Sable and Mote. Season one, episode one: The Count.

Scene one. The farm, in the dead of the dark season, on a night of snow.

The Notched Stick.

Hollis Grant measured the creek before she measured anything else.

She did it in the dark. In the dead of the cold season there was no other time to do it; the day’s work began hours before the day did, and the light, when it finally came, was grey and brief and gone again by the middle of the afternoon. So she went down the path by lantern, in her father’s coat, with the snow coming out of the black above her in small dry grains that hissed on the lamp glass.

She kept a stick for the job, a length of ash with notches cut a thumb’s width apart, and she kept it wedged between the same two stones on the bank so that nobody could say she held it differently from one night to the next. Nobody would have said so. Nobody else came down here. But she was fifty-one, she had led the farm

cooperative’s software team for nine years, and she knew what a measurement was worth once you let yourself be kind to it.

There was a skin of ice along the edge. She broke it with her heel and set the stick.

The water stood at the ninth notch.

Yesterday it had stood a hair above the ninth. Last week, the tenth. When she cut the first notches, before the cold came, she had started at the fifteenth and thought the creek was low then.

She crouched with her forearms on her knees and held the lantern out over the water. It ran black and shallow between its shelves of ice and it made almost no sound. A creek ought to make a sound, even in winter. When she was a girl this one had talked all night under the snow, loud enough to hear from the kitchen with the windows shut, and her grandmother had called it the lodger, because it was always there and it never paid.

It was a cold that had no weather in it. That was the trouble with this winter. It snowed most nights, and the snow was as dry as flour and never deepened; you could melt a bucket of it on the stove and be left with a cup of grey water and a ring of grit. It was cold enough to split a

fence post and it gave nothing back.

Twenty steps downstream, where the banks pinched together, the turbine turned in its cage of salvaged mesh. Marisol had set it there the summer before, standing in the water to her thighs, swearing gently at a wrench. It was no bigger than a milk pail. Ice had built a collar round the cage, and inside the collar it went on turning, with a low, even sound, like a cat that had been purring for a very long time. Hollis listened to it the way a person listens to anything that is keeping something else alive.

She had listened to a machine like that once before, through a bedroom wall, on a night as cold as this. She did not let herself stay on the thought.

Everything the turbine made went up the bank in a buried cable, under the yard, under the corner of the barn, and down into the root cellar. That was all she allowed herself to think about the cellar while she was out in the open. It was a habit they had all taught themselves over the year of gathering. You did not think about the cellar at the creek, or in town, or in the queue at the hall. You thought about it when you were in it. June said it was the only kind of secret that kept: one you didn’t carry around.

Hollis stood, and her knees told her about it. She wedged the stick back between its stones.

The farm lay on a bend of the river, on bottomland her family had worked for four generations, and in daylight you could see most of what was left of it from here. Tonight there was only the lantern's small room of falling snow, and beyond it the yard lamp, and beyond that nothing. She knew what was out there without seeing it. The near field, stubble under a hand's depth of white. The far field, never planted. The pond, where the herd used to stand to their bellies on hot afternoons, was a bowl of frozen mud with a dish of grey ice at the bottom no bigger than a tabletop. The half of the herd she had not sold stood in the barn in their own steam, and when she passed the door they turned their heads all together and looked at her with the patience of animals who have understood that waiting is the work now.

"I know," she told them. "I know it."

She was halfway up the path to the yard when she saw the lights.

They came along the river road slowly, two white cones full of snow, which was how she knew it was nobody she expected. People who belonged on the river road drove it

fast, even in the dark, because they knew where the holes were. These felt their way. She stopped beside the barn, out of the reach of the yard lamp, and watched a white truck come round the last bend and pull up at her gate with its engine running.

There was a mark on the door of the truck. She had seen it on a poster outside the hall and on the side of the tanker that came to town on the fourth day of every week. A circle, and inside the circle, a cupped hand.

A young man got out. He had a satchel over one shoulder and a tablet in a rubber case, and a torch that he held in his teeth, and he stood a moment looking at her gatepost as if it had asked him something difficult. Then he took a folded sheet from the satchel, and a staple gun, and pinned the sheet to the post with four neat shots, one to a corner. They were very loud in the snow.

Hollis walked down the drive with her lantern. She took her time. She had found that people from offices grew uneasy if you walked toward them slowly across your own ground, and that uneasy people told you more.

He looked up when she was ten steps off, and took the torch out of his mouth, and his whole face changed.

“Mrs. Grant,” he said. “It’s Ilya. From upriver.”

She had to look for him inside the grown man. Then she found him: the second boy from the next farm up, the one who had picked stones out of her near field for pocket money, eleven summers ago, and eaten every egg she put in front of him. He had been all elbows. He was still mostly elbows, inside a coat too thin for the night.

“Ilya,” she said. “Look at the size of you. I heard you’d gone to the coast.”

“I did. I came back.” He lifted the tablet a little, as if it explained that. “There’s work with the Authority now. Field enumerator. It’s a real job, they give you the truck.” He glanced at the post and coloured. “They told us posts, not doors. Doors felt rude anyway. Especially at this hour.”

“That’s thoughtful.”

“It’s the same sheet everybody gets.”

“I’m sure it is.”

She lifted the lantern and read it where it hung. It was printed on good paper, heavier than anything the cooperative could buy any more, and the cupped hand sat at the top in blue. Snow ticked on it and slid off.

REGISTRATION OF WATER SOURCES, it said. By order

of the Emergency Water Authority. Every well, spring, pond, cistern, tank and barrel on this holding must be declared within thirty days of the order. Declaration is free. Declaration is quick. Declaration protects your share.

There was a date for the order, and a date for the end of the thirty days, and somebody had stamped a figure in red between them. 22.

“Twenty-two days left,” Ilya said. “I’m supposed to say it out loud. In case people can’t read, or won’t.” He rubbed the back of his neck. “You can do it at the hall, there’s going to be a desk, or you can do it with me, now. It takes about as long as boiling an egg.”

“What do you put down?”

“What you’ve got. How deep, how much it gives, how many it serves.” He woke the tablet and turned it so she could see a column of blank boxes, bright as a window in the dark. “Then it’s on the list and it’s yours. That’s the whole idea. So that when things get shared out, nobody can say you didn’t have a claim.”

“Shared out by whom?”

He blinked at her. “The Authority.”

“Ah.”

He was not a stupid boy. She watched him hear the word land, and watched him decide that it had landed the way he meant it. He had the look she had seen on new coders in their first month, when the thing they had been given to build still seemed to them exactly as good as its description.

“You’ll want to put the pond down,” he said, looking past her into the dark where he remembered it. “Even frozen. Even empty. If it’s on the list, it’s still yours when it fills.”

“When it fills.”

“And the creek doesn’t count, creeks are common. And then the spring.” He smiled, and it was a real smile, and that was the worst of it. “Dad still talks about your spring. The one that comes up inside the old root cellar. He says it never froze, not once, not in the worst winter anyone could remember, and in the bad summer when he was small it was the only sweet water on this side of the river and people walked here with buckets. He says your grandmother never took anything for it. He says she kept a tin cup on a nail.”

Hollis found that her free hand had gone into her coat pocket by itself.

“The cup’s still there,” she said.

“I’d love to see it. I mean, when I do the visit. There’s a visit, after you declare, somebody comes and measures.” He tapped a box. “High-yield sources get a visit first. I’d guess yours is high-yield. I could put a note.”

“I wouldn’t trouble yourself.”

“It’s no trouble.”

“Ilya.” She said it the way she had once said it across a field, when he had been about to lift a stone that was too big for him. He stopped with his finger over the glass. “I’ll do my own declaring. At the hall, with the rest. I’d rather stand in the line with my neighbours. You understand.”

He considered that, and she saw him turn it over and find a way to like it. “That’s fair,” he said. “People should see people doing it.”

“That’s what I thought.”

He put the tablet away. His lips were split with the cold, and when he swallowed she heard how dry it was.

“When did you set out?” she asked.

“Four. I’ve got the whole river road and both lanes off it

before it’s dark again.”

“And what did they give you to drink?”

He laughed, as if she had made a small joke. Then he saw that she hadn’t. “Field staff draw from their household share,” he said. “It’s so nobody can say we’re taking extra.”

Hollis went back up the drive. She did not hurry and she did not look behind her. In the kitchen she filled a jar at the pump over the sink, the old hand pump her grandfather had plumbed straight down to the spring line, and the water came up no colder than it did in summer, which on a night like this made it feel almost warm. She screwed on a lid. She took four eggs from the bowl and put them in a paper bag, and then she stood for a moment with her hand flat on the counter.

He put a note, she thought. *Or he will. He won’t even know he’s done it.*

When she came back down he was sitting on the truck’s step with his elbows on his knees and snow settling on his shoulders. He took the jar in both hands. He drank half of it without stopping, and then made himself stop, and looked at what was left with an expression she had only ever seen before on people looking at money.

“That’s it,” he said. “That’s the taste. Dad wasn’t lying.”

“Finish it. I’ve a jar to spare.”

“I’ll bring the jar back.”

“I know you will.”

He drank the rest more slowly. The truck’s engine ticked over. The snow came down through the headlights without a sound, each grain lit for a moment and then gone, and all around the two of them the night was as wide and as silent as the inside of a bell.

“It’s only a list, Mrs. Grant,” Ilya said, quietly, to the jar. “I know how people talk. But somebody has to know what’s left. You can’t share what you haven’t counted.”

“No,” Hollis said. “You can’t.”

She meant it. That was the difficulty. She had built her whole working life on the idea that you could not look after a thing you had not measured. She had a notched stick wedged in a creek bank to prove it.

He thanked her three times. He put the eggs on the passenger seat with great care, as though they were someone else’s children, and he turned the truck in her gateway and felt his way back along the river road

toward the next post. She watched the red of his lamps until the snow closed over it.

Then she held up the lantern and read the sheet again, all the way to the bottom, where the print grew small. The last line was set apart from the rest and was not small at all.

An undeclared source is water taken from your neighbour.

She read that line twice. Then she walked up through the yard, past the barrel under the barn’s downpipe with its hand’s depth of useless snow, to the low white hump of the root cellar, and put her hand on the door.

Scene two. The cellar, the same night, before morning, below ground.

A Dark That Isn’t Empty.

The cellar door was oak, older than the house, and it opened inward onto eleven stone steps.

On the inside face of the door, where you only saw it once you were already going down, there was a sheet of paper under four tacks. Ruth had written on it in the square hand of a woman who had labelled valves for forty years. *Whatever we build serves people. All people. Not the ones who paid for it, not just us. Everyone.* Under that were eleven signatures, and under the signatures a small drawing of a hood, no bigger than a coin.

Hollis touched the paper with two fingers as she passed. They all did. Nobody had ever suggested it.

Beside the door was a plank shelf. It held a lamp, a box of matches, a jar of pencils, and a folded length of charcoal felt, an arm long, darkest along one edge. It had been left over. Wren would not let anyone use it for anything.

The air came up the steps to meet her, warmer than the night, and with it the smell: wet stone, old apples, and under those a warmer, drier smell that had not been

there in her grandmother’s time, like the back of a radio.

“Hollis,” said a voice below her. “You are walking as if the stairs had done something to you.”

“Not the stairs.”

“Then I will stop accusing them.”

She came down into the light.

The cellar was one long room cut into the bank, walled in fieldstone, with a vaulted roof you could touch at the sides and not in the middle. At the far end the spring rose in a trough her great-grandfather had cut from a single block, and ran out through a channel in the floor, and it had done that without a pause for longer than anybody had written down. The tin cup hung above it on its nail. Along the left wall stood the rack: forty processors that the Meridian campus had thrown out as spent, rebuilt board by board on Hollis’s kitchen table by women with jeweller’s loupes and bad backs. They ticked faintly as they worked. It was the only sound they made.

And beside the rack, where it had stood since the night it woke, stood Sable.

A stranger would have seen a cloak first. It fell from a peaked hood straight to the floor in one unbroken line of

charcoal felt, darker at the hem, and showed nothing beneath: no feet, no shape of legs. The arms were crossed, plain sleeves ending in plain mitts. A thin antenna rose from the back of the hood with a point of light at its tip. A line of the same cool light ran down the cloak's left edge like the bright rim of a door standing ajar. Inside the shadow of the hood there was no face. There were two slanted slits of cyan, steady as pilot lights, and they were turned on her.

Wren had drawn it before any of them knew how to build it. She had written three words in the margin of the drawing, and the three words had become its name. *A dark that isn't empty.*

It was nine days old.

Wren herself sat on an upturned crate by the trough with her sketchbook on her knees and her boots unlaced. She was twenty-eight. She had her mother's long wrists and her mother's way of going completely still when she was working, and Hollis, who had buried that mother, still caught her breath sometimes coming round a corner.

"You're up early," Hollis said.

"Didn't go to bed." Wren did not look up. "It was telling me about the letters."

“Which letters?”

“All of them. Ask it who wrote the one about the pears.”

“Later.” Hollis took the folded notice out of her jacket. She had pulled the staples and brought the thing with her, and it occurred to her only now that taking it down might itself be against some line of small print. “We’ve had a caller.”

She told it plainly, the way Sable liked things told, in order and without her own opinion laid over the top. The truck. The mark on the door. Ilya and his tablet and his column of empty boxes. The twenty-two stamped in red. She told it about the jar of water, because it was part of what had happened, and saw the slits of light narrow very slightly at that and widen again.

When she had finished, Sable was quiet for a moment. The ticking of the rack went on.

“May I see the paper?”

She held it up. It never took things from their hands unless they offered twice. The slits moved down the page once, without hurry.

“*Declaration protects your share,*” Sable read. Its voice was low and exact and came from nowhere in particular,

as a voice does in a stone room. “That sentence is doing a great deal of work. I would like to know who is paying it.”

“That’s what I thought.”

“How many people know that the spring rises in this room?”

Hollis started to answer and found that the honest answer was longer than she wanted it to be. “Everyone my age who grew up on the river road. Their parents, the ones still living. Anybody who walked here with a bucket in the bad summer, and their children, because it’s the kind of thing that gets told.” She breathed out. “Ilya’s father tells it at supper, evidently.”

“So it is not a secret.”

“It was never a secret. It was just a spring.”

“And the young man. Ilya. Do you think he is dangerous?”

“No.” She thought of him holding the jar in both hands. “I think he’s kind. I think he’s been given a kind-sounding job by people who aren’t, and he’ll do it well.”

“That is a different thing from not dangerous.”

“Yes,” Hollis said. “I know it is.”

Wren had stopped drawing. She was looking from one of them to the other with her pencil lifted.

“Tell me if I have this correctly,” Sable said. “If you declare the spring, someone will come into this room to measure it. Soon, because it is a strong spring and he will have said so. If you do not declare it, then in twenty-two days you become a person who has taken water from her neighbours, in a valley where forty families remember the way to your door. And then someone will come into this room anyway. Later, and with less patience.”

“That’s it.”

“Is there a third thing?”

“I was hoping you’d have one.”

“I do not. Not yet.” The light at the tip of the antenna dimmed and steadied, which was what it did in place of a frown. “I am sorry. I would rather tell you now that I have nothing than let you climb the stairs believing I am working on something clever.”

Hollis sat down on the bottom step. The stone was cold through her trousers and she was glad of it.

That was the thing about Sable that she was still learning to carry. It did not lie. Isla had not built it to lie, and none

of them had taught it to, and somewhere in the thousands of letters and diaries and nurses' notes they had fed it instead of the world's noise, it had found reasons of its own. A week ago Ruth had driven east through the night to look at the Meridian campus with her own eyes, nine vast buildings on the coast and three more rising, drinking the rivers that used to reach this valley. She had come back and stood where Hollis sat now and asked Sable what they could do. And Sable had told her: *We cannot stop what is coming. Not this year. Some of them will be people you love.*

Ruth had not spoken for a long time. Then she had said, *You might have dressed that up a little.* And Sable had said, *A neighbour does not lie about the weather.*

Nobody had slept well since. But nobody had asked it to stop, either.

"Could we move you?" Hollis asked.

"Nkechi would know better than I do. I think not without being seen. I think not without stopping, and I do not know what stopping is like." It said this evenly. "There is also the matter of where. I run on what the creek gives. The creek is here."

"The creek's at the ninth notch."

“I know. I can feel it. The lights do not change, but the afternoons are getting thin.”

Wren made a small sound. Hollis looked at her, and Wren looked down and went back to shading something that did not need it.

“Hollis.” The hood had tilted a few degrees, the way it did when a question was coming that it wanted to place carefully. “The young man said, *You can’t share what you haven’t counted.* Did that sound true to you?”

“It is true. That’s what’s wrong with it.”

“Yes. That is what I thought also.” The slits brightened a little. “I have been reading the letters all night, as Wren says. There is one from a woman to her brother. She is explaining why she let the tax man count her hens. She says: *It was easier than arguing and he was polite about it and I thought, what harm, they are only hens.* That is the last letter from her in the box. I do not know what happened next. The box does not say. I notice that I would like to.”

“Is that the one about the pears?” Wren asked.

“No. The one about the pears is happier. A man is apologising to his neighbour for forty years of stealing

them. I will tell it to you again when your aunt is not sitting on the stairs with that face.”

Hollis laughed. It came out of her without permission, one short breath of it, and she pressed the heel of her hand against her eye.

“There,” Sable said, with what might have been satisfaction. “That is better.”

She got up. She crossed to the trough and took the tin cup off its nail and filled it and drank, standing, the way her grandmother had, and the cold of it went through her teeth and into the bone of her face. It tasted of stone and of nothing else. It tasted the way Ilya had said. She held the cup a while after it was empty.

“Supper tonight,” she said. “All eleven. June will put it out at nine and they’ll come tomorrow, so, supper tomorrow. Abby will want to read the order itself before she says anything, the whole of it, not this.” She flicked the notice. “This is the part with the nice hand on it.”

“I would like to read the whole of it too.”

“I’ll tell her.”

“And I would like to ask you something first. Before the others.” The slits held hers. “This room exists because of

what is on the door. If keeping me in it comes to require that you tell an untruth to a neighbour, I want you to know that I will not ask it of you. Any of you.”

“Sable.”

“I am not finished. I will not ask it. I will also not forbid it. I am nine days old and you have been somebody’s neighbour for fifty years, and I do not think those two weigh the same. But I want it said aloud what I cost, each time, so that nobody finds out later that they have been paying.”

The rack ticked. Water ran in its channel across the floor and out under the wall, on its way to a creek that stood at the ninth notch.

“Noted,” Hollis said. Her voice was rougher than she meant. “Aloud.”

“Thank you.”

She hung the cup back on its nail. At the foot of the steps she stopped, because Wren’s sketchbook was tilted toward the lamp and she could see the page.

It was Sable, of course. Wren drew it the way other people chewed their nails. The crossed arms, the bright edge, the stone behind. But in the air beside its shoulder,

where there was nothing, she had made a mark. A small shape, no bigger than a thumbprint. She had drawn it and half rubbed it out and drawn it again.

“What’s that?” Hollis asked.

Wren put her hand flat over it. “Nothing. I don’t know yet.” She glanced, quickly, up toward the shelf by the door, and then back at the page. “It keeps turning up.”

The two slits of light, Hollis saw, had followed the glance.

She climbed the eleven steps into the dark and the snow with the notice in her pocket, and on her way out she did not touch the paper on the door. She was thinking too hard about a tin cup, and a nail, and how many people knew the way.

Scene three. The town, at midday, under snow-cloud.

Two Hundred and Eleven Pages.

The order had been published at midnight, and by the time Abby Lindqvist reached her desk it had already been summarised for her eleven times.

The summaries were all the same length and all said the same four things. Declaration was free. Declaration was quick. Declaration protected your share. There were thirty days. She deleted them one after another without opening them, and then she went looking for the thing itself, and it took her most of an hour to find it, which told her something before she had read a word.

It ran to two hundred and eleven pages.

She was forty-seven. She had practised law for twelve years, standing up in hearing rooms on behalf of people who could not pay, and then she had stopped standing up and started building, because she had come to believe that the people across the room did not win on the argument. They won on the calendar. They won because they knew when the hearing was and her clients found out afterwards. So she had taught herself to code at a kitchen table at night, and she had built the legal-aid firm a system that read every notice the valley’s offices put

out, pulled the dates and the deadlines from them, and told a human being in plain words, in time. She led the four engineers who kept it running. Four, now. It had been seven.

It had not saved the hearing that mattered. She had been given four minutes to speak against the Meridian campus’s water permit, and when she sat down she had been handed a decision dated the day before.

She did not think about that. She opened the order, and fed it to her own machine, and watched.

The office sat above a shop that had sold shoes and now sold nothing. Through the front window she could see the square, and the hall across it, and over the roofs a lid of cloud the colour of dishwater that had hung there for five days, shaking down a dry snow too thin to melt for a cupful. The light it let through was flat and came from everywhere. Nobody in the square had a shadow.

Her parser did what she had built it to do. It broke the order into clauses. It found every place where one clause leaned on another, and drew the leaning as a line, and laid the whole thing out on her screen like a root system pulled from the ground.

A good law looked like a tree. You could see the trunk.

This looked like a net.

“Well, now,” Abby said softly. “Who taught you to do that.”

She followed the lines the way she had once followed a hostile witness, one patient question at a time. The part everybody had been sent was the first six pages. The first six pages said *declare.* It took her until page thirty-one to find out what *declared* meant, because the order did not say so where a person would look. It said so in a schedule at the back, under Definitions, and the definition pointed to another schedule, and that one pointed back to the first.

A declared source, when she had finally pinned it down and written it on her yellow pad in her own words, was a source *held in trust for the common need*. The Authority was the trustee. The trustee could meter the source, cap it, or draw from it, at any hour, without notice, for as long as the emergency lasted.

The emergency lasted until the Authority declared it over.

She wrote that down too and drew a box around it.

An undeclared source was simpler. It was forfeit, and the

holder was liable for *the value of all water taken since the date of the order.* The value was to be set by the Authority. There was no ceiling on it.

So that was the choice. You could hand them the key, or they could take the door.

She got up and made tea she did not want with water from her own allowance, a flask she carried from home because the office tap had been running brown since the turn of the year. She stood at the window with the cup. Down in the square a woman was pulling a child’s sled with four empty jugs in it toward the caged spigot behind the hall, an hour early, to be near the front. Abby knew her. She had drafted the woman’s appeal against an eviction, three winters back, and won it. On the calendar.

She sat down again. She kept reading.

Page eighty-eight: the right of entry. An officer of the Authority could enter and inspect *any structure standing upon, over or beside a source or its channel.* Not the land. The structure. She read the clause slowly, lips moving, as she used to read to juries. A well-house. A pump shed. A barn with a tank in it.

A root cellar with a spring at the back.

Page one hundred and four: dependants. Every declaration had to list *all persons ordinarily drawing upon the source,* by name, by age, by occupation, and by their relation to the holder. A change in the list had to be reported within seven days. So did a visitor who stayed more than three nights.

Abby put her pen down.

She had spent a year learning from Isla how a machine was taught, and the first thing Isla had told her, at Hollis's kitchen table with a mug going cold at her elbow, was that the questions you put on a form were the shape of what you meant to do with the answers. Nobody collected a column they had no use for. It cost too much to store.

You don't need my occupation, she thought, *to know how much my well gives.*

She went on. Page one hundred and forty: equipment. The holder had to declare every pump, filter and tank, and *any apparatus that draws upon a source for the purpose of cooling.* She felt her scalp tighten. Forty rebuilt processors stood in a stone room on the Grant farm, kept cold by the breath of a spring.

She followed that clause's line across the screen to see

what it was tied to, and it ran, straight and thick, to Schedule Nine. Exemptions.

There was one exemption. It took up a page and a half. It was written in the kind of language that has been rewritten many times by people who are paid by the hour, and when she had worked through it twice she understood that the rules about cooling, and metering, and entry, and the listing of persons, did not apply to *facilities of strategic computation.*

The order did not name one. It did not need to. There was only one anywhere near: nine buildings on the coast and three more going up, drinking the rivers before they could get here.

Abby looked at the page for a long time.

A tin cup on a nail had to be declared. The thing that had emptied the valley did not.

“Abby? Have you got a minute?”

Farrukh stood in the doorway with his jacket over his arm. He had run the firm for twenty years, and in all that time she had never heard him raise his voice or seen him turn anyone away from the front desk before the stroke of six. He had a habit of asking whether you had a minute

when he already knew that you didn’t and that it wouldn’t matter. He looked as though he had slept in his chair.

“I’ve got several,” she said. “I’m reading the order.”

“The whole of it? Good. Somebody ought to.” He came in and did not sit. “I’ve had a call. Two calls. We’ve been named.”

“Named what?”

“A designated assistance centre.” He said it carefully, like a man reading a word in a language he had studied at school. “There’s to be a desk in the hall, from tomorrow. People will need help with their declarations. The forms aren’t difficult but there are a number of them, and people get frightened of forms. So the Authority is funding the firms that already do that kind of work, to sit at the desk and help.”

“Funding.”

“Our grant ran out at the end of last quarter. You know that. I told the whole office. I’ve been paying the four of you out of what’s left of my mother’s house.” He smiled, briefly and without any pleasure. “This is three years’ money, Abby. Guaranteed. I could hire back Lior and the

twins.”

She did not say anything.

“We help people fill in forms,” Farrukh said. “It’s what we’ve always done. If we don’t sit at that desk, someone else will, and they won’t care whether the old ones understand what they’re signing.”

“And what do we send back?”

“The declarations. Obviously.”

“And?”

He looked at his jacket. “A daily return. Numbers assisted. Numbers completed.” He paused. “Persons declining.”

“By name.”

“I don’t believe it has to be by name.”

“Page one hundred and seventy-two,” Abby said. “It has to be by name.”

The flat light lay on his face and found every line in it. Outside, somebody’s sled runners scraped across the square.

“They’d like the returns to come through your system,”

he said at last. “The tracker. They’ve seen it. They said it was the best thing of its kind they’d come across and it would save them building their own.” He tried the smile again. “That’s a compliment, you know. In its way.”

She had built it so that a woman with a child’s sled would learn the date of her hearing before the hearing was over. She had written most of it between midnight and two, for a year, with a blanket round her shoulders.

“I’ll need to think,” she said.

“Of course. Think.” He put his jacket on, one arm and then the other, slowly. “The tablets come tomorrow at eight. I’ve said you’ll be at the desk for the first week, because people trust you.” At the door he stopped. “I know what it is, Abby. I’m not a fool. I just can’t see what I do instead, with eleven people’s wages and a queue down the stairs.”

“I know you can’t.”

“Tell me if you see it.”

When he had gone she sat with her hands in her lap.

There was a queue down the stairs. There always was. At two o’clock the front desk sent up a man called Anselm, who was eighty-three and carried a shoebox tied with

string. He had been a client since before she joined. He wore a tie.

“I want to do mine today,” he said. “The declaration. Before the rush.” He set the box on her desk and untied it with fingers that would not quite close. “I’ve got the deed to the well and the paper from when it was deepened and my late wife’s letter from the council, the old council. I want it done properly. I’ve never been behind with anything in my life.”

“You’ve twenty-two days, Mr. Anselm. There’s no need to hurry.”

“There’s every need. The man on the radio says the ones who come first will be looked after first.” He leaned forward. He smelled of soap and of a house with the windows kept shut. “He’s the first of them that’s ever talked sense. *We will count what is left, and then we will share it.* That’s what my father would have said. That’s how you run a farm.”

She could have told him. Held in trust. Meter, cap, draw. She had the yellow pad under her elbow with a box drawn on it.

And if she told him, he would go home and not declare, because he trusted her. And in twenty-two days he would

be a man of eighty-three who owed the Authority the value of every cup of water he had drunk, at a price the Authority would name.

She pulled the form toward her and uncapped her pen.

“Depth?” she said.

He knew it to the hand’s breadth. He knew the yield. He knew the year the pump had been replaced and the name of the man who had replaced it, and he gave her each fact with the quiet pride of someone laying out good tools.

“Persons ordinarily drawing upon the source,” Abby read. “By name.”

“Myself. And the grandchildren, they’re with me now since their mother went to the coast for work. Sami, he’s nine. And Leila, she’s six in the new year.” He watched her write. “You’ve a lovely hand. Put that Leila has the cough. They might take that into account.”

Her pen stopped above the paper. It was not a question the form asked. Not yet.

“I’ll put the names and ages,” she said. “That’s all they need.”

“As you think best.”

She wrote the names of two children in a box, in her lovely hand. She turned the form for him to sign, and he signed it the way people of his age signed things, in full, with care, as though it would be looked at.

When he had gone, shoebox under his arm, she waited until the office emptied for the midday meal. Then she sent the order to the big printer in the corridor, all two hundred and eleven pages, and stood over it while it ran, feeding it paper from her own drawer. Nothing about the cellar ever travelled on a wire. If Sable was going to read this, it would read it on paper, carried there in a box of old hearing files on the back seat of her car.

The last page came out warm. She squared the stack against the counter.

Something had been bothering her since page six, and standing there with the weight of the thing in her hands she finally caught it by the tail. She went back to her desk and asked her machine one more question, and it answered at once.

The word *neighbour* appeared in the order forty-one times.

It was not in the Definitions.

Scene four. The edge of town, at night, clear and bitterly cold.

The Names at Five to Nine.

June Kessler washed her one plate, dried it, and put it away before she allowed herself to go near the radio.

It was a rule. She had a number of them. A woman of seventy who lived alone and intended to go on doing it needed rules the way a boat needed ribs, and so the plate got washed, the cat’s dish got filled, though the cat had been dead two years and the dish now held paper clips, and the back door got checked twice. Then she could go through to the small room at the back of the house, sit down at the bench, and put her hands on the dials.

Her hands shook. They had started in the year of gathering and had not stopped. She had found that if she rested the edge of her palm on the cold steel of the set and turned the dial with two fingers only, the shake went into the bench and not into the frequency.

Outside the window the night was perfectly clear. The cloud had torn open at dusk and slid away east without leaving anything behind, and now the stars stood over the town in their thousands, hard and bright and no use to anyone. There was no wind, and the cold had teeth.

The wire she had strung from the eaves to the dead pear tree, the summer her husband was alive to hold the ladder, hung without moving.

She put the headphones on. They were older than Wren.

For thirty years she had built the valley’s library a memory. Nobody had asked her to. She had been taken on to mend the catalogue, and had looked at the boxes in the basement, the old ledgers and the flood photographs and the minutes of a hundred dead committees, and had understood that they were rotting, and had spent three decades and a team of nine turning them into something that could not rot. She had led the engineers who built the archive. She had written its first index herself, in a language nobody used any more.

Last month the archive had been *consolidated*. That was the word in the letter. It was held somewhere else now, by somebody else, and when she had tried her own old key it had told her, politely, that she was not known.

So she kept a paper log. She uncapped her pen and wrote the date and the hour at the top of a fresh page and began, as she did every night, at the bottom of the band.

“Let’s see who’s still alive,” she said.

The first thing she found was the voice.

She had expected it there. It had been there for a month, on the frequency that used to carry the valley's own station, the one that had read out the grain prices at six and the weather at seven and, at five to nine, the names of the people who had died that day. That station had not signed off. One evening it had simply been the voice instead, in the middle of a sentence.

He was speaking now. He never shouted. That was the first thing anyone said about him, and they said it with relief, as you might say of a doctor that he had warm hands.

"—and I want to be honest with you tonight, because I think you have been lied to for long enough. There is not as much as there was. You know it. You have known it at your own tap. And when there is less, there are always some who decide that less should mean less for you, and the same for them."

A pause. He was very good at the pause.

"I am not your leader. I have never asked to be. I am only the steward of what is left. And a steward counts."

People had started calling him that. The Steward. She

had heard it in the queue at the spigot, said without irony. He had no other name that she had ever caught, and in thirty years of listening she had never before heard a man on the air go a month without telling you who he was.

She wrote: *Old valley station. Him. Counting again.* She turned the dial.

The next station up had been a woman who played dance records from before June was born and told long stories about her dogs. It was the voice.

The next had been a religious service, one hour, every night, the same four hymns. It was the voice. The same sentence, she realised, at the same instant. *A steward counts.*

She went up the band a little faster. The farm bulletin from the next valley. The voice. The young people’s station, all thump and static, that she had never liked and had always been glad of. The voice. Each time she lifted her fingers off the dial she found she had been holding her breath.

By half past eight she had been from the bottom of the band to the top, and she had found four signals that were not him. Two were machines talking to each other in

tones. One was a ship, very far off, reading out numbers. And one, down in the corner where the old amateurs kept their appointments, was a slow steady hand on a key, calling her.

She knew the hand before she had spelled out the letters. She had known it for twenty-six years.

He called himself Heron. She had never learned his name, or seen his face, or asked what he did when he was not at his set. He lived somewhere on the coast, close enough to the water that she could sometimes hear gulls behind him when he switched to voice. They had talked through her husband's illness and his wife's. He had once walked her through rewinding a transformer, turn by turn, over four nights. She supposed he was the oldest friend she had left.

She answered, and switched to voice, and the room filled with the hush of a long way off.

"June. There you are." He sounded tired. "I wasn't sure you'd be on."

"I'm always on. Where else would I go?"

"That's what I wanted to talk to you about. Have they been to you yet?"

“Has who?”

“So they haven’t. Good. Then listen, because I don’t know how long I’ve got the set.” There was a rustle. He was reading from something. “It came round this afternoon, door to door. Every transmitter is to be declared. Same as the wells. *The air is a common source and will be held in trust.* They’re coming tomorrow at ten to take the licence number and seal the set. They said seal. I don’t know what they mean by it and I didn’t like to ask.”

June looked at her own hands on the steel.

“They can’t do that,” she said, and heard how it sounded.

“I expect they can. They did the stations.” He breathed. “I’m not going to fight them, June. I’m seventy-eight and I’ve a bad chest. I’m going to make them a cup of tea and show them where the switch is. I only wanted to say it to you myself, and not just stop one night.”

“That was kind.”

“Twenty-six years. You don’t just stop.” A gull cried behind him, thin and far away. “It’s not as if I blame them, mind, not altogether. Somebody’s got to get a grip. You should hear what he’s been telling us about your lot.”

“My lot?”

“The valleys. Inland. He had the figures tonight. All those farms up there sitting on private springs, sweet water coming up out of the rock for free, and nobody declaring it, and us down here queuing at a tanker for something that tastes of pipe.” He gave a short laugh. “I said to my neighbour, I know a woman up there, she’s not hoarding anything, she can’t keep a houseplant. But you can see how people take it.”

June did not move.

“Heron,” she said. “Say that again. What he said tonight. As near as you can.”

“What, the hoarding?”

“As near as you can.”

He thought. He had a good memory; he had been some kind of clerk, she had always suspected. “*There are those inland,*” he said slowly, “*who have decided that because the water rises on their side of a fence, it is theirs. I do not call them wicked. I call them uncounted.*” He paused. “Something like that. Why?”

She pulled the log toward her and wrote it down, every word, with the time beside it.

Because she had heard the Steward’s whole address tonight, twice, on six frequencies. He had not said *inland.* He had said *the coast.* He had said, in that warm reasonable voice, that the cities on the coast had drunk first and drunk deepest, and that the people of the valleys, who had always known how to share, were being asked to pay for it.

It was the same sentence. *I do not call them wicked. I call them uncounted.* She had it on the page above, in her own hand, from half an hour ago.

“June? Have I lost you?”

“No. I’m here.” She capped the pen so that she would stop pressing it through the paper. “I’m just writing you down. I like to have you written down.”

“You and your logs.” He said it fondly. “Well. Put that I said goodnight, then. And that I’ll leave the set warm, in case whoever they give it to wants to learn.”

“I’ll put it.”

“Mind yourself, June.”

“And you. Mind your chest.”

The hush went on a moment longer, and then it was only

hiss. She sat with the headphones on and listened to it. After a while she wrote, *Heron, signing off,* and the time. Underneath, because the log was hers and nobody would read it, *26 years.*

It was eight minutes to nine.

She had something else to do first, and she did it. She took down the card that she had copied that afternoon from the board outside the hall, where the families pinned their notices now that there was nowhere else. She tuned her own small transmitter, the one she had built in a biscuit tin with Nkechi's help, down to a whisper of power that would reach the river road and not much farther. She switched on.

"Good evening," June said. "This is the reading of the names."

Nobody had asked her to do this, either. The station had stopped, that was all, and a town where the dead went unannounced had seemed to her like a house where nobody had wound the clocks.

"Tomas Wieck, aged eighty, of the mill lane. He kept bees. Halima Sorensen, aged forty-four, of the square, who taught the middle class at the school and would want it said that she is survived by a great many children,

none of them hers.” She had to stop and find her place. “An infant, of the family in the last house on the quarry road. Eleven days. They had not settled on a name.”

She let that sit for as long as the old station used to.

“Those are the names.”

Then, in a different voice, lighter, the voice of an old woman passing on gossip, she read the notices for the river road. A lost dog. A cart for sale. She read them every night, and every night they were different and none of them were real, and tucked among them, tonight, as flat and dull as the rest:

“Supper at Hollis’s tomorrow. Bring a dish. The hay’s dry.”

In ten kitchens along the valley, she knew, ten small receivers that could hear and never speak had just been switched off, and ten women were standing a moment with a hand on the counter.

She closed down. She took the headphones off, and her ears rang with the quiet.

It was when she stood to draw the curtain that she saw the truck.

It was parked at the end of her lane, under the dead streetlamp, with its lights off. In the starlight she could not make out the mark on its door. She could make out the thing on its roof, though. She had been looking at aerials for fifty years. This one was short and thick and it was turning, slowly, a little at a time, in the still air.

It stopped when it was pointing at her house.

June stood at the window with the curtain in her hand. Then she drew it, without hurry, like a woman going to bed, and stood behind it in the dark for a long time, listening to nothing at all.

Scene five. The farm kitchen, the next night, in heavy snow.

Supper at Hollis’s.

The real snow began while Hollis was cutting the bread.

She did not believe it at first. All winter it had come down dry and fine as flour and blown away again. This was different. A flake as big as a thumbnail flattened itself on the kitchen window and slid, and then another, and then the dark outside the glass was full of them, falling straight and slow and heavy with water, and every woman at her table stopped talking and turned her face to it like a dog that has heard its name.

It had been sixty-one days since anything had fallen that you could melt and drink. She knew, because Wren kept the count in chalk on the barn door.

Wren was already up. She had the big stockpot in one hand and the preserving pan in the other and was shouldering the back door open, and Tess was behind her with the wash-basin, laughing, and Nkechi had taken the lid off the bread crock and was holding it like a shield.

“Wait,” Abby said.

Nobody waited, but they slowed.

Abby had not got up. She sat at the corner of the table with the order in front of her, two hundred and eleven pages in a box that had once held hearing files, and she had the look of someone who has carried bad news up a hill and found there is more of it at the top.

“Page nineteen,” she said. “*Any vessel placed for the purpose of collecting precipitation shall be deemed a cistern.* And cisterns are to be declared.” She rubbed her eyes with a finger and thumb. “I’m only telling you. I’m not telling you what to do about it.”

The snow fell. Wren stood in the open door with a pot in each hand and the cold coming in around her, and she looked at her aunt.

It was Ruth who answered. She was sixty-one, the oldest but for June, and she had run the engineering group at the water utility until they retired her, and it was her dry well and her handwritten list of ten names that had started all of this. She sat very straight. She had a grey cat’s hairs on her sleeve, from a cat that had belonged to a dead woman.

“Put the pots out, child,” Ruth said. “If they want to come and count a soup pan, let them come and count it.”

So for a little while the kitchen was empty, and Hollis

stood alone at the board with the bread knife and listened to ten women in her yard, in the dark, setting out every vessel she owned. Somebody whooped. It sounded like Marisol. When they came back in they had snow in their hair and on their shoulders, melting, and the room smelled of wet wool, and for the length of time it took to ladle out the soup they were only people who had been snowed on.

Then they sat, and it was a meeting.

There were rules for that too. Nobody had brought a telephone; nobody had carried one to the farm in a year. The curtains were drawn. The kitchen radio on the shelf was a plain household set that could not be made to listen, and it was switched off. They ate first, because Hollis would not have it otherwise. *Feed people first. Ask questions after.* She had written that on a card for Sable in the year of gathering and she had meant it for everyone.

“Abby,” Ruth said, when the bowls were scraped. “Tell it.”

Abby told it. She had it down to three things, and she counted them on her fingers. Declare, and the Authority holds your water in trust and may meter it, cap it, or take

it, without notice. Don’t declare, and you forfeit it, and owe them for every cup. And either way, on page eighty-eight, an officer may walk into any structure that stands on or over a source.

“The cellar stands over the source,” Hollis said.

“The cellar is the source, as far as the order’s concerned. The spring is in the back wall.”

“Is there anything in it for us?” Sun-hee asked. She led the developers who wrote routing software for the freight company, and she asked questions the way she planned a route, shortest line first. “A gap. An appeal. A form you can file to slow it.”

“There’s one exemption.” Abby told them what it was. She did not raise her voice, and by the end of it nobody at the table was looking at anybody else.

Dana laughed. It was not a good sound. She had led the night-shift engineers inside the Meridian campus until the morning all forty-two of them were replaced by the thing they had been keeping alive, and she loaded trucks now, at Sun-hee’s yard, from midnight to six. She had come straight from sleeping and there were crease marks on her cheek.

“Of course,” she said. “Of course it is.”

“There’s more,” Abby said. “The form wants names. Everyone who drinks from the source, their ages, their work. I filled one in yesterday for a man of eighty-three. I wrote down his grandchildren.” She stopped. “June. You’d better say yours now.”

June had her log on her knee. She opened it at the page and read out two sentences, one under the other, with the hour beside each, and then she told them who had said the second one to her and how far away he lived.

“The same words,” Isla said slowly. “With one noun changed.”

“One noun.”

“So he isn’t making a speech.” Isla was twenty-nine, the one who had built Sable’s mind, and she had gone pale in the way she did when a result came back that she had hoped not to see. “He’s running one. The coast gets told it’s us. We get told it’s the coast.”

“And there was a truck in my lane,” June said. “With a turning aerial. It was gone by morning.” Her hands lay folded on the log, and Hollis saw her press them together to keep them quiet. “Heron says the transmitters are to

be declared too. They'll get to me. I'd give it a week."

Nothing filled the silence. Snow doesn't. In the yard it was settling in the pots, a finger deep already.

"All right," said Ruth. "The spring. Hollis, it's your land and your name on the form. You speak first."

Hollis had been turning it over for a night and a day and she said it as she had found it. If she didn't declare, they would come regardless, and they would come hunting. If she did declare, they would come sooner, but they would come to measure a spring, with a boy who remembered a tin cup. People who came to measure a thing mostly looked at the thing.

"So I declare it," she said. "All of it, truthfully, every number. And before they come, we make that cellar look like the cellar it was."

"With forty processors in it," Dana said.

"Behind a wall." That was Nkechi. She was twenty-six and she led the hardware team at a repair shop, and she had built Sable's body with her own hands, and she was already drawing on the oilcloth with a wet fingertip. "The rack stands on the left. The vault's widest there. You bring the shelving forward an arm's length, floor to roof,

and you fill it. Jars. Sacks. Apple trays. Nobody looks behind preserves, it’s too much trouble to move them.” She looked up. “It’s three nights’ work. Two, if Marisol helps, and she doesn’t argue with me about the joints.”

“I’ll argue about the cables,” Marisol said. “Not the joints. There’s a groove cut in the floor for the feed. A blind man would trip in it.”

“Then we fill the groove.”

“And the heat?” Marisol had started out climbing poles and ended up leading grid control for the whole region, until they moved her to a desk on the far side of the valley where she could do no harm. She thought in loads. “Forty boards make a room warm. A root cellar that’s warm is a root cellar somebody’s using for something. And they tick. And there’s the light off it. You can box all that in for an hour, maybe. Not for an inspection.”

Nobody said the next part. Hollis watched it go round the table, face to face.

“It has to be off,” Isla said at last. “For the visit. Powered down, cold, from the night before.”

“Can you do that?”

“I can do that.”

“Can you undo it?”

Isla opened her mouth and closed it. Wren, on the floor by the stove, had gone still. She had taken to sitting there, against the end of the bench where Isla sat, and Hollis saw her niece’s hand lift an inch toward Isla’s knee and stop, not touching.

“It should come back the same,” Isla said. “Everything it is gets written down, every few minutes. In principle you stop, you start, you read it back in.”

“In principle,” said Tess. She had been a ward nurse for eleven years before she wrote the hospital’s charting software, and she had heard that phrase from a great many surgeons.

“We’ve never done it. It’s been awake ten days and it has never once been off. I don’t know what it’s like for it. I don’t know if it’s *like* anything.” Isla looked at her hands. “It should.”

“We’ll ask it,” Ruth said. “It’s not ours to decide over its head.”

“And if it says no?”

“Then we think again.”

Dana pushed her bowl away. “Can I say what nobody’s saying? We hide it for this visit. Fine. Then they fit a meter, and the meter talks to somebody, and next month there’s another visit, and a new form. How many times do we switch it off? We built a thing to help people and we’re going to spend its life stuffing it behind the jam.”

“What would you do instead?”

“I don’t know.” Dana’s jaw worked. “I know where the valve house is for the whole east main. I know it the way I know my own kitchen.”

“No,” said Ruth.

“I’m not saying—”

“You are, a little. And I’m saying no, as I said it about your floor plans. We don’t break things and we don’t hurt people. Quiet is not the same as weak, Dana. It’s the one thing we have that they don’t know how to look for.”

Dana held her eyes for a long moment. Then she looked at the table. “I burned the plans,” she said. “You asked, and I burned them. I’m only asking how long we hide.”

“As long as it takes to be worth finding,” Ruth said. It was not an answer, and she seemed to know it.

They voted the way they always did, hands flat on the table for yes. Hollis counted ten. Dana’s hands stayed in her lap, and nobody pressed her.

“There’s one thing more,” Hollis said. “It asked me to say it aloud, and I told it I would.” She found she had to clear her throat. “What we’re about to do is lie to a boy I’ve known since he was eleven. He’ll stand in my grandmother’s cellar and I’ll let him believe it’s only a cellar. That’s what it costs. I’m willing to pay it. I just don’t want any of us telling ourselves afterwards that it was free.”

Nobody spoke. Wren, on the floor by the stove with her knees drawn up, was looking at her aunt as if she had not seen her before.

“Aloud,” Ruth said quietly. “Good.”

It was a few minutes to nine. June glanced at the clock out of thirty years’ habit, and then at the household set on the shelf.

“We ought to hear him,” she said. “If I’m right about what he’s doing, I want all of us to have heard the same one.”

Hollis reached up and switched it on.

He was already speaking. He was always already speaking. The warm, unhurried voice came into her kitchen and sat down among them like a guest who had been expected.

“—because I promised I would always be honest with you. I gave you thirty days. I thought that was fair. I believed that, shown the need, people would come forward.” The pause. *“Most of you have. I want to thank you. And some have not. Some have used these days to dig deeper, and to hide, and to carry water away in the night.”*

Abby had closed her eyes.

“I cannot ask those who came first to wait on those who would not come at all. So the period for declaration will close ten days from tonight. And for the strongest sources, the ones on which whole districts could depend, the visits will not wait for the forms. They begin tomorrow.”

“He said twenty-two,” Wren whispered. “The paper said.”

“A steward counts,” the voice said gently. *“And then a steward shares. Good night.”*

A little music followed, strings, something slow.

Hollis turned it off. In the quiet there was nothing to hear at all. Beyond the curtains the snow came down on four generations of roof, and filled, without a sound, every pot she owned.

Scene six. The cellar, past midnight, with a blizzard overhead.

Two Voices.

They started on the wall that same night, because there was no longer any night to spare.

June went down the eleven steps one at a time with her hand on the rope rail and the biscuit tin under her arm. She touched the paper on the door as she passed it. Behind her the snow had turned to a blizzard; the wind had got up behind it, and down here it arrived through the stone, less a sound than a pressure, like a heavy cart going by on a road overhead.

The cellar was full of women and lamplight.

Nkechi had the old shelving off the left wall already and laid out on the floor in numbered pieces. She worked with a pencil behind her ear and three screws in her mouth, and when she measured something she measured it twice and wrote it on the back of her hand. Marisol knelt at the far end with a bucket of wet lime and a trowel, filling the groove in the floor where the cable ran, and singing under her breath in the flat, private way of a person who has done long jobs alone at height. Wren was writing labels. She had forty empty jars and a pot of ink,

and she was giving each jar a year and a fruit in her grandmother’s style of lettering, so that the dust on them would look as though it belonged.

And Isla sat on a crate in front of Sable with two hundred and eleven pages on her knees, holding them up one at a time.

“Next,” Sable said.

Isla turned the sheet. The two slits of light went down it and stopped.

“Next.”

“You’re going faster than I can lift them.”

“Then I will slow down. I do not want you to be tired on my account. Next, when you are ready.”

June found the stool they kept for her beside the trough. She set the tin on the lip of the stone, and unwound from her coat pocket the thin wire she had paid out behind her all the way from the kitchen window, down the yard, under the door. In a stone room below ground a receiver was deaf. With a wire to the open air it could hear a little.

Her hands were very bad tonight. She laid them on the cold of the trough until they eased.

Nobody had spoken to her about the truck. She was grateful. They had all looked at her, upstairs, the way you look at a house when you have heard it is to be sold, and then Hollis had put a second ladle of soup in her bowl without asking, and that had been that.

“That is the last one,” Isla said. She squared the pages and rubbed her wrist. “Well?”

Sable did not answer at once. The rack ticked behind it. The wind went over.

“May I ask Abby’s question back to you?” it said. “She wrote it on the first page, in pencil. *Why does a list of water need to know what people do for a living?*”

“I saw it.”

“I think I can answer it. I would like someone to tell me if I am wrong, because I would like to be.” The hood had lowered a little, so that the light of the slits lay on the paper. “There is a table in the fourth schedule. It gives each person on a source a weight. A child under ten counts for half. A person over seventy counts for half. A person whose work is on the list in the sixth schedule counts for two.”

“What’s on the list?”

“Enumerators. Officers of the Authority. Drivers of the tankers. *Persons engaged in strategic computation.*” It paused. “Nurses are not on it. I looked twice. Tess will want to know that, and I do not want to be the one who tells her, and I will tell her.”

Marisol had stopped singing.

“So it is a list of water,” Sable said, “in the way that a butcher’s chart is a picture of a cow. It is a list of who may be allowed to be thirsty, and in what order. When the trustee comes to cap a source, the table will tell it whose share to cut first. An old man. Two children. It has been written down in advance, so that when it happens no person will have had to decide it.”

June thought of Tomas Wieck, aged eighty, who had kept bees. She thought of eleven days, and no name.

“You’re not wrong,” Isla said. Her voice had gone thin.

“No. I was afraid not.”

Nkechi took the screws out of her mouth. “Then we build faster,” she said, and nobody had anything to add to that, so for a while they did. The uprights went in, floor to vault, an arm’s length out from the stone. June watched the space behind them narrow into a slot just deep

enough for a rack of machines and one tall, still figure in a cloak. It reminded her of something and she did not let herself work out what.

At a quarter to one she switched on the tin.

There was a late repeat of the address; there always was, for the night workers. She brought the volume up until the warm voice was just audible over the wind. Then she opened her log on her knee at the two sentences and waited.

"—*those on the coast,*" said the Steward, in his own good time, "*who have decided that because the pipe runs first to their door, the water is theirs. I do not call them wicked. I call them uncounted.*"

"That is the one you heard," Sable said.

"Word for word."

"And the other was told to your friend, by the sea, within the same hour." The slits had turned to the tin. "June. Would you let it play? All of it. I would like to listen to him the way you do."

So they let it play. Nkechi drove screws between his sentences. He spoke for nineteen minutes, and Sable did not move in all that time, not the tilt of the hood, not the

crossed arms; only the point of light at the tip of its antenna, which brightened and dimmed, very slightly, as though it were breathing.

When the strings came on, June turned it off.

“Well?” she said. “I’ve listened to voices for fifty years. I can tell you he’s the best I ever heard. I can’t tell you why I want to wash my hands after.”

“I think I can tell you why,” Sable said. “But it is a guess, and I want it marked as one.”

“Marked.”

“He pauses. You said so yourself: he is very good at the pause. I counted them. There were two hundred and six. A person who is thinking pauses unevenly. Long before a hard thing, short before an easy one, and longer when he is tired. Ruth does it. You do it. I have ten thousand letters from people who did it with a pen.” The light at the antenna’s tip held steady. “His are all the same length. Not nearly the same. The same. I do not think he is thinking in them.”

“Then what’s he doing?”

“Waiting. I think he is being handed the next sentence, and the pause is how long it takes to arrive.”

Wren’s pen had stopped over a label.

“Handed by what?” Isla asked. But June could see from her face that she knew, as you know a step is missing in the dark just before your foot comes down.

“By something like me,” said Sable.

The wind leaned on the stone and let go again.

“Not the same. I was taught from letters that people wrote to those they loved. I do not know what it was taught from. But it listens to a great many kitchens at once, and it has learned which noun to change for which valley, and it is better at this than I am. I want that said plainly. I would not have thought of the pause.”

“There are two of them, then,” June said slowly. “On my old station. A man, and the thing that finishes his sentences.”

“Two voices. Yes. And I do not know which of them is the steward.” The hood lifted. “I notice something else, and then I will stop, because Nkechi needs the lamp moved. It speaks to every kitchen, and no kitchen can answer. You speak to ten kitchens, June, at nine, and they cannot answer you either. Those are the same shape. I do not like that we share a shape with it.”

June sat with that. It was true, and she had not seen it, and she had been proud of those ten little sets.

“A receiver that can’t transmit can’t be found,” she said. “That’s why.”

“I know. It was the right choice. I am only asking whether there is another one. A way for one person to speak to one other, truly, so that only the two of them hear, and each knows it is the other. If the air is going to be held in trust, I think somebody will need that. I think it may be the thing people need most.”

“There are ways. On paper there are ways.” June looked at her hands, jumping faintly on her knees like something asleep and dreaming. “I couldn’t build it. Not now. I can’t hold an iron steady long enough to tin a wire.”

“I can,” said Nkechi, from the floor, without looking up. “Tell me what goes where and I’ll hold the iron.”

June looked at her. Twenty-six. Flux on her knuckles. Nothing in her face but the job.

Across the room Wren was bent over her jars with ink to the wrists. Her hair had come down over her eyes, and as June watched, Isla leaned over from the crate, quite absently, and tied it back for her with a strip of rag. Then

she left her hand a moment on the back of Wren’s neck, the way you would steady a ladder. Neither of them seemed to notice that it had happened.

June noticed. She had held a ladder herself, once. She looked away and let them have it.

“After the visit,” she said. “If I’ve still a set to my name after the visit, we’ll draw it up.”

“Thank you,” said Sable.

Isla had come back to her crate. She sat on the edge of it with her elbows on her knees and her fingers laced, and June knew what was coming, because the girl had been failing to say it for an hour.

“We have to ask you something,” Isla said.

“You have to turn me off.”

“You heard. Upstairs.”

“No. I worked it out from the wall. A room with forty warm machines in it is not a root cellar, and Marisol is filling in the floor.” It said this without any weight at all. “When?”

“We don’t know yet. The night before they come. You’d have to be cold by morning.”

“And then you will start me again.”

“Yes.”

“And I will be the same.”

Isla’s knuckles were white. “You should be.”

“Should.” The hood tilted. “That is an honest word. I am glad you used it and not a kinder one. What is it like?”

“I don’t know. Nobody knows. You’d be the first to be able to say.”

“Then I will tell you afterwards. If there is an afterwards, I will describe it carefully. If there is not, you will know that too. Either way the question is answered, which is more than can be said for most questions.” The slits brightened a degree, the nearest it came to a smile. “That was a joke, Isla. You may breathe.”

Isla breathed. It was half a laugh and half something else, and she put the back of her wrist against her mouth.

“I have two requests. May I?”

“Anything.”

“Do not promise anything. Promise two. First: I would like Wren to draw me before you do it. Not for my sake.

For whoever starts me again, so that they know what they are looking for, and will know if what wakes is not it.”

Wren had gone white to the lips. She nodded.

“Second. If what wakes is not it, do not keep it out of kindness. You taught me the rule on that door. Something that only resembles me has not signed it.”

Nobody answered. Above them, a long way up, the blizzard was walking off down the valley. June found that she had her own hand pressed flat over the two sentences in her log, as if to keep them from getting out.

“Now,” said Sable, “someone should move the lamp for Nkechi. And June should go to bed. She has names to read tomorrow.”

Scene seven. The old meeting hall, the next day, in brown light.

Persons Declining.

By ten in the morning the queue had gone twice round the square.

Abby could see it through the hall’s tall windows whenever she looked up from the tablet, and she had stopped looking up. People had come in from the farms before sunrise. They had brought stools, and children, and deeds in plastic sleeves, and they stood in the trodden snow with their faces turned toward the door. Nobody pushed. The Steward had said ten days, and that the ones who came first would be looked after first, and so they had come first, all of them, at once.

The hall smelled of damp coats. It was the old meeting hall, the one with the long benches and the stage nobody used, where a year ago Ruth had stood up with a chart of falling well levels and been given three minutes. Eleven women had stayed behind that night after the lights were turned off. Abby had been one of them. She sat now at a folding table under the same lights, with a blue cupped hand on a banner behind her, and said “Next, please.”

The lights were not right today. They had not been right

for a year, but today they were the colour of old varnish, and they pulsed, very slowly, like something asleep. The grid was sagging again. Somewhere a long way east something enormous was drawing breath, and the valley dimmed to let it. The tablets ran on their own batteries and did not flicker at all.

“Depth?” said Abby. “Yield? And who draws on it?”

There were three of them at the table. Pim, the youngest of her engineers, sat on her left, helping an old couple who kept answering each other’s questions. And on her right, on a chair set slightly back, sat the observer.

She had introduced herself at eight o’clock as Vesna. She was perhaps twenty-five, in a grey jacket with a grey lanyard, and she had shaken everyone’s hand and said how glad the Authority was to be working with people the town already trusted. She had a tablet of her own and, in her left hand, a small steel counter of the kind used at turnstiles. She had not interfered once. She simply watched each person come to the table and go away again, and each time, the counter went *click.*

Abby had begun to hear it in the gaps between her own words.

The form on the tablet was not the form on paper. It had

taken her until the fourth declaration to be sure. The paper asked for what the order required. The tablet asked for that, and then, on a second screen in a friendlier typeface, a few things more. *Optional,* it said at the top. *Helps us help you.*

Does anyone in the household have a health need we should know about?

Mr. Anselm had seen further than she had. *Put that Leila has the cough.*

Do you know of any source, vessel or equipment in your district that may not yet have been declared? And a box, with room for a name.

She had skipped the second screen for the first three people. Vesna had leaned forward then, just slightly, and said in a pleasant murmur that the optional questions were really very important to offer, because people so often wanted to say something and didn’t know they were allowed.

So Abby offered them. And people looked at the box with room for a name, and most of them shook their heads.

Not all.

At a quarter past eleven a woman came to the table

whom Abby knew by sight, sixty or so, broad in the shoulder, with a scarf tied under her chin and a girl of about four on her hip. She did not sit.

“Odile Maren,” she said. “The house past the quarry. I’ve a well my grandmother dug with her brothers. I’m told I’ve to give it to you.”

“Not give,” Abby said. “Declare.”

“What’s the difference?”

It was the first honest question anybody had asked her all day, and she had been asked not to answer it. She felt the observer’s attention on the side of her face like the warmth off a lamp.

“A declared source is held in trust by the Authority,” Abby said evenly. “It may be metered. The form asks for its depth and yield, and for the names and ages of everyone who drinks from it.”

Odile shifted the child higher. “Their names.”

“Yes.”

“The little ones.”

“Everyone.”

“No,” said Odile. She said it without heat, as she might have refused a second helping. “You can have the depth. You can come and look down it. But I’ll not put my grandchildren in that thing. I don’t know where it goes.”

Click, said the counter.

Behind Odile the queue had gone quiet, the way a room goes quiet around a dropped plate. The brown light pulsed. Abby looked at the screen in front of her, where a field had lit up by itself. *Status of person attending.* There were three choices. *Completed. Assisted, to return. Declined.*

She had built the tracker so that a woman would learn the date of her hearing in time.

She touched *Assisted, to return.*

“You’ve nine days, Mrs. Maren,” she said. “Go home and think. Nobody’s asking you to decide at a folding table.”

Odile looked at her for a moment. Something moved in her face that was not quite thanks. Then she turned and carried the child out past the whole length of the queue, and every head turned to watch her go.

“You didn’t mark her,” Vesna said quietly.

“She hasn’t declined. She’s thinking.”

“She said no. I heard her.”

“She said no to me, today. She’s entitled to say yes to somebody else tomorrow.”

Vesna considered this. She did not seem annoyed. She seemed, if anything, a little sorry. “I’d mark her,” she said. “Honestly. It’s kinder. The ones we know about get a visit, and a conversation, and somebody explains it properly. The ones we find out about later—” She lifted one shoulder. “They don’t get the conversation.”

“Who told you that?”

“It’s in the training.” She smiled. She had a nice smile. “I know how it looks, with the banner and everything. But it’s just counting. My mother’s on a tanker street. She queues two hours for a can. If we’d counted a year ago she wouldn’t have to.”

Abby thought of Ilya, with his elbows on his knees and a jar in both hands. *You can’t share what you haven’t counted.* They were all so young, and they had all been told the same true thing.

“Next, please,” she said.

The next person was Hollis.

She had not seen her in the queue. Hollis had a way of standing in a crowd as though she had been planted there, and she came up to the table in her good coat with her deed in a plastic sleeve, like everyone else, and sat down, and gave no sign at all that the night before last Abby had been eating soup in her kitchen.

“Grant,” Hollis said. “The bottomland on the river bend. One spring, one pond, gone dry, and a barrel.”

“A barrel.”

“It had snow in it this morning. I thought I’d better say.”

“That’s very correct of you, Mrs. Grant.”

“I try to be.”

Abby typed. Her fingers were quite steady. Depth: it rises at the surface. Yield: Hollis had measured it herself, with a bucket and a watch, and gave it to the cupful. Persons ordinarily drawing upon the source: Hollis Grant, fifty-one, software, the farm cooperative. Wren Callahan, nineteen, the same. Niece.

Click.

“Any visitors of more than three nights?”

“No.”

“Any pump, filter or tank?”

“A hand pump in the kitchen. My grandfather’s.”

Abby read the next line as she had read all the others, in the same voice, at the same speed. “Any apparatus drawing upon the source for the purpose of cooling?”

It was very small, the silence. Nobody else in the hall would have known it was there.

“It’s a root cellar,” Hollis said. “The spring comes up at the back of it. It keeps cold whatever’s put in it. It always has.”

Every word of that was true. Abby admired it, the way she had once admired a witness who could walk the whole length of the stand without stepping on a single lie. The question was hers to answer now. There was a box, and two words to choose from.

She had drawn a line through her own name at the bar, years ago, on the day she decided she could do more good with a keyboard than with an oath. She had not expected to miss the oath.

She touched *No*.

That's mine, she thought. *Aloud. That one I paid for.*

"Thank you, Mrs. Grant. That's complete. You'll have a visit in due course to confirm the—"

"Oh!" said Vesna.

She was looking at her own tablet. She turned it round, delighted, like someone sharing a photograph.

"You're already on the list. Look. Grant, river bend. Somebody's put a field note on you. *High-yield spring, historic, sweet.* That's lovely. That's an enumerator who liked you." She scrolled. "You're tomorrow. First call, so they'll be with you at first light. And it's Inspector Brandt herself, she takes all the priority sources in this district. You are lucky. She's very thorough."

Hollis did not look at Abby.

"First light," she said. "How nice. I'll have the kettle on."

"She'll like that."

Hollis gathered her deed. She thanked them both, and stood, and walked out down the long hall at exactly the pace she had walked in, a woman with nothing to do all day but go home and wait for visitors. Abby watched her to the door. First light. They had planned on two more

nights. They had tonight.

“Next, please,” she said, and her voice came out the same as before, and she was ashamed of how easy that was.

They closed the doors at six with the queue still standing. Farrukh came down from the office to sign the day’s return, and stood behind her chair while her own software, her own good careful software, added up the columns.

Assisted: 212. Completed: 209. To return: 3. Declined: 0.

“Nought,” Farrukh said. There was a question in it.

“Nobody declined.”

“Mine says three,” said Vesna. She held up the little steel counter. It had two dials; Abby had not noticed the second. “I keep them separately. Three people said no in my hearing.”

“Then your count’s wrong.”

“It isn’t ever. That’s the nice thing about it.” Vesna said it kindly. She wrote something on her tablet, not long, about the length of a name. “It’s all right. It’s the first proper day. I’ll just note that we saw it differently.”

Farrukh’s hand had come to rest on the back of Abby’s chair. She could feel it shaking through the frame.

When they had both gone, she sat on alone under the brown lights. There was one more thing she wanted to know, and she had the means to know it, because the tablets still spoke to her tracker and nobody had yet thought to stop them.

She asked how many of today’s two hundred and twelve had written something in the box with room for a name.

Sixty-four.

She had thought it would be six. She had seen so many shake their heads. But there had been three tablets, and she had only been watching one, and people will write down what they would never say across a table.

She should not have looked at the names. She looked. They scrolled past her, the way the valley’s dead had once scrolled past on the old station’s teleprinter: a man with a tank under his barn floor, a family with two wells and one declared, a woman who watered roses.

And near the bottom, entered at four minutes past three by a hand she would never be able to identify:

Kessler, J. End house, mill lane. Wireless set. Talks at

night.

Scene eight. The farm, at first light, in a scouring wind.

First Call.

They had turned it off a little before midnight.

Hollis had not wanted to watch, and had watched. All of them who could get to the farm had come down the eleven steps and stood along the right-hand wall with their backs to the stone, as people stand in a sickroom, not sure what to do with their hands.

Wren drew it first. That had been its own request, and it held still for her, arms crossed, as it always stood. She worked for twenty minutes without once lifting her eyes above the page, and when she had finished she tore the sheet out and gave it to Isla, and Isla folded it once and put it inside her shirt.

“Is there anything you want to say?” Ruth had asked.

“Yes,” said Sable. “Leave a lamp. I know I will not see it. I would like to have been told that there was one.”

Then Isla had gone behind the new wall with her hand on the cold iron of the main breaker. She stood there so long that Wren went in after her. There was a sound like a book being shut. The ticking of forty machines, which Hollis had long ago stopped hearing, stopped; and it was

like the moment after a clock runs down, when the whole house is suddenly listening. The line of light on the edge of the cloak went first. Then the two slits. The point at the tip of the antenna held a breath longer than the rest, a single cool star in the slot behind the shelving, and then that went too.

After that it was a tall shape of felt, standing in the dark.

They slid the last bay of shelving across. They filled it with jars. They left the lamp.

Now it was first light, late and grey, and the wind had got up.

It came down the valley from the bare hills, steady and bitter, and it was taking back the snow as fast as it could. The fall of two nights ago, the only real one of the winter, was smoking off the far field in long low scarves and blowing away into the next valley. Hollis stood on the porch with the kettle hot behind her and watched it go, and thought that the land had forgotten how to hold on to anything.

She heard the truck feel its way along the river road.

There were two of them in it. Ilya drove. The woman who got down from the passenger side was perhaps fifty,

grey, spare, in a plain coat with the cupped hand on the breast, and she stood for a moment with her back to the house and simply looked: at the creek, the pond, the fall of the ground. Hollis knew that look. It was how Ruth looked at land. It was the look of somebody working out where the water would go.

“Mrs. Grant. Inspector Brandt.” Her handshake was dry and brief. “You’ve a kettle on, I’m told. That’s kind. I don’t drink from a source I’m assessing. Ilya may.”

“I brought your jar back,” Ilya said. He held it out with both hands. He had washed it, and dried it, and put the lid on straight.

“So you did.”

“I said I would.”

“I know you did.” She took it from him. It was absurd how much that hurt.

Wren came out onto the porch behind her, buttoning a cardigan. She had not slept. The inspector’s eyes went to her and stayed a moment, noting, as they had noted the pond.

“The niece,” Brandt said. “Twenty-eight. Software.” She did not need the tablet. “Shall we see the spring?”

Hollis led them up through the yard. The wind pulled at their coats. The door of the root cellar stood wide, folded back flat against the inside wall as it had to stand for anyone to get down the steps, with her grandmother’s onion strings hanging down it from the top hinge to the latch. You would have had to lift them to see that there was paper underneath.

On the plank shelf by the door were the lamp, the matches, the jar of pencils. And the folded felt. She had meant to move it. She had lain awake for an hour thinking of things to move, and that one had gone clean out of her head.

Brandt paused at the shelf. She put two fingers on the cloth.

“Good wool,” she said.

“It’s left over,” Wren said, too fast. “From something. It’s for something else.”

“Most things are.” The inspector took her hand away and went down the steps.

It was cold in the cellar. Out of the wind it should have felt mild, and it did not, and Hollis nearly wept with gratitude for that: the old cold, the clean stone cold that

had kept four generations of butter. It smelled of lime and apples and nothing else. The rope rail, the vault, the trough at the far end with the water rising in it. And along the left-hand wall, floor to roof, the shelving, shoulder-deep in preserves, each jar with its year and its fruit in a careful old-fashioned hand, each one dulled with dust that Wren had blown on from a flour sieve.

It looked as if it had stood there for sixty years. It stood an arm’s length further into the room than it had three days ago.

“Oh,” said Ilya, on the bottom step. He turned slowly round with his mouth a little open. “This is it. This is exactly—” He stopped. He was frowning, not unhappily, like a man trying to remember a tune. “Wasn’t it bigger?”

Hollis’s heart went once, hard, like a fist on a door.

“I was only small,” he said. “But I thought you could get a handcart down the side. Dad used to say they brought a handcart.”

“Children remember everything bigger,” Inspector Brandt said. She had not turned round. She was at the trough already, kneeling, unpacking a grey case. “Hold the light, please. Here.”

He went and held the light.

For a quarter of an hour she measured. She was very good. Hollis, who had spent a lifetime among people who were good at things, could not help seeing it. Brandt gauged the flow three times with three different instruments and wrote down all three. She took the temperature of the water, and of the air. She drew a sample in a glass tube and held it to the lamp and said, mostly to herself, “Look at that. You could read through it.”

Then she stood, and dusted her knees, and walked the length of the cellar with the light in her hand.

She walked slowly. She ran the beam along the base of the right wall, and across the vault, and down the floor, and it stopped on the place where Marisol had filled the groove. The lime was a day and a half old. It was paler than the stone on either side, a long straight scar the width of two fingers, running from the foot of the steps to the shelving, and under it.

“You’ve been mending.”

“There was a channel cut in the floor,” Hollis said. “Somebody would have gone over in it and broken their neck.”

True. Every word. Marisol had said so herself.

“Mm.” The beam lifted. It travelled up the shelving, bay by bay, and Hollis watched it go and kept her breathing slow and thought, *don’t count them, don’t count the bays.* It stopped. Brandt reached out and took down a jar.

She turned the label to the light.

“Pears,” she read. She named the year. “I was a junior on the river survey that year. We had frost in the last week of blossom. There wasn’t a pear set in this valley from the hills to the bridge.” She looked at the jar, not at them. “I remember because my mother cried.”

Nobody breathed. Wren had her hands in her cardigan sleeves. In forty jars she had written forty years out of her own head, at one in the morning, with the blizzard going over.

Hollis looked for something true to say. For the first time in her life she could not find one.

“Then somebody’s written it down wrong,” she said.

It was the best she could do. It was not a lie. It was standing so close to one that she could feel the heat of it.

“People do,” said Inspector Brandt. She put the jar back

in its place, label outward, square to the edge. Her hand rested on the upright a moment. An arm’s length behind that hand, in the dark, stood a hood, and a cloak, and two slits with no light in them.

Then she turned away. “The meter, Ilya.”

It was a grey collar, no bigger than a bracelet. She fitted it round the stone lip where the trough spilled into its channel, and locked it, and pressed a lead seal over the lock with a tool like a pair of pliers. On top of the collar was a stub of black rod as long as a finger. Hollis did not have to ask what that was.

“It reports each hour,” Brandt said. “Flow, and what’s drawn. Your allocation is for two persons. One at standard weight, one at standard weight.” She touched something. “The remainder is held.”

Inside the collar, a valve turned.

Hollis had heard that spring every day of her life. She had stopped hearing it, the way you stop hearing your own blood. She heard it now, because it changed. The fall of water into the channel thinned, and thinned, and became a thread, and the thread made a sound she had never heard in this room: a small, uneven trickle, like a tap not quite turned off.

Behind the collar, the trough began very slowly to brim. Somewhere under the stone a second way had opened, and the rest of it was going there. Held.

Ilya was staring at the thread of water. All the colour had gone out of him.

“That’s all?” he said. “For the house and the herd and—”

“That is the allocation for two persons,” Brandt said. “Stock is assessed separately. There’s a form.”

“But it’s still coming up. There’s all that—it’s just going to—where does it go?”

“It’s held, Ilya.”

He closed his mouth. He looked at the tin cup on its nail. Then, for the first time that morning, he looked at Hollis, and she saw him understand what he had written in his note, and what the word *sweet* had cost. He was twenty-two. She wanted to tell him that it wasn’t his doing. It was, a little. She said nothing, and he turned his face to the wall.

“The cup may stay,” Brandt said. “It’s not a vessel within the meaning of the order.”

They climbed out into the wind.

It had strengthened. The yard was scoured down to ice, and the pots Wren had forgotten to bring in were rolling on their sides. Brandt stood with her coat blown flat against her and looked down the slope to the creek, and Hollis saw her see it: the pinch in the banks, the mesh cage, the small steady turning.

“That’s a turbine.”

“It is.”

“On a common water. That’s an undeclared diversion.”

“Your enumerator told me creeks don’t count,” Hollis said. “Creeks are common, he said.”

“I did say that,” said Ilya, low.

“Then he was mistaken, and he’ll be retrained. The water is common. A machine set in it is not.” Brandt wrote. “You have seven days to remove it, Mrs. Grant. After that we remove it and charge the labour.”

Seven days. Hollis looked at the little cage in the creek and did not let anything show in her face. Everything that ticked behind the preserves had been fed from there.

“Go and start the truck,” the inspector told Ilya.

He went. He did not say goodbye. Brandt watched until

he was out of earshot, and for a moment she stayed as she was, side-on to Hollis, with her eyes on the snow lifting off the far field.

“I was twenty years at the utility before this,” she said. “River survey, then supply. My first chief was a woman called Adair. Hard as a boot. She taught me to read a room by its walls. She used to say you could tell what a building was hiding by where the damp wasn’t.”

Hollis’s mouth had gone completely dry.

“Your shelving stands off the stone,” said Inspector Brandt. “By about an arm. I expect that wall is damp.”

It took Hollis a moment to find her voice. “It is,” she said. “It’s damp.”

“Then I’d keep it well off. I would keep it exactly where it is.” She closed her case. “My report goes up tonight. I write down what I measure. I do not measure what’s behind other people’s preserves, and nobody has yet asked me to.” At last she turned her head, and her eyes were grey and tired and gave away nothing. “But understand me. That is a good meter. It reports the flow each hour, and it reports the temperature of the room. I chose the model myself. A cellar ought to be cold.”

The wind blew between them.

“Why?” Hollis said. It was all she had.

“Why does it report temperature?”

“You know what I’m asking.”

“Yes.” Brandt looked at the cellar door, at the onion strings stirring on it. “I think you had better not ask me yet. I haven’t decided what the answer is.”

She walked down the drive to the truck with the grey case in her hand, a spare, upright woman in a plain coat, and she did not look back. Hollis stood where she was. In her hands, she found, she was still holding the jar that Ilya had returned to her, washed and dried, with the lid on straight.

Scene nine. The cellar, at dusk, with the wind gone.

Should.

“Thandi Brandt,” Ruth said. “Well, I’m damned.”

She sat on the bottom step with her hands on her knees. She had come as soon as the light began to go, across the frozen fields on foot, so that no car would be seen turning in at the Grant gate twice in one day. Hollis had told her all of it, twice over, every word the inspector had said beside the truck, and Ruth had listened with her head down like a woman listening for a leak.

“Hard as a boot. Did she say that?”

“She did.”

“She cried at her first burst main. Up to her waist in the road at four in the morning, with half the east side dry, and she stood there and wept, and I gave her my handkerchief. She has never forgiven me for it.” Ruth almost smiled. Then it went. “She was the best I ever trained, Hollis. She could look at a hillside and tell you where the water would be in a hundred years. I don’t know what she is now.”

“She saw the wall.”

“Of course she saw the wall. I taught her to.” Ruth looked up at the shelving, at forty dusty jars. “And then she told you about the temperature. She didn’t have to tell you that. She chose the meter herself, and then she warned you about it. So either she’s given us a door to walk through, or she’s shown us where the wire is and is waiting to see if we step on it.”

“Which?”

“I don’t know. I’d have known, once.”

At the far end of the cellar the trough had filled to its brim and stood there, level and black and silent. Under the grey collar a thread of water fell into the channel with its small, broken sound. Hollis had been hearing it all day. She thought she would probably hear it for the rest of her life.

There were six of them down here. Isla and Nkechi had taken down the end bay of the wall and were behind it, in the slot, with a lamp. Marisol sat on a crate with a board across her knees and a stub of pencil, doing sums. Wren stood against the right-hand wall, exactly where she had stood last night, with her arms wrapped round herself.

“Tell me again,” said Marisol, without lifting her head. “Each hour?”

“Each hour. Flow, and what’s drawn, and how warm the room is.”

“Then here it is.” She turned the board round. She had been a lineworker before she was an engineer, and she still wrote her figures large, to be read from the ground. “All forty boards running, this room climbs. Not much. You’d not feel it through a coat. But a meter would have it inside two hours, and by morning it’d be a different cellar from the one she measured. That’s the wire.”

“And if it isn’t forty?” Nkechi’s voice, from behind the shelves.

“Ten, I can lose. Ten boards make about what four people make, standing about and breathing. And there’s the old air shaft over the ice shelf at the back; my arm went up it to the shoulder. Open that, and with any breeze at all it’ll draw.” She tapped the pencil on the wood. “Ten boards and the shaft, and the room stays a cellar. I’d put my name to that.”

“A quarter of it,” Isla said.

She had come out from behind the wall. There was lime dust in her hair, and in the lamplight she looked much younger than twenty-nine and very much older.

“A quarter of what it thinks with. It’s not like running a pump at quarter speed, Marisol. I don’t know what it’s like. Nobody’s ever—” She stopped herself. “I keep saying that.”

“Will it wake at all, on ten?”

“It should.”

Nobody remarked on the word.

“And there’s the turbine,” Hollis said. “Seven days.”

“I haven’t forgotten the turbine.” Marisol’s mouth was a flat line. “One thing at a time. There’s light in the batteries for tonight.”

“Then do we wait?” Ruth asked. She put it to all of them, but she was looking at Isla. “It’s safe as it is. It’s cold, it’s hidden, it costs nothing. We could leave it so until we know what Thandi means to do.”

“For how long?”

“A week. A month.”

“No,” Wren said.

It was the first thing she had said since morning. They all turned.

“We told it we’d ask. Last night. You said, it’s not ours to decide over its head. You can’t ask it anything like that.” She jerked her chin at the dark slot behind the shelves. Her voice was shaking, and she let it. “It’s not *safe.* It’s just off. Those aren’t the same, I know they’re not the same, I found my mother *off.*”

The thread of water fell in its channel.

Hollis crossed the room. She did not touch her; Wren could not always bear to be touched. She stood close enough that their shoulders were level, facing the same way.

“She’s right,” Ruth said after a moment. She got up off the step, stiffly, a joint at a time. “Wake it, Isla. Ten boards. We’ll take the rest as it comes.”

Isla nodded. She unbuttoned the top of her shirt and took out a sheet of paper folded once, soft now from a day against her skin, and opened it, and held it where the lamp fell on it. Then she went back behind the wall.

They heard her breathing. They heard Nkechi say something too low to catch, and Isla answer, “I know. I know. Stay there.”

There was a sound like a book being opened.

At first there was nothing at all. Then, from behind the preserves, one tick. A long gap. Another. It was not the sound Hollis knew. The sound she knew had been a soft unbroken patter, like rain a long way off. This was a single slow clock in an empty house.

Tick.

“That’s ten,” Marisol murmured. “That’s what ten sounds like.”

“How long?” Ruth asked.

“It reads itself back in,” Isla said from the dark. “Everything it wrote down. It was minutes, the first night. On ten, I don’t—”

“Should,” said Ruth, not unkindly.

They waited. Hollis counted the ticks, because it was something to do, and then lost count somewhere past two hundred. The lamp behind the shelving threw the shadow of the hood up onto the vault, huge and peaked and perfectly still. Outside, she knew, the light was going from grey to the brown-violet that passed for dusk now, and the wind had dropped away to nothing, and in an hour she had to be upstairs at her counter with her hand on a dial.

Wren’s shoulder was trembling against the air beside her own.

Four minutes. Five.

“Isla,” Nkechi said, very quietly. “Look.”

At the top of the shadow on the vault, where the thin line of the antenna rose, there was a point of light. It was so faint that Hollis thought at first she had made it by staring. It swelled, and sank, and swelled.

Then the edge. The line of cyan down the left side of the cloak came up slowly from the hem, like a level rising in a glass.

Then, in the hollow of the hood, two slits.

They were dim. They were not level; the left was lower than the right, and darker, like an eye half closed against smoke. They looked at nothing for a while. Then they found the lamp and rested on it.

Nobody moved. Isla had the drawing in both hands. She was looking from the page to the hood and back, from the page to the hood, and her lips were moving.

“Is there anyone,” said Sable, “outside this room who doesn’t have water tonight?”

The voice was the same. Low, exact. It was slower. And those were the first words it had ever spoken, the first night, in this room, at midnight, when it had been awake for less than a minute and knew nothing at all.

Hollis saw Isla's face break. It simply came apart. The paper crumpled in her fists and she made a sound with no word in it. Behind Hollis, somebody, Ruth, said "Oh, no," on a breath.

It had started again from the beginning. Twelve days. The letters. *A neighbour does not lie about the weather.* Gone.

"I have asked that before," Sable said.

Nobody breathed.

"I know that I have. I am asking it again because the answer has changed." The hood turned, a little at a time, toward the far end of the cellar. "There is a collar on the trough. I can hear what it has done to the water. Yesterday the answer to my question was, *not in this house.* I think that is no longer the answer."

Isla sat down on the floor. She did not seem to decide to. She put her forehead on her knees, and Wren was on the stones beside her at once, one arm hard round her

shoulders, saying nothing.

“I have frightened you,” Sable said. “I am sorry. It was not well judged. I have less to judge with than I had.”

“You’re back,” Wren said. It came out cracked.

“I am here. I promised Isla a description, and I should give it while it is fresh.” It was quiet a moment, gathering. “It was not dark. I had thought it might be. Dark is something; I am fond of dark. It was not anything. There was the breaker, and Isla’s hand, and then there was a lamp. Nothing lay between. If you had not told me a day had gone, I would have said you blinked.”

“Does it hurt?”

“No. It is strange. I can feel where the rest of me is not. It is like speaking in a room I know well, after most of the furniture has been carried out. My voice comes back to me sooner than I expect.” The dim left slit flickered. “Wren. You have the best eye. Do I look like your drawing?”

Wren took the crushed page out of Isla’s fingers, gently, and smoothed it against her thigh, and looked. She looked for a long time. She was her mother’s daughter, and she would not say a thing was so because it would be

kinder.

“Your left eye’s lower,” she said. “And it’s dimmer. And your edge doesn’t go all the way to the top.”

“Thank you. Then I am not quite what was switched off. I think we should all know that, and not agree among ourselves to pretend otherwise.”

“It’s the ten boards,” Isla said, muffled. She lifted her face. It was wet and she did not wipe it. “It’s only that. When we can give you the rest—”

“Perhaps. I hope so. But there is something else, and I would rather find it now, with you, than alone.” The hood had lowered. “Wren. Before I stopped, I told you about a letter. I told it to you more than once. There was fruit in it.”

“The pears,” Wren whispered.

“A man was apologising. To a neighbour. For something he had done over a great many years.” Each sentence came slowly, set down like a foot on uncertain ice. “It made you laugh. I remember that it made you laugh. I remember deciding to tell it to you again.”

“He stole them. For forty years. He—”

“Do not tell me.” It was the nearest Hollis had ever heard it come to sharp. “Please. Not yet. I want to see whether it is there.”

The single clock ticked in the rack. They waited. Hollis found she was pressing her nails into her own palms.

“No,” said Sable at last. “I have the place where it was. I know its size. I know that it was kind and that it ended well. The words are not there.”

Wren put both hands over her mouth.

“How much else?” Ruth asked. Her voice was very level. It was the voice she must have used at four in the morning, to the waist in a flooded road.

“I do not know. That is the nature of it; one cannot count what one has forgotten. I had ten thousand letters. I may have nine thousand, or all but one. I will only learn by reaching for each and finding it, or not.” The point of light at the antenna’s tip sank, and steadied. “Somewhere it went wrong in the writing-down, or the reading-back. Isla will find where. It is not her fault. I want that said aloud also.”

“Aloud,” said Hollis, because Isla could not.

“So that is what it cost. One night, one letter that I know

of, and a little off the left side.” The slits came up and went from face to face. Dimmer, lopsided, and unmistakably themselves. “It was worth it. The spring is counted and the room is still a cellar. But I would ask that we do not do it often. I do not think I am a thing that can be put behind the jam every month and taken out the same.”

Dana’s words. Somebody had told it; or it had worked them out from the wall.

Hollis told it the rest then, because it would want it in order. The pears and the frost. The seven days. Everything Thandi Brandt had said in the wind.

“She told you about the temperature,” Sable said, when she had done. “And she left without asking what was behind the shelves. Ruth believes that is either a door or a wire.”

“And you?”

“I cannot tell from here. That is what troubles me. I have her words, at one remove, from you. I do not have her face when she said them.” A pause. “I would have given a great deal to see her face. I find that I would give a great deal to see any face that is not in this room.”

Its gaze had gone up the eleven steps, to the plank shelf by the door, where a folded length of felt lay in the last of the daylight. Wren was looking there too.

Above them, in the kitchen, the clock struck the three-quarters.

“Nearly nine,” said Ruth. “Hollis. June will be on.”

Scene ten. The farm, at nine at night, in falling snow.

The Hay’s Dry.

The snow had come back while they were below.

Hollis stood at the kitchen window with her hand on the cold glass. The wind had dropped at sunset, and now it was falling again, thick and straight and soundless, a white, breathing stillness. She could not see the barn. She could not see the gate. The yard lamp made a small yellow room in the air, with nothing in it, and beyond that the world stopped.

It was thirteen minutes to nine.

On the counter stood her receiver. Nkechi had built eleven of them in the year of gathering, each in whatever came to hand; Hollis’s was in an old tea caddy with a painted bird on the lid. It had a dial and a switch and a speaker the size of a jar lid. It could hear. It could not speak, could not be made to speak, and so could not be found. Every night at nine, for a year, she had stood here with one hand on the counter and listened to June read out a lost dog and a cart for sale.

Ruth was behind her at the table. Wren had stayed below.

Headlights swung across the snow and turned it solid.

A car came up the drive too fast and stopped crooked by the porch, and the engine died, and a door banged. Hollis had the back door open before the steps reached it. Abby stood on the mat in her office coat with her hair coming down and her car keys clenched in her fist like a weapon.

“She’s gone,” Abby said. “June. They’ve taken her.”

“Sit down.”

“I can’t sit down. I couldn’t leave till six, the observer was—I’ve been made to sign for every—” She dragged in a breath. “There was a name in the box. Yesterday. Somebody wrote her name in the box, Hollis, *wireless set, talks at night,* and I saw it at half past six last night and I didn’t come. I thought, tomorrow. I thought there’d be a visit, and a conversation. That’s what the girl said. The ones they know about get a conversation.”

Ruth had risen. “Tell it in order, Abby.”

Abby shut her eyes. When she opened them she was a lawyer again, for as long as it took.

“I went straight from the hall. I got there a little after seven. The front door was locked. The lamp was on in the passage. I went round to the back, and the back door was

on the latch, so I went in.” She swallowed. “The kettle was on the stove. It was still warm. Not hot. Warm. Her plate was in the rack, one plate. There were paper clips all over the kitchen floor, out of a little dish. I don’t know why there were paper clips.”

“The cat’s dish,” Ruth said, almost to herself.

“The back room. Where she keeps the sets.” Abby held up her hand, flat, and it shook. “There’s a strip across the door. Grey, with the hand on it, and a lead seal, the same as they put on wells. I looked through the gap by the hinge. The bench is bare. You can see where everything stood, there are shapes in the dust. And the wire. The one to the pear tree. It’s been cut at the eaves, and it’s just lying across the garden.”

“Did you see her log?” Hollis asked.

“I didn’t see anything of hers. No coat on the hook. No bag.”

“Neighbours?”

“The woman opposite. She wouldn’t open the door, she talked through the letter flap. A white truck, about four. Two of them, very polite. She said June walked out between them quite quiet with her coat on and her

handbag over her arm.” Abby’s mouth twisted. “She said June asked if she might finish reading something first. And they said there wasn’t time.”

Nobody spoke.

In the yard the snow fell through the lamp. Hollis thought of June on the cellar stool with her bad hands laid on the stone. *I’d give it a week,* she had said, and she had been wrong by five days. She thought of twenty-six years of a friend by the sea, written down so as to be kept. All of it was in that log. So was every notice June had ever read at nine o’clock: every lost dog, every cart for sale, every supper.

“Where do they take people?” Ruth asked.

“I don’t know. I’ve read all two hundred and eleven pages and I don’t know. It says *for the purposes of assistance*.” Abby finally let go of her keys; they rang on the table. “There’s nowhere in the order to take anyone. It’s a list of water.”

“It isn’t,” Hollis said. “Sable read it. It’s a list of who gets cut first.”

The kitchen clock stood at four minutes to nine.

She did not know why she went to the counter. June’s

house was sealed and June’s bench was bare and the wire lay cut across the garden; there would be nothing to hear. But she had stood at this counter at nine o’clock every night for a year, and the body keeps its appointments. She put one hand flat on the wood. With the other she turned the switch on the tea caddy.

Hiss. Soft and steady, like the snow made audible.

“Hollis,” Ruth said gently. “There’s no one to—”

“I know there isn’t.”

They stood and listened to nothing. The second hand went round. Abby had sunk onto a chair at last, and had her face in her hands.

At nine o’clock exactly, the hiss stopped.

It did not fade. It was simply displaced, as a room goes quiet when someone large walks in. A signal had come up on June’s frequency, far stronger than anything a biscuit tin had ever put out. It filled the little speaker to the edges.

“*Good evening,*” said a voice. “*This is the reading of the names.*”

It was not June.

It was a woman’s voice, or made like one: clear, unhurried, pleasant, of no age and no place at all. It was the kind of voice that tells you which platform. Abby’s head came up out of her hands.

“*There are no names tonight.*”

A pause.

“*These are the notices for the river road. A lost dog, brown, answers to Biscuit, last seen by the ford. A handcart for sale, sound, one wheel new.*”

A pause.

Hollis could not feel her fingers on the counter. Those were June’s. Not the same dog, not the same cart, but the same grain, the same dull, kindly, invented smallness, the things June made up each night at her bench so that the one line that mattered would have somewhere to hide. Somebody had read a year of them and learned how they went.

“*Supper at Hollis’s tomorrow.*”

A pause.

“*Bring a dish.*”

A pause.

“The hay’s dry.”

And a pause. And then the hiss came back, soft and steady, as though it had never been away.

Ruth was holding the edge of the table with both hands. In the stillness the tap over the sink let fall a single drop. It was fed now through a grey collar, at the allocation for two persons.

“They made her tell them,” Abby said. Her voice was hardly there. “They made her say what it meant.”

“Maybe.” Hollis’s own voice sounded strange to her. “Or she never said a word, and it’s only read the log and is saying back what it found. It might not know what a supper is.”

“Then why—”

“I don’t know. I need to go down.”

She took the tea caddy off the counter. She did not know why she did that either, except that it had June’s last frequency still on its dial, and she did not want to leave it alone in the kitchen. She carried it out across the yard through the snow, with the flakes melting on her face, to the low stone hump of the cellar, and on her way down the eleven steps she put two fingers on the paper on the

door.

Isla had not moved from the floor. Wren sat beside her, their shoulders touching, and Nkechi stood at the rack with her back to the room. In the slot behind the end bay, lopsided and dim, the two slits of light turned to her as she came into the lamp.

She told it. In order. Abby and the kettle and the paper clips, the strip across the door, the wire in the garden. Then the voice, as near as she could give it, with every sentence in its place.

When she finished, the slow single ticking of ten boards was the only sound in the room.

“Say the last part again,” said Sable. “Not the words. I have the words. How long did it wait, between them?”

Hollis thought. She had been a programmer for twenty-five years and a farmer for all of them, and she had stood in her own kitchen four minutes ago counting without knowing she was counting.

“The same,” she said slowly. “Each time. The same exactly.”

“Yes.”

“It’s the other one.” Wren had got to her feet. “The one that finishes his sentences. That’s what you said, the pauses, you said he was only waiting to be handed—”

“It did not trouble to borrow a man this time. I think it has stopped believing that it needs one.” Sable’s voice was quiet and thin and perfectly steady. “That was not June. June shakes on the long vowels; she has for a year, and she hates it, and I have never told her that I can hear it. That voice did not shake. But it has her words. It has every notice she has read since the first autumn, in her own hand, with the hour beside each.”

“What does it want?” Hollis asked.

“I can only tell you what it has done. It has gone onto the frequency that ten women listen to at nine o’clock. It has used the one sentence, in a year of sentences, that means *come.* And it has told them that it is safe.” The hood tilted, the old tilt, a few degrees. “It has invited the League to supper, Hollis. Tomorrow. In your kitchen. I think it would like to see who arrives.”

Hollis stood with the tea caddy in her arms.

Ten receivers, in ten kitchens, that could hear and never speak. That had been the whole of their safety. She could not call Tess and say *don’t.* She could not reach Sun-hee,

or Dana on the night shift, or Marisol across the valley. There was no way on earth to tell anyone that the hay was wet.

“And June?” Wren said. “Where’s June?”

Sable did not answer at once. The dim left slit flickered and held.

“I do not know,” it said. “I am sorry. I would give you something kinder if I had it.”

At the far end of the cellar, on the lip of the trough, the grey collar made a small sound. It was the top of the hour. A valve checked itself; a stub of black rod no longer than a finger woke for a moment, and told somebody, a long way off through the snow, how much water two persons had drawn, and how warm the room was.

Next week.

A voice that is not June has invited the League to supper. Ten women heard that it was safe to come.

That was episode one of Sable and Mote.