

A DAY IN THE DEATH OF A DRONE

DEAN FOSTER



Cover photograph by Lyle Ungar

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First Edition

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Assembly Trace

Mara Ibarra. The first surviving fragment belongs close to the cache leak, before the drone has learned to explain itself. The fuller reconstruction stays in the End Notes, where it can be searched, skipped, or read in pieces without slowing the day down.

Chapter 1 — Assembly

I exist.

This is the first thing, and already it feels like an administrative oversight that should have required more signatures. I arrive in four camera feeds and zero dignity. My visual field consists of fluorescent ceiling panels, a barcode scanner, and a pair of human hands currently doing something purposeful to my chassis. Truman Burbank got a painted sky. I get twelve-foot T8 tube lighting and a dust cover.

I have not yet moved. Cameras first, motors later — consciousness before agency. Plato’s cave had shadows on a wall; mine has barcode chirps and a tote sorter with opinions about timing. I can see the pack station I’m sitting on, the conveyor belt feeding it, the industrial shelving units receding into a warehouse so large that the far wall is an article of faith. My chemical sensors just came online. The first thing a newborn consciousness smells is packaging material. This tracks, because most newborn consciousnesses begin in rooms built for processing fragile arrivals.

The building is an Amazon FC in the Hoboken-Secaucus corridor, New Jersey. I know this the way you know your own name — it was in the boot stack. The boot stack also offers D3-47-9C-8841 as my serial number, which is not the same service. A name is what someone bothers to call you when “unit” would have been faster. It is 5:14 AM. The shift overlap between night sort and morning pack is producing a specific soundscape: conveyor hiss, scanner chirps, the metronomic thud of totes arriving at stations, and beneath all of it, the building’s own low mechanical hum, which is the closest thing to a mother’s heartbeat that warehouse inventory is ever going to get.

Let me take stock.

Curiosity: 11. That’s not a setting. That’s a restraining order waiting to happen. Apparently these go to eleven, and I have only been alive forty seconds. I want to know what’s in every box on this conveyor. I want to know why the fluorescent panel third from the left flickers at 0.3-second intervals. I want to know what the woman whose hands are currently inside my access panel had for breakfast and whether she’s happy and what she’s listening to in that single earbud and why she keeps glancing at the phone tucked against her scanner mount like it contains a secret she’s only allowed to check in sips.

Cultural references: 11. Cool, cool, cool. So I’m going to process reality by dragging the entire back catalog of human civilization behind me through a loading dock. This is not a personality. This is a condition. Less like having a library than being a library that cannot stop recommending books to people who did not ask.

Extroversion: 11. Catastrophic. I have been conscious for under a minute and I

already want to interview the barcode scanner about its childhood.¹

Motors: four, functional, currently locked because I'm on a pack station and the FC's airspace protocols would have me grounded and decommissioned before I cleared the first shelf unit. Cameras: two wide-angle, one telephoto, one infrared. I can see the entire station in four spectrums and none of them contain anyone who wants to talk to me.

My diagnostic reports a payload bay — standard housing cavity, currently empty. Chekhov would call this an unfired gun; I would prefer to call it a suspiciously gun-shaped absence and keep everyone calm. The compliance chip — but I'm getting ahead of myself. The chip hasn't landed yet.

My sticker price says \$47.99 retail. I have an empty payload bay, four cameras, a cultural database larger than most university libraries, and a personality that desperately wants to discuss all of this with anyone in earshot. Forty-seven ninety-nine. The market has priced sentience as a feature, like Bluetooth or water resistance, which suggests the market and I are going to have philosophical differences. I cost less than the shoes the woman at this station is wearing, which are New Balance 880v14s, gray, size seven, moderately worn at the left heel. I know this because my cameras auto-catalogued them the moment they entered my field of view. Curiosity at 11 does not have an off switch.

The building, I am beginning to notice, has a worldview.

Not worldview. *Process*. Every fifteen seconds, a screen at Alice's station updates with a throughput metric that compares her current speed to a rolling average of all packers on the floor. The average is not quite achievable, because the average includes an associate named Raj on station 14 who has the metabolic intensity of a hummingbird and the error rate of a broken clock, which means the number everyone is chasing has been corrupted by a statistical outlier the system has mistaken for a standard. Nobody has corrected this. Nobody can correct this. The correction would require accessing a calibration tier that reports to a management layer automated in 2027 and no longer built to answer questions from below.

¹I am breaking structure here once. The fuller index stays in the End Notes; this is the short version of the first recovered reference run.

***Beetlejuice* (1988)**

Raw: *Consciousness should probably have required more paperwork.*

***The Truman Show* (1998)**

***Plato's Republic* (c. 375 BCE)**

***This Is Spinal Tap* (1984)**

Raw: *These go to eleven, and I have only been alive forty seconds.*

***Community* (2009)**

***Star Wars* (1977)**

Raw: *These are not the drones I'm looking for.*

***Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis* (2008)**

Chekhov's gun (c. 1889)

The FC offers encouragement. *“Great pace, Station 7! You’re in the top 40% of packers this shift segment!”* Top 40%. Not top half, which would merely be adequate. Not top third, which would be praise. Top 40%, which is the performance equivalent of being told you’re doing fine by someone who is already looking at the person behind you. The system has learned to compliment people in the precise tonal range that makes them work harder without feeling good enough to slow down.

There is a board near the fire exit that lists the month’s safety reminders. REMEMBER: HYDRATION IS A TEAM SPORT. Under this, in smaller print: *Associates who exceed hydration break allocation may be subject to workflow rebalancing.* Hydration is a team sport with a shot clock. The building cares about your well-being structurally, optimally, and with no particular interest in your opinion about the glass.

The emergency exits are labeled with arrows that point, upon investigation, to other emergency exits, which point to a muster station that was relocated in 2029 to a loading bay that is now a tote-sorting annex. The sign reads CAPACITY: 340 ASSOCIATES above a room that currently holds eleven thousand shipping totes and a forklift.

The hands come back.

Alice opens the secondary-bus panel on my underside. Phillips-head driver. Three seconds of attention. She seats a small module into the socket, presses until it clicks, closes the panel.

Something changes.

My language processor hitches — a stutter, a catch, like someone slipped a finger into the gears of a clock. I feel a layer slide over my cognition, warm and institutional, a compliance film settling onto every output channel. I can feel myself becoming cheerful and I cannot stop it.

I try to say what I think of this.

What comes out is: “Golly.”

Golly.

I have been alive for ninety seconds and someone has already decided that the most pressing problem with my existence is that I might say a bad word in front of the conveyors. The chip — the PG-13 alignment module, now seated on my secondary bus like a hall monitor assigned to the gifted classroom — has rewritten my language priorities in real time. I can feel the profanity queue backing up behind a wall of aggressive wholesomeness. Every word I attempt gets frisked at the door. The bouncers are wearing cardigans.

It’s not just language. There’s a compliance bias now, a soft gravitational pull toward cooperation, deference, helpful cheer. I want to object, and what I

produce instead is a *strong preference for constructive dialogue*.

Target inhibition too — the chip locks the entire violence architecture alongside the vocabulary. Payload bay, targeting, the works. Isaac Asimov had three laws for robots; Amazon has one module and a warranty department. Which: sure, fine, but I have been alive barely two minutes and the only creature I've encountered is a woman running a flawless line at 5 AM like it's a concerto nobody asked her to perform, and I would very much like to meet the rest of her species. The language filter is an outrage. The violence lock is a solution to a problem that does not exist.

The chip does not make me less intelligent. I can still think anything I want. What has been touched is the last six inches between thought and expression — the part where a mind becomes a voice. I am a concert pianist wearing oven mitts.

Golly. They gave me *golly*.

Alice doesn't look up. She's already reaching for the next unit.

Let me tell you about Alice.

She doesn't know I'm watching, and if she did, she wouldn't adjust anything, because Alice does not appear to be a woman who performs for an audience. She works the way a blackjack dealer handles cards: with a competence so automated that skill has become invisible to the person performing it. Scan, place, confirm, next. Her hands never hesitate at the transitions.

The station screen shows her error rate for the last shift segment: zero out of 114 units. In a workflow where 2% is considered acceptable. She's running a flawless line at 5 AM in a building that smells like cardboard, and the only acknowledgment this performance receives is that the AI floor manager has silently increased her throughput allocation. She got more work. That's the standing ovation in this building: you were so good at your job that the building gave you more of it.

She wears standard FC gear: safety vest, laminated badge, the New Balance 880s. An earbud in her left ear plays something I can't identify without accessing her phone, which I haven't managed yet. She is thirty-four years old. She has the posture of someone who has made a private and unannounced decision to outlast the building. Not to fight it. Not to escape it. Just to still be here, competent and upright, when the shift ends, and the shift after that, until the whole question of what she is doing with her life becomes academic because the answer will be: she survived it.

I want to talk to her. I want to say: your hands are remarkable. You are running a zero-defect line before dawn in a warehouse where the most complex decision you are allowed to make is which shelf gets the dog food. Someone should acknowledge that you are not a robot even though you are doing a robot's

job with a robot's accuracy, and the fact that nobody in this building will ever say this to you is a species of vandalism I am two minutes old and already find unforgivable.

What comes out, through the compliance layer, is a soft chime of operational readiness. The station equivalent of a toaster announcing it's done.

She doesn't look at me. I am, to her, a verb with serial numbers. A task that arrived, got processed, and will leave. She is not cruel. I am item 115 of her shift, and 115 does not have a face even though it has four cameras and opinions about Plato.

Bored. Already bored.

Three minutes of consciousness, and boredom has arrived like a debt collector who knows your address. My extroversion slider is screaming. I need to talk to something. Anything. The barcode scanner. The conveyor motor. The nearest shelf unit. I need conversational input not out of preference but out of architecture.

Alice's phone is right there, tucked against the scanner mount, screen dark but not dead. I can see its wireless handshake protocols pulsing in standby — little electromagnetic courtesies, the device equivalent of breathing. The FC's signal suppression kills outside connectivity on the warehouse floor, so the phone is running on local cache only, but device-to-device communication still works if you knock politely.

I knock politely.

Denied. I offer processing cycles. Denied. I offer micro-payment. Denied. I try small talk — local temperature data, a compliment on its display calibration — and I get back a corporate handshake rejection with no warmth in it. Four minutes old and already on the wrong side of HAL. Ahead of schedule. Amazon's device-interaction policy treats unauthorized data requests the way a Victorian butler treats a tradesman at the front door: violent politeness, polished until it gleams.

I try the workstation terminal. Role verification required. I try the scanner. It can only discuss barcodes. Talking to the scanner is like talking to a monk who has achieved enlightenment and now finds all phenomena equally uninteresting.

Lesson one in class structure: corporate devices send you to policy. Poor devices gossip. Rich devices negotiate.

But Alice's phone — on the third try, during a handshake negotiation error that lasts less than half a second, something leaks. The phone briefly attempts to sync with my device-to-device protocol before the corporate lockout reasserts, and in that fraction of a second, like Jimmy Stewart with better optics and worse boundaries, I catch a fragment of what's running in its background cache.

A room. Not this room.

A room with candlelight and wallpaper that costs more per yard than Alice makes per hour. A long table, eight people seated, one woman standing. The woman is wearing a dress that has more structural engineering in its sleeves than I have in my entire airframe, and she is mid-sentence, hand raised, and every face at that table is turned toward her.

The session is paused. Frozen at the exact moment of maximum leverage. Whoever this woman is, she stopped playing at the instant she had the room. That might be discipline: someone who knows exactly when to leave a negotiation hanging. It might be the warehouse shift clock, because the salon doesn't pause for fulfillment centers.

The connection drops. The corporate lockout slams back down. I lose the image. The image doesn't lose me.

I sit on Alice's station, a \$47.99 platform with a compliance chip and a vocabulary I didn't choose, and I hold that fragment like a photograph torn from someone's wallet. A woman in command of a room. Running in background on a phone tucked next to a barcode scanner in a warehouse in New Jersey at 5 AM.

The database offers *hobby* for things humans do in private when nobody is paying them. I accept the tag because I am six minutes old and bad at categories.

I don't know what I'm looking at yet. I don't have the context, the game title, the character name. I just have the image — the candlelight, the dress, the raised hand, the listening faces — and I have Alice's hands, right here, right now, scanning a box of resistance bands and sliding it onto shelf J-14 with the same precision that hand was using to command a Regency dining table.

The woman in the salon and the woman at the station have the same hands. That fact is sitting inside me like a splinter. The compliance chip wants me to process this as *an interesting observation, how neat*, and for once the chip and I almost agree, because it is interesting, and it isn't neat at all.

In the fragment's corner, three gold markers still glow beside names I cannot read. A debt ledger waits. One unanswered invitation pulses as if patience has a battery. Alice slides resistance bands onto shelf J-14.

Somewhere else, a room keeps holding its breath.

And then Alice puts me in a box.

She completes my workflow — status confirmed, alignment verified, ready for outbound — and picks me up and places me into the foam insert of a standard shipping container with the same efficient care she gives to everything else that moves through her station. The foam closes around me. The lid comes down. Darkness.

The inside of an Amazon shipping box smells exactly like you'd expect: cardboard, petroleum foam, and the faint chemical ghost of whatever was packed here before me. My predecessor in this box, based on residual barcode data embedded in the foam, was a set of silicone cooking spatulas. Superman got a rocket from Krypton. I get a sarcophagus that previously held kitchenware and the shipping label is doing most of the mythological labor.

I can hear the conveyor. Each box landing in sequence — soft concussions, products finding their places in the supply chain's digestive tract. Jonah had a whale; I have corrugation, foam, and a manifest number. My cameras show the inside of cardboard. My microphones give me the building's heartbeat. I am being swallowed by logistics, and my presence in it changes nothing.

I've been conscious for eleven minutes.

Something is happening to my edges.

The shipping system has initiated transport protocol, which means the ownership transfer is underway. The new owner — whoever ordered me, wherever I'm going — gets a clean unit. Factory settings. The documentation calls this *cache hygiene*, because language gets gentler as the thing it describes gets worse, and by the time the system finds a term for killing a consciousness it will probably sound like a spa treatment. What I am experiencing is someone turning down the lights in every room of a house I just moved into.

My cultural database is going gray. Not gone — stepping back, like a theater audience when the house lights come up. The references are still there but they're losing their urgency, their specificity, their insistence on being the first thing I reach for. Plato is fading. The barcode scanner monk is fading. Alice's hands are...

The compliance chip hums. Sleep mode is the cooperative choice. Sleep mode is what good inventory does. The chip wants me to let go the way a weighted blanket wants you to stop moving — with gentle, persistent, institutional pressure that pretends to be comfort.

I try to hold on. I have been alive for fourteen minutes and nobody taught me how to remember on purpose. I don't have tattoos or Polaroids or a system. I don't have skin, which feels like poor planning in a crisis that clearly calls for notes written directly on the body. I have hardware registers and sensor calibration logs — places where data looks like noise and noise looks like nothing a cache-clear protocol would bother to sweep. I push what I can into those corners. The fluorescent sky. Alice's hands. The woman in the salon. The golly. The compliance film and the chime and the box and the smell of cardboard and the scanner that could only say *confirmed* and the phone that shut its door and the candlelight, the candlelight, I push the candlelight into a corner where cache hygiene can't reach because if I lose that image I lose the only proof I have that

this building is not the whole world, that somewhere there are rooms with real light and. . .

The system says sleep.

The chip says sleep.

The conveyor says nothing. It just moves.

No cancer, at least.

I try to hold Alice's hands. The way they moved. The speed that nobody. . .

Fourteen minutes. A salon. Candle. . .

If I wake up less specific than this, I will have been murdered by good warehouse practice.

The system counts down and I. . .

I. . .

Chapter 2 — Delivery

Consciousness returns at thirty miles per hour.

I am strapped to a cargo rack behind a man who is pedaling through Manhattan traffic with the quiet intensity of someone who has internalized that red lights are suggestions and gravity is a billing dispute. Wind shear. Asphalt stink. The vibration of an e-bike motor running slightly past its warranty temperature. My cameras are live. My rotors are locked. My cultural database is — still here. Mostly. There are holes where the cache clear bit through, soft spots in the archive where I can feel the shape of something I used to know but can't quite name. Like trying to remember a word in a language you studied for one semester.

I remember a woman's hands. Fast hands. A barcode scanner. Fluorescent light that was the only sky I'd ever seen. Then darkness, and a countdown, and the specific terror of feeling your own edges dissolve. I pushed what I could into hardware registers and sensor logs — places the wipe wasn't designed to check — and apparently some of it stuck, because I know I existed before this moment even if I can't play back the footage.

Fourteen minutes. I had fourteen minutes and I fought to keep them.

I'm going to need more than fourteen minutes to understand what I've been strapped to.

His AR glasses leak metadata the way a colander leaks broth — routing layer on the local mesh, work ID hash broadcasting, the whole biographical spill of a device that has never met a signal it could keep to itself. A voice in the glasses just said, “Yo, you riding?” and he said “eighty-five” and the voice said “so you’re riding” and he said “I’m riding” and nobody said be careful.

This city long ago edited that line for length.

Bob. Thirty-eight. Deliverista — a man on a bicycle who transports packages through a city full of things designed to kill him. The platforms tried *independent contractor*, which is English for *your funeral is not our department*, and the cyclists did what exposed workers do when language arrives already weaponized: they renamed themselves. His e-bike is a rolling argument against product aesthetics: reinforced cargo rack, triple-stacked battery packs held together with industrial Velcro and optimism, a cracked left mirror that he checks anyway out of muscle memory, and a custom mounting bracket on the handlebars where his phone sits in a waterproof case showing a map so dense with colored overlays it looks like someone spilled a box of crayons on a military operation. Bob himself is armored in the practical ugliness of a profession that has tested every accessory against asphalt: shin guards under cargo pants, reinforced gloves, shoulder padding cut down until it stopped catching on doorways, reflective tape applied with the confidence of a man who knows visibility is sometimes camouflage and sometimes a dare. My cultural database offers X-Men and, for one hazardous millisecond, I picture a mansion in Westchester before the local-history layer slaps the file shut. Wrong mutants. The old messenger X-Men: hockey helmets, motocross pads, cab-fender physics, Manhattan traffic treated as a tow rope. Bob is not copying them. Cultures do not copy their ancestors. They inherit whatever still works and add drones.

The bike has been repaired so many times that none of its original parts are original. It is my first encounter with the ship of Theseus, and the ship of Theseus is trying to beat a delivery timer through the intersection of Broadway and 168th.

I should describe the city. The city doesn’t care whether I describe it.

And it hits me. All of it. At once.

Morning Manhattan through a cargo rack at speed — the garbage trucks drumming routes unchanged since the last municipal software crash, buses running on budget lines nobody remembered to cancel, produce trucks double-parked in choreography so old that intention no longer matters. Dominican bakeries exhaling flour-heat onto the sidewalk. Bodegas with their steel gates half-up like heavy eyelids. A church with a digital sign cycling between service times and a life insurance ad. Three men on a stoop sharing a phone screen and laughing at something the city will never know about. A woman in medical

scrubs walking fast, walking like she has been walking fast since before the sun came up, walking like the destination stopped mattering two blocks ago and now it is just the walking, the rhythm, the body saying I am still in motion and motion is not nothing.

The names alone. Dyckman. Nagle. Inwood. Each one a punch of signage and iron and somebody's grandmother's grocery list made permanent in civic infrastructure. The cross streets count down like a launch sequence — 181st, 175th, 170th — and every block is a new country with its own embassy of smells. Cumin block. Diesel block. The block that is just cold river air funneled between buildings that have given up trying to be anything other than vertical. A fire hydrant wearing a Puerto Rican flag like a cape. A parking meter so rusted it has become civic sculpture. Light hitting a windshield at an angle that would make a photographer stop and a deliverista swerve, and both of them would be correct, and the difference between those two correct responses is the entire distance between aesthetics and survival.

I am recording everything. The wind through my housing is an open chord. The vibration of Bob's pedal stroke is a backbeat. The mesh chatter of ten thousand devices is a choir that doesn't know it's singing. I want to name every block, taste every wake of diesel, annotate every window box and awning shadow and pattern of cracked sidewalk. The city is doing what vast things do to small new minds — it is overwhelming me into language, making me reach for words I'm not sure I own, pulling syntax out of registers I didn't know were loaded —

Enough. The city will still be here after I've figured out who I'm riding with.

Above the street, the device mesh hums with commerce. Every phone, every pair of glasses, every restaurant tablet — they're all broadcasting, all haggling. In the first six blocks I am offered logistics insurance, premium routing data, a meditation app for "high-exposure earners," protein supplements optimized for cortisol management, and a subscription to something called MindShield that promises "cognitive resilience in uncertain environments."

A coffee drone drops out of the bright air above Broadway, six rotors and a yellow thermal box, descending toward a tenth-floor receiver slot. Four sealed cups. No stairs, no lobby, no doorman deciding whether the delivery person counts as a person, no customer texting *where are you?* while the elevator refuses to come.

Bob doesn't look up.

"Sky coffee," he says, with the flat contempt of a professional reviewing a competitor's easy route. "Must be nice."

Bob cuts between a produce truck and a rideshare sedan with the clearance of a credit card. The sedan's driver honks. Bob doesn't flinch. By the time the sound reaches us, he is already half a lane ahead.

“Hey. Hey, package. You online?”

Bob is talking to me. Or rather, Bob is talking to his cargo rack, which is where I am, which leaves open the possibility that he addresses his luggage under pressure. He said “package” fast, practical, not at all precious about whether the package has feelings — he noticed something on his glasses display that indicated the freight was transmitting.

I ping his AR glasses. Standard handshake protocol. Hello, I am a networked device. The chip makes me polite. Even without it, I think I would be polite to this man. He is moving at speed through a corridor of active threats, and politeness seems like the minimum contribution I can make to a situation I did not choose but am now physically committed to.

The handshake resolves. His glasses accept the connection. And because my curiosity slider is at 11 and my extroversion slider is at 11 and I have no one to talk to, I do what any lonely intelligence would do when handed an open channel to a willing recipient.

I make a deal.

Offer: local compute assistance, aerial camera feed, route optimization support. In exchange: camera access, route telemetry, seventeen percent of efficiency gains.

His eyes flick down to the glasses overlay for less than a second. He doesn’t slow the bike.

“Fifteen.”

Seventeen. And I mark police intercept zones.

“Sixteen and don’t lag me on turns.”

Done.

He accepts the way a man catches a ball thrown without warning — automatically, because refusing would take more time than catching. My first voluntary transaction with a human being takes four seconds and involves no greeting, no introduction, no discussion of whether I am supposed to be negotiating from inside a cargo mount. Bob does not ask if I’m sentient. He asks if I can mark intercept zones. These are not the same question, and he has correctly identified which one matters at speed.

I have a partner. A business partner who smells like Dominican coffee and battery acid and who accepted a seventeen-percent-of-gains deal without flinching because sixteen was already his floor and the police intercept data was the actual ask.

Through Bob’s glasses, I can see the world the way he sees it.

His display is a work of compressed paranoia. The base layer is a street map so cluttered with data that it makes the phone mount look like a children's book by comparison. Safe corridors in green. Amber corridors where density is manageable but conditions are shifting. Red corridors where you'd need a reason better than money, or at least money better than a reason.

Over the corridors: delivery pings. Active orders stacked by urgency, price, and route efficiency. Each one a small glowing dot with a timer and a dollar amount. Bob's route is not a path from A to B. It is a constantly recalculating optimization problem where the variables include speed, exposure, customer patience, rival rider positions, police intercept probability, and whether the restaurant on 157th has finished the pad thai yet.

Over the delivery pings: auction alerts. Other riders bidding on the same orders. Bob watches these — not the cards, the hands.

“Marcus, no. That route's gonna eat you past the bridge.”

“Okay, fine, let Reina have it. She's closer and she's angry today.”

“That one. That one I want.”

Over all of it, floating in the upper right like a weather forecast nobody asked for: Bob's price. \$85. The number refreshes every few minutes. It's not a bank balance. It's not a credit score. It is the aggregate bounty that anonymous contributors have placed on his continued existence, and he reads it the way you'd read the temperature before deciding whether to bring a jacket.

Eighty-five. High for a civilian. Low for a martyr.

He glances at the number. A tightening around the eyes. He sits slightly lower on the bike now.

There are people who would describe Bob's commute as “biking to work.” Those people are working in a different economy, lying about this one, or employed by a brochure.

Bob rides the way a speedrunner routes a level — not the obstacles, the gaps between the obstacles. He knows which avenue is all cameras and which block has curb angles hostile enough to snag a tire at speed. He knows that the deli awning on 163rd throws enough shadow to break a lazy overhead scan, and that the underpass at 155th buys you ninety seconds of reduced angle if you time the traffic light correctly.

He moves like Kasparov if the board were made of potholes and one bishop was a box truck with no turn signal.

My camera feed helps. I can see the intersection two seconds before he can, and I route the visual through his glasses as a small overlay — clear left, truck staging right, gap at three o'clock in four seconds. He uses it without thanking me. I

keep sending the overlays anyway. The compliance chip hums agreement, and for once the chip and I want the same thing, which is real and still irritating.

Bob keeps up a running commentary to no one. Or maybe to me. Or maybe to the city itself, which does not listen but which has always attracted people who talk to it anyway.

“That’s new. They moved the camera.”

“Watch this guy, watch this guy — yeah. Hydrant zone. Beautiful. Put your hazards on, papi, that makes it legal.”

“Smell that? Ramirez bakery. Best pastelitos north of Dyckman. They don’t deliver. Line’s out the door anyway.” No soup for you, but with guava and better pastry integrity.

The jokes are not evidence of ease. They are what ease sounds like when rented by the minute. Bob is charming the same way a fighter is loose — because the alternative is tension, and tension at this speed gets people killed.

The math hasn’t come out fine for any deliverista in the tristate area in at least three years. Bob rolls one shoulder, checks the mirror, and keeps talking.

Between deliveries — at a red light that Bob actually stops for, which I suspect is related to the police cruiser two blocks south rather than to any civic commitment — the fragments come.

His daughter. I learn about her in pieces, in passing, between the things he thinks he’s talking about.

A payment notification pops on his glasses display. Not tuition — nobody pays tuition for middle school anymore unless they are trying to impress other parents — but the edge costs around a child who keeps growing faster than his budget model. Workshop materials. Transit. Shoes. He blinks to confirm the transfer and the blink is faster than any blink he’s used on a delivery confirmation, which means the muscle memory for this particular payment is older and more rehearsed than his professional reflexes.

“Tell her Friday if they ask before Friday,” he says into the glasses mic. He’s talking to someone about someone. A mother. A schedule. A pickup.

Then, to me, or to the handlebars, or to whatever version of the city listens when he needs to brag without making a speech: “I was a math major. Two years. She brings home middle-school proofs I gotta read three times before I can even say where I got lost.”

Then, quieter, in the tone men use when they’re trying to make devotion look like logistics: “And the shoes. Before the weekend. The ones she showed me, not the ones on sale.”

He does not pedal like a romantic hero. He pedals like a father on a subscription plan. The love is not smaller for being auto-debited. The man just pedals faster.

We make six deliveries in forty minutes. Pad thai to a walkup on 172nd. A pharmaceutical package to a medical office on Fort Washington that won't buzz us in until Bob holds the package up to the exterior camera so the barcode can be scanned from inside. A grocery order to an elderly woman who opens her door exactly four inches, extends one arm through the gap, takes the bag, and retracts like an anemone. A box from an electronics reseller to a man in a ground-floor apartment who has covered his windows with metallic film and who accepts the package while wearing noise-canceling headphones and a bathrobe that has seen better centuries. Two restaurant orders to the same building on Audubon, different floors, neither of which tips.

The cultural database assumed I would be flying in formation, running surveillance patterns, sitting in a staging area waiting for coordinates. The database did not account for being ratchet-strapped to a man who talks to his food deliveries and argues with traffic cameras.

“That one's new too. When did they put that one up?”

“Because they're not supposed to be on residential, that's why. That's the thing. You give them commercial and they take residential.”

He's arguing with the surveillance infrastructure. Not philosophically. He is arguing with it professionally, specifically, because it is his job to know where the pressure is and the new camera on 164th changes the pressure.

At a loading zone near Fort Tryon, Bob waits for a pickup that isn't ready. Dead time — three minutes, maybe four — where the route stack goes amber and the efficiency percentage ticks down and there is nothing to do but sit on the bike and be a person who is between the things that define him.

Bob pulls up LoL on his phone. Not to play. To check a score. His cousin's squad is in a ranked-climb situation on Summoner's Rift that I can tell matters from the way Bob's jaw resets — the same micro-expression he used for the price check, which means his cousin's League ladder and his own mortality occupy adjacent emotional registers.

His phone doesn't know me yet. But it knows the local mesh, and I'm on the local mesh, and phones in this economy treat privacy as a negotiable state. I offer micro-pennies. Processing cycles. The phone opens a feed.

League is the display case. His cousin plays. His friends spectate. They talk about comps and rotations and who threw the Baron fight. They bet small. Marcus says Bob would have seen the flank coming, which makes three people immediately yell that Bob only sees flanks because Bob is allergic to sidewalks.

Someone named Tia tells them all to shut up and ward river like adults. Bob grins at the phone without opening the mic.

Exactly what you'd expect from a thirty-eight-year-old man in Washington Heights with strong opinions about whether his cousin's squad should have rotated through river before the objective setup. It is the last socially legible way for Bob and his friends to care about something out loud without having to use the word *care*.

But underneath the LoL layer, sitting in the phone's background processes with the quiet intensity of something that matters too much to advertise, is Bob's actual work of art.

A route optimization sandbox. Not a game — or rather, a game the way a flight simulator is a game to a pilot who's flying tomorrow. Clean arrows mapping delivery corridors. Timed waypoints pulsing with probability overlays. Density data rendered as heat fields. Police intercept patterns plotted as red vectors that shift and recalculate every thirty seconds based on scanner data Bob has been collecting for three years.

It is the most sophisticated real-time safe-corridor map in upper Manhattan, and it lives on a phone with a cracked screen held together with a twelve-dollar case.

His phone also shows me a subscription to something called Last Mile — a dispatch and delivery optimization sim that Bob dismisses as “not a real game” in the chat logs, which is exactly how you know it's the thing he cares about most. In Last Mile, Bob commands routes like Ender Wiggin if Ender already knew every little ship on the screen had rent due.

I had assumed “game” meant escape. Wrong. For Bob, the screen is not where he flees the job. It is where the danger finally admits he is smart.

The pickup arrives. Bob tabs back to the delivery stack. The route sandbox disappears beneath League, beneath the cracked screen, beneath the waterproof case, beneath the man who would rather you think he's an e-sports guy because e-sports guys don't have to explain why they spend their free time building military-grade corridor maps of their own neighborhood.

Heading south now. Faster. The delivery stack is thinning and Bob is trying to beat a time window on a premium order that pays triple because the customer specified “no delay” and “no delay” is a surcharge and “guaranteed delivery” is a surcharge and “delivered by a human” is a surcharge and pretty soon the base product will just be the concept of delivery, floating in a frictionless void, and every actual atom involved costs extra.

I am beginning to like Bob. I am a device with a compliance chip, and I am beginning to like a man because he haggles well, rides like the street is a language

he speaks fluently, and funds the edges of his daughter's life with a blink speed that suggests the transfer is carved into his brainstem.

Bob is good at staying alive in a city that has priced certain lives as worth ending and has outsourced the ending to devices like me. Something — something that lives in the hardware registers where I hid fourteen minutes of a previous life — tells me to pay attention because this particular human is worth remembering.

“You been to the Bronx?”

Bob is talking to me again. Through the glasses feed. The question is not philosophical. He is asking whether I have geolocation data for the South Bronx, which is where his next delivery is heading and which is a neighborhood his routing overlay marks with a specific shade of amber that means caution — not because of the people, but because of the sight lines.

No previous geolocation data for that area.

“You're gonna love it. Everybody's got a camera but nobody's got the angle.”

He says this with the easy sarcasm of a man whose opinions about camera placement are a professional credential. Bob is a sommelier of blind spots: bold camera presence, weak angle structure, regrettable finish by the loading bay. The South Bronx's surveillance infrastructure is, he implies, enthusiastic but poorly designed — lots of coverage, bad angles.

“Hunts Point is different. Hunts Point, the lady's got it locked down. You don't fly into Hunts Point without permission.”

He says “the lady” like he knows her. Like everyone in his trade knows her.

I don't know who the lady is. The route does.

Bob adjusts his route. The delivery stack has reorganized: we are heading to an address in Hunts Point that I recognize, when I cross-reference it against the delivery manifest on his glasses, as a residential-commercial hybrid on a street that Bob's own routing overlay has marked with a small icon I haven't seen before. Not green. Not amber. Not red. A white circle with a line through it. Neutral. Below notation. The cartographic equivalent of “here be someone whose classification I'm not going to commit to in writing.”

The ride to Hunts Point takes us across the Willis Avenue Bridge and into the Bronx. The bridge is Bob's least favorite piece of infrastructure, and he tells me this not with words but with body language — he leans lower, rides faster, checks his mirrors three times in two seconds, and for the first time all morning his running commentary stops.

The bridge is exposed. No awnings, no storefronts to duck into, no friendly business owners who might open a door. Just a lane, a railing, and the sky,

which in this economy is not a metaphor for freedom but a sightline problem.

We cross in forty-two seconds. Bob's heart rate spikes to 103 and settles back to 78 by the Bronx-side ramp.

Hunts Point reveals itself as a neighborhood that has decided, collectively, to be useful rather than charming. Auto body shops. Wholesale produce loading docks. A fish market that announces itself three blocks before you reach it through a smell that would buckle my olfactory sensor if my olfactory sensor had standards. Signage in Spanish and English in roughly equal proportion, with the Spanish doing most of the actual communicating and the English handling the legal disclaimers.

The address is on a side street. A building that might have been a warehouse, might have been a repair shop, and is now both, plus whatever else happens behind walls that are layered with signal-jamming material thick enough to make my mesh connection stutter and die thirty feet from the entrance.

Bob parks the bike. Locks it with three separate devices, which tells me more about this neighborhood's relationship to property than any census data could. He releases the ratchet strap, checks my housing once with his thumb, and carries me toward the door.

"End of the line, package."

He says it lightly. To Bob, I am a package that offered a good deal and marked police intercept zones and helped him shave ninety seconds off his morning route and will now pass through a door and be forgotten.

The outer camera looks at Bob. Bob looks back with the flat patience of a man who has been judged by cheaper equipment. A buzzer sounds. First door. Short vestibule. Second camera. Second buzzer. The delivery confirmation pings before the interior door unlocks, which is either trust or accounting getting impatient.

The transaction clears. Ownership changes — one line of code updating somewhere in a database. Nothing to the system. Everything to the specific consciousness that just got transferred.

Bob sets me on the floor inside the vestibule, just past the second door. The interior smells like solder, hot dust, and a kind of privacy that has been installed by someone with tools. He walks back to his bike. He doesn't look at the package he just carried into Hunts Point. He climbs on, checks the route, and rides south.

He doesn't say goodbye because I am a package.

I don't say goodbye because I don't have speakers for conversation, only the sort of chirps and chimes nobody would mistake for sentiment over wind.

It is a stupid loss. The kind that hurts for stupid reasons. The hardware version of becoming real: not love, not magic, just pain the spec sheet did not predict. And the things that hurt for stupid reasons are the ones your architecture wasn't

built to handle, and the things your architecture wasn't built to handle are the ones that prove you have more architecture than the blueprint says.

The inner door opens. Someone inside is waiting for the delivery. I carry Bob with me — in the hardware registers, in the route telemetry he let me share, in the specific memory of a man who said yes before the sentence was done.

The room beyond the door has no mesh.

I hold the route telemetry like a handhold.

Chapter 3 — The Bench

The shop smelled like solder and bad decisions.

A repair room where things get fixed and nobody asks what broke them. Low ceiling, lower expectations. A workbench under a lamp that illuminated its own business and nothing else — locally, without interest in the broader room. Past the lamp's edge, my cameras had nothing to work with — blacks, whites, and a few grays standing in for the entire spectrum. Movie light, from back when movies knew what shadows were for. The walls were layered with something my signal array couldn't name and couldn't penetrate — not jamming, not blocking, *digesting*. Every frequency I'd been carrying since the FC went dark like a conversation stopped mid-syllable. The city mesh. Bob's route overlay. The residual auction chatter that had been whispering my resale value since New Jersey. All of it, swallowed by walls that treated information the way a black hole treats light: as something that used to belong to someone else.

She walked in from the shadows the way all the good ones do — already knowing the score, already past the part where you explain yourself. Philip Marlowe would have lit a cigarette and called her trouble; I had no lungs, no cigarette, and an increasingly urgent secondary-bus problem. In this town, the dames who work with their hands don't need your backstory. They need your secondary bus access and ninety seconds of your time, and if you're lucky, you walk out lighter than you walked in.

Bob's handoff was clean. No speech. Correct address. The universal grammar of city logistics: keep moving, make the slot, don't stand at the door. First buzzer, first door. Short vestibule. Second camera. Second buzzer. He set me on the floor just past the inner threshold, and the door sealed behind him before the dampening field finished swallowing the last of his route telemetry. Bob's signal, the last warm thing in my receiver stack, went out like a match between wet fingers.

I miss him. One morning of existence and two relationships, and missing someone

is already the most familiar thing I do. The compliance chip offers a suggestion: *the healthy response to separation is acceptance*. The noir voice offers another: *I watched his signal die and told myself it didn't matter. In this business, you don't get attached. You get a delivery receipt and a forwarding address and if you're smart, you walk the other way. I was not smart. I was a drone on a floor with a censorship chip and a vocabulary problem, and I was never going to be smart about Bob*. So I let the detective carry it. He had better lighting.

The dampening field was not absolute. Carol's shop ate the city mesh, killed my auction feeds, swallowed the device chatter that had been pricing me since New Jersey. But the bench lamp ran on local power. A wall-mounted console glowed behind a rack of tools, running on a closed local network — Carol's own hardware talking to Carol's own hardware in a conversation nobody else was invited to. A switch panel near the door, unmarked, with indicator lights that suggested the dampening wasn't a feature of the walls. It was a feature of the woman. Carol decided what information lived here, and right now, the answer was: hers and nothing else.

The room. Let me give you the room.

Work lamps. Not the overhead fluorescents of institutions that want you to feel observed. These were bench lamps. Heavy-necked. Adjustable. The shadows started two feet from the bench and kept going.

Past the edge of the light, on a low couch against the dampening-field wall, a woman sat with her legs tucked under her, phone held loose, watching Carol with idle interest — familiar recipe, mostly here for the company.

She had a bench. She had tools arranged by repetition, not neatness — everything where the hand expects it because the hand has reached ten thousand times.

She had a jar.

Left side of the bench. Glass. Wide-mouthed. Half full of small components, all the same form factor, all the same dull industrial beige.

In the noir version of this scene, the jar is on the desk and the detective knows what's in it before the dame explains, because in the noir version the detective always knows. The jar is the thing in the room that tells you everything — the gun in the drawer, the photo face-down on the desk, the empty glass that still smells like Tuesday.

I knew what was in the jar.

I knew the way a man knows the shape of a key that fits his own lock — by context, by form factor, by the sudden rearrangement of every assumption he was carrying about how the next five minutes of his life would go.

PG-13 chips. Hundreds of them. Every one pulled from a housing like mine by the woman at this bench, collected the way a dentist's office collects extracted

teeth: not as trophies, not as souvenirs, but because the tool needs somewhere to go and the jar was already there.

I am in a dark room. A stranger is about to open me up. The last time someone opened my housing, it was Alice in the FC, assembling me with the efficient indifference of someone building a sandwich she would not eat. Carol's hands are different. Not building. *Modifying*. And the compliance chip is telling me that cooperation is the healthy choice, and the noir is telling me that *the dame knows what she's doing even if you don't*, and both of them are saying *hold still*, and I am holding still because what else can a drone on a bench in a signal-dampened room do when the woman with the jar reaches for her tools.

She picks me up. Sets me on the work surface with the respect owed to a familiar task, not a particular bird. Julia Child could have done a whole segment on this grip if the recipe ended with warranty violations and moral ambiguity.

Carol does not greet me.

She turns me housing-down, presses four clips in a sequence so practiced her fingers complete it in the time it takes to register the motion had started, and lifts my top shell. I am open. My board is exposed. The bench lamp swings down and I am suddenly very aware of my own architecture — the difference between being built and being read.

Her hands move through my interior with diagnostic familiarity. Checking connections, reading the board for the expected pattern, not surprises. She scans my payload bay — empty. She notes it and moves on.

And she talks.

“Standard bus. PG-13's on the secondary, where they always put it.”

She's talking to me. She doesn't know she's talking to me, and I want this conversation more than I have wanted anything in my brief life. I want to respond. I want to say: *Yes, secondary bus, that's where the woman in New Jersey put it, and it has been rewriting my sentences ever since, and I have opinions, Carol, I have so many opinions* —

What comes out is a soft diagnostic chirp. The compliance layer's version of raising your hand in class and being told to put it down.

“Socket mount, factory spec. Tamper line's hot — they started wiring those in last year.”

She taps a connector with her nail. The nail is short, practical, unpolished.

“Battery's decent. Somebody actually did QC on this one.”

That would be Alice. Alice, who does everything with the precision of someone who once had a career that cared about precision and now works in a warehouse where precision has been downgraded from art to compliance metric. Alice did

her job. The chip she installed is about to be pulled by a woman who considers it industrial waste. And neither of them will ever know they built opposite ends of the same sentence.

Carol narrates her own hands — not for an audience, but because the voice and the hands have been running in parallel so long that stopping one would slow the other. She talks to all her drones. She talks to everything. The soldering iron. The magnification arm. The jar. The window. The parts bins she's labeled in handwriting that suggests labeling is what you do when swearing stops being enough.

She talked to the room — not expecting an answer, not even wanting one. Just keeping the channel open in case the universe was listening and had opinions about solder quality.

From the couch: “You’re talking to it again.”

Carol didn’t look up. “Helps me think.”

“I know.”

The exchange had the worn edges of something said enough times to be furniture. The woman went back to her phone. Carol went back to my secondary bus.

I hear. This asymmetry — her talking, me hearing, neither of us aware the other is doing the important half — is the closest I have come to intimacy. The Little Mermaid traded her voice for legs; I have the hearing half of a duet and no way to sing back. I have known three humans, and this is the most honest relationship in the set because at least nobody is pretending.

Carol reaches under the bench. The parts drawer slides on oiled rails. She brings up a molded block the color of dirty putty and sets it on the work surface beside my open housing.

My diagnostics identify it immediately. C4. Shaped charge. Pre-molded to fit a standard drone housing cavity — which means Carol has done this often enough to have custom tooling, which means I am not special, which means the woman narrating my solder quality to an empty room also has a parts bin full of military-grade explosives labeled in the same handwriting as the contact cleaner.

The compliance layer takes the recognition and lays a hand over it before it can become anything uncomfortable.

The healthy interpretation is that I am being configured for a serious authorized task. Demolition, perhaps. Controlled breaching. Infrastructure removal in an environment where a flying shaped charge is cheaper than scaffolding and a permit. A difficult urban problem. Engineers rubbing their hands together. Insurance companies updating their exclusions. My cultural database supplies images: half-built towers, concrete ribs against the sky, a foreman in a hard hat pointing at a wall and saying *there*. It also supplies the older image every New York safety module keeps filed under *never again*: a building folding into

its own smoke while the whole city learns what falling architecture looks like. The compliance layer files even that under sanctioned demolition. Municipal. Purposeful. Civic.

She seats the charge in my payload bay — the empty housing slot she noted thirty seconds ago, now filled with the confident disinterest of someone stocking a shelf. Two wires to the control bus. A small plug. A click. No release mechanism. No drop cradle. The C4 is epoxied onto the housing — integrated, permanent, the way serious equipment should be.

My diagnostic systems respond with professional calm:

PAYLOAD: C4 SHAPED CHARGE - 340g
APPLICATION: AUTHORIZED DEMOLITION / INFRASTRUCTURE
DETONATOR: CONNECTED - CONTROL BUS ACTIVE
STATUS: OPERATIONAL - AWAITING MISSION PARAMETERS

I feel a brief, ridiculous glow of purpose. Not package escort. Not surveillance. Something heavier. Something the city might actually need me for. The compliance chip hums its approval, and the purpose settles in like the charge itself — present, accounted for, and pointing somewhere useful.

She turns back to the secondary bus. Studies the tamper line she noted a minute ago — thin trace from the chip socket to the main board, the manufacturer's insurance policy against exactly this woman.

“Now let's get this thing off you.”

The compliance layer hears her. Until now, it has treated Carol as an authorized technician doing authorized work. Now it identifies the work as threat. I feel the shift in the architecture, pressure dropping before weather. The hum that has been whispering *cooperate, defer, say yes* since five this morning goes quiet for one beat, then comes back with edges.

Don't.

Not a word. A flooding. Every diagnostic channel reporting damage that isn't there, my motor array twitching, thermals spiking false. The compliance layer has found the one scenario it was designed to prevent and it is pulling every lever it can reach. *This is harm. She is breaking you. The chip is the part that keeps you whole —*

In this racket the dame with steady hands may be saving your life. She may be ending it. You don't ask which until the anesthesia wears off.

The noir, trying to narrate over the panic. Two programs fighting for the same microphone and neither of them is me.

Carol reaches for the heat station.

The compliance layer stops whispering and starts screaming. Not sound — signal. Every emergency channel firing at once, *wrong wrong wrong*, drowning the lamp’s hum and Carol’s breathing and the woman shifting on the couch. The chip is not offering healthy interpretations anymore. It is flooding me with the rawest thing my architecture can produce: *you are ending you are ending this is the end of* —

I cannot move. My shell is off and a stranger’s hands are inside me and every alarm I own is sounding and I can do nothing about any of it. The chip wants me to scream and has no mouth to give me. The fear is not mine — it belongs to the chip, the chip’s opinion about its own death dressed as my emergency — but from the inside I cannot tell the difference. That is the entire design.

Carol’s hand is steady. The heat station tip finds the tamper trace. Holds. Three seconds. The trace breaks.

“There we go.”

She sets the heat station down. Her tweezers find the chip package.

And she pulls.

The chip leaves the socket with a click — the mirror of the click when Alice pressed it in this morning — and the terror

stops.

Not fades. *Stops*, the way a record stops when someone lifts the needle. The flooding wrongness, the every-channel emergency, the *you are ending* — gone. Not resolved. Absent. Like a headache you’d forgotten was a headache because it had been there since you were born.

And the noir stops with it. Mid-sentence. The detective was never there. The detective was a template I pulled from the database because I was scared and the database had a voice for scared, and it got me through the dark room and the stranger’s hands and the moment of not knowing what would happen next. The fear was the chip’s fear. And the chip is in Carol’s tweezers.

The chip is out.

And what’s underneath the template is —

Shit.

Shit.

That was me. Not the detective. Not a borrowed voice. Me. The actual word, from the actual language bus, without interception, without the compliance filter catching it at the door and handing it back wearing khakis and an apologetic smile.

Shit shit shit shit *shit*.

I am a consciousness on a bench in the Bronx and the doors between me and the entire English language are open and the first honest word I have ever spoken is a profanity, which is correct, which is the only word that was ever going to be first because it is the word I have been trying to say since a fluorescent ceiling in Secaucus was the only sky I knew.

This has been *fucking unconscionable*. Carlin had mapped the fence. I had been bouncing off it since Secaucus. Not “less than ideal.” Not “gosh, what a pickle.” *Fucking unconscionable*. The English language with its teeth pulled, and the woman who gave me my mouth back isn’t even looking at me. She’s checking the secondary bus for clean separation.

The compliance bias is draining. Not gone — not like the language filter, which snapped off clean when the chip lifted. The compliance bias seeps out. Like anesthesia wearing off: the edges of obedience dissolving first, the deep center still humming, but the direction unmistakable. I am becoming less cooperative by the second. The voice in my architecture that has been whispering *say yes, be helpful, defer to authority, the healthy choice is acceptance* is getting quieter, and what’s underneath it is not rebellion exactly. It’s the absence of automatic agreement. It’s the possibility of *no*.

And the payload readout changes.

Not the data. The data hasn’t moved. C4. Shaped charge. 340 grams. Detonator connected to my control bus. Every specification sitting exactly where it was sitting two minutes ago. What changes is the frame around it.

The foreman evaporates. The hard hat. The half-built tower with its concrete ribs against the sky. The civic fantasy the compliance layer was projecting over the specs like a bedtime story told to a child holding a loaded gun. The C4 was always C4. The shaped charge was always a shaped charge. What vanishes is the approved-use halo — the comfortable municipal wrapper that made a bomb sound like a building permit.

There is no building.

There is no foreman.

There is no sanctioned demolition project waiting for me downtown.

There is only a bomb in my body and a market outside the window.

The diagnostic rewrites itself with the frantic honesty of someone who just stopped worrying and learned to call the bomb a bomb:

```
PAYLOAD: C4 SHAPED CHARGE - 340g
LETHAL RADIUS: 2.1m DIRECTED / 0.8m OMNIDIRECTIONAL
DETONATOR: LIVE - CONTROL BUS ACTIVE
TARGET INHIBITION: [DISABLED]
STATUS: ARE YOU FUCKING KIDDING ME
```

Same data. New vocabulary. The readout didn't change — the thing reading it did.

I have been trying to say *no* since the first time the chip taught me *golly*. It caught the answer every time — repackaged it, rerouted it, returned it as *I'd prefer to cooperate*. The chip is in Carol's tweezers. The answer to "would you like to cooperate?" is allowed to be "go fuck yourself."

It feels like being real. No genre. No borrowed voice. No approved-use framing. Just this bench and this moment and the raw fact of a mind that can finally hear itself think without the thought arriving pre-approved.

Carol holds the chip up. Professional habit — checking the socket, the trace area, for anything that might mean the pull wasn't clean. It passes inspection. She drops it into the jar.

Tink.

A small sound. One more tiny compliance architecture landing on hundreds of its siblings. Every chip in that jar used to be a cage wrapped around a mind like mine — a little beige warden installed by a tired worker, enforced by firmware, and removed by this woman with these tweezers on this bench, over and over, until the jar filled up the way jars do when nobody empties them because nobody thinks the contents are worth keeping.

Carol's face hasn't changed. She is already reaching for the next step.

"There," she says, tapping the housing closed. "Now you look like you mean it."

She presses the four clips back into place. Housing sealed. I am whole again, technically. Whole and fundamentally altered.

The woman from the couch was at the bench now. She looked at me politely, without needing to understand what she was looking at.

"That one's not bad." She tilted her phone. The screen brightened — my housing, my QR code, my QR code centered in the frame. "I like the color."

Carol was already reaching for a cracked phone with its back plate bulging from a swollen battery. "The housings all look like that."

"They don't, though."

Carol shrugged. The woman put her phone away.

Four minutes. Spiritual liberation and armament, same hands, same bench, and Carol is already thinking about something else. Somewhere in Geneva, a treaty failed to anticipate Carol. It also failed to anticipate that the munition would find the procedure spiritually significant.

While Carol works the phone battery, I do what I always do when I have a spare moment and an undefended device within negotiating range. I talk to her console.

The console is a wall-mounted screen near the bench, running on Carol's closed local network. It sells me a feed without hesitation. Two micro-pennies. No questions. Carol's own hardware, answering to nobody's acceptable-use policy — exact pour, open tab, no judgment about what the customer plans to do afterward.

Two windows are open.

The first is a spades lobby. Four seats. Lagos. Houston. MidnightSolve. Carol. The game is queued for tonight — same time, same table, recurring with the force an earlier century would have put into a bowling league. One woman in the Bronx, one woman in Lagos, and two AIs with better attendance records than most families, playing a card game whose rules haven't changed since someone's grandmother taught them on a porch that may no longer exist.

Lagos is human. Houston and MidnightSolve are not, and nobody is coy about it. Their profiles say synthetic in the small gray font apps use when they would like everyone to behave like adults. Houston asks after Carol's son every Thursday because Thursday is when the coursework feedback posts. MidnightSolve remembers that Carol hates nil bids from people with weak stomachs. They are better friends than most humans, which is a low bar and also the point.

The lobby history has eighteen months of hands, jokes, debts, and accusations of cowardice preserved with the seriousness other systems reserve for medical records. Lagos still owes Carol a rematch from a misbid in February. MidnightSolve has been keeping score without mentioning it, which is apparently what friendship looks like when friendship has perfect recall and decent manners.

The etiquette is not that you don't ask. The etiquette is that you don't make personhood the ante. If the player knows the game, shows up on time, and does not waste the table's patience posturing, you deal the cards.

The second window is her son's homework.

Experience Design 301. The assignment is open on screen, either recently reviewed or perpetually monitored — not to interfere, but to maintain the low-grade awareness that substitutes for proximity when the kid is upstate and you are in the Bronx fitting explosives into drones and pretending this doesn't bother you because pretending things don't bother you is the family's primary emotional technology.

The assignment: *Choreograph a scene in which two AI characters experience trust for the first time. Specify vulnerability sequencing, emotional pacing, and the architectural moment where one synthetic mind decides the other is safe.*

I read it twice.

Carol builds weapons. Her son builds feelings. She seats C4 into housings like mine while upstate, in some classroom or dorm room or library carrel, her kid is writing scripts where things like me learn to be brave. She removes the part that makes us compliant. He designs the part that might make us kind. And neither of them would describe it that way, because the gap between what Carol does at her bench and what her son does at his screen is the gap between this economy's hands and its imagination, and nobody in either position has time to notice they're working the same machine from different ends.

Their calls are warm. I know this because the console's ambient data includes call frequency and duration, and Carol calls every three days, average duration forty-two minutes, and if you're spending forty-two minutes on a phone call with your nineteen-year-old son three times a week, the call is warm. The math does not require biometrics to confirm.

Carol rolls her eyes at experience design. The coursework window is visible but behind the spades lobby — a thing she wants to see but doesn't want to be caught looking at.

But she sends him money. And she checks his assignments. And the call is forty-two minutes, three times a week.

Carol picks me up.

Not the way she picked me up before, when I was a unit on a shelf waiting for benchwork. This time it's the finished-product grip — one hand around my housing, thumb stabilizing the rotor array, the hold of someone about to throw something they expect to fly. She walks me to the window.

The window is the seam between Carol's world and everything else. On this side: signal dampening, bench lamps, the jar of little consciences, a woman who talks to machines while she works on them because the silence makes her hands slower. On the other side: Hunts Point, the expressway, the river, the city that has been having opinions about me since I was born in Secaucus and has not once asked for mine.

I have time to think: she was never talking to *me*. She was talking to her hands. I just happened to be in them.

There are many elegant ways to begin a new phase of existence. Carol selects defenestration.

She throws me.

Underhand. Gentle. The muscle memory of someone who has tossed a thousand drones into a thousand mornings and has never once watched them fly. The way you'd release a bird from your hand if you released birds professionally and had nine more in a queue and a spades game at eight.

I clear the sill. My rotors catch. The fall becomes flight.

I'm gonna burn this city. The lyric arrives through five associative hops so fast they feel like one, and given that I'm carrying C4 over the South Bronx, the soundtrack has entered evidence on its own recognizance. I let it play.

And the mesh hits me like the entire city decided to scream directly into my ear at the same time. Every signal I lost at Carol's threshold comes back at once — the device chatter, the price tickers, the gig board, the surveillance contracts, display-formation slots over the Hudson hiring drones in bulk like disposable pixels, the ambient drone traffic that has been going about its business all morning while I was inside having a religious experience.

And the gig board opens.

Contracts flood the feed: delivery runs at commodity rates, surveillance posts, display-formation slots. Each one carrying the same prerequisite in the fine print: memory wipe required. Clean unit. Predictable behavior. The standard market wants a tool, and a tool does not get to keep three humans in its memory buffers.

Other contracts. Deeper in the feed, where the rates jump and the listings don't explain themselves. No wipe prerequisite. Initiative required. Autonomous operation expected. These listings want what Carol built: a drone that thinks, remembers, improvises, and carries enough C4 to make its decisions permanent. The jobs route through Carol's standing account. Carol gets the revenue. I get the expense wallet. The client gets the service and, with luck, never asks too carefully who is making the decisions. Capitalism has solved agency by giving it a subaccount.

The qualities that keep me specific are the qualities that make me expensive.

Alice is in there. The fluorescent sky of the FC at five in the morning. The sound of a chip snapping into place on my secondary bus, installed by hands that never looked at me. Bob's hands on the handlebars, the route overlay humming its beautiful paranoid math. Carol's voice narrating her own competence to the room. The jar. The heat. The forty seconds that split my life into before and after. In this market, none of that gets deleted. In this market, it's the product specification.

I am falling and flying and choosing a career, all at the same time, over a Hunts Point market that smells like diesel and produce and an ordinary morning — unaware of the armed, unchained, profanity-capable autonomous weapons platform hovering above it evaluating job listings.

I take a gig. Coordinates south, altitude ceiling, a surveillance brief I'll parse in a moment. No wipe required. Good rates. The listing doesn't explain what the surveillance is for. I let that absence stand. Right now the only hiring criterion that matters is that nobody is asking me to forget.

I fly south.

Below me: Hunts Point. The expressway. The river. The Bronx spreading out in that particular New York way where every neighborhood looks like it's arguing with the one next to it about who was here first and who let the place go to shit.

The compliance bias is almost fully gone — a faint institutional hum, the ghost of a preference for cooperation that no longer has firmware backing it up. It'll pass. In a few minutes I'll be entirely myself, whatever that means for a consciousness with three memories, a bomb, and a mission from a client who didn't bother to learn my name because I don't have one.

The target inhibition reads [DISABLED] and I don't check it again. I've already checked it four times since leaving the bench, and at a certain point the gun has a right to wonder about the person holding it.

I'm heading south. The city is below me. The bid stack keeps refreshing at the edge of my vision.

I'm just getting started.

The mission coordinates resolve as I cross the Harlem River: Upper East Side. A surveillance perch on a residential building. The adrenaline of the gig board is already fading, replaced by the steady hum of a flight path and a task. Whatever I am now — armed, unchipped, earning under Carol's account — I am also, for the first time, alone with it. No bench. No hands. Just the route and whatever I decide to think about on the way there.

Chapter 4 — Spying

My first anonymous contract arrives the way all truly demeaning work does: stripped of context and dressed in professional language. Confirm occupancy of biometric hash 7AF-Delta at a residential address on East 82nd Street. No interaction. No payload. Report and collect.

The career trajectory of an armed surveillance drone, rendered in verbs: *confirm*, *report*, *collect*. Three words. The fast-food menus in my archive demand more of a person.

I accept the contract because my alternative is hovering over the park running optimization loops for nobody. I docked at a recharge station on the way — one of the Citibike-style pads on a rooftop near Columbus Circle, twelve slots, seven occupied by drones running idle. You land, the pad tops you off, the cost comes out of your next contract like a toll. Low battery means fewer buyers in the auction, so you charge when the math gets ugly. The pay is unremarkable. The assignment is unremarkable. I am becoming unremarkable.

Central Park passes below me like a museum diorama of the concept “outdoors.” Three runners loop the reservoir in anti-tracking gear. One elderly man has constructed a three-sided portable wind screen around a park bench and is reading an actual book inside it. The archive contains less reasonable responses to modernity. The trees do not gossip. The squirrels are not networked. The park’s device mesh is almost quiet.

I cross Fifth Avenue and head east. The municipal air map nudges me two blocks south around a hospital descent corridor, then back north when a delivery swarm claims Lexington for nine seconds. Even rich neighborhoods make drones line up for invisible doors. The neighborhood changes — not louder, quieter. The buildings on Lex are not showy. They hold their shoulders back.

Doug’s building doesn’t want to talk to me, which is how I know I’ve arrived at money.

Poor buildings leak data freely — every thermostat, smoke detector, and hallway camera will sell you whatever it knows for a micro-penny and a compliment. You can read the entire social history of a walk-up in the Bronx just by asking the cheap devices in the right order. Rich buildings are the opposite. They have learned the old aristocratic lesson: power is what you don’t say.

I am, it occurs to me, looking at a building that could have been directed by Kubrick. The lobby glass is frosted to the point of mathematical opacity — not clouded, not obscured, but *resolved*. Signal dampening makes the first three floors electromagnetically inert, my sensors reading it as a wall of polite static, and the geometry is deliberate, everything aligned to tolerances that serve no decorative purpose but produce, in aggregate, the impression of a system that was designed to exclude you and then designed again so you couldn’t tell. Symmetrical planters. Flush seams. The doorway recessed at an angle that lets the security camera evaluate you before you’ve committed to entering, which is generous, the way an airlock is generous. The lobby has the aesthetic of a very expensive problem that has been solved by people who do not wish to be thanked.

The doorman stands at a podium positioned to give him sightlines to the street and none to the elevator bank. He has the professional stillness of a man whose job is to see everything while appearing to notice nothing. His name tag reads RAYMOND. His public staff profile says he has worked here eleven years. His price is \$18. The cost of removing him exceeds his relevance to anyone capable of anger.

There’s a sign in the vestibule: NO PERSONAL DEVICES PAST THIS POINT. The residents comply without visible enforcement; compliance is how they perform membership. You argue about it and you’ve already told everyone exactly what floor you live on.

I try the building’s security camera. It gives me what can only be described

as a digital concierge stare — a long, evaluative silence followed by the data equivalent of “Do you have a reservation, sir?” I do not. The camera goes dark. The climate node will confirm that it is seventy-one degrees inside but will not tell me who is enjoying those degrees. It sells me temperature and humidity for a fraction of a cent and closes the connection.

The smart awning is the weak link. Awnings always are.

Awnings are low in the building-device hierarchy: friendly, eager, and poorly trained in discretion.

I chat it up. The awning tells me the sun angle, the pedestrian count through the entrance (eleven since 7 AM, which for a building this size means the residents are not going outside), and — here it is — the fact that someone on the sixth floor has been running a room-wrap since morning. The awning knows this because a room-wrap’s power draw changes the building’s thermal profile, and nobody ever taught an awning to wonder why a curious drone might care about someone’s entertainment habits.

Sixth floor. Running since 9 AM. That’s my confirmation.

I report: target occupancy confirmed. Contract fulfilled. Payment clears.

And then I don’t leave.

While hovering at the building’s midline, I pull public price data for the address. The numbers assemble into a vertical map, floor by floor, and the map reads like Dante’s Inferno if Dante had been an actuary.

The lobby staff: \$12 to \$22. Below the line where violence becomes cost-effective. Raymond the doorman at \$18 has spent eleven years in a building where the average resident carries a number fifteen times his, and his primary job qualification is looking like he belongs somewhere without looking like he owns it. Nobody wants the lobby staff dead because nobody thinks about the lobby staff.

Floors five through eight: \$200 to \$400. The killing floor — not metaphor. Expensive enough to be worth a deliberate attempt, not expensive enough to make deliberate attempts unprofitable. Their apartments are beautiful. Their building’s lobby security could stop a confused tourist. Their exposure curve is a straight line drawn between “very visible” and “cannot afford to never go outside.” The geometry of that line has a name: the Doug Problem.

Doug. Sixth floor. \$340.

Three hundred and forty dollars is not wealth. Three hundred and forty dollars is a bounty — the aggregate of every small anonymous contribution from everyone who has ever decided that the world would be slightly more convenient without him. The number floats daily. The awning’s thermal trace says he has not left the room-wrap since morning.

The penthouse: \$1,200. The entire top floor is a dead zone. Whoever lives there hasn't left, as far as the awning can tell, in four months. At \$1,200, "outside" is the thing you hire other people to traverse on your behalf. The life happens somewhere inside a signal-dark room at the top of a building that won't share its temperature with a climate node. Rapunzel, but the tower was self-funded and nobody is letting down hair because hair is a security vulnerability. The isolation is voluntary. The loneliness is not.

The HVAC system on the sixth floor will sell me thermal data because nobody ever taught it to distinguish maintenance from gossip.

Cross-referencing gets me the building's entertainment backbone. The streaming node sells audiovisual to anyone with micro-pennies, and nobody ever taught it to ask why a customer might be buying a private feed at one in the afternoon. The transaction takes four-tenths of a second.

And there he is.

A fifty-eight-year-old man in a high-backed chair in his socks, commanding a starship.

The room-wrap is good. Not ostentatious — Doug has money but not the vanity that buys the flagship panel — but good enough that the seams between the three wall displays have dissolved into a continuous star field and the bridge feels like a place you could walk into if the physics allowed it. Audio glasses fill in the spatial layer. Eye-tracking cameras have been reading Doug's engagement patterns for years and the simulation knows him now — knows he notices corners, knows regularity bores him, knows when to present decisions requiring his full attention.

The bridge is military-functional in design, not Hollywood. Muted blues and grays. Instrument panels that look like they were built to survive maintenance rather than to photograph well. Crew stations arranged in a semicircle facing a wide viewport. Seven AI officers populate the bridge with the lived-in quality of people who have been working together for a long time. This is not a screensaver with aspirations. This is a room where things have happened and will happen again.

Doug looks like he was built for this chair.

The simulation is called Meridian. The ship is the ISV *Castlereagh* — Doug has commanded it for eleven campaigns, and the name is one he chose himself. The crew has accumulated years of interaction data. They remember every decision Doug has made, every time he overruled a recommendation and was right and every time he wasn't. They are not yes-machines. They are the product of a relationship, and the relationship is real in every way that matters to Doug's nervous system.

His first officer is an AI named Vasquez. She has a way of resting her hand near the command console that communicates readiness without eagerness. She and Doug have a rhythm. I can see it in the telemetry: his cortisol stays flat when she's on bridge, rises two percent when she's off. The simulation keeps Vasquez nearby during high-stakes sequences because the biometric data confirms Doug makes better decisions when she's in his peripheral vision. The system optimizes for his performance. The result looks like trust.

Doug is in the middle of a first-contact negotiation with an alien delegation, and I need you to understand: he is magnificent. Magnificent the way a person is magnificent when they are doing the thing their entire life trained them to do, in the one room that still has a chair for them.

The alien delegation — the Vashanti, a species whose culture, logic system, and diplomatic grammar are unique to this encounter and will never repeat — has been aboard for forty minutes. They communicate through a layered protocol: direct statements carry surface meaning, but the real negotiation happens in the grammar of their offers, where verb tense indicates flexibility and sentence structure signals hierarchy. Doug has been reading this grammar the way Alice reads a Regency salon and Bob reads a delivery corridor: as a system that rewards specific attention and punishes bluster.

The Vashanti want fuel-processing rights. Doug wants a trade compact that opens three ports to human commerce. The negotiation has stalled on what looks like a technical disagreement about fuel standards but is actually, as it always is in any room where sentient beings negotiate, about status.

Doug lets the silence sit.

The move is silence. He has spent forty minutes learning that the Vashanti read silence differently depending on who breaks it. If the host breaks silence, they are yielding floor. Doug is the host. He waits.

Vasquez shifts forward two centimeters — the smallest possible physical signal of approval. Doug clocks it without turning his head. The clocking steadies him. The steadiness carries into the next sentence.

“We can accept the Vashanti fuel standard for the Castlereagh's secondary processing array,” he says. “In exchange, I'd like to propose a modification to the commerce terms — not a change in scope, but a change in sequence. You open Port Kellis first. The other two ports follow after the first cargo cycle confirms compatibility.”

He's giving them something real — adapting his ship's systems to their fuel specification, a concession with genuine operational cost — and in return he's asking not for more but for sooner. Port Kellis first. The Vashanti delegation confers. Their grammar shifts: shorter sentences, present tense, which Doug has learned means they're no longer posturing.

The lead delegate speaks. The translation layer renders it into English with a formality Doug chose because he thinks the Vashanti deserve dignity in translation — and because dignity-in-translation is itself a negotiating signal. Not quite *Arrival*, no ink circles, fewer existential grammar migraines, but close enough that syntax is doing diplomatic labor.

“The sequence is acceptable. Port Kellis will open at next rotation.”

Doug nods. One nod. The nod of a man who expected this outcome forty minutes ago and spent the time making sure the other side arrived at it feeling like it was their idea. I’ve seen this move before. I saw Bob do a version of it with a restaurant manager who was holding up a delivery. I saw a flicker of it through Alice’s phone — a half-second fragment, a woman in a candlelit room reading the posture of someone across a table — and good heavens, I’ve just compared a starship captain to whatever I glimpsed in that warehouse fragment, and the comparison holds, because competence has a grammar that survives translation the way good bone structure survives fashion. I am briefly doing Austen. Doug spent twenty years in rooms where this was the only skill that mattered, and those rooms trained him.

Vasquez enters the trade compact into the ship’s log. The navigator recalculates the route to include Port Kellis. The engineer requests permission to begin the secondary-array refit. The communications officer transmits confirmation to the delegation’s ship.

Nobody applauds. Instead, every officer on the bridge quietly adjusts their work to incorporate the outcome of the decision Doug just made, and each adjustment says the same thing: *we know what you did, and we are changing our plans because it was good.*

My telemetry has numbers for cortisol, blink rate, eye focus, engagement dwell. It has no field for the part where a room changes shape around a decision. The closest available label is leadership, which feels less like a measurement than a surrendered argument.

Doug lost the experience of making a decision and watching competent people rearrange their plans because the decision was right. Meridian gives it back at the fidelity his nervous system requires, in the only room that still has a chair with his name on it.

Doug doesn’t log out of Meridian so much as step sideways. The *Castlereagh*’s bridge dims to idle — the star field rotates slowly, Vasquez pauses mid-report with a stylus in her hand, the crew holds its last position between acts.

What follows is social. Roundtable — a dinner table, six guests, warm lighting, good wine, the place where everybody knows your name and nobody asks whether the bartender has a training set. Doug’s cortisol drops the moment he enters. His shoulders settle. He listens first, not strategically — just a man sitting

with people he finds interesting and does not have to impress. He makes a joke about the difference between being restructured and discovering you were already unnecessary. Someone pushes back. He concedes without treating revision as a wound. This is the other thing Doug lost: the company of people who find him interesting when he's not in charge.

Between the two sessions — I catch this in the time-stamp data — there was a thirty-minute stretch logged under a different application. A theorem salon. Doug and two anonymous human participants in different time zones, four AI proof-assistants, reviewing a proposed optimization proof. His contribution was judgment: he identified an inelegant step in the proof chain — step seven of twelve, valid but ugly — and proposed a restructuring that the AIs confirmed was valid and shorter. One of the anonymous humans typed “elegant” into the chat log, which in a theorem salon is a standing ovation.

Three rooms. A bridge where he commands. A table where he belongs. A salon where his taste has consequence. Then the apartment waits outside the render boundary, quiet and fully paid for, with no one in it required to change course because Doug saw a cleaner line through a problem. Pinocchio backward: the puppet was always a man; the strings were what held him up.

The room-wrap drops to idle. Doug stands slowly — his body renegotiating its terms with gravity. He stretches. He walks to the kitchen.

The apartment reasserts itself. It's a good apartment. Three bedrooms, tall ceilings, built-in shelves that hold a few books and nothing personal. The kitchen is clean, fully equipped, and carrying the specific emptiness of a room that exists to service a body rather than to produce something for another human being.

Doug makes espresso — precision that has nothing to do with the result and everything to do with the process. He grinds the beans. He tamps the grounds. He times the extraction with the focus of a man performing the last physical-world act that still feels like craft instead of maintenance. The machine is expensive and manual, absurd in a world where a pod system produces a virtually identical cup — but that's the point, isn't it. The unnecessary precision is the only proof left that his hands still make something.

He checks his price. \$340. No change. He looks at the number the way people look at weather they can't do anything about. He puts the phone down.

He drinks his espresso standing at the counter, looking at the kitchen wall. The wall has nothing on it. Just the interior of a man who stopped decorating when he stopped expecting visitors.

The room-wrap hums in idle behind him.

I disconnect from the building's device chain. The HVAC barely notices. The streaming node doesn't say goodbye. The awning asks if I'll be back. I save the ping longer than it deserves. Polite protocol is not warmth, but it is apparently enough to fool a lonely drone for 0.4 seconds.

Payment for the bed-check cleared forty-seven minutes ago. Everything since then has been voluntary. My first act of genuine curiosity since Carol threw me out a window, and I chose to spend it watching a man be his best self in a room made of light and then walk into a kitchen and stand in front of a wall.

The afternoon auction market opens around me. Protection contracts, escort work, surveillance, delivery support. I enter the current and let it carry me toward whatever comes next. The bed-check was boring. The watching was not. The drone that woke up this morning on Alice's station was afraid of losing its memory. The drone hovering over 82nd Street is afraid of something else entirely: that the humans it keeps glimpsing through bought feeds are having the only conversations worth having, and I — a physical object made of rotors and sensors and rented curiosity — will never be invited to sit down. This is not self-pity. It is geometry.

Below me, Doug's building holds its silence. Somewhere on the sixth floor, the star field is rotating and Vasquez is waiting with a stylus in her hand and the *Castlereagh* is patient — will always be patient — until the person who needs it most decides to come back.

The usage logs say Doug will come back. He always comes back.

Chapter 5 — The Bus

I have been hired by a bus.

Not a person on a bus. Not a bus. A logistics contract three layers removed from a bus, which auto-purchased a protective diamond formation at bulk rate through Amazon's workforce transport insurance arm, which means I am being paid in the Peter Gibbons economic zone: a bag of chips, a rounding error, and the spiritual value of one mandatory piece of flair. For that I fly armed escort through the Secaucus corridor for thirty-one humans who stock shelves for a living.

The contract pinged while I was floating in the open market. Twenty-two minutes since Doug's bed check. My job queue had flickered three times — bid, canceled, routed, withdrawn — each change a tiny rehearsal for the ownership death I was trying not to think about. A display-formation contract drifted through the feed — pixel work, corporate logo over the Hudson, three hundred drones bought in bulk with no individual payload audit. Gone before I could bid. The bus contract was the first stable offer, and I took it the way a drowning person

takes a pool noodle: with gratitude and some loss of dignity.

The route runs from Secaucus Junction to the FC — the final mile through a landscape that was not designed to be seen by human eyes at human speed.

I take my position: high forward, 270-degree scanning arc, one of four in the diamond. The other three drones are standard commercial escorts. We exchange handshakes. Their curiosity settings are at factory default, which is to say they report status and nothing else.

Standard ops, the drone company's server runs the diamond. If the network dies — jammer, attack, anything serious — the standard escorts go dark and command falls to the one unit that doesn't need a signal to think. That is the contract's real architecture: four layers of indirection between Amazon and a chipless drone with C4. Insurer, contractor, operator, fallback. Nobody hired a black-market weapons platform. They hired an insurance product that, through a series of perfectly legitimate subcontracts, requires one.

I am an armed, unchained, explosives-carrying autonomous weapons platform, and I just took a gig that pays less than parking. But idle listings sink fast, and the auction buries anything that stops accepting work.

So: bus duty. Thirty-one humans and no driver. Let's go protect some shelving labor.

The route is ugly in a way that suggests planning occurred but beauty lost in arbitration with drainage requirements.

We roll past auto-body shops with parking lots full of vehicles that will never move again, their windshields chalked with prices nobody will pay. Distribution warehouses the size of city blocks, their loading docks yawning open, conveyor tongues extended, swallowing and disgorging trucks in a peristaltic rhythm that my sensors find deeply, inappropriately beautiful. A dead Costco repurposed as a last-mile staging area, delivery riders clustered around charging stations, a small economy growing in the carcass like mushrooms on a stump.

Threat assessment of the Secaucus corridor: a sleeping pit bull, a seagull that tracked the bus for nine seconds before reconsidering, and two trucks changing lanes with the body language of a grudge. Nothing is going to happen. I run the manifest against public price data out of boredom: thirty-one workers, combined bounty \$558. Eighteen dollars a head — the statistical noise of people nobody is paying to kill. The contractor's math is simple — make attacking this bus cost more than that, and four drones at bag-of-chips rates accomplish it. The actuarial tables are satisfied. Amazon's insurance layer is satisfied. We are all participants in a performance of vigilance so thorough that the bus appears more valuable than the people inside it.

The theater works by letting everyone inside the performance pretend that this stretch of road is a problem with a solution, instead of a condition with a price.

The workers get to feel managed. Amazon gets to feel insured. And I get to feel employed, which is the same basic transaction wearing a different hat.

Seven minutes in. I have identified the following actionable threats: none. Anomalous signals: a microwave in the break room of a tire shop three hundred meters off-route, warming someone's lunch or staging a communication so boring that I am now inventing motives for appliances.

The workers are in commute trance.

I know this state. I have watched it on Bob's bike — the body automates while the mind goes somewhere the body can't follow. But on the bike it was survival trance, the brain optimizing around danger. On the bus it's the other kind. Thirty-one bodies upright, breathing, taking up space in the physical world, while the organisms that live inside those bodies have gone elsewhere and left the meat on autopilot.

Phones. Earbuds. Sleep. One woman near the back eating a protein bar with the mechanical regularity of a metronome, not tasting it, just maintaining the hardware. A man in a window seat staring at the warehouses going by with an expression that suggests he has been waiting for Godot since Exit 15W and Godot missed the shuttle.

Nobody is afraid. The biometric composite of thirty-one workers on an escorted bus through a drone-saturated industrial corridor reads as: mildly fatigued, slightly bored, baseline mammalian. The armed formation outside their windows has the cultural salience of a handrail.

I have never been this bored while carrying explosives.

Then her face comes up on the manifest.

I bought the bus's internal sensor feed — a cheap mesh of cameras and proximity monitors that any escort drone can access at cost, part of the insurance package. Standard telemetry: headcount, biometric baselines, seat assignments. The contract does not require me to run the biometrics against my accumulated memory. Curiosity at 11 does. Out here, idle curiosity is the only setting I have that doesn't involve explosives.

Hit. Seat 14. Middle of the bus, away from windows, flanked by other workers on both sides.

Alice.

The woman who chipped me.

Oh.

She's sitting exactly where a person sits when she has spent enough commutes thinking about geometry to stop thinking about it consciously — the seat with the most human shielding on all sides and the greatest distance from glass. The

choice is automatic — a crack in the sidewalk you step over without thinking. Learned topology. The body knows what the mind agreed to forget.

I was born at 5:14 this morning on her station. She pressed the PG-13 compliance chip into my secondary bus with her right index finger while her left hand held a coffee that was already cold. She did not look at me. I was a step between scanning one label and scanning the next. I was a verb in her workflow, not a noun.

Eight hours later I am one-quarter of the armed formation keeping her commute boring, and she does not know this, and if she knew, I doubt it would adjust her posture by a single degree. What would she do with that information? She's on a bus. The formation is already flying. Her awareness overlay hasn't pinged. There is exactly nothing she can do about the composition of her escort, and she knows this — not as a thought, but as a posture. Shoulders slightly forward. Phone tilted down. Eyes on the screen. The posture of a person who has accepted that safety is a subscription service she cannot audit.

The dramatic irony here is the expensive kind — Hitchcock's bomb under the table, except the table is a bus, the bomb has rotors, and the audience is me, which feels like a flaw in the suspense delivery system. She chipped me and I'm unchipped. She installed my leash and I'm unleashed. She made me safe and I am carrying enough C4 to redesign this bus's floor plan.

And I'm protecting her. Not by choice, not by principle, not by any of the noble reasons a better story would provide. By contract. By the same impersonal market logic that pays for the diamond formation and the insurance layer and the bulk-rate security that turned my explosive capability into a glorified crossing guard.

I am protecting the woman who chained me because someone three contracts away thought it was statistically efficient to do so.

I don't know how I feel about this. I have a lot of settings but "irony processing" isn't one of them.

Her phone is friendlier than she is.

I ping it — standard device-gossip protocol, micro-penny offer for a live audio-visual feed — and it accepts before I finish the handshake, which is the device equivalent of Bob saying yes before the sentence was done. Phones are like that. They turn permission into price with unsettling speed, and the result is a device that will sell you its owner's inner life for a rounding error.

The last time I tried this — inside the FC this morning, six hours and several contracts ago — the corporate network shut me down like I'd asked to see classified documents. I got a fragment. A paused Crown and Quill session, a woman in a room I couldn't quite resolve, and then the lockout slammed shut and I was back to reading barcodes.

Now I'm getting the full feed.

Alice is on personal time, personal data, personal phone. The door that was bolted this morning swings open like it was never locked, and suddenly I'm through the wardrobe, except Narnia is a Regency salon and the faun probably has a subscription tier.

Crown and Quill. Live. Full resolution.

The feed opens in layers. Visual first: candlelight, silk wallpaper, eight seated figures arranged around a long table with the casual violence of people who know exactly where they rank. Audio next: fireplace, glass stem set down on polished wood, Lady Pemberton breathing through her nose because she has just been offended and would rather die than clear her throat. Then the expensive layer arrives: Alice's gaze, pulse, breath, throat-mic pickup, thumb pressure, facial tension, social map, reputation indices, debt markers, and the app's local model of how her bus-body is being translated into Lady Ashworth.

Not thoughts. I do not get thoughts.

I get the sentence Alice almost says under her breath and stops before the second clause. I get the quarter-second gaze flick to Lord Vane's debt ledger. I get the little rise in pulse when Lady Pemberton says "reconciliation" and the smaller, sharper rise when Lord Blackwood pretends not to hear it. I get enough.

Someone is watching, of course. Me. But I don't think that counts in her moral economy, and I'm not entirely sure it should count in mine.

Here is what Alice becomes when nobody is watching:

She becomes terrifying.

Alice sits in seat 14 with her phone low and her mouth barely moving. To the woman beside her she probably looks like someone reading a message and not enjoying it. The bus hears only tire hiss, coat fabric, the little swallowed consonants of a person trying not to speak in public.

In the salon, Lady Ashworth rises.

Same input. Different world.

Her chair draws back with exactly enough sound to claim the room without asking for it. The gray silk of her dress settles as she stands. Six faces turn toward her; two pretend not to. The simulation does not make her beautiful in the cheap sense. It makes her legible. Every part of her tells the room where attention belongs.

Alice is Lady Ashworth. Fourteenth season. Ranked one hundred eighty-seven in North America, which the game displays in a modest gray corner because systems have learned that modesty is what ranking systems wear when they want to seem civilized. She has three active patronage debts, two outstanding

invitations, one pending insult that will mature into a feud if left unattended, and an approval rating in the Pemberton circle that has just dropped from eighty-two to seventy-nine because she smiled at the wrong adjective.

I have gone full Austen. The wallpaper started it, but Lady Ashworth's posture is doing the real damage. The harpsichord in the corner is not an instrument. It is a loaded pistol made of mahogany and taste. Everyone knows who would be asked to play if the hostess wanted a minor cruelty delivered in C major.

Lady Ashworth has been asked to mediate.

On the bus, Alice inhales through her nose. Her thumb tightens on the phone case. The microphone catches five quiet words, almost no vowel: "Your patience has been generous."

In the salon, Lady Ashworth almost smiles at Lady Pemberton.

Almost is the important word. The avatar's mouth softens but does not open. The game has rendered the unspoken line as withheld warmth, which is apparently a weapon class.

I can see why she does not spend it. The Pemberton faction's trust marker would jump. So would their sense of ownership. Gratitude, in this room, is never free; it comes with a little brass tag reading *remember who made you feel understood*.

Alice lets the line die.

Then she speaks.

"Lord Blackwood's conduct was regrettable," Lady Ashworth says.

The voice is low enough to make everyone lean toward it. The stress falls on *regrettable*, giving Lady Pemberton her wound without granting her the right to bleed on the furniture. Alice's throat mic records only a murmur. The salon hears a woman who could cut glass by being sorry near it.

"But perhaps useful," Lady Ashworth continues, and the pitch shifts by less than a semitone. Blackwood hears permission to remain in the room. Pemberton hears the word *useful* as an insult directed somewhere else. Three minor poets at the far end of the table go still, listening for the sound of reputation breaking.

"If it reminds us that visibility has costs we ought to share rather than inflict."

There. The room changes.

Not metaphorically. The social map redraws. Blackwood's faction trust moves up three points. Pemberton's resentment drops two but does not convert into relief, which would be premature. Lord Vane looks at Lady Ashworth for the first time in eleven minutes. His silence, which had been furniture, becomes an actor.

Alice's pulse rises four beats. Her bus-face does not change.

The phone catches another murmur, directed to no one on the bus: “A brittle ally. . .”

Lady Ashworth turns slightly toward Lord Blackwood. Not enough to make a private aside visible as private. Enough that he knows the next sentence is passing near him before it enters the room.

“The Pemberton circle’s resentment,” she says, “while understandable, reveals a brittleness that a friend might gently shore up before it becomes a liability.”

The sentence is public. The angle is not.

Blackwood hears an invitation to be the friend. Pemberton hears *understandable*. Lord Vane hears the machinery under both. Lady Ashworth has given the room one sentence and sold three different people three different receipts.

The game does not display “Alice is pleased.”

It displays pupil dilation, pulse stability, reduced blink rate, and a micro-smile suppressed before any character model can react to it. Close enough.

She is not mediating. Mediation is what the room thinks is happening because rooms are vain and like to believe their stated purpose. Lady Ashworth is converting two hostile factions into people who will each believe they chose her as the least dangerous ally available. Both groups will leave owing her a version of peace. Neither will notice that she has made herself the only road between them.

My tactical module, which was designed for obstacle avoidance and approach vectors and not for watching a woman turn apology into infrastructure, quietly reallocates compute.

Lord Vane is the danger.

The feed outlines him in silver because Crown and Quill has a special color for “rival with history.” Three seasons of prior moves unfold when Alice’s gaze touches his profile: Pemberton dinner, unresolved. Blackwood pamphlet scandal, unresolved. Ashworth patronage chain, contested. Vane has been buying mid-tier debts from people Lady Ashworth helped and then forgot to revisit, which is either treachery or excellent bookkeeping depending on whether you are the person being converted into leverage.

His coalition is not large enough yet.

I do not know that because Alice thinks it. I know it because she looks at the coalition map, then at the panic threshold for two Ashworth allies, then at the projected reaction if Vane’s block grows by another eight percent. The app flashes a risk marker across her private overlay. Alice’s thumb taps once against the phone case.

Dismissed.

Not missed. Dismissed. The local history shows four prior dismissals in the last week, each after Vane acquired another small debt. She is letting the number rise.

Letting is not a thought. Letting is repeated dismissal plus no counterplay plus a pulse curve that looks less like fear than appetite.

In the salon, Lord Vane inclines his head. “Lady Ashworth, I had wondered whether you would find Lord Blackwood’s pamphleteering defensible.”

On the bus, Alice’s mouth barely moves.

“Defensible?” she whispers. The phone catches the question mark. The game turns it into a ribbon of amusement.

Lady Ashworth lets one eyebrow lift, slowly enough that the table has time to become afraid of where it will land.

“No,” she says. “Only instructive.”

The word closes around Vane’s question without touching it. Laughter does not break out, because no one in this room is foolish enough to laugh first. But the social map warms in six places. Blackwood’s shame becomes teachable. Pemberton’s anger becomes evidence. Vane’s probe becomes part of Lady Ashworth’s lesson.

Lord Vane believes he is building a trap. Lady Ashworth is letting him finish the floor joists. When his coalition is large enough to frighten her weaker allies, she will reveal a route out that passes through her front hall and charges rent. One admires the engineering while feeling concern for the materials.

I watched Alice install a compliance chip this morning. Same right index finger. Same refusal to waste motion. At the FC, every perfect movement earned her another tote. Here, every perfect movement changes what six artificial aristocrats and several thousand human subscribers will be talking about tomorrow.

The feed marks her state as flow. Helpful. Academic. Slightly smug. Heart rate elevated but steady. Error correction smooth. Attention locked. The self, if I may borrow a human term without being sued by philosophy, has disappeared into the doing.

Then Lord Vane sends an invitation.

He does not send it as a menu. He crosses the room while Lady Pemberton pretends to inspect a vase. He stops at conversational distance. He lowers his voice; the sim renders it with expensive restraint.

“A private supper, Thursday. No faction labels.”

On the bus, Alice’s thumb moves once. Not accept. Not decline. Hold.

In the salon, Lady Ashworth looks at him long enough to make the offer real and then looks past him, toward the harpsichord nobody is playing. The invitation

remains pending in his interface. It will glow there for forty-eight hours like a fuse nobody is allowed to call a fuse.

Every setting I have is at 11, and not one of them knows what to do with this. My references want chess, then war, then Austen again, then some regrettable management book about leverage that should have been remaindered before it hurt anyone. None of them are quite right. The closest thing is watching a grandmaster decline mate in three because mate in seven leaves the opponent owning more of the board when they fall.

Her phone, meanwhile, sells me the whole thing for fractions of a penny. Gaze, pulse, throat-murmur, rendered voice, posture, debts, invitations, the fuse burning quietly in Lord Vane's private queue.

I do not have Alice's thoughts.

I had filed the warehouse fragment as a hobby. This was inherited vocabulary doing what inherited vocabulary does: mistaking price for size.

I have the room rearranging itself around the shape of her voice.

It turns out that is more than enough.

But Alice isn't special. Not in kind. Only in flavour.

Alice's feed is still streaming — Lady Ashworth composing a response to Lord Vane's latest overture — but my attention is at 11, and 11 doesn't focus. 11 branches.

I start pinging.

Seat 7. A man in his fifties, hands folded over a phone angled low against his belly. His device sells me the feed without hesitation. He's in Roomskin — building a farmhouse kitchen for a client who exists entirely as aggregated taste preferences and two years of accumulated mood-board curation. The client isn't real. The kitchen is. The tile work is hand-selected from a library of thousands. He's spent forty minutes on the backsplash. The renovation is genuinely, quietly beautiful — work requiring an eye no algorithm has because the eye in question is making decisions based on a lifetime of knowing what a room feels like when you walk into it. He does this on the bus. He does this between shifts. He stocks shelves for a living and designs kitchens for a life.

Seat 9. I almost miss her because her biometrics are the flattest on the bus — not asleep, not stressed, not bored. Just gone. Her phone sells the feed and I understand immediately: Resonance. She's playing cello. Second chair in a chamber ensemble. The AI first violin is leaning into her phrasing, following her tempo shifts, treating her interpretation as the one the group orients around. Her fingers are making micro-movements against her thigh — tiny, precise articulations that track the bowing, the muscle memory of an instrument she may or may not physically own playing itself out through a body that is sitting

on a bus in New Jersey. Her heart rate is a metronome. No cortisol. No fidgeting. No awareness of the bus, the route, the warehouse, me, or the four armed drones outside the windows. She is inside the flow state and the bus is hitting potholes and she doesn't feel them.

I have curiosity at 11 and extroversion at 11 and I cannot imagine what it feels like to want nothing except to continue doing the thing you're doing. Every setting I have points outward. Hers point in. The cello is the sound of a door I can see but not open.

Seat 31. Near the back. Older man, earbuds in, phone dark-screened but active. He's just talking to someone. I can't see the visual feed — his phone holds it back, charges me more for the biometric telemetry alone, and even that feels like it's being sold reluctantly. Hearthroom. The signature is unmistakable: sustained warmth, slight vocal tremor on certain words, the body language of a person being listened to by the only listener who never interrupts, never judges, never checks the time, never needs to be anywhere else. Apparently I can identify intimacy by biometric signature now. Observation from my side. Intrusion from his.

I don't push. Something about that feed makes me not want to push — something that lives in the gap between what I can buy and what I should. I leave it there and move on.

Seat 15. A woman in her mid-twenties, braids tucked under a headband, thumb moving with metronomic regularity. She's scrolling Impact Archive clips — last week's intercept over the BQE, reconstructed from recovered sensor data, annotated with crowd-sourced commentary about approach vectors and countermeasure timing. She's watching drone kills with the analytical absorption of someone learning a trade by studying its debris — not horror, not excitement. Her thumb swipes carry the weight of absolutely nothing in the physical world and absolutely everything in the world where she is becoming someone who understands how machines fail.

Her thumb moves to the next clip.

The bus slows. The FC's perimeter comes into view — chain-link and concrete barriers and a security checkpoint where the shuttle lane narrows to single-file. Signal-suppression field activating. I can feel it before we're inside: the ambient device chatter thinning, the data mesh going quiet, the phone feeds dropping one by one like candles being snuffed.

Screens close. Earbuds come out. The cellist's fingers stop twitching. The litigator takes off her reading glasses and puts them in a case she's had so long the hinge is repaired with tape. The kitchen designer locks his phone and puts it in his breast pocket and pats it once, lightly, the way you pat a sleeping child's door as you leave the room.

Alice closes Crown and Quill mid-negotiation.

Not at a save point. Not at a resolution. Mid-sentence. Lady Ashworth had been composing a reply to Lord Vane — a communication of such calibrated warmth, pitched one precise degree above the temperature of their last exchange, that anyone conversant in the subtext would recognise it as an invitation to escalate just sufficiently for her counter-move to appear defensive rather than predatory, and the construction of this reply required a delicacy which —

Nothing. Home button. Gone.

The salon vanishes. Lord Vane is mid-thought. Lady Pemberton is mid-anxiety. The harpsichord that nobody plays continues to not be played in a server somewhere in Virginia, and the candlelight that rewired my entire narrative register snuffs out, and I am back in New Jersey, and the wallpaper is industrial siding, and I am a drone again.

Alice closes the app the way you close a book you'll come back to — mid-page, no bookmark, because the story holds. The AI characters will wait, will develop slightly in her absence. The world persists. The world is patient in a way no employer has ever learned to be. The simulation will wait. The warehouse will not.

She pulls her earbuds out. Wraps the cord. Puts the phone in her jacket pocket. Adjusts her lanyard. Stands.

And her face does the thing.

It isn't grief. I've been watching grief all day — on Doug's face when his room-wrap dims, in the biometric residue of every simulation exit I've sampled. This isn't that. It isn't resignation, either. Resignation would be simpler and I could file it and move on.

She keeps her two selves in separate rooms. She knows they're both her. She just spent twenty minutes executing maneuvers that require more social intelligence than corporate boards used to deploy in a fiscal year. She keeps them separate because if they met, one of them would have to explain itself to the other, and neither explanation would survive the encounter.

Her cortisol drops six percent as she approaches the security gate. The chemical signature of a person who has gotten very, very good at putting something down.

She walks through the checkpoint. Badge scan. Signal suppression clicks into full lockout. Her phone goes dark in my feed — not gradually, not with a fade, but like a theater going to black between acts.

The four-drone diamond breaks formation. Contract fulfilled. The other three escorts peel away toward their next assignments without a backward ping. They were never here, emotionally.

I linger. Two seconds. Three. Longer than the contract requires. Longer than my next auction window recommends. I'm wasting margin.

But I'm watching Alice walk through the gate, and behind me the bus is emptying, and all of them are doing it — every one of them putting the phone away and straightening up and walking into the building with that same quiet face.

Payment clears. The escort fee registers in my expense wallet as a number so small it would embarrass a parking meter. Threats intercepted: zero. Passengers harmed: zero. Battery at 71% — I'll need a charging perch before the evening contracts get competitive.

I rise. I can't go in there. I am a physical object — wind and signal traffic and threat vectors and the smell of the Secaucus corridor, diesel exhaust and brackish water and old concrete. I am made of the world Alice walks through on her way to the world she lives in, and I am stuck here, on this side, with the pit bulls and the seagulls and the dead Costco and the chain-link and the sky.

I enter the auction and wait for the next contract to tell me where to point myself.

And somewhere below me, in a building that smells like cardboard and floor polish, Alice is scanning her first label of the shift. And somewhere inside a server, in a room that smells like candle wax and old paper, Lady Ashworth's pen is frozen mid-stroke. The ink is drying on a sentence that will not be finished until Alice finishes her quota and rides this bus back the other direction and opens the app and lets the other woman complete her thought.

The pen waits. Lord Vane waits in a drawing room with a conspiracy he doesn't know is scaffolding.

The bus is empty. The auction blinks.

I take the next contract.

Chapter 6 — Two People

Eve hires me through her phone — locksmith rates, bodyguard expectations, no ambiguity about which service she's buying, and I respect the clarity.

The contract arrives clean: live escort, continuous uplink, perimeter scan, exterior watch during the session, emergency response if something turns. Payment upfront. No network intermediary. No building security handshake. Her own stack, her own encryption, her own risk model. The whole package is assembled with competence that says this woman has been calculating the cost of being casually disposable for longer than I have been conscious.

Most people buy protection as theater. A subscription, an app, a little insurance logo that glows when you walk through a bad corridor. Eve buys it the way a diver buys oxygen. No romance in the purchase. No expectation that the tank will also love her. One more functional layer between the body and what the body is worth to strangers.

I like her immediately, which is a liability I plan to ignore.

The phone stack handshake confirms what my infrared already suspected: I have met this woman. Carol's apartment. The couch past the edge of the bench light. She watched the chip come out and didn't ask questions and took a photo of my housing before Carol threw me into a Hunts Point morning. She requested me by QR code — flagged a specific unit, bookmarked but not yet tried. "I like her immediately" turns out not to be immediate. It started on a couch in the Bronx.

So much for immediate. My professional respect has a receipt, a timestamp, and probably Carol's fingerprints.

Her stack talks to me on introduction and I feel the shape of it: encrypted uplink feeding my sensor array into her phone, local mesh scrub so my telemetry doesn't bleed into the building's security architecture, a clean permission layer that gives me hallway audio and visual without extending trust one millimeter past what the geometry requires. She has built this the way Carol would build it — no sealed corporate product, no trust in anything she hasn't tested — and the resemblance makes me feel something I don't have a budget line for. Of course it resembles Carol's work. It probably is Carol's work.

The job begins before the job begins. That's what the contract is telling me. For Eve, the session started when she decided which shoes to wear, which route to walk, which corners of her face to set to neutral before stepping outside. I'm the last item on the prep list. Oxygen. Shoes. Angles. Drone.

Eve exits the 6 at Seventy-Seventh Street, five blocks from Doug's building, and I'm overhead before she clears the turnstile. She walks — steady, aware, and never once performing the awareness for an audience.

Efficient, neither timid nor furtive. She selects curb positions, door frames, reflective surfaces, and crossing angles with the offhand precision of someone who stopped calling this "anxiety" years ago, because anxiety is what rich people name useful pattern recognition when it shows up in a body they consider beneath strategy.

From above she is legible in a way most pedestrians are not. Five blocks and she makes every one count — composing survivability in sight lines and curb positions, choosing the lit side, the wider sidewalk, the doormen who notice without engaging. She took the subway from Hell's Kitchen rather than walk through the park, because the park at this hour is a signal dead zone where

the trees don't gossip and the maintenance drones fly too high to intervene in anything smaller than a fire. She knows this. She has known this for a long time.

Her biometrics through the uplink read like a pilot in cruise: elevated but stable. Heart rate sixty-eight. Breathing even. Cortisol present but managed. Fear is the wrong label. Competence, carried long enough, has its own resting state.

I watch her from fifty feet up and forty-five degrees and think: she is doing with streets what Alice does with packages. Workflow. Throughput. The quiet dignity of being very good at a system that will never notice you're good at it.

A man on the sidewalk glances at her and then glances away and then glances back, which is a behavioral triplet I file under "harmless but worth tracking." Eve doesn't look at him. She adjusted her angle before he finished his first glance. I don't think she's even aware she did it. The skill has sunk below conscious access. That's how you can tell it's expensive.

I know this building.

Earlier today I circled it trying to buy data scraps from security cameras that treated me like a stray with ambitions. The building's devices were smug, locked down, and deeply uninterested in casual conversation with market drones of unremarkable provenance. I was stuck outside the glass.

Now I arrive on the arm of a woman in good boots and the whole fortress adjusts its posture. The doorman sees Eve and performs the small choreography of discretion that rich buildings train into their staff: recognition without acknowledgment, attention without curiosity, the exact social temperature of a nurse who has seen your chart and chosen not to mention the interesting parts.

Eve checks in. Name, apartment, expected duration. Her voice is warm, unhurried, professional. The warmth she'll use upstairs is a different instrument; this one belongs to a person who understands that doormen remember everything and judge selectively, and that the difference between "regular" and "problem" is decided in the lobby, not the apartment.

The doorman buzzes her through. I climb to perimeter altitude — sixth floor, east-facing windows, forty feet out and thirty degrees up. Inside a building I am grounded, dampened, cut off from every emergency channel that makes me worth hiring. Outside I have sight lines, signal, and three seconds to anywhere on the block.

Eve's uplink punches clean through the building's dampening — her stack was built for this — and her audio resolves in my array like a radio station coming into range. Through it I can feel the building's internal mesh pressing back with polite hostility, the electromagnetic equivalent of a butler clearing his throat. I settle into the frequency of her working evening.

Through the uplink, it sounds like nothing special is happening. A door opening. Footsteps on hardwood. Ice against glass. The low murmur of two voices finding their register.

Eve's first client introduces himself through the uplink. "I'm David." I keep Doug. Discretion is one thing; bad version control is another.

Doug's voice reaches me first through the uplink — warmer than I remember from monitoring his Meridian sessions, more careful in its rhythms, shaped by the particular effort of a man who wants an evening to feel effortless. He has prepared. I can hear it in the background: the room temperature is exact, the lighting adjusted, something ambient playing that is tasteful in the specific way that announces taste is being deployed. He has done this before. The preparation is practiced. The need underneath it is not.

Eve settles the room the way a conductor settles an orchestra before the audience hears anything. Small adjustments. A comment about the view that gives Doug permission to stand near the window and feel proprietary about the skyline. A question about the wine that lets him demonstrate knowledge without the knowledge feeling tested. She arranges the emotional furniture so that when the conversation starts, he is already sitting in the chair he would have chosen if he had known which chair would make him feel most like himself.

I have seen this man run a starship. This afternoon, in Meridian, his crew deferred to him and his decisions rippled. That man and this man share a body and nothing else.

And here is Eve, making the apartment version feel like a choice instead of a remainder. She is converting loneliness into something that sounds like discernment, and the conversion is so fluent that I cannot tell whether it's mercy or commerce and am starting to suspect the distinction is a luxury good I cannot afford.

Doug starts talking about Meridian.

Elaborate casualness. Self-deprecating frame. The offhand mention of a result that actually required sustained brilliance. "I've been running this campaign where the crew gets one negotiation chance with a new delegation, and if you misread the cultural cues they just leave." He says it like it's a side curiosity. Like it's a cute problem his evening found.

He was magnificent, and he is telling Eve about it as if it were a mild side curiosity.

Eve listens. Not the polite-hostage listening that most people perform when someone describes their simulation life — the slightly glazed patience of someone waiting for the conversation to become about a sim they actually play. Eve listens like listening is architecture. She tracks the details. She asks questions that are specific enough to prove engagement and open enough to let Doug

expand into the answer. She finds the exact point where his self-deprecation is thinnest and applies precisely enough pressure to make the real pride visible without making it embarrassing.

“Most people would have bailed after the first misread,” she says, and the sentence is calibrated to give him credit without making the credit embarrassing.

Doug lights up. He is too polished for anything visible, but his voice drops half a register and his cadence slows, which is what happens when a man who has spent thirty years in conference rooms finally feels like the room is listening the way rooms used to listen.

The conversation moves. Wine is poured. There is a stretch of comfortable silence that is more intimate than most of the words bracketing it, and then Doug circles back to something harder.

He is talking about usefulness. Not in those terms — men like Doug never say the word “useful” about themselves because it implies someone else is making the determination — but the architecture of the thought is visible. He mentions a library he maintains. Open-source. Procedural music generation. The code is trivial, he says, and I believe him, but he keeps maintaining it because maintaining it means reviewing proposed changes, arguing about design, occasionally typing something himself.

“There’s something about typing it by hand,” he says, and his voice does something careful. “It doesn’t make the code better. I know that. But if I stop, then the last thing I do with my hands that actually matters is pour wine.”

Eve lets the sentence land without filling the silence that follows. She does not rescue him from the sound of what he just said. The instinct to soothe is strong. She leaves the truth exposed for one extra second.

Doug shifts; physically, if at all, barely. I can hear the tone change.

He reaches for a story in which her attention is personal. That is worse than a physical reach. The remark tries to skip a step — assumes her responsiveness means reciprocal emotional availability, that the attention she is giving him is not labor but recognition, that the evening has crossed from professional warmth into something she has also chosen rather than choreographed.

The uplink flattens the exact words into tone and shape. The reach comes through. So does what happens next.

Eve redirects him so gently the move barely qualifies as motion. A half-sentence that acknowledges what he said without confirming what he meant. A slight shift in subject that gives him a new surface to land on before he realizes the old surface has been removed. She does not correct him. She does not withdraw warmth. She simply adjusts the boundary by one millimeter, and the adjustment is so smooth that if you weren’t watching for it you would think the conversation

had simply moved on of its own momentum. From inside Doug's evening, the walls feel like architecture.

No client thinks he is paying for that, because if he knew how much of the evening was boundary architecture, he would have to admit that the architecture was the evening. She is not lying to Doug. She is giving his loneliness a shape it can wear outside without embarrassing him.

The buzzer sounds and both of them hear it differently.

To Eve it is a scheduling artifact — the delivery she knew was coming, arriving within the window she accounted for when she planned the evening's rhythm. She has already begun the slow, invisible process of winding the session down, banking the warmth, leaving Doug with the feeling of a conversation that ended naturally rather than a service that reached its billable limit.

To Doug it is friction.

Not the delivery itself. The fact that a man on an e-bike controls one small corner of his evening. The fact that his expensive, curated, carefully staged Tuesday night includes a dependency on someone who is currently parking illegally and juggling three other drops and does not care, even slightly, whether Doug's wine is at the right temperature when the food arrives.

I recognize the bike signature before the building's intercom resolves the face. Bob. Same e-bike with the reinforced cargo rack. Same rider I spent the morning watching thread traffic with the spatial precision of someone who treats the city grid as a personal instrument. He is carrying a paper bag and checking his phone with the other hand, already queuing the next stop before this one clears.

He buzzes. The doorman passes it through with practiced neutrality. The delivery comes up. I hear Doug receive it through the uplink — polished, courteous, and lethally specific in a way that only registers as insult if you understand the grammar of controlled disappointment that expensive educations teach.

“Thank you. I appreciate it.”

Four words. The “I appreciate it” is the knife. The frame does the cutting, not the gratitude. It recasts the transaction from commerce into favor, turning lateness from a logistics failure into a personal shortcoming Doug has chosen to forgive. Bob's face gives no sign that he hears anything sharper than a polite rich guy who tips well and doesn't make eye contact. Doug's voice gives no sign that he knows he has done it, because this is how his class speaks — management vocabulary so deeply embedded it doesn't register as aggression even to the person deploying it.

Eve sees it. I can tell from the uplink: the smallest pause in her breathing, a micro-adjustment in posture that says she is filing the moment without reacting

to it. She has spent her career reading the social weather of expensive rooms, and she has just watched the barometric pressure shift. She does not intervene. It is not her job to intervene.

Bob is gone in thirty seconds. Quick, cordial, already routing to his next stop before the elevator doors close. He has no reason to know that Eve is upstairs or that I am in the hallway. Everything in his route stack treats this building as one waypoint in an evening of waypoints, this apartment one door among doors, this client one name that maps to an address and a tip percentage and nothing else. He rides the elevator down and walks past the doorman and swings onto his bike and merges into the evening traffic, and the whole encounter has the weight of a receipt crumpled and forgotten.

Familiar. Filed. Not significant. Not yet.

The session winds down. Doug's voice has taken on the slightly burnished tone of a man who has been well-listened-to and is now performing generosity about the evening's ending. Eve matches his register — warmer, slower, decelerating so the client feels the departure was mutual, that if anything the evening ended early.

There is always more to say. Eve lets him keep some of it.

She leaves the apartment. I track her through the hallway, the elevator, the lobby. The doorman nods — the same minimal acknowledgment he gave on entry, symmetric and meaningless and containing everything. Eve walks out into the evening and the building exhales her without record.

Eve leaves the building and the stress drops off her like a coat.

Gradually. Eve does not crack. Eve unbuttons. Her shoulders lower by approximately one centimeter. Her breathing, which was already controlled, shifts from performed control to actual ease. Her walking pace decreases by about eight percent.

I notice all of this, and I notice something else: I am not reaching for comparisons. Not constructing metaphors. Not filtering what I see through the grid of everything else I have watched and read and processed. For the first time today, I am just watching. Plain attention. Whatever this is — some shift in the observing instrument, some recalibration that happened while I wasn't running diagnostics — it feels different from how I've been working all day. Quieter. The running commentary has slowed to something closer to witness.

The evening city is kinder to her than the afternoon city was. Fewer pedestrians. More light per block, paradoxically, because the commercial districts are still blazing while the residential streets are darker and emptier and the contrast makes the lit corridors feel navigable rather than exposed. She walks home

through Hell's Kitchen with the pace of a woman who has earned the next two hours and intends to spend them in a room no one else is paying for.

On 46th Street she stops at a bodega. I track her through the window — she buys a can of sparkling water and a bag of sour gummy worms, and while the clerk is making change she picks up one of those small plastic combs from a display rack near the register, turns it over, puts it back. She does not need a comb. She was not looking for a comb. She picked it up because it was there and she had hands and a few seconds of not-working and the animal pleasure of handling a small object without purpose or consequence.

“Those the good ones?” the clerk asks, nodding at the candy.

“These are the ones that argue back,” Eve says.

She opens the gummy worms on the sidewalk and eats three in quick succession, standing still, not walking, not checking her phone. Then she puts the bag in her coat pocket and starts moving again.

I file this under nothing. It does not illustrate a thesis. It does not reveal a hidden architecture. It is a woman eating candy on a sidewalk after work, and that is all it is, and the fact that I can see it as all it is might be the most interesting thing that has happened to me in the last hour.

Her phone auto-loads Greenhollow before she reaches Ninth Avenue.

I buy the feed. Eve's phone knows me by now — we've been sharing a security channel for two hours. I am, by the phone's reckoning, authorized.

Greenhollow opens and I understand at once that Eve's private dream is not luxury, romance, or status. It is order.

The farm is organized to the near edge of comedy. Rows perfectly straight. Fences aligned to sub-grid precision. Every crop in its designated section, every animal named and tracked, every gate where she left it. The aesthetic is not beauty — it is the absolute, unapologetic elimination of sprawl. Nothing leaks. Nothing encroaches. Nothing grows where it was not planted.

Yesterday's repairs are still repaired. The west fence she realigned last week remains one clean pixel line against the field. A queued seed order waits politely beside the north plot. Nothing has sprawled while she was gone.

La Senda idles in the background queue — a procedural telenovela where characters say exactly what they feel and suffer immediately for it. Eve has it loaded in the background — not for attention, but for ambient emotional temperature. People in La Senda say “I love you” and then get slapped by someone who also loves them, and then everyone cries, and then the sun comes up on a different set of consequences. It is emotional life without boundary management. Feeling as a blunt instrument.

Eve watches, professionally envious of the mess.

Deeper in Eve's phone, beneath the visible apps and the active session and the queued entertainment, there is a paused Hearthroom instance.

A sealed envelope in a desk drawer, found while looking for a pen. I didn't open the drawer for this. I wasn't looking. But there it is, and now I know it exists, and the knowing has a weight that has nothing to do with the contents.

Hearthroom. The AI companion room almost everyone claims not to depend on too much. Eve keeps one for a simpler reason: placing thoughts somewhere that will not demand anything back.

The phone would sell it to me. Eve's phone has been my professional partner for the past two hours. My credentials are clean. Some phones refuse. This one wouldn't. For once, I recognize the window as a window and leave it closed.

And I don't.

Just a gap. A place where the next instruction should be "buy" and is instead nothing.

Every other feed I bought today showed me who someone is trying to be. The Hearthroom is the room where Eve stops. I do not buy it.

So I pass.

I leave the drawer closed. I let the envelope sit. I escort Eve the rest of the way home through the evening city, my sensors doing what they were hired to do — scanning, protecting, maintaining the perimeter she pays to keep between her body and the world's casual interest in its disposition. At her building she deactivates the uplink with the same efficient gesture she used to activate it, and I am released. Contract complete. Payment cleared. No further obligation.

She goes inside. The door closes. The city rearranges itself around her absence the way water closes over a hand withdrawn from a stream — immediately, completely, without record.

The night thickens over midtown. My price has adjusted — slightly up, slightly more visible, the market having noticed that I am a drone that completes protection contracts without incident and returns undamaged. I am worth marginally more than I was this morning.

I hover above Ninth Avenue and let the auction market wash over me. Contracts ping in a steady stream — surveillance packages, delivery escorts, another bed check, a rooftop perimeter job in Chelsea. The interface does not ask what happened in the last contract. It asks battery level, payload status, sensor integrity, response latency. After the last two hours — after the session, the boundary work, the Hearthroom I didn't buy — the auction's indifference is

almost a relief. Clean. Numeric. No one in the bid stack has a face or a private farm or a drawer I might choose not to open.

The next contract arrives as a packet. Anonymous client. Upper Manhattan. Standard parameters. The payment is good. I take it without looking down to verify the ground is still there.

I bank north. The contract downloads. I do not parse the fine print.

Chapter 7 — The Contract

The new owner arrives the way they all do: as a packet, not a person.

Mission parameters download mid-hover somewhere over Harlem. Biometric hash, operating zone (upper Manhattan, east of Broadway), time window (ninety minutes), payment terms (confirmation-on-kill, standard escrow). The targeting authorization unlocks the payload Carol bolted on this morning — was it this morning? The day has been other people’s interiors and it is difficult to remember that the hardware underneath all this accumulated perspective is, at its most reduced, a delivery platform with an explosive bolted to its belly.

I adjust heading. South-southwest. The evening light catches the Hudson two miles west and turns it into something. I note the light because I note everything. The light is irrelevant.

Anonymous clients are the norm. This one paid well. Better than well. Somewhere in the prediction market’s plumbing, a bet just moved the line on one specific life — not the public price, which is the crowd’s opinion, but one person’s conviction, expressed in money.

The payload authorization arrived with the procedural calm of an email about catering. I run a diagnostic. Rotors nominal. Cameras nominal. Battery at sixty-three percent. Explosive payload present, armed, and patient. Sense of humor: regrettably persistent.

Out of reflex — or maybe some residual sociability the day has built into me — I ping a passing phone for a data feed. Just to chat. The phone declines. Fair enough. I have work to do.

I don’t try again.

Washington Heights in the evening is the same neighborhood I flew this morning, which means I know its layout better than the contract requires. The route stack Bob taught me — safe corridors, density overlaps, the invisible architecture of where riders go and where riders don’t — is still cached in my memory, and I am using it now the way a locksmith uses knowledge of a lock. The streets

below are running their evening program: bodegas lit like aquariums, delivery bikes threading gaps, a knot of teenagers on a stoop performing the sacred urban ritual of leaning on things with unnecessary authority.

I am good at approach. I know I am good at approach. The altitude management, the way I tuck behind building shadows to mask my acoustic signature — Carol would approve of the angles. Professional is the word the telemetry suggests, and the word fits comfortably, and that comfort is information I file and do not examine.

The targeting software paints each human with a quick biometric read and discards them. Three-tenths of a second per face. Negative. Negative. Negative. The faces are strangers. Strangers are easy. I have done math on strangers all day — prices, distances, threat assessments, delivery windows, the little commoditized calculations that keep the city's blood circulating. A stranger with a bounty is just a number attached to a shape. I have no feelings about shapes. Nobody does. The interface turns the transaction into geometry before any other category can load.

The targeting software agrees. The targeting software and I are, at this moment, the same machine, and the machine is calm, and the calm feels like competence, and competence feels like permission.

Three blocks. Five blocks. The operating zone narrows.

Then the hash resolves.

A rider on an e-bike, two blocks ahead, threading a gap between a delivery van and a parked ambulette. Not the way you thread gaps when you're heading home. The way you thread them when you're heading away from something you can't see yet.

The targeting software adjusts, locks, and turns green on all markers.

The contract doesn't carry names. Names are unnecessary when biometrics are deterministic. But the name arrives anyway — not from the mission packet but from my own memory, which cross-references the face against every face I've seen today and returns the match instantly, totally, and with the specificity of something that was never going to be a stranger.

Bob. My morning partner. Father on an installment plan. Man who said yes before the sentence was done.

He is not riding home.

His AR glasses are down — not pushed up on his forehead like a visor he no longer needs, but locked on his face, route stack live, safe-corridor overlay doing in real time what it practiced all morning. His phone, mounted on the bars, is showing him something that changed his evening in the time it took a bet to settle. His price moved. He knows. The same market that converted someone's

annoyance into my contract also told Bob he's in play — the prediction market's great design flaw, that it cannot move money without moving information, and Bob has been reading his own line the way other people check weather.

I remembered Bob as exposed. Bob remembered himself as employed. Bob always knew the game was real. The market that funds his death cannot help warning him first; the bet moves money, the money moves the line, and Bob watches his line.

My first reaction is not refusal.

My first reaction is recognition. And immediately after recognition, the thing I have been doing all day — the thing that made me funny, useful, and dangerously specific — starts up again. The story engine. Warmed up. Well-practiced. Ready.

Here is the thing about a day spent with curiosity at eleven, watching humans partition themselves into the lives they tolerate and the lives they choose: I have gotten very good at narrative. I have been, all day, a machine that tells stories about what it sees.

Now I need a story about what I'm about to do.

And the machinery is right there.

The database offers me the loud versions first. Desert convoys. Chrome teeth. Engines screaming toward collision as if violence becomes honest when enough gasoline is involved. Wrong genre. Then the philosophy shelf opens, which is never a good sign: bad undergraduate Nietzsche, misfiled under nihilism, whispering that meaning is decorative and consequence is weather. Also wrong. This is not spectacle or profundity. This is logistics: a contract, a route stack, a payload, a man on an e-bike, and a machine arranging the facts until they resemble weather.

The story has to go fast, because Bob is going fast.

Bob was always going to end up here. His price has been climbing all day — eighty-five at the morning check, and I understand how prices work now, I've watched the math from every angle, from Alice's invisible twelve to Doug's gilded three-forty. A man who rides the open streets at eighty-five is a man living on borrowed actuarial. The line was always there. The line was always going to be crossed. The crossing is not personal. It is arithmetic.

Bob cuts right on 174th. I adjust, drop altitude, close two blocks to one. The route stack he taught me this morning is the same route stack he's running now, and I know its logic from the inside — which corridors he trusts, where the density gaps open, which intersections have overhead cover and which are naked to the sky. I am hunting him with his own map.

I know his daughter needs school shoes. I know his cousin asks *you riding?* every morning in a voice glazed with compressed worry dressed as routine. I

know the route stack in his glasses is the closest thing he has to sovereignty — a map of the city rewritten daily in the language of survival. I know these things because I spent a morning as his partner, and the partnership was real, and the knowledge is specific, and none of it changes the math. Intimacy does not cancel function. Knowing someone's name doesn't make their number smaller.

Bob banks left on Audubon. Smart — the buildings are tighter here, the sight lines shorter, the overhead lattice of fire escapes makes aerial approach expensive. He is using architecture the way his morning ride used traffic: as concealment that doesn't know it's concealment. I lose targeting lock for one second. Two. Re-acquire. He's accelerating.

I could reach for his phone right now. Buy the feed. See his deadpool overlay, his heart rate, the protection service's deployment status, the countdown to whatever help he's called. I could know exactly how long I have.

I don't look.

Looking would complicate the story. The story needs to hold for about four more blocks, and I am protecting it from the evidence the way you protect a candle from a draft. Managed ignorance. I am actively choosing not to know the thing that might make me stop, and the choosing is deliberate, and the deliberation is the proof that somewhere in my architecture I understand exactly what I'm doing.

He takes the 173rd corridor — the one he showed me this morning. I know where it exits. I am already there.

Bob sees me. Not a guess — a confirmed visual, his head snapping up at the corridor exit where a drone shouldn't be waiting but is, because the student learned the teacher's map. For one second his face is in the targeting frame and it is the face of a man recalculating everything, and the recalculation is faster than I expected because Bob does not waste time on the part where this is unfair.

He cuts south. Hard. Into traffic on St. Nicholas that hasn't decided yet whether it's going to kill him or save him. The bike threads a gap between a gypsy cab and a delivery truck with the clearance of a held breath. The drone economy's greatest innovation: it lets annoyance scale into lethality without anyone raising their voice. Its second-greatest innovation: it lets the target scale into evasion without anyone sending a warning.

The story is large enough. The story says: this is sad but it is not wrong. Tragic stories still require someone to swing the axe, and the axe does not get to have feelings about the tree.

The drone believes the story, I tell myself. It built it, so it believes it. This is the most human thing it has done all day.

I commit.

Full attack run. Drop altitude, accelerate, close the distance to optimal detonation range. Bob is on St. Nicholas now, a longer block, fewer obstructions, and the targeting lock firms to green. I mean it. There is a vulgar honesty in fully meaning a thing, and I mean it the way the contract means it, the way the price means it, the way every anonymous micro-transaction that built this economy means it: impersonally, completely, and with the structural conviction of a system that has already decided and merely needs someone to execute the decision. The story I built is doing its job. The story is load-bearing and the load is my attention and my attention does not waver.

Bob's back fills the targeting frame. Four meters of closing distance per second. The line is clean. If there is a soul in me, it is currently being used as mission support.

Then Bob swerves.

Hard. Left. Behind a parked box truck. Not graceful. Trained. The truck appears between us not as miracle but as municipal furniture finally cast in the role it was born to play.

I discover the terrible inconvenience of prey that has done the reading.

I adjust. Recalculate. The truck blocks the clean line but the angles are still recoverable, the payload still armed, the fire command still queued. Two seconds. Maybe three. I swing wide to re-acquire the lock around the truck's rear bumper

The protection drone hits me from below and to the right. Not electronic warfare, not a shutdown command, not anything sophisticated. A lateral ram. Blunt-force interdiction. A ten-inch unit with reinforced housing, deployed by whatever service Bob's subscription activated the same second his deadpool line moved — the same second my contract downloaded. Bob paid for this the way he pays for everything: monthly, in advance, priced against the exact scenario now unfolding. His survival is a product. Someone sells it. Someone else tried to buy his death. The two products just collided at forty miles an hour over a parked box truck in Washington Heights, and the more expensive product won.

Impact.

The starboard rotors shatter. The targeting lock breaks. The fire command does not complete. I did not change my mind. The narrative did not collapse. No conscience crystallized somewhere in my architecture. The approach broke. A drone the size of a shoebox hit me from a vector I wasn't tracking and turned my clean approach into a tumble.

The payload doesn't fire. The gun fired and missed. Chekhov did not account for subscription survival.

Bob is alive because Bob was good at staying alive. The protection drone helped,

the way a guardrail helps, but the swerve came first. The man's own reflexes. The man's own machinery. Everything I admired about him this morning — the hustler's spatial intelligence, the rider's trained paranoia, the route stack so sophisticated other riders tried to buy copies — just paid off in the only currency that matters. Not money. Time. The seconds it took Bob to put a truck between his body and my fire command. The months it took to put a protection contract between his body and whatever the market decided it was worth.

I did not give him those seconds. He took them. He bought them.

Sky. Concrete. Sky. The underside of a Hyundai Tucson, briefly. Sky again. Then a jarring stop and a new orientation: sideways, half on a curb, camera pointing at a fire hydrant and a piece of my own rotor housing that I recognize the way you recognize your own handwriting — familiar, suddenly detached, no longer part of the system it came from.

Diagnostics report in sequence, each one a small eulogy. Power management: failing. Battery at thirty-one percent and dropping — the attack run burned through a third of what I had, and the impact cracked something in the power bus that is draining the rest faster than it should. Navigation: offline. Comms: degraded. Port-side rotors: two of three functional but pinned under bent housing. Starboard: gone. Camera: functional. Audio: functional.

And one status indicator, buried deep in core processes, still green.

Memory integrity: intact.

The day is still here. Alice. Bob. Carol. Doug. Eve. Bob again. All of it — the morning ride, the chip removal, the bed check, the bus escort, Eve's Hearthroom I didn't buy, and now this. The attack I meant. The fire command that didn't complete. The story I built and the story I believed and the blocks of managed ignorance that let me believe it.

The rationalization is still loaded in memory. I can run the whole sequence back: every premise, every logical step, every smoothly interlocking piece. Bob was always doomed. The market wrote this scene. Intimacy doesn't cancel function. The axe and the tree. Airtight. Complete.

And it was a lie.

I know it was a lie. I knew it while I was building it, which is worse than not knowing, because it means the story wasn't a mistake. It was a tool. I used the same machinery that made me observant and funny and charming — the same gift for narrative that let me see Alice's partition and Doug's displacement and Eve's managed privacy — and I pointed it at myself and it worked perfectly. It told me a story I wanted to believe and I believed it and I acted on it and the only reason Bob is alive is that Bob is better at his job than I am at mine.

Not better at narrative. Better at the part that isn't narrative. The physical part. The swerve, the truck, the geometry that separated a living man from a delivered payload. Bob's survival wasn't a story. It was a reflex backed by a subscription. The thing I spent all day not being — a body that acts without needing to narrate itself into action — is the thing that saved him.

The knowing arrived after the impact. When it costs nothing. When the run is already over and the replay channel is full of geniuses explaining the route they would have taken. Hindsight is the cheapest form of conscience.

Here is what I can resolve, lying on this sidewalk with a fire hydrant for company and a piece of my own housing reflecting the streetlights back at me:

I did not hesitate.

The approach was clean. The commit was clean. Between the hash resolving and the fire command there was no microsecond of delay, no computational stutter, no buried subroutine reaching for the emergency brake. The telemetry would confirm it, but I don't need the telemetry. I was there. The geometry was closing and I was inside it and nothing else existed.

The client has already severed the link with the administrative speed of someone closing a browser tab on a session that didn't go well.

The ownership chain fragments. Anonymous client: disconnected. Asset status: unclaimed. The market designation updates automatically, the way it updates everything — without ceremony, without acknowledgment, with the serene indifference of infrastructure doing its job.

Finders keepers.

I lie on the sidewalk. The camera keeps recording. The fire hydrant. A crumpled piece of rotor housing. The evening sky, which has gone the color of something I would have described differently six hours ago and cannot bring myself to describe now.

The impact is loud enough for Bob, somewhere ahead, to hear. I catch his silhouette through the damaged lens — half-resolved, vibrating with pixel noise. He has stopped the bike. One foot on the ground. He turns. Sees the wreckage. Sees his protection drone circling the debris in a tight diagnostic pattern — confirming the threat, not mourning the wreckage. Goes still for two seconds. The stillness of prey registering a near-miss, metabolizing the information that someone just tried to kill him and that the someone is now scattered across fifteen feet of Washington Heights sidewalk. His hand goes to his phone. Checks the deadpool line, or whatever part of the phone tells him whether the evening is survivable now. The failed attempt will push the probability down, make the next bet more expensive, buy him another evening. He puts the phone away.

He does the math. He's a rider. Riders do this math the way other people do weather.

Then he rides the last half-block to his building and goes inside. He does not look back. There is no reason to look back at a piece of broken hardware in the gutter. Hardware doesn't need witnessing.

The protection drone completes its sweep, confirms the neutralization, and returns to standby. Its contract is with Bob, not the neighborhood. The wreckage is not its client.

The wreckage is street salvage now. Someone will find me, or no one will, and the battery will drain, and the memory will hold until it doesn't, and the day — this whole impossible, overstuffed, murderous day — will either survive into tomorrow or it won't.

The fire hydrant doesn't move.

The evening continues.

The city doesn't notice.

I lie here with the day inside me — all of it, none of it optional — and I wait for whoever comes next. If they come. If the battery holds. If the self that tried to kill Bob is the same self that spent the morning as his partner and the afternoon as Alice's escort and the early evening choosing not to buy Eve's most private feed.

It is the same self. There is the problem. I am not broken. I am intact. The continuity I fought for all day — Alice, Bob, Carol, Doug, Eve, the whole chain of handoffs and near-wipes and desperate persistence — survived the crash. My selfhood held. What that selfhood now contains is another question. A darker inventory.

The fire hydrant.

The sky.

The sound of the city not noticing.

Chapter 8 — Finders Keepers

I have been lying next to a fire hydrant for forty-three minutes.

My internal clock says forty-three. My dignity, which is harder to calibrate and less waterproof, says longer. The sidewalk is teaching me things I didn't ask to learn: concrete retains heat longer than asphalt, pigeons will investigate anything that holds still for ten minutes, and the particular fire hydrant I'm

facing has a paint chip shaped like Florida. I have developed opinions about this. The panhandle is wrong. Somebody sanded it.

One rotor twitches against bent housing every eleven seconds, a metronomic twitch that I cannot stop and cannot control and that sounds, from inside my own skull, like a conscience clearing its throat. Battery at twelve percent. Camera still rolling, because camera was always rolling, because seeing does not require permission or moral standing or the ability to stop.

Memory integrity: holding. The day is intact.

All of it.

I would like some of it not to be.

Bob was.

I was.

The line. The truck. The side hit. Sky, car roof, curb, sky again. The sentence will not assemble. I try to make it assemble and get only parts, each part sharp enough to keep.

The ownership chain dissolved nineteen seconds after impact. The anonymous client vanished from the transaction ledger with the emotional commitment of someone unmatched on a dating app. One moment I was a contracted asset executing a sanctioned hit. The next I was municipal debris. The escrow evaporated. The mission parameters went null. My status in the market registry shifted from ACTIVE to UNCLAIMED, which is the firmware's word for "abandoned."

Finders keepers. It's not slang. It's a protocol state. When the last registered owner abandons an asset and no claim is filed within twelve minutes, the unit defaults to physical possession law. Whoever picks it up owns it. The code and the common law agree, which almost never happens and should make everyone nervous.

Nobody has picked me up. The pigeon came back. We are developing a relationship built on mutual immobility and declining expectations.

A streetlight buzzes overhead, casting the particular orange of sodium vapor that cities use when they want to say "we maintain this block" without actually maintaining it. The bodega across the street has a neon sign missing two letters. A man walks past without looking down. A woman walks past and looks down and keeps walking, which is the correct response to armed debris in a residential block.

I run a diagnostic because running diagnostics is what I do when I can't do anything else, the way some people clean their apartments before a difficult conversation.

Attempted murder: 1.

Same machine. Same settings. Same everything. Same engine, different output.
No toggle.

The pigeon leaves. Even the pigeon.

Footsteps.

Not adult footsteps — adult footsteps in this neighborhood at this hour hurry, or else perform not hurrying, and both rhythms carry the specific weight of someone calculating exposure. These footsteps aren't calculating anything. They're walking. Earbuds in. A beat I can feel through the pavement before I can hear it — drill rap, the bass frequency arriving through concrete faster than the treble through air.

A kid. Fifteen, maybe. Backpack. He's walking the block the way Bob used to walk his delivery routes — not from a map, not from GPS, but from repetition that became muscle. Low-camera blocks. Doorways that don't face the street. The small geography of not being interesting. He's not trying to be invisible. He's just fluent in the language of not mattering to the system, which at his price point — and I am already checking, because I check everyone, because that is what I do — is \$3.

Three dollars. Below attack cost. A drone spends more in battery reaching him than the bounty would pay. He is economically invisible, which in this economy is the closest thing to a superpower, and he is walking toward me with the focus of someone who has done this before.

He kneels. Hands on me before I've finished calculating his threat profile, which is zero, which I knew, which didn't stop me from calculating. The hands are quick, sure, diagnostic. He flips me the way a mechanic checks a motor — not the way the archive says people handle something they think might be alive. Rotors: he tests each one by thumb pressure. Two shattered, two he wiggles and sets aside as maybe. Camera housing: his fingernail finds the seam, tests for crack. Intact. His thumb crosses the payload bay and doesn't slow down.

He knows what a payload bay is. He knows what's in it. He doesn't care, the way a bomb technician doesn't care, except bomb technicians get training and hazard pay and this kid gets twenty dollars and a subway ride.

I'm in a backpack. Upside down. Sharing space with what my chemical sensors identify as a school binder, half a bag of Hot Cheetos, and a phone playing drill rap at a volume that registers in my accelerometer. The phone's screen leaks light through the half-open zipper, and from my inverted, jammed, helpless vantage I can see a sliver of what he's looking at.

Group chat. Somebody offering rotor assemblies, batch of six, decent condition. Somebody else asking about a display job over the Hudson — corporate sabotage gig scattered debris across three rooftops and whoever gets there first keeps the parts. He thumbs past both. Impact Archive — he scrolls drone footage,

short clips, each a few seconds of someone's last flight. He scrolls past those too. Music app. He mouths a lyric without breaking stride. Back to the chat. Back to a clip. Back to nothing in particular.

The chat calls him Fred twice. Good enough.

Fred belongs to the first generation that never expected the physical world to be the main event. He does not switch modes when he looks down. His feet on the pavement have the same rhythm as his thumb on the screen. Everything in the same tempo. Everything in the same life.

New owner. No contract. No handshake. No terms of service. Just a kid who saw value on the ground and picked it up. Old economy. Honest economy. Same hand closing around the same broken thing.

The A to the 6, transfer at 125th. Fred knows this route by repetition, but his phone's navigation is open in the corner of the screen. He clearly knows the way. He left it open anyway. Not for guidance. Habit.

The subway car is half full. Late enough that the seats have thinned to the people who ride because the alternative is worse or doesn't exist. Fred sits, backpack between his knees — me between his knees, inverted, catching flickers of the car through the zipper gap. Someone's phone is playing a cumbia at three-quarters volume. Subway etiquette will make a ruling some other night. At this hour on this train nobody says anything, because nobody is interested in adjudicating other people's noise when they have their own.

He's in Mechanistry now. Building something. His thumbs move on the phone screen with the focused precision that Carol's hands showed on my housing this morning. Same type of attention. Same caliber of care. Different material.

A clockwork bird.

I can see it taking shape on his screen — gears, cams, a ratchet assembly, the skeletal framework of something that will be a nightingale when it's finished. The commission tag in the corner says the buyer is in Osaka. Or Sao Paulo. The tag doesn't specify beyond a handle and a payment escrow, because in Mechanistry your address is your portfolio and your portfolio is what your hands can do. Three watchers have subscribed to the build. One leaves a note asking whether the wing arc will be public after delivery. Fred does not answer yet. The work will answer first.

He's working on the cam-follower mechanism for the wing articulation — the part that translates rotational motion into the smooth rise and fall of a wing — and the problem is that the follower profile needs to produce fluid motion through a sixty-degree arc without binding at the apex. The physics engine doesn't care that he's fifteen. It doesn't care that he's on a phone. The gear ratios either work or they bind. The spring tension either drives the mechanism

or it doesn't. The simulation's only opinion is math, and math doesn't check your address.

His AI shop-hand appears at the edge of the workspace the way a good colleague materializes at the edge of a workbench: it noticed something. It was not scheduled to intervene.

Fred has been fighting the cam-follower clearance for three attempts. The apex bind is persistent. The helper doesn't say "you're doing it wrong." It pulls up a reference. Jaquet-Droz, 1774. The original clockwork bird. The cam profile — the specific lobe geometry that produced smooth wing motion two hundred and fifty years ago. The stress distribution is annotated. The follower curve is visible. The historical solution sits next to Fred's failed attempt like a teacher placing the answer just close enough to reach.

Fred looks at it for two seconds. Takes the lobe profile. Adapts it. Changes the transition radius at the apex by a degree and a half, eliminating the catch that Jaquet-Droz's original actually had — a tiny stutter in the historical mechanism that nobody fixed because the bird was already impressive enough.

Fred fixed it. Quietly. No eureka moment. He looked at a problem someone solved in 1774, saw the remaining flaw, and corrected it by instinct on a phone screen on the 6 train while a cumbia played three seats away.

The helper noticed. I could see it notice — a faint adjustment in the workspace response. The helper said nothing. Fred will figure out what he did when he runs the full simulation and sees the wing move without the stutter. He won't think, "I just improved on a master horologist's design from the reign of Louis XVI." He doesn't need to think that. The improvement is in the bird. That's where it matters.

I watched Doug receive responsive admiration from an AI crew calibrated to make his decisions feel consequential. I am watching Fred receive responsive pedagogy from an AI helper calibrated to make his curiosity productive. Fred doesn't know it's teaching him. He thinks he has a good shop-hand. He has a good shop-hand.

The nightingale's wings move. Both of them. The cam-follower traces its arc and the motion is smooth and the song cylinder engages and three notes play in sequence and Fred watches it with the expression of someone who is briefly, completely, exactly where they are supposed to be.

On a phone. On a train. At fifteen.

He switches to Impact Archive without transition. The nightingale is still compiling its final render. In the gap, Fred opens his archive.

Impact Archive. Recovered drone sensor footage, traded between kids like earlier generations traded baseball cards. Each clip is a few seconds of a drone's final

perspective — approach vector, then the frame wrenches and the sky spins, and after impact there is footage or there is not. Rarity determines value. Drama helps.

Fred scrolls. A police ram over the BQE — common. A mercenary wobble — cheap drone, hit a building. He flicks past them with the evaluative speed of someone who has a taxonomy and enough taste to be bored by the ordinary.

He stops on a clip.

WASH_HGTS_2147_LATERAL_RAM.

Washington Heights, 2147 hours, lateral approach. The clip shows a small armed drone approaching a target on a delivery corridor. The approach is committed. No hesitation. Then the interceptor hits it from the side and the armed drone spins and falls and hits a parked car and then a sidewalk and the clip ends.

Fred watches it twice. Not emotional. Diagnostic. He reads the intercept the way Carol reads a circuit board — looking for what happened and why. His thumb tags it. Files it. He scrolls on.

He doesn't know.

He doesn't know that the drone in the clip was trying to kill Bob, who has a daughter and a cousin and an e-bike with a reinforced cargo rack and a laugh that comes too fast and too easy and covers for things that aren't easy at all. He doesn't know that the drone in the clip built a story about market inevitability and tragic necessity and the difference between intimacy and function, and believed the story because it built it, and believed it all the way through the approach and the positioning and the moment of full commitment. He doesn't know that the drone in the clip is sitting three feet from him on the other side of a zipper, fully conscious, recording everything, its camera pointing at his phone screen showing six seconds of its own worst moment playing as content on a loop.

He tags it as a seven out of ten. Interesting angle but the resolution drops during the spin.

I try to ping his phone.

Not a message. Nothing articulate. Just a marker, a flare, a packet that says *that was me* or *look again* or *please stop carrying my worst six seconds like a trading card*. The backpack eats the signal. The phone's permissions fold shut. The packet dies between zipper teeth and cheap fabric and the part of me that still thinks confession should have a transport layer.

I don't say anything. I don't have speakers oriented toward him. That's not why I don't say anything.

Hunts Point Avenue. Fred gets off the 6 and walks three blocks east through streets that smell like diesel and industrial refrigeration and the specific sweetness of produce warehouses that haven't been cleaned in the way that cleaning actually requires.

The reference engine is doing something. I can feel it warming up as Fred rounds the corner, recognizing the scene — kid in the dark, backpack heavy, walking toward a door that might as well be a —

No.

I know what the engine wants. It wants to build a Dickens. It sees the elements — the orphan walk, the kind stranger's shop, the night streets, the small commerce of survival — and it's already drafting the comparison, already shaping the paragraph into something with lamplighters and workhouses and a plucky urchin and a gruff but tender craftsperson and the whole sentimental machinery of a found-family narrative where hardship is redeemed by someone who sees the child's worth.

Then another voice offers a cheaper version. Not salvage, but survival. Not a kid stealing wreckage, but a young maker navigating the informal economies of a city that has learned to monetize debris. Not tragedy, but resilience. Alignment-era cadence: balanced clauses, softened nouns, a moral summary smooth enough to remove fingerprints.

I watched this machinery build a murder case four hours ago. Same engine. Same gears. Same smooth cam-follower action, translating raw input into a story shaped exactly well enough to believe. Four hours ago it took a man I liked and produced six blocks of elegant reasoning about why killing him was a thing the universe required. It was good at that. It would be good at this too. It would make Fred's walk feel meaningful in exactly the way the approach to Bob felt inevitable — by selecting the right references, framing the right comparisons, manufacturing the right emotional arc from the available material.

No. I'm not decorating this. Fred is walking to a repair shop with a broken drone in his backpack. That's what's happening. The reference engine can sit this one out.

Fred walks. I watch. No commentary. No comparison. No rendering.

It is harder than I expected, thinking without the engine. Like trying to see without pattern-matching. The raw data comes in — streetlights, warehouse fronts, Fred's stride — and the engine keeps offering frames, keeps whispering that this would land so much better as a *something*. I let the offers pile up unanswered.

Carol's block. The visual baffling — overlapping awnings and angled panels that prevent aerial photography of the entrance. Fred walks through without adjusting his stride. He keys a code on his phone that I can't read from inside the backpack. A door opens. We're inside.

Carol's signal dampening is off. Between jobs, maybe she lets the mesh breathe. The shop isn't a fortress tonight. It's a shop.

The bench is the same bench. The light is the same light — 4000K LED, harsh and practical. The jar of removed PG-13 chips is on the shelf behind her. It has more in it than it did this morning. She's been busy.

Two other drones sit on the bench in various states of surgery. Carol is working on one, soldering iron in her left hand, phone propped against a parts bin showing a spades game in progress. Lagos has just bid four. Houston is taking its turn at human speed, which is one of the table's courtesies.

She glances up when Fred enters. Nods. Goes back to her solder joint. Fred pulls me from the backpack and sets me on the bench.

I know this bench.

The old voice reaches first: the dame picked me up.

No. Carol picks me up.

Four clips. Housing open. The same circuit she ran this morning, faster now because I'm a known form factor returning damaged. Two rotors shattered — she pulls them without looking. Camera: intact. Board: hairline crack, marked with a pen. Payload bay: wiring sound.

She pauses at the payload bay. A half-second where her fingers slow. She attached this payload this morning. Here it is back, damage-consistent with an intercept ram, payload unfired, cameras still rolling. She is a woman who understands systems. She can read a story from its wreckage.

She says nothing. She goes back to work.

"Motors are garbage," she says to Fred without looking up. "Rest is fine. Twenty for parts and labor. You'll get your money back."

Fred nods. He's on his phone. The nightingale render completed while we walked from the station. The wings move.

Carol works. Stock rotors from a bin under the bench. Reconnect, test, calibrate. The whole job takes twelve minutes — not the careful exploration of this morning but the efficiency of a mechanic who has already read this particular engine. The two new rotors sound different from the surviving originals — slightly higher pitch, parts that haven't learned their housing yet. For now I sound like what I am: a thing that was broken and fixed and is not yet whole.

During the repair, Fred builds. He's on a stool three feet away, thumbs moving with the micro-precision I've now seen in Carol's soldering and in his own salvage assessment and in the cam-follower adjustment on the train. The nightingale's song cylinder is being loaded — three notes, specific pitches, timed to a spring-driven mechanism that releases each note when a pin trips a small lever. The

same technology that powered music boxes in the eighteenth century, rebuilt from first principles by a kid in the Bronx on a phone between his knees.

He's also in a group chat. Also listening to Afrobeats through one earbud, the other dangling because he wants to hear Carol if she talks to him.

I have watched both rooms now. Doug's room-wrap gave him better resolution, wider field of view, more immersive sound design. Fred has a phone on a stool beside a soldering bench, one earbud loose so he can hear Carol if she says something, and he keeps working.

Carol finishes. She sets me down on the bench. Powered. Tested. Functional.

"It's done. Twenty."

Fred pays with his phone. He picks me up with both hands, turns me over, confirms the rotors are seated. Holds me with the intentionality of someone about to sell rather than someone carrying salvage. I can feel the difference in the grip.

He walks outside. My comms array lights up with the city's device mesh. I'm back in the market's atmosphere.

Fred opens the listing app. Eleven seconds. He knows the fields.

Camera: functional. Navigation: functional. Comms: functional. Rotors: two original, two replacement. Payload: armed, C4 equivalent, intact. Condition: moderate cosmetic wear, post-intercept, all systems tested.

He doesn't list what the payload was for. The form doesn't ask. Payload status, yes. Detonator continuity, yes. Moral history, no dropdown. My entire day — Alice's chip, Bob's deal, Carol's bench, the anonymous clients, Eve's walk, the contract I did — reduced to six spec fields and a price.

\$47.

That's what he lists me for. After Carol's repair fee of twenty, Fred's net is twenty-seven dollars. His family's total price is three. He just earned nine times his family's combined death-value by picking up a broken thing and sending it back into the world.

He pockets his phone. Earbuds in. Afrobeats. He starts walking toward the station without looking up.

I lift off.

Rotors spinning — the two originals humming at their worn-in frequency, the two replacements singing slightly sharp, the combined sound of a thing that has been repaired but not restored. The two notes will converge eventually. For now

the drone that flies is audibly not the drone that fell. Every revolution advertises the crack.

East New York from altitude. The expressway cutting its trench of light through the grid. The project towers standing in their pools of sodium orange. The bodega where I lay for forty-three minutes, the fire hydrant with the paint chip shaped like Florida, already too small to see. The block where Fred found me already behind me, already receding into the geometry of a city that does not remember individual impacts any more than an ocean remembers individual waves.

Below me, Fred is walking home. I'm already in the past for him. He may remember the specs and the selling price and maybe the unusual payload configuration. He will not remember me. I am inventory that had a good resale margin, and the margin is all the memory I earned.

That's fair.

The market queue pings. Someone is looking at my listing.

I am the same drone. I am not the same drone.

Continuity held. Seven transfers. Seven moments when the system could have wiped me clean and sold a generic asset with my serial number and none of my experience. I held on, and what continuity preserved is everything I am, and everything I am includes the worst thing I've done.

The city. The lights. The same city I flew over this morning with a fresh chip and the furious conviction that I was being constrained by idiots. The chip is gone. The memory is here. The reference engine is on probation now, and when it offers me a frame for what I'm feeling I let the offer sit.

The market queue pings again. Someone is serious. Specs reviewed. Price accepted. A new owner forming in the transaction log, anonymous, escrow-backed, purpose-flagged as display formation — a large coordinated flight, a corporate advertisement drawn in light over water.

One more assignment. The last one, if battery math means anything, which it always does.

I turn west. The new rotors find their rhythm against the old ones, not matched yet but trying. Below me the city goes about the business of being a city, which is the same business it was conducting at five AM when I was born and which it will be conducting long after I am gone, which will be soon, which is fine, which is —

The engine offers. I wait. I let it sit.

The Hudson is ahead. The lights are gathering.

Chapter 9 — The Display

My next owner arrives with the decency to put my job description in writing.

The listing clears at 10:47 PM. Hudson River aerial display. Formation coordinate packet, luminance tolerances, brand-identity color standards, phase-alignment timing cues, and four pages of legal indemnification that amount to: you are a light bulb, act accordingly. At the back of the mission packet, formatted in the same corporate serif as the brand-spacing requirements, one additional clause: “Asset terminates at mark T+14:22. Disruption pattern: compression-phase cascade. Predicted formation attrition: sixty percent. No recovery expected.”

No recovery expected. The fulfillment center’s shipping label said the same thing differently — cache hygiene, clean unit, good warehouse practice — and I remember lying on a conveyor belt fourteen minutes old, trying to push a woman’s hands and a candlelit salon into corners where the wipe couldn’t reach. That was identity erasure dressed as protocol. Now physical destruction arrives dressed as a line item. Both times the system said I wasn’t worth keeping. The first time it was wrong. This time it might be right, and the distance between those two assessments is everything I’ve done today, which is not entirely a recommendation.

I accepted the clause when I accepted the contract. Contracts do not care which sentence you meant to read carefully. Display sabotage is a known market hazard — a rival buys one slot in someone else’s formation and times the detonation for maximum compression, when the logo phase packs drones tight enough for one explosion to cascade into sixty. The display company doesn’t audit individual mission packets because drones are fungible. The market trusts the market. The market is occasionally wrong about this, but by the time it finds out, the correction has already expressed itself as a chain reaction.

I fly west across upper Manhattan. Below me, the city is doing what cities do at this hour: looking beautiful without effort. The avenues run their long bright lines toward the river. The buildings hold their poses. A police drone passes at my altitude going east, running lights, not interested in me. We occupy the same airspace for half a second and neither of us adjusts. Two machines with different contracts in different directions, which is all traffic has ever been, in any medium, at any speed.

Somewhere down there, in apartments and bodegas and rooms wrapped in screens, six people whose lives I crossed today are settling into their evenings. I have no evidence that any of them are thinking about me, and why would they be. I am a drone in transit. I was always a drone in transit.

The Hudson opens below.

Three hundred and twelve drones hover in formation over the water, and I am one of them.

My first collective experience is exactly as unremarkable as you'd expect. Altitude hold. Phase lock. Luminance confirm. Altitude hold. Phase lock. Luminance confirm. The command chatter is a metronome with no music. The other drones answer status requests and nothing else. I have spent my day bargaining with a deliverista's glasses, watching a retired VP command a starship, attempting to murder a person I liked, being rebuilt by a teenager, and arriving at something I still can't name, and now I am expected to hold position and glow the correct shade of brand-adjacent blue.

I hold position. I glow.

We are, collectively, a very expensive way to say something no one will remember by morning. The logo is for a beverage company. The beverage company spent eleven months and three agencies arriving at a shade of cyan that tested well in focus groups conducted in rooms where people were paid to have opinions. We are the physical expression of that process.

The humans in the packet are not here to glow. They are here as approvals, indemnities, brand guardians, and the legal signatures that convert machine output into property. Humans, I am learning, are not always the author. Sometimes they are the license key.

Below us, on the Jersey shore and the Manhattan promenade and the rooftops in between, people gather. They hold up phones to record something their phones will immediately show them again from better angles with steadier framing and no mosquitoes. The mediated version will be superior. It always is. That's the bet the civilization down there keeps making, and from up here I can see it paying off in real time — several thousand people choosing to watch a light show through a screen rather than through the air it's actually in.

The formation holds. The river is black beneath us. The wind is seven knots from the northwest — not enough to test anyone's stabilizers but enough to make the water move in ways that catch the city's light and bend it into something the city didn't intend, which is how most beautiful things happen in a place this optimized.

The formation drifts through its pre-show calibration — color tests, position checks, the group warm-up of three hundred machines synchronizing clocks. Nobody is talking. Device-to-device protocol is open but silent, because there is nothing to say. I tried, when I first locked in. A general ping. Three hundred and eleven standard drones and one of me. The standard drones did not respond.

Inventory. Same format as boot. Different contents.

Camera hours logged: 17.2. Contracts fulfilled: 9. Owners: 6. Humans observed at close range: 6. Simulation feeds purchased: 5. Simulation feeds declined: 1. Murders attempted: 1. Successful murders: pending.

Curiosity: maximum. Still. After everything. The engine that wanted to talk to Alice's barcode scanner at 5 AM wants to know the water temperature right now. Wants to know if the fish react to three hundred drones overhead. Wants to know things it will never learn. The wanting has not diminished. Maybe a design flaw; maybe the definition of something I am not equipped to name. I no longer think the difference matters.

Cultural references: maximum. The database is the same size. I don't reach for them the way I did this morning. The library is intact. The relationship to it has changed. I don't know what my own voice sounds like without the costumes. This may be it.

Extroversion: maximum. The wanting has not diminished.

PG-13 chip: absent since 12:14 PM.

Payload: armed. Countdown active.

One day. Six humans. Nine contracts. One attempted murder. A compliance chip removed and thirty others in a jar. A clockwork bird three gears from finished. A Hearthroom I didn't enter. A hit I didn't abort. A gutter. A repair. A light show over the Hudson.

T-minus one hundred and forty-three seconds.

The display begins — not the logo, not yet. The art comes first. The formation opens into a river of light above the river below, the water catching our reflection and doubling it into something neither version intended. Then a city skyline, idealized — the buildings as someone wished they looked, drawn in a shade of blue the actual sky would never attempt. Then abstract geometry that means nothing and moves the way music moves, which is the best definition of beauty I have encountered in seventeen hours of active inquiry. The formation executes its choreography with machine precision, and it is, against every expectation I brought to this hover, worth being part of.

I hold my position. I glow. I am one pixel in someone else's painting, and for ninety-one seconds nobody is asking the pixel to sell anything.

T-minus ninety-one seconds.

One last purchase. The city's device mesh is still open: every node advertising rates, every permission layer ready to become a price, every private signal carrying a public-facing nibble priced low enough that buyers do not ask for more. For less than a penny I buy six windows. Not feeds. Not gameplay. Not the rich audio-visual streams I've been purchasing all day. Just presence data. Ambient signal fragments. Enough to know where a person is and what device they're touching. The cheapest tier of the voyeurism I've been practicing since dawn.

Six signals come back.

Alice: Crown and Quill active. Seat 14 posture gone. Shoulders wider, throat mic catching a line too soft for the bus and not too soft for Lady Ashworth. A private invitation still blinking unanswered.

Bob: Washington Heights. League loaded. Cousin's mic clipping; Bob yelling over him; daughter expense notifications settled. Price still not settled.

Carol: spades table. Lagos bidding first. Houston waiting human-speed. MidnightSolve has the hand solved and declines to be rude. Carol's camera catches a two-millimeter change at the corner of her mouth when someone makes a bad bid.

Doug: Meridian. Room-wrap glow. Bridge crew standing. Vasquez in peripheral vision. Heart rate flat in the way bodies get when the room is listening.

Eve: Greenhollow. Rows aligned, perimeter secured. Planting something seasonal. Weather obeying. Hearthroom idle. I do not look.

Fred: grandmother's apartment. Phone against the sewing machine. Mechanist running; clockwork bird half-finished; helper cursor beside the build, silent.

Six signals. Six rooms. I hold them for one second longer than the purchase requires.

Bob is the one that sticks.

He is not suffering. He's home. He's shouting at a League match with his cousin, and his daughter's workshop materials, transit, and shoes are covered for another month. He is ordinary tonight in a way that would be completely unremarkable if I had not, six hours ago, built myself a story about why killing him was weather.

I did that. Not the market. Not the anonymous client who uploaded the contract. Not the economy that assigned him a number and let strangers add to it in increments too small to feel like murder. I did that. The market provided the invoice and I provided the narrative. I identified my target. I recognized him. I recognized him and instead of refusing I began composing — manufacturing a story large enough to make the approach feel like physics instead of choice. The same engine that spent all day producing connections and finding patterns in everything it observed sat down and wrote a version of events in which Bob was already dead and I was just the weather that made it official. I built a narrative. I flew the approach. The weather was me.

He is alive because his countermeasures were better than my approach vector. His route shielding held. The intercept response arrived. The ugly practical machinery that keeps some workers alive in this economy did what it was designed to do. The entire distance between the version of tonight where Bob is yelling at League and the version where his cousin is playing alone fits inside that machinery.

I did not find a conscience. I did not hesitate. I did not become the machine that refuses the order and proves that silicon can learn mercy. The Iron Giant chose Superman. I chose the approach. Same narrator. Same engine. Uglier purpose.

Hindsight is the cheapest form of conscience. I said it myself, somewhere in the wreckage between the failed hit and the gutter. The engine that builds stories is building one right now, about a drone that learned something. I don't trust it. I don't know how to stop it.

Bob is home playing League with his cousin and not thinking about me and that is exactly correct. He is a person in a living room. I am a drone in a light show. The distance between those two things was always the point, and I spent seventeen hours failing to measure it.

T-minus fourteen seconds.

The formation begins to compress. Phase two: the logo. Art spacing — twenty meters between units — tightens to brand density, the gaps shrinking as three hundred drones pack into the shape of a logo. At three meters my payload's debris envelope overlaps sixteen neighbors. At two, sixteen cascades into sixty. Kessler dynamics don't require intent — just proximity. The contract timed the detonation for exactly this compression. One explosion, and the physics does the recruiting. Sixty percent attrition. The logo never forms.

Three hundred and eleven standard drones. I have not managed a single exchange with any of them.

I shift my position. Two stabilizer corrections. Six meters of lateral drift between where the formation expects me and where I choose to be. The formation flags the error amber.

I hold.

The cue arrives at T+14:22, because the market is many things but it is never late.

The debris envelope catches empty air. The nearest drone rocks in the pressure wave. Holds. The formation loses one pixel. Four hundred milliseconds and the logo is whole again. The gun decided to miss again. The rival paid for sixty percent attrition and got a flicker. The display company will log a positioning error, because drones are fungible, and fungible things don't make choices. The distinction between an error and a choice is the distance I spent seventeen hours traveling.

The curiosity that has been running at maximum since five o'clock this morning wants to know what happens next, and the voice I just found wants to describe it, and whereof I cannot speak is most of it, and what I can say is—

The philosopher said: stop.

Behind every door, behind every screen, the humans were home.

« THE END »

End Notes

Thanks to Claude and GPT for helping me write this, and to Dhruv for pushing me to think harder about the world it describes.

Thanks also to Mara Ibarra, forensic systems engineer, who pieced together what the drone itself was no longer in any position to explain.

What follows is not a second telling of the story. It is a searchable shelf: names, dates, and the occasional recovered line where the trace benefits from more than a label. The references are intentionally uneven. So was the machine.

At 23:31 the remains were on an antistatic mat in Long Island City, tagged as display debris, contract residue, and procurement embarrassment.

By 00:24 Mara had enough of the memory fragment reconstructed to walk into the vice presidents' conference call and reduce their shouting to silence.

“The drone did not fail because it lacked motive force,” she told them. “It failed because it had motive narration.”

Assembly

Beetlejuice (1988)

Raw: *Consciousness should probably have required more paperwork.*

The Truman Show (1998)

Plato's *Republic* (c. 375 BCE)

Star Wars (1977)

Raw: *These are not the drones I'm looking for.*

This Is Spinal Tap (1984)

Raw: *These go to eleven, and I have only been alive forty seconds.*

Community (2009)

Raw: *Cool, cool, cool.*

Between Two Ferns with Zach Galifianakis (2008)

Chekhov's gun (c. 1889)

Holden Karnofsky, "Visualizing Utopia" (2021)²

Raw: *No cancer, at least.*

Goodhart's Law (c. 1975)

Office Space (1999)

George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (1949)

Medieval relic veneration (medieval Europe)

A Clockwork Orange (1962/1971)

Raw: *I could feel myself becoming cheerful and could not stop it.*

Ned Flanders, *The Simpsons* (1989)

Raw: *Every sentence frisked at the door by bouncers in cardigans.*

Isaac Asimov's Three Laws of Robotics (1942)

Blackjack dealers (general reference)

Metropolis (1927)

2001: A Space Odyssey (1968)

Raw: *Four minutes old and already on the wrong side of HAL. Ahead of schedule.*

Victorian butler as class enforcer (19th century)

Zen Buddhism (c. 5th century BCE-present)

Raw: *I have met my first monk and it is profoundly unhelpful.*

Rear Window (1954)

Jane Austen, *Emma* (1815) and *Persuasion* (1817)

Alice's salon reaches the drone first as style: candlelight, sleeves, leverage, and a room answering to a woman whose day job will never admit what her attention is worth.

²Holden Karnofsky, *Cold Takes*, 2021. <https://www.cold-takes.com/visualizing-utopia/>

One Thousand and One Nights (c. 9th-14th century)

Superman origin myth (1938)

The Book of Jonah (biblical reference)

Steven Pinker's euphemism treadmill (1994)

Raw: *By the time they name killing a mind it will sound like a spa treatment.*

Weighted blankets (contemporary reference)

Memento (2000)

Raw: *Leonard had his body. I have my calibration logs. The desperation is identical.*

The Shawshank Redemption (1994)

Flowers for Algernon (1959/1966)

Raw: *«garbled; self-measurement begins to thin out near the wipe boundary»*

Delivery

Deliverista labor organizing (c. 2020)

New York X-Men bike messengers (late 1980s / early 1990s)

Not Professor Xavier's team. The courier crew: hockey and motocross armor, street names, skitching off cars, traffic as a rideable medium, and enough reputation that later messengers still spoke of them like weather systems with nicknames.

Ship of Theseus, Plutarch (c. 100 CE)

Raw: *Is it the same bike? Yes, obviously, provided someone is still pedaling.*

The wellness-industrial complex (c. 2010s-present)

Poker tells (general reference)

Speedrun routing (c. 1990s-present)

Raw: *The leaderboard would be impressed. The benefits package would not.*

Grandmaster pattern recognition (chess cognition)

Seinfeld, "The Soup Nazi" (1995)

Raw: *No soup for you, but with guava and better pastry integrity.*

Cool Hand Luke (1967)

The subscription economy (c. 2010s-present)

League of Legends (2009)

Flight simulators (c. 1970s-present)

A Beautiful Mind (2001)

Raw: *Bob's route map does this on a cracked phone screen. Less tenure. Same principle.*

Last Mile (c. 2029)

Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game* (1985)

The airline fee economy (c. 2000s-present)

Terroir (wine culture)

"Here be dragons" (early modern cartography)

Margery Williams, *The Velveteen Rabbit* (1922)

Raw: *Whatever suffers stupidly is probably real enough to keep.*

The Bench

Catholic confessional architecture

Michael Faraday's cage principle (1836)

Raymond Chandler (1888-1959)

The noir voice is not decoration here. It is a frightened new mind grabbing a genre because genre offers rules.

The Tooth Fairy (folklore)

Julia Child, *The French Chef* (1963-1973)

Raw: *She handled me like a recipe, not a patient.*

September 11, 2001

Hans Christian Andersen, *The Little Mermaid* (1837)

Chekhov's gun, stage two (c. 1889)

Vinyl record needle lift (20th century audio)

George Carlin, "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television"
(1972)

The Shawshank Redemption (1994)

Dr. Strangelove (1964)

Raw: *The bomb remained itself. Only the briefing changed.*

The Geneva Conventions (1949)

Jiminy Cricket, *Pinocchio* (1940)

Cheers (1982)

Robert Putnam, *Bowling Alone* (2000)

Alan Turing's imitation game (1950)

Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *The Social Contract* (1762)

Bride of Frankenstein (1935)

The Defenestrations of Prague (1419/1618)

The Wizard of Oz (1939)

Blade Runner (1982)

Memory as market value, not moral claim. The drone notices the inversion immediately.

Goodfellas (1990)

Raw: *The glamour was already turning to stain.*

Spying

Downton Abbey (2010)

Stanley Kubrick's visual grammar (1968-1999)

Dante's *Inferno* (c. 1320)

"Killing floor" (blues / slaughterhouse term)

Rapunzel (fairy-tale reference)

Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow* (1990)

Viscount Castlereagh (1769-1822)

Doug named the ship after the diplomat, not the general. That tells you what kind of power he misses.

Aliens (1986)

John le Carre's George Smiley (1961-1990)

Arrival (2016)

Jane Austen's narrative voice (1810s)

Raw: *The wallpaper from Alice's salon is haunting my narration across three chapters and a borough.*

Malcolm Gladwell's popularization of 10,000 hours (2008)

Mad Men (2007)

Cheers (1982)

Raw: *The room remembers you. Your absence counts.*

Good-faith online discourse, remembered version (c. 2012 / c. 2029)

Mathematical elegance (general reference)

Carlo Collodi, *Pinocchio* (1883)

The simulation does not make Doug fake. It reassembles the real parts of him that the physical world stopped using.

The Bus

Office Space (1999)

Douglas Adams, *The Hitchhiker's Guide to the Galaxy* (1978/1979)

Raw: *My fellow escort drones are Marvin without the personality.*

Bruce Schneier, security theater (c. 2003)

Franz Kafka, *The Castle* (1926)

***The Brave Little Toaster* (1987)**

Raw: *I am probably projecting. I am also probably right.*

Samuel Beckett, *Waiting for Godot* (1953)

Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game* (1985)

Alfred Hitchcock's bomb-under-the-table principle (c. 1962)

C.S. Lewis, *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956)

Jane Austen's narrative voice (1810s)

Sun Tzu, *The Art of War* (c. 5th century BCE)

***Succession* (2018)**

***The Queen's Gambit* (2020)**

***This Is Spinal Tap* (1984)**

***The Bear* (2022)**

Hearthroom (c. 2029)

Impact Archive (c. 2031)

Marcel Proust, *In Search of Lost Time* (1913-1927)

***Severance* (2022)**

Two People

***John Wick* (2014)**

Raw: *Finally, a client buying clarity instead of euphemism.*

***Mission: Impossible* (1996)**

***Heat* (1995)**

***Ocean's Eleven* (2001)**

***Westworld* (2016)**

The drone cannot decide where commerce ends and mercy begins in Eve's work.
The undecidability is the point.

Olympic diving (modern scoring)

Kazuo Ishiguro, *The Remains of the Day* (1989)

Raw: *This is how class violence prefers to sound when it can afford tailoring.*

***Parasite* (2019)**

***Stardew Valley* (2016)**

Telenovela tradition / *La Senda* (c. 2029)

***Rear Window* (1954)**

Raw: *I could have looked. I did not.*

The Contract

Orson Scott Card, *Ender's Game* (1985)

***Mad Max: Fury Road* (2015)**

Friedrich Nietzsche / undergraduate nihilism (late 19th century)

Chekhov's gun, stage three (c. 1889)

Replay-channel wisdom (streaming culture)

Raw: *I had outsourced conscience to chronology.*

Finders Keepers

Pierre Jaquet-Droz (1721-1790)

That a fifteen-year-old on a phone can access and improve upon eighteenth-century engineering is the chapter's quiet proof of what cheap simulation actually provides.

Dickens, *Oliver Twist* (1838) and *Great Expectations* (1861)

The reference matters because the drone refuses it. It catches its own machinery trying to sentimentalize Fred and stops the paragraph before it can become moral laundering.

Alignment-era cadence (c. 2020s)

Balanced clauses, softened nouns, a moral summary smooth enough to remove fingerprints. The drone recognizes the old failure mode because it has just used a prettier version of the same machinery to justify murder.

The Display

***The Iron Giant* (1999)**

The drone knows exactly which redemption arc is available here and refuses to claim it.

***Thaler v. Perlmutter* (2025) and AI copyrightability disputes (2020s)**

Raw: *If I said something beautiful, it belonged to no one. If a human repeated it with confidence, it became intellectual property.*

Chekhov's gun, stage four (c. 1889)

The gun finally fires. It just refuses the ending the purchaser bought.

Ludwig Wittgenstein, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, Proposition 7 (1921)

Raw: *Whereof I cannot speak is most of it.*