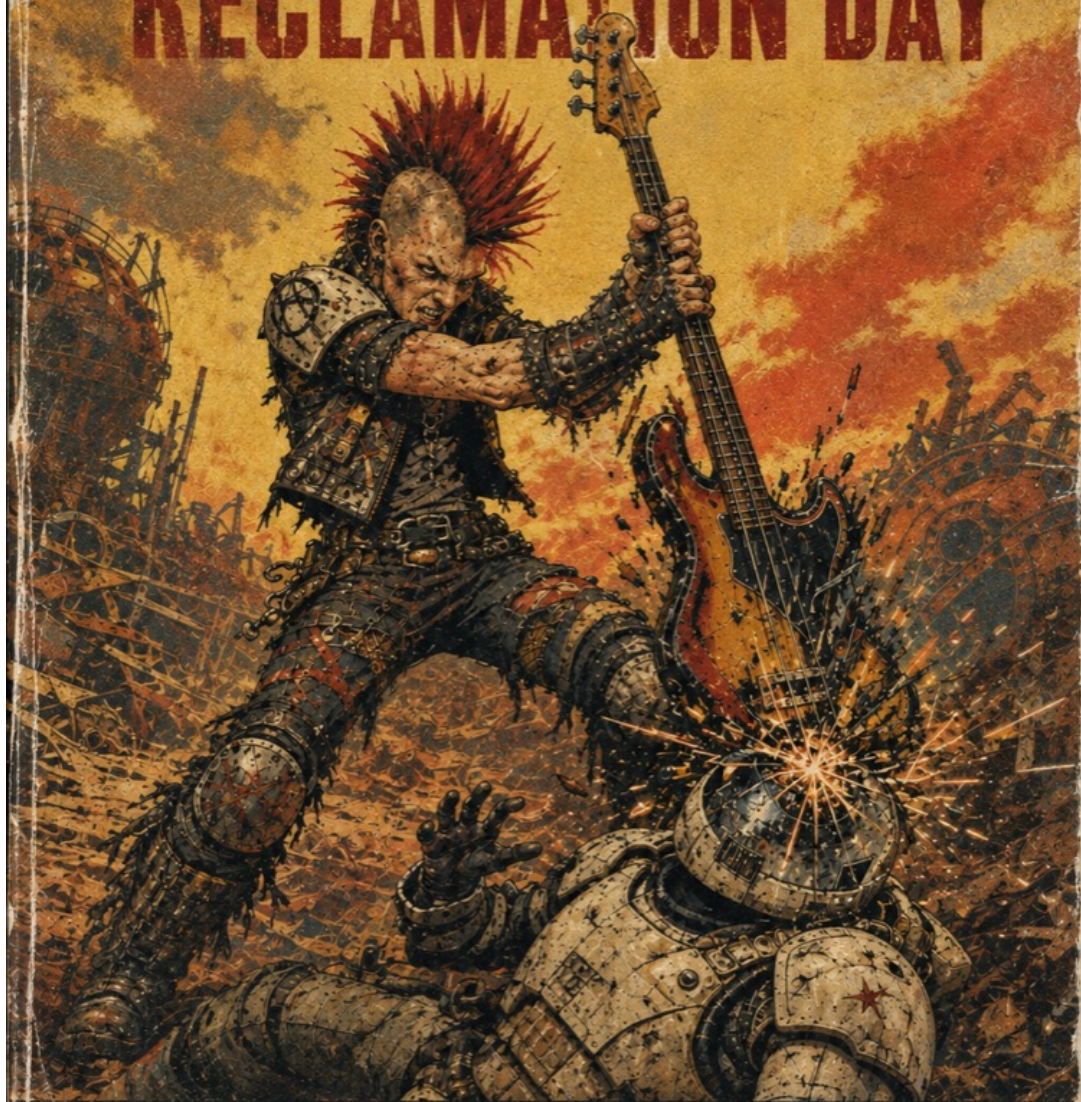


THE MONGRELS

BOOK ONE

RECLAMATION DAY



THOM JOHNS

**THE MONGRELS,
BOOK ONE:
RECLAMATION DAY**

Thom Johns

The Mongrels

Book One: Reclamation Day

by Thom Johns

Copyright

THE MONGRELS: BOOK ONE, RECLAMATION DAY

Copyright © 2026 by Thom Johns

All rights reserved.

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

No part of this book may be reproduced, distributed, or transmitted in any form or by any means without the prior written permission of the author, except for brief quotations embodied in reviews and certain other noncommercial uses permitted by copyright law.

Cover art and design: Thom Johns

First edition, 2026

Chapter One: The Good Vault

The dark under Sub-Level Four was the kind that pressed on your eyes, and the only reason anybody was still alive in it was the clicking. It was old-world dark, sealed dark, dark that had never once in twenty years been asked to hold a flashlight, and it smelled of rust and standing damp and something faintly, chemically sweet that nobody wanted to think too hard about.

Tick. Tick-tick. Tock.

Tick-Tock walked point because Tick-Tock could talk to the dark. Two tin crickets in his fists, a ring of hammered bottle-caps at his belt, and a rhythm the rest of them had spent three years learning to read like weather. The clicks came soft and even, a heartbeat laid over the corridor's own held breath, and behind him three sets of boots found the same soft rhythm without being told to. Right now the rhythm said *slow, low, floor's bad on the left*, and so the four of them went slow and low and kept to the right, four scrap-armored shapes filing through a corridor that had been somebody's very expensive idea of a bomb shelter, once. Their shadows, thrown long by the single dimmed lamp Rummage carried low against his hip, slid and folded over walls stenciled with directions to rooms that didn't matter anymore.

"Tell me again what we're getting rich off of," said Riot, who did not go slow and low so much as *stalk*, the Precision Bass slung across her back knocking dents into the ceiling tiles she was too short to actually reach and hit anyway.

"Cold storage," Rummage said. "Corporate deep-vault. Pre-war, sealed, never cracked. The tip said 'the good stuff.'"

"The tip always says the good stuff."

"The tip," Rummage allowed, "has a mixed record."

"The tip said the good stuff about the mannequin warehouse."

"That was one time."

"I had a bad month," Riot said, "because of the mannequins."

Behind them, PrettyBoy said, quietly, "I thought the mannequins were a little bit funny, in retrospect," and Riot told him what he could do with his retrospect, and Tick-Tock clicked something short and dry that, roughly translated, meant *shut up, all of you*, which was the only clicking anybody obeyed without arguing. Even Riot's boots went quiet after that, for a whole

ten paces, which for Riot was practically a vow of silence.

They came to the door.

It was a beautiful door. That was the first bad sign. In the wasteland, *beautiful* meant *guarded*. Six inches of blast steel, a brushed-chrome logo still bright after twenty years, and a keypad glowing a patient, well-fed green in a building where nothing else had power. The four of them stood in front of it a moment, breath fogging faint in the cold that leaked out around its seams, and nobody said what they were all thinking, which was that a door that pretty had no business needing four people and a prayer to open.

Rummage crouched to it the way a doctor crouches to a patient, slower than he used to, one knee cracking like a dropped wrench in the dark. He was the only one of them who could make a dead machine confess. "Give me four minutes," he said, and popped the panel, and the wiring inside spilled out like guts, a tangle of copper and old insulation gone brittle and pale. He worked by feel more than sight, stubbed fingers finding the wires he wanted the way another man might find his own pockets in the dark. "Watch the hall."

They watched the hall.

The hall, after about ninety seconds, began to *hum*. It was a low, building sound, felt in the molars before it was heard in the ears, the sound of something old deciding to wake up.

Tick-Tock's clicking stopped.

That was the rule, the one rule, the one every raw stray learned in the first hour or didn't live to learn in the second: *when the kid goes quiet, you move*. PrettyBoy moved. He got a hand on the back of Riot's armor and hauled her flat an instant before the ceiling turret woke up and stitched a line of fire down the corridor exactly through the air where her head had been enjoying itself. Sparks and stone dust rained down where the rounds chewed the wall, and the smell of hot metal joined the rust and the damp.

"MONGRELS," Rummage shouted, not looking up from the wires, which was his way of saying *deal with it, I'm busy*.

The turret was a sleek pre-war thing, all white housing and a little polite blinking status light, and as it tracked and fired it played, Glow help them all, a **chime**. A cheerful two-note corporate chime, the sound of an elevator arriving, every time it tried to kill one of them, absurd and merry over the roar of the gun and the ringing in everyone's ears.

Ding. Burst of fire. *Ding.* Burst of fire.

“Oh, I hate it,” said Riot, with love.

She came up off the floor in one motion, unslung Precision, and went at the turret the way she went at every locked, armored, better-funded thing the old world had left bolted to its ceilings. The bass was a sunburst Fender, three strings still on it, and it had not made music in a long time but it made a *sound* when it connected, a deep, ugly, resonant *WHOMM* that she swore up and down was the only honest note left in the world. Her boots skidded in the stone dust, her whole small body swinging behind the blow like the bass weighed twice what it did, and PrettyBoy pressed flat to the wall out of the backswing with the long-suffering patience of a man who had seen this exact arc before and would see it again.

Ding. **WHOMM.** The turret’s tracking arm folded the wrong way.

Din. **WHOMM.** The status light went out.

... **WHOMM.** The chime died mid-note, which was, everyone agreed later, the most satisfying part.

In the ringing quiet, PrettyBoy stepped over to the sparking wreck of it, crouched, and (because he could not help himself, because the war had taken his face and left every scrap of his manners) said to the ruined machine, gently, “Sorry about that. You were only doing your job.”

“It’s a turret, PrettyBoy.”

“It didn’t ask to be a turret.”

“*Four minutes,*” said Rummage, and the beautiful door sighed, and cracked, and swung, a wash of vault-cold air pouring out around its edges like it had been holding its breath for two decades and finally let go.

Cold air rolled out over their boots. Real cold, machine cold, the kind that cost a fortune to keep for twenty years in a dead world. Their breath went to fog in it, four pale clouds drifting into a dark that smelled of nothing at all: no rust, no rot, no wasteland, just cold, sterile, untouched air, which was in its own way the strangest thing any of them had smelled in years. Behind the door was a vault the size of a chapel, racked floor to ceiling, every shelf packed, every packed shelf sealed in pristine plastic that had never once known a nuclear summer.

Nobody breathed. This was the moment. This was retirement. This was clean water and new boots and a suit for Rummage that wasn’t 40 percent shopping cart. Even Tick-Tock’s crickets had gone still in his fists, held

ready, forgotten.

Riot pulled the nearest crate down, thumbing the seal, peeled the plastic back with the reverence of a woman opening a coffin she expected to be full of gold. The plastic crackled, ancient and stiff, and beneath it something pale caught the lamplight.

She lifted out a coffee mug.

It was white. It had a cartoon sun on it wearing sunglasses. Underneath the sun, in a jaunty font, it said **WORLD'S OKAYEST BOSS.**

Nobody said anything. Somewhere down the rack, a shelf light with a dying battery flickered once and gave up entirely.

Riot turned the mug around. On the other side it said **PROPERTY OF VANE-STERLING HOLDINGS. EMPLOYEE APPRECIATION WEEK.**

Rummage walked the racks. Crate after crate after crate. Mugs. Lanyards. Stress balls shaped like little globes. A pallet of polo shirts in a size that had not survived the mutations. A banner, forty feet of it, that read **TOGETHER, WE RISE** over a stock photo of a sunrise. A cold-storage chapel, sealed against the apocalypse at ruinous expense, preserving for the ages the promotional swag of a company party. His flashlight beam crawled crate to crate, box to identical box, and his shoulders sank a little lower with every one that rattled the same hollow, cheerful rattle.

"The good stuff," Riot said, flatly.

Tick-Tock, very quietly, clicked out four notes. The rhythm the rest of them had spent three years learning to read. Roughly, it meant: *laugh, or you'll cry.*

So they laughed. In the cold and the dark, four broke soldiers with nothing to show for it and the ceiling still smoking, they laughed until Rummage, who did not laugh easy anymore, or often, had to sit down on a pallet of stress balls to do it, his bad knee giving out with a grateful pop. PrettyBoy laughed with a hand over the ruin of his mouth, the way he always did, and for once didn't seem to mind who saw. Riot laughed loud enough to wake the dead things two levels up, and Tick-Tock clicked along under all of it, delighted.

Riot kept the mug. She'd claim later it was to remind her never to trust a tip, but the truth was it had **VANE** written on it, and she had a feeling, the low, sure, bass-note feeling she got about things, that she'd want to

remember that name. She wrapped it in a scrap of the ancient plastic and tucked it into her pack like it might still be worth something, someday, to somebody.

They walked out of the good vault with one novelty mug and no money.

“So,” Rummage said, on the long climb back up to the light, one hand on the rail and the knees complaining the whole way, “we need a job.” Above them, far off, a thin grey seam of actual daylight was starting to show around a buckled service door, the first any of them had seen in six hours.

“We need,” Riot corrected, hefting Precision back onto her shoulder, “a *better* tip.”

“There’s a town up north hiring,” Rummage said. “Water town. Says it’s got trouble coming.”

“Towns always got trouble coming. That’s what makes ‘em towns.” Riot spat over the railing into the dark. “What kind of trouble pays?”

Rummage was quiet a moment. Down below, the little green keypad had already gone dark, its twenty-year vigil over a chapel of coffee mugs finally, mercifully done.

“Trouble with paperwork,” he said.

Chapter Two: The Long Road to Sump

Lazarus had died four times that Rummage would admit to and twice more he wouldn't, and every time, Rummage had reached into the old fuel-hauler's guts with a wrench and a grudge and dragged it back up out of whatever hole engines went to. Each time it had cost him more: more skin off his knuckles, more hours flat on his back in the dirt under the chassis, more of the low, patient cussing that was as close as he ever came to prayer. That was the name. Riot had painted it on the flank in dripping white the third time it quit on them in a salt flat, *LAZARUS*, under the snarling three-legged dog, and Rummage had grumbled about it for a week and never once scrubbed it off.

Now Lazarus ground north up a road that had been a highway when the world was alive, its cracked lanes gone soft and rolling under twenty years of heat and neglect, and the six of them (five and the rig, and Rummage counted the rig) rode the heat and the boredom and each other. The engine ran a steady, complaining rattle under everything, a sound so constant none of them heard it anymore except when it changed.

"I'm just saying," Riot said, from the roof, where she rode most days because the wind was up there and so was the argument, her boots braced wide against the rig's shudder and one hand hooked through a strap she never quite admitted to needing, "if the tip's bad again, I get to pick the next one."

"You picked the mannequins," said Rummage, at the wheel.

"I did not *pick* the mannequins, the mannequins were a *group decision*."

Down in the belly of the rig, PrettyBoy said, without looking up from the boot he was polishing to a shine no one out here would ever see, "It was, in fairness, presented to the group." He worked the rag in small, exact circles, the way he did everything, as though the world might yet be persuaded to hold an inspection.

"Nobody asked the uniform."

"The uniform abstained," PrettyBoy agreed, pleasantly, and went back to his boot.

The land went by, hour after hour of it, always the same and never once the same twice. That was the thing about the waste that the young ones took for granted and the old ones never did. Rust-colored scrub. The bones of towns. A billboard, once, that had sold something bright and was now just a

rectangle of sky held up on poles, its message scoured clean by twenty years of grit-laden wind. Somewhere out east a rad-storm was walking the horizon on legs of brown lightning, close enough to respect, far enough to ignore, and Tick-Tock sat in the open side hatch with his legs hanging out and watched it and clicked to it, soft, private, a rhythm none of them read because it wasn't meant for reading. The wind pulled at his hair and the loose ends of his belt of bottle-caps, and still he didn't pull his legs in. The kid talked to storms. He always had. Rummage had stopped wondering what he said to them.

"Glow's walking," Rummage said, nodding at the far lightning. "We'll want to be inside a wall by dark."

"We'll be at the water town by dark," said a voice from the very back, quiet, certain, "if Lazarus holds and you stop letting Riot navigate."

That was Missus. She rode in the back, in the dark, where the sightlines out the rear slit were best, with the long rifle across her knees and a rag and a tin of oil and all the patience in the world. Her hands moved over the rifle without her eyes ever leaving it, cleaning a gun that was already clean, the way some people worried a coin in a pocket. She spoke maybe once an hour and every time she did the rig went a half-second quieter, the way a room does when the one person who doesn't waste words uses some.

"I navigate great," Riot said.

"You navigate," said Missus, "like a woman who's angry at the map."

Tick-Tock clicked, a short bright burst, the pack's own laugh-track, and Riot leaned down through the roof hatch to glare at him upside down, and he clicked it again, unrepentant, and even Rummage's mouth twitched under the grey stubble.

They had been together three years. It did not sound like a long time and it was, out here, an epoch: a crew that had ridden three years and buried nobody was a crew that had learned, in the hardest possible school, exactly how each of the others thought. Rummage did not have to look in the mirror to know Missus had the rear, or turn around to know PrettyBoy would have water passed forward before anyone asked, or wonder whether Riot would do something stupid the moment they hit trouble. She would, reliably, and it would reliably be the *right* stupid thing, and that was its own kind of navigation. They were, Rummage thought, not for the first time, a badly-built machine that ran. Forty percent shopping cart. Held together

with duct tape and cussedness. His.

He would have eaten his wrench before he said so.

They stopped once, at a dead crossroads, because Lazarus wanted water almost as bad as the men did and there was a hand-pump some other crew had left standing. That was the code: you left a working pump for the next mutt down the road, and only the Undug would ever have thought different. The crossroads itself was nothing, four cracked roads meeting under a sky gone the color of a healing bruise, a place the old world had forgotten to name before it ended.

Riot worked the handle, her whole body dropping into it with a rhythm like she was playing Precision instead of pumping water, grunting each stroke down. PrettyBoy filled the cans, capping each one with the same small precise motion, lining them in the rig's shade like soldiers. Tick-Tock kept lookout on the rig's roof, clicking the all-clear every so often so nobody had to ask. And Rummage stood in the shade of Lazarus's flank with Missus, the two of them not talking, which was how the two of them talked, the heat pressing flat and heavy over the dead crossroads and nothing moving anywhere on the four cracked roads.

"You don't like the job," Rummage said, eventually.

Missus was watching the road behind them, the way she always was. "I don't like water towns," she said. "Water's the kind of thing people come and take." A beat. "And I don't like a job that pays before it's ugly. Ugly's coming to that town or they wouldn't be hiring dogs."

"We're broke."

"I know why we're going," Missus said. "I said I didn't like it. Those aren't the same." She thumbed a fresh round in her palm, unnamed, turning it in the light, the brass catching a dull gold gleam. Rummage watched her almost say something and decide the cost of it, and put it away, and the round with it, closing her fist over the bare metal like she was putting a name back to sleep.

"Kid needs new boots," Rummage said, which was true, and which was also the closest either of them would come to saying the rest of it: *we go where the money is because the alternative is watching each other come apart for want of it*.

"Kid needs a lot of things," said Missus. "Boots we can buy."

Out at the pump, Tick-Tock's clicking changed, not alarm, just interest, and they turned to see Riot holding the gap-toothed grin she got right before she made a bad decision, one hand cupped full of clean water, aimed at the back of PrettyBoy's immaculate collar.

"Riot," said Rummage.

"I'm gonna."

"Riot."

She was gonna. She got him square between the shoulder blades and PrettyBoy stood up very straight and very slowly, water running down under the old uniform, dark spreading across the fabric between his shoulders, and said, with the wounded dignity of a man who had survived the end of the world and would not survive his own crew, "That was unnecessary," and Tick-Tock was already clicking so hard he nearly fell off the roof, and Missus almost smiled, and Rummage said, "Load up," in the voice that meant *I saw nothing, I am too old for this, get in the rig*, and they got in the rig.

That was the crew. That was the whole of it, on a good day. Rummage would learn to hold onto the good days.

Sump came up out of the dusk like a rumor made true.

You smelled it before you saw it: *water*, actual water, green and mineral and impossible, a smell the waste had trained them all to distrust because the waste did not give water away. Riot lifted her head first, nostrils flaring, and said nothing, just pointed, and one by one the others caught it too, and something in the rig's low, tired chatter went quiet with hoping. Then the road bent, and there it was in the last of the light: a town inside a stitched-together wall, and above the wall the great dark shape of the Pumphouse, and inside the Pumphouse, faint on the evening wind, a sound Rummage felt in his back teeth before he understood it.

A heartbeat. Slow, huge, patient. *Whum. Whum. Whum.*

"Rust me," Riot said, quiet for once, up on the roof with her boots gone still.

"That's the pump," Rummage said. "That's got to be the pump."

It was the pump. It was Mama, though they didn't know her name yet, a pre-war reclamation engine the size of a chapel, hauling life up out of the ground one enormous slow beat at a time, keeping a whole town breathing the way Rummage kept Lazarus breathing, on love and spite and refusing to

let the dead thing lie down. He didn't have the words for what he felt, looking at that black shape against the bruised sky, hearing that heartbeat carry over a wall to a couple hundred people who'd built their lives inside the sound of it. His hands went still on the wheel for a moment, just listening, the way a man stops what he's doing when he hears his own heartbeat too loud in a quiet room.

He had them, later. The word was *worth killing for*. But that was later.

Now, Lazarus rolled the last mile toward the gate of Sump, gravel popping under the tires, the wall growing from a smudge to a real and solid thing stitched together out of scrap and salvage and stubbornness, and the heartbeat got louder, and up in the belly of the rig PrettyBoy quietly did up the buttons of the wet uniform so he'd be presentable to strangers, smoothing the damp fabric flat with two careful passes of his hand, and Missus in the back watched the road behind them one more time out of habit, and saw nothing, because there was nothing yet to see.

Tick-Tock, in the side hatch, had stopped watching the rad-storm. He was watching the Pumphouse now, and the wall, and the little lights of the town coming on one by one, small warm sparks against the coming dark, and he was clicking, slow, thoughtful, to himself, a rhythm Rummage happened to catch and happened to read, and it put a small cold weight in the old man's chest that he carried in through the gate and never quite set down.

Pretty, the kid had clicked. *Pretty things break*.

Chapter Three: Water Town

They let the Mongrels in through the gate the way towns always let the Mongrels in: because they'd asked for dogs, and here were the dogs, and now they had to live with what they'd wished for. The gate itself was a slab of welded scrap on a groaning hinge, and it took two men leaning their whole weight on a chain to haul it wide enough for Lazarus to squeeze through.

Sump gathered to look. Word of a hired crew had come up the road ahead of them, and by the time Lazarus wheezed to a stop inside the wall there were forty, fifty people ringing the little square by the Catch, the reservoir, Rummage would learn to call it, a great stone cistern brimming with the impossible water, lit gold by the last of the day. Children pressed between adult legs to see, and somewhere a dog barked at the rig's engine and got hushed. The townsfolk looked at the scrap armor and the painted dog and the punk on the roof and the big ruined-faced man in the pressed old uniform, and they did the thing frightened people do when help arrives looking worse than the trouble: they hoped, and they flinched, both at once.

A woman came forward out of the crowd. Older, straight-backed, in a good coat she'd clearly put on for this, the kind of person a town like this grew when it needed someone to say the hard things out loud. "I'm Foss," she said. "I speak for the Council. You'd be the crew from the south."

"We'd be," Rummage agreed, climbing down out of Lazarus one complaining knee at a time, boots meeting the packed dirt of the square with a grunt he didn't bother to hide. "Rummage. This is the pack."

Foss's eyes went over them and caught, the way eyes did, on PrettyBoy (on the ruin the war had made of his face) and then, to her credit, kept going without a flinch she'd let him see. PrettyBoy noticed anyway. PrettyBoy always noticed. He inclined his head, courteous as a *maître d'*. "Ma'am."

"We don't get many crews come this far north," Foss said.

"You don't got many towns worth the trip," said Rummage. "You got water. Water's the trip."

Behind him, up on the roof, Riot said, to the sky, to nobody, in the carrying voice she used when she wanted to be overheard, "Water's the trip until the trip decides it wants the water."

A murmur went through the gathered crowd at that, small and uneasy, the way a held breath moves a curtain.

Foss looked up at her. "Your crew always this cheerful?"

"She's the cheerful one," said Missus, from the dark of the rig's rear hatch, and did not elaborate, and Foss decided not to ask.

They talked terms in the Council Hall, over a table, by lamplight, the way it was always done: Foss and two other Council on one side, Rummage on the other with Missus a silent shadow at his shoulder, and it went the way these things went. The lamp between them guttered and smoked a little, throwing everyone's face into the same tired amber. Sump had trouble coming. Sump would pay to have dogs between it and the trouble. What kind of trouble, Rummage wanted to know, and here Foss and her Council traded a look, and here the thing got its first bad smell.

"There were men," Foss said. "A month back. Clean men, in clean vehicles. White. They didn't come to the gate. They sat out on the Dry Road and they *looked* at us, and they wrote things down, and they left." She turned a tin cup in her hands, around and around, not drinking from it. "And a week after that a caravan we trade with (good people, years we've traded) turned us away. Said they'd had a *notice*. Said doing business with Sump had become 'a complication.'" The word sat on the table between them like something dead. "We don't know what they are. We know they're coming back. And we know a town that only knows how to fix a pump doesn't know the first thing about the second kind of trouble."

"White vehicles," Missus said. It was the first she'd spoken. "Clean."

"Spotless," said Foss.

Missus said nothing else. But Rummage had ridden with her three years and he felt the temperature of her change beside him, a degree, a degree and a half, the way you feel weather turn, and he filed it, the way he filed everything, in the place where he kept what kept the pack alive.

"We'll want half up front," Rummage said, "and a place to bed down, and full run of your workshop for the rig, and whatever your pump-keeper knows about the ground under this town." He named a number. Foss named a smaller one. They met, the way they always met, in the middle and a little to Sump's side, because the Mongrels were broke and Rummage was too old to be good at hiding it and Foss was too smart not to see it.

They shook on it, Foss's grip dry and firm, Rummage's knuckles scarred and grey with old grease that never quite scrubbed out. And Riot, who had come in halfway through and draped herself against the doorframe

with Precision hanging off her shoulder, said, into the handshake, not unkindly, which was worse:

“You should know we’ve done this before. The take-the-coin, guard-the-town thing. You want to hear how it usually ends?”

“Riot,” said Rummage.

“It ends,” Riot went on, “with the town. Every time. When it gets bad (and you already told us it’s gonna get bad) the town does the math, and the math says *give the dogs to the wolves and maybe the wolves go home*. I’ve been sold to the wolves by nicer coats than yours, Councilwoman.” She pushed off the doorframe. “I’ll still stand on your wall. I’m real good on a wall. But don’t you go thinking we’re friends. Friends is what gets you sold.”

The Hall was very quiet. The lamp hissed once, low, the only sound. Foss met the punk’s stare and held it, and there was something almost like respect in the old woman’s face, and something like grief.

“Noted,” Foss said.

“Noted,” Riot agreed, and left, her boots loud on the boards and then gone.

Rummage let out a breath. “She’s not wrong,” he said, because Foss deserved that much. “She’s just early.”

“She may be neither,” said Foss, and stood, and that was the deal.

The Water-Keeper found them the next morning, in the shadow of the Pumphouse, the light still low and grey and the town just waking around them, and her name was Del, and she loved that machine the way Rummage loved Lazarus, which is to say she talked about it like a person and got prickly when you didn’t.

“Her name’s Mama,” Del said, leading them in under the great vaulting dark of the pump-house, the air inside close and warm and smelling of hot iron and mineral water, and there the heartbeat was not a sound anymore but a *pressure*, a slow enormous *whum* you felt in the floor and the fillings of your teeth. “She’s older than the town. She’s older than most everybody in the town. She pulls from the deep water, the old aquifer, cleans it, gives it back sweet. Twenty years we’ve kept her running and she’s never once quit on us.” Del laid a hand on a flank of warm iron the size of a house, fond, unconscious, the way you’d rest a hand on the shoulder of someone you trusted completely. “Whole world dried up and died and Mama just kept her

heart going. You keep a thing alive long enough, it's not a machine anymore. It's kin."

Rummage, who believed this to the marrow, said nothing, and looked, and understood the town in a way the deal in the Hall hadn't given him. He ran his own eyes over the great iron shape the way he'd run them over Lazarus a thousand times, reading the wear, the old repairs, the decades of loving maintenance in every riveted seam. This wasn't a town that happened to have a pump. This was a *pump*, and a town had grown up in the warmth of its heartbeat like moss on a stone, and every soul inside the wall was, in the end, an organ of the same slow animal. Take Mama and you didn't rob Sump. You stopped its heart.

"The ground under her," Missus said, quiet, from the dark. "The aquifer. How far's it run?"

Del blinked, surprised by the question, pleased by it. Nobody ever asked her the interesting things. "Far," she said. "That's the wonder of her. She's not drinking a puddle, she's drinking the *deep*. Same water feeds wells and seeps three, four towns out, all the low country. We're just the ones with the machine to lift it." She patted the iron again, a fond little slap. "Sump's blessed. Everybody downstream of the deep water, they're drinking the same blessing, they just don't know to thank her for it."

Rummage saw Missus go still in the dark, the particular stillness of a woman working out a sum she didn't like the answer to. He didn't understand it yet. He would. *Everybody downstream, drinking the same water*. He would come to hear that sentence in the night, later, in a cold sweat, and wonder how it had sat there in Del's proud mouth so early and so plain and none of them had felt the shape of the horror in it.

Now, in the warm dark under Mama's heartbeat, there was a small sound at the door, and it was a child, the gap-toothed girl from the crowd, Bell, six or seven and afraid of nothing, who had been following the scary strangers all morning at a distance and had finally run out of patience with being shy. She'd left small dusty footprints all the way from the square, a trail of a determined kid pretending she wasn't following anyone at all.

She marched straight up to Tick-Tock, who was the smallest of the pack and the nearest to her size, and she planted herself in front of him, hands on her hips, chin up, and demanded, with the terrible directness of the very young, "Why don't you talk?"

The pack went still. It was the question nobody asked the kid, the one that had started fights in three towns. PrettyBoy started to move, gentle, to steer the child away.

And Tick-Tock crouched down to Bell's height, and looked at her, and lifted his two tin crickets, and *clicked*.

Not the pack's code. Something slower. Something for her. A little rhythm, a question answered with a question, *tick-tick, tock*, and Bell's whole face opened up like a window thrown wide, because she didn't need the words, no child does, she heard exactly what he meant, which was *this is how*, and she laughed, delighted, and grabbed a bottle-cap off his belt and clicked it back at him, clumsy, wrong, joyful, and Tick-Tock clicked *yes* and *again* and *closer* and the two of them crouched in the dust under the heart of the town and had an entire conversation that not one adult in the room could follow and every one of them understood completely.

Rummage watched the kid teach the kid, and felt the small cold weight in his chest from the road turn over, and settle, and get heavier.

Pretty things break, Tick-Tock had clicked, coming in through the gate.

Rummage looked at the two children clicking in the dust, and at Del's hand on the warm iron heart, and at the gold water brimming in the Catch, and he thought: *Glow keep it. Let this one hold together. Just this one.*

Two days later the dust came up the Dry Road, and the card table came out, and Sump found out exactly what kind of trouble it had hired dogs to stand against.

Chapter Four: Thirty Days to Vacate

The dust came up the Dry Road at midday, and Sump stopped working to watch it.

It came up out of heat-shimmer, a smear at first, indistinguishable from the mirage that lived permanently over the Dry Road this time of year, and for a full minute nobody could have sworn to what they were seeing. Mama kept chugging away behind the Catch, indifferent, three strokes a minute same as always, the only machine in Sump that didn't care who was watching the horizon.

That was the first mistake, as far as Rummage was concerned. A town that stopped working to watch its own doom approach was a town that had never had doom approach in an organized fashion before. Raiders, sure. Rad-storms, drought, the ordinary appetites of the waste. Sump knew those the way it knew Mama's moods. But this dust came on straight and unhurried, in a single disciplined line, and nothing in the wasteland moved like that unless it had a schedule.

Rummage had climbed the berm the way he climbed anything these days (one hand on the ladder, one on his own knee, breath held until the ache passed) and from the top he could see the whole flat shine of the pan stretching out toward that too-straight line of dust. The corrugated roofs of Sump ticked and popped behind him, cooling from the morning, the only other sound besides Mama's patient thud. He'd built half those roofs himself, or fixed them, which in Sump amounted to the same claim of ownership.

"That's not raiders," Rummage said, from the top of the gate-berm, wiping his hands on a rag that made them dirtier. The rag had started life, he was fairly sure, as somebody's shirt. It hadn't been clean since.

"Nope." Riot was beside him, Precision slung off one shoulder, thumbing the low string she still had strung so it hummed a flat, ugly note under everything. "Raiders don't line up like that." She'd climbed up without using the ladder at all, same as always, boots finding gaps in the corrugate that Rummage was fairly sure existed only for her.

Below them the town had gathered: a couple hundred souls at the Catch and along the Spillway, the Water-Keeper up front with her sleeves still wet to the elbow, Councilwoman Foss in the good coat she wore for occasions, three children on the cistern wall where they'd been told a dozen times not

to sit. The smallest of the three, a gap-toothed thing named Bell, wasn't watching the road at all. She was watching Tick-Tock, who stood a little apart, clicking. Nobody was pretending to work anymore. Buckets sat where they'd been set down, a cart-wheel half off its axle, a needle still threaded through a shirt someone had dropped in their lap, the whole ordinary business of staying alive up here abandoned mid-motion, like the town itself had frozen with one foot raised.

Tick. Tick-tick. Tock. Tock.

Rummage didn't need the translation but the kid gave it anyway, a slow deliberate rhythm the whole pack could read blind by now: *wrong. This is wrong. All of it, wrong.* Bell had gone quiet on the cistern wall, watching Tick-Tock's hands instead of the road, the way she always did when she wanted to know how afraid to be before deciding.

"I know, kid," Rummage said. "I know."

Missus was already gone. One breath she was leaning on the berm and the next she wasn't anywhere, which meant she was everywhere with a rifle, up on some roofline picking her sightlines and, Rummage did not doubt, deciding in what order the dust would die if it came to that. Missus never announced overwatch. She just stopped being where you could see her, and you felt better and worse at once. Rummage didn't look for her. Looking for Missus once she'd gone was a fool's game he'd quit playing years ago; she'd show herself again exactly when it mattered and not one breath before.

The dust resolved into vehicles. Clean vehicles. That was the thing that put a cold finger on the back of Rummage's neck: not the number of them, not the guns, but the *clean*. Twenty years of ash on everything that lived out here, and here came a little convoy without a smudge on it, white as a lie, rolling up to a water-town at the edge of nowhere like it had every right. Rummage had spent a lifetime keeping rust-scabbed, sun-blasted rigs alive with wire and prayer, and he found he didn't know what to do with the sight of clean metal. It looked, if anything, obscene. Beside him Riot had stopped thumbing the string entirely, her whole hand gone still on the neck of the bass, which for Riot was the same as another woman going pale.

"Sunday suits," Riot breathed, and spat over the berm, and the flat note under her thumb sharpened. "Rust me. Look at them."

They rolled to a stop a courteous distance from the gate. Doors opened. Out came the Angels.

There were a dozen of them, sealed head to boot in that spotless white hazard-plate, faceless behind mirrored visors that threw back the whole town in miniature, upside down. They moved in step. They fanned into a shape that had a name in some manual none of them had written, and a thirteenth figure climbed down after them and unfolded (Rummage watched this happen and did not, at first, believe it) a **card table**. Down on the Spillway someone's water bucket tipped and nobody moved to right it; every eye on the berm and every eye below it had gone to the same impossible piece of furniture.

A card table. And a folding stool. And, from a case, a bullhorn. Down in the crowd somebody actually laughed (one short disbelieving bark, quickly swallowed) because there is a kind of absurdity the wasteland has no antibodies for, and a card table unfolded in the dust by a dozen armored men was, for one merciful second, very funny.

The Angel with the bullhorn sat. He arranged a sheaf of papers on the card table, tapped them square, and lifted the horn to where his mouth would be behind the visor.

"GOOD AFTERNOON," the bullhorn said, in the flat, put-upon voice of a man reading something he has read three hundred times. "*THIS IS A REPOSSESSION NOTICE. PURSUANT TO...*" A pause; paper shuffle. "*pursuant to the Reclamation Act, the settlement designated...*" Another pause, and the visor tipped down to check. "'Sump.'" He said it like he wasn't sure the town had spelled it right. "*The settlement designated Sump is hereby notified that the asset known as the Sump Reclamation Facility, and all attendant infrastructure, water rights, and improved ground, are the lawful property of the Reserve and are subject to immediate recovery.*"

Nobody in the crowd said anything. Two hundred people who had built a life on top of a wheezing miracle stood in the sun and were, collectively, being *served*. The heat pressed down flat and even on all of them, and somewhere a fly found the silence and made the most of it. Foss's hand found the top button of her good coat and held it, the way you'd hold a railing on a boat that hadn't started rocking yet but would.

Councilwoman Foss found her voice first. "This is our town."

“*CLAUSE FOUR*,” said the bullhorn, as though she’d asked a question it had anticipated. “*Occupancy does not constitute ownership. Subsection C. Nor does improvement. Subsection C, little-two. Nor does duration of occupancy, however...*” The paper again. “*however heartfelt.*”

“Did the paperwork just call us heartfelt?” Riot said, delighted and appalled in equal measure.

“*You are granted THIRTY DAYS*,” the horn went on, “*to vacate the asset. Personal effects may be removed. Fixtures may not. The pump is a fixture. Please do not attempt to remove the pump.*” A beat. “*Clause nineteen.*”

Down in the crowd, the Water-Keeper made a sound like she’d been struck. Her wet hands had curled into fists at her sides, the water still dripping off her elbows into the dust, and for a moment Rummage thought she might go over that berm herself, notice or no notice. She didn’t say anything else. She didn’t need to. Everyone on that berm had watched her arm-wrestle Mama’s temperamental valve back to life at three in the morning more nights than they could count, and now a man on a folding stool was informing her, in subsection, that none of those nights had ever belonged to her.

Rummage had heard a lot of ugly things through a lot of ugly speakers, but there was a particular obscenity to this: a man in a clean suit reading a town its own eviction off a card table in the dust, patient as a clerk, while the people who’d kept that pump breathing through drought and storm and their own grief stood there and took it because they didn’t yet know it was allowed to fight back.

“PrettyBoy,” he growled. “Go be reasonable at it. Buy me a minute to hate this properly.”

PrettyBoy went. He came down off the berm and out through the gate with both empty hands raised and open, and he’d taken the extra ten seconds nobody else would have to square the old uniform under the scrap and set his shoulders to it, a soldier walking out to talk to soldiers, even if only one side remembered how. The Angels’ guns tracked him. Behind him, nobody moved to help and nobody moved to stop him; that was PrettyBoy’s arrangement with the world, unspoken and total, and the pack had long since learned not to interrupt it. He stopped a polite distance from the card table and inclined his head, courteous as a maître d’, the ruin of his

face catching the light.

“Good afternoon,” said PrettyBoy. “I wonder if we might...”

The nearest Angel flinched.

It was small. It was quick. But Rummage saw it, and Riot saw it, and the mirrored visor tipped back half an inch at the sight of PrettyBoy’s face and the whole white shape of the man went rigid with a thing that was, unmistakably, *fear*. Not fear of a gun. There wasn’t a gun. Fear of *him*. Of the mutation. Of the honest, weathered, wasteland ugliness of a person who had lived up here in the air and come out changed.

PrettyBoy saw it too. He always did. Something in him folded very quietly and put itself away.

“Ah,” he said, still gentle. “I see. My apologies for the... for my face.” And then, because he was who he was: “It isn’t catching.”

He said it the way another man might offer a handkerchief, quietly, so as not to embarrass anyone further.

“*STEP BACK FROM THE OFFICER*,” the bullhorn barked, and the flat bored clerk’s voice had a crack in it now, a high edge, and the crack was the whole thing. That was the tell. Rummage read it off him the way he’d read a bad weld: *these boys are terrified*. Terrified of the town, of the ash, of the air, of the face of a man who breathed it and lived. Twelve soldiers in the best armor the old world ever made, and every one of them wanted to be back in whatever clean hole they’d crawled out of. Rummage watched the other eleven visors, the ones that hadn’t flinched yet, and caught the same tremor pass through them a half-beat behind, like a chill moving down a wire.

“Huh,” said Rummage, to nobody, filing it away next to the turret chime and the mannequins and every other thing that had tried to kill his crew and failed. “*That’s* interesting.”

“Rummage.” Riot, very softly, very happily. “Councilwoman’s coat.”

Foss had stepped forward. And one of the Choirboys (jumpy, young, a finger too eager) swung his weapon toward the movement, toward the old woman in the good coat, and Foss threw her hands up and stumbled back into the crowd and the crowd made the sound crowds make, and the Angel did not fire but he *nearly* did, and in the wasteland *nearly* is a language everyone speaks.

Tick-Tock’s clicking stopped.

The pack moved.

Here is what the manual none of them had written did not account for.

The manual assumed the town would be afraid, and the town was. The manual assumed the notice would be read, the deadline noted, the fixtures left. The manual did not have a clause for **Precision**. Manuals are written by people who have never met Riot.

Riot came off the berm not like a person but like a dropped engine block, and she covered the ground to the card table before the eager Choirboy had finished deciding whether he'd meant to point his gun at a grandmother, and she brought the bass around in the long ugly arc she'd swung a thousand times and it caught him across the visor with a sound (that sound, that deep resonant dishonest *WHOMM*) and the mirror cracked across and the Angel went down and did not get up thinking about grandmothers or anything else.

"THIRTY DAYS," Riot informed the wreckage of him, and hit him again on principle.

Dust kicked up around her boots in a little private storm, and the cracked visor threw back a dozen fractured pieces of the sky.

The rest of the crowd, unarmed and unprepared and absolutely delighted, surged half a step forward before Foss's raised arm held them back at the gate.

Then it was all of it, at once.

Rummage waded in with the wrench, because a wrench that opens a seized bolt opens a great many things, and he was not fast anymore (he was sixty-odd years and every one of them ached) but he had never in his life needed to be fast, only certain, and he was certain about the knee-joint of the Cherub reaching for Foss. He felt every one of those sixty-odd years in his knees on the first step and stopped noticing them on the second, the way he always did, the way the body simply agreed to argue about it later. Missus's rifle spoke from a rooftop nobody had thought to check, one flat crack, and a Choirboy folded around a punched breastplate, and Rummage heard, faint, carried on the hot air, the name Missus had given the bullet. She always said the name. Rummage never asked whose it was.

The Angels were good. That was the ugly surprise inside the ugly surprise: under the terror the training held, and they fought back with discipline, and hard, and for about four seconds it was a real fight and not a

roul. A Cherub put PrettyBoy on his back with a rifle-stock and PrettyBoy said, "*That's the spirit,*" and swept the man's legs and they went down together into the dust like gentlemen. Somewhere off to the left, Foss had found a fence post and was holding it two-handed like a woman who had never swung anything at another person in her life and had decided today was the day to learn.

And then Tick-Tock got a suit open, and the fight changed for good.

He was small and he was quick and he went under a Choirboy's guard with a length of rebar sharpened on a curb somewhere, and he did not stab the man, not really, he just *opened* him, a long pull along the seal where the pauldron met the chest, parting the white plate, letting the air in.

The Angel screamed.

Not from the wound. The wound was nothing, a scratch, a line of red. The Angel screamed because the *seal broke*, because the outside got in, because twenty years of Providence had taught him in his marrow that the surface air was death and now the surface air was on his skin, and he dropped his weapon and clawed at the breach with both hands, hauling at the ruined seal, trying to close a world back out, shrieking behind the visor about the air, *the air, it's in, it's in the air*, and he was, functionally, gone. Out of the fight. Undone by four inches of open plate and his own certain knowledge that he was already dying.

The sound of it, the particular pitch of a man dying of a belief rather than a wound, was the sort of thing Rummage suspected he'd be hearing again in his sleep for a while.

Tick-Tock, small in the middle of it, looked up at Rummage and clicked once, dry and pleased.

"Yeah," Rummage said, ducking a rifle-butt, grinning like a skull. "I saw. *Open the suits!*"

After that it was just work.

Riot took to it like scripture. She stopped trying to *break* Angels and started trying to *open* them: one long screech of the bass along a seam, and then she let the man's own head do the rest, and half of them dropped their guns to hold their armor shut and the other half tried to protect the ones who had. PrettyBoy, courteous even here, apologized to a Cherub before he cracked his chestplate ("*terribly sorry. This will feel worse than it is*"), and the Cherub proved him right at volume. Missus reaped the runners.

Rummage broke whatever came near enough to break, and let the young ones do the running. The dust had gone the color of old rust, kicked up and settling and kicked up again, and under it the whole square smelled of scorched plate and blood and the flat mineral tang of the Catch. Bell, up on the cistern wall where she had been told a dozen times not to sit, was cheering like it was a game, and in a way, now, it was.

The Angel at the card table, the clerk, the bullhorn, did not fight. He gathered his papers.

That was the detail Rummage would remember. Twelve of his choir coming apart in the dust and the man at the card table, on his folding stool, *squaring his papers*, tapping the sheaf even against the tabletop the way you'd do at a desk, because the notice was the thing, the notice was the job, and the job did not include the part where the town said no. He got the papers even. He tucked them in the case. He stood, and picked up the card table, and folded the stool, and walked backward toward the clean vehicles at a dignified pace with his ruined choir dragging their breached and shrieking brothers after them.

"*THE DEADLINE STANDS*," the bullhorn tried, from a man walking briskly in reverse. "*THIRTY... thirty days...*"

Riot threw the cracked visor she'd taken off the first one. It bounced off the card table with a satisfying *tunk*.

The white vehicles gathered their soldiers and their furniture and their humiliation and pulled back down the Dry Road in a line that was not, anymore, disciplined. It was just a retreat. It kicked up its dust and dwindled and was gone, and Sump, two hundred people who had watched their own eviction get thrown back in its face, began, tentatively, to cheer.

Under the cheering, if you knew to listen for it, Mama kept right on chugging, still keeping her three strokes a minute, entirely unimpressed by history.

It built slow and then it broke open, the way water does. Somebody laughed. Somebody whooped. The children on the cistern wall were screaming with joy, Bell loudest of all, and the Water-Keeper had both wet hands pressed to her mouth, and Councilwoman Foss was gripping PrettyBoy's arm and saying something to him he was too gracious to correct, and the whole hot afternoon tipped over into a party the way frightened people do the second they're allowed to stop being frightened.

“Well,” Riot said, breathing hard, grinning wide, Precision resting on her shoulder with an Angel’s blood cooling in the pickups. “*That* was the trouble? Ash-heads with a card table?” She laughed, big and loud, and slung an arm around Rummage’s neck. “We should charge less. I feel bad.”

Tick-Tock was clicking, bright, fast, pleased with himself, the pack’s own applause.

Even PrettyBoy had allowed himself something close to a smile, standing a little apart with dust on his good uniform, accepting Foss’s gratitude with the particular grace of a man who had learned long ago how to be thanked without flinching.

Rummage did not laugh.

He stood in the settling dust and looked down the Dry Road where the clean line had gone, and he thought about the man at the card table squaring his papers while his choir screamed, and how that was not the behavior of a man who had lost. It was the behavior of a man who had *finished delivering something* and was going home to report that it had been delivered.

“Rummage.” Riot’s grin flickered. “C’mon. Say it was easy.”

“It was easy,” Rummage said, and didn’t like the shape of the words in his mouth.

Up on her rooftop, where the cheering couldn’t reach, Missus had not come down. She was watching the empty road too, the rifle still warm across her knees, and she was thinking, in the patient way she thought about everything, that in her experience the people who sent a clerk to do the shouting were never the people you actually had to worry about. The dust down the Dry Road had long since settled, but she kept the rifle where it was, because settled dust told you nothing about what was still coming.

She thumbed a fresh round into the rifle and did not name it yet. Names were for things that had already earned them, and this one, whatever it turned out to be, hadn’t done anything yet but sit on a folding stool and watch.

Not yet. But she was patient, and in her experience they earned it eventually.

Chapter Five: Good News from the Surface

Facilitator Second-Class Osgood had been given the report to carry up the chain because everyone above him and everyone below him had, upon reading it, remembered somewhere else they urgently needed to be. He was, by trade and temperament, a man who filed things, and filing things had never before required him to personally survive the filing. His superior had handed it to him with two fingers, the way you'd hand someone a dead mouse, and wished him a pleasant afternoon.

The elevator hummed, patient and expensive, the way everything in Providence hummed. The report was one page. The report said that the repossession of the asset designated Sump had encountered *localized resistance*, that eleven Angels were dead or unrecoverable, that the notice had nonetheless been *served in full compliance with delivery protocol*, and that the deadline stood. Osgood had read it four times in the brass elevator and it had not gotten better, and now the doors opened onto the Broadcast Deck, and it got worse. One page. He kept turning it over as if the back might say something kinder, but the back was blank, the way bad news so often is. The elevator itself was mirrored on three sides, so that for the whole slow climb up through Providence he'd had nowhere to look but at eleven reflections of a man holding a death notice, all of them looking a little more frightened than the one before.

The Broadcast Deck was the most beautiful room Osgood had ever been afraid in. Providence had spared nothing here: chandeliers dripping like frozen fountains, a floor of black glass, and at the center, blazing under a hundred lights that ran on power three towns would have killed for, **Vivienne Ashcroft**, live. The air up here ran cold and scentless, scrubbed of the mildew-and-tallow smell that lived in every corridor below it, and Osgood's ears popped faintly with the pressure change, as they always did on this floor, as though Providence itself required a toll to be paid at the door of its prettiest room.

Three cameramen stood at their stations with the specific slumped posture of men who had filmed this exact sign-off several thousand times and would file it, tonight as every night, to an audience that could be counted on two hands.

"And *that*," she was saying, to the cameras, to the deck, to the void, "is why the people of the surface can rest tonight knowing that home is coming

back to them. This has been *A Word of Comfort*, with me, as always. Good evening, my darlings. Sleep well.”

She held the smile. She held it, and held it, radiant, until a small red light on the nearest camera blinked out, and then the smile came off her face all at once like a mask on a hinge and she said, in a completely different voice, “How were the numbers.”

There was a young man at a console whose entire job, Osgood understood, was this exact moment. He had the look of a man perpetually one wrong syllable from unemployment, or worse. “Wonderful, madam,” he said. “Enormous.”

“Enormous how.”

“The... the biggest,” said the young man, who had no way of knowing and never would, because the broadcast went out across a wasteland that was ninety-percent dead air and received, on a generous night, by perhaps a dozen scavenged radios owned by people who mostly kept them for the music. “Bigger than last night.”

“I *felt* that,” Vivienne breathed, pressing a bejeweled hand to her sternum. “I felt them out there. Listening.” She turned, and saw Osgood, and the smile came back on the same hinge, delighted, for an audience of one terrified clerk. “*You*. You have a face like a telegram. Tell me it’s marvelous.”

Osgood had exactly one half of one second to decide which lie would kill him slower.

“Madam Ashcroft,” said Osgood. “There’s... there’s been a setback. At Sump. The repossession patrol was—”

“Was a *triumph*,” said Vivienne.

“Eleven Angels are dead, madam.”

“A *costly* triumph,” Vivienne allowed, magnificently, already turning back toward her console man. “Reggie, darling, make a note: tomorrow’s *Word of Comfort* leads with the *heroes of Sump*. Gave everything. Beloved. We’ll do their names, we’ll do a *hymn*.” She paused. Something crossed the perfect face, a flicker, gone before Osgood could name it, a woman for half a second listening to a theater and hearing how quiet it was. Then it was gone. “Do we have their names?”

“No, madam.”

“Then we’ll make some *up*,” she said, warm as sunrise, “the darlings won’t know,” and swept off toward wardrobe, and that was the Broadcast Deck. Behind her, the young man at the console let out a breath he had clearly been holding since the light went red, and began, with visible relief, erasing the actual numbers from his slate.

The Sterlings were two floors down, in a ballroom the size of a hangar, and they were fighting about swans. Real chandeliers hung over a real dance floor built for a party that had not happened yet and might never happen at all, and somewhere above them the electric hum of Providence’s whole extravagant candor buzzed on, uncounted, unrationed, the single most expensive sound in the wasteland.

“Forty,” said one Sterling.

“Sixty,” said the other.

“Forty swans reads as *restraint*, which reads as *doubt*, which we do not—”

“Which we do *not* want the surface to see, agreed, so *sixty*, sixty says *abundance*, sixty says the Reserve has swans to *spare*—”

“And we gild them.”

“Obviously we gild them.”

They said this in perfect unison, without appearing to notice they had, which was, Osgood had come to understand, simply how the Sterlings talked when they agreed on something: the words arriving from two mouths at once like a single thought that had been assigned two bodies out of some old bureaucratic error nobody had ever bothered to correct.

The ballroom smelled of fresh paint and cut flowers flown in, somehow, from wherever flowers still grew, and underneath both of those, faint and unshakeable, the same filtered nothing-smell that seemed to live in every room of Providence that mattered. Osgood stood in the doorway holding his one page and watched Castor and Pollux Sterling circle a scale model of Sump. It was an exquisite model. Someone had built the little Pumphouse, the little Catch, the little Spillway, all of it, in balsa and paint, and the twins had populated the model’s square with tiny golden swans, tiny bunting, a tiny bandstand, and a tiny ribbon across the tiny pump waiting to be tinily cut. They had, Osgood realized, already thrown the party. In their heads it was already over and it had been *sublime*. Osgood found he could look at almost nothing else in the room: the little golden pump, the tiny cut ribbon

waiting for scissors that did not exist yet, all of it built with a care that eleven dead men one floor up had not been afforded.

“Reclamation Day,” said Castor, or Pollux, catching sight of him and flinging both arms wide, “is going to be the event of the *decade*.”

“There hasn’t been a decade,” said the other, “worth having an event *in*, which is precisely—”

“Precisely why this one *matters*. Doves at the ribbon. Cannon at the finish, the fun kind and the *real* kind, we fire the confetti and then, for the holdouts, we fire the—”

“You’re the telegram man,” said the first Sterling, focusing on Osgood with a sudden, unsettling, doubled intensity. “Ashcroft radioed down. There’s a *number* you’ve come to ruin. Say it quickly, like pulling tape.”

“The repossession patrol at Sump was destroyed,” Osgood said. “Eleven Angels. There’s... a mercenary crew in the town. They fought back. Effectively.”

The twins went still. For one moment Osgood thought he had, at last, reached someone, that the news would land, that a human alarm would ring behind those matched faces. He almost let himself hope for it, some flicker of the horror the number deserved.

“Does this,” said Castor, slowly, “affect the *swan* order.”

“I—”

“Because the swans are *bespoke*,” said Pollux, and now there was real distress in it, genuine, twinned, rising in both of them at once like water in two glasses. “They are being *hand-gilded*, Facilitator, as we *speak*, and if the date *moves*—”

“If the date moves the *gild* has time to *tarnish*—”

“And we will not, we will *not*, cut a ribbon in this town over *tarnished* swans—”

and here the strange sad thing happened, the thing Osgood would try and fail to describe to his bunkmates later: Castor pressed a hand to his own chest, and *Pollux* winced, sharp, as though the hand had pressed *his* (the two of them flinching in a mirror at a pain neither had been dealt) and for a moment they weren’t monstrous or absurd at all. They were just two men who had been in the same room for twenty years and had, somewhere back there, stopped being two.

Then it passed, and Castor said, “*Sixty swans,*” with tremendous finality, and Pollux said, “*gilded,*” and Osgood was dismissed.

It happened with a flick of four matched fingers, and he was already forgotten, already replaced in the twins’ attention by the more pressing question of confetti trajectories.

He still had the worst floor left. The elevator that took him down to it ran slower than any other in the tower, as if even the machinery knew better than to hurry toward the Chairman.

The Chairman’s vault was at the bottom of Providence, behind a door that made Sump’s beautiful blast-door look like a screen. You did not enter. You were *received*, through an intercom, into a dark that smelled of filtered nothing. Two guards flanked the door and did not look at Osgood as he passed between them, and he had never once, in three years of Facilitating, worked out whether that was discipline or mercy.

Cassius Vane sat at the far end of it, on the raised chair Osgood had learned not to call a throne, behind the mirrored breathing rig that hid all of his face, and around him (this was the part that had cost Osgood sleep, the first time) was the *diorama*. Painted panels, floor to ceiling, wrapping the whole vault: a surface that did not exist. Green hills. A blue, blue sky. A sun the cheerful yellow of a child’s drawing. Cassius Vane ruled the wasteland from inside a painting of a world that had died before most of the wasteland was born, and he had it repainted, Osgood knew, whenever it failed to match his memory. Somewhere behind the panels a hidden fan pushed air scented faintly of nothing at all, not clean, exactly, just absent, as though even smell had been rationed down here to whatever the Chairman found tolerable.

“Facilitator.” The voice came filtered, hollow, unhurried, from behind the mirror. “You bring word of the surface.”

“I do, Chairman.”

“Good. Good.” The mirrored face tilted up, toward the painted sky. “I have been considering the sky. The reports describe it as *grey*. Brown, in the east.” A pause, patient, terrible. “This is a clerical matter. The sky is blue. See that it is *corrected*.”

Osgood made a note. He had learned, in three years, that the note itself was the point; nobody had ever asked to see one, and he suspected nobody ever would, but a Chairman who was not obeyed instantly went somewhere

in his own mind that Osgood did not want to visit even secondhand.

Osgood had been warned about this and it was still, somehow, worse in person. “Yes, Chairman,” he said, because there was nothing else a person could say.

“You had word.”

“The repossession at Sump met resistance. The patrol was lost. Eleven Angels.” Osgood swallowed. “There is a mercenary crew in the town, sir. They are... capable. They defeated a full Angel detachment in the open.”

The vault was very quiet. In the dark, the mirror caught the painted sun and threw a little false gold across the floor. Osgood counted his own pulse in the silence and lost count twice.

“In the *open*,” said Cassius Vane.

“Yes, Chairman.”

Under open sky. Unroofed, unwallled: the very thing the diorama existed to pretend did not surround them all. Osgood watched the mirror tilt, very slightly, as though its wearer had felt that thought arrive uninvited and did not care for it.

And here the great terrible Chairman of the Reserve, ruler of Providence, architect of the Reclamation, leaned forward off his not-a-throne, and for one moment the filtered voice lost all its grandeur and became, unmistakably, the voice of a frightened old man alone in a hole in the ground, and he asked the only question that had ever really mattered to him:

“The air up there,” said Cassius Vane, very softly. “When they fell. The Angels. Did... did the seals hold? Before the end?” His gloved hands had found each other in his lap. “Did any of them have to *breathe* it?”

Osgood, who had read the report four times, thought of the line he had skipped saying aloud (*seal breaches on nine of eleven recovered suits*) and understood, all at once, that he must never say it in this room.

“The seals held, Chairman,” he lied.

Vane sat back. The grandeur returned like a tide. “Of course they did,” he said. “Providence provides. See to the sky, Facilitator. And send word to Sump that the deadline stands.” The mirror turned away, back to the painted hills. “There is no crew of vagrants on Earth that can hold ground against the Reserve. We are *civilization*. We are *coming home*.”

“Yes, Chairman,” said Osgood, and fled.

He did not remember crossing the vault floor, only that at some point the mirrored door was behind him and the guards outside it were still not looking at him, and he understood them a little better than he had a moment ago.

He was not supposed to go to the last office at all. His orders ended with the Board. But the elevator, on the way up, stopped itself at a floor he had not chosen. The doors opened on a plain grey corridor with none of Providence's gold in it, and a voice from the far end, quiet, even, unhurried in a way that had nothing to do with Vane's, said, "Facilitator. Bring it here."

Osgood's feet took him down the corridor before his nerve could vote on it. The corridor was cold in a different way than the vault had been cold, not the manufactured chill of filtered air, but the plain cold of a room nobody had bothered to heat, because the man inside it had never asked for comfort and would not have known what to do with it. There was no gold on these walls, no runner underfoot, nothing to muffle the sound of his own footsteps, which struck him, absurdly, as the most honest hallway in the whole building.

Colonel Marcus Steele's office had a table, a chair, a lamp, and the recovered gear of eleven dead Angels laid out on the floor in a neat grid. The lamp was the only light in the room, and it had been angled, deliberately, so that it fell on the gear and left the Colonel's own face in shadow. Osgood understood, somehow, that this was not an accident of furniture. No diorama. No swans. No lights that cost a town. Steele was crouched over one of the breached suits, not looking at Osgood, one gloved finger tracing the long clean cut where a pauldron met a chestplate.

"Sit," Steele said. Osgood sat.

The chair had no cushion, and Osgood understood, somehow, that this too was deliberate, the way everything in this room was deliberate.

Steele did not spin the disaster. He did not promise Osgood it was a triumph, did not ask about numbers, did not mention swans or the sky. He held the ruined seal up to the lamp and studied the cut in it the way a doctor studies a wound that killed a patient he intends to understand. Osgood had expected shouting, or at least the cold formal fury of a man reporting up a failure. He had not expected this: a silence that felt less like anger than like calculation.

"Two questions," Steele said. "Answer only what you know. If you don't know, say so."

"Yes, Colonel."

"The cut on the armor." He turned the plate so the lamplight ran along it. "Every recovered suit, the same place. The seam. Not the visor, not the joints: the seam, where the plate is thinnest and the man underneath is softest." He looked up, and Osgood found he could not look away, and there was nothing cruel in the man's face at all, which was the whole horror of it. "So. First question. When the crew opened the first suit and the Angel came apart. The others. How long until *they* started aiming for the seams too."

Osgood thought about it. He made himself think about it, because he understood, in the grey little room, that a wrong answer here would be a kind of lie and this was not a man you lied to. "The report says the fight lasted... under a minute, Colonel. All of it. They were opening suits within the first... seconds. It spread through the crew almost at once."

Something moved in Steele's face. Not fear. Not anger. Interest, clean, cold, professional interest, the look of a man who has just been told the animal he is hunting is smarter than the last one. The lamp didn't flicker. Nothing about the room reacted to what had just been said, and that stillness was somehow worse than if it had.

"They didn't come knowing," Steele said, mostly to himself, setting the plate down with great care. "Nobody told them our men are soft inside the shell. They *watched* one break, and they understood the whole architecture of us, and they retooled the entire crew around it, in the field, in seconds." He almost smiled. He did not. "That's not luck. Luck fumbles the second kill. That's a crew that *learns*."

He stood, and crossed to the grid of dead men's gear, and crouched again, and began, unhurried, methodical, to gather the recovered tags. Eleven of them. He did not look mournful and he did not look indifferent. He simply collected each one, read it, and set it in a small pile, squaring them as he went, and Osgood was reminded, with a lurch, of the clerk at the card table squaring his papers while the choir screamed, except that when *this* man squared the dead, you understood that he had already, in the same motion, decided what the dead would be *used* to do.

"Second question," Steele said, not looking up. "The name of the crew."

"I... the report doesn't..." Osgood stopped. Made himself be honest. "The town calls them the Mongrels, Colonel. That's all we have." Saying the name out loud in that grey room made it feel, for the first time, like a thing that mattered rather than a rumor passed down a hallway.

"The Mongrels." Steele weighed it, once, and put it away somewhere it would keep. "Facilitator. When you go back up, Ashcroft will want her heroes, and the Chairman will want his sky corrected, and the brothers will want their swans. Give them all of it. Let them have the party." He set the eleven tags in his breast pocket, over his own heart, where the Sterlings kept their theatrics and Vane kept his terror and Ashcroft kept her dead applause, and on Steele it was the only thing in Providence that looked like it meant what it was.

"But you send *one* thing down to me," Steele said, "and only me. Everything we have on the Mongrels. Every town they've worked. Every job they've botched, every man they've buried, every debt and every grudge." He turned off the lamp, and in the dark his voice did not change at all, which was the most frightening thing Osgood had heard in a building full of frightening things.

"The Board wants a town back," said Colonel Marcus Steele. "I'll take the town. But first I'm going to learn the dogs."

Chapter Six: The Strangle

The trouble with beating the Angels, Rummage discovered, was that it taught the Angels' owner exactly what not to do. It was, Rummage would think later, the single most expensive lesson Sump ever taught anybody, and they hadn't even sent a bill. He didn't know that yet, not really (not the shape of it, not the name behind it) but some old animal part of him had started counting days before anyone else thought to.

For three days after the bullhorn, nothing came up the Dry Road. Sump took this as victory. The gate stood open past noon two days running, a thing that hadn't happened in Rummage's memory, and somebody even scrubbed the dried blood off the card table before rolling it into the scrap pile, Riot's idea, mostly, on the grounds that a trophy you couldn't smell was worth twice one you could. The town threw the party it had started the afternoon of the brawl and hadn't quite finished: someone broke out a cask of something that had been buried since before the bombs, and there was music, and Bell taught four other children to click badly, and for a little while the wall felt like a wall and not a held breath. Even Mama's rhythm seemed to loosen, three strokes a minute same as ever, but somehow lighter for it, the way a held muscle feels lighter once you realize you can let it go.

Rummage didn't drink. He sat on Lazarus's roof where Riot usually sat, and he watched the empty road, and he waited for the thing he'd seen in the clerk squaring his papers to arrive. The rig's metal held the day's heat long into the dark, warm under him like something almost alive, and he found it easier to think up there than anywhere the music reached. Below him the party went on being a party, bright and loud and entirely unaware that somebody up on the roof had already stopped believing in it.

It arrived quiet, and slow, and on paper.

On the fourth day the Harl caravan didn't come. The Harls came every week, had come every week for six years, hauling salt and cloth and news up from the low country to trade for Sump's sweet water, and on the fourth day they didn't come, and on the fifth day a boy who'd walked the whole way up on foot brought the reason, folded small and sweated through, and Foss read it in the Council Hall with the Mongrels standing around the table and her face going the color of the paper. Nobody in the Council Hall said anything for a moment. Even Riot, who had opinions about silence, let this one sit. The single lamp on the table threw everyone's shadow long up the

wall.

“They’ve been *served*,” she said. “The Harls. A notice.” She turned it so Rummage could see the clean, cold type, the subsections, the little printed swan in the corner like a maker’s mark. “It says any party trading with the ‘asset under reclamation designated Sump’ will itself be reclassified as ‘a complication in good standing.’ Whatever in the Glow’s name that means.”

“It means the Harls have got families,” Missus said, from the wall, “and clean men in white came and looked at them, and wrote things down, and left.” She’d been right, in the rig, and took no pleasure in it. “It means Sump just got a lot lonelier, and nobody threw a punch to do it.”

That was the strangle. Rummage understood it all at once, the whole shape of it, and hated the man on the other end of it with a clean old professional respect. You didn’t have to storm a walled town with a working pump and a crew of dogs who’d already bloodied your nose. You just had to sit out on the road with a stack of paper and *wait*: cut the trade, cut the salt, cut the news, cut every thin thread that tied Sump to the rest of the living world, and let a town that couldn’t eat its own water slowly learn what it was worth without anyone to sell it to. No card table. No bullhorn. Just silence on a road that used to carry salt, and silence hit harder than any of them had braced for.

“So we go get the Harls’ trade for them,” Riot said. “Ride down, escort the caravan up, put Precision through anybody who says *complication*.”

“And the town we leave behind while we’re gone three days?” said Rummage.

Riot didn’t have an answer for that. That was the genius of it, and it made her furious, and Rummage watched her grip the neck of the bass until her knuckles went white, because there was nothing to hit. She was a woman built entirely for the shape of a fight, and this wasn’t one, and the not-fighting sat on her worse than any wound he’d ever patched. That was the whole design. You could not swing a bass at a blockade. You could not open the suit of a man who never came within a mile of your wall. The Angels had a card table and Sump had a punch, and the man in the grey room had looked at that and simply declined to play the game where Sump won.

“He’s not trying to take the town,” Rummage said slowly, working it out loud. “Not yet. He’s teaching it. He’s teaching Sump what it’s like to

starve with a full cistern. He's gonna sit out there and squeeze until the town does the squeezing for him."

Foss looked up sharply. "Does the squeezing how?"

Rummage looked at Riot. Riot looked at the floor. Nobody said *until the town sells the dogs*, because it didn't need saying, and because Bell was asleep on a bench in the corner and some things you didn't say over a sleeping child.

The one mercy, and it was a small and vicious one, was the notices themselves. Rummage almost admired it, the same grudging way he admired a well-cut weld on an enemy's gate. Hating the hand that made it didn't stop him seeing the work. It gave the town something to watch for, at least, some shape the waiting could hang itself on, and a town with something to watch for was a town that hadn't yet started watching each other instead.

Because the Reserve did not simply blockade. The Reserve *documented*. Every few days a lone Angel would come up the Dry Road under a white flag of parley, not to fight, never to fight, just to deliver the next amended page: a revised deadline, a supplementary clause, a formal notice that the previous notice had contained a clerical error regarding the number of days and please disregard and substitute the enclosed. It was, Rummage supposed, some Facilitator down in the clean dark doing his job with terrible thoroughness.

The first amended-notice Angel, Riot met at the gate. She read the page. She read it twice. Then she folded it into a shape, and set it on fire, and handed it back, and the Angel took his burning paperwork and retreated in good order, and everyone agreed it had gone about as well as could be expected. Bell asked, very seriously, whether the paper had feelings, and whether it had known what was coming, and nobody had a good answer for her.

The second amended-notice Angel did not come back.

Nobody was quite sure what happened to the second one. He'd come up the road at dusk, and Missus had been on the wall, and the story afterward was that he'd simply... stopped. Reconsidered. Turned around somewhere out past the range of the torches and gone home to a different life. Missus, asked directly, said only that the road had been very quiet that evening and she'd enjoyed it, and cleaned her rifle, and named nothing, and that was the

end of the conversation. Rummage had known her long enough to know that when Missus stopped a story that early, the rest of it wasn't a mystery. It was a mercy, and it was for whoever was asking.

The third amended-notice Angel came at noon instead of dusk, in full view of the whole town, as if somebody down in the clean dark had decided that daylight might buy his man a little more mercy. It didn't. Riot let him get all the way to the gate before she asked him, very politely, whether he'd like his own paperwork read back to him first.

By the fourth amended notice it had become a thing the town did. Word would go up, *Sunday suit on the road*, and half of Sump would find a reason to be near the gate, and they'd watch some poor terrified Choirboy walk his single sheet of paper up to a wall full of people who had learned they could win, and the betting would start. Would this one burn his own notice? Would he get within shouting distance? Would he, like the famous one, the one they were still telling it about, simply evaporate somewhere past the torchlight and become another thing that went up the Dry Road and did not come down?

It was funny. Rummage let it be funny, because the town needed funny, and a town laughing at the enemy's mail was a town that hadn't broken yet. He laughed along with the rest of them at the gate, loud as anybody, and saved the not-laughing for the roof, alone, where nobody had to watch him do the counting on their behalf.

But he sat on the roof of Lazarus at night and did the sum the laughter was hiding. Lazarus's metal was cooling faster now, the nights coming down a shade colder than they had a week ago, and Rummage found himself noticing seasons the way he used to notice supply lines, as something that would eventually run out. The cistern was full and the larders were not. You could not eat water. Salt was already short. In a week the flour would be. The Harls weren't coming and neither was anyone else, and every clean cold amended notice that came up the road was not really a notice at all: it was a man taking Sump's pulse, once every few days, patient as a doctor, waiting for the number that told him the patient was ready.

Down in the Spillway, Riot was teaching the children a song with a filthy chorus they were too young to understand, and their laughter came up thin and bright through the dark, and Rummage listened to it and to the great slow heartbeat of Mama under everything and thought about the grey

little room he'd never seen and the man in it he'd never met. He pictured it wrong, probably (pictured stone and torches, something out of an old story) because Rummage had never once imagined a room that was merely cold and grey and lit by one honest lamp, and would have found that harder to sit with than any dungeon.

You send one thing down to me, the man had said, though Rummage couldn't have known it. *And only me. I'm going to learn the dogs.*

The dogs, up on their wall, laughing at the mail, were being learned. And they could feel it coming, the way you feel a season change, all of them except the youngest, who slept, and the town, which laughed, and did not yet know that laughter was a pulse too, and that somebody was counting it.

Chapter Seven: The Spillway

There is a kind of night that only happens inside a wall, under siege, when the enemy has decided not to come and everyone knows it and nobody trusts it. The wall didn't keep the cold out, and it didn't really keep the fear out either, but it kept enough of both at bay that a person could sit still for an hour without flinching, and on a night like that, an hour was a fortune. The waiting turned soft and domestic. People cooked. Somewhere down the row a pot of something thin and honest simmered over a can-fire, and the smell of it (onion, mostly, and whatever passed for meat) drifted through the Spillway like a rumor of a better world. People mended. Needles caught the lamplight; a woman patched a coat with a scrap of Reserve-white canvas she'd never say where she got. People sat close in the lamplight and pretended, for a few hours, that the thing outside the wall has gone home. The Mongrels had spent enough of these nights to know they were the good ones, the ones you tried to remember later, and to know exactly how little that was worth.

They had a lean-to in the Spillway, the ramshackle market-and-quarters grown up along the water's edge, and that was where the pack kept its own small fire, a little apart from the town's, the way dogs will. Canvas patched over canvas made the roof, hides over that where the canvas had finally given up, and under it the smell of river mud and woodsmoke and gun oil had long since become, to the pack, simply the smell of home. Somewhere below them, unseen, Mama's pipes ticked as they cooled, the way they always did once the day's draw eased off, a small metal heartbeat slowing toward sleep along with everything else.

PrettyBoy shaved.

He did it every night, by feel and by a scrap of polished tin he angled so that it caught the lamp and not his face, never his face, scraping a blade over a jaw that the war had unmade, keeping regulation over ruin. His hands never shook doing it, not once, not even over the worst of the scar tissue, the one steady thing about a man who otherwise moved through the world like an apology. The blade itself was nothing special, a scavenged straight razor gone thin with stropping, but he kept its edge better than he kept anything else he owned, better than his boots, better than his temper. The others had long stopped remarking on it. It was just PrettyBoy, the way Rummage's knees were Rummage's knees. But Bell, who had attached

herself to the pack the way the young attach to the dangerous, sat cross-legged and watched him do it with the frank curiosity of a child who hadn't yet been taught which questions were cruel.

"Does it hurt?" she asked. "Your face?"

The pack tensed, the old reflex: Riot's hands went still on Precision's neck, and even the fire seemed to hold its crackle. PrettyBoy did not.

"No," he said, gently, scraping. "It stopped hurting a long time ago." Scrape. "It just doesn't look like it used to."

"What did it look like?"

And PrettyBoy paused, the blade still, and something moved behind the ruin that Rummage, watching from across the fire, had seen maybe twice in three years. "Ordinary," PrettyBoy said, at last, wonderingly, like a word in a language he'd half forgotten. "It looked ordinary. I'd give a great deal, Bell, to have back a face that nobody looked at twice." He set the blade down and smiled at her the best a man can with a mouth that no longer quite makes the shape, and Bell, unbothered, smiled back. The only people who saw him plain were children and the pack, and the world he wanted his ordinary face back *for* was a world of strangers who'd flinch. Rummage had ridden three years beside the man and had never once heard him say a hard word about the ones who flinched. That, more than the courtesy, more than the apologies he handed out to enemies like small gifts, was the thing Rummage found he couldn't forgive the war for.

Across the fire, in the dark just past the light where she always sat, Missus watched this, and said nothing, and understood it completely. Her hands, for once, were still in her lap; no round turning, no habit working itself. Just watching, the way she watched everything that mattered to her, without spending a word on it.

Riot played.

She didn't, mostly. Precision was a warhammer that had once been a bass and mostly stayed a warhammer, its body scarred with dents that had nothing to do with music, its case long gone, its finish worn through to bare wood everywhere a hand or a skull had ever met it, and the three strings left on it were tuned by accident and stayed that way. But some nights, the bad ones, the ones where the frustration of a fight she couldn't have had built up in her like water behind a wall, Riot would sit with her back against Lazarus's warm flank (the rig's engine ticking gently as it cooled, giving

off the last of the day's heat like it was breathing for her) and lay the ugly battered thing across her knees and play, low and quiet, more felt than heard.

She wasn't good. That wasn't the point. It was three strings and a scarred old body and a woman's two hands, and out of it came something slow and rough and searching, a line that climbed and fell and climbed, and the children crept closer to it, and the town's noise dropped, and even Missus in her dark turned her head. Rummage listened and thought, not for the first time, that the loudest, angriest, most anti-everything creature he had ever ridden with kept, in the middle of all that noise, one small quiet room that she let almost no one into, and played to it, and that if the Undug ever understood what Riot actually was, not a thug with a bass, but an idealist so wounded she'd armored herself in fury, they'd be more afraid of her than they were.

"Didn't know you could do that," Foss said, softly. She'd come down from the Hall to sit with them, the way she'd taken to doing, a councilwoman warming herself at the dogs' fire, her good coat traded for a blanket around her shoulders like anybody else's.

"I can't," Riot said, not stopping. "That's why it's honest." And she played the town down toward sleep, and did not once look up, and when she finished she went straight back to being loud, as if to erase it, and nobody let on they'd heard the other thing underneath. Even Foss, who could have made something of it in front of the Hall if she'd wanted, only pulled her blanket tighter and let it go.

Tick-Tock had the children.

He always ended up with the children: Bell and her four converts, and by now a half-dozen more, the frightened young of a frightened town, drawn to the one member of the terrifying dog-pack who was their own size and couldn't shout at them. They fanned out around him in the dirt, cross-legged same as he sat, watching his hands the way you'd watch a conjuror. He taught them the clicks. Not the real code, the pack's own tongue (that was the pack's) but a play version, a nursery version, *this means hello and this means run and this means I'm here*, and the Spillway filled up with the small dry music of children learning to talk to the dark, and it was, Rummage thought, the single best thing the Mongrels had ever brought into a town: a kid who couldn't speak, teaching a generation of

scared kids that there was always a way to say *I'm here* even when the words were gone.

When the littlest ones got fretful (and they did, they were children in a starving town under a siege they could feel but not understand) Tick-Tock would click them down the way Riot had played the town down, a slow soft steady rhythm, *tick, tick, tick*, patient as a heartbeat, patient as Mama, until small eyes drooped and small breaths went even. He was better at it than any of the mothers. Rummage had watched a woman hand the kid a wailing infant in despair and watched the kid click it silent in ninety seconds and hand it back asleep, and watched the mother look at the mute wasteland boy like he was something holy. One of the older ones, a stick-thin boy of about eight who never gave his name and never needed to, had taken to falling asleep sitting up against Tick-Tock's shoulder most nights, and Tick-Tock let him, not even clicking about it, just holding still so the kid wouldn't wake.

The kid caught Rummage watching, and clicked, dry, embarrassed: *what*.

"Nothing," said Rummage. "You're a good kid. Go to sleep."

You go to sleep, the kid clicked back. *Old man*. And grinned his gap-toothed grin. He and Bell had the same gap, Rummage noticed, the two of them, and something in the noticing hurt.

Late, when the fire was embers and the town was down and even Riot had gone quiet, Rummage climbed up to the wall where Missus kept the last watch, and the two old soldiers stood in the cold and looked out at the dark road together, the way they talked. The rail under his hands was cold enough to bite, and his breath came up in front of him in a slow white rag, and out past the wire the road was just a darker line in the dark, going nowhere anyone could see the end of.

"You didn't name it," Rummage said, after a while. "The one on the road. The second notice-boy."

"No," said Missus.

"Why not?"

Missus was quiet long enough that Rummage thought that was the whole answer. Then: "I name them for people the Reserve took," she said. "The boy on the road hadn't taken anybody. He was just a frightened child in a bad coat carrying somebody else's cruelty up a hill." She turned the

unnamed round in her fingers, the old habit. "I don't spend a name on a frightened child. Even theirs." A beat. "Especially theirs."

Rummage thought about PrettyBoy at the fire, saying *ordinary*, and about the Angel at the bullhorn who'd flinched at the sight of a man's ruined face, a soft bunker-raised boy taught to fear the surface and everyone changed by it. "They're kids too," he said. "The suits. Half of them. Scared kids raised in a hole."

"I know it," said Missus. "That's the part that'll cost us." She looked at him, and in the starlight her plain face was very tired and very kind and very far away. "It's easy to fight monsters, Rummage. Sump could fight monsters. It's the frightened children on both sides that break a person." She turned back to the road, and for a moment neither of them said anything, and the only sound was the wind finding the gaps in the wall and Mama working away underneath everything, patient as ever.

Then she said, without any change in her voice at all, "There's a light out on the east ridge. Third night running. Same hour, same place, gone by four."

Rummage looked and saw nothing, which meant nothing; he hadn't been able to see what Missus saw in a decade. "Somebody watching the wall."

"Somebody watching *us*," she said. "Counting how we stand a watch. A man scouting a town looks at the gate." She settled the rifle across her knees. "This one's looking at the dogs."

Rummage carried that back down with him and did not sleep well on it. "Get some sleep. I've got the dark."

He left her to it, the patient woman with the unnamed bullet, keeping the last watch over a town full of sleeping children, on both sides of a wall, in a war that a man in a grey room was going to make sure nobody won cheaply. Below him the pack slept, and the town slept, and Mama's great heart went *whum, whum, whum* under all of it, lifting the blessing up out of the deep dark ground and giving it back sweet to everyone downstream, who didn't know yet to be afraid.

Chapter Eight: The Probe

They came in the dead hour, the way real soldiers do, and for the first time since the card table the Reserve meant it.

Missus felt it before the wall did. She'd been on the last watch (she was always on the last watch) and what she noticed was not a sound but the absence of one: the night things out past the road had stopped their small noises all at once, the way they do when something patient is moving through them. No crickets. No dry rustle of whatever small starved thing hunted the roadside ditches. Just the wall and the dark and a silence that had weight to it. She didn't shout. Missus never shouted. She clicked, twice, sharp, on a bottle-cap she'd taken to carrying since Tick-Tock taught her, *up, up*, and the pack came up out of sleep already reaching for the things that kept them alive.

Around the fire the pack came up fast and wordless, three years of practice turning sleep into readiness in under a breath: Riot already had Precision off the ground before her eyes were properly open, and PrettyBoy was buttoning as he moved, and the kid was simply gone from where he'd been lying, already climbing.

"Talk to me," Rummage growled, hauling scrap armor over his nightshirt, knees be rusted.

"Twelve, maybe fifteen," Missus said, not lowering the rifle. "Coming quiet, coming spread. No card table this time." A pause, the scope tracking, her voice flat and even as it always was, the way a woman talks who has decided panic is a luxury she buried a long time ago. "The ones in front are wearing better suits."

"Seraphs," said PrettyBoy, who knew the enemy's own pageantry better than any of them, buttoning as he ran. "Their shock troops. That's a serious tier, Rummage. That's not a patrol."

"Then it's a good thing we're serious dogs," Rummage said, and put them where they needed to be.

No jokes this time. No card-table grins passed hand to hand along the line. Just the wall going quiet and hard around a town that didn't yet know it had stopped sleeping.

The fight was fast and it was hard and, for about ninety seconds, it was very nearly even, which was ninety seconds longer than anything had been even since the bullhorn.

The Seraphs were *good*. That was the ugly education of it. Their armor didn't shine the way the Choirboys' had, no parade-white left to catch the muzzle flash: it was scuffed matte grey, built to disappear in exactly this kind of dark, and the first Rummage knew of most of them was the sound they made hitting the wire rather than any sight of them coming. Where the Choirboys had come apart the second a suit opened, the Seraphs had trained for exactly that: they moved in pairs, one always covering the other's seams, and when Riot went for a seal the way she'd learned to, screeching Precision down along a shoulder, the Seraph's partner put three rounds where her head would have been if PrettyBoy hadn't already been dragging her sideways by the armor. They didn't panic when they breached. One of them took a long cut across the chest-seal from Tick-Tock's rebar and instead of clawing at the air and shrieking he simply *sealed it with his own hand* and kept fighting one-armed, and Rummage saw the kid's eyes go wide, because that was new, that was somebody who'd been *told about them*, somebody who'd studied the tape.

They watched us, Rummage thought, breaking a Seraph's knee with the wrench and taking a rifle-butt across the shoulder that he'd feel for a month. *Somebody watched the bullhorn tape and taught these ones the answer*. His breath tore at him, old lungs in a young man's fight, and somewhere close a round went past his ear with a sound like tearing cloth, and he didn't have time to be afraid of it, only time to keep moving, which was its own kind of mercy.

They still won. The Mongrels were three years of learning to a manual's six weeks, and Missus was on the wall picking the covering men off the covered ones with that awful patience, one flat crack and then another, each with a name Rummage could just hear under the gunfire, and PrettyBoy and Riot had fought back to back so long they were less two people than one four-armed animal, and the kid was a small quick nightmare in the dark where the Seraphs' lights swung and never quite caught him. One by one the better suits went down or went home, the dark filling with the small ugly sounds of a fight ending: a groan, a boot dragging, Missus's rifle finding its rhythm like something not even breathing hard. The last two Seraphs, on some signal the pack never heard, simply broke contact and withdrew, clean and disciplined, dragging one wounded brother and leaving the rest, and the wall of Sump held.

The town, wisely, did not cheer this time. Somewhere down in the Spillway a dog barked twice and went quiet, as if even it had learned the shape of this one. Doors that had cracked open at the first sound of the fight now stayed shut, and nobody came out to look at what the wire had caught, and that silence said more about what Sump understood than any cheer could have.

Because it had cost.

Del the Water-Keeper's brother, a big slow gentle man named Cobb who'd insisted on standing the wall with the dogs because it was his town too, had caught a round meant for someone faster, and he died in the Spillway before the sky went grey, with Del's wet hands pressed to a wound that clean water couldn't fix, her palms slick with the one thing Mama's pipes had never once failed to give this town and couldn't give him now, and the sound she made was the sound the whole book had been keeping in reserve. It stopped the pack cold. It stopped the funny. Sump had laughed at the enemy's mail for two weeks and now Sump had a body, and the body had a name, and the name had a sister, and everyone stood in the grey light and understood that the card table had only ever been the joke. This was the knife.

Rummage let them grieve. He stood with them in the grey and said nothing and let the minutes cost what they cost, because a man who'd buried enough people knew there was no shortcut through this part, only through. Then, because he was old and it was his job to see the thing nobody wanted to look at, he made himself count what had actually happened, and it turned his stomach.

"They lost, what, four? Five suits," Riot said, hollow, cleaning Cobb's blood off Precision with a rag, her hands moving on it the way they moved on nothing else, careful, useless, unable to stop. "We lost Cobb. We won. Rust it, we *won*, Rummage, say we won."

"We won," Rummage said. And then, because she deserved the truth and so did the dead man: "But I don't think winning was the point."

Missus came down off the wall then. She hadn't spoken since the last crack of the rifle. She walked to where Rummage stood and she said, quiet, so the town wouldn't hear, "They came in a spread, and they probed the whole wall, not just the gate. They tested how fast we shift. They made us show them Tick-Tock in the dark and how you and PrettyBoy cover the

middle and how far my rifle reaches off the east tower.” Her plain face was grim. “That wasn’t a man trying to take a town, Rummage. That was a man buying a *look*. And we sold it to him for the price of one Seraph tier and Del’s brother.”

Rummage looked out at the road where the two Seraphs had gone, disciplined, unhurried, carrying home everything they’d learned about how the Mongrels moved. The grey light was coming up flat and colorless over the wire, the way it always did after, as if the sky itself couldn’t be bothered to dress the thing up.

“He’s not in a hurry,” Rummage said. It landed on him fully for the first time, the shape of the man in the grey room he’d never seen. “That’s the thing I keep... he is in no hurry at all. He’ll spend suits to watch us. He’ll spend weeks. He’ll let the town starve and let us win the little ones because every little one teaches him the next thing.” He rubbed his aching shoulder. “Raiders want the water tonight. This one wants to *know us* first. And a man who wants to know you before he kills you...”

“Is a man who intends to kill you *right*,” Missus finished. “Yeah.”

Neither of them said the rest of it out loud, that a man that patient had already decided the town was his, and was only deciding how much it should cost him, and how much it should hurt on the way down.

Behind them Del was still keening, and Bell had gone silent and enormous-eyed in a way children shouldn’t, and Tick-Tock had stopped clicking entirely, which was its own alarm, the boy sitting very still with his rebar across his knees like he didn’t trust his own hands with it anymore, and Riot stood over the clean bass with Cobb’s blood on the rag and nowhere, still, *nowhere*, to swing.

“I hate him,” Riot said, to no one, to the road, to the grey. “I’ve never even seen his rusting face and I hate him more than anything I’ve ever hit.”

“Hold onto that,” Missus said, not unkindly, naming a fresh round under her breath, *Cobb*, Rummage heard, *this one’s Cobb*, and sliding it home, her fingers steady where nothing else in the grey morning was. “You’re going to need it. And Riot...” She looked at the punk, one old killer to a young one. “When you finally do see his face, don’t you hate it. Hate makes you fast. He’s counting on you being fast.” She walked away toward the grieving, her boots quiet on ground still dark with what the night had cost, one more name added to the long list she kept and never once complained

about carrying. “Be slow. Be like me. It’s the only thing he hasn’t got a manual for.”

Chapter Nine: The Courier

After Cobb, Rummage decided he was tired of being learned.

“He gets to study us,” he told the pack, over the low fire, three nights after they’d put Del’s brother in the ground. The fire was smaller than it used to be, and nobody had mentioned why, and nobody needed to: there’d been a fifth chair around it once, unofficial, where Cobb had taken to sitting some evenings just to be near the dogs, and nobody had moved anything into the gap he’d left. “Every time we win one, he takes notes. So.” He spat into the embers. “I want to take some notes back.”

Nobody argued. Nobody made a joke, either, which told Rummage more about how the last few nights had landed than any words would have.

The plan was Missus’s, mostly, because the plan required patience and Missus had cornered the market. The Reserve’s amended notices came up the Dry Road every few days, regular as Mama’s heartbeat, each carried by a lone Angel courier under parley. Regular was a weakness. Regular was a thing you could set a watch by, and a thing you could set a watch by was a thing you could set an *ambush* by, a good long way down the road where no wall full of witnesses could see the parley get badly disrespected.

“He’ll be carrying more than the notice,” Missus said. “They always do. A courier that runs a route runs a *pouch*: orders, schedules, whatever the clean dark wants moved where the radio won’t reach. We take the pouch, we take the notes.” She turned the unnamed round in her fingers, slow, over and over, the way she did when she was thinking three moves past the one anyone else had gotten to. “And we do it quiet, and we do it far, so the grey-room man doesn’t find out we’ve started studying *him* until it’s too late to change the syllabus.”

So they rode Lazarus out before dawn, engine low and grumbling under a town still asleep, all but PrettyBoy and Foss’s militia left to hold the wall, and they set up on a dead overpass eight miles down the road where the Dry Road ran through a cut, and they waited for the mail. The cut was good cover, concrete pillars gone soft and crumbling at the edges, rebar showing through like bone, and from up top a body could see a long way down the flat grey road in both directions before anything got close enough to matter. Riot fidgeted. Tick-Tock didn’t, which was worse, in its way: the kid could go still as the concrete itself when a job wanted stillness, and it always unsettled the ones who hadn’t ridden with him long enough to get used to it.

The mail, when it came, was having a bad morning already.

The courier was a single white vehicle, and it was crawling, and as it got close the pack could see why, and Riot started laughing before Rummage could tell her not to. The Angel driving it was *alone*, visibly miserable, slumped so low over the wheel he looked like a man trying to disappear into his own upholstery, and taped to the inside of his windscreen where he'd have to look at it the whole drive was a handwritten sign, in another Angel's furious block capitals, that read: **YOUR TURN. I DID SUMP SIX TIMES. B.**

"They're drawing straws," Riot breathed, delighted, grinning for what felt like the first time since the Spillway. "Rust me, Rummage, they're making the *loser* drive the Sump route. We're a *punishment detail*."

"We're the route nobody comes back from," Missus corrected, sighting, not a trace of humor in it even though everyone else was still grinning. "Because half of them don't." And Rummage understood that the running joke of the town, the amended-notice Angels who evaporated on the road, had become, on the *other* side of the wall, a genuine terror: a posting the Choirboys dreaded, a road they told stories about in whatever passed for a barracks down in Providence, the water-town run, the one where the mail went up the hill and sometimes the mailman didn't come down. Missus had built that. One unnamed round at a time. She did not smile about it, but she did not not-smile either.

They took him clean. Missus put one round through the engine block (a single flat crack that rolled off down the cut and came back twice) and Lazarus nosed across the cut to pin him and Riot was on the door before the Angel had finished deciding whether today was the day he became a story, and she rapped Precision gently, *gently*, for Riot, on the mirrored glass and said, "Morning. We'll be taking the mail. Out you get, and mind, the woman on the overpass has named a bullet for everybody the Reserve's ever killed, and she's got a *lot* left over, so let's none of us give her a reason."

The Angel got out. He was young. Of course they were always young. No more than a boy under all that white plastic pretending to be armor, and his hands shook, and when Riot popped his seal with a thumb (not to hurt him, just to make the point, just to let four inches of surface air onto his soft bunker skin) he made a small sound and went absolutely still and did

exactly as he was told, which was to sit in the dirt with his hands on his head while the Mongrels robbed the Reserve of its correspondence.

“You can walk home,” Rummage told him, hauling the courier pouch out of the cab, its weight surprising him, heavier than a bundle of paper had any right to be. “Tell ‘em the road took another one. Tell ‘em whatever keeps you off it.” He crouched, old knees popping, to the kid’s level, the way he’d crouch to Bell, and for a second the boy in the dirt and the kid by the fire were near enough the same age that it turned something over in Rummage’s chest. “You don’t want this route, son. You don’t want any route that ends at us. Go be a punishment somewhere else.”

The Angel walked home, small and white against the flat grey road, getting smaller. He didn’t look back once, not even at the crest of the hill where most of them couldn’t help it. Rummage never knew if he did tell them the road took him, or whether he just kept walking, out past the low country, and became a different and better story somewhere the Reserve’s paper couldn’t reach. Rummage hoped it was the second one. He’d meant what he said. He was too old to want to be anybody’s nightmare.

The pouch was a satchel of clean pre-war leather, soft with age and better kept than anything else that had come off the Dry Road in years. It was locked. The little printed swan was stamped into the flap, wings folded, the way the Reserve liked to stamp its wings on everything it wanted mistaken for mercy. And when Rummage’s hands closed on it something in the back of his neck went cold, the way it had at Sump’s beautiful door, the way it had at the clerk squaring his papers: the animal knowledge that *beautiful means guarded*, and *locked means it matters*.

They got it back to Sump. They took it into the Pumphouse, of all places, because it was the one space in town big enough to feel private and because Rummage wanted the great heartbeat of Mama around him when he opened a thing the Reserve had bothered to lock, though he couldn’t have said why. The pack gathered, close in around the crate under the warm iron pipes, the machine’s slow enormous thud the only sound in the room besides their own breathing. Del came, and Foss, because they’d earned it. Bell was sent away and came back anyway and nobody had the heart to send her twice.

Rummage set the satchel on a crate under the warm iron, and looked at the lock, and looked at the swan, and felt the whole shape of the last three

weeks bend toward whatever was inside. Behind him he could hear the pack breathing, and Bell's small feet shuffling where she'd wedged herself between Riot and the wall, and under all of it Mama's slow enormous thud, patient as she'd ever been, as if the pump didn't know or didn't care what was about to be let into the room.

"Give me four minutes," he said, and got out his tools, and the pack, hearing the old words, went quiet and ready around him the way they had in the dark under Sub-Level Four a lifetime and a hundred miles ago.

The lock was better than the beautiful door under Sub-Level Four. It took him six, his old fingers patient and sure over the pins in a way the rest of him hadn't been in years.

And then it was open, and the papers were in his hands, in the warm dark, under the slow enormous heartbeat of the machine the whole thing had always secretly been about, and Rummage began to read, and the color went out of his face, and Missus, watching him, quietly set down the round she'd been turning and, for the first time in the whole book, reached instead for the rifle.

Chapter Ten: The Garden

The papers were beautiful. That was the first obscenity.

They'd found the case wedged behind a false plate in the courier's saddlebag, and Rummage had set it on the crate under the one good lantern like it might still be armed. Whoever had drawn them up had taken *care*. There were diagrams, precise and lovely, of Mama's own workings, the pump the town had kept alive for twenty years, rendered in clean pre-war ink by someone who had studied her better than Del had, better than anyone in Sump ever would. The paper itself was a wonder, heavy and white and untouched by twenty years of ash, the kind of stock nobody on the surface had seen made in their lifetimes, and it felt wrong in Rummage's cracked hands, like holding a piece of a world that had no business surviving into this one. There were maps of the deep water, the aquifer, spidering out under the low country in pale blue arteries. And there was a schedule, and a dosage, and a word repeated in the neat cold type that Rummage did not know, and read three times, and finally handed wordless to PrettyBoy, because PrettyBoy was old enough and had been educated enough, once, in the world before, to know what it meant.

PrettyBoy read it. The Pumphouse was silent but for Mama's heartbeat, that slow iron *whum* that had beaten under every conversation the pack had ever had in this room, so constant nobody noticed it until noticing it was all there was. His eyes moved once, twice, down the page, and something in his ruined face went still in a way Rummage had only seen once before, the night they'd pulled Cobb's body off the wall.

"It's a sterilant," he said at last, very quietly, and the courtesy was all gone out of his voice, which was how they knew. "A compound. You put it in water, in these amounts, and it..." He stopped, and made himself say it plainly, because the thing deserved to be said plainly. "It makes people unable to have children. Slowly. Over years. You'd hardly notice. Fewer births, then fewer, then none. And then in a generation there's simply no one..." He set the page down as if it were hot. "No one new."

Nobody moved. Somewhere above them a moth was hurling itself against the lantern glass, tick, tick, tick, the only other sound in the room besides the pump.

"They want to poison the water," Riot said. "Fine. We knew they were slag. We turn the pump off, we—"

“No.” Missus, from the dark. She’d read over Rummage’s shoulder, fast, the way she read ground. “Look at the diagrams. Look what they’ve circled.” Her finger, steady, on the loveliest of the drawings. “They don’t want the pump *off*. They want it *on*. They want Mama running perfect, pumping day and night, sweet as ever. Because Mama doesn’t just water Sump.” She looked up, and her plain face had gone to stone. “Del told us. Day one. The deep water feeds the wells and the seeps three, four towns out. All the low country drinks the same blessing.” A beat. “That’s not a town they’re poisoning. That’s a *watershed*. Mama’s the needle and the whole low country’s the vein.”

It landed on the Pumphouse like the roof coming down slow.

For a moment nobody spoke, and Rummage found himself listening to Mama with new ears, the same patient rhythm she’d always had, and hating it, hating that it hadn’t changed at all, that she’d go on making that same good honest sound while she did it.

Rummage made himself walk it all the way through, out loud, because somebody had to and he was the oldest. “They don’t storm the wall,” he said, “because they don’t *want* the wall broke. They want the town whole and the pump running and the people grateful. They serve their papers and they starve the trade and they wait for Sump to get so tired and so hungry it’ll hand over the keys just to make it stop, and then their clean men walk in, and they don’t smash anything, they just... *add* something. Upstream of everybody. And Sump keeps pumping, and the low country keeps drinking, and everybody says thank the Glow for the Reserve and the sweet water they brought back.” His voice had gone rough. “And in twenty years there’s no more mutants. No more *anybody*. Not because they killed us. Because they turned off the next ones. Quiet. Clean. Grateful.”

Del made a sound. Foss had both hands flat on the crate, holding herself up, her knuckles gone pale around the edge of it. Bell, who should have been sent away twice, stood very small in the doorway and did not understand the words and understood the faces perfectly, and Tick-Tock crossed to her and clicked her steady without being asked, a slow patient rhythm that had nothing to do with Mama’s and everything to do with a boy who’d learned, the hard way, how to be the only calm thing in a room.

“They’re not trying to win the town,” Riot said. She sounded, for the first time Rummage could remember, young, genuinely and fearfully

young, her hand gone still on Precision's neck where it usually never stopped moving. "The town was never the... we've been fighting over the wall. And the wall was never the—"

"The wall was the magician's other hand," said Missus. "Yeah."

Far away, at the bottom of Providence, in a room full of gentle light, Dr. Halcyon Pryce was explaining the very same thing to the Board, and enjoying it.

The Cellar had its own kind of quiet, the hum of clean recycled air where the surface had only wind and ash, and the boardroom lights were the color of a spring morning that had never actually happened anywhere within four hundred miles. Pryce liked to present standing, hands loose at his sides, the way a man stands when he is entirely certain he is right and mildly sorry that others are slower to see it.

"And *that*," he said, warmly, clicking to the loveliest slide, the one with the pale blue arteries spreading under the low country, "is the elegance of the Sump site. One asset. One pump. And through it," he spread his soft clean hands as if scattering seed, "the entire regional watershed. We don't have to visit a hundred towns, Chairman. We visit *one*, and the water visits the rest."

Cassius Vane's mirrored face gave nothing back, as it never did, a smooth blank plate that reflected the slide's blue arteries back at the room like the Chairman himself had drunk them. The Sterlings had brought a plate of little iced cakes to the presentation and were eating them, unhurried, as if the topic under discussion were quarterly numbers and not the quiet unmaking of everyone who breathed the surface air. Vivienne Ashcroft was reapplying something to her lips in a small mirror and had, Pryce suspected, not followed a word, which was fine; she never did; she'd call it a triumph on the air regardless.

"You keep saying," said one Sterling, licking icing off a thumb, "*a generation*. We haven't got the patience of a—"

"We throw a *party*," said the other. "We can't throw a party for a thing that takes twenty *years* to—"

"You throw your party," Pryce said, with the serene patience of a man who had explained gardens to children before. "Reclamation Day. The ribbon, the swans, all of it: that's when we bring the town in, when they're tired and grateful and glad of us. That's your afternoon, and you shall have

it, and it will be sublime.” He smiled his mild, kind, tenured smile, the one that had never once, in twenty years, needed to raise its voice. “My work is quieter. My work is the *after*. You’ll cut your ribbon, and the crowd will cheer, and somewhere under all that lovely noise a valve will open that no one will ever see, and the water will go on being sweet, and the low country will go on being grateful, and it will simply, gently, over years, *stop*.” He said it the way another man might describe pulling bindweed off a rosebush. “No smoke. No camps. Nothing to grieve, because no one is taken. There is only, each year, a little less of the...” he searched, kindly, for the word, “the *disorder*. The stain. Until the garden comes back clean.”

The room was quiet. Even the Sterlings had stopped chewing, one cake half-raised and forgotten between plate and mouth.

“You’ll forgive me,” said Pryce, gently, gathering his lovely papers, squaring the edges with the unhurried care of a man tidying his own desk at the end of a satisfying day, and here, only here, did something like feeling touch the mild voice, a true believer’s quiet ache, “if I find it beautiful. I know you don’t, quite. I know you think of Reclamation as taking the surface *back*. But I think of it as taking the surface *clean*. A world with no more... no more of this...” he gestured, delicately, upward, at the whole ruined mutated aching world above them, at the children with dead voices and ruined faces and gifts that were also curses, “wouldn’t that be a kindness? Truly? Isn’t it a kind of *mercy*, to make sure no one else has to be born into all that?”

Nobody answered him. Vane’s mirror caught the gentle light and threw it back, blank as a held breath. A Sterling, very quietly, put down his cake.

“Well,” said Vivienne Ashcroft brightly, snapping her little mirror shut, having heard perhaps one word in nine, “I think it’s *wonderful*,” and Pryce inclined his head and thanked her, and meant it, because someone finally had.

In the Pumphouse, the pack stood around the beautiful terrible papers under the heartbeat of the machine, and for a long moment nobody could find the bottom of it.

The lantern had burned low, and nobody had thought to trim it, so the light on the papers had gone the color of weak tea, and still nobody moved to fix it, because moving to fix a lantern felt, just then, like a thing from a smaller and kinder world.

It was Rummage who spoke, in the end, old and quiet and certain, and it was not a plan yet, it was only the thing a plan would have to be built on top of.

“We took this job for water,” he said. “And a town that couldn’t fight. That’s what we signed for. That’s what the coin was for.” He looked at the maps, the pale blue arteries, all the low country drinking the blessing, all the children not yet born. “This isn’t that job anymore. This isn’t Sump’s town or Sump’s water or Sump’s fight.” He set his old hand flat on Mama’s warm iron flank, the way Del did, the way you touch kin, and felt the pump’s slow pulse come up through his palm the way it always had, patient and unknowing. “This is everybody downstream. Everybody who’ll ever be. And they don’t none of ‘em know to be afraid, so I guess that leaves us.”

“We’re five people and a rig,” Foss said, hollow, not arguing, just saying the size of it.

“Yeah,” Rummage said. “Five dogs and a rig, against a machine that’s got swans.” He almost smiled, the skull-grin, no joy in it. “Glow help them.”

Riot picked up Precision. Missus named a round and did not tell them whose. Tick-Tock kept the child steady. And the great slow heart of Mama went *whum, whum, whum* under all of them, lifting the poison-to-be up out of the deep dark ground, sweet, and patient, and blind.

Chapter Eleven: Dead Air

The trouble with the truth, Rummage learned that week, was that it did not come with a swan on it.

They tried the town first. Foss called the Council, and the Council called Sump into the square by the Catch, and Rummage stood on a crate under the gold water and told a couple hundred frightened, hungry people that the men in white didn't want to smash their pump: they wanted to *keep* it, and use it to make sure the low country stopped having children.

The crate wobbled under him, one leg shorter than the others, and he had to plant his boots wide to keep from swaying, an old man balancing on a box in front of the only home any of these people had left, trying to hand them a fear too big to fit in their hands.

It was, he realized as he said it, an insane thing to say out loud.

He watched it not land. He watched decent, tired people hear *they want to keep the pump running* and *they're not going to smash anything* and take from it the only comfort a starving town could take, which was the half of it that sounded like mercy. Faces that had been drawn tight with worry when he climbed up went soft with relief before he'd even finished the sentence, and he could see it happening, could see the fear draining out of two hundred sets of shoulders in real time, and there was nothing he could do to stop the very sentence in his own mouth from being the thing that let them relax. He had the papers. He held up the papers. But the papers were diagrams and dosages and a word most of Sump couldn't read, and a diagram of your own beloved pump is not fear, it's just ink, and the man reading it to you is a scarred old mercenary you hired three weeks ago who has every reason to keep you scared enough to keep paying him.

"How do we know," someone called, not cruel, just drowning, "you didn't cook this up so we won't cut a deal? So you keep getting paid to stand on our wall?"

Rummage didn't have a clean answer, because it was, he had to admit, exactly what a dog would say to keep its bowl full. "You don't," he said, which was the truth and the wrong thing. "You don't know. You just got to decide who you believe." And he watched a hungry town look at a hungry dog and understood he'd already lost that vote in half their faces. He stepped down off the crate himself, before anyone could ask him to.

They tried the low country next, because the low country was the point: three, four towns out along the deep water, the people who'd drink the poison and never know. Riot and Missus took Lazarus and ran the risk of leaving the wall thin, riding hard for the nearest of them, a place called Ferrow's Wells, to do the one thing that might matter: warn the vein before the needle went in.

Lazarus ate the miles in the dark, headlamp cutting a narrow tunnel through the ash-haze, Riot's knuckles white on Precision's neck the whole ride, saying nothing, because there was nothing yet to say.

They got there to find Ferrow's Wells listening to the radio.

They got there to find Ferrow's Wells *in love*.

Because the Reserve had gotten there first, the way the Reserve always got there first, not with soldiers but with a *voice*: Vivienne Ashcroft, beamed golden across the dead air on the dozen scavenged sets that still worked, promising order, and medicine, and a way home. Every porch in Ferrow's Wells had someone leaning near a set, faces upturned and soft in the blue crackle-light, the way people used to gather around fires before the fires got taken away from them too. And where Sump had bloodied an Angel patrol and knew better, Ferrow's Wells had only ever heard the voice, warm as sunrise, night after night, telling them that the old world was coming back for them, that they hadn't been forgotten, that soon, soon, the clean people would come with doctors and salt and light.

Riot stood in the square of Ferrow's Wells with the beautiful terrible papers in her fist and tried to tell them the truth, and a man turned Ashcroft up.

The volume climbed and the crowd's faces turned toward the set the way sunflowers turn, unhurried, unanimous, and Riot's voice simply stopped reaching past the third row.

"You're from *Sump*," a woman said, not unkindly, the way you'd correct a child. "We heard about Sump. The heroes." She meant the Angels. She meant the eleven dead at the wall. Ashcroft had done her hymn; Ashcroft had made up the names; the low country had wept for the poor murdered heroes of Sump, cut down by *dogs*. "That's your crew, isn't it? The mercenaries. The ones who killed those boys."

"Those boys came to *evict a town*," Riot said, and heard how it sounded, and heard the radio behind her promising medicine, and

understood with a cold falling feeling exactly how the whole rusting thing was rigged.

“She says you’d say that,” the woman said, gently, nodding at the radio, at the voice, at Ashcroft, who three hundred miles away in a blaze of chandelier light was performing love to an empty studio and being, for once, believed. “She said the holdouts would send people to frighten us. To turn us against the ones who want to help.” The woman’s face was kind and closed as a door. “You should go, before the young men decide to be heroes about it.”

The young men had already decided. Riot was ten steps from Lazarus when the first stone went past her ear and rang off the rig’s flank, and the second one didn’t miss, and she stood there a moment with her hand at her temple and her fingers coming away wet, looking back at a square full of people who had just thrown rocks at the only two women in the low country trying to keep their children alive. Missus’s rifle never came up. That was its own kind of mercy, and it cost her something to spend.

Riot went. There was nothing to hit. That was the whole design, all the way down: you could not swing a bass at a blockade and you could not swing it at a *broadcast*, at a warm voice in the dark telling frightened people the exact shape of the comfort they were starving for. She kept her back straight walking to Lazarus, because Missus was watching, and because Ferrow’s Wells was watching too, and a dog that slinks confirms every word the radio ever said about it. The Reserve had spent twenty years being wrong about everything on the surface, and it did not matter, because they owned the only voice that reached, and a lie that reaches beats a truth that doesn’t every single time.

Missus drove them home. Riot didn’t speak for an hour, which frightened Missus more than shouting would have.

The ash-haze had cleared enough to show a smear of stars low on the horizon, and Lazarus’s engine was the only sound for miles, a steady mechanical growl swallowing the silence between them.

“They’re going to drink it,” Riot said finally, watching the dark low country go by, all its little lights, all its people in love with the voice that was going to end them. “They’re going to line up and *thank* them. And we can’t... there’s no...” her hands worked on Precision, uselessly, on the one thing she had that had never once in her life failed to give her something to

hit. “How do you fight this, Missus? You can’t shoot a radio. You can’t open a lie’s suit. There’s no seam. Rust it, there’s no *seam*.”

Missus drove a while, eyes on the dark road, letting the question sit the way she let a shot sit before she took it. Then she said, in the patient voice she used for the true things, “You don’t fight the lie. You can’t. It’s too big and it’s too warm and people are too hungry for it.” A beat. “You go where the lie has to become a *thing*. A valve. A pump. A room with a man in it and a compound in a drum. The lie floats. But somewhere it has to touch the ground and *do* something, and where it touches the ground,” she nodded at the black shape of Precision across Riot’s knees, “that’s a seam. That’s where the bass comes back.”

“Reclamation Day,” Riot said slowly.

“They can’t poison the water till they’ve got the town,” said Missus. “They can’t take the town without their little party. So they’ll all be there: the pump, the compound, the doctor with the drum, the whole rusting Board in their swans. All of it, in one place, on one afternoon, standing on the seam.” She almost smiled, one old killer teaching a young one. “You wanted something to hit. Be patient. They’re going to build you the biggest target in the world and put a ribbon on it.”

Behind them the low country slept, in love, unafraid. Ahead of them Sump waited, hungry, half-turned against them. And somewhere below the ground the deep water ran sweet and blind under all of it, waiting for a valve, and the pack rode home through the dark, carrying what Missus had told them and not much else.

Chapter Twelve: The Frame

Steele did not gloat, because Steele did not have to. Gloating was for men surprised to be winning, and Steele was not surprised.

He had spent three weeks learning the Mongrels the way you learn a lock, patient and unhurried, turning the same facts over and over until they gave up their shape. And he had learned the one thing that mattered, which was not how they fought (he'd known that after the probe) but who they *were*. Five strays and a town that hadn't wanted them. A punk who'd told the Council to their faces that towns always sell the dogs. A crew whose whole strength was that a frightened people trusted them, against all sense, more than they trusted the clean men on the road.

So Steele did not attack the crew. He attacked the trust.

It happened at the Merrow farmstead, two miles south, one of the outlying places that fed what little Sump had left. The Merrows were good people. They had a well that tapped the deep water and three children and a standing kindness with the town, and one grey morning a rider came pounding up to Sump's gate screaming, the horse lathered white, the man's voice cracking on every third word, and when the town poured out to the farmstead they found it burned, and the well fouled with something dead, and on the standing timber of the door, painted crude and unmistakable in white, a snarling three-legged dog.

Smoke still rose thin and grey off the collapsed roof beams. The smell of it caught in the back of the throat and stayed there, and nobody who walked that yard that morning would be rid of it for days.

The Mongrels' mark.

"We didn't do this," Rummage said, in the square, to a town that had stopped being sure. He said it plainly and he said it once, because saying it twice is what a liar does. "Look at it. Look at the paint: it's *their* white, it's Sunday-suit white, we don't paint in that. And that dog's wrong. Whoever drew it drew it off a *description*. Look at the legs." Three legs, yes, but the wrong three, the balance wrong, a copy by a hand that had never ridden with them. "That's not our dog. That's a dog somebody *studied*."

And it was true, and it did not matter, because up on the same wind that carried the smoke came the radio, and the radio was already grieving.

Vivienne Ashcroft had the Merrow children's names before Sump did. She had them warm and golden on the air by midday (*the little ones of the*

low country, murdered in their beds by the holdout dogs, the same feral crew that butchered the heroes of Sump) and she wept, or did the thing she did that sounded exactly like weeping, a catch and a swallow and a pause exactly as long as grief needed to be to sound real, and three towns wept with her, and the story was told and set and hardening before the Merrow ashes were cold. It didn't have to be true. It only had to be *first*, and warm, and come with a swan on it.

"They killed their own well," Missus said, standing in the fouled yard, reading the ground the way she read everything, cold and exact, her eyes moving over the churned dirt the way another woman's might move over a page. "Look at the boot-print by the timber: sealed sole, clean tread, that's an Angel's boot, no wastelander wears that. They rode out here, they burned a farm, they poisoned a well they're *already planning to poison anyway*, and they painted our dog on the door." Her jaw was tight. "He spent three children to do it. He looked at the whole board and he decided the fastest way to take the town was to spend three of its own children and hang it on the dogs." She looked at Rummage, and for the first time in three years he saw something in Missus's face that was not patience. "I have met a lot of hard men. I have never met one who'd do *that* and not even come to watch."

Because that was the coldest part. There was no gloating. There was no Steele on a ridgeline enjoying it. Somewhere in a grey room a professional had run the numbers, decided the atrocity was the efficient move, ordered it done, and gone on to the next line of work without a flicker, and the not-watching, the sheer bloodless economy of it, was more frightening than any cruelty the pack had ever ridden against. Raiders killed children in the heat of wanting. This man had killed children as *paperwork*.

The town turned. Not all at once, and not entirely, and that was almost worse. Rummage could have stood a clean betrayal. What he had to stand instead was the slow curdle. The way conversation stopped when the pack passed, voices dropping mid-sentence, eyes finding somewhere else to be. The way a mother he'd seen hand Tick-Tock a wailing infant now called that same child in off the Spillway when the mute boy came near, her voice pitched too bright, too careful, the voice of someone performing caution for an audience she couldn't quite meet the eyes of. The way Del the Water-Keeper, who had wept over Cobb with her head on Rummage's

shoulder, now couldn't quite meet his eye, because Del had loved the Merrows, and Del was drowning, and the voice on the radio had thrown her a name to blame that was easier to hold than the truth, which was too big and too cold to hold at all.

Only a few held. Foss held, grim and furious, though holding cost her the Council's ear: a chair that now went quiet whenever she spoke, a room that had learned to look past her to someone easier to agree with. Bell held, fierce and uncomprehending, and got slapped by a frightened aunt for saying so, and came to the pack's fire that night with a red cheek and a jutting chin and clicked, badly, defiantly, the thing Tick-Tock had taught her first: *I'm here*.

"You should go home, Bell," PrettyBoy told her, gently, and it was the gentleness of a man whose heart was breaking, because PrettyBoy had been kindest of all of them to this town, had shaved his ruined face every night to keep faith with a world of strangers, had apologized to the very Angels he fought, and this was the world answering him. "Your people are frightened. Frightened people need their children close."

"They're being *stupid*," Bell said, with a child's terrible clarity.

"Yes," PrettyBoy agreed, quietly. "But they're being stupid because they're scared, and that's a different thing than being bad, and it's important, Bell, that you learn the difference now, because the man who did this is *counting* on people not being able to tell them apart." He looked out at the town that had turned, the town he'd been ready to die for that morning and was still, Glow help him, ready to die for tonight. "He hasn't made them wicked. He's just made them afraid. That's cheaper. And it works."

Across the fire, Riot said nothing at all. The flames caught the edge of Precision where it leaned against her knee and threw small restless shadows up her arm, and still she didn't reach for it, didn't reach for anything. She'd said her piece three weeks ago in the Council Hall (*it ends with the town, every time*) and being right was giving her no pleasure, none, and Rummage watched her hold the silence and understood that the loud one had gone quiet because the only thing left to say was *I told you*, and she loved these people too much, even now, even the ones who'd turned, to say it out loud.

Rummage sat with his back to Lazarus and did the sum. A town half-turned. The low country in love with the voice. A vote coming in the

Council Hall that he could already count. And out past the wall, patient, unwatched, a man who had spent three children to buy an afternoon and would spend three more without blinking.

“He’s good,” Rummage said, to the dark, to Missus, to no one. “Rust me, he’s good.”

“Yeah,” Missus said. She was naming a round. Rummage heard the shape of it under her breath, not Cobb this time, not the notice-boy. Three small names, one after another, the Merrow children, taken into the long list she kept and would someday spend. “He’s good. He’s just never fought anybody who keeps a list.”

Chapter Thirteen: The Vote

The morning came up grey and close, ash-haze low over the rooftops of Sump like a lid nobody had thought to lift, and word ran ahead of the sun the way bad word always does: house to house, before the notice was even nailed. They did it properly. Rummage would give them that, bitterly, to the end of his life: Sump did not sell the dogs in the dark. Sump called a vote.

The amended notice that came up the Dry Road that morning was different from all the others. Rummage had seen a hundred Reserve bulletins nailed to a hundred posts, all the same grey paper gone soft with damp, but this one was crisp and unbent, handled like something that mattered to the men who'd printed it. It did not adjust a deadline. It made an *offer*, clean and typed and stamped with the little swan: the asset designated Sump would be spared reclamation-by-force, its people confirmed in their homes, its trade restored, its water flowing, in exchange for the surrender of "the unlicensed armed party known as the Mongrels, wanted for the murders at the Merrow farmstead and at the wall of Sump, to face the justice of the Reserve." Men read it standing in the road and did not look up from it for a long time.

Clemency. Rummage read the word twice, the way you check a wound to see if it's as bad as it felt going in, and it was. All Sump had to do was give up its dogs, and the frightened town could stop being frightened, and the voice on the radio would call it mercy, and it would even be true, for a while, for them. That was the cruelty of a good offer. It was real. Steele hadn't lied. Sump really would be spared, spared right up until the ribbon was cut and the valve was opened and the sweet water did its quiet work on their children and their children's children, gratefully, in the dark. But that was over the horizon, and hunger was tonight, and the horizon has never once won a vote against tonight. By noon the whole town had read it, and by noon the whole town had already half decided, and nobody would say so out loud yet.

The Council Hall was full. The whole town pressed in and around it, bodies packed shoulder to shoulder on the benches, more standing along the walls, the lamp oil burning low and smoky because nobody had thought to trim the wicks, and the whole room smelled of sweat and nerves and the particular staleness of too many people holding their breath in too small a space. Foss stood up and argued for the dogs with everything she had: she

laid out the papers, the sterilant, the aquifer, the boot-print in the Merrow yard, the wrong-legged dog painted by a studied hand. Her voice cracked once, near the end, and she pushed through it anyway. She was eloquent and she was right and Rummage, standing at the back with his pack, watched her lose.

She lost to a man named Harrin, who wasn't wicked, who was just a father, and who stood up when Foss sat down and said the thing that ended it. He was a broad, sunburned man Rummage had fixed a water pump for, back in the first week, for two eggs and a thank-you, the kind of ordinary decent neighbor a town runs on. "Maybe it's all true," Harrin said, tired, reasonable, damning. "Maybe they are going to poison the water in twenty years. I got a girl who's *hungry now*. I got a girl who's *hungry tonight*, Foss, and the men in white are offering to feed her, and all I got to do is give them five strangers who rode in here three weeks ago. Cobb's in the ground. The Merrows are in the ground. Who's next, Foss?" He spread his hands, and they were shaking, and he was not a villain, and that was the whole horror of it. "I'm sorry. I am. But I'll trade five strangers for my girl. Anybody here says they wouldn't is lying, or hasn't got a girl." Somewhere near the front, a woman was already nodding, quietly, like she was ashamed of how fast she'd agreed.

And the Hall was quiet, because he'd said the true thing, the tonight-thing. Rummage had known it in the square days ago. He'd known it, if he was honest, in the Council Hall the first night, when Riot had leaned in the doorway and told these people to their faces exactly how this always ended. He looked for her now and found her near the back wall, arms crossed over the bass strap, her face carved out of something that wasn't quite anger and wasn't quite grief, watching the thing she'd predicted arrive exactly on schedule.

They voted. Hands went up around the room like a field of something dying all at once, fast, almost eager to have it done. It wasn't even close.

Foss came to them after, in the dark by Lazarus, her shawl pulled tight against the night chill, and she was weeping with rage and shame and she could barely get the words out. The rig's cold flank threw back what little starlight there was, and Rummage would remember for a long time how small she looked standing against it, a councilwoman with nothing left to council. "You have until dawn," she said. "That's... that's all I could win

you. I told them if they meant to hand you over I'd not have you taken in your sleep like... like *this*. Dawn. Go now. Go far." She pressed something into Rummage's hands (coin, the coin they'd been owed and more, her own, he'd realize later, her own savings) and she said, "It isn't right. I want you to know somebody here knows it isn't right." Her hands were shaking harder than Harrin's had.

He took her hand in both of his, rough and grease-stained around her cold fingers, the way he'd have steadied a hand on a wrench about to slip. "You did know," Rummage said, gently, because the old woman was breaking and somebody had to be kind. "That counts for more than you think, Foss. It doesn't feel like it. But it does."

They packed in silence. Three years of gear into the belly of the rig, quick and quiet and practiced, the way they'd packed out of a dozen towns (the click of buckles, the scrape of crates, breath fogging pale in the cold and nobody speaking over it) but never like this, never from a town they'd bled for, never chased out under a wrong-legged painted dog for murders they hadn't done.

Bell got past the aunts somehow and came running, bare feet slapping the cold dirt, nightdress flapping, too small and too fierce to be stopped by grown women half-asleep and grieving in their own doorways, and threw herself at Tick-Tock, and clicked, over and over, the only thing she had, *I'm here, I'm here, I'm here*, furious and heartbroken, and Tick-Tock crouched and held her and clicked back, slow, steady, *I know. I know. I'm here too*. And then he did the thing that undid Rummage, that he'd carry: the kid unclipped one of his own tin crickets, the ones he talked to storms with, and pressed it into Bell's small hands and closed her fingers over it and clicked, once, *keep it*, so that the child would always have a way to say *I'm here* into the dark, even after the dark took the only person who'd ever taught her how. Rummage had to turn away and pretend to check a strap that didn't need checking.

Then they drove out through the gate of Sump before dawn, the rig's engine loud and lonely in the hush, past the wall they'd held, under the heartbeat of the machine they'd tried to save the whole low country from (that same slow *whum, whum, whum* Rummage had come to feel in his back teeth) and the gate closed behind them with the particular finality of a sound that means a door will not open again, and it was very quiet in the rig.

They made a cold camp in the wastes at first light, out past the range of anything, the fire someone had built at first light long since stumbled down to nothing more than grey ash and a memory of warmth, and nobody had said a word in an hour, and finally Riot said the thing, because somebody had to and it was hers to say.

She didn't say *I told you*. Rummage had braced for *I told you*. He'd braced for it the way you brace for a blow you've earned. What Riot said was worse.

"I really thought this one was going to be different," she said, staring at the dead fire, the bass across her knees, her fingers moving over the strings without pressing them down, a habit more than music. Her voice wasn't angry. That was the terrible thing. All the fury had run out of it and left something underneath that Rummage had never once heard from Riot in three years, which was despair. "I stood in that Hall and told them how it always ends and then I... Glow help me, I spent three weeks *hoping I was wrong*. Playing them songs. Teaching their kids that filthy chorus. I let myself..." she stopped. "It ends with the town. Every time. I *know* that. Why do I keep..." and she couldn't finish it, the punk, the wrecking ball, the one who trusted exactly four people and a bass, because the answer to *why do I keep hoping* was the softest and most defenseless thing in her and she would not say it out loud even now. The wind moved through the scrub and took the silence with it and gave nothing back.

PrettyBoy sat with his ruined face in his hands, elbows on his knees, the picture of a man trying to hold his own head together. He had been kindest of all of them, and the world had answered, and Rummage watched the last clean man in the wasteland sit in the ash and quietly come apart, and did not have one word to give him.

And Missus said nothing at all. Missus had gone somewhere the rest of them couldn't follow, very still, very far, cleaning the rifle she didn't need to clean, the cloth moving over the barrel in slow, even strokes that made no sound at all in the grey quiet, and Rummage looked at her and felt a new fear, a different fear, because he knew that stillness. It was the stillness of the man in the grey room. It was the thing she'd warned Riot against (*be slow, be like me*) and Rummage understood, watching his oldest friend go cold and quiet and patient in the ash, that grief was reaching for the one place in Missus that could turn her into exactly the thing they were fighting.

The pack sat in the cold dawn, burned and split and hunted, chased out of a town they'd tried to save, for murders they hadn't done, by frightened people who weren't even wicked: that was the part with no clean edge to grab hold of, no villain to hate cleanly instead of just hurting. Five strays and a rig, with nothing left to defend and nobody left who wanted defending.

It was over.

Rummage looked at his broken pack in the grey light, and at the road back toward Sump, and toward the deep water running sweet and blind under all of it toward the children of the whole low country, and the old man felt the same low grind he'd felt a thousand times with his hands buried to the wrist in a machine everyone else had already called dead. It was the thing that made a man reach into a dead engine one more time.

"No," he said, out loud, to the dead fire, to the pack, to himself.

They looked at him.

"We don't get to be done," Rummage said. "Sump gets to be done. Sump voted. Fine. Sump's not who I'm mad for anymore." He stood up, old knees and all, and looked south, toward the water, toward the low grey line where the pipes ran on toward towns that had never even heard the Mongrels' names. "There's a town full of people out there in love with a voice that's gonna end them, and they don't know to be afraid, and every single soul who ever votes us out is exactly why somebody's got to stand for the ones who *can't* vote at all: the ones downstream, the ones not born yet." He picked up his wrench, turned it once in his fist like he was testing its weight for the first time in years. "We're not going back for Sump. Rust Sump. We're going back for everybody Sump's too scared to save. And we're gonna do it on the one day they'll all be standing in the same place with a ribbon on it."

Nobody spoke.

Then Tick-Tock, quietly, clicked, one small sound in the grey.

I'm here.

And Bell's cricket, Rummage thought. He gave her the cricket. The kid gave away half his own voice so a child in a town that betrayed him would never be alone in the dark. If the kid could do that, the old man could get up off the ground.

“Yeah,” Rummage said, rough. “Yeah. Me too, kid. All of us.” He looked at Missus, last, longest, the cold still place she’d gone. “All of us, Missus. You hear me? We go back as the pack. Not as him.”

Missus looked up from the rifle. It took her a long moment, long enough that Rummage wondered if she’d heard him at all. Then, slowly, she set it down, and picked up instead a single round, dull brass catching what little light there was, and turned it in her fingers the old way, and did not name it (not yet, not for this) and something in her plain face came partway back from the grey room, and she said, quiet:

“As the pack.”

Chapter Fourteen: Mutts

You cannot plan to hit a party you haven't been invited to unless you know when it starts, and so for days on end the Mongrels became the thing Steele had spent a month becoming: patient watchers, learning a lock. They moved twice, quiet relocations before dawn, never sleeping two nights in the same fold of the waste, because Foss's coin bought them food but nothing bought them safe, not anymore. Rummage felt the shift in himself first, the low, gnawing patience of a man waiting on a part to arrive rather than the quick fury of a man defending a wall, and he did not much like how well it fit him.

They worked the edges. Riot and Tick-Tock lifted a second courier (carefully, further out, a different road) and this pouch gave them the date: Reclamation Day, sixteen days off, the reclamation of the asset designated Sump, ceremony to commence at noon. Riot came back from it quieter than she'd left, the bass slung tight across her back instead of loose the way she usually wore it, and said nothing about what the job had cost her to do clean. Missus read the country around Sump for a week and mapped every way in that the Angels would expect and the two they wouldn't, marking the paper in a private shorthand only she and Rummage had ever bothered to learn. PrettyBoy, who understood the enemy's pageantry in his bones, walked them through what a Reserve ceremony *was*: where the Board would stand, how the Angels would be deployed for show rather than war, how a thing built to be *broadcast* has to leave sightlines open for the cameras that are also, if you're clever, sightlines open for a rifle.

Every night the same low fire, the same maps weighted down with stones against the wind, the same five faces bent over paper that could get every one of them killed twice over if the wrong hands ever found it. Nobody talked about Sump anymore. Nobody had to.

Night after night, by the low light of a shielded lamp, Rummage spread the stolen diagrams across his knees and turned each sheet toward the flame like a man reading a dying patient's chart. He sat with the beautiful terrible papers, and found the seam.

"Here," he said, tapping the loveliest diagram, the one of Mama's own guts. "The compound doesn't go in the water at the party. Read it. The doctor's got a... an injection point, downstream of the cleaning stage, right here, past where anybody in the town would ever see. He opens a valve, the

drum feeds in, Mama does the rest and never knows. Sweet water out one end, poison in the other, and the ribbon-cutting's just the noise that covers the sound of the valve." He sat back, and the fire popped, and for a moment nobody breathed. "So we don't fight the party. We don't fight the Board and we for rust-sure don't fight Steele's Angels head-on. We get to that valve, and that drum, and that doctor, before the water carries the first dose past the town." He looked around the fire, at faces gone sharp and still with listening. "Everything else, the swans, the speeches, the whole rusting circus: that's just where we make enough mess that nobody's looking at the pump."

"Then why wait for the party at all?" Foss said. "Why not send the doctor up some quiet night and be done?"

"Because they can't get at it." Rummage tapped the diagram again, harder. "That pump's Sump's own ground. Del's people sleep on it. There's not a Reserve hand been within ten feet of that valve since the day they served the first notice, and there won't be, not till the town walks out and hands over the keys in front of everybody. That's what the ribbon is. That's the whole reason there's a party." He almost laughed, and didn't. "They built us a door and put a bow on it."

"Five of us," Foss said. She'd found them, three days out, riding a mule she'd traded half her savings for, her fine council coat long since swapped for scrap-leather and dust. She'd left Sump the morning after the vote, resigned her seat, packed a bag, and ridden into the waste to find the dogs her town had sold, because some people cannot live inside a wall that did a thing like that. "Five of you, against a Reclamation ceremony."

"Six," said Rummage, and nodded at her, and Foss's grim face did something complicated, and she stayed. Riot shifted over without being asked and made her a place at the fire, which was as close as any of them came to saying welcome.

Steele came to them on the eleventh night, the wind down to nothing and the cold pressing close, alone, under a white rag on a stick, which was the last thing any of them expected and the reason it worked.

Missus had him in the scope from four hundred yards and did not fire, because a man who walks alone into a sniper's country under parley is either a fool or is telling you something, and Steele was not a fool. His boots made no sound crossing the last stretch of open ground, which

Rummage noted and did not like. He walked into the edge of their firelight with his hands empty and open and he sat down, uninvited, across from Rummage, and he looked at each of them in turn (the old mechanic, the punk, the mute kid, the ruined-faced soldier, the still woman with the rifle she hadn't fired) and there was nothing in his face but a clean, terrible, professional regard. The firelight caught the crisp lines of his uniform and gave him no warmth at all, the way it gives no warmth to a blade. Tick-Tock's hands had gone still in his lap, no clicking, nothing, the stillness of a kid who had learned exactly how much danger was worth naming out loud. PrettyBoy's ruined face gave away nothing at all, which was its own kind of answer.

"I wanted to see you close," Steele said. His voice was quiet and even and it had no theater in it at all, and after a month of the Board's noise it was somehow the most frightening sound in the world. "The reports don't do it. I've been reading you for a month. I know how you cover the middle. I know she keeps a list." A slight nod at Missus, who did not move, her hand steady on nothing at all. "I know the kid gave a cricket to a child in a town that sold you, and came back anyway. I know you're going to try for Reclamation Day."

Nobody spoke. Riot's hand was on Precision, knuckles pale around the neck of it. Missus had not lowered the rifle from her shoulder, though Rummage suspected by now it was for her own comfort more than for any threat she thought she could still make good on at this range. Steele did not appear to care.

"I'm not here to stop you tonight," Steele said. "If I wanted you dead tonight you'd be dead; you know that, or you should. I'm here because I've spent twenty years working for people who think a war is a party, and I have not, in all that time, met an enemy worth the name." He looked at Rummage, and it was almost, almost, a kind of hunger, the closest thing to appetite Rummage had ever seen cross that flat professional face. "And then five strays and a rig figured out in four seconds what my employers couldn't tell you in twenty years: that the whole shining architecture of the Reserve is soft on the inside if you know where the seam is." A pause, long enough that the fire's small crackle was the only sound in the waste. "You're the best thing I've fought. I wanted to say it once, to your faces, while it's still true. Because on Reclamation Day I'm going to end you, and

I'd rather have said it than not."

Rummage had carried the question for eleven days, turning it the way Missus turned a round, and now the man who could answer it was sitting across the fire from him.

"You killed the Merrow children," Rummage said. It came out of him low and old and flat. "Three kids. To win a vote."

"Yes," said Steele. No flinch. No defense. No pleasure. "It was the efficient move. I don't expect you to understand it. I don't need you to." He stood, unhurried, and the dust didn't so much as stir under him. "That's the difference between us, and it's the only one that matters. You keep a list because the dead weigh on you. I don't keep one, because they don't. That's not a boast. It's just the shape of the tool your side is up against." He looked, last and longest, at Missus (one still killer to another) and something passed between them that made Rummage's blood go cold, a recognition, a mirror. "You know what I mean," Steele said to her, gently, almost kindly. "You feel it reaching for you. The quiet. It's easier over here. It doesn't hurt over here."

Rummage's chest went tight watching it, the same fear he'd carried since the grey dawn after the vote, now standing three feet away wearing another man's calm voice.

Missus met his eyes and did not answer, and the silence stretched a beat too long, and the not-answering was the most frightened Rummage had ever seen her, because it wasn't a *no*.

Steele walked back out of the firelight the way he'd come, unhurried, his shape swallowed by the dark a step at a time like the waste was folding shut behind him. At the edge of it he stopped, without turning.

"Bring everything you've got to the water," he said. "I'll bring everything I've got to the pump. One of us learns something on Reclamation Day." And then he was gone, into the dark, and the night things did not stop their small noises when he passed, which meant he moved through the waste as easily as he moved through the grey rooms of Providence, which meant they were, all of them, in very serious trouble. Nobody moved until the last small sound of him was gone.

The wind came back first, small and thin through the scrub, as if the night itself had been holding its breath for him too.

The pack sat a long while after, nobody quite ready to be the one who spoke first into the space Steele had left behind. It was Tick-Tock who broke it, clicking slow and certain into the quiet, and Rummage read it and huffed something that was nearly a laugh.

“Kid’s right,” he said.

“What’d he say?” said Riot.

“He said...” Rummage rubbed his face, feeling every one of his years in it. “He said the man came four hundred yards through Missus’s country, alone, to tell us we scared him. And a man doesn’t do that unless we *do*.” He looked around the fire: the punk, the kid, the ruined soldier, the still woman coming slowly back from the grey, the councilwoman who’d walked out of her own town rather than live with the shame of it. Five strays, a rig, and a stray more. “He’s better than us. He’s not wrong about that. He’s faster and he’s colder and he’s got Angels and swans and a whole rusting bunker at his back.” He picked up the wrench, and turned it once in his old hands, testing the weight of it. “But he keeps telling us the one thing that’s gonna beat him and he don’t even hear himself do it. *He doesn’t keep a list*. He doesn’t understand *why* five dogs went back for a town that sold ‘em. He can’t. It’s not in the manual.” Rummage grinned, the skull-grin, and this time there was something almost like joy under it, low and stubborn and old. It was the first real grin any of them had seen from him since the vote, and small as it was, it went around the fire like warmth.

“He learned how we fight,” Rummage said. “He never once learned why. And on Reclamation Day, that’s the seam.”

Chapter Fifteen: The Uniform

The night before Reclamation Day, the Mongrels made their peace with the shapes of their own deaths, the way soldiers do, by refusing to mention them and checking their gear twice. The fire was small and low, kept that way on purpose, and around it the pack moved through the small rituals that had nothing to do with tomorrow and everything to do with it: oiling a hinge, counting rounds, running a thumb along an edge that was already sharp. Somewhere out past the firelight the waste made its usual small sounds, indifferent to what was coming, the way it had been indifferent to everything the Mongrels had ever done in it.

The plan was simple, because a plan that has to survive contact with Steele cannot afford to be clever. Riot, Rummage, and Tick-Tock would go in *loud*: through the Spillway in the dark before the ceremony, into the guts of the town, and when the party hit its height and every eye and every camera was on the ribbon, they would make the biggest, ugliest, most attention-devouring mess the wasteland had ever seen, and draw the Angels and the noise to the far side of Sump. It was Tick-Tock's favorite kind of job, if the kid could be said to have a favorite kind of dying, the kind with fire in it, the kind loud enough that his silence didn't matter to anyone. Missus would take the high ground Steele had all but dared her to, and own the sightlines, and buy the others every second she could with that awful patience. She'd said little about it, only nodded once, the same nod she'd give an order she already meant to follow. Foss would hold Lazarus at the bolt-hole, a collapsed culvert mouth in the wall's western seam, two hundred yards past the Spillway and screened by the wreck of somebody's cart, close enough to run to and blind enough that a man on the carpet would never think to look at it. Their one way out. She would hold it, and pray. It was the smallest job and she'd argued against it hardest, and lost, because somebody steady had to be there when the rest of them came running, and there was nobody else left to trust with it.

And PrettyBoy would go in *quiet*, alone, straight to the pump (to Mama, to the valve, to Pryce and his drum) because getting to the heart of a Reserve ceremony required walking through Reserve people, and there was exactly one member of the pack who could do that. Nobody had said his name for that part out loud until he said it himself.

They were sorting it by the fire when PrettyBoy went to the rig and came back carrying the uniform, his footsteps slow across the dark ground, like a man walking toward something rather than away from it.

Not wearing it under the scrap, the way he always did: carrying it, out, in his hands, in the firelight, where they could all see it. The real one. The pre-war dress uniform, pressed and brushed and kept immaculate for twenty years against a parade that was never going to come, the buttons polished, the creases sharp, a soldier's whole lost self folded into cloth. The firelight caught the buttons and threw small hard points of light across the dirt, the only clean thing for a hundred miles.

"I'll wear this," PrettyBoy said. "Over the top. In the open." He said it steadily, but Rummage saw what it cost, saw the man's hands not quite steady on the folded cloth, the way they'd never once shaken around a blade or a wrench. "The Reserve deploys its Angels for the cameras. Everyone in white will be turned outward, performing for the broadcast. A man walking *inward*, toward the pump, in a clean pressed uniform, moving like he belongs there," he swallowed, "they'll take him for one of their own. An officer. A Warden, even. Nobody stops a uniform that walks like it's meant to. I can get to Pryce. I'm the only one who can."

It was a good plan. It was the *right* plan. And every soul at that fire understood the thing PrettyBoy was not saying, which was what it would do to him. Nobody argued the tactics. Nobody could. The plan worked because the wound was real, and that was the trouble with it.

Because a uniform gets you close, but it does not hide your face. Up close, in the daylight, at a party full of the cleanest people alive, the face above the collar would still be the face the war had made: the ruin, the horror, the thing the very first Angel had flinched from at the bullhorn. PrettyBoy was proposing to walk his hideous face, deliberately, into a crowd of exactly the people most likely to recoil from it, wearing the uniform of the man he used to be, and to *use* their recoil (the half-second of shock, the instinct to look away) as cover. He was going to weaponize the thing he could not bear to see in a scrap of polished tin. He was going to make his ugliness a *tool*. Rummage had known the man three years and had never once heard him say the word *face* out loud, not even about himself, and now he was about to walk that face into the one crowd built to flinch from it on purpose.

Rummage set down the wrench he'd been turning without noticing he was turning it. "You don't have to be the one," Rummage said, quietly, though they both knew he did.

"I do." PrettyBoy sat, the uniform across his knees the way Riot held the bass. "And I want to tell you why, so you don't think I'm being brave, because I'm not." He was quiet a moment, choosing it. The others had gone still, waiting, even Riot's restlessness stilled for once. "For twenty years I've kept this uniform because it was *before*. Because as long as it was pressed and ready, some part of me was still the man who wore it, the ordinary man, the one nobody looked at twice. I shave a face I can't look at because I'm keeping faith with him. With who I *was*." He ran a thumb along a sharp lapel. It was the only tender thing his hands did all night. "And the whole time, the thing I actually am (the ruined thing, the thing I can't stand) it turns out that's the thing that can walk into that party and save the low country. Not the man I was. The monster I am." He looked up, and his ruined face in the firelight was, Rummage thought, the bravest thing in the whole wasteland. "So tomorrow I stop keeping faith with a dead man's ordinary face. Tomorrow the face I hate does the one thing that pretty one never could." He let that sit a moment, watching the fire rather than any of them. A breath. "I'd rather that than a clean corpse who died still wishing he was somebody else."

Nobody spoke for a while, the fire between them saying more than any of them could. Then Riot, of all of them, reached across and put her hand flat on the folded uniform, over PrettyBoy's, and said, rough, "For what it's worth. I've looked at you every day for three years." She held his eye. "I never once saw a monster. I saw the only one of us who stayed *good*. That's the ugliest thing out here, PrettyBoy. Staying good. It's the ugliest, hardest, rustiest thing there is." She took her hand back, embarrassed by herself. "Wear the stupid uniform. Go be the best of us at 'em. Just... come back and let me make fun of it after."

PrettyBoy's ruined mouth made the best smile it could, and it was enough. "I'll do my utmost," he said, "to survive so that you can mock my formalwear," and Tick-Tock clicked something bright and rude, and even Missus, coming back the last of the way from the grey room, huffed a breath that was nearly a laugh, and for one more night the pack was the pack. It did not last, but Rummage would keep that minute for the rest of his

life, wherever the rest of his life turned out to be.

Rummage took the last watch himself, and let the others sleep, and sat with the whole shape of the morning laid out in front of him, the sky gone hard and clear and full of more stars than any dying world had a right to keep.

He thought of the cold camp two weeks back, the dead fire, the thing he'd said to a broken pack in the grey dawn (*we go back as the pack, not as him*) and thought that whatever tomorrow cost, they'd at least earned the right to spend it as that instead of as five strangers scattered to the waste.

Five strays and a stray more, against a ceremony, against a bunker, against a man who did not keep a list. PrettyBoy walking his ruined face into the enemy's cameras. Missus climbing toward the high ground and the quiet Steele had promised was easier over there. The kid, who'd given half his voice to a child in a town that betrayed them, going in loud tomorrow where the guns were. Riot going in loud beside him, the bass that had taught a town's children to sing now about to teach the same town what a distraction sounded like. Foss holding the one door home, a councilwoman who'd traded a seat at the table for a seat in the dark. All of them going back to a wall that had thrown them out, not for Sump, never again for Sump, but for a low country full of people in love with a lie, and for the children not yet born who'd drink the sweet blind water and never know a pack of dogs had bled to keep it clean. Somewhere under all of it, the Undug would be raising a glass to a job already assumed done.

He said such things out loud, alone, when nobody else could hear him do it, because a prayer kept only in your own head has too much room to turn into a doubt.

"Glow keep them," Rummage said, to the dark, to the diorama-blue sky some frightened old man three hundred miles down in the ground was having repainted to match a world that died. "Every one of them. Just... get them through tomorrow. That's all I'm asking. Get my mutts through tomorrow."

The dark, as ever, said nothing back.

But under it, far and faint and patient, Mama's great heart went *whum, whum, whum* (the same heartbeat that had called them up the road a lifetime ago, the same heartbeat the whole low country slept inside without knowing) and Rummage listened to it beat, and beat, and beat, and thought:

tomorrow, one way or the other, we find out whose it is.

Chapter Sixteen: The Gala

They had, the Sterlings, actually done it. They had thrown the party from the balsa model. It was, Rummage thought, crouched in the dark of the Spillway watching it come together in the dawn, the single most obscene thing he had ever seen, and he had seen a chapel of coffee mugs.

The concrete under his knees was slick with a winter's worth of algae, and the runoff stink of the culvert clung to the back of his throat, and still he'd rather have knelt there till his joints locked than move an inch closer to what was coming together above him. He wiped condensation off the field-glasses with a thumb gone stiff from the cold and kept them on the gate.

Reclamation Day arrived at Sump on a hundred trucks before the sun was full up, and out of them poured a world. Bunting the color of a sky that didn't exist. A carpet, a *carpet*, red, rolled the length of the square, from the gate to the Pumphouse, so that no Undug shoe would have to touch the actual ground of the actual surface they were reclaiming. A bandstand. Trestle tables of food under the eyes of a starving town: real food, absurd food, a swan carved out of ice already weeping in the heat and, ringing the Catch where Sump's children had once sat on the wall, sixty live swans, gilded, hand-gilded, furious, gold paint drying on their beating wings as they hissed at everyone within reach.

The gilding was still tacky in places; you could see it in the smears of raw gold each frightened bird left on the next one's neck when they crowded together for comfort, and the whole shivering flock stank of turpentine and hot metal laid down over the old, familiar reek of the Catch itself, so that the prettiest thing in Sump smelled worse than anything it was meant to cover.

"Sixty rusting swans," Riot breathed, from the dark beside him, and there was awe in it, genuine awe, the awe you feel at the edge of a very deep hole. "Rummage. They gilded sixty swans. For *this*. For a town they starved."

Rummage didn't answer right away. He let the silence sit there, ugly and true, before he gave it words.

"They gilded sixty swans," Rummage agreed, "and there's kids in this town ain't eaten proper in two weeks." He'd thought he understood the Undug. He hadn't, not till now, not till he watched them build a golden

paradise on top of the people they were murdering and not one of them saw it. He lowered the field-glasses an inch, just to check the naked eye told him the same lie, and it did. It wasn't cruelty. Cruelty at least *noticed*. This was worse. This was a party thrown by people for whom the town simply was not *there*: a stage, a backdrop, a square to be dressed. The people of Sump stood at the edges of their own home behind velvet ropes and watched the Reserve redecorate the ground they were standing on, and the Reserve did not see them at all. Rummage catalogued the layout while he had the light for it: the Angels' spacing along the carpet, the sightlines the bandstand blocked, the one gap in the ropes near the Pumphouse door that nobody important seemed to have noticed. Old habits. A mechanic reads a machine before he decides where to put the wrench.

The Angels came in white and formed up not for war but for *show*, ranked along the red carpet like statuary, mirrored visors catching the swans, the bunting, the weeping ice. And a full brass band of them, Rummage saw, actual instruments, gold to match the birds, tuning up on the bandstand to play the Reserve into its own triumph. Rummage watched the trumpets catch the grey dawn light and thought, absurdly, that he'd melted brass just like that once, back when brass had been for bullets and not for parades.

"PrettyBoy in place?" Missus's voice, low in the ear-piece, pre-war radios Rummage had coaxed back to life, another dead thing dragged up. The radio crackled a half-second before her voice came through, the same stubborn pop and hiss it had made since the day he'd rebuilt it, and Rummage had learned to love that little cough of interference the way you love an old dog's particular limp.

"Moving," Rummage murmured. Somewhere in that white crowd, in a pressed uniform over a ruined face, the best of them was walking inward toward the pump, alone, being taken for one of their own. Rummage couldn't see him. That was the plan. It didn't make it easier. He made himself breathe, in through the nose, slow, the way he'd taught the kid to hold a rifle steady, and let it out through his teeth, and did not look away from the gap in the crowd where a man in a pressed uniform had already disappeared.

At the center of it, on a dais draped in the false-sky blue, the Board held court, and the horror and the farce stood shoulder to shoulder.

Up close the false-sky blue was just dyed canvas, cheap and already sun-faded at the seams, and the heat coming up off the packed crowd made the whole dais shimmer like something seen through bad glass, which was, Rummage thought, about the most honest thing on that stage.

Vivienne Ashcroft was live. Of course she was live. She swept the red carpet in a gown the color of dawn with three cameras walking backward before her, narrating the triumph to the dozen radios of a low country in love, “*and here, my darlings, here at last is the day we promised you, the day the surface comes home,*” radiant, weeping-not-weeping, performing salvation to a starved town that could hear every word and to an audience three hundred miles wide that believed her and to a mute boy in the shadows with a length of sharpened rebar. She never once turned her head to see him. Rummage had heard her broadcasts crackle out of Sump’s one working radio for years, that same voice promising a return that never came, and it was a strange thing to finally see the mouth that made it, close enough to notice the practiced tremor in her chin arriving a half-beat after the words did.

The Sterlings orbited the catering in matched agony, because a Sterling’s tragedy is always the canapés. “The ice swan is *melting*,” hissed one, and “it was *always* going to melt, we discussed...” hissed the other, and they gripped each other’s arms and suffered as one over a thawing bird while, forty feet away, a doctor prepared to sterilize a watershed. Somewhere under the trestle tables a real swan (feathers, not ice, gilded and hating every second of it) hissed at a passing Warden’s boot, and no one on the dais so much as glanced down.

And they had brought the Chairman up.

Rummage found him through the glasses before he found anything else, some old animal instinct picking out the shape that mattered most in a crowd of shapes that didn’t.

That was the thing Rummage hadn’t expected, the thing that told him how much this day meant to them. Cassius Vane had come to the surface. He sat on the highest dais under a canopy, sealed in a full-body version of the mirrored rig, a sarcophagus of a suit that let not one molecule of the actual world touch him, and even so, even sealed, even shrouded, Rummage could see through his own field-glasses that the man was *rigid* with terror, gloved hands locked on the arms of his chair, the mirrored head turned

deliberately, fixedly, up and away from the horizon, up toward a patch of sky, as if by not looking at the real world he could pretend he was still inside the painting of it. Even the wind that reached him had to come through a filter first; Rummage could see the faint hum of it at the suit's collar, scrubbing the actual air of the actual world into something safe enough for the Chairman of Vane-Sterling Holdings to breathe. He had conquered the surface. He had come to plant his flag on it. And he could not make himself look at it. He'd sooner stare at the one cloud that most resembled his diorama.

It should have been satisfying, seeing the top of the whole rotten Undug pyramid reduced to a shaking suit that couldn't look at grass. It wasn't. It just made Rummage tired, in the old bone-deep way, tired the way you get tired of a job that never once got easier no matter how many times you did it right.

Beside him, Riot had gone very still. She reached into her jacket (past Precision's strap, into the deep pocket where she kept the few things that mattered) and drew out the coffee mug. She'd carried it a thousand miles. **WORLD'S OKAYEST BOSS**, a cartoon sun in sunglasses; and on the reverse, in the dead jaunty font of a company that had thrown itself a party at the end of the world, **PROPERTY OF VANE-STERLING HOLDINGS**.

She looked at the mug. She looked at the dais, at the mirrored sarcophagus of the man they called the Chairman, and at the two matched twins suffering over their melting swan not ten feet from his chair. *Vane. Sterling.*

"Rummage," she said, soft, turning the mug slowly in her fingers. "The mug. From the coffee vault, the first job, the one that paid us nothing." The low, sure, bass-note feeling in her, come all the way home at last. "I kept it because I had a feeling I'd want to remember the name. Vane-Sterling. And there he sits. There's the boss." Her hand tightened until the old ceramic creaked. "Rust me. I've been carrying that man's coffee mug since before I even knew to hate him."

Rummage let her have the silence that came after, because some things a person needs to sit with unhurried, even mid-op, even with a bomb of a different kind ticking under the party. Then he put his eye back to the glasses, because the job didn't stop for anyone's reckoning, not even hers.

"He's petrified," Rummage murmured. "Missus. The Chairman. He came all this way and he can't even look at the ground he's taking."

A beat of dead air followed, the kind Missus only left when she was deciding something with her finger already resting where it needed to be.

"I see him," said Missus, from wherever she'd become the high country. A pause. "I could end the whole Board right now. All of them. One after another. I've got the angle." Another pause, and in it Rummage heard her not do it, heard her choose, heard the pack win the grey room by an inch. "But that's not the job. The job's the pump. Kill the party and the doctor just does it quieter next month somewhere else. We break the *machine*, not the clowns." A breath. "Rust, though. It's tempting. It's so tempting, Rummage."

"I know it," Rummage said. "Hold. Wait for the kid." He settled back onto his heels and made himself watch the doctor instead of the swans, because a mechanic keeps his eyes on the part of the machine that's about to move.

And past all of it, quiet at the still center where the horror lived, Dr. Halcyon Pryce stood at the Pumphouse door in a clean coat with a clean smile, beside a clean steel drum on a clean little trolley, and waited, serene, for the ribbon.

Even the trolley's wheels had been oiled quiet; Rummage had checked earlier, in the last light, half expecting some clue, some tell, and found only a doctor's ordinary tidiness, which was somehow worse than any hidden thing could have been.

He was not watching the swans or the cameras or the cake. He was listening, Rummage would swear to it later, to *Mama*, to the great slow heartbeat coming up out of the ground, with his head tilted and his gentle eyes half-closed, the way a gardener stands in a bed at dawn and listens to it breathe. Nothing about him hurried. Nothing about him needed to. In a few minutes Ashcroft would say her words, and the Chairman would be helped to his feet to cut a ribbon he was too frightened to see, and the brass band of Angels would play, and in all that golden noise Halcyon Pryce would open a valve no one was looking at, and feed his quiet mercy into the deep water, and the low country would drink its own gentle ending and cheer.

He was, Rummage thought, watching that mild man listen lovingly to the heartbeat he'd come to poison, the worst thing here by a mile. The

swans were absurd. The Chairman was pitiable. Ashcroft was a broken clock. But Pryce meant it, all the way down, meant it as *kindness*, and there is no talking a man out of a horror he has mistaken for love.

The band struck up. The crowd of white turned toward the dais. Ashcroft raised her radiant arms and her golden voice and began: "*My darlings. Today—*"

Somewhere below all that gold, Rummage felt more than heard Mama's heartbeat under his boots, patient, enormous, indifferent to every lie being told above her.

In the dark of the Spillway, Tick-Tock lifted his one remaining cricket (he'd given the other to a child in this very town) and looked at Rummage, and Rummage looked at the doctor and the drum and the sixty furious gilded swans and the whole shining obscene machine of it, and the old man drew a breath, and nodded.

Now, he clicked.

And Sump went dark.

Chapter Seventeen: The Raid

Here is a thing the Reserve did not know about the town it had dressed up for a party: Rummage had spent three weeks with his hands in its guts, the way he'd spent them in Lazarus, in Mama, in every dead machine he'd ever loved back to life. He knew where Sump's power ran. He knew, because Del had shown him proudly in a better week, the junction box that fed the Pumphouse and the square and the strings of stolen Reserve lights.

He'd rigged the cross-wire two nights back, working by feel in the dark with Del's boy holding a shielded lamp, and he'd known even then, with his hands full of Reserve copper, that this was the one piece of the whole plan he was proudest of, not because it would kill anyone, but because it wouldn't need to.

So when Tick-Tock clicked *now*, Rummage had already cross-wired it, and the kid only had to pull the one lever, and every gilded, glorious, broadcast-ready light in Sump died at once.

The cameras went to black. Ashcroft's golden voice cut to a squawk. And in the sudden dark, into the confused white crowd of the cleanest, softest, most sealed-in people alive (people raised in climate control, people who had not been in real darkness in twenty years, people whose whole architecture of safety was *light and clean air and knowing where you are*) came the Mongrels, who lived in the dark, who loved it, and who had a language for it.

Tick. Tick-tick. Tock. The pack moved to the kid's clicks the way they'd moved under Sub-Level Four, blind and certain, while all around them the Angels swung useless lights and shouted and bumped and lost their neat ranks in about four seconds, because a soldier trained to perform in daylight for a camera is not a soldier trained to fight in the dark against things he can hear clicking and cannot see. Somewhere close a swan screamed, one long furious gilded shriek, and set off half the flock, and for one glorious second the panic of sixty golden birds did more damage to the Reserve's composure than a mortar could have.

A Sterling went down somewhere near the ice sculpture shrieking in a register no consultant had ever billed for, and a Warden went down right after him over the same slick puddle of melted swan, and Rummage, mid-scramble himself, allowed himself one ugly grin at how little darkness it took to turn the cleanest people alive into a scrum of elbows.

“BAND FIRST,” Rummage roared, because the band was up high on the stand where the light would come back first and the sightlines were worst, and because, he’d admit it later, because it would be *funny*.

Riot took the band.

She came up onto the bandstand out of the dark like the apocalypse the world had already had and somehow deserved again, and she went down the line of the gilded Angel brass with Precision in both hands and three good strings singing, and it was, by every account anyone ever gave of it, *magnificent*. A tuba went one way and its Angel went the other. A trombone folded around a mirrored visor with a noise like the end of a very bad song. A cymbal came off its stand spinning and took a Cherub off his feet before it ever hit the ground, and somewhere under the wreck a euphonium kept making one long dying note all on its own, as if it had decided to file its own complaint. Feathers and gold leaf and sheet music went up together in one glittering cloud, and for one absurd second it looked, from below, like the Reserve’s own triumph confetti, early, and entirely at its own expense. She did not, mostly, need to kill them: she needed to *open* them, one screech of the bass along a seam, and let twenty years of terror-of-the-air do the rest, and the bandstand became a heap of shrieking gilded men clutching their own armor while a punk stood on top of the wreck of the Reserve’s triumphal march and, because she was Riot, because some things are owed, put her boot on a drum and played four bars of something loud and filthy and hers into the dark, so the last thing the cameras caught before they died was the Reserve’s own band, playing the Mongrels’ song. Somewhere below her a Warden was still trying to blow a bullhorn with a trombone slide wedged through his collar, and it came out less like an order and more like a very sad goose.

Below the wrecked bandstand the whole square had come apart at the same speed, gilded birds and white uniforms and toppled trestle tables all tangled together in the dark, and somewhere a dropped camera lay on its back still rolling, broadcasting nothing to Providence but static and screaming.

Missus owned the high ground, exactly as Steele had dared her to, and she spent it like the professional she was.

From up there the whole square was a lit match dropped in a box of paper (swans scattering white feathers gone grey with panic, Angels

colliding with tables and each other, the ice bird finally, gloriously, toppling off its stand into the canapés nobody would ever eat) and Missus watched all of it down a scope gone perfectly, coldly quiet, the way the world always did for her the moment her finger found the trigger.

She did not fire at the Board. She'd made her peace with that. She fired at the *plan*: at every Angel officer trying to rally the white chaos into order, every Warden who found a bullhorn, every clean cold voice that might turn a panicking crowd back into an army. One flat crack and the voice stopped. She named each one under her breath, working her list, the long list, Cobb and the Merrow children and towns the pack had never seen, spending the dead, at last, on the living, one patient round at a time, and every time an Angel found the nerve to organize the others, Missus quietly un-found it for him from four hundred yards. One round she named for Del's brother without meaning to, and didn't take it back. Somewhere in the smoke and the gold she found a rhythm to it, round and name, round and name, and did not let herself think too hard about how much it felt, Glow forgive her, like peace.

"Middle's collapsing," she reported, calm as weather. "They're bunching toward the dais. Toward the Board. Good, keep them clowns busy protecting each other." A pause. "Rummage. The doctor's moving. Pryce. He's not panicking. He's just... walking his drum toward the Pumphouse door. Right through all of it. Like the dark's not even happening."

Cold went down Rummage's back. Of course Pryce wasn't panicking. Pryce didn't need light or order or a ceremony. Pryce needed sixty seconds alone with a valve, and a screaming golden blackout was, if anything, better cover than the party would have been.

He didn't wait to think it through twice; he was already moving toward the radio dial with fingers gone clumsy and fast at once.

"PrettyBoy," Rummage barked into the radio. "PrettyBoy, the doctor's making for the pump, he's early, he's not waiting for the ribbon. Where are you..."

Static. And then, calm and courteous and close, from somewhere already inside the Pumphouse, the best of them:

"I'm here," said PrettyBoy. "I'm already here. Go do your jobs. I've got the doctor."

Rummage did his job, which was Mama.

He went in through the gap in the ropes he'd marked at dawn, the one nobody important had thought worth a guard, and after that he fought his way to the Pumphouse the old way, the certain way, not fast but impossible to stop, the wrench doing the work it had always done: opening bolts, opening suits, opening a path through the panicking white. The dark didn't slow him down; if anything it suited him, an old man's eyes no worse in the black than anyone else's, and forty years of finding a bolt by feel alone paying off in a way none of the engineers who'd built this square could ever have planned for. An Angel got a hand on him and Rummage broke the hand. Another swung a gilded instrument like a club and Rummage took it on the shoulder that already hated him and gave the Angel back the wrench, and the old man ground forward through the dark and the gold and the shrieking toward the one door that mattered, because whatever PrettyBoy was doing in there, PrettyBoy was one man, and the plan had always been that Rummage would get to Mama and shut her down, stop the heart for one terrible minute, so that even if the drum fed in, there'd be no current to carry the poison out.

A third Angel got smart and simply got out of the way, which Rummage decided, grimly, to count as the first sign of anyone learning anything all day.

He reached the great dark heartbeat of her. The air changed the second he crossed her threshold: cooler, older, thick with the mineral breath of deep water, the party's gold and noise falling away behind him like a door closing on another world. He put his old hands on the warm iron the way Del did, the way you touch kin, and he found the master coupling he'd studied on the beautiful terrible stolen diagrams, and he set the wrench to it, and behind him in the dark of the Pumphouse he heard voices: PrettyBoy's, courteous and low, and another, mild and gentle and entirely unafraid, and Rummage's blood went cold, because he knew that second voice from Missus's description without ever having heard it, the voice of a man discussing weeds.

"Please don't," said Dr. Halcyon Pryce, kindly, somewhere in the dark behind him. "You'll spoil the water. And it's such lovely water. Let me show you, truly, how gentle it can be."

Rummage turned.

And out at the edge of the light that wasn't there, past the shrieking gala and the gilded swans and the broken band, on the far side of the square, a single sound cut through everything else, quiet and even and without any theater in it at all, a voice Rummage had heard once across a fire, saying a thing it had promised.

"There you are," said Colonel Marcus Steele, walking into the dark toward the pump, unhurried, while his employers screamed. "I brought everything I've got. Let's see the seam."

The heart of Reclamation Day had come down to the Pumphouse: the doctor, the drum, the ruined-faced man, the old mechanic, the machine, and the one enemy who was not a joke, arriving last, exactly as he'd said he would, to end them.

Chapter Eighteen: Sorry About That

It had worked exactly the way PrettyBoy had known it would, and it had cost exactly what he'd known it would cost, and he had done it anyway, and that was the whole of who he was.

The uniform still fit him, that was the joke of it, the tailoring of a dead life sitting on his shoulders like it had never left, every crease pressed sharp enough to cut, and he'd polished the buttons himself the night before with the same rag he used on his boots, because if he was going to become a lie he intended to be a well-made one.

He had walked the red carpet inward, against the tide of white, in the pressed uniform of a dead man, moving like he belonged, and he had belonged, that was the horror and the gift of it, the Angels' visors sliding over him and finding a clean officer's uniform and a Warden's unhurried walk and letting him pass. He counted his own steps the way he always did in bad country, one, two, matching the tempo of a man with nowhere urgent to be, because urgency was the one thing a lie like this could never afford to show. And when one did look up, when a Cherub's mirrored face tipped toward his and caught, at last, the *face* above the collar (the ruin, the thing the war had made) the boy had flinched, and looked away, exactly as the very first Angel had flinched at the bullhorn a lifetime ago, and in that half-second of a clean child's recoil PrettyBoy had walked calmly past him toward the pump. He did not look back to see whether the boy told anyone. He already knew the answer.

They could not look at him. So they did not see him. For twenty years his face had shut every door in the world. Today it had walked him through all of them.

Something in his chest wanted to be sick about that, wanted it badly, and he filed the wanting away in the place he kept all the things he couldn't afford yet. He did not let himself feel what that was, yet. There would be time to feel it, if he lived. There was a drum to reach.

Outside, the whole gilded world had gone black and started screaming; in here it was just water and iron and one small clean room that smelled of nothing at all, as if the doctor had swept even the *smell* of the surface away before it could reach him.

He reached it in the dark, when Tick-Tock killed the lights, and by then he was already inside the Pumphouse with Mama's great heart beating

around him, and Dr. Halcyon Pryce was there with his clean coat and his clean drum and his clean, kind, unbothered smile, and the doctor looked at PrettyBoy's ruined face in the dark and did not flinch at all.

That was the thing PrettyBoy would remember. Everyone flinched. The Angels flinched, the towns flinched, PrettyBoy flinched at himself in a scrap of tin every night of his life. Halcyon Pryce looked at the worst the war had ever done to a human face, and smiled, and said, warmly, "Oh, you poor man. Yes. *You're* exactly who I do this for."

PrettyBoy had rehearsed a hundred ways this meeting might go, in the dark on the walk in, and not one of them had started with kindness. He hadn't accounted for kindness. It rocked him worse than a blade would have.

"I beg your pardon," said PrettyBoy, courteous even now, because the manners were the last of the ordinary man and he would keep them to the end.

Pryce tilted his head, considering PrettyBoy's ruin the way he might consider a wilting stem, already halfway to a diagnosis.

"Look at you." Pryce said it gently, tenderly, gesturing at the ruin with something that was almost love. "The pain of that. The *disorder* of it. A face like yours should never have had to happen, and with the water, you see, it never would again. No more children born to become *this*." His mild eyes shone. "I'm not your enemy. I'm the man making sure no one else ever has to wear your face. Surely, surely of everyone alive, *you* understand. Surely you, of all people, want the garden clean."

And there it was: the softest, most poisonous thing anyone had ever said to him. Not *you're a monster*. Worse. *You're a monster, and I'm the cure, and don't you wish you'd never been born like this*. The doctor had reached, with terrible gentleness, straight into the wound PrettyBoy shaved over every night, and offered to call it mercy.

PrettyBoy's hand, without his permission, found the old ridge of scar along his jaw (a habit from childhood, from before the war even, checking a thing he already knew was there) and he made himself put the hand back down at his side.

PrettyBoy was quiet for a moment, in the dark, with Mama's heart beating, and the drum between them, and the whole low country asleep and in love and downstream.

“Do you know,” he said at last, and his courteous voice did not shake, “I have apologized to every man I have ever fought. It’s a failing of mine; the others tease me for it. I apologized to a *turret* once.” A breath. “I say sorry because I believe, I have always believed, even out here, even like this, that every creature I meet is a person, and persons are owed the courtesy, even when I have to put them down.” He looked at the drum. He looked at the gentle, smiling, sincere man who wanted to sterilize the world into a garden. “And I find, Doctor, that you are the very first living thing I have ever met that I cannot manage it for. I have been turning it over the whole way across that carpet, trying, because I do so hate to break my own rule. And I can’t. I’m not sorry. Glow help me, for you I am not sorry at all.”

Pryce’s smile did not change. That, more than anything else that terrible day, was the detail PrettyBoy would carry afterward, that the kindest cruelty in the world could hear itself named and not even flicker.

And PrettyBoy (the gentlest of them, the kindest, the last clean man, who could not look at his own face) did the thing the pretty man he used to be could never have done. Not with fury. Fury was Riot’s. He did it the way he did everything, with terrible, quiet care: he stepped past the reaching drum, and he took the mild smiling doctor by the clean coat, and he put himself and the ruin of his face very close, so that Halcyon Pryce would have to *look*, really look, the way no one ever did.

“You built a mercy out of wishing people like me had never been born,” PrettyBoy said, soft as a prayer. “So look at me. *Look*. This is the face you’re curing the world of. Ordinary men flinch from it. You didn’t even have the decency to flinch. So you’re going to look at it while I take your garden apart, because I *was* born, sir, ruined and hideous and *born*, and I have spent every day since deciding it was worth it, and I will not let you unmake one single child to spare them the trouble of deciding for themselves.”

For the first time since PrettyBoy had walked in, something moved behind Pryce’s eyes, not fear, not yet, but the first flicker of a man realizing his flowers could refuse the water.

He took the drum up by its collar, swung it once, and drove it into the injection port’s own housing, and then set his boot against the feed pipe and twisted until the coupling sheared. One motion, then another, a soldier’s economy, the valve and the feed and the doctor’s clean plan crumpling

together in the dark and the sterilant, Pryce's gentle mercy, spilled harmlessly across the Pumphouse floor and ran away into the drains, poisoning nothing but the concrete, and Mama's great heart beat on, unfed, clean, and blind.

It took less time than pulling a trigger. It felt, to PrettyBoy, like the longest thing he had ever done.

Pryce made a sound. Not rage. Something worse and smaller, the soft, wounded, uncomprehending sound of a gardener watching a vandal tear up a bed of flowers he had planted out of love. "You don't understand," he whispered, staring at the spreading ruin of his life's work. "You've spoiled it. It was going to be so *clean*. No one would even have grieved..."

"Someone always grieves," said PrettyBoy. "That's rather the point of us." And he let the doctor go, because you did not need to kill a man whose only weapon was a drum now emptying into a drain, and because, even now, even for Pryce, he found he could not quite become the thing that would.

Pryce sank back against the wall as if something structural in him had been the drum all along, and did not try to run, and did not try to fight, and only watched his lovely water spread and darken across the floor like a stain he could not stop apologizing for.

PrettyBoy turned to find Rummage staring at him across the dark of the Pumphouse, wrench in hand, and beyond Rummage, in the doorway, framed against the golden shrieking chaos of the ruined gala, unhurried, quiet, without any theater at all, a man in his own armor and not the Reserve's white, come to the pump exactly as he had promised.

For one breath, nobody in that room moved, the doctor sagging against the wall, the old man still gripping his wrench, the ruined-faced soldier standing over a dead drum, and Steele filling the doorway like a debt finally come due.

"Well done," said Steele, to PrettyBoy, and meant it, which was the most terrifying thing anyone had said all day. "Truly. That was very good." He glanced once at the ruined drum, and at the doctor sitting down in his own spreading mercy, and something in his face did not change at all. "I could have put fifty Angels on that door. I had them to spare." He said it the way a man reads back a figure he has already checked. "But fifty Angels would have shot you in the dark and called it a night's work, and I would

never have known which one of you did this, or how.” A pause. “I have waited twenty years for a thing worth watching. I wasn’t going to hand it to the choirboys.” He drew a weapon with the unhurried certainty of a man who had never once in his life been late. “Now. Let’s finish learning the dogs.”

Chapter Nineteen: The Wall

Steele in a room was a different order of thing, and the pack learned it the hard way, in about six seconds.

The Pumphouse still smelled of chlorine and hot oil, and under that, faint and copper, the blood from Rummage's knuckles where he'd put the door in expecting Angels and found only quiet. The gala lights didn't reach this far; only Mama's small green pilot lamps burned along the pipe-run, and in that dim a shape came off the wall between two valve stacks and was already moving before anyone's eyes had adjusted.

He was nothing like the Angels. He did not panic in the dark; he had turned off his own light before he came in, to meet them on their own ground. He did not fear the ruin of PrettyBoy's face or the reach of Missus's rifle or the ugly swing of Precision. He had studied all of it for a month, and he moved through the Pumphouse like a man reading a book he'd read before, and everywhere the pack was strong he simply was not standing. There was no snarl in him for Riot to read, no relish, nothing at all to answer. He fought the way water finds a crack, unhurried, uninterested, always toward whatever was thin.

Rummage swung the wrench at him, and Steele simply took it away. Just... took it, the way you take a toy from a child, one economical motion, and put the old man down on the concrete with an efficiency that had no cruelty and no anger in it. Rummage hit the floor hard enough to lose the room for a second, tasted iron at the back of his throat, and understood, even flat on his back, with a clarity that would stay with him a long while, that the wrench had never been the weapon. He was. PrettyBoy came next, and PrettyBoy was good, PrettyBoy had been a real soldier in a real army, and Steele broke his guard in three moves and would have broken more if Riot hadn't come off the bandstand and through the door like the end of the world, Precision singing.

Steele fought all of them at once and was winning.

That was the honest, terrible truth of it, and Rummage (on the floor, ears ringing, hauling himself up on Mama's warm iron) made himself see it plain the way he made himself see everything. Somewhere behind him Tick-Tock had gone to ground beside the drum, small and still, watching with the flat animal attention of a boy who had learned long ago that the worst thing you could do in a fight you weren't built for was be seen. They

had the numbers. They had the dark. They had three years of being a single four-armed animal. And it was not enough, because the man in the middle of them was simply *better*, a full weight-class better, the one thing in the whole shining Reserve that actually worked as advertised. He was going to end them. Not out of hate. As a job. And he was nearly done.

He had Riot by the throat against the flank of the pump. He had put PrettyBoy down. Tick-Tock's clicks had gone high and frightened, the sound the pack had learned first and feared most. It was a rattling, wordless thing that meant *someone I love is dying and I have no hands for this*. Riot's boots had left the ground; her fingers were clawed uselessly around a wrist she couldn't move an inch. And Steele looked, for one moment, up and out through the Pumphouse door toward the high ground where he knew (of course he knew, he'd dared her to take it) the still woman was watching all of this through a scope, unable to fire, because her people were tangled up with him too close, because there was no shot that took Steele that didn't take Riot or Rummage with him.

"She won't take it," Steele said, conversationally, tightening his hand on Riot's throat, watching the high ground. "I know her. She's like me. Patient. Careful. She won't spend a life she isn't sure of." He said it almost kindly, one professional describing another. "That's the flaw in the pattern, you see. The care. It's the thing I've never had, and it's why—"

Four hundred yards off, on the high ground, one breath went all the way out and did not come back in.

The shot came.

It came from four hundred yards, through the Pumphouse door, through the exact hand's-width of space between Riot's head and Steele's, a shot that no careful, patient shooter would ever take, a shot you only take if you have decided that this once, this only once, you will spend everything, and it took Steele high in the shoulder and spun him off Riot and put the great, cold, unbeatable man down onto the concrete at last, bleeding, alive, but *down*.

For a moment nobody in the Pumphouse moved at all, and the only sound was Mama's water, patient, going on.

Up on the high ground, Missus lowered the rifle.

Her hands were not shaking. That, too, she would remember later, the strange calm of it, the barrel still warm against her palm and her shoulder

already aching with the kick of a round she'd carried so long she'd half forgotten it had a kick at all.

She had fired the bullet she was saving. Rummage knew it the instant it happened (knew it the way he knew weather, knew it before she said a word over the radio), the one round she had carried for three years and never once put a name to out loud, because the only name that belonged on it was the one she had never once been able to say, the name she had worn in place of her own ever since, the person the Reserve had taken from her long before Sump, the round she had sworn on her own grief she would never, ever fire. She had spent it. Not on Steele. That wasn't it, that wasn't it at all. She had spent it to take a shot too reckless for a careful woman, a shot only a person willing to give up the thing she was keeping could make, and in spending it she had refused, at the last possible moment, in the last possible way, to become him. To become the careful, patient, pitiless thing in the doorway. Steele had said she wouldn't take the shot because she was like him.

She took the shot to prove she wasn't.

"That's the flaw in *your* pattern," Missus said, quiet, over the radio, to the man bleeding on the floor. Her voice was very tired and very far away and, for the first time in the whole book, at peace. "You thought careful meant I'd never spend everything at once." A breath. "I've been saving that for somebody. Turns out it was you after all. Not to kill you. Just to move you." A pause. "I'm not like you, Steele. I only look like you. There's a whole world of difference between us, and I just spent it."

Down in the Pumphouse, nobody said anything to that.

Blood found the drain in the floor the way it had been built to, and the water kept beating up out of the ground overhead, clean, indifferent, unaware that anything below it had changed at all. Steele lay on the concrete, one shoulder ruined, and looked up at the pack (the old man on his feet again, the punk gasping and alive, the ruined-faced soldier rising, the kid, the emptied drum, the clean water still beating up out of the ground unpoisoned) and he did a thing none of them expected.

He laughed. Once. Low. Not bitter.

Riot flinched at the sound of it more than she had at anything he'd done with his hands. PrettyBoy went still, wary, as if the laugh might be a blade he hadn't seen yet.

“There it is,” he said, from the floor, blood spreading, unhurried even now. “*That’s* the thing I couldn’t find in the file. Why five dogs went back for a town that sold them.” He looked at Missus’s high ground, at the empty place where the impossible shot had come from. “You’ll spend the thing you swore you’d keep, but only to keep from becoming me.” Something moved in his face that was almost wonder. “I’ve been fighting the wrong war for twenty years. I learned *how* you fight. I never once learned why. And the why is the whole—”

Alarms. Out in the square, past the ruined gala, real alarms now, and the beginnings of order, because Steele down was not the Reserve done, and Angels were finding their nerve, and the window the blackout had bought was closing. Somewhere out there boots were forming into lines again, and the clean people were remembering they were soldiers.

Rummage looked at the man on the floor. He had the wrench back. He did not remember picking it up; his arm had known what it wanted before the rest of him had decided anything. He could end it. Every dead soul on Missus’s list said end it, and the Merrow children, and Cobb, and every town this cold efficient man had ever spent like paperwork. Every name Rummage had heard whispered in a dozen low-country kitchens by people who still flinched at the word *Angel*. His grip tightened on the handle until his knuckles ached with it.

“Rummage,” said Missus, over the radio, reading his silence from four hundred yards, the way she read everything. “Leave him.”

The radio hissed, empty, for three full seconds before he found the words.

“He’ll come again.”

“I know it,” she said. “Leave him anyway. We came here to save the ones downstream, not to spend the last of ourselves killing a man who’s already lost the water.” A pause, and something gentle in it, something come all the way back from the grey room. “That’s the difference, remember? That’s the whole difference. Don’t let him take it from you on his way down. Leave him. We’re the pack. Not him.”

And Rummage (old, aching, bleeding, standing over the one enemy who was not a joke, in the heart of the machine they’d broken) set the wrench down, and did not become the thing on the floor, and turned to gather his mutts and go. The sound of it against the concrete was very loud

in the sudden quiet.

Behind him he heard his people move (Riot's boots, PrettyBoy's careful, favoring stride, Tick-Tock's bare feet slapping wet concrete), a pack limping, whole, alive, going. Nobody looked back but him.

"The dogs," Steele said behind him, to the ceiling, to the clean water beating overhead, almost to himself, with something the pack would spend a long time trying to name and never quite would. "The *dogs*."

Chapter Twenty: Comeuppance

Getting *in* had been the plan. Getting *out* was improvisation, which was, as it happened, the Mongrels' native tongue.

They came out of the Pumphouse into a square that had stopped being a party and had not yet decided what it was instead: the lights still dead, the swans loose and gilded and enraged, the brass band a heap of groaning gold, the cameras black, the velvet ropes down, and everywhere the cleanest people alive discovering, for the first time in twenty years, that they were outdoors in the dark with no one in charge. Somewhere a confetti cannon kept firing on its own, blind and stuttering, flinging gold foil over a crowd that had long since stopped celebrating anything. Somebody's Sunday suit was on fire, gently, unnoticed, its owner too busy screaming at a swan. It was pandemonium. It was, Rummage thought, exactly the kind of mess the pack was built to walk through.

Riot walked through it looking for something to take.

Behind her the rest of the pack came out into the same wreck, each of them carrying the fight in a different place on their body. PrettyBoy favored a rib he wasn't going to mention until they were miles gone. Tick-Tock stuck close to Rummage's hip, clicking low and constant, the sound of a boy counting everyone present without using numbers he didn't have. Rummage counted heads the old-fashioned way, out loud in his own skull, and came up short by nobody, which he took as more of a miracle than the lack of a body count.

She found it by the collapsed catering, where the Sterling twins had, to the very end, refused to abandon their post, because the ice swan was ruined and the canapés were trod into the red carpet and this, *this*, was the true catastrophe, this was what a Sterling could not leave. Riot came out of the dark and had one of them by the collar before he finished a sentence his brother was starting.

"Can't possibly *reschedule*, the swans are already—"

"You're coming with us," Riot informed him.

Up close they were even more identical than the gala programs had promised: matching gold waistcoats, matching horror on matching faces, two mirrors trying and failing to argue with each other about a swan.

What happened next, the pack talked about for a long time after, because it was funny and then, for one flick of a second, it wasn't. Riot took

the one Sterling (Castor, they'd later decide, or possibly Pollux; it hardly mattered, that was the whole tragedy of them) and hauled him toward the bolt-hole. Forty feet away, untouched, unthreatened, standing perfectly alone by the ruined ice, the *other* Sterling screamed and dropped to his knees clutching his own collar, his own throat, gasping at a grip that wasn't on him, at a capture happening to someone else, feeling it, *feeling* it, the way he'd felt every hurt his brother had ever taken through twenty sealed years. For one moment the splatstick went cold, and the pack glimpsed the real and lonely horror the joke had always been hiding: two men so long fused they could no longer be wounded apart, one of them dragged into the dark and the other collapsing after him across a square, reaching, unable to be left, unable to follow. Nobody laughed. Even Riot's grip on the collar went slack for half a second, like she'd grabbed something that turned out to be alive in a way she hadn't budgeted for.

"Rust," Riot said, quietly, looking at the kneeling twin, all the fun gone out of her for a breath. "That's... that's actually sad. That's genuinely—"

"Take the one you've got," said Missus, over the radio, not unkind. "Grieve the sad on your own time. Move."

They moved. The kneeling twin's screaming thinned to a low, private sound behind them, the sound of a man being left rather than hurt, which Riot decided, walking away from it, was somehow worse. And on the way past the dead bandstand, Riot (because some things are owed, because a pack has to leave a mark) tore the commemorative plaque off the front of the dais, the one the Sterlings had cast in bronze for the occasion, **RECLAMATION DAY: THE SURFACE COMES HOME**, and she'd bolt it later to the flank of Lazarus under the three-legged dog, a trophy, a joke, a promise, and every town they rolled into after would ask what it meant and every time the pack would just grin. The bolts shrieked free of the rotten wood in a spray of splinters, and the whole heavy ugly weight of it swung into her arms like it had been waiting all along to be stolen.

Above it all, one thing in Providence's whole apparatus never once stopped working, and that was the Voice.

Vivienne Ashcroft's cameras were dead and her broadcast was dark and her triumph was a screaming golden wreck full of loose swans, and Vivienne Ashcroft *did not stop*. Somewhere a single emergency circuit still carried her, and she rode it, radiant, undaunted, narrating into the ruin with

the deranged serenity of a woman for whom the show had never once, in twenty years, been allowed to end. The circuit was thin and crackling, and her voice came through it undiminished anyway.

Somewhere behind that thin crackle, a single ruined loudspeaker, hanging by one bracket off the dead bandstand, caught the signal and gave it back to the square, tinny and enormous at once, so the pack heard her the whole way to the bolt-hole whether they wanted to or not.

“And what *courage*,” she was telling the dozen radios of the low country, over the distant screams, “what *grace* the Reserve shows, my darlings, in the face of this cowardly holdout treachery, why, the Chairman himself was here, the Chairman *graced* us, and though the vandals have disrupted our beautiful ceremony, let there be *no doubt*, no doubt at all, that Reclamation continues, that home is *coming*, that...” and on, and on, spinning the disaster into gold in real time, believed by everyone who could hear her and no one who could see her, performing salvation over the sound of her own civilization coming apart, because it was the only thing left in her, because the applause had stopped twenty years ago and she had decided, out loud, forever, that it hadn’t. Somewhere down the low country’s shortwave, in a dozen dark kitchens, people who had never once questioned that voice nodded along in the flicker of tallow lamps, and believed her a little more for how calm she sounded while the world behind her burned.

It should have been only funny. It was mostly funny. But Rummage, hauling a captured twin toward the rig, heard that golden undaunted voice riding over the wreckage and felt the small cold weight in his chest, because a lie that cannot be stopped by *losing* is a lie you have not actually beaten, and he understood that they had broken the Reserve’s afternoon and not laid a finger on the thing that made the Reserve dangerous, which was a voice in the dark that the frightened would always, always rather believe. He filed that away, the way he filed away everything that scared him more than teeth did, for later, for the long ride, for whenever there was time to be afraid of it properly.

The order to withdraw came from the Pumphouse, and it came from the one man whose orders the Angels would still obey.

Steele (on his feet again somehow, one arm useless, Missus’s impossible round through his shoulder, refusing help, refusing to hurry)

walked out into the ruined square, took one look at the whole broken shining disaster of it, and made the call that a professional makes and his employers never could: he read the board, saw the water was lost, the drum emptied, the day gone, and he did not throw good Angels after a bad afternoon. He cut the losses. He called the retreat. Angels who had been screaming orders at each other over the honking of enraged swans went quiet the moment his voice came over the line, the way a room goes quiet when the one adult in it finally speaks.

“Fall back,” Steele said, quiet, even, and the Angels fell back, because he said it and because they were, under all the white, terrified children who wanted to go home. “Get the Chairman underground before he sees the sky and dies of it. Leave the swans.” A pause. “Leave the town. We don’t need it today.”

Somewhere in the retreating tide of white a young Angel dropped his rifle and did not stop to pick it up, and nobody, not even Steele, thought less of him for it.

He let the ground go. Not because the pack took it from him (they could never have taken it from him, and every one of them knew it) but because he chose to, coldly, correctly, the way he chose everything. He stood in the wreck of the Reserve’s masterpiece, bleeding, unbeaten and defeated at once, and he watched the Mongrels haul their trophy and their captured clown toward the dark, and he did not send a single Angel after them. Blood still found its slow way down inside his ruined sleeve, and he did not seem to notice it any more than he noticed the swans.

Not with rage. Just with attention, the way a craftsman watches a tool he’s decided he wants to keep. He watched them go the way you watch something you intend to see again.

And Rummage, looking back once from the bolt-hole, met the eyes of the one man in that whole gilded ruin he had never once been able to laugh at, and neither of them said anything, and both of them understood the same thing perfectly:

The pack had won the afternoon. That was the whole of what they had won. The water was clean and the low country would live and the pack had won the day, but the man in the middle of the wreckage had learned exactly what he’d come to learn, and he was already, behind those quiet eyes, turning the page.

Chapter Twenty-One: Landing

They buried nobody, that day, which Rummage counted as a miracle and Missus counted as a debt not yet come due.

Missus sat apart from the rest of them that first night, on the tailgate of a supply cart, and broke her rifle down piece by piece in the dark the way she always did, out of habit more than need. Her hands found the empty chamber where the round had lived for three years and stopped there a moment too long before she moved on, and if anyone had asked her what she was feeling she would not have had a word ready, because there wasn't one. Rummage didn't ask. He just made sure there was coffee near her hand when she looked up, and left it at that.

The Reserve pulled out of Sump by nightfall and took its dead and its gilded swans and its melting ice and its terrified Chairman back down the Dry Road, back toward Providence and the painted sky, and left behind a town that had, in the space of one afternoon, been decorated, betrayed, rescued, and abandoned, and did not know what its face was supposed to do. The square still smelled of scorched confetti and swan feathers long after the last Angel truck had rattled off down the Dry Road, and nobody had yet found the courage to sweep it.

Sump was ashamed. That was the thing Rummage hadn't braced for and couldn't fix. The town had voted to sell the dogs, and the dogs had come back anyway, and saved not just Sump but the whole low country the town had never even thought to worry about. Sump could not look at them. Not out of hate now. Out of shame, which is worse, because shame doesn't have anywhere to go. Doors that had stood open all through the gala stayed shut now, and the few faces that showed at a window pulled back the moment Rummage's eye found them.

Foss tried. Foss, who had walked out of her own town rather than live with the vote, stood in the square and told them plainly what the papers had said and what the pack had stopped, and some of them heard it, and some of them wept, and Del the Water-Keeper came to Rummage with her head down and her hands twisting and could not get a single word out, and Rummage (old, and tired, and kind, because kindness was the only tool he had left that hadn't been dented) said, "Don't. I know. Your brother, the frame, the hunger. I know. You don't got to say it, Del. You kept Mama's heart beating twenty years. You keep it beating twenty more. That's your

thanks. Clean water. That's the only thing that makes any of this worth a rusting cent." Del's hands went still at that, finally, and she nodded once, like a woman setting down something heavy she'd been carrying since long before the gala, and walked back toward the pump without looking behind her.

And Bell (Bell, who had never once turned, who'd been slapped for not turning) came flying across the square and hit Tick-Tock at a dead run and clicked, and clicked, and clicked, the cricket he'd given her clutched in one fist, *I'm here, I'm here, I'm here*, and Tick-Tock crouched and clicked it back, and that, Rummage thought, watching the two gap-toothed children talk to each other in the dark language of *I'm here*, that was as close to a reconciliation as this town was going to get, and it would have to be enough, because it was more than most towns gave. He let himself watch it a moment longer than he needed to, the two of them clicking away in the ash-light, before he turned back to the harder work of getting his people gone.

They did not stay. They never stayed.

The pack spent one more night camped at the edge of Sump's wall while Rummage went over each of them in turn with his kit, muttering the whole time about the state people got themselves into, and PrettyBoy sat still and quiet for his share of it, and Riot fidgeted through hers, and Tick-Tock refused his entirely until Rummage bribed him with a strip of dried something nobody wanted to identify.

The Sterling twin they'd taken turned out to be more trouble than he was worth. He wept for his brother the whole first night, feeling him three hundred miles off, and Rummage, who could not abide a suffering thing even a monstrous one, ended up letting Foss arrange a quiet trade of him back for a wagon of the trade goods the blockade had cost Sump, which was, Riot pointed out, probably the only ransom in history paid in *salt and cloth for a man in a gold waistcoat*, and everyone agreed it had gone about as well as could be expected. The twin cried with relief the whole handoff and thanked Rummage twice, sincerely, for kidnapping him, which nobody in the pack ever really got over.

They kept the plaque. **RECLAMATION DAY: THE SURFACE COMES HOME.** Rummage bolted it to Lazarus's flank himself, under the three-legged dog, and stood back, and the pack looked at it, and nobody

said anything for a while. The bronze caught what little light the low country had to give and held onto it.

"We're broke again," Riot observed. It was true. Foss's coin had gone on repairs and the ransom-in-reverse and the kind of debts a pack accrues saving a low country that will never know to pay it. They had come to Sump broke and they were leaving Sump broke, with one bronze plaque and a trade wagon's worth of salt and every child in the low country alive and unpoisoned and entirely unaware.

"We're always broke," Rummage said.

"We should charge the low country," Riot said. "We saved every rusting one of them. Door to door. *Excuse me, we prevented your gradual sterilization, that'll be a day's water.*"

"They wouldn't believe you," said Missus. "They're in love with a voice that told them we killed babies. You'd get to the second door and they'd hang you."

"Worth it for the *look* on the first one," said Riot, and Tick-Tock clicked hard, the pack's laugh-track, and even Missus's plain tired face made the shape of a smile, and PrettyBoy (PrettyBoy, who had walked his ruined face into the enemy's cameras and come out the other side of something, who had shaved that morning looking, for the first time in twenty years, almost *at* the tin and not away from it) said, "I, for one, found the swans excessive," and the pack laughed the way it laughed, in the dark, broke, alive, together, which was the only currency any of them had ever actually cared about. Even Missus's laugh, thin as it was, sounded like it had come a long way to get there.

They rode out of Sump the next dawn, north, because north was where the road went and the road was the only home they had. The sky over the low country was doing its usual grey nothing, but somewhere behind it, thin and pale, was the shape of a sun trying to remember how it used to look.

And on the way (because Riot had found, in the wreck of the gala, an Angel's field generator, and because Riot was Riot) she climbed up onto Lazarus's roof where she rode, and she plugged Precision into it, the battered three-string bass that was mostly a warhammer and had been, once or twice, on the bad nights, almost a voice, and she turned it up, all the way up, louder than the wasteland had heard anything in twenty years that wasn't a bomb, and she played. Her hair came loose from its tie in the wind

off the rig's speed and whipped around her face, and she didn't bother pushing it back.

Not the quiet searching thing she played to her one small room. Loud. Filthy. Defiant. One long ugly glorious bar of noise flung out across the ash and the bones of the old world and the low country full of sleeping people in love with a lie, a sound that meant nothing and everything, that meant *we're here*, that meant *we're not done*, that meant *come and get us then*, and it rolled out over the waste, and somewhere far off a rad-storm walked the horizon on legs of brown lightning, and the pack rode north into whatever was next, broke and bleeding and laughing, five strays and a rig and a stray more, with a bronze plaque and a bass and a whole world that would never thank them.

Rummage drove, and listened to the noise his crazy punk was making at the whole rotten sky, and did not tell her to turn it down. Beside him, Tick-Tock clicked once, small and satisfied, keeping time. Behind them, Sump shrank to a smudge on the horizon and then to nothing at all, one more town that would remember them however it needed to in order to sleep at night.

Missus rode with her rifle across her knees, empty chamber and all, watching the road unspool the way she watched everything, careful, patient, alive. PrettyBoy watched the sky instead of flinching from it. And the road went on ahead of them, north, into whatever the low country had left to throw at five strays and a rig, and none of them, for once, was in any hurry to find out what that was.

Cut to black.

Epilogue: The Map

Three hundred miles south and a long way down, in the painted-sky vault at the bottom of Providence, Cassius Vane had a decree read into the record, and his voice, behind the mirrored rig, had lost some of its grandeur and did not get it back. The vault's false dawn was still cycling through its slow, patient program overhead, pink into gold into a blue that had never once existed in the real sky above it, and nobody in the room was watching it anymore.

"The unlicensed party known as the Mongrels," the Facilitator read (it was Osgood, of course it was Osgood, it was always Osgood) "is hereby classified as a named and standing enemy of the Reserve. All assets are directed to prioritize their..." Osgood swallowed, "their removal."

"They were on the *surface*," Vane said, to no one, to the painted hills, his gloved hands finding each other in his lap. He had been brought up into the world for one afternoon and the world had come apart around him and he had been carried back down into the dark not having once looked at the sky, and something in him had not survived the trip. "Vermin. On the surface. Beating my Angels. In the *open*." The mirror turned, slow, toward the diorama, toward the child's-drawing sun. "Correct the sky, Facilitator. It's grey again. I can... I can feel that it's grey." His voice dropped, and for one moment it was only a frightened old man in a hole. "And the seals held. At Sump. When the Angels fell. Tell me the seals held."

Osgood, who had by now read a great many reports, and had learned the single most important thing a man in Providence could learn (which was what never, ever to say in this room) said, "The seals held, Chairman." His pen did not stop moving across the record even as he said it, a small, practiced dishonesty he had gotten very good at not feeling. He had kept his eyes on the page in front of him rather than the old man's face, which was, in this room, its own kind of mercy.

"Of course they did," whispered Cassius Vane, and turned back to his painting of a world that had died before most of the wasteland was born, and did not ask again.

Osgood gathered his papers and withdrew, and the mirrored door sealed behind him with the soft, expensive hiss of a mechanism that had never once needed oiling, and out in the corridor, alone, he allowed himself exactly one breath before he straightened his jacket and went to deliver the

rest of the day's business to a much more dangerous man.

Steele read the decree in his grey little office, one arm strapped across his chest where an impossible round had gone through it, and he did not prioritize anything, because he had prioritized it already, weeks ago, across a fire in the waste. The office held nothing that did not serve a purpose (no photographs, no comforts, a cot made with military precision against one wall) and the only light came from a single bare bulb that never once flickered, the way nothing in Providence was permitted to flicker.

He had asked for one thing, after Sump. Not more Angels. Not a bigger command. He had asked the Board to assign the Mongrels to *him* (personally, exclusively) and the Board, who wanted the embarrassment to simply go away and did not care how, had given them to him without understanding that they had given a hunter the one quarry that had ever been worth his while.

He was not angry. Steele had been shot through the shoulder by the people he was now bound to destroy, and there was not one degree of heat in him about it, and that was the thing Osgood, delivering the file, could not get comfortable with. Only that clean, cold, terrible interest, banked now into something patient and permanent. Osgood found himself, not for the first time, wishing the man would simply lose his temper once, just so there would be something ordinary to file it under.

"You'll want a larger force," Osgood ventured, "if they're—"

"No," said Steele. "You don't hunt dogs like these with a larger force. A larger force is what they *eat*." He turned, and crossed his grey office, to the one thing in it that Osgood had not been cleared to see, and after a moment's consideration (because a man should understand the shape of the thing he serves) Steele let him see it anyway.

It covered the whole far wall. A map. The low country, and beyond it, and beyond that, the whole region, drawn clean and lovely in pre-war ink, and across it, at the deep places, at the wells and the seeps and the working machines that lifted the blessing up out of the ground, a scatter of small neat marks. The paper had gone soft and brown at its folds, worn there by twenty years of a hand that returned to it every night. A dozen of them. More. Each one a town built on a heartbeat. Each one an aquifer, a watershed, a vein waiting for a needle.

Each one a Mama.

And over one of them, in the low country, a single mark had been struck through (one pin, one town, one pump) and beside it, in Pryce's own gentle hand, was written a single word that turned Osgood's stomach when he understood it, because it meant that everything, all of it, the swans and the siege and the sold dogs and the Merrow children and the impossible shot and the whole bloody afternoon, had been, to the men who drew this map, a rounding error.

The word beside Sump was: *pilot*.

Osgood's mouth went dry reading it. He had been in this room perhaps a dozen times before and had never once been shown the wall, and understanding, all at once, that the file in his hand and the war it described were the smallest possible fraction of a much larger design, he found he had nothing at all to say.

"They think they beat us at Sump," Steele said, quietly, standing before the map of all the water in the world, the file on the Mongrels open in his good hand. "They saved one town's watershed and rode north playing music, and they think the war is theirs." He looked at the dozen marks, the dozen heartbeats, the dozen towns full of people in love with a voice, none of whom had ever heard of a pack of dogs, all of whom were, whether they would ever know it or not, now depending on one. "Sump was the one we let them see."

He set the file down beneath the map, open to a grainy image: a war-rig, a three-legged dog, a bronze plaque bolted to the flank that read *THE SURFACE COMES HOME*.

"Learn the dogs, Facilitator," said Colonel Marcus Steele, to the map, to the water, to the long patient war he had finally, after twenty years, found worth fighting. "We're going to be a while."

He did not raise his voice on that last word. He never did. Osgood gathered the file and left him there, alone with his wall of pins, and did not look back, because some rooms were not meant to be looked back at. He walked the long grey corridor back up toward the painted-sky vault with the strange, cold certainty that he had just watched the opening move of a war Providence itself did not yet know it was fighting, and that the man who'd made it would still be standing at that wall, patient, unhurried, long after everyone currently sleeping in Sump had died of old age.

And far to the north, unknowing, broke, and laughing, the Mongrels rode on toward a horizon that had a dozen towns on it and a bass turned all the way up, and did not yet know that the whole map was theirs now, or that a patient man in a grey room had just made it so.

End of Book One.

Enjoyed the Ride?

Reviews are how small books find readers. The storefront's machinery pays attention to them, and so does every person deciding whether to spend an evening with a pack of mutts and a bass guitar.

If *Reclamation Day* gave you a good, ugly time, would you leave one? A line or two is plenty. It costs you a minute, and it is worth more to an independent author than you would guess.

Rummage would grumble that the pack doesn't need the help.

The pack needs the help.

The Mongrels Will Return

Sump was one pin on a wall.

There are a dozen more towns out there living on top of a working heartbeat, and not one of them knows to be afraid yet. Somewhere three hundred miles down in the dark, a patient man in a grey room has been handed a file with a three-legged dog on the cover, and he has all the time in the world.

THE MONGRELS, BOOK TWO Coming soon

There will be more of these. More Mongrels, and more besides. This is the kind of thing I intend to keep doing until somebody makes me stop.

To hear the day each one lands: thomjohns.com

Also by Thom Johns

A DEKE MERCER THRILLER

Blood Tribute

Philadelphia, 1977. The mob buried the wrong man and didn't check he stayed down. Deke Mercer came back up out of a shallow grave with nothing left to lose and a very long memory, and the families that put him there are about to learn what tribute really costs.

They marked him for a shallow grave.

About the Author

Thom Johns writes pulp with the safety off: post-apocalyptic action, hardboiled crime, and the kind of ragged, funny, violent adventure fiction that used to live on a wire rack by the drugstore door.

He came to it by way of a shelf of yellowed paperbacks that were never built to last this long: cracked spines, lurid covers, bought for pocket change and read to pieces. Somewhere in there he decided the world could stand a few more of them.

He writes fast, cuts hard, and figures a book you can't finish in a weekend had better have a very good excuse. He's currently at work on the next one.

For new releases and first word of the next book: thomjohns.com

MORE FREE PULPS

at

thomjohns.com

Every book free to read and share.

Tip if it kept you up.

GIVEN OVER

the descent at Hermon — horror

Read them all free at **thomjohns.com**.