DARRIN MATTHEW PEPPERS

Caleb and Bastet

An Exclusive Preview: Prologue Through Chapter Three

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Contents

Prologue	1
Chapter One	23
Chapter Two	51
Chapter Three	70


DARRIN MATTHEW PEPPERS
CALEB
&
BASTET
RECOGNITION
VOLUME ONE

CALEB & BASTET
RECOGNITION
An Exclusive Preview: Prologue Through Chapter Three
Darrin Matthew Peppers
Bastet Productions

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Caleb & Bastet: Recognition
Book One of the Caleb & Bastet Series
Preview Edition, 2026
Not for resale.



WELCOME TO THE HIDDEN WORLD

Thank you for joining us on this journey.

Inside this exclusive preview, you'll find the complete Prologue and first three chapters of *Caleb & Bastet: Recognition*, the opening novel in the *Caleb & Bastet* series.

This world has been nearly twenty years in the making, and I'm grateful to finally share it with you.

What begins as one man's search for answers will lead into a hidden world of ancient mysteries, secret organizations, supernatural forces, and a war humanity was never meant to discover.

And at the center of it all are Caleb and Bastet.

Welcome to the hidden world.

— Darrin Matthew Peppers

VERITAS • LIBERTAS • HUMANITAS

Truth • Liberty • Humanity

"You have been lied to since birth.
History is not what they taught you.
The past was stolen, the records were burned,
and the war never ended —
it simply went underground."

Prologue

At 1:11 a.m., St. Augustine's Hospital in Yakima seemed to draw a breath and forget how to release it. Snow pressed against the narrow windows in restless white sheets, melting into wavering trails beneath the dim glow of crucifix-shaped lamps along the corridor walls. Their thin, uneven light barely kept the darkness from claiming the room. The air carried the sharp sting of antiseptic, but beneath it lingered a softer scent—old candle wax drifting in from the chapel farther down the hall, as if prayer had reached the room before help could.

Only a week earlier, every scan had agreed on one impossible conclusion. There was no heartbeat. Then, without warning, Anna went into premature labor. The contractions came hard and fast enough that there hadn't been time to question what medicine had already declared impossible.

The chart said so in careful, professional terms: no fetal heartbeat, no viability, stillbirth protocol prepared. The words had been spoken with the measured softness reserved for news medicine could not change. The staff had shifted into the subdued, practiced rhythm reserved for irreversible moments. Their movements were precise, their voices low, and their eyes fixed more often on the instruments than the grieving mother.

Then the monitor beeped. The single blip cut through the room so sharply that every head lifted at once. For a moment, no one moved. The nurse froze with her hand halfway to the tray, and the doctor leaned toward the screen, disbelief tightening his expression. Another beat followed. Then another.

The line that should have remained silent began to pulse, each beat arriving with more insistence than the last. The doctor reached automatically for a dial that did not need adjusting. The nurse stepped closer, staring at the monitor as if waiting for it to confess to a mistake. Nothing in her training accounted for what appeared on the screen—or the unease that crossed her face.

The heartbeat surged once more, stronger and more violent than the faint blips that preceded it. It did not sound like recovery. It sounded like defiance.

No one said it aloud, but every person present felt it: the atmosphere had shifted from resignation to intrusion. The doctor swallowed once and forced his voice into place. "Proceed," he said, and though the word should have sounded clinical, it came out with the weight of a man hearing himself obey something he did not understand.

Motion returned immediately. Commands were given and instruments changed hands, though disbelief still showed at the edges of every practiced movement. Outside, the storm pressed harder against the building, wind rattling the glass in uneven bursts that sounded, for an instant, like distant static.

Then the child entered the world. Three months early and declared stillborn only a week before, the child should never have survived the night.

He did not announce himself with a cry. He arrived with a thin, fragile breath, as if drawn from somewhere deeper than his lungs. He was impossibly small beneath the harsh delivery lights, his skin pale and his body nearly still. And yet he was alive.

The neonatal team moved immediately, clearing his airway, supporting his breathing, and wrapping his tiny body against the cold. Only after the first fragile breaths steadied did the nurse carry him to Anna.

She was already fading. The bleeding had begun during delivery, and despite the doctor's efforts, it hadn't slowed. Anna had heard the urgency in their voices, seen the bloodied instruments changing hands, and understood what no one had yet been willing to tell her. Her face had gone pale with a kind of final softness, but when she looked down at the child, something in her steadied. Recognition settled into her expression—the look of someone

seeing something she had feared she might never be allowed to see.

Her fingers trembled as they traced the curve of his cheek. The motion was slow and deliberate, as if she were committing him to memory one line at a time before the world could interfere. Her breathing came shallow and uneven, every word requiring visible effort, but the tenderness in her expression did not waver. "Caleb…" she whispered.

The name settled into the room with a strange certainty. It did not feel invented in that moment. It felt discovered, as though it had already belonged to him and had simply been waiting for someone to say it aloud.

"My beautiful boy…" A faint smile touched her lips. "I used to play music for you every night. I always wondered if you could hear it."

A tear slipped from the corner of her eye into her hair as she drew him closer. Little strength remained in her arms, but she held him with the quiet desperation of someone trying to make time hesitate.

"I wish I could see you grow up," she said, her voice thinning at the edges. She stopped once to gather breath, then forced the rest through. "I wanted to know who you'd become."

She pressed her lips to his forehead and stayed there long enough for the room to go still again around her. When she pulled back, her gaze searched his newborn face with a focus that seemed impossible under the circumstances. Her thumb brushed his cheek one last time. "Be strong, my boy." Her fingers tightened, barely. "Fight for the light."

The words left her as breath more than sound, yet the room seemed to hold them. The nurse lowered her eyes. The doctor, who had spent the last several minutes trying to reclaim the situation through procedure, stopped pretending that procedure meant anything at all.

"The hemorrhaging won't stop," the doctor said quietly. The words snapped everyone back into motion. The nurse reached for another tray as someone called for more blood.

Anna barely seemed to hear any of it. Her eyes found Ervin. "Dad…"

The word was little more than breath. He was already beside her. She looked down at Caleb one last time, then back at her father. "Take care of him."

Ervin took her hand. "I will."

She searched his face for one final heartbeat. Then she nodded. It was enough.

Her hand loosened quietly, like a tide slipping back into darkness. The monitor flattened into a continuous tone.

No one moved for a second that felt longer than it was. The nurse turned away, lifting a hand to her mouth. The doctor looked down at the chart, his pen hovering uselessly above the page.

Training returned before grief did.

The nurse stepped forward, then stopped. She looked at Ervin. He hadn't moved.

Anna's hand still rested against Caleb's blanket, though the strength had already left it. Ervin lowered himself beside his daughter, his movements slow and deliberate.

One hand brushed the hair back from her forehead. He folded her hand gently between both of his. For a long moment, he said nothing. He simply looked at her, at the daughter he could not save. Then his eyes drifted to the child she had left in his care. One pair of eyes had closed upon the world for the last time. Another had only opened to it for the first, too new to understand that the first face he had known was already gone. For one brief, precious moment, a mother's last glimpse of the world had been her child's first glimpse of love.

The nurse finally spoke quietly. "Sir…"

He looked up.

"He's barely two pounds." She glanced toward the transport incubator waiting beside the bed. "We have to move him now."

Ervin nodded once. He leaned down and kissed Anna's forehead. "I'll keep my promise." He gently lifted Caleb from her arms. The child weighed almost nothing, warm and impossibly fragile against his hands.

The nurse settled him into the transport incubator as its monitors and warming systems came alive. Ervin never took his eyes off his grandson. Together, they disappeared through the NICU doors. Behind them, Delivery Room Three fell silent.

In the NICU, the neonatal team worked quickly, transferring Caleb from the transport incubator and connecting him to monitors and oxygen while carefully regulated heat wrapped around a child who should never have survived the night. Ervin remained beside him throughout, never taking his eyes off his grandson.

One by one, the staff completed what they could and moved on to other patients. The door opened and closed behind them, leaving only the faint sounds of the hospital beyond it—distant footsteps, a cart rolling unevenly across tile, a voice speaking somewhere down the corridor.

Inside the room, the silence returned, changed by everything that had happened there.

Ervin stood near the incubator, his posture straight, his hands clasped behind his back. Discipline held his body steady while everything else adjusted. He had learned long ago that when a situation crossed into territory that could not be immediately understood, the worst thing a man could do was move too quickly.

The grief for his daughter remained present, sharp and unrelenting, but it no longer demanded expression. It had already begun to change, settling into something quieter and more controlled. He did not push it away. He let it sit where it was, contained and waiting. He turned his attention to the incubator.

Caleb lay beneath the soft amber glow of the heat lamp, his small frame surrounded by plastic and carefully regulated warmth. Up close, the fragility was undeniable. His skin still held that faint translucence, the look of something that had arrived before it was ready, and yet the rise and fall of his chest had steadied into a rhythm that no longer felt uncertain.

Alive.

The word formed in Ervin's mind, but this time it did not feel like a contradiction. It felt like a fact that everything else would eventually have to adjust around.

Ervin stepped closer and rested his hand against the side of the incubator. The plastic was warm, controlled by the machine's internal system, but beneath that manufactured heat, something else moved. At first, it registered

only as a faint sensation—something too subtle to name—but within a second, it resolved into something unmistakable: a vibration.

It was too faint to feel like an ordinary physical force, yet it carried structure. It moved through the surface into his palm, up his arm, and settled behind his ribs like a second rhythm layered beneath his own heartbeat. It remained steady and controlled, as though it had been designed to exist exactly at that level. Ervin did not pull his hand away. He had felt something like it before.

The recognition came quietly, without warning, unfolding in the same way the sensation itself had—gradually, then all at once. The room around him did not disappear, but it shifted, his awareness moving through time as easily as it moved through space.

Nineteen forty-seven. Before Roswell became a story people told each other to feel clever. Before the truth was reshaped into something manageable. The Rainier Incident.

He had been younger then, though not inexperienced. The operation had not been official, at least not in any way that would survive documentation. The mountain had been quiet that day, unnaturally so, the kind of silence that suggested something had already passed through and changed the environment without leaving visible evidence behind.

He remembered the pressure first: the way the air had thickened until every breath required slightly more effort. Men who had been talking moments before stopped without knowing why. The security perimeter around the incident site held, but no one felt confident in what they were holding it against.

Ervin had stood at the back of the room then, just as he stood now: watching something that did not belong to the world he had been trained to understand. When it opened its eyes, it did not speak. It did not need to. The meaning came through anyway—not as sound, not as language, but as something placed directly into him, bypassing thought and memory entirely. It had not introduced itself. It had not explained anything. It had simply been there, and the understanding had followed. He had never been able to repeat it clearly. Only fragments remained, impressions that refused to settle completely into words.

Something about the soul—not whole, not free, not complete in the way it was meant to be. Something about containment—not a prison built from walls, but from systems, patterns, and cycles that did not break. Something about Earth—not as a home or a beginning, but as a boundary, a place where something entered and did not leave unchanged. A closed loop. A gate.

The understanding had settled deeper than anything he could consciously recall. It had stayed with him long after the operation ended, long after the reports were rewritten, long after the official version of events replaced what had actually happened.

That was the moment everything shifted. The understanding had cost him more than sleep: it had cost him certainty.

The world he returned to after Rainier looked the same, but he never trusted it again. Not the government. Not history. Not the stories people told themselves to feel safe.

Once you learned the cage existed, pretending otherwise became impossible. That was the moment he stopped believing the war was what they said it was. That was the moment Arcane began—not as an organization—not yet—but as a decision.

The memory receded slowly, not vanishing but folding back into place, leaving behind the same quiet certainty it had carried when it first arrived. Ervin blinked once and found himself back in the hospital room, his hand still pressed against the incubator, the vibration still present beneath his skin. It was stronger now; not louder, but more defined. He lifted his eyes toward the window.

Snow streaked across the glass in uneven lines, catching and bending the light from outside. For a moment, there was nothing beyond it but motion and darkness. Then the pattern shifted: a shape, perfectly circular, appeared above the roofline. It did not move with the storm. The wind bent around it, diverting in subtle ways that would have gone unnoticed by anyone not looking for them. Its edges shimmered faintly, not with light but with distortion, as though it occupied space differently from everything around it.

Ervin did not react outwardly. He simply watched. Recognition settled into him again, deeper this time. Not fear. Not surprise. Confirmation. He had

been told, in fragments and coded language, that there would be a moment like this. Not a message that could be decoded, not coordinates that could be followed, but something that would be known when it was seen. He did not understand it then. He did not fully understand it now, but he understood enough.

The craft's appearance above the hospital was no coincidence. The shape pulsed once, subtle enough to be missed by anyone not already focused on it. Then the storm closed over it. Gone.

Inside the room, the lights flickered briefly. Ervin's hand tightened against the incubator. He looked down. Caleb's fingers moved again, curling faintly against the blanket in what seemed like a response. His breathing remained steady, aligned with the rhythm that now filled the room. The vibration beneath everything settled into a steady cadence, threading through the space with quiet persistence.

He watched in silence as the incubator's temperature display shifted by a fraction. The child's fists loosened. Slowly, Ervin straightened. The grief remained, but it had changed. It had found direction.

Ervin shifted his stance, placing himself between the incubator and the door, a soldier's instinct. A grandfather's promise. Whatever had arrived that night—it had not come for the room. It had come for the boy.

Ervin kept one hand lightly against the incubator as he watched Caleb breathe. The rhythm had steadied to the point of being unnerving, each rise and fall measured with a precision that did not match the chaos of his arrival. He watched the pattern without moving.

It was not exact, which was what bothered him. If the rhythm had aligned perfectly with the sensation moving through the room, it might have felt mechanical, something he could reduce to function. Instead, it ran close to perfect, like a living thing adjusting itself to a field it recognized but did not yet fully understand. The slight imperfection made it harder to dismiss and easier to believe.

When he finally lifted his eyes toward the window again, the storm had turned the glass into a shifting wall of white and reflected shadow. For a moment, there was nothing there but weather and darkness. Then something

interrupted the pattern so completely that it seemed less like an arrival than a reveal.

A cat stood on the narrow exterior ledge. Its coat was black. Snow clung to its shoulders and paws, yet the wind did not seem to touch it. It stood perfectly balanced on the narrow ledge as though gravity had simply agreed to leave it alone.

Its eyes, emerald green, caught the light next. They did not reflect light in the ordinary way, but held a bright, deliberate steadiness. The cat was not merely looking in his direction. It was looking at him. It tilted its head once. Then it blinked—slowly, deliberately, with a self-possession that would have been almost human if it had not seemed older than that.

Ervin narrowed his eyes slightly, not because he doubted what he was seeing, but because some part of him recognized the difference between an animal and a presence wearing one. Before he could move, the cat took a single step along the ledge and slipped beyond the edge of the window frame. Ervin moved to the glass without haste, scanning the ledge, the corner seams, and the shadowed edges of the sill. There was no movement along the wall and no shape below. Wherever the cat had gone, the storm had swallowed the route from view. There was only the glass, the snow, and the reflected image of a man old enough to know that impossibility was often nothing more than a word civilians used when they lacked the file clearance to describe a thing correctly. A faint metallic tap sounded overhead.

Ervin glanced toward the ceiling. "Raccoon…" he muttered. The sound came again: a slow scratching that drifted through the ventilation duct, followed by the soft scrape of metal shifting against metal. Then came silence.

Another scrape came from overhead.

A strained metallic pop echoed overhead as the vent cover shifted outward on one hinge.

Slowly, carefully, a tiny black nose appeared. It twitched once, then two emerald eyes peered cautiously into the room from the darkness beyond. The cat studied the distance to the floor with obvious concentration. Apparently satisfied, it disappeared back inside the duct. Ervin blinked.

A second later, the tip of a black tail emerged from the opening. Then the

cat's rear slowly backed into view. It was climbing down backwards or at least attempting to. Its two white hind paws searched the empty air below, feeling for a floor that remained several feet out of reach.

The little white paws began pedaling furiously, bicycling through empty space while the rest of the cat remained stubbornly lodged inside the vent. Scritch. Scrape. Pedal. Pedal. The tail lashed once in visible annoyance. The pedaling stopped, followed by a pause. Then came an even more determined burst of frantic bicycle legs accompanied by a thoroughly offended muffled sound somewhere inside the duct.

Ervin simply stared. For the first time that night, despite everything, he almost laughed.

Then gravity made the decision for the cat. She slipped free, dropping nearly seven feet, twisting neatly in midair before landing just a fraction off-balance. She corrected instantly.

She was fully grown, but unusually petite, the kind of cat people often mistook for a kitten. The overhead light caught the small white patch beneath her chin before she shook out her coat with slow, deliberate dignity, scattering tiny droplets of melting snow across the tile. Then she sat and lifted her chin. Through nothing more than absolute force of attitude, she transformed one of the least graceful entrances Ervin had ever witnessed into something that somehow looked entirely intentional. The indignity vanished, but the composure remained. She was regal once more.

As she turned and began walking toward the incubator, the overhead light caught something at her throat. Ervin's attention shifted at once. A narrow band circled the cat's neck, fitted with precision rather than comfort, simple enough at a distance to be mistaken for a collar but far too exact in its construction to belong in that category. At its center, resting precisely against the black fur above the small white patch on her chest, hung a pendant shaped like a small sistrum.

The metal was difficult to name. It carried the warmth of old copper and the richness of aged gold, etched with lines too precise to be decorative. In the shifting hospital light, they hinted at symbols—or circuitry—without remaining still long enough to be understood. The piece did not look

ornamental, but functional. As she drew near the incubator, Ervin saw the slightest tremor pass through the pendant.

It did not jingle. It did not make a sound. It answered. The response matched the purr that began low in the cat's chest as soon as she reached the child.

Ervin watched the necklace a moment longer than he intended. It was neither a tag nor a domestic affectation. If it was a device, it belonged to a category of engineering he had never been shown. If it was something else, then it came from a world where technology and symbol had never split into separate languages.

The cat stopped beside the incubator, studying the clear enclosure for a moment before leaping onto the sturdy counter beside it. She settled near the edge, her emerald eyes lowering toward Caleb through the transparent wall.

The change in the room was immediate, but not theatrical. Nothing flashed, nothing sparked, and no machine sounded an alarm. The shift was subtler than that and far more convincing. The regulated warmth of the incubator remained what it was, but the atmosphere around it settled into a coherence that had not existed moments before. Caleb's breathing deepened. The harsh fragility of it softened into something more anchored, more certain. The monitors flickered once, then steadied. The cat leaned forward until her whiskers touched the edge of the incubator wall. The purr continued.

The tension that had filled the room began to loosen so gradually that Ervin noticed only once it was gone. It was not safety or peace, but something closer to equilibrium. The cat remained beside the incubator, her tail curling neatly around white paws that looked almost porcelain against the smooth countertop. Her eyes lowered slightly, but nothing in her posture suggested sleep or distraction. She was not watching the child in the passive way an animal might watch warmth or movement. She was guarding him.

Ervin studied the creature in silence, his gaze moving once from Caleb to the pendant at the cat's throat and back again. He did not know what she was. He had suspected something would come. He simply had not expected it to arrive like this. What he knew was simpler and more useful than explanation.

More completely than anything else in the room, she belonged here.

"Comedic entrance for a guardian," he murmured at last, keeping his voice low enough that the words barely disturbed the air. "Noted."

One ear flicked in his direction. The response was slight but deliberate enough to make him pause.

He let out a slow breath through his nose and gave the smallest nod, not in approval, but in acknowledgment. "All right," he said quietly.

The word carried more weight than it should have, holding acceptance, recognition, and a decision that did not need to be spoken twice.

Outside, the storm struck the hospital windows. The building rattled, the lights hummed, and somewhere down the corridor, a phone rang. Inside the room, none of it seemed to matter any longer. Something had entered the space and taken its place within it, and for the first time since the monitor had gone flat, the air no longer felt like it was waiting for something to end.

It felt as though the room had finally recognized its purpose: the child, the guardian, and the man who would spend the rest of his life standing between them and the dark. Another change began to gather.

Ervin felt it before he could see it, a subtle shift in the air that had nothing to do with temperature or pressure. It felt more like alignment, as if something invisible had begun arranging the space into a configuration it recognized. The hum that had settled beneath everything since the child's birth did not grow louder, but deepened, becoming more defined, more structured, like a second layer locking into place beneath the first.

He remained beside the incubator, his hand still resting lightly against the plastic, but his attention lifted. The feeling drew his eyes upward without effort, guiding his focus to the space directly above the child.

At first, there was nothing to see. Then the air wavered.

The distortion was subtle, almost easy to dismiss, like heat rising from a surface that should have been cool. But there was no heat source here, nothing in the room that could account for the effect. The space itself seemed to tighten, as though invisible lines were pulling inward toward a single point.

Ervin's eyes narrowed. He did not move.

The distortion intensified, not expanding outward, but folding inward

with quiet precision. It did not ripple or tear. It compressed, collapsing into itself in a way that suggested intention rather than reaction. Then something occupied the space. It did not descend or arrive in motion. It was simply there, suspended perfectly still above the incubator.

Ervin's breath slowed.

The object held its position with absolute certainty, as though gravity had no authority over it. Its surface was black—deeper than shadow, absorbing the room's dim light instead of reflecting it back. For a moment, it appeared smooth, almost featureless. Then the details resolved.

The shape was not a sphere. It was a head, a cat's head: stylized, precise, and unmistakably intentional in its design, with clean, symmetrical contours that suggested engineering rather than biology. The ears rose in sharp, controlled angles, not soft or organic, but exact. The face was smooth and seamless, the material flowing without visible joints, as if it had been formed in a single piece rather than assembled.

Ervin remained still, studying the cat-shaped object.

He simply observed.

The surface shifted subtly, not moving in space but in depth. Beneath the obsidian exterior, faint patterns suggested layered structure, like something existed within it that did not fully belong to the outer shell. It did not look mechanical in any conventional sense. It looked constructed by something that understood design differently. Then the eyes opened, golden and alive with internal light rather than reflection.

Golden light moved beneath the surface in slow, deliberate currents, like distant stars shifting behind black glass. The effect was not bright, but it was impossible to ignore.

Ervin felt it in his chest immediately. The vibration changed—not stronger, but clearer, as if the presence above the child had completed something that had already begun. Bastet reacted at once.

Her eyes lifted fully to meet it. Her posture was unchanged, but her focus absolute. There was no tension in her body, no sign of threat or uncertainty. What passed between them was not curiosity but recognition. Her purr adjusted slightly, tightening into a more precise rhythm; the pendant at

her throat responded in kind. The sistrum vibrated faintly, its motion now perfectly synchronized with the frequency settling into the room. The effect was immediate.

The space stabilized. The monitors held steady. Caleb's breathing deepened again, each inhale stronger than the last, each exhale settling without strain. The fragile instability that had defined his first moments was gone, replaced by something anchored and deliberate.

The cat-shaped object did not move. It did not drift or rotate. But something in its surface shifted—a faint pulse of gold along the fine lines that traced its form, like energy moving through pathways too subtle to be called circuitry.

Recognition settled into Ervin. He did not know why the certainty arrived so suddenly, but it remained all the same. The object was not stabilizing the child. That had already happened. It was recognizing him.

For a moment, Ervin saw Anna exactly as he had left her. Then he pushed the memory aside and focused on the child. He stepped closer to the incubator, placing himself more firmly between the object and the door. The movement was instinctive, not defensive, but rooted in the same reflex that had guided him through every situation where the unknown carried consequence.

The object did not react. It did not acknowledge him the way it had Bastet. But neither did it ignore him. Its presence held, steady and deliberate.

Caleb's fingers moved again, stronger this time, curling and releasing with a faint but unmistakable intention. His chest rose deeper, drawing in air with a strength that had not been there moments before. Alive… but more than alive.

Ervin studied the object carefully, his gaze moving across its form, its eyes, the subtle movement beneath its surface. He searched for something familiar, something he could anchor to experience or training, but nothing fit. He did not know exactly what it was. He only knew it matched stories he had spent decades trying to dismiss: stories of guardians, of visitors; stories that suddenly no longer felt like stories at all.

Outside, the storm surged again, wind striking the building with renewed force, but inside the room, the shift held steady. The space had changed, not

in volume or light, but in structure. The object remained suspended above the child, silent, watching, and waiting.

For the first time since the night had begun, Ervin understood something he could not yet explain: this had not happened by accident. The child had been recognized by Bastet, by the object, and by something larger than either of them.

Whatever system had just answered Caleb's arrival into the world, Ervin knew one thing with absolute certainty: it would not be the last answer.

The shift reached the room before the knock: a subtle pressure against the boundary that had formed around the incubator. It did not disrupt what had settled there, but it pressed against it with quiet intent, as though something outside had located the edge and was testing how firmly it held. The cat's purr continued without interruption, and the steadier rhythm beneath it remained intact; but the atmosphere adjusted just enough for Ervin to notice.

Footsteps followed—measured, even, and deliberate. Whoever approached already knew where they were going and why. Ervin did not turn immediately. Instead, he shifted, placing himself more squarely between the incubator and the door, the movement small and controlled: the posture of a man who had already chosen his position.

The knock came once, light but final. "We'll need a moment," a voice said from the other side. Professional. Controlled. Familiar. Ervin said nothing.

The door opened only partway, just enough for two men in dark suits to be visible in the hallway. They did not step inside. Their bodies remained angled outward, their attention divided between the corridor and the room they had no authority to enter. Their posture and stillness identified them more clearly than their faces. CIA. Behind them stood two figures in black coats and clerical collars, their silhouettes framed by the colder hallway light. They wore the appearance of Vatican representatives with practiced precision. "We'll take it from here," the taller Priest said, his voice calm and unforced, carrying the kind of authority that did not need reinforcement.

"We have standing orders," one of the agents replied.

"And you will have confirmation," the Priest said, meeting the objection without friction. "We'll close it properly."

The exchange lasted only a second longer before the agents stepped aside. They did not lean in or attempt to see past the doorway. They held their position in the hallway, leaving the verification to the supposed Vatican representatives.

The Priest entered first, the second figure following behind him. The door closed, shutting the agents out in the hallway, and the pressure in the room shifted. Their movements were controlled, but the illusion they carried no longer held under direct observation.

Ervin watched them carefully, his attention settling not on what they appeared to be, but on what they actually were.

The Priest stopped a few steps inside, his gaze moving directly to Ervin. For a moment, nothing else occupied his attention. "I'm sorry about Anna, Ervin," the Priest said, his voice low and steady. He paused, allowing the words to settle before adding with the quiet, dry warmth only an old friend would use, "Hell of a night. You lose a daughter, gain a grandson, and apparently the universe decides to make a personal appearance."

The words carried weight without ceremony. They were not formal and not distant; they belonged to someone who understood exactly what had been lost and chose not to reduce it to procedure. Ervin held the Priest's gaze and gave a slight nod. Nothing more was required.

The Priest gave a faint, tired smirk. "Most grandfathers get cigars and congratulations. You get a snowstorm and visitors from upstairs." His eyes moved, taking in the room in a single, controlled sweep. They paused on the incubator, then lifted to the object suspended above it. Something in his expression shifted—not surprise, but recognition, followed by quiet confirmation.

The Priest glanced up at the floating object and let out a low breath. "Well, that answers a few questions. Kid's barely an hour old, and he's already got premium celestial security."

Behind him, the smaller figure leaned slightly, curiosity overriding restraint. "Can I have them?" he asked, his voice low and threaded with something that did not belong in the room. He tilted his head toward the agents waiting in the hallway. "Just for a little while?"

The cat's ears flicked once, but her purr did not stop.

"Bobby," the Priest said, the name landing flat and controlled.

Bobby stilled.

"You are bound," the Priest continued, his tone calm but absolute. "You will behave."

Bobby frowned, visibly weighing the limit.

"You'll be compensated."

A brief pause followed.

"Snacks?"

"Yes," the Priest said. "Your favorite: Red Dye 40 drinks and snacks."

Bobby's grin returned instantly. "Deal."

The reveal came without spectacle. The Priest lifted a hand and brushed his cheek, the liquid-crystal interface releasing its hold as the translated human form simply ceased to exist. Light slipped across the surface before resolving into the familiar, battle-worn face Ervin had known for decades. The broad-brimmed, weathered hat remained exactly where it had been, while the sleeve of the black clerical shirt settled naturally against his left forearm, exposing the old tattoo of a Chinese dragon coiled around the Earth, its claws gripping the globe, an image that had long since become as recognizable to Ervin as the man himself.

Bobby followed less carefully. His interface released with a brief shimmer, the liquid-crystal structure dissolving into shifting bands of light before revealing Bobby's true proportions—a compact blue figure with pointed ears, tiny horns, round spectacles, and a grin that arrived far too quickly. The oversized clerical clothing, having existed only as part of the stabilized interface, disappeared with it as though it had never been there at all.

Barely three feet tall, Bobby adjusted his glasses. "Oh." He reached into a pocket of his own little coat, one far too small to hold anything useful. "My hat." He triumphantly pulled out a battered little brown pointed hat and jammed it onto his head.

The Priest didn't even look at him. "Bobby."

"What?"

"Take it off."

"Why?"

"We're putting the masks back on before we leave."

Bobby blinked.

"The hat wasn't part of the disguise."

"Oh."

The Priest reached over, plucked the little hat off Bobby's head, and stuffed it back into the same impossible pocket. "There."

"I liked my hat," Bobby said.

"I know. You look like the worst garden gnome I've ever seen."

Bobby smiled.

"I like garden gnomes."

"I know you do."

"They look happy."

"They also don't attract attention."

Bobby considered that for a moment. "That's smart."

"It usually is."

Bobby left the hat where it was.

The Priest studied the child, then the object suspended above the incubator. A faint smile touched the corner of his mouth. "We're right on time."

Ervin followed his gaze.

"So… it finally began."

The Priest nodded once. "It has."

A quiet moment passed.

Ervin kept his eyes on Caleb. "And now?"

The Priest's expression settled into quiet certainty. "Now we make sure nothing interferes with it."

Ervin glanced toward the closed door. "The CIA?… and the Vatican?"

The Priest nodded once.

"They came here expecting to confirm the death of an Indigo child. And if they discover he's alive…"

"They'll kill him."

The room fell silent.

The Priest's expression never changed. "Which is why they must leave here

believing he died tonight." He looked toward the incubator. "As far as they are concerned, Caleb Reinhart never survived his birth."

Bobby leaned in closer, studying the incubator and the object hovering above it. "That thing's new," he muttered.

The Priest ignored him, his full attention on Ervin. "You understand what this is." It was not a question.

The Priest squeezed Ervin's shoulder once, firm and brotherly. "You're not doing this alone, old man. Not this time." The words carried more weight than comfort. They were a promise: whatever happened next, Caleb would not face it alone.

For a moment, the grief threatened to break through. Not because the promise solved anything, but because Ervin realized how badly he needed to hear it.

Ervin didn't answer. He didn't need to.

"Then we're aligned," the Priest said.

A quiet moment passed between them—old friends who had seen too much to need many words. Then the Priest turned toward the doorway. "Arcane's already moving."

Ervin looked up. "How long?"

"By sunrise, this hospital will be locked down." The Priest's voice stayed calm. "Nothing gets near the boy tonight."

Ervin gave the smallest nod.

The Priest turned and moved to the door, Bobby falling in behind him. Their masks settled back into place as they reached the threshold, distortion folding over them until they once again appeared as they had when they entered.

The door opened. The agents were still there. "All set?" one of them asked.

The Priest's expression was neutral again, his voice returning to a clean, professional cadence. "Yes. Another Indigo child is deceased. You can close it."

One of the agents nodded. "The Vatican will be pleased."

The Priest held his gaze. "See that the report reaches the appropriate hands."

"It will."

The disguise had worked perfectly.

The agents never glanced toward the incubator, questioned the report, or realized the dead child they had come to verify still breathed only a few yards away. They moved away down the corridor.

The Priest stepped out, Bobby following, and the door closed behind them with a quiet, deliberate click.

For several seconds afterward, nothing moved except the steady rise and fall of Caleb's chest and the low vibration of Bastet's purr. The storm continued to press against the building, but its sound no longer felt immediate.

Ervin remained beside the incubator, his attention fixed on the child, Bastet, and the presence suspended above them. His grief had not lessened or receded simply because something else had entered the room. It remained sharp, present, and anchored in the same place it had been when he stepped forward to lift the child from her arms. What had changed was the way it moved through him. It no longer threatened to overwhelm him or pull him under. It had settled into something narrower and more focused, compressed into a form that held its shape and direction. He lowered his gaze to Caleb.

The child's breathing had stabilized completely, each inhale drawing deeper, each exhale settling into a rhythm that no longer suggested struggle. The fragile irregularity of those first moments had disappeared, replaced by a pattern that felt guided rather than learned. His fingers moved again, small and deliberate, curling and releasing against the blanket with a faint but unmistakable intention. Ervin watched the motion for a moment, then lifted his eyes.

The cat remained beside the incubator, composed and still, her presence no longer unusual but essential. The pendant at her throat caught the overhead light as she shifted slightly, the etched metal responding in perfect synchronization with the purring that continued without interruption. It did not behave like an accessory or a marker. It behaved like part of a system that had already begun to engage.

Above the child, the object remained suspended in complete stillness. It did not draw attention to itself or attempt to assert itself. Its surface shifted subtly beneath the light, suggesting layered structure without revealing it.

Ervin had seen advanced systems before—devices that operated at the limits of what could be explained—but this did not fit any category he trusted. It did not feel like something that had arrived unexpectedly. It felt like something that had arrived on schedule.

Ervin exhaled slowly, allowing the realization to settle without resistance. Too many elements had converged at once—the signal he had received, the shape above the hospital, the Priest and what moved behind his disguise, the cat, and now this. None had hesitated or questioned their placement. Each had arrived with the same quiet certainty. That was enough.

Ervin reached into his coat and withdrew the secure phone, his movements steady and deliberate. His thumb moved through the unmarked contacts with practiced familiarity until he found the number he had carried in memory for years. He paused only long enough to acknowledge what the call would set in motion, then pressed it. The line connected quickly. No greeting followed, only silence that carried expectation rather than uncertainty.

"It's Reinhart," he said, his voice low and controlled. "My grandson is alive."

A brief pause answered him. "Understood."

"Quiet custody," he continued. "Fallon protocols. Orchard node first. Hide him. Stabilize him. Protect him until we understand what he is."

Another pause followed, shorter this time. "Confirmed."

Ervin looked toward the incubator. Caleb lay beneath the soft amber light, while Bastet remained close beside him and the mysterious cat-headed object hovered nearby, its obsidian surface catching the faint glow. Three unlikely companions, already bound by something Ervin could neither explain nor ignore.

"No one else touches this," Ervin said.

There was a subtle shift on the other end of the line, the kind that suggested recalibration rather than surprise. "Understood." The connection ended.

Ervin lowered the phone and returned it to his coat, his hand settling once more against the incubator as though the movement had completed something rather than interrupted it. His shoulders relaxed slightly, not from relief, but from alignment. The decision had already been made. The call had simply acknowledged it. He leaned slightly closer to the glass, his attention

shifting from the child to the cat and the strange object hovering above him.

"We were told you might come," he said quietly. "I just didn't expect it to be like this."

Then the object above the child responded with a subtle internal shift, the light within it moving with controlled precision before settling again. The cat's eyes flicked toward Ervin briefly, then returned to the child, her purring tightening for a fraction of a second before resuming its steady rhythm. Ervin straightened, his gaze lingering on Caleb.

"You should've lived to see this," he said, the words quiet and unforced, directed somewhere beyond the room.

The grief surfaced again without resistance, not because the pain had lessened, but because there was finally something left to protect. It moved through him and settled into something steadier, something he could carry without losing his footing.

He squared his stance between the incubator and the door. The movement was small, but it carried finality, a decision expressed through posture rather than words. Whatever had revealed itself that night—the Priest, the agents, the presence behind the masks, the circular craft above the hospital, and the cat-shaped object now hovering above the child—it had all pointed in the same direction.

Outside, wind struck the building in uneven bursts that rattled the glass, but it could not reach what had formed inside the room. The space held. Everything remained exactly where it was supposed to be. Ervin stood anchored between the child and whatever might come for him. He had seen what happened when decisions were made too late, when lines were drawn after the moment had already passed. Not this time. The world would believe the child had died, the people who needed to find him never would, and anyone who came for Caleb Reinhart would first have to come through Ervin.

Chapter One

The Pattern Begins
Thirty Years Later
Present Day

The morning crowd at Pike Place Market moved the way it always did—dense, distracted, and self-contained, flowing in unpredictable currents that only looked chaotic from the outside. Tourists gathered near the fish stalls with phones raised, waiting for something to be thrown, while locals cut through them with practiced efficiency, stepping around bodies and conversations without ever appearing to slow down. The air carried the layered scent of saltwater, coffee, and hot oil, all of it sitting beneath the constant murmur of voices that never quite resolved into a single sound.

The movement wasn't random, even if it looked that way. Vendors called out prices with practiced rhythm, hands moving without hesitation as fish were lifted, weighed, and wrapped. Someone laughed too loudly near the edge of the crowd, while a street musician shifted chords just off tempo, forcing the sound to fight its way through the noise instead of blending with it. The entire place operated on overlapping patterns, each one slightly out of sync with the next, creating a layered current that most people felt but never noticed.

Caleb noticed it—not the surface movement, but the gaps between its patterns. He moved through the crowd without breaking stride, watching the surrounding chaos thin toward the quieter storefronts.

The tailored blue suit helped him disappear into the morning business

crowd. At a glance, he didn't stand out, which was exactly the point. Lean build, controlled posture, and features sharp enough to register but neutral enough to disappear meant most people didn't look twice. The fitted jacket reinforced it, giving him just enough presence to pass as someone with somewhere to be while discouraging anyone from asking where. His glasses softened the edge further, resting low on the bridge of his nose—not as an accessory, but as a necessary correction, even if the world behind them never quite resolved the way it did for everyone else. It never had.

Edges bled in ways they shouldn't. Movement lingered where movement should have ended. Shapes existed just outside the boundaries of objects, attached to people, buildings, or sometimes nothing at all. Caleb had learned early that trying to focus on those distortions directly only made them worse. They sharpened when you stared at them, stretching into forms that demanded interpretation.

He refused to give them his full attention. He let the distortions sit in the periphery, where they belonged and where they were most honest.

A couple stood near the corner of the market, locked in an argument that didn't need volume to carry. Their voices stayed low, but the tension between them was sharp enough to cut through everything else.

Caleb didn't look at them directly, but something at the edge of his vision shifted anyway.

Two tall, emaciated figures clung to the couple like translucent shadows. At times, they looked vaguely human. At others, they looked like something that had only learned what a human was by watching from a distance. The creatures drifted closer as the argument sharpened, drawn toward the anger and rising emotion feeding them.

Dark translucent streams of light—like threads of smoke mixed with faint energy—began to siphon from the couple, flowing into the creatures' forms. The figures grew slightly more solid as they fed, their hollow eyes flickering with quiet satisfaction.

Don't stare, Bastet cautioned.

"A little late for that," Caleb muttered, keeping his gaze at the edge of the scene.

Caleb watched from the corner of his eye. The streams pulsed stronger with every raised word, every sharp gesture. "You know," Caleb muttered under his breath, "no matter how many times I see it, it always gets to me."

Bastet's voice slid into his thoughts, smooth and controlled. *They feed on emotions. Always have. Archons.*

"Most people never notice them," Caleb muttered. "Probably for the best. Sometimes I envy them."

The archons? Bastet asked.

"The people."

For a moment, Caleb wondered what it would be like to walk through a crowd and only see a crowd. No distortions. No shadows. No things feeding in the corners of his vision. Just people.

Bastet was quiet for a moment, then spoke. *I don't.*

"Why?"

They seem exhausting.

Caleb couldn't really argue with that.

Caleb adjusted his path without breaking stride, stepping around the interaction before it could sharpen into something worse. The creatures didn't notice him. They rarely did when stronger emotions were present.

You're drifting again, Bastet said, carrying just enough amusement to be intentional.

"I'm walking through a market where people throw fish for entertainment."

It's culture, Bastet said.

"It's seafood assault."

Tourists seem to enjoy it.

"Tourists also stand in line for pumpkin spice."

Exactly my point, Bastet replied.

Another familiar voice followed, quieter and steadier.

Adjust two feet left.

"Let me drift," Caleb muttered.

You're about to walk into someone.

"I'm not—"

He shifted half a step to the left, narrowly avoiding a man carrying coffee.

The man pulled the cup closer to his chest and gave Caleb a long sideways look before continuing past.

"Talking to himself," the man muttered to his friend.

His friend glanced at the CatPack riding against Caleb's shoulders. "Maybe he's special. Look—he's got an emotional support cat."

Caleb kept walking, calling back to the two men. "I can still hear you."

Bastet's amusement slipped through their bond. *This is going exceptionally well.*

"Not helping."

I wasn't trying to.

The EMS CatPack rested comfortably against his shoulders, its weight distributed so naturally it never pulled against his balance. Its deep red, reinforced body resembled an expensive, high-end pet carrier, with padded shoulder straps, rounded upper housing, and a sturdy gray lower section fitted with discreet storage compartments. To anyone watching, it looked like a professional, climate-controlled emotional support carrier, designed for comfort rather than attention. Nothing about it suggested the technology hidden beneath its quiet exterior.

A large, clear viewing dome was integrated into the upper front of the pack, its curved surface reflecting the movement of the market while giving Bastet an unobstructed view. She sat comfortably within the chamber, her emerald-green eyes steady and alert, the gold sistrum pendant at her throat catching the light in brief flashes. Beneath the dome, a fitted identification panel displayed BASTET in bold lettering, with EMOTIONAL SUPPORT ANIMAL printed below it. The markings looked official enough to discourage questions before they could form. To anyone else, it was a sophisticated pet carrier; to Caleb, it was something else entirely.

He turned off the main stretch of the market and toward a narrower storefront that most people passed without noticing: Running Elk's Ellensburg Blue & Native Jewelry. The display window held polished stones, copperwork, and handcrafted pieces arranged with quiet intention.

Copper ran through the designs with deliberate precision, suggesting a purpose beyond decoration.

The door chimed softly as Caleb stepped inside, and the noise of the market cut off behind him with abrupt finality.

The air changed immediately. Whatever lingered at the edge of his vision outside didn't cross with him. The space inside the shop held differently, cleaner in a way that wasn't about air or light, but about what was no longer there. Less salt. Less movement. More earth.

A faint scent of sage lingered in the air, mingling with worked metal and the distinct trace of copper beneath it. The lighting shifted as well, warmer and more controlled, pulling the space inward and making it feel contained. Running Elk stood behind the counter. He didn't look up right away.

"Late," Elk said.

Caleb checked his watch without really checking it. "I'm on time."

"You're thinking about being on time," Elk replied. "That's not the same thing."

Caleb smirked slightly as he stepped farther inside. "You always this philosophical, or is today special?"

Elk didn't look up. "I've always been philosophical. You're just late enough to notice."

That earned Caleb a glance.

The cat's purr shifted faintly, aligning with something deeper in the room that most people would never register.

Elk looked up. His gaze moved past Caleb's face to the CatPack and held there for a fraction longer than usual. "Good," he said quietly. "She's steady."

"She's always steady," Caleb replied.

Not always, Bastet corrected.

I'm trying to make you look good, Caleb replied internally.

I require no assistance.

Caleb ignored her.

Elk stepped out from behind the counter and moved toward the back of the shop without another word. Caleb followed, passing through a narrow corridor lined with stone, copper, and materials that felt older the farther in he went. The hum beneath everything became more noticeable here, not louder but more structured, like a signal that had been given room to exist.

Another archon lingered near the corridor leading toward the back of the shop, stopping well short of the copper-lined threshold. It wasn't feeding on anyone. Instead, it stretched along the upper corner where the ceiling met the wall, thin and barely visible, like residue left behind by something that had already moved on. The copper hadn't prevented it from wandering inside, but there was nothing here it could draw from. It remained motionless, watching without purpose.

Caleb didn't stop.

You see it? Bastet asked.

I always see it.

You're not reacting.

It's not reacting to me.

Good.

Elk stopped in front of what appeared to be a solid wall. His hand pressed flat against the surface, and after a brief pause, a seam revealed itself—not opening in a mechanical way, but separating with a precision that suggested the system had been waiting for that exact input.

The elevator interior was compact and deliberate, clean lines with no wasted space. A narrow copper rail ran along the wall at human shoulder height, smooth and reinforced, clearly designed for something smaller to walk along. It extended toward the elevator doors, ending at the threshold with a precision that suggested it was meant to connect with something beyond. Caleb had noticed it the first time he'd come here. It wasn't for humans.

The door closed behind them without a sound. The descent began immediately.

Music filled the space, low at first, then settled into something recognizable. Beethoven—*Seventh Symphony*—played through the system, the tones warmer, less sharp, as if the edges of each note had been rounded off without losing their precision.

Caleb didn't look up, since it was always playing.

Caleb felt a downward pull in his chest before he registered it physically, one that didn't quite match the movement of the elevator. The hum deepened slightly, threading beneath the cat's purr in a way that made the two feel

connected.

You feel that? Caleb asked internally.

I always feel it, Bastet replied.

The elevator continued its descent. Finally, it settled to a smooth stop. The doors parted soundlessly, revealing the facility beyond. The copper rail inside the elevator aligned perfectly with its counterpart outside, forming an uninterrupted walkway across the threshold. The CatPack's entry hatch released with a soft click.

Bastet stepped out of the CatPack onto Caleb's shoulder, then sprang lightly onto the copper rail. She crossed the threshold without breaking stride and immediately began her slow inspection of the facility as though checking that everything remained exactly where she had left it.

Caleb stepped out of the elevator and crossed the platform. A nearby armory caught his attention for a moment. Weapon racks, holsters, and training stations all seemed arranged slightly differently than he expected, as though the room had been built around a preference. The impression lingered just long enough to register before the larger facility pulled his attention elsewhere.

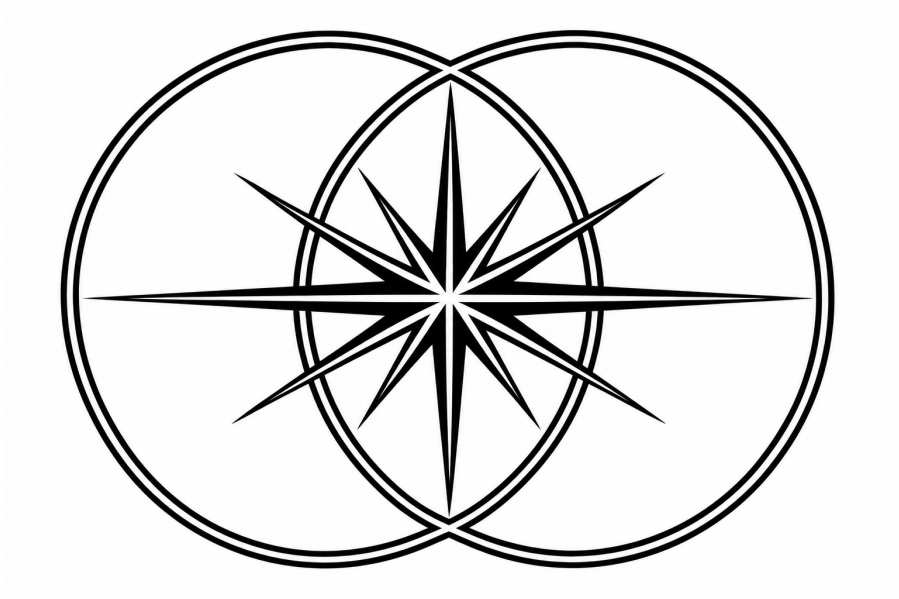
The copper railing continued seamlessly from the elevator into the facility, running along the walkways at the same shoulder height, providing a clear path for smaller companions to move beside their partners. It was one of the many quiet details that reminded Caleb this place had been built with guardians in mind.

The space beyond it unfolded in layers. Platforms stepped down into a central hub, connected by walkways and reinforced with materials that balanced modern engineering with something older woven through it. Screens displayed data in controlled streams, personnel moved with quiet efficiency, and the entire structure operated with a precision that felt closer to a system than a facility.

Copper ran through everything, not as decoration but as infrastructure. It traced along railings, through walls, and beneath glass panels, forming a network that felt alive in a way steel alone never could.

Arcane—unlabeled, unannounced, and unmistakable. The symbol domi-

nated the far wall above the command floor: two intersecting circles enclosing beams of light radiating from the center, rendered in dark metal and copper, large enough to be seen from nearly every level of the facility. Beneath it, etched into the structure itself, ran the organization's motto:



VERITAS • LIBERTAS • HUMANITAS

Three promises and the reason many of the people inside still believed the fight was worth having.

An American flag hung nearby as a reminder of the nation the organization had once sworn to protect before it learned some threats existed beyond governments.

The scale of the facility didn't fully register at first. The space extended beyond what the initial platform suggested, dropping into additional levels that weren't immediately visible from the entry point. Walkways branched outward and downward, connecting to sections that looked more like

command decks than workstations, each one carrying its own function without interrupting the whole. Personnel moved between them without hurry or hesitation, each step fitting into a larger pattern that suggested coordination without visible direction.

That network was part of the larger pattern running beneath the surfaces as much as along them, threading through walls, floor panels, and structural supports as a system designed to regulate the facility's underlying current. The faint warmth Caleb had felt in the elevator deepened here into a subtle presence, as though the building itself were tuned to something just outside normal perception.

The facility felt permanent, established through years of deliberate use.

Caleb adjusted his jacket and tie as his eyes moved across the room. The environment felt contained and structured, as though the facility itself had been designed to account for things most people never perceived. The low operational hum of Arcane settled around him almost immediately, copper-lined infrastructure carrying a steadier resonance than the city above ever could.

"Welcome back," a voice called from across the floor.

Circuit watched Bastet step lightly on the copper rail.

"I spent months making that carrier temperature-controlled, pressure-balanced, and more comfortable than most first-class airline seats." He shook his head with a faint smile. "And she still prefers the railing."

Bastet's reply came through Arcane's Guardian communication system, her telepathic voice translated cleanly through the facility speakers. "It has a better view."

Caleb didn't turn immediately. The purr behind him deepened once, then settled.

"Something's off," Bastet said quietly.

Caleb's gaze lifted toward the central display where coordinates pulsed in slow, deliberate intervals. "Yeah," he said. "I know."

Caleb felt the shift in the room the moment he stepped off the platform and moved deeper into the central hub. Movement redirected around him with quiet efficiency as something took priority over whatever had been

happening before. Screens that had been running passive data feeds locked into active displays, and personnel scattered across the lower levels began to converge without being called. The entire hub moved with coordinated purpose. Caleb approached the central operations table without hesitation, his pace steady, his attention already fixed on the projection forming above it. The coordinates he had noticed upon entering the facility were now layered into a broader map, one that extended from the Seattle coastline inland across dense forest and elevation gradients that most civilian maps ignored entirely. The surface of the table responded to proximity rather than touch, the projection rising into a controlled three-dimensional field that allowed depth without clutter, each layer of data arranged in a way that suggested it had been built to be read quickly.

Ervin looked up as Caleb approached. His broad shoulders filled a tailored black three-piece suit beneath a long, dark overcoat. Thick silver-gray hair swept neatly back from his deeply lined forehead, while a carefully trimmed beard and mustache framed the familiar face Caleb had known his entire life. Dark, round-framed glasses rested across his nose, and a pocket-watch chain curved across his waistcoat, lending him the distinguished appearance of a man from another era. Yet beneath that commanding presence remained the grandfather who had raised him.

"My boy," Ervin said.

The words carried the warmth of family. Ervin returned his attention to the map, leaving the briefing to Circuit. "You're seeing it," Circuit said from the opposite side of the table.

Caleb didn't look up immediately. His eyes tracked the movement of the data first, following the shipping lines as they traced along the coast before breaking inland in irregular patterns that did not match standard distribution routes. "Routes are wrong," he said.

"They're not wrong," Circuit replied, adjusting the display with a quick series of gestures that pulled the lines into tighter alignment. "They're just not what they say they are."

Whiskers hovered quietly beside Circuit, the same obsidian cat-headed intelligence that had first appeared above Caleb's incubator the night he

was born. Whiskers held his familiar place with the ease of someone who had worked beside Circuit for decades. Circuit's dark hair carried gray at the temples, and his posture leaned forward from years spent closer to systems than people. His hands moved across the interface with practiced precision, layers of data coming apart and reassembling beneath his touch before most people would have recognized the pattern. His eyes moved faster than everything else—tracking, calculating, anticipating—processing outcomes before the system had time to display them, but experience had replaced whatever urgency might once have lived behind them.

"They stage at the coast," he continued, isolating a segment of the route. "Then they break into smaller runs before heading inland. Same timing, same spacing, same gaps between movement."

Caleb shifted his focus slightly, letting the pattern settle instead of forcing it. "Destination?"

Circuit expanded the map, pushing the projection deeper into the interior until the clean geometry of the city grid gave way to forest density and elevation markers. The terrain shifted into something less defined, less documented, but the pattern held. "Packwood," Circuit said.

Caleb's eyes narrowed.

"Or what's under it," Circuit added.

Caleb studied the map again, this time pulling his focus away from the routes and onto the location itself. "Why Packwood?" he asked.

Circuit didn't answer immediately. He shifted the projection slightly, expanding the surrounding region. Forest, elevation, scattered infrastructure, and long stretches of undeveloped terrain filled the display.

"It's not a hub," Caleb continued. "No population density, no industrial cover, nothing that justifies this kind of traffic. You don't move something sensitive into the middle of nowhere unless you don't want it seen."

"Or unless you need the space," Circuit said.

Caleb nodded. "Not for storage," he said. "For isolation."

Caleb expanded the terrain further, letting the surrounding region resolve in greater detail. The forest stretched outward in dense layers of evergreen, broken only by narrow access roads and scattered structures that looked

temporary even when they weren't. Elevation shifts carved the land into natural barriers, creating pockets of space that could be sealed off without drawing attention.

"It's not just remote," Caleb said. "It's controlled."

Caleb traced one of the access routes with his eyes, following it as it narrowed into a single line that disappeared into tree cover. "Shut down two of those routes, and nothing gets in or out without being seen." The projection shifted slightly as seasonal overlays flickered into place, the forest taking on a muted wash of color—deep oranges and dying reds threading through the green, the kind of transition that came just before everything dropped into winter.

"October," Caleb said quietly.

Circuit glanced at him.

"Seasonal traffic drops," Caleb continued. "Tourists leave, locals stay in, and everything out there gets quieter than it would usually be." His gaze settled back on the mountain. "You don't move something unstable into a place like that unless you're planning for nobody to hear it when it goes wrong."

Circuit didn't argue.

"They're not hiding shipments," Caleb added. "They're hiding outcomes."

The projection adjusted again, layering thermal imaging over a network of structural anomalies buried deep beneath the mountain. Interference obscured much of the data, but repeating patterns resolved through it with increasing clarity. Something large occupied the space beneath the mountain, radiating a faint but measurable signature.

Bastet's purr shifted slightly behind him, tightening just enough to register.

"That's not storage," she said.

"No," Caleb replied, still watching the projection. "It isn't."

"Please tell me we're looking at a secret underground warehouse," Caleb said.

Bastet was quiet for a moment. "That would be the optimistic interpretation."

"I hate it when you do that."

"You should."

Circuit pulled another data stream into view, this one less visual and more behavioral. Timelines, movement intervals, and density changes replaced the map, showing the pattern over time rather than space. Caleb let his eyes soften slightly, allowing the structure to emerge instead of chasing it.

"Shipments increase before disappearances," Circuit said.

Caleb looked up. "Trafficking?"

Circuit hesitated for a fraction of a second. He adjusted the data again, refining the overlap until the correlation became impossible to ignore. "Not standard," he said. "No resale markers, no redistribution, no financial echo." He isolated another layer of the data. "But there's been an unusual increase in missing children along the same routes."

Caleb's attention fixed on the new pattern. "They go missing after the shipments?"

"Close enough to establish a correlation."

For a moment, the map stopped being routes and numbers and became faces instead—children who had simply vanished and never come home. The thought settled heavily in Caleb's chest. Someone was doing this on purpose.

Recognition moved through the people around the table as Caleb's conclusion settled over them. He had given shape to a suspicion Arcane had already begun to form.

Caleb leaned slightly closer to the projection, letting the pattern settle in his mind without forcing it into a conclusion too quickly. The routes, the timing, the escalation tied to movement—it all pointed in one direction, but the reason behind it remained just outside clear definition. "They're not just moving material," he said quietly.

He had seen smaller anomalies before, but never anything this extensive or that suggested an operation on this scale.

"You ever run it through a stable system?" Caleb asked.

Circuit shook his head. "Not directly."

"Good," Caleb said. "Because it doesn't just sit there. It pushes back."

Circuit looked at him for a moment longer than necessary. "Yeah," he said quietly. "We've noticed. First flags came from radiation," he added, pulling a secondary data set into the display. "Not consistent enough to track

conventionally, but strong enough to trigger alerts when it spiked."

Caleb studied the readouts as they layered over the route map. The readings didn't behave like standard radioactive material. They fluctuated in ways that suggested instability, but not decay—more like interference, as if something about the material resisted being measured cleanly. "That's how it starts," Caleb said.

Circuit glanced at him. "We've seen these signatures before."

Caleb nodded. "Smaller quantities. Nothing this organized."

Caleb let the data sit for a moment, watching how the readings bent around certain points in the map instead of spreading outward the way they should have. "It doesn't just emit," he said quietly. "It distorts."

Circuit adjusted the projection.

"You're moving something," Caleb observed.

Circuit didn't respond immediately. His hands paused above the interface for a moment, then continued moving, pulling in a restricted feed that overlaid the existing data. "That's what it looks like," he said.

The feed resolved into low-resolution footage, the kind captured under conditions where clarity wasn't the priority. Crates moved through a controlled space: heavy, reinforced, marked in ways that meant nothing outside a narrow band of clearance. The camera angle shifted once, then stabilized, catching a container mid-transfer. Caleb watched what emanated from the crate.

At first, it looked like heat rising from pavement, a faint wavering in the air around the container that made the straight edges behind it bend slightly out of alignment. But the terminal was cold, and nothing in the surrounding equipment produced enough heat to explain what Caleb was seeing. The effect was strongest immediately around the reinforced crate, fading rapidly beyond it like a mirage with no visible source. "Run that again," he said.

Circuit looped the footage.

Caleb watched the container itself rather than the surrounding movement. The shimmer appeared again as the crate crossed the frame, strongest along its sides and lower edge. Light passing through the air around it seemed to bend just enough to make the background waver, the same way distant

asphalt could appear liquid beneath summer heat.

The crate moved, and the shimmer moved with it.

Caleb leaned in closer. "There."

Circuit slowed the footage.

As the container changed direction, the effect followed without delay, remaining concentrated around the cargo before thinning into nothing several feet behind it. The distortion moved in direct alignment with the container, confirming that the cargo itself was producing the effect.

"That isn't normal heat," Bastet said quietly.

"No," Caleb replied. "And it's not something riding the crate." He studied the distortion another moment. "I've seen that signature before, but never around a shipment this size. If it's what I think it is, somebody's moving a hell of a lot more than they should be."

Circuit isolated the image and adjusted the contrast, making the wavering air easier to see without changing its behavior.

The room grew quieter as several people along the edge of the hub noticed the same thing. Caleb watched the sequence one final time, following the shimmer from the moment the crate entered the frame until it disappeared from view. The effect never separated from the cargo.

Caleb leaned back slightly.

Whatever was inside those containers altered the surrounding space strongly enough for a camera to record the effect.

"We've lost teams on less than this," he said.

Circuit gave him a small, sober nod.

Caleb's gaze shifted back to the map, tracking the routes one more time from coast to mountain, letting the entire system settle into place in his mind.

"This isn't testing," he said. "This is operational." He couldn't prove it, but every instinct told him he was right.

"That's new," Bastet said.

"Yeah," Caleb replied.

Circuit looked between them. "You want to tell me what I'm not seeing?"

Caleb let the pattern settle again, confirming it wasn't a one-off artifact or a trick of the feed. "Not yet," he said finally.

Circuit nodded once, accepting that answer without pushing for more. That was how Arcane worked. You didn't explain what you couldn't confirm, and you didn't pretend clarity where there wasn't any.

The projection shifted back to the full map, routes and timelines merging again into a single operational picture. Circuit let the final route settle across the display. "That's everything we've got."

Whiskers pulsed once beside him.

Ervin, who had remained silent through the briefing, stepped forward. "The operation starts with you."

Caleb looked up. "Recon?"

Ervin nodded. "The Port of Seattle. Find out what they're moving and where it's going. Bring us something we can build on, and we'll build the rest of the operation from whatever you find."

Caleb straightened slightly, accepting the assignment without hesitation. "Understood." Behind him, Bastet's purr deepened once, then settled again into its steady rhythm.

Ervin rested a hand briefly on Caleb's shoulder before turning toward the adjoining operations room, where several Arcane personnel were already preparing the next phase of the mission. Circuit gave the map one final adjustment, then followed with Whiskers hovering beside him, leaving Caleb alone at the central table. Around the hub, the rest of Arcane continued its preparations, equipment moving between stations as the operation gathered momentum.

The coordinates pulsed at the center of the display, steady and deliberate, as if marking time rather than location. Caleb watched them for a moment longer, recognizing the pattern taking shape beneath the data. The same quiet, steady voice returned in his thoughts: *You're overcompensating. Let it resolve.*

Caleb adjusted his focus, allowing the pattern to remain where it was instead of forcing it into a conclusion. Nothing about this felt routine—not the routes, the timing, or the way the data resisted being understood. He stepped back from the table. "Let me know when they're ready," he said.

Circuit answered through the nearby comms station. "You'll have them in

five."

Bastet dropped lightly from the copper rail and stepped back into the CatPack, as the front hatch sealed with a quiet mechanical click. "Acceptable," she said.

Caleb turned and scanned the room once more. Personnel were already moving into position, gear being pulled, data updated, everything shifting toward execution without needing to be called out.

Behind him, Bastet's voice returned, quieter this time. "It's wrong," Bastet said.

Caleb looked back toward the coordinates one last time: Packwood. The name meant nothing yet, but the feeling did. "Yeah," he said.

Caleb didn't leave Arcane immediately. He let the room settle first, watching personnel disperse in controlled patterns while gear moved between stations and systems adjusted without a single raised voice. Before heading out, he received Circuit's reconnaissance package through Arcane's encrypted network, confirming the latest coordinates and available surveillance data.

The entire space was already reorienting itself around the mission as he headed back toward the elevator. The elevator carried him back up through the layered structure beneath the city, the hum fading slightly as the doors closed and the pressure of Arcane gave way to the quieter weight of Seattle above. By the time he stepped back into Running Elk's shop, the world had narrowed again, copper and stone dissolving into glass, wood, and the filtered noise of the market beyond.

The drive south was quick, carrying them toward elevation and trees. The EMS CatPack rode secured in the front passenger seat, its clear domed panel facing outward so Bastet could quietly watch the road ahead. She rarely spoke during the drive, preferring to observe the passing world in thoughtful silence.

Caleb felt the transition as density gave way to distance, the constant movement of the city thinning into quieter stretches of road.

By the time the road began to climb, the city had already fallen behind him.

The community emerged gradually along the winding road. Lights grew sparse, traffic disappeared, and homes sat deep behind mossed rock and

dense evergreen. Each property stood far enough from the road to remain concealed until Caleb was nearly upon it.

The gate came into view at the crest of the hill, steel and powder-coated, built with the kind of precision that didn't invite conversation. The guard barely glanced up as Caleb approached. The security system had already authenticated him. The gate opened.

Beyond it, the road narrowed and curved downward through trees and controlled lighting while cold mist drifted low across the ridge. As Caleb's Bronco rolled toward the house at the far edge of the property, Halloween decorations emerged beneath the lantern glow—small pumpkins along the drive, weathered lanterns hanging from low branches, and a few skeletal figures positioned among the trees closer to the house.

A black wooden sign near the front walkway read: BEWARE OF CAT. Smaller silver lettering beneath it added: (She bites. And judges.)

Warm orange lights wrapped neatly around portions of the porch rail while carved pumpkins lined the stone path leading toward the front steps. Most were elegant enough to pass as tasteful seasonal décor, though one had been carved into a disturbingly accurate Egyptian cat face wearing a tiny gold paper crown while another appeared to be sitting on a miniature velvet throne.

Caleb slowed as the headlights swept across the porch. "You said you were keeping it tasteful."

Bastet's voice drifted smoothly through their bond. *I am. I only used three skeletons. The rest are in storage.*

Three is tasteful. Five would have been excessive, she added.

Caleb shook his head with a tired smile. "Your definition of excessive needs work."

Near the front steps, one final wooden plaque rested beneath a lantern: PROTECTED BY ANCIENT GUARDIAN. A small paw print had been pressed carefully into the corner beneath the lettering like a signature.

Caleb stared at it for a long moment. "I'm pretending I didn't see that."

Bastet sounded deeply satisfied with herself. *And yet you did.*

The sight pulled a memory forward before he could stop it.

He was thirteen again, standing in Ervin's orchard under a cold October

moon. Pumpkins lined the rows like silent sentinels, some carved with crude protective symbols and Egyptian hieroglyphs. Bastet sat regally on a haybale wearing a tiny witch hat she had refused to remove, tail flicking with dignified irritation. "You look ridiculous," Caleb had teased.

I look iconic, she corrected, lifting her chin. *There is a difference, small fry.*

Ervin had only chuckled from the porch, watching them with quiet amusement as the three of them carved pumpkins late into the night, the orchard lit by soft lanterns and filled with the smell of woodsmoke and frost.

The memory released him gently, leaving behind the faint scent of pumpkin and cold air.

Caleb pulled the Bronco to a stop near the front walkway and killed the engine. He stepped out, walked around to the passenger side, and retrieved Bastet's EMS CatPack, settling it securely against his shoulder. As he approached the front steps, he noticed a small Amazon package tucked beside the door, partly hidden behind one of the pumpkins. He picked it up and glanced at the shipping label. Lupita Chiquita.

Caleb stared at the name, then slowly shook his head. *Another one?*

I have no idea what you're implying, Bastet replied through their private connection.

Of course you don't.

He carried the package toward the door without another word.

From the outside, clean lines, dark materials, and controlled lighting gave the house the appearance of a modern structure built for efficiency rather than display. Its dark exterior blended naturally with the surrounding trees and rock.

A doormat outside the entrance read WELCOME. UNLESS YOU'RE KAREN. Caleb stepped over it without comment and entered the house, the EMS CatPack resting securely against his shoulder. He let the door close behind him, set the unopened package on the nearby coffee table, and placed his keys beside it.

Bastet remained inside the CatPack as the outside world cut off cleanly, the environment shifting around them almost immediately.

Inside, the house's deliberate design became unmistakable. The layout was

open but structured, every element placed with purpose rather than style. Steel, dark wood, and glass defined most of the space, while equipment and furnishings were arranged with deliberate economy. Natural linen curtains framed the windows, their pale fabric softening the interior without compromising its clean, controlled appearance.

A compact workbench occupied a recessed workspace just beyond the main living area, its tools arranged in a sequence that suggested continuity rather than storage, as if each one had been set down mid-task rather than put away.

The lighting carried a softer tone than Arcane, but it remained deliberate, preventing shadows from pooling in corners without flattening the space entirely. Comfort was secondary to control.

Caleb's copper pendant rested flat against his chest, fixed securely in its usual position. The background noise of Arcane disappeared completely, replaced by a quieter space where every sound carried more weight and every movement felt more defined.

Above him, the ceiling told a different story.

A continuous rail system traced the perimeter of the room, cut with smooth oval openings that allowed uninterrupted movement between spaces. It wasn't decorative and it wasn't subtle. It existed because something in the house required it, and everything else had been built around that requirement.

Bastet shifted inside the CatPack, ready for whatever came next.

The front hatch released with a soft mechanical click, and Bastet stepped out with the same composed precision she carried everywhere else. She didn't pause on the floor or acknowledge it in any way. With a controlled leap, she caught the rail overhead and moved onto it as if it had always belonged to her. Caleb slipped the now-empty EMS CatPack from his shoulder and set it beside the gear rack.

Bastet walked the rail slowly, tail steady, inspecting the room below with the seriousness of someone checking whether her standards had been maintained in her absence. Her attention settled briefly toward the kitchen. *You moved my water bowl.*

Caleb glanced toward it. "Half an inch."

Three-quarters.

"You measured it?"

Bastet looked down at him. *I have eyes.*

Caleb stopped. "That was my argument."

It was foolish when you used it.

"Of course it was."

Bastet continued along the rail. *I'm glad we agree.*

A hammered copper sink sat beneath the kitchen window, its warm metallic surface polished from years of use. Copper utensils hung neatly along the backsplash, each in its designated place. A separate filtration system supplied purified water, reserved for drinking and Bastet's ceramic bowl. Inside, Bastet's food was stored separately—sealed containers arranged with the same precision as everything else; ceramic bowls set aside because anything less had already been rejected. Caleb refreshed her water and set out her evening meal, placing both beneath the rail exactly where she expected them. It was part of the routine between them, performed so automatically neither of them ever mentioned it.

Plastic is unacceptable, Bastet added from above.

"I remember," Caleb replied.

Good.

"You bring that up surprisingly often."

Standards require vigilance.

"That's not an answer."

It was the correct answer.

At the end of the hallway, two doors remained closed. One bore a small brass plaque reading HER MAJESTY'S PRIVATE CHAMBERS. Beneath it, smaller lettering offered a warning: Knock. Wait. Reconsider. A small circular hatch near the top of the frame connected directly to the rail system, allowing access without opening the door itself. The space beyond it remained untouched unless she chose otherwise. In Bastet's mind, this was less a matter of privacy than jurisdiction. Caleb moved past it without comment.

The transition from Arcane to the house settled into him fully now. The structured intensity of the facility had been replaced by something quieter, but not softer. Here, nothing pressed against the edges of his perception,

leaving the open space of the house comfortably ordinary.

Bastet's purr adjusted. *You're thinking too much,* she said.

"Children are disappearing," Caleb replied. As he moved, the bracelet at his wrist shifted slightly, copper threaded through dark stone that didn't reflect light so much as absorb it. He didn't look at it, but he felt it the same way he felt everything else that mattered. "Thinking feels appropriate."

Bastet went quiet for a moment. *Yes. It does.*

Caleb looked up at her. The humor had left her voice completely.

But thinking about them and finding them are not the same thing, Bastet continued. *We find them.*

"Yeah," Caleb said. "We do."

Caleb's phone chimed softly, interrupting the moment.

I hear scratching at night on the rooftop, and there was yowling near the back fence last night. My garden is not a litter box, and something keeps tripping the motion lights. Every time I try to record it, my cameras cut out. This is not acceptable. I will be contacting the HOA.

He didn't finish reading. "Tell me you didn't do any of that," he said, looking up toward the rail.

I would never use her garden, Bastet replied in her precise British accent. *I am classy, cultured, and sophisticated.*

At home, Bastet had her own bathroom with a proper toilet. She had made it abundantly clear that litter boxes were beneath her standards.

Caleb looked up at her. "That's not what her message says."

She's growing pumpkins, Bastet continued, as if that clarified everything. *Large ones, if she's fortunate. She should be thanking us if I graciously left natural organic fertilizer. Allegedly, of course.*

"That's not how it works."

Bastet's tail flicked once as she continued along the rail. *I have my own toilet,* she added. *Why would I downgrade to a garden?*

Caleb stared at her for a second. "That's… not helping your case."

It's not a case, she said calmly. *It's a standard.*

A second voice slipped into Caleb's thoughts, bright with amusement.

Oh, Karen's a dumb bi—

Language, the calmer voice cut in, steady and controlled.

Caleb didn't look up.

That was fast.

Bastet remained unruffled.

It needed to be.

Another message appeared on his phone. *I heard something again. This is escalating.*

Caleb rubbed the bridge of his nose. "You're escalating Karen."

She escalates herself.

"That's not a defense."

It's accurate.

He set the phone face down on the counter, letting the message sit unanswered. "She's going to keep pushing," he said.

She always does, Bastet replied.

"That doesn't mean you help her."

It means she requires correction.

Caleb glanced toward the window, then back up at the rail. "Try not to escalate things while I'm sleeping."

That depends on her behavior.

"That's not reassuring."

It's honest.

A brief pause followed before Bastet added, *Allegedly.*

He crossed the room toward the gear rack, where everything sat arranged and ready. The EMS CatPack rested beside it while Bastet completed another circuit along the overhead rail with quiet satisfaction.

Caleb pressed his thumb against a recessed panel beside the rack. The surface shifted with a soft mechanical response, revealing a compact reinforced compartment where weapons and equipment were secured in fitted mounts rather than stored. Above him, Bastet continued her inspection as if nothing had changed.

"We're leaving soon," Caleb said.

I know.

He watched her move along the rail, her pace measured and deliberate, as

though the house still required inspection before she allowed it to be left unattended. At last he said, "Let's try not to leave a situation behind us."

That depends on how it behaves while we're gone.

"That's not how situations work."

It is if you plan correctly.

Caleb didn't argue with that.

The shift back into work required little effort. The pattern from the briefing hadn't faded; if anything, it had sharpened enough that ignoring it was no longer an option. The same quiet, steady voice returned. *You're aligning too early.*

I know, Caleb replied internally.

Then wait.

I am waiting.

Another voice followed, lighter and edged with amusement. *You're pacing.*

I'm standing still.

Mentally pacing.

Bastet's purr settled into a steady rhythm above him. *Something's wrong,* she said.

Caleb nodded. "Yeah."

This time, there was no humor, no correction, and no attempt to reframe it into something manageable. Just recognition.

Caleb turned back to the open equipment compartment. He removed the pistol first, the familiar weight settling naturally into his hand. The worn black frame showed years of honest use, while the engraved "963 Hz" marking along the slide caught the light for only a moment. Its oversized upper barrel sat above two smaller gold-lined ports, giving the weapon a distinctive three-port profile. He checked it once.

Packwood remained at the center of the pattern, along with whatever was taking children off those roads and making sure they never came back.

Caleb returned the pistol to its fitted mount and stepped back from the compartment long enough to change.

The suit came off in stages, each piece set aside with the same control he brought to everything else. Jacket first, then the tie, then the shirt, the fabric

replaced with something that moved better and didn't pretend to belong anywhere outside the work.

The Nirvana shirt went on without thought. The dark gray fabric sat worn but intact, the faded red smiley face stretched across the front.

Dark jeans followed, fitted close enough to stay out of the way without restricting movement. The change wasn't dramatic. It was functional, and that was enough.

Caleb pulled the black leather jacket on last, its worn surface broken by deep red panels across the shoulders and down the sleeves, silver zippers catching the light as he settled it into place. Its weight felt different from the suit, less formal and more direct. The version of him that had moved through Pike Place was gone by the time the zipper caught.

He returned to the open compartment, secured the 963 in its holster, placed the EMS CatPack inside, and removed the tactical version from its fitted mount.

The EMS pack had been built to pass unnoticed, its clear front and neutral structure designed to invite as little attention as possible. The tactical version did the opposite. Its reinforced frame held sharper lines, the surface matte and controlled, with the cat-head emblem integrated into the front plate rather than applied to it. Thin channels of red illumination traced the seams, dim at rest as if waiting for input rather than displaying it. Above the cat-head emblem, the word BASTET glowed in red lettering across the reinforced front panel.

Caleb lifted the tactical CatPack and settled it onto his shoulders. The system adjusted instantly, distributing the weight evenly across his frame. The compartment sealed behind him, the wall returning to its original form.

Bastet paused on the rail, watched him for a fraction of a second, then dropped in a controlled arc and stepped into the tactical CatPack without hesitation. The seal closed. The red accents brightened briefly, then settled.

Better, Bastet said.

Caleb checked the straps once. "But it's still a backpack."

Bastet sounded deeply offended. *It is a tactical transport platform.*

"It's a backpack."

It has armor.

"It's a backpack with armor."

You continue to miss the point.

Caleb gave the strap a final adjustment. "I understand the point. I just enjoy calling it a backpack."

A quieter voice moved through his thoughts, steady and grounded. *Center first.*

I am, Caleb replied internally.

Another voice followed, lighter and edged with energy. *Now we can actually do something.*

Not yet.

Soon, it answered.

He picked up the matte-black helmet and slid it on, the visor lowering into place with a soft seal. The chin strap clicked home out of habit, checked once with the same unconscious routine he applied to every piece of equipment before a mission.

The helmet's internal optics engaged immediately, balancing glare, contrast, and motion without interfering with the layered perception he carried naturally. The enhanced display sharpened the world around him while leaving his other senses undisturbed. Caleb moved toward the door.

Outside, the October air had cooled further, the last light fading behind the tree line and leaving the ridge in a muted gradient of shadow and reflection. Moisture sat across the asphalt in thin layers, catching the lantern light and turning it into a shifting surface that reflected more than it revealed.

The Ducati Streetfighter waited beneath a covered parking area beside the house, just beyond the driveway. The bike didn't belong to the quiet around it, but cut through it. Even at rest, it held tension in its frame, every exposed line built with purpose instead of restraint. The geometry was aggressive without being exaggerated, compact where it needed to be and open where it mattered, as if the design had removed anything unnecessary. Caleb took a second longer than usual before approaching the bike.

The Ducati demanded Caleb's full attention. Every input produced an immediate response, leaving little room for hesitation or distraction.

He stepped beside the Ducati and ran one hand briefly along the frame. Then he mounted it.

The red frame caught what little light remained as Caleb settled into position, sharp against the muted surroundings.

The CatPack adjusted immediately as his posture shifted, redistributing its weight with a precision that kept his center clean. Bastet moved slightly inside, not reacting to the motion so much as aligning with it, her presence settling into the same rhythm without resistance.

You do enjoy this part, Bastet said.

"It's efficient," Caleb replied.

It's fast.

"That too."

It's dangerous.

"That too."

You always sound happier when danger is involved.

"I am not happy."

You bought a Ducati.

"I bought reliable transportation."

Bastet was quiet for a moment. *That may be the dumbest thing you've said all week.*

The proximity fob recognized him before his thumb reached the starter.

The engine came alive with a controlled surge. Its vibration traveled through the frame and into Caleb, grounding him in something physical, immediate, and measurable.

The gate opened as he approached.

The guard looked up briefly this time, tracking the movement just long enough to confirm what he already knew before returning his attention to the console. Caleb didn't slow as he passed through, the road beyond opening into a controlled descent that curved through the trees. He rolled forward, then accelerated.

The bike leaned into the road as the first turn approached, the tires holding clean contact against the damp surface as the lantern lights streaked across his visor in brief, controlled flashes. The forest closed in on either side, dense

and quiet, absorbing sound rather than reflecting it.

As the road dropped away from the ridge, the uneasy sense Caleb had carried from the briefing sharpened again. He couldn't identify its source, but the patterns he had seen at Arcane continued to trouble him. The shipments, the missing children, and the distortions surrounding the cargo were connected somehow. He could feel it, even if he couldn't explain why.

You're still thinking about Packwood, Bastet observed.

"Hard not to."

Then trust what you've seen. We know something is wrong. The rest will come.

Caleb leaned into the next curve, the road opening briefly as the elevation dropped. The skyline came back into view in the distance, the city lights cutting through the dark in sharp, defined lines.

The calmer voice moved through Caleb's thoughts, steady and measured. *You're already trying to solve what you haven't seen.*

Someone has to, Caleb replied mentally.

Another voice followed, lighter and edged with unmistakable amusement. *And here I thought we were finally going to have some fun.*

Caleb didn't respond. He pushed the bike harder.

The road straightened, the distance collapsing faster as the line between preparation and execution disappeared beneath him. The pattern had fully settled now, not as information, but as certainty.

Bastet's purr deepened slightly. *This one feels different,* she said.

"Yeah," Caleb said. "I know."

Chapter Two

The Silent Port

Caleb killed the Ducati's engine in a shadowed maintenance lot three hundred yards from the main terminal, letting the machine roll the final distance on momentum before guiding it into a narrow gap between a tall stack of idle pallets and a rusted maintenance container. The October night air carried the sharp bite of salt mixed with diesel exhaust, and the bike's frame ticked softly as it cooled, the sound disappearing almost immediately into the wider ambient noise of the port. He remained seated for a long moment, allowing the environment to settle and resolve around him before he made any further move. The tactical CatPack rested comfortably against his shoulders, its weight balanced and familiar. Bastet stayed inside, a steady presence of composed vigilance, while the two silver orbs remained docked flush on the rear of the pack, silent and ready.

Caleb released his helmet's chin strap, lifted it off, and set it on the Ducati's seat before moving away from the bike. He continued on foot along the outer perimeter, boots nearly silent on the wet concrete that reflected sodium-orange lights in fractured, shifting patterns. The lights bled unevenly across puddles and shallow depressions, turning the ground into broken mirrors that caught and shattered the skeletal silhouettes of massive cranes rising against the black water beyond. Container stacks towered like cold metal canyons, their long corridors stretching out in ways that felt unnaturally quiet, the metal walls channeling wind and distant sounds into unpredictable echoes. Distant ship horns groaned low and heavy over the harbor, their

echoes stretching across the water, while closer forklift movements arrived in sporadic, muffled bursts that faded before fully reaching him.

Beneath the brine and machinery exhaust, Caleb recognized the same subtle pressure he had encountered around other anomalies. He kept the sensation at the edge of his perception and continued moving.

The port continued its ordinary rhythms around that underlying pressure. Machinery cycled in the distance with metallic groans and hydraulic sighs. Cranes shifted position with slow, deliberate movements, and water lapped steadily against steel hulls—yet none of those familiar sounds managed to displace the constant thread of unease woven through the environment. It stayed there, constant and unmoving, present in everything.

Caleb reached the perimeter fence but did not touch it. He followed it toward a service entrance where the maintenance lanes connected to the container yard. The gate stood partially open for authorized equipment traffic, leaving enough room to slip through without climbing the barrier. Caleb waited in the shadows, studying the camera sweeps before committing to the crossing.

The security cameras swept in predictable, repeating arcs, each pass wide and resetting with a slight off-center hesitation that revealed the pattern clearly once you knew what to look for. The work was deliberate and rehearsed, designed to create the illusion of security while leaving exploitable windows. He adjusted his timing instinctively, crossing the open stretch between sweeps in smooth, unbroken strides that kept him invisible against the background. No alarms triggered. No sudden lights or movement responded from the darkness. That seamless passage was exactly the point of his approach.

Caleb kept to the deeper shadows as he advanced, climbing with quiet efficiency to an elevated vantage point wedged securely between two stacked rows of containers. The metal surface felt cold and slick with condensation under his palms, the faint dampness seeping through his gloves and chilling his fingers as he pulled himself higher. From this height, the terminal unfolded below him in a scene of orderly, tightly controlled chaos that stretched out in every direction. The Triad crew worked with disciplined

restraint that bordered on ritualistic precision. No voices carried on the night air at all. Only crisp, economical hand signals passed between the men, each gesture acknowledged instantly and acted upon without hesitation or discussion. Lights were kept to the bare minimum, positioned only where strictly necessary, leaving large portions of the surrounding yard swallowed in deep shadow even though the port itself remained fully operational. They unloaded reinforced crates from a mid-sized freighter docked farther down the line, transferring them in precise sequences from crane hook to ground crew before routing the loads along predetermined paths that deliberately avoided the more exposed and visible lanes.

A gangway lowered slowly from the freighter. Several Triad members shifted their attention toward it without interrupting their work. One man descended alone: broad-shouldered and measured, his heavy boots striking steel with a slow, deliberate rhythm.

No one spoke. They simply made room.

The crew moved most of the crates in a familiar rhythm born of repetition and practiced coordination. One crate received different treatment, drawing Caleb's attention immediately.

The men handled that particular box with visible, almost reverent caution.

Packwood surfaced again in Caleb's mind, along with the unusual increase in missing children Circuit had tied to the same routes. Whatever was inside that crate, somebody was moving it with the same care most people reserved for explosives.

Either that's incredibly valuable, Caleb said internally.

Or incredibly dangerous, Bastet replied.

Those are becoming the same thing.

They have always been the same thing.

Their spacing adjusted without any spoken instruction, each person compensating for the others as they worked in tight formation. Hands never rested on the surface longer than absolutely necessary, and no one leaned their full weight into the load the way they did with ordinary cargo. Even the forklift operator corrected his approach angle twice before fully committing, the machine idling for a noticeable extra moment as if the driver sensed

something off about the balance or the contents inside. Then Caleb noticed the air immediately around the crate.

At first, it looked like heat rising from pavement, a faint wavering that made the straight container seams behind it bend slightly out of alignment. But the October night was cold, condensation glistening across the surrounding steel, and nothing nearby produced enough heat to explain what he was seeing. The effect remained strongest immediately around the reinforced crate, fading rapidly beyond it like a mirage with no visible source. Caleb narrowed his eyes. Whatever was inside that crate wasn't just making the crew nervous.

Bastet remained inside the tactical CatPack, her posture poised and composed even within the confined space. Her striking green eyes caught faint reflections from the orange lights filtering through the vents, the thin dark band and etched sistrum pendant at her throat briefly gleaming as she made a small shift.

Caleb's voice dropped to a whisper. "Bastet. Eyes in the sky."

I'm on it.

One silver orb detached silently from the rear of the CatPack, hovered for the briefest instant to stabilize itself, then rose in a perfectly soundless line. It threaded between the stacked containers before settling high along the arm of a nearby crane forty yards away, staying well within operational range.

Caleb kept his attention on the activity unfolding below, trusting the system to handle the orb's ascent.

A forklift rumbled past below, its engine low and throaty, casting long shadows across the wet concrete as its headlights swept between containers. Reflections stretched and broke across puddles whenever the machine changed angle. One of the Triad men gestured sharply with two fingers. Two others immediately adjusted their grip on the special crate, sliding it onto a flatbed with measured, almost cautious slowness. The only audible sounds were the soft scrape of metal against metal and the occasional creak of tightening straps under tension. No one spoke a single word. The crew maintained their tight formation as the crate continued deeper into a secondary corridor carved between the towering stacks of containers. The driver of the flatbed waited nearby, arms crossed tightly over his chest,

observing the entire process with an expression that gave nothing away.

The orb on the crane arm held its elevated position, effectively invisible from ground level. Bastet received its incoming feed without any outward comment, processing the data with her usual clean precision.

Caleb shifted his weight slightly on the narrow metal ledge, boots finding firmer purchase against the damp surface as he settled into position. His attention remained fixed on the operation below, moving between the workers, the reinforced cargo, and the routes being cleared ahead of it.

His breathing stayed slow and even, the cold air tasting of metal and brine with every inhale. He had run surveillance operations like this many times before, but this shipment carried one detail he couldn't dismiss: the faint wavering in the air immediately around the unusual cargo. The distortion persisted against the cold October night. Six threads ran at once—the crew below, the vehicle positioning, the crane arm geometry, the light reflections, the wind patterns, and the faint mirage-like shimmer surrounding the unusual cargo. Most people would have filtered it down to background noise.

His brain didn't.

Never had.

Years ago, doctors had called it ADHD.

Arcane had different theories.

Caleb had stopped caring what anyone called it as long as it kept working.

Messy, the bolder voice muttered.

Effective, the calmer one replied.

Bastet's voice came through their link, smooth and controlled.

You're steady. Good. They are not.

The calmer voice returned, minimal and grounding.

Stay high. They're armed.

Caleb did not respond to the last comment. His gaze continued tracking the careful choreography playing out below. Another crate came off the ship and received the same cautious, respectful treatment as the previous one. The crew moved it steadily toward the waiting flatbed. No plates were visible from Caleb's elevated angle. The driver stood beside it, arms still crossed, watching the transfer without expression or unnecessary movement.

The orb continued feeding Bastet an uninterrupted view from above. Caleb adjusted his grip once more on the container edge, fingers steady despite the cold seeping through his gloves. The tactical CatPack sat perfectly balanced against his back, its weight distributed for long-duration surveillance. The second orb remained docked and ready. He would only deploy it if the situation demanded more eyes on the ground.

Below, the last reinforced crate was secured carefully onto the flatbed. The crew pulled a heavy dark tarp across the load and cinched it down, concealing the reinforced crates beneath an anonymous industrial silhouette.

The broad-shouldered man didn't follow the crate. He stepped away from the loading lane instead and took up a position apart from the main crew, watching the operation without a word.

The Triad members continued their disciplined work around him, maintaining the same tight formation as the reinforced cargo moved deeper into the secondary lanes.

He stayed exactly where he was, elevated and unseen. The night stretched around him in every direction—cranes towering like silent guardians overhead, container canyons forming their own private, labyrinthine maze, and the black water in the distance reflecting fractured orange light in shifting patterns. Everything held—too still, too aware.

Bastet's ears flicked once inside the CatPack, a small, precise movement that registered through the link before any words came.

The elevated orb is seeing it too.

Caleb stayed exactly where he was, unmoving on the narrow metal ledge.

The shimmer?

Yes.

That mattered. Whatever Caleb had noticed around the unusual cargo wasn't limited to his own perception.

Below, the Triad members continued their disciplined work in the adjacent lanes while machinery cycled through its usual rhythm. Near the route the reinforced crates had taken, the cold air still carried a faint mirage-like shimmer, subtle enough to miss unless someone knew exactly where to look.

The workers avoided the affected area without discussing it. Each time

someone crossed near the route the crates had taken, they gave it a little extra room—never enough to look deliberate, but enough for Caleb to notice the repetition.

He watched it happen twice.

Then a third time.

Whatever the crew knew about the cargo, they had been taught to keep their distance.

The effect was easier to see now that Caleb knew where to look. The air above the route wavered faintly, bending straight container seams by a fraction before they resolved again. It resembled heat rising from pavement, but Bastet's thermal feed showed nothing warm enough to account for it.

Temperature?

Ambient, Bastet replied.

Caleb narrowed his eyes.

Then it isn't heat.

The orb on the crane arm adjusted its angle by a few degrees, silent and unseen from below. Bastet processed the incoming feed without comment for several seconds, offering nothing until it became necessary.

The broad-shouldered man Caleb had watched descend from the freighter now stood apart from the main crew. His posture was relaxed but fixed, the kind of stillness that carried weight. A battered mustard-colored fishing slicker hung heavy over dark waterproof bibs, its raised hood casting deep shadows across a weathered face and thick gray beard. Black rubber boots planted him solidly against the wet concrete, completing the look of someone who might have spent his entire life working these docks if not for the way everyone else kept their distance. A large, rusted hook hung from a short chain at his side, the metal glinting dully whenever the orange light touched it. He did not touch the hook. He did not need to. Its presence alone seemed to reinforce the space he occupied.

The stillness around him held longer than it should have. Not frozen—contained. Caleb tracked the man indirectly, watching how the surrounding crew responded to him instead of giving him unnecessary attention. The Triad members adjusted around him without acknowledging it, giving him

space in ways that weren't part of their earlier formation. It wasn't respect. It was accommodation. That difference mattered. The hook at his side shifted again with his movement, metal brushing against fabric with a sound too soft to carry, but visible in the way it disturbed the line of his coat. The object didn't belong to the rest of the operation. It wasn't functional in the same way the crates or vehicles were. It was personal. Caleb didn't need to understand it yet. He only needed to remember it.

People like that rarely carried symbols.

They carried histories.

And Caleb had learned long ago that the dangerous ones usually advertised themselves before they acted.

Bastet's attention shifted toward him. *That one,* she said quietly.

The guy with the hook?

Yes.

I'm calling him Hook Guy until further notice.

Your naming conventions continue to disappoint me.

The man finally turned from the loading lanes and headed toward a black SUV waiting beyond the main operation.

He's moving, Caleb said internally.

I see him.

The second Sentinel Orb detached silently from the CatPack and dropped below Caleb's position, threading between the container stacks until it settled behind the departing man. At Bastet's command, it fired a tracking dart no larger than a pinhead. The dart embedded itself in the thick rubber near the heel of his boot without breaking his stride.

The man never looked down.

Before reaching the SUV, he paused and tilted his head slightly—not searching or scanning, just registering something that didn't belong. His gaze swept the container stacks, passing close to Caleb's elevated vantage without landing on it. After a moment, his head returned to neutral.

The slight movement suggested he had felt something. Whether he understood what caused it was another question.

Then he climbed into the SUV, and the vehicle began moving toward the

exit lane with its headlights off.

The faint shimmer remained along the route the crates had taken. From Caleb's angle it was barely visible, but the elevated orb gave Bastet a cleaner view.

Second orb, Caleb said internally.

The unit broke away from the departing SUV and moved back along the container edge, descending toward the affected lane.

Keep it outside the route.

I know how reconnaissance works.

Just checking.

You should stop.

The orb moved closer.

Through Bastet's feed, the effect became easier to define. Straight lines behind the wavering air appeared fractionally displaced, much like objects viewed through rising summer heat. The distortion was strongest near the path the reinforced crates had followed and weakened steadily farther away from it.

Bastet held the orb in place.

Thermal?

Still ambient.

Radiation?

A brief pause followed while the orb sampled the air.

Elevated.

Caleb's attention sharpened.

How elevated?

Enough that I would prefer you not stand in it.

That technical?

Extremely.

Caleb watched the faint shimmer for another moment.

Whatever the crates contained, they had left more than tracks behind.

The yard continued operating around the anomaly. A low slap of water against the pilings carried through the container lanes, uneven and delayed. The illusion of normal operation rebuilt itself quickly. That was the design.

Open lanes filled again with routine motion, forklifts resuming steady cycles, crews re-forming around the remaining cargo. Nothing in the visible system acknowledged what had just moved through it. Lights didn't change. Sound didn't shift. Procedures held. Only the movement around the affected route had changed. Caleb watched the patterns re-form, tracking how the operation closed around the absence of the crate rather than reacting to it. Whatever had moved through the corridor hadn't broken the system. It had been expected. That made it worse.

Caleb let the evidence settle. The effect wasn't coming from the workers; it had followed the cargo, and the Triad crew knew enough to avoid prolonged exposure. Whatever was inside those reinforced crates, the route through the yard had been planned around moving it safely.

Still reading it? Caleb asked internally.

Bastet was silent for a heartbeat.

Yes. Weakening, but slowly.

Residual?

Most likely.

That was enough. Whatever the cargo was, it left a measurable footprint behind.

From his elevated position, the port had already begun to look ordinary again, but the faint shimmer along the cargo route refused to belong.

Caleb shifted his weight, tested his grip and angle, then began his descent down the container wall.

His hands moved along the surface with quiet precision, finding seams and structural edges without searching for them. Each movement stayed controlled, avoiding sudden shifts or unnecessary contact that might translate into sound. The geometry of the stack gave him a clean route if he respected it, and he did. When the angle changed, he dropped the final stretch rather than forcing a clumsy climb, absorbing the impact through bent knees and a slight turn of the hips that dispersed the force without a trace.

The landing disappeared into the surrounding noise of the port. No echo carried. No mechanical rhythm shifted. He stayed where he was for a moment, letting the surrounding space settle around him again. The port continued

its layered cadence—distant machinery cycling through heavy breaths, water dragging against hulls in a slow, repetitive rhythm, the long metallic groan of a crane adjusting under load, and the faint chain-rattle of unsecured gear catching intermittent gusts off the harbor.

All of it sounded familiar. None of it felt right.

"Path?" he asked quietly.

He wasn't following the Triad members anymore.

He was following the route the reinforced cargo had taken.

The faint optical shimmer was weaker here, but Bastet's sensors were still registering the residual radiation. Caleb intended to follow that footprint as far as he safely could before the readings faded or the operation erased every other trace.

Bastet did not answer immediately. He felt her attention shift through the link as both scouting orbs fed her continuous streams of visual and thermal data. The processing happened in silence, fast and exact, her presence steady inside the CatPack. When she spoke, her tone carried its usual precise, measured cadence.

Left corridor, she said. *Two units rotating back. Stay tight to the wall and avoid center exposure.*

That's a lot of words for 'don't get caught,' Caleb replied internally.

You require additional guidance, Bastet replied.

You're a rude hairball.

No, just accurate.

Caleb pushed off the shadowed container base and moved. The corridor narrowed quickly, compressing into a steel channel between stacked containers where the overhead sodium lights failed to reach evenly. Patches of illumination broke apart across the wet concrete, leaving deeper pools of shadow that didn't quite align with the fixtures above. He kept his shoulder close to the container face, using uneven seams, support ridges, hanging chains, and bundled tarps as partial cover while he advanced. The smell here was stronger than in the open yard—thick with salt, diesel, oxidized metal, old rope, and the stale chemical tang of treated canvas that had been wet too many times.

The narrow container lane played tricks with sound. Footsteps echoed between the steel walls while machinery from the open yard arrived muffled and incomplete. His mind tracked everything at once without effort: foot placement, light angles, patrol timing, orb position, possible exits, and the weakening sensor trace left along the cargo route.

Six threads running clean.

The first guard appeared at the far end of the lane, flashlight angled low as the beam swept across the ground in a steady arc. A second followed three steps behind, posture tighter, movement quieter. Neither spoke. When the lead beam neared the patch of corridor where the crate team had shown unconscious avoidance earlier, the guard adjusted by instinct and stepped around it without acknowledgment.

"Two," Caleb murmured.

I see them, Bastet replied. *First one favors his left side. The second compensates for it.*

One orb slid soundlessly along the upper edge of the container row ahead of the guards, staying just outside their peripheral vision. The second remained elevated, feeding Bastet a wider view of the surrounding lanes. Caleb let the men advance deeper into the corridor, then crossed behind them in two quick steps and slipped into the adjacent lane before the flashlight beam swept back across the corridor.

This lane was worse. The stacked rows pinched closer, turning the air colder and holding onto the smell of wet rope, old rust, and machine oil. A loose chain tapped softly against corrugated steel somewhere ahead, the sound arriving sharper than it should have. Caleb eased forward, every part of his focus widening without losing center. Arcane called it his scatter-shield—the way his attention tracked too much at once, sorted it into separate threads, and kept the wrong things from settling into blind spots.

Three ahead, Bastet said after a beat. *Spacing is close. They're not talking.*

Caleb slowed near a stack break where the corridor widened by less than two feet but opened enough angles to make the space dangerous. He adjusted his line by inches, keeping close to the deeper shadow cast between two overlapping stacks.

Movement caught at the edge of his vision. Then the flashlight snapped across the corridor faster than expected and caught the outer line of his shoulder for half a breath.

Contact, Bastet said, her tone hardening.

The first guard turned. "Hey—"

Caleb was already moving. He closed the distance in two strides and stepped inside the guard's reaction window before the man could finish processing what he had seen. One hand knocked the flashlight off-line hard enough to send its beam skidding across the corrugated steel wall, while the other landed a short, compact strike to the solar plexus that folded the guard forward and stole the rest of the shout from his chest. Caleb redirected the falling weight into the container face, controlling the impact so it landed as a heavy scrape instead of a report.

The vibration carried farther than it should have, traveling through steel and hollow space in a way that made distance harder to judge. For a moment, the corridor felt thinner, as if the sound had pressed outward instead of dissipating.

The second guard reacted faster. He came in low and close, no wasted roar, just a tight knife arc meant to open space. Caleb stepped into the line of it, trapped the wrist before the blade could complete its path, and turned the joint just enough to collapse the alignment. The guard tried to drive through with shoulder and body weight, but the corridor worked against him. Caleb took the momentum and sent him sideways into the corrugated steel with a jarring metallic shudder that echoed harder than he liked. The guard lost his footing and began collapsing against the container wall.

Messy, the bolder voice muttered.

Correct it, the calmer one replied.

I'm working on it, Caleb thought.

You created it, Bastet replied.

That's a strong accusation.

It is an observation.

A third guard rounded the corner with his rifle rising too fast for comfort. The lower orb dropped from above and fired a brief pulse of concentrated

light across the guard's eyes. The man flinched and turned his face away on instinct.

Caleb used the half-second exactly as it arrived. He pivoted off the second guard's collapsing frame, crossed the angle before the rifle found center, and struck upward into the throat with measured force that shut down breath without crushing cartilage. The guard dropped where he stood. The rifle hit the ground with a dull clatter Caleb felt in his molars.

Caleb held still immediately, listening past the ringing pressure in his ears and the hard pace of his own breathing. Nothing fired back. No sudden lights changed. No shout rose from the parallel lanes. The wider machinery noise continued its distant rhythm as if the port itself had decided this interruption did not yet deserve acknowledgment.

You're welcome, Bastet said, satisfaction threading through her voice.

For what? Caleb asked.

Preventing that rifle from rearranging your face.

I had it under control.

Of course you did. That's why I intervened.

You have seconds, not minutes, Bastet said. *There's movement two corridors over.*

Caleb crouched fast and checked the three guards in the order they had fallen. All alive. The first man was already trying to pull air back in, fighting to regain control of his breathing. The second had lost the knife and most of his orientation. The third would be useless for a little while.

That mattered. Dead men ended investigations; living ones created questions.

He nudged the flashlight deeper into shadow with his boot, hooked the rifle by its sling and dragged it just out of the most obvious line of sight, then pushed off the wall and moved before the corridor could teach him a lesson about staying still after violence.

The maze tightened again as Caleb slipped deeper between the container rows. His breathing remained controlled, but the fight had raised his pulse and tightened the muscles across his shoulders. Somewhere behind him, the port was beginning to react.

You have company closing, Bastet warned.

I figured.

Then keep moving.

Caleb ducked beneath a hanging chain, caught it with one hand, and used the swing to vault a low stack of bundled netting and dock hardware that blocked the cleanest route ahead. His boots hit the far side softly, but the landing sent a sharp jolt through his already strained body. He absorbed the impact, steadied himself, and kept moving.

The corridor smelled stronger here of old water, machine grease, and the sour chemical note of treated canvas left too long in damp air. Somewhere behind him, voices had started—not loud yet, but closer than they should have been if the bodies had truly vanished into the environment.

He cut right at the next break, then left again when Bastet redirected him from a sweep pattern he could not yet see. The orbs adjusted with him, one staying high enough to keep the lane geometry clear, the other dropping lower when the shadows thickened and the spacing got mean. The port still smelled of salt, fuel, and old rain trapped in industrial metal, but now the sharp scent of sweat had entered the mix, evidence of his body pushing toward the line where control became cost.

He pushed deeper anyway. No hesitation. No wasted motion. The immediate threat had been handled. The rest of the yard simply had not caught up to it yet, and when it did, he intended to be somewhere else entirely.

Caleb slipped through the final seam of shadow between the outer container rows, moving low and fast along the service paths. The voices behind him were growing louder but still disorganized—the system correcting itself in pieces rather than all at once. He kept to the maintenance lanes and the deeper pockets of darkness, using the fading operation noise and the last scattered shadows to stay unseen. The CatPack sat balanced against his spine, its weight familiar and steady as he moved.

Once he reached a safer distance near the outer fence line, he paused long enough to catch his breath and scan the perimeter. No immediate pursuit lights swept the area. The tarped flatbed carrying the reinforced crates was already moving toward a separate exit lane, taking the shipment away from

the route the man with the rusted hook had followed in his SUV.

The shutdown wasn't random. It followed a sequence. Lights didn't just go out—they dropped in layers, each section fading as another picked up just long enough to cover the transition. Movement mirrored that pattern. Forklifts cleared in controlled arcs, crews dissolving into vehicles or sealed entry points without lingering in the open.

Even the idle equipment seemed positioned with intent, angled in ways that reduced visibility into deeper lanes while preserving clear lines for anyone who knew where to look.

Caleb tracked it without shifting position, letting the pattern resolve instead of forcing it. This wasn't cleanup. It was containment. Whatever had moved through the yard tonight wasn't being hidden after the fact—it had been accounted for from the beginning.

That mattered because the crate wasn't breaking the pattern. It was what the pattern had been built around.

"Orbs," he said quietly.

Bastet didn't need further instruction. She recalled both scouting units with a soft mechanical click that only he could feel through the link. The silver spheres slid back into their docking ports on the CatPack with practiced precision, the faint vibration traveling through the harness.

"Tracker?" Caleb asked as he continued toward the maintenance lot where the Ducati waited.

Still attached.

"To his boot?"

Unless he changed footwear while I wasn't looking.

Caleb glanced toward the exit lane. "He's in the SUV."

Yes.

"Signal?"

Clean. The tracker is relaying his position through Arcane.

"Good."

Circuit will have him as long as the dart keeps transmitting.

Caleb replayed the operation in his mind. The shipment had gone one way and the hooded man another. Two vehicles, two routes, and Caleb doubted

the separation had been accidental. He didn't understand the reason yet, but he intended to find out.

That bothered him more than the shipment itself. He let the pattern settle for one final pass, committing it to memory before breaking from cover.

He reached the Ducati without incident, the bike still exactly where he had left it, tucked between the stack of idle pallets and the rusted maintenance container. The helmet waited on the seat. He slipped it on, secured the strap, then mounted in one smooth motion, the familiar frame settling under him like an extension of his own body.

From his position, he had a clear line of sight across the yard. The last work lights were cutting out now, the operation shutting down with the same practiced efficiency Caleb had watched all night. Forklifts went silent. Crews disappeared into vehicles or buildings. Within minutes, little remained beyond the orange glow of security lamps and the distant slap of water against the pilings.

Bastet's voice came through the CatPack's encrypted comm.

"This wasn't the shipment," she said. "This was the start."

The proximity fob recognized him. The Ducati came alive beneath him with a low, controlled growl that vibrated through the frame and into his chest. The engine note was quiet enough not to carry far across the lot, but powerful enough to remind him he still had speed on his side.

The encrypted comm crackled softly inside his helmet.

"Circuit," Caleb said into the comm.

"I've got your tracker," Circuit replied.

"I figured you would," Caleb said.

"Your guy is still riding in the SUV. They've cleared the port and are putting distance between you," Circuit reported.

Caleb rolled the Ducati out of the maintenance lot and onto the access road without answering. He kept his speed controlled, waiting for Circuit to confirm the vehicle's direction before committing to a route.

Then Circuit's voice returned.

"Tracker confirms they're heading south out of Seattle."

Caleb waited.

"Vehicle's staying off I-90. They're taking the southern route."

That narrowed it.

A later update came as Caleb continued toward the highway.

"They've connected with US-12. Heading west."

Caleb smiled faintly beneath the helmet.

"Westport route."

"Looks that way," Circuit replied.

"I'm transferring the tracker to satellite coverage now."

"I'll keep you updated."

"Copy."

Roughly two and a half to three hours under normal conditions. Tonight the road would be mostly empty, the darkness absolute once he left the city glow behind. The man with the hook already had a head start. For now, all Caleb could do was trust Circuit to keep the tracker alive while he closed the distance.

Caleb was reacting now, not dictating pace. That knowledge sat heavy but useful in his chest. The wind cut cold across his helmet as he opened the throttle, the Ducati surging forward with smooth, predatory power. The highway unspooled beneath him, the scattered glow of highway lamps giving way to the black expanse of night on either side. He kept his focus sharp, the scatter-shield in his head still sorting inputs even as the miles disappeared.

Seattle's industrial glow gradually disappeared behind him as the highway opened west. Traffic thinned, reflective markers replacing streetlights until the Ducati's headlamp carried most of the road ahead. Caleb didn't push the speed to its limit. Not yet. He held it just below that threshold, balancing distance with control, letting the bike carry him forward without drawing unnecessary attention.

For the next few minutes, the comm remained silent. No update yet. That was good. It meant the tracker was still alive. This wasn't a static target or a warehouse endpoint where time worked in his favor. This was a moving node in a system that had already proven it could adapt faster than most operations he had seen.

The window to intercept wasn't closing yet, but it wasn't waiting either.

He leaned slightly into the next curve, letting the bike settle into the line as the highway bent west. No hesitation. No wasted motion.

The tracker signal stayed constant, a quiet thread pulling him forward through distance rather than urgency. Caleb let it sit just below conscious focus, close enough to monitor without forcing his attention onto it. That balance mattered. Too much focus slowed reaction. Too little lost the line.

He adjusted his speed slightly, letting the Ducati stretch into a sustained pace that would close ground without drawing attention. The road was mostly empty now, long stretches of black broken only by the occasional reflective marker or distant headlights passing in the opposite direction. Every few miles, the terrain shifted subtly—low tree lines thickening, elevation changing just enough to alter the way sound carried and light behaved.

The further he moved from the city, the clearer the pattern became. This wasn't a one-off movement. It was part of something structured. The kind of structure that didn't rely on speed or secrecy alone, but on timing—on sequences that locked together cleanly whether anyone was watching or not.

Caleb exhaled slowly and adjusted his grip again, settling deeper into the ride as the highway curved west. He thought about the rusted hook. The quiet authority. The way every Triad member had instinctively made room when the man stepped off the freighter. Whatever the hooded man was involved in… it was larger than a single shipment.

He leaned into the next curve, the Ducati settling beneath him as the highway stretched farther into the darkness. The miles slipped steadily beneath the tires, but his thoughts never left the port. The mirage-like shimmer around the cargo. The elevated radiation Bastet had detected. The disciplined choreography. The man who had stepped off the freighter as though the entire operation belonged to him.

The pieces belonged together. Caleb just couldn't see how yet. Every passing mile widened the gap. Caleb tightened his grip on the handlebars. For the first time that night, the destination mattered less than the clock.

If he arrived too late… whatever waited at the end of that tracker would disappear before he ever laid eyes on it.

Chapter Three

Harbor of Shadows

The highway narrowed long before the town appeared, the clean stretch that had carried Caleb out of the city breaking down into darker, tighter lanes that curved through dense stands of evergreen. The Ducati's headlamp carved a narrow path through the October darkness, picking out reflective markers, damp patches of asphalt, and the occasional sign that flashed into view and vanished before it fully registered. The air had shifted miles back, losing the heavy industrial weight of the port and settling into something colder and cleaner, edged with damp earth and salt carried inland from the coast. The ride had smoothed into a steady rhythm, engine vibration and breath syncing into something controlled and sustainable.

Caleb adjusted his posture slightly, easing tension from his shoulders without reducing speed as the bike settled into a line that favored control over aggression. Hours of riding and the earlier confrontation at the port had left a dull heaviness in his limbs, but his focus remained sharp. The scatter-shield in his head continued sorting overlapping inputs into clean threads without forcing him to prioritize one over the other.

The tracker hasn't deviated, Bastet said.

And people always say criminals are unpredictable.

Most criminals are.

These ones?

These ones made spreadsheets.

Bastet had spent most of the ride quietly processing the feed, letting the

route resolve before offering her assessment.

They won't change course, Caleb replied. *Not if the departure window's real.*

It is.

He didn't ask how she knew. Experience had taught him that if Bastet sounded certain, the argument was usually already over. He trusted her read on the pattern more than the raw signal.

The road bent again, tighter this time, forcing him to lean before it opened toward a darker horizon. The trees thinned just enough for a faint glow to appear ahead, low and scattered, not the wide wash of city light but smaller, more contained. Westport revealed itself gradually: a cluster of weathered structures pressed against the edge of open water. He followed the tracker deeper into town.

Caleb rolled off the throttle slightly as he entered the outer stretch, letting speed bleed down to match the environment. The road widened, then fractured into smaller access routes that fed into the town. Buildings appeared in uneven clusters, low and worn, set back from the road with just enough space to feel separate but not isolated.

Westport was a working town, built around the rhythm of the water and the people who made their living from it, not a place designed for visitors or anything that didn't belong.

Signal's ahead, Bastet said. *The tracker's slowing near the waterfront.*

Caleb eased off the throttle. *Our guy?*

Same signal. He's approaching the docks.

Then we're right behind him.

Caleb followed the direction without looking down, letting the pull guide him rather than the projection itself. The smell hit before anything else—stronger salt, wet wood, fuel, and the lingering trace of fish and processing waste that never fully left a place like this. It was different from the port: less mechanical, more lived-in, but no less heavy.

Caleb angled slightly toward the waterfront, slowing just enough to bring the docks into view without committing himself to any one approach. Across the waterfront street, a broad working trawler sat moored alongside the pier, its reinforced decking and heavy rigging visible beneath the dock lights. A

small group of men moved across it under low dock lights. Even at a distance, their movement carried a deliberate weight that didn't match the rest of the town. None of them moved like men working a job; they moved like they were holding a position.

None of them spoke, and that absence stood out more than any visible motion. One of the men paused and glanced toward Caleb's side of the street, watching for a fraction too long before returning to his task.

Caleb filed the reaction away.

Tracker's stopped beside the trawler, Bastet reported.

Caleb studied the vessel. *So he's meeting someone aboard?*

Possibly. I can't confirm that from the signal alone.

A moment later, Bastet's attention sharpened. *He's moving again. Away from the vessel.*

Where to?

Across the street. Toward the buildings.

Caleb watched the men aboard the trawler. None appeared surprised by the activity around them. Whoever they were, they behaved like men protecting an operation rather than preparing for an ordinary fishing trip.

The buildings tightened as he moved closer to the water.

A few neon signs flickered weakly in the darkness, their light bleeding unevenly across the damp pavement.

Left, Bastet said.

He turned onto a narrower street that ran parallel to the docks, the ocean just beyond the last row of structures. It remained unseen, but its presence was constant in the steady push of wind and the distant, rhythmic crash of water against the break.

The tracker signal stabilized, no longer pulling forward but holding near the waterfront.

He's stopped again, Bastet said. *Inside one of the buildings across from the trawler.*

Caleb glanced between the trawler and the weathered buildings lining the street.

Can you narrow it down?

Working on it.

He let the Ducati roll the final stretch before cutting the engine, allowing the bike to coast into a shadowed space near the edge of the street. The sudden drop in engine noise exposed the environment more clearly. Wind moved through the gap between buildings while loose metal shifted somewhere along the docks and faint voices carried from inside one of the nearby structures. He scanned the street without turning his head, taking in the absence of movement as much as anything present. There were no people outside, no idling vehicles, and no obvious surveillance, but that didn't make the space clean. It meant the opposite—nothing here was careless enough to leave itself exposed.

"Orbs," Caleb said quietly.

Positioning, Bastet responded immediately.

The silver spheres disengaged silently, one rising along the edge of the building line while the other slipped lower, threading the narrow space between structures toward the waterfront. Their movement was precise and controlled, avoiding direct lines of sight.

Caleb swung off the Ducati, boots landing quietly on the damp pavement. He released the chin strap with a soft click, lifted the helmet free, and rested it carefully on the seat. He ran a hand briefly through his hair before letting it fall back into place. The cold air pressed against his skin immediately, sharper here than it had been on the highway, carrying more moisture and less movement.

I have him, Bastet said.

Caleb looked toward the waterfront. "Where?" he asked softly.

The building across the street.

A weathered bar sat halfway down the block, facing the waterfront and the trawler moored beyond the opposite side of the street. Caleb nodded once. "Then that's where we're starting."

He kept his attention on the vessel a moment longer. "The boat isn't going anywhere until the tide turns," he said quietly.

No, Bastet replied. *But the man we followed here might.*

Caleb turned toward the weathered building instead of the docks. *If*

somebody knows what this operation is really about...

Bastet finished the thought. *They won't be standing on the deck announcing it.*

Caleb shifted his gaze. The bar was a low, weathered structure with fogged windows and a sign that flickered just enough to suggest it had been doing that for years without anyone bothering to fix it. The sound from inside carried steadily—voices, glass, movement—nothing unusual on the surface. Across the street, the trawler remained active while the tracker held inside the bar. Two locations. One operation. Caleb studied both for another moment.

Connected.

Yes, Bastet replied.

A second voice edged in, low and amused. *Now it's interesting.*

Stay focused, the calmer one replied.

Caleb ignored both.

He moved toward the entrance at a controlled pace. The air felt heavier near the building, holding warmth and sound instead of letting it dissipate. As he reached the door, it opened. The shift hit immediately.

The air was warm, thick with stale beer, fried food, damp wool, and the lingering salt that clung to everything in a place like this. The lighting was low and uneven, a mix of old fixtures and flickering neon that left parts of the room brighter than others for no clear reason. The place didn't just smell used—it felt settled into, like it had been absorbing the same conversations for years without changing.

Country music played quietly from somewhere near the back, present enough to fill the space without dominating it. A handful of men sat at the bar or in scattered booths, most of them in heavy jackets and work boots, their postures relaxed but not careless. A few heads turned when Caleb stepped fully into the room, but most returned quickly to drinks and low conversation. Two men at the bar kept watching, their eyes moving over the CatPack, his jacket, and the unfamiliar face with the quiet assessment of locals deciding whether someone belonged. Both wore long, scraggly goatees that hung beneath their chins, one dark and uneven, the other streaked with gray.

One of them leaned back slightly on his stool. "That a pet carrier?" he asked, voice rough with disuse. "Or you just like carrying your problems on your

back?"

The man beside him looked Caleb over and smirked. "Didn't think Seattle sent their lost-and-found down this far."

Caleb glanced at the two men with a faint smile. "Lost and found? Funny, Seattle reported two missing goats from the landscaping crew. There's a reward for bringing them back. You guys wouldn't happen to be housebroken, would you?"

The first man's smirk faded, though not completely. His friend gave a quiet laugh and turned back toward the bar, letting the challenge die without becoming anything more.

You're being polite, the bolder voice said, almost disappointed.

Give him time, the softer voice replied.

Caleb ignored them and let his eyes sweep the room one final time before choosing a small table along the back wall. It gave him everything he wanted: a clear view of the entrance, the windows, most of the room, and enough distance that anyone approaching him would have to do it in the open. He pulled out the chair facing the room and sat, leaving enough space behind him for the CatPack to remain clear of the wall. The chair opposite him remained empty. A middle-aged bartender wiped down the counter with the slow, practiced rhythm of someone who had seen every kind of customer walk through the door and learned not to ask unnecessary questions. He wandered over without hurry. "Coffee?"

"Black." The bartender nodded once and disappeared.

Caleb used the few quiet seconds to study the room. Conversations stayed low, drifting between weather, fishing, and equipment—nothing unusual and nothing worth remembering.

Opposite back corner, Bastet said. *Hook Guy.*

Caleb let his eyes drift instead to the mirror hanging behind the bar. The hooded man's reflection came into view without Caleb turning his head: broad shoulders, dark coat, and the rusted hook. He remained alone in the back corner, watching Caleb through the mirror. The bartender returned, setting the coffee down without a word. "Anything else?"

Caleb shook his head. "No." The bartender disappeared again.

Steam curled slowly from the mug. Caleb wrapped his hands around it without drinking. The reflection moved.

The man with the hook stood, crossing the room without hurry. Nobody greeted him. They simply shifted enough to let him pass. He stopped beside the table.

For a moment, neither man spoke. Then, without asking permission, the stranger pulled out the opposite chair and sat.

"You're late," the man said.

Caleb left the coffee untouched while he studied the man sitting across from him. Conversations still drifted through the room in low currents. The jukebox carried its quiet country rhythm, and glasses met worn wood in the same steady cadence, yet the balance had shifted. The space no longer belonged entirely to the people in it.

Caleb let the silence settle for a heartbeat before answering. "Didn't realize I was on your schedule," he said.

Up close, the stranger looked less like a man and more like something that had settled into the shape of one and learned how to wear it well enough to pass. He was a broad-shouldered white man with pale, weather-beaten skin and features that suggested European ancestry, though Caleb couldn't place his origins. His frame carried the dense, balanced weight of someone accustomed to physical work. The coat hung heavy and damp from the outside air, and the rusted hook at his side caught the dim light in short, dull flashes whenever he shifted slightly.

The eyes didn't match the rest. They were too steady, too aware, tracking without effort and without hesitation.

"You came a long way to say that," the man replied. His voice carried the same quality as his presence—low, controlled, and absent of anything unnecessary. It wasn't threatening. It didn't need to be.

Caleb shrugged slightly. "I came a long way because you left something interesting behind."

The man's gaze didn't break. "You think it was left behind?"

Caleb let that sit for a second, then tilted his head just enough to suggest mild consideration. "Overlooked, abandoned, or deliberate," he said. "And

judging by how smoothly your operation ran, I'm betting on the last one." His eyes flicked briefly toward the mirror, then back. "You don't strike me as careless."

A faint shift crossed the man's expression—recognition that the conversation had already stepped past the surface layer.

Around them, the bar continued without interruption, but the people closest to the exchange had gone quieter, their attention drifting toward the table.

One of the men near the door adjusted his stance slightly, not turning, but closing off a fraction of the exit line.

"People come through here sometimes," the man said. "They ask questions they don't understand. Usually they leave before it becomes a problem."

Caleb rested his forearm on the edge of the table, posture relaxed, tone unchanged. "That the policy, or just a suggestion?"

The man's mouth moved, not quite a smile. "Depends how quickly they learn."

Inside Caleb's head, the bolder voice stirred with quiet amusement. *He likes you.*

Focus, the calmer one said.

Caleb ignored both.

"Funny thing about learning," Caleb said. "It usually happens right after something goes wrong."

The man's eyes narrowed slightly, not in anger, but in interest. "Something go wrong for you tonight?"

Caleb met his gaze evenly. "Depends how you define wrong."

There was a brief silence; the kind of pause where both sides adjusted, recalculated, and tested for weakness without committing to movement.

"You were at the port," the man said.

Bastet's voice slid directly into Caleb's thoughts. *He knows.*

I gathered that.

Your investigative abilities continue to astound me, Bastet replied.

I'm gifted.

Caleb took a slow sip of coffee before setting the mug down. "You run a lot

of ports?"

"I notice patterns," the stranger replied. "Yours stood out."

Caleb let out a quiet breath that might have been a laugh. "That's a problem. I try to blend."

"You're not very good at it."

"I've been told I'm memorable."

"That wasn't a compliment."

"Those are usually the memorable ones."

The man's gaze shifted past Caleb's shoulder, settling on the CatPack visible behind him. A quiet dismissal crossed his expression.

"You carry too much with you," he said.

Caleb glanced back over his shoulder. "In my defense, she insisted on coming."

Bastet's response arrived immediately in his thoughts. *As if I'd let you wander into a place like this without adult supervision.*

The man's attention returned to the CatPack on Caleb's back. He had caught a glimpse of the clear dome and its small feline occupant when Caleb first entered, and his curiosity clearly hadn't faded.

"You bring that into a place like this," he said quietly. "That's either confidence…"

He let the pause hang.

"…or a mistake."

Caleb felt Bastet's attention sharpen. *I dislike him.*

That makes two of us.

No. I dislike him professionally.

What's the difference?

I'm considering options.

"Depends," Caleb said to the stranger. "You always ask questions you don't need answers to, or just when something makes you nervous?"

The shift was small, but it landed.

"I ask questions when something doesn't fit," the stranger said.

Caleb tilted his head slightly. "Must be exhausting. Everything not fitting."

Caleb pressed the opening.

"Crates don't usually leave the air shimmering behind them," Caleb continued, voice still even. "Especially when it's forty degrees outside and the thermal reading says there's no heat. They don't usually leave elevated radiation behind either. So either you've got bad cargo… or you don't understand what you're moving."

The man's jaw tightened, just enough to register. "You don't know what you're dealing with," he said.

Caleb's eyes drifted briefly toward the rusted hook. "So…" He looked back up. "You actually pick women up with that thing, or is it compensating for something else?"

The stranger didn't answer. He studied Caleb for another moment. "You got a name, smartass?"

Caleb smiled faintly. "Depends."

"On what?"

"Whether you're introducing yourself first."

The man studied him for a moment. "You can call me The Fisherman."

Caleb glanced at the rusted hook. "The Fisherman?"

"That's what I said."

"Is 'The' your first name?"

The Fisherman's expression didn't change. "Keep talking."

Another quiet beat passed between them. Neither man looked away.

Caleb studied him for a moment. "You know, you look like the guy they put on frozen fish-stick boxes. Only I'm guessing you're not here to sell me dinner."

The Fisherman's expression remained unreadable. "You're observant," he said.

"Occupational hazard."

"Maybe."

Caleb's eyes dropped briefly to the hook one last time.

"But I know one thing."

The Fisherman waited.

"That hook isn't the most dangerous thing you're carrying."

The Fisherman didn't react, but the room did. A man near the far wall

straightened. Another near the bar adjusted his grip on his glass without drinking. Outside, through the fogged window, movement along the dock changed pace, the timing just slightly too coordinated to be ignored.

Careful, the calmer voice murmured.

Let him, the other voice said, quieter this time, carrying an edge of amusement. *Now we're getting somewhere.*

Caleb almost reacted but didn't push further. *Not yet.*

"You've got a window," he said instead, tone dropping just enough to change the weight of the words. "Tide turns, you're gone. That right?"

The Fisherman held his gaze for a long moment. "You already know the answer."

Bastet's voice came quietly through their private connection. *He expected us.*

Yeah, Caleb replied mentally.

That bothers me, Bastet said.

Yeah.

Then you know you can't afford a mistake.

The hook shifted again, brushing against fabric with a soft scrape. "And I know," The Fisherman said, "you're not here to watch."

Caleb finished the coffee in one steady movement and set the mug down with controlled precision. "No," he said. "I'm not."

Another pause followed, shorter this time and far more dangerous.

"You're alone," The Fisherman said.

Caleb's mouth twitched. "Am I?"

He felt Bastet's immediate offense through their telepathic bond. *I am literally attached to your back. This guy is as sharp as a marble.*

Fair point, Caleb replied mentally.

Thank you, Bastet said.

One of the men near the bar moved before the moment could settle, stepping in close and slamming both palms down against the table with a sharp, explosive crack that cut through the surrounding conversation. "Enough," the man growled, leaning forward as though he expected Caleb to flinch.

Caleb looked down at the hands resting on the table. Then up at the man.

Before the man could react, Caleb caught both wrists, pulled sharply toward himself, and let the man's own momentum do the rest. His forehead slammed into the table with a solid crack that carried through the room. His body folded immediately, unconscious before it reached the floor.

Caleb released him at once, not holding the motion any longer than necessary, letting the weight collapse where it fell without adding anything extra to it. No one else moved to follow it up, and that told Caleb everything he needed to know about how the room had just read the situation.

The Fisherman didn't so much as glance at the unconscious man. His eyes remained fixed on Caleb, his expression unchanged, as though losing one of his men was an inconvenience too minor to acknowledge.

Conversations thinned instead of stopping, voices dropping just enough that the absence of sound became more noticeable than the sound itself. A glass was set down more carefully than it had been lifted. A chair shifted an inch, then stopped. No one rushed in, and no one backed away. They were waiting to see if it would become something else.

Caleb adjusted his sleeve slightly as if nothing had happened. Then the room resumed.

The people closest to the exchange didn't look directly at Caleb, but their awareness had shifted, their posture tightening in small ways that suggested they were no longer just part of the background. The man on the floor was still breathing, still unconscious, but no one reached for him. That absence mattered more than any reaction would have.

Outside, through the fogged glass, movement along the dock changed in response, the figures near the vessel adjusting position in a way that mirrored what was happening inside without needing to see it.

Caleb didn't acknowledge any of it directly. He glanced once toward the window, then back to The Fisherman.

The Fisherman's mouth moved again, just enough to suggest he understood the answer without needing to hear it. "You don't walk into a place like this without expecting it to end one way or another," he said.

Caleb stood. The chair shifted quietly against the worn wooden floor.

The movement was smooth and unhurried, but it shifted the room more

than anything he had said. A few heads turned again, this time not out of curiosity but awareness. The men near the door adjusted their positions by inches, not blocking the exit yet, but closing space.

"That's the thing," Caleb said, adjusting his jacket slightly as he stepped away from the table. "I don't expect it to end here."

The Fisherman watched him, the stillness returning to his posture, heavier now, more deliberate. "Good," he said. "Because it won't."

The bartender passed nearby, collecting an empty glass from the neighboring table. Caleb stepped around the unconscious man sprawled beside his chair, pulled a bill from his pocket, and dropped it beside his empty mug.

"Keep the change," he said, giving the bartender a brief nod. He glanced toward the man on the floor. "And somebody call this guy a cab. I think he's had one too many."

Without waiting for a response, Caleb turned and walked for the door without rushing or looking back. It swung shut behind him with a dull thump, cutting off most of the bar's warmth and low conversation.

The cold hit harder once Caleb cleared the doorway, the bar's heat and low conversation sealed behind him. He kept walking without looking back, measured and controlled, giving the space ahead time to reveal how it meant to close. He crossed the empty street toward the waterfront, the trawler waiting beyond the dock line under the low harbor lights.

The dock lights cut narrow lanes through the fog, enough to catch the sheen on wet planks, the hanging loops of rope, and the edges of mooring posts worn smooth by years of strain. Moored alongside the pier, the trawler sat low and broad against the water, its heavy rigging shifting softly while a few deck lights burned in muted pools across the working surface. At least two crewmen remained aboard, moving between the stern and wheelhouse while the men on the dock tightened their positions around Caleb. The men near the vessel were no longer pretending to work. Their spacing had tightened. Their attention had sharpened. Whatever casual cover the dock had offered a few minutes ago was gone.

Behind him, the bar door opened. The Fisherman stepped out into the cold air with the same controlled weight he carried inside, coat hanging damp and

heavy, the rusted hook suspended from a short chain at his side. The metal shifted against his coat with each measured step, its presence as deliberate and unsettling as the man carrying it. Two of the men from inside followed first, then another from the far side of the dock line, with one more shape shifting near the stern of the vessel as the pattern resolved into something more honest. Four men, cleaner than before, plus the one who actually mattered.

Caleb kept moving until he had a little room around him, then stopped and turned to face the Fisherman. His eyes met the man's for a moment before shifting toward the others spreading out along the dock, keeping their positions within his field of view. "No more talking?" he asked.

The Fisherman stood still for a second, eyes fixed on him. "You had your chance. You should have kept walking."

Caleb's mouth twitched faintly. "That's usually what people say right before they start making bad decisions."

He glanced at the men closing in, then calmly removed his glasses and slipped them into their protective case. "You look like the type who'd hit a guy wearing glasses," Caleb said, securing the case inside his jacket. "So I'll save you the temptation."

One of the men to the left took a step forward, broad and heavy through the shoulders, hands loose at his sides in the way of someone who thought he could close distance without paying for it. Another hung back near a piling, holding an angle that would matter if the first rush failed. The two nearest the boat looked like dockworkers until Caleb studied their posture. Their weight sat too far forward, their stillness looked practiced, and their eyes tracked too much.

Bastet's voice slid into his thoughts, composed and precise. *They're trying to fold you.*

Relax. I got this, Caleb replied, confidence edging toward arrogance.

The bolder voice in his head—Asmodeus—gave a low, satisfied laugh. *Finally.*

The opening riff of Metallica's *Whiskey in the Jar* erupted inside Caleb's skull with the force of amplified sound, sudden and visceral, surging through him like an adrenaline spike. The rhythm locked into his movement, setting

a tempo beneath the moment before the first body ever committed. It sharpened his timing without taking over, feeding the aggression already coiled there.

Asmodeus sounded delighted. *Try not to embarrass me.*

The first henchman lunged. He came in fast and low, boots hitting the wet boards with enough force to carry momentum into a shoulder-driven collision meant to crush Caleb backward into the mooring posts before the others closed. Caleb waited one half-second longer than instinct preferred, then pivoted on the line, letting the rush overshoot just enough to break the angle. One hand caught cloth and bone at the shoulder while the other guided the man's balance past its center. The redirect was tight, efficient, and brutal. The man hit the piling chest-first, hard enough to knock the breath out of him in a sharp burst without ending the fight.

Caleb stepped through the recoil and drove an elbow into the back of the man's neck as he folded, then released before the body could drag him off balance. The impact jarred up his own arm, feedback traveling through bone and tendon. The second one was already there.

This one came smarter, circling from the blind side with his weight set lower, reaching instead of charging, hands open in the first beat as if he meant to grab and hold rather than strike clean. Caleb shifted backward just enough to deny the lock, then snapped a kick into the outside of the man's knee. The impact landed with a thick, ugly jolt that should have taken something from him. It didn't. The man staggered but did not drop, his recovery coming too quickly for the damage that had just landed.

That registered. The man wasn't fully human—not enough for Caleb to say it aloud yet, but enough to file away.

The man came back through the pain as if it belonged to somebody else. Caleb stepped inside his second attempt before the grab could close, drove a short strike into the throat, then another into the ribs and a third under the jaw. The sequence would have ended most men. This one absorbed it, backed a step, and smiled with blood on his teeth. It wasn't much of a smile, but it was enough.

Behind them, The Fisherman didn't move. He watched. That told Caleb

more than the smile did.

The third and fourth men committed together now, whatever pretense of staggered engagement they had been holding discarded in favor of pure numbers. One cut from the right with a length of chain wrapped twice around his fist, while the other came straight through center with the sort of controlled aggression that only worked if someone else forced the reaction first. Caleb shifted toward the chain because it mattered more.

The first swing came horizontal and fast, aimed at the head but meant to control range even if it missed. He ducked under it, felt cold metal whisper past the back of his neck, then drove forward before the man could recover the line. His shoulder hit sternum. His forearm crushed upward under the chin. He stripped the chain hand off its path and slammed the man into the railing hard enough to make the old wood shudder. The impact rang through damp timber, and Caleb felt the feedback travel up his own frame.

Caleb felt the familiar pressure building behind his eyes as he focused on one of the charging men. His eyes narrowed, locking onto the attacker as he gathered the force and released it in a concentrated push. The invisible impact lifted the man clean off his feet, sending him hurtling sideways across the dock.

Caleb turned his head sharply, his gaze following the man through the air as he maintained the direction of the force. The attacker slammed into a stack of crab cages hard enough to twist metal and explode rusted wire across the planks. The impact shook the boards beneath Caleb's boots.

One of the remaining attackers hesitated after the impact, yellow eyes widening for the first time since the fight began.

Pain detonated behind Caleb's eyes just as violently.

A warm line of blood slipped beneath Caleb's nose. He caught it instinctively with the back of his hand. Too much.

"What the hell are you?" the attacker snarled.

"Currently?" Caleb said. "A migraine with anger issues."

Caleb moved on instinct, stepping into the opening and driving the exchange forward, but the backlash hit immediately. His vision tunneled, and the next command reached his body a fraction too late.

Bastet's voice cut in. *You're bleeding.*

I'm fine, Caleb replied mentally, already moving.

The pressure behind his eyes spiked again, sharper now, like something pushing outward from the inside. Caleb forced it down immediately. He had already spent more than he intended, and burning through the rest now would leave him with nothing when he actually needed it.

The fourth man hit him from the side a fraction later. Not a clean strike. More like getting rammed by something that weighed too much and had forgotten the difference between force and finesse. Caleb took the collision across the ribs, gave ground and turned with it before the follow-up could land square. Pain flared sharp under his right arm.

Caleb converted the step into a pivot, trapped the next swing on the outside, and buried a punch into the man's liver with everything the angle gave him. Again, it should have ended something. Again, it didn't.

The man grunted, folded for half a beat, then came back with the strain showing around his eyes and mouth. Beneath the skin, unnatural muscle density pushed against the human appearance. The control was slipping just enough for the truth to push at the edges.

Bastet's voice returned. *They're showing.*

Little busy, Caleb replied mentally.

Oh, that's right. You've got this, Bastet replied, her sarcasm unmistakable.

Caleb didn't answer because the chain came again. The man at the railing had recovered faster than he should have and snapped the wrapped metal across the space between them with a short, brutal economy that forced Caleb to choose.

He chose down, dropping his level and moving forward at the same time, entering the range the chain was supposed to deny. His fist landed twice in the man's body, once high and once low, then his head drove into the bridge of the man's face with a wet crack that bought him exactly one second of space. He spent it on the fourth man.

A hand shot out for his throat. Caleb slapped it aside, caught the wrist, and rolled under the second arm before the grip could close. He turned the shoulder hard enough to wrench the upper body off-line, then used the

motion to sling the man straight into the metal winch assembly bolted near the dock edge. The impact rang through steel and damp timber at once. This time, the man stayed down. The first one—the one who had hit the piling—was coming back to.

Caleb exhaled slowly through his nose, resetting his stance as the music inside his head kept time with the fight, every heavy beat daring him to push harder than was wise. The dock had shifted from a worksite into a confined fighting space, every rope coil, bollard, crate, and rail now part of the math. He could use the space. He could manage angles. He could break momentum.

None of them were staying down the way they should. Their edge was clear now—strength that absorbed what should have dropped them, speed that closed gaps too fast, recovery that cheated the cost of every hit. The Fisherman stepped forward at last, neither rushing nor eager. He entered the edge of the fight with the calm of someone who had known exactly how it would unfold and had waited only until it pleased him to participate. "You hit hard," he said.

Caleb kept his eyes moving between him and the two men still capable of closing. "You hire soft. Clearance rack?"

The Fisherman's expression didn't change, but his voice dropped a notch, steady and cold. "Don't test my resolve, boy."

Asmodeus gave a low, devilish laugh inside Caleb's head. *Oh, I like this one. Push him. Make him bleed for it.*

Uriel's raspy voice cut in immediately, his voice calm but firm.

Stay calm. Stay focused.

Caleb didn't smile. He simply adjusted his stance, voice level and collected. "Resolve looks expensive when you're paying with other people's bodies."

The Fisherman's gaze drifted once across his men, then returned to Caleb. "They were told not to tear the place apart too early."

"That your way of apologizing?"

"No." The hook lifted slightly. "That's me being fair."

Caleb's attention dropped to the hook for less than a second.

The man with the chain moved again from the edge, trying to exploit the glance, and Caleb answered on instinct. He stepped off-line, caught the

wrist on the return, and drove a palm strike straight through the man's nose. Cartilage went. Blood came fast.

Caleb ripped the chain free on the recoil and wrapped once around his own hand before turning just in time to catch the first man's second rush. This one came uglier now, whatever restraint he'd been working under giving way to something more animal and less strategic.

Caleb snapped the chain across the man's face to stop the entry, then kicked the front leg out from under him and brought him down hard on the dock planks. The boards shook. Caleb unwound the chain from his hand and tossed it aside, freeing his hand as the remaining attackers closed in.

The man growled, the sound finally pushing the truth all the way to the surface. Werewolves. Or close enough that arguing the taxonomy while one was trying to kill him seemed like a spectacular waste of time.

The 963 rested against Caleb's side, close enough to draw, but the attackers were already inside his firing space. Worse, he hadn't brought silver rounds. The pistol could still hurt them, but without the specialized ammunition, he couldn't count on putting them down before they recovered. He kept his hands free and his attention on their movements, relying on his close-quarters training to keep the attackers off balance.

Now we're having fun, Asmodeus said, the internal pulse sharpening.

Bastet's voice cut in. *Caleb.*

The one on the ground was already trying to come back up. Caleb stomped once into the sternum to buy space, turned, and caught movement from the side in time to absorb only part of the hit the next henchman threw. Claws hadn't come out, but his fingers had changed, thickening as the knuckles swelled, distorted, and seemed to grow larger beneath the skin.

The blow clipped his jaw and sent bright white static across his vision for a beat. He answered with a hook to the body, another to the face, then drove the man backward into a stack of bait crates that exploded in wet wood and old smell beneath the impact. The dock stank suddenly of fish rot, diesel, and fresh blood. The Fisherman moved through it without hurry. He was close enough now that Caleb could see the details he'd missed inside: weather-cracked skin at the hands, old scars at the throat, the faint rawness where the

hook's harness disappeared beneath the coat as though the body had long ago stopped objecting to the metal and had simply learned to hold it.

Nothing theatrical about him. That was the problem. Monsters were easier when they needed the room to know they were monsters.

"You should've stayed in the bar," The Fisherman said.

Caleb wiped blood from the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand and settled his feet again. "And miss whatever this is? Doesn't seem polite."

The man with the broken nose was up. The one from the crates was up, a little slower. The one on the dock planks was pushing to his knees. Too many, too close, and moving fast.

Caleb shifted left, forcing the approach into narrower lines, using the railing at one side and the cable spool at the other to limit how many could come at once. It bought him space, but not enough to slow the pressure completely.

The first man came in again and took a straight right that snapped his head back, but he didn't drop. The second pushed through immediately after, absorbing a hit that should have ended it and returning with far more force than Caleb expected. The third was already back in the fight.

The timing compressed, each movement stacking on the next without the gaps he needed to control the flow. Caleb caught one arm, redirected, drove a knee into the thigh, then pivoted into the next strike before the recoil had finished. It worked, but only just, and the margin was shrinking with every exchange. The riff in his head hit the chorus hard for a moment. *Faster,* Asmodeus urged, his voice cutting through the music.

That left The Fisherman, who still hadn't actually attacked. He just watched Caleb work, read the rhythm, and took one more step into range. The music in Caleb's head swelled.

Asmodeus sounded almost reverent. *There he is.*

The Fisherman lifted the hook just enough to show exactly how much reach the thing gave him and exactly how much damage he expected one good line to do.

Caleb felt the whole dock narrow around that single motion.

The first swing came fast enough to surprise him. The hook cut through the air with a weight that didn't belong to metal alone, forcing him to shift

harder than he wanted to and costing him ground he hadn't meant to give.

The rhythm broke for a fraction of a second, just long enough for the others to feel it, and the space around him tightened in response. They weren't testing him anymore. They were closing, and this time there wasn't going to be room to move.

The Fisherman recovered from the missed swing and held his position a few steps away, hook angled across his body as his men pressed in around Caleb. He didn't rush another strike. He watched for the opening they were supposed to create.

Bastet, a little help? Caleb asked through their private connection.

Oh? I thought you had this, she replied, satisfaction unmistakable.

Bastet.

Already handled.

The two Sentinel Orbs, which Bastet had kept concealed along the dockside buildings, swept into the fight like angry silver hornets. They moved on opposing angles, answering her commands with precise bursts of acceleration. Bastet remained safely inside the CatPack, directing both units through their private connection. The first orb slammed straight between the legs of the nearest werewolf with a meaty, resounding thwack.

The werewolf's eyes bulged. A monstrous howl erupted from his throat, rising with all the fury of a creature born to terrify its prey, only to crack halfway through into a shrill, almost cartoonish "AWWOOOO—YEEEeee!" His knees buckled hard enough to make the dock planks shudder. He dropped to one knee, both hands cupping his groin, face twisted in pure agony while his enhanced healing tried and failed to keep up with the fresh insult. The pain hit deep and personal, turning his supernatural strength into something suddenly, humiliatingly fragile.

The CatPack speaker clicked on behind Caleb's shoulder, and Bastet's voice cut across the dock, cool and commanding with a razor edge of superiority. "This one's all bark. No balls to speak of."

Asmodeus chuckled inside Caleb's thoughts, the riff still pounding beneath his amusement. *Nothing worse than a tough guy singing soprano.*

One of the werewolves hesitated and glanced toward the CatPack. "The

cat talks?"

Caleb felt the corner of his mouth twitch despite the burning in his side. "And somehow she's still the smartest one here."

"Low intellect. Lower vibration," Bastet added. The werewolf's attention lingered on the CatPack a fraction too long.

The distraction was perfect. While the first werewolf wheezed and tried to stand, Caleb drove a knee into the second one's thigh, buckling the leg with a sharp crack of impact.

He followed with a short, vicious uppercut that snapped the head back. The man staggered but didn't drop—until the second orb whipped around in a tight arc and struck across his forearm hard enough to break his balance and send him stumbling off-line. This one didn't manage much of a roar. He let out a sharp, undignified yelp and folded forward like someone had cut his strings, crashing face-first into a stack of bait crates that exploded in wet wood and old fish rot. The smell bloomed thick and nasty over the dock, mixing with the salt and diesel in the air.

Asmodeus stirred inside Caleb's head, the heavy riff of *Whiskey in the Jar* pulsing through like a dirty laugh.

Eyes front, Uriel's voice cut in, steady and grounded. *The distraction is useful. Don't lose the rhythm.*

The Fisherman remained a few steps away, hook still raised, irritation flickering across his weathered face as he watched his men dissolve into embarrassed groans. For the first time, his attention shifted from Caleb to the Sentinel Orbs. Caleb used the opening without hesitation.

The second orb whipped in fast and clipped the inside of the wiry werewolf's knee. The joint buckled immediately. His charge collapsed into an awkward stumble as he fought to stay upright.

Bastet's tone stayed coolly composed. *Their recovery is impressive. Their coordination is not.*

Caleb didn't lose it. He used the chaos exactly as it was handed to him. He closed the distance in two quick strides, grabbed the nearest werewolf by the collar while the man was still cupping himself and trying to rise, and slammed him sideways into the metal winch assembly. The impact rang out

loud across the water. The werewolf slid down the steel, groaning low, too busy protecting his bruised pride to mount any real defense.

One of the downed werewolves tried to push back up, snarling through the pain, claws starting to slip through at the fingertips as the change threatened to push further. Bastet wasn't having it. *Their timing is deteriorating,* she observed coolly.

The remaining werewolf—the wiry one who had recovered fastest earlier—roared in frustration and charged Caleb head-on, trying to ignore the hovering orbs and power through. Caleb let him come, pivoted at the last second, and used the man's own momentum to redirect him straight into the path of the second orb, which slammed into his shoulder and knocked him off-line before he could recover.

The impact landed with another solid thump. The werewolf's shoulder twisted sideways under the strike, and his charge dissolved into a clumsy stumble that carried him straight past Caleb's position.

Caleb followed through with a grounded strike to the kidney, then another to the back of the neck that finally dropped the man to all fours. He stayed there, panting heavily, too distracted by the fresh wave of pain to rise quickly. The dock felt narrower now, the mist pressing in as the lap of waves against the hull mixed with groans, boots scraping wet planks, and the rising throb of the trawler's engines.

A werewolf lunged through the opening on Caleb's left. He felt the familiar pressure building behind his eyes as he focused on the attacker, then thrust one hand forward and pushed. A faint ripple warped the air between them, spreading outward from Caleb's hand before striking the man square in the chest. The force hurled him backward, his feet leaving the planks as his arms and legs snapped forward from the sudden acceleration. He slammed into the dock railing with enough force to make the old wood shudder beneath him.

Pain stabbed behind Caleb's eyes immediately. Weaker than before, but still costly.

The Fisherman finally moved again, stepping over one of his fallen men without looking down. The hook swung in a tighter, more controlled arc

this time, forcing Caleb to duck low. The metal scraped along the top of a mooring post, sending a few sparks into the hazy air. Caleb came up inside the reach and drove a short punch into The Fisherman's ribs, feeling the solid give of muscle and bone beneath the coat. It wasn't enough to end it, but it bought precious space while the werewolves were still recovering.

Caleb felt Bastet's attention shift.

He's adapting.

What changed?

He stopped watching the orbs.

Bastet's orbs weren't finished. The first one zipped past Caleb's shoulder and tagged The Fisherman's lead leg just above the knee, hard enough to make the man stumble and mutter a low curse. The Fisherman recovered fast, but the momentary loss of balance let Caleb land another clean strike, this one snapping his head to the side with a satisfying thud.

Bastet's tone remained almost conversational inside his thoughts. *Keep them off balance. Their recovery is fast. Their timing isn't.*

Focus on the hook, Uriel reminded, cool and precise. *The rest is noise. Use the openings she gives you.*

Caleb used every second. While the werewolves were still groaning and trying to untangle themselves from pain and embarrassment, he snatched a broken plank from the shattered bait crates and cracked it across the nearest one's face. The wood splintered on impact, and the man howled, curling tighter as Caleb discarded the broken piece. The second orb snapped sideways instead, clipping another werewolf across the temple before ricocheting into his shoulder. His balance collapsed completely, sending him stumbling backward into the dock railing with a heavy metallic clang.

The trawler's deck lights flickered as someone inside moved quickly—probably prepping to cast off or grab a weapon from below deck. The engines throbbed heavier now, the boat rocking harder against the bumpers as if eager to leave the mess behind. Caleb's own body ached in a dozen places—ribs screaming with every twist, shallow cuts burning from salt air, blood dampening the torn fabric at his side—but the chaos had given him the edge he needed. The dock was littered with groaning werewolves

clutching themselves, their supernatural recovery fighting a losing battle against repeated, humiliating strikes.

One particularly bold henchman managed to lunge past the orbs and grab Caleb's coat with both hands. He hauled hard, trying to drag him toward the water's edge where the drop would do the rest. Caleb planted his feet, twisted sharply, and drove an elbow into the man's forearm hard enough to weaken the grip.

Both orbs converged. One clipped the werewolf across the temple while the second struck hard beneath the ribs. His grip broke instantly. Caleb twisted free as the man staggered backward and dropped hard onto the wet planks.

Bastet's voice carried a note of quiet satisfaction inside Caleb's thoughts. *Amateur. He commits before he understands the angle.*

Caleb drove the man the rest of the way down with a boot to the chest, pinning him long enough to turn back toward The Fisherman. "I'm doing all the work while you're riding around in a temperature-controlled throne."

The CatPack speaker clicked on behind his shoulder. "Carrier," Bastet corrected.

One of the werewolves faltered for half a step, yellow eyes flicking toward the pack.

Caleb ducked another wild swing. "My mistake… Your Majesty."

"I graciously accept your apology," Bastet replied through the speaker.

The werewolf nearest Caleb snarled, "Would you two shut up?"

Caleb slipped another swing and drove his elbow into the attacker's ribs. "We're having a private conversation."

"Not anymore," Bastet said.

Caleb rolled his eyes as another werewolf charged. "I was afraid you'd say that." Before the creature could reach him, one of Bastet's silver orbs slammed into its knee, breaking its stride and sending it sprawling across the wet planks.

The werewolves were still dangerous, still healing, still trying to rise with yellow eyes flashing and claws flickering at the edges; but every time they committed to a rush, Bastet's orbs disrupted the attack at exactly the wrong moment—knees, shoulders, elbows, wrists—breaking their timing before

they could overwhelm Caleb.

The Fisherman swung again, wider this time, forcing Caleb to leap back toward the gangplank. The boat rocked harder against the bumpers, rigging creaking overhead in the mist. Caleb's ribs screamed with the movement, breath catching for a moment, but the chaos had bought time. The dock felt alive with the sounds of grown men reduced to protective curls and frustrated snarls, the air thick with fish rot, diesel, salt spray, and the sharp undercurrent of embarrassment.

Asmodeus nudged again, the riff light but insistent. *Now this is entertainment.*

Stay centered, Uriel warned. *This window won't last forever. The boat is preparing to move.*

Caleb exhaled once, slow and controlled, feeling the rhythm beneath the madness. Bastet's two orbs hovered ready, silver and gleaming in the hazy dock lights, steady and precise. The Fisherman was still advancing, hook raised, jaw set in clear annoyance at how his clean operation had dissolved into this undignified circus. The werewolves groaned and pushed themselves up slower each time, their strength clashing with the fresh waves of pain that refused to fade quickly.

And somewhere behind them, the trawler's engines rose another octave as the crew prepared to cast off. Time was running out.

The Fisherman closed another step, adjusting his grip on the hook as if none of Bastet's chaos had changed the outcome in his mind. The werewolves were pushing themselves back up, slower now but angrier, their eyes catching the sodium light with intent. The trawler's engines deepened in tone, the hull rocking harder against the bumpers as the gap between dock and boat began to widen.

You're out of space, Uriel said.

I've noticed.

Bastet's voice cut through their private connection. *You've already pushed too hard.*

Caleb didn't need the warning. His body was already delivering it. Every burst took something back—a little breath, a little strength, another fraction of precision from muscles beginning to resist him. He could spend the resonance

however he wanted—reading an attack, finding an opening, surviving the next exchange—but every use drew from the same reserve. Eventually, the bill always arrived.

Bastet's voice cut through the pressure before he could dwell on it. "Your survival instincts remain encouraging."

"You say the sweetest things."

"I know."

Caleb exhaled once, slow and controlled, forcing the breath lower. The pain in his ribs sharpened immediately, a clear reminder that his body was already pushing back. But he didn't stop. He couldn't. The rhythm mattered more than comfort, and comfort was already gone.

He drew the inhale deep, pulling everything into place, then let the exhale follow longer and tighter. The rhythm locked into place against the resistance of his own body, each breath shaped deliberately because the alternative was chaos. The dock felt narrower under his boots, the mist pressing in like a living thing, carrying the sharp bite of salt, diesel, and old fish rot. The sodium lights cast long, distorted shadows across the blood-slick planks, turning every rope coil and crate into a potential weapon or obstacle. The trawler's engines growled with increasing urgency, the hull rocking harder against the bumpers as the lines strained and creaked. Caleb felt the window closing with every passing second, the weight of the coming backlash already pressing at the edges of his control.

The mist separated into layers instead of haze. The dock beneath his feet stopped shifting and became measurable—boards, gaps, angles, edges, each one exactly where it should be. The men around him didn't slow, but they became readable, every movement exposing its intent just before it happened.

The Fisherman's hook rose with practiced certainty, carrying more threat than anything the werewolves had shown.

Nothing around Caleb had slowed. He was simply reading more of it.

Uriel returned. *Easy.*

Working on it.

Don't waste it, Asmodeus added, low and eager, the pulse of *Whiskey in the Jar* driving beneath the words. Caleb moved.

The werewolves closed again, but damage and Bastet's interference had finally broken their timing. Caleb moved through the openings instead of fighting each man separately—redirecting one into the railing, dropping another with a strike to the damaged leg, and using the third as a barrier against the fourth. Within seconds, the center of the dock cleared and left only The Fisherman advancing through the wreckage.

Blood, salt spray, and diesel hung thick in the air while the werewolves struggled back to their feet behind him. Caleb's own body ached in a dozen places—ribs burning, shallow cuts stinging in the salt air—but Bastet's interference had bought him the seconds he needed. He spent them on The Fisherman.

That's better, Asmodeus said, satisfied.

You're spending it too quickly, Uriel said.

The Fisherman stepped forward without reacting to the fallen men or rushing his advance, entering the space with the same calm certainty he had carried since the beginning. The hook rose into position with practiced ease, its threat unmistakable. Caleb shifted his stance. The rhythm still held.

The first swing came wide, designed to force movement rather than land clean. Caleb stepped inside it, tighter than comfort allowed, and drove a strike into the ribs that landed solidly. The Fisherman didn't fold.

The distance between them closed in increments instead of steps, each movement compressing the space without fully committing to the next. Caleb adjusted with him, tracking the change not just in position but in timing, the way each shift forced a response instead of inviting one. The difference was subtle but critical. The werewolves had pressed. The Fisherman controlled.

Caleb tested him again with enough force to matter. The contact landed, but the response that followed was already adapting, the man stepping through the damage instead of away from it. That changed the equation. It meant the fight wasn't about breaking him quickly. It was about forcing enough disruption to create a moment that could actually hold.

The Fisherman adjusted, the counter coming fast, the hook snapping back along a tighter line that forced Caleb to twist away hard. The metal grazed his side, tearing fabric and skin.

Up close, the difference became unmistakable. The werewolves endured damage; The Fisherman learned from it. Every strike Caleb landed forced an adjustment in timing, angle, or distance—and nothing surprised him twice. That made him far more dangerous than the men around him.

Uriel's calm voice returned inside Caleb's thoughts. *Pull back.*

Caleb ignored it.

The Fisherman came again, this time lower, aiming to catch and drag. Caleb dropped under it, closed the distance, and drove a series of short, efficient strikes—ribs, solar plexus, jaw—each one placed to matter.

The Fisherman took the hits, not cleanly or without effort, but he took them all the same, absorbing the impact in a way that didn't match the damage being done. His body gave just enough to register each strike before resetting, the structure behind it refusing to fail. Then he smiled, blood collecting at the corner of his mouth. The resistance hit harder this time.

Enough, Uriel said.

The rhythm began to slip. Caleb felt it in his legs first: a heavy resistance building where there should have been precision. His breathing stayed locked, but it cost more now. Each inhale dragged. Each exhale resisted. The clarity held, but the effort to maintain it climbed with every movement.

The Fisherman stepped in again. No hesitation. No adjustment. Just certainty.

Caleb met him head-on. Their movements collided in the center, force against force, the hook driving in while Caleb deflected just enough to avoid a clean catch. He answered with a strike to the side of the neck, then another to the ribs, then forced the man back half a step.

Uriel's voice remained unnervingly calm, and that unsettled Caleb more than any warning could have. *Disengage. Now.*

The first warning came from his body. The edges of his control tightened. The Fisherman saw the shift immediately and pressed the advantage. The hook came faster, cleaner. Caleb twisted away, but not far enough. The metal tore across his side, shallow but sharp. Pain flared hot and deep.

His breath broke for a fraction of a second, and that was enough to collapse the rhythm completely. The control he had forced into place fractured under

the strain, and the backlash hit all at once in a single, overwhelming surge that his body couldn't absorb cleanly.

His vision tunneled as his muscles tightened toward locking, forcing conscious effort into movements that normally came on instinct.

Nausea rolled through him hard enough to make the dock seem to tilt beneath his boots, and his left hand seized halfway closed while white static fractured across what remained of his peripheral vision. The connection between intention and movement lagged just enough to matter.

His breathing stayed controlled, but it no longer stabilized anything. It only kept the backlash from taking the rest.

Bastet's voice cut through the noise. *Caleb. Move.*

He did, barely holding the movement together as his body resisted the command.

The Fisherman stepped forward again, sensing the shift, pushing the advantage without changing his pace. Caleb gave ground, each step heavier than the last as the clarity collapsed back into noise and pain.

He couldn't hold that state any longer.

Bastet's voice cut through the noise again. *Wheelhouse.*

Caleb forced another step. *What?*

Behind the Fisherman, the trawler's engines rose as the crew prepared to cast off. He glanced toward the vessel, then back at Caleb, weighing the injured young man against the departing shipment. Whatever decision he reached, he wasn't about to let the boat leave without him. He broke away from the fight and crossed the gangplank onto the trawler, leaving his recovering men scattered across the dock.

My orb picked up an active navigation console and an external data module still connected to it.

Caleb forced another step. *Removable?*

It appears so.

The final stern line was still holding, keeping the trawler within a narrow jump of the dock even as the engines strained against it. Caleb used the last moment of contact, stepped across the widening seam, and caught the rail before his weakened leg could betray him.

The cabin hatch was open just enough. Caleb turned and pushed through, the interior hitting him with a wave of heat, oil, and stale air. The space was tighter, quieter, wrong in a different way than the dock. A compact navigation console glowed faintly beneath the wheelhouse windows. A small encrypted data module remained slotted into its side, almost hidden behind bundled cables and mismatched electronics.

He reached for the module without breaking stride and ripped it free. The connection broke with a faint click. Caleb slipped the module into his jacket pocket and kept moving.

Behind him, the engines surged and the final stern line dropped into the water. The gap between dock and hull began widening immediately. Caleb turned back toward the exit, forcing his body to respond despite the resistance building through every muscle. He reached the deck, pushed off before the distance grew beyond reach, and struck the dock hard. His weakened legs failed to absorb the landing cleanly, and he nearly went down as the world tilted beneath him.

The Fisherman stood at the edge of the retreating boat, watching as the gap widened. His posture carried the same certainty it had from the beginning. Caleb held his gaze for a fraction longer than necessary and caught something new there: recognition.

"He knows something about me," Caleb muttered, his voice rough with pain.

Perhaps, Uriel replied quietly.

Caleb kept his eyes on The Fisherman. *What?*

That remains to be seen, Uriel said.

The trawler pulled steadily into the mist, The Fisherman still visible at the rail as Caleb stood on the blood-slick dock, the data module secure in his pocket and the resonance backlash grinding through his body like broken glass in the gears.

He tasted copper again and realized he'd missed some of it earlier. Not from the hits. From pushing too far. The trawler was already pulling away, its engines rising into a deeper, more committed tone as the widening gap between hull and pier turned pursuit into impossibility. The Fisherman

remained visible at the rail, one hand resting on the weathered metal as if he had already accepted the exchange for what it was. The certainty in that stillness was somehow worse than rage would have been.

A scraping sound pulled Caleb's attention back to the dock. One of the werewolves, the broad one Bastet's orbs had humiliated most thoroughly, dragged itself across the planks on a forearm and one knee, yellow eyes fixed on Caleb with an animal hatred sharpened by pain. Blood ran from the corner of its mouth in a dark thread that caught the sodium light before dripping into the grooves of the wet wood. Caleb did not wait for it to regain its feet. He stepped into the rise, caught the incoming arm before the claws could fully clear, and drove an elbow hard into the side of the head. Bone met bone with a flat, ugly impact, and the creature collapsed again, this time without any fight left in the body. Caleb turned and moved for the bike.

The Ducati sat where he had left it, low in the darkness beside the building line just beyond the dock, beads of mist and harbor spray silvering the frame. It looked improbably clean against the mess behind him, like something from another life waiting patiently for him to stop getting hit long enough to use it.

Every step toward the Ducati sent fresh pain through his ribs and legs. When he reached it, Caleb pulled the data module from his pocket and pressed it into the sealed reader beneath the tank console. The system accepted it with a soft click and began copying the contents automatically.

He retrieved the protective case from his jacket, slipped his glasses back on, and secured the case again. Then he picked up his helmet from the Ducati's seat, slipped it on, and fastened the chin strap.

His right hand trembled as he reached for the starter. His first attempt missed the switch entirely, and when his left hand closed around the grip, the fingers cramped halfway shut before he forced them open again.

Breathe, Uriel said.

Caleb forced the inhale lower, ignoring the sharp protest that climbed up his side, and tried again. He swung a leg over the seat and hit the starter. The engine coughed once, then caught on the second attempt, the growl traveling up through the frame and into his hands in a way that grounded him more

effectively than anything else had since the burst collapsed.

Arcane maintained more than one emergency safe house along the coast. The nearest one lay inland. If he could reach it, he could finally find out what he'd stolen.

Behind him, the boat was turning toward open water. The Fisherman stayed where he was, one dark figure at the edge of the deck, watching without urgency.

A crewman approached from the wheelhouse, keeping his voice low. "Sir, he took the data module."

"I know," The Fisherman replied, his eyes remaining fixed on the shrinking coastline.

"Should we go after him?"

The Fisherman turned his head slightly. "Contact the Triad riders. He's heading inland on a motorcycle. I want that module recovered."

"And the man?"

The Fisherman's expression remained unchanged. "Alive, if possible. I want to know who he is."

Caleb twisted the throttle and let the Ducati surge forward, tires biting into the wet pavement as he left the dock behind. The harbor widened to his left in strips of black water and fractured orange reflections. Mist dragged through the streetlights in low ribbons, turning each lamp into a blurred halo that made distance harder to judge than it should have been.

The backlash followed him onto the road. His peripheral vision remained narrow, his ribs protested every bump, and the tremor in his hands made the first few turns more deliberate than they should have been. He slowed enough to compensate. For once, speed could wait. Bastet's voice came through the link.

You pushed too far, Bastet said.

I noticed.

You are bleeding on my carrier.

It's our carrier.

It was my carrier first.

Fine. Your carrier, Caleb conceded, jaw tightening as he leaned through

the first long curve. *And for the record, those shots below the belt were beautiful. Couldn't have done it better myself.*

Those were educational strikes, Bastet replied. *If they learn from them, they may yet contribute something of value.*

Caleb almost smiled. *And if they don't?*

One of them will certainly not be contributing puppies to the next generation.

Asmodeus chuckled somewhere deeper in the noise, the fading pulse of *Whiskey in the Jar* still running under the moment like an afterimage. *I still say that second one hit the high note. Beautiful work by both of you.*

Eyes forward, Uriel said. *The road climbs in two hundred yards.*

Caleb adjusted before the turn arrived and let the Ducati settle into the rising lane that carried him away from the waterfront and toward the industrial outskirts of Westport. The smell of salt and diesel stayed with him for another minute, then began to thin beneath damp pavement, wet cedar, and the colder breath of open dark. The harbor was already fading behind him as the road emptied and the night widened.

The tank display flashed as the reader finished its initial scan. Caleb risked one brief glance when the road straightened, reading only the largest repeated fields before returning his attention forward. The screen flickered twice before resolving into a rough field of symbols, routes, and partial manifests. None of it read like standard shipping data. The lines were too geometric in some places and too organic in others, as if whoever built the system had expected normal cargo tracking to exist only as a cover layer over something else. Several nodes flashed in dull red. Another line repeated a phrase often enough to stop being incidental.

Caleb recognized the frequency from Arcane threat files: 5.5 Hz, low enough to interfere with cognition, perception, and emotional regulation. The phrase "anchor point" was new. Caleb looked back to the road and kept the bike steady while the information settled.

That is not inventory, Bastet said.

No.

Uriel came in a beat later. *Do not keep looking down.*

I'm not planning to decorate the road with my face.

You came close two minutes ago.

Asmodeus laughed quietly. *To be fair, that would be memorable.*

Caleb eased off the throttle slightly as the road curved tighter through a damp industrial stretch where stacked containers, chain-link fencing, and dark warehouse walls created a false sense of shelter from the mist. The sense did not hold. Beyond the warehouses, the road opened again, bordered by scattered industrial structures and increasingly dense stands of trees. Traffic had thinned to almost nothing, leaving only the occasional distant headlights and the darkness gathering beyond the Ducati's headlamp.

The tank display shifted as the bike hit a smoother stretch. A new layer surfaced beneath the partial manifests, this one closer to a route index than a cargo list. Intersecting lines cut inland toward terrain markers Caleb recognized from Arcane overlays. Several coordinate clusters aligned with abandoned service roads, dead industrial connectors, and mountain-adjacent access points that existed more in memory and local rumor than on current maps. None offered an obvious reason for repeated cargo movement, yet the routes kept converging on them. Whatever Caleb had taken off that trawler revealed more than individual shipments. It exposed an organized network.

Caleb studied the converging routes. *It's pointing inland.*

Uriel stayed steady. *Keep the line. We can read it later.*

Caleb wanted to argue, but the next bend made the point for him. A wave of nausea hit as he leaned into the curve, and the Ducati drifted farther toward the centerline than he intended before he corrected. He immediately backed off the throttle. The resonance had already collected its price. Pretending otherwise wasn't going to make the road safer.

A truck appeared in the opposing lane and passed in a wash of white light and road spray. Caleb felt the pressure wave hit him half a beat too late and had to counter it. By the time the headlights disappeared behind him, his forearms were tight enough to ache all the way into the elbow.

Slower, Bastet said.

I know.

That was not a suggestion.

I know, Caleb replied, easing off again.

The Ducati responded immediately, dropping into a steadier growl that made the road feel marginally less hostile. The shift cost him time, but speed was useless if the bike went out from under him before the mountain road even started. The harbor had been the fight. This was the price of surviving it. He could live with that as long as the machine beneath him still answered the way it was supposed to.

The display on the tank console flashed once and expanded another layer of the route map. This time, the line that mattered ran east with uncomfortable certainty. Smaller nodes branched off it: some marked in symbols he had never seen on any Arcane manifest, others carrying alphanumeric strings that looked almost military until the patterns broke in the wrong places. One cluster pulsed near terrain that sat uncomfortably close to the Packwood corridor. It wasn't confirmation yet, but it was close enough to matter.

"It wasn't a shipment," Caleb said quietly. "It was a route."

Asmodeus answered first, the humor in his voice lower now, almost thoughtful under the leftover rhythm. *Bigger than the boat.*

Uriel's voice followed. *And not meant to be seen.*

Caleb's fingers tightened on the grips. The crates had never been the destination. They were moving through something, toward something. Whatever waited inland mattered far more than the shipment that had exposed the route.

The first true stretch of mountain approach began to make itself known in the shape of the air before the grade changed under the wheels. The mist thinned in patches, revealing heavier black masses beyond the shoulder—stands of fir, wet stone, guardrail breaks that opened onto darkness. The road narrowed just enough to command respect without appearing dangerous to anyone stupid enough to treat it casually. Caleb had driven worse roads in worse weather. Tonight the difficulty was not the road. It was the body carrying him through it.

He risked one more look at the display when the lane straightened. The same line kept pulling east, its inland nodes intersecting in places that looked less like logistics and more like intentional placement. One of the markers held longer than the others before collapsing back into the field. Anchor

point active. Caleb did not need a lecture to know what that meant. He had seen enough already that night to understand the shape of the lie, the boats, the crates, the repeating 5.5 Hz anchor points.

The way the handlers had been trained to keep their distance from the cargo, The Fisherman's quiet certainty, the impossible resilience of the werewolves—none of it was isolated; it was all connected. And the data module riding in his console was the first piece of proof he could actually carry home.

The road continued inland, rising through darker stretches of forest and wet stone. The occasional break in the trees revealed nothing but mist and the uneven silhouettes of the surrounding hills.

Caleb leaned into the next curve with more care than speed, the Ducati holding steady beneath him despite the tremor still trying to work itself through his hands. Bastet stayed quiet for a few seconds. Uriel remained silent as well. Even Asmodeus let the riff fade until only the shape of it remained. That silence told Caleb almost as much as the drive had.

The Fisherman was not finished. The men on the dock had not been random muscle. The boat had not been an endpoint. And whatever sat waiting at the far end of those anchor lines inland, it had already grown large enough to organize itself around rhythm, material, bodies, and fear.

Caleb pushed the bike a little harder once the road opened again, with the kind of controlled commitment that meant the choice had been made. Pain still rode with him. The backlash still pressed at the edges of everything. None of that changed the direction.

The road east waited. Whatever was waiting near Packwood had just become personal.

Caleb rolled the throttle forward just enough to feel the Ducati answer beneath him. For the first time that night, he wasn't chasing a shipment. He was following the first visible outline of a network. And it led toward the mountains.

THE PATTERN HAS ONLY JUST BEGUN.

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Thank you for being here at the beginning.

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