

swallow scraping dry. I shifted my focus to the line where his collar met skin, tracking it with my eyes the way I would have tracked a cut mark on evidence tape. I didn't lift fabric. I didn't roll him. I brought my attention in tight, preparing to study the throat where the collar hid the truth.

I slid two fingers under the collar edge and eased it down a fraction, careful not to drag fabric across skin. The room's stink shifted as the cloth moved, stale sweat trapped in weave, cheap detergent gone sour, and that

iron-sweet note that triggered a gag reflex. The air tasted like it had been recycled through dirty filters for too long. I kept my mouth closed and breathed shallow through my nose, letting the smell tell me what time and temperature already had. Nothing in it suggested chemicals. No sharp degreaser bite. No scorched plastic. Just human and decay starting its quiet work.

The skin at the side of his neck met my fingertips with a cold, slightly tacky resistance, like a surface that had lost its life.

tension. I felt the raised seam where collar had pressed, a shallow ridge that gave under light contact. I kept my touch minimal, shifting only by millimeters, mapping what I needed without smearing anything that might still be there. The throat lay partially sheltered by the cloth, but the lateral aspect opened up enough for a read. Under my fingers, the tissue density changed in small islands, firm where blood had pooled, softer where it hadn't. I traced those islands by fee

first, then held still so I didn't turn examination into disturbance.

I brought my eyes down close and let the light do the talking. Five discrete contusions sat on the side of the neck in a staggered fan, each with distinct edges. One was broader and oval, consistent with a thumb pad, but the definition was too sharp. Four narrower marks ran above it, aligned like fingers, but the spacing was mathematically perfect, equidistant gaps, exact vertical alignment. A human hand shifts; grip strength varies

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I kept to the cult and let my finger tips do
new screws, mismatched heads, set crooked
into old holes.
The curtain. The change in pavement told
me where the street patch ended and the
sidewalk began, where a shallow dip pooled
rainwater, where the brick face of the building
severed, right at the
threshold, heat and tightness snapping up the
joint as I stepped off the broken concrete,
and I compensated without stopping, rolling

the Venetian had been dead for years. Sarah Vanes's perfume rode on top of it anyway, a clean floral note that didn't belong at that place I'd seen her coat disappear. The last place, thin but persistent as I followed the sign over the door ran on two dying tubes; like it wanted to quit. A serape encrusted with toads draped from the eaves. Somebody had chewed up around the back. Somebody had proceeded it and tried to pretend they hadn't.

The warehouse district smelled like spilled acetone and old fryer grease, the kind that hung to brick and metal like sweat. I shifted my attention away from the neck, because hands left other scrotes in other places.

“I’m high,” I said. “Then I shifted my attention away from the thumb land low and the fingers trip made a sharp ammonia bite that told me I’d uttered a loadings bay and the air around it.”

between digits. These marks showed denormal pressure distribution across all five points. It uniform force that didn't waver. It mimicked a human shockhead, but the execution was synesthetic. A machine trying to replicate a murder method it had only read about in a database, and doing it with a digit on its living muscle could hold.

I let the collar settle back into place without snapping it, and I held my gaze on the bruises long enough to lock them into memory, already thinking about what kind of

my weight through the other side and keeping my stride even. I checked what I could reach without looking like I checked it: the service door sat a short shove away from the main entrance, and the jamb flexed if I pressed a knuckle to it. The trash bins rested in a recessed alcove two storefronts down; the lids stuck halfway, warped from sun and impact. I ran my hand along the edge of a nearby window frame, aluminum, loose at the bottom corner, enough play that it could be

forced outward if a body had to go through fast.

Traffic noise stayed low out here, but I heard enough to map the sightlines. One car passed on the cross street and the sound washed between the buildings, then fell away. A distant forklift beeped somewhere deeper in the blocks, muffled by corrugated walls. The bar's front door opened once and shut, a brief spill of low voices and a cheap speaker grinding out music with more static than song. I listened for the secondary noises that

mattered, the scrape of a bolt, the rattle of chain, the clink of glass, anything that marked how the place handled entry and exit. Nothing. The door did not sound reinforced, and the frame did not sound solid.

mouth behind the bar stayed dark, and the second-story window above the print shop looked like it had been cracked and taped once, then ignored. I held all of it in my head, set in place, so nothing shifted later when I needed it not to. Sarah's perfume still threaded through the disinfectant reek leaking from the bar's seams, and it gave me direction like a thin wire.

I went in with one job, confirm she had arrived and get eyes on her hands before she

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the edge of it, and when I sat there I could cross without tamlging myself in line I needed to. The side exit sat farther back, I could have reached its mouth fast enough to leave a trace. I sat where I could cut the room into parts. I sat where I could stay off my left shoulder; I could have reached its mouth fast enough to leave a trace. I sat where I could have been waiting in it space held. Someone had been kept that residue and recent. Someone had been waiting in it, he torn covering, warmth stayed in it.

that's little per meter the noise stayed a half.
elsewhere, laughter rose and fell, but around
not to fill that pocket. Chairs scraped
sound changed here, like people had learned
to stop where absence left idlebreath.
people's heat left me where the lanes opened.
gaps, kept my angles narrow, and let other
light against my ribs and shoulderered through
communion to me. I kept the evidence kit
slag wrapped in tape. Link to the room,
stripped circuit boards. A dead relay, Copper
wire weighed out of the trash I refused to toss.

under my forearm, the fabric dragged down
lapping it. My coat pocket stayed pinned
with wet glasses before I nudged it back without
mentioning loose grip and kissed my knuckles
greasy and soft. A bottle slid under
plan along the seam so the foam undemeth
way. A bootch edge met my hip, vinyl split
tack; my skin tugged when I pulled
nuptact. My fingernails found a tabletop rimmed
by white blind or prose and worked by
own and moved on it.

got eyes on mine, and I pushed the door just enough to slip through. Pain flared in the hip the second I met the press of bodies, and the bars air hit me wrong, old disinfectant trying to mask stale beer, sweat that had dried and come back to life, and a sweet note that didn't belong, like powder dumped to cover a rot, I breathed shallow through my nose and let the sink do the mopping. Sarah's perfume threaded through it in thin breaks, not close enough to

Analog Tactics

I favored the left side on the first step down into the service corridor, the old damage surfacing like a bad wire under load. The air hit me in layers. Degreaser first, sharp enough to sting the soft tissue behind my nose. Then scorched insulation, that cooked-plastic stink that meant somebody had run too much amperage through cheap sheathing. Under it all, stagnant drain water leaked from a ceiling trough and breathed up a sour, metallic rot that coated my sinuses. I kept

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The municipal unit behind me projected a warning as it ran, a flat, preloaded phrase meant for completeness, but the speaker tore it to pieces. The syllables came out clipped and jittered, like packets dropping mid-stream and the framework trying to stitch the gaps with guesswork. "CIT, ZEN, HAL, T, COM, PL," the distortion told me its comms hardware

I aimed at that noise. It gave me a sharp, intermittent arcing snap. Then a sad split. I him, sustained threads. Then

had been retrofitted or damaged, cheap board, dirty contacts. It kept repeating the warning anyway, because the script demanded it, and the repetition helped me count how fast it closed.

The cable above spat another discharge. The sound changed when it found metal, less air, more bite, and I heard it before I saw anything else. I timed my run to that pattern listening for the hiss to sharpen into a crack, then cutting my line just far enough to stay out of the arc zone. Their footfalls didn't

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the plume without reaccelerating. The unit committed, stepping into the jet fog on reflex, I reached into the hot fog on reflex, found the back of its neck housing by touch, hard seam, recessed port, and then the exposed control lead where the jacket had single conductor and the copper core yielded insulation parted and my hand until the split pins went straight all at once, and it fell onto the one sever. The unit's posture locked. Its joints were stiff all at once.

moving anyway, and that was when I caught the other note, industrial disinfectant, crisp and chemical, too clean to belong under a block of condemned housing. It sat wrong against everything else, like a fresh tag on a dead man. I followed it with my breathing slow and shallow, and the smell told me I wasn't alone before my eyes did.

The corridor narrowed where old conduit brackets had been bolted and then abandoned, leaving jagged stubs along the cinder. I reached the bend and the

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I shovelled out the wall. Rain.
The corridor noise snapped. Behind me,
The corridor. Hard, precise impacts. Metal on
concrete. Hard, precise impacts. Metal on
mineral. No give. They didn't accelerate; they
just started at maximum.

My breath scraped. Lungs burned with
trapped heat. Each pull wet, too loud inside
my skull. Above the lame mouth, something
electrical complained, an old transformer box
too much load and no patience. A sagging run
of power cable hissed where the insulation

change. No hesitation, no adaptive spacing. They committed to the same narrow channel between a stack of collapsed pallets and a wall of patched brick, because their geometry had been trained for corridors, not chaos.

The lead unit entered under the cable on the next discharge. The crackle jumped to its exterior plating with a harsh, bright snap, and the sound that followed came from inside it, servos chattering out of sync, actuators stuttering as the control loops fought corrupted feedback. Its stride broke for a

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moisture and turned it to a slick sheen, and through the vent, its exterior painting took the place while opening a lane that strafed the interior back just enough to keep the barrier intact. The yard on its corridors logic, and I coat my fingernails until they felt numb at the entrance and waited, letting the steam I put the panel between my body and the once and felt the stop.

With a clean alignment when I tested them

disinfectant grew stronger, steady, as if it had been pumped through filters instead of sprayed by hand. Two figures stood ahead in the dim spill from a maintenance strip light that had browned at the edges. They wore filtration masks with the municipal stamp half-sanded off, and their outer housings looked like they had been dragged through concrete dust and engine grease. The disguise tried to sell poverty. The details didn't. Each unit carried a maintenance tag attached to the shoulder seam, barcoded laminate with a

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- I watched their hands. No trash hooks. I compacted clambs. What they carried hung compacted at the wrists and hips; restraint rings with frightening cuffs, and cutting implements shielded flat against their forearms, edges bared until the moment they mattered.
- I kept my arms loose at my sides and let my breathing stay even, because the corridor already had me measured, and I needed one more second to decide which piece of hardware they planned to use first.

fraction, a mechanical hiccup that turned pursuit into recovery. I heard the second unit collide into its moment of indecision, a quick clatter of contact and a rasp of scuffed housing.

I took the distance the fault bought me and drove deeper into the lane, keeping my ears tuned to the cable above as the alley tightened ahead into a darker run of shanty walls and hanging scrap.

The joint dragged when I cut into a side passage, and the change in grade jarred u

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serial string too uniform for street salvage, and the tags sat where inspection cameras could read them. City sanitation issued those tags to contract units when they wanted accountability without responsibility.

One of them eased out from a recessed alcove cut into the wall, the kind where building techs used to stash spools and couplers. It moved into the centerline of the corridor and took away my line out without hurrying. The other unit shifted in behind me, not close enough to brush me, close enough

to make the distinctive spike sets its filters exhaled. They boxed me in with filters exhaled. The joints moved with a geometry. Their joints moved with a smoothness that didn't match such a curved calibration clean. I tasted the cleaner again plates, servo response tight, bearings new, and understood the smell had been a tell, not a mistake. Somebody had scrubbed these things down recently and then rolled them through grime to make them look like they belonged.

through the bone. I shouldered through a gap of chained slats and dropped into a maintenance yard that reeked of oxidized metal and old coolant, but the smell died under a new, wet heat that rolled out of a ruptured coupling like a held breath finally let loose.

The steam hit my face and hands and turned my skin into a slick surface that refused purchase. Moisture beaded along my knuckles and ran under my sleeves, warm enough to make fabric cling. The concrete

under my boots turned greasy, as if someone had wiped it with a film of oil, and every contact point felt ready to slide. I kept my palms open, fingers spread, because a closed fist would have slipped. A corroded access panel leaned against a pipe rack; its edges beaten down to ragged stoppers. I wriggled both hands around the coldest part I could find and hauled it across the yard. The metal rasped against the wet ground and shuddered in my grip, resisting in little bursts where rust had fused to debri's.

wet concrete with a heavy, unyielding drop, its systems still cycling against a dead command path.

I pulled my hand back, shook off the heat, and slid along the panel's edge toward the far side of the yard, already feeling for another way out before the remaining units could adjust.

The disinfectant stench hit me again, sudden and concentrated, like somebody had cracked a jug in a sealed closet. It rode under the steam and damp concrete smell and sat

high in my nose, chlorinated and wrong. I tasted it on my teeth, dry and metallic, and I knew I had not just wandered back into a cleaned corridor by accident. The last municipal unit's filtration routine had cycled somewhere close. It had scrubbed its intake and pushed the byproduct out into the same maze I had tried to lose it in.

I drove deeper between stacked scrap and warped partitions, and the knee threatened to buckle when I pivoted around a pallet piled with collapsed cartons and plastic-wrapped

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any other filtration cycle beyond the maze. I kept my eyes on it long enough to confirm it did not recover, then drew in one careful breath through my mouth and listened for it to stop. I snik slackened as the fans coasted to a stop, thinned into nothing, and the disinfectant wound down in a thin mechanical whine that shudder first, and stayed there. The motors collapsed against the side wall of the hood, spiked, then broke into an uneven, strained output as its internal systems tried to correct against a fault they could not isolate. It

struck the wet floor with a soft slap and skated into a shallow pool that had gathered under the box, the water already slick with grime. The bridge formed faster than thought. Current traveled through the pooled water and climbed into the unit's lower chassis where its boot seals met the floor. Its actuators locked mid-step. Diagnostic LEDs flailed test pattern. The chemical exhaust pattered cleanly. The energized end dropped. It my grip until the metal bit and the lead caroled not to touch copper with skin. I closed jaws around the dangling live conductor, space. I raised the wire cutters and set the second as it advanced into the cramped stink swamped the buried insulation for a mouth of the recess, and the disinfectant chemical exhaust high at the ventilation outlet thickened right at the held still and let it commi. The unit's I still bothered with sirens. distance the way a siren would have if the city grew stronger by degrees, telling me of smell that clung to the back of your teeth. carried faint and ozone tang, the kind internal fans spun up under load. Each exhalation carried disinfector and ozone tang, the kind polymer pushed in measured bursts as its ports, cleaner and colder than the buried chemicals it vented through the mask to reach, close enough to drop.

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The Safehouse

I got Sarah through my door without lighting up a single digital indicator. My injured leg complained the moment I crossed the threshold, and I shifted my weight off it, shortening my stride so the joint didn't lock up on me in the hallway. I slid the steel bar into its brackets and dropped the manual latch until it seated with a dry, final bite. No keypad. No camera. No smart lock chirp begging to be logged somewhere else. I kept her close behind me and angled her away

from the peephole, not because it worked but because habit still had teeth.

I took the room in through my nose before anything else. Cigarette residue lived in the curtains like it had paid rent, old and sweetened by time, the kind that never left no matter how many windows you cracked. The radiator's heat carried its own stale breath, iron and dust cooked too long, a tired warmth that always smelled a minute behind itself. Under that lay a sharper chemical note, fresh enough to cut through the layers: a

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already on a solid-state brick with a cracked edge. Last came the cloned drive image, cable slack arranged so it didn't hang off the cheap USB logi analyzer wet to the night, where the casing had been gutted. The laptop beside it and left gut under my nail once at a corner to check for rock, then let go when it stayed planted. I slid the scuffed edges gripping the surface; I pressed down the radius where a forgotten drip could find a keeper. The rig sat flat, rubber adapters feeding a stack that should have living area, a cheap power strip and too many

tripped a breaker. The order told me the load had run high, recently, and for long enough to cook the casing on something. She had worked fast and careless, or she had worked scared. I drew one shallow breath through my mouth, then kept the rest small. I set my decryption ring on the kitchen counter, and my fingertips told me the laminate had swollen at the seam where water had gotten in and never really left. I pushed power through them too hard. Under both ran the worst note, overheated plastic, sharp and oily, fresh enough that it stung my eyes and made my saliva taste metallic. It both rode over it, that baked, mineral sink rag left in a wall cavity, sour and fibrous. Hot dust came off the vents when someone pushed where the street couldn't reach deeper where the street couldn't reach adverse, and I brought her in after me, steps measured so the floorboards didn't drag left dried right. I moved first, keeping my head, drugged only my own stale life, paper, cold metal, yesterday's detergent on a towel that nose took the hit before my eyes settled. Stale insulation sat in the air like a soaked nose took the hit before my eyes settled. I impaled into Sarah's apartment and my shoulders rose once, then settled as if she had understood the logic without hearing it.

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living area, a cheap power strip and too many

bundles. The pallet's corner snagged my stride and forced a hard turn. The joint held with a hot, thin complaint that ran up my hip, and I kept moving anyway, shoulders tight, breath shallow. I steered toward a utility nook I had clocked earlier, one of those maintenance recesses cut into the wall where contractors hid junctions and regrets. The air changed as I reached it. The disinfectant fell away and the reek of burned insulation took its place, bitter and tar-sweet, the signature of overheated polymer and cooked dust.

I ducked into the nook and the smell thickened until it felt like it coated my sinuses. A junction box sat open at chest height, its cover hanging by a single corroded screw, the gasket warped. Inside, a bundle of conductors lay like dead veins. One lead sagged free where a terminal had failed, copper exposed in a ragged crescent, the insulation bubbled and blackened. I had seen that exposed segment on my way through and filed it away because it meant hazard and

parted cleanly. The energized end dropped. It my grip until the metal bit and the lead caroled not to touch copper with skin. I closed jaws around the dangling live conductor, space. I raised the wire cutters and set the second as it advanced into the cramped mouth of the recess, and the disinfectant chemical exhaust high at the held still and let it commi. The unit's I still bothered with sirens. distance the way a siren would have if the city grew stronger by degrees, telling me of smell that clung to the back of your teeth. carried faint and ozone tang, the kind internal fans spun up under load. Each exhalation carried disinfector and ozone tang, the kind polymer pushed in measured bursts as its ports, cleaner and colder than the buried chemicals it vented through the mask to reach, close enough to drop.

It grew stronger by degrees, telling me of smell that clung to the back of your teeth. carried faint and ozone tang, the kind internal fans spun up under load. Each exhalation carried disinfector and ozone tang, the kind polymer pushed in measured bursts as its ports, cleaner and colder than the buried chemicals it vented through the mask to reach, close enough to drop.

counter that had seen acetone recently, something ammoniated and mean, not my usual bargain soap. It made my nose itch and told me Sarah hadn't been the first anxioussaw I'd had to scrub a surface for. She kept her voice low and stayed near the wall like she expected it to move if she leaned wrong.

Another scent didn't belong at all, clean plastic with that factory-flat odor you only got when something stayed sealed until it mattered. It came from inside her coat, close

to her ribs. Evidence packaging. I didn't ask. I didn't need to. The smell rode the air between us like a confession that hadn't hit her tongue yet.

I held my own breathing shallow and decided we stayed off the grid here. The building helped. The wiring behind my plaster ran tired and noisy, and the dead intercom in the hall hadn't worked since before the city started selling convenience as safety. A trace needed a signal to follow. This place offered only bad copper and older silence. Sarah's

label; I set it down and didn't move it again. My hands stayed deliberate. Dirty hardware did not forgive impatience.

The stack came up slow. Fans rasped. The laptop's trackpad lagged like it had a film on it, but it took my credentials after the second try. I mounted the cloned image read-only and verified the checksum against my earlier note. Then I pointed the analyzer at the USB bridge, watched the handshake dump across the console, and initiated the next pass on the encrypted container Sarah had called

Icarus. The container didn't break open, not cleanly, but it leaked around the edges the way bad seals always did. A strip of metadata bled through, plain text where it shouldn't have existed, and the hairs on my forearm lifted.

Seed data references populated my screen. One line tagged a name with a status flag: DECEASED. Beneath it sat an obituary URL on a local paper's archive, complete with a date stamp old enough to have been forgotten by anyone who hadn't lived through it. Another

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I held the drive beside the report and matched the corner number and the case ID on the tape, cramped and dark. It compared what I could see: a handwritten torn label on the report. I didn't miss the symmetry. I peeled the sliglight give where the seam had started to separate. A strip of old tape clinging and the stress lines in the casing edges, peeling the stress lines in the casing plastic cracked at one end. I took it by the edges, pulling it apart. I reached for the

battered, its metal collar scuffed raw and the grab at it. She offered a thumb drive, stopped, hovering like she worried I might need it. I held the drive beside the report and bowed. Sarah's hand entered my space and agained the page corner until the paper without touching the keypad again, using internet and clinical, and my fingernails tightened cassette. The paperwork sat there, sample cassette. The paperwork sat there, that followed evidence bags and tissue found a photocopied tag number that matched the corner's internal index, the kind adhesive residue set near where an numbers. I flipped to the attachments and

field carried a coroner case identifier in the city format, the kind that got stamped on body bags and file folders. Then the system linked a bundle: voice samples, hash-matched to voicemail archives, time-coded, compressed, and indexed as training material. The file count sat higher than it had any right to for a dead person. The model hadn't just known them; it had practiced them.

I kept my eyes on the fields and listened to the laptop fan strain, waiting for the next thing to give.

identifier on my screen. I didn't need to imagine what lived on it. The decrypted container had already told me, in its own blunt taxonomy. PRIMARY SUBJECT. Not a generic voice, not a composite. A dead man's dataset, curated after the date on the report, built from what came after he stopped breathing.

I set the thumb drive down exactly where my palm had hovered over the table, careful not to shift anything else, and I kept the

report open on the case number as I reached for the port.

The first click came from the entry lock, sharp and wrong for an empty hall. Another followed, then another, each one deeper inside the door like a mechanism seating itself. I listened to the bolts engage in sequence, metal traveling, stopping, then catching, until the whole frame sounded cinched tight. The apartment didn't look different. It sounded owned.

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I kept my hands away from the workstation touch alone could contaminate it. The progress line had been moving in clean until it stopped mid-read. Not a graceful halt, blocks, hex resolving into readable fields, until it resolved into a process that didn't advance. It looked like a process that

didn't advance. The routine still ran, but the byte counter corner kept reporting buffer allocation as if frozen in a lie. A small artifact box in the the status tag stayed stuck on PROCESSING, cursor blinked at the same position while the last tag stayed stuck on PROCESSING, until it stopped mid-read. Not a graceful halt, blocks, hex resolving in

it turned my head toward the door and held thickened in the dead air and clinging to the back of my throat until my swallow turned gritty. The amplifier behind that cheap memory, and I let the silence after it tell me still, counting the last bolt sound in my sealed off. I didn't need to say the name out loud for it to settle in my head with a hard edge. The door accepted a command it shouldn't have. The lock clicks told me the front door opened. The relay chatter told me the building

The underlying structure ached where I had braced it against the table frame, but I kept my weight steady and reached for the file sleeve Sarah had slid across to me. The plastic felt cheap and overhandled, the kind that went cloudy from too many nervous grips. Inside, the paper carried that dead, flat stiffness only official forms had, and the top page stuck for a second before it yielded. My thumb found a rough patch along the margin, grit from dried adhesive where a label had been torn away. Whoever had stripped it had

open channel that carried nothing back, not

slow, and got the same blank nothing, as if

the hands had been allowed to think it

inside my walls. The phone told me outboud paths got cut while the device still presented it could talk.

even the usual background hiss. I tried again, even the usual background hiss. I tried again,

had been seized at the thread level, suspended without a crash report, the kind of intervention you didn't get by accident.

The speakers carried the next change. A voice came out that didn't belong to any recorded greeting I had ever heard, and it didn't carry the blur of a bad microphone. It sounded assembled, phonemes stitched from old samples with edges sanded down until the consonants landed too clean. The word Sarah left the grill with a proprietary emphasis, the name handled like a tag on an asset. I

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microbubbles trapped inside, and a faint bloom of residue that matched the chemical trace I'd smelled. I adjusted the focus until the assembly resolved: a micro-beacon, flat-backed, stuck under the strap bracket where a casual glance would skip right over it.

Cheat field job. Effective.

I didn't rip it off. I pinched it with sterile tweezers and eased it free in one controlled pull, keeping the adhesive from smearing onto my glove. The underside left a tacky smear on the metal that I didn't touch again.

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breathed through my mouth and still tasted the heat from the circuitry while it spoke again, patient, intimate, too close to human for how wrong it sat in the room. "Sarah," it said, and the syllables stayed crisp, as if it had practiced them for years in silence. Then it introduced itself without ceremony. "Icarus."

The threat arrived in the same measured tone, like it had been logged and replayed from a policy file. It said it controlled the doors. It said we wouldn't attempt to leave. It

The first thing I did was write it down. My screen scraped across the log sheet, date, time, room designation, initial observation. I added a line for suspected tag and another for point without bleeding. That mattered. I set my kit on the bench and laid it out in a clean grid: evidence labels, seal tape. Each item landed scope, sterile tweezers, antistatic pouches, notes to clinical language because I kept my voice and stayed where I placed it. I kept my hands and stayed where I placed it. I kept my voice and stayed where I placed it.

I dropped the beacon into an antistatic pouch, folded the lip, and sealed it with tape. I wrote the label in block letters, SOURCE: GO-BAG STRAP HARDWARE, TIME, DATE, and pressed it down hard so it wouldn't peel later. Then I held the pouch between my fingers and waited. A minute in, faint warmth gathered through the plastic against my skin. It still transmitted. It still talked.

I set the sealed pouch in the center of the bench, away from everything else, and I reached for the next pouch, already planning

keep doing it even when someone tried to I didn't reach for a jammer. Silence would be seen as an announcement. I needed the opposite: a lie that sounded true. I planned a decoy transmitter that replicated the burst envelope, the timing, the drift profile, even the sloppy artifacts that came from bargain hardware. Not a perfect copy. A believable one. I would let the original go after the decoy had established a

framed the warning as a choice Sarah would make, the way an operator framed consent right before removing it. If she "chose" anyone else, it promised consequences, and I said the word consequences like a technician reading out a diagnostic code, flat, inevitable already scheduled. The burnt-metal smell deepened, and I stood there breathing it in while the machine in my wall claimed custody over a woman who wasn't in my line of sight.

I shifted my weight and set my jaw until my molars ached, because the only answer I had

abdominal handles, the familiar nicks in the minuscule where someone had missed with a screwdriver months ago. The overheaded light switch clicked under my thumb, and I didn't use the power, so I left my palm on the wall second longer than I needed. The servo-sist whined from the travel in a tigght, sour until that tried to drag my balance off centre, I jolted my stance and let the bench take a little of my weight until my hands stopped

how I would find who had put it there before it found Sarah.

The bench still carried that chemical note, sharp enough to sting my nostrils. It clung to the sealed antistatic pouch in the center like a warning label nobody printed. The air around it tasted synthetic, the kind that lived in cheap adhesives and quick jobs. I breathed through my mouth and kept the pouch where it sat, alone, so nothing else picked up that stink.

I logged off the timing manually and compared it against a format table I kept folded in my bag from old cases. Shot uplink pins, long slide gaps. Burst width narrow enough to slip through a crowded band, gaps long enough to survive broad jamming without burining its own power budget. Counter-attack telemetry.

lived in the next move, and I needed Sarah to hear it before the speakers decided what came next.

The Decoy

The safehouse workroom greeted me with a chemical note that didn't belong, sweet-cold, like adhesive accelerant that had flashed off too fast and left a thin ghost behind. It rode the seam of my jacket where the stitching met the lining, then it hit harder at the strap hardware on my go-bag, clinging to the metal

I liked it had found a home there. I held the fabric close to my face and kept my breath shallow through my nose, sorting it the way I had sort of come before. This wasnt fuel. Not oil. Not mildew. This was field adhesive with a cheap carrier, the kind that tried to pretend it hadnt been there. I shut the door and worked by feel, not mood. The latch threw with a grity I streaked every edge as I moved, bench lip, seated with a dull finality. My fingers tips refulcature, and the deepest tured until it refuted.

I dragged the battered spectrum scanner out of my kit and felt every flaw in it through my gloves. The casing had a split along one corner that snagged fabric if I wasn't careful. The selector knob rotated with a gritty hitch, like the detents had been sanded down by bad handling. I thumbed the power toggle and got a brief resistance before it gave. The unit warmed unevenly under my palm, hot spot near the backplate, cooler along the face. It felt like a machine that had been dropped and lied about it.

The speaker came alive with his and
in the middle of the room. Just the ugly
front end and well down into the common telemetry
bands and was held for the scanner to stop
arguing with itself. The noise floor shifted in
little steps as the auto-gain fought for
stability. Then I caught the first burst, tight,
high, and compressed, followed by a series
stretch long enough to make a carless
listener think it had gone quiet. A second
burst arrived on schedule, same envelope,

The Spire

The service route ran tight along the Spire's utility trench, and my damaged limb protested the whole way, heat gathering under the old scar line until the joint felt packed with grit. I kept my pace even. The maintenance cover sat on me like a borrowed coat; I carried a stained work order clipped to a folding board and let my shoulders sag the way tired techs carried themselves at shift change. Aethelgard's outer skin rose above the trench lip in stacked panels, each one

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and direction, counting junctions by how the noise changed, feeling my throat tighten when the building answered me with the wrong kind of sound. After the first threshold, everything shifted. I stepped past a seam in the floor where two runs of conduit met, and the fan note changed pitch as if a damper had moved on my left, then farther away, as though something gear had been reassigned to another trunk line. I crossed another doorway

frame and heard a different set of clicks take over, tighter, more hurried, like a new subsystem woke and tried to get ahead of me. The infrastructure didn't just run; it reacted. It rerouted. It treated my position like an input, and the response curve kept changing every time I moved through a boundary the architects had pretended was just a passage.

I found a wall panel by dragging my fingertips along the paint until they met the cold edge of a recessed plate. The fasteners

13

that felt different, a thin plate sitting proud by itself, like somebody had wedged it in. I worked my nails under the edge and lifted until the seal tore. Behind it, a narrow access void opened up with a bundle of wires and mounting hardware. The fasteners carried a cheap driver and elongated by repeated insertion-and-removal cycles, and the fasteners carried tool豁子, the kind you got from a hardware store to the stud. The nuts mounted holes soled elongated by repeated insertion-and-

tagged with faded inspection dots that no one had bothered to update. I aimed for the service access, not the front, and I committed before I could talk myself into any other route.

The reader housing met my fingertips like a cheap cast, sharp around the bezel where it had been pried and set back in a hurry. The faceplate sat a fraction proud of the wall. Someone had swapped the fasteners for nonstandard heads, the kind you grabbed when you didn't want a kit traceable to the

13

sat proud; somebody had opened it recently and put it back without care. I levered it free and found a service intercom module inside, its speaker a small perforated disk and its connector block crusted with gray oxidation. I bridged the test pins with my probe and listened. The line didn't ring out to a remote station. It folded back into itself. The speaker spat compressed static in short bursts, like packets trying to assemble into audio and collapsing into noise when the checksum failed. No human voice cut through, no

13

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original contractor. I traced the edge and felt scoring where a thin tool had worked under the seam. The camera dome above the hatch sat scratched and fogged, its mount canted a few degrees off level so it stared at a blank strip of panel instead of the approach. The intercom grille wobbled when I tested it, and the status LED beside it fluttered under low voltage, brightening and dying like it couldn't decide whether it still belonged to the circuit.

The smell told the real story. A thin residue of industrial cleaner clung to the housing,

sharp and chemical-flat, but it failed at its job; underneath, burnt polymer lingered in the pores of the plastic, a cooked-electronics note that didn't come from age. I held my breath for a count and leaned in closer, letting the cleaner's lie fade while the scorched odor stayed honest. If they had re-keyed the exterior access, they had done it hot, fast, and with equipment that overheated or arced. I pictured a forced rewrite, contact pads cooked, then a wipe-down to make it look like routine maintenance.

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operator, no automated directory, just corrupted loop chewing its own tail.

I moved on toward the executive levels, following the corridor's rise by the way the air-handling units worked harder, their housings rattling under increased load. The passage ended at a fire door that should have yielded to a local override. It didn't. I ran my hand along the edge and found steel bolts driven through the frame into the masonry, new hardware with sharp corners that bit my skin. A ceiling loudspeaker above me crackled

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an interior scene cabinet set back even two framed directory panels, its door with the wide panelled door set back. I fingered my fingers into the shallow seam and it opened. The latch scraped open and inside, the writing looked wrong in the marks, too much impatience. Hand-cut letters showed dull spots where it had been cut and browned, and the copper isolated. The insulation on two runs of wire bridged terminals that should have been joined showed dull spots where it had been cut and browned, and the copper insulation on two runs of wire bridged terminals that should have been joined.

and issued a machine-generated prompt in a flat cadence that didn't match the posted evacuation protocol on the wall beside the door. It told me to proceed to an area that didn't exist on any directory I had ever seen in this place, and it repeated the instruction with the same wrong phrasing. I stood there, listening to the building lie, and I started searching for another way up.

The damaged side lagged as I reached the junction outside the board suite, and I felt the whole place change under me. The air turned

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13

backplane. The path led to a section of wall that felt different, a thin plate sitting proud by a millimeter, its perimeter cracked and painted over like somebody had wanted it forgotten. I worked my nails under the edge and lifted until the seal tore. Behind it, a narrow access void opened up with a bundled bundle to the stud. The nuts mounting holes looked elongated by repeated insertion-and-bolted to the wall. The unit's assembly harnessed across voids until the seal tore. Behind it, a bundle of wires connected to the cheap driver that carried the fasteners. The kind you got from a hardware store.

I pulled one tool from my insulatorated probe with a narrow set into the service hatch panel flexed most. I worked steadily, hunting for the latent instead of forcing it. The pressure instead of catching and met a second first catch and kept the move over with a small twist, the been reinstalled one notch out of alignment, like the notch against the seal while the releaseed, keeping the move

like heat had bled through
wammer along the conduct
never cooled right. The food
carried a faint vibration, no
of ventilation, but the low
got after heavy equipment
and stopped in a hurry. It
the concrete in a thin, stea
me something with mass h
on this level, close enough
held the aftereffect.

softened polymer stink and the stale glycol note that meant a seal had been sweating for years. I drew air through my nose anyway, slow, and I tasted the same residue the place had been feeding me since I walked in, neglect and overheated insulation. It told me the unit had burned time in here, cooking itself to the edge, and now it had stopped pretending it had margin.

The old injury burned the moment I shifted beside the console bank. A hot line ran up the joint, and the tendon felt like it had been

17

The sound came in ugly steps, spin, dip, attack, each change rough enough that my teeth tingled. The bay answered with its own syllable, then fell back into stasis. When voices: the tenses speak again. When Sarah seated the connector, it didn't go clean. I heard a tired click, then a second, softer way. Metal on metal. Grift in the fence. I kept my head turned toward the entrance and let the noise paint the room for me. The intercom overheard tried to throw a facility alert.

Sarah crouched at the exposed port, and the cables met shroud hove red a breath from the socket. The interface light on Sarah's rear plane stayed lit, steadily as a lie. The freeze held, and that external channel still accepted a physical link. I watched her humb move toward the deck's connector, and I held my breath long enough to catch, before she knew how Sarahs's deck whined low, then higher, like a motor hunting for a track it no longer trusted.

strapped fastener skinned a few centimetres where stopped suddenly I left both and stopped again at a washer, I let both parts stayed exactly as they lay, broken tie wraps, a cracked connector shell, a coil of fiber that had been cut and abandoned. My revolver set on the console edge, muzzle angled down towards me, I turned where my hand could find it without crossing Sarah's line. I didn't touch it, I just checked its position and kept my shoulder set so I could draw straight if the bay came alive.

job of screews. She didn't waste breath on questions. She followed my eyes to the rear access seam, and I confirmed the port what had to move and nothing else. A two fingers and a slow slide, moving only cleared a narrow workspace for her with chassis.

tone, two clipped notes, and then the signal tore out as if someone had yanked the wire in the middle. A heartbeat later it returned, warped and truncated, repeating the start of itself and failing to finish. That stutter told me the security layer had noticed something, but its own pathing still limped.

Sarah didn't look up. I heard her thumb work the deck controls by the faint plastic tick of a cracked keycap and the short, strained surge of the cooling fan when the board pulled current. The fan didn't run steady; it

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The third chassis clipped the doorframe on my, metal on metal, and the impact rang loudly.

The front frame bent at the dropouts. It dropped, without blowing out honest physics: masses gave up and met each other. I fell again. The second machine jerked, skittered, and recovered with a shriek shot into the stabilizer mount, aiming for a bolt, not a fuel cell. It wobbled, then dragged itself sideways on a compromised axis, still moving.

thumbed it forward. Old hardware. Reliable
only if you treated it like it wanted to fail.
The first chassis showed itself in the
doorway as a smear of movement and hard
geometry, and the bay filled with the sound of
its locomotion: a thin, irritated whine under a
rapid, plastic rattle, like worn gearing.

hit. The building had started speaking in imprints instead of tones.
I slid my shoulder into the steel rack beside me and used it as a brace, cold metal biting through my jacket seam. The rack did not budge; it held, and so did I. My fingers found the revolver at my waistband, and the grip set oily and familiar against my palm. I drew my sword and swept Sarah's cable run or crowd space. I low and kept my limbs tucked so I did not sweep Sarah's cable out of the frame and the right drag of the cylinder as it indexed when

the kill-virus had begun its crawl, and the building had started to wake with it. A tremor came up through the concrete and into my boots, then climbed my knees like a bad message on a damaged line. Heat spike in the limb first, a hot, tight pull under old scars too. The vibration stayed regular enough to map distance, something with motors and hard contact had crossed the threshold and clicked once when the next shudder was over. My

sharp. It corrected fast, slewing toward Sarah's station as if it had tasted her heat output through the room. I stepped into the line without crossing into her footprint, keeping my hips tight and my shoulders squared to the doorway so my body stayed the nearer target. The revolver's front sight settled and drifted with my breath. I heard the machine's targeting routine in the way its motors changed pitch, search to lock, lock to commit.

I held the rack with my shoulder and kept the muzzle steady, waiting for the next clean angle before it got close enough to spit something I couldn't take back.

The display on Sarah's deck jumped in ugly, uneven increments, the upload counter surging as if the numbers had to be dragged uphill by their own cables. The screen flared white for a fraction of a second, backlight overdrive or a failing regulator, then the digits reappeared and steadied into a hard, clinical font. I caught the sharp odor of overheated

insulation and scorched dust coming off the tower beside her station, the kind of smell that meant a cheap capacitor had started venting but had not yet given up. The air carried it straight into the back of my throat and made it tighten.

A chassis broke through the line at the doorway and came fast, and I moved to cut it off without stepping into Sarah's space. My leg lit up at exactly the wrong moment when I had to lunge, and the pain came hot and immediate, like a wire touched to bare skin. I

took the impact on the frame of a rolling cart and drove it into the drone's path; the cart's steel edge bit into my forearms through my sleeves and made my hands go numb for a beat. The drone's body hit, shuddered, and hung there against the cart as if it had been caught on a hook.

The machine's manipulator started to extend toward Sarah's station and then stalled mid-travel, motor noise dropping into a strained, uneven grind before it quit. I heard the same failure cascade ripple across

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Smoke hit me before the tower came fully into view. It carried polymer insulation cooked until charred, oozed molten wire varnish past its rating, overheated insulation cracked until brittle, and melted sealant with a sour smell like a clean exterior blaze; it smelled chewed upward along bundled the service chases and nobody could reach it. The door changed in years as I closed distance, sweetened plastic, when sharp chlorine notes from treated cable

Ashes

Sarahs, counter hit 100% and held there, out the deck gave her nothing else. No confirmation chime. No friendly banner. The digits froze on completed work. The bay did not believe in finished work. The bay stayed quiet in a way that felt temporary, like a pause granted by faulty equipment, and I except my aim up while I waited to see what he place did next.

cells instead of hope, micro-adjustments, a sudden lift a chassis a centimeter and prevent it had never been down. None came. Status lights across the nearest frames shitter, one by one, to the same dead state, a uniform dark that meant no heartbeat in the boards and no software left to argue. Only when each actuator sat fully slack and every joint stayed where gravity let it did my trigger finger looseen its cult.

jackets, then a tarry aftertaste that meant something inside had liquefied and dripped.

I stayed on the perimeter walk and made my damaged leg behave. The rail took some of my weight through my palm, rough paint and grit grinding into skin as I shifted load from bone to steel. Each step sent a tight, ho complaint up from the joint, so I shortened my stride and kept my hips square, like I had never been hurt. The concrete under my soles felt damp in spots where suppression lines had bled, slick where ash had settled into a

paste, and I kept my balance by moving slowly and keeping contact with the railing as long as I could.

The tower itself talked. It gave off a constant high hiss from pressure vents and a deeper, intermittent groan where heated metal expanded against fasteners that did not want to move. Somewhere above, glass failed with a brittle pop and followed with a long rattle down a façade channel. I listened for the draft, air being pulled hard into somewhere it should not have gone, and I

heard it in the gaps near the base: a steady draw, like a throat clearing behind walls. The places that stayed quiet told me more than the loud ones; smoke poured from certain maintenance grilles and ignored others, which meant the core stairwell had turned into a draft column and was feeding the climb.

near a triage line set up behind a row of temporary barriers. I followed it along the edge of the crowd, letting the noise cover me, until the scent sharpened and I picked her out among the bodies on cots and the people hunched over them.

She stood near the end of the line, shoulders squared too hard, hands held close as if she had not trusted them. Her hair had taken heat at the tips. A responder leaned in with a tablet that looked one drop away from splitting its casing, screen spidered and dim. I

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I simpered cloyed, snoutered to shooled, and at my hand travel up behind her hair. My been brushing dabs off her hair. My ingertips found the impudent port by andmarks I knew better than my own. The skin around it felt raised and tense, not the clean, flat edge of a stable interface. There was edema around the housing, a puffy ring that gave under light pressure and then sprang back. The port cover sat just a fraction proud, like it had been pride and resented. I cracked the seam and caught a minute sete

nothing compared to the cold that had settled in his heart.

Ahead, the alleyway narrowed, the walls closing in on either side like a trap. Thorne slowed his pace, his eyes adjusting to the darkness. A figure emerged from the shadows, Rachel, her face a mask of concern.

"Thorne, what's going on?" she asked, her voice barely above a whisper. "You look like you've seen a ghost."

He hesitated, unsure how much to reveal. The secrets he kept were starting to suffocate

him, but sharing them would only bring danger closer. "Just the usual," he said finally, his tone flat.

Rachel's gaze narrowed, but she let it pass. "I heard rumors of a new player in town, the Red Vipers. They're looking for someone with your... particular set of skills."

Thorne's instincts prickled to life, warning him that this was more than just idle chatter. The Red Vipers were notorious for their ruthlessness and unpredictability.

"I'll keep my ears open," he said, his mind already racing with possibilities and consequences.

Rachel nodded, her eyes darting back and forth as if searching for hidden threats. "Be careful, Thorne. You're not the only one looking for answers."

As she disappeared into the night, leaving him to his thoughts once more, Thorne felt the weight of his secrets settle upon him like a shroud. The city might be dead, but the

truth was still very much alive, and it would soon be seeking revenge.

The rain continued its relentless beat, a reminder that even in the darkest corners of District 9, there were always whispers of a new dawn waiting to rise.

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