both keep his footing and control his weapon. His boots slid; he dropped to a knee and then onto his side. His helmet rim clicked on aggregate. The mass folding over him kept moving.

246 A second flatbed tried to pivot to open an egress lane. The driver measured it wrong under pressure and turned too ambitiously. The truck jackknifed at the hinge between cab and bed, blocking the road beyond the tables. The gap that had existed for an orderly outflow narrowed until a person could not pass. People saw the space closing and pushed harder.

247 "Table," Aaron said out of habit, angling left toward the canopy where order survived in stacked paper. His head had made the map already and was following the only arrow he still believed in.

248 "Gap," Leah said. He felt the jerk on his sleeve. She pulled a half-step with the energy of someone lighter, then another. He recalculated and followed. He looked where she had pointed earlier, the same gap Leah had pointed out. The bottom rail at the fence had a lift in it, zip ties popped. A child could have gone through easily. A teenager could make it. A man could force it if he did not need to take a full breath while doing it.

249 They moved outside the main flow. Aaron got his palms on the chain-link, rough metal with old galvanising rubbed thin, and pulled up while Leah dropped and shoved her shoulder through the narrow space. She pushed with her legs and slid. The bandage on her hand snagged once and left a small strand of cloth. She reached back and got his sleeve, twisting fabric in her fingers to gain purchase. Two more plastic ties at the post gave as he lifted. He did not have the rib to make it smooth; pain went bright and then dull. He went anyway. The bottom rail came up, he flattened, and he worked his hips through with a grinding of zipper teeth against grit. On the other side the slope fell away.

250 They slid down the gravel embankment. The stones were rounded river rock that had been dumped to armour the canal side. They rolled to stop momentum, a controlled fall that still scraped skin from elbows.

Leah kept her backpack on her chest to protect it; Aaron kept his left arm tight to guard his ribs. They lay where they had stopped for two counts and then got up because others would find this hole.

251 Above, the crowd sound shifted again: a higher frequency that meant people were screaming names now. A second shot cracked, and this time it was not redirection but part of the energy. None of it served distribution.

252 "Towpath," Leah said, breathing fast. She looked left, downstream, where crushed stone made a thin walkway beside the canal under scrub trees that had survived on water that would not sustain them much longer.

253 Aaron angled his body toward the road by reflex. Cars continued to inch in place. The lanes no longer mattered. The jackknifed truck made a gate he could not pass with a car anyway. Pain confirmed what his eyes already knew.

254 He nodded once. The nod was for the path, for letting her set it. He filed lead to her and adjusted pace around his ribs. His breath settled into a shallow cycle that allowed movement. There was no language for concession beyond the nod and the way he moved behind her.

255 They kept to the shadow of the fence line. A supersonic crack went across the canal and bounced off concrete. They crouched by reflex, their bodies folding small, and then they moved because staying still placed them on a map of trajectories they could not calculate.

256 At a culvert mouth, water from a surface lot drained into the canal through a corrugated pipe. A thin film on the flow showed colour shifts that did not belong in water. The lip of the culvert had a white crust that had not dissolved in last night's rain. The smell there was the pool smell and ground metal.

257 A kiosk that had once held event flyers now held a municipal map. The bottom half had been torn away at an angle. The remaining half showed the 'Official Corridor' in blue lines overlaid on streets that had

not been swept. The weigh station appeared as a neat icon at the edge of the map with arrows around it that suggested movement would be orderly. The arrows did not show trucks with tarps that lifted to reveal nothing. Aaron looked at it for three seconds that he counted. Then he moved, the information tagged as noise.

258 Leah stopped on the edge of the path and shifted the backpack to open the main zip just enough to check the bottle. She put her fingers on the cap to feel the moulded teeth of the tamper band and twisted one degree to check play. Still sealed. She slid it deeper against her chest and set the straps tighter. She looked at him, then at the path.

259 He did not ask to carry it. He knew the math: she had both hands available most of the time, and his left side could not take a fall with weight on it. She read that calculation without words.

260 They stepped onto crushed stone. It made a sound underfoot that carried. The path ran straight and then bent with the canal, following the line the engineers had set long before water needed to be treated like a chemical. The canal surface had a sheen that moved when the wind shifted. In the distance a pump coughed, ran, coughed again, then fell silent. Radios from the checkpoint had become a low texture behind them, then nothing that could be understood.

261 They moved inland along a route that did not appear on the blue corridor arrows. The sanctioned lane and its signs stayed behind them. The city did not vanish. It just became quieter in the parts that mattered to them now. He counted ninety in his head, an interval to decide intake later.

Chapter 4

Canal Towpath

²⁶² The towpath narrowed where the canal widened into an industrial basin. Barges lay at moorings along the sheet-piled edge, their decks tilted a few degrees off design trim. Mooring lines rode loose in their eyes and brushed against cleats where crew had tied them when water still held the hulls level. Streaks of dark algae showed the old surface line, a datum band laid on steel and concrete by a different set of rainfall chemistry. The current moved slowly under a sheen that broke in plates when the wind crossed.

²⁶³ Aaron kept to the inner side of the path, ribs held by posture rather than tape, his breaths counted and rationed to match the distance. The turn of his torso had been calibrated since the loading bay. He held his upper body still and let his legs perform the change in direction. Leah ranged between the edge and the fence, eyes on the next bend, then the one after. Her hand was wrapped, the white cloth under new tape. The cloth had gone grey at the edges where path dust and dried canal mist had marked it.

²⁶⁴ “Lines,” Leah said, indicating the moorings without breaking pace. The ropes had slackened enough that a tug had set and landed its spliced eye in a way that would permit a retrieval without lifting. No tug would come.

²⁶⁵ “Level drop,” Aaron said. A reaction expressed as procedure. Falling levels meant more than the lines; cavitation risks would increase at pumps that had not been designed for higher dissolved solids. The observation matched what a display would show. Reduced draft would stall barge deliveries and shift volume to trucks the remaining lanes could

not support.

²⁶⁶ At a safety sign, a wiped border had left a white fringe that persisted despite wind and grime. The sign still directed hard hats and vests. The vests were at a checkpoint now or hanging on pegs where they would stay. He ran his tongue across the back of his teeth and tasted a background of disinfectant and coins he had not put in his mouth.

²⁶⁷ They rounded a bend and encountered the spillway gate, a steel leaf fixed between piers, raised just enough to let volume pass into the next reach. Flow pressed an object against the lower edge in steady contact that did not release. A person lay face-down in brown water, held there by a lift under the chest. The fingers of one hand were splayed and a thin plastic bag, the kind used to carry a small number of items, had caught on two of them. The bag ballooned and collapsed in rhythm with the limited surge that made it past the gate. The head was turned away. No rescue line on the concrete. No truck on the access. No shutdown, no crew; the gate held what it held.

²⁶⁸ Leah stopped for half a second. She did not look away. Aaron registered the stop and did not reach for her. He scanned the gate mechanism for a breaker lockout and saw only rusted boxes and a dead indicator.

²⁶⁹ They moved on. Leah pointed to the trabecular pattern of white residue along the canal edge where water dried and salt bands remained. The pattern traced every micro-roughness on the poured concrete. It continued in a thin line along the base of the pilings where capillary action had drawn small menisci that had then evaporated.

²⁷⁰ “Metric,” she said, flat. She tapped the crust with her knuckle. The sound was a dry click.

²⁷¹ He nodded once. It did not need words. All his reading about conductivity and halide loading had been replaced by these bands. He would have photographed them once. Now the bands recorded the change more clearly than any chart.

272 The city hum diluted with every metre. At first it was a reduction in the range of frequencies, less tyre noise, fewer horns. Then it became wind across a stand of scrub trees that had grown along the towpath where maintenance had fallen off, and the occasional cough of a pump that had not yet seized, two coughs to one short run. Somewhere behind them a siren made an attempt at urgency, rose and fell twice, and then stopped at a non-pattern point. He counted the seconds until the next. None came. He let the count stand.

273 Leah swept her gaze across low benches and under a staircase to a raised maintenance platform and shook her head once. Sitting would place them in view from three sides. The benches faced the water. The staircase had only one way off. Visibility traps. She gestured along the path instead. Movement carried fewer corners.

274 He wanted shelter because shelter implied a condition with rules. His ribs wanted rest that was not measured in tens and twenties. But in the last place where rules had been written in marker on a board and held by volunteers, a bottle had broken under a shoe and the line had become a front. He suppressed the urge to correct posture and gave Leah the nod that meant the path, the next bend, the next change. Letting her set route reduced variables.

275 Ahead, two teenagers stood on a pedestrian bridge that crossed the canal at a slight angle. They were too thin for their jackets and their hair had been cut for maintenance rather than style. They watched without signalling and did not call out. One shifted; a shoe scuffed on concrete. They turned their faces toward the interior and then back to the water, then were no longer visible when Aaron and Leah rounded the next bend. A decision had been taken by them that did not include contact.

276 Leah dropped to a crouch at the mouth of a service road that ran away from the path between low warehouses. She moved three metres in, checked left and right, and returned with the same speed. It dead-ended against a lane of closed roll-ups. A cul-de-sac would make them patient

prey if anyone chose to map their movement. She did not explain. She did not waste words to carry a point that the next bend already held.

277 The wind rose and carried a persistent chemical tang. Rain residuals had dried on every surface, but the smell from a drainage slot in the retaining wall retained the heavy character of pool maintenance. He mapped the smell to treatment regimes that were failing to control the combination of ions now flowing through the system. He stopped himself from pursuing the thought into a plan. There would be no plan that distributed chlorine better than wind could carry it.

278 They crossed a footbridge where an algae line showed a level two hands higher than the current water. Leah placed her boots on the non-slick parts of the boards and tested each plank before committing weight. The river stones below had caught white residue in their interstices. A paper cup had lodged behind a rusted angle iron and now bore a thick encircling band that would not rub off when it dried; it would become one more ring measured as a countdown.

279 They passed a set of mooring posts where tags from the port authority had once hung. The tags had numbers and dates printed in black. Someone had written in pen a revision date and then another, each getting closer together. The last was only three days after the one before. The ink had bled in the wet air and the numbers were hard to read. Frequency of intervention had gone up until intervention had ceased altogether.

280 “Any weirs ahead?” Leah asked.

281 “Two,” he said. “Small. A few centimetres of drop.” He had seen them on the municipal map at the kiosk before the crowd had made it a wall. The map did not show a body pinned to a gate.

282 They kept moving. The canal widened again and the path moved away from the water to go around a fenced intake yard. The chain-link had been wired with a domestic alarm box that hung open now. A red LED that had once indicated status no longer lit. On the concrete apron

beyond, a portable meter lay on its side with the display dark. A past reading could have been recorded inside and logged against a value in a system that had now turned into a list of messages with dates and little squares coloured in ways that could still calm people in offices.

283 “Don’t stop,” Leah said, seeing him glance at the meter.

284 “I won’t,” he said. He let the urge pass. Their database now was how quickly his breaths stacked when he tried to talk too much and how the knot of tape on her hand held under pressure.

285 At the next bend, the towpath dipped and rose around a sink. In the low point, dried water left a cracked grid of pale lines across the dust. He put a foot in the only place where that grid had not fully formed and lifted it again without leaving a mark that would hold the next rain. Leah moved in his angle of vision and checked the tree line. She kept her left hand on the strap of her pack and her right against her chest where the bottle sat. He watched for her to switch hands or adjust; she did not. She had accepted the load and the responsibility in a way that had nothing to do with his history of printed schedules.

286 A shadow at the margin of the canal resolved into a shopping trolley tipped on its side with a white arc along one edge where rain had dried repeatedly. The arc sat under a film that had etched the metal slightly. He stepped around a patch of damp under the trolley where there was no smell now, only colour. The colour did not belong to water.

287 They reached a place where the path merged with a streetside segment that ran between low brick walls. Beyond, low brick walls and gaps replaced storefronts. The sound field consisted of wind in grass and something plastic rattling against metal where a cable tie had been clipped too close to an edge. A siren that might have been ambulatory started again near the centre and stopped again where fuel and direction had ended.

288 They did not shelter. The benches were visible from too many angles. Three at least. He could not model all of them with his current

oxygen uptake. Leah continued to make small adjustments that kept them out of fixed frames.

289 At a culvert mouth much like the one they had passed earlier, the iridescence on the thin layer of water had more colour to it under changing light. Bands pulsed when the wind ruffled the surface. The lip had formed a continuous crust that had grown thicker toward the sunward side. Leah looked at it and raised a hand that might have touched it once in some earlier time to test. She did not touch it now. The crust already provided the measurement. Thicker on the sun side meant more loose crystals on that edge. He moved them one step to the other side of the path to keep dust off the bottle mouth.

290 When the basin ended, the path bent toward a concrete pedestrian tunnel under an old rail spur. The tunnel had been tagged with paint that had run in rain and then been outlined by the mineral film of the new precipitation. The outlines made the letters more angular and hard to read. He stayed quiet to keep his breath steady.

291 The light beyond the tunnel had changed. Dusk had become the kind of late that made distances compress because edges merged. Leah slowed without asking. He matched her pace and measured the shallow cough that started when he tried to talk and then faded when he didn't. He revisited the decision to stop and rejected it again.

292 "You good?" Leah asked, not as small talk but as a functional status check.

293 He made a short sound that meant yes within the range she would accept. He left it there; detail would not reduce distance.

294 They left the water at a break where the path cut up to a feeder road. A shuttered parking structure squatted at the corner, its entry chain lifted high enough that a person could duck under. The entry ramp had a diagonal stripe of white across it where rain had pooled and receded. A sign warned of clearance limits. Another told drivers how to pay. Both retained rings of dried water around old tape marks. A staircase door

stood one latch away from open where someone had defeated it with a pry bar. Leah went first, pushing gently until the hinge moved. Sound damped against concrete, and the smell here was dry dust and old oil.

295 “Cap,” she said.

296 He nodded and watched her remove the bottle carefully. She turned it slowly, checked the tamper band with her thumb and forefinger, felt the molded ridges to confirm no stretch, then twisted the cap just enough to release. No flex in the ring. The small sound of air equalizing existed and then did not. She poured a measured capful and held it steady. The cap held about five millilitres.

297 “Yours first,” she said.

298 He took the cap, held it to his lower lip, and tipped with care. The water had the plastic taste from containment and the memory of what had been dissolved in it at some earlier point and then removed by design. He swallowed. He did not tilt his head back because that invited a larger inhale that would not go where it should under the current constraints. He handed the cap back and watched her refill it for herself. She sipped, swallowed, and tightened the cap back down until the ridge teeth settled under the ring with a soft ratchet sound. She seated the bottle against her sternum again where it sat between zippers and fabric.

299 “Every ninety,” she said.

300 He nodded once. It would cost him more to argue the dosage than to accept it. She had selected a number that matched what bodies could accept without triggering systems they could not feed. The regularity carried comfort on paper. He let it carry enough here to make the next minutes possible.

301 He pressed his hand carefully against his ribs. His next inhale caught. “Hurts.” It was unnecessary to report, but necessary for planning.

302 She scanned the stairway above. “Stairs, not floor,” she said. “Ten steps up. We’ll sit with backs to the wall. No one can stand behind.”

303 He looked at the concrete landing. One exit, but he had his ankles planted and would feel a shadow before it touched him. “Okay.”

304 They stepped to the landing above the entry and sat. The concrete took heat from his legs through the fabric. Grit pressed under his palm when he shifted. He arranged his torso to keep the injured ribs from catching at the wrong angle. Leah eased her pack off but left the straps looped around her elbows so she could pull it up in one move. She placed the bottle deep again, zip pulled straight.

305 “Forty on, twenty off,” she said. “We can hold that.”

306 “Good,” he said. He checked the time on his phone without waking the screen fully. He did not need light to know the clock would show a number that would add up to a pre-dawn arrival at the interstate if they did not stop more than agreed.

307 Through the open doorway a faint flicker became visible and then expanded. He stood to look without standing in the doorway. Down the road, a car burned. The flame moved along the seats in a slow creep, not fed by an explosion, just material by material, cloth to foam to plastic. No sirens. No engine noise that would mean response. Leah did not come to the door because there was nothing for her to do with that information.

308 “Normal now,” she said, settling the words without inflection.

309 He sat. A minute later he stood again and wrapped his ribs with a strip of cloth pulled from the pack. Leah held one end, taking care not to twist. He pulled it tight to where breath still moved and pain stayed at the edge rather than at the centre. She tore grey tape with her teeth and secured the wrap. She re-taped her hand over the white cloth, checking that circulation did not fail in the fingers. The tape seals adhered to skin still carrying a film of salts that had come through pores and not dried fully. Technique replaced what he could no longer call denial. He made the shift because she had already made it.

310 “Five kilometres,” she said. “Interstate, then irrigation lines.”

311 He nodded. The irrigation lines meant places where pipes crossed and valves might sit; they meant metal boxes where flow had once been managed and might now be silent but still existing in space that could hide a body.

312 They ate a packet of dry crackers that were more sodium than food and resealed the plastic with a piece of tape. Dry food did not make sense under this rationing regime. It was what they had. He loosened his jaw when it locked and swallowed dry.

313 “Sleep in turns,” Leah said. “I’ll take first. Forty minutes.”

314 He set a timer without sound and watched the screen until it dimmed. She adjusted her hood to keep the dust off. Her breathing stayed quick for a few minutes and then settled. He sat with his back on the concrete and counted one hundred and eighty, three times, and stopped when the count did not constrain anything more. He listened for steps. He heard the sound of plastic rubbing against a metal edge every so often when wind moved through the entry, and the slow drag of a boot heel on concrete. He lifted a hand to wake her, then froze when the scrape came again and stopped. He counted to four, twice. A dark bar along the door edge read as a boot toe, then resolved to a torn strip of weather seal. He held still for a count of five. He kept his breathing shallow and his shoulders still. The scrape did not return. After his forty, he touched her elbow and she came to waking without flinching.

315 When it was his turn to lie still, he did not fully sleep. He drifted to a place where images did not come. The burning car had no sound in his head. The only sound was wind, fitted into the remake of the city’s own noise. The timer vibrated and flashed. He sat, retied the binding where it had loosened slightly, and rolled his shoulders until the pain settled into the same contour it had had earlier. They stood together without words and left the stairwell as they found it, no marks beyond dust patterns that would not matter to anyone who came later. He glanced at the phone: 04:10, enough margin for five kilometres before dawn.

316 They took a feeder that ran parallel to the canal for a while and then turned inland across an open field where a sound wall had once mitigated noise from the interstate, choosing exposed ground toward the interstate over corners they couldn't see. The wall still stood. The noise it had managed no longer existed. The sky had shifted from black to the kind of grey that did not either commit to light or admit night had returned. They climbed the embankment to a pedestrian-friendly overpass that rose over eight lanes of road. No lights moved on the pavement below. No trucks. No cars. The message boards had gone dark except for one panel that displayed a frozen advisory. The letters were still legible but meant nothing without motion to carry them as instruction to people in vehicles.

317 Aaron paused at the center of the bridge. He had looked at maps that carried the interstate as a line that joined places where food and water travelled. The line lay inert now, a long band of aggregate and bitumen without function. A piece of tread lay in one lane where a semi had shed it months earlier. The edges of the tread had accumulated pale dust, and a ring under it marked where a puddle had evaporated in concentric bands that would not go away without real water.

318 "Look," Leah said, not at the road but out over the land west of the bridge. The fields began there, formerly green strips divided by irrigation lines into rectangles that had once been visible from the air in crisp geometry. Now the surface was pale and brittle. Irrigation ditches reflected a dull array of colours in the low light, a thin film indicating the presence of things the treatment plant had not been built to remove in the volumes currently present. A few trees near farmhouses had kept leaves because of their roots and shaded ground, but the leaves themselves had a white edge.

319 They crossed. The overpass had a chain-link fence to prevent falls. Someone had cut a section to throw something over months ago. Through the opening he saw a billboard that faced the interstate, an image of a bottle with water beading on it, promising purity. A skull had been

spray-painted over the label in thick black. The skull had been drawn as a shorthand rather than an art object. The person who had done it did not want to be misread.

320 “Lights,” Leah said. She pointed. In the fold of the land, far toward where the river would run, a set of lights held steady. They were not the yellow of sodium that cities still used on the edges. These were bright and fixed on a single plane, aligned along a structure. Floodlights. They could be a plant, a yard, a dam. The dam was on the map he had memorised for its intake structures. He could not confirm identity from here, but the bearing aligned with the idea of a river valley where concrete had been poured in a different era with a different confidence.

321 “Bearing,” he said. He marked it in relation to a radio tower with one steady red on its top that still worked. He placed the angle against the bridge parapet in his head and would carry that angle down the slope.

322 They descended the embankment on the other side. The verge had patches of scrub with small flowers that had managed one pass before running out of something they needed. He put his boot on a crust that had formed over soil that had dried too often, and the crust flaked in a tight pattern. Each flake had a white edge where salts had risen. Under the flake, the soil was powder. He avoided inhaling dust because he could not cost oxygen to cough.

323 A ditch ran beside the field, water a few centimetres deep. The surface showed swirls of colour, subtle in this light, not vivid, but real, a record of chemistry. Frogs would not have called from this ditch. He did not test the surface with his hand because they had done enough testing with taste and glass and learned what it gave. Leah stepped over the ditch and landed on ground that held, then took a second step and adjusted when the next patch shifted. She moved with small corrections that made a straight line where a more confident stride would have earned a fall.

324 A bird rose from the ditch, flapped twice, and went low again. It had stayed here because it had no other coordinates.

325 They came to a fence that had been built to keep deer out of a field during a season when a crop had been worth defending. The fence had fallen in two places where posts had rotted at the base and salt had corroded wire. Leah stepped through, turned, and watched Aaron adjust his body to bring his ribs through without twisting. He did it by stepping with one foot forward, one back, and sliding to avoid rotation. She said nothing but stood ready to catch a stumble. He did not stumble.

326 On the other side, a farm road cut across in a straight line toward a group of structures that could be barns or houses or both. From this distance, the roofs looked collapsible. A light glowed in one window. It could be a battery lantern, a candle, a generator, a fire. It told them nothing about water.

327 Leah looked at the floodlights again. “Same,” she said, adjusting the bearing.

328 “Same,” he said. He checked the time. Their ninety minutes had almost turned over. He waited for her to call it rather than asking. She did. They stopped, not at the top of a rise or in a depression, but on a slight side slope where a person coming at them would have to adjust footing. She removed the bottle, opened the cap with care, and poured two capfuls. She handed him his first. He took it, drank, and returned the cap. She tipped her own into her mouth and closed the bottle again, ring settled below the teeth with the same soft ratchet.

329 “Two more after the next two sets,” she said, meaning they would get two more each if nothing changed and then nothing after that unless they found a source that would not strip their throats and kidneys and would not coat their glasses in a crust when it dried.

330 He left the after aside. The field ahead held an irrigation line made of old PVC that had collapsed where it crossed under the road and a metal standpipe that rose out of the ground with a locking cap that had been left off by someone who had hoped for pressure that never came. He would look inside when they reached it because he could not not look, but

he knew what would be there: a dry tube scent and the dead smell of accumulated solids.

331 They walked. The road crunched under their boots where fine crystals had formed in places where water had been and then gone. A sign lay on its face in the ditch. He kicked it lightly to turn it. A municipal notice about water restrictions from a month when people still believed restrictions moved the dial. The seal at the top had bled. The text told him to reduce use and not to waste. Under it, a hand had written a question that had been asked at the community centre and not answered there either. He set the sign down again without reading the question to the end.

332 The light in the farmhouse window went out. He noted it and did not adjust course.

333 They reached the standpipe. He leaned down, keeping his ribs fixed, and put his eye on the opening. The pipe held a shallow pool of liquid that did not ripple under his breath. He saw a skin on it, a cloudy look consistent with rehydrated residue. He left it untouched and didn't call Leah to look.

334 "Keep going," she said. It might have been a question, but it was not. He stood and they did.

335 The floodlights remained in position, neither flickering nor shifting. Whoever ran those lights had power and a reason to spend it. A dam had reasons. An industrial site had different ones. He placed the bearing again against the angle of their shoulders and the shape of the land under their boots. They kept their line between the collapsed PVC crossing and the radio tower's single red, both set toward the floodlights.

336 The interstate behind them would still be empty when light fully arrived. He kept his eyes forward. The road ahead did not promise more than distance measured in steps and breaths. He adjusted his binding with two fingers and stopped when tightening cut breath too far. Leah watched and then looked away, leaving the adjustment unremarked.

337 They descended toward the fields with the smell of dry soil and old wet plastic in the air. The fields did not wave or carry life in a way that could be perceived at this scale. They showed salt rings and residue and a long absence of usable rain. The traces persisted without help. The cough of pumps could no longer push against new loads.

338 They stayed with the plan; it kept decisions few. Leah held the bearing because she had taken that from him at the fence and he had not asked for it back.

Chapter 5

Salted Field

³³⁹ The fields did not hold moisture. What had been irrigated rectangles now showed a pale crust in islands and sheets with powder between. A ditch carried a few finger-widths of liquid that reflected colours inconsistent with water that could be used. On the surface, wind pushed a film that shifted in bands. Aaron moved on ground that flaked under his boots and tried to keep his torso still. His left side protested when he forgot and twisted for a better look at distance. Leah checked the edges where cover existed, fence posts, a collapsed trellis, the metal standpipe they had refused earlier, the line of a road two properties over with a broken culvert.

³⁴⁰ Mid-morning brought a farmhouse. The rooflines had sagged at their joints. A concrete trough stood in a yard where cattle had once been turned in. Its rim was ringed in white where water had evaporated over months without a full rinse, each ring a record of how far against hope someone had filled it and how fast the level fell. The yard gate had lost one hinge and hung skewed. No vehicle tracks led in or out within the last weather cycle that could still be read.

³⁴¹ Leah slowed and shifted to the side so the trough sat between them and any door. She lifted a palm to warn for a door crack. Aaron saw her fingers splay once and then contract. He read it as restraint rather than stop. They moved to the edge of the yard on a line that would let them fall back and not be pinned by the fence.

³⁴² The farmhouse door opened. A woman stood with one hand on the jamb, hair clipped short and skin around the eyes creased from sun and squinting. She did not call hello. She looked at their hands and their

packs. A second figure moved behind her and disappeared into the interior shadow.

343 “What have you got for water?” she said. Her voice was a measured thing, likely used that way for days. “You pass our yard, you trade.”

344 Leah kept her right elbow tight to her chest. The bottle sat beneath fabric and tape. Aaron kept his shoulders square and his hands where the woman could see them.

345 “We don’t carry surplus,” he said. He kept the plane of his body between the woman’s eyes and the shape under Leah’s jacket.

346 “You’ve got something,” the woman said. She looked at the trough rim where residue held. “I’ve got children. They don’t drink this.” She tapped the white line with her knuckle. It made a dry sound.

347 “Not enough to trade,” Aaron said. “We’re transit only.” He heard his own words and heard that they sounded like an application rather than a refusal. “We can offer tools.” He put a hand to his pack slowly and lifted the flap.

348 “Tools,” the woman said. The word carried no weight anymore.

349 He took out a small folding box cutter, warehouse issue, with a spare blade taped to the handle against loss. “Sharp,” he said. “Clean. Spare blade.” It was the kind of offer he understood: something functionally defined, a thing with an appropriate use in a process.

350 “Cut what?” she said. She didn’t look at the knife. “We lost seedlings. We lost beans. We lost the last damned squash. Cut what?”

351 Before he could answer, a boy of fifteen, at most, stepped onto the porch. He held a rusted hoe in his right hand, the kind that had scoured a patch by a back door when it gave a return on effort. He did not hold it high. He stood with it resting but with both hands ready. The blade edge was pitted and sat with a bevel that had not been sharpened in months. On the far side of the yard, a grey-haired man stepped out near a strainer

post where the fence bent ninety degrees. He did not say anything. He kept his position in a way that closed a corner. With the boy off the porch and the grey-haired man set at the strainer post about nine metres out, the corner fence would catch them if they moved wrong.

352 Leah made a small motion that would not read to anyone who did not share her map, two fingers down by her thigh moving twice. Back. Aaron had learned it along the canal and the feeder road. His body wanted to comply. His mouth moved first.

353 “Listen,” he said. He kept the knife in sight but not extended in a way that could read as a threat. “There is a distribution point ahead. Not here. We passed one that was closed, but the corridor,” He stopped when he saw the woman’s face change at the word. “Numbers and lanes,” he said, and heard the mistake as he made it. “Two every ten seconds, left lane,”

354 The boy didn’t wait for the rest. He came off the porch. The woman set off too, not at a run but at the walk of someone who has decided to close distance without wasting motion. The grey-haired man moved at the same time, keeping the angle so that if Aaron and Leah went straight back, they would hit the corner of the fence and the trough. Leah had read this when she had asked to move. Aaron had tried to apply a form that could not hold. He stepped back and his heel found stubble cut at ankle height. It held until his weight was fully on it and then he went sideways. His left side took the ground. A shock jumped under his ribs and into the space where breath should go. Breath did not go there. It stacked at the top and made a sound he didn’t intend.

355 The first strike he felt landed on his right shoulder, not a swing with the blade, just a blow with a handle end to make him let go of anything that might matter. He kept his hand off Leah. He did not let it curl. Leah got a hand in the collar of his jacket and yanked. She pulled him up without a word on a line that moved them off the fence corner and into open ground. His shoulder absorbed the hit, locked, then carried weight. He got a foot under him.

356 “Back,” Leah said then, one word, finally aloud. “Now.”

357 They moved. The boy followed, the hoe held two-handed now. The woman angled to their left. The grey-haired man covered the right. They were not sprinters; they were desperate. The yard had no cover. The only trap was the ground, which gave way under set weight. Aaron looked for his breath and took what he could get in segments. He took the knife and stuffed it into his pocket because showing it invited a bad outcome and holding it made him useless at speed.

358 Clods hit around them and broke to dust. One struck Aaron between the shoulders and became powder on his jacket. Another hit Leah’s backpack and turned to a white smudge. She kept them moving toward a shallow draw that traced a path out of the yard’s field. It had a lower profile. From the farmhouse, the woman shouted something about thieves. The grey-haired man did not shout. He gained in the angle the longer they stayed on the straight line.

359 “Right,” Leah said. “Now.”

360 Aaron pivoted a step to the right and felt the pain spike hot and then ease to a contour he knew. The draw deepened and showed a coarse, broken edge where spring water would have moved in other years. At the bottom, a strip of liquid lay under a crust about sixty centimetres across. The crust caught light. It was not ice. Along the lip, a white line about a millimetre thick had built up over repeats and now held as a continuous layer. The surface had coloured swirls despite the shade.

361 Leah went down first, no pause. She put one boot where a clump of grass still anchored soil. It held. Her weight moved across. She landed on the far side and took two fast steps to clear the bank. Aaron followed on the same placement, adjusting for his ribs. The crust under his next step flexed in a way that did not break. He did not set full weight. He kept moving and his foot met solid ground on the far side. When the boy reached the bank, he stopped. He looked at the strip, then at the woman, then at his own boots. He did not come across. He did not know whether

a boot that went through would come back out with skin.

362 “Leave it,” the grey-haired man said. He did not look away from the white edge. He and the woman checked their perimeter and broke off. Their decision took a second and carried the information that crossing would cost more than they had.

363 Aaron and Leah kept moving along the draw until Aaron’s breath went from stacked to a cadence that gave him enough oxygen to see further than the ground. The run cost calories they could not replace today. He kept his hands away from his ribs because pressing did nothing but tell him what he already knew.

364 “Stop,” Leah said when they had put a distance that made sense between them and the farmhouse. They stopped for sixty seconds. Leah set the bearing by the radio tower red light that still held steady as a single point during daylight. His breath settled to six steps per inhale. The floodlights in the valley were not visible from here. They were too low and the ground between hid them.

365 He nodded. He tried to speak and went into a cough that caught high, intercostals in spasm, and dragged the pain back under his left arm into the plane of his chest. The cough came again when he tried to get a longer breath. He bent in a way that did not compress his ribs and waited for the impulse to pass. Leah watched and waited for the signal that he could fit words in the spaces he had.

366 “Okay,” he said finally. It was not full but it carried meaning.

367 “Ditch,” Leah said. She angled toward a longer line of the irrigation network where banks would give them a profile below the horizon and any watchers at a distance would read them as movement at ground level rather than as upright figures.

368 They moved. The ditch ran straight and then bent around a field corner. At one point, a stand of volunteer weeds made a low screen. Birds did not call here. Insects did not buzz. A sound from earlier, a pump’s cough and half run, did not repeat. Aaron placed his feet where ground

looked compacted. He kept his torso as still as he could. Leah shortened their stride to stop his breath tipping back to coughs.

369 On the right, a barn leaned. It had once been painted a light colour. The paint had been stripped by weather and by water that did not end clean. A cistern sat against the downspout, a plastic tank that had seen seasons. At the base of the outlet, a ring showed where overflow had dried in concentric bands. The bands were white. The rim around the top where rain had gone in had white lacing about two millimetres thick.

370 Leah looked at it as they passed. “No,” she said.

371 “Yes,” Aaron said reflexively, meaning he agreed with her read, not that they should stop.

372 “Trap,” she said. “Whatever’s there is wrong.” She kept moving, a fraction faster for three steps until they had line-of-sight cover from the barn. Aaron’s chest eased as distance did the work their legs had to do.

373 When they reached a stretch where fence posts still stood at regular intervals, Leah stopped and slid Aaron’s pack off his shoulders. He did not object because the act read as necessary rather than as statement. She shouldered his pack over her own, adjusted straps until weight sat on her hips and not on ribs he carried. The wrap at the base of her right thumb scraped under the strap; she shifted the padding a finger-width to keep pressure off her palm. She looked up the line of posts until she could see the next angle in the fence.

374 “Two to there,” she said, meaning two kilometres, the way farm markers broke the land into units that matched work.

375 He nodded. The joint took the load and worked. He counted posts. The first dozen gave him a number that made the distance finite. Leah carried both packs with the straps set tight on her hips, and they kept a straight run along the fence line.

376 On the far side of a powerline cut, a patch of ground had gone from crust sheets into powder. Leah stopped and crouched. She slipped

two fingers into the top layer and brought up a pinch. It ran from her fingers into her other hand in a fine stream; each flake carried a white edge about two millimetres thick. She lifted her right pocket and let the powder drop into it. She did not explain it. Aaron watched and did not comment. He understood it as a record, even if he did not know what she planned to do with it.

377 Sound came from the bearing they had kept since the overpass. It fit the pattern of a generator set or an industrial yard, steady load without fluctuation. It did not sync with any windmill or farm pump. It did not pulse as if it were emergency gear that cycled on and off at fuel intervals. It held. The floodlights would be there when the land let them be seen again. Aaron pencilled distance against their speed and the remaining heat of the day. He put the perimeter at about twelve kilometres at their pace, tying the hum to their kept bearing and the tower's steady light with the post count as a check; dusk was reachable if they skipped extra stops. He marked dusk as a point that could be met if they did not stop for more than water dosing and pain management. He did the calculation without words. Leah checked his eyes when he lifted them and nodded once, reading the same endpoint.

378 Heat rose fast from the ground when the sun moved behind thin cloud. The surface reflected light back into their faces. The horizon tipped once, then again. The second time, he put a hand out and touched Leah's sleeve without force, not to stop her but to link. She stopped anyway and took the bottle from inside her jacket with care. She turned it in her hands and checked the teeth of the ring. She turned the cap just enough. The small sound of air moving existed and stopped. She poured a capful and held it, then poured a second and held that. She extended the first, five millilitres from her allotment, to Aaron.

379 "That's yours," he said. His mouth was dry. The words came without spit.

380 She shook her head once and put the second cap against her own mouth without tipping. Her eyes stayed on him. He took the cap from her

and tipped. The plastic taste existed. The water itself existed. He swallowed. He did not gasp after. He handed the cap back.

381 She closed the bottle and seated the ring teeth with a soft ratchet. She tucked the bottle back where it had been and made sure fabric covered it fully. She did not explain the cost of giving him her measure because it was obvious. He did not thank her with words here because speaking vented moisture and could set the cough off again, and it would not change the act.

382 They moved again and held the line along the ditch. Aaron's breathing settled to a rhythm that allowed them to keep the time he had set in his head. Their shadows shortened. Then they lengthened. The ditch joined a lateral that pointed toward the fold in the land. When they crested a shallow rise, the floodlights finally presented as visible lines.

383 They were bright and fixed. The hum that reached them now was louder and carried the quality of a site designed to deliver steady output: not a start-stop diesel in isolation, but a bank with fuel reserve meeting steady demand. The light held the contours of a large structure in the valley without naming it. On the approach, fencing appeared at angles, with diagonal bracing catching the light at points where white crust had built from spray that had dried and dried again. The fence had verticals and mesh, a regularity that meant someone had completed the work all the way around.

384 Leah crouched and pointed left. A culvert ran under a service road that dropped toward a lower gate. Its mouth was visible, ribbed concrete with a lip running out of the hillside. The space could take a person through without visibility from the main structure if the angles held.

385 "Culvert," she said.

386 Aaron shook his head. "Visible," he said. "Hands out. No surprises." He looked at the fence and the way light fell on it. "We show we're not a problem."

387 “Okay,” she said. She accepted it because of where they were and what a wrong move could invite.

388 They stepped into view, away from cover. Leah kept her hands clear and low. Aaron kept his hands up to chest height, palms empty. The bottle stayed hidden. They walked toward the fence on a line that hit a point on the ground in front of a mesh bay where two fence panels met. Above, black shapes crossed a narrow line. The spacing of the shapes showed people with a reason to walk a line. Their steps had a measured cadence rather than an excited one. The shape of their shoulders read as load-bearing with gear. This was not improvisation. This was ongoing work. On the mesh, a paint-flaked board read “Stop at line.”

389 A horn sounded once, a specific pitch that carried instruction rather than panic. A voice followed, amplified but not distorted. “Stop at the line.” Another beat. “Hands visible. Stay where you are.”

390 They stopped at a pale stripe painted three metres out and kept their hands in view.

Chapter 6

Dam Camp

³⁹¹ The floodlights were mounted on steel uprights set into the concrete apron, their housings scorched where insects had burned against them weeks ago. Between the uprights and the mesh, a painted board flaked at its edges with "Stop at line" painted on it, and the stripe itself sat pale against a darker, repeatedly rinsed strip of dirt. The horn had sounded once already. The amplified voice had instructed them to stop and keep their hands visible. They stood at the stripe. Under the floodlights the ground looked flat and shadows ran thin between fence and scoured dirt. When Leah lifted her hands, dry residue loosened from her sleeve and fell in small flakes.

³⁹² On the catwalk above, silhouettes moved with the economy of people who had walked that path many times. One paused, then continued. Aaron counted five between the nearest corner and the midpoint. The fifth stopped, rested hands on the rail, and looked down without speaking. The rail had a run of white at its base where runoff from fog or spray had dried repeatedly. Leah's hands sat clear of her jacket, fingers apart, elbows bent outward just enough to read as non-threatening. He kept his palms up, chest high. His ribs stayed tight under the binding.

³⁹³ Boots approached inside the mesh. The man who stepped into the wash of light carried a baton at his belt and a radio clipped to his vest. The vest was rubbed thin over the shoulders. A pale ridge of scar traced his jaw. He held his hands clear of the baton and the radio both. He looked at their hands, then at their boots, then at the straps of their packs. He did not look away when he spoke.

394 “Drop the packs,” he said. “Step back to the line.” He lifted an open palm and made the backing motion without exaggeration. “Hands where I can see them.”

395 Aaron nodded once. He slid the strap from his right shoulder first to keep his left side as still as possible. He lowered the pack and eased it upright against his shin so it wouldn’t fall and spill. Leah took the weight of both straps, let her pack slip from her shoulders, and placed it upright as well. She kept her fingers away from the zippers.

396 “Step back,” the man said. He tapped the baton once against his own thigh. He didn’t reach for it. He watched their feet. They stepped back to make their heels touch the paint.

397 “Names,” he said.

398 “Aaron Hale.”

399 “Leah Hale,” she said.

400 “Hale,” he repeated, as if testing how the syllable moved. “I’m Lacey,” he said. “Omar. Gate. We have rules. They apply.”

401 He didn’t wait for agreement. He made a small motion toward another guard inside the mesh. The second guard brought a bin and set it just beyond the gate where Aaron could see it and not touch it.

402 “Packs down,” Omar said, as if he hadn’t already watched them do that. “We’ll open them. You don’t reach. Pockets out. Knives and tools to the bin. No weapons unless assigned.” His eyes moved to Leah’s jacket. “All liquids visible. Personal water is communal on entry.”

403 She kept her lips closed and her fingers steady on the edge of her jacket. The bottle under her jacket had ridden against her sternum since the canal crossing. Her right elbow stayed close to her body. She looked left without moving her head. Aaron met her eyes. He lowered his shoulders a fraction.

404 Leah took the bottle from inside her jacket. She showed the cap and the tamper ring separated from it, the cap reseated. She didn’t tip it.

She held it in both hands, arms extended. Her right thumb twitched near the cap; her eyes flicked to the ring teeth; then she eased it forward. The guard inside the mesh stepped forward and took it without looking at her face. He held the bottle at a point on the label where fingers wouldn't slip and put it in the bin. The sound was lightweight plastic touching plastic. The guard marked something on a small tablet screen with his thumb.

405 "Pockets," Omar said.

406 Aaron turned his pockets out slowly. The folded weekend schedule had taken damage, softened by sweat and pressure. He set it on the ground at the line. He placed the box cutter next to it with the blade folded. He put the spare blade taped to the handle beside it, adhesive grit on its edges. Leah laid down three hair ties, a small coil of tape, and the blue-edged cloth from her hand when the guard asked to see under the tape. The cloth was grey at the edges from dust. The cut at the base of her thumb showed pink under new tape.

407 "Step back," Omar said again, breathing steady. "We'll bring what returns to you. Not everything returns." He looked at each of them in turn to see if they understood. "If you can't work, you don't stay."

408 A woman moved up the corridor inside the mesh. Her hair sat pulled back with a rubber band. The skin around her eyes looked raw from short sleep and long light. She wore faded fatigues with a taped name strip. She stopped behind Omar. She took in the packs, the bin, the bottle, then the two figures at the line.

409 "Captain," Omar said.

410 She nodded once. "Navarro," she said to them, unnecessary introduction made anyway. She didn't offer a hand. She gave her attention to Leah's taped hand and then to the binding crossing Aaron's ribs under his jacket. "What's the injury?" she said, eyes on Aaron.

411 "Left ribs," he said. "Door came down. Breathing's workable. I can move." He kept his sentences short to keep the pain from rising.

412 She looked to Leah. “Mobility?”

413 “Fine,” Leah said. “Cut here,” she held up her hand. “No loss.”

414 Navarro watched the blood flow in Leah’s fingertips under the tape, checking capillary refill without touching. She nodded once. “No promises here,” she said. “You come in as mouths until you contribute. That’s the math.” She looked back to Aaron. “Work?”

415 “Anywhere you put me,” he said.

416 “Radio range?” Leah said then. “Do you have a set that reaches inland?”

417 Navarro’s mouth flickered once without changing shape. “If you make yourself useful, you can sit a block with Ruth. She’ll tell you what she can hear.” She flicked her eyes at Omar. “Intake both. Boots wash. Packs through quarantine. Water to central. Medical look at the ribs and the hand. Bunks after muster. Galley if they make it before cut.” She shifted her weight. “You don’t steal and you don’t run a side market. You break here, you leave.”

418 “Understood,” Aaron said.

419 “Okay,” Leah said.

420 Omar keyed his radio. “Two for intake,” he said into it. The radio hissed; a clipped call sign came back, then the carrier dropped. He unlocked the gate with a practiced turn that kept his fingers clear of a pinch point. The gate swung inward. He gestured with his palm up. “Through.” He looked at their faces but not in their eyes, a habit made by repetition.

421 Inside the mesh, the concrete darkened six shades where it had held spray long enough to dry to a different tone. The air temperature dropped two degrees. Somewhere below, water moved through a controlled space. The sound of it was constant and regular, unlike the canal cough that had grown irregular as they went inland. The catwalk ran along the edge of a spillway wall. Beyond it, a deep void caught light

and dissolved detail. Leah stepped where Omar's hand pointed, keeping her feet away from the edge of the catwalk without telegraphing fear. Aaron moved with the care his ribs demanded and with the economy that kept his posture neutral under watch.

422 At the far end, a guard with a pump sprayer waited. The sprayer had a faded hazard label. "Boots," she said. She misted their soles and lower sides with a neutralising solution. It ran clear. It pooled along a groove and took a white film with it for a centimetre, then left the same line beneath when it dried. The guard swallowed and sprayed again. The line remained faint and insistent. She finished the procedure anyway and wrote two marks on a clipboard.

423 Omar kept them moving. He steered them into a corridor where cable trays ran along the ceiling and old industrial signage still hung at head height, its edges furred with mineral. The corridor smelled of concrete that had absorbed damp and released it over and over. The walls had places where hands had rubbed them smooth.

424 "You'll get tagged," Omar said. "Badge stays on. Doors open for you where they're supposed to. They don't where they shouldn't. Don't test it." He paused by a table. A young man at the table took a clear photo of each face with a small camera, printed a badge on a thermal unit, and laminated it between sheets that clouded slightly at the edges as they cooled. The badges had their names and a barcode. Omar hooked a finger under Aaron's lanyard and lifted it to collar height, then tapped two knuckles once toward the exit and let the badge fall.

425 Another guard lifted Aaron's pack. She set it on a table behind a plastic sheet and opened it with a gloved hand. She removed a small packet of crackers and set it aside with a stuck label. She held each item up and either returned it to the pack or placed it in a bin marked 'quarantine'. She pointed to Aaron's rib binding without touching him. "Medical's left, two doors down," she said to Omar.

426 Omar nodded. “Walk,” he said to them. He didn’t need to add please. He didn’t need to raise his voice. His presence, and the position he held in the corridor, did the work.

427 The radio room was narrower than the hall outside and taller than it looked from the doorway. Antennas fed lines through the wall in a tight bunch that had been wrapped with tape until it smoothed to a single column. Hand-drawn maps pinned to corkboard showed counties and river lines and the skeleton of a grid network that didn’t exist anymore except in how it had once been intended. Callsigns were written in block letters on torn paper strips and pinned around dials and meters whose glass had been cleaned so often that static had left a pattern. A big clock on the wall hung crooked by the thickness of the cable passing behind it.

428 Ruth Adler sat on a low stool with a headset she didn’t adjust. Her fingertips were yellowed from nicotine. Her skin looked chapped around the mouth and under the nose. She lifted one hand without looking and beckoned. Leah stepped inside and stood where she wasn’t in the way of the door. She kept her hands at her sides, ready for instruction.

429 “Sit,” Ruth said, pointing to the spare stool. “Don’t touch that dial unless I tell you. That one either.” She tapped a control with the back of her knuckle. “You can write.” She pushed a notepad toward Leah with the end of a pencil. The pencil was short and blunt at the end. The pad had a list of callsigns, some crossed out in a single line and some boxed in the corner with a check mark. Ruth tapped the pencil twice on the top margin. Leah wrote the time in the corner.

430 Leah sat on the spare stool and placed the pad on her knees. The headset Ruth wore leaked a thin edge of sound into the room: shaped breathing, carrier hiss, then a voice so far under the noise that Leah had to piece a word from fragments.

431 “AG-Three,” Ruth said softly. “They’re late.” She thumbed a switch. “AG-Three, AG-Three, this is River Dam. Checking.”

432 The speaker gave back noise without the shape of a voice. Ruth rolled a dial a quarter turn. The noise changed quality; mains hum entered at a different frequency around the hiss. “Lost a step,” Ruth said. She eased the dial back. “There,” she said. “Hear it?”

433 “Yes,” Leah said.

434 A different voice arrived, present and then already receding. “This is...” The rest was buried under noise. Another fragment punched through. “...lost peaches...” Then gone again.

435 Ruth didn’t chase it with the dial. She waited four seconds. Leah counted them. Then Ruth called, “AG-Three, repeat.” Silence answered. Ruth moved her hand to a different switch and held it with two fingers, feeling for something that might be mechanical rather than sound. She let the switch up. “We don’t throw the dial at noise,” she said to Leah. “We listen to what’s not there. The pauses tell you if they lost power or they lost a mast or if a human gave up.” She turned a different control with a micro adjustment and the hiss shifted to a breathier texture. “That’s line loss,” she said.

436 Another station broke in, further inland, the consonants clipped and the vowels pulled thin by the path they traveled. “This is Hartley. Turbidity spike to three-eight NTU. Chloride above two-five-zero ppm. Pump two offline pending inspection. Say again, River Dam, copy?”

437 “Copy,” Ruth said. “Hartley, this is River Dam. Copy three-eight NTU, chloride above two-five-zero. Maintain filtration by rotation. We will not relay forward today.” She took her finger off transmit and left the set live. “Hold your people,” she added, not into the mic. The mic sat between them on the table. Leah wrote it on the pad. She wrote the numbers too. She wrote the call sign and the time. Before Ruth tapped again, Leah added the next time marker on her own. Ruth’s pencil paused above the pad, then stayed still.

438 Leah lifted her head. “Do signals come back?” she said. She kept her voice low to avoid masking the meter movement.

439 Ruth didn’t answer. She watched the meter. After a moment she shook her head once, not big enough to have been meant for Leah if Leah hadn’t been looking. “Listen to the drift,” Ruth said. “Hear how the hum came up when Hartley spoke? That’s a generator stepping in. When it drops out hard, that’s fuel. When it fuzzes and collapses, that’s weather on corroded joints.” She leaned in and cupped the headset closer to her ear. “Write the times. Keep your lines straight. When you cross out a call, one line. We remember them.”

440 The board on the wall had three callsigns boxed in red. One had a cross-out line drawn through it at an angle more careful than the others. Leah remembered the two silent teenagers on the bridge, they had watched and then gone, and her breath went shallow at the way a call sign could become a single line.

441 Ruth pointed at the pad. “You don’t draw skulls on it,” she said. “You don’t draw anything.”

442 “I won’t,” Leah said. She didn’t add that she had seen a skull sprayed on a bottled water billboard and had understood it as communication then. This was different. This was a log of who existed and didn’t.

443 Footsteps sounded in the corridor. The echo suggested one person. Ruth kept the set open. Leah’s eyes learned the meters and their rhythm, the numbers that climbed and fell and the way Ruth’s face didn’t change when engagement fell into static. Leah sat without moving for a long block of time. She wrote what Ruth told her to write and left space when Ruth tapped the page to leave space. When Ruth’s hand closed and opened twice, Leah poured a cap of water from a communal jug for Ruth, who drank it without remark and handed the cap back.

444 “Again,” Ruth said, meaning listen, not transmit. Leah did.

445 The pump house sat at the far side of the main spillway, where access doors had been cut into a thicker section of concrete decades earlier. A roll-up had been anchored open with a rusting pipe through the brackets. Inside, the floor was damp in a pattern that had settled into it over time. A discharge pipe turned at a right angle into a paneled wall. Pressure gauges showed values Aaron didn't take the time to translate. He set his hands where the senior tech told him and took the weight of a hose that wanted to twist in his grip.

446 "Here," the senior tech said. He was older than Aaron by twenty years and his shoulders hung in a way that recorded work rather than posture. "Keep it from kicking." He stood where he could see the gauge and the intake screen at the same time. "When it stutters, don't over-correct."

447 Aaron braced through his left side to keep his ribs still. He felt the hose shudder through the rubber and canvas layers. He added half a rotation to the coupling with his right hand when the thread found it. He looked at the intake catch and saw a cloud of fines pass the screen and settle out as the flow steadied again. The fines ran grey and then tan and then a darker grain that wasn't silt but wasn't gravel. Sand hit the catch in small spurts and stayed there until someone scooped it.

448 A panel on the wall displayed conductivity and turbidity, and pH 6.4, along with three numbers Aaron didn't need to know to make the hose hold its place. Conductivity read 1,120 microSiemens per centimetre and stayed steady. Turbidity read 38 NTU; tape covered the red indicator to prevent fixation. A clipboard by the panel showed: filter-change interval: 48h□36h. Someone had written a note in pencil under the panel: Do not announce. Ladder rung had been erased and replaced with the word tremor three times.

449 The senior tech looked at the sand catch and gave a small head shake. He took a long-handled scoop, moved sediment into a bin, and set

the scoop aside where it could drip into a tray. He walked past a doorway where a line of people waited with cups and bottles under a sign that read Two per hand. He didn't make eye contact with them. He wiped his hands on his thighs and went back to the gauge.

450 The hose kicked once. Aaron's grip held and the movement under his hand became pressure, then a steadier flow. The stutter had a cadence that became a series; once, it lost a step and then came back. He counted two minutes, then four, between larger dips in output. Between the dips, small coughs marked air in lines not designed for air. When the coughs came faster, he counted faster. When they slowed, he let his breath lengthen a fraction before the binding told him to hold.

451 A child reached up to a counter beyond the doorway and pushed a plastic cup forward. The parent's hand wrapped around the child's and kept the cup level. The parent lifted their eyes and met Aaron's for not even a second. They looked away. The cup filled in a measured stream that made no sound loud enough to be more than the floor's damp itself. The parent's wrist stayed locked against any shake. They stopped a finger's width short of the brim, tipped the cup to catch a bead that clung to the lip, then set it level again.

452 Aaron glanced at the sand catch again and thought about saying something. The hose vibrated against his palm and he tightened his grip. He flicked a glance at the child's cup; the stream stayed even. He kept quiet and matched his breath to the stutter. He marked the count against the cough and the time on the wall clock and the weight in his right hand. He moved the hose two centimetres left when the senior tech told him.

453 "Lunch," someone said. The word didn't carry food in the way it would have in another place. It carried a pause. Aaron registered the absence of Leah beside him and corrected himself; this was not a place where she was assigned. Another person stepped into his position, and Aaron stepped out of it.

454 Outside the pump house, the air smelled of damp electrics and chlorine. He hooked his fingers into his belt for a second to take pressure off his ribs. The belt shifted and settled and he let go. He didn't lift his shirt to check the tape for shift because the gesture would read as a claim.

455 He walked the perimeter of the pump house and found the scoop bin. He lifted it with both hands close to his body, using his legs to take the load. He moved the bin to the marked spot, then nudged it along the tray's run inside the mark so the scoop path shortened by a few steps. He set the bin down, wiped his palms, and went back inside.

456 The senior tech glanced at the bin, then at Aaron, and said nothing. "Back on," the tech said. Aaron took the hose and kept his attention on the job until the flow held steady.

457 Muster put bodies into lines that could be counted as units. An admin worker wrote numbers on a whiteboard and crossed a set out with a straight horizontal line when the number changed. A schedule showed kitchen on one line and pumps on another and radio on a third. The column marked watch had names that did not mark status; they marked place and time.

458 The barracks were built out of a concrete hall and a set of prefabricated walls that had been stood up and bolted to a floor. The bunks were metal frames with webbing that ran along their lengths. A sign noted capacity and not comfort. Families and work units were placed by proximity to their functions. The pump crew was near the intake hall. The kitchen crew slept off the galley. People assigned to the catwalk slept closest to the stairs. The radio room had two cots set in a side office; Ruth had one and the other rotated between trainees and someone on emergency call.

459 Aaron's bunk took the lower position in a two-frame. A man above him lay on his side and watched nothing. Leah's bunk stood one section over and a line down, close to the door that led to the corridor running to admin. She dropped her pack to the floor and sat for a moment with her hands between her knees and her ankles together, not in a school posture but in a way that kept her ready to stand.

460 Dinner at the galley was thin soup with a faint mineral taste even after a boil with a few vegetables. The steam off it smelled of plastic from the bowls. A ladle dipped and filled, dipped and filled. People ate and brought their bowls back. A boy counted the bowls with an expression set in concentration, not pride. He chalked numbers on a slate and then erased them and chalked them again when his supervisor told him to do the count twice.

461 A whiteboard in the galley listed water rations. A hand added a line and erased another. The number changed from 1.2 L/day to 0.9 L/day. Under it, someone wrote Review Friday in block letters. The text stayed there across seven updates.

462 Night patrols paced the catwalk in pairs. The fence stayed visible under the floodlights out to where land rose. The mesh showed a scatter of bright points where spray had left residue. Leah left the radio room after Ruth had sent her to eat and walked along the corridor past the pump house and turned into the galley just as Aaron left it. He lifted his chin. She did the same. They didn't speak.

463 The first night ended with lights lowered but not off. The second began with the same sound of batons and the same cough under the floor in the pump house and the same hiss in the radio room. Ruth crossed out one callsign with a single line. She circled another and put a question mark beside it and, later, a line through that as well. Leah watched and wrote the times and the words Ruth told her and the numbers that belonged to other people's water.

464 On the third day a man in the barracks woke from a sleep that was not deep and reached for a bottle that did not exist anymore. He stared at the space where he had thought it was. He put his hand back on his chest and let it rest there. A woman in the next bunk turned her face toward the wall. A child coughed two coughs and stopped when someone's hand settled on their back.

465 Aaron's ribs did not improve so much as settle into a level he could work through. He rewrapped the binding on the second evening and then left it alone for two more. He took shorter steps on stairs and longer ones on the flat and never had to defend either because no one watched his gait except when the corridor narrowed and a passage needed to be negotiated.

466 On the fourth day, the pump house stutter count changed. Spacing shifted from four minutes to three for two hours, then went back to four. The sand in the catch came in two larger dumps instead of many smaller ones. Aaron wrote it on a scrap next to the hose coupling, and the senior tech looked at the scrap and said nothing.

467 On the fifth day, the soup was thinner and the ladle shook very slightly in the hand that held it because the hand belonged to a person who had been awake too long, not because the person had a tremor that came from inside. The whiteboard still read 0.9 L/day.

468 On the sixth day, the catwalk patrol called down once to the gate for a check. Omar's voice came back up through the radio, flat and even. "Clear," he said. "Still clear." He knocked his baton against a metal post in a pattern that had become part of the night and then walked on. Someone further along the catwalk sang three notes under their breath and stopped when they remembered where they were.

469 On the seventh day, Ruth pulled the headset down around her neck for a second and rubbed her ear. Leah sat with the pad and the pencil and wrote a time without a name next to it because there was no call attached to the quiet. Ruth set the headset back on and exhaled one

word that wasn't a report and wasn't a transmission. "Still," she said. Leah wrote that too and then crossed it out because the pad wasn't for words like that.

470 Lights cycled at board times and the horn marked shift change. Patrols passed in pairs on the quarter hour. Chalk marks set spacing in the galley queue. Shoulders lowered a fraction. A mother let a child walk the two metres to the end of the bunk row alone. Talk stayed on assignments and counts.

471 Aaron finished a watch at the pump house and walked the corridor to the barracks. He paused by a window that wasn't a window in the way a house has windows but an opening onto another covered space where light fell from an angle he couldn't share. He felt the cough under the floor and timed it against the number he had in his head. He reached his bunk and sat. Leah came in with her shoulders level and her gaze already on him because she had used the angle of his shoulders at a distance to know what he was doing. She sat on her own bunk with the same amount of movement it took to sit without making the mattress sway.

472 "Any range?" he said.

473 "Some," she said. "Hartley still talks. Others don't." She tipped her chin toward the radio room and didn't elaborate. She looked at his ribs and didn't ask. He looked at her hand. The tape was cleaner now. The cloth had been washed and, when it dried, kept the faint line of mineral along its woven edge.

474 The lights shifted to the lower setting. The patrol's footfalls lined up again with the places where the catwalk flexed a fraction under weight. He listened to the cough under the floor and counted four between them out of habit. The next interval gave him three. One beat short.

Chapter 7

The Ledger

⁴⁷⁵ The whiteboard changed at midday. A hand erased 0.9 and wrote 0.8 in figures that were clear from the far end of the yard. Under the number, a second line appeared in smaller print: no refills. Review Friday stayed where it had been for a week, not erased, not changed. The board covered water; soup stayed on its own chalk. Aaron read the board and checked the angle of the sun against the floodlight housings that never switched on during daylight. The chalk lines on the concrete that set queue spacing had been refreshed; intervals along the rail had been halved. The line doubled back on itself along the rail and out toward the spillway wall, twice the bodies for the same patch of shade.

⁴⁷⁶ He took his place with the rest. The heat sat without wind. White residue clung in seams on the railings from earlier mists that had drifted across in a light onshore flow and dried where metal showed pitting from years of spray. An admin worker stood on a crate and pointed at the board without speaking. People read and went quiet at the second line. Aaron's ribs registered the time he had already stood that day in the pump house and the time he would return. He measured his breaths against pain levels he could hold.

⁴⁷⁷ A child near the front went down without a sound large enough to get ahead of the crowd noise. Their parent knelt, one hand on the child's shoulder, the other raised. "Hey, here, here." A guard put a palm up to the parent and motioned aside without leaving room to argue. The child's head lolled, then flicked as the guard lifted, the movement careful and impersonal. Two guards slid the child into the narrow strip of shadow under a concrete overhang where the wall met the ground-level cable

tray. The line did not stop. The admin worker pointed again: one pace, one unit. The ladle at the galley window continued its pattern: dip, fill to the mark, pass. Aaron looked once more at the child's face as a cloth was tucked under a neck to keep skin off heat in the concrete, then faced forward and moved with the line by half a step.

478 The pace slowed. There were more questions at the window, none of them answered with more than a shake of the head and the same gesture to the sign. A woman three places up from Aaron held two badges instead of one. She had a rag wound around her wrist. "He's there," she said, pointing behind the stacked crates and down the side lane toward the barracks. "His leg. We were together."

479 "Back of the line," a guard said. The guard wasn't Omar. He looked at Omar and waited.

480 Omar approached from the gate side and set his boots where the chalk squares overlapped. "One badge, one place," he said. "Back of the line."

481 She took a step toward the gap in the crates. "He can't stand," she said. "I held it for him."

482 Omar watched her hands. Aaron counted, reflex without decision. One, two, three, four. Omar lifted the baton and set it horizontal across the space between two crates so it formed a line her body would have to commit to crossing. He held it at hip height, blade edge away. His jaw tightened, a small read in the muscle close to the scar. "Back," he said. "Single badge, single queue position."

483 She looked at the window, looked at the boards, then at the concrete. She stepped sideways out of the gap and disappeared into the heat shimmering off the yard. Someone behind Aaron muttered and stopped. The line moved a step.

484 The child at the wall made a dry sound and shivered. A hand fanned air toward their face in small strokes. The parent looked up, checked for a response from the window, and lowered their head again.

Aaron watched the bowl exchange, steel to plastic, no spillage, then looked back at the board. He thought about the sign's second line. No refills meant no second queue loop to game the system. He read the posture of the guards who didn't need to raise voices because the board did it for them. A semblance of fairness ran the yard. Not fairness in outcome. Fairness as visible procedure: chalk, board, baton forming a line in air that everyone could see and not cross without changing the number of guards it would take to hold the yard.

485 Leah walked the catwalk above the spillway wall, moving past the mesh that glittered faintly with old spray. She paused between the catwalk floodlight housings where shade held. Her head turned in small arcs that mapped people, not the yard. She marked names with her lips without sound, then sets: spouses, work partners, parents and children, clusters that could move as a unit if pushed. She let one hand rest at the rail where white crust made a thin grit under the skin, then removed it and wiped the grit down her trousers. She moved on and repeated the motion of matching a face to a position in the queue. Aaron realised she wasn't looking for trouble in the abstract. She was learning who moved when told and who held their place too tight and who would take a step for someone else without being told. It was Ruth's training run by a different instrument.

486 He moved one more step. The yard held a steady heat. A fly hit the galley window mesh and fell. A man at the window asked about the number on the board. "It was one point two," he said. "Last week." The ladle hand didn't change angle. "It is zero point eight," the server said. She tapped a finger on the board behind her. "No refills."

487 The queue adjusted; spacing closed and posture shifted. Breaths shortened, not because of sudden fear but because people standing in sun with less to drink needed to make choices about what to swallow and what to hold. Aaron looked at the bowl in his hand, then at the woman two places ahead who had the same kind of bowl but with a chip at the rim that would hold a film when it dried. He shifted his grip on the plastic

to keep his cracked knuckles out of contact with the rim where the salt dried to a rough film after every wash.

488 Omar returned to the gate side. Someone called his name to ask if extra work would lift their allocation. He said, "Schedule's posted," without stopping. He knocked the baton against a post once in a familiar pattern and kept walking. It was part of the night usually. Now it had moved into day.

489 At the wall, the child turned their head and swallowed. A guard lifted the cup from the rim and tilted a small amount into the child's mouth without any of it touching the cup exterior. The parent took the cup back and held it at waist height so they wouldn't empty what remained. Aaron watched the hand not tremble. The line shifted by a step, then half again. When he reached the window, the ladle hit the same mark in his bowl, not over and not under, because the server's wrist had adapted. The board held at zero point eight. He carried the bowl out of the sun and into the corridor where the air temperature brushed lower by two degrees. He kept his breath consistent to avoid catching the binding across his ribs.

490 The pump house lost it for six seconds. Aaron had a number in his head for a pause that long because he counted in work. He kept his grip as the hose went slack. Metal on the panel hummed on a different note as the motor unloaded. People in the doorway shifted weight but did not leave. No one spoke. That was how the pump house listened. Aaron held the hose in position so when the pressure returned it would not throw. On five he expected a catch and didn't get one. On six, pressure came back. It was thin under the glove. The vibration turned rough for a beat. The hose kicked; he braced and caught a hitch under the ribs.

491 The gauge needle rose slower than he would have liked and settled one tick below the earlier mark. The senior tech didn't look up. He slid the scoop into the catch and lifted a load that would have been a two-hour quantity last week and now matched what they got in under one. He tipped it into a bin marked every 3 hrs in block letters, the earlier 6 hrs crossed out with two strokes of marker. A damp track ran down the inside of the bin and pooled along a lip where earlier pools had dried to a white line. The tech set the scoop aside so it would drip where the tray caught and not onto the floor.

492 Aaron watched fines running in thin plumes through the water just downstream of the screen before they settled as brown then a darker shade as they mixed with heavier grit, and tasted a slight chlorine tone in the back of his throat after an hour in the room; it wasn't the water, it was aerosol off wet surfaces. His skin at the knuckles had opened at two points where it had dried after other shifts and split when he worked the coupling this time. The sting stayed with him through the six seconds and through the catch; it had joined the list of background data.

493 He didn't lift his chin to talk; he spoke where he was. "People should know," he said. "We lost six. It came back weaker." He shifted the hose a centimetre to avoid micro-vibration in the joint.

494 The senior tech kept his eyes on the needle and then on the water at the screen and then on the queue sign beyond the door (Two per hand), and only after that at Aaron. "Not yet," he said. His voice wasn't flat or angry. He'd said it too many times to pretend it meant anything. "Command tells it when they tell it."

495 Aaron could have asked, Which command? He didn't. He took the answer and put it where he put things he couldn't change and could be fired for testing. He kept his hands where they were and let his feet adjust to the floor. He marked the gate of the hose against what had happened at the yard. Concealment had a use. Panic at the queue would change flow in the yard the way a sudden surge changed flow in a pipe; backed pressure somewhere else made a failure more likely where they had the least

tolerance. But the quiet kept people responding to the last number they saw, not the number they lived in. No one would move to a new behaviour until they had data they couldn't ignore or were told through a board and a baton at the gap. Delay like that saved stability now and cost it later. He would work the hose either way. Same pattern: pressure falling here; voices dropping there.

496 The senior tech lifted the scoop and emptied the catch again. He shook his head at the bin without saying why. "Three hours," he said to the air. He picked up a rag and wiped the handle so the next hand would know it was dry. Aaron felt the hose firm slightly and then soften. He tightened the coupling a quarter turn and kept his left side still to avoid pain he had no spare for. His breathing had shortened by a fraction after the six seconds and he forced it longer until the binding found its place on his ribs again.

497 At the doorway, a woman held two bottles turned inward so the plastic wouldn't catch on the frame. The sign above her head had shifted in tone from the old painted letters to the board underneath where white had leached and left a faint outline. She waited for the dip to end and then stepped forward exactly one shoe length to the mark on the floor before she held the bottles out. The worker at the counter filled them to the right height and not beyond. No refills travelled from the yard to the pump house as a rule. It was cleaner to say it once and post it once than ask the pump crew to say it at the door and be shouted at for authority they didn't hold. The bottles moved. The queue held. The hose kicked down the line, a small cough. Aaron counted the gap to the next in case the six had become a new pattern. It didn't yet.

498 "Do you trust command?" Aaron said, not as a challenge, but because he wanted to know from someone whose work had made him hold judgement rather than claim it.

499 The senior tech set the scoop down where it would not roll. "I trust what the panel says," he said. "The rest of it depends on whether they can keep bodies from making it worse." He didn't explain who they

were. He looked at the gauge and then at the doorway again in the same order. He lifted the scoop.

500 Aaron's hands stung. Salt had dried in a fine line along the cracks in his skin. He knew it would open again later when he wrapped his ribs and pulled the tape to settle the cloth. He straightened the hose by a degree. A cough came in, the third in the last ten minutes, and went. He returned to counting. The room's sound set the measure for what he would do when it went off measure again.

501 The radio room's air held the reverb of the building. Traffic had thinned here too. Hiss shaped sound into something you could study. Ruth kept the headset centred and didn't rub at her ear this time. She brought a fader up a fraction and then rolled it back when the hum carried a mains note at the wrong frequency. Leah sat with the pad and wrote the time without being asked. The pencil had been sharpened since last shift but the lead had chipped along one edge; it left a double trace when pressure changed.

502 "NB-One," Ruth said. She didn't look at the map when she said it; she looked at the meter. "You're late."

503 A voice arrived in small blocks that carried their own shape. "North... brackish intrusion... rising..." The word after rising dissolved into noise; then the carrier went. Ruth held four seconds without moving the dial. Leah counted to four with the pause between breaths and wrote the fragment on the pad, drawing a line after the last legible word. Ruth touched a second switch and then let it go; she listened for the way dead air told a different story than a broken mast. Hiss moved from edge to centre. Ruth shook her head once.

504 "Log it," Ruth said.

505 Leah wrote: NB-One: brackish intrusion rising, cut. She wrote the time. She looked at the map where brackish could mean half a dozen places depending on the river, the tide, the draw. Ruth didn't say which. It didn't matter anymore which reach it was. The word was the measure. Rising. It meant thresholds and tolerances in treatment that had already been passed.

506 A different carrier filled in at a lower volume. "Ag South Hub. Reading you, River Dam."

507 "Ag South," Ruth said. "Go ahead."

508 The voice came clean for three seconds. "Yield zero for winter wheat. Repeat: zero. Signing off for maintenance in three. Back at, " The time didn't arrive. Carrier cut without a click. Leah watched the meter slope down and stay down. She didn't move the dial. She wrote the words in full, printed carefully so a second person reading it later would not mistake what had been said. She wrote the time and then left space as Ruth had trained her to do when a return might come. She waited two minutes. It didn't. She crossed the callsign once with a straight line.

509 Ruth didn't change expression. "Log what matters," she said. "Who's left." She pointed one finger at the list of callsigns on the wall where several now had single lines through them. "We don't remember the ones who disappear. We remember who we can talk to." She used a fingernail to press a pin deeper into the cork so a paper strip wouldn't fall. "AG-Three," she said under her breath without transmitting. She was not calling. She was remembering where the gap was.

510 Leah repeated names without transmitting. "NB-One. Hartley. Ag South." She placed them on the map with eyes, then looked to the left where a thin pencil line she had drawn earlier marked a cluster that had gone silent two days before. She stopped herself from drawing anything else on the pad. Only lines and times belonged there. She would not drift into anything that felt like comment.

511 The mains hum rose slightly under the hiss. Ruth pressed two fingers against the headset cup to seal it and adjust her hearing. “Generator step,” she said, not into the mic. “They’re on a smaller unit now.” She kept the set live. She did not send River Dam’s main call. There was no point in filling air with their own voice; the air needed to be kept clear for anyone who still had power to send.

512 “What does ‘hold your people’ mean?” Leah said. The question was quiet; it wasn’t meant for the log. She kept the pencil on the paper in case a time needed to be put down.

513 “Exactly what it says,” Ruth said. She didn’t look away from the dial. “You don’t tell them a story you can’t deliver. You keep them in the space you can actually protect.” She hovered a hand over a knob and didn’t move it. “That’s it.”

514 Leah nodded once. She kept the pencil ready. She waited for the next voice. It didn’t arrive. The meter fell to baseline hiss; Ruth kept the channel open. She wrote the time again with a blank line after it and didn’t fill it.

515 An hour went without a call that mattered. Ruth didn’t relax. She kept watching the meter because that was where the future would show before a human voice told it. Leah stayed still in her chair until she had to move because her leg would cramp if she didn’t. She shifted and made the least possible sound. Ruth tapped the pencil on the pad once. It meant yes, move now. Leah stretched her foot and then brought it back. She wrote another time. She wrote NB-One below it and left a short line beside it in case it came back. It didn’t.

516 Lights shifted to evening dim; the barracks had heat that never left because the concrete had absorbed it and yielded it back on a lag. Catwalk steps marked the quarter hour with the same three sounds that

matched the flex of metal under the guard's weight. Aaron sat on the lower bunk because he liked to see the aisle at eye level, not at a neck angle. Leah came down the line without rushing and sat on the frame opposite him without letting the webbing sway.

517 She kept her voice down. "When Ruth says 'hold your people,' she means do not promise," she said. "Not comfort. It's instruction."

518 He nodded. The word had an operational tone in his head anyway. "The pumps spit sand," he said. He kept his hands on his knees because putting them in his pockets hurt his ribs when he pulled them back out. "We lost six seconds on a stop. It came back weaker. Don't repeat that. Not yet."

519 Leah's mouth tightened without any change in her eyes. "Okay," she said. She looked at his knuckles and then at her hands because she had work there too. "Your hands are splitting," she said.

520 "Salt," he said. "It's in everything." He flexed his fingers once to show what he meant and then didn't because the skin would open more. "I'll wrap them." He meant when no one was looking. He kept the wrap he used for his ribs for that too.

521 "We can cut some load," she said. "I'll take bowls back after galley if our times line up. You pre-stage that cable spool outside the radio room so I don't have to run both turns." She wasn't asking for permission. She was setting an exchange she knew he would accept because it didn't break anything and it kept energy in a system that was bleeding it from every seam.

522 "Done," he said. He hadn't thought of the cable. He had seen it and not solved for it because it sat inside someone else's assignment. "I can move it on my way back to pumps. It's one lift."

523 She considered it. "Only if no one else is on stairs. Don't block the corridor."

524 He almost smiled. The expression did not form. “I know how to move a thing without making it a problem,” he said. He felt the old reflex to direct her into what would be safest next and stopped it before it became sound. “Your work in there, Ruth needs you,” he said. He let the respect in without having to name it. “It’s not a wait. It’s the most we can know.”

525 Leah met his eyes for a second and then looked at his ribs and back at his face. “It’s what we can hold,” she said.

526 He looked past her at the corridor. Someone turned the corner carrying a crate with both arms around it and didn’t look at either of them because they knew that if they made eye contact someone might ask for help and they couldn’t give it without dropping what they were already doing. He kept his voice even. “We don’t tell anyone what we can’t support,” he said.

527 “No promises we can’t keep,” she said.

528 He nodded again. “No promises.”

529 They sat until the quarter-hour footsteps matched the pressure he had in his chest and told him to stand. He did it in one movement to keep his ribs from catching. Leah stood without letting the frame creak. She touched the side of his arm once, not a hug, not display, and then turned toward the corridor. He turned the other way. The catwalk steps passed overhead and the mesh gave a small sound in the wind that didn’t exist anymore except as a temperature differential above the spillway where water moved through a controlled space.

530 He walked toward the pump house. She walked toward the radio room. Their compact was another rule added to the others.

Chapter 8

Trade Ends

⁵³¹ The trucks were heard before anyone saw them. Aaron heard the gear changes come up the service road and then flatten near the outer mesh. The sound echoed flat off the spillway wall. Bodies outside the fence began to converge in ones and twos from the road edge and the bridge abutment, eyes turning to the cargo even before the brakes held. Inside, people shifted without breaking routine. A server lifted her ladle, set it down, and stood in the window frame to see. A boy stopped chalking numbers for bowls and leaned to the side to make a sightline past a stack of crates. A guard on the catwalk paused mid-step and looked along the spillway wall, then continued. The whiteboard still read 0.8 with a second line under it: no refills.

⁵³² Two trucks, mismatched. The lead was a black pickup with a jagged drop logo in white on the door, the paint scraped along one lower panel. The second was an older flatbed with angle-iron rails and a tarp that had been tied down with six different kinds of cord. The tarp moved in sections; underneath, shrink-wrapped cubes showed through at the corners where plastic had frayed. Labels formed bands of blue and green that belonged to three brands and one stray block with orange that didn't match their language. A third human shape moved on the tailgate. Boots with clean stitching, forearms inked and tight. Harker stepped up one rung higher to stand tall enough to look over the fence line.

⁵³³ Aaron took his place at the rail inside the mesh, angle to the gate that allowed him to see the service road and the spillway wall without twisting his torso. His left side felt steady only when still. A thin white run marked the lower rail where prior spray had dried. He kept his hands

clear of it to avoid reopening the cracks along his knuckles. He counted Omar's guards without moving his head: four at the gate, two on the catwalk above, one to the left by the corner where the fence met the spillway barrier. Omar had his baton against the post, not raised. Small details held. The baton would move if the gap between crates to the left opened. It had done that earlier for a woman with two badges. It had worked then.

534 Outside, the crowd drew closer to the trucks and formed arcs. There was no true queue; the trucks created their own geometry and people fitted themselves into it. A gaunt woman with buzzed hair and bright eyes took the far side with two others behind her and kept her hands down, not reaching. A man with a hat at the wrong angle held his wrist where tape had once been wrapped. A child sat on a pallet that had fallen off a different truck months earlier and had been dragged into the shade of the bridge. The child did not look up from the concrete. Aaron watched for hands and weight shifts, not faces.

535 Harker faced the fence and performed to it. He lifted one hand and cut the air to pull attention. "River. Listen up."

536 No one inside answered. Navarro walked up from the admin corridor with no visible hurry and put herself where the mesh met the gate panel, boots set equally apart. Her face had a kind of fixed energy of someone who had not slept enough in days. She did not call out. She watched until Harker knew she was watching.

537 "We can talk," Harker said. He carried a voice that had worked in rooms with music or engines running. "Two trucks today. Mixed. More behind if this goes right. We exchange."

538 Navarro lifted her chin once to indicate acknowledgement and waited.

539 "Access," Harker said. "We come in. We set a gate time. We handle the perimeter with you while we unload. Your people get protected water and extras. We get a slice for risk. That gets us through.

That gets you through."

540 He used terms that belonged to a different period. Protected. Slice. Through. The words bounced off concrete and metal and returned faint.

541 Navarro kept her hands behind the mesh, not on it. "No access," she said. The tone was flat without being hostile. "Gate stays shut. You don't run our perimeter. We don't outsource control of the yard."

542 Harker spread his hands and grinned without humour. "So how do you want to do it? We throw it over the fence?"

543 "You want to donate," Navarro said. "You can set pallets outside the stripe. We'll assign distribution."

544 The crowd outside shifted. They heard donate, not exchange. Sound moved through them with no single voice carrying it.

545 Harker jerked his head once, then steadied it. "This is an exchange," he said, louder. "Protection for supply. If you think you hold this place alone, "

546 "We do," Navarro said. "We hold it by not changing rules when someone shows up with a truck."

547 Harker looked past Navarro and found faces he could work. His eyes moved along the mesh and paused. He saw Aaron. He tipped his head forward and mouthed a single word, shaping it slowly and exactly so the meaning could not be misread. Debtor.

548 Heat in the yard did not change. Aaron did not shift. His ribs would have argued with any unnecessary motion anyway. A sudden move would tear at the cracked ribs and put him down for hours. His thumb and forefinger pressed the badge lanyard at his collarbone, then released. He had asked for two bottles and a clear path. That was the recorded transaction. The rest had been tagged by them. He had walked out with Leah and with one bottle later. He stood inside now behind a gate Harker wanted. It was a kind of data Harker had just used.

549 "You," Harker swept his hand at the bodies outside, not at the ones behind the mesh, "are thirsty. That gate has what's yours behind it. They've been lowering numbers all week."

550 Omar stepped forward and set his boots in line with the gate latch and planted the baton at hip height across the gap where, on other days, someone would try to cut through. He said nothing. The guards to either side reweighted to the balls of their feet. The pattern on the catwalk adjusted. Leah was up there in the shadow between two floodlight housings. She had her forearms on the top rail, elbows bent, not leaning her weight into it. She was counting the bodies who would move if any one of three things happened: the latch lifted, the baton raised, or someone outside put a hand on the fence. She took faces into sets and then moved on, lips forming words without sound. The skin at the heel of her right hand showed a lighter strip where the blue-edged cloth under tape had been replaced during a wash cycle and had dried with a faint mineral line. She let her hands go still.

551 "You want to hold it all," Harker said. He kept his eyes off Navarro now. He worked the crowd in an order he knew. "They can't. They can't hold it for everyone. If you stand there and let them keep the gate locked, your kids go dry. If you bring us in, we can make this fair."

552 At "fair," stances shifted in a dozen places at the word. Aaron saw the change as a tilt of shoulders and a forward lean a centimetre at a time. The word had been the one that used to move him. He had lived by it. He wore it in the way he made lines and held them for other people.

553 Navarro did not raise her voice. "You're pitching a market to a place that doesn't run on that model," she said. "We have ration. We have posted numbers and posted rules. We have the only thing that stands between this yard and what that looks like." She nodded once at the outside first row where two men had already put hands on the tailgate to keep balance. "We are not opening the gate."

554 Harker took the baton measure in, then ignored it with a show of confidence. He stepped on the tailgate and let his weight ride a spring. The truck rocked once. The second truck's driver pulled the tarp back a metre to reveal a cube of clear bottles that weren't all the same size. Random cases filled gaps. The plastic edges were scuffed white where they'd moved against each other over road miles.

555 "You want children to drink?" Harker shouted. "Tell her to open the gate. We do it together."

556 Outside bodies edged closer. Inside held. A chlorine trace sat in the air and on his tongue above the usual concrete damp. He set his palm flat against his shirt and then let it fall. He watched Omar's jaw. The muscle at the scar shifted once and then set. Omar knocked the baton one time against the post. It rang along the catwalk in an even tone.

557 "Don't," Navarro said to no one in particular. Then to Harker, "You can set it down outside the line and walk away."

558 "That's a joke," Harker said. He laughed once. "You know what happens when we leave this here?"

559 She looked at the trucks, then at the crowd, then at the water falling through the spillway openings. It made sound that never stopped and never altered except when gates were moved to keep the difference in level where it had to be. Harker read her pause as a crack to push into. He misread.

560 "No access," she said again. "No exchange. Not at our gate."

561 He had one more line and used it. "You think the ones beyond your fence will let you keep calling it ration when you have more than them? You think they won't come again and again until you let the right people in?" He raised both arms. "We'll handle it for you. We hold the approach; you hold the core. Shared risk, shared return."

562 "You show with two trucks," Navarro said. "You say more behind. Your timing says otherwise." She pointed once at the sky's colour and the

angle of the light on the opposite slope. "You don't have fuel for night if it goes wrong."

563 Harker's grin flickered. It was the first true data exchange that touched him. He turned it to a performance anyway. "Gate call, now," he shouted. He spread his arms wider. "We exchange."

564 No one with authority inside moved. Somewhere outside, a voice started, "Open, " and cut as bodies pressed to the mesh. Leah's hands came up a centimetre on the rail and then back down. Aaron counted four beats without deciding to. Fingers hooked the mesh near the latch and slipped off. Omar's latch hand twitched, then reset on the housing. The next noise after that was not a voice.

565 A rock hit the side of the second truck with a sound that belonged to thin metal struck hard. The driver flinched and turned as another shape moved fast across the bed. Hands reached up and found Harker's ankles. He tried to keep his footing on the tailgate and failed. His shoulder hit the bed rail. He went down into arms that pulled in six directions at once.

566 Omar didn't lift the latch. He moved one foot and then set it back. Guards to either side kept their batons down and their palms visible. The fence held the inside out of the equation.

567 Harker shouted. It wasn't a word at first. It turned into two. "Gate! Help!" He found the syllables where he had found strangers' names when he sold them water at a price and told them it was a favour. He used the tone of someone who expected compliance because it had been purchased before.

568 No one inside moved to the latch. Navarro did not look at Omar. She already knew what he would do. "Hold," she said. It was a steady instruction delivered at standing volume. It carried to the line because the yard was quiet and no one was shouting.

569 The first row pushed. Pressure moved through the bodies in a single direction. They pulled Harker clear of the truck bed, and those who

did not have hands on him put them on the pallet. Knives came out, not for him but for plastic. Straps were cut. Cases broke from their stacks. Bottles fell to the road and rolled under boots and wheels. Others were lifted by the necks and by the flats. A woman wrapped two belts together into a longer strap with a double buckle and looked up at the short bridge span that carried the service road over the lower apron.

570 They moved Harker to the concrete column, the one with a maintenance ladder whose first three rungs had been removed long ago to keep children from climbing. Belts went around his torso, then another around his thighs. Buckles found holes where they still existed; when they didn't, the leather was punctured with a screwdriver and a key. The strap ends were pulled through, braced with knees, and heaved. He kicked once. The straps tightened. The column held the load. A loop ran under his arms and over the ladder bracket that remained above reach; five lengths in all, four leather and one nylon, took the load. The webbing gave a dry creak under weight. His boots scuffed the column and left two dark arcs where the rubber left behind a trace. His soles cleared the slab by five centimetres. His mouth moved. Sound did not carry as far as his earlier voice had. He stopped kicking. A heel flexed twice, then stilled.

571 The crowd did not stay to watch. They had water in their hands and under their arms. They were already walking away with pieces of the pallet, scattering down the road and into the culvert line and under the bridge. One man threw a case to a second person and missed. Plastic split along a seam, and three bottles burst under pressure, sending thin arcs onto concrete that became white lines as they dried at the edges. The rest were gathered. Footsteps receded. Engines did not start. There was no fuel to waste on exits when legs could carry the load.

572 Harker swung once and then did not. His head hung at an angle that faces take when muscles cease correcting weight. The belts held; the support carried the load. The trucks stood with doors open and no drivers. Dust from the road settled on the top edges of the cases still intact. The tarp on the second truck slipped another hand's width and

revealed nothing anyone would want without treatment.

573 Aaron's throat tasted of chlorine again not from the river but from the aerosol that had travelled hours and days through the air and settled into surfaces that then let go when disturbed. He stood very still. Leah had come down the stairs fast enough to show it mattered and slow enough not to make the catwalk flex; she stopped at his shoulder and did not speak. She was breathing from her stomach, not her chest, making each inhale long and each exhale longer. The two of them faced the same direction.

574 Omar lowered the baton to vertical and held it there. The guard next to him eased their weight back onto their heels. Navarro stepped a half pace toward the mesh and then stopped again. No one opened the gate. No one called out to the trucks. The trucks did not move. The crowd had already thinned and moved away.

575 Aaron looked at the mesh and then at the body under the bridge support and then back at the mesh. The fence marked the boundary of the yard and the rule. Inside was ration. Outside, belts and a bracket held a man to a column.

576 He had been called debtor. He did not reach up to touch his badge. He wanted to. He stood without moving his hands. Inside, the badge tied to a bunk and a bowl; outside, it was plastic on a cord.

577 The light shifted along the spillway wall. Angles stretched. People went back to their positions because doing something settled the jitter bad outcomes leave. The board still read 0.8. No refills.

578 Aaron stepped back from the rail when Omar lifted his chin once to tell those inside they could disperse. Leah stayed with him. Neither spoke. They walked the corridor back from the gate toward the core in the same cadence as any return from a check, not a return from what had just happened.

579 By late afternoon, the yard had the remains of dust but not their drivers. Bodies outside rolled the black pickup onto the shoulder to clear their own egress. The flatbed sat empty with the tarp half on and half off, cords loose and ends dragging. There would be a debate inside the camp about whether to send a team to haul what was left and whether pulling anything across the stripe changed the meaning of the stripe. Navarro walked past the admin whiteboard without stopping. She did not gather a team. She did not instruct a salvage. She did not change the rule on the board that said no refills. She went to the core and then to the west parapet to stand where no one could look at her face and try to read something in it she did not want to show.

580 Leah went to the catwalk again. She set her hands on the rail and held still, looking down at the river. It moved under the spillway and fanned out over a concrete apron that showed lines where high flows had taken grit and left curved streaks. The surface showed slick traces where thin films gathered in bands and then broke against turbulence. She could not see the numbers at the intake panel from here. In the log an hour ago she had copied the meter values; the red lamp stayed taped. Untreated, it carried salts and fines the camp could not drink. Flow patterns below did not alter because of what had happened at the gate.

581 Footsteps passed on the catwalk behind her and stopped. The pair had the pattern she knew now as gate-side. Omar and his partner paused at the floodlight housing and looked out at the same view for a count that matched the rhythm of their night footsteps. Omar tapped the baton against the post once, out of habit, then didn't do it again. He moved on. Leah counted three and let her breath follow. She checked the yard again. People were back in their corners. The galley had a line of five then three then two and then closed its hatch and put the ladle into the sink to soak the salt film off for a while.

582 Inside the corridor the air cooled to concrete humidity. Aaron moved as if he were on shift, even though he was not scheduled in the pump house for another interval. He drifted past the intake door to catch

the motor note. It sat on a level that meant loaded, not unloaded, and the small cough that had come every few minutes in prior days did not arrive in the ten seconds he stood there. He didn't trust it. He didn't trust lack of data where he knew change was accelerating. A brief burst of radio squelch from down the hall cut in and faded.

583 Her route took Leah from the catwalk to the radio room. Ruth sat with the headset regardless. The rule held: keep the channel clear and record what mattered, not their own story. The door was open. The room had heat from bodies and equipment rather than sun.

584 Ruth had her headset on and one hand on a knob she was not moving. "Hartley," she said, to the room, not into the mic. "You're late."

585 Leah took the stool and the pencil. The pad lay where it always lay. She printed the time at the top of the next line. Ruth did not look at her to check. Leah looked at the meter instead. It twitched and then steadied and then moved again with a carrier that wasn't signal yet. Her thumb hovered over the transmit key and then lifted.

586 "River Dam, copy?" The voice was thin, not because of equipment but because the person on the other end was saving breath. It stated identity on a lag. "Hartley."

587 Ruth touched the switch and lifted it and then set it back but did not speak over them. She let Hartley choose whether to trust the line. Leah watched the needle.

588 "Chlorides," the voice said, and then nothing. It came back in a second. "Pump three... offline. Two rotating. Lab... pending." The last word was a trace of a standard they had kept until yesterday. Ruth did not answer while the carrier held.

589 The carrier cut. No click. Just slope and then baseline hiss. Ruth keyed and gave a breath-level, "Copy. Logged," then closed the line. Leah looked at Ruth. Ruth lifted a finger. Not yet. Leah looked at the clock on the wall, then wrote the time and the words exactly as they had arrived. She left space after them for a return that did not come. No return after

ninety seconds. She counted to one hundred. She drew a single line through Hartley on the strip pinned to the cork board, not an X that would erase them, just a stroke that said the line was not active.

590 Ruth did not transmit any information about trucks, or a hanging under a bridge, or a man named Harker whose name did not belong to any station with a callsign and so did not move through this room. She did not say the word trade. She kept the air clear.

591 Leah's hand did not smudge the pencil line. She set the pencil down and checked her fingers. The skin at the base of her thumb had a paler band where the tape was off. The cloth with the blue edge was drying on a chair in the corner, and salt had left a thin white seam in its weave as it dried. The line was less than a millimetre wide. If you looked quickly you might miss it.

592 Down the corridor, Aaron stepped into the pump room because the senior tech had turned his head and nodded once to say he was welcomed. At the intake panel the needle held near 1.45 mS/cm, up from 1,120 μ S/cm earlier in the week; a strip of tape still covered the red lamp. As he watched, the needle settled one tick lower than his last pencil mark on the frame. He added another small tick. He put his hands on the hose in the same position as always and registered a small jog in vibration that came and went. The motor housing held a steady note under his palm. The catch tray held a load that matched two hours, not three, which meant the label on the bin (every 3 hrs) was being violated by reality regardless of what the marker said. The sediment line sat above the scribed mark. He didn't speak. He did not announce that Hartley had said what they had said, not because the senior tech would have done anything different with that information but because the rule they had adopted from the radio room was now general: hold your people. You did not give them a story you could not deliver. He could not deliver anything except keeping the hose from throwing when pressure changed.

593 The camp continued. The quarter-hour footfalls went over the catwalk. The galley rinsed bowls with the minimum water that would still

lift the film that dried at the rims. A child coughed twice and then not again. The admin board did not shift the number down even though it probably should, because numbers were changed on a set schedule and not in response to panic or grief. Navarro walked the parapet and came back inside and stopped at the open door of the radio room. She looked in but did not speak. Ruth did not acknowledge her because she did not need to. The two of them already knew what the other would do. Navarro moved on.

594 Leah sat with the pencil and the pad. She listened to hiss and the low mains note that had altered two days before when they moved to the smaller generator at night. The air in the room felt thicker than it had during the scene outside not because of heat but because of quiet that had to be held on purpose. She wrote time without sound and kept the space after the Hartley line open another minute and then put a dot there because Ruth had taught her to mark places where silence might be mistaken for omission later. She looked at the map and did not add anything. She knew where the river systems went and where the farms used to draw. She knew where the line had ended for Harker. None of that went on the map.

595 Aaron took a step backward from the hose at a switch of hands and felt the binding across his left ribs tug at the cloth and then settle. He had made a count of options without naming them to anyone. Pumps: unstable. Rations: posted, lower, no refills. Radios: thinning to nothing. None of those would be there for him if he did anything that put him on the other side of a gate. He had known that in a general way. Now he knew it from what he had seen under the bridge. He reached for the scoop and set it where the senior tech always liked it so it would drip into the tray and not onto the floor. He looked at his knuckles. The lines had opened at the edge again where salt had dried and split the skin. He did not wrap them now. He would when he could sit without anyone watching him change tape on his ribs and on his hands.

596 No one on the channel said trade. No one in the pump room announced six seconds lost today. No one in the yard talked about belts. The fence stayed still. The light on the spillway shifted to the lower setting that spread illumination across the concrete and left the edges in half-shade. Leah kept the headset in place without putting it on. Ruth lifted it and then set it down again. The room stayed quiet.

597 Air moved between the warmer apron and the cooler wall and made a faint sound at one section of mesh. Leah reached up and steadied the pencil because that sound had made her hand move. She wrote the next time. She left the rest of the line blank. She waited.

Chapter 9

The Column

598 By midday the intake panel's needle had moved past 1.5 millisiemens per centimetre, held there for three minutes, then settled one tick above Aaron's last pencil mark on the frame, consistent with the drift Ruth had been logging across the channel. The motor's note stayed loaded. The catch tray showed a line of fines that should have been a three-hour load and wasn't. He touched the hose, felt the slight jog that came and went without pattern, and counted to six to see if it repeated. It did not. A thin white ring had formed at the hose coupling. Outside, footfalls crossed the catwalk on the quarter hour and the yard voice kept the same clipped register it used for everything from muster to soup.

599 Sound from the road arrived first, a long, uneven approach with pauses not set by engines but by legs. Then figures gathered along the fence beyond the painted stripe. Adults first, then children they had held back to see if the gate would open for adults alone. It did not. PET bottles without caps hung from straps. A five-gallon bucket with a bent wire bail swung against a thigh. Old jerrycans with split seams showed white along the cracks where evaporation had left its mark. Shirts had a line at the stomach where fingers had gripped them to keep fabric off damp skin. The front rows did not speak at once. When the voice came, it arrived as a short word repeated on an exhale: water.

600 He let the hose seat and looked for the senior tech's nod. It came. He stepped back, wiped his hands on his trousers without adding a new line of salt to the cracks in his knuckles, and walked out into the cooler corridor. The yard heat was sharper. On the west run of mesh the bodies arrayed to fill gaps according to queue habits from the past days. Omar

set his boots on the chalked pace marks and lifted his baton to horizontal across the post to signal the line inside to hold. Two guards stood at the corners. Two more took the catwalk rail. Navarro came up the admin corridor and stopped at the mesh; the mesh reflected her face in a warped grid.

601 “Hold the line,” she said. She did not raise her voice. She did not look at Omar for confirmation because protocol already placed him where he stood. He tapped the baton once against the post to carry the instruction laterally without radio.

602 The front of the column pressed up to the stripe and stopped. The word water rose and dropped and then rose again, less in unison as breathing patterns separated. The fifth pulse ended in coughs. Children tried to form the word and turned it into air. A man at the edge held up an empty bottle and tilted it. A woman held her wrist under her other hand to keep it steady and failed. The mesh did not move. Inside, a child at the pump doorway lifted a cup and the server filled to the mark without wetting the outside.

603 Aaron stepped to the inner rail at the west run and stopped short of the dried white run of spray that split his knuckle on contact if he forgot himself. He counted the guards’ spacing, the distance between Omar and the corner, the corner and the next post, the post and the lever housing. He counted because counting prevented moving when movement served nothing.

604 Leah came into his view along the inner edge with two bowls nested, both already empty and dry. She walked with careful, even steps that spaced weight. Her right hand showed the paler strip where tape had been removed earlier, the skin at the base of her thumb edged with a faint mineral seam from the cloth now drying near the radio room. She looked past him at the mesh and then at the ground line under the mesh.

605 A section of bottom wire had been lifted months earlier to pass a cable and then wired back in place with a repair that was functional from

a distance and insufficient up close. The rebar pin at that section had taken a knock that bent it away from the foundation. It left a wedge a child could fit through if the mesh lifted a hand's height for two seconds. The front rows outside had pressed up to the stripe. Two children had stepped out of their set because adults behind them had moved, and they now stood near that wedge without anyone's hand on their shirts. One was a boy with a T-shirt cut down at the neck to keep skin from chafing. The other had a plait cut off the week before and the white of that cut showed against the scalp. Their elbows were sharp.

606 A surge to move hit and eased; he kept his hands still above the wrists. Leah took one more step and placed the nested bowls against the post near his thigh with the sound of plastic on salt film. A small twist kept them from spinning. She glanced left and right, casual. Her hands went to the mesh picks where the repair wire had been twisted. She held the picks without tension and kept her shoulders still; someone not watching her hands would see no change.

607 A stone struck the road sign at the service bend and made a flat sound that did not travel far. Heads turned that way. The chant fell off and resumed a half-second late. In that space, Leah lifted. With one hand, she raised the mesh. It took more force than it should have because the wire had cut into the post paint. A gap just large enough opened; her eyes stayed on her hands, attention set on a burr that needed clearing. She lifted once. One child slid under. She let the mesh drop for one count, then lifted again. A twisted pick grazed her knuckle; she pressed the wire to free it. The second child's shoulder brushed the bottom wire and made a small sound. She lowered the mesh and took her hands off the picks.

608 Aaron moved on the inside without a pattern that would be read as a rush. The cable spool he had staged there earlier sat on its edge against the wall. He rolled it one third of a turn and stood exactly where a guard at the corner would have had a clean view to the base of the mesh. He did it with the exact weight-saving movement he used at the pump, no wasted shift, no lift that would make his ribs protest beyond the

manageable. The guard looked and saw him. From the corner post, his shoulder occluded the base of the mesh.

609 Outside the fence, a woman with hair buzzed to the scalp and eyes bright with calculation stepped forward and then back, timing a move. She saw Leah's hands. She saw Aaron's shoulder fill the view. She did not speak. Her jaw worked once. Her fingers pressed and released at her side in small counts while her gaze ran from latch to corner to the lifted wire. He marked her in case the pattern repeated.

610 Leah reached down, lifted the nested bowls again, and stood. Nothing showed. The two children did not run. They walked behind the galley corner with their heads low and their arms close. An older body waiting for a bowl of soup stepped aside without looking at them, a behaviour learned here in the first days because looking proved nothing and made trouble. The children turned into the barracks row, matched the camp's gait, and disappeared between frames. Leah set the bowls on a ledge to dry and walked toward the radio corridor at the same pace she had used for the bowls.

611 The chant returned to its flatter sound and then failed again on a cough from the first row. Omar reweighted his stance and put his hand to the latch without touching it. Navarro did not move. When she did speak, she said only, "No opening," careful with words that meant the difference between a yard and a crush.

612 Aaron kept his hands away from his badge because touching it now would be seen. He controlled his breath to keep the ribs from tightening on a pump of adrenaline and counted to eight to settle the timing of his chest against the sound of mesh flexing in breeze. When his count returned to one, the children were gone and could not be retrieved without pulling the place apart.

613 The whiteboard at the galley had not changed in two days. The second line that said no refills had remained beneath 0.8, unchanged. Navarro stepped up to it in the hour after the two small bodies had vanished into the bunks and pointed. “Two unlogged mouths means the rest drop now,” she said. She checked the intake panel readings and the catch-tray load against the posted headcount on her clipboard before ordering the cut. An admin climbed onto a crate and erased the eight with the side of his hand. The film smeared and left a paler band behind. He wrote 0.4 slowly so there would be no argument it had been rushed. He left Review Friday untouched because the review had never happened on Friday but removing the text would draw more attention than leaving it. He tapped the board twice with the back of the marker and then put the marker in the tray because he had been told not to waste caps. He wrote no second pass under no refills and underlined it once. The cut covered the added mouths. It would for a few days.

614 After the numbers changed, voices across the yard shifted. Some people read them out loud in the old habit from offices and schools that presumed shared information decreased error. Most watched the server’s wrist angle more than the board. A man at the pump doorway who had watched the wrist all week stepped forward again when he should not have and a second man behind him shoved him in the kidney with the heel of a hand at the exact moment the server reached the fill line. The bowl tipped and water ran off the lip in a sheet that left a new white arc when it dried. One punch. The guard on that post set his baton against both men’s chests at once by turning the baton sideways. The man who had lost his fill snapped at the baton, then saw the rest of the line had not moved, saw the board, saw Omar at the gate, and stepped back under the posted change. The server did not raise her eyes. She filled the bowl again to the new mark and passed it forward without water on the outside.

615 Outside the stripe a woman went down without sound. The bodies near her turned as if she would stand and found she had not. Two of them took her under the arms and pulled her into a strip of shadow made by the low concrete of the apron where the road began to slope, the same

thin shadow where a child had been taken two days before. As they pulled, her sleeve scraped on grit with a dry rasp. The fence did not move. Navarro did not send a runner. The people at the mesh nearest the spot looked to the gate and lowered their heads in the same motion as the ones at the window turned forward. One of the children outside put his hands on the mesh and then took them off in the time it took Aaron to count to three.

616 Aaron walked the line inside to the gate post and spoke to Omar without making it a performance.

617 “We could make one exception,” he said, and kept his voice at the level used for shift changes.

618 Omar’s jaw tight near the scar flexed once and then set. He held his breath for one count.

619 “Exceptions kill the many,” he said. He did not look at Aaron when he said it. He looked at the latch housing and the hands that would reach for it if it moved. Two younger guards on the rail watched his hands instead of the crowd. Omar kept his thumb near the latch pin without contact.

620 “Understood,” Aaron said. He had asked because code required attempts before refusal knew it was necessary. He stepped back from the post the way someone leaves a line by choice and not by force.

621 Voices overlapped in the yard. The phrase unknown thieves of water started in the middle of a group, not the front, and propagated outward in repeats. Soft hearts came after it, spoken in the flat tone used for policy. A woman three back in the queue looked at faces instead of the board and counted who had been seen where in the last hour. Aaron heard words as sound units first and then as string. He kept his face neutral because it was his face that would be read, not his words.

622 When the server lifted the ladle, her wrist stopped at the new mark without the micro-correction her hand had needed the first day the number dropped. The line advanced in half-steps. A boy with a slate

marked bowls served by chalking a stroke and rubbing his thumb through it when a supervisor shook her head at his speed. He corrected and started counting every second bowl to keep pace with a wrist he had not yet learned to match. Heat slowed hands.

623 He moved away from the queue to the shaded edge of the spillway wall. The air there carried cool from water that still fell and could not be drunk. He watched the stripe outside. The bodies at the stripe were a metre deeper than they had been that morning. The ones who could not stand anymore had moved back into the shallow ditch that ran toward the culvert so those with strength could take their place at the fence. The ditch carried nothing useful. Its edges had the same white lip as the fields.

624 A runner with a vest rubbed thin at the shoulders found him at the corridor junction that fed the pump house and the admin core.

625 “Hale. Outer watch. West run. Immediate.” The runner’s voice did not carry apology or anger. It carried a list of instructions stored and retrieved without colour. He looked past Aaron down the corridor and then back at the badge to confirm match. His eyes tracked once to the roster board beside the gate hardware.

626 “Copy,” Aaron said. He did not ask why. Reasons did not arrive here in that format. He set his shoulders so the binding across his ribs would not pull when he took the corner onto the parapet stairs and made that turn in one smooth motion to save pain later. He matched his breathing to his steps, four on the draw and four on the release, so the tape would not bite. He counted the steps out of habit and because counting kept separate the action he had helped and the post he would now take because of it. Ten to the landing, ten more to the parapet.

627 Leah came the other way with something cupped in her palm. It was the heel of a slice of bread, dry and hard, saved because someone had

left it at a bowl return and a child could still soften it in soup enough to swallow. She reached out and offered it so his hands could stay free while he walked.

628 “For you,” she said. It was not a question.

629 He shook his head once.

630 “Keep it for them,” he said. He did not say which them. The word had a place here. She understood it without further specification.

631 She did not argue. She moved the heel back into her pocket precisely to avoid losing crumbs and the salt line there would collect the crumbs if she knocked her hip against a corner. She looked past him toward the parapet.

632 “West run,” he said to make sure she knew where he would be. She nodded once.

633 “Ruth needs me in the room,” she said. She tilted her head toward the radio doorway and then the headset.

634 He put two fingertips against the steel frame to steady his step past her. She touched the side of his sleeve with the edge of her hand not to stop him but to meet the place where his ribs sat behind cloth. There was no second exchange. She turned toward the radio and he turned toward the mesh.

635 The west run post had a view across the service road bend and down to the lower apron where the short bridge threw shade. The belts on the column there still held their load from the day before. The body had not moved. The nylon strap and belts had done their job. He marked the time since and then stopped marking because the number did not alter the present requirement. A guard two posts down lifted his chin. Aaron lifted his chin back by one degree to show acknowledgement without coming off his mark.

636 Wind came up the valley in a steady push that did not alter for three minutes. It lifted dust from the road and turned the surface of the

lower apron into a faint shimmer where films broke and reformed in lines that matched old flow paths. The smell carried chlorine at a trace. It made the back of his throat bitter and then turned into nothing when breath adapted.

637 He set his boots at the exact stance that kept his spine from twisting and forced the rib tape to carry load where the bones would not. He took the weight in his thighs instead. He did not lean against the post. Leaning read as fatigue to anyone watching from outside and that was an invitation to test. He understood that now from long practice.

638 At the water points after shift change, people stopped meeting each other's eyes. Bowls moved from hand to hand without looking past the lip. A woman with a rag around her wrist who had argued two days earlier for a place for her partner took her bowl without speaking at all. The boy with the slate adjusted his count again because the wrist now landed slightly lower than his previous mark and he had to subtract a stroke without appearing to erase. The space around each person at the window measured exactly one pace. The chalk had been refreshed along the rail, and the chalk lines were closer together than they had been. The bodies stood on them with obedience that was not respect and not fear but an understanding that the chalk was what kept the place live.

639 Aaron heard a scrap near the wall by the galley: the kid at radio cuts us. A second sentence: they give her extra, see. It came with the flat certainty of hearsay. He did not step in. He had procedures, not clearance. He saw Ruth at the radio room doorway five minutes later. She stood with her headset around her neck and put a stool a hand's width inside the threshold. Leah took the stool without being told, and Ruth faced the yard with both of them visible in the rectangle. She did not address the words; she placed the trainee in view. She placed the trainee in view so the yard would see: not hidden, not special, at her side during

training.

640 From the west run Aaron saw the column thin. People who had stood at the mesh in the morning were no longer at the mesh in the evening. The ones who remained set tarps at the fence line and then moved them back to the shoulder because the guard at the corner tapped his baton against the post twice and said, “Off the line.” They staked cloth to scrub that had been cut by wind, and the stakes came loose. A small fire was attempted with plastic and then put out because it made a smell that made children cry. People put their backs to the road barrier to sleep because it was a thing that did not move.

641 The light dropped. The floodlights along the yard came up not all at once but in a sequence that made the mesh into a rectangle with edges. The first stone reached the fence at the third light. It made the sound of mesh struck by a thrown pebble, then a larger one, then a handful that would have been gravel three years ago and was now dust bound together by damp. The catwalk patrol did not move to the gate. They walked to the posts and banged batons against them with a steady cadence that carried along the inside wall and set a beat that was not song and was not warning so much as a reminder that the fence belonged to the ones with batons on this side. The batons did not rise to shoulder height. They hung and struck in a line that did not vary. Inside, impacts answered thrown stones at fixed intervals; escalation would have required crossing the stripe. No one did.

642 Aaron counted the interval between stones. Three seconds. Then five. He counted the baton cadence to match. He watched for hands on the mesh by the latch and saw none. He swallowed against the bitter trace in his throat and let the pressure of his breath seat the rib tape at the place it always did on the second minute of standing. He did not reach for his badge. He kept his hands still and let the quarter-hour footfalls above him mark the quarters.

643 In the radio room doorway Leah’s pencil moved. Ruth stood with her head tilted, two fingers on the headset, listening for a station that had

gone silent. The meter registered noise-floor fluctuations. No one transmitted anything about ration changes or stones. The channel stayed clear. The pattern settled: stone, five counts, baton. Hiss, three counts, baton. He logged the intervals and held his post.

Chapter 10

Static

⁶⁴⁴ The cold arrived without wind first, a stillness that let the spray settle evenly across the spillway lip and hold. By dawn a clear skin lay over the outer edge of concrete where it always looked wet, now thick enough to support a white haze where minerals seeded the surface. When the breeze did rise it carried a metallic bite at the back of the throat that did not belong to winter, a pool-chemical taste that made breath come shorter and hang in the air as a visible plume before thinning.

⁶⁴⁵ Leah put her fingers on the rail outside the radio room and lifted them again before the skin stuck. A white band that had washed pale over weeks showed sharper now under the glaze. She flexed her hand in her pocket to return warmth to the base of her thumb and stepped into the room where Ruth sat with the headset cup sealed against one ear. The other cup rested askew so she could hear the corridor. The meter's needle lay above floor hiss in the way that meant a carrier without intelligible content. Ruth did not move the dial.

⁶⁴⁶ "West Relay Four," a voice said after a breath between cuts, the consonants flattened as if the mouth had moved away from its microphone and then leaned back in. "Switching to local only." The last word scraped in and the carrier died without a click.

⁶⁴⁷ Ruth did not answer for three counts. She lifted the transmit key and let it down without touching it to its stop.

⁶⁴⁸ "Copy. Logged," she said, not onto air but into the room. She tapped the pad where Leah's pencil already moved. Leah wrote the time and the exact words, shaped them in her mouth without sound to keep the spacing right, and drew a line where the last legible letter ended. Ruth

slid the paper strip marked WEST RELAY 4 one finger-width down the cork and put a single line through it. She did not pin it to the bottom. She did not speak a count of how many remained.

649 Outside, the spillway sounded unchanged by the glaze. Water hit water and turned over, and a thin crust set on the droplets that reached the lip and hesitated. Breath lifted from faces that came off the parapet and walked past the radio doorway. The station heater on the far wall did not run. The mains hum shifted down a fraction the way it did when the smaller generator held the load at night and sometimes in the day now.

650 A northern voice came in next. It had the clipped syntax of someone speaking in a room with a clock and a list.

651 “North Outpost Two to River Dam. Evacuation post at thirty-seven point nine seven one by minus one twenty-two point five four. Window fifteen hundred to seventeen hundred. Then we’re off.” The carrier stuttered once and lifted again for two seconds; the transmitter sagged and recovered, then dropped.

652 Ruth’s head stayed still. She let the line go a quarter-second long to see if a final clause would arrive. It did not. Leah wrote the coordinates and the window, copied the phrasing, and blocked off space for a return. She waited with the pencil tip just above the paper. Ruth’s hand hovered over the second switch and rested again on the desk. Four minutes passed while the meter showed only the baseline. Ruth touched the cork with one finger and Leah drew a single line through NORTH OUTPOST 2, careful not to make it an X.

653 Leah looked at the map, paper counties with river lines and a grid someone had sketched months ago to keep a sense of where people were when the dials did not tell you. The strips with callsigns hung on pins. The spaces where strips had been did not carry replacements. Some pins had been pulled but most remained as blank metal that reflected the light.

654 “How many are left?” Leah asked. The words came out with less weight than they had felt sitting behind her teeth. She watched Ruth’s hands rather than Ruth’s face.

655 Ruth tapped the map with two nicotine-yellowed fingers. First here, toward the coast. Then there, inland along a power corridor. She did not speak a number. She tapped again toward the south where a cluster had been. The taps were slower than last week. She kept her head at the same tilt that let her hear mains drift and line loss. She did not answer the question because the pins answered it and because counting out loud would not make any station come back.

656 “Log what matters,” she said, not as correction; a cue to resume the log. “Who’s left.”

657 Leah nodded and wrote the time for silence. She set the pencil down and flexed her hand. The skin across the base of her thumb showed a paler line where tape had been earlier and the cloth she had washed had dried with a faint mineral seam. She rubbed the seam between forefinger and thumb and listened, breathing through her mouth until the metallic taste receded to a place where it could be ignored.

658 By midday the glaze thickened where spray reached highest on the wall. Under the catwalk the sheen ran a little way down and then broke where water still carried enough movement to keep its surface open. Someone from the galley walked across the yard holding a bowl with both hands. Steam rose off the surface and then went sideways on a breath of wind and disappeared before it reached the corner.

659 Ruth lifted her finger a fraction and Leah leaned toward the desk as if she could pull a signal in with the angle of her back. The gauge needle stepped up a width you could miss if you blinked.

660 “South Relay Three,” a woman’s voice said, thinner than the northern one and more tired, “River Dam, we’re closing. Hold your people.” The carrier went to noise without a pop. A mains flick registered at the edge of the sound, and then nothing.

661 Ruth did not transmit. She half-raised the key and put it back. She looked at Leah and then back to the panel.

662 “Write it.”

663 Leah wrote the exact words. She set the pencil in the spine of the pad and looked for a return that did not come. In a minute Ruth pointed at the strip on the cork without touching it. Leah drew a line across SOUTH RELAY 3 and wrote the time. She left the space for the return empty in the log, because that was what space was for.

664 The afternoon moved toward a light that came later than the clocks said it should have and then did not last. The wind finally chose one direction down the valley and stayed there. It put the smell from the lower apron into every corridor. People walked more carefully on the parapet because a place that had been dark and damp yesterday was now glass with a powder film on top. Floodlight housings showed smear where sun had thawed and re-frozen in an old streak pattern. A gull came in low, touched the glaze with a wingtip, righted, and kept going without circling.

665 At the gate the stripe outside the mesh lay clean and useless under new dust. Bodies that had stood there the day before had thinned further. Those who remained had pulled tarps back to the road barrier and made themselves small. No one reached for the mesh in the day. Omar stood his post with his thumb near the latch pin without contact. He made the baton knock once and then did not repeat it because there was no escalation worth answering with a beat.

666 Leah carried two bowls filled to the mark and cold, from the galley past the radio doorway and up to the parapet. She kept both in one hand to leave the other for the rail. She held the bowls to her side so the wind would not catch them. Steam had not risen from the bowls when she'd picked them up. The galley had cut heat again. Soup now arrived at the mark and stayed at room temperature because room temperature was the air. People did not ask why. The whiteboard at the galley still read 0.4. The two lines beneath it, no refills and no second pass, had not been

erased. Review Friday stayed at the bottom in dry marker that had left a ghost under newer strokes.

667 He was on the west run where it curved toward the service road bend. Aaron's body stood rigid and square to the mesh without touching it. He kept his weight centered so his ribs would not pull in the wrong place. He did not lean on the post because leaning read as weakness and because the ice at the base would slip a boot if he put weight fast where weight could not stay. His hands were on the rail at a height that let him release without looking like he wanted to release. He kept his breathing at a measured rate that matched the quarter-hour footfalls from the catwalk above.

668 She stopped at his shoulder and waited until the footfalls aligned with his chest. She was close enough to feel the cold come off his jacket and close enough to hear the click where his badge lanyard knocked once against the zipper and then settled. He swallowed; he had learned to swallow instead of cough. The bitter trace in the air made the urge sit high in the throat where it wanted to become sound. She could see the place in his neck where he held it.

669 "Hold your people," she said. The words were the same shape as the ones in the radio room. They had the same weight. She did not add any. She watched his hands but did not touch them.

670 He did not answer out loud. He counted ten beats and she could see the count because his jaw worked once on four and again on seven. On ten his shoulders dropped by a fraction and his hands loosened against the rail without moving from it. He nodded once and drew air in without the cough taking it. He set his feet a fraction wider to hold the watch without strain.

671 He angled his head toward the yard.

672 "You on?"

673 "Back to the room," she said. "Ruth's listening."

674 “Keep it clear.” He looked at the lower apron where spray made a fog that showed as a bright ring under the light. The belts at the bridge column held what they held. He did not look at it long. He set his eyes on the latch housing and the hands that would reach for it if it moved, and he watched those hands not reach.

675 “Galley’s cold,” she said.

676 “We’ll take it,” he said. “Save the burn.” The plastic tang lifted off the bowl; his mouth flinched before he took it.

677 She set one bowl where the parapet met the stair post. The other she held with her fingers inside to warm them. The bowl did not hold warmth. He reached out and took it without looking at the contents. The surface did not steam. He tipped the bowl enough to meet the mark with his lips and swallowed, then set it down with the same care he used at the pump. The metal of his badge brushed the bowl and made a sound that would become normal if it happened enough times.

678 “Pre-stage tomorrow,” he said. “Spool by the radio hall. Not in the corridor.”

679 “I’ll clear stairs,” she said. “One body at a time.”

680 He grunted once. It could have been agreement or pain. He shifted his stance a degree to keep his weight off the new ice wedge at the base of the post. The lane between the post and the rail to his left had become a trap for boots. He adjusted without looking down.

681 He took two breaths and nodded toward the stair.

682 “Back to the room,” he said again. “Hold your, ” He stopped and closed his mouth against the word. He did not need to say it twice.

683 She took the bowls and moved along the parapet at a pace that matched the wind. It pushed her coat against her side and made the fabric stiff in a way that showed the air would stay dry until morning. She kept her hand on the rail where there was no ice. Two posts ahead a guard tapped his baton against the metal and stopped. The sound ran along the

mesh and died under the steady water.

684 By full dark the wind held steady and the ice grew in from the lip where spray hit clean. The lower apron's edge showed a faint white rim where mineral set inside clear ice. A rectangle of shade lay beneath the short bridge where ice would outlast the sun the next day. Breath from the catwalk turned the beam edges into a visible band when bodies moved along it.

685 Relief came on the west run and the baton cadence fell away behind him. He stepped into the pump room with the same cold on him, and the floor stayed cold.

686 The pump house sounded different under cold. Motors held a lower note. The hose to the catch tray pulsed thinner and the tray filled faster with a sediment line that firmed into a ridge and then slumped. The finer stuff stayed in suspension longer and then settled in a layer that was smooth enough to reflect the light from the doorway. The scoop lifted loads that had weighed less the week before and now came away heavy without clumps. Aaron stood with his hands on the hose coupling and kept it from kicking itself out of its seat when the load changed.

687 He swallowed against the cough that perched at the back of his throat. The air tasted like chlorine and ground metal. He had learned he could push the urge down if he closed his mouth for a count of six and let his chest sit still against the tape. The first night at the pumps he had let the cough out and the sound had woken a place in his ribs that kept him from sleep until morning. He did not make the sound now. If he coughed in front of the senior tech, the man would say nothing and adjust the stance board anyway. At muster his name would not be on the pump line. It would be under sweep. Sweep ate hands and brought nothing into the room. Work for stay did not include the work he could do best.

688 The gauge needle rose slowly and settled one tick below his last line and two below the mark before that. He lifted the pencil and made a short line that the senior tech would not erase. He did not speak. He watched for the change in motor note that came before the hose went slack. When it came he took the weight through his forearms and wrists and let his thighs take the rest so his ribs would not pull at the wrong time. The hose slackened at four seconds twice, then six, then caught with a thinner push. Across ten minutes he counted four unloads; last week had been two.

689 “Catch,” the senior tech said.

690 He set the hose in the cradle and slid the scoop under the lip without splashing. The fines slid off the edge in a sheet that held together before breaking into smaller plates. He lifted and let it drip, tilted, and tapped the scoop against the bin. The bin label read every 3 hrs over a faint crossed-out 6. The line in the bin sat above the scribed mark that someone had put there when the camp had thought the label would hold longer. The tray passed the three-hour scribe at one-forty.

691 “Finer,” Aaron said.

692 The senior tech nodded. He did not look away from the panel. He had the same stance he had in the first week and read each gauge without needing to think. He pinched the tape over the red lamp to resettle it where corner lift had let light show once in the day.

693 “Loaded notice longer,” the tech said. “Return weaker.”

694 “People should,” Aaron began, and stopped because he knew the sentence that followed and he also knew what the tech would answer.

695 “Not yet. Command tells it,” the senior tech said, as if completing Aaron’s thought but not for the sake of completion. “Keep the hose.”

696 Aaron nodded and closed his mouth on the cough again. He swallowed. His knuckle skin had split by the second joint of his index finger. When the hose flexed he felt the split open and sting with a clean

pain that he could file away with the others.

697 Someone banged a baton against a post above the pump house corridor and the sound came down through the wall in a steady cadence. Not a warning. It held people in their lanes no matter what the weather did. The yard had learned the sound and set their bodies to it without needing to see a baton move. Inside, the server at the pump doorway tilted a bottle and filled a cup exactly to the mark without wetting the outside. “No second pass” stared back from the board behind her shoulder and did not need to be read for her wrist to stop.

698 On the parapet the ice had started to look like it belonged there. Patches that had been glass in the afternoon now carried a dusting where air had blown spray into grains. The risk lay in places where water had run clean and then frozen clear over clear. The surface looked wet and was ice. A guard two posts down from the corner, shorter, with a beanie under his helmet and a new vest with a tear along the shoulder, stepped onto a spot that read as wet and was not. His boot lost purchase. He reached for the rail with his right hand, missed, and went down on the heel of his left palm with a crack distinct from the ice. He sucked breath and then doubled over, clutching his side.

699 Aaron kept his hands on the rail. You did not leave your post unless the post beside you had already lost a body. The guard at the corner moved first. He crouched, looked at the angle of the wrist, and did not test it. He wrapped the forearm above the wrist with the guard’s scarf without pulling tight. The injured man kept breathing in a way that sounded like he had been reminded ribs could be counted one by one. He sat up with his hand in his lap and his eyes shut. The hand did not sit straight. The line of posts along that run shifted a half-step to cover the gap while a runner went inside for a sling. Two posts were reassigned and the watch interval stretched five minutes. The sling came back and the wrist was secured. Underfoot ice removed margin; a boot that lost purchase drove weight through the wrist.

700 Leah appeared in the pump doorway with a square of cotton folded twice. It had been a T-shirt once and then a rag and now it was clean because rags got washed like bowls and heads and signs when there was time and there had been time today. She held the cloth flat and Aaron lifted his hands without asking what it was for. She pressed the cotton against his knuckles, then handed it to him. He folded it with his thumbs to keep the salt out of the splits and to press the edges of torn skin together, and he wiped once along his fingers where salt had dried in a line. He handed it back. She rubbed her own thumb where the skin had cracked along the old tape mark and then folded the cloth and tucked it into her sleeve. She did not speak. On her way out she eased the door with her shoulder so the server kept both hands on the bottle.

701 The senior tech set the scoop back into the catch. The motor note held and then unloaded again for four seconds. Aaron closed his mouth over the cough and breathed through his nose. He let his ribs move as little as they could while still moving. He thought about the line outside the mesh and the bodies who had learned the distance between painted stripe and fence with their toes and held that line even now because the chalk said so and the batons said so and something in them still believed a line meant something if the right people held it.

702 He wondered how many stations were left and did not ask. If he had been in the radio room he would have heard the southern voice say, Hold your people. He had heard it in the yard anyway. She had carried the words along the corridor and up the stair without raising her voice. He did what the words said because there was nothing else to do.

703 The gauge needle settled one more tick below the last line he had made. He lifted the pencil and drew another short stroke. The intake panel held 1.49 mS/cm for a count of ten and then fell a tick; the tape over the red lamp stayed flat. Cold pulled the reading down a notch without easing the draw. He capped the pencil and slid it into its slot. The senior tech stared at the panel and kept his jaw steady in the way that meant he had already run the numbers and did not like the end of the line

but would not say it until someone above him told him to say something else.

704 At the catwalk a baton tapped a post once and then a second time. It did not make the sound of fear and it did not make the sound of anger. It made a line of sound that could be followed. The batons stayed down. The latch did not lift. The fence stayed between inside and outside. The water fell and turned over and made a fog that settled on the lip and froze, and the white band on the edge of the concrete grew a width you could measure with a finger if you had a free hand.

705 Leah stepped back into the radio room. The meter read hiss. The pins on the map held their places with more space between them than in the week before. She wrote the time and left the line on the page empty. Ruth raised two fingers from the desk and then let them fall. She sat still and listened to what was not there.

706 Aaron held the rail and counted between batons. He drew air in and out the way Ruth would have told someone to do if she had been at the parapet and not at the desk. He had learned to hear instruction in phrases until they became procedure. He watched for hands at the latch that did not come and for ice where there had not been ice the day before. He thought about the bowl he would carry and how he would not heat it. He thought about the scoop and the fines and the way the tray would fill faster in the cold and the numbers that would drop by single ticks toward the bottom of what the panel could tell them.

707 By near midnight the wind held steady; the slab stayed cold under it. The guard with the fractured wrist had been moved to the corridor

where heat held a little longer than outside and put his back against the wall with his arm in a sling that had once been a bandage for a thigh. A body shifted from the east post to cover his place and Omar, who had not left his post all day, knocked his baton once at the transition and kept his thumb near the latch pin and did not touch it. The belt at the bridge column did not move except where a strand lifted and settled in the steady air.

708 Static thickened; the meter held at hiss. Ruth and Leah kept their headsets set to it. In the pump house the motors ran with a fine rasp. In the yard people kept to baton cues and a voice that said no opening. Aaron stood in the cold and learned where ice formed and where it did not and what it did to a person's wrist and what it did not change about a line.

709 He swallowed once more against the cough and let it sit where he could hold it. He did not touch his badge. He did not look down. He looked ahead and counted until the number reached ten and began again.

Chapter 11

Hard Choices

710 By the next dusk the wind had not shifted. The ice that had grown in from the lower lip held where spray reached and thickened a little along the line that light made bright under the lamps. The white band at the edge of concrete carried one more width than at noon. Breath rose and thinned the way it did when the air stayed dry. The mains hum sat low; the smaller generator had taken the load and kept it.

711 Aaron stood at the west run where the mesh curved toward the service road bend. He set his feet wider than the boot trap at the base of the post and kept his hands on the rail. The rib tape pulled if he leaned, so he kept upright. His split knuckles stung under the salt film that never quite left. He kept the cough down by swallowing and counting to six, the way he had learned to keep it from becoming sound.

712 Beyond the stripe, bodies that had slept at the road barrier kept their tarps low. Figures rose and settled without approaching the mesh. The belt strap under the short bridge lifted once and fell back into place on the ladder bracket. Harker's boots still hung above the slab and left two dark arcs on the column.

713 A different sound came along the shoulder then, not the even cadence of a column arriving but a shorter pattern that matched four or five legs, then a pause, then movement again. The figures that appeared at the bend did not carry bowls. Two had lengths of rebar with a hook bent into one end. One carried a ladder that was not a ladder, the rails were grey conduit and the rungs were rope forced through drilled holes and knotted. Another had a sack that clinked once against itself when he shifted it from one hand to the other.

714 Aaron kept his hands still. He let his breath go steady and matched it to the quarter-hour footfalls above where the catwalk came across the parapet. Two guards took the corner position and the next post. Omar was already at the latch with his thumb near the pin without touching it. He lifted his baton horizontal and clicked the end of it against the post once. Hold.

715 The figures stopped at the stripe, as if the paint still meant something, then stepped across it. The first man slung a hook up in a single motion. It cleared the top rail and seated with a metal-on-metal sound that carried into the yard. The second followed with his hook two metres away. The ladder came forward in the hands of two. They tried to set its feet on the ice at the base. It slid. They adjusted angle and tried again. The rope rungs sagged when it took weight.

716 "Back from the mesh," Omar said. He kept his voice level.

717 Batons knocked in cadence along the line, a signal that turned bodies into a line rather than a group. No one lifted a latch. Catwalk feet went quarter-hour steady and then paused over the posts nearest the gate. Hands inside stayed off the wire.

718 The man at the left hook had a length of webbing in his pocket. He looped it over the hook and set it against his shoulder and pulled to draw the mesh toward him, making space. The ladder bit a little on the third try. A thin man with a cap too small for his head stepped onto the first rung and pushed the second backward with his foot to keep it from kicking out. The rope gave under him. He put a fist through the mesh to steady himself and took another step.

719 Aaron counted and moved nothing. The mesh took the load, bowed a fraction, and then came back when the first figure stalled at the third rung. On the inside, a guard put the baton through the mesh just above the rung and twisted to lift the rope off the conduit, pushing the improvised ladder away without reaching over. The man swore and came down two steps clumsy, the rope burning his palm. His partner shoved

the frame harder against the mesh and made a second try.

720 "Drop it," Omar said. Still plain. Still even.

721 The second raider with the sack set it down. He drew out a length of aluminium tube with tape at one end. The tape was thick enough to act as a grip. The other end of the tube had steel fixed inside with hose clamps. It was a screwdriver run out to twice a forearm's length and sharpened on a stone, a shallow bevel along one edge, until the last four centimetres glowed clean even in bad light.

722 "Watch hands," Aaron said, low enough that it was to the post to his right and not to the yard.

723 The man with the tool moved along the mesh until he was opposite the second post. He leaned, set the point to the mesh. The tool scraped the mesh once. The first strike hit mesh and slid, ringing against a pick. The second went for the space between picks and found the gap the first had widened. A guard stepped to block with a baton. The metal sounded again. The third thrust came where the baton was not. It pushed through and found soft under a vest edge and kept going until the hand that held the tool hit steel and could not go further.

724 The guard folded once and stepped back without choosing to. The baton dropped out of his hand and clattered on the concrete. Blood came down his side in a run that made a line to the base of the post. He stared at the place where his body had been entered and then looked up. He opened his mouth and closed it and opened it again as if the breath would set itself the way it did on the quarter-hour. It did not.

725 "Medic," someone said, already turning to run.

726 Omar put his baton sideways through the mesh and levered it against the ladder rail, turning the frame and dropping the climber back one rung with a short fall. He kept his eyes on the latch, not the wounded man. His thumb stayed near the latch pin without touching. The men outside gave ground on the left as catwalk boots moved faster above. The first hook came loose with a yank; the second stuck and then freed on the

third pull. The ladder went backward, the left rail catching a patch of ice and skidding, the right foot sticking for half a beat before it lost purchase and went with it.

727 "Back," Omar said. "Back from the mesh."

728 The man with the tool pulled it out of the wire with a sound Aaron felt in his teeth. The tip was dark. The man lifted it once and then lowered it, not triumph, not apology. He reached for the sack and missed the handle. He looked at his hand as if checking that it still belonged to him and found the sack the second time. He and the others stepped back over the stripe and then one more step. One of them turned his head toward the road and shouted; the words carried as fragments. Another found the rest for him.

729 "Open the gate next time," he said, louder. "You'll open it anyway."

730 They withdrew toward the bend with their ladder and hooks. They walked. They kept a distance from each other so the hooks would not catch. The short pattern of their feet went away in two notes and then became part of the shoulder noise again.

731 Inside, the medic arrived at the post with a small roll and nothing in it that could put blood back where it had gone. He set one palm under the guard's jaw and one over his chest. He didn't ask for space because the post had made space for him without moving. He did what there was to do and then stopped.

732 "No chest rise," he said, to no one in particular. "Entry under the arm seam. No external bleed to tourniquet." He put two fingers where a pulse should have been. He kept them there for a count that surprised Aaron for its length. He took them away and kept his hand still for one more count. He looked at Omar and shook his head. He went to his bag and took out a square of cloth and covered the guard's face with it. He lifted the edge once to recheck and then let it fall back. The cloth lay at the cheekbone; he finished the motion so that it covered both eyes and the

nose.

733 "Muster board minus one," a runner said.

734 "Hold the line," Omar said.

735 Two posts down a body moved to fill the gap. The catwalk above shifted heads to look along the run. The medic stepped away. A runner left toward the core where a list was kept of names and who had them. Aaron watched the latch housing and then the place where the screwdriver had gone through the mesh. The diamond there was deformed by a fraction. He saw where a hand would aim next time and set that piece in his head as a fix.

736 "Replace pick; tighten five diamonds," he said low.

737 Navarro came down the parapet. Her hands were not on anything. She stopped at the mesh opposite the post and did a count that began with the dead and then went to the living. She did not put a number to any of it. She looked at Omar and then at the latch and then at the road bend where the hooks had gone out of sight. She did not look at the cloth over the guard's face for long.

738 "No crossing," she said. "No chase."

739 Omar said, "Copy." He moved a man from the catwalk down a stair to the post. He took a body from the corner to cover the vacated patrol. He did it without having to think which name to say because the names were all spoken in the same order they were written when a place opened. A small movement went along the line as feet reset to new intervals.

740 Navarro looked at the mark on the mesh and then at the post base where blood had run to the ice and made a red film that would set harder than water would. She lifted her chin toward the corner.

741 "Cover the gap. Keep the cadence," she said. She was not looking for a reply. She turned and went back toward the core.

742 Batons ticked against posts once and then again at intervals the inside had learned to follow. The figures at the road shoulder had gone from standing to sitting again. No one touched the mesh. The stripe looked like paint and meant what it meant because there were bodies to stand where they stood.

743 Aaron swallowed and counted to six and held the cough. His fingers tightened on the rail and the split in his knuckle opened and stung and then stopped stinging because there was nothing to be done for it that would not cost a post.

744 The corridor that ran along the west parapet held the day's cold. The concrete there had not warmed since the heater had been cut. The chalk board where work intervals were pinned sat under a light that showed the old wipe marks where numbers used to be higher. The letters that read Review Friday had been there long enough to leave a ghost of ink under the ink.

745 Navarro stood with her shoulder partly turned to the board so she could hear the yard as much as the corridor. The latch noise and the batons carried into the space through mesh and wall. She had a list on a clipboard that was not for anyone else's eyes. She kept it close.

746 "We can pull six," Aaron said. He kept his voice even, left children out, and left unsaid who would choose which six because they both knew what that sentence would cost. "Controlled intake. Vulnerable only. Tag on entry. Remove them from the outside column and the pressure drops."

747 She looked past him first. She looked at the door that led to the steps as if someone could come through it carrying another gap that needed items to fill it.

748 "Six becomes sixty by dusk; our zero point four becomes zero point two overnight," she said. "We are at zero point four and holding. No

refills. No second pass. Intake is frozen except for replacement of labor. You know the board."

749 "We could announce a window," he said. "We set a stretcher here. The worst cases. One in, one out keeps count flat; pressure may drop." He heard what his mouth had just put in the air and kept going anyway. "It channels. It gives the others, " He broke off because she turned and that was enough.

750 "Open once," Navarro said. "Open once and the latch stops being a latch." She held the clipboard the way a person holds a thing that matters and would break if dropped. "You saw them at the mesh. You saw one weapon. There are always more."

751 He stood with the rail sound in his left ear and felt his ribs pull when he drew a deeper breath to say what he had come to say. He had three sentences lined up and only one of them had a place to go.

752 "There has to be a valve," he said, but quieter. He looked at the floor because he needed his eyes on something when he said it.

753 "It collapses the inside," she said. "You want one more night. I want another week." She looked past him, not to avoid his eyes but to read the movement on the other side of the wall that telegraphed down the mesh. "You know what the pump does right now. Your hands are on the hose. Cold brought the number down a tick. The draw did not ease. You bring in mouths and I put the number on the board that kills us." "Zero point four and holding."

754 He opened his mouth. He was going to say Leah's name and stopped. He understood, in the shape of that unnamed word, what the intake would do. It would set his daughter at the end of a line he had lengthened with his own hands, and it would move the mark on the bowl to a point where dehydration would do the rest.

755 He said, "We could..." and the voice clicked out on the next consonant. He swallowed. "We could pre-stage a stretcher at the stripe and send one of the, " He stopped again. The plan ended there. The

numbers stayed wrong.

756 Navarro neither nodded nor shook her head. She moved the clipboard down and then up again. She had not written anything.

757 "West run," she said. "Cold interval. You know where the slip is now. Cover the post we lost. Omar will move you for the last hour." She turned her shoulder again to face the wall that carried sound.

758 He moved before the moment could look like defiance. He put his palm on the cool paint by reflex and left no sweat on it because the air took moisture out of skin before it could appear. He went toward the parapet stair. The phrase about the stretcher went with him for three steps and then was gone.

759 He cleared the corridor and stepped to the radio doorway. The mains hum held lower on the smaller set. Leah stood in the doorway with the headset around her neck and the pencil held in the place between thumb and finger where salt had split the skin earlier this week and now looked paler than the rest. The meter showed baseline hiss and the needle held where it had held since the last voice had said anything that could be written. Ruth sat at the desk with her hand near the cork without touching it.

760 Leah looked at Aaron the way you looked at a person who had cold on him and would keep it for hours.

761 "They'll come back for the latch," she said. "You open for one, you open for all. We die faster." She kept her voice low in the corridor. The air carried sound into rooms you did not mean to fill.

762 He stood at her shoulder, not touching the door frame because the paint there had a build-up that came off on skin and then stayed on skin. He let his jaw work on four and seven and finished the count at ten before

he answered.

763 "Navarro said it," he said, but that was not an argument. It was a report.

764 "Hold your people," Leah said. She looked toward Ruth and the map without lifting her head. "Don't say what you can't do. Don't make a story. Keep the space you can protect."

765 Breath held steady without a cough. The marks on his knuckles had gone from red to pale and back again three times in the last hour. He thought of the two children who had slipped under the mesh when she had lifted it, and then of the board and where the marker had moved that afternoon after that act had been added to the camp without a line. He kept them in.

766 "There's mercy," he said. "There has to be." He kept his voice without tone so it would not carry. "But it can't be on the board."

767 "Never at the latch; never near the board," she said.

768 Leah looked at him to make sure he was not asking her for permission to break the fence in a way that would show. He was not. She nodded once.

769 "Specific," she said. "Small. Quiet. No trace. If it changes the board, it kills us." She drew her mouth into a line that matched the single line you drew through a callsign when no one came back.

770 He kept his hands at his sides so the rag she had given him earlier would not tempt him to check the splits. He had learned to keep action off his fingers when he had no need to use them.

771 "You call it," he said. "You're better at knowing where the line is." He meant the stripe and the ration mark and the point where a system turned into a crowd.

772 She left that part unanswered. She stepped back into the radio room and set the pencil down across the spine of the log pad and then picked it up again and wrote the time for silence. She added no note

about the mesh because the radio carried no camp business.

773 Ruth lifted a hand and let it fall. The motion meant nothing around the radio except that it was something she did when she heard a change in the mains and then realized it had been a shift in the air in the hall instead.

774 "West run," Aaron said, to himself more than to either of them. He touched the corner of the door frame with the back of his hand and went to the parapet stairs.

775 The wind met him with the same numbers it had carried for two hours. The ice at the base of the post had spread along a seam between two pours and made a narrow wedge that would take a boot unless a heel landed first. He set his foot where he knew it would hold. The belt lifted once under the bridge and lay back. The road shoulder had figures at it and one more shape than had been there ten minutes before. No one came to the stripe.

776 Omar lifted his chin. Aaron lifted his a fraction and took the post that had been his before the corridor. Hands where they went, breath matched to the feet that crossed the catwalk on the quarter-hour; he counted from one to ten and started again. The baton knocked at intervals that made the yard hold still. The latch stayed shut. The mesh held. The load at the post stayed.

777 He looked at the small deformation in the wire where the tool had gone in. He glanced, then looked away, because dwelling on a mark fixed it, and it was already fixed enough.

778 The outside threw one stone that hit a post and fell without bouncing. A hand pulled a tarp tighter at the road shoulder. A voice carried along the barrier, a sentence in pieces, and then fell silent. A high, thin whistle came off the ice seam.

779 One swallow pushed the cough back behind his tongue. He left the badge lanyard alone, kept his eyes on the latch housing and on the hands that would reach for it if they came, and waited for the next count to start.

"Replace pick; tighten five diamonds. Flag on the post."

Chapter 12

The Last Pallet

⁷⁸⁰ The intake panel had risen one mark since first light and held there, the needle steady enough that the senior tech did not lift the tape on the red lamp. The motor note stayed loaded and turbidity held at 46 NTU. The catch tray filled with fines that should have taken three hours and reached the scribe at 13:32. Aaron kept the hose seated with his left hand and let his right rest where salt had split the skin, the cloth Leah had given him folded under the knuckles. Breath went in without a cough when he kept it shallow and counted to six.

⁷⁸¹ He heard carts on the storage corridor above the pump room and a voice call for a second set of hands. Not urgent. Carrying. When they reached the turn, the sound changed from rubber to something harder. Wood scrape over concrete.

⁷⁸² On the next shift change he passed the hose to the senior tech, wiped his hand once against the rag to keep salt out of the splits, and stepped into the corridor. The air smelled of chlorine and metal. He climbed at a measured pace to spare his ribs. The first cart came into view pushed by two people and steered by a third with a palm on the corner. Shrink wrap showed scuffed, not split. He saw the colour of the caps through the cloudy plastic and the manufacturing seams on moulded bottles. Sealed. The pallet was low, two courses, not four, and the wrap had a white haze where spray had dried on it sometime before it had been tucked behind coil stock.

⁷⁸³ A second cart followed with loose cases. A woman from inventory held a paper strip to the wrap and read out a sequence. Her mouth snapped shut on the last number and opened again without sound. She

looked at the intake clerk, who tilted his head and gave a small negative shake without moving closer. The intake clerk did not control this corridor. The intake clerk had discovered that as of now.

784 Navarro stepped into the space, glanced at the pallet, then at the intake clerk. She did not smile. She lifted the paper strip herself and turned it. Her voice carried just enough to reach the yard.

785 "Inventory reconciliation, sealed stock, pallet one of one," she said. "Distribution to work-critical units only. Pumps, perimeter, sanitation." She raised her chin. "Gather in the yard. This is supplemental to baseline. Baseline remains zero point four."

786 She kept the paper in her left hand and took the stairs to the parapet. The yard came into view under a sky that didn't change. The whiteboard by the galley door still showed 0.4 with 'no refills' and 'no second pass' and the ghost under it where numbers had been higher once. The stripe outside the fence lay under dust. Faces lifted toward the parapet as Navarro moved along the rail.

787 She did not raise her voice. Sound carried along the catwalk.

788 "The pallet is sealed. It is the last sealed pallet on site. This allocation is task-linked." She tapped the paper with the edge of a finger. "Litres per unit-of-work. Zero point two litres per perimeter segment; zero point two five per pump shift. Pumps and intake, perimeter and gate, sanitation. No deviation."

789 Aaron stepped off the stair. He lifted the sagging tape and re-strung it into a serpentine that put space between groups. The chalk from his pocket marked quick headers at the lane mouths: Pumps; Perimeter; Sanitation. He set a hand cadence for the server, two every ten seconds, start and hold.

790 Bodies shifted a step; no one decided to move. A few people nodded without showing teeth. Others rolled their shoulders and looked down the boards at their posts, refusing the word and yielding to the maths because there was nothing else to yield to.

791 Murmurs moved through the yard and stayed low. "Favourites."
"Radio kids get their own." "Gate gets two." Voices came clipped but
stayed under a threshold set by baton cadence and the shape of the tape.

792 "Radio is not heavy labour," Navarro said, without turning. Her
shoulders stayed square. "Radio bought us time twice. There are no
pallets now. We keep pumps, perimeter, sanitation."

793 Ruth stood in the radio doorway beyond the tape he had just
pulled with one headset cup on, the other off, as she did when she had to
hear the yard and the hiss at the same time. Leah stood behind her
shoulder with a pencil, not on the list and not pretending to be, on the
wrong side of the line he had just made. When her name didn't come she
did not move. She kept her eyes down and wrote the time against a blank
line because the meter showed nothing but baseline. She touched the
pencil to paper harder than she needed to; the point still sharp enough to
leave a clean stroke. Those nearest glanced toward the radio doorway,
then looked away.

794 Aaron watched names go under his chalk and tape. The lines
moved the way lines moved when lanes and signs aligned. A server lifted
the wrap with a knife and didn't cut the plastic; she eased it so that it
peeled and could be folded back to cover what was left afterward. Each
bottle came out with two hands to reduce the chance of drop. The caps
stayed sealed; distribution of sealed water was face to face under the
parapet.

795 When they reached perimeter, Omar kept his thumb near the
latch pin without touching it. His stance didn't shift as he watched the
angle that raiders had approached the last night. He was ready for a push
that didn't come; the lanes set the yard back to procedure.

796 Leah did not look up when perimeter names were done. She had
taken off the clean strip of tape from her knuckle two days earlier; a paler
line there showed where it had been. She held the pencil with that hand
and kept the point down. The small muscles at the corner of her mouth

held still.

797 Aaron saw the distance between where she stood and where the bottles moved hand to hand. He had chalked part of that distance. He watched the distance and kept a steady count. It stayed fixed.

798 A woman at the back of sanitation said something Aaron didn't catch and then said it again louder. "Galley gets none?"

799 "Galley is not heavy labour," Navarro said. "Galley is duty on rotation."

800 No one laughed. The rubric had no place for humour.

801 By the time the first course of the pallet had been halved, the yard settled into the new cadence. The murmurs didn't stop; they moved to the edges. Two people who had thought their names would be read didn't move when they were not. Omar's baton clicked once and then not again. They yielded to the assignments on paper and tape.

802 When the lanes had cleared and the tape sagged a fraction under its own weight, Aaron stood at the parapet corner and watched the service road bend. Cold held at the lip, ice still growing along the seam. He heard the clink of a cap in a hand, a sound that now meant something other than what it had the week before.

803 Leah came up the short stair with a bowl of water to the mark. She had got it without waiting in the line because Ruth had sent her for it when the server wasn't watching. She carried it without spilling. She set it on the rail where the mark showed and looked at him.

804 She tried to smile. The skin at the corner of her mouth split. It left a small line and a bead of red that the wind dried before it could fall. She didn't put her tongue out to wet it. She kept her lips pressed together as if that could seal the mark the way the wrap sealed the pallet.

805 "I'm fine," she said. She lifted the bowl and held it out. "Galley said we could carry one if the board wasn't looking."

806 He took the bowl and drank to the mark and not beyond it. The plastic tasted as it always did. He set the bowl back without letting his badge brush it. He watched her mouth for the twitch that meant pain. He saw it and said nothing.

807 "We'll hold," she said. The words came out with no space for anything else to be put on them.

808 He nodded and didn't commit to the gesture with his neck because of the pull on his ribs.

809 He left the parapet and went down two steps and into the yard. He moved near the edge of the sanitation sector, where a man in a rubbed-thin security vest now had a sealed bottle in his hand and stood waiting for the signal to return to post. Aaron touched the sleeve near the shoulder to get his attention.

810 "You on the night run?" Aaron asked.

811 "Two on, one off," the man said. He wasn't Omar. He held the bottle near his chest, cap still sealed.

812 "Swap," Aaron said. "I take your next slot. You take my hose."

813 The man looked at the bottle and then at Aaron. He shook his head once. "Audit on swaps."

814 "Not a swap on the board," Aaron said. "Just a swap."

815 "Audit on swaps," the man said again, the same words. "Not my neck."

816 He moved to the short wall where sanitation had already started back with their load. Aaron watched him step away with the bottle at his side.

817 He tried again with a perimeter man near the west run, a man with a scar near his jaw who had kept his stance steady when the raiders

had come. The man listened and didn't interrupt.

818 "I'm not losing post," he said. "You know the latch is bad. You know the angle."

819 "I cover your angle," Aaron said.

820 "No," the man said. He didn't add anything to it.

821 Aaron didn't follow. He stood for a moment with his hands at his sides and let the air hit the split skin on his knuckles. The stinging kept his hands still.

822 At the radio doorway Ruth held her bowl in both hands. She had not been on any list. Her hands shook once when the wind cut and then stopped shaking when she set the bowl down on the ledge.

823 "You," she said to Leah, and she lifted the bowl a centimetre.

824 Leah didn't move from where she stood. She looked at the bowl and then at Ruth and then at Aaron without holding on any of them long enough to draw attention. Her mouth was closed; he could see where the skin had split.

825 "Hold your people," Leah said, the words low enough that they didn't go beyond the doorway. "You keep it, Ruth."

826 Ruth nodded and did not insist. She picked up the bowl and drank to the mark and not beyond. She set it down and slid it along the ledge so it would not make noise.

827 Aaron watched the bottles in the yard as they were opened. The crack of a cap separating from its ring had a distinct sound he had not heard so many times in one place. The first drink from sealed water caused eyes to close on more than one face. Hands were steady. The way people held those bottles had no exaggeration in it. Everyone understood what a seal meant now.

828 He checked the intake steps, board, log, witness, then left them. He chose the recess behind coil stock and counted the turns he could

make without light.

829 He watched one bottle go from a gate guard's hand to his mouth and then back down, half the mark gone. The guard breathed with his mouth closed afterward to keep what stayed in from being taken by the air.

830 Aaron found his jaw working on four and seven and his count finishing at ten without a cough. A line of thought, kept small and steady during the day, came into place. There were no more pallets coming. There was only this one. He had drawn the lines that directed the flow. He watched Leah's mouth and he understood that none of his lines would move even if he argued until the small generator failed.

831 He didn't argue. None of his lines would move. He began counting the turns that would hold in the dark.

832 The drill had been on the chalk board since the afternoon: blackout, twenty-minute window, corridors clear, posts remain at half-staff. He had not written the time down; he didn't need the number to know the interval after the mains hum changed. The smaller generator stepped off and the lights dropped in stages to nothing. People moved the way they had been told to move: hand to the wall at shoulder height, slow feet, quiet. The catwalk guards had lamps, not floodlights. The yard lay in dark that still had edges because people kept to lines.

833 Aaron set his hand on the paint at shoulder height and let bodies set the pace. On days when the generator held, he had counted the steps from the parapet stair to the storage turn. Not useful now. In the line, he made the small decisions that kept him inside it. With three others, he took one corridor and then went with two as the line thinned at the bend. Because of his ribs, he didn't lead with his shoulder; he kept his chest still.

834 At the storage threshold a runner with a clip light stood to the left and counted those who went through. The runner's body made a soft barrier; the corridor camera eye had a paper strip over it for the drill. The door sensor clicked each time it opened and then sounded a longer tone when it closed. The runner written under Perimeter on the board used his thumb to keep time against his finger when the door clicked. He did not look at faces.

835 Aaron let a group pass into the bunk corridor and turned his shoulder into the dark where coil stock and tarps had been stacked to keep the lane clear. He had seen where the second course of the pallet had been staged when the first had come down. Not the main stack. A secondary stack in a recess behind coiled cable and a folded field tent. The tarp hung over it was not tied at the bottom.

836 He went into the shadow with his left hand out and found the fabric by touch. He lifted the edge and slid himself into the space it covered. He didn't try for a case. He felt along shrink wrap and stopped at a bottle shape he could take with one hand. His fingers traced the moulded ribs and found the gap between two bottles pinned together under the plastic. He worked one bottle free and kept his breathing shallow because of the way his ribs pulled with any change.

837 The bottle came toward him. It stuck once and then slid. It made a small dragging sound when the plastic rubbed plastic. He put his hand on the moulded bottom and drew it clear. He set the weight against his jacket and felt the cold through the cloth.

838 Someone's shoulder bumped his back through the tarp. The bottle neck tapped the cap of the bottle behind it, a small click against plastic. He held still until the fabric settled, counted two breaths with the cold through the tape, then moved again. A voice at the door said a number that matched the thumb counting.

839 Sliding the bottle under his jacket, he tucked it into the space that his rib tape had created and held it there with his elbow. The tape

pressed. He moved out of the recess and let the tarp fall. Stepping into the corridor light that the clip lamp gave, he became part of the cautious shuffle again. He kept his face still and let his count keep his feet where they needed to land.

840 The door clicked open and he passed through and the tone that said it had closed came after him. The generator made no sound because it was off by plan. The dark did not change. He moved into it and took the stair down to the corridor that led to the bunks. His feet found the edges the way they did when he was tired. He put his left shoulder to the wall and moved until the light returned in stages with the hum. He did not breathe deeper when it did.

841 In the bunk row he stood for a count of six and kept his hands at his sides. He felt the bottle against his ribs the way he had felt a box wedged under his jacket when he had taken a tool home from the warehouse and told himself it was because he would bring it back the next morning. He had brought that tool back. He would not bring this back.

842 Ruth did not need a printout to know when something had shifted. She sat with one headset cup to her ear and the other off; the meter showed hiss. The generator had returned. She let her hand hover over the transmit key, then lowered it again. She lifted her head and looked through the doorway toward storage.

843 "Someone took mercy," she said. The words reached Leah and stopped.

844 Leah looked in the same direction and then at Ruth. She didn't smile this time. She pressed her lips together to keep from showing the mark where skin had split.

845 In storage, the thermal printer by the tally board spat out a strip of paper. The intake clerk tore it off and read. "Reconciliation 22:00,

22:15: minus one unit." He read the door log on the panel beside it. It scrolled time stamps without emotion. "20:13," he said, and he didn't say the name because the badge reader had already assigned it. A camera mounted over the corridor had a square of paper with 'offline' stamped in blue across it. "Drill start chalked at twenty ten," he added. "That twenty thirteen pass is the last drill-time movement; reconciliation runs twenty-two hundred to twenty-two fifteen."

846 The intake clerk slid the slip under a clip and called, "Omar." He stayed at the board. Sound carried from that corner of the camp to the parapet.

847 Omar took the slip and read it. He looked up at the clerk. "He passed storage at twenty thirteen. End of shift?" The clerk nodded. Omar wrote: "Runner T-12: saw movement by coil stock." He slid the note under the clip with the slip.

848 "Hale," Omar said. He didn't say it loud. Aaron was there because he always returned to the storage corridor at the end of shift to ask if any hose had been spliced or any catches had changed. He stepped forward.

849 "Walk," Omar said. He didn't touch Aaron's arm. He set a pace that didn't force Aaron to match it faster than he could without pulling his ribs. They walked to the space near the notice board where the galley steam sometimes drifted and then didn't because there was no heat tonight and steam didn't last.

850 "During the drill," Omar said. He looked at the slip, not at Aaron. "Movement recorded. Camera offline by plan. Door recorded at twenty thirteen. Reconciliation shows minus one unit. You confirm any work movement through storage at twenty thirteen?"

851 Aaron's mouth opened and shut. He could say he had passed the doorway, which was true. He could say he had not entered, which was not. He kept air in his lungs and let words sit behind his teeth because any word he let out now would have to be tied to numbers later.

852 "Hearing," Omar said, when Aaron didn't speak. "DR-nineteen. Eighteen hundred tomorrow."

853 DR-19 logged. He pinned the slip with two others already on the cork: one about a work injury, one about a bunk dispute. He posted a typed sheet under them with a line for the hearing. "DR-19: hearing 18:00 tomorrow."

854 He handed a copy to Aaron. He did it the way he would have handed him a coil of tape for a repair. Neutral hands. No theatrics.

855 "You'll have your say," Omar said. He didn't add what everyone knew about the board and how it moved when the numbers got small.

856 He walked away. He tapped his baton once on the nearest post and then didn't tap it again. He moved along the corridor to check the latch housing because he checked it when he passed.

857 Leah came down the corridor after Omar had gone. She stood before the board and read the sheet. She didn't speak. Her hand lifted as if to touch the edge of the paper and then stopped. She put her hand in her pocket and stood still long enough to be sure the movement would not be read as reaction.

858 Aaron held the copy Omar had given him and did not fold it. He didn't know where to put it because if he put it in his pocket the outline would show and if he held it in the open someone would ask him for it. He slid it under his jacket with his elbow near the place where the bottle sat. He kept his stomach muscles clenched to hold both.

859 The yard changed by degrees. Voices that had carried in low bands during the day went lower. The baton cadence shifted down the line so that it landed a fraction closer together. The space between bodies increased at the places where small favours had been passed in the last week. People looked down more often, not at the ground but at their hands. No one ran a finger around the rim of a bowl to catch a second drop. The board by the galley stayed unchanged: 0.4 with 'no refills' and 'no second pass'. The air smelled of metal and something burnt.

860 Aaron went to the bunk row. He sat because standing hurt more than sitting when he had to be still. He put his back against the wall and kept his shoulder away from anyone else's shoulder. He did not take the bottle out. He put a hand over the place it was and didn't press. The bottle's ridges pressed the tape; he kept his breathing inside the count. He looked at Leah across from him and in the space between looking and looking away they agreed on nothing out loud.

861 He had the bottle. The hearing had a time. The air had changed. The camp had made its ruling. The night stayed. The mains hum held steady on the smaller generator.

862 He closed his eyes for a count and opened them. He listened to the yard and the corridor. He counted how long it took between batons and breaths. He did not cough. He counted toward eighteen hundred. He waited for the hour to pass.

Chapter 13

Radio Quiet

863 The meter needle sat on hiss and did not rise above it. Ruth kept one headset cup over her ear and the other off, the way she had done on days when carriers rose and fell across the band. This morning the line stayed flat. She read the first callsign in a steady voice and held the count long enough for any transmitting set to finish handshakes. Silence held to the end of the count.

864 "West Relay Four," she said, five beats between words. "River Dam, standing by." She watched the needle and did not touch the knob.

865 Nothing picked. She lifted her pencil and made a short stroke on the log in the square she had kept for that relay. The time went down without extra words.

866 "North Outpost Two," she said. "Window per your last. Standing by." She waited the exact interval they had measured when the northern carrier had strength. The window passed with the same hiss on the meter.

867 Leah stood behind her shoulder with a pencil in her hand and the top edge of the paper pressed against the desk so it would not lift in the draft from the corridor. She formed the words under her breath at the same pace, a whisper that did not reach the doorway. "North Outpost Two. Window per your last. Standing by." Her mouth moved, the split at one corner kept small by tight control.

868 "South Relay Three," Ruth said. She kept her voice even. "Hold your people." The meter stayed on baseline.

869 Aaron watched from the doorway and set his back against the jamb because standing without the wall's support put a pull on his taped

ribs. His hands rested at his sides, palms dry from the air. A pale seam showed under the old tape on his knuckles where the skin had split and healed and split again under salt. He watched Ruth's pencil move and then stop. He counted six beats, swallowed to keep a cough down, and counted four more.

870 On the cork board above the desk, grey metal pins marked the sites where strips had been. WEST RELAY 4 had a line drawn cleanly through it, just one, not an X. NORTH OUTPOST 2, the same. SOUTH RELAY 3 had the line Ruth had put through it two days earlier. No new strips had been pinned in their place. The map did not show a network anymore. It showed where the network had been.

871 Ruth let the last count run out under her breath and did not transmit again. She reached to the hook where the headset lived between sessions and stopped her hand before it touched the wood. She set the headset on the desk with both cups down and the headband flat so the weight would not pull on the cable. It made a small rubber sound against the desktop and did not slide.

872 Leah looked at the board and at the empty pins and then down at the log. She did not write another name. She whispered through the sequence without raising her head. "AG-Three. West Relay Four. North Outpost Two. South Relay Three." The meter needle did not move. AG-Three, the old ag sector repeater. She closed her mouth and the skin at the split went white for a count and then the red returned to the surface.

873 Outside, the spillway lip held a skin where spray had frozen in the last cold that had not lifted fully. A white band traced under the glaze where minerals had seeded the concrete. The smell from the lower apron carried into the corridor, chlorine and metal at a level they had called normal for weeks now.

874 Ruth drew a single line through the last strip that had not been marked before this morning. She pressed the pencil hard enough that the

cork took the line and did not bounce the lead. She did not move the strip to the bottom of the board. She left it where it lived on the map and left the line visible. No carrier above room noise at any window.

875 "Logged," she said to the room. Her voice did not carry beyond the doorway.

876 Aaron kept his jaw working at four and seven, then stopped the habit. He looked at the empty space between pins where no strip hung and knew that a person had once sat at a desk somewhere in that space with a headset cup pressed to their ear and a generator that held at night and failed sometimes in the day. He looked at the white chalk line along the rail outside and counted the mineral bands where spray dried by hour.

877 Ruth took her hand off the key and turned the volume down so the hiss dropped to a lower band they called room noise. She stood up. Her hand hovered near the hook a second time and then she left the headset where it sat on the desk. Leah kept her pencil in her hand and did not sharpen it even though the lead had dulled at the point; there would be nothing to record with a fine edge and no one to read a thin line.

878 People in the corridor angled toward the yard as guards reduced posts to half-staff, and movement slowed.

879 "Assembly," a voice said from the catwalk. Not loud. Navarro did not shout. The word moved along the rail and down the stairs and into the yard as guards repeated it in near-identical tones.

880 With the confirmation, no one questioned the call to assemble.

881 Aaron stepped back from the doorway to make space in the corridor and let Ruth and Leah pass without turning sideways. He kept his hands clear of his badge lanyard so it would not click against his chest. He followed them to the parapet stair. His ribs pulled once when he adjusted to avoid a boot trap he knew by now. He set his foot inside the slower line and stayed there.

882 The yard filled the way it did when the whiteboard told a new number, bodies arranging themselves where tape and chalk and habit put them. The board still said 0.4 with 'no refills' and 'no second pass.' Faint traces of older numbers showed under the fresh dry-wipe. Steam from the galley did not carry far; the smaller generator ran low; in the corridor it was barely audible and at the rail the wind covered it.

883 Navarro stood with one hand on the catwalk rail and one on the paper she had taken earlier from storage. She did not use a loudhailer; in that space her level, measured voice reached the yard without amplification when she kept it level and measured.

884 "No outside contact since first light," she said. "No other camp is responding." She lifted her chin in the direction of the radio doorway without naming it. "Last inland carrier silent on the meter. No one is coming. It is not that they are late. They are not coming."

885 The sound in the yard changed by degrees. It did not spike. People adjusted weight on their feet and set their shoulders. No one moved toward the gate.

886 "The numbers are these," Navarro said. She did not read a speech. She read the figures. "Calorie inventory: eight days by count at our current headcount if we hold the line at the board and if no one adds mouths. That is a hard number. We do not count what is not in the storeroom."

887 She turned one page, not fast. "Water draw and treatment: intake held the last twenty-four hours at a lower mark than last week. Conductivity at about 1,180 microsiemens per centimeter this morning; drift positive. Filter intervals are at three hours with a real catch at two. Turbidity sits up from yesterday and down from last week but not low enough to ease. The smaller generator carries the load. We do not have sealed stock except what is already assigned to posts and shifts."

888 Heads turned toward the pump corridor door. Aaron felt his shoulders tighten and then ease as he kept his arms at his sides.

889 "There is one week at best on water under this enforcement," Navarro said. "At best. That assumes no breach at the fence, no influx at the latch, no change in the intake chemistry that forces us to shut down. No deviation from the board."

890 She did not pause. She turned from the rail and looked toward the storage corridor. "DR-19," she said. "Advanced to immediate hearing due to network collapse. Storage alcove."

891 Bodies did not break formation. Only those named by procedure moved. A lane opened across the first row and held. Omar came from the west run with his baton in his hand and his thumb near the latch pin out of habit that did not stop when he stepped inside. Ruth left the radio doorway without touching the headset. Aaron followed Omar down the stair and into the corridor turning left where the coil stock had been. The smell of plastic wrap and dust sat in the air with the metal. The alcove was colder than the corridor.

892 The thermal printer at the tally board still had the last reconciliation slip under the clip, its edges curled by the heat that had pushed it out the night before. Omar did not touch it. He brought out a folded sheet and flattened it against the cork with the heel of his hand. "DR-19," he said. "Unauthorised removal of sealed unit."

893 He did not ask if Aaron understood the words. He read the line below them. "Reconciliation window twenty-two hundred to twenty-two fifteen. Door log shows a badge at twenty thirteen during the scheduled drill. Camera offline by plan. Variance flagged during reconciliation: minus one unit." He turned his head a fraction. "Runner T-12: 'saw movement by coil stock.'"

894 Navarro stood opposite the tally board with a clipboard and a pen that still had its cap chained to the body so the cap would not go missing to some pocket. She did not write yet. She watched Aaron's hands and

then his face.

895 Ruth placed the end of two fingers on the corner of the clipboard and then took them back. She did not sit. There was nowhere to sit.

896 Omar looked at Aaron. He had set the facts out. There was no more paper to read. He did not say anything else.

897 Aaron put his hand flat against his jacket where the bottle had been. It was not there now. The shape under his ribs had been absence since the bunk row. He could say he had gone down the storage corridor by rule during the drill. He could say nothing. Leah would be looking at a wall somewhere off the bunk row, pencil in hand or hand in pocket to keep the skin over the split mouth from pulling. He let his jaw work once and stopped it.

898 "I took it," he said.

899 Omar's baton did not move. He drew one breath and let it out. He wrote a short line on the sheet: 'admitted'. He did not add comment. Navarro's pen moved across the clipboard. She wrote in block letters large enough to read from an arm's distance.

900 "Banishment at dawn," she said, not as a threat, not as theatre. She wrote the words in the space where outcomes were recorded. "Enforcement at first muster."

901 Ruth looked down at the words and then at Aaron. Her eyes were bloodshot from nights at the radio and from air that stripped moisture. She did not say his name or Leah's. "Hold your people," she said, not to contradict the written decision but to place the phrase where it had always been used.

902 Navarro lifted the clipboard and tapped the pen twice on its edge to settle the ink. She lifted the hearing sheet from the cork and pinned the outcome posted below the whiteboard where the baseline rules sat. The word 'banishment' carried across the corridor without need for repetition. It was a word people knew from other camps and from older times when

fences had been new.

903 They stepped back to yard distance and yard sound. It changed at the edges. Heads that had been turned up went down. Hands that had been held around bowls in the wind loosened and then tightened on the same bowls. Murmurs began and faded without being told to stop. No one clapped or called out. No one cried. The stripe outside the fence lay under dust. The line held because the bodies held it.

904 Omar did not touch Aaron's arm. He looked toward the west run and then at Navarro. She nodded once. He would post a watch. He would not change the cadence. He lifted his baton and tapped the post near the latch housing one time as he passed. The sound travelled down the metal.

905 Aaron stood in the corridor until the others had gone toward their posts. He put his palm to the wall where paint had bubbled when damp had got under it and then dried again. The paint was rough. He took his hand away and flexed the fingers once to keep the splits from locking. He swallowed to keep a cough from rising, counted six, and then walked toward the bunk row.

906 They had agreed on the stair space for any talk after postings.

907 There was a space under the parapet stairs where light did not carry all the way. Blankets had been stored there once and then moved. The concrete held the day's cold. He stood where the support met the floor and waited until foot traffic on the corridor died down to one body every twenty seconds. A guard's lamp beam crossed the stair above and moved on. Leah arrived without noise beyond the soft contact of her boots on the floor. She kept one hand in her pocket and the other at her side.

908 He took the bottle from under his jacket. He had moved it earlier to the bunk row so it would not print through his clothes in the corridor

and had slipped it back under his jacket to cross unseen. He had checked its cap by touch to ensure the ring was still intact. He held it out to her now with both hands. It was cold even through the plastic. He did not say anything until the bottle left his palms.

909 "I took it for you," he said.

910 She held the bottle in both hands and looked at the water. The cap was clean under the moulded ring. She did not ask how. She did not look up. She lifted the bottle until the light from the corridor hit the seam so she could see if there was any flaw in the plastic. There was none.

911 "Tomorrow," she said. "We make it last."

912 He nodded once to avoid pulling his ribs. He shifted his stance where the concrete had a low swell that made standing uneven. He kept his hands at his sides because if he reached out she would have to let the bottle go to take his hands, and that would make the bottle a thing that could drop.

913 "I'm sorry," he said. He spoke quietly. "For the year. For the rules I put between you and everything. For the timetables. For the curfew."

914 Leah kept her eyes on the bottle, then lifted them to his face. She nodded once. She did not say it's fine. She did not soften her mouth. She moved the bottle slightly in her hands, testing the grip with cold fingers.

915 "Four sips," she said. She brought the bottle closer to her chest and set her thumb against the cap. "Two and two." She pressed four small marks into the label with her nail.

916 "Four," he said. He did not try to add a fifth or to make a joke. He had not made jokes for a long time now and the air in the corridor did not hold room for one. "At dawn."

917 She reached into her pocket and took out a strip of cloth that had once been tape backing and had no adhesive left. She wrapped it around the bottle for a grip and moved it once so it would sit where her palm could hold it without slipping if her hands went numb in the cold on the

catwalk. She folded the cloth's end over. She did not tie it.

918 "If they look, keep it under the blanket," she said. "No outline." She turned the bottle in her hands one quarter turn to check the seam again. "We share. Even."

919 He thought of the sound the cap made when it cracked. He thought of the way people had closed their eyes yesterday when sealed water had hit their tongues. He kept his jaw still. His hands hurt where the splits had re-opened in the cold earlier and closed again under pressure. The pain sat present and useful.

920 "We share even," he said.

921 They stood in the space under the stair until a runner went past without looking in. Leah lifted the bottle and set it under her jacket, the cold pressing through fabric. She moved her elbow to fix it there the way he had fixed it the night before, careful not to grind it against her ribs. She pulled the jacket's edge down so the shape did not print. She slid the cloth she had used for grip into her sleeve.

922 "I go back to the room," she said. "Ruth will sit with the hiss. I'll write the time."

923 "I'll take west," he said. "Until relief."

924 She nodded and stepped out of the shadow into the corridor. She kept her eyes down and her pace slow to match the others. No one looked at her. He waited three counts and then followed in the other direction toward the parapet.

925 Night came on. The wind kept its edge. The smaller generator carried the load with a two-beat wobble when the heater in the galley kicked and died again. On the catwalk, Omar tapped the post once as he moved past the latch housing, the signal they had all learned as the sound of bodies staying in place. Aaron placed his hands on the rail and kept them there. He counted six, swallowed down the cough, and kept the next count without needing to swallow again.

926 He did not think past dawn. He kept clear of his badge, his ribs, the place where the bottle had been. The wind came up from the apron with that metallic taste it had carried since the first advisories. It went into his mouth and nose and down his throat and stayed there the way it stayed in everyone who had to breathe while the intake worked and the filters clogged faster and the catch trays filled faster than the scribe. The night did not change that.

927 He stood his post. He counted toward dawn. Three hundred counts to first light.

Chapter 14

White Dawn

928 At first light, the motor note changed. He left the west rail and stepped into the intake hall when he heard it. In the intake hall, the motor note held under load, wavered, and dropped, not the long drop of a shutdown but a short fall followed by nothing. Aaron had a hand on the hose coupling to feel movement before the gauges caught up. Under his palm the line shivered, then pushed a thin slurry into the catch tray, mostly fines, not silt. The tray was already ahead of the pencil mark made last hour, a dark band pressed higher than plan. Sand rattled out once more, a dry clatter against steel, and then there was air. The sound traveled to the far wall and faded.

929 He kept his mouth closed to hold what moisture he had and counted to six to push the cough down. When he lifted his other hand to the panel, the taped knuckles split at the old lines and smarted in the salt air. The conductivity needle had drifted upward in small steps through the night and now sat high; the alarm LED the senior tech had taped over two days ago would have been lit if the tape had been removed. The smaller generator held the hum with a low wobble. The flow indicator read zero.

930 On the catwalk, boots slowed to the interval that meant nothing more needed a shout. No one called for a swap. No one said clear the corridor. A runner leaned at the storage threshold with his clip light off, lips pressed, breathing through his nose. The door sensor did not click because no one touched the handle. In the yard below, vapor hung in a thin strip where spray had formed a film over the lip and frozen and then thinned. It was not ice this morning. The surface carried a sheen that

caught light in broken patches.

931 Aaron stepped back from the hose and took his hand off the panel because there was nothing to move. He wiped his palm on the cloth Leah had given him days ago and folded the cloth over the split skin once more, finding a place where it would not rub. He looked at the catch tray. The fines had settled in a slope to one side; the water beneath the layer did not rise. He knew the spacing of the pulses the motor took when it found liquid again. There was no second pulse.

932 No one changed what they were doing when the pumps stopped. A woman in a faded hoodie and two children stood at a plastic sack near the galley line. The sack had been sealed with a cable tie the week before. She set a knee on the corner and pulled the woven plastic apart along the seam with both hands. The fabric cracked in small threads and a grey powder lifted. There was nothing inside to pour. One of the children looked into the sack as if the angle might change what was there. The woman kept her hands steady and folded the sack flat without letting it go.

933 Near the door to the galley, the whiteboard had two lines drawn where only one had been yesterday. The top line read baseline; the line below looked like a tally. Under it, someone had written the count for the morning muster. 'Muster expected 117; present 102.' Chalk dust sat on the lip of the frame where someone had wiped and written again. A chalk nub lay beside it. No one moved to call names. No one went to the bunks to shake shoulders. Eyes went from board to yard and then down again.

934 At the audit checkpoint, the steel shutter sat at shoulder height and did not move. The counting frame lay on its side. The three-mark ledger remained under a clip on the wall with the last slot empty. No clerk stood behind it. A guard who had stood at that post the day before carried his baton under his arm and looked toward the west run out of habit. He did not raise the baton to knock against a post because the post did not need a cue when the hose made no sound.

935 Aaron took two steps into the corridor and stopped. Flaking paint would stick to his jacket, so he kept his shoulder off the wall. He lifted his head and swayed it slightly to ease the pull on his ribs without using his hands. The air had the chlorine-metal in it that had been their normal for days. His mouth tasted of it. He swallowed once and counted four and then six to hold the cough where it would not shake his chest.

936 When he reached the parapet stair the cadence above him had thinned. Two posts on the rail were empty. A guard set his baton on the rail and walked off the catwalk. Another unbuckled his vest and stepped down toward the bunks. The baton knock that had kept the yard in lanes had become a sound at the beginning and end of the catwalk only, a single tap to mark that a human body still moved there. On the concrete below, tape lines still marked pumps, perimeter, sanitation from yesterday's supplement, chalk flaking where feet had crossed in obedient arcs. The tape had not been pulled up, but people no longer moved along it.

937 Navarro sat on a blue crate at the base of the stair with her back half turned to the river. Her clipboard sat on her lap and the pen chain hung slack around a finger. She watched the horizon. No call went to the server or the gate. She had nothing to say that would keep a hose from taking air.

938 A man at the fence line stood with his bowl in his hands and looked at the latch housing. He looked away when Omar took his post at the latch and set his thumb near the pin the way he always did. The man did not call for the gate to open. He turned his body and walked back along the tape line because it was the way his feet still understood the yard.

939 Omar stepped down from the catwalk and crossed to Aaron without hurry, the baton not held as a weapon but as a thing that had always been in his hand. Two guards came with him, one the man with the jaw scar who had refused a swap yesterday, the other a young one whose vest had rubbed thin at both shoulders. Omar stopped close enough that Aaron could see the chapped skin at the corners of his

mouth. He did not look at Navarro. He looked at Aaron's chest where the lanyard sat and at Aaron's hands.

940 "You know why," he said.

941 Aaron kept his arms at his sides so he did not tighten the ribs. He nodded once. Navarro did not stand up. Omar turned to the west side and the two guards fell in without a word, one to Aaron's left, one just behind. They did not put hands on him. It was still the inside.

942 They walked past the audit shutter that had not been closed all the way since it had last been used, past the notice board where the DR-19 sheet hung under the ration board. The paper had curled slightly at the corners. Someone had pressed a second pin for emphasis. The word on the sheet did not change as they passed it.

943 At the gate, the mesh bowed inward a fraction where the ladder had bit two nights before. The small diamonds had been pulled out and twisted back and now held in an irregular line. Omar put his thumb on the latch pin without lifting it and set his other hand on the post. He did not tap the baton. It lay against his thigh.

944 The river moved below the spillway lip, a film spreading from the base and moving toward the far bank. The light came up in the east as a band that filled and then evened. It was not a sunrise that anyone remarked on because there was nothing there to remark. It was a change in visibility.

945 At the stair, the rail showed white in the dawn.

946 Navarro did not get up from the crate, but she turned her head so that the latch, the notice board, and Aaron were all in one line. She pointed once at the sheet posted below the ration board. She tapped it with two fingers and the chain on the pen clicked once against the metal

clipboard.

947 "DR-19," she said. "Banishment at dawn. Enforcement at first muster." She kept her eyes on the latch. "Procedure puts you outside now."

948 Aaron set his jaw and kept it there so he did not show his teeth by accident when the air hit the split places at his mouth. He counted four and seven without moving his lips. Leah stood two paces behind Navarro in the corridor, half in the shadow of the radio doorway. Ruth stood just inside the doorway with the headset laying flat on the desk instead of on the hook. The cups sat rubber side down. The band rested without spring.

949 Navarro looked at Omar. The river made its noise under them that was more hiss than water. The smaller generator kept the background sound at a level they called room. She did not lift the clipboard.

950 "Hold him catwalk side until full light," she said. "Just inside the fence. One time."

951 The light on the rail was already grey moving to white.

952 Omar's jaw worked. The skin along it tightened and released. His baton shifted in his grip before he stilled it. He did not look at Navarro the second time. He looked at the latch housing and the mesh and then at the two guards. He nodded once. He did not shift his feet.

953 Leah stepped forward so that she stood beside Aaron with her shoulder close to his arm. She had her jacket zipped and the cloth she had used for a grip tucked into her sleeve. She glanced at Navarro and then held her eyes on the latch so that no one would call it a plea.

954 "I'll stand with him," she said. She kept her voice low and even.

955 Navarro did not say yes. She did not say no. Her face did not change. She looked at both of them as if checking their position on a plan. "Inside the fence," she said. It was not a warning. It was the parameter.

956 Ruth did not speak. She reached for the headset and stopped her hand before it touched the cable, then set it down again in the same place. The meter needle inside the room stayed at hiss.

957 Aaron looked at Navarro for a single beat.

958 "Thank you," he said.

959 She moved the pen in her hand so that the chain did not click again.

960 "Full light and then outside," she said. She had not bent a rule before this. She said it and did not add anything.

961 Omar lifted his baton just enough to move the two guards a half step back for space and set the baton down again against his thigh. He neither smiled nor nodded.

962 Aaron shifted his feet by a fraction to ease his ribs and then stood still. He had nothing to add. Leah stood with her weight even and her hands out of her pockets. She kept her mouth closed. The split stayed small.

963 They held position at the latch.

964 Leah took the bottle from inside her jacket. The plastic was cold through fabric. The molded ring at the cap base was intact where she had checked it the night before. She set her thumb on the cap with the deliberate care used to avoid making any noise louder than necessary. Her index and middle fingers tapped the label once before she lifted. Aaron held the body of the bottle with both hands to keep it steady. His left hand covered the place where the cloth folded to protect his splits. He adjusted his grip to spare his ribs.

965 The cap cracked. The sound was not loud but it carried along the rail because there was nothing else moving in the air. Aaron felt the ring

separate under Leah's thumb. He held the bottle a fraction longer to let the crack settle in case anyone behind them turned to look at the sound. No one did. Ruth stayed just inside the doorway. Navarro watched the horizon. Omar watched the latch. The guards watched Omar.

966 Leah raised the bottle. She did not tilt it to his mouth. She held it by the body so that he could take it himself. He took a small mouthful, not a sip by habit but by counting. Under his tongue, he held the water to let his mouth take it without sending it down his throat too fast. He kept his eyes open. He swallowed when he reached the count he had set and handed the bottle back.

967 Leah took her first share the same way. She set the bottle to her mouth and did not touch the cap with her lips. She tipped the smallest amount in, held it in place, and swallowed. Her breath changed when she swallowed. The muscle at her throat moved once and stopped.

968 They waited. Aaron counted to one hundred under his breath without open sound. He did not move his head while he counted. He kept his hands on the bottle so that they did not shake and show a wanting that would waste water to the air. At one hundred, Leah raised the bottle again.

969 They took the second sip each. Aaron held his a fraction longer. The points at his split knuckles lost their sting while his mouth stayed wet. His chest loosened once, not because the ribs had healed but because his breath had found a space between the pull and the cough. It did not last. It was enough to make the next count possible.

970 Inside the radio room, the meter needle did not rise. Ruth kept her hand near the key and did not move it. The volume stayed at room noise. No carrier rose above the hiss, none today. The headset lay on the desk. The hook did not hold anything. The cork board with strips and single strike lines remained on the wall with nothing added.

971 The eastern sky evened into a white the yard called daylight when it was full on the rail. Aaron watched the concrete under his boots shift in

appearance from dark to a paler shade. He did not look for a sun. He watched the change as a condition.

972 "Hold longer," Leah said. "On the third." She had her thumb on the bottle again. She looked at his face for a fraction and then back at the cap.

973 They took the third. Aaron let it sit until the count he had used before and then added two more beats because she had said hold longer. His tongue did not burn now. The plastic taste sat under a cleaner taste he had not had in weeks. He swallowed and breathed out through his nose to keep the wet where it would do something.

974 Leah lifted the bottle and took the third herself. She did not close her eyes. She kept them on the latch housing. She swallowed and set the bottle in both hands again.

975 Around them, the yard was losing its lanes. People in twos and threes took small or long steps toward the bunks or the fence. A man who had carried a baton yesterday set it down on the top of a post and walked away without looking back at the place where he had left it. The audit shutter still hung open. The counting frame slid a centimeter when someone brushed it with a hip and then settled.

976 Aaron held the bottle and felt its weight. They were down to a fraction that would not tolerate impatience. Leah waited for his count without asking what number it was.

977 "Last," she said. "Ten beats before. Ten after. Slow."

978 He lifted the bottle and took the fourth sip. It was not larger. He made it not larger by attention. He held it and then swallowed on the tenth beat. His chest told him to take air fast. He did not. He took the air into his nose and eased it out through his mouth to keep his throat from drying where the water had been.

979 Leah took the bottle and finished the fourth. The molded ring at the cap base made a small click against her tooth when she adjusted the

angle. She did not spill. She swallowed and then let her head touch his shoulder for one breath. She brought it back up without letting it stay there long enough to make it a problem for his ribs.

980 Behind them the headcount at the board meant nothing. No one chased the count. People who had been told to stand in lanes yesterday did not stand there now. The people who had told them to stand there did not call them back. Navarro still sat on the crate. She had not moved the clipboard. She watched the edge of the river and the change in light over it.

981 The river moved. The film on its surface widened and thinned in places where little chop had formed from wind and whatever came off the apron. The sound of it mixed with the lower hum of the generator. No one spoke.

982 Leah turned the empty upside down over her hand to show they had finished exactly what they had agreed to finish. Nothing came out. She slid the bottle under her jacket the way she had brought it out, turning it so the flat sat against her side. She pulled the jacket's edge down. The four nail ticks on the label brushed her sleeve. She used her elbow to hold it without making a print anyone would question.

983 They stood with nothing in their hands. Aaron did not reach for her because it would mean motion he could not pay for with breath. In the place he had stood yesterday at nearly the same time, he set his feet and noticed the difference in noise. Counting boards on the catwalk would have marked it, but he did not do that now.

984 Omar moved his hand to the latch pin. Without looking at Aaron first, he lifted the pin without a sound. His first knuckle blanched on the pin head. The hinge did not squeal. The mesh swung in a small arc that did not catch on the deformation left by the ladder. He stepped back and let the opening exist for a breath and then another without saying a word. The guards were there. They did not touch anyone.

985 Aaron looked at Leah. She looked back at him. There was no exchange beyond agreement to use the opening. He stepped forward. He kept his shoulders square because turning his body would pull the ribs in a way that would show. Leah went with him. Her boot heel hit the stripe and crossed it. He felt concrete under the next step that was indistinguishable from the concrete inside the fence except for where his foot had landed with regard to the line.

986 The gate closed behind them with a sound no different from the sound it had made four days before when the door schedule had been real. The latch pin went back down. Omar did not tap his baton. Omar stood with his thumb on the pin. He kept his eyes on the mesh and the latch housing.

987 No one at the fence called for their names or shouted questions or offers. No one offered a coat or a bowl because there was nothing to offer. People moved in small groups away from the board and from the tape lines and from the catwalk. They did not move toward the road in a line. They moved without formation.

988 Ruth stood in the radio doorway and watched them until they were beyond the angle at which she could see their bodies against the fence. She did not lift a hand. The headset remained on the desk. The needle remained on hiss.

989 Aaron and Leah stopped two strides beyond the stripe because there was nowhere to go that was different enough to require a new plan. The river's light sat in their eyes. The air held the same taste. The dam wall at their backs held the same cold they had known on the inside. He kept his mouth closed and counted to six to keep a cough down. He did not swallow because there was nothing new to move down his throat.

990 Leah slid her hand into her jacket pocket and closed fingers around the bottle to hold it in place not because it would fall but because it felt like a thing that needed a hand on it. She looked at the service road bend that had brought raiders and trucks in the last weeks and saw only

the road.

991 "We'll stay on the shoulder," she said after a time. It was not a plan. It was a way to stand.

992 Aaron moved his head. It might have been a nod. It might have been a way to unhook the vertebrae in his neck. He kept his hands down. The light was white without markers. The yard on the other side of the mesh thinned further. The blue crate under Navarro shifted when she stood at last. She did not call anything after she stood. She looked once at the latch and then at the horizon the way she had already been looking.

993 The weather stayed the same. The pump room stayed quiet; the hose was dry. Fines in the tray had settled and the catch at the scribe meant nothing. The chalk under the ration board clung where no sleeves brushed it. A baton sat on a post and did not fall; the wind was not strong enough to push it. The audit shutter stayed open to the air.

994 Aaron and Leah watched the fence. Their hands stayed empty. They stood by the closed gate at the dam. The taped lanes in the yard were empty. He counted his breaths; the count held.