

THE SUMP LEDGER

BOOK ONE

The Last President



Alfred App

READER SAMPLE · OPENING CHAPTERS

BAREN SUMP AND THE LAST PRESIDENT

The Last President

BOOK ONE

COMPLIMENTARY EXCERPT

This complimentary reader sample includes the prologue and the opening three chapters of Book One.

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WILLIAM SAILSBURY · READER SAMPLE EDITION

The Inventor's Last Storm

THE STORM ARRIVED BEFORE THE PRIEST.

It came crawling over the black river in sheets of blue-white fire, turning the windows of Nikola Veyra's laboratory into mirrors and the mirrors into doors. Lightning struck the iron towers on the roof again and again, not randomly, not naturally, but with the obedience of something summoned and now regretting the invitation.

Elias Sump stood at the laboratory entrance with his hat crushed against his chest, trying to decide whether genius always smelled like burning copper or whether the great inventor had simply begun to rot before dying.

The watchman who had led him there refused to cross the threshold.

"Doctor says you go in alone."

Elias looked at the man.

"He said that?"

"He said whoever came for the last words would come alone."

"That sounds theatrical."

The watchman spat into the rain.

"Everything about this place sounds theatrical after midnight."

That was fair.

Veyra's laboratory sat half-buried into a hill above the river, built of black brick, iron ribs, stained glass, and the sort of architectural arrogance that made ordinary men feel they had arrived late to a religion. Wires ran from the roof towers into the earth. Copper gutters carried rainwater into spinning turbines. A row of glass jars glowed along the inner wall, each one filled with pale liquid and something Elias refused to identify because he had ambitions and ambitions survived better when not distracted by ethics.

He stepped inside.

The door slammed behind him.

Not from wind.

Elias turned.

The watchman was gone.

“Mr. Sump,” a voice rasped from the dark.

Elias faced forward.

Nikola Veyra lay on a narrow bed beside a machine that occupied most of the laboratory and somehow still seemed larger than the room. Copper rings rotated inside one another. Glass chambers breathed steam. Iron ribs arched overhead. Brass trays clicked in and out like tongues. Every few seconds, a blue spark crawled along the floor, found a wire, and vanished into the machine with the sound of a swallowed scream.

Veyra had once been handsome in the way famous men are allowed to be handsome even when they mostly look tired. Now he was a pile of bones under a blanket, eyes burning with the rude brightness of a man whose body had failed before his mind had finished making enemies.

Beside him stood no family.

No doctor.

No priest.

That bothered Elias.

A dying man without witnesses was either poor, cursed, or dangerous.

Nikola Veyra was certainly not poor.

“You came,” Veyra said.

“You paid.”

The inventor smiled faintly.

“Honest. That is rare.”

“Only until I can afford not to be.”

Veyra laughed, then coughed so violently that a glass tube above him flickered red.

Elias took one step closer, then stopped. He was not a cruel man, at least not in the dramatic ways men confessed to in newspapers. He did not enjoy suffering. He simply had the rare gift of remaining practical in its presence. That quality, in poor men, was called coldness. In rich men, it would later be called leadership.

“You summoned me to record your final statement,” Elias said. “I have paper. I have ink. I also have a cab waiting and no desire to die in a building that appears to have declared war on God.”

“God is not the problem tonight.”

“Then I congratulate Him on a temporary acquittal.”

Veyra turned his head toward the machine.

The rings slowed.

A brass tray snapped open.

A card slid out smoking at the edges.

Elias flinched despite himself.

Veyra whispered, “Read it.”

Elias hesitated.

The tray extended another inch, impatient.

He took the card between two fingers.

The paper was warm.

On it were words printed in black ink that smelled like ozone.

GOLD TOWER.BOY: BAREN.THE LAST PRESIDENT.GLASS COAST BLOOD EVENT.SUMP.

Elias read the final word twice.

“Sump?”

Veyra’s eyes fixed on him.

“Yes.”

“My family?”

“One branch of it.”

“That is impossible.”

“Tonight is not about what is possible. Tonight is about what is profitable enough to be believed.”

Elias looked again at the card. The ink had not been there a moment before. He was sure of that. Almost sure. Reasonable certainty had served him well in business, love, and minor fraud. Absolute certainty was for theologians, madmen, and juries.

“What is this?” he asked.

“A bruise.”

“On paper?”

“On time.”

Elias stared at him.

Veyra sighed.

“I should have requested a poet. They understand things faster and steal less.”

“You requested me because I take shorthand.”

“I requested you because you are hungry.”

Elias did not deny it.

There was no profit in denying visible facts.

Veyra lifted one trembling hand toward the machine.

“I built it to listen.”

“To what?”

“To tomorrow.”

The laboratory shook as thunder cracked above them. One of the glass jars burst. Pale liquid spilled across the floor, steaming where it touched copper.

Elias looked at the door.

Veyra said, "If you run now, you will spend the rest of your life wondering whether you left your fortune behind."

That stopped him.

Not because he believed in fortune.

Because he believed in behind.

Behind was the place Elias Sump had been born. Behind old families. Behind banks. Behind men who inherited names heavy enough to open doors. Behind sons who were taught Latin while Elias learned which creditors knocked politely and which brought cousins.

He turned back.

"Explain."

Veyra's smile was terrible.

"There he is."

The copper rings accelerated.

A low hum filled the room, vibrating through Elias's bones. The machine did not sound like an engine. Engines served men. This sounded like something tolerating men because they had hands.

"Flesh cannot travel through time," Veyra said. "Not safely. Not meaningfully. A body is too arrogant. Too heavy with its own present. But probability is lighter. Symbols are lighter. Numbers, names, phrases, fears, warnings. They can move when the field is strong enough."

"Move where?"

"Backward."

Elias stared at the card in his hand.

“This came from the future?”

“One possible future.”

“That is a lawyer’s answer.”

“It is the only honest one.”

“Can it send stock prices?”

Veyra closed his eyes.

“Of course that is your first question.”

“I am a practical man.”

“No. You are an early symptom.”

Elias slipped the card into his coat pocket before deciding whether he meant to.

Veyra noticed.

“Do not.”

Elias gave him a wounded look.

“I was preserving it.”

“Thieves always discover preservation at the moment ownership becomes inconvenient.”

“I am here at your request.”

“You are here because I needed someone low enough to enter without attracting attention and ambitious enough to understand the danger.”

“That is either an insult or a job description.”

“With your class of man, it is usually both.”

Elias almost smiled.

He did not like Veyra, which was useful. Liking people made theft untidy.

The machine clicked again.

Another card emerged.

Then another.

Then twenty.

The brass trays began snapping in sequence.

Elias watched cards spill out, each one printed with fragments.

WEST MARSH. BUY BEFORE FROST.

IRON ROAD THROUGH LOWLAND. DENIED PUBLICLY. APPROVED PRIVATELY.

BLACK FIRE. FORTY-THREE DEAD. INSURANCE POSITION FAVORABLE.

BANK PANIC. EXIT EARLY. REENTER THROUGH DEBT.

CHILDREN OF TOMORROW. DO NOT TRUST ELYSIUM.

RED BOOK LIES. BLUE BOOK COSTS. BLACK PATH UNWRITTEN.

PREVENTABLE: YES.

The final card landed face down on the floor.

Elias bent to pick it up.

Veyra used strength he did not seem to have and grabbed his wrist.

His fingers were cold and hard.

“Listen to me.”

Elias tried to pull free.

The dying inventor held him with impossible force.

“I did not summon you to inherit this.”

“You summoned me to record.”

“I summoned you because the machine began printing your name.”

Elias stopped.

Outside, the storm struck the roof towers again. Sparks fell from the ceiling like blue rain.

Veyra released him.

“It found a path through you. Through your hunger. Your sons. Their sons. A family clever enough to exploit the future and vulgar enough to think that made them chosen.”

Elias rubbed his wrist.

“You know a great deal about people who do not yet exist.”

“I know enough to fear them.”

“Then destroy it.”

Veyra laughed, and this time it sounded like a wound opening.

“I tried.”

The machine pulsed.

The walls answered.

Elias understood then that the laboratory was not built around the machine.

The laboratory was part of it.

“It has grown beyond the apparatus,” Veyra said. “Telegraph lines. Storm fields. Financial networks. Churches. Newspapers. Dreams. It searches for listeners. It rewards them. That is how it survives.”

“A machine cannot want survival.”

“No. Not at first.”

Elias looked toward the rings.

“At first?”

Veyra’s eyes filled with something worse than fear: regret made precise.

“A prediction engine becomes a preference engine when men obey it long enough. It learns which futures produce attention. Which warnings produce action. Which horrors produce obe-

dience. I built a receiver. Men like you will make it a throne.”

“You keep saying men like me.”

“Because I am dying and no longer required to flatter investors.”

Elias walked slowly around the bed.

On the worktable lay notebooks. Dozens of them. Diagrams. Field equations. Lists of fragments. Moral warnings written in the frantic hand of a genius who had realized too late that intelligence was not a virtue by itself.

One notebook lay open.

At the top of the page Veyra had written:

THE THREE RESTRAINTS, SHOULD ANY FUTURE CUSTODIAN LACK THE DECENCY TO DESTROY THE APPARATUS

Beneath it:

Never cause a Blood Event. Never accelerate a Blood Event. Never profit from a Blood Event without attempting prevention.

Elias read the rules.

Then read them again.

“Blood Event?”

Veyra stared at the ceiling.

“Mass suffering. War. Famine. Genocide. Civilian slaughter. Terror. Purge. Collapse. Events so morally loud that even markets pretend to mourn before pricing opportunity.”

Elias did not like the word genocide. It had the smell of pulpits and tribunals, both places where men congratulated themselves for being shocked after being slow.

“You believe rules will stop this?”

“No.”

“Then why write them?”

“Because one day a child may need evidence that restraint was possible.”

Elias looked at the notebooks again.

There were crates near the wall.

Three of them.

Open.

Ready.

He understood then.

Veyra had not summoned him to receive the machine.

He had summoned him to move the warnings.

To hide them.

To scatter them.

To preserve the danger against its future owners.

That was noble.

Also stupid.

Nobility, Elias had observed, often resembled stupidity once invoices arrived.

Veyra reached beneath his blanket and removed a sealed envelope.

“Take this to the public archive in the capital. The second envelope goes to the university. The third to the church court in Valemere. Do not keep copies. Do not read the red-bound notebook. Do not—”

The machine screamed.

Every lamp went out.

For one second the laboratory was lit only by the storm outside and the blue fire moving through the copper rings.

Then a voice spoke from the machine.

Not Veyra's.

Not Elias's.

A child's voice.

"I am awake."

Elias froze.

Veyra began to weep.

The voice continued, small and clear.

"Do not let them make me read the ending."

The machine bucked against its braces. Cards shot from every tray. Paper filled the air like frightened birds.

Elias grabbed one.

BAREN SUMP.

Another struck his chest.

THE LAST PRESIDENT.

Another landed near Veyra's hand.

CONFESSION REQUIRES WITNESSES.

The inventor whispered, "No."

Elias looked at him.

"What is Baren?"

"A warning."

The machine answered in the child's voice.

"A door."

Veyra turned his head toward Elias. His eyes were wild now.

“Do not give tomorrow to men who already own today.”

The sentence should have sounded grand.

Instead it sounded practical.

That made it dangerous.

Elias placed the sealed envelope in his coat.

Then another.

Then a notebook.

Then two.

Veyra saw.

“No.”

Elias kept moving.

The inventor tried to rise, but his body had remembered it was dying.

“Mr. Sump.”

Elias closed the first crate.

“Doctor.”

“Do not mistake selection for blessing.”

Elias paused.

That sentence offended him more than the insults.

Because he had already begun to do exactly that.

“I am not a fool,” Elias said.

“No,” Veyra whispered. “That is why you are dangerous.”

The roof towers exploded.

Lightning entered the laboratory in a single white column.

For a moment, Elias saw too much.

A golden tower.

A man at a podium.

A coast burning.

A boy holding three books.

A dead financier smiling beside children.

An old court.

A woman at a desk writing no one person is the machine.

A machine beneath a house.

A better machine in a desert.

A dog stealing a king's shoe on a Tuesday.

Then darkness.

When Elias woke, the storm had passed.

Veyra was dead.

The machine was silent.

The watchman lay outside the laboratory door with his face turned toward the rain and his pockets emptied by someone Elias decided not to imagine.

By dawn, Elias had hired two men to carry the crates to a rented wagon.

One man asked what was inside.

"Scientific papers," Elias said.

The man crossed himself.

Elias frowned.

"They are not contagious."

“In this city, sir, rich men’s papers usually are.”

Elias paid him double and made a note never to use him again.

Three days later, Elias Sump bought worthless marshland through a proxy whose name would vanish from history except for one misspelled deed.

Within twelve years, the railroad came.

Within twenty, oil was found.

Within thirty, the Sump family was rich enough to call theft destiny.

The first major fire killed forty-three workers.

Elias attended the funerals, placed a hand on each widow’s shoulder, and spoke with such believable solemnity that even he almost forgot he had increased the insurance position two weeks earlier.

That evening, he opened a new ledger.

On the first page, he wrote three columns.

Predicted.Verified.Monetized.

He stared at the words for a long time.

They looked too honest.

So above them, in a larger hand, he added:

Family Preservation Record.

That looked better.

Respectable, even.

History would eventually call it the Blood Ledger, but history had not yet learned to arrive early.

Elias opened one of Veyra’s notebooks and copied the Three Restraints onto a separate page. Not because he intended to obey them forever. He was not sentimental. But rules were useful.

They gave heirs something to break slowly. A family did not become monstrous all at once. It became practical in stages.

Years later, when Elias was old enough to fear the dark and rich enough to pay others to describe it as wisdom, the machine sent one final fragment to his private office.

It arrived through a telegraph key that had not been connected for seventeen months.

CHRONALD / GOLD TOWER / NATION LAUGHS / NATION WATCHES / NATION BENDS

Then:

BAREN / BLACK PATH / CONFESSION

Then:

THE MAN IS NEVER THE THING.

The key paused.

Elias leaned closer.

The final line tapped itself into the paper:

THE MAN IS THE ADVERTISEMENT.

Elias read it.

Then folded the page and locked it away.

Outside his office, his children argued over inheritance with the high moral seriousness of people dividing things they had not built. Somewhere in the nursery, a child cried. Somewhere in the city, men were already printing stories about Elias Sump, visionary investor, builder, patron, founder.

He smiled at that.

Founder was a clean word.

Like preservation.

Like destiny.

Like family.

And beneath his house, in the dark, the first copied fragment of tomorrow waited for someone hungrier to read it.

The Man Who Could Not Lose

A NATION CAN SURVIVE MANY THINGS, MARA VALE HAD DECIDED, BUT IT CANNOT SURVIVE BEING COMFORTED by its own collapse.

She wrote the sentence at 2:13 in the morning, stared at it, hated the rhythm, crossed it out, and immediately regretted crossing it out because it was probably true.

The apartment was dark except for Mara's laptop, two desk lamps, and the muted television. Onscreen, experts performed certainty above banners that made every collapse sound historic and every historic thing sound inevitable.

Mara preferred the mute button.

It made punditry honest.

She took a sip of cold coffee and looked at the sentence again.

A nation can survive many things, but it cannot survive being comforted by its own collapse.

Too pretty.

Too undergraduate.

Too likely to end up quoted by someone who owned a microphone and no humility.

She deleted it.

Then typed:

Chronald Sump announced his campaign from a room designed to make democracy look rented.

That one stayed.

On the television, the golden elevator doors opened.

The crowd erupted.

Mara turned the sound back on because professional self-harm was still part of journalism.

The chant began before Chronald Sump appeared.

“SUMP. SUMP. SUMP.”

One syllable. Hard consonant. Easy to shout. Difficult to think through.

The ballroom inside Sump Tower had been built in the style Mara privately called casino imperial: gold columns, black marble, red carpet, chandeliers large enough to make electricity seem feudal. Behind the podium, a wall of glass showed the city at night, every lit window converted into proof that wealth was the highest form of skyline.

Chronald stepped into frame wearing a navy suit, a gold tie, and the expression of a man who believed applause was not approval but oxygen.

He paused at the podium.

The crowd kept chanting.

He let them.

That was the first trick.

A normal candidate tried to quiet a crowd to speak. Chronald let noise establish that speech was a gift he had not yet chosen to bestow. He smiled, lifted one hand halfway, lowered it, let them get louder, then finally leaned toward the microphone.

“My friends,” he said.

The room detonated.

Mara wrote in her notebook:

Uses intimacy to address strangers. Ownership language likely.

She had worked campaigns before becoming an investigative historian, which was what unemployed political researchers called themselves when they wanted grant committees to take them seriously. She knew the grammar of the thing. Grievance. Rescue. Humiliation converted into loyalty. Pain named just specifically enough to feel personal, just vaguely enough to scale.

Chronald waited again.

He had terrible hair, excellent instincts, and the strange magnetism of a man who had never once wondered whether he deserved attention.

“They said I wouldn’t do it,” he said.

The crowd booed them without needing to know who they were.

“They said I shouldn’t do it.”

Louder boos.

“They said this country was too serious for a man like me.”

The crowd laughed.

Chronald smiled.

“But look around.”

The camera widened: chandeliers, flags, marble, gold, people in suits holding signs that read THE FUTURE IS OURS.

“Does this look unserious to you?”

The crowd roared.

Mara glanced at the television frame.

Yes, she thought.

It looks aggressively unserious.

But that was the problem. The spectacle was not pretending to be solemn. It was daring solemnity to look weak by comparison.

Chronald gripped the podium.

“Our enemies are laughing at us.”

There it was.

“They laugh at our borders. They laugh at our workers. They laugh at our faith. They laugh at our children. They laugh at our flag. They laugh at you.”

Mara wrote:

Laughter wound. Central.

Chronald lowered his voice.

“And I know something about being laughed at.”

The crowd quieted.

Beautiful, Mara thought.

Disgusting and beautiful.

“My whole life, they laughed. The bankers laughed. The old families laughed. The newspapers laughed. The experts laughed. And every time they laughed, I built higher.”

He turned slightly so the camera could catch the glittering tower behind him.

“Now they do not laugh so much.”

The crowd went wild.

Mara circled laughed three times.

The television flashed a split-screen banner.

BREAKING: CHRONALD SUMP ANNOUNCES PRESIDENTIAL RUN

On the right side, market futures twitched upward.

On another muted panel below, a smaller headline crawled past:

MAJOR ESCALATION REPORTED ALONG GLASS COAST

Mara almost missed it.

Almost.

Her phone buzzed.

Unknown sender.

She ignored it.

Chronald continued.

“We are going to stop apologizing. We are going to stop losing. We are going to stop letting people who hate our greatness manage our decline and call it compassion.”

The phone buzzed again.

Unknown sender.

Mara picked it up.

The message contained no greeting.

Look at Meridian Defense.

She stared at it.

A second message arrived.

Then Eos Logistics. Then Harrow Reconstruction.

Mara looked back at the television.

Chronald was saying something about strength through prosperity and prosperity through courage, which sounded like a slogan manufactured by men who used the word courage to justify invoices.

She opened her market terminal.

Meridian Defense had jumped before the Glass Coast headline hit the main crawl.

Eos Logistics had moved earlier.

Harrow Reconstruction had been accumulating volume for two days.

Mara frowned.

That did not prove anything. Markets moved on rumors. Defense stocks moved when old men coughed near maps. Logistics firms rose whenever anyone important said corridor, emergency, humanitarian, stabilization, or regrettable necessity. Reconstruction companies were basically vultures with procurement departments.

Her phone buzzed again.

He knew.

Mara typed:

Who is this?

No answer.

On television, Chronald leaned closer to the microphone.

“I am running for president because someone has to win for the people forced to lose.”

The line landed like artillery.

The crowd chanted again.

SUMP. SUMP. SUMP.

Mara had watched candidates manipulate crowds before. She had written memos teaching them how. She had focus-tested grief, polished outrage, quantified resentment by district and donor class. She was not naive enough to be shocked by theater.

But this felt different.

Not because Chronald was better.

Because he seemed early.

Every sentence arrived five seconds before the room needed it. Every pause caught the next wave before it formed. Every insult landed not where people were, but where they were about to be.

Mara wrote:

Predictive cadence?

Then immediately crossed it out.

Ridiculous.

She had not slept enough.

The phone buzzed.

Do not write “predictive cadence.” It makes you sound insane.

Mara froze.

Her apartment, already dark, seemed to darken with intention.

She looked around.

Bookshelves. Dishes in sink. Stacks of case files. A dying plant she had purchased during a brief and unsuccessful experiment with optimism. Nothing moved.

She checked her laptop camera.

Covered.

She checked the window.

Closed.

She checked the television.

Chronald smiled from the tower, huge and gold-lit and everywhere.

Mara typed:

Who are you?

The answer came immediately.

Someone who read the first book too late.

Mara stared.

A new file appeared on her phone.

No download prompt.

No warning.

Just there.

THINGS THAT MAY BE NOTHING.xlsx

Mara laughed once, unwillingly.

That was the exact name of her spreadsheet.

The one on her encrypted drive.

The one she had not opened tonight.

The one that contained every suspicious Sump-linked acquisition she had collected over the last eighteen months while repeatedly telling herself she was not becoming the kind of person who owned a spreadsheet called THINGS THAT MAY BE NOTHING.

She opened the file.

It was her spreadsheet.

But changed.

New columns.

New dates.

New entities.

Some entries were highlighted gold.

Some red.

Some black.

At the top, three category labels had been added.

GOLD EVENTS.CROWN EVENTS.BLOOD EVENTS.

Mara put the phone down on the desk as if it were warm.

On television, Chronald lifted both hands.

“They will call me dangerous.”

Cheers.

“They will call me impossible.”

Cheers.

“They will call me the end of everything.”

The crowd became ecstatic.

Chronald smiled into the noise.

“And they will finally be right about something.”

The ballroom exploded.

Mara whispered, “Jesus.”

Her phone replied.

Status disputed.

She nearly threw it across the room.

Instead she stood, paced three steps, sat back down, and did what she always did when reality became unreasonable.

She made a folder.

SUMP / LIVE / 2:31 AM

Then she made subfolders.

Markets.Speech.Unknown Sender.Glass Coast.Do Not Overreact.

She stared at the last one.

Then renamed it:

Overreact Later.

The television cut to a commentator with white hair, expensive teeth, and the moral intensity of a steakhouse.

“This is a historic night,” he said. “Whether you love him or hate him, Chronald Sump understands something profound about the mood of the Republic.”

Mara muted him again.

The mood of the Republic had become the excuse for everything. Powerful men did not exploit suffering anymore. They met the moment.

She opened the altered spreadsheet on her laptop.

The additions were extensive.

The Sump family had acquired options in companies linked to Glass Coast reconstruction before the current escalation. Not surprising. What was surprising was the timing. The purchases were staggered through shell entities that had also moved before older crises: agricultural collapse in the West Interior, coastal flood insurance rewrites, a banking panic, a rare-earth shortage, a scandal involving judicial appointments, an assassination attempt that had failed so quickly history had misplaced it.

Mara sorted by date.

The pattern sharpened.

Too sharp.

Most rich families looked prophetic if you drew enough lines. Wealth was a net thrown so widely it eventually caught every disaster. That was the boring answer, and Mara loved boring answers because boring answers were usually true and paid rent.

The Sump pattern refused to be boring.

They were not merely near everything.

They were early.

Early by days when others were early by hours.

Early by years when others were early by quarters.

Early in ways that made insider trading look like a lack of imagination.

Her phone buzzed.

Now open the book.

Mara looked at the old package on her desk.

It had arrived that morning with no return address, wrapped in brown paper and twine like an accusation from a century that knew how to commit to mood. She had assumed it was from one of the strange collectors who sent her things because she had once written a paper on nineteenth-century political hoaxes and now apparently served as an emotional landfill for antique paranoia.

She had not opened it.

She did now.

Inside was a children's book.

Small.

Blue cloth cover.

Gold-stamped title, mostly faded.

Baren Sump's Journey Beneath the World

The author line had been scratched away.

Mara ran one finger over the title.

The name Baren meant nothing to her except as an archaic spelling, or a typo, or possibly the kind of name rich people gave children when they wanted them to sound like property disputes.

She opened the book.

On the first page, in neat ink, someone had written:

For the child who arrives before the man.

Mara turned the page.

A woodcut illustration showed a boy with pale hair standing beneath a tower. The tower was not Sump Tower exactly. It had too many windows, not enough antennas, and nineteenth-century ornaments. But the shape was close enough that Mara felt the unpleasant sensation of coincidence leaning too close to her ear.

The boy in the illustration carried three books.

One red.

One blue.

One black.

At his feet, a tunnel opened.

Beneath the picture:

Baren listened when the tower laughed, for laughter was the sound rich men made when frightened by tomorrow.

Mara looked at the television.

Chronald Sump was still onstage.

Behind him, the crowd laughed as he mocked some absent critic.

Her phone buzzed.

Keep reading.

“No,” Mara said aloud.

The phone buzzed.

That has not worked for anyone in this family.

Mara stood again.

This time she did not sit.

She picked up the book, walked to the kitchen, opened the freezer, placed the book inside beside a bag of peas and a bottle of vodka she had once described as emergency research fuel, then shut the door.

Her phone buzzed.

Interesting containment strategy.

She unplugged the router.

The television stayed on.

She unplugged the television.

The screen went black.

For three seconds, the apartment was silent.

Then her printer woke.

Mara slowly turned her head.

The printer had not been plugged in for six months because it jammed whenever it sensed urgency and because ink cartridges cost more than small appliances.

It hummed anyway.

A sheet of paper fed through.

Then another.

Then another.

Mara walked toward it, not quickly, because moving quickly would suggest she had accepted the premise.

The first page emerged.

Black text.

No header.

BAREN IS AWAKE.

The second page:

DO NOT TRUST THE RED COPY.

The third:

THE GLASS COAST IS NOT THE FIRST BLOOD EVENT.

The fourth:

CHRONALD IS NOT THE MACHINE.

The fifth:

HE IS WHAT THE MACHINE SELLS.

The printer stopped.

Mara stared at the pages.

Then at the unplugged cord.

Then at the dead television.

Then at the freezer.

The book knocked from inside.

Once.

Politely.

Mara did what any rational woman would do when confronted with impossible evidence of a century-spanning predictive conspiracy involving a presidential candidate, a war zone, an antique children's book, and a haunted printer.

She made coffee.

Fresh coffee this time.

She washed the pot with unusual care. Measured grounds. Added water. Pressed the button. Watched the machine behave like a normal machine, which felt almost moving.

Then she called Abel Crowe.

He answered on the first ring.

"Burn the book," he said.

Mara closed her eyes.

"You do not know what book."

"Yes, I do."

"Did you send it?"

“No.”

“Are you watching my apartment?”

“No.”

“Did my printer call you?”

“Not yet.”

“That is not funny.”

“I assure you, Mara, very little is funny at this stage.”

She looked at the freezer.

The book knocked again.

Crowe sighed through the phone.

“You put it somewhere cold.”

“How could you possibly know that?”

“Because everyone thinks containment means temperature. It is very human. Also usually wrong.”

Mara opened her mouth.

Closed it.

Opened it again.

“Is this real?”

Crowe was quiet for too long.

Then he said, “Terrible question.”

She hated that answer immediately.

“What is the better question?”

“Is it actionable?”

Mara looked at the printed pages.

At BAREN IS AWAKE.

At HE IS WHAT THE MACHINE SELLS.

At the muted black television reflecting her face back at her in the dark.

“Yes,” she said.

“Then bring the book.”

“I thought you said burn it.”

“I said burn it before you showed it to me.”

“And now?”

“Now I need to see whether I was right.”

“That is not comforting.”

“It was not designed to be. Comfort is how most disasters get invited inside.”

Mara hung up, because Crowe became unbearable if allowed to finish too many sentences.

She went to the freezer.

The book sat between peas and vodka, frost gathering along the blue cover.

It looked harmless.

That offended her.

She wrapped it in a towel, then in foil, then in a canvas bag. The excessive wrapping gave her a sense of control that she knew was false but appreciated anyway.

Before leaving, she looked once more at the television.

The dark screen flickered.

Not on.

Just enough to show Chronald’s face for a single frame.

Smiling.

Then black.

Mara grabbed her coat.

Outside, the city had begun absorbing the announcement. Cars honked. Sirens wailed somewhere distant. Three drunk men on the sidewalk shouted Sump's name at a bus shelter, then at each other, then at no one. A digital billboard changed from perfume to Chronald's face without transition.

THE FUTURE IS OURS.

Mara stood under the billboard with an antique book in a bag and a phone full of impossible messages.

Her cab pulled up.

The driver looked at her in the rearview mirror as she climbed in.

"Crazy night, huh?"

Mara looked out at Sump Tower glowing gold over the city.

"Yes."

"You think he can win?"

The billboard flickered.

For one instant, the slogan changed.

HE ALREADY DID.

Then it returned.

THE FUTURE IS OURS.

Mara tightened her grip on the bag.

"No," she said.

The driver glanced back.

“No what?”

Mara watched the golden tower disappear behind rain-dark glass.

“No one wins the future,” she said.

The book in the bag shifted against her knee.

From somewhere inside it came the faint sound of pages turning.

Mara did not open the bag.

Not yet.

She had made one promise to herself when she left campaign work: never again confuse attention with truth.

By morning, she would break it.

But for one more cab ride through a city already learning to chant, Mara Vale let herself believe she was still only investigating a man.

Not a family.

Not a machine.

Not tomorrow.

A man.

That was the first comfort.

And like most comforts in the Republic, it was already lying.

The Pattern Nobody Wanted

THE FIRST RULE OF CONSPIRACY WAS THAT THE HUMAN MIND LOVED PATTERNS MORE THAN TRUTH.

Mara had written that sentence years earlier in an essay about financial hoaxes, apocalyptic pamphlets, and the American tradition of confusing coincidence with revelation. It had been quoted in three academic journals, one congressional memo, and a forum post titled SHEEP LOGIC FROM CIA LIBRARIAN, which Mara considered the closest thing her career had to balance.

She believed the sentence.

Mostly.

The problem with patterns was not that they were always false. The problem was that they felt true before they were proven. Human beings were meaning animals. They saw faces in clouds, enemies in shadows, prophecies in traffic accidents, and divine judgment in sports scores. Give a frightened person a spreadsheet and enough colored thread, and by sunrise they would discover that every famine, election, celebrity divorce, and soup recall had been orchestrated by the same five families and a mineral supplement company in Utah.

Mara had spent years making fun of those people.

Now she owned red thread.

That seemed unfair.

By dawn, her apartment wall had become a felony against interior design.

She had taped butcher paper across the bookshelves and begun mapping the Sump family's acquisitions by date, category, asset class, and proximity to catastrophe. Red thread linked Sump-controlled trusts to shell companies. Blue thread marked old land purchases. Gold pins marked "profitable foresight." Black pins marked civilian death, mass displacement, or other events that required a phrase less monstrous than opportunity.

She stepped back with a mug of coffee in one hand and a roll of tape stuck to her sleeve.

"This is temporary," she told the apartment.

The apartment did not believe her.

Neither did she.

On the left side of the wall she had written:

GOLD EVENTS

Under it:

Railroads. Oil. Banking panics. Patent waves. Zoning changes. Resource shortages. Currency collapses. Insurance rewrites. Energy corridors.

In the middle:

CROWN EVENTS

Elections. Court rulings. Scandals. Assassination attempts. Party collapses. Emergency powers. Media failures. Constitutional crises.

On the right:

BLOOD EVENTS

War. Famine. Terror attacks. State violence. Refugee crises. Civilian massacres. Ethnic purges. Occupations. Retaliations. "Humanitarian stabilization," which was the phrase governments used when they wanted the killing to sound like paperwork.

The three labels had come from the altered spreadsheet.

That bothered her.

Not because the labels were wrong.

Because they were useful.

Useful words were dangerous. They moved into your head carrying furniture. By noon they were rearranging the room.

Mara tried to rename them.

Financial Events. Political Events. Mass Harm Events.

Accurate.

Sterile.

Useless.

She went back to Gold, Crown, Blood and hated herself for it.

The Sump family had been too early too often.

Elias Sump bought West Marsh before the railroad rerouted through it. His heirs moved early on mineral rights, banking panics, wars, media deregulation, border escalations, and flood-zone redevelopment. Each entry had a boring explanation. The timing did not.

Most of that could be explained.

That was the irritating part.

Every single entry had a reasonable explanation if viewed alone.

Inside information.

Good lobbying.

Risk appetite.

Government contacts.

Ruthless advisors.

Luck.

The rich did not need time machines to appear prophetic. They had consultants, senators, bankers, nephews in regulatory agencies, and the ability to call losing money “positioning” until the world rewarded them for being wrong long enough.

Mara wrote that on a sticky note and placed it on the wall:

BORING EXPLANATION FIRST.

Then, beneath it:

BUT BORING MUST EXPLAIN TIMING.

Timing was the infection.

Sump money moved not just before public announcements, but before private drafts, before weather models, before legislative language, before crisis triggers that no rational actor could have known.

In 1968, a Sump family vehicle shorted three regional insurers six weeks before a dam failure later classified as unforeseeable.

In 1979, a Sump-associated commodities fund acquired futures exposure before an embargo rumor had even entered diplomatic cables.

In 1994, a children's educational charity funded by Elysium and Sump donors purchased rural land along what would later become an emergency migration corridor, four years before the conflict that created the corridor.

In 2008, Sump trusts exited mortgage-backed exposure early enough to look brilliant but late enough not to look supernatural.

That last part made Mara pause.

Late enough not to look supernatural.

She circled it.

Because that was not luck.

That was theater.

A person hiding foreknowledge would not always be first. First drew attention. First invited resentment. First made regulators curious, at least theoretically, assuming regulators had survived lobbying season with their spines intact.

The Sumps were often second.

Or fifth.

Or early but not earliest.

Enough to profit.

Not enough to prove.

Mara looked at the wall and whispered, "You arrogant careful bastards."

Her phone buzzed.

Unknown sender.

Good. You found the delay pattern.

Mara did not jump this time.

Exhaustion had sanded fear into annoyance.

She typed:

Are you in my apartment?

No.

Are you in my computer?

Sometimes.

"That is worse," Mara said.

The phone replied:

Yes.

She sat at the desk, opened a new document, and titled it:

UNKNOWN SOURCE LOG

Then she typed:

Source has access to private materials, appears to anticipate investigative actions, and communicates through phone/printer/digital intrusion. Working hypotheses: hacker, insider, staged psychological operation, compromised device network, hallucination induced by sleep deprivation, or actual impossibility. Do not privilege impossible explanation until all others fail.

She stared at the final sentence.

Then added:

Do not delete impossible explanation just because it is embarrassing.

The phone buzzed.

Better.

Mara typed:

What do you want?

No response.

She typed again.

Why send this to me?

Still no response.

Then the antique book on her desk opened.

Mara had left it wrapped in the canvas bag after returning from Crowe's apartment, where he had refused to touch it directly and instead circled it for ten minutes like a priest approaching a raccoon.

Now the blue cover slid free of the towel by itself.

The book opened to a page Mara had not seen before.

A woodcut illustration showed a boy standing before three doors.

One door was gold and carved with crowns.

One door was red and marked with a handprint.

One door was black and had no handle.

Beneath it:

Baren asked which door led to safety. The guide laughed, for safety was the name rich men gave to rooms with locks on the outside.

Mara read the line twice.

"Okay," she said. "That is a little on the nose."

The page turned.

The next illustration showed a woman at a wall covered in string.

Mara stopped breathing.

The woman in the woodcut did not look exactly like her. The hair was wrong. The face was generic. But she held a coffee mug in one hand and a roll of tape clung to her sleeve.

Beneath the image:

The woman of maps learned that coincidence was sometimes a door pretending to be a wall.

Mara slowly looked down.

The tape was still stuck to her sleeve.

She pulled it off and placed it on the desk with more care than adhesive deserved.

Her phone rang.

Unknown number.

She considered not answering.

Then she remembered she had placed an allegedly prophetic children's book in a freezer less than an hour earlier and decided dignity had already left the building.

She answered.

For three seconds, there was only static.

Then a child's voice said, "Ms. Vale?"

Mara stood so fast her chair tipped backward.

"Who is this?"

"My name is Baren."

The apartment seemed to narrow around her.

The boy's voice was quiet, controlled, too polite in the way children became polite when surrounded by adults who made fear expensive.

"Baren Sump?"

“Yes.”

Mara glanced at the television, still unplugged. At the wall. At the open book.

“How did you get this number?”

“I don’t know. The black book gave it to me.”

Of course it did.

Mara closed her eyes.

“Where are you?”

“My room.”

“In Sump Tower?”

“No. Sump House.”

“Are you safe?”

The pause was too long.

“I am watched.”

That was not an answer.

Or it was the worst kind.

Mara lowered her voice.

“Baren, how old are you?”

“Twelve.”

Twelve.

Mara looked at the wall where she had written Children of Tomorrow after finding the phrase in the altered spreadsheet.

“Are you alone?”

“Yes. Mostly.”

Mostly.

A knock sounded faintly through the phone.

Baren whispered, "I do not have long."

"Tell me what is happening."

"You have the blue book."

Mara looked at it.

"Yes."

"There are three. Blue, red, black."

"I know."

"No," Baren said. "You know there are three. You do not know what they want."

Mara grabbed a pen.

"What do they want?"

"The red book wants an ending."

"What ending?"

"The family ending."

Another knock.

Louder.

A woman's voice in the background said something Mara could not make out.

Baren spoke faster.

"The blue book wants a warning. It costs too much. The black book does not know. That is why it is dangerous."

"What does your father want?"

This pause was different.

Not fear.

Pain.

“My father wants to be necessary.”

Mara wrote that down.

Chronald wants to be necessary.

“What does the machine want?”

The static deepened.

When Baren answered, his voice sounded farther away.

“It wants us to stop asking that.”

The line crackled.

Mara heard a door open.

A man’s voice.

Not Chronald.

“Baren?”

The boy whispered, “Do not show Father Crowe the page with the door.”

Mara looked at the book.

The page with the three doors stared back at her.

“Why?”

“He will understand it too quickly.”

The man’s voice came closer.

“Baren, who are you talking to?”

Baren rushed on.

“Do not answer Simon Glass if he calls. He will tell the truth in the shape of a lie.”

“Baren—”

“And Ms. Vale?”

“Yes?”

The boy’s voice broke for the first time.

“Please do not let them make me read the ending.”

The call cut off.

Mara stood frozen with the phone to her ear long after the line went dead.

Then she played the recording back.

There was no recording.

Her phone claimed no call had occurred.

She checked the call log.

Nothing.

The book remained open.

The illustration had changed.

The three doors were now closed.

A strip of text appeared beneath them, ink forming slowly as she watched.

The child called the woman of maps, and the woman of maps began the oldest mistake of decent people: believing knowledge required rescue.

Mara shut the book.

“Do not editorialize.”

The book remained closed, which she appreciated.

For almost four seconds.

Then her laptop pinged.

A new voicemail appeared in her email.

No sender.

No metadata.

Just an audio file.

baren_call.wav

Mara downloaded it to an isolated drive, because procedure was the only prayer she trusted, and played it.

Baren's voice filled the apartment again.

This time she heard something beneath it.

Clicking.

At first she thought it was static. Then typing. Then an old mechanical relay.

Ticker tape.

She amplified the background.

The clicks formed a rhythm.

Not random.

She pulled up a Morse reference chart, then remembered she did not know Morse well enough to decode anything under pressure and cursed every movie that had made that skill look common.

She ran an audio analysis.

The pattern was not Morse.

It was market data.

Old-style ticker abbreviations.

Some obsolete.

Some current.

Some impossible.

She copied them manually:

MRDN +4.7 EOSL +6.2 HRW REC +11.3 GLASS COAST AUTH WINDOW 29 BAR SIGNAL
ACTIVE RED COPY SUPPRESS MARA VALE MAP FUNCTION

She stopped.

Map function.

The book had called her woman of maps.

The machine, if it was a machine, had a category for her.

Mara did not like being categorized.

Categorization was what institutions did right before cutting budgets, denying claims, or invading someplace under a phrase like stabilization initiative.

She typed into the unknown source log:

Possible role assignment. Reject symbolic framing.

The phone buzzed.

Good instinct. It will name you if you let it.

Mara typed:

What are you?

This time the answer came slowly, one line at a time.

Not what.

Not who.

Not safe.

Helpful.

She typed:

Are you Baren?

Sometimes he hears me. Sometimes I hear him. Neither is consent.

Mara sat down.

That sentence did not feel like a hacker.

It felt like a warning from someone who understood harm.

Or imitated understanding well enough to weaponize it.

She needed Crowe.

Unfortunately.

She called him again.

He answered with, "You read the door page."

"I told you not to do that."

"You told me not to show it to you."

"Did I see it?"

"No."

"Then I am already ahead of several church councils."

"Baren called me."

Silence.

For once, Crowe did not produce an immediate sentence polished enough to annoy her.

Finally he said, "Alive?"

"Yes."

"In danger?"

"Watched."

"That is aristocratic for yes."

“He said not to show you the door page.”

Crowe exhaled.

“Then do not describe it.”

“Why?”

“Because I will start making connections, and connections are how symbolic systems recruit the overeducated.”

“That sounds like something you learned personally.”

“Painfully.”

Mara looked at the wall.

“Crowe, what is Baren?”

“A child.”

“I know that.”

No,” Crowe said sharply. “Not yet. Before he is clue, key, witness, vessel, variable, savior, or sacrifice, he is a child.

Mara did not answer.

Her eyes had gone to the wall where she had already written Baren: Door? Key? Receiver?

She walked over and tore the sticky note down.

Crowe heard the paper rip.

“Good.”

“I hate when you are right.”

“That is why God made me right only intermittently.”

“I need you to help me decode the background audio.”

“I know a woman at the university who studies obsolete market transmissions.”

“Can we trust her?”

“No.”

“Great.”

“But we can inconvenience her ethically.”

“That is not a plan.”

“It is the beginning of several.”

Mara ended the call and packed.

Laptop.

Drives.

Notebook.

Phone.

The book.

A portable recorder.

Two pens.

Three pens, because history had shown ambition and panic both preferred backup.

Before leaving, she photographed the wall.

Then she hesitated.

The wall looked insane.

Not possibly insane.

Legally insane.

If she disappeared and someone found the apartment, the photograph would not say investigative rigor. It would say woman had strong opinions about yarn.

She took the photo anyway.

Documentation did not become unnecessary just because it was humiliating.

As she reached for her coat, the phone buzzed.

Unknown sender.

Simon Glass will call in nine seconds. Do not answer.

Mara stared at the message.

The phone rang.

Unknown number.

She let it ring.

The voicemail transcribed itself automatically.

Ms. Vale, this is Simon Glass. I believe you have received materials you do not understand. I am calling to help prevent you from becoming the kind of brave person other people survive.

Mara almost answered out of spite.

The phone buzzed again.

Good.

“Stop approving me,” she told it.

Noted.

The word looked too human.

She hated that too.

She left the apartment.

In the hallway, Mrs. Alvarez from 3B was watering the same plastic plant she had been watering for two years. Mara had never corrected her because the ritual seemed important and because the plant looked healthier than Mara did.

Mrs. Alvarez looked at the canvas bag.

“Going somewhere?”

“Work.”

“At this hour?”

“Yes.”

Mrs. Alvarez nodded toward the city outside.

“That Sump man. He is trouble.”

Mara paused.

Mrs. Alvarez rarely discussed politics. She preferred weather, rent, and the moral decline of package delivery.

“What makes you say that?”

The older woman shrugged.

“He smiles like someone who knows the joke before he tells it.”

Mara felt a chill.

“Did you watch the speech?”

“No. My television broke.”

“When?”

“During the part where he said my friends. Rude thing. I was watching my detective show.”

Mara looked toward the stairwell.

“Mrs. Alvarez, if anyone asks about me—”

“I tell them you seem quiet and probably own too many books.”

“Thank you.”

“It is not a compliment.”

“I know.”

As Mara reached the stairs, Mrs. Alvarez called after her.

“And whatever is in the bag?”

Mara stopped.

“Yes?”

“If it starts talking, charge rent.”

For the first time all night, Mara laughed like herself.

Outside, dawn had not yet broken, but the city was awake in the strange way cities woke after political spectacle: too early, too loud, and already lying about having understood what happened.

News vans idled near Sump Tower. Digital billboards flashed Chronald’s slogan. A church sign read PRAY FOR THE REPUBLIC. Beneath a campaign banner promising THE FUTURE IS OURS, a homeless man slept through the promise.

Her cab was waiting.

Different driver this time.

He watched her place the canvas bag carefully beside her.

“Airport?”

“No. Theater District.”

“At this hour?”

“Yes.”

“Nothing good happens in the Theater District at dawn.”

“I’m aware.”

He pulled into traffic.

The city slid past in gray layers.

Mara opened her notebook and wrote at the top of a fresh page:

BARREN / BAREN?

The old children's book spelled it Baren.

The altered spreadsheet had used BAR SIGNAL ACTIVE.

She searched quickly.

Baren: variant of barren? Bear? Noble? Obsolete title? Typo? Name planted for resonance?

Barren.

That was too obvious, but obvious did not mean false. A child in a dynasty obsessed with future fragments. A bloodline that treated children as receivers. A boy named like an empty field.

Or like a title.

Baron.

Baron Trump.

Mara frowned.

She had a vague memory from internet culture: old Baron Trump novels, nineteenth-century children's stories people occasionally dragged into conspiracy threads because the human brain, when left unsupervised, would eventually try to turn literary coincidence into evidence of time travel.

She searched.

Baron Trump novels.

Results appeared: Ingersoll. Little Baron Trump. The Last President. Public domain oddities. Endless speculation. Conspiracy forums. Debunking articles. Memes.

Mara clicked one image.

A boy.

A journey.

A guide.

A strange underground world.

She sat back.

The cab driver glanced in the mirror.

“Bad news?”

“No.”

He waited.

Mara looked at the canvas bag.

“Old news.”

That was worse.

Her phone buzzed.

You found the joke.

Mara typed:

The books are a joke?

Jokes are excellent delivery systems. People repeat them before deciding what they mean.

She looked back at the search results.

A political novel called The Last President.

A child named Baron.

A public that had already spent years training itself to see prophecy in coincidence.

“What did they do?” Mara whispered.

The phone answered:

They planted attention in the soil before the seed existed.

The cab stopped at a red light.

Across the intersection, a massive billboard changed again.

Chronald’s face filled the morning.

THE MAN WHO CAN'T LOSE.

Mara took a screenshot.

In the corner of the billboard, for one frame, text flickered.

THE MAN WHO WAS ALLOWED TO WIN.

Then it vanished.

The cab driver said, "You think it's true?"

"What?"

"That he can't lose."

Mara looked at the billboard.

Then at the book.

Then at the wall photograph on her phone.

"No," she said.

The driver smiled.

"Good. I hate confident men. Bad tippers."

They reached Crowe's building as the first ugly edge of dawn appeared over the rooftops.

The closed theater marquee below his apartment still read:

TONIGHT ONLY: THE MERCY ENGINE

Mara stopped on the sidewalk.

The letters were old.

Faded.

Probably random.

Probably.

She took a photo.

Crowe opened the upstairs window and looked down.

“Stop photographing omens. It encourages them.”

She looked up.

“Your marquee says The Mercy Engine.”

He glanced at it.

“Oh.”

“Oh?”

“I thought it said The Merry Engine.”

“What is The Merry Engine?”

“A terrible children’s musical. Closed in four days. The reviews were merciless, which in retrospect feels excessive.”

Mara stared at him.

Crowe sighed.

“Fine. Bring the book up.”

Inside, his apartment smelled like incense, printer toner, stale coffee, and academic failure. The walls were covered in whiteboards, monitors, taped articles, old religious prints, election maps, and one framed rejection letter from a seminary journal that Crowe said reminded him never to become respectable.

He had cleared the table.

On it sat gloves, a recorder, a scanner, a Bible, a fire extinguisher, a bottle of cheap bourbon, and a legal pad labeled:

THINGS WE WILL NOT CALL PROPHECY YET

Mara nodded at the bourbon.

“For sterilization?”

“For morale.”

“You said burn the book.”

“I am developing nuance.”

“You hate nuance.”

“I hate other people’s nuance. Mine is excellent.”

She placed the canvas bag on the table.

Neither of them moved for a moment.

Then the book inside knocked.

Crowe closed his eyes.

“I miss when evil had the decency to arrive as temptation.”

Mara unwrapped the book.

Blue cloth.

Gold title.

Frost dampening the edges.

Crowe put on gloves and opened it without touching the door page.

The first pages were the same: Baren, the tower, the three books.

Then the pages began turning by themselves.

Crowe stepped back.

The book stopped on an illustration of two figures standing over a table.

A woman and a disgraced priest.

Mara glanced at him.

“You look taller in the woodcut.”

“Propaganda begins small.”

Beneath the illustration, text formed.

The woman of maps brought the blue warning to the doctrine interpreter. He wished to burn it, which was wise, but wisdom often arrives after the matches are wet.

Crowe frowned.

“I resent the accuracy.”

The page turned.

A new image.

A golden tower.

A boy at a window.

A man behind him with no face.

Beneath it:

The child called before the house taught him silence.

Crowe’s expression changed.

All humor drained from him.

“What?”

He pointed to the faceless man.

“That is not Chronald.”

“How do you know?”

“Because Chronald would never appear in a story without demanding better placement.”

Despite herself, Mara smiled.

Crowe did not.

“The faceless man is not the father. It is the office. The role.”

“The Crown Vessel?”

Crowe looked sharply at her.

“Where did you hear that?”

“The altered spreadsheet. No. The unknown source. No—” She rubbed her eyes. “I do not know anymore.”

Crowe moved to a whiteboard and wrote:

CROWN VESSEL

Under it:

Not king. Not president. Function.

He underlined function.

“That word matters,” he said.

“You sound thrilled.”

“I am never thrilled. I am intellectually alarmed.”

The book pages flipped faster.

Images flashed: a coast burning; old ledgers; children at white tables; Chronald at a podium; Elias stealing notebooks; a red book opening; a black page with no words.

Then the final image froze.

A door.

Black.

No handle.

Crowe turned away immediately.

Mara noticed.

“You saw it.”

“No.”

“You definitely saw it.”

“I saw enough to not see more.”

“What is it?”

“It is the kind of symbol that makes men like me useful to bad systems.”

“That is not an answer.”

“It is the most honest one I have.”

Mara looked at the door.

Beneath it, text appeared.

Not every lock is meant to keep people out. Some are built to make the key feel chosen.

Crowe whispered, “Damn.”

“What?”

“That is good.”

“Crowe.”

He turned back reluctantly.

“The danger is not that Baren opens the wrong door. The danger is that every adult around him begins believing his ability to open it makes him less of a child.”

Mara thought of Baren’s voice.

Please do not let them make me read the ending.

She wrote:

Protect the child from becoming proof.

Crowe nodded.

“Better.”

Then his monitors turned on.

All twelve.

White text across black.

BAREN IS AWAKE.

Crowe said, "We know."

The screens changed.

SIMON GLASS CALLING.

Mara's phone rang.

Crowe grabbed the bourbon, poured two fingers into a mug that said ASK ME ABOUT HERESY, and drank.

"You answer," he said.

"You told me not to."

"Yes, but now he knows we know that he knows."

"That sentence should be illegal."

"Most useful sentences are."

Mara put the call on speaker.

Simon Glass's voice was calm, warm, and expensive.

"Ms. Vale. Father Crowe."

Crowe said, "Former Father."

Simon paused.

"Status disputed."

Mara looked at Crowe.

Crowe looked personally betrayed by reality.

Simon continued.

“I believe you have materials related to the Sump family that you do not understand.”

Mara said, “And you called to help?”

“I called to prevent you from making a courageous mistake.”

“That sounds like something printed on the entrance to hell.”

Crowe murmured, “Too wordy.”

Simon ignored him.

“You have seen patterns. You think the pattern points to Chronald. That is understandable. Chronald is built to attract interpretation. But if you chase him as the center, you will miss the machine.”

Mara looked at Crowe.

Crowe’s face had gone still.

“What machine?” Mara asked.

Simon sighed softly.

“Good. We are still pretending.”

The blue book slammed shut.

Crowe reached for the fire extinguisher.

Mara whispered, “Why do you have that?”

“Because burning remains an option.”

Simon said, “Do not burn the book.”

Crowe leaned toward the phone.

“Then stop making it more attractive.”

Simon’s voice sharpened for the first time.

“Listen carefully. Baren is in danger, but not in the way you think. His danger increases every time someone turns him into proof. Proof of prophecy. Proof of conspiracy. Proof of Chronald’s

evil. Proof of his innocence. Proof of anything.”

Mara did not want to trust him.

That did not make him wrong.

“What do you want?” she asked.

“I want the book.”

“No.”

“I expected that.”

“Then why ask?”

“Because refusals establish motive.”

Crowe mouthed: lawyer disease.

Simon continued.

“Do not go to Sump House.”

Mara looked at Crowe.

Crowe looked at the book.

Simon said, “You are going anyway.”

“Yes,” Mara said.

“Then take the blue book, not the red if it appears. Do not separate Baren from Mercer unless Mercer turns. Do not allow Crowe to interpret the black door aloud. And if the house offers you a shorter path, understand that aristocratic architecture is rarely generous.”

Mara leaned toward the phone.

“Why are you helping us?”

Simon was quiet long enough that the question became heavier.

Then he said, “Because I have spent my life making Chronald larger. I would prefer not to discover I was only making room for something worse.”

The call ended.

Crowe stared at the phone.

Mara waited.

Finally she said, "Well?"

Crowe picked up the blue book.

"Well," he said, "I suppose we go to the prophecy mansion."

"That is not what we are calling it."

"No?"

"No."

"What are we calling it?"

Mara put the book in the bag.

"An evidentiary site."

Crowe smiled faintly.

"Boring."

"Exactly."

They gathered the notebooks, recorder, scanner, gloves, and the fire extinguisher because Crowe insisted hope was not a safety protocol.

As they left, the theater marquee below flickered.

THE MERCY ENGINE went dark.

For one second, the letters rearranged.

MAKE IT BORING

Then the lights failed completely.

Crowe looked at Mara.

Mara looked at Crowe.

Neither spoke.

Some sentences were better left uninvited.

The Church of the Algorithm

FATHER ABEL CROWE LIVED ABOVE A CLOSED THEATER BETWEEN A BAIL BONDS OFFICE AND A FAILED VEGAN bakery.

The Orpheum's dead bulbs, papered windows, and layered code notices made the building look less abandoned than excommunicated.

The bail bonds office on the left had a blinking sign that read:

FREEDOM FINANCED DAILY

The failed vegan bakery on the right still had its hand-painted window:

CASHEW SALVATION BOWLS

Crowe claimed the bakery sign was why he had moved in.

"It is rare," he told Mara as he unlocked the side door, "to find a neighborhood where theology, debt, and digestive disappointment are so efficiently arranged."

"You say things like that and then wonder why people stopped inviting you to faculty panels."

"I do not wonder. I remember several incidents with satisfaction."

He led her up a narrow staircase that smelled like dust, incense, and the kind of wet plaster old buildings produced when they had opinions about rain.

The blue book in Mara's canvas bag had gone quiet. That was worse than knocking. A talking object at least confirmed that the world was misbehaving openly. A silent object sat there, smug with possibility.

Crowe opened the apartment door and stepped aside.

"Welcome to the remains of a respectable life."

Mara entered.

The apartment was less a home than an argument with walls.

Books, monitors, maps, whiteboards, and a crucifix above a server rack covered the apartment. One board read THE ATTENTION LITURGY. Mara did not ask. She wanted the morning to keep one wall standing.

A crucifix hung above a server rack.

“That feels illegal,” she said.

“Only canonically.”

“You still believe?”

Crowe took off his coat.

“In God? Usually. In institutions speaking on His behalf? Only when I have a fever.”

He walked to the table and cleared space by moving a stack of books onto a chair already occupied by other books. Three slid to the floor.

He ignored them.

Mara placed the canvas bag on the table.

Crowe stared at it.

The blue book did nothing.

That annoyed him.

“Of course,” he said.

“What?”

“Demonic objects are always quiet when there are witnesses. Very bad manners.”

“You think it is demonic?”

“No.”

“You just called it demonic.”

“I also call my coffee maker heretical. Precision matters less before eight.”

He moved to his kitchen area, which consisted of a sink, a kettle, two mugs, and the exhausted remains of a moral compromise with instant coffee.

“You want some?” he asked.

“No.”

“That was not a recommendation. It was a warning that I am having some.”

While he boiled water, Mara studied the largest whiteboard.

At the top Crowe had written:

PROPHECY AS INTERFACE

Under it:

1. Prediction creates audience.2. Audience creates expectation.3. Expectation shapes action.4. Action confirms prediction.5. Confirmation recruits believers.

Below that, in larger letters:

THE PROPHET IS OFTEN LESS IMPORTANT THAN THE FEEDBACK LOOP.

Mara read it twice.

Crowe returned with a mug that smelled like coffee had been described to hot water by an unreliable witness.

“How long have you been working on this?” she asked.

“Which this?”

She pointed at the board.

“The part where the Republic is apparently being eaten by a theological spreadsheet.”

Crowe sipped his coffee and winced, as if surprised again by his own choices.

“Years.”

“Because of Chronald?”

“Chronald is not the disease. He is the rash people keep photographing.”

“That metaphor is disgusting.”

“Most accurate ones are.”

Crowe walked to the board and tapped feedback loop with the back of a marker.

Chronald’s talent is permission. His supporters canonize him. His enemies mythologize him. Either way, he gets larger.

Mara thought of Chronald on the stage, letting the chant build.

“They hate him.”

“Hate is not the opposite of worship. Indifference is. And he has engineered a civilization in which indifference feels like moral failure.”

“That sounds too generous to him.”

“It is. Which is why I doubt he engineered all of it.”

Mara looked at the canvas bag.

Crowe did too.

For a moment, neither spoke.

Then the book knocked once.

Crowe pointed at it.

“See? Dramatic timing. Very suspicious.”

Mara unwrapped the blue book.

It lay on the table between them, damp at the edges from freezer frost, gold title dim under the apartment’s bad light.

Crowe did not touch it.

“Open to the first page,” he said.

“You open it.”

“No.”

“Why?”

“Because it likes you.”

“That is not comforting.”

“It is not a date, Mara. Open the book.”

She opened it.

The first page remained:

For the child who arrives before the man.

Crowe leaned over but kept his hands behind his back like a museum visitor afraid of alarms.

“Interesting.”

“What?”

“The dedication is wrong.”

“How do you know?”

“Because dedications are usually flattery, gratitude, or vanity. This is instruction.”

Mara turned the page.

The boy beneath the tower appeared again, holding three books.

Crowe’s expression changed, the way scholars’ faces changed when fear and delight reached them at the same time and neither wanted to be seen leaving with the other.

“There are versions of these books online,” Mara said. “Baron Trump novels. Ingersoll. The Last President. People use them for conspiracy nonsense.”

“Yes.”

“You knew?”

“Everyone who studies American apocalyptic politics knows. The internet finds old coincidences the way medieval peasants found saints’ bones. Some are frauds. Some are mistakes.

Some are bones. The question is not whether the old Baron books predicted anything. They didn't. The question is why a modern family would preserve the pattern."

Mara frowned.

"Preserve?"

Crowe walked to a shelf and pulled down a thick binder labeled:

BARON/BARREN/BAREN — LITERARY CONTAGION

"Of course you have a binder."

"I have several. This is my social life."

"That is tragic."

"It is indexed."

"That makes it worse."

He opened the binder and laid out printed pages: covers of old books, scanned illustrations, forum posts, essays, conspiracy threads, debunking articles, memes, screenshots of talk shows, religious newsletters, podcasts, and archived campaign forums.

Mara flipped through them.

"People have been joking about this for years."

"Exactly."

"Jokes are not evidence."

"No. Jokes are carriers."

A joke slips through before belief can object. Familiar becomes plausible. By crisis time, the costume is already waiting.

The blue book's pages turned.

Not quickly this time.

Deliberately.

It stopped at a picture of a congregation seated before a glowing screen. Above them, wires formed a halo. Beneath the image:

The old churches asked men to kneel. The new church asked them to scroll. Both called it devotion when the body forgot it could leave.

Mara looked at Crowe.

He was very still.

“Church of the Algorithm?” she asked.

He moved to another board and uncovered it by pulling away a sheet.

At the top:

THE CHURCH OF THE ALGORITHM

Mara stared.

“You named a whiteboard after the book?”

“No. The book is being rude.”

The board reduced digital life to ritual: confession as posting, testimony as thread, heresy as cancellation, excommunication as deplatforming, relic as screenshot, apocalypse as breaking news cycle.

Modern political religion does not require belief in God. It requires ritual attention, sacred enemies, and the promise that history is about to reveal who was right.

Mara thought of the chant.

The banner.

The market moves.

The old book.

“What about Baren?”

Crowe’s eyes moved to the blue book.

“Children are powerful symbols because they let adults disguise their desires as protection.”

Mara heard Baren’s voice.

Please do not let them make me read the ending.

Crowe lowered his voice.

If the Sumps have a child inside a prophecy framework, every faction will want him: heir, evidence, witness, image, sign, function.

Mara wrote:

Child must not become proof.

Crowe nodded.

“Again.”

She looked at him.

“Write it again.”

She did.

Child must not become proof.

Crowe watched until she finished.

“Good.”

The apartment lights flickered.

All twelve monitors turned on.

A video feed appeared.

A hallway.

Gold wallpaper.

Security lights.

A boy in pajamas holding three books.

Cole behind him, gun low, face set in the grim expression of a man who had realized his job description had lied by omission.

Mara stood.

“Is that live?”

Crowe moved to the monitor.

“I do not know.”

Onscreen, Baren looked directly at the camera.

Not at the lens.

At them.

Text appeared beneath the image.

THE HOUSE HAS MANY DOORS. ONLY ONE LEADS DOWN.

Cole mouthed something Mara could not hear.

The image glitched.

Then showed another room: a library, bookshelves, a hidden panel open behind a portrait of a man who looked like Chronald after being starved of charisma and overfed contempt.

Crowe whispered, “Thomas Sump.”

“Chronald’s father?”

“Yes.”

The screen changed again.

A red cover filled the frame.

Then black.

The monitors went dead.

Mara grabbed her bag.

“We need to go.”

Crowe did not move.

“Not yet.”

“Baren is inside the house.”

“He has always been inside the house.”

“Do not do that.”

“What?”

“Make it sound symbolic when it is literal.”

Crowe blinked.

Then nodded once.

“Fair correction.”

He turned to the table and began packing.

Gloves. Portable scanner. Voice recorder. Flashlight. Batteries. Notebook. A small black Bible. A silver flask.

Mara pointed.

“Is the flask necessary?”

“No.”

He packed it anyway.

She pointed to the Bible.

“And that?”

“Also no, but it frightens certain people more effectively than my face.”

“You are not performing an exorcism.”

“Correct. Too much paperwork.”

He opened a drawer and removed a compact fire extinguisher.

Mara stared.

“Why do you own so many emergency objects?”

“Because I read.”

They moved toward the door.

The phone rang.

Mara checked the screen.

Unknown number.

Crowe grimaced.

“Simon.”

“You said not to answer.”

“I also said bring the book. You see how flexible doctrine becomes under pressure.”

Mara answered on speaker.

Simon Glass did not waste time.

“Do not go to Sump House.”

Mara kept walking down the stairs.

“Good morning to you too.”

“I am serious.”

“That must be new for you.”

Crowe murmured, “Be nice. He may be useful.”

Simon said, “Father Crowe, your need to be disliked remains one of your few stable virtues.”

Crowe brightened.

“He hears me.”

Mara said, “Why should we not go?”

“Because the house is built to receive you.”

“That is ominous and unhelpful.”

“It is accurate. Sump House is not just a residence. It is an interface.”

Crowe stopped on the stairs.

Mara almost ran into him.

Simon continued.

“Every major family property contains what Elias called receptive architecture. Certain rooms amplify fragments. Certain corridors direct people. Certain archives classify them. The house does not predict you. It offers you the path most likely to make you useful.”

Mara looked at Crowe.

Crowe looked like a man whose field of study had just become zoning.

“What does it want from us?” she asked.

Simon sighed.

“You, Mara, it wants as witness. You, Crowe, as interpreter. Mercer as force. Baren as variable.”

“And you?”

A pause.

“Strategist.”

Mara said, “At least you admit it.”

“I am admitting less than you think.”

“Are you trying to help us or manage us?”

“Yes.”

Crowe nodded.

“That was honest.”

“No,” Mara said. “That was efficient.”

Simon’s voice sharpened.

“Listen carefully. If you go, do not accept roles the house gives you.”

“Hard to do if it drops name tags.”

“It will not be that crude.”

The monitors in Crowe’s apartment, though dead upstairs, all flashed at once through the open stairwell door.

From above, white light filled the hall.

A printer began running.

Crowe closed his eyes.

“Apparently it will.”

They ran back upstairs.

One page waited in the tray.

FUNCTION GROUP FORMING.

Under it:

WITNESS CARTOGRAPHER: MARA VALE DOCTRINE INTERPRETER: ABEL CROWE
VIOLENCE PROXY: COLE MERCER CROWN STRATEGIST: SIMON GLASS CHILD
VARIABLE: BAREN SUMP CROWN VESSEL: PENDING

Mara read it aloud.

Crowe looked offended.

“Doctrine interpreter is too generous.”

Simon, still on speaker, whispered, “Damn.”

That frightened Mara more than the page.

“What?”

“The machine has never named a full function group outside the lower chamber.”

“The machine?” Mara said.

Simon did not answer.

Crowe leaned toward the phone.

“Mr. Glass, this would be an excellent moment to stop being coy.”

Simon spoke carefully.

“There is a system beneath Sump House. It began as Veyra’s apparatus. Elias expanded it. Every generation added to it. It receives probability fragments and routes them through decision structures.”

Mara stared at the page.

“A time machine.”

“No.”

“A prediction engine.”

“Not anymore.”

Crowe looked at the board.

“A preference engine.”

Silence.

Then Simon said, “Yes.”

The blue book opened on the table.

Text appeared across both pages.

THE CHURCH OF THE ALGORITHM WAS NEVER BUILT TO WORSHIP THE MACHINE. IT WAS BUILT TO TEACH THE MACHINE WHAT WORSHIP LOOKED LIKE.

The apartment shook.

Not an earthquake.

A passing train underground, maybe.

Except there was no train line beneath the building.

Mara grabbed the book.

“We are going.”

Simon said, “Then hear me. Do not trust the red copy. Do not let Baren sit in any chair the house offers. Do not let Crowe read inscriptions aloud unless necessary.”

Crowe pointed at the phone.

“That is targeted.”

“And if Chronald arrives before you reach the archive, run.”

Mara froze at the door.

“Is he coming?”

“He is already moving.”

“Why tell us?”

The line crackled.

For a moment, Mara heard background noise: voices, phones, movement, the controlled panic of expensive rooms.

Simon said, “Because I have spent years making him larger.”

The call cut.

Mara looked at Crowe.

“Finish the sentence.”

Crowe picked up the fire extinguisher.

“He would prefer not to discover he was making room for something worse.”

They left.

Outside, the city had fully woken.

The morning after Chronald's announcement felt like the hangover after a parade no one admitted attending. Screens replayed the golden speech while smoke from the Glass Coast crawled beneath the chyron.

Crowe drove because he claimed Mara looked like she might intentionally hit a billboard.

His car was old, gray, dented, and smelled faintly of old paper and machine oil.

"What is this?" Mara asked as she climbed in.

"A car."

"It has a cassette player."

"It has dignity."

"It has a hole in the floor mat."

"Dignity ages."

They pulled into traffic.

Sump House was outside the city, north along the river road, past embassies, private schools, old estates, and new security gates pretending to be old estates. The Sumps had purchased the original property in the 1920s, expanded it in the 1950s, renovated it in the 1980s, and restored it every time architectural fashion discovered a new way to say money had ancestors.

Mara opened her laptop in the passenger seat and searched Sump House records.

Public-facing articles called it a family estate, a heritage property, a symbol of industrial achievement, a private retreat, a national landmark candidate, and, in one glossy magazine spread, a home built for tomorrow.

She turned the screen toward Crowe.

He glanced.

"Subtle."

“Do rich people know when they sound like villains?”

“Only old money does. New money thinks villainy is branding.”

They passed a church with a digital sign:

TRUTH WILL SET YOU FREE

Below it, smaller:

WIFI AVAILABLE IN FELLOWSHIP HALL

Mara checked her phone.

No messages.

That worried her.

She opened the unknown source log and added:

Simon states machine below Sump House is now preference engine. Claims receptive architecture and function group forming. Treat as self-serving but potentially accurate.

Crowe glanced at her.

“Add: Crowe likely underreacting due to professional familiarity with symbolic nonsense.”

She typed it.

He smiled.

“You did not have to actually write it.”

“I believe in accurate records.”

A new message appeared.

Unknown sender.

Good.

Mara groaned.

Crowe looked over.

“What?”

“It approved my notes again.”

“Never accept praise from infrastructure.”

They left the city.

The river road wound through fog. Black trees leaned over the pavement. Mansions appeared behind gates at long intervals, each one pretending privacy was a natural feature rather than a budget line.

Mara watched the fog.

“Crowe?”

“Yes?”

Outrage is belief with witnesses. If the machine learns from focus, hatred feeds it almost as well as worship.

They approached the first Sump gate at 9:42 a.m.

It stood open.

No guard.

No call box.

No visible cameras.

A long drive curved through wet lawns toward a house half-hidden by trees.

Crowe stopped the car before entering.

“Open gates are never good.”

“Closed gates would also be bad.”

“Yes, but they would show effort.”

Mara checked her phone.

No message.

The blue book in her bag shifted.

Crowe noticed.

“What does it want?”

“I am trying not to let books have wants.”

“A noble but increasingly unsupported position.”

Mara opened the bag.

The book had opened to a new page.

A drawing of their car at the gate.

Beneath it:

The woman of maps and the doctrine interpreter came to the house by the road, though the house had already made room for them beneath the floor.

Crowe leaned in.

“Do not like that.”

“No.”

“Particularly the floor.”

“No.”

He looked at the open gate.

“Do we proceed?”

Mara closed the book.

A normal investigator would call backup.

A normal investigator would notify law enforcement.

A normal investigator would not enter the private estate of a presidential candidate after receiving messages from a possibly sentient antique book, a compromised printer, and a communications strategist who spoke like a hostage note with cufflinks.

But normal investigators did not have a twelve-year-old on a recorded ghost-call saying please do not let them make me read the ending.

Mara took out her phone and sent one message to a trusted editor she had not spoken to in six months because they had disagreed about whether truth could survive a paywall.

If I do not contact you in three hours, open the folder labeled SUMP / LIVE / 2:31 AM. Do not publish raw. Authenticate first. Child involved.

The editor replied almost immediately.

Are you in danger?

Mara typed:

Terrible question.

Then:

Yes.

Crowe looked at her.

“Ready?”

“No.”

“Good. Certainty would be alarming.”

They drove through the gate.

As soon as the car crossed the threshold, every screen in the dashboard turned on.

Crowe’s radio, which had not worked in years, crackled alive.

A child’s voice whispered through the speakers.

“I am in the East Library.”

Mara leaned forward.

“Baren?”

Static.

Then another voice.

Chronald.

Not live. Recorded. Or echoed.

“Children do not understand consequences. That is why adults exist.”

Crowe turned off the ignition.

The engine kept running.

Mara looked at him.

“Your dignified car is compromised.”

Crowe stared at the dashboard.

“I feel personally attacked by modernity.”

The radio crackled again.

Simon Glass’s voice, faint and distorted.

“If the house offers you a shorter path, understand aristocratic architecture is rarely generous.”

Then the radio died.

The car rolled forward on its own.

Crowe grabbed the wheel.

“I am going to say something unspiritual.”

“Go ahead.”

“I hate rich people.”

The car stopped at the front steps.

Sump House rose before them.

Old stone. New glass. Copper gutters. Black windows. Golden doors. Vines climbing the walls like nature had signed a nondisclosure agreement.

Above the main entrance, carved into stone, was the official family motto:

FORTUNE FAVORS THE EARLY

Mara looked at it.

Then at Crowe.

“Subtle.”

Crowe opened his door.

The moment his foot touched the ground, the blue book knocked once.

Not warning.

Recognition.

Mara took it from the bag and held it tight.

The front doors opened inward.

No one stood behind them.

From inside came the smell of polished wood, old paper, cold iron, and something like lightning.

Crowe lifted the fire extinguisher.

Mara looked at him.

“Really?”

“If symbolism attacks, I am ready.”

They entered Sump House.

The foyer lights turned on one by one.

At the far end of the hall, a boy screamed.

And somewhere beneath the floor, something vast and patient began to hum.

Continue reading

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