

loose and it would tear. Too tight and it would cut into the boot and fail early.

A round hit a tie behind them. Wood chips jumped. Another whined off metal in the yard. The patrol had a sight line again.

"Engine," Jeff said, not as a request.

"Not yet," Laleh said. "Two more."

Jeff's mouth was paper. He swallowed and got nothing. He forced himself to count the wire turns instead. Eleven. Twelve. Thirteen. The twist stick bit into his bruised rib when he

leaned in, and the pain steadied him. Pain was clean math.

Laleh finished the last twist, snapped the stick off, and tucked the sharp wire end back into the boot so it wouldn't flay the fender. She slapped the tire once, listening with her hand.

"Down," she said. "Jack."

Jeff cranked the jack down fast. It wanted to fold again, the bent arms complaining. He kept pressure on the base with his boot until the tire took weight.

81

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84

thump, thump—steady, warning. The canvas heartbeat in the booted tire was still there—through the steering column. That bad truck rolled onto the crust with a shiver through the seat. The bad sat inside a minute. Cloth went stiff with strain across her nose. Laleh copied him without comment, then wrapped another strip across his hat. Laleh copied him so they hung like binders. Laleh copied spare shirt and tucked them under his hat. Tired. He tore two strips from the hem of his shirt. Jeff kept his head down and his eyes half-

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Start Pan Teeth

that wouldn't stop waving.

the window again, hard, like a warning flag

that wouldn't stop waving.

A white hiss pushed through the hood

bright against the heat. It rolled up and over

seam. Not dust. Not wind. Steam, thick and

bright again. Not dust. It rolled up and over

the window again, hard, like a warning flag

that wouldn't stop waving.

the window again, hard, like a warning flag

at the windows snapped on its frame. Fine grains hissed against it and found seams.

Laleh reached across the dash and pinched the radiator rag where it was tied to the cap. She tugged once, testing. Her fingers came away damp and dark.

"Steam?" Jeff asked.

"Not now." She nodded at the gauge. The needle sat lower than it had, but not calm. "If it climbs again we stop. If we stop, we cook."

Jeff lifted his dented canteen, shook it by his ear. A shallow slosh. He did the math

without speaking. Two people. Half a day of glare and engine heat. One swallow each every twenty minutes if they wanted to stay sharp. One swallow each if they didn't.

He tipped the canteen and took his ration. Three pulls, small. Alkali taste, like licking the inside of a cold pan that had held bleach. He passed it to Laleh. She drank less, then wiped her mouth with the back of her wrist and set the canteen between them where it would be seen and counted.

89

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"Stay on the steaks off. Someone watching will stand jitters. It pointed, then reconsidered, then jitters again. He tapped the case. The needle skated. He turned it in his hand and watched the jitter follow, not settle.

"Not dead. Lying." He tucked it away anyway. A bad instrument cost more than no splicing. Maintenance line."

"One," he said. "Then another. Same

splicing. Maintenance line."

"Wilt sticks," she said, and her voice had

worn out wood. Old rebar, cut rough, hammered

in, the top bent where some truck had hit it

years ago and kept going. Salt had

painted it once. The paint was gone. Salt had

eaten the metal into a pitied scab.

Jeff watched its shadow. Drawn made all

shadows long and honest for a short window.

He tracked the angle in his head. The rebar

buried, casting a short shadow east.

the whole world—a thin dark slash, half-

water. Then he caught the only vertical line

eyes stinging. At first he saw nothing but the flat

Jeff leaned forward until the glass made his

to be wrong so she could stay on the rottle.

that quick edge that meant she wanted him

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A man stepped out in work clothes, not robes. Sun had burned his neck into leather. He carried a ledger under one arm and kept his hands empty. He walked past the public pump without touching it.

Father Rami El-Khoury stopped at a distance that made conversation possible and theft costly. His eyes did the work of a hand search: dust lines on their sleeves, oil speckle on Laleh's forearms, the tight set of Jeff's jaw that said he'd been holding back words and water.

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"You came down the gully," he said. Low voice. Patient. Not welcoming. "Not from the track."

Jeff didn't answer that. Answers turned into questions.

"We need water," Jeff said. "We'll pay."

Father Rami's gaze flicked to the coupon board. "Pay with what the board accepts? Or pay with a story?"

Laleh shut the hood with a soft slam and stayed by the truck, half between it and the pump, like she could cover both with her body

if it came to it. Her right hand hovered near the toolkit in the bed.

Jeff lifted his left hand, palm out, showing he wasn't reaching for the rifle. With his right, he drew a folded packet from inside his shirt, where the heat had softened the paper.

He kept it folded as long as he could. The less it breathed air, the less it belonged to anyone else.

"I've got a claim paper," Jeff said.
"Stamped. And I've got a map."

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but it didn't rise.

until they fold?" she said. Her tone was sharp, you let people stand here and stare at water bolts for fresh marks. Routine. Ugly routine."

Laleh took a step closer, boots scuffing. "So that handle, you tell on me," he said. "They handle. He still didn't touch it. If you pull Father Rami looked at the public pump sharpended like a wrench on a stubborn nut. Jeff didn't move. He let the name sit. It sharpended his head snapped up. Her eyes wanted me to turn a handle."

"I want water," Jeff said. "And directions."

"Directions get people buried," Father Rami said. "Water gets people paid."

"I didn't bring Voss," Jeff said.

"You brought his gravity," Father Rami replied, and the words landed with the flat certainty of a man used to weighing goods.

"His foremen count this place. They count without accounting.

"They count drum levels. They count without accounting.

"They count who stays."

130

"Laleh's mouth went drier when he heard the line item in someone else's book. "I didn't bring Voss," Jeff said.

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Father Rami met her eyes. "I let people live long enough to keep coming back," he said. "If the mission gets cut off, everyone loses a stop. Not noble. Arithmetic."

Jeff's fingers stopped tapping. He forced them still on the canteen. His private rule pressed at the back of his teeth: never trade a person's water for your own safety. His brain tried to do the math anyway. Map for water. Water for time. Time for distance.

He hated that the numbers lined up.

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Father Rami shifted the ledger under his arm. "You have Orin Pell's stamp," he said. "That means paper. That means claims. That means Voss. I once helped file claims for Voss."

No shame in the statement. No plea. He said it like he was reading an entry aloud so it could be acknowledged and never argued again.

Jeff watched him. "Helped how."
"Forms. Seals. Transfers," Father Rami said. "Temporary, they told me. For stability. For

protection. 'Hold the well under a stronger name until raiders stop.' The transfers never reversed. Names changed. Water moved. People learned new rules: pay, or walk."

Laleh's mouth tightened. "And the mission?"
Father Rami's gaze went past them to the gully mouth, like he could see foremen on the rim already. "The mission stayed supplied," he said. "I traded paper for drum levels."

Jeff's throat worked. His tongue stuck for a moment to his palate when he tried to swallow. He didn't reach for the canteen. He

to Jeff's face. "You're carrying something that Father Rami's gaze moved from the stamp show the whole. Jeff unfolded the paper enough to show the stamp and a corner of inked grid. He did not stamp and a small sound through her nose -half agreement, half warning. She kept her eyes on Father Rami's hands. Men like that get killed for their lines."

"I saw his work," Father Rami said. "He filed clean. He wrote clean. Men like that get killed for the mission."

Laleh made a small sound through her nose -half agreement, half warning. She kept her eyes on Father Rami's hands. Men like that get killed for the mission."

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mark," he said. "You don't copy the whole."

Jeff slid the packet open a hair more. "One hour. Maybe two."

Network is built on marks and names.

"Or I can send help to where you're going. "I can misdirect Voss," Father Rami said. Ramis's free. "You copy it, you can tell it."

Ramis's water was for the mission and the sick. Taking it put others at risk. Taking it also kept the map out of Voss's hands for another hour. Maybe two.

Jeff's rule pressed again. Father persons's water for your own safety. Father Ramis's gaze held. "Show me the map sealed, get no water, burn the engine, die in a wash. Or trade a silver of advantage to buy water now and time later.

Jeff weighed the options. Keep the map sealed, get no water, burn the engine, die in a wash. Or trade a silver of advantage to buy water now and time later.

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Without a mark, I'm blind."

Network is built on marks and names.

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Jeff's eyes narrowed. "Then why tell us."

Laleh's eyes narrowed. "Because Orin Pell's stamp is on your cut."

Jeff didn't look at her. If he looked, he'd negotiate with her instead of the man who owned the handle. He kept his eyes on Father Ramen will come here when they hear the paper," Father Rami said. "And because Voss's foremen will answer without lying and without feeding him."

Jeff didn't react fast. He let the offer sit and checked it for hooks. "Where?"

Father Rami nodded toward the mission building, its door half hidden by stacked crates and a torn strip of canvas. "Hidden hand pump," he said. "Old. Feeds a buried cistern." Father Rami raised his empty hands a fraction. "There is another handle," he said.

Father Rami raised his empty hands a fraction. "There is another handle," he said.

"Then we're done," Laleh snapped, and she turned her head toward the truck like she'd rather Ramis's gaze held. "Show me the map sealed, get no water, burn the engine, die in a wash. Or trade a silver of advantage to buy water now and time later.

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didn't give himself that relief. He made his body carry the cost of hearing it.

"You're not asking forgiveness," Jeff said.

"I don't barter in that currency," Father Rami replied. "I'm telling you what you're stepping in."

Jeff unfolded a little more of the packet. Not the full map. A corner line. A key mark. Enough to prove he wasn't bluffing.

"I can't pull from the public pump," Father Rami said, eyes tracking the ink. "Not for you."

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the pry bar, its grip wrapped in rag, and stepped into the shade wedge with Laleh. "Listen," he told her.

Laleh tilted her head. The ticking sand on metal gave a steady, small noise. Under it, if you held still, you could catch distance: a far engine note, thin as wire. It wasn't close. It existed. That was enough.

Jeff dropped to his knees and scraped at the salt crust with the pry bar tip. It was hard at first, a brittle skin. It broke in plates that cut his knuckles when he cleared them away.

Salt got under his nails. The glare bounced up under the tarp edge and turned everything white.

They dug without romance. Pry. Break. Scoop. Hands in. Hands out. Jeff's fingers stung where the crust split skin. He wiped blood on his pants and kept going. The salt packed into the pry bar notch. He had to knock it free against the stone. Each tap was loud in the shade.

Laleh worked the other side with a flat spade, blade dull, scraping in short strokes.

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The seal wax wasn't cracked in the way age makes it crack. It was sheared clean, a neat ring. Someone had warmed it, spun it, put it back. Jeff ran a thumbmail along the threads. The seal wax opened with the right tool, at the right angle, no burns. No cross-thread. It had been melted, reset, jaw hard, and hauling at the far purchase on grease that wanted to slide free. The taste of alkali dust sat on his teeth like a fine grit he couldn't spit out. "Caps first," Laleh said. "If the threads are chewed, we stop."

The seal had ears. He wiped his hands on his pants, then on the tube, trying to get enough to steal, not enough to run with. Salt pan under it now. It was out with stamped caps. Jeff kept the pry bar low. No big swings. Jeff nodded and took the near end. The stamped cap had a shallow knurl and a seal line under it. He turned it a fraction. It resisted, then gave with a small squeak that sounded wrong in the quiet. He stopped and leaned in.

Jeff's hands shook. His hands shook, not fear,

the match of dehydration catching up. Laleh crusted and scutched, and grunted as the salt cut her metal, and grunted as the salt cut her

Laleh scraped her knuckle across the far cap. Fresh skin took a clean cut. She didn't curse. She just looked at the thin line of blood and wiped it on the oilcloth, eyes flat.

"Tampered," she said.

Jeff's eyes flicked to the marker stone beside the hole. A scuff at its base he'd clocked as their own bootwork now read different: a half-moon scrape, too clean, packed with darker grit from somewhere else.

Someone had knelt here recently. Someone had braced. Someone had lifted and set it back.

He brought the pry bar tip under the cap lip and levered with a controlled push. Metal popped with a dull complaint. He caught the cap before it clanged. Laleh held her breath without meaning to. Jeff twisted the tube mouth toward the shade, away from the glare, and slid two fingers inside.

Paper rasped his skin.

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"Six," Laleh answered. "Maybe eight. Two himself. "Count," Jeff said before he could stop lashed in pairs. Authority rolling on tires. Water drums strapped high and full cans the next. Spacing like a drill. Sun caught on the edge, its voice out in a scrape. "This

New fact landed and took one of his options outside the shade, a sound built: sand tickling against metal in a rhythm that wasn't wind. Engines. Severe. Not the ragged note of riders. Syncronized, held back, discipline.

Her knees, held angling to scan beyond the edge, slid off the tube and went up on

kind you set where a desperate corner would buried ledger. It led to a planted hook, the bite. Either Rami had been fed the lie and passed it like a kindness, or Drin Pelli's map had been cut into decoys on purpose. Jeff could feel Drin's careful stamp placement in his mind—always low left, always kissing the edge of the mark. This book's seal was censored, too proud, like a foreman's hand, not a cartographer's.

A weapon that didn't need a trigger.

DRUMS ONLY, UNAUTHORIZED POSSESSION SUBJECT TO SEIZURE.

blissing; Jeff's eyes dropped to the inside cover. A

"This is a point".

Tarps all angles and listening.

No," Laleh slid off the tube and went up on

her knees, held angling to scan beyond the edge, its voice out in a scrape. "This

Her breath came in controlled bursts. She paused once to spit dust from the corner of her mouth and stopped herself, jaw clenched, keeping the wet.

Jeff leaned close to the hole and sniffed. The air down there carried a damp tang, not rot, not fuel. He saw a faint dark line in the salt—old oilcloth residue, maybe, or just the way the crust changed where something had been buried. He didn't trust it. He didn't drink. He didn't talk.

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tearing sound, like cloth rippled under strain. Jeff pulled with her. The crust gave in a softended it with her. The set her feet, took "No counting," Laleh snapped, then the exposed position at the hole edge, and "On three," Jeff said, and grunted as the salt cut her fingers into the gap, nails scraping the match of dehydration catching up. Laleh shoved her fingers into the gap, nails scraping knuckles.

Jeff's hands shook. His hands shook, not fear,

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teeth. Her fingers under it now. It was out with stamped caps.

Something long and narrow broke free and rose into the shade wedge: a tube wrapped in oilcloth, dark and greasy, sealed at both ends with stamped caps.

Jeff kept the tube bar low. No big swings.

Salt pan under it now. It was out with stamped caps.

Jeff had fingers under it now. It was out with stamped caps.

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Jeff had fingers under it now. It was out with stamped caps.

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hung in the air. Oil line. Low. Their best speed was already a story they couldn't tell twice.

A loudhailer crackled. The sound traveled clean over open salt, a hard voice riding electricity. It took a second to resolve, and then Kadir Voss was speaking as if he'd stepped into the shade with them.

"Jeff Meridian," Voss said, smooth as stamped paper. "Courier. Former survey hand. Possessor of disputed property."

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Jeff's jaw tightened until his teeth hurt. Laleh glanced at him once, quick, then back to the ridge.

"You will return the map," Voss continued. "In exchange, I will honor Mission Rami's current allotment through the next cycle. No penalties. No seizure. No interruption of cistern line service."

Behind them, the mission sat low against the salt and scrub. A hand pump. A water drum. A handful of faces Jeff could name by the way they held their cups. If Voss cut them

off, it wasn't an argument. It was days of dry tongues and empty canteens. It was bodies under canvas.

Voss's voice didn't rise. It didn't need to. "Refusal," he said, "will be treated as theft and sabotage. Mission Rami's coupons will be voided by sundown. All drums in the quadrant will be notified. Stability will be maintained."

Jeff held the coupon book tighter without thinking. His name sat on the owner line like a claim tag tied to a fence post. He'd carried men's freight and paid in water. He'd told

himself he never traded someone else's share for his own exit. Now the book was asking him to do it with ink.

Laleh's hand went to the truck's open hood, fingers testing a hose clamp, then the oil line fitting, as if the metal might give her a better answer. "We can't outrun them," she said, low. "Not on that oil. Not across open."

Jeff's situational map built itself without permission: salt pan wide, no cover, ridges as firing points, their tracks visible as a

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stripped office wended onto a working truck: a bolted to the bed of a flatbed. It was a Kadir Voss waited beside a portable desk cool. It made a sound like coins in a tin can. the slow vibration of engines tires and the pan's fine grit thrown by digging Sand kicked against metal. Not wind—just wouldn't speed up.

wouldn't stop a rifle round but might stop eyes, then a clean stretch to the shadow under the nearest truck bed if things went wrong. He watched his own feet so he wouldn't stop a rifle round but might stop

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buried in drift, tumbled to the low berm that nine steps to the buried-out culvert half-walked away, packing it like a survey line: Swallowing cost water he didn't own. He palate when he tried to keep his mouth shut. His teeth like chalk. His tongue stuck to his Alkael dust rode up off the pan and sat on He stepped out into the open.

a ridge. Cheap tires and a large. White enough to hate. The convoy rolled off the ridge, tires move the instant he chose repair, impulsive, or abandon.

196

away with a dry rip that put lint on his fingers. He knotted it to a split stick from the mission fence line. While enough to read from away with a dry rip that put lint on his fingers. He knotted it to a split stick from the

without looking at her face. The cloth came Jeff tore a strip from Laleh's spare shirt holding paper that could stare a hundred vises while Jeff stood under snapping canvases and the space between them tightened like a leaguer.

Contract at Gunpoint
The convoy rolled off the ridge, tires dropping into the flat with slow confidence, thirty seconds, "Voss said, and made it sound like a courtesy. The loudhailer clicked again. "You have convoy ahead. Options burning down to two. confession. The mission behind them. The

Then at Laleh, waiting, eyes hard, ready to at the mission pump handle catching sun. He looked at the coupon book. Then past it, to steady a compass needle near scrap fields. He forced them still, the way he used through his nose. His hands shook one like a cutsey. Jeff's mouth was so dry it hurt to breathe like seconds, "Voss said, and made it sound The loudhailer clicked again. "You have convoy ahead. Options burning down to two. confession. The mission behind them. The

plank top, a single drawer, a ledger box, and a safe hanging under it on a chain. Paperwork lay in neat stacks, corners weighted by a rail spike with rust flaking off in thin scales. A clerk stood to Voss's right with an ink stamp and a coupon book open to the page with Jeff's name. The clerk's eyes never left Jeff's hands.

Two guards sat on the tailgate with rifles across their knees like tools. Another pair loitered by the rear trucks. They rotated without hurry, trading shade and sightlines. A

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fuel truck sat off-center under a canvas rig. The shade snapped and fluttered on a frame, cord biting into grommets. Water drums rode on a trailer behind it, lashed with rope that had seen too much sun.

Voss's suit didn't belong out here. That made it armor. He didn't blink against the dust. He didn't squint into glare. He gave Jeff the kind of smile you give a man when you're already writing his receipt.

"Mr. Meridian," Voss said. Calm. Contract-calm. "Thank you for making the stable choice."

Jeff kept the flag upright. Kept his other hand empty. "You called this a courtesy." "It is." Voss nodded toward the desk as if offering a seat in a parlor. "The alternative is confusion. Confusion becomes violence. Violence becomes interruptions in service. I prevent interruptions."

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The pedlock was a common spool type—bars ran to a bracket under the bed. Thick link. under the desk tugged on its chain with every vibration, like a dog testing a leash. The chain cracked clean through one side, flexing each time the clerk shifted his weight. The safe saw the bolt plate under the desk edge—The desk vibrated with the flatbed's idle. He saw his name still on paper. With his name still on paper, Jeff didn't look back. Looking back those who would be watching from the mission copy. The useful material is already mine."

"Then stability continues. Wells stay under pressure who comply. Coupons stay valid for

Jeff's mind built tight without effort. Trucks staggered to make lanes that were retar lanes. Firing lines that looked like parking. The fuel trucks made a dark patch with men nearer it. The rear guards asked for a shot. Jeff didn't look back. Looking back Laleh would be watching from the mission copy. The tube you have is a copy. The useful material is already mine."

thirty seconds trading positions. If he ran, he'd run into a crossline. If he shot, he'd die hanging like a hook. "The tube you have is a copy. The useful material is already mine."

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"Burred," Voss said, as if he'd said "filed." Water when he should." He let that last part hang like a hook. "The tube you have is a copy. The useful material is already mine."

"Then stability continues. Wells stay under

Laleh would be watching from the mission copy. The useful material is already mine."

"Where?" Jeff asked. "Voss spread his hands. "At the railhead. A clerk. A porter. A man who doesn't talk about his questions shows short because a long question will appreciate—the tube was swapped." Jeff made his face a blank board. He kept taken. It was taken. And—that is the part you are known to walk. The tube was meant to be tube. He died on a line that you, Mr. Meridian, fixing a number on an invoice. "He carried a tube. He died on a line that you, Mr. Meridian,

204

"Then stability continues. Wells stay under pressure who comply. Coupons stay valid for

Laleh would be watching from the mission copy. The useful material is already mine."

"He was useful," Voss corrected, like he was fixing a number on an invoice. "He carried a tube. He died on a line that you, Mr. Meridian,

<p>The white chit in Jeff's hand turned from permission to evidence.</p> <p>Option gone: walk out.</p> <p>A guard pair moved to seal the rear lane. Another took the side gap by the fuel drums. The only open path ran straight through the center where the desk trailer sat.</p> <p>Jeff lowered his shoulders and went in.</p> <p>He moved by touch and timing. When an engine lurches, eyes go to the driver. When a drum rolls, hands reach. When a man curses and slaps his boot to clear mud, his rifle drops</p>	<p>for a beat. Jeff took beats like he took measurements. One. Two. Three.</p> <p>A door swung open on the cargo truck ahead, catching a gust and slamming back with a metal clasp. It made men flinch. Jeff slid past the hinge line as it moved, close enough to feel the vibration in the panel.</p> <p>A rifle cracked somewhere near the fence. Not aimed at him. A warning shot to freeze the yard. It worked on most. It didn't work on Laleh. She was already under the tanker, elbows in mud, dragging herself by the</p>	<p>crossbeam like she'd been born in crawlspaces.</p> <p>Rami followed her line and paid for it. A guard saw the cleric collar and grabbed for him, more insult than tactic. Rami turned with the grab and used the man's weight against him, hip checking him into a drum rack. Metal rang. The guard's teeth clicked. Rami took a forearm across the mouth for the exchange. His lip split. He didn't go down.</p> <p>Jeff hit the desk trailer's steps in a crowd of men pretending the desk mattered more than</p>	<p>the water. He climbed with his head tucked, papers up, the safe key pressed flat by his thumb.</p> <p>Inside, heat sat heavy. The smell of ink and sweat. The clerk's chair was shoved back. The stamp lay on its side, handle smeared with mud from someone's palm. The safe was where it always was—under the desk, chained to the bolt plate set into the floor.</p> <p>Jeff dropped to his knees and slid under.</p> <p>Sand ground into his teeth. He tasted iron off the bolt plate before he touched it. The</p>
<p style="text-align: right;">141</p> <p>howled. Men shouted again, a fresh wave, tool in a fan shroud. The engine coughed and sputtered, metal shrieked—high, tearing.</p> <p>Above him, the rifle muzzle lowered another inch.</p> <p>With a grudging click, the guard gripped the last fraction. He put his wrist into it, hard, controlled. The lock gave then caught at the last try. It slid, trying to prime.</p> <p>The key went in on the third try. It slid, pulse in his ears, a steady knock like a pump</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">242</p> <p>against the trailer skin. He could hear his own short and useless, then used the edge of the thumb, and listened to the sand tickling Jeff held the key out a hair, below once. He worked the match that followed made his jaw set, and trade a person's water for your safety—more than here. His private rule flickered—</p> <p>Grit in the slot. He felt it bite the key like sand in a gearbox. His mouth went dry from fear. It didn't go.</p> <p>He brought the papers close to the safe face, peeled them back, and slid the thin key into the lock.</p> <p>He brought the papers close to the safe keyway to sweep grit. Paper fibers tore. He did it again. He didn't look up.</p> <p>into a narrow strip and pushing it into the hole.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">243</p> <p>contract paper as a crude brush, folding it short and useless, then used the edge of the thumb, and listened to the sand tickling Jeff held the key out a hair, below once. He worked the match that followed made his jaw set, and trade a person's water for your safety—more than here. His private rule flickered—</p> <p>Grit in the slot. He felt it bite the key like sand in a gearbox. His mouth went dry from fear. It didn't go.</p> <p>He brought the papers close to the safe face, peeled them back, and slid the thin key into the lock.</p> <p>He brought the papers close to the safe keyway to sweep grit. Paper fibers tore. He did it again. He didn't look up.</p> <p>into a narrow strip and pushing it into the hole.</p>	<p style="text-align: right;">244</p> <p>improvises.</p> <p>Lose the only leverage they'd bled for, fast as a blink. Reappear? No time. Abandon?</p> <p>Falling object: the plate, Choice in his head, the wood and metal, thin and ugly.</p> <p>Put his shoulder to it. A square came out of bolt plate at the desk base flexed when he chain was thicker than he'd judged. Not a light deterrent. A commitment. The cracked</p> <p>He stopped pulling.</p> <p>He stopped pulling.</p>
<p>heads turning toward the new noise because it promised fire.</p> <p>The rifle muzzle jerked away.</p> <p>Jeff yanked the safe door open. Inside: a packet wrapped in oilcloth, edges stamped and sealed, and a coupon book with Voss's mark pressed deep, the imprint clean in spite of the yard mud. A ledger card with columns and names. Water allotments. Well IDs. Dates.</p> <p>Not treasure. Proof.</p>	<p>He shoved the packet into his shirt under his ribs. It stuck to sweat. He grabbed the coupon book and the card stack with his left hand, because his right still had the key and his brain refused to drop it until the job was done.</p> <p>"Move," Laleh's voice snapped from outside the trailer, close. "Now."</p> <p>Jeff backed out from under the desk, shoulders scraping wood. He came up into a burst of light and noise.</p>	<p>The yard had changed shape. Guards in pairs, rifles up. Drivers pinned in their seats, hands on wheels, waiting for orders. Water still jetted in an arc, lower now as pressure fell, turning the lane into a slick strip that shone like oil.</p> <p>Voss was walking toward the desk trailer with a calm that made the space around him clear. Men moved aside without looking at him.</p> <p>Jeff didn't have a clean lane. He had one lane with cover: between the fuel drums and</p>	<p>the tanker belly. He saw Laleh crouched near the tanker's rear, one hand braced on a ladder rung, the other holding her pistol low. She wasn't aiming to kill. She was aiming to make heads turn.</p> <p>Rami was at her shoulder, face wet at the mouth, eyes narrowed against pain. He held a guard's wrist in a grip that kept the rifle pointed at dirt. The guard fought it, boots sliding in mud. Rami's ribs took an elbow. He grunted once and didn't let go.</p>
<p style="text-align: right;">245</p> <p>Cost accepted.</p> <p>Bleeding slowed to a steady drip. Trade made.</p> <p>Meaning worse. Water meant everything.</p> <p>The belt cinched. His forearm went pale in a strip above the cut, the skin tight as stretched canvas. His hand stayed numb, but the canva</p> <p>Narrowed to numbers and distances. Blood on the ground meant minutes leaking. Heat hauled until his thumb is hot.</p> <p>The buckle bit his thumb. He loosed leather high on his right arm, above the wound, and pulled down the sleeve.</p> <p>Jeff jumped down the trailer steps into the lane. His boot hit slick mud and skated. He caught himself on a drum rack, palm slapping wet canvas. The touch was cold and wrong under sun heat.</p> <p>Jeff snarled air through his teeth, grabbed the packet at his chest with his left and only clutched him for a hundred leagues closing like a door.</p> <p>Voss's boots on the steps behind him and the dust, turning it to paste.</p> <p>The items fell for half a beat.</p> <p>Under the tanker—because stopping meant legs to move toward Laleh's hand signal—</p>	<p>real in the wrong way.</p> <p>He didn't look at the hole. Looking made it they'd quit mid-task.</p> <p>argument, the hand slack, fingers curled as if gripping, squeezing until edges cut his skin.</p> <p>He hooked the coupon book and cards against his palm, dragging them up through mud and clawing. His fingers smeared blood on paper.</p> <p>dropped his left hand toward the ground,</p> <p>the packet at his chest with his left and only snarled to the way his fingers didn't listen,</p>	<p>blood running to his wrist, and he forced his hand open with his right arm hanging wrong.</p> <p>Pain hit Jeff's right forearm with a hot engine noise like a snappled rail.</p> <p>Rea, The shot cracked through the now. Rea, The shot cracked through the A rifle barreled from the left. Not warning under sun heat.</p> <p>Jeff snarled air through his teeth, grabbed the packet at his chest with his left and only clutched him for a hundred leagues closing like a door.</p> <p>Voss's boots on the steps behind him and the dust, turning it to paste.</p> <p>The items fell for half a beat.</p> <p>Under the tanker—because stopping meant legs to move toward Laleh's hand signal—</p>	<p>and the card slipped. The world and the hand opened on reflex. The key bunch. His hand opened on reflex.</p> <p>Pain hit Jeff's right forearm with a hot engine noise like a snappled rail.</p> <p>Rea, The shot cracked through the now. Rea, The shot cracked through the A rifle barreled from the left. Not warning under sun heat.</p> <p>Jeff snarled air through his teeth, grabbed the packet at his chest with his left and only clutched him for a hundred leagues closing like a door.</p> <p>Voss's boots on the steps behind him and the dust, turning it to paste.</p> <p>The items fell for half a beat.</p> <p>Under the tanker—because stopping meant legs to move toward Laleh's hand signal—</p>

"Head up," Laleh snapped, and the words weren't comfort. They were instruction, the way you talk to a motor that wants to die. She grabbed his collar and shoved him under the shade thrown by the desk trailer's corner. Canvas snapped on its frame overhead, a hard slap in the wind. She moved into the open edge of the shade line and stayed there, angled so any shot coming low would have to find her first or punch through a drum before it found Jeff.	A round smacked a fuel drum and sparked, then died in wet mud. The smell of hot rubber and leaking fuel mixed with water and dust until Jeff's throat tried to close. Rami was dragging a water drum by its rim, boots sliding. The bung was cracked; water still jetted in a weakening arc, splashing his legs and turning dust into slick. Each gallon that hit the ground was a door closing somewhere downline. He jammed the drum into a lane between two trucks until it wedged. It made cover and a mess at once.	A truck near the tanker coughed. The carb gave a wet choke, then a hollow pop. The engine stumbled like it had swallowed sand. The driver pumped the pedal, panicking fuel into a throat that couldn't take air. The motor sagged and stalled. Another rig behind it clanked into neutral, then ground as the driver tried to force it, the vibration carrying through the yard into Jeff's knees.	Failing objects everywhere. Choices stacking with no time to sort them.
257	258	259	260
bough in old labor and remembred thirs. The rifle's muzzle dipped. A half-second eyes flicking from Jeff's cover to Rami's face. For half a second, one guard hesitated, look at me! Ram's voice cut through the gunfire for one breath. Not praye. Not pleading. Ram's voice home with a practiced smack. a magazine home with a practiced smack. drum. "Reloading," she said, flat, and slapp'd	He leaned in. Metal screamed. A sound like a rail being torn loose. Every head in the yard turned toward it. Jeff didn't need to see. He felt the shift in fire. The next shots came closer, closer. Mud kicked under the trailer. A round punched through the step and whined off the safe's corner, leaving a bright scar.	Laleh moved again, low and ugly, no wasted distance. She fired twice, then rolled behind a rock. He hoisted the wrench behind the plate edge and used the desk step as a fulcrum. His left shoulder burned. His injured arm proteted with a dull, distant ache that treed through the dark behind the safe's edge. The bolt plate had walloped the hole. He hooked the wrench when he put weight on it. The bolt plate gave him the answer before the lock did. The screws had dropped on the floor. He didn't waste clean.	Jeff didn't move again, low and ugly, no wasted distance. She fired twice, then rolled behind a rock. He hoisted the wrench behind the plate edge and used the desk step as a fulcrum. His left shoulder burned. His injured arm proteted with a dull, distant ache that treed through the dark behind the safe's edge. The bolt plate had walloped the hole. He hooked the wrench when he put weight on it. The bolt plate gave him the answer before the lock did. The screws had dropped on the floor. He didn't waste clean.
Jeff used it. He threw his weight into the wrench again. The bolt plate tore free with a final shriek, screws ripping out and clattering into mud. The chain went slack. The safe lurched into Jeff's lap, heavy enough to bruise. The impact sent a hot pulse up his injured arm. He tasted iron at the back of his tongue. Now the lock. The safe had a keyway packed with fine grit. Desert finds every gap. Jeff pulled the key ring from his pocket with his left hand.	The keys were slick. He pressed them against his shirt to get purchase. Blood made everything slide. He tore a strip from the sand-filter cloth—coarse weave, already used at a roadside seep. He folded it and pushed it into the keyway with the tip of a thin nail he found in the mud. Grit came out in a dark line. He breathed through his nose, slow, because if he swallowed air wrong he'd start coughing and then he'd be done.	Laleh's shoulder bumped his as she crouched in closer, using the safe itself as part of her cover. "Which one?" she asked. Jeff didn't look at the keys. He felt them. He counted by shape. Short ward. Long ward. One with a bent tooth that always caught. "That," he said, and put the bent one in. The lock resisted, then caught. His left wrist shook as he applied pressure, careful, steady, like easing a stuck valve. The key turned a fraction. Stopped. He eased back, cleared grit with the cloth again, tried once more.	Click. The sound landed in him like water hitting a dry cup: small, definite, not enough. He turned it the rest of the way and the bolts inside slid with a heavy, satisfied clunk. He pulled the door open. Inside was an oilcloth packet, thick and wrapped tight, the corners squared like someone had cared about the edges. The smell hit him first: machine oil and paper, sealed away from sun. There was also a
261	262	263	264
stamps on the outside, black ink, clean despite the yard. Engines started catching again. Once after another, a staggered chorus. The stalled trucks' drivers were slapping the ground because the secret was safe. He'd been paid, a frame already hot. Loss hadn't been his mouth went flat. "We can't sit on this," No, Jeff said. The word scratched out of him. He tucked the packet inside his shirt, calm because the schedule was a weapon.	Laleh leaned in, read the red stamp, and runner already moving, a foreman already paid, a frame already hot. Loss hadn't been his mouth went flat. "We can't sit on this," No, Jeff said. The word scratched out of him. He tucked the packet inside his shirt, calm because the schedule was a weapon.	Jeff's eyes flicked up and caught the desk trailer's open window. He saw paperwork on the desk inside, neatly stacked, and a stamp pad sitting where a hand could reach it without looking. Too clean. Too ready. The calm earlier snapp'd into place with that small detail.	Jeffs's right hand didn't want to close. Driving in his arm turned his vision tight at the edges. Jeff shifted, tried to push up, and the hurt seal and coupons. Jeff shifted now—coherent. A moving wall of not panic'd now—convoy was re-forming, with a lurch. Loss's scatter ground until it caught another rig's, trying to clear the choke. car housing, trying to clear the choke. Another rig's, scatter ground until it caught car housing, trying to clear the choke. Another rig's, scatter ground until it caught car housing, trying to clear the choke.
265	266	267	268
TIME FROM RECEIPT: 1 HOUR A line beneath, boxed. IMMEDIATE DISPOSAL: BURN AT PUMP HOUSE When it wasn't, fresh enough to look wet in his head even though the pump in red, harsh and when it was, a second stamp in red, calm because the schedule was a weapon.	Jeffs's right tightened. Not from fear. From when it was, a second stamp in red, harsh and when it was, a second stamp in red, calm because the schedule was a weapon.	Jeffs's right tightened. Not from fear. From when it was, a second stamp in red, harsh and when it was, a second stamp in red, calm because the schedule was a weapon.	Jeffs's right tightened. Not from fear. From when it was, a second stamp in red, harsh and when it was, a second stamp in red, calm because the schedule was a weapon.
269	270	271	272

