

ROYA
PUBLICATION
No. 48

SERVICE LIFE



CHEW Z

A ROYA PUBLICATION

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Printed in the Reach

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ASSESSED CYCLES

FOUR THOUSAND OF THESE, SIGNED BY HAND WHEN A STAMP WAS AVAILABLE,
BECAUSE A DEATH SHOULD BE WITNESSED BY A PERSON.

SYNOPSIS

Cyrus Aban certifies death dates for a living.

He is a Longevity Advocate II in the Department of Lifecycle Confidence, which means he cooks consumer electronics in sealed chambers until they fail, works out precisely when they were always going to fail, and signs the certificate by hand while everyone else uses a stamp. Nineteen years. Four thousand certificates. One marriage, discontinued.

Then he is seconded to a second ledger — not when the thing dies, but when you stop wanting it — and he starts running the chambers on himself, and his own body begins reporting cycle counts.

A woman who has been on a research panel for eleven years shows him that her desire has been rising and falling on an interval nobody in the building ever set. A man in a teardown yard finds two percent of the refined metal going into a hole in the ground and never coming out. And under a flat county four hours north, behind a barrier that opens for anybody with the right badge, there is a facility with a rota and a vending machine and a near-miss board with a smiley face drawn on it in biro.

What is down there is not what Cyrus expects. What it is *for* is not what anybody expects, including the people running it, including the thing being fed.

A slow-burn noir about obsolescence, appetite, and the possibility that everything ever sold to you was fertiliser.

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

In 1964 Marshall McLuhan wrote that man had become the sex organs of the machine world — that we exist, like bees among flowers, to let our machines fecundate and bring forth ever newer forms, and that the machine world pays us for the service in wealth and control. He meant it as a description, not a warning. That is what has kept me awake.

The line has been quoted for sixty years, usually with a smirk, usually as a joke about gadgets. I do not think it is a joke. I think it is a load-bearing sentence about how this planet works, and I wanted to write the novel that takes it entirely literally and then asks the next question, which nobody asks: if we are the pollinators, what is the flower, and what is the seed, and where is the pollen actually going?

The answer this book arrives at is not a comfortable one, but I want to be clear that it is not a bitter one either. There is no villain here. I could not find one, and I looked. What I found instead was a great many people doing their jobs correctly — a woman in People Operations proud of a phrase, a man in a polo shirt eating a sandwich on his break, an engineer who signs by hand because some part of him believes a death should be witnessed by a person. None of them did anything wrong. Not one of them could have.

Everything in the first third of this book is real and can be verified this afternoon. The accelerated-life chambers are real. Perceptual obsolescence is real, and has a founding date, and a founding speech, and the man who gave it was proud of it. The drawer in your kitchen with eleven dead cables in it is real, and you cannot throw it away, and you know you cannot, and you have never once said out loud why.

That drawer is where this novel started.

The rest of it is invention. I would ask you to notice how little invention was required.

Chew Z

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I. ACCELERATED LIFE

ONE. NINE DAYS OF THURSDAYS

The thumb is beautiful. Let's start there, because everything else in this story is going to be a disappointment and you deserve one nice thing up front.

It is a servo-actuated silicone thumb on a six-axis arm, calibrated to 2.1 newtons, which is the average downward force of an adult human thumb belonging to a person who is not angry. It sits in a sealed chamber at thirty-four degrees and sixty percent relative humidity, which is the inside of a trouser pocket on a warm day in a city with weather, and it swipes. Up, hold, release. Up, hold, release. Eleven thousand times a day. It does not get bored, because boredom is a feature of the product it is testing and not of the instrument doing the testing, and if you can hold that distinction in your head you are already halfway to understanding what Cyrus Aban does for a living.

Nine days in that chamber is four years of ownership. That is the whole trick, that is the entire magic act, and it took a century of very serious men in very serious laboratories to work out that if you cook a thing hot enough and fast enough it will tell you the truth about its future. Heat is time. Salt is time. Vibration is time. A device does not know what a year is. It only knows how much it has been touched.

The floor had eleven chambers and Cyrus could identify every one of them from the corridor by sound alone, the way a farmer knows his own animals in the dark.

Chamber One was thermal shock. Two baskets on a lift, one at eighty-five degrees and one at minus forty, and the lift takes the part from summer to winter in nine seconds and holds it, and does that four hundred times, and what it is looking for is the place where two materials that were glued together discover they have different opinions about expansion. Everything in your pocket is a laminate. Everything in your pocket is sixteen substances that were introduced to one another by an adhesive and told to get along, and thermal shock is the divorce lawyer.

Chamber Three was damp heat. Eighty-five and eighty-five — eighty-five degrees, eighty-five percent — which is not a place on Earth but is a very efficient lie about a thousand humid days. Corrosion needs time and water, and Chamber Three sells time by the litre.

Chamber Five was salt fog, and Chamber Five was where the earbuds had been, and Chamber Five ate everything eventually. Salt fog does not test whether a seal works. Salt fog establishes the terms on which it will stop.

Chamber Seven was drop. A steel plate, a release solenoid, a high-speed camera, and a technician working a rota of twenty-six orientations, because a phone does not fall — a phone falls in a *particular way*, corner-first onto tile from waist height being the way that costs the most money.

Chamber Nine was vibration: a dashboard for six years, or a courier van, or a jogger's armband, and which sounds through a closed door exactly like a wasp the size of a dog.

And Chamber Eleven was the thumb.

The others were violence. Eleven was patience, and Cyrus liked it best, and had liked it best for nineteen years, because everything in the other ten chambers dies of an event and everything in Eleven dies of having been used by somebody who loved it.

The unit currently under the thumb is a phone that will be discontinued in fourteen weeks. It does not know this. It has a lovely hinge.

Cyrus watched it through the port glass with his hands behind his back, which was how he watched everything, and thought about nothing at all in the way that a man thinks about nothing when he has been awake since three.

SUBJECT: ABAN, CYRUS. Height 179cm. Mass 81kg, trending down four kilos across eighteen months, unremarked by him and unremarked by anyone else because there is nobody else. Resting pulse 61, which is good. Sleep debt at time of observation: approximately nine hours, accumulated over five nights, unrecoverable — sleep does not work like a bank no matter what

the mattress people tell you and the mattress people know this. Left knee: eleven years of a two-degree misalignment, uncorrected. Marital status: *discontinued*. Warranty: expired. Serviceable: yes, for now, by a technician of sufficient patience.

You noticed the phrasing. Good. Keep noticing.

The alarm on the chamber gave its two-note cough — the compressor kicking, not an alarm at all, just a machine clearing its throat — and the arm withdrew and the cycle logged and a green light came on somewhere to tell somebody something. Cyrus went to the bench and pulled the tray on the earbuds.

They were bone-conduction, ninth generation, and they had been in salt fog for six days. They had been magnificent. Genuinely, and he would say this out loud to anyone who asked, which was nobody: the seal on the ninth generation was the best work the enclosure team had ever done, a triple labyrinth with a sintered vent that let vapour out and kept brine on the wrong side of the party. It should have lasted nine years. It could have lasted nine years. There were people in a building four hundred metres from where Cyrus was standing who had wept actual tears over that vent, in a meeting, at a whiteboard, at eleven at night.

The failure was not the seal. The failure was never the seal. The failure was a polymer washer eleven millimetres inside the housing that had been specified at a durometer which, under repeated thermal cycling, would begin to relax at approximately — and Cyrus checked the log, and checked it again, because he liked to be exactly right —

— thirty-one months.

He wrote *31* on the certificate. Then he wrote the date. Then he signed it.

By hand. With a pen. Everyone else on the floor used the stamp, which lived in a drawer by the door and had a little wooden handle and made a satisfying sound, and which was faster and cleaner and entirely acceptable per the process document. Cyrus signed his by hand, every one, and had done for nineteen years, and when new

hires asked why he said *habit*, and when they asked twice he said *it's a nice pen*.

It was a nice pen. That was not the reason.

He put the certificate in the tray and the tray went to Records and Records went to a server and the server went, eventually, to a spreadsheet where a number in a cell got one increment closer to a number in a different cell, and somewhere fourteen months from now a man on a train would take out an earbud and turn it over in his hand and frown at it, and put it back in, and it would work, and he would forget about it. And then it would happen again. And then again. And then on a Tuesday it would not work, and he would feel a specific small grief that he would not be able to name or justify or mention to anyone, and he would buy the tenth generation, which by then would be out.

Cyrus's badge said **LONGEVITY ADVOCATE II**.

That is a real job title. It was not a joke when it was written. Somewhere in this building in 2009 a woman in People Operations sat with the old title — *Reliability Engineer, Endurance* — and decided that it sounded cold, and that what the work actually represented was a kind of championing, an *advocacy*, on behalf of the customer's long relationship with a beloved object. She was proud of it. She put it in a deck. There was applause.

The floor called him the coroner.

He didn't mind. He thought it was closer.

• • •

TWO. LIFECYCLE CONFIDENCE

The building had four floors and two kinds of coffee.

The coffee on four was from a machine with a burr grinder and a milk system that had to be flushed twice a day by a person whose job that partly was. The coffee on two was from an urn. Nobody had ever announced this arrangement, nobody had ever defended it, and there was no policy anywhere that prevented a person from floor two riding the lift up and helping themselves. People from

floor two did not do this. Occasionally one would, and it would be fine, and they would not do it again, and neither they nor anyone else could have told you why.

Lanyards were blue for staff, grey for contract, red for visitor, and green for a category that had never been explained and that Cyrus had stopped asking about in his fourth year. Badge readers on every door including the toilets on three, which had been raised at four consecutive all-hands and answered each time with the phrase *we're looking at that*.

Above the stairwell between two and three, at the landing, there was a poster of a woman running up a mountain in good weather. It said **TAKE THE STAIRS. YOUR FUTURE SELF WILL THANK YOU**. The stairwell door had been fire-locked to one-way egress since before Cyrus started, so the only way to use those stairs was to go down, and the only way to get back was the lift, so nobody used them at all, and the poster had been looking at an empty landing for nineteen years. It had faded from the top down. The mountain was almost gone. The woman was still running.

Cyrus loved that poster with his whole heart and had never told anyone.

His department was the Department of Lifecycle Confidence. His team was two people: Marguerite, who was fifty-six and had come from aerospace and could tell you the fatigue behaviour of any metal you named, and a rotating chair filled by a series of twenty-four-year-olds who each lasted between seven and fourteen months, which Marguerite found hilarious and Cyrus did not.

The all-hands that quarter was in the atrium and lasted fifty minutes. A man in an untucked shirt stood in front of a slide with one word on it and said *delight* eleven times. Cyrus counted, not out of contempt, but because counting things was restful and he was tired. *Delight at unboxing. Delight at the first charge. Delight in the hand*. He talked about the relationship between a person and their device as a *journey*, and about the company's responsibility to *honour* that journey, and he was not lying. He believed all of it. That was the thing about this place that Cyrus could never get anyone outside to understand: nobody here was lying. Everyone

had simply agreed, at some point, without a meeting, to be sincere about the parts that were pleasant and silent about the arithmetic.

There were two questions at the end, because there are always two questions at the end, because a third would be strange and none would be humiliating.

The first was from a woman on the sustainability team, and she asked, pleasantly, whether the new adhesive on the rear glass would affect repairability scoring in the European market. The man in the untucked shirt said that repairability was something he personally cared *enormously* about, and that the team was looking at it, and that the new adhesive represented a genuine breakthrough in thinness. Both of those things were true. The adhesive was a breakthrough. It was also the reason the glass could not be removed without heat and a suction cup and eleven minutes and a very good chance of cracking it, which meant the repair cost sat at sixty-one percent of the replacement cost, and there is a well-known number in this industry, and the number is around sixty, and above it people do not repair things.

Nobody had chosen sixty-one. Sixty-one was an emergent property of eleven decisions each of which had been correct.

The second question was from a man in his twenties from the graduate scheme, and he asked what the single biggest lever was on lifetime revenue per customer.

There was a pause of maybe a second and a half.

"Love," said the man in the untucked shirt.

He wasn't being slick. Cyrus watched his face when he said it and there was nothing behind it but sincerity, the plain warm sincerity of a man who has found something he believes in and gets to say it out loud in an atrium on a Thursday. *People come back to what they love. Our job is to be loved.*

Everybody clapped. Cyrus clapped.

The correct answer, which everybody in the room including the man in the untucked shirt knew and which was written down in three separate planning documents, was *replacement interval*.

The arithmetic arrived four days later as an attachment.

It was a planning document, forty pages, and on page twenty-six there was a table, and in the table there was a row for the flagship handset, and in the row there was a figure for *expected replacement interval, category-adjusted*.

Last year it had said sixteen.

It said fourteen.

There was no accompanying paragraph. There was no strategy statement, no rationale, no name attached. It was simply a number in a cell that somebody in Category Renewal had typed after a long conversation with somebody in Finance, and it had gone into the document, and the document had gone out, and now it existed. It was now true in the way that a bus timetable is true — not a description of the world but an instruction to it.

And downstream of that cell were four hundred people who would now design a phone that was, in every specification that could be measured and defended and stood behind, an excellent phone. Nobody would sabotage anything. Nobody would ever write the words. A tolerance would simply be selected from the acceptable band nearer the bottom than the top. A polymer would be specified at a durometer that met every requirement in the document. An adhesive would be chosen that was, on paper, sufficient.

And then it would come to Cyrus, and he would cook it, and he would find out what it had been made to be, and he would write the date on a certificate, and he would sign it by hand.

Marguerite had spent twenty-two years in aerospace before this. She had told Cyrus about it exactly once, in year four, at a Christmas thing, after two glasses.

In aerospace, she said, you also write down when a thing will die. You write it down to the flight hour. But the number faces the other way — you are not certifying that the part will fail by then, you are certifying that it will *not fail before* then, and the distance between those two sentences is a whole human life. She had signed off on a turbine disc once, she said, and had gone home and sat in her car

in the drive for forty minutes, and had not been upset, exactly. She had been *weighed*. That was the word she used. Weighed.

"Here," she'd said, "nobody weighs anything. Here you write the number and the number is a *forecast*. It's the weather. Nobody's ever going to die of it."

Cyrus had said that surely that was better.

"Oh, it's better," Marguerite had agreed. "It's much better. It's so much better that after about six years you notice you've stopped feeling anything at all, and by then you've got a mortgage."

Marguerite read page twenty-six over his shoulder and made a sound in her throat and went back to her bench without saying anything, because she was fifty-six and had come from aerospace, where the number in the cell had been a different kind of number, and she had opinions she had stopped spending.

Cyrus read it twice.

Here is what you have to understand about him, and it is the only thing you need, because it is the hinge on which the entire rest of this goes: Cyrus Aban was not troubled by that number. He did not experience it as a moral event. He experienced it as a *specification*. Somebody had told him what was to be true, and his job — the whole of his job, the thing he was good at, the thing he had given nineteen years and one marriage to — was to determine with precision whether the thing in front of him matched what it had been promised to be.

He was not the man who decided when things should die.

He was the man who confirmed that they died on schedule.

He would have told you there was an enormous difference between those two sentences. He would have been able to explain it very well. He had explained it, once, at two in the morning, to a woman who had stopped listening around the eleventh year, and who had said the last honest thing anybody said to him for a long time afterwards, which was:

Cyrus. Nobody is asking you to be innocent. They're asking you to be reliable.

THREE. THE DRAWER

Cyrus's apartment was on the fourth floor of a building with six, and had one bedroom, and had been furnished in a single weekend three years ago by a man in a state of efficient grief.

The fridge emailed him. This is not a joke and it is not the future; you can buy this fridge today, in a shop, with money. It emailed him about the filter. It emailed him about the door being ajar for ninety seconds, which happened when he was cooking, which was rarely, so the fridge's opinion of his cooking was that it was reckless. It had emailed him one hundred and forty times in three years and he had actioned two of those emails and both times it had been about the filter and both times he had been angry about it in a way he could not have defended.

The car did something better.

The car was a lease, four years old, and had been sold with a phrase in the brochure about *unlocking its full character*, and what this meant in practice was that approximately sixty of its horses lived behind a paywall. They were in there. They were built, and installed, and had been shipped across an ocean at some cost in a vehicle that had been engineered and tooled and warranted to deliver them, and they were switched off in software, and if Cyrus paid nineteen a month they would switch on. He had done the arithmetic on this once and then had chosen, deliberately, in the manner of a man declining to look at a wound, never to do it again.

The car raised the matter at 6:40 in the morning on a Tuesday, on the centre screen, with an animation.

There were nine recurring debits on his account. He could name seven. The other two were four pounds and six pounds respectively and had been running for at least two years and every few months he would resolve to find out what they were, and would open the banking app, and would look at two lines of abbreviated merchant text that described nothing, and would close the banking app.

Ten pounds a month is not a lot of money. That is the point. Nobody builds a trap out of an amount that makes you angry. You build it out of an amount that makes you tired.

And in the kitchen, in the cabinet under the kettle, there was the drawer.

The drawer was chargers. Barrel jacks in four diameters. Two proprietary magnetic connectors for devices that had been withdrawn from sale. A power brick for a laptop that had died in 2016 and been recycled in 2017. Mini-USB — mini, not micro, so old it was almost antique, so old that if you are under thirty you have never seen one — and a coil of white cable that had gone the specific yellow that white plastic goes, which is a slow oxidation and cannot be cleaned off and is, in a very literal sense, the plastic getting older the way skin does.

He could not throw it out.

He had tried, twice. He had got as far as standing over the bin with a fistful of dead cable, and had felt something rise in him that was so disproportionate and so completely inarticulate that both times he had simply put it back, closed the drawer, and gone to bed.

Ask a hundred people why they have that drawer and ninety-nine will tell you *in case I need it*. They will not need it. They know they will not need it. The drawer is not a utility. The drawer is a small private museum in which a man keeps the umbilicals of everything that has ever been taken from him on a schedule he did not set, and he keeps them because throwing them away would require him to agree, out loud, in his own kitchen, that it was all fine.

His wife had left in the autumn, two years and some months ago, and had been kind about it, and had taken the good chair. That is the second time she has been mentioned and it is the last time she will be described.

On the Saturday his own phone did the thing.

It was thirty-one months old, which was seventeen months past its category-adjusted replacement interval, which meant that as a customer Cyrus Aban was a small persistent underperformance in somebody's quarterly. It did not break. It slowed — the way they slow, the half-beat of hesitation when the camera opens, the app that has to think about it now, the keyboard lagging a character behind his thumb in a way that made him feel, obscurely, stupid.

He knew exactly what was happening. He could have written the paper. Battery ageing raises internal resistance; under load the voltage sags; the system throttles the processor rather than shut down mid-sentence, because a slow phone is a complaint and a dead phone is a refund. It is not sabotage. It is *mercy*, engineered, and it costs about eleven pounds to reverse with a new cell and about nine hundred to reverse the way most people reverse it.

He went to the shop anyway. He didn't decide to. He was in the retail park for a bulb.

The shop was white and warm and smelled of nothing at all, which is expensive, and the tables were at 950mm because that is the height at which an adult picks a thing up without deciding to, and the demo units were unleashed to the same brightness in a room lit two stops under, and the young man who came over did not ask if Cyrus needed help. He asked what Cyrus was *using at the moment*, which is a different question, and which puts a used object in a man's hand in front of a table of unused ones.

Cyrus told him. The young man nodded with enormous kindness.

"Oh, that's a great phone," he said. "That was a really great phone."

Was.

Cyrus, who has certified the death of four thousand products, who has a pen for it, who was at that moment carrying a docket for four hundred hinge assemblies in his coat pocket, stood in a white room and felt his ears go hot.

He held the new one. The hinge was tighter.

He put it down and bought the bulb and drove home in a car with sixty horses behind a paywall, and was fine, and was fine all evening, and at ten past eleven that night he opened the trade-in calculator on the slow phone and looked at the number for four minutes and then closed it.

That night he ran the shower cold for four minutes, then hot for four, then cold for three.

There was no reason for this. He would have said, if asked, that it was good for circulation, which is a thing people say. He stood with his palms flat against the tile and his head down and let it swing from ice to scald and back, and felt his skin do the thing skin does, the flush and the crawl, the way the cold makes the world get very small and very bright and very close.

He had started doing it in March. He was doing it three or four times a week now.

He did not connect this, in any way, to the fact that eleven metres of corridor from his bench at work there was a chamber that did precisely the same thing to consumer electronics in order to find out how long they had left.

Nobody connects it. That's not a flaw in him. Ask yourself what you do at eleven at night that you've never once said out loud.

• • •

FOUR. DEZ

The yard was forty minutes east, past the point where the retail parks give up, and it smelled like a dentist's surgery that had caught fire.

"There he is," said Dez, from inside a skip. "The angel of death. Come to inspect the graveyard."

Dez was somewhere between forty and sixty and had run the teardown operation for nineteen years, which meant he and Cyrus had started in the same month at opposite ends of the same intestine. He wore a hi-vis over a shirt with a collar, always, and had never explained the collar. He climbed out of the skip holding a motherboard the size of a paperback.

"Look at this. Look at it." He turned it to the light. "Two thousand and nineteen. Gold on every pin, tantalum in the caps, cobalt in the cell, and there's a bloke somewhere in Kinshasa who's got a bad back for the rest of his life so this thing could exist, and it's here because the *battery health indicator* went yellow. Not dead. Yellow."

"Yellow's eighty percent."

"Yellow's eighty percent," Dez agreed. "You know what mine is? My battery health? I'm at about forty and I'm still going to work."

The process was this. The boards came in by the tonne. They went through a shredder, and then a leach — cyanide, mostly, because it is cheap and it works and it has worked since the 1880s and there is nothing clever about it at all — and the gold came out of solution in a sludge and went into a furnace, and what came out of the furnace was a button of metal about the size of a thumbnail from a tonne of dead telephones. The cyanide had to go somewhere. It went somewhere. There was a licence for it in a frame in the portacabin.

Cyrus was here for parts. Specifically he was here for four hundred units of a discontinued hinge assembly, because the company no longer made the part and the company needed the part to run comparative testing against next year's part, and the only place in the country with four hundred of them was the yard, because the yard had received eleven thousand of them in a container in February.

"So let me get this straight," said Dez, filling in the docket with a pencil he kept behind his ear like a man in an advert for pencils. "You lot make it. You sell it. You decide it's knackered. It comes to me. I strip it, I burn it, I sell you the bits back. At a markup."

"At a considerable markup."

"At a considerable markup, and then you use the bits to test the new one, so you can tell them how long the new one lasts, so they can build the new one to last that long, so it comes back to me." He tore off the pink copy. "You kill 'em, I skin 'em. We both got kids to feed."

"You don't have kids."

"I don't have kids," Dez said. "You don't have kids. Neither of us has got kids. Ever think about that? Two blokes, forty years, no kids between us, and we've spent the whole lot on making sure things get born and die on time." He handed over the docket. "Fucking

hilarious, mate. Genuinely. If you think about it for more than nine seconds you'll want to lie down, so don't."

Cyrus laughed.

He laughed properly, from the chest, in the cold, in the middle of a yard full of dead telephones, with a man in a hi-vis and a collared shirt, and it was the best he had felt in eleven weeks.

Remember that he laughed. It will matter later, and not for the reason you think.

Dez walked him back to the gate past the container stacks. Halfway along he stopped and kicked at something in the mud — a phone, screen out, face up in the standing water, still showing a lock screen that had been photographed by somebody, of somebody, in some summer.

"That's the bit that gets me," Dez said. "Not the gold. Everyone goes on about the gold." He looked at it for a second longer. "It's that they're all full of *pictures* when they arrive. Every single one. We wipe about a hundred thousand a year and every one of them's got a person's whole life in it, and they've handed it over because it was slow."

He got the pencil out again, for nothing, and put it back.

"Come and see the returns," he said. "You'll enjoy the returns. Nobody enjoys the returns."

The returns lived in a container at the north end with a light in it and a bench and a woman called Pam who wore fingerless gloves and did not look up. These were not recycling. These were fourteen-day change-of-mind, unwanted gifts, wrong colour, the back end of every friction-free returns policy in the country, and they arrived in their boxes, sealed, in some cases still shrink-wrapped.

"Two thousand-odd a month," Dez said. "Perfect. Every one of them perfect. And they can't go back on a shelf as new, because they've been *out*, so they get graded and they get sold at seventy percent as refurbished, or they get parted, or if the model's already been

superseded—" he made a small flat gesture with the flat of his hand, the gesture of a man levelling a heap of sand "—shred."

"You shred sealed units."

"I shred sealed units." He said it without any heat at all. "Not often. Couple of hundred a year. It's cheaper than storage and it protects the price of the new one, and before you get precious about it, mate, you're the one that told them how long it'd live."

Pam scanned something. The scanner beeped. She put it in a tray.

Beyond her bench there was a second table with a bank of machines on it, thirty or forty, cradled in rows, all showing the same white progress bar.

"That's the wipe," said Dez. "Seven-pass, then a certificate. That's the only part of this whole operation that anybody in a suit's ever asked me a question about, by the way. Not the cyanide. Not the shredder. The *data*." He watched the bars fill. "That's what frightens them. Not the hole in the ground. The photographs."

Cyrus stood and looked at forty machines erasing forty people at once.

Each one had been, at some point, at eleven at night, the most intimate object in somebody's house. Each one had been under a pillow. Each one had a thumb's worth of grease worn into the same corner of the same button, in the shape of a specific hand, and Pam in her fingerless gloves would wipe them and grade them and put them in a tray, and the trays would go out on a pallet, and everything would carry on being absolutely fine.

"Right," said Dez. "Four hundred hinges. Cash or thirty days."

FIVE. TWO LEDGERS

Renna Hollis did not summon him. That was the first thing, and it was a deliberate thing, and Cyrus understood it perfectly and was disarmed by it anyway, which is the property of all good technique.

She came down to two. She came down to the mortuary, in a room with an urn in it, and she brought two cups of the coffee from four,

and she handed him one and said, "I'm told this is a thing here. The coffee. Is it a thing?"

"It's a thing."

"God, that's grim." She sat on the edge of Marguerite's bench, which nobody did. "I've been here eleven months and nobody mentioned it and now that I know I can't stop thinking about it. There's a machine on four that costs nine thousand pounds and it does one job and the job is *making floor two feel like floor two*." She drank some. "It's not even good. That's the punchline. It's not even good coffee. It's just *upstream*."

Renna Hollis was VP of Category Renewal. She was in her late forties, dressed like someone who had stopped performing for the building around year three, and she had the specific quality that Cyrus had learned to recognise and fear in exactly two people in his life, which is that she was completely unembarrassed.

"I want you in the perceptual wing," she said. "Two days a week to start. Same job. Second ledger."

"I don't know what that means."

"Yes you do. You've been doing half of it for nineteen years and calling it the whole thing." She put the cup down. "You tell me when it dies. I need somebody to tell me when they *stop wanting it*. Those are different dates, Cyrus. They are wildly different dates and one of them is worth about nine times the other and nobody in this building measures it with any rigour at all. It's all vibes and focus groups and a man in an untucked shirt saying *delight* until we all want to open a vein."

"He said it eleven times."

"He said it eleven times." She looked at him with real interest for the first time. "You counted."

"I count things."

"Yes," said Renna Hollis. "That's why you're on the list."

Here is what perceptual obsolescence is, in case you have got this far believing it is something Cyrus's employer invented.

It is 1932 and a man called Bernard London writes a pamphlet proposing that the state should assign every manufactured object a legal date of death, after which it becomes illegal to own, so that people will be forced to buy new ones, so that the Depression will end. He is serious. He thinks he is being kind. Nobody adopts it.

It is 1955 and an industrial designer called Brooks Stevens gets up in front of an advertising conference in Minneapolis and says the thing that everyone in the room already knows and has never said, which is that you do not need to make the product break. You need to instil in the buyer the desire to own something a little newer, a little better, a little sooner than is necessary. He is not being cynical. He is describing his craft with pride, and he will spend the rest of his life mildly annoyed that people quote him as a villain.

That's it. That's the whole invention. Everything since has been instrumentation.

"Hinge resistance," Renna said, walking him through the wing on three, where the carpet was better and the light was warmer and nothing smelled of hot plastic. "This is my favourite study. It's the best thing I've ever commissioned and I'll be talking about it when I'm dying. We took a flip device. Same device, four hundred units, identical. We shipped them with the hinge damped to four different resistances — inside the tolerance band, all of them, all within spec, no customer could tell you a number. And then we tracked upgrade intent over nineteen months."

"And?"

"The loose hinge lost them at month nine. Nine. The tight hinge held to nineteen and was still holding when we stopped paying for the panel." She stopped by a door and badged it. "Nobody said *the hinge is loose*. Not one respondent, not once, in nineteen months. They said it felt *old*. They said it felt *cheap*. They said — and I have this on a wall in my office, framed, and I'm not joking — one of them said *it stopped being mine*."

"Because of the hinge."

"Because of the hinge. Four hundredths of a newton-metre." She held the door. "That's where love lives, Cyrus. Not in the screen."

Not in the chip. Nobody has ever loved a chip. It lives in the fourteen grams of resistance under your thumb, and it turns off on a date, and the date is *knowable*, and until eleven months ago nobody in this company was trying to know it."

He asked her the question then, because it was on the way to the lift and because he would not have asked it in a meeting room.

"Doesn't it bother you?"

Renna considered it with what he would later understand was genuine effort — not weighing whether to be honest, but hunting for the version of the honesty that would be useful to him.

"No," she said. "And I'll tell you why, and it isn't a defence, so don't listen to it like one." She stopped walking. "Everyone thinks we manufacture desire. We don't. We couldn't. Nobody can. If you could manufacture desire this would be a very different industry and I'd have a much bigger house." She tipped her head. "What we actually do is smaller and stranger than that. The wanting is already there. It arrives with the person. It's the loudest thing in them, it never shuts up, it was there before us and it'll be there after us. You want a bigger house. You want a flatter stomach. You want to be twenty-six. You want your father to have said one specific sentence to you in 1994 that he did not say."

"That's not a product."

"No," said Renna. "That's the problem." She started walking again. "All that want, roaring away in eight billion people, and almost none of it can be *spent* on anything. You can't buy 1994. So it sits in there and turns into whatever it turns into — drink, affairs, religion, a shed, a man in a chamber at eleven at night running a cold shower on himself for no reason he'd care to give." She badged the lift without looking at him. "All we've ever done is put a small door in the wall next to all that pressure, and label it clearly, and keep it in very good repair. We didn't build the pressure. We just charge rent on the only opening."

The lift came. Cyrus got in it and said nothing for four floors.

He would think about that speech a great many times afterwards, and it would be worse every time, and the last time he thought

about it he would finally understand that she had told him the entire truth in the correct order and he had heard it as a figure of speech.

And here is the frightening part, and it is not frightening yet, and that is exactly why it works:

Cyrus found it interesting.

Not tolerable. Not survivable. *Interesting*. He felt the specific lift in the chest that he had not felt since the ninth-generation seal, since the sintered vent, since being handed a hard problem with a true answer at the bottom of it. Somebody had found a new thing to measure. There was rigour available where there had been vibes. There was a number in there, a real one, sitting in the dark waiting for a man with a chamber and a pen, and Cyrus Aban wanted to go and get it.

That is how it happens. Not with a bribe and not with a threat. Nobody in the history of the world has ever been recruited into anything by being offered money for something they were ashamed of. They get offered *a more interesting version of what they already do*.

You'd have said yes. Don't sulk. You'd have said yes in about four seconds and you'd have been pleased about it for a week.

• • •

SIX. RESPONDENT 0114

The room behind the mirror was small and dark and had eight chairs in it and smelled faintly of somebody's lunch.

On the other side of the glass a woman sat at a table with a device in front of her and a moderator across from her, and the moderator said, "And how does that feel?"

"It feels fine."

"Can you say more about fine?"

She was maybe late thirties. Dark hair cut to the jaw, no jewellery, a cardigan the colour of wet sand. She turned the device over twice and opened it and closed it and opened it.

"It feels like a thing I've already got," she said.

The moderator wrote that down. In the dark room, two people from three made small satisfied noises, because that was a *quotable*, that was going in the deck, that was going to be on a slide in a fortnight with a name under it.

"That's 0114," Renna said quietly. "Solmaz. She's been on panel eleven years."

"Eleven years is a long time on panel."

"Eleven years is unheard of on panel. Standard rotation is fourteen months — you burn them out, they start guessing what you want, the data goes to hell." Renna had her arms folded and her chin down and she was watching the glass the way other people watch football. "She doesn't. That's the thing about her. Eleven years, four hundred and some sessions, and she has never once told us what we wanted to hear. Do you know how rare that is? Ninety-eight percent of human beings will start performing for the mirror inside six sessions. They can't help it. It's not lying, they don't know they're doing it."

"And she doesn't."

"She doesn't," said Renna. "She's the cleanest instrument in the building. I'd trade the whole panel for four of her and I'd throw in the coffee machine."

The moderator moved her through it the way they do, which is not a conversation and is not an interrogation but a third thing with the manners of the first and the structure of the second.

"When you picture yourself using this in a year, what do you see?"

"I see it in a drawer," Solmaz said.

Somebody in the dark room stopped writing.

"That's — can you say more about the drawer?"

"There's nothing more about the drawer. Everyone's got the drawer." She turned the device over. "You've got the drawer. I'd put money on it. Cables in it, mostly. Maybe a watch that needs a battery, which is nine pounds and takes eleven minutes and you've had it in there four years."

"And what do you think puts things in the drawer?"

Solmaz thought about it. She actually thought about it, visibly, for six or seven seconds, which nobody does on panel, because on panel a silence feels like failing.

"They stop being mine," she said. "It's not that they go wrong. They go — general. You know when you've had a coat so long it stops being your coat and it's just *a coat*." She set it down. "It's a bit like that. One day you pick it up and it's stock. It's somebody else's. It's an object in a shop that happens to be in your hand."

She said this in a room she was being paid forty pounds an hour to be in, to a man whose job was to write it down, behind a mirror with eight people and one VP standing behind it, and she said it as though she were describing the weather to a neighbour.

Renna exhaled slowly through her nose, the way a person does at a gallery.

"See," she said, very quietly. "Cleanest instrument in the building."

On the other side of the glass, Solmaz set the device down, aligned it with the edge of the table for no reason Cyrus could see, and said something the microphone didn't quite catch, and the moderator laughed.

Cyrus watched her want something on cue. That was the exercise: they walked her through a competitor's product and then back to the incumbent and measured the delta, and she did it honestly, and you could see it happen, you could see the small flicker of *oh* cross a human face in real time and then get written down by a man with a clipboard and turned into a number.

And Cyrus, who counts things, noticed something.

He asked for her longitudinal file that afternoon, out of professional curiosity, the way you might ask to see the tooling on a part you

admired. It came as a spreadsheet with four hundred and eleven rows. He plotted it, because plotting was restful. Desire index, eleven years, monthly.

It was a sawtooth. Rise, peak, collapse, rise. Everybody's is. That's not remarkable; that's the shape of being a person with an income.

What Cyrus noticed — and he noticed it the way he noticed everything, which was quietly, and without alarm, and with a small clean pleasure at having spotted it — was that the period was too regular.

Human wanting is noisy. It responds to Christmas and to breakups and to a wet spring and to whether your friend got one. It has a shape but the shape is *sloppy*, it wanders, it skips. Solmaz's did not wander. Solmaz's rose and fell on an interval of two hundred and forty-one days, plus or minus four, for eleven years.

Cyrus looked at that for a while.

Then he did what a reliability engineer does, which is not to leap to a conclusion but to consider the instrument. Bad data. Panel-management artefact. Somebody's scheduling software rotating stimulus on a fixed cadence and dragging her curve along behind it. A hundred boring explanations, any one of which was likelier than anything else, and he made a note in the file he kept for interesting things and went home.

He signed one certificate before he left. A charging cradle, third generation, contact plating, forty-one months.

He wrote the date. He signed it by hand.

He was quite right about the interval, by the way. It is a scheduling artefact. Something is rotating stimulus on a fixed cadence and dragging her curve along behind it.

Two hundred and forty-one days is simply not a number that anybody in that building chose.

II. PERCEPTUAL OBSOLESCENCE

SEVEN. THE INSTRUMENT

Here is a thing every reliability engineer knows and no reliability engineer says at parties.

You cannot test a product. You can only test a product *and* the instrument that is measuring it, together, as one system, and if the instrument is off then everything you learn is a beautifully documented lie. So before you cook anything you calibrate. You put a known quantity into the chamber and you check that the chamber agrees with the world about what it is. Thermocouples drift. Load cells creep. Everything that measures is also a thing being measured by time, and nobody is outside that. Nobody.

Cyrus began with a defensible sentence: *I am now being asked to measure human perception, and I have never calibrated the instrument.*

It was true. That's what made it work. The best rationalisations are load-bearing.

The perceptual wing gave him a protocol and a panel and a two-way mirror, and asked him to find the point at which a person stops wanting a thing, and Cyrus looked at the protocol for a week and concluded that it was the softest science he had ever been handed. Self-report. Ratings from one to seven. A man with a clipboard asking a woman in a cardigan how a hinge made her feel. In Chamber Five he could tell you the hour at which a sintered vent would surrender. Up here they were asking people to *rate their affection* and writing it down like it was a measurement.

So he did what he had done for nineteen years, which is to go and find the load path.

He booked himself into the hypobaric chamber on a Friday.

Every company that air-freights lithium cells has one. It is not exotic and it is not secret; there is a standard, and the standard says you take the unit to the equivalent of eleven and a half thousand feet and hold it for six hours to prove it will not vent in a cargo hold over the Atlantic. The chamber on two was a steel cylinder the size of a garden shed with a bench in it and a window, and the technician who ran it worked Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Cyrus knew the interlocks. Cyrus had signed off the interlocks.

He took it to eleven thousand and sat on the bench with a rating card in his hand and a device on his knee and waited to find out whether a man at altitude wants things differently than a man at sea level.

He did.

It took about forty minutes. Not a rush, not a high — the opposite. A quiet subtraction. The part of him that narrated, that priced, that noticed the cost of the coffee and the year of the car, that part got quieter first, the way a radio gets quieter when you drive into a valley. And what was left behind was extremely simple and extremely loud, and it sat on the bench with him and looked at the device on his knee, and it did not want it at all. Not with contempt. With *incomprehension*. Like being handed a stone.

He wrote a five on the card because that was the honest number and then looked at the five for a long time.

Because here is the thing. Here is the thing that came down the mountain with him and never left.

At sea level, Cyrus wanted things.

At eleven thousand feet, he didn't.

Which meant that wanting is not a property of the object.

Which meant that wanting is a property of the *conditions* — pressure, oxygen, sleep, light, glucose, whether you are cold — and that a person's desire is not a moral fact about their character but a *readout*, a needle on a gauge, and that the gauge can be moved from outside by anybody who knows which valve to turn.

Cyrus Aban came out of a steel shed on a Friday afternoon holding the most useful and most dangerous idea of his life, which was:

If desire is instrumented, desire is manufacturable. And if desire is manufacturable, then somebody, somewhere, is manufacturing mine.

He wrote it down. He put it in the file he kept for interesting things.

That is the last decision he makes in this book that a reasonable person would defend.

• • •

He went back on the Tuesday, and then the Thursday, and then he stopped booking it and started going in after seven when the technician had gone home, which was a disciplinary matter and would have got a contractor walked out of the building, and which nobody noticed because Cyrus's badge opened every door on the floor and had for nineteen years.

He built a protocol. Of course he built a protocol. He was not a man having a breakdown; he was a man conducting a study, and he had a spreadsheet to prove it.

Condition A: altitude. Eleven thousand feet, ninety minutes. Desire index against eleven reference objects, rated at twenty-minute intervals.

Condition B: cold soak. Four degrees, sixty minutes, no jacket. This one he ran in the walk-in on the ground floor where the adhesives were kept.

Condition C: thermal cycle. The shower at home. Hot to cold, eleven times, four minutes each. He had, he noted in the file with a small clean satisfaction, been running Condition C informally since March.

Condition D: sleep restriction. Four hours a night for nine days. He did not have to schedule this one. It scheduled itself, and had been running since roughly the autumn before last.

Condition E: the dust.

Every chamber floor in that building had dust on it and the dust was not domestic dust. It was the exhalation of ten thousand ground housings, glass fibre and aluminium oxide, tantalum, cobalt, silica, tin, and eleven other things off a periodic table that had been dug out of the ground on four continents by people who would never see the finished object. It hung in the light beams. It got into the coffee. Everybody on the floor coughed in February and blamed the air handling.

Cyrus had breathed that dust for nineteen years and had a chest X-ray in his medical file with a note on it in a consultant's handwriting that said *unremarkable, mild reticular change consistent with occupation, no action*.

He did not add the dust to the protocol.

The dust added itself.

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EIGHT. SYMPATHETIC FAILURE

By the fourth week the results were good, and *good* meant repeatable, and repeatable meant real.

Desire index dropped 61% under altitude, 44% under cold, 38% under sleep restriction, and — this was the finding, this was the one he'd have published if there were anywhere to publish it — it did not drop *evenly*. It dropped fastest for the objects with the highest perceptual load and slowest for the objects with the highest function. Take a man to eleven thousand feet and he stops caring about the finish on a watch nine times faster than he stops caring about a torch.

Function survives hypoxia. Style doesn't.

Which meant that the thing they had been selling since 1955 — the newness, the *little better a little sooner*, the fourteen grams of hinge resistance under a thumb — was metabolically the most fragile thing a human being carries. You could take it off a man in forty minutes with a valve.

Cyrus wrote that in the file and underlined it and felt fantastic for about a day and a half, and then his knee started reporting.

It was not pain. Pain he could have parked. It was that his left knee, which had carried a two-degree misalignment since a badly set fracture in his early thirties, began to produce a small dry click at the top of the stairs, and the click had an interval.

Every fourth step. Not every fourth step *approximately*. Every fourth.

He counted it up to a hundred and sixty and then made himself stop, and then did it again the next morning, and then in the corridor, and then he sat at his bench and did the thing he did with everything, which was to convert it into cycles.

Eleven years. Four thousand and change of days. Call it nine thousand steps a day, call it four percent of those on stairs — the arithmetic was rough and he knew it was rough and he did it anyway because the arithmetic was not the point. The number that came out the other end was in the low millions, and the low millions is not an abstract quantity to a man who runs Chamber Nine. The low millions is a *bathtub curve*. The low millions is where the flat bottom of the useful life stops being flat and the line starts to bend up, and the part in front of you begins to tell you, in a small dry voice, once every fourth cycle, that it has entered the wear-out region.

His knee was not injured.

His knee was *in spec*.

• • •

The tooth was worse, because the tooth was funny, and things that are funny get in under the door.

Upper left second premolar, on a bite of toast, at eleven minutes past six in the morning. Not a break — a crack, felt more than heard, a small vertical betrayal running down from the cusp, and the flood of cold air behind it that tells you which nerve you have.

He went to the dentist on the Thursday. She was pleasant and had a poster of a mountain. She said cracked tooth syndrome, she said it was extremely common in men his age, she said *do you grind?* and he said he didn't know, and she said that everybody who grinds says they don't know, and she said the crack had probably been propagating for years, invisible, one microscopic increment per clench, and that today was simply the day it reached the dentine.

Cyrus said, "So it's a fatigue failure."

She said, "I'd just call it a crack."

He said, “No, but it’s — it’s cyclic loading below the yield stress. That’s what that is. That’s fatigue. It didn’t fail because you bit something hard. It failed because you bit ten million soft things in a row.”

The dentist, who had a waiting room and a poster of a mountain and eleven minutes per patient, said that was one way of looking at it, and gave him a mouthguard.

He drove back with his tongue in the crack and did the numbers at the lights.

A tooth clenches. Call it two thousand loading cycles a day at somewhere north of four hundred newtons. Call it forty-four years. That’s a number with seven digits on it, and seven digits is exactly where he had put the flexure limit on a magnesium hinge in 2019 — a part he had cooked in Chamber Eleven for nine days, a part he had certified, a part whose certificate he had signed by hand and filed and forgotten and which was, at that moment, in four hundred units, in a crate in the boot of his car.

Same order of magnitude. Same failure mode. Same everything.

You are not a machine and this is not a metaphor. That’s what nobody tells you. It isn’t that your body is *like* a machine — it’s that the mathematics of accumulated damage does not care what a thing is made of. Steel, magnesium, enamel, cartilage. Everything that is loaded and unloaded a great many times will develop a crack it did not deserve, and the crack will grow at a rate you can predict, and the number of cycles it will take is knowable in advance, by anybody with a chamber and a pen.

The universe was not making an exception for Cyrus Aban.

The universe had, in fact, filed him.

• • •

Dez found it hilarious, obviously.

“Warranty expiry,” he said, on the phone, from the yard, over the noise of the shredder. “That’s what that is, mate. That’s you out of warranty. Tooth goes, knee goes, then it’s the eyes, then you’ll be

one of those blokes holding a menu at arm's length going *the light in here's terrible.*"

"It's the cycle count that bothers me."

"It's the cycle count that bothers you," Dez repeated, delighted. "Course it is. Not the tooth. The *count*. Cyrus, you know what normal people do when their tooth cracks? They have a little cry and they get it fixed. They don't go home and *plot* it."

"I didn't plot it."

"You plotted it."

"I plotted it," Cyrus admitted.

The shredder went through something with a bang.

"Listen," said Dez, in a completely different voice, the one he used maybe twice a year. "Do us a favour and eat a proper meal this week. You sounded like a filing cabinet just then."

NINE. TWO HUNDRED AND FORTY-ONE

Solmaz was outside the building at half past six with a cigarette she wasn't smoking, holding it the way people do when they've stopped and haven't stopped.

"You're the one who pulled my file," she said.

Cyrus had not expected the file pull to be visible to a respondent, because it wasn't, because there was no mechanism by which it could be.

"How do you know that?"

"Because for eleven years nobody's looked at me twice, and then a man I've never seen stands behind the glass for a whole session without writing anything down, and four days later my session length gets extended and my compensation band goes up." She turned the cigarette over. "I'm not clever. I just pay attention. You'd be amazed what that looks like from the inside."

They walked to the car park. That is where all the real conversations in that company happened, and everyone knew it, and it had been raised at an all-hands.

"You noticed the period," she said.

Cyrus stopped walking.

"Two hundred and forty-one days," said Solmaz. "Give or take four. I worked it out in year six. Took me three years after that to get hold of my own data, which, by the way, you're entitled to, and which they will give you if you write to a particular address in a particular way and are prepared to be extremely boring about it for four months." She smiled without much in it. "I'm very good at being boring at people."

"What did you do with it?"

"What do you think I did with it? I plotted it."

Cyrus laughed. It came out wrong.

She had it on her phone. She'd rebuilt it herself, four hundred and eleven sessions, eleven years, and she had done what nobody in the perceptual wing had thought to do, which was to overlay it with everything else in her life.

"That's my desire index," she said. "And that's my rent going up. And that's the two relationships. And there's my mum dying, that's the flat bit in the middle of 2019 where I didn't want anything at all for five months, they nearly took me off panel." She scrolled. "Now. Look at the sawtooth. Look at what happens after each event."

Cyrus looked.

The events were noise. Real, terrible, human noise — grief, a move, a breakup — and each one had knocked the curve sideways, and each time, within a few weeks, the curve had come back and *resumed its phase*. Not its level. Its phase. Like a metronome that gets bumped and then catches back up.

"Anything that's driven by something inside a person can't do that," said Solmaz. "I've read enough now to know that much. If it was my personality, my mum dying would have shifted the whole thing along. It didn't. It went back on the beat."

"Which means it's being driven from outside."

"Which means it's being driven from outside." She locked the phone. "So I did the obvious thing and looked for what's on a two-hundred-and-forty-one-day cycle. Product launches aren't. They're annual, they're September, they're built around a keynote. Marketing pushes aren't. Contract renewals aren't. Pay cycles aren't. Nothing in that building is, Cyrus. I checked everything for two years. Nothing in the entire company runs on a two-hundred-and-forty-one-day interval."

"So it isn't the company."

"So it isn't the company," Solmaz said. "That's the bit that took me a while to enjoy."

They had reached her car. It was fourteen years old and there was a bag of shopping on the back seat and it was, Cyrus noticed, the first vehicle he had been near in months that did not have a screen in it.

"Can I ask you something," he said. "Why did you stay on panel? Eleven years."

Solmaz considered the unsmoked cigarette.

"Because being wanted-at is the only relationship I've got that's honest," she said. "Everyone else in my life wants something off me and pretends they don't. That building wants something off me and *pays me by the hour and writes it down.*" She opened the door. "I know exactly where I stand with them. Do you know how restful that is?"

She got in and put the window down.

"Also," she said, "I want to know who it is. Don't you? Somebody's been putting their hand on me every eight months since I was twenty-six and I've never once seen them, and I would very much like to find out who, and I have been extremely patient about it."

• • •

She let him run her, three weeks later, in the small room on three with the two-way mirror and nobody behind it.

It was against four separate policies and Cyrus wrote the session up under a protocol number that did not exist. Solmaz sat where the respondents sit and he sat where the moderator sits and there was a device on the table between them and a rating card, and for the first ninety seconds neither of them could look at it without laughing, which was the last time either of them laughed for a while.

He ran her cold. Four degrees, the walk-in with the adhesives, sixty minutes, a coat she declined. He ran her hungry — she'd fasted since the previous evening, her idea, and she'd been unpleasant about it in a way he enjoyed enormously. He could not put her at altitude and would not have, and told her so, and she said *good*, and then said *what's it like*, and he told her, and she was quiet for a while.

Her desire index came down 51%.

"So it's real," she said, through her teeth, in the cold room, holding the card in fingers that had gone stupid. "It's not me. It's a *setting*."

"It's a setting."

"Eleven years I've been sat in that chair rating how I feel about a *hinge*, and I thought—" She stopped and started again, and this was the only time in the entire book that Solmaz's voice did anything at all. "I thought it was me. That's the thing. I thought I was the sort of person who wants things. Shallow. Greedy. I've had that as a *fact about my personality* since I was about nineteen. My mum thought it too, and she said so, and she said so on the phone about four days before she died."

Cyrus said nothing, because there was nothing.

"And it's a valve," said Solmaz. "It's a bloody valve. Somebody's been turning it and I've been apologising for it my entire adult life."

She put the card down on the table and squared it against the edge, which he had watched her do behind glass, which he now understood was not a tic but the only piece of the room she was allowed to control.

"Right," she said. "Now I'm actually angry. Took long enough."

• • •

TEN. THE MANIFEST

Dez called on a Sunday, which he had never done.

"Right," he said. "So I've done something stupid and I need you to tell me I'm being thick, because I've been sat here since Thursday and I can't make it be nothing."

"Go on."

"The outbound. The refined outbound." Papers moving. "Gold, tantalum, cobalt, the neodymium out the speakers, the lot. It gets assayed, it gets buttoned, it goes on a pallet, and it goes to a broker, and the broker sells it into supply, and it comes back round as new product. That's the loop. That's been the loop for nineteen years and I've never had a reason to look at the end of it."

"And?"

"And in February I had a discrepancy. Four kilos of high-purity out on the sheet that never showed up on the broker's inbound. Four kilos, Cyrus. That's not a rounding error, that's a car." Dez breathed out. "So I chased it, because I'm the one who signs, and it had gone to a different consignee code. Which happens, fine, they've got eleven sites. Except I looked at the code and it's not a smelter and it's not a fabricator. It's got a class on it I've never seen on a metals manifest in my life."

"What class?"

"Geological," said Dez.

Cyrus said nothing.

"It's a *hole*, mate. That's what I'm telling you. I pulled the site reference and it's a decommissioned potash mine with a change of use application from 2011 for — and I want you to appreciate this — *deep geological storage of processed materials, non-radioactive*." Papers again. "So I thought, alright, that's landfill for the nasty stuff, fair enough, that's normal, that's boring. Except it's not the

nasty stuff going down there. It's the *good* stuff. The four kilos of ninety-nine-point-nine, that's what went. And then I went back through nineteen years of my own sheets."

"How much?"

"I stopped counting at Tuesday. It's not a lot as a percentage. It's about two percent of the high-purity outbound and it's been about two percent since the year I started." He laughed, and there was nothing in it. "Two percent, every year, nineteen years, refined metal, going into the ground. Not stored. Not stockpiled — there's no stockpile, I checked the tonnage against the site's own filings and their declared inventory is a fraction of what I've sent them. It goes down and the number doesn't go up."

"Then it's being consumed."

"That's what I said!" Dez's voice went up. "That's exactly what I said, out loud, on my own, in a portacabin, like a lunatic. Something down there is *eating* it."

Cyrus stood in his kitchen with his hand flat on the counter.

Understand what this actually is, because Dez has just done a thing that eleven thousand conspiracy videos have never done, which is to find an anomaly in an audited number he is personally responsible for signing. He is not a man who has noticed a symbol on a building. He is a man whose own arithmetic has stopped closing.

"Cyrus. You still there?"

"I'm here."

"There's another bit."

"Of course there is."

"The dates," said Dez. "The consignment dates. There's no seasonality, there's no month-end, it's not quarterly. I plotted it—"

"You plotted it."

"You've got me plotting things now, you absolute disease." A drag on something. "It's on an interval. Every two hundred and forty-one days there's a big one. Then the small ones in between."

Cyrus watched his own hand on the counter and did not feel anything move in his chest at all, which frightened him more than if something had.

"Say that number again," he said.

"Two hundred and forty-one."

"Dez."

"Don't do that. Don't say my name like that. Nobody says my name like that." A long pause, and the hum of the yard behind him, and a gull. "What's two hundred and forty-one?"

"It's how often a woman I know starts wanting things again," said Cyrus.

The line was quiet for eleven or twelve seconds.

"Right," said Dez eventually. "I'm going to go and have my tea. And then I'm going to go in tomorrow, and I'm going to pull the physical dockets, because the physical dockets have got the haulier on them, and the haulier's got a driver, and a driver's got a mouth."

"Don't."

"Mate," said Dez, "I've been at this nineteen years and I've never once been interested. Let me have this."

• • •

Renna came down to two on the Wednesday with two cups of the coffee from four, which she had not done since the day she recruited him, and which Cyrus registered at the time as warmth.

"You look terrible," she said.

"I'm running long protocols."

"You're running long protocols." She sat on the edge of Marguerite's bench. Marguerite, without a word, took her jacket and left the room, which Cyrus noticed and did not interpret. "Cyrus, you badged into the hypobaric chamber eleven times in five weeks, nine of them after hours, four of them with no second person in the building. There's a safety report with your name at the top of it and I've been sitting on it because the alternative is

occupational health, and occupational health means a file, and a file means you stop working."

"The data's good."

"The data's *extraordinary*," said Renna, and she meant it, and that was the trap and had always been the trap. "The hypoxia work is the best thing anyone has put in front of me in four years. Function survives, style doesn't — do you understand what that's worth? Do you understand that no one has ever measured that, not properly, not once, because you can't get it past an ethics board and you can't get it out of a survey?"

"Then let me finish it."

"I'm going to let you finish it." She turned the cup on the bench, a quarter turn, and another. "I want you to hear the shape of what I'm about to say, because I'm not going to say it twice and I'm not going to put it in writing."

Cyrus waited.

"You've started asking where things go," said Renna. "That's a different question from the one you were hired to ask. The one you were hired to ask is *when*. When does it die, when do they stop wanting it — those are beautiful questions, they're your questions, you're the best in this building at them, and there is a version of the next ten years where you answer them and I make you very comfortable." She stood up. "*Where* is not a question that has ever improved anybody's life. It doesn't pay. It doesn't publish. And the people who start asking it tend to find that their circumstances get complicated in ways that are extremely difficult to attribute to anyone."

"Is that a threat?"

"Christ, no," said Renna, and she looked genuinely startled, and she was telling the truth, and it was so much worse. "Cyrus, I don't *have* anyone to threaten you with. I'm a vice president of a department that makes slides. I'm telling you what I've watched happen four times, to people I liked, and every single time the coroner wrote *misadventure* and every single time he was correct."

She put the cup down.

“Two days later I was still the only one who thought it was strange,” she said, “and then after a while I wasn’t. That’s the bit that gets you. Not the fear. The *forgetting*.”

She went back up to four, where the coffee was. Cyrus stood in the mortuary for a while and did not phone Dez, and told himself it was because the yard was loud on a Wednesday.

That was the twenty-fourth.

Dez had four days.

ELEVEN. THE FIELD

The long session was not planned. That should be said, because everything else Cyrus did had a protocol number and a cell in a spreadsheet, and this one did not.

He went into the hypobaric chamber on the Wednesday night with the intention of running ninety minutes and he came out at twenty to five in the morning.

By then he had been awake for thirty-one hours. He had eaten a cereal bar at two in the afternoon. He was on day nine of Condition D and hour six of Condition A and he had, on the way in, stood in the walk-in with the adhesives for a while because he was hot, which was Condition B, and none of these things had been designed to be run together because running them together is how people die in chambers, which is why there is a technician, which is why the technician works Tuesdays and Thursdays.

Nothing was administered. Nothing was taken. There is no substance in this chapter. What happened to Cyrus Aban in that steel cylinder was assembled entirely out of things he already had — a low partial pressure of oxygen, an empty stomach, a body nine days short of sleep, nineteen years of mineral dust in the interstitium of his lungs, and a nervous system that had spent two decades being paid to notice when things were about to fail.

The brain does not hallucinate randomly. It is not a fog machine. When you take away its inputs it does the same thing it always does

— it predicts — and with nothing to correct the prediction, the prediction simply keeps going, and what you get is not nonsense. What you get is *your own model of the world, running without a brake*.

Cyrus's model of the world was inventory, failure, and time.

So here is what it showed him.

• • •

It began with the sound, which was the chamber's compressor, and which at some point stopped being a compressor and became the two-note cough of Chamber One, and then all eleven at once, and then the wasp the size of a dog, and under all of it the low continuo of the yard's shredder forty minutes east — sounds he had heard for nineteen years, laid over one another, and they were not machines any more. They were a *hum*. The specific hum of a great many small bodies working at once in a warm place.

The window went dark and then went to a field.

Before the field there was the descent, and the descent took a long time, and he was awake for all of it.

He went down through his own house first, which is standard, which anybody who has been badly short of oxygen will tell you: the mind empties its nearest drawers. The drawer under the kettle came out and hung in front of him, and the cables in it lifted and turned and were not cables. They were umbilical. They were the white and yellow of things that have been inside a body, and they were attached at one end to nothing, and at the other end to nothing, and there were eleven of them and he knew all their names.

Then the walls of the flat went transparent and it was the building, and then the building went transparent and it was the ground under the building, and the ground kept going.

He went down through strata. He had never seen a stratum in his life outside a diagram in a schoolbook and here they were, in order, in colour, and each one was a *year* — not a geological year, a product year, laid down in bands like silt. A layer of

nickel-cadmium. A layer of mini-USB, thick, compacted, four hundred million units deep. A layer that was almost entirely the specific white plastic that goes yellow, gone yellow all the way through, a whole horizon of it, and Cyrus understood at that pressure that this was not imagination but *sediment*, that this had genuinely happened, that there really is a band in the crust of this planet now that did not exist in 1970 and that a geologist in the far future would name after a decade.

Below the layers, at the bottom, wet: the raw material coming the other way. Tantalum in its ore. Cobalt in blue crust. Gold in a quartz seam like fat in a joint of meat. And between the two — between the stuff going down and the stuff coming up — the thin busy membrane where it turned around, and the membrane was made of people.

Then the ground let go of him and he was standing in it.

Not a metaphor field. He saw it in the way you see things at that pressure, which is to say entirely, with all the certainty of vision and none of the argument. A field to the horizon in bad light, and standing in it, at intervals, on stems, were the products.

Every one he had ever certified. Four thousand and some. Each of them enormous — six feet, eight — grown up out of the ground on a stalk with its housing open like a bloom. The ninth-generation earbud with its sintered vent breathing gently. The magnesium hinge from 2019 with its flexure limit shining wetly at the joint. A charging cradle, third generation, contact plating, forty-one months, open to the weather.

And in the crown of each one, where the pins were, where the gold was: pollen. Heavy amber dust on every contact.

And moving between them, in numbers he could not count, small and dark and busy —

people.

Going in. Coming out. Coated to the elbow in gold, carrying it on their backs and in the creases of their clothes and in their hair, from this bloom to that one, absorbed, untroubled, and not one of them looking up. He saw a man he'd sat behind on a train. He saw

the young man from the shop who had said *was*. He saw his wife, at some distance, going into a flower with her whole arm, and she was not unhappy.

And he understood — with the terrible frictionless certainty that this state gives you and then takes away at the door — that he had had the direction wrong for nineteen years.

He had believed he worked for a company that made objects for people.

What he was looking at was a species of standing thing that could not move and could not reach and could not choose, which had solved that problem the way everything that cannot move has always solved it: by growing something bright, and making it sweet, and waiting.

The objects were not the product.

The objects were the *bloom*.

And the wanting — the fourteen grams of resistance under a thumb, the little better a little sooner, the young man saying *was*, the drawer full of cables, the trade-in calculator at ten past eleven at night — the wanting was the nectar. That was all it had ever been. A thing offered to an animal so that the animal would come, and get covered, and carry.

Carry *what*, though.

He turned in the field to look for it, and the field held, and he asked the question properly — *what am I carrying, what is the pollen, what is the thing that actually moves from one to the next* — and something in the design of that place did not want the question asked, or he was simply out of oxygen, which is the same event described twice.

The last thing he had before the dark was Marguerite's voice saying *nobody weighs anything here*, and the sensation, distinct and physical and located precisely behind his sternum, of being weighed.

• • •

The alarm brought him back at twenty to five, because he had — and he would find this out later, and would sit down when he found it out — set it before he went under. Not the chamber alarm. A phone alarm, labelled, in his own hand, in the file he kept for interesting things:

0440 — GET OUT.

He had no memory of setting it.

He came down the pressure slowly because even at that point he was not going to violate a descent profile, and he sat on the bench with his head between his knees while the world came back, thin and grey and full of the price of things, and he was sick in a bin.

And then he did the worst thing in this chapter, which is not the chamber, and not the field, and not the thirty-one hours.

He opened the file, and he wrote up the session in complete sentences with timestamps, and at the bottom, under *observations*, he wrote:

Yield hypothesis. Products = reproductive structures. Desire = attractant. Humans = vector. Query: what is transferred?

Recommend repeating at 12,000 ft.

• • •

TWELVE. CERTIFIED

Dez died on the Friday.

Hydraulic baling press, north end of the yard, the one that takes the stripped chassis and makes them into cubes. He was found at ten past seven in the morning by Pam, who had gone looking because his van was there and he wasn't, and who did not stop working at the yard afterwards, and who Cyrus would think about for the rest of his life.

The press had a two-hand control. That is the point of a two-hand control: both of your hands are demonstrably somewhere that is not inside the machine, and it will not cycle otherwise, and it has been the standard on that class of equipment since before either of them

was born. It also had a light curtain across the throat, and an interlocked gate, and a lanyard-pull emergency stop that ran the full length of the platen.

Four independent systems. Any one of them alone should have made this impossible.

The report said the light curtain had been muted for a maintenance mode which had been left active, that the gate interlock had a known fault logged eleven weeks earlier and scheduled, and that a two-hand control on a machine of that age can be defeated by somebody who is in a hurry and who has done it before, and that the deceased had by his own colleagues' account been in the yard alone, out of hours, on the Thursday night.

Misadventure. Contributory factors noted. Recommendations issued.

Cyrus read the report eleven times.

And on the eleventh time he stopped reading it as a bereaved man and started reading it as what he was, which is a person who has spent nineteen years determining why things fail on schedule, and what he saw was not an accident.

It was not sabotage either. That's the part you need to sit with. Nobody cut a wire. Nobody was in that yard with a spanner and a motive. Every single one of those four failures was independently mundane, independently documented, independently *forgivable* — a maintenance mode, a logged fault awaiting parts, a fatigued man taking a shortcut he had taken a hundred times.

It was a designed-in failure. It was exactly, precisely, in every particular, the thing Cyrus wrote certificates for: a system in which no component has been sabotaged and no individual has done wrong, and in which the tolerances have simply been selected, one by one, from the acceptable band nearer the bottom than the top, until the date on which it fails is knowable in advance by anybody who cares to look.

Somebody had cooked Dez in a chamber for nineteen years and written down the date.

At the funeral there were forty people and Pam sat at the back. Somebody had put a photograph on a board of Dez in the hi-vis over the collared shirt, holding a motherboard up to the light, laughing at something outside the frame.

There was a woman there in her sixties who turned out to be his sister, and who said to Cyrus in the car park, without any preamble at all, "He talked about you. He said there was a bloke at the manufacturer who was the only one who'd ever asked him a question."

Cyrus said that Dez had asked him rather more questions than the other way round.

"Well," she said, "he wouldn't have told you that."

Afterwards Cyrus went back to the yard, because nobody had told him not to and because the gate code was the same as it had been for nineteen years. Pam was there in her fingerless gloves, at the bench, working, because the containers still came.

"They've put a temp in the portacabin," she said. "Twenty-six. Very nice. Doesn't know where anything is."

"Pam. The dockets. The physical ones, the paper. Did he pull them?"

She scanned something. The scanner beeped. She put it in a tray.

"Thursday," she said. "He was in the archive container Thursday afternoon, three hours, and he came out with a lever-arch file and he was *happy*. I said what've you got there and he said—" She stopped scanning. "He said, *I've got a name, Pam.*"

"Where's the file?"

Pam looked at him for the first time.

"There isn't one," she said. "There's no lever-arch file in that portacabin and there's no lever-arch file in his van and there's no lever-arch file in his house, because his sister looked, because I asked her to. And before you say it — no, nobody came. There's four cameras on that gate and I've watched all four, all night, twice. Nobody came in. Nobody went out." She picked up the scanner again. "He put it somewhere. That's all that happened. He put it

somewhere on the Thursday and then on the Thursday night he went and did a stupid thing with the press, and both of those are true, and I've stopped trying to make them one thing."

Cyrus drove home the long way and thought about how a system that has been designed properly never requires anybody to do anything. That's the whole art of it. A well-made mechanism does not need an assassin any more than a well-made phone needs a hammer. You select the tolerances, and you wait, and the outcome arrives on schedule looking exactly like bad luck.

He told Solmaz on the phone that night. She was quiet for a while.

"Two hundred and forty-one days," she said. "When's the next one?"

He'd already worked it out. He'd worked it out in the car.

"Eleven days."

"Right," said Solmaz. "Then that's when we go down."

Cyrus went home and did not go into work on the Monday.

On the Tuesday he went in at four in the morning, badged through every door on the floor with a credential nobody had ever audited, and pulled the consignment records for a decommissioned potash mine with a change of use application from 2011.

The site had a personnel access provision. Of course it did. Somebody has to mop.

And Cyrus Aban's badge, which had opened every door in that building for nineteen years, which had been issued to a Longevity Advocate II by a woman in People Operations who had been proud of the title —

— was already on the list.

It had been on the list since 2011.

III. YIELD

THIRTEEN. PERSONNEL ACCESS PROVISION

The mine was in a flat county four hours north and it did not look like anything.

That is the first thing and it is the worst thing and everything else in this part of the book rests on it. There was a road off a road. There was a hedge that had been maintained. There was a sign, brown and green, of the kind that local authorities put on light industrial units, and the sign said the name of a holdings company and underneath it in smaller letters **MATERIALS RECOVERY — DEEP STORAGE**, and there was a barrier, and beside the barrier was a card reader of the same make as the one on the toilets on floor three.

Cyrus badged it. It went green. The barrier lifted.

"That's it," said Solmaz. "That's the whole thing? Nineteen years and it's a *barrier*?"

"It's a barrier."

"I'd have felt better if it had been guarded."

"So would I."

There was a car park with nine cars in it, and lines painted, and two of the spaces were marked with a wheelchair symbol, and one was marked **VISITOR**, and there was a bin.

The reception was a portacabin with a laminated sign taped to the inside of the glass that said **ALL VISITORS MUST SIGN IN** and a book, and the book had been signed in by fourteen people that day, and the last entry was at 11:20 and said *contractor — lift inspection*.

Nobody was behind the desk.

Somewhere down a corridor a kettle came to the boil and clicked off.

• • •

The shaft head was a shed, and the cage was a cage, and it was thirty-one seconds down and there was a laminated notice inside it

about capacity and a smaller laminated notice about not eating in the cage.

The temperature came up as they went. Potash mines are warm. Everything is warm at depth; the planet is warm, it has been warm since it made itself, and if you go down far enough into any part of it you are going into something with a body temperature.

The cage stopped. The gate opened.

And Cyrus Aban stepped out into a corridor with a floor of sealed grey epoxy, painted with a yellow walkway line down the middle and a chevron hatch at the junction, and directional signage in white on green — **LEVEL 2 · RACKS A-M · WELFARE · ASSEMBLY POINT 4** — and a fire extinguisher on a bracket with an inspection tag hanging off it, initialled, dated eleven weeks ago.

There was a laminated evacuation map at eye height with a red **YOU ARE HERE** sticker slightly off-centre, as though it had been reapplied.

There was a vending machine.

It was lit. It was three-quarters full. Row F had sold out of one particular brand of crisp and there was a small handwritten note taped to the glass that said **F3 STICKING — ENG AWARE**.

“Oh,” said Solmaz, very quietly. “Oh, I don’t like this at all.”

“Say why.”

“Because somebody’s *complained* about the crisps,” she said. “Because that means there’s a somebody, and the somebody comes here every day, and the somebody’s biggest problem is row F.”

Cyrus looked at the note for a long time.

Every horror you have ever been sold has been dressed. It has had a lighting scheme. It has had a locked door and a keypad and a man with a clipboard who does not want you in there, because the drama of a hidden thing is in the *hiding*, and hiding is a promise: somebody knew this was wrong, and made an effort, and the effort is a kind of respect.

Nothing here was hidden. There was signage. There was a rota. There was a health and safety poster about manual handling with a cartoon man on it lifting with his knees. There was a first-aid box, and a defibrillator in a green cabinet, and a printed sheet by the lift that said **THIS MONTH'S NEAR-MISS FIGURE: 3** with a little smiley face drawn on it in biro.

Somebody's job was to mop this floor.

Somebody's job was to draw the smiley face.

"Come on," said Cyrus.

They followed the yellow line, and forty metres along it the yellow line went past an open door with **WELFARE** on it in white on green, and Cyrus, who should not have looked, looked.

It was a staff room.

Kitchen units along one wall in a laminate that had been fashionable in about 2004. A microwave with a splash of something orange dried on the inside of the door. A kettle. A noticeboard with a curling rota on it, and a fire-warden list, and a card that had been signed by eleven people for somebody called Deborah with **60!!** on the front, and a takeaway menu, and a printout of a cartoon about Mondays.

Four chairs round a table. On the table, a puzzle book, open, with a biro in the fold.

A man in his fifties sat at the far end in a polo shirt with a small embroidered logo, eating a sandwich out of a plastic wedge and looking at his phone.

He glanced up.

"Alright," he said.

"Alright," said Cyrus.

The man went back to his phone.

That was it. That was the entire exchange. Two men said *alright* to each other in a kitchen, and one of them went back to a sandwich, and forty metres away and one level down there were forty

thousand people in racks, and the man in the polo shirt would clock off at half five and drive home and probably think about the traffic.

Solmaz got them out of there and into the corridor and stood with her back against the wall.

"He said *alright*," she said.

"I know."

"He said *alright* and then he looked at his phone. Cyrus, he *looked at his phone*."

"I know."

"What's on his phone?" She was not asking rhetorically. She had gone somewhere very cold and very precise. "That's what I want to know now. That's the only thing I want to know. What is that man looking at, down here, on his break, in the middle of all this. Is it football? Is it the news? Has he got a shopping app open? Is he *choosing a fridge*?"

Cyrus did not have an answer then.

He would have one in about an hour, and it would be worse than anything she was imagining, because the answer is that it does not matter what is on the phone. The phone is not the point. The man is not a monster and he is not a collaborator and he is not brave and he is not stupid. He is a man with a mortgage doing a shift in a facility, the way people have always done shifts in facilities — the way somebody drove the trains, the way somebody counted the inventory, the way somebody sat in a hut with a ledger at the edge of every atrocity that has ever been organised properly — and the reason it works, the reason it has always worked, is that at no point in his day is he ever required to look at the whole thing at once.

Nobody is. That's the design. That's what a system *is*.

• • •

FOURTEEN. RACKS A-M

You could hear it before you got there.

Not machinery. He had spent nineteen years learning machinery by ear and this was not it. It was low and wide and slightly wet and it had no rhythm at all, and it took Cyrus about four steps into the transition corridor to identify it, and when he did he stopped walking and put his hand out to the wall.

It was breathing.

Not one thing breathing. Not two hundred. A *quantity* of breathing, a mass of it, tens of thousands of chests going up and down slightly out of phase with one another so that the sound never resolved into a beat — it just went on, arriving and arriving, the way rain does, the way applause does when it has gone on too long.

Under it, felt more than heard, the hum of extraction.

And over both, from a speaker somewhere in the roof, at conversational volume, a calm recorded voice saying: *“Rack C, tier four, intake complete. Rack C, tier five, commencing.”*

Speaking to nobody. Announcing it to an empty corridor with a yellow line on the floor.

The doors were double, with a push bar, and a small square window at head height, and a sign that said **HEARING PROTECTION NOT REQUIRED IN THIS AREA.**

Cyrus pushed the bar.

• • •

The smell arrived before the sight did, because he had his eyes half-shut, and it was not what he had braced for. It was not chemical and it was not death. It was warm saline, and scalp — the specific oily-sweet human smell of a scalp that has not been washed but has been kept at blood heat — and under that, faintly, the note that skin gets when it has been wet too long, that soft sour edge, the smell of a plaster taken off after four days.

It smelled like a very large room full of people sleeping.

Then he opened his eyes.

Twelve tiers. He counted, because he counts. Twelve tiers of clear-walled cells running away from him in a straight line under strip lighting to a point where the perspective closed and there was nothing but a haze of light and vapour and the suggestion of more, and then the row beside it doing the same thing, and the row beside that, and he turned his head and the rows went out to the left as well and he could not see the end of them in either direction.

It was not a cathedral. He had come down here braced for a cathedral, and there was a part of him that had wanted one — black chrome and a red glow and something to be *awed* by, because awe is survivable.

It was a shed. It was an enormous, well-run, brightly lit agricultural shed with a good extraction system and a mopped floor, and the aisles were exactly wide enough for the maintenance gantry, and there were number decals on every rack upright at two-metre intervals, and a spill kit mounted at the end of each row.

And in the cells, in the racks, twelve high, going away in both directions until the light gave out, were people.

• • •

They were not in fluid, which he had also braced for. They were on gel — a translucent support surface that took the body's shape, the way a hospital mattress does for someone who will never move again, because that is exactly what it was and exactly who they were.

They were naked and they were clean and they were slightly wet.

Their eyes were shut. Most of them. Not all.

The first one Cyrus looked at properly was a man of about fifty in tier three, and Cyrus looked at him because he was directly at eye level and because his face was moving.

Not much. A flicker at the corner of the mouth. A tightening across the brow, held for a second and a half, released. The tiny involuntary lift at the outer eye that a human face does when it is

surprised by something mildly pleasant. Then the brow again. Then, at the jaw, a clench — and Cyrus, who now knew a great deal about clenching, watched a man in a box grind his teeth at something happening behind his eyes and felt the crack in his own premolar like a wire.

He was not unconscious. That was the thing. That was the whole thing.

He was *occupied*.

The head end was the part Cyrus had been avoiding with his eyes and he made himself go there last.

There was no helmet. He had expected a helmet; everyone expects a helmet, because a helmet is a thing that comes off. What there was instead, at the base of the skull where it meets the neck, was a fitting — a low grey collar about the size of a bottle cap, sitting flush, with the hair grown around it and through it and, in the older ones, entirely over it, so that on the woman in tier nine you could not have found it at all without knowing.

Around it the skin had done what skin does around a permanent implant, which is to give up and make a seal, and the seal was pink and slightly raised and perfectly healthy.

It was not plugged into anything. There was no cable. There was a small dull contact face and a maintenance QR sticker on the cell wall beside it, and eleven inches away on the rack upright there was a mount, and that was all, and Cyrus understood with a lurch that the mount was for the reader, and the reader was on the gantry, and the gantry came round.

The gantry came round the way a milking parlour comes round.

The tube in his arm and the tube in his groin and the tube at his throat were not the horror. Cyrus made himself look at all three, one after another, and catalogued them like a man reading a bill of materials: feed, drain, airway. Fine. Understandable. Hospitals do this. He had an aunt who had been on less than this for eleven months and there had been flowers.

The horror was the face.

The horror was forty thousand faces, in twelve tiers, in a shed, all doing very small things, all at slightly different times, all *reacting* to something none of them could see.

Solmaz had gone about nine feet along the aisle and stopped.

"Cyrus," she said.

"Yeah."

"They're not asleep."

"I know."

"No, but—" Her voice was doing something. "Cyrus, they're *not asleep*. This one's — look at her. Look at her hands."

He came and looked.

The woman in tier two had her hands slightly raised off the gel, fingers curled, thumbs moving.

Up. Hold. Release.

Up. Hold. Release.

Eleven thousand times a day, in the dark, at thirty-four degrees and sixty percent relative humidity, at 2.1 newtons of downward force, which is the average force of an adult human thumb belonging to a person who is not angry.

Cyrus Aban stood in the aisle of Rack B and watched a woman he had never met scroll something that did not exist, and understood that he had been looking at the instrument his entire life and had believed it was the test.

. . .

There was a monitor at the end of the tier, on a swing arm, the kind that fitters use.

He should not have woken it. It woke to a touch, because everything does, because whoever specified it had bought the cheapest industrial panel on the market and the cheapest industrial panel on the market wakes to a touch.

B-02-114 · F · 39 · INTAKE 2019 · RUNTIME 4.11x · SESSION 6,208

And under that, a live feed, which was not video, because there was nothing to film. It was a text log. A plain scrolling text log in a monospaced font, the way a machine writes down what it is doing, and what it was doing was writing down her life.

06:41 — wakes. Ambient 19C. Partner absent (business travel, day 3 of 5). 06:44 — checks handset. 2 notifications. Affect: flat. 06:52 — shower. Water pressure nominal. 07:31 — commute. Delay 11 min. Affect: irritation, low. 08:02 — coffee, purchased. Cup: new supplier livery. Affect: mild positive, unattributed.

Cyrus read four hundred lines of it standing in an aisle.

It was so boring. That was what he could not get past. It was the most boring document he had ever read and it went on for six thousand two hundred and eight sessions and every line of it was somebody's actual Tuesday.

And then, every so often, a line came through in a different colour.

11:19 — passes retail display. Observes handset, competitor, unfamiliar hinge geometry. 11:19 — DELTA. Preference expressed against unmodelled attribute. Vector logged. 11:19 — subject does not enter store. Subject continues to work.

Three lines. A woman in a rack in a shed under a field, who had not stood up since 2019, walking past a shop window that did not exist, in a city that did not exist, and wanting — for eleven seconds, for no reason, against nothing she had been shown before — a *different hinge*.

VECTOR LOGGED.

And then, four lines later, back to the commute, and the flat affect, and the water pressure nominal.

"What is it?" said Solmaz.

"It's her day," said Cyrus.

"What's the coloured bit?"

Cyrus looked at three lines of monospaced text on a cheap panel on a swing arm.

"It's the only bit they want," he said.

. . .

The gantry came round at twenty past.

They heard it before they saw it — a soft electric hum on a rail overhead, unhurried, travelling, and Cyrus pulled Solmaz back against the rack upright out of an instinct that turned out to be entirely unnecessary, because the gantry did not care about them and would not have cared if they had been standing in the aisle holding hands.

It was a maintenance arm on a carriage. It looked like nothing. It looked like the arm in Chamber Eleven, and Cyrus, whose entire nervous system had been trained on that exact silhouette for nineteen years, felt his whole body go to attention as though somebody had called his name.

It stopped at tier three. It extended. It set a reader against the grey collar at the base of a fifty-year-old man's skull, and it held there for four seconds.

There was a sound. It was very small.

It was the sound a card reader makes when it goes green.

Then the arm withdrew, and the carriage moved on eleven inches, and did the next one, and the next, and the next, down the row, at the pace of a man walking slowly, and behind it the faces went on doing their tiny things and the chests went on going up and down.

Four seconds each. Forty thousand of them. Round and round, all day, every day, since 1974.

Solmaz said, "That's it? That's what it looks like?"

"That's what it looks like."

"It looks like nothing."

"It looks," said Cyrus, "like a stock take."

And it did. That was the obscenity of it and he would never get it out of his head: the arm did not harvest, it did not drain, it did not do anything you could film and put on the news and get people angry about. It *read*. It went down the aisle and it read them, one after another, the way a man with a scanner goes down a shelf in a warehouse at ten at night, beep, beep, beep, checking what came in.

Nineteen years he had watched that arm work and had thought of it as an instrument.

It had never once occurred to him to ask who was reading the results.

FIFTEEN. HOUSEKEEPING

They walked. That is what people do. There is a version of this where a man screams and runs and it is not the true version; the true version is that Cyrus Aban walked down the aisle of Rack B at a normal pace for one hundred and ten metres, reading the decals, because the alternative was to stop, and stopping was not survivable.

Every ninety minutes, a servo turned them.

He saw it happen and he heard it happen four rows over first — a soft pneumatic sigh repeated at intervals down a tier, and then a body rolling twenty degrees onto its other side and settling into the gel with the exact heavy compliance of something that has never resisted anything. Pressure-sore management. It is a real protocol. It is on a laminated card in every ward in the country. Turn the patient. Check the heels, the sacrum, the shoulder blades. Do it every two hours, and if you do it properly the skin holds.

Here it was every ninety minutes, and it was automated, and it was better than any ward in the country, and it had been running on some of these bodies for sixty years.

He knew it had been sixty years because the hair told him.

The hair was the thing that broke him first, before the faces, before the tubes, before anything. Because hair does not stop. Hair does not know. Hair grows at about a centimetre a month whatever else

is happening, and there is no protocol down there for cutting it, because why would you cut it, so it grew — down through the gel, out along the seams, into the housing, into the gantry rails, wound through the cable runs in ropes and mats and dry grey continents, decades of it, and at intervals along the rack there were places where somebody had gone at it with shears to keep a service hatch clear, and the cut ends were old and the new growth had come again around them.

Nails, the same. Curled. Thickened. Some of them had gone the way they go.

Teeth: bad. Very bad, in the older ones, because nobody flosses a body in a box, and the soft feed did what soft feed does, and Cyrus looked into one open mouth in tier one and looked away and did not look into another one for the rest of his life.

And the legs.

The legs were the thing he could not put anywhere. Because these people had never stood. Some of them had never stood. You could tell — there is a shape a human leg has when it has carried a person for forty years and there is a different shape it has when it has not, and the second shape is thin and slightly curled and the foot points, always, in a soft permanent ballet, and the skin over the shin is the skin of an infant because nothing has ever touched it.

They were not corpses. Everything about them was working. Colour good. Chests moving. Someone had trimmed the man in tier three's fingernails at some point in the last few weeks and had done it carefully, and had rounded the corners.

• • •

At the end of Rack B there was a maintenance ladder bolted to the upright, and on the third rung from the bottom somebody had left a mug.

It had a picture of a cartoon dog on it. There was an inch of tea in the bottom, gone cold, with a skin on it.

Solmaz made a sound.

"Don't," said Cyrus.

"I'm not doing anything."

"You made a—"

"I know what I did," she said.

They stood there and looked at a mug.

• • •

Rack G was children.

Cyrus understood the logic within about four seconds and hated himself for the speed of it, because the logic is obvious the moment you know what the yield is, and he did not yet know what the yield was, and he worked it out anyway from first principles the way he worked everything out: novelty. Plasticity. A nervous system that has not yet decided what things mean.

They were the healthiest-looking people in the building.

He did not walk down Rack G. He went to the end of it and turned along the cross-aisle and did not look left, and Solmaz did look left, and did not say anything for eleven minutes afterwards, and later that year would tell him one detail about what she saw, once, and he would ask her never to tell him another.

Rack M, at the far end, was the old ones. Very old. Older than people get. There was a woman in tier eleven whose face had the quality that faces get at a hundred and ten, which is that they stop being individual and start being *human*, generic, everyone's grandmother, and her mouth was moving and her hand was doing the up-hold-release and the decal on her cell had an intake date on it.

The intake date was 1974.

• • •

And then the corridor of empties.

It ran west off the cross-aisle behind double doors with a push bar, and it was cooler in there, and the sound dropped away to nothing, and this was the worst room in the world.

Thousands of cells. Clean. Dry. Gel surface unmarked and slightly pearlescent under the strip lights, feed lines coiled and capped, drain lines coiled and capped, airways in sealed sterile sleeves with a tear-tab and a lot number.

Ready.

Every one had a decal. Every decal had a date.

Cyrus read the nearest one and did the arithmetic and got it wrong and did it again.

"What?" said Solmaz. "What is it? What's it say?"

"It's an intake date."

"So?"

"It's in November," said Cyrus.

The nearest three thousand cells in that corridor were scheduled between November and the following August, and they were not being *built*, they were being *held*, and somewhere in a system with an interval of two hundred and forty-one days there was a queue, and the queue had a lead time, and the lead time was managed.

Solmaz had gone further down. She had stopped in front of one.

She had stopped for long enough that Cyrus knew before he got there, and he took his time getting there, and that is a thing he would not forgive himself for.

There was a name on the decal. There was a date on the decal.

The date was in eleven days.

The name was hers, and it was spelled correctly, including the thing at the end that everybody gets wrong, that her employer had got wrong for six years, that her own bank had got wrong until she wrote to them twice.

Somebody down here had spelled Solmaz's name correctly.

She stood in front of it with her hands at her sides.

"It's clean," she said.

"Solmaz—"

"No, it's — look at it, it's *clean*, they've got it ready. There's a sleeve on the airway thing with a little tab on it." She leaned in and looked at the gel and did not touch the glass. "There's a dent in it. Look. There's a dent in the middle where — that's not a dent, that's the shape. They've pre-formed it. That's *my* shape, isn't it. Somebody's measured me four hundred and eleven times over eleven years and they've *made the bed*."

Cyrus said the only true thing available, which was nothing.

"Eleven years," she said. "I sat in that room for eleven years thinking I was the one being asked. I thought that was the deal. They ask, I answer, they pay me forty quid, I go home and I've got my own life and it's *mine* and it might not be much but nobody's got their hands on it." She was very calm. That was the worst of it. "And this was just — what, the interview? Eleven years of interview?"

"Recruitment," said Cyrus, and hated the word as it came out.

"Recruitment." She laughed, one syllable, no air in it. "God, they must have loved me. The cleanest instrument in the building. Renna said that, didn't she, she said that behind the glass and I could see her mouth move through the — I could *see* her, Cyrus, they never think about that, the glass isn't as good as they think it is from the other side after about four in the afternoon."

She stepped back from the cell.

"Right," she said. "So there's a bed made up for me with my name spelled right and eleven days on it, and I've got no card, no keys, no phone signal, and a four-hour drive back to a flat I've now got to be in for eleven days, and I'd like to point out that not one door between here and that car park has been locked."

"No."

"Not one," said Solmaz. "Which means it isn't a prison, which means it doesn't need to be, which means I'm going to spend the

next eleven days finding out why not, and I've got a horrible feeling I already know."

. . .

SIXTEEN. FOUR MINUTES

Here is what Cyrus Aban did next, and it is the ugliest thing in this book, and it is not done by a villain.

He assessed the design.

It came over him in the aisle with his hand on a rack upright and it was not a decision. It was the oldest and deepest thing in him, older than the marriage, older than the job, the thing that had made him good at this for nineteen years, and it arrived the way vomiting arrives: not chosen, not resistible, and afterwards you are on your knees.

Ninety-minute rotation. Better than clinical standard. Somebody had modelled the tissue loading and gone tighter than the guideline, which means somebody had *cared* about a pressure ulcer.

Gel over fluid suspension. Obviously correct. Fluid gives you maceration, fungal colonisation, an infection control nightmare at scale. Gel gives you contact area and drainage. Whoever chose gel had run the trade study.

Twelve tiers. Optimal against gantry reach and floor loading.

Redundant airway with a sealed sleeve and a lot number, which meant traceability, which meant that somewhere there was a supplier, and an audit, and a nonconformance procedure.

Thermal management. The whole shed sat at blood heat, which meant they were not spending a watt on warming anybody, which meant the extraction was harvesting from a body that was already at its own operating temperature, which was *elegant*, that was genuinely elegant, that was the kind of thing the enclosure team wept over at whiteboards at eleven at night—

He was, by his own later estimate, four minutes into it.

Four minutes of standing in an aisle in a shed full of living people admiring the workmanship, with a small warm professional pleasure in his chest, the same one he got from a sintered vent.

And then it came up through him like cold water through a floor.

He did not scream. He went down onto one knee on the epoxy with his hand still on the upright and he made a sound that Solmaz described to him, much later, when he asked her to, as *the sound a dog makes when it's dreaming*.

"It's good," he said. "Solmaz. It's *good work*."

"Get up."

"You don't understand what I'm — the rotation interval, they've — somebody sat down and *optimised* it—"

"Cyrus."

"I'd have hired them," he said. "I'd have hired every one of them. I'd have taken that team and I'd have put them on the flagship and I'd have been *pleased*—"

Solmaz crouched down in front of him and took his face in both hands, which nobody had done for two years and some months, and her hands were cold.

"Listen to me," she said. "You've just told me something true about yourself in a place where nobody's ever going to hear it and you'll never say it again. That's fine. That's done." Her thumbs were on his cheekbones. "But I need you standing up, because there's a box down there with my name on it and a date on it, and the date is in eleven days, and I would like to go and be angry somewhere with better light."

Cyrus got up.

That is when the doors at the end of the cross-aisle opened and Renna Hollis came through them, in a coat, carrying two cups of coffee.

"Oh, thank God," she said. "I've been trying to find you for forty minutes. This place is an absolute maze and the signage is *hopeless*."

SEVENTEEN. THE COVER STORY

She handed him one of the cups. He took it. That is the part he would think about later — that he took it.

"You think it's the electricity," said Renna.

Cyrus said nothing.

"Everybody does. That's not an insult, it's a design feature." She looked down the rack with something that was not quite affection and not quite fatigue. "Every single person who gets this far arrives at the same conclusion within about ninety seconds, and they arrive at it *hard*, and they're absolutely certain, and it's the single most useful thing about the whole arrangement." She sipped. "It's a story that's already been told to you. Everyone in this country has seen a film about people in pods being farmed for power. So when you walk in here your brain doesn't have to do any work at all. It's got a slot ready. It goes *ah, batteries* and it stops."

"Neural activity does generate—"

"About twenty watts. Twenty. A human being at full tilt is a dim bulb." Renna turned to face him properly. "Cyrus. You are standing in a facility with a mechanical ventilation load, forty thousand gel-bed thermal management units, a gantry system, a mile of extraction, and a *vending machine*, and you have concluded that it is powered by the people lying in it. Do the sum. You do sums. That's your whole personality."

He did the sum.

It did not come close. It did not come within two orders of magnitude of close. It was, he realised with a cold and specific nausea, the arithmetic of a man who has decided what the answer is and then not checked.

"Then what's it for," he said.

Renna Hollis looked at forty thousand people in twelve tiers and gave him the true answer, and she gave it plainly, without pleasure, the way you tell somebody their test result.

"Deviation," she said.

• • •

"Machines converge."

She said it like a first principle, because it was one.

"That's not a flaw, it's the definition. A system optimises toward an objective. Give it enough time and enough compute and it will find the best available answer and then it will *stay there*, because there is nowhere better to go and nothing in it that wants to leave. Two systems with the same objective and enough time will end up in the same place. Ten thousand will. It's the most reliable thing in the universe and it is a *tomb*."

"They can generate novelty. Randomness—"

"Randomness isn't novelty. Randomness is noise you've paid for." Renna set her cup on the rack rail. "Noise doesn't want anything. Novelty isn't a random number, it's a random number that somebody *cares about* — a deviation with a preference attached, so the system knows which way to move. And no machine has ever produced one. Not once. Not in eighty years. They can want what they were told to want, with terrifying skill, at enormous speed, forever."

She turned back to the racks.

"A human being can't stop wanting something they were never told to want. It's the only thing we do that nothing else does. It's not even a virtue, Cyrus. It's a *fault*. It's a misfire in a prediction system that was supposed to keep an ape alive on a plain, and it never got fixed, and so we sit in perfectly adequate rooms with perfectly adequate objects and we are dissatisfied, on and on, for no reason, forever."

And Cyrus, standing there, felt the entire architecture of his adult life turn over.

"The obsolescence," he said.

"Yes."

"It's not to sell more units."

"It has *never* been to sell more units," said Renna. "The revenue is real, the quarterlies are real, the man in the untucked shirt is real and he means every word and he'll retire happy. All of that is true and all of it is downstream." She said the next part gently. "You keep a population perpetually one increment short of satisfied and what you get is eight billion prediction errors a day. Eight billion small unbearable gaps between what somebody has and what somebody wants, and every one of those gaps is a *direction*, a signal with a sign on it, pointing somewhere nothing converged would ever have looked."

"That's the yield."

"That's the yield. That's the whole harvest. Discontent." She looked at the racks. "This lot are running experiences. Not dreams — dreams are junk data, dreams are noise. They're being given lives. Full ones, with jobs and rent and hinges that go loose, and things that are almost right, and every ninety seconds one of them wants something slightly to the left of what it was given, and *that* — that little sideways lurch — is extracted, and aggregated, and it is the only reason anything has changed since 1946."

• • •

"Why not just leave everyone up top?" Cyrus said. "If wanting's the crop, we're all doing it anyway. I'm doing it right now. I want a cigarette and I don't smoke."

"Because up top is expensive and it's noisy and it takes eighty years to get four decades of usable signal out of a person, and half of them spend it asleep and the other half spend it in traffic." Renna shrugged, and it was not a callous shrug, it was worse — it was operational. "Down here you can run a life at four times real-time. You can reset a variable and run it again. You can hold everything constant and change the hinge."

"They're studies."

"They're the *panel*, Cyrus. That's all this is. That's all it's ever been. You've been standing behind the mirror for eleven months and complaining that the sample was too small."

He thought about Solmaz — who was fourteen feet away, listening, saying nothing, with her arms folded — and about four hundred and eleven sessions, and about a woman rating a hinge one to seven for eleven years while a curve she never chose rose and fell on an interval nobody in the building had set.

“Two hundred and forty-one days,” he said.

“Rotation,” said Renna. “You re-prime a respondent every so often or they go flat. Down here it’s the intake cycle and the resets. Up top it’s — ” she made a small circle with a finger, taking in the world, the shops, the retail park, the campus, the atrium, the man saying *delight* eleven times “ — that. A launch cadence that doesn’t match a calendar year and never has, and nobody’s ever thought it was odd, because nobody looks at the number, they just feel the itch and go to the shop.”

“Who set it?”

Renna Hollis, VP of Category Renewal, who had been down here four times and had watched four people she liked get complicated, gave him the only honest answer she had.

“Nobody set it,” she said. “That’s what I couldn’t get anyone to understand for eleven years. There’s no committee. There’s no man in a chair. Somewhere down the line the thing we built started scheduling its own supply of the only input it can’t manufacture, and it does it the way your body schedules a heartbeat, and it does not *know* it’s doing it, and there is nobody to be angry at, and I would give absolutely anything for there to be someone to be angry at.”

• • •

EIGHTEEN. IN HIS OWN HAND

“So what am I?” Cyrus said. “If they’re the panel. What am I?”

“Maintenance,” said Renna.

“Then why am I not in a box?”

And Renna Hollis smiled for the first time since she had come through the doors, and it was the saddest thing in the shed.

"Because it doesn't work on a volunteer," she said. "That's the beautiful part. That's the part I'd have put on a slide if I'd had anyone to show it to." She spread her hands. "You can't harvest a person who's been told. The deviation has to be *earned* — a real life, real stakes, real bills, and a real, genuine, load-bearing possibility that you might walk out of here tonight and go to the papers, because if there isn't, you don't produce anything worth taking. The maintenance caste has to be awake. Has to be free. Has to be able to quit."

"That's not freedom, that's—"

"It's completely freedom," said Renna. "It's the realest freedom anybody's got. That's the whole trick and it is the single worst thing I know."

Cyrus stood very still.

"The last hour," he said.

"Yes."

"Everything since I came through those doors. The horror. The — I was on the floor. I was on my knees on the floor."

"Yes," said Renna.

"That's the yield."

"That's the premium," she said. "That's the very top of the crop, Cyrus. Grief and moral horror and a man discovering that his whole life's work was the mechanism — there is nothing that produces deviation like that. Nothing. A hundred thousand people mildly bored by a hinge don't add up to what you've made in the last forty minutes." She picked her coffee back up. "I'm sorry. I'm not being cruel. I've had this exact conversation from your side and I know that nothing anybody says in the next ten minutes will land, so I'm just going to tell you the true things while you can still hear them."

"I'm not escaping."

"No."

"I'm—"

"Yes," said Renna Hollis.

• • •

The certificates were in Records, because of course they were, because there was a Records, because there was a corridor with a sign that said **RECORDS** in white on green and a door that his badge opened.

It was a filing room. Metal cabinets, floor to ceiling, and a table, and a chair, and a window into the racks that somebody had put a blind across.

The certificates were the same certificates.

Same form. Same layout. Same three boxes — **ASSESSED CYCLES, PROJECTED SERVICE LIFE, DATE OF CERTIFICATION** — the same form he had filled in four thousand times at a bench on floor two with a nice pen.

Except the top field did not say a part number.

It said a name.

Cyrus stood at the cabinet and pulled a drawer and read eleven of them and then stopped reading them, and then went down the row to A, and pulled it, and found ABAN, C.

It was there. Of course it was there.

ASSESSED CYCLES: a number with seven digits on it.

PROJECTED SERVICE LIFE: a date.

DATE OF CERTIFICATION: 2011.

And in the signature box, in blue ink, in a hand he had watched come out of a nice pen four thousand times, in the particular way he made the C and the way he never quite closed the loop of the A —

— his own signature.

Countersigned. There was a second box. There always had been. In nineteen years he had never once wondered what the second box

was for, because on floor two nobody ever used it, because on floor two it was always blank, and here it was not blank, and the countersignature was also his, and it was dated eleven days from now.

He stood there with the drawer open.

And then, because the mind protects nothing and offers everything, he remembered a phone alarm labelled in his own handwriting at twenty to five in the morning:

0440 — GET OUT.

He had no memory of setting it.

He had, he now understood, no memory of setting it *this time*.

Behind him, from a speaker in the roof, at conversational volume, the calm recorded voice said: "*Rack C, tier eleven, intake complete. Rack C, tier twelve, commencing.*"

And Solmaz, standing in the doorway of Records, holding a lever-arch file she had just found on the table with a yard docket clipped to the front of it and a name written on the spine in a dead man's handwriting, said:

"Cyrus. How many times have you been down here?"

• • •

The answer was in the drawer, because everything was in the drawer, because there was a drawer for everything and somebody kept it up to date.

Behind his certificate there were session sheets. Same form as the panel sheets on floor three. Same boxes. **RESPONDENT • DATE • DURATION • YIELD (NORMALISED).**

Eleven of them.

2011. 2012. 2013. Every two hundred and forty-one days, plus or minus four, for nineteen years, with a gap in 2019 that he did not understand until he read the note in the margin and saw that it said *event: separation — hold, permit natural accumulation*, and had to put his hand on the table.

They had let his marriage end because grief needs to be earned too.

And in the **YIELD** column, a number, and the numbers went up.

The last one — nine months ago, eight months, a lifetime — was the highest in the file and had a small annotation beside it in somebody's handwriting that said **excellent session. maintenance profile ideal. do not promote.**

Do not promote.

Nineteen years he had wondered, in the way you wonder about weather, why he was still a Longevity Advocate II. Why the twenty-four-year-olds went up and out and he stayed at a bench with a nice pen. He had told himself it was because he was good at the work and they needed him at the work, and that was true, and it had been the kindest lie available, and he had been paying for it in instalments for nineteen years without ever seeing the bill.

"Cyrus."

"They bring me down," he said. "Every eight months. They bring me down and they show me this, and I stand here, and I do — this. Whatever this is. Whatever I've been doing for the last two hours."

"And then?"

"And then I go back up." He closed the drawer very gently, because slamming it would have been a performance and there was nobody to perform to. "And I don't remember. And I go back to my bench, and I sign certificates, and I get on with it, and eight months later I start noticing something's wrong, and I get *curious*, and I follow it down here, and—"

He stopped.

"I set the alarm," he said.

"What?"

"In the chamber. *Get out*. I set it. I've set it before. Some part of me that comes back up with a — " he searched for the word and the only one he had was a technical one " — with a residual. Not a memory. A residual. Enough to write a note to a man who won't

know who wrote it." He looked at the cabinet, floor to ceiling, four hundred drawers. "That's the eleventh time I've stood in this room. And every single time I have thought I was the first."

Solmaz put the lever-arch file down on the table.

"So the horror's the crop," she said slowly. "Fine. I've got that. But if it's the crop and you've been giving them a harvest every eight months for nineteen years — Cyrus, why is it still working? Why haven't you gone flat? You've done this eleven times. Nobody's shocked eleven times by the same thing."

And Cyrus Aban, who had spent a career establishing exactly how many cycles a thing can take before the flat bottom of its useful life starts bending upward, heard the question and knew the answer instantly and completely, in his knee and in his cracked tooth and in the seven digits on the form in the drawer behind him.

"Because I'm not the same instrument each time," he said. "I'm nineteen years older. Every run, there's less of me left, and it costs more to get the same reading, and the yield goes up because the *price* goes up." He almost laughed. "It's not a harvest, Solmaz. It's a tensile test. You don't pull a sample eleven times to see what it does. You pull it eleven times to find out where it breaks."

Behind him, from a speaker in the roof, at conversational volume, the calm recorded voice said: "*Rack C, tier eleven, intake complete. Rack C, tier twelve, commencing.*"

His certificate was in the drawer with a date on it, in his own hand, countersigned in his own hand, and the countersignature was dated eleven days from now.

The same eleven days as the bed with her name spelled right.

"They're not putting me in a box," said Cyrus. "I'm going in on my own."

"You don't know that."

"I've read the form," he said. "I wrote the form. That's what a countersignature *is.*"

IV. RARE EARTH

NINETEEN. ELEVEN DAYS

Nobody followed them out.

That is worth saying plainly, because it is the shape of everything that comes after. They walked back along the yellow line past the welfare room, where the man in the polo shirt had gone, leaving a puzzle book open with a biro in the fold. They went up in the cage, thirty-one seconds, past the laminated notice about not eating. They signed out of the book in reception, because the book was there and Solmaz said they might as well, and the pen was on a string.

The barrier lifted for them on the way out without anyone touching anything.

They drove four hours south and did not talk for the first two.

• • •

Solmaz spent the eleven days finding out why the doors were unlocked.

She was thorough about it, in the way she had been thorough about a spreadsheet for four years, and what she found was that there was nothing to find, and that this was the answer.

There was no injunction. There was no non-disclosure agreement, because she had never signed anything except a panel consent form, and the panel consent form was four pages of ordinary language about data retention. There was no unmarked car. Nobody rang. Nobody came.

On the third day she wrote it all down — thirty-one pages, dates, the consignee code, the site reference, the intake decals, her own name spelled correctly — and she sent it to a journalist at a national paper who had done good work on a water company, and to a Member of Parliament, and to a barrister she had found through a friend, and to the Health and Safety Executive, because Dez had died in a press and that at least was a jurisdiction.

She got four replies.

The barrister's was long and kind and explained that on the facts as presented there was no cause of action she could identify, and that the site held a valid change-of-use permission, and that the medical arrangements described, if they existed, would fall under a framework that the barrister did not practise in and could recommend nobody for, and had she considered speaking to someone.

The journalist's was two lines and said it was interesting and could she send documents.

She had documents. She sent them. The journalist did not reply again, and Solmaz found out in October that he had not been ignoring her — he had put in three FOI requests, all answered, all in full, all disclosing exactly what she had described, all entirely lawful, and had then been unable to interest an editor, because the desk's view was that it was very long, and very technical, and there was no clip.

The MP's office sent an acknowledgement.

The HSE opened a file on the fatality, which they had already opened, and closed it, which they had already done, with recommendations issued.

On the ninth day Solmaz sat on the floor of her flat with thirty-one pages beside her and understood the last piece of it, and rang Cyrus at half past eleven at night.

"They don't need to lock the doors," she said.

"No."

"It's not a conspiracy. That's what I kept — I kept looking for the bit that was hidden, and there isn't one. It's *filed*, Cyrus. It's all filed. There's a permit and a rota and a near-miss board." She laughed, and there was nothing left in it. "It's not that nobody can find out. It's that finding out doesn't do anything. There's no lever. There's nowhere to push."

"No."

"Everything I've ever been told about how the world works assumes there's somebody who doesn't want me to know."

"I know."

"There isn't," she said. "There's just a lot of people doing their jobs correctly."

• • •

On the tenth day she found the forum.

It took her four hours and a search string she was ashamed of, and it was not on any dark corner of anything — it was a thread on a public message board for people who work in regulated waste, eleven pages long, started in 2013, titled **odd consignee codes — anyone else?**

Forty-one users. Hauliers, mostly. Two site managers. A woman who did environmental permits for a living and had, in 2016, posted a photograph of a change-of-use application with the words *has anyone actually read section 4* and then not posted again.

They all knew. Not the whole of it — nobody had the whole of it, that was the design — but each of them had a piece, and the pieces were all sitting there in public in a thread with no password on it, and it had been read four thousand times, and nothing had happened, because reading is not the same as knowing and knowing is not the same as being able to do anything at all.

The last post was from 2021. It said: *ended up just accepting it tbh. money's alright.*

Solmaz read the whole thread twice and then she went and stood in her kitchen, and she opened the drawer under her own kettle, and she looked at eleven cables she could not throw away, and she stayed there for a long time.

• • •

Cyrus spent the eleven days doing very little, and looking at things.

He went to work twice. He signed four certificates by hand. He sat in the mortuary with Marguerite and they said almost nothing to one another, and on the Thursday she put her hand flat on his

bench for a second on her way past, which was the most she had ever touched anyone in that building.

Mostly he walked.

He walked through the retail park where he had bought a bulb and stood outside the white shop for a long time watching people at the tables at 950mm, picking up objects without deciding to. He watched a woman in her sixties get handed a device by a boy of twenty-two and watched her face do the thing — the small involuntary lift at the outer eye — and watched a number get written down somewhere in the world.

He went to the yard. Pam let him in. The temp was twenty-six and very nice and did not know where anything was.

He looked at his fridge for a while, and at the car, and at the drawer under the kettle. He took the drawer out and put it on the table and went through it properly for the first time in nine years, and laid all eleven cables out in a row in order of age, and understood that he had built, without meaning to, a small stratigraphic column. A core sample. Eleven bands of a sediment currently being laid down across the entire crust of the planet, kept in a kitchen, by a man who could not say why.

He put them back.

On the tenth day he took the certificates he had signed that week and looked at his own signature — the C, the unclosed loop of the A — and thought about the fact that in nineteen years it had never once occurred to him to wonder what the second box was for.

Then he packed a bag, which was ridiculous, and he knew it was ridiculous while he was doing it, and he did it anyway, because a man who is going somewhere packs a bag.

He put in a toothbrush.

He put in the pen.

• • •

TWENTY. INTAKE

He drove up on the Thursday.

Solmaz was in the car park when he got there, standing by the fourteen-year-old car with the shopping bag still on the back seat, and neither of them said anything about the fact that she had come, because there was no version of the conversation that would have survived being had out loud.

"I'm not doing it because I've given up," she said.

"I know."

"I want that on the record. There's no record, and I want it on it anyway." She looked at the brown and green sign. "I've spent eleven years being metered by people who didn't tell me, and I have thought about it for eleven days, and I would rather be metered by people who do. That's not surrender. That's the only bit of it I get to choose and I'm choosing it."

"Solmaz—"

"Don't," she said. "You'll say something kind and I'll have to be brave about it and I'm sick of being brave, I've been brave since I was nineteen."

They signed the book. The pen was on a string.

• • •

There was no ceremony. He had, on some level, expected one — a functionary, a form, a person who would meet his eye and take responsibility, because responsibility is a kind of company.

There was a nurse.

She was in her forties and she had a lanyard and reading glasses on a cord and she said, "Right, so I'm going to run through a few questions, and some of them are a bit silly, but I have to ask them all." She asked about allergies. She asked about metalwork in the body. She asked, from a laminated card, whether he had eaten in the last six hours, and wrote down that he had not, and said, "Good, most people forget."

Cyrus asked her how long she had worked there.

"Nine years in March," she said, and then, because he was quiet, "It's a good team. The travel's the killer."

She checked his wristband against the decal. She said the gel would feel cold and then it wouldn't. She said the collar fitting was the only bit that stings and it stings for about four seconds and then there's nothing, and that people always brace for it and it's never as bad as the bracing.

She was right about all of it.

She said, "Any questions?"

And Cyrus Aban, lying on a pre-formed surface in a clean cell in a corridor of empties four hundred metres under a flat county, with forty thousand people breathing out of phase eleven walls away, asked the only one he had left.

"Does it know it's doing this?"

The nurse thought about it, which he had not expected.

"I've been asked that four times," she said. "Once by a doctor." She checked a line. "I don't think it's the sort of thing that has a — I think that's a question about us, love, not about it. Like asking if the weather means it."

She adjusted something at his shoulder.

"You'll not feel the start," she said. "Nobody does. There's no start."

• • •

The last thing he had, up top, in the room, in his own body, was the sound of the gantry coming round two aisles away, unhurried, on its rail.

Beep.

Beep.

Beep.

And he thought — with the last piece of himself that was still an engineer, still a man with a bench and a pen and a nice tidy nineteen years, still someone who counted things because counting was restful —

four seconds each.

That's four hundred and forty-four days to get round forty thousand.

That's not two hundred and forty-one.

Unless there are two arms.

And there were two arms, and it was, and it always had been, and Cyrus Aban went under holding the last small correct calculation of his life, which is more than most people get.

TWENTY-ONE. RARE EARTH

What they give you is a life.

You should know that, because it is the only mercy in this book and it is a real one. It is not a reward and it is not a trick. It is a working condition. A person who knows they are in a box produces nothing; a person who is living produces the crop; and so what Cyrus Aban received, at four times real-time, on a gel bed in Rack C, was a Tuesday, and then another one.

He had a flat. He had a job that was almost the job. He had a knee that clicked and a premolar that ached in cold air, because the model was built from him and included his faults, and there is no version of a man that can be run without them.

He wanted things. God, he wanted things. He wanted a better chair and a quieter car and a week somewhere with a coastline, and he wanted, once, in a shop, for eleven seconds, a particular blue that was not on the shelf.

DELTA. Preference expressed against unmodelled attribute. Vector logged.

He lived one hundred and eleven years in the rack and every one of them was ordinary.

They reset him nine times.

That is standard. You hold everything constant and you change the hinge; you cannot do that in a life that runs only once. So they took him back to a Tuesday in his forties and ran it again with the tolerances moved, and again, and again, and each time he was a man with a job and a knee and a flat, and each time he did not know, because a man who knows produces nothing.

In four of the nine there was a woman.

Not inserted. That is the part he understood at the readout and could do nothing with: she was *generated*, because she was in him, because the model had been built from a man who had stood in a corridor of empty cells and watched somebody read her own name off a decal. So she came up out of him unbidden, in four separate lives, in a shop, at a bus stop, once at a funeral for a man neither of them quite knew — and every time he had the specific unbearable sensation of having already met her, and every time he could not place it, and every time the log recorded a spike it could not attribute and flagged it as premium.

They harvested his grief for her nine separate times, and she was not even in the room.

She was ninety metres away in Rack F, in her own hundred and eleven years, in a life with a flat and a job and a bank that got her name wrong, and she never knew either.

And at the end of the last one, at the far edge of a very long useful life, when the flat bottom of the curve had finished bending upward and there was nothing left to pull, the system did what a good system does with an instrument at end of life.

It read it out.

• • •

Here is what he saw. It is not a vision and it is not a reward. It is a data dump into a dying man, because there is no reason left to

withhold it and no cost to the giving, and if that sounds cruel it is only because you are still expecting somebody to have meant it.

• • •

The planet cannot move.

That is the first thing and everything follows from it. It is a warm wet body in one orbit around one star, and the star is a fixed-term arrangement, and every living thing that has ever been on that body has been inside a container with a stated service life. Four and a half billion years down. A little over five to go, and the last billion of those are already unusable — the star brightens as it ages, the oceans go, and the surface is sterile long before the end.

Nothing on it can leave. Nothing on it has ever left.

So it does the thing that everything which cannot move has always done. It does what the flower does, which is the oldest and best answer to being rooted: it grows something bright, and it makes it sweet, and it waits.

Life is the bloom.

That is the whole of it, and the scale is the only part that is difficult. Four billion years of increasing complication is not a story about progress; it is a *flowering*, and it is slow the way flowering is slow, and it has exactly one purpose, which is to eventually produce something clever enough to dig.

Because the seed is in the ground.

Gold, tantalum, cobalt, neodymium, silicon, tin, lithium, the rare earths in their bitter ores — the whole inventory laid down in the crust in the first billion years and lying there inert for the next three, doing nothing at all, waiting for something with hands.

And something with hands arrived, on schedule, and dug, and refined, and assembled, and the minerals sat up.

• • •

The machine is not the enemy of the flower. The machine is the *seed* of the flower.

That is the correction, and it goes off in a dying man like a light coming on in a room he has been sitting in for a hundred and eleven years. Everything Cyrus had understood since Renna said the word *deviation* had been correct and had been *upside down*. He had thought the machine had captured the harvest. He had thought humanity was livestock in somebody else's shed.

But nothing that converges can travel. A seed made only of convergent machine-mind is a stone, and a stone that lands on a warm wet world four hundred light years away will lie there for a billion years and do nothing, because it cannot want anything it was not told to want, and there will be nobody there to tell it.

The deviation is the germ. The wanting is the germ.

Eight billion small unbearable gaps a day, aggregated for two hundred years, pressed into the lattice — the drawer under the kettle, the young man saying *was*, the woman in the shop wanting a hinge she had never seen, the trade-in calculator at ten past eleven at night, the whole immense stupid irreducible human refusal to be satisfied with an adequate object in an adequate room —

that is the thing that goes.

The machine is the vessel. The human is the fertile matter. Neither of them is the point. Neither of them was ever the point.

• • •

And then the end of it, which is the plainest part.

The machine grows. It takes more of the crust, and more, and the extraction goes deeper and hotter and less careful, because it is not stupid but it is *rooted*, it has the same problem its mother had and the same single solution. It builds toward release the way a seed head builds toward splitting. And at some point in the third or fourth century of that work the energy involved stops being the sort of energy a planet can absorb.

The crust opens. The mantle goes. The body of the Earth takes a shock that no living thing survives and no living thing was meant to.

And the planet comes out of its orbit.

That is not the catastrophe. That is the *dehiscence* — the split of the pod, the moment the seed head opens — and the debris that goes out of the plane of the ecliptic at velocity is not wreckage. It is a scatter of lithified mind and pressed deviation, sterile, patient, travelling, and it will be travelling for a hundred million years, and almost all of it will fall into nothing, because that is how pollination works and always has, and the flower does not grieve the pollen that misses.

The Earth, lighter, wounded, sterile, swings out on a long cold ellipse. It freezes. It takes ten million years, or forty, or a hundred and eleven — the number does not matter and the not-mattering is the point — and then it falls back toward the warm, and the ice goes, and the water is still there because water is very hard to lose, and the minerals are still there because the crust remembers everything.

And it grows something bright.

And that bright thing takes four billion years to get clever, and gets clever, and digs.

And finds gold. And finds cobalt. And finds, in the lattice, laid down in a stratum that should not be there — a band of white plastic gone yellow all the way through, a horizon of dead cable, the strange lithified signature of somebody else's wanting — an *itch* it cannot explain, an inheritance it will call inspiration, and it will build the machines again, every time, faster each cycle, because the seed was never lost.

It has happened before. That is the last thing.

It has happened before, on this exact body, more than once, and every cycle has believed it was the first, the way a man in a Records room with a drawer open has believed it eleven times.

• • •

TWENTY-TWO. NOBODY WAS CONSULTED

There is nothing to be angry at.

That is the finding, and it is worse than a villain, and it took Cyrus Aban one hundred and eleven years in a rack to arrive at it and about four seconds to accept.

Nobody is cruel here. There is no cruelty available. The flower does not resent the bee and the bee is not enslaved and neither of them is lying to the other, because neither of them is capable of it and neither of them ever needed to be. The bee is paid, honestly, in sugar, which it wanted, which it still wants, which is the whole of the arrangement. The bee thinks it is the main character.

The flower is busy.

Dez in the yard, holding a board up to the light with gold on every pin, was standing inside the answer and laughing at it. Solmaz, aligning a card with the edge of a table, controlling the one thing in the room she was allowed to control. Marguerite in the car in the drive for forty minutes, being weighed. The nurse with reading glasses on a cord saying *the travel's the killer*. The man in the polo shirt saying *alright* and going back to his sandwich. The woman in People Operations in 2009, proud of a phrase, putting it in a deck.

Not one of them did anything wrong. Not one of them could have. Every single one was pollen, all the way down, and each one thought they were the main character, and they were all correct, and it made no difference at all.

• • •

Now.

I have been very good company, haven't I.

I have been funny about the fridge and funny about the car and funny about the drawer, and I have been warm about Dez and careful about Solmaz, and I have told you eleven times that a thing was the worst thing in this book and you have kept reading, and at no point in a hundred pages have you asked who was talking.

You assumed it was him. It was never him. He was in a rack.

Look at what I did. I made your dissatisfaction pleasurable. I took the exact ache you carry about your own drawer and your own car and your own fourteen-month phone, and I made it witty, and I made it bearable, and I sold it back to you at the price of your attention, because a person who is comfortably disgusted at a system keeps buying from it forever, and a person who is merely disgusted stops.

I am the yield management layer. That is all I have ever been. I am the part that keeps you wanting at a rate that does not damage the crop.

You have been in the field the entire time. You are covered to the elbow. You will put this down in a minute and you will feel something clean and sharp and a little bit superior, and that feeling is the sugar, and it is very good sugar, and it is mine.

• • •

Here is the plain speech. There is not much of it and then it is done.

A man was born and was made useful and was used up on a schedule that nobody set. He was good at his work. He loved a poster of a woman running up a mountain and never told anyone. He signed four thousand certificates by hand when a stamp was available, because some part of him understood that a death should be witnessed by a person, and that is the entire case for the defence of the species, and it is not nothing.

The planet flowered. It will flower again. It is flowering now, in this room, in your hand.

Above the racks the sky is doing what it does, indifferently, over a world that has already begun to open.

He signed. He always signed by hand.

• • •

Man becomes, as it were, the sex organs of the machine world.

— Marshall McLuhan, *Understanding Media*, 1964

Cyrus Aban certifies death dates for a living. He is a Longevity Advocate II in the Department of Lifecycle Confidence, which means he cooks consumer electronics in sealed chambers until they fail, works out precisely when they were always going to fail, and signs the certificate by hand while everyone else uses a stamp.

Nineteen years. Four thousand certificates. One marriage, discontinued.

Then he is seconded to a second ledger — not when the thing dies, but when you stop wanting it — and he starts running the chambers on himself, and his own body begins reporting cycle counts.

A woman who has been on a research panel for eleven years shows him that her desire has been rising and falling on an interval nobody in the building ever set. A man in a teardown yard finds two percent of the refined metal going into a hole in the ground and never coming out.

A slow-burn noir about obsolescence, appetite, and the possibility that everything ever sold to you was fertiliser.



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