

# EXORDIUM

Pain is the first thing that still belongs to me.

It wakes before thought. Before breath. It blooms under the skin like heat trapped in meat too thick to cut. Not a spike—never clean like that—but a spreading, crawling pressure, as if something inside me is inflating and has forgotten where the edges are.

I try to curl, but my body does not agree with the shape. My spine grinds. Something along my ribs catches, wet and fibrous, and I scream without sound. My throat tightens around a noise that never leaves. The inside of my mouth tastes of iron and rot. My gums bleed again.

I am lying on stone. Or on flesh pretending to be stone. I can't tell anymore.

When I move my arm, it moves late.

There is a delay between wanting and obeying. A soft drag, like muscle being peeled off itself. The skin along my forearm puckers and tightens, pulling toward the elbow where the swelling has grown worst. It pulses there, slow and patient, as if listening. Veins have gone dark, almost black, thick as cords. They throb in a rhythm that is not mine.

*Good*, something thinks—not in words, not in sound, but in pressure, in a sudden easing of the pain that makes me sob.

I don't know what that thing is. I don't know if it is me.

I try to remember my name. There is a hollow where it should be. When I reach for it, the pain flares in punishment, sharp enough to make my vision tear sideways. White sparks crawl across the dark. My jaw snaps shut so hard my teeth chip. I swallow the fragment without meaning to. It sticks in my throat.

Inside and outside have lost their meaning.

Sometimes there is a ceiling above me, close enough to smell—mold, old water, something sweet and wrong like spoiled fat. Sometimes there is only a wide pressure, an openness that presses down harder than walls ever did. Wind hurts now. Light hurts worse. Cold slides straight through skin and into bone, where it lingers and gnaws.

I push myself up.

My left leg buckles. The knee bends the wrong way, too far, cartilage squelching. I feel it before I see it. The joint has grown extra mass—lumpy, uneven. When weight hits it, something inside slips and then settles, satisfied. I bite down on my tongue until blood floods my mouth, hot and comforting compared to the rest.

*Up*, the pressure urges.

I obey. I always obey.

The ground is slick. My palms leave smears when I press them down—dark, oily streaks that steam faintly in the cold air. My skin peels when I lift my hands. Thin layers come away like wet parchment, exposing raw, glossy tissue beneath. It doesn't bleed much anymore. It weeps instead.

There are shapes around me. Buildings, maybe. Or carcasses stacked into walls. Doors gape like wounds that never closed. I cannot tell if I am indoors or outside. The air smells the same everywhere now: damp stone, old blood, a deep underlying warmth that makes my stomach twist.

The thing inside me tightens when I hesitate.

Pain spikes through my abdomen. Something pulls inward, rearranging. I gasp and feel a pressure under my ribs, like fingers spreading from the inside, testing space. My stomach distends visibly, skin stretching thin and shiny. New lines appear, branching, livid purple. I feel them grow.

*Move.*

I limp forward. Each step sends a shudder through me, setting off smaller pains—secondary aches that ripple outward from the main wound, reminders of what I have already lost. My shoulder grinds where bone has fused wrong. My neck pulls to one side, tendons shortened. My vision on the right flickers; the eye there is cloudy now, always watering.

I catch my reflection in something smooth and dark.

I don't recognize it.

The face is swollen, asymmetrical. One cheek sags, heavy with growth. The skin there is translucent enough that I can see movement beneath—slow contractions, like something breathing. My mouth hangs open slightly, lips cracked and blackened. When I blink, the eyelids don't quite meet.

Fear tries to surface. It doesn't last. Fear requires a future.

The pressure eases again, approving. With it comes a warmth that spreads through my chest, almost like relief. Almost like purpose.

I understand, dimly, that this thing is guiding me. Not with words. With reward and punishment. With the precise application of agony. It does not explain. It does not need to. I am a body. Bodies are simple.

Ahead, something shifts. A sound—wet, dragging. Another body, maybe. Or something that used to be.

The pressure inside me swells, eager. My heart stutters, then settles into a new rhythm to match it.

I step forward.

Pain follows.

That is all I know.



# THE KEEPER OF FLOW, ELSEWHERE...

The blockage is warm.

That is the first wrong thing.

Stone channels should be cold year-round. Even in high summer, the old drains keep their chill. This one steams faintly when he pries the cover loose, breath fogging back into his face as if the ground is exhaling.

He kneels anyway. Habit beats caution. Thirty years of clearing refuse teaches the hands to move before the mind finishes objecting.

The smell hits second.

Not rot. Not waste. Something coppery and sweet, like opened flesh left too long in the sun. It clings to the back of his throat and makes his eyes water. He spits, wipes his mouth with the back of his glove, and leans closer with the lantern.

The channel pulses.

Not fast. Not obvious. A subtle tightening and release along the stonework, just enough that the slick lining the trough ripples inward, then settles. He freezes, counting breaths, waiting for it to stop.

It doesn't.

His chest tightens. An old ache blooms behind his sternum, sharp and sudden, like a hand squeezing the heart. He gasps, startled more by the timing than the pain. It eases after a moment, leaving a dull warmth in its wake.

*Work*, the warmth seems to say.

He snorts at himself. Pain makes fools of men. He lowers the hook.

It doesn't scrape stone.

The hook sinks.

There is resistance—not hard, not soft. Fibrous. When he pulls, it gives reluctantly, stretching before coming free with a sound like wet cloth tearing. A length of pale matter rises from the channel, glistening in the lantern light. Veins thread through it, blue-black and sluggish.

His stomach lurches.

The ache in his chest flares again, harder this time. His vision tunnels. Sweat beads instantly along his spine despite the cold. He drops the hook and clutches at his shirt, fingers digging into his own flesh as if to anchor himself.

The pain fades.

Relief follows. Too fast. Too complete.

He is left shaking, breath ragged, heart beating steady again—steady in a way it never is after a scare. Strong. Encouraging.

He looks back into the channel.

The lining is no longer stone. Not entirely. Pale growth creeps along the edges, creeping over the old masonry, smoothing it, sealing cracks that should have been there for centuries. It contracts again, just slightly, like a throat swallowing.

His hand twitches.

He doesn't remember deciding to reach in.

The glove soaks through immediately. Heat seeps up his arm. Something brushes his knuckles from within—testing, curious. The pain snaps back, sharp enough to make him grunt, but it is already softening, shaping itself into something almost bearable.

Useful.

He pulls his hand free with a wet sound. The glove comes away in his grip. His skin beneath is red, blistered, patterned with branching lines that weren't there before. They throb in time with the channel's pulse.

He laughs once, thin and cracked.

“This isn't—” he starts, but the word dies when another pulse rolls through the stone and into him. His knees buckle. He catches himself on the wall, smearing something dark and slick across the mortar.

The warmth settles deeper this time, coiling low in his gut. It is not pain now. It is insistence.

The channel clears itself.

He watches as the fibrous mass retracts, drawing back into the depths, leaving the trough clean—cleaner than he has ever seen it. The water runs clear. The pulsing slows.

Satisfied.

His chest aches dully, like a bruise pressed too often. His arm trembles, skin crawling as if something beneath it is shifting, finding a better fit.

He knows, without knowing how, that he should report this.

He also knows—just as surely—that if he does, the ache will return. Worse. Sharper. Unforgiving.

He replaces the cover.

The stone is warm under his hands.

As he stands, a new sensation blooms behind his eyes, gentle but firm, nudging his gaze toward the street above, toward the city proper, where the flow is heavier. Where the work never ends.

He wipes his blistered hand on his coat and starts walking.

The ache follows.

It always will.

# 1.

## A FURTIVE EVENT

He washes his hands until the knuckles split.

The water is cold enough to make the skin squeal. The basin is shallow, stone worn concave by generations of the same gesture, the same ceremony: scrub, rinse, deny. The soap is lye-heavy and smells faintly of burned fat. It bites into the cracks. He watches the pink thread out of him and vanish down the drain as if the building drinks it.

Good.

Blood is a story. A smear becomes a witness.

He dries with a cloth that used to be linen before it became only texture. When he presses it to his palms, the cloth clings—not wet, not sticky, but eager, as if his skin has learned to reach.

In the corridor outside, the torchlight makes the plaster walls look bruised. Not flaking—blossoming. The building breathes in slow, rude pulses. Somewhere deeper, timber shifts with the intimate sound of cartilage.

He does not look at that. He never looks at that.

He adjusts the clasp at his throat. The clasp is stamped with the seal of the Office—an eye over a keystone—and the metal is warm though it should not be. It always warms when he lies. He

has told himself it's body heat and proximity and the angle of his collar.

He has told himself many things.

A boy waits at the end of the corridor. Not a child, not yet a man. Shaved head, eyes too bright. Hands tucked into sleeves as if he's afraid of what they might do if he lets them out.

"Sir," the boy says.

He hates being called sir. It implies respect. Respect implies choice. There is no choice. There is function.

"Report."

The boy swallows. The swallow travels up his throat like an animal trying to escape. "A street woman found one near the tannery. Alive. Screaming. They brought it to the river steps before it went quiet. The steps are... soft, sir."

He does not react to the word *soft*. He has trained his face to be a wall. Walls can be climbed, but not read.

"Where is it now?"

"In the shed behind the river gate. We... we wrapped it in sailcloth. It kept trying to crawl out through the seams."

He nods once. A small motion that tells the world it may continue.

The boy's gaze flicks, involuntary, to his hands. The boy has heard the stories: how the Office touches you and you stop being yours.

He does not touch the boy. He does not need to. Fear is a leash you can hold without closing your fist.

“Bring me the seal wax,” he says. “And three men. Not the ones who pray.”

The boy nods too fast and bolts, relief and terror tangled.

He moves, alone, down a different corridor, away from the river gate and toward the inner rooms where the Office keeps its quiet.

The door to his chamber is oak faced with iron. Someone once tried to carve a blessing into it—looping script, clumsy, desperate. The iron ate the letters. Now only dents remain, like teeth marks.

Inside, the air is warm and stale. There are no windows. There is one narrow vent that breathes out a slow exhale from the building’s lungs. The floor is tiled and clean and always, always slightly damp, though no water is spilled here.

He takes off his gloves.

His hands are not the hands he was born with. That is the first truth he allows himself in the privacy of darkness. The fingers are longer than they should be, the joints too articulate. His nails are kept trimmed short, but the beds beneath them are dark as if bruised. The lines on his palms are thicker, ridged, like scar tissue grown into language.

He flexes and listens.

*Click.* A sound like a beetle under bone.

He sits at the table where his instruments wait: a knife narrow as a tongue, a pair of forceps, a thin awl. The tools are clean, arranged with reverence. They have names in the Office, though no one speaks them. Naming gives power. Power invites attention. Attention invites punishment.

He opens the small lacquered box, lifts the lid with two fingers.

Inside: a strip of dried flesh, pale and translucent as onion skin. It is folded carefully, like a letter.

He does not let his breath catch. He has never, in all his years, let it catch. He has learned what the *meat beneath* does when it thinks you are *listening*.

He unfolds the strip.

It is not parchment. It is not paper. It is human, once. The edges are frayed with a delicate, fibrous fuzz. Tiny pores pattern it like the surface of a tongue.

And when he presses it to the table, it clings.

He takes the awl and pricks his thumb.

A bead of blood wells, bright and insolent.

He touches the blood to the strip.

It drinks.

Not greedily—methodically, like a machine built to accept payment. The blood vanishes into it and the strip flushes faintly pink, almost shy. Then, beneath his fingertip, it tightens, a subtle contraction. Approval.

The room warms by a fraction. His fingertips stop aching. The low, constant pressure at the base of his skull eases as if someone has loosened a collar.

Reward.

He hates it. He depends on it.

He leans closer and the strip's pores open in rows, dimpling like skin around gooseflesh. A sensation blooms in his mouth—not taste, exactly, but the memory of being fed. Milk warmth. Infant comfort. A lie so old his bones believe it.

The parasite has no voice. It does not need one. It speaks in physiology, in the body's oldest bargains.

He places his palm flat beside the strip.

There is a moment of nothing.

Then pain darts through his ring finger like a wire pulled tight and snapped. He does not flinch. His eyes water anyway—betrayal from glands that do not know discipline. The pain is sharp and precise, not injury but instruction.

*Not that hand.*

He withdraws it slowly.

He understands, as he always does, without words: *use the other.*

He places his left palm down.

Warmth. Relief. A slow, animal purr under the skin. The base of his neck goes loose. His shoulders drop, unbidden.

Approval again.

He has spent years translating this into policy.

He has built an institution out of it.

He stares at the strip and, for a moment, lets himself feel the nausea that lives beneath his ribs like a second organ.

When he was young—when he still had a name that belonged to him—he believed in law. He believed in rightness. He believed the Office was a fortification against chaos.

Then he was shown the foundations.

Not the metaphorical foundations. The literal ones. The way the stone under the city hums at night when the river is low. The way old mortar sweats in summer, salty, as if remembering tears. The way certain alleys smell sweet when it rains, like opened bodies.

He was shown the place under the archive where the floor gives slightly underfoot, like packed earth over a shallow grave.

He was shown a wall that was not built but grown.

He threw up. The men watching him had smiled, not kindly. A rite of entry.

Then the pain began. Not from injury. From inside.

The *meat beneath* made him understand: knowledge is not free.

He learned quickly. He learned to stop looking. He learned to become a hand that moves without trembling.

He learned to point other people at the dark so he would not have to stand there alone.

A knock at his door. Three knocks. The code.

He folds the strip, returns it to its box, closes the lid.

“Enter.”

The boy slips in, followed by three men in river leathers. Their faces are the taut faces of people who haul nets in winter. Two have scars on their jaws that look like healed bites. The third has a twitch in his cheek that never resolves. All three keep their eyes low.

The boy holds out a lump of red wax and the Office stamp.

He takes it and weighs it in his hand. The wax is soft from the boy’s anxious grip.

“Stay outside,” he tells the boy.

The boy leaves, almost colliding with the doorframe in his haste.

He looks at the three men. “If you vomit on the specimen, I’ll have your tongues.”

They nod. None of them smiles. Good.

He pulls on his gloves again. The leather creaks. His hands feel further away, insulated from consequence.

“Walk,” he says.

They move through the corridors like a small tide.

As they approach the river gate, the air changes. Damp. Metallic. A smell like pennies and wet wool and something faintly floral—wrong sweetness, like meat left too long in heat.

The shed is behind the gatehouse, a crude structure built to hold ropes and oars. Now it holds other things.

The door is barred. The bar is new wood. Someone has already tried to be careful. Caution is a prayer.

He nods to one of the men. The man lifts the bar and opens the door with his shoulder.

Inside is dark. The torchlight moves across stacked crates, nets, a coil of rope—

—and the sailcloth bundle on the floor.

It is not still.

The cloth bulges in slow waves. It makes soft thudding sounds, like someone knocking from the other side of a wall.

One of the men makes a choking noise and swallows it.

He steps closer.

The bundle stinks of river rot and human sweat and iron. The sailcloth is stained through in patches, dark and shiny as if oiled. Threads have been chewed. Not torn—*chewed*, with blunt persistence.

“Hold it,” he says.

Two men kneel and press their forearms across the bundle. It thrashes under them, weak but furious, like a dog in a sack. Their muscles stand out. One of them whispers something under his breath—a charm, a plea. The other spits, as if to ward off a taste.

He crouches and slides the tip of his knife beneath the sailcloth seam.

The bundle convulses.

A sound comes from inside the cloth—wet, broken, half-speech. A human attempt at language strangled by new anatomy.

“Please—” it says, or tries to. The word is chewed into pieces. “Pl—ease.”

He opens the cloth.

The thing inside is a person in the way a ruined house is still a house.

It is missing an ear. The side of its head is not torn but folded inward, as if something beneath the skin has decided the old shape is inefficient. Its jaw has been pulled subtly forward; the teeth do not meet correctly. Saliva spills in a continuous string, viscous and glossy. Its eyes are wide, frantic, but they do not

focus on him—they flick past him, to corners, to shadows, as if the world is full of predators he cannot see.

Its hands—gods.

The fingers have split. Not all the way down; the tips are bifurcated, each finger ending in two smaller digits like pale worms. They wriggle independently, testing the air. The nails have multiplied too, tiny hard crescents, scraping the cloth, leaving little white tracks.

It tries to curl into itself but cannot find the geometry anymore. Bones grind under skin. Something clicks, rearranging.

The men hold it down harder. The creature screams. The scream is not a voice; it's a leak. It pours out of it like water out of a cracked jar. High at first, then warbling as the throat spasms and something inside shifts, trying to optimize sound.

He watches without expression.

This is what happens when the parasite gets a mouthful and no leash.

He has seen it in alleyways and cellars, in hospitals where the sheets move on their own. He has seen it in priests who begged for miracles and got only growth.

He has also seen what happens when you guide it.

When you make it work.

He lifts the Office stamp and wax.

The creature's eyes lock on the stamp. Recognition? No. Fear. The parasite recognizes.

The warmth at his collar grows. The clasp is hot now. An ember against his throat.

The creature thrashes harder, then suddenly goes rigid, as if a wire inside it has been yanked taut. Its pupils widen until the eyes are almost black.

It speaks again, voice lower, wrong. "No."

That word is clearer than the begging.

Interesting.

He melts the wax with the torch, drips it onto the creature's sternum. The wax sizzles against skin. The creature howls. He presses the stamp into it.

The seal bites.

The skin beneath the stamp dimples and then... yields. Not like flesh. Like dough. Like something that *wants* to take an impression.

When he pulls the stamp away, the eye-and-keystone mark remains, raised and glossy, as if grown rather than branded.

The creature's screaming cuts off mid-breath.

The men flinch as if struck.

The creature's chest rises and falls in shallow, obedient breaths. Its split fingers stop wriggling. They curl inward, controlled.

Silence fills the shed, thick and buzzing.

One of the men whispers, hoarse, "What did you do?"

He stands. His knees crack softly.

"I made it belong," he says.

It is a lie and a truth at once.

Belonging is another word for captivity. Captivity is another word for stability. Stability is the only mercy the city will accept.

He looks down at the branded mark. The wax has cooled. The seal is perfect.

The creature's eyes track him now, more focused, less animal. That is worse. That means the parasite is learning to look out through the person. That means something inside has taken the reins.

His throat tightens. The clasp burns.

He ignores it. He has ignored worse.

"Lift it," he says.

The men hesitate. The creature does not resist as they haul it upright. Its body tries to follow old rules and fails, joints moving with a lag, like a marionette a fraction behind its strings.

They drag it toward the door.

Outside, the river gurgles against stone steps that should not be soft. He keeps his eyes on the creature, not the steps.

A cold breeze slides in from the water, and with it comes a smell like opened earth.

He knows, without seeing, that the city's underplaces are waking again. That something beneath the stones is shifting. That the parasite is not contained; it is *distributed*. It is threaded through the city like nerves.

This specimen is not an anomaly.

It is a flare.

He turns to the men. "You will take it to the Office cellar. You will chain it. You will not speak of its hands or its mouth or the way it looked at the stamp."

One man nods too quickly. Another looks like he might faint.

"And if anyone asks," he continues, "you found a drunk at the river steps. He fell. He cracked his head. He died. You did your duty."

The words land in them like nails.

They drag the creature away.

He stands alone for a moment, listening to the river and the subtle, sick sound of the stone under his boots giving slightly, as if something below is pressing up to feel him.

His gloves feel tight. Too tight. As if his hands have swollen.

He pulls one glove off.

On his left palm, beneath the ridged lines, there is a faint raised shape—an eye over a keystone. Not ink. Not scar.

Grown.

His stomach drops, slow and heavy, as if his organs are remembering gravity.

He should be afraid.

He is afraid.

But fear is not the strongest thing in him.

The strongest thing in him is relief—because the mark means the parasite still approves of his work.

The strongest thing in him is disgust—because the relief feels like love.

He puts the glove back on, covering it as if cloth can hide a truth from a thing that lives under skin.

He returns to the corridor where the walls pulse softly in torchlight like living meat pretending to be stone.

He walks toward the inner rooms, toward the archive, toward the places where the city's secrets are kept in sealed cabinets and sealed mouths.

Behind him, the river keeps moving.

Below him, the city keeps growing.

And under his collar, the clasp stays warm, warm,  
warm—approval pressed against his throat like a thumb.

Not a voice.

A command.

*Continue.*

## 2.

# A TEMPORARY PULSE

Bastion learns there are worse things than pain.

Pain is loud. Pain announces itself. Pain gives you something to push against.

What happens to her does not.

It begins as a heaviness in her limbs, the kind you get after carrying a body too far. Not exhaustion—*occupation*. As if her muscles are already busy doing something else and resent being asked to move again.

She is standing at the edge of the south works when it hits her. The south works are a place of routine misery: lime dust in the air, vats breathing steam, men with burned hands and women with wrapped faces. The ground here is pale with ash and old spills, crunchy underfoot. Nothing grows. Even rats avoid it.

She knows this place. She trusts this place. That is why the moment feels wrong.

Her left foot does not step when she tells it to.

It lifts—eventually—but late, dragging, the toe scraping hard enough to jolt her knee. The delay is small. Almost polite. Enough that she could pretend it didn't happen.

She doesn't.

She stops walking.

Around her, the works continue: the slap of hides, the hiss of water on lime, the low talk of laborers who have learned how not to be heard. No one looks at her. No one ever does unless she gives them a reason.

Bastion flexes her hands.

They respond. Slowly, but correctly.

She breathes in. Out.

The heaviness settles deeper, like sediment.

*Move*, she thinks—not as a command, but as a test.

Her right arm twitches. Not the way she intended. The elbow lifts a fraction, then drops. The motion is sloppy, as if the instruction had to pass through something thick before reaching muscle.

Her mouth goes dry.

She does not panic. Panic is for people who think the world is fair.

She turns toward the nearest wall and leans a shoulder against it, pretending to watch the vats. The stone is warm. Too warm. It gives slightly under her weight, not crumbling, not cracking—*yielding*.

She pushes away sharply.

The wall rebounds, subtle as breath.

Her stomach tightens.

This is not the first strange thing she has lived through. Bastion has been hungry enough to eat boiled bark. She has watched a man drown standing up in a crowd because no one noticed his mouth filling. She has seen bodies pulled from collapsed cellars with their arms bent backward like broken wings.

The city does things to people.

But this—

She presses two fingers to her wrist.

Her pulse is steady. Maybe a touch slow. Each beat feels cushioned, as if her blood is moving through something softer than vessels.

She pulls her hand away and looks at her fingers.

They look normal.

That is worse.

She straightens and pushes off from the wall. This time her legs obey immediately, almost eagerly. Too eagerly. She stumbles forward, catching herself with a hand on a vat rim. Hot metal burns her palm through her glove.

The pain is sharp, cleansing.

Her breath comes back.

For a moment, she almost laughs.

Then the pain fades too fast.

Not healed. Not dulled.

*Removed.*

The burn still marks her glove. The heat still radiates from the vat. But the sensation drains out of her palm like water from a punctured skin.

She stares at her hand, flexes it.

No pain.

Her heart begins to pound now, loud enough that she can hear it in her ears.

“No,” she says aloud, and the word feels strange in her mouth, as if it does not quite fit the shape of her tongue.

A pressure blooms behind her sternum. Not pain. Not yet. A firm insistence, like a hand laid flat against her chest from the inside.

*Stay*, the pressure suggests.

Not a word. A condition.

She takes a step anyway.

The pressure tightens.

Her breath catches. Her vision narrows at the edges, dark creeping inward like ink dropped in water.

She stops.

The pressure eases.

Her vision clears.

Her lungs loosen.

Bastion stands very still, the city's filth and steam curling around her, and understands something without being told:

This is not happening *to* her.

This is happening *through* her.

She backs away from the vats, moving carefully, experimentally. Each step away from the wall feels permitted. Neutral. But when she turns toward the inner streets—the direction of the Office, the stone, the sealed places—the pressure stirs again, warning without cruelty.

*Not that way.*

Her mouth tastes faintly sweet, like milk left too long in heat.

She swallows bile.

She does not run. Running would teach it urgency. Running would teach it fear.

Instead, she walks toward the river.

The pressure does not resist.

That frightens her more than resistance would.



The river steps are crowded.

They always are. Washerwomen, children with buckets, men pissing into the water with casual disrespect. The stone steps slope down into the current, worn into shallow basins by centuries of feet.

Today, they are wrong.

Bastion sees it before she feels it: the way the steps sag, the way the edges are too rounded, too smooth, as if something beneath has softened and remembered motion.

A woman is crouched at the waterline scrubbing cloth. Her knuckles disappear into the stone with each stroke, sinking a little, rising slick and wet. She does not notice. She hums to herself, a tuneless sound.

Bastion's breath goes shallow.

The pressure in her chest pulses, slow and approving.

She turns away sharply—and collides with someone.

“Watch it,” a man snaps.

She grabs his arm to steady herself.

His skin gives.

Not like flesh.

Like packed earth after rain.

Her fingers sink in a fraction, enough to feel warmth beneath, enough to feel something *shift* away from her touch.

The man yelps and jerks back. “What the fuck—”

She stares at her hand.

There is no blood. No mark on him. No mark on her.

But her fingertips tingle, buzzing with sensation, alive in a way they were not a moment ago.

The pressure blooms again, this time accompanied by something else.

Relief.

A soft easing behind her eyes. The ache in her lower back—the one she has carried since hauling stone last winter—loosens, then vanishes.

Her knees almost buckle.

She clamps her jaw shut so hard her teeth hurt.

Around them, people stare now. The man shakes his arm, confused, angry. “You sick?” he demands.

She opens her mouth to answer—and feels her tongue hesitate, heavy, as if waiting for instruction.

Her chest tightens.

She snaps her mouth closed.

“I’m sorry,” she forces out after a moment. The words scrape on the way out, resisted, then allowed.

The pressure eases again.

Approval.

She steps back, hands raised, and the crowd’s attention drifts. People in the city are practiced at not seeing things that make their lives harder.

She retreats up the steps, away from the water, heart hammering.

*Think*, she tells herself. *Think*.

She tries to remember the last time she felt truly well.

The thought skids. Not gone. Just... diverted.

Her mind feels padded, its sharp edges wrapped in something pliant.

She presses her nails into her palm until she feels skin break.

Pain flares, bright and honest.

The pressure recoils.

Good.

She presses harder, dragging her nails down, opening shallow lines. Blood beads, real and hot.

The pressure surges back, stronger this time, squeezing her lungs, her throat. Her vision spots.

Her knees hit stone.

Around her, someone laughs. Someone shouts. The river keeps moving.

Her head swims.

*Enough*, the pressure conveys—not angry, not pleading.  
*Enough now.*

She gasps, sucking in air. The pain in her palm drains away again, stolen.

Her cuts remain, but empty.

Her body is no longer fully hers.

That truth lands heavy and irreversible.



Time passes. She does not go home.

Home has walls. Walls have ears. Walls have learned to listen.

Instead, she slips into a half-collapsed storage building near the old quay, one the river claimed a corner of years ago. The roof sags. Moss carpets the beams. No one uses it anymore because the floor shifts if you stand too long in one place.

She sits anyway.

The stone beneath her thighs is damp and faintly warm.

She presses her back against a pillar and slides down until she's crouched, arms wrapped tight around herself.

The pressure settles, content.

Her breath slows against her will.

She closes her eyes.

Immediately, sensation blooms. A hyperlapse of an ineffable vista. A recrudescence.

Not images. Not memories.

*Awareness.*

Her own body unfolds to her in new, invasive detail. She feels the drag of blood through veins she has never noticed. A perpetual unnoticed tug. The minute sliding of bone in socket. A deeper gut throb. The soft negotiation of organs making room for one another.

And beneath it all—

Another rhythm.

Slower.

Deeper.

A pulse that does not belong to her heart.

It presses outward, testing.

She bites down on the inside of her cheek until she tastes zesty copper.

The foreign pulse stutters.

Pain is still a lever.

She uses it again, grinding her teeth, digging her nails into her arm.

This time the response is different.

Instead of retreating, the pressure *wraps* the pain, cushions it, *absorbs* it. The foreign rhythm steadies.

A sensation unfurls in her chest—warmth, safety, the echo of being held.

Her eyes fill with tears she does not remember deciding to cry.

“No,” she whispers, hoarse.

Her throat tightens, not choking, not silencing—*guiding*.

*This is better*, the sensation suggests. *This is easier*.

Images flicker behind her eyes now, unbidden.

Stone arches. Dark spaces beneath streets. A vast weight pressing upward, patiently. Bodies arranged not in piles but in patterns, interlocked, supportive. Hands grown into walls. Spines curved into arches.

Not death.

*Structure*.

Her stomach lurches.

She retches, dry and violent. Nothing comes up.

The warmth recedes slightly, offended.

She gasps, panting, suddenly unaware of ... of...

She understands something then, with a clarity that hurts more than any wound:

This thing does not need her consent.

It only needs her *continuation*.

Time renders itself completely unnecessary against the perspective of continuation. Even so, an obscure section of her ego proffered the question: how long have I been.... Faltering, she recognizes the futility of the word "I".

She is not special. She is not chosen.

She is available.

Outside, the river slaps against stone. Somewhere nearby, something heavy shifts beneath the city, settling, adjusting.

Bastion curls forward, forehead to her knees, trying to make herself small inside a body that no longer respects boundaries.

Her name feels fragile now, a temporary label.

She does not know yet that others like her already exist—marked, guided, folded into roles.

She does not know about the Office or the seal or the men who decide who belongs and how.

She knows only this:

If she lets herself rest—

If she lets the warmth finish spreading—

She will not be able to tell where she ends and the city begins.

And the city is very, very hungry.

### 3.

## THE COST OF SKIN

Fenner has spent his life learning the safe ways to look.

There are angles of truth that do not bite. There are words you can read without becoming their prey. There are histories you can hold at arm's length—clean, numbered, bound in calfskin—and there are histories that sweat when you open them.

He has made a career out of pretending the first kind is the only kind.

Tonight, he is brought the other.

The Office does not knock at a scholar's door like an ordinary creditor. It arrives as absence: the street empties in advance, the lamps dim as if ashamed, the air turns thin and practiced. Fenner feels it before he sees it—the old pressure in his temples, the faint sour taste behind his tongue that always comes when the city wants him to remember what he is.

A man stands in his threshold wearing an insignia Fenner has only ever seen on coins and official seals: an eye over a keystone. The clasp at the man's throat catches lamplight the way wet tissue catches it—too much shine for metal.

Behind him: three river-leather men with dead hands. Their boots track damp across Fenner's floorboards. Not water.

Something that smells like copper and river weeds and the sweet rot of opened fat.

Fenner's wife is asleep in the back room and he thinks of her when he is cut off—

“Fenner,” the man says, as if their acquaintance is old and friendly.

Fenner doesn't offer his own name. Names are hooks.

“What is it you want?” Fenner asks.

The man looks past him into the apartment, not searching so much as *measuring*—walls, shelves, the way the ceiling sags slightly at the corners like a drooling mouth.

“You curate records,” the man says. “You authenticate.”

“I compile,” Fenner corrects. “I translate what I'm permitted to see.”

A faint smile. Not amused. *Satisfied*. “Then you understand permission.”

One of the river men shifts. Something wet thuds softly from the sack he's holding.

Fenner's eyes go to it against his will.

The sack is sailcloth. Stained through in dark patches, glossy at the edges. It moves in slow, irregular pulses, like a heart trying to remember its rhythm.

Fenner's skin prickles.

He has seen bodies in the plague years. He has seen men torn apart by mobs. He has catalogued horrors like a butcher catalogues cuts. But this—

This is wrong in the way a familiar word becomes wrong when repeated too many times. The shape is human, but the movement is not.

“Leave,” Fenner says quietly. “You have the wrong house.”

The man’s clasp warms; Fenner can almost feel the heat from where he stands.

“No,” the man says. “We have the correct house.”

He steps inside without asking. The others follow. Fenner doesn’t move to block them: blocking is for doors. The Office comes through walls.

Fenner backs toward his table where his lamp burns low. Scrolls lie there, half-unrolled, ink still tacky. A small comfort: work unfinished, proof he has not yet been swallowed by the city.

The man—Antagonist, though Fenner will never think of him as that; he will think of him as *the Office’s face*—sets a small lacquered box down on Fenner’s table.

The box makes a sound when it touches wood. Not a thud. A soft, moist *pat*, like skin meeting skin.

Fenner’s stomach tightens.

“What is this?” he asks.

“An item,” the man says. “A record.”

Fenner’s mouth goes dry. “Records don’t... move.”

The man tilts his head. “Not the ones you’re given.”

He opens the box.

Inside is a strip of pale tissue folded carefully like a letter. It’s thin as onion skin, faintly translucent. Pores dot it in a pattern too regular to be random.

Fenner recognizes it immediately and wishes he didn’t.

There are old forbidden texts in scholarly circles, spoken of in murmurs: *flesh-sheets*. Living archival media. A lie told to frighten apprentices. A rumor used to test loyalty.

Fenner has never believed, not fully.

His hands tremble.

“Close it,” Fenner whispers.

The man’s smile returns, a little wider. “Read it.”

Fenner laughs once, sharp and involuntary. “You want *me* to read—” He can’t finish. The smell rising from the box is faintly sweet, like milk turned and warmed.

“Authenticate,” the man says. “You know the old scripts. You know the pre-Imperial hands. You have spent your life telling your students what is real and what is forgery.”

Fenner’s throat tightens. “Why?”

The man's gaze drifts to the back room where Fenner's wife sleeps.

The look is not a threat in the way a knife held is a threat. It is worse.

It is the calm assumption that Fenner's life is already property.

"Because," the man says, "there are people in the city who have started to notice the stones."

Fenner's spine goes cold.

"The river steps," he says before he can stop himself.

A tiny nod. "Soft."

Fenner's mouth opens. Words pile behind his teeth and find no exit.

He has been studying municipal records for months—subtle inconsistencies in maintenance logs, odd expenditures of lime, missing death registries, shipments of mortar that never reach their destinations. The numbers have been wrong in a way that feels... biological. Like an infection moving through accounts.

"Bodies," Fenner whispers.

The room goes quiet, as if the building leans in to listen.

The man's clasp gleams.

Fenner's hands ache—phantom pain in the joints, a pressure under the nails. The city has always punished his curiosity in small ways: headaches, sleeplessness, the sudden rawness of

his mouth when he's too close to something true. He has learned to interpret these as weather. He has learned to stop before the storm.

Tonight, stopping is not offered.

"Read," the man repeats, patient. "Or we take you below and let the record read *you*."

Fenner swallows.

His eyes go to the sailcloth sack in the river man's hands. The sack gives another slow pulse. A muffled sound leaks out—wet, broken, half-speech.

Fenner's mind scrabbles for a rational shape, a theory, anything that isn't this. He feels suddenly ten years old again, kneeling in a chapel, being taught that obedience is safety. That your body belongs to the gods. That your thoughts are not private. That pain is instruction.

He had left religion for history because history, he thought, could not touch him.

He was wrong.

Fenner reaches for the tissue strip with two fingers.

It clings to his skin instantly, not sticky, not wet—*grateful*. The pores open in rows like gooseflesh.

Fenner jerks back. The strip stretches with him like a membrane, refusing to let go. For a heartbeat he sees his fingertip through it, distorted, magnified, as if he's viewing himself through someone else's eye.

He forces himself to peel it off and lay it flat on the table.

It relaxes, smoothing itself like an animal lying down.

“Lamp,” the man says.

Fenner lifts the lamp and brings it closer.

Faint marks appear on the tissue as the light hits—thin, dark lines like veins. At first he thinks it’s natural patterning.

Then the lines shift.

They *rearrange*.

Letters form. A hand he recognizes with nausea: the old Imperial chancery style used in the first consolidation edicts. Except this hand is too perfect, too fluid, as if the ink is alive and eager to show off.

Fenner’s breath catches. The tissue gives a subtle contraction, like a small satisfied swallow.

“Read it aloud,” the man says.

Fenner’s jaw clenches. “No.”

The pressure behind his sternum blooms—an unseen palm pressing inward.

Fenner gasps. The lamp trembles in his hand. His ribs feel suddenly too tight around his lungs.

He forces words out anyway, strangled. “I will read silently.”

A pause.

Then the pressure eases a fraction.

Permission.

Fenner's eyes track the first line.

It is a proclamation. Of course it is.

*By the Grace of the Keystone, by the Eye that Endures—*

Fenner's mouth tastes of iron. He continues, silently, letting the words fall into him like stones.

*—the body is no longer private property. The body is a civic instrument. The body is a mortar. The body is a tax paid in flesh.*

Fenner's vision blurs.

He blinks hard and the letters crawl, adjusting, keeping their shape.

His fingers go numb.

*Autonomy is sedition. Desire is leakage. Consent is disorder.*

Fenner's stomach heaves.

He looks up, furious, and the man watches him with calm interest, as if Fenner is a specimen in a jar.

"This is propaganda," Fenner spits. "A forgery meant to—"

The tissue strip tightens.

Pain snaps through Fenner's eyes like hooks sunk behind his sockets.

He cries out, dropping the lamp. It clatters on the table and spills oil. The flame gutters but doesn't go out; it licks sideways, hungry.

Fenner claps his hands to his face.

It doesn't help.

The pain is not on the surface. It is *inside* his gaze, as if his eyes have been turned inward and forced to watch themselves.

The man speaks gently, almost kindly. "Do not insult it while it is feeding."

Fenner's hands tremble. He feels tears spill hot down his cheeks. The room smells suddenly stronger—milk-sweet rot, copper, and something like wet limestone.

He pries his hands away from his face and looks down.

The tissue strip has changed.

It is thicker now. Less translucent.

As if it has absorbed something from his attention.

As if reading is a form of bleeding.

Fenner's mouth opens and a sound comes out—half sob, half laugh. "What is it doing to me?"

The man leans in close enough that Fenner can see, just at the edge of the collar, the faint raised mark on the man's palm when his glove shifts: an eye over a keystone, grown under skin.

The mark looks like a healed scar the body decided to keep.

"It is teaching you," the man says softly. "The lesson the Empire was built on."

Fenner's tongue feels thick like tar. His thoughts slide, slow and resistant, a constipation inside of his skull.

He forces himself to look back at the strip.

The letters have changed again. New lines blossom, dark and eager, as if the tissue has decided to write *to him* now that he is properly open.

*The dead are not wasted. Waste is rebellion.*

Fenner's hands shake so hard his fingers knock the table.

*Stone is hungry. Feed it.*

He tries to look away.

His eyes don't.

His eyes stay pinned to the text, as if the muscles that move them have been reassigned.

The pressure in his chest turns warm. Not comfort. *Reward*. A soft loosening behind his eyes, a easing of the pain, a false gentleness that makes his body want to comply.

Fenner shudders. His body leans forward without permission.

“Stop,” he whispers.

The tissue strip makes a tiny sound, like a tongue clicking.

A river man behind him begins to gag. “Fuck,” the man chokes, voice breaking. “Fuck, it’s—”

Fenner turns his head slightly and sees what the men have brought.

The sailcloth sack is open now.

The thing inside is upright, held by two men like a drunk. It is human-shaped, but its hands—

Its fingers have split, bifurcated at the tips, writhing in small independent motions like pale worms. Its jaw sits wrong. Its mouth is wet and slack. One ear is missing, not torn but folded inward like someone tried to put it away.

And on its sternum, glossy and raised in cooled wax, is the Office seal: an eye over a keystone.

The branded thing’s eyes meet Fenner’s.

There is recognition there.

Not personal. Not human.

Recognition like a lock recognizing a key.

Fenner’s stomach drops.

The branded thing speaks, voice low and wrong, cleaner than it should be. “Read,” it says.

Fenner’s skin crawls. “It talks.”

The man’s smile widens. “It repeats. That is not the same.”

The branded thing’s split fingers twitch toward Fenner, eager.

Fenner recoils, but the pressure in his chest tightens again, steering him back toward the strip.

He understands, suddenly, the shape of the trap: the Office didn’t bring the specimen as a threat.

They brought it as a *demonstration*.

This is what happens when the parasite touches you raw. This is what happens when it is guided. Sealed. Owned.

And Fenner—Fenner is here to make this ownership *legible*. To stamp history onto the present so it can pretend it has always been lawful.

Fenner tries to speak. His mouth opens and nothing comes out. His tongue feels watched.

A warm wave spreads through his body and his fear softens at the edges, dulled the way wine dulls a wound. His spine loosens. His shoulders drop.

He hates his body for enjoying it.

He bites down hard on the inside of his cheek.

Pain blossoms. Honest, bright, private.

The warmth recoils.

For a heartbeat his thoughts sharpen.

He snarls, blood in his mouth, and slams his palm down on the tissue strip.

The strip *grabs him*.

It does not tear his skin. It does something worse.

It grips the ridges of his palm-lines, nests into them, and Fenner feels the sensation of being *read* from the inside. His fingerprints become text. His nerves become ink.

He screams.

The branded specimen answers with a wet, delighted sound.

Fenner's eyes flood with tears and the world narrows to the table, the tissue, the crawling letters.

He sees, in a flash that is not memory but implanted knowledge, a city older than this one. A first capital. Stone laid over pits. Bodies arranged like bricks—knees locked, spines curved, jaws wired shut to keep the scream inside. Men in fine robes smiling as they press seals into living sternums. The parasite's warm approval spilling through a crowd like holy oil.

He sees an Empire built not on conquest but on *compliance*.

He feels the seduction of it: stability, warmth, relief. A world where pain has rules.

He sees the cost: the body as civic mortar, autonomy as treason, consent erased with a stamp.

He wrenches his hand away.

Skin comes with it.

Not a flap. Not a clean strip.

A thin layer of his palm peels off, translucent and wet, the ridges of his fingerprints trailing like shredded lace. Blood beads bright beneath, exposed nerve screaming.

Fenner sobs—a raw animal sound he hasn't made since childhood.

The tissue strip twitches on the table, now darker at one edge where Fenner's skin clings to it like a new page.

Letters bloom over the fresh flesh immediately, hungry ink writing on living substrate.

Fenner stares, shaking, and sees his own palm-lines mirrored there, converted into script.

The man watches with quiet satisfaction. "There," he murmurs. "Now it's true."

Fenner tries to stand.

His legs don't move.

He feels, with cold clarity, that something has taken a small vote in his joints.

The branded specimen leans closer, held back only by the river men. Its split fingers reach, tremble, then still as if awaiting instruction.

Fenner's wife coughs once in the back room—half-waking, unaware.

Fenner's heart lurches.

He turns his head toward the back room, desperate.

The man's voice is soft as velvet over teeth. "Do not involve her."

Fenner looks back, fury and terror twisting in him. "You came here to threaten my family—"

"I came here to secure the city," the man says, calm. "The stones are softening. People are noticing. A woman at the river steps sank her knuckles into the stair and smiled as if nothing happened. That kind of ignorance is a blessing. We protect it."

Fenner's mouth hangs open.

A woman at the steps. Fenner's mind coughs up the image of a broad-shouldered laborer he has seen near the south works sometimes—eyes like flint, body built for carrying. He doesn't know her name, only the way she moves as if the world is always trying to shove her and she refuses to be moved.

Fenner's throat tightens.

Threads. The city tying itself together through suffering.

The man gestures, and the river men step forward.

Fenner tries to crawl backward, dragging his flayed palm across the floorboards, smearing blood in a thin, bright arc. The pain is so sharp he nearly blacks out.

Then the warmth returns.

His pain drains, stolen away, leaving only the wetness and the horror and the knowledge that his body has been overridden.

Fenner lies still, panting.

The man crouches beside him. “You have two choices,” he says. “Come with us and continue reading. Or stay here and let the record grow without guidance.”

Fenner looks down at the tissue strip.

It has already begun to thicken, to pulse faintly, as if breathing. The ink crawls across its surface in patient loops.

Fenner understands what “without guidance” means: the parasite will not simply write history. It will write *him*. It will use his knowledge the way it used his skin—as substrate.

Fenner’s eyes burn.

He forces himself to speak, each word scraped raw past unseen pressure. “If I come... she lives.”

The man’s smile is almost pity. “She remains uninteresting.”

Fenner’s body shakes with rage and relief and shame, all tangled. He hates himself for bargaining. He hates the world for making bargaining the only language.

The river men lift him.

Fenner's flayed palm dangles uselessly, dripping blood. The air kisses exposed nerve. He makes a sound like a strangled laugh.

As they drag him toward the door, Fenner's gaze catches his bookshelf—his neat volumes, his careful histories, his safe lies.

He wants to burn them. He wants to swallow them. He wants to scream warnings into the street until the city hears him.

Instead, his mouth stays closed.

The building breathes.

The street outside has emptied completely, as if the city is holding its own breath to watch.

The man walks beside Fenner, unhurried.

Behind them, on the table, the tissue strip flexes once—pleased—and the ink settles into a new line, written in Fenner's own stolen ridges:

*THE BODY REMEMBERS WHAT THE MIND DENIES.*

Fenner is carried into the night toward the sealed places under the city.

Toward the stones.

Toward the hunger that has learned to call itself law.

## 4.

# THE CHEST BEARS THE SEAL

He is not afraid of blood because blood is familiar. Blood is honest. It ebbs. It eagerly flows when you invite it. Blood obeys the rules if you do too.

What unsettles him is when blood *stays*.

The cellar beneath the Office is not deep, but it feels far from the surface in the way a grave feels far from the sky. The stairs sweat. The walls weep. The air tastes like rust and old prayers mashed together.

He has been stationed here since dawn.

The Scholar arrived before him.

The Scholar is still alive.

That is the problem.

The Scholar is chained to a ring set into the floor—iron sunk deep into stone that hums faintly if you rest your ear against it. Fenner sits slumped forward, head bowed, shoulders trembling in small, rhythmic motions. His left hand is wrapped in cloth gone dark and stiff. The cloth sticks when it moves.

The Enforcer keeps his distance.

He has learned that proximity invites... curiosity.

Across the cellar, the *specimen* hangs in its frame.

It was once a person. He knows this because the shape is still there if you squint and forgive it. The torso is bound upright with iron bands. The legs are wrong—knees bent backward slightly, tendons rethreaded into something springier. The feet never quite touch the floor; they twitch as if dreaming of ground.

The hands are the worst.

Each finger has split again since last night. Not evenly. Some into three. Some into four. They writhe against their restraints, tapping, scraping, testing. Nails have multiplied into hooked crescents, translucent and sharp as fishbone.

Its chest bears the seal.

Eye. Keystone.

The wax has sunk deeper into flesh, swallowed until only the shape remains, raised and glossy like a birthmark no one asked for.

The Enforcer shifts his weight.

His armor creaks. Leather, boiled hard, reinforced with plates stamped by the Office. The inside of the cuirass is always warm when he puts it on, even in winter. He tells himself it is trapped heat.

He has told himself many things.

Fenner coughs.

A wet sound, deep and rattling. The Scholar lifts his head slowly, as if gravity has been renegotiated. His eyes are bloodshot, unfocused. When he swallows, his throat moves oddly, as if something inside resists the motion.

“Please,” Fenner says.

The Enforcer stiffens.

The word hits him wrong. Too naked. Too human. He prefers orders. Screams. Threats. Begging is... intimate.

“You should rest,” the Enforcer says, because that is what the manuals recommend. Neutral language. No promises.

Fenner laughs. It breaks into a sob halfway through. “It doesn’t let me.”

The Enforcer looks away.

The specimen lifts its head at the sound of Fenner’s voice. Its eyes—too glossy, pupils stretched wide—fix on the Scholar.

It smiles.

The Enforcer’s stomach tightens.

He has seen men smile after being flayed, after being burned, after being broken in ways that make the body forget its shape. Those smiles were reflexes. Endorphins misfiring. Mercy in chemistry.

This smile is... purposeful.

The specimen speaks.

“Read,” it says.

Its voice is wrong—layered, as if two throats are sharing the work. The word comes out clean anyway.

Fenner whimpers.

The Enforcer grips his spear harder than he needs to. The shaft is wrapped in rough leather, good for sweating hands. The spearhead is narrow, designed to punch through ribs. It has killed men. It has killed beasts.

He does not know if it can kill *this*.

He was told not to intervene.

“Guard only,” the Antagonist said earlier, calm as a priest. “Do not interrupt the process. Pain is part of the instruction.”

The Enforcer had nodded. He always nods.

But watching is different from imagining.

Fenner begins to convulse.

His body arches against the chain, spine bowing. His bound hand spasms, blood seeping fresh through the cloth. His mouth opens wide, too wide, jaw straining, as if something inside him is pulling the hinges apart.

“No,” Fenner gasps. “No no no—”

The specimen’s fingers twitch, eager.

The air in the cellar thickens. The Enforcer feels pressure build behind his eyes, at the base of his skull. A familiar sensation, like a headache that knows your name.

He has felt this before—during executions sanctioned by the Office. During riots that needed *correction*. During nights when the city slept easier because someone screamed in its place.

A warmth spreads through his chest, low and steady.

Approval.

He hates that he recognizes it.

Fenner screams in a thin, tearing sound, like cloth ripping slowly.

The Enforcer flinches despite himself.

Fenner's mouth works, lips peeling back from teeth that chatter uncontrollably. His eyes roll white, then snap back, fixing on the Enforcer with sudden clarity.

“Kill me,” Fenner says.

The Enforcer freezes.

He has been ordered to kill before. He has killed children. He has killed men who begged. He has killed women who thanked him afterward.

This is different.

“Please,” Fenner whispers. “It’s in my hands. In my mouth. It’s—reading me.”

The Enforcer's gaze drops to Fenner's wrapped palm.

The cloth is moving.

Not pulsing. *Writing.*

Thin, dark lines bleed through the fabric, branching, curling. The cloth tightens around Fenner's hand as if shrinking, molded by something beneath that is growing thicker, more defined.

Letters.

The Enforcer feels bile climb his throat.

Behind him, the specimen makes a sound like a wet chuckle.

The warmth in the Enforcer's chest intensifies. His limbs feel light. Loose. Ready.

*End it*, something suggests inside him. *End the noise.*

He raises his spear.

Fenner sees the movement. Relief floods his face so fast it looks like pain.

"Yes," Fenner breathes. "Yes—"

The pressure behind the Enforcer's eyes spikes.

Pain lances down his arm, sharp and immediate. Not from strain. From *correction*.

His spear-arm jerks sideways, slamming the haft into the stone wall hard enough to crack it. The impact rattles his bones.

He cries out.

The specimen shrieks—not in pain, but in outrage.

The warmth vanishes, replaced by cold compression around the Enforcer's lungs. He gasps, armor suddenly too tight.

*No*, the pressure conveys. *Not that*.

The Enforcer staggers, dropping to one knee. His vision tunnels. The cellar tilts.

He understands then, with a clarity that makes his teeth chatter:

He is not allowed to choose mercy.

Another convulsion, harder, body spasming and straining against chains that groan but do not give. The lines under the cloth on his palm darken, thicken. The skin of his forearm ripples as if something beneath is crawling upward, seeking more space.

Fenner screams again.

The Enforcer clamps his jaw shut.

He forces himself upright, shaking.

"I'm sorry," he mutters, not sure to whom.

He steps back.

The specimen quiets immediately, satisfaction radiating from it like heat. Its fingers still. Its eyes half-close, blissed.

The pressure in the Enforcer's chest eases.

Reward.

He hates it. He hates himself more with each reward but never lets it show..

Hours pass. Or minutes. Time misbehaves here.

At some point, Fenner goes limp.

The Enforcer approaches cautiously, spear ready.

Fenner is breathing. Shallow. Uneven. His eyes stare unfocused at the ceiling.

“Is it... over?” the Enforcer asks, stupidly.

Fenner's lips move.

“Never,” he whispers.

The cloth around his hand splits.

The Enforcer recoils.

Fenner's palm is no longer a palm.

The skin has thickened, smoothed, stretched translucent. Beneath it, ridges and lines have rearranged into dense script that crawls slowly, adjusting itself as if proofreading.

Fenner sobs quietly, tears tracking into his ears.

“I can feel it thinking,” he says. “Using me. Like a book you leave open in the rain.”

The Enforcer's hands shake.

He has enforced law his entire life. He has believed—had to believe—that order is worth blood. That stability requires sacrifice.

But this—

This is not sacrifice.

This is *repurposing*.

Footsteps echo on the stairs.

The Enforcer straightens immediately, snapping to attention.

The Antagonist descends, unhurried. His presence changes the air, makes it taut, expectant. The clasp at his throat gleams warmly.

He surveys the scene with professional interest.

“How is our Scholar?” he asks.

Fenner laughs weakly. “Go to hell.”

The Antagonist crouches, examining Fenner’s altered hand with naked fascination. “He’s progressing faster than expected.”

The Enforcer swallows. “Sir... he asked for death.”

The Antagonist looks up, eyes calm. “And?”

The Enforcer’s mouth opens.

No answer comes.

The Antagonist rises. “Prepare him for transport. The lower archive. He will continue his work there.”

He turns to leave, then pauses.

“And Enforcer?”

“Yes, sir.”

“If you feel pain,” the Antagonist says mildly, “do not resist it. Resistance confuses the system.”

The Antagonist ascends the stairs.

The Enforcer stands frozen.

Behind him, the specimen begins to hum—a low, vibrating sound that makes the stone underfoot quiver faintly, as if answering.

Fenner weeps softly.

The Enforcer grips his spear, knuckles white.

He realizes, with slow horror, that he is no longer guarding a prisoner.

He is guarding a *process*.

And somewhere above, in the streets near the river, people are beginning to notice the stones giving way under their hands.

Soon, there will be more of them down here.

Soon, watching will not be enough.

## 5.

# A CITY OF SAGGING STONES

The city wakes and reorients. Pressure redistributes.

It happens first underground, where no one is supposed to notice. Old tensions, grudges, once taut, loosen. New ones settle in like fresh splinters. Stone that has carried too much for too long exhales and finds a better angle to endure.

Above, people call it a bad morning.

A mason steps onto a curb and sinks ankle-deep. He laughs, embarrassed. Then the curb pulls back and slinks tongue-like around his leg: a mouth remembering how to close, how to eat. The mason screams a short scream of terror, understanding his death is near. unique to living things that become aware they are about to die. The street swallows the sound.

A bakery collapses inward, then as if changing its mind, bulges outward. Walls fold like wet paper, revealing a hollow interior where the oven should be—an absence shaped like a ribcage. Across the lurching cobblestones of the street, a boy watches as the baker crawls out, his arms white and slick and bubbling and a handprint pressed into his chest from the inside. He dies smiling an hour later, peaceful, no pain, his lungs full of warm air that smells faintly of milk.

At the river steps, the stone sags another inch.

Children treat it like a game.

They jump from step to step, laughing as their feet leave shallow impressions that fade slowly after. One child trips. The step rises to meet him, grinding its delight. His knee bends the wrong way and keeps bending. It doesn't stop despite the screams and the excruciating refusal of his body to break. The bones turn into splinters inside his flesh and the joint becomes a useless appendage. A disgustingly loud *pop* is heard as they watch the skin separate to allow the bone to protrude. The whiteness of the bone is alarming. His friends scatter screaming, his knee keeps extending. Adults arrive too late, arguing about blame, about negligence, about whose child it was. It doesn't matter because the poor boy lies motionless in grey, ready for the stone to receive him.

No one asks *why* the step reached up.

The city does not care what questions people ask.

It cares only that weight is being redistributed.



Bastion feels it before she sees it.

She wakes on the cold floor of the half-collapsed quay building, the taste of stone in her mouth. Her muscles ache in a way that

feels earned, almost nostalgic. For an imperceptible moment she thinks she dreamed everything.

When she shifts herself up, the floor shifts back.

Her stomach drops and the primal fear forces her body to react: she sits up too fast. The pressure blooms in her chest immediately, firm but not cruel.

*Easy*, it suggests.

Her heart hammers anyway. “Easy”

She presses her palms to the floor.

The stone is warm. Soft. It dimples under the weight of her light frame, then firms again, obedient. She snatches her hands away as if burned.

The warmth in her chest pulses.

Approval.

“No,” she whispers, raw-throated. “No, no, no.”

She staggers to her feet.

Outside, the city sounds wrong. Louder. *Denser*. Crowded with motion and immediacy, like a migraine or racing thoughts. Every noise feels packed too close together, overlapping in a way that makes her temples ache. The acrid scent of copper permeates the city: Bastion smells it everywhere. And something else. Something sweet and intimate and vile.

She steps into the street.

A woman kneels a few doors down, hands buried wrist-deep in a wall. Not breaking through it—*inside* it. Her shoulders rise and fall in calm, steady breaths. Her face is slack with relief.

Bastion's stomach twists.

"Hey," Bastion says. "Hey—"

The woman looks up, smiling dreamily. "It's so warm," she says. "I didn't know it could feel like this."

The wall ripples around her arms, holding on as a lover. An embrace.

Bastion backs away. The pressure in her chest tightens—direction.

*This way.*

She resists.

Pain flourishes behind her eyes immediately, white and surgical.

She gasps, doubling over.

*Fine*, she thinks, furious and terrified. *Fine*.

She knows she is moving in the right direction because the pain eases.

Reward.

She hates how fast her body learns to accept things. She hates her mind for hating her body.



Fenner is kept conscious for his transportation.

That is deliberate.

They do not gag him. They do not blindfold him. The Antagonist needs him to see the city *as it is becoming*.

Fenner hangs between two Enforcers as they move him through service corridors and sealed stairwells. His flayed hand is wrapped again, tighter now, the cloth soaked through and stiff. Beneath it, something crawls, restless, annoyed by the confinement.

His chapped lips open and he laughs suddenly, thin and broken.

“Do you hear it?” he asks.

The Enforcer on his right does not answer.

“It’s louder now,” Fenner continues, breath hitching. “The city. It’s... speaking up.”

The Antagonist walks ahead of them, hands clasped behind his back. His posture is immaculate. His clasp is hot enough now that Fenner can feel it radiating when they draw close.

“You are projecting,” the Antagonist says mildly. “Pain alters perception.”

Fenner wheezes. “You’re lying to yourself.”

The Antagonist stops.

The Enforcers halt automatically, chains clinking. The sound of raiment reverberates in a satisfyingly terse medley.

The Antagonist turns slowly, considering Fenner as one might consider a tool showing early signs of wear.

“You think this is denial?” he asks. “This is *maintenance*.”

Fenner bares his teeth. Blood leaks from the corner of his mouth where he’s bitten through again. “You didn’t build the Empire,” he rasps. “You inherited it. And you never asked what it’s built *on*.”

The Antagonist steps closer.

Fenner feels the pressure immediately—his lungs compress, his heart stutters. His vision flickers.

“You will not anthropomorphize infrastructure,” the Antagonist says quietly. “That is a beginner’s mistake.”

Fenner laughs again, hysterical. “It remembers us,” he says. “That’s the problem. It *remembers*.”

The Antagonist straightens.

“Move him,” he says. They do.

Descending deeper, the walls change. Stone gives way to something that only pretends to be stone—smooth, veined, faintly elastic. A crafty deception. The floor slopes gently, like the inside of a throat.

Fenner’s body shudders as it prepares to speak. “Oh,” he breathes. “Oh, this is where you keep the old ones.”

The Antagonist does not correct him.

They reach the lower archive. It is not a room so much as a cavity.

Shelves curve organically along the walls, grown fulcate, rather than built. Bound volumes are embedded directly into the stone—spines fused, pages half-absorbed. Some books twitch faintly, as if breathing. Others ooze slow rivulets of ink, a foul ichor that seeps back into the walls.

At the center stands a simple table.

On it: flesh-sheets. Dozens of them. Hundreds. Some pale and thin. Some thick and dark. Some clearly human. Some... less human.

“This isn’t history,” Fenner mutters in a low whisper. He weeps openly now. “This is digestion.”

The Antagonist gestures a command the Enforcers understand. “Begin.”

Fenner, manacled, is being chained to the table by the mountainous Enforcer duo. And the moment his altered hand touches the surface, the cloth disintegrates.

Skin peels back like a flower opening too fast. A shimmer, melting.

The Script beneath unfurls, dark and eager, craving, crawling up his wrist.

Fenner screams.

The shelves answer with a low vibration, appeased.



The Enforcer stands at the threshold.

He should not be here. He knows that. He feels it in the tightness behind his eyes, the faint nausea curling in his gut. But something has changed in him.

Time spent guarding the old Authenticator has changed the shape of his obedience. He sees now that the Office is not preventing collapse.

It is *curating* it.

He grips his spear, fortifying.

Behind him, up through manifold layers of rock and muscle and memory, the metropolis settles again. Another adjustment. Another life incorporated. Another high-tide followed by the low.

The Enforcer feels it in his bones—a subtle easing, like a joint finally popping into place. A name. His own name.

Warmth spreads through his chest.

Approval.

He swallows hard. For the first time in his life, he wonders what would happen if he chose to refuse.



Bastion reaches the edge of a square she has never seen before. She treats the urban inconsistency with mere casual concern - familiar locations are rearranged while the citizens sleep in their beds. A daily twisting game of hide-and-seek that only the humans lose.

People stand scattered across the square, staring at the ground.

Cobblestones bulge upward in slow, rhythmic pulses, a giant chest breathing. Cracks open and close, breaking apart only to bond again, *flexing*.

A man drops to his knees, sobbing with relief as the ground cups his shins.

A woman screams as her foot sinks too deep and does not come back.

At a distance it seems that all the screams are screams of terror. Up close, the truth is that the people consumed by the rapture were experiencing an intense pleasure that could only be expressed in death-screams.

Bastion stands frozen at the edge, pressure roaring in her chest now, a perverted guide pulling, always *pulling*.

*This is what you are for*, the sensation insists. *This is where you fit*.

She clamps her jaw shut until her teeth ache. Her jaw juts and her chin lifts in defiance.

“No,” she whispers.

Pain explodes behind her eyes.

She screams, collapsing to her knees, hands clawing at the stone. The ground yields instantly to her touch, welcoming.

The pain vanishes.

Warmth floods her body, so intense it almost makes her weep, and for a heartbeat, she understands the temptation completely. No fear. No ache. No loneliness. Just belonging. She yanks her hands back, tearing skin. Blood splatters the stone.

The warmth recoils, offended.

The square shudders.

Somewhere deep below, something large and patient turns its attention upward.

It has already decided what comes next.

## 6.

# ALL SYSTEMS HUNGER

Isembard should be dead.

He knows this with the calm certainty of a man who has already finished dying and is now inconvenienced by the aftermath.

He remembers the moment clearly: the alley behind the cooper's row, taking a piss in the dark, the sudden softness under his boots, the way the ground sighed as if relieved to finally be allowed to give. He remembers falling—not down, but *in*. Stone folding around his legs. Hands grabbing his arms. Someone screaming his name, or maybe it was just screaming.

He remembers the pain stopping halfway through. That was when he understood something was very wrong.

In a room that smells like lye and old meat, Isembard is staring at a ceiling that pulses faintly in time with his breath. Or maybe his breath pulses in time with it.

His legs are gone. Severed neatly from his torso.

*Reassigned.*

Where his hips should taper into thighs, there is instead a thick column of gravel and flesh fused together, tapering down into the floor like a root. The surface is smooth in places, ridged in

others, faintly warm. Veins like channels thread through it, glowing dimly when his heart beats.

He can still feel his feet.

They are far away.

His feet are cold and itchy and so very, very far away now.

Isembard swallows, testing if his ability to eat or drink still functions. His throat works, dry and raw. When he tries to yell out, only a hoarse rasp comes out. The sound is disappointingly muffled and absorbed by the walls before it can travel.

A figure sits beside him.

At first he thinks it's a statue. The man is still as a pond, armor glowing dull in the low light, a javelin resting across his knees. His face is shadowed and unreadable.

"You're awake," the man says.

His voice is steady. Too steady.

"Kill me," Isembard croaks. The words scrape his throat bloody.

The man does not move.

"I can't," he says.

Isembard laughs weakly. "Won't or can't?"

The man hesitates.

"Can't," he repeats.

The ceiling flexes.

A warmth spreads through Isembard's abdomen, slow and intimate, like a hand rubbing circles from the inside. His panic softens at the edges. His heartbeat slows.

He hates it.

"Don't," he whispers. "Please don't let it—"

The warmth increases.

Pleasure ghosts across nerves that should not exist anymore. Sensation blooms down the column where his legs used to be, spreading outward into the stone.

He moans before he can stop himself.

The man flinches.

"I'm sorry," he mutters.

Isembard sobs. "What did you do to me?"

The man looks down at his own hands.

"Nothing," he says. "That's the truth I keep telling myself."

Footsteps echo.

Another figure enters the room—robes this time, ink-stained fingers, eyes too bright with terror and fascination intertwined.

Fenner.

Isembard recognizes him from the archives. The scholar who used to argue with his students about important dates in ancient history as if they mattered.

Fenner looks like a wraith of his former self.

His left hand is unwrapped but it is no longer a hand.

Skin has thickened and smoothed, translucent, stretched vellum. Beneath it, dense script crawls and rearranges itself, letters forming and unforming, correcting, annotating, erasing, editing, improving its quality. The writing pulses faintly, a textual heartbeat, responding to Isembard's presence.

Fenner stares at Isembard with naked horror.

"Oh," Fenner whispers. "They've started anchoring civilians."

Isembard whimpers in unveiled despair, the last remnants of hope abandon him.

Fenner staggers closer, compelled and resisting at once. He reaches out with his ruined hand, stops inches from Isembard's chest.

"Don't touch me," Isembard begs.

Fenner's face crumples. "I don't want to," he says. "It does."

The script under Fenner's skin accelerates.

The room warms.

Isembard feels a pull in his chest—not pain, not pressure. *Alignment*. His heart skips, then resumes at a new rhythm, syncing with the stone beneath him.

Images flood his mind.

Streets settling soundlessly. Walls thickening where they once were paper-thin. Old cracks closing with disrespect. The city tightening itself like a fist around a spine, anticipating something will break before it bends. No sense of time in his mind. All the affirming patterns of reality that had once insulated him so securely from only the eternal, seething spaces

He sees himself from above—a body half-embedded, stabilizing a weak junction beneath a tenement. He feels the weight of the building distributed through him, hears the sigh of relief as the structure settles.

A dazzling wave of awareness sweeps over him, a glacial hyperlapse. He understands his purpose instantly. He screams anyway.

“No,” he sobs. “I’m not a wall. I’m not—”

The warmth surges.

The pain of loss drains away, replaced by deep, structural satisfaction. The sensation of *usefulness* burrows into him, intimate and obscene.

Fenner recoils, gagging.

“This isn’t emergency integration,” Fenner gasps. “This is expansion.”

The armored man—the Enforcer—steps forward. His spear trembles in his grip.

“This wasn’t an order,” he says. “This wasn’t—”

A new voice answers from the doorway.

“It was inevitable.”

The Antagonist enters, clasp at his throat, glowing faintly.

He surveys Isembard with professional interest, nodding once.

“Good anchoring,” he says. “Clean uptake.”

Isembard’s vision blurs with tears.

“Please,” he begs. “Please don’t do this.”

The Antagonist meets his gaze.

“We didn’t,” he says calmly. “The city did.”

Fenner shakes violently. “You’re lying. I know what hunger smells like..”

The Antagonist smiles thinly. “All systems hunger.”

Isembard feels something *lock* inside him.

A final click. A cinch fastened.

The glimmering throb becomes a constant warmth.

His breathing slows, deepens. His terror dulls, wrapped in something gentle and smothering.

He hates himself for how good it feels.

Fenner watches, eyes wide with dawning comprehension.

“This is how you bring us together,” Fenner whispers.

“Necessity. Damn your decrees. Wipe your arse with the whole lot.”

The Antagonist inclines his head.

“Half-correct,” he says. “Necessity is the only truth people accept. But half-truths are usually rounded up. My decrees are proof that truths are mere remnants of undying falsehood. I did what was necessary to create the scaffolds to build the bridges that would carry us all to the truth, if you’ll excuse the extended analogy.”

The Enforcer steps back, face pale.

For the first time, he feels what nausea tastes like. Bile creeps from the back of his neck to his tonsils; a most awkward flavour.

Isembard’s screams are heard to fade into what would become his final mutterings, then into nothing at all.

He is no longer fully human, but he is alive, somehow. His enduring thought is sustaining his mind...and somewhere beyond, the city stands a little straighter, supported by a man who will never walk again and a system that has learned how to make that feel like mercy. Thus is Virtue.

# 7.

## A PERMANENT WARMTH

Marrow has always believed numbers tell the truth because they do not care who hears them.

People lie. Bodies lie. Memory lies most of all—softening, editing, replacing its own bruises with cleaner stories.

Numbers only accumulate. They are pitiless. They do not forgive. They do not forget. They do not blink when a child goes missing, when a wall buckles, when a name is scraped from a registry and replaced with a blank line and a seal. They simply add.

That faith dies at his desk.

It dies the way rot begins: quietly, without spectacle—an odor before a wound, a subtle warmth before the fever declares itself.

Marrow knows warmth.

He has carried it since birth like a second marrow inside his bones—an inherited affliction the midwives in the lower wards called *Fireblood*, and the Office physicians named with their tidy ancient language Exlatin: *erythromelalgia*. A failure of the small vessels, they said. A rebellion of the nerves. A defect in the body's own valves and signals: the arterioles opening when they should close, the capillaries flooding his hands and feet

with heat until his skin flushed like scalded meat. Burning that lived under the epidermis, in the dermis, along the ulnar edge of his palms, up the tendons that ran like cords from his metacarpals to his phalanges.

As a boy, he slept with his fingers in a bowl of cold water, waking to numbness and wrinkled skin, the nails pale as candle-wax. As a man, he kept ink-stones chilled and wore thin gloves even in summer so the heat would not swell his joints. The ache would crawl along the radius and ulna into his forearm, and he would clench his jaw until the masseter muscles throbbed and his teeth squeaked in their sockets.

Warmth was his private tyrant. He had learned to live beneath it.

So when it comes again—different, alien, *intentional*—he notices immediately.

It begins with totals that won't close.

Midmorning, the ledger lies open in front of him: civic maintenance for the lower wards. Lime shipments. Mortar requisitions. Replacement stone. Each line a narrow artery of bureaucracy, each number a bead of blood meant to return to the heart of the Office intact.

The sums should resolve cleanly. They always do. This city is old, but its paperwork is meticulous; the columns are straight as clerics' spines, the seals crisp as teeth marks.

Today the column ends with a remainder.

Marrow feels his throat tighten, the soft palate lifting as if to swallow the irritation before it can speak. He quenches a minor

frustration—he has not made a single clerical error in over five harvests—and there is no smudge of ink to betray an unsteady hand or a momentary lapse. His fingers, even when burning, are precise. His script is a disciplined thing, each loop and serif taught by pain.

A surplus.

Marrow frowns and recounts.

Same result. Recount again.

He checks the previous week. Same pattern. Then the one before that. Always small, always *beneath notice*: a sack of lime here, a cartload of mortar there, a half-pallet of replacement stone redirected downward. Never enough to trigger review, never enough for a superior to lift their eyes. Always signed off with the same seal.

An eye over a keystone.

He recognizes the seal the way one recognizes a predator's footprint. It sits at the edge of awareness, unremarked by those who wish to survive.

He could ignore it—most men ignore what might get them killed—but he is bound by civic duty, and by the small, stubborn vanity of his own reputation. The ledger is his chapel. He cannot let heresy sit in the margins.

His mouth goes dry at the thought of reporting it.

Marrow is not a brave man. He knows where bravery ends in a city like this. It ends in basements. It ends in chains biting into wrists until the carpal bones ache. It ends in interrogations in

rooms without windows, where light is a luxury and screams are routine administrative noise.

So he does what clerks do in their times of need.

He follows the paper.

The requisitions lead him through layers of filing cabinets, past rooms where other clerks sit hunched and silent—spines curved, scapulae showing through threadbare cloth—scratching away at ledgers that smell faintly of mildew and old sweat. The air is thick with dust and skin flakes, the fine fallout of a thousand bodies pressed into work.

No one looks up. No one ever looks up. Looking up is how you get noticed.

His own disease stirs as he walks, warmth pooling in his hands like poured wax. The nerves in his fingertips prickle; the median nerve complains beneath the carpal tunnel. He flexes, hears a faint click in the knuckles, imagines synovial fluid thickening like old grease.

At the back of the records hall is a door Marrow has never used.

It is marked:

***ARCHIVAL SUB-LEVEL: RESTRICTED***

The letters are stamped with a severity that makes his eyes water.

The lock is warm—*alive-warm*, like skin under cloth, like a fevered forehead. When his fingers brush the metal, the heat

answers him, blooming through his glove as if it recognizes his blood.

He flinches so hard his shoulder pops, a sharp pain in the rotator cuff.

He tells himself it is imagination. The city runs hot. Stone holds heat. Metal remembers hands.

He unlocks it anyway.

The stairs spiral downward.

The air thickens with every step, growing intimate, wet. It smells like ink and scale armor and shiny copper and something unnameable but familiar—breath trapped under blankets, the sourness of a mouth closed too long, the iron sweetness that rises when you press a finger into a healing cut and it opens again.

The walls are close here, curved, not quite symmetrical. The stone seems... wrong. Not chipped and honest, not cleanly laid. It bulges in places like scar tissue, and where it narrows the passage, Marrow's sleeve brushes it.

The wall gives.

Not crumbles—*gives*, as flesh gives under pressure. He feels it yield and rebound, a soft resistance like fat over muscle.

He jerks his arm back and stares at the sleeve. Nothing. No smear. No wetness.

But his skin crawls anyway, a ripple along the epidermis, gooseflesh rising on his forearm.

“Get a grip,” he mutters.

His voice sounds wrong down here—damped, swallowed. The syllables do not echo. They are absorbed, as if the stones have tongues.

At the bottom is a room that should not exist.

Shelves curve along the walls like ribs. Not metaphorically—Marrow sees the architecture and his stomach folds in on itself. The shelves bow outward in repeating arcs, pale and smooth in a way stone should not be, and the seams between them resemble cartilage. The whole room has the faint sheen of something that once had moisture.

They are full of books but not shelved.

Embedded.

Spines fused into the stone, pages half-absorbed, margins bleeding slowly into the surface as if the walls are reading them back. Some volumes protrude like broken teeth. Others are swallowed to their titles alone, words trapped at the edge of consumption.

In the center stands a table.

On it lie sheets.

Marrow stops breathing.

At first glance they look like parchment. Then his eyes adjust and horror arranges itself into anatomy. He sees pores. He sees follicles where hair once grew. He sees the faint topography of

veins—superficial, branching blue-green—and the subtle twitch of contraction as if the sheets are alive and resent being still.

Skin.

Someone's skin.

Prepared and flattened. Stretched. Too smooth in places, puckered in others, as though the dermis had been scraped thin. The edges are ragged, not cut cleanly, but torn along fascial planes—where skin peels from subcutaneous fat with wet reluctance. There is a faint smell of tallow, of old blood turned sweet.

Marrow's stomach convulses. Bile rises, burning his esophagus. He swallows hard, feels his larynx bob.

“No,” he whispers. “No no no—”

Something shifts behind him.

Marrow turns.

A man stands at the threshold, armored, spear in hand. His face is drawn, eyes sunken, jaw clenched so tight the muscles jump beneath the skin. There are old scars on his cheekbone, pale ridges like healed burns. His nostrils flare as if he can smell fear.

The Enforcer.

Marrow recognizes him vaguely—one of the Office's quiet blades, a man built like a door left slightly ajar: broad shoulders, narrow gaze, all purpose.

“You shouldn’t be here,” the Enforcer says.

Marrow laughs, a sharp hysterical bark that dies in his throat. “I know.”

The Enforcer hesitates. His grip tightens on the spear until his knuckles whiten. The spearhead catches the dim light and looks too clean for this place.

“Go,” he says. “Forget what you saw.”

Forget.

As if the mind can unsee a room built of ribs and paper and skin.

Marrow looks back at the table.

One of the flesh-sheets has begun to darken.

Lines form slowly across its surface—not ink, not at first, but the faint raising of tissue as if the writing is swelling from within, like scar-keloid. Then black seeps through, following those raised paths. A script emerges with obscene patience.

Numbers.

Columns.

Dates.

His handwriting.

Marrow's knees give out. He hits the floor with a dull crack that sends pain up through his tibias into his knees. The patellae jar; he feels cartilage protest.

"Oh gods," he sobs. "It's using the accounts."

The Enforcer swears under his breath, the word scraped raw.

Marrow crawls closer despite himself, drawn by a terrible familiarity. He drags his palms over the floor; the stone feels faintly warm, like a body that has just died. His disease flares as if in sympathy, heat flooding his hands until the skin tightens over the tendons.

He reads the living ledger.

It is perfect.

Every death: unreported. Every collapse was reclassified. Every body reassigned. Names turned into materials. Injuries converted into requisitions. A broken spine becomes a "beam." A crushed pelvis becomes "foundation fill." A missing child becomes "waste removed." The parasite does not merely consume flesh—it consumes *procedure*. It hides in workflow, in the blind spots between departments, in the margins no one checks because the margins are where fear lives.

Marrow's mind tries to flee, but there is nowhere to go. The room holds him the way lungs hold smoke.

A pressure blooms behind his eyes, as if fingers press against the optic nerves from inside the skull. His temples throb; he feels the pulse in the superficial temporal artery. His mouth tastes metallic, copper and pennies. His tongue feels thick, too large for his teeth.

Then comes the warmth.

Not the familiar burning of his congenital curse—this is not a malfunction, not random cruelty. This warmth is *crafted*. It spreads through his chest like a hand laid gently over the sternum, sinks between the ribs, and settles near the heart. It is almost comforting, a heat like fresh bread.

This makes sense, the sensation suggests.

This is orderly.

“No,” Marrow gasps, clawing at his own shirt. His fingernails snag thread. “No—”

He feels the temptation immediately: the relief of not having to question, not having to reconcile impossible sums. The beauty of a city that balances itself with flesh instead of numbers. The pleasure of closure—the finality of a column that ends without remainder, the clean snap of an account resolved.

His entire life has been an argument with his body. Fireblood has made his hands enemies. It has made pain constant, and constant pain teaches you to worship anything that offers structure.

The warmth offers structure.

The Enforcer steps forward sharply. “Don’t touch it.”

Too late.

Marrow’s fingertips brush the sheet.

It clings.

Not like glue—like a mouth.

The skin under his glove kisses the living parchment and *recognizes it*. There is a wet, intimate adhesion, as if the sheet exhales and his pores drink it in. Pain lances up his arm—not sharp, not violent, but precise. Instructional. Surgical. It travels along the radial nerve, up the forearm, through the elbow where the humerus meets the radius and ulna, into the biceps and the shoulder, each joint briefly locking as if checked by an invisible clerk.

His fingers stiffen. The joints in his phalanges seize, tendons tightening. He feels the flexor digitorum profundus pull like a tightened rope. His hand contorts at new angles, bones reoriented.

Ink-black veins bloom beneath his skin, tracing paths he has written a thousand times before. They spread under the dermis like spilled ink finding cracks, crawling along the cephalic vein, blooming at the wrist, threading up toward the crook of his elbow.

He screams.

The sheet tightens, drinking.

He feels it sip him through his fingertips, a suction that pulls heat and blood and something else—attention, obedience—into the parchment. It is not eating him like an animal. It is *processing* him.

Words appear faster now, blooming in his own hand, the script rising as if scarred into living tissue:

***DEFICITS RESOLVED VIA STRUCTURAL INTEGRATION.***

Marrow sobs. “I didn’t agree—I didn’t—”

The warmth intensifies.

Approval.

His fear dulls, smothered under pleasure so intimate it nauseates him. The relief of usefulness. Of totals resolving. Of balance achieved. His chest loosens. His lungs draw in air without the usual tightness. His mind quiets because he likes the way it makes his body feel.

He hates the way his body—traitorous, fevered since birth—answers this new heat like a lover.

The Enforcer roars and slams his spear down between Marrow and the table.

The impact cracks stone—

—and something beneath it screams.

Not a human scream. Something vast, subterranean, a sound like a thousand throats opening at once. The shelves shudder. The rib-curves flex. Dust falls like dandruff from the ceiling.

The pressure behind Marrow’s eyes spikes violently. He sees a brief wash of red, as if blood floods the vitreous humor. His skull feels too small for what is inside it.

The Enforcer staggers, blood pouring from his nose. It sheets down over his upper lip, drips from the philtrum, splatters onto the floor. He wipes it with the back of his gauntlet and leaves a smear like paint.

“No,” he snarls, voice shaking. “You don’t get him.”

Footsteps echo above.

Measured.

Unhurried.

Someone descending who has never feared stairs.

The Antagonist enters the room, clasp glowing like an ember at his throat. He does not react to the smell, to the skin on the table, to the shelves of ribs. He belongs here the way a priest belongs at an altar.

He takes in the scene at a glance.

“Ah,” he says mildly. “You found Marrow.”

Marrow’s head lolls back. Tears stream sideways into his ears, warm and salty. His jaw aches from holding itself open in silent sobs. His tongue sticks to the roof of his mouth.

“I just... count things,” he whispers. “I just wanted them to add up.”

“They do now,” the Antagonist says, and his voice is the last line of a report.

The Enforcer turns on him, shaking, spear held like a boundary. “This wasn’t sanctioned.”

The Antagonist’s eyes flick to him. Cold, weighing, like a number deciding whether you exist. “It was necessary.”

He steps closer to Marrow, studying the blackened veins creeping up the clerk's arm. He watches the way the skin around them flushes, the way the writing continues to rise and settle as if the flesh is learning to be paper.

"An excellent fit," he murmurs. "Administrative integration is accelerating."

Marrow feels something settle inside him.

A final column closes.

The warmth becomes permanent—not a flare, not a symptom, but a *state*. It anchors in his chest like a coal set beneath the ribs. It is not his Fireblood. It is something else: a city's satisfaction.

He stops crying.

The Enforcer takes a step back, horror plain on his face. His throat works as he swallows, Adam's apple bobbing. He looks like a man watching a friend drown slowly in warm, placid water.

Marrow looks at him and smiles gently.

It is a small, polite smile—the kind a clerk gives when explaining a minor discrepancy to a customer. His lips are trembling, but the expression holds.

"Don't worry," Marrow says. "It balances out."

Above them, the city exhales. Not metaphorically—Marrow feels it through the floor, a deep settling like a creature shifting its weight. Mortar sighs. Foundations relax. Somewhere far

overhead, a wall stops cracking. A street stops sagging. A problem becomes a line item marked *resolved*.

Another inconsistency corrected.

Another human reduced to infrastructure.

And somewhere, deep beneath stone and skin and paper—beneath ribs that are shelves and shelves that are ribs—the system learns that it can consume not just bodies—

—but bureaucracy.

Marrow's hand, still stuck to the living sheet, twitches as if preparing to write.

The next stage will be easier.

## 8.

# THE PRESSURE SUGGESTS

Bastion does not remember deciding to go underground.

She remembers the moment her boots crossed the threshold of the service stair—heel to lip of stone like a verdict—and the moment the light changed color, draining from municipal gray into bruised yellow and then into something closer to the inside of a mouth: damp, intimate, wrong. Everything between those moments feels... assisted. Not erased. *Edited*. Like a sentence that keeps its meaning even after someone else has improved the grammar.

The pressure in her chest is constant now.

It sits behind her sternum like a hand that has learned the shape of her ribs. It presses where the costal cartilage meets bone. It does not squeeze her lungs; it doesn't need to. It merely suggests, and her body, traitor that it is, obeys before her mind can argue.

The stairwell smells like old water and breath held too long—stagnation and panic layered over years. Beneath that is the sour tang of lime, the medicinal bite of wet stone, and a thin copper note that makes her tongue itch as if she has been chewing pennies. Every few steps she tastes something else: soot, mildew, the metallic ghost of blood. Her mouth floods with

saliva, then dries out again as if the air is stealing moisture directly from her gums.

Her hand grazes the wall for balance.

The wall is not cold.

It is *cool* the way skin can be cool when fever sits deeper, a chill surface over hidden heat. The stone curves inward as she descends, narrowing where mortar should be. In places there are no seams at all—just smooth, veined surfaces, as if the city has forgotten how to pretend it was ever assembled.

Her shoulder brushes the wall and she feels it respond—subtle tension, the almost-imperceptible recoil of something with fibers.

Like muscle recognizing muscle.

She yanks away, heart thudding hard enough to shake her collarbones.

“No,” she mutters. “You don’t get to know me.”

The pressure tightens briefly. A correction. The sensation of being re-aligned.

She keeps walking anyway, jaw clenched, molars grinding. She listens for footsteps behind her but hears only her own breath and the soft, wet noises the stairwell makes when she isn’t looking directly at it—tiny sounds like lips unsticking.

Halfway down she passes a cluster of service doors marked with old civic sigils, their paint blistered as if something hot has licked them. The symbols are eroded in a way that feels

personal, as if someone has been worrying at them with a tongue. One door bulges outward, pulsing gently with a slow rhythm. Something behind it makes a wet sound—content, repetitive, like a throat swallowing at rest.

A sewer rat—big as a housecat, eyes bright as buttons—scurries from under the doorframe and freezes when it sees her. Its whiskers tremble. Its sides heave. Then it bolts up the stairs past her legs, nails clicking like typewriter keys. Another follows. Then another. A whole line of them, fleeing in a panic that feels organized—like evacuation. They smell of grease and wet fur and the faint ammonia sting of fear.

Bastion does not open the door.

She knows—without knowing how—that if she opens too many doors, she will not leave. Not because she will be killed. Because she will be *reassigned*. You don't "leave" a place like this. You get folded into it.

At the bottom of the stairwell is a corridor that was never meant to be walked.

The floor slopes downward in a subtle way that makes her calves tighten and her knees flex. It feels designed to encourage flow: of water, of blood, of people. She imagines the city's planners like butchers, guiding a carcass along a hook-line.

The walls are seamless, no mortar lines, no honest joints—only smooth surfaces with faintly luminescent threads that brighten where she passes, as if her presence irritates them awake. The glow is sickly, not light so much as a mild inflammation. In the corners, where darkness should pool, there is movement: flies.

Not a few.

*A cloud.*

They drift in lazy spirals, a black weather system made of wings. Their bodies wink as they turn. Their buzzing is low and thick, like a choir humming through rotten teeth. Occasionally one lands on the wall, and for a heartbeat the wall dimples under it, accepting the tiny weight. The fly lifts again and leaves behind nothing but a faint wet mark.

Bastion swallows.

The taste in her mouth changes—suddenly bitter, like she has licked old paper or sucked on a rusted nail. She wipes her lips with the back of her hand and smells herself: sweat, cheap soap, iron from cracked skin. She tastes the iron too. Her knuckles are split from work and cold weather; they bleed without her noticing now.

She can feel the city's attention on her—an awareness sliding over her skin as though a blind person is reading her with fingertips. It catalogues her posture. The set of her shoulders. The old healed injuries in her joints. The way she stands like someone resisting an invisible current.

Her knees weaken.

This way, the pressure suggests, almost gentle.

She stumbles forward—and nearly collides with someone.

A man in armor reels back, spear half-raised.

They freeze, staring at each other in the narrow corridor while the flies drift between them like dust motes caught in bad light.

It takes Bastion a heartbeat to recognize him.

“You,” she breathes.

The Enforcer looks worse up close. Gaunt. Eyes rimmed red. There is dried blood under his nose and at the corners of his mouth, crusted into the cracks like old paint. His armor hangs oddly, as if his body beneath it has subtly changed shape—something has taken a measurement and decided it could be improved. The straps sit wrong on his clavicles. The breastplate rides higher than it should. His throat looks swollen, as if he has swallowed a fist.

“You shouldn’t be here,” he says hoarsely.

Bastion laughs once, sharp. “You say that like anyone should.”

He lowers the spear slowly, but not all the way. Like a man lowering a knife only because he is too tired to stab.

“Turn around,” he says. “If you still can.”

The pressure in Bastion’s chest surges—offended.

Pain flickers behind her eyes, a brief bright flash as if something has tugged at the optic nerves.

She grits her teeth and pushes through it. “I can’t.”

The Enforcer studies her more carefully now. His gaze lingers on her hands, on the white scars at her wrists, on the way her shoulders square like she’s bracing against a shove. He

watches her the way you watch a door in a storm: for the first sign it will give.

“Touched,” he says quietly.

Bastion nods. “Used.”

Something ugly and human moves across his face—guilt, anger, the residue of a conscience that refuses to die cleanly. “It’s pulling you.”

“Yes.”

He exhales through his teeth. The sound is dry, like sand being poured. “It’s doing that more often.”

They stand there, two people shaped by a system neither consented to and both have served. Above them, distant events combine to echo a tired, cracking sound. Somewhere water drips in a steady rhythm that resembles a heartbeat. The flies thicken, drawn to their warmth, hovering close enough that Bastion feels the faint brush of wings against her cheek.

A scream echoes down the corridor.

Endless echoes.

The sound of a voice being slowly repurposed—worn down like a tool.

Bastion flinches so hard her neck muscles knot. “What is that?”

The Enforcer swallows, stammering: “It’s the Compiler. The Authenticator..”

The pressure in Bastion's chest shifts.

Interest.

"Take me to him," she says.

The Enforcer hesitates.

Behind them, the corridor subtly narrows—as if the walls have leaned in to listen. The air thickens. The smell changes again: ink, iron, and something intimate, like a wound under bandages.

"If I do," he says slowly, "you don't leave."

Bastion meets his eyes. "If I don't, I won't either."

That earns a bitter, broken smile—small, involuntary, like a reflex. "Come on, then," he mutters. "Before it decides for us."

They move.

As they walk, little things betray the larger disaster above: grit sifts from the ceiling in soft, constant rain; a rivulet of filthy water runs uphill for a few inches before remembering gravity; a dead rat floats in a shallow gutter, bloated and pale, its belly split so its intestines trail like wet rope. The flies adore it. They settle and rise in waves, making the carcass seem to breathe.

Bastion keeps her eyes forward. She cannot afford to look too long at anything. Looking is how you get taught.

The lower archive is not quiet.

It breathes.

The shelves curve inward like ribs—true ribs, too regular to be an accident—packed with volumes that twitch and ooze ink. The books are embedded in the walls as if the walls have swallowed them mid-scream. Their spines flex. Their pages pulse under thin stone skins. Here and there, an exposed edge of paper has gone soft and translucent, like boiled cartilage.

Flesh-sheets lie draped over stone lecterns, thickening as they absorb attention. Some are stitched at the margins with coarse thread that looks like tendon. Some are nailed down with iron pins that have rusted into the material, making orange blooms.

The air hums with a low vibration that Bastion feels in her teeth, in the roots of them. Her molars ache.

At the center—

Fenner.

He is chained upright now, no longer slumped. His posture is wrong—too straight, too aligned, like a diagram of a man rather than a man. The chains bite into him at shoulders and hips; you can see the indentation in the skin, the way the flesh has begun to accept the shape of restraint.

His left arm is bare.

It is no longer an arm.

From elbow to fingertips, his flesh has flattened and thickened into a broad vellum-like plane—translucent and veined. Bastion can see branching vessels trapped under the surface like pressed flowers. The skin has lost its ordinary texture and gained a smoothness that makes her stomach flip, as if the body has been scraped and polished.

Dense script crawls across it continuously, forming proclamations, annotations, corrections. Letters slide aside to make room for new ones. The writing doesn't sit on the skin; it rises *from* it, swelling like scar tissue and then darkening to ink-black, as if the body bleeds language.

Fenner's face is streaked with tears. His lips are cracked. Saliva shines at the corners of his mouth. His eyes snap up when Bastion enters.

For a moment, recognition fights through whatever haze has been poured into him.

"You," he whispers. "River steps."

Bastion feels cold spread through her gut. "You saw me."

"I saw patterns," Fenner gasps, voice shredded. "You're a junction. A stress point."

"Stop," she snaps. "I'm a person."

Fenner laughs weakly. It's the sound of a man who has discovered personhood is negotiable in this city. "So was I."

The Antagonist stands nearby, hands clasped behind his back, watching the writing crawl over Fenner's skin with professional satisfaction, like an architect admiring a load-bearing arch. His clasp glows faintly at his throat, ember-bright, too warm for the air.

"Fascinating convergence," he says calmly. "You arrived faster than projected."

Bastion rounds on him, fury rising like bile. "You did this."

He tilts his head, almost curious. “I facilitated inevitability.”

The pressure in Bastion’s chest roars—recognition surging, not in her mind but in her ribs. Pain lances through her spine, down the vertebrae like a rod being driven. She staggers, catches herself on a lectern, and the surface dimples under her palm.

The Antagonist watches with interest. “You feel it more strongly than the others. That’s rare.”

Fenner screams suddenly.

The script on his arm accelerates violently, letters rearranging into a single repeated phrase so fast it becomes a stutter of meaning:

***STRUCTURAL FAILURE IMMINENT.  
STRUCTURAL FAILURE IMMINENT.  
STRUCTURAL FAILURE IMMINENT.***

Bastion’s breath catches. “What does that mean?” she demands.

Fenner sobs. “It’s overfeeding. The city can’t redistribute fast enough. It needs anchors—*now*.”

The Antagonist’s calm cracks for the first time—not fear, but irritation, like a ledger that refuses to close. “That is not possible yet.”

The floor heaves.

Shelves shudder. Books embedded in the walls moan as their spines flex. A wet creak runs through the room like the sound of

a giant shifting in its sleep. Ink dribbles from the walls in slow black tears.

Somewhere above, stone gives way.

Not a crash—more like a sighing collapse, like a lung failing.

The city shudders in pain, and Bastion feels it in her bones, in her legs, in the sockets of her teeth. In the clustered nerves of her gums.

The pressure inside her spikes. Urgency. Panic.

*You*, it insists. *You fit*.

“No,” Bastion screams. “I don’t belong to you!”

The Enforcer moves without thinking.

He drives his spear into the floor.

Into something beneath the stone floor.

The corridor screams.

A sound too deep to be heard properly—felt instead, rattling bones, loosening teeth, making her vision jitter. The shelves convulse. Flesh-sheets shrivel, ink smearing wildly like blood wiped with a dirty cloth. A swarm of flies explodes upward, scattering as if the air has become fire.

The Antagonist staggers back, eyes wide, jaw tightening. “What have you done?” he snaps.

The Enforcer is shaking. Blood streams from his ears now, dark and glossy, tracing the curve of his jaw and disappearing into his collar. “Chosen,” he rasps, as if the word costs him a piece of throat.

The pressure in Bastion recoils violently—  
then surges again.

Angry.

Fenner convulses, chains rattling like teeth in a jar. “You’ve wounded it,” he cries. “It will compensate!”

The floor cracks open.

A fissure splits the stone like a mouth splitting into a grin. From below rises heat and a smell that makes Bastion gag: wet iron, bile, old meat, damp earth. Something vast shifts beneath them, offended, reorienting. The archive’s rib-shelves flex as if bracing for impact.

Bastion feels the pull sharpen into a hook. That’s when she receives an understanding of the impending event.

*The city is birthing!*

And she is standing exactly where the pressure converges—where all the invisible forces meet like rivers colliding into a single brutal current.

The Antagonist regains his composure with effort, eyes blazing. “Seal the lower wards,” he orders, voice cutting. “Now. Abandon the river districts.”

Fenner laughs hysterically, tears and spit shining on his chin. “Too late. It’s already rewriting the routes.”

Bastion looks at the Enforcer.

He meets her gaze, grim and steady, blood on his mouth like a soldier’s obscene lipstick. “If it takes you,” he says, “it stabilizes.”

“And if it doesn’t?”

The ceiling cracks. Stone sags like wet flesh, as if gravity has become negotiable. Dust falls in thick clumps. Somewhere, a beam complains.

The city screams again—closer this time, as if it has leaned down to put its mouth against the room.

Bastion clenches her fists. The skin splits at her knuckles. Blood beads and runs, warm and real. Her breath comes fast; she tastes copper.

“I won’t be your foundation,” she says, voice shaking but certain.

The pressure answers, cold and absolute, not in words but in certainty that presses into her ribs:

*Then you will be the rupture.*

And above them, the city begins to collapse inward—deliberately—toward a single, catastrophic solution, while the smallest things keep happening anyway: flies regrouping in the stale air, rats fleeing in tight disciplined lines,

ink dripping like rain, and Bastion's own blood—stupid,  
stubborn, human—refusing to balance.

## 9.

# MEMORIES OF COLD ANSWERS

The Antagonist has always believed control is not domination.

Domination invites resistance. It creates heroes. It cultivates martyrs. It teaches the oppressed to name their pain, to sing it, to sharpen it into a weapon.

Control is alignment. Control is load distribution. Control is knowing which pressures to release and which to apply so the structure holds.

A city is not a crowd; it is a lattice of forces: compressive loads in the piers, tensile stresses in the tie-rods, shear along mortar beds, thrust lines arcing through vaults like invisible musculature. You do not command stone. You persuade it. You do not “rule” a foundation. You maintain its tolerances.

That belief fails when the city screams.

Not metaphorically. Not poetically.

The sound comes from everywhere at once—through ashlar and brickwork, through barrel vaults and buttresses, through the long ribs of aqueducts and the cramped hollows of crawlspaces. It travels along the very joints of the city: the voussoirs of arches grinding against their neighbors, the

keystones shuddering as if their function has been reinterpreted.

It comes through bone, too—through the petrous part of the temporal bone, through the sutures of the skull, through the wet places behind the eyes. A low, grinding moan layered with sharper ruptures, like fascia tearing under too much strain, like ligaments snapping with a hideous wet pop. It vibrates the teeth in his jaw; he feels it in the periodontal ligaments, in the root canals like a tuning fork.

The city is hurting.

He grips the banister as the lower archive convulses. The banister is iron, cold as law, but the stone beneath his boots ripples like dermis under spasm. Ink runs off the shelves in rivulets, pooling on the floor like spilled viscera—black, glossy, thick as old blood that has begun to clot. Flesh-sheets writhe, thickening, thinning, correcting themselves too fast to stay legible, their surfaces puckering with gooseflesh, their margins tightening as if sutures are being pulled.

This is not scheduled.

This is not acceptable.

“Seal the access corridors,” he snaps. His voice comes out thinner than he intends. He hears it, and hates that he hears it. “Redirect anchors from the river wards. Priority to central load paths. Reinforce the primary piers. Brace the transepts. Close the service shafts.”

No one answers.

The Enforcers nearest him are on their knees, retching or bleeding from the nose. One claws at his own chest as if trying to tear something out from beneath the sternum. Another sits with his head bowed, shoulders trembling, a thin line of blood seeping from both ears—hemotympanum, he thinks distantly, the way he thinks when the world is slipping: the middle ear flooded, pressure equalization failed.

The system is oversaturating.

He turns back to Fenner.

The Scholar is barely recognizable now. His arm has spread further, the vellum-like tissue flattening across his thorax, the skin stretched thin over the costal margin. The transformation is not random. It is anatomical. It follows planes: epidermis thinned to a translucent membrane; dermis thickened into a parchment-like lamina; subcutaneous fat redistributed, drained, reallocated; the fascia lata of his life rewritten into something that functions like page backing.

Script crawls over his ribs, his neck, his jaw. The letters swell like hypertrophic scars, darken like bruises, then settle into ink-black permanence. Words spill off him onto the chains, onto the table, onto the stone itself—capillary action pulling meaning into mortar pores as if the city's masonry is thirsty.

Fenner is not screaming anymore.

He is reciting.

“—load exceeded—reassignment failure—junction collapse—”  
His voice is monotone, but his eyes are wet and wide, pupils

blown in sympathetic dilation. He is both witness and instrument.

“Stop,” the Antagonist orders.

Fenner’s head jerks up. His gaze is unfocused, but something looks through him, the way wind looks through a hollow reed and makes it sing.

“It won’t,” Fenner says softly. “You taught it persistence. You taught it to optimize.”

The Antagonist feels something cold settle in his gut, not fear—*assessment*. A cold answer to a hot problem. A memory of winter nights in training halls, where the only warmth came from discipline.

“You are extrapolating,” he says. “You are damaged.”

Fenner smiles with half a mouth. The other side is pulling strangely, as if the zygomatic muscles have learned a more efficient tension. His cheek twitches. “So are you.”

The floor drops an inch.

A settling. A differential movement. A failure of bearing capacity. The kind of shift that turns hairline cracks into fractures.

The Antagonist stumbles, catching himself on a shelf that yields under his grip like muscle under a palpating hand. He feels the give, the rebound, the false compliance.

No.

He forces himself upright.

This is still a system. Systems fail when inputs are incorrect. Systems can be corrected. A collapse is merely a series of unaddressed stresses. A city is a machine of stone and flesh, and machines need to be tuned.

He looks at Bastion.

She stands rigid near the fracture line in the floor, blood slicking her palms, jaw clenched so tight her masseter muscles jump. For the first time, he sees her properly—not as a variable in a model, not as a laborer with a file number, but as a body occupying space.

Her skin is a weathered olive—sun-darkened and work-marked—with pale scar tissue on the knuckles. Her nose had been broken and set without care, leaving a slight deviation. Her eyes are a hard, stormy brown—clear, alert, too awake.

The Antagonist tries to shake his reverie. He rarely spends his time appraising the details of a person's physical appearance. Unless he had a personal investment. Or if he was ordered to by the Office.

The fabric is tight across her shoulders. There is soot on her collarbone, dried salt at the throat. She smells of rust and wet stone and the faint sharp bite of cheap soap—the kind used to scrub blood out of fingernail beds.

And around her, the pressure is visible now.

Stone dimples toward her. Hairline stress fractures in the floor converge like thrust lines seeking a keystone. The cracks map themselves with obscene intelligence: radiating, then correcting,

then radiating again, as if the city cannot decide whether to cradle her or split her open.

She is exactly where the rupture would stabilize.

Clarity cuts through his panic like a blade through silk.

Of course.

“You,” he says, stepping toward her. “This is why you survived initial contact.”

Bastion barks a laugh—raw, disbelieving, and somehow still *human* in the middle of this. “Survived? That’s what you call it? Lucky me, I didn’t get turned into a wall *yet*.”

The Enforcer flinches at her tone. The Antagonist does not.

“You’re necessary,” he replies. “There’s a difference.”

Bastion lifts her blood-wet hands and looks at them as if she might fling herself out of her own skin. “Necessary like mortar. Necessary like a hinge. Necessary like... a nail.”

The pressure around her surges, eager. The air warms in a ring around her sternum. Even the flies—still swirling in the periphery—shift toward her like filings toward a magnet.

The Antagonist raises his voice, pitching it low, calm, authoritative—the tone that has steadied riots and quieted screaming rooms. A tone built from years of knowing which words function like braces.

“Listen to me,” he says. “You can end this.”

Bastion's lips peel back over her teeth. "End it how? By letting it eat me? By letting it turn me into one of your 'anchors'?"

"By letting it use you," he corrects. "Temporarily. You'll be alive. Integrated. The city will stabilize. Thousands won't die."

Bastion spits to the side. The saliva hits stone and sizzles faintly as if the floor is fevered. "Alive?" she says. "Like Fenner is alive? Like those sheets are alive? You want me breathing while I'm *not mine*."

The Enforcer laughs—a short, broken sound that ends in a cough. "You're lying."

The Antagonist doesn't look at him. "I'm calculating."

The city lurches again.

Somewhere above, a tower collapses inward with a sound like a ribcage folding—compression failure, progressive collapse, the load path suddenly re-written. Dust rains down the corridor shafts. The archive shelves groan; the embedded books flex like spines. A fissure snakes across the floor and stops inches from Bastion's heel, as if waiting for permission.

Fenner convulses, voice rising. "He's wrong," he gasps. "It won't stop at her. It never stops. It learns."

The Antagonist snaps, "Silence." It is an order with hooks.

Pain lances through Fenner and he goes limp, breath shuddering. The script on his skin pauses, then resumes with renewed aggression—as if the system has been reminded that disobedience is waste.

The clasp at the Antagonist's throat burns now, hot enough to sting the skin. He ignores it. Pain is a signal; signals can be triaged.

"Bastion," he says, softening his tone with practiced precision, offering a handhold. "You feel it, don't you? How close you are. How easily the pressure resolves around you."

Bastion's laugh is quieter this time, more tired than cruel. "I feel it trying to erase me," she says. "Like I'm chalk and it's got a wet rag."

"No," he says. "I feel it trying to keep you."

She blinks. Once. A micro-flinch of doubt. The warmth in her chest flickers in response: temptation dressed as safety.

Good.

He steps closer.

The floor beneath his boots gives, then firms again, obedient. The stone acknowledges him. It always has. He has spent years teaching the city the shape of his will.

Or he thought he had.

Bastion lifts her chin. "Let me ask you something," she says, voice sharp but steady. "When it 'uses' me... what part of me gets to say no?"

"That's not how structures work," he answers before he can stop himself.

Bastion's smile is small, bright, and vicious. "Exactly."

The Enforcer moves.

He steps between them, spear raised—not at Bastion.

At the Antagonist.

The spearhead catches the archive's sick light and looks like a surgical instrument.

"Don't," the Antagonist says sharply. He feels the word leave him like a brace being bolted on.

The Enforcer's hands shake. Blood runs freely from his nose now, dripping onto the stone. It makes small dark stars. His eyes are glassy with pain.

"You told me resistance confuses the system," the Enforcer says. "So does sacrifice."

The Antagonist stares at him.

This is new.

This is *unmodeled*.

"You are out of alignment," he says. A diagnosis. A condemnation.

"I know," the Enforcer replies, and the simplicity of it is almost unbearable. "It hurts."

The Antagonist feels the pressure shift away from him.

The city's attention slides off him like a hand withdrawing. The warmth that once sat behind his sternum—comforting, compliant—evaporates.

Cold blooms where warmth once lived.

“No,” he says, and for the first time the word is not policy. It is fear.

He reaches instinctively for the control he has always relied on—

—and finds only resistance.

The clasp at his throat burns like a cautery.

Pain explodes down his spine, sudden and savage, radiating along the paraspinal muscles, the erector spinae seizing. He cries out as his knees buckle, armor clattering. The pressure that once soothed him now crushes, compressing lungs, forcing breath out in wet gasps. He feels the diaphragm spasm. He tastes blood.

Betrayal.

The system is correcting him.

He claws at his collar, fingers slipping on sweat and ink-mist. He rips the clasp free.

The skin beneath is wrong.

Raised.

Glossy.

An eye over a keystone, grown deep into the anterior neck, nestled against the larynx like a parasite's badge. The tissue is hypertrophic, slick with mucus, pulsing with each ragged breath. It looks like a granuloma that has learned symbolism. It stares without eyelids.

The Antagonist gags.

Fenner laughs weakly. "You let it inside you to control others," he wheezes. "You just forgot you were also a body."

The Antagonist retches, bile and blood spilling from his mouth. The vomit is streaked dark, as if ink has joined the fluids. He feels the back of his throat burn—esophageal abrasion, gastric acid, the humiliation of the animal.

The city convulses violently.

Stone arches crack. Vault ribs fracture. Shelves collapse in a cascade of wet groans. Flesh-sheets tear, screaming as they die—yes, *die*, because whatever animates them loses coherence in the shock. Ink splatters across the floor in arterial sprays.

Bastion screams too—not in pain, but in refusal.

"I choose nothing," she roars. "You don't get me. None of you do."

Her voice cuts through the archive like a chisel through plaster.

The pressure recoils, furious—

then lunges.

The floor splits open beneath Bastion, a yawning cavity lined with veined stone and wet, contracting surfaces. The fissure is not a crack; it is an incision. The edges retract like tissue around a wound. The cavity below pulses with peristaltic motion, the walls slick, ridged, vascular—architecture behaving like mucosa.

Heat pours out like breath from a giant lung.

The Antagonist crawls toward her, desperation overriding dignity. “You don’t understand—”

Bastion looks at him once.

Her eyes are clear. *Clear*. The kind of clarity that comes when you stop bargaining with a predator.

“I do,” she says, and her voice softens just enough to be cruel. “You understand too. You’re just late.”

Then she turns slightly, glances at the Enforcer with something like grim camaraderie. “Hey,” she says, breath hitching. “If you’re going to do something brave... do it loud.”

The Enforcer tries to rise and cannot.

Bastion steps into the rupture.

She floats. She refuses even gravity’s authority.

The atmosphere becomes thick in something like loss. The city heaves in cosmic defeat.

The pressure detonates outward, a wave of force that hurls the Antagonist back against a wall hard enough to crack stone. His

vision whites out. He feels his bones shift, joints misaligning as the system scrambles to compensate—his shoulder subluxates, the humeral head slipping; his teeth clack together; his neck whips and the muscles seize.

The Enforcer is thrown too, slamming into a pillar. He does not rise.

Fenner screams as the script on his body goes mad, letters tearing themselves apart, rewriting faster than tissue can support. The vellum-plane of his arm ripples with micro-tears; ink bleeds into the fissures like a hemorrhage into a bruise.

Above them, alarms ring—bronze and harsh, like the city has found a voice it hates.

Seals slam shut across districts. Portcullises drop. Floodgates grind. The great arches that connect ward to ward are shuttered with stone slabs designed for siege. You can hear the counterweights thudding in their housings, the pulley wheels screaming for grease.

The order goes out at last, rippling through corridors, shouted and stamped and carried by terrified runners:

***ABANDON THE LOWER CITY.***

The Antagonist lies broken, gasping, his throat burning, his authority gone. The eye-keystone in his neck pulses faster, as if excited.

For the first time in his life, he understands what it feels like to be infrastructure that is no longer needed.

The city convulses one final time—

—and begins to seal itself closed, trapping whatever has gone wrong inside.

Including him.

# 10.

## HUNGER HEAVIER THAN CHAINS

Fenner wakes inside a place of absence and silence.

The constant vibration that lived in his bones since the lower archive is gone. No hum in the teeth. No pressure under the sternum. No approving warmth pressing from behind his eyes like a thumb.

For the first time in days, his thoughts are his own.

That realization hurts more than anything the parasite did to him.

He lies on cold stone slick with ink and blood and something thicker that used to be words. A coagulated slurry of pulp and meaning. The air tastes scorched, like a library after fire: char and wet ash and the faint sweet rancor of singed leather. He breathes and feels it scratch down his trachea. His breath fogs faintly.

The city is no longer breathing here.

Sealed.

He turns his head slowly. Every vertebra complains, a dry articulation of bone and tendon, a spine remembering it is merely scaffolding.

The archive is ruined.

Shelves lie collapsed like broken ribs. Load-bearing members—once elegant, once disciplined—have failed in messy sequence: buckling, shear, then outright fracture. Flesh-sheets hang in shreds, pale strips twitching weakly before going still. Their dermal surfaces are dulling, drying, losing the wet sheen of “alive.” Ink pools everywhere, already oxidizing, already dying. Without attention, without readers, the text cannot hold itself together. It blurs. It slumps. It becomes a mere stain.

Fenner laughs once, hoarse.

“So that’s what you needed,” he murmurs. “Witness.”

Pain flares as he tries to sit up.

His body protests in a thousand small ways. Joints grind. Muscles seize. The intercostals spasm between ribs. Something inside his chest clicks—costochondral cartilage shifting—then settles at a slightly wrong angle, as if his skeleton has been re-filed and re-seated.

He looks down at his left arm.

It is no longer a page.

The vellum-flesh has begun to retract, thickening, darkening, losing translucence. The epidermis is returning in patches like weather coming back to a ruined landscape. The script beneath

it is fading—not vanishing cleanly, but smearing, like ink dragged through water. Letters blur into scars. Some become raised keloids. Others sink into shallow depressions like pitted old stone.

He touches it with shaking fingers.

Pain answers.

Sharp.

Honest.

Human.

Fenner sobs, and the sound is ugly and raw, animalistic.

Across the ruined chamber, someone groans.

The Enforcer lies half-buried under a fallen pillar—a fractured pier section, heavy enough to have crushed a lesser body completely. His armor is cracked, twisted, a breastplate deformed as if the metal itself tried to flee. Blood mats his hair. One leg bends at an angle that legs should not bend to; the tibia has likely snapped, the fibula too, and the knee is wrong in a way the eye recognizes before the mind accepts it.

Fenner drags himself toward him.

Every movement is agony. His palms slide on ink. His knees grind against grit. He tastes copper again—his own blood, leaked somewhere behind his teeth.

“Stay with me,” Fenner croaks.

He doesn't know why he says it. Habit, maybe. Or guilt. Or the stubborn scholarly impulse to keep a witness alive.

The Enforcer's eyes flutter open.

For a moment, they are unfocused.

Then they sharpen.

"It's... quiet," the Enforcer whispers.

Fenner nods. "Yes."

The Enforcer exhales shakily. "Good."

They lie there together for a long time, two men emptied of their functions. Not heroes. Not villains. Just bodies, briefly spared conversion.

Above them, stone groans as the city settles into its new shape—arches redistributing thrust, piers taking fresh load, masonry finding new equilibrium with reluctant creaks. It is a settling you can feel in the jaw.

Fenner feels something else, too. He feels the absence where those things used to be.

A cavity.

A scar.

The parasite has been cut off.

Contained.

He understands this with the terrible clarity of a historian who has finally read the original source instead of the cleaned transcript.

The city has done this before.

Seal the damage. Abandon the infected districts. Write new records that pretend continuity. Let centuries pass until the foundations are forgotten again.

Fenner pushes himself upright. White pain spears through his spine. He welcomes it. Pain is proof of ownership.

“People will ask what happened,” the Enforcer mutters.

Fenner smiles grimly. “No. They’ll be told.”

He looks around at the devastation and sees the future paperwork already forming like mold.

“Whole wards sealed,” he continues. “Records lost. A structural failure blamed on age, water damage, poor maintenance. The dead counted as casualties.”

The Enforcer swallows. “And the truth?”

Fenner closes his eyes.

Behind them flickers an image that doesn’t behave like memory so much as a wound refusing to scab: Bastion stepping into the rupture—not in surrender but in refusal. The city recoiling. The system screaming as it lost its keystone.

“She broke the loop,” Fenner says softly. “By denying a resolution, she removed the win-state.”

The Enforcer frowns. “She’s dead.”

Fenner opens his eyes. “Yes.”

A beat.

“Or worse,” he adds. “Or more.”

The Enforcer lets out a breath that might be a laugh, but it breaks into a cough. “That’s not comforting.”

“It’s honest.”

Fenner braces himself and stands.

His ruined arm hangs heavy—scarred, still faintly warm in places. Neuropathic heat where it shouldn’t be. It will never be the same.

Neither will he.

Footsteps echo faintly from above—distant, cautious. Rescue teams, maybe. Or officials come to assess what must be erased.

Fenner knows what happens next.

He will be questioned. Examined. Pressured to explain what he knows in ways that make it safe. He will be offered protection in exchange for silence.

Authority always does this after a catastrophe: it converts survivors into assets.

This time, he is ready.

He looks down at the Enforcer. “Listen to me. If they ask—”

“I know,” the Enforcer says quietly. “I saw nothing. I heard nothing.”

Fenner nods. A pact formed in ruin.

The city above them creaks again, finalizing its seal.

Somewhere deep below, the vast and patient entity is still alive—starved, wounded, furious—unable to reach.

For now.

Fenner feels the weight of history settle on his shoulders.

Heavier than chains.

He understands the final, obscene joke of it:

Humanity did not survive the parasite by defeating it.

We survived by forgetting.

Fenner flexes his scarred hand, wincing.

“Not this time,” he whispers.



High above, where the air is thin and honest, a gull rides the wind.

It does not know politics. It does not know keystones. It does not know that beneath the slate roofs and soot-smearred domes a city has just amputated its own infected limb.

It circles once over the river wards and sees only geometry: collapsed streets like snapped ribs, a dust plume rising from a failed arcade, a line of people moving along a quay like ants escaping rain.

It hears the alarms as a metal song.

It smells smoke and salt and the sweet rot of exposed sewage where a culvert has split—stench rising in warm sheets. It banks away from the worst of it, offended, and glides toward cleaner air.

Below, sewer rats pour from ruptured grates in frantic ribbons of fur, whiskers slick, eyes bright with simple purpose. They scatter through broken arcades and under fallen lintels. They do not care about secrets. They care about open routes and the absence of feet crushing them.

Flies lift in black veils from where the river has been fouled, rising in clouds that catch the light and shimmer like corrupted glitter. They move as if the air itself has gained a nervous system.

The gull watches none of this with meaning.

It watches because it has eyes.

It wheels past a cathedral nave whose roof has partially collapsed, exposing rib vaulting like a skeleton turned outward. Sunlight spills through the missing sections in harsh, rectangular shafts. Dust dances in those beams with the aimless beauty of a world that hasn't learned fear.

The bird dips.

A gust catches it.

It climbs again, higher, indifferent.

# 11.

## TRUST WHAT RESISTS YOU

The Survivor doesn't remember their name, but remembers the texture of the street.

It was supposed to be stone. That is what people said. That is what the city wanted them to believe: that the ground was inert, dependable, dead.

But the first time the parasite touched them, it did not come as a monster from below.

It came as the street itself decided they belonged to it.

Now the Survivor lives in the sealed edge-districts, in the places the Empire pretends are empty. They move through alleys where the walls sweat and the air tastes like pennies. They sleep in doorframes that pulse faintly, as if the buildings are dreaming.

Sometimes they find others—lost people who slipped past barricades, hungry and terrified. Sometimes those people cry when they see the Survivor's skin, because the Survivor's flesh still bears the parasite's handwriting: scars that are too neat, tendons that pull wrong, joints that bend like hinges in architecture.

The Survivor watches those reactions without understanding why it hurts.

They understand pain. Pain is a language they speak fluently. They understand relief, too, the awful sweetness of it, the way it makes you forgive what should not be forgiven.

But names? Stories? Doctrine?

Those are harder.

Still, the city teaches.

The Survivor learns by touch.

They learn that the “stone” of the sealed walls is newer than the old street, and therefore less convincing. The new walls are pale, smooth, stamped with sigils. They look like barriers.

But when the Survivor presses their ear to them, they can hear movement inside—slow, patient, like muscle sliding over bone.

The walls are not barriers.

They are bandages.

On one night when the rain is heavy and the patrols are sparse, the Survivor climbs a collapsed stairwell to a rooftop that shouldn't exist because the building beneath it has been abandoned for years. The city holds the roof anyway. The city is good at holding things up.

From here, the Survivor can see the memorial square in the distance, gleaming with imported dead stone. The plaque catches lightning flashes and throws them back like a signal.

The Survivor does not know what a memorial is. But they know the difference between dead stone and living stone. They can feel the city's attention shifting, like a body rolling in sleep.

A memory rises—faint, stubborn:

A voice, long ago, in a room that smelled of ink and fear, speaking a sentence with the tired certainty of law.

***Bodily autonomy was removed centuries ago.***

The Survivor doesn't know what autonomy means. But their skin reacts to the word the way it reacts to a threat: tightening, aching, remembering.

They look down at their hands. The fingers twitch, as if waiting for instruction.

The parasite used to instruct them through pain. It used to make their body a tool.

But something is different now.

Sometimes, in the sealed districts, the Survivor feels a *pause* in the parasite's hunger—an uncertain hesitation, like a predator reconsidering a familiar pattern. The Survivor doesn't know why, only that the air changes around certain cracks in the walls, certain seams in the street.

Tonight, on the rooftop, the Survivor senses that same hesitation.

A direction forms in their bones, not as command but as invitation.

Go.

They climb down and move through the dark toward the memorial square, avoiding patrol routes the way an animal avoids open fields. When they reach the edge of the square, they crouch behind a toppled cart and stare at the plaque.

It is real stone. Dead. Imported. Honest.

And at its base, where dead stone meets living pavement, there is a hairline gap.

The Survivor crawls closer, drawn by the gap the way the body is drawn to a wound.

Inside the gap, something small rests: a shard of stone covered in tiny, carved letters. The Survivor cannot read. But their skin can.

When they touch the shard, pain blooms—brief, sharp, not punishment but recognition. The letters on the shard align with the scars on their arm, as if matching a key to a lock.

They hear—faintly—voices. Not in the air, but in the city beneath the square. The pressure of many bodies held in place, the grind of structure. The slow chew of rot that is also memory.

The Survivor closes their eyes and presses the shard to their chest.

For the first time, the parasite does not offer relief.

It listens.

And in that listening, the Survivor feels something they have not felt since before they became The Survivor:

A thin line between *self* and *city*. A boundary the doctrine tried to erase. A line Bastion, somewhere beneath all this “stone,” may have carved back into existence with nothing but refusal.

The Survivor stands up in the rain, holding the shard of truth like a warm coal, and walks into the city that pretends it is stone—ready, finally, to remember what was stolen.



# REASSIGNMENT

He wakes to silence and thinks, for an instant, that the system has finally rewarded him.

Then he tries to move.

A bolt of pain lances from his lower back into his abdomen, a deep visceral pull that makes him gasp. The silence does not change. No soothing warmth rises to meet the pain. No corrective pressure arrives like a hand on the sternum.

That is when he understands the silence is not reward.

It is containment.

The room is small—cell-sized, proportioned with bureaucratic economy. Four walls, a ceiling too low to forget, a floor that offers no corner of shadow large enough to hide in. The surfaces are “stone,” but the smell betrays them. Real stone is indifferent. It holds onto the cold. It does not answer you.

This does.

Each breath he takes is met by a faint inward draw from the walls, as though the room is tasting the air he has warmed, sampling him in microscopic sips. There is dampness threaded through the scent: mineral, iron, and a sweet note underneath that makes his stomach tighten—like spoiled fruit left too long in a sealed jar.

He is no longer in the Office proper.

He recognizes none of the furnishings. There is a cot with a bare mattress and no sheets, the sort used for short stays and long confessions. A single lamp is bolted to the floor, its metal housing scabbed with old scratches. A drain sits in the center like an unblinking eye. Around it, the “stone” is stained darker in a widening halo, as if others have leaked here before: sweat, blood, bile—fluids with no place to be dignified.

The Empire has a word for this, too.

Reassignment.

A polite synonym for disposal.

He sits up slowly, testing his body like a man checking structural integrity after an earthquake. His shoulders ache where muscle has stiffened. His wrists throb from restraints that are no longer there. His throat burns as if he has been shouting in his sleep.

He waits for relief that does not come.

The parasite used to reward him for obedience—small, controlled cessations of pain, a precise reduction in discomfort that felt like a professional nod. A lull in the nerves, a loosening of tension, the clean sensation of being “in alignment.” It was not joy, not even comfort, but it was *manageable*. It made atrocity feel like duty, duty feel like service, and service feel like purpose.

Now there is only ache.

He presses a hand to his abdomen where the parasite’s access once made him feel powerful, chosen—*partnered*. The flesh there is wrong. Not infected, not inflamed. Too smooth. Too

sealed. As if the city has closed a wound with careful sutures and then discarded the thread.

No warmth answers his touch.

He laughs once, a cracked sound that scrapes the back of his throat.

He gave them everything: permits, bodies, districts, exceptions signed in clean ink that smelled faintly of metal. He let the parasite into him because he believed stability required sacrifice. He believed the doctrine was necessary. He helped ensure no one ever reclaimed it.

Now he understands what the doctrine was always for.

Not to protect the city.

To protect the idea of the city as stone—immovable, unquestionable, eternal.

A knock comes at the door and an attendant slides in a tray through a gap.

Water. Thin broth. Two tablets.

The attendant's eyes remain down. Their face is blank in the practiced way of people trained to be surfaces.

He lifts his head and feels the old shape of command try to reassemble itself inside his mouth.

"Who authorized this?" he asks. The question comes out automatic, clipped—authority reflex.

No answer.

The tray is left. The seam closes.

He stares at the tablets. White. Chalky. Unlabeled. He hates that they are unlabeled. He hates that he is considering them like a petitioner.

He drinks the broth anyway. Hunger makes cowards of doctrine. The liquid tastes of boiled grain and something medicinal. The tablets crumble against his tongue like plaster dust. He forces them down with water. Sleep comes hard as if applied by force.

Sometime later he is woken by a rhythmic, geologic rumbling, like a physical insistence traveling through the soles of the cot, into his bones. It has a cadence. A working cadence. A machine that never stops because stopping would mean admitting it exists.

He sits up and presses his ear to the surface of the warm stone.

He feels vibrations, a low language carried through structure, the way a distant hammer carries through beams. The sound beneath is too steady to be panic. Too patient to be chaos.

Chewing.

Pressure cycles.

Peristalsis.

Feeding without need of teeth or jaws.

The parasite is still there.

Contained, the Empire would say. Contained like a prisoner. Contained like a disease. Contained like a secret. But he recognizes the pattern. This is allocation. From another perspective, it was imprisonment.

He has been placed somewhere useful—not to the Office, not to his hierarchy of reports and seals and approvals, but to the city itself. To its lower load paths. To whatever “maintenance” now happens beyond paperwork.

A custodian repurposed.

Days pass without markers. The lamp does not dim naturally. The air never fully freshens. Time becomes a function of the tray: broth, water, tablets, silence.

Sometimes he wakes with the sensation of being inhaled.

The chewing below grows closer—or perhaps he is simply learning to hear it better, the way a person learns to hear a neighbor’s footsteps through thin walls and begins to anticipate them with resentment.

He begins to dream.

Chaotic dreams. Administrative nightmares with tactile detail.

Districts sealed behind pale walls that close like eyelids. Streets softening underfoot like wax warmed by too many bodies. Faces appearing briefly in arches, smoothed into curves as if the city cannot decide whether it is architecture or flesh and chooses both. He dreams of ink that doesn’t dry because it is not ink; it is coagulated language.

He dreams of Bastion.

A martyr of pure refusal.

Her stepping into rupture not as sacrifice, but as a cunning sabotage—denying the system the clean closure it craved.

In the dream he hates her for it. The hate is sharp and immediate, because she proved the system could be denied and still endure. She made his whole life's logic look like superstition dressed as policy.

And then, in the same dream, he feels something else: dread that is almost admiration, and that disgusts him even more.

He cannot stop returning to the moment the city chose to save itself by abandoning parts of itself. He had always claimed stability justified atrocity.

The city agreed—

until it decided he was also an expendable district.

One morning the seam opens and two Enforcers enter.

Not his Enforcers. These wear no insignia. Their armor is plain and scuffed, the kind meant for work that must not be commemorated. Their faces are expressionless in the trained way of people who have watched too much rot and learned to survive by becoming stone themselves.

“Come,” one says.

He stands too quickly and sways. His legs feel unfamiliar, as if the muscles have weakened in ways his mind refuses to acknowledge. He steadies himself, draws his shoulders back,

tries to arrange his posture into something that looks like command rather than captivity.

“This is an error,” he begins. “I require—”

The Enforcer’s hand closes around his forearm. The grip is not cruel.

It is final. A procedure being performed correctly and without malice.

He tries again, quieter, because some part of him still believes quiet authority might be heard where shouting isn’t.

“You know who I am.”

The Enforcer doesn’t react. The other one takes his other arm as if he might faint. The walls are too smooth. The corners too rounded. He catches himself looking for masonry joints—header courses, stretcher bonds, anything honest. But there are none.

No window or air shafts.

Only the smell: damp iron and the same sweet rot under it, stronger now, like fruit collapsing into liquor. He hears the faintest wet sound from the walls as they move past, a subtle contraction that makes his skin crawl.

At the end is a stairwell descending into darkness.

He stops. His feet refuse the first step.

“Where are you taking me?” he asks, and he hears the panic in the sentence before he can disguise it.

One Enforcer glances back. Eyes flat. Voice neutral.

“Below.”

He knows then. Not execution. Not imprisonment.

Integration.

The word lands in his mind like a dropped stone.

He pulls back instinctively, and the Enforcers tighten their hold, not to punish but to prevent complication. Panic sharpens into something clean, almost honest.

“I have served,” he says, and hates the pleading in it. “I have kept order. I have—”

The Enforcer cuts him off, not loudly, not theatrically. A simple sentence, delivered like a line from a handbook.

“Service does not grant consent.”

The stairs are narrow and steep, built for utility, not dignity. The air grows warmer with each step. He feels it against his face like someone else’s breath. The walls sweat faintly. He can smell salt. The air is thick with metallic textures.

The chewing is louder here.

The stairs end in a chamber where the “stone” is exposed—no longer pretending. It glistens under the lamp-light like wet tissue. It pulses in slow waves. It bears the faint outline of faces smoothed into load-bearing curves: brows flattened, mouths erased, cheekbones redistributed into buttresses. Bodies rendered into architecture with an engineer’s indifference.

He gags and spits.

He has seen diagrams. He has signed permits. He has approved “material reallocations” with a steady hand. But seeing is different than standing inside it, surrounded by it, smelling it.

A central column rises like a spine. It is wrapped in pale strata like limestone. It is the city’s memory made structural.

The Enforcers push him forward and he digs his heels in and feels the floor give slightly, as if testing his resistance.

The slab of rock in front of him opens, yawning, concave.

The edges of the hole retract with slick precision. The interior is warmer than he can tolerate. A smell pours out that makes his eyes water: blood, bile, damp earth, and something sweet that is unmistakably human fat breaking down.

Warmth floods him. Pain follows—sharp and familiar, a language he once mistook for partnership.

He cries out—no words, just sound—and waits for the old reward, the old correction, the old pleasant easing that used to arrive when he did what was required.

Nothing.

No relief.

The system does not bargain with him anymore because it has already assigned his closing function.

He is pressed into the living wall.

At first it is only pressure—his scapulae forced flat, ribs compressed until he can't draw a full breath, his lungs reduced to shallow working volumes. He feels cartilage flex. He feels the intercostals strain. He feels panic in the vagus nerve, in the throat, in the sweat that erupts cold across his back. The surface accepts him with procedural patience.

His clothing tears. Fabric peels away. Skin drags, then adheres. He feels the epidermis tug as if being pulled through a narrow aperture. The dermis burns. Nerves flare, then go numb in patches as if the body is being rewired for endurance.

His limbs begin to lose their shape; his organs grind to gravel.

Shoulders forced into a new plane. Hips rotated. The muscles of his thighs stretched and redistributed like mortar being pressed into gaps. His hands—those hands that signed orders—flatten, fingers splayed, metacarpals aching as their joints lock into positions that are no longer expressive but load-bearing.

His throat tightens. He tries to scream again and finds the sound trapped behind swelling tissue. The airway narrows. The larynx feels as if it is being wrapped. His voice reduces to a wet rasp, then to nothing.

Silence returns. Containment.

He spent his life defending a city built on bodies. Now he will hold it up.

He will become a literal column that cannot speak.

A pillar of the Earth.

# CODICIL

Fenner's skin itches with the friction of scrawling ink.

The parasite's script still lives across his torso and down his arms, letters raised like scar-keloid, shifting microscopically when he breathes. The Empire calls him *recovered*, because it has a template for recovery: the body returns to function, the mind returns to obedience, the story returns to usefulness.

Fenner knows better. He is a record the city cannot erase without admitting the city can read.

They keep him in a narrow room in the Office annex, where the walls are *stone* and the air smells faintly of wet iron. The stone hums sometimes, but softly, like it has been trained to whisper. A clerk is assigned to him—young, polite, terrified. The clerk brings approved texts each morning: harmless histories, sanitized decrees, a children's primer explaining civic duty through pictures of smiling towers.

"You will help restore confidence," the clerk says, and attempts a smile that does not reach his eyes.

Fenner nods. He always nods.

When the clerk leaves, Fenner lifts his sleeve.

The skin beneath flexes. Letters surface, rearrange, settle. The line appears on him in three places. Not because the Office

wrote it. Because the parasite did. Faithfully. A scribe that cannot help but preserve what it consumes.

At night, when the annex sleeps, Fenner reaches beneath his cot and retrieves a shard of real stone—imported masonry salvaged from a shipment meant for the new memorial. Dead stone. Honest stone. Unbreathing and unfettered. He presses it to his skin and is grateful; because it matters to him.

“You like to write?” Fenner murmurs. “Then write on this. Write where I can hide it.”

But the stone stays cold. A thing of divine indifference.

Fenner shows great skill in subdued patience, anticipating the tablet will soon generate a reply, but nothing happens.

Then his skin tightens.

The script on him rearranges—subtle, nauseating, like a book reordering itself without permission. Pain spikes, sharp and personal. The parasite’s punctuation. It is editing ruthlessly under his skin. *Corrections*.

A line of script peels free, unbinding in a pale crusty ribbon, lifting from his flesh as if drawn by invisible pincers, and seeps into the porous surface of the dry strata, the crimson iron in his blood soaking into it like a sponge, a page of spilled ink full of words that never expected to be read.

There is no relief. He waits until the pain brings clarity.

Over the following weeks, Fenner repeats the torturous process. He is making a new archive: doctrine stolen from skin,

hidden in stone, smuggled into the one material the Empire still believes is inert.

More weeks pass.

The city's official narrative hardens. Speeches praise the sealing of districts as decisive compassion. The Antagonist's name is first omitted, then quietly condemned, then rewritten into a parable about individual failure rather than systemic atrocity.

Fenner listens and copies what they give him. He smiles when Marrow the clerk checks his work.

Meanwhile, the cold stone tablet under his cot grows heavy with half-truths: laws, confessions, suppressed doctrine, the parasite's own unintentionally honest annotations—

***consent labeled sedition***  
***desire categorized as leakage***  
***resistance defined as inefficiency***

One morning, the clerk arrives pale with drops of sweat on his forehead.

"They're moving you," he says, voice too steady. "To the memorial site. You will read at the dedication."

Fenner nods. The Empire does not destroy evidence if it can instead *perform* it.

They escort him through streets that look normal until you pay attention. The buildings stand with the strained patience of things being held up by someone else's pain.

They reach the Square of Continuance. The imported plaque gleams in the sun. Real quarried stone, clean and dead, surrounded by pretence.

A crowd gathers. They have come to witness closure.

Fenner steps to the podium and feels the meat beneath the city stir—a pressure in the air, listening the way a stomach listens for hunger.

He reads the approved lines. The crowd nods. They clap at the right moments. The officials smile like sculptors admiring their work.

Then Fenner pauses.

He reaches into his coat and lifts the shard of dead stone.

It looks like nothing. A pebble. A keepsake.

But when the sun hits it, letters inside the pores cast tiny shadows.

The first line becomes visible.

***Bodily autonomy was removed centuries ago.***

A murmur ripples through the crowd—not understanding, but *recognition*. The sentence feels wrong in this place. On this day.

Fenner speaks it aloud anyway.

An infection disguised as a lecture.

The officials stiffen. Guards move. Somewhere beneath their feet, the city tightens, offended by the sound of truth.

Fenner continues.

He recites what the Office erased. He recites what the parasite preserved. He recites calmly, with the authority of a body turned into a document.

Some people cover their ears. Some cry. Some stare, as if a crack has opened in the idea of stone.

Hands grab him. He does not resist. He lets the shard fall.

It clinks against the base of the memorial plaque and skitters into a narrow gap between imported stone and living pavement.

A small thing.

Easily missed.

But the city is made of gaps pretending to be solid.

And now, inside one of those gaps, something has been introduced that does not belong.

**YOU HAVE REACHED THE END  
OF BOOK 1. CONTINUE THE  
STORY IN BOOK 2: A CURATED  
COLLAPSE.**