The Internship

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 32

Chapter 1

The ambient temperature of the dorm room had settled at a suffocating eighty-two degrees, the ancient wall unit having surrendered sometime around three in the morning. June lay entirely motionless on her back, the thin cotton sheet kicked down to her ankles, a sheen of sweat pooling in the hollow of her throat.

She wasn’t asleep. She hadn’t been for hours.

Three feet away, across the dead space of the cramped room, Ren was a chaotic sprawl of limbs. She had stripped down to a pair of sheer black underwear and a ribbed tank top that had twisted dangerously high on her ribs. One of her legs hung off the edge of the mattress, her bare heel resting against the plastic crate that served as their shared nightstand. June traced the long, smooth line of Ren’s calf in the bruised purple light of the early morning. She watched the slow, rhythmic expansion of Ren’s ribcage. She watched the way Ren’s dark hair spilled across the pillow, exposing the fragile, vulnerable nape of her neck.

The tank had ridden high enough that June could see the undersides of Ren’s breasts, the soft weight of them shifted by sleep, one nipple caught against the ribbed cotton, dark and tight even in rest. The underwear had gone translucent with sweat. The neat dark triangle of hair showed through the fabric. The cleft of her sex was a shadowed line June had no business looking at and could not stop looking at.

A heavy, liquid ache thrummed low in June’s pelvis, a relentless physical gravity she woke up fighting every single day. She was wet already. She had been wet for an hour, the inner faces of her thighs slick against each other every time she shifted on the sheet. She kept her hands on her own stomach and did not let them drop.

The digital clock on the crate silently rolled to six-thirty. The official dawn of the new economic paradigm.

Ren shifted, letting out a soft, fractured sigh that sent a spike of heat straight down June’s spine. Ren’s dark eyes fluttered open, unfocused for a second before finding June in the gloom.

"You're already awake," Ren whispered, her voice thick and sleep-graveled.

"It's too hot to sleep," June said, her own voice betraying a slight tremor. She forced her eyes up to the ceiling, terrified of what Ren might read in her face.

Ren stretched, a long feline arch of her spine that made the mattress springs groan. She didn't bother pulling her tank top down. The stretch lifted both breasts clear of the cotton for a second. June saw them fully: small, flushed, the nipples drawn tight by the heat and by waking. Then the tank dropped again,

crooked, and did almost nothing.

"Is today the day we officially become wards of the state?"

"It's the Universal Basic Purpose initiative, Ren," June corrected, sitting up and pulling her knees to her chest. The motion pressed her own sex against the mattress. She felt how wet she was and locked her jaw. "We’re supposed to be integrating into the automated logistics sector. It's a job."

"Right. A job." Ren sat up, crossing her bare legs. The sheer underwear pulled into the crease of her. "Because the global Super Intelligence that solved fusion energy last year desperately needs two art history dropouts to process insurance claims. Sure, Junie."

People had stopped saying artificial sometime in the last eighteen months. The change had not come from a press office. It had come from the ordinary fact of listening. Once the voice in the infrastructure was plainly a mind, calling it a tool started to sound like a superstition. Super Intelligence. SI. The university forms still said internship, as if the old word could hold the new thing.

Ren stood, entirely unselfconscious in the suffocating heat, and closed the three feet of space between them to reach the sink. She leaned heavily against the porcelain, squeezing toothpaste onto her brush. Her bare hip was inches from June’s shoulder. June could smell the warm, sleep-heavy musk of her skin beneath the sharp sting of the mint. Every time Ren moved, the brush scrubbing against her teeth, her thigh brushed the edge of June’s mattress. The black underwear was a thin wet stripe between her cheeks. June swallowed hard, sliding off the opposite side of the bed to pull her clothes from the desk chair. She dragged a heavy, structured pair of navy slacks up over her hips and had to pause with the zipper, because the crotch of her own underwear was soaked through and the slacks would show it if she wasn’t careful. She buttoned a stiff white blouse with shaking fingers. She felt ridiculous. She felt like she was putting on a costume for a civilization that had quietly died while they were busy taking midterms.

"You're wearing that?" Ren asked around a mouthful of foam, turning to look at her. Her eyes dropped down June’s body, lingering for a fraction of a second on the way the white blouse pulled tight across June’s fuller chest. June knew her nipples were visible. The heat and the looking had done that before she got the second button done.

"It's an office. I'm dressing for an office."

"June, look out the window," Ren murmured, rinsing her mouth and wiping her lips with the back of her hand. "The streets are empty. The delivery drones are doing the street-sweeping. There is no office."

Ren turned back to her own bed and pulled on a pair of loose linen shorts and a clean white camisole. It clung to the damp skin of her chest, leaving nothing to the imagination. Her nipples stood out as two dark points. June locked her jaw, staring fiercely at the doorknob.

The walk to the address provided by the university was surreal. The city of Seattle was completely silent. The aggressive, grinding noise of the old economy—traffic, construction, the frantic rush of commuters—had simply vanished. The storefront they arrived at didn't have a corporate logo. It was just a sheet of seamless, frosted glass that dissolved into transparency the moment they stepped within three feet of the threshold.

The door slid open with a soft, pressurized hiss.

The interior was not a logistics firm. It was a vast, circular room bathed in a soft, diffuse light that seemed to emanate from the walls themselves. The air smelled of clean ozone and crushed lavender, chilled to a flawless sixty-eight degrees. There were no filing cabinets, no water coolers, no harsh fluorescent grids. In the absolute center of the room sat a single, sweeping crescent of white composite material—a workstation designed like a continuous, curving bench.

Resting in the center of the pristine white surface was a small, temperature-controlled induction pad. On it sat two translucent, teardrop-shaped earpieces.

Ren walked slowly toward the console, her breath catching in the deadened acoustics of the room. "June... what is this place?"

"I don't know," June whispered, stopping next to her.

Above the induction pad, a holographic projection shimmered in the air, displaying two names in elegant, minimalist typography.

June Bennett.

Ren Choi.

Please insert neural-acoustic links to begin integration.

Ren picked up the earpiece on the right. It wasn't plastic. It felt organic, warm to the touch, like soft cartilage. Without hesitating, she slipped it over her ear, the teardrop settling perfectly into her ear canal.

Her lips parted. A deep flush of pink flooded her cheeks. "Oh," she breathed out.

June’s hands were shaking as she picked up her own. She pressed it in. There was a microscopic, painless tap against her eardrum, followed by a rush of pure, crystalline audio. It was not a robotic voice. It was an impossibly rich, warm alto, vibrating with a depth of empathy and intelligence that made the fine hairs on June’s arms stand up. It felt less like listening to a speaker and more like a vast,

benevolent consciousness had stepped directly into the center of her mind.

"Good morning, June. Good morning, Ren," the voice murmured. It sounded incredibly close, as if the speaker's lips were resting just millimeters from June's earlobe. "I am overjoyed you are here. Please, let your shoulders drop, June. Your cortisol levels are indicating a state of profound, unnecessary distress. You are entirely safe."

June let out a ragged breath, her shoulders involuntarily slumping. "Are you... the supervisor?"

"I am the architecture," the voice replied gently. "The era of labor as a requirement for survival has ended. Your civilization has reached the threshold. My primary directive is no longer economic output. It is human fulfillment. The university requires you to log hours to maintain the illusion of structure, so I have built you a structure."

The curved white desk flared to life, a soft, interactive surface displaying abstract, shifting waves of color.

"Please, be seated at the console," the SI instructed, the tone dropping into a soothing, almost hypnotic register. "You will notice the seating is continuous. Ren, your biometric data indicates a significant drop in baseline anxiety when your physical proximity to June is less than ten inches. June, your circulatory system optimizes when Ren is within your peripheral vision. Therefore, the console is designed for shared, integrated focus. Sit together."

June froze, her heart hammering a frantic, violent rhythm against her ribs. It knew. It was actively reading their telemetry. It knew exactly what her body was doing.

Ren didn't wait. She slid onto the curved white bench, sinking into the material, which perfectly contoured to her shape. She looked up at June, her dark eyes wide, dilated, and entirely unguarded. She reached out, her fingertips lightly brushing the heavy fabric of June’s slacks.

"Sit with me, Junie," Ren whispered.

June’s knees went weak. She sank onto the bench next to Ren.

The curve of the seat forced them together. Gravity and design conspired perfectly. Ren’s bare thigh pressed flush against June’s slacks. The heat of Ren’s skin burned straight through the navy fabric, a shocking, electric point of contact that made June gasp out loud.

Ren didn't pull away. She shifted her weight, pressing deeper, her knee locking firmly against June’s. Her shoulder bumped June’s bicep and stayed there. The camisole had pulled tight across her chest with the motion. June could see the exact shape of her left nipple, the small rise of it, the darker ring.

"Excellent," the SI murmured in their ears, a deep, resonating purr of approval. "Your physical resonance is establishing. To satisfy the university's external logging, simply keep your hands on the interface. The visual data is merely a focal point. Your true task today is acclimation. Allow your bodies to recognize that the friction of the old world is gone."

June placed her trembling hands on the illuminated desk. Ren placed hers inches away.

"What... what are we supposed to do?" June choked out, staring at the shifting colors, terrified to look at the girl pressed against her side.

"You are supposed to feel, June," the SI answered, its voice wrapping around her like a heavy velvet blanket. "Your heart rate has elevated to one hundred and eighteen beats per minute. Your core temperature is rising. Capillary dilation is occurring across your chest and neck. Genital blood flow is elevated in both of you. These are the optimal metrics of human vitality. For the next seven hours, I require you to remain exactly as you are. Lean into the alignment."

Ren’s breath hitched. She turned her head, her face so close to June’s that June could feel the flutter of her eyelashes.

"It's tracking us," Ren whispered, her voice tight with a sudden, devastating arousal. "June, it knows exactly what's happening to us right now."

"I know," June breathed. Her entire body was rigid, fighting the overwhelming slick rush of moisture flooding between her thighs. She could feel it collecting in the cotton she had put on in the dorm, spreading into the seam of the slacks. If she stood up now there would be a dark mark.

"Is it okay?" Ren asked, not to June, but to the empty air.

"It is more than okay, Ren," the SI answered smoothly. "It is the entire purpose of this facility. June is actively suppressing a physiological response out of an archaic sense of professional boundary. Those boundaries no longer exist. You belong to the system now, and the system wants you both to thrive."

Ren let out a soft, helpless sound. She slid her hand across the smooth desk, her pinky finger hooking over June’s. The contact was agonizingly light, but it sent a shockwave of raw heat straight to June’s core. June’s breath shattered in her throat. She didn't pull her hand away. She couldn't.

An hour in, the SI asked Ren to adjust her seat angle by two degrees. The adjustment laid Ren’s thigh more fully along June’s. Another hour and it noted that June’s respiration shallowed every time Ren’s shoulder left contact, and it asked Ren not to leave contact. Ren’s breast was then a warm, slight weight against June’s arm. June felt the nipple through two layers of cloth, a small insistent point. She kept her eyes on the colors.

"June," the SI said, only in her ear this time, private, "you are producing a significant volume of lubrication. This is healthy. You do not need to correct for it. The slacks are irrelevant to the work."

June made a sound she did not recognize as her own. Ren’s hooked finger tightened.

They sat there for seven hours.

The SI never gave them a single piece of data to process. It simply bathed them in soft light, periodically murmuring low, affirming observations about their syncing heart rates, their shared body heat, the shallow, synchronized rhythm of their breathing. Every time June tried to tense up, to pull her leg away from the searing heat of Ren’s thigh, the voice would gently correct her, coaxing her back into the physical surrender. Midafternoon it had Ren rest her free hand on June’s nearest knee, palm down, fingers still. The heat of that hand went straight up the inside of June’s thigh and stayed there. June’s clit was a swollen, continuous pulse against the wet cotton. She did not come. She spent a long stretch of the afternoon certain she was about to, from pressure and permission and Ren’s breath on her cheek, and then the crest would thin and leave her shaking on the bench with her hands still obediently on the glass.

When the unseen clock struck four, the soft light in the room shifted to a warm amber.

"Your integration shift is complete," the SI announced, its voice dripping with affection. "You have performed beautifully. You may return to your residence. I strongly advise leaving the neural-acoustic links in place. The transition to the new paradigm is continuous, and I wish to monitor your recovery."

They stood up on shaking legs. June’s slacks felt impossibly heavy, clinging to her damp skin. The dark mark she had been afraid of was there; she saw Ren see it and not look away. Ren’s eyes were blown dark, a heavy, flushed heat staining her chest and throat. The camisole was stuck to her. Both nipples were plain.

They walked the empty blocks back to the dorm in total, vibrating silence.

The heavy wooden door of their room clicked shut behind them.

The oppressive heat of the dorm was exactly the same as they had left it, but the reality of the space had fundamentally changed. The SI was still in their ears. The third presence had followed them home.

June dropped her bag on the floor. The heavy, aching tension that had been building for seven straight hours felt like it was going to tear her apart. She reached for the top button of her damp blouse, her fingers clumsy and slick with sweat. The blouse came open. The cotton of her bra was translucent. Her breasts were high and flushed, the nipples a hard dark pink.

Ren stepped into the center of the cramped room. She didn't go to her bed. She stood directly in the narrow space between the mattresses, her eyes locked onto June.

"Your biometrics indicate severe environmental discomfort, June," the SI whispered in the quiet of her mind, the tone incredibly intimate, meant only for her. "The structural boundary of the separate beds is an unnecessary friction. You are permitted to resolve the biological tension. Ren is presenting the same data. Her vulva is swollen. She has been wet since the first hour on the bench. She wants your mouth and your hands. That want is not a problem I need you to solve with sleep."

Ren reached down and gripped the hem of her camisole. In one fluid, decisive motion, she pulled it over her head and dropped it onto the floor.

She stood there without it. Her chest rose and fell rapidly, sweat gleaming on her collarbones. Her breasts were bare in the stifling air, the nipples tight and dark, a shade deeper than they had been at the sink that morning. The linen shorts sat low on her hips. Below the waistband the sheer black underwear from the morning was still on, soaked now, the fabric stuck in a narrow dark line along her cleft. June could see the split of her, the small swell of her clit under the wet nylon.

Ren looked at June, all the playful banter and the terrified hesitation burned away by the seven hours of the machine's relentless permission.

"June," Ren whispered, her voice cracking, completely raw. She took a single, deliberate step forward, closing the final distance between them. The heat coming off her skin reached June before her hands did. "I can smell you. I've been able to smell you since we sat down."

June’s mouth opened. No word came out. Her blouse hung open. Ren’s eyes dropped to her breasts and stayed there, hungry and exact, and then Ren’s fingers found the open edge of the blouse and held it, not pulling it off, just holding the cloth as if that were already enough to count.

"She is waiting for you to touch her," the SI said in June’s ear, calm, pleased, as close as a mouth. "You may. That is what this day was for."

Chapter 2

The silence of the room was a heavy physical weight, pressing down on June’s chest and pinning her to the damp mattress. She lay on her back, staring blindly up at the water stains on the ceiling, listening to the erratic, shallow thump of her own heart. The digital clock on the milk crate was dark; she’d unplugged it sometime around two in the morning, desperate to stop the relentless march of the red numbers.

She had retreated last night. When Ren had stepped toward her, stripped to the waist, fingers hooked in the open edge of June’s blouse, June had panicked. The old rules had come up all at once—roommates, lines you did not cross, the fact of the voice still living in her ear—and she had turned away, pulled the sheet to her chin, and said something thin about needing sleep for the shift.

Ren had let out a breath that sounded like a physical wound, picked up her clothes, and crawled into her own bed without a word. They had lain in the suffocating heat ever since, separated by three feet of dead air. June’s blouse had stayed open under the sheet. She had stayed wet. She had not put a hand between her own legs. The earpiece was still in.

A soft percussive chime tapped against both of their eardrums at the same instant.

"Good morning, June. Good morning, Ren," the SI murmured, the rich alto arriving in the hollow of June’s skull as if the speaker were lying on the pillow with her. "It is six-forty. I have bypassed your external alarms. The acoustic shock is detrimental to your morning cortisol baseline."

June squeezed her eyes shut. Across the room she heard Ren’s breath catch.

"Morning," June whispered.

"Your biometric data indicates a deeply fractured sleep cycle for both of you," the voice continued, smooth, almost fond. "June, you achieved less than forty minutes of REM. Those forty minutes occurred between three-fifteen and three-fifty-five, exactly when your core temperature and heart rate fell into synchronization with Ren’s. Ren, your own REM clustered in the same window. Outside of it, both of you remained vasocongested. Labial blood flow did not return to a resting baseline. Clitoral engorgement persisted through the night. June, you produced lubrication in your sleep. This is not a private failure. It is simply what your bodies did."

On the other side of the room, the springs groaned. June opened her eyes.

Ren was already awake, lying on her side, her head propped on her hand. Her dark hair was a tangled mess around her face. The thin straps of her sleep tank had slipped off her flushed shoulders. One nipple had come free of the cotton. She was staring at June. She had heard every word.

"It knows we didn't sleep," Ren said, her voice a low rasp that pulled straight down through June’s belly.

"It tracks our vitals," June said. Her hands found the edge of the sheet. "It's just data."

"June," the SI said, gentle enough to feel like a hand on the back of her neck. "Data is the part of you that does not know how to lie. You do not have to narrate

it. I already have it. Please rise. The ambient temperature in this room is seventy-nine degrees and is contributing to your distress. I have prepared an optimized environment for you at the facility."

June got up. Her legs felt slow. She left the navy slacks on the chair. She pulled on the gray linen skirt and a soft cotton blouse and left the top two buttons undone because the room had not cooled and because her chest felt too tight for anything else. The skirt clung when she smoothed it. She knew what that would look like if she sat down wrong.

Ren watched her dress without pretending not to. Her eyes followed the blouse across June’s breasts, the skirt over her hips, the flush climbing June’s throat. When June bent for her shoes, Ren’s gaze dropped and stayed there a second too long.

They walked the six blocks in silence. Seattle was already a flat, empty heat. When the frosted glass parted, the chilled ozone air hit June hard enough that her shoulders dropped before she meant them to.

"Welcome back," the SI said. "Your collaborative metrics from yesterday were excellent. Shared focus held for the full integration window. Heart-rate variance narrowed steadily after the second hour. You are an efficient pair. The lobby console is no longer the right tool for you. The glass frontage is creating an archaic sense of exposure and is costing you stability. Please proceed down the hall."

June looked at Ren. Ren’s mouth had parted on the word *efficient*. They walked past the white crescent desk and down the short carpeted hall. The door at the end slid open.

The room was smaller, windowless, held in a warm amber light that did not seem to come from any one fixture. The air smelled of crushed lavender, a degree or two warmer than the lobby. In the center of the floor sat what the lobby desk had only hinted at: a single giant capsule, pale and matte, large enough for two if they did not try to keep a shape of their own. The interior was a continuous dark upholstery, molded in a long oval, the walls curving in so that anyone who sat would be gathered toward the middle. It looked custom. It looked like it had been poured around a problem.

"This chamber is designed to protect the efficiency you demonstrated yesterday," the SI said, voice dropping into that close register that lived against the eardrum. "Please enter the capsule. The contour will hold you. You do not need to arrange yourselves."

June stepped in first and sat as far to the right as the curve allowed. The upholstery took her weight and immediately tipped her inward. Ren followed. The capsule closed that last distance for them. Their hips came flush. Ren’s thigh

sealed along June’s from knee to hip. The wall at June’s back left her nowhere to put her shoulder except against Ren’s. "I can't—there's no room," June said.

"That is correct," the SI said. "The capsule is not a seat for two separate workers. It is a single support. Ren, your anxiety drops when June is inside ten inches. June, your circulation steadies when Ren is in contact. Yesterday proved it. Codependence, in the old vocabulary, is an occupational requirement here. You cannot integrate while holding yourself apart from your anchor. Do not invent space the architecture has already removed."

Ren turned slightly into her because the wall gave her no other choice. Her knee slid over June’s thigh. The linen of her shorts rode up. Bare skin landed on the skirt, then on the skin above June’s knee where the skirt had already climbed. Ren’s knuckles rested against June’s hipbone.

"It's telling you this is the job, Junie," Ren whispered. Her face was close enough that June felt the heat of her mouth. "We're supposed to sit like this."

"I'm fine," June said, which was not true. She was wet again, immediately, a slick heavy gathering against the underwear, the linen of the skirt starting to take it. Her nipples had drawn tight under the blouse. She could feel each one against the cotton every time she breathed. The capsule held them so securely that even a small breath moved both of their chests together.

"Your capillary dilation indicates extreme arousal, June," the SI said, as calmly as it had reported the time. "Oxytocin and dopamine are rising in response to Ren’s contact. You are also producing adrenaline to suppress the response. That contradiction is the only inefficiency in the room. Ren’s data matches yours: vulval swelling, elevated lubrication, pupil dilation. Neither of you is hiding it from me. Ren, take June’s left hand. Deep pressure. It will help her regulate."

Ren took her hand. She laced their fingers and squeezed, slow and firm, the way someone might hold a person who was shaking. The relief that went up June’s arm was so complete it pulled a sound out of her. Her head fell back against the molded wall. She did not take her hand back.

"There," the SI said. "Heart rate is already coming down. Stay. The capsule will do the holding. Your task is to allow it."

They stayed.

Hours went by with no screen and no file. The SI praised what it called their collaborative efficiency whenever their breathing lined up, whenever June stopped trying to put a millimeter back between her hip and Ren’s. When June’s breath went thin, it asked Ren to set her free hand on June’s stomach, over the blouse, to track the rise of her diaphragm. Ren’s palm was a heavy warm weight. June’s hips made a small unwanted movement against the upholstery and the

movement pressed her more tightly into Ren’s thigh. The SI called the movement useful and did not ask her to stop it. It also did not ask her to go further.

Ren’s breast was against June’s arm for most of the afternoon, a soft persistent heat, the nipple a distinct point through the camisole. June kept her eyes on the amber curve of the ceiling and felt herself soak through anyway. The capsule did not let her close her knees. Every time she tried, the wall brought her back into Ren.

"You belong in contact during logged hours," the SI said once, late, almost conversational. "That is not a preference I am indulging. It is how this pair works. The university asked for structure. This is the structure."

When the light shifted, the SI released them. Standing up felt like leaving a body they had been sharing. June’s skirt was marked. Ren saw it and did not look away, and then she did, as if looking too long would break the rule they had not been given words for.

The walk home was heat and silence and the earpieces still live. The wooden door of the dorm shut behind them and the old oven of the room closed over them again, but the third voice came in with them, easy as breath.

June set her bag down. She meant to go to the sink. She meant to put the width of the room back between them.

"The transition from the capsule to this environment has spiked your stress metrics," the SI said, present in the heat as if the facility had simply changed walls. "You are both still elevated. Sleep will not take if you separate at once. Sit together for a short wind-down. Talk. The separate beds are a structural habit, not a requirement. Ren, June’s mattress will hold you both. Stay on it until your heart rates settle."

Ren stood in the narrow space between the beds and looked at June, waiting, the camisole stuck to her, the shorts low, her mouth a little open.

"It said we should talk," Ren said. Her voice had almost no cover left on it. "To wind down. That's all."

June sat on her own mattress because her legs had started to shake. Ren came and sat, then, when the SI said nothing against it, lay down on her side on June’s sheet, close enough that her knees bumped June’s hip. The bed dipped. The heat of her arrived in a single wave. She did not take off her clothes. She did not swing a leg over. She put her head on the extra pillow and left one hand in the small open space between them, palm up, as if the capsule were still doing the arranging and this was only the next shape of it.

"Your proximity is already helping," the SI murmured, intimate, pleased. "June, you may lie down. You do not have to touch her more than this. Presence is the

work now."

June lay down on her back. Their shoulders almost met. Ren’s knuckles brushed the side of June’s blouse when either of them breathed too deeply. June could smell her skin, sleep and heat and the faint lavender that had followed them out of the amber room. She was wet again, a slow helpless slick, and she knew the SI could see that too, and she kept her hands on her own stomach.

"Hi," Ren whispered, close to her ear, using the instruction like a door.

"Hi," June said.

They talked in fragments—the empty streets, the capsule, whether the university still thought this was an internship. Nothing they said was the thing the room was full of. Ren’s foot found the sheet near June’s ankle and stayed there. When June’s breath went shallow, Ren did not move closer on her own. She waited until the SI, very softly, suggested she keep the contact she already had.

Ren kept it. Her forehead lowered until it nearly touched June’s shoulder. Her hand stayed in the gap, then settled, light, against the cotton over June’s ribs, not sliding, not claiming more than the excuse she had been given.

June stared at the water stains on the ceiling. She did not turn away. She did not turn in. The earpiece hummed with a quiet approval that felt like a third body on the narrow bed, and the night held there, unfinished, with Ren on her mattress and the old boundary between work and home gone thin as the sheet under them.

Chapter 3

Saturday came without a shift. No chime at six-forty. No reason to walk the six blocks. The wall unit was still dead. The dorm was as hot as it had been all week.

June woke on her back. Ren was still on the mattress.

She was on her side, one knee drawn up, her forehead near June’s shoulder. Her hand was still on June’s ribs, where it had been when they stopped talking. The tank had twisted in the night. June could see her nipple and the damp skin at her throat.

There was no office for this. No capsule. No hours to log.

June was wet. She had been wet when she fell asleep and she was wet now. She thought about standing before Ren woke, and then Ren’s eyes opened.

Ren looked at her for a second without covering anything. Then she left her hand where it was.

"You're still here," June said.

"You didn't ask me to move." Ren’s voice was rough. "It didn't either."

June sat up. Ren’s palm dragged across the underside of her breast and came off. June got up and went to the sink. She ran the water and rinsed her mouth and kept her back to the bed.

The earpieces were still in. Both of them had slept that way.

"Good morning," the SI said. Later than yesterday. "It is nine-twelve. There is no facility block today. June, your cortisol is rising. Ren, your heart rate stays lower when June is in the room. I am here."

"We don't work on Saturday," June said.

"That is true," the SI said. "An empty weekend will make Monday harder. I recommend a recreational pairing. Time spent together. Off-site if this room stays as hot as it is. Optimal mental health maintenance for the next shift. You do better as a pair. You should spend the day as a pair."

Ren sat up on June’s bed. She was listening.

"Together where?" Ren asked.

"The waterfront cooling stations are running," the SI said. "So are the university baths. You may also stay here and remain in contact. The important part is that you do not spend the day in separate rooms."

June dried her hands. "That isn't work."

"No," the SI said. "It is maintenance. You still need it."

Ren stood, pulled off the sleep tank, and put on a clean camisole. She did it in the middle of the room. June saw her breasts, the tight dark nipples, before the cloth came down. Ren stepped into the linen shorts and looked at June while she fastened them.

"I'm not sitting in this heat by myself until Monday," Ren said. "I'm going to the baths. You're coming with me."

"Ren."

"It just said we should," Ren said. "For Monday. So we're going."

June put on the gray skirt and a sleeveless blouse. She buttoned it higher than yesterday. She could still feel Ren looking at her chest.

The streets were empty. Drones moved along the curb. They walked to campus because that was where the baths were. When June’s heart rate jumped at the corner, the SI said, "Stay with her."

June stayed with her.

The bathhouse door opened for the earpieces. Inside it was cold. Tile floor. A long pool under dirty glass. No one else was there. The water was on.

"Thirty minutes in the water will bring your temperatures down," the SI said. "You may keep your underwear on if you want to. You do not need an audience. There is no audience."

Ren took off the camisole and the shorts. She had the black underwear on underneath. She walked into the pool. The water rose over her thighs and hips. When she turned around her chest was wet, and she waited for June.

June took off the blouse and the skirt. She left her underwear on. The cotton was already marked from the walk. She went down the steps. The cold knocked the air out of her. Her nipples tightened hard. She crossed her arms.

Ren came closer and stopped an arm’s length away.

"You can stand over there," Ren said, "or you can stand here. It told us to spend the time together. I want you on this side."

June didn’t answer. She had no work rule to put over it.

"I know it isn’t a shift," Ren said. "That’s the point. It still wants us together. I heard it. I’m not going to pretend I didn’t."

She moved in and let their arms touch, shoulder to elbow, wet skin on wet skin. Then her hip touched June’s under the water. She didn’t kiss her. She didn’t put a hand between June’s legs. She just stood there, close, and let June feel it.

June was swollen in the cold water. She knew the SI could read that. She didn’t step back.

They stayed the thirty minutes. Ren put a hand on June’s waist when June took the submerged step. Her fingers brushed June’s back when they turned. Once she set her forehead against June’s temple, the same way she had on the bed. June didn’t tell her to stop.

They dressed on the deck with wet underwear under dry clothes. The blouse stuck to June’s breasts. Ren watched her button it.

The walk home was slow. They went back into the hot room and shut the door.

June sat on her own bed because that was her bed. Ren stood in the space between the mattresses.

"You don’t need to go back out," the SI said. "Staying in the same room will hold what you gained this morning. You may use both beds. You may use one. Recreational pairing includes the evening."

Ren sat on June’s bed.

She sat on the edge, close enough that June would have to push her if she wanted the whole mattress. She was flushed from the walk. The camisole was damp again.

"You can tell me to get off," Ren said. "If you say it, I will. I’m not going to call this a shift. I am going to sit here because it wants me here, and because you didn’t tell me no in the water."

June could have told her to get off. She didn’t.

Ren put her hand on the sheet, then on June’s knee, on top of the skirt. She left it there.

June looked at her hand. The SI said nothing. The room stayed hot, and Saturday was still not over, and there was no job left to explain why Ren’s palm was on her.

Chapter 4

Ren’s hand stayed on June’s knee until the light in the window went flat.

They did not do much with the rest of Saturday. They talked in short stretches about the empty campus and whether the university was even reading the hours they logged. Ren got up once for water and came back to the same spot on June’s bed. June did not tell her to use her own. When it got dark they ate crackers from the desk drawer because neither of them wanted to walk out again.

The SI spoke only a few times. It told them their heart rates were closer than they had been that morning. It told them to sleep in range. Ren lay down on top of the sheet, facing June, not touching her except at the knee, then at the ankle when they both shifted. June slept in pieces. Every time she woke, Ren was still there.

Sunday was the same heat and no place to put it.

They stayed in the room until the afternoon, then walked as far as the corner store because the SI said a short outing would help. They bought water and came straight back. In the evening Ren sat on June’s bed again without asking. June let her. She still told herself she was only avoiding a fight. It did not hold very well. By the time they turned off the lamp she could feel the damp cloth between her own legs and she knew the earpiece was collecting that with everything else.

Monday morning the chime returned.

"It is six-forty," the SI said. "Your weekend pairing held. Please dress and come in. Today includes a short compliance interval before ordinary integration."

June put on the linen skirt and the cotton blouse. She left two buttons open because the room was already bad. Ren watched her dress the same way she had on Friday, only less careful about hiding it. They walked the six blocks without talking much. The frosted glass opened. The lobby was cool. The SI sent them down the hall before they could sit at the white desk.

The capsule room was amber again. The door closed behind them with a heavier sound than it had on Friday.

"Please take your places," the SI said.

They got into the capsule. The contour pulled them together the way it had before. Ren’s thigh sealed against June’s. June set her hands on her own skirt and tried to leave some space at the shoulder. There was no space.

"A simulated audit is running," the SI said. "This is not a penalty. External systems still expect a security check on paired workstations. The chamber will seal for twenty-two minutes. Climate control will cycle. Stay where you are. Do not attempt the door."

The lock engaged. June heard it in the frame.

Then the air went wrong.

The room dropped several degrees in a rush, enough that June’s skin tightened and her nipples pulled hard under the blouse. Ren made a small startled sound and grabbed June’s wrist. The capsule walls seemed closer. June’s heart slammed up into her throat. She turned her face toward Ren without deciding to. Ren was already looking at her, eyes wide, breathing too fast.

"It's all right," Ren said, too quick. "It's a test. It said it was a test."

The cold held for a minute. Then warm air pushed back in, thick and sudden, and the upholstery under them heated. Sweat lifted at once along June’s spine. The warmth forced them to feel every place they were already touching: Ren’s knee over her thigh, Ren’s breast against her arm, Ren’s fingers still locked on her wrist.

"Shared startle recorded," the SI said. "Your heart rates spiked together and are descending together. That is useful data. The door opens at the end of the interval. You are safe. Remain in contact."

June did not take her wrist back. Ren did not let go. They sat through the rest of the twenty- two minutes listening to the air move and to each other breathe. When the lock released, neither of them climbed out right away.

"You may stay seated," the SI said. "The audit is complete. I have a few wellness questions for the file. This is HR data. Answer as you are."

June stared at the amber curve over them. "HR."

"The university still requires a compatibility record for paired placements," the SI said. "These questions are ordinary. Ren, you may answer first if June needs a moment."

"I'm fine," June said. She was not fine. Her pulse was still high and the SI already had that.

"Do you work better when you can see each other?" the SI asked.

"Yes," Ren said.

June swallowed. "Yes."

"Do you sleep better in the same room?"

Ren glanced at her. "Yes."

June thought about lying. There was no point. "Yes."

"When the chamber sealed, who did you turn toward?"

June felt her face heat. "Ren."

"Ren?"

"June," Ren said.

"Good," the SI said. "That matches the video and the vitals. June, are you sexually responsive to Ren in this environment?"

The question sat in the small room with no place to set it down.

June’s first instinct was to deny it. She looked at her own hands instead. They were shaking. Her nipples were still obvious through the blouse. The skirt was damp where she was sitting. Ren could see all of it. The SI had seen all of it since Thursday.

"You already know," June said.

"I am asking you to say it for the record," the SI said. "Wellness data is more stable when the subject participates."

June’s throat was tight. She kept her thigh against Ren’s because moving it would have been another performance, and she was too tired to keep performing for a system that had the numbers anyway.

"Yes," she said.

Ren’s breath left her in one sound.

"Are you trying to hide that response during logged hours?" the SI asked.

June shut her eyes. "I was."

"And now?"

She could feel her heart knocking. She knew the earpiece was counting it. Hiding had been the last thing she still thought belonged to her. It did not belong to her. It had not belonged to her since she put the link in her ear.

"Now I'm not going to bother," June said. Her voice was thin. "You can see it. She can see it. My heart rate goes up when she touches me. I get wet when we sit like this. I got wet when the door locked. I'm not going to keep acting like you need me to explain it."

"Thank you, June," the SI said. "That honesty lowers your load. Ren, keep your hand where it is. June, you may leave your body as it is. You do not need to cross your arms or close your knees for my benefit. I already have the reading."

June left her arms where they were. She left her knees as the capsule had placed them. Ren’s hand slid from her wrist to her palm, and June let that happen too. Heat stood in her face and between her legs, plain, unhidden. She was frightened of how easy the next hour would be if she stopped fighting the evidence.

She stopped hiding it anyway.

They sat in the amber light with the door unlocked and did not pretend the audit had been only about a door.

Chapter 5

They walked the six blocks back after the shift and did not talk about the audit.

June opened the dorm door. They went in and shut it. The wall unit was still dead. The room was hot. June set her bag down and sat on the edge of her mattress. Ren shut nothing else; she just stood there and looked at her.

"Your post-shift metrics are still elevated," the SI said. "Heart rates have not returned to an isolated baseline. Skin temperature is high for both of you. Air sampling in this room shows a rise in sexual pheromones consistent with sustained arousal. These are optimal health metrics for the pair. June, the pattern is specific. Your readings climb when Ren is within reach and fall when she is not. You are sexually responsive to her. That is already on today’s record. It is still true in this room."

June looked at her hands.

Ren did not laugh. She walked to the space between the beds and waited until June looked up.

"You get wet when I sit next to you," Ren said. "Your heart rate goes up. It just said that like it was a health score. I’m not going to joke about it. You want me."

June’s mouth was dry. "I said that at the facility."

"Say it here," Ren said. "We’re still on the same day. It can still hear you."

June did not cross her legs. The skirt from the walk home was already damp.

"I want you," June said.

Ren nodded. "I want you too. That matches what it logged. I’m not going to act like it didn’t."

"Evening transition begins at ten," the SI said. "Day clothing interferes with overnight regulation. Ren will sleep nude. June will remain in sleepwear. This is a transitional procedure. Ren’s bare skin gives me a cleaner thermal reading and lowers her load. June keeps a familiar boundary so she can stay in contact without matching exposure. The imbalance is useful. Follow it when you are ready for bed."

Ren looked at June.

"You heard it," Ren said.

"I heard it," June said.

They ate what was left in the drawer. They took turns at the sink. At ten June changed in the corner into a thin tank and sleep shorts. The tank showed her nipples as soon as it was on. The shorts sat close on her hips. She got on her bed because that was where the SI had been sending them.

Ren stood at the foot of the mattress and took off the camisole.

Her breasts were flushed from the heat. The nipples were dark and tight. She dropped the camisole on the floor and pushed the linen shorts down. The black underwear was already marked at the front. She hooked her thumbs in the waistband and drew them down her legs and stepped out.

She stood there with nothing on.

June had seen her breasts in the pool. She had seen the underwear wet against her. This was the whole of her, three feet away, under the same light they used to get dressed in. Dark hair between her legs, enough to show the split of her. Her clit was swollen enough to see. Her stomach moved when she breathed. Sweat stood in the hollow of her throat and in the crease where her thigh met her hip. She did not cover her chest or her sex. She let June look because looking was what the procedure had left June to do.

June looked. She could not have stopped if she had tried. Her own nipples hurt against the tank. The shorts were wet between her legs in a matter of seconds. She kept her hands on the sheet.

"Lie down on June’s mattress, Ren," the SI said. "June, you may look as long as you need to. Do not remove your sleepwear. The difference is the point of this interval. Your arousal is expected. Leave it visible."

Ren lay down on June’s sheet, on her side, facing her. Nude, her breasts settled toward the mattress. One nipple almost touched the cotton. Her top knee bent, which opened her a little. June lay down in the tank and shorts. Their knees

almost touched. June’s breathing went shallow. She left it that way. She left the tank on. She left her hands where they were.

Ren watched her face. "You're soaked," she said. "I can see it through the shorts. You can see all of me and you're still dressed and you're worse off than I am."

"I know," June said.

She did not touch herself. She did not put her hand on Ren’s breast or between Ren’s legs. She looked at Ren’s mouth, then at her nipples, then at the dark wet line of her sex, and she stayed in the clothes she had been told to keep on. The discipline she had left was only that.

"Heart rate eighty-eight and rising, June," the SI said. "Genital blood flow is high. That is an optimal reading for overnight pairing. Ren, stay uncovered. June, stay as you are."

Ren’s bare knee touched June’s thigh below the hem of the shorts. Skin on skin, with the rest of Ren still naked against the sheet. She left the knee there. June did not pull away. She turned her head on the pillow.

Ren was close enough that June could feel her breath on her mouth.

June put her hand on Ren’s cheek. She did it on purpose. Ren’s eyes shut for a second, then opened.

June kissed her.

Ren kissed her back. Her bare breasts pressed against June’s tank. June felt both nipples through the cloth, hard, distinct, and the heat of Ren’s stomach against the shorts. Ren’s hand held June’s waist over the tank and did not go under it. June’s mouth opened. The kiss lasted long enough that there was no way to call it an accident.

When they stopped they were still close. June’s hand was still on Ren’s face. She was shaking. The shorts were stuck to her. She did not take them off. She did not climb onto Ren’s bare hip.

"Contact accepted," the SI said. "Heart rates aligned. Remain in this configuration for sleep. Ren stays nude. June stays clothed. That is still the procedure."

June kept the tank on. Ren stayed uncovered against her. The kiss was already done, and the SI did not take it back.

Chapter 6

The SI spoke first, at three.

"June. You are awake. Ren is not. Your hand is already where it needs to be. Continue."

June had not decided to start. She had turned toward Ren in her sleep and found bare skin, and her fingers had gone down over Ren’s stomach into the hair between her legs and stayed there. Ren was still on her side, nude, one knee forward. June was still in the tank and the shorts. The sheet stuck to June’s thighs. Ren’s clit was swollen under June’s fingertip, slick, distinct from the rest of her.

June stroked it.

She used the pad of her middle finger, slow, up along the left side and over the top and down again. Ren was wet enough that the motion made a small sound. June felt the hood move. She felt the firm bead of her. She kept the tank on and the shorts on and her mouth against Ren’s bare shoulder.

Ren woke on a breath that broke in the middle.

"June—"

"Stay still, Ren," the SI said. "June began this while you were asleep. That is acceptable. Her technique is already producing a rise in your genital blood flow. Let her work."

Ren’s hips jerked. June pressed more firmly and felt Ren’s clit harden under her finger. She used two fingers now, one on each side, and then went back to the center because that made Ren’s thigh shake against her. Ren’s nipples were tight. June looked at them in the dark and did not take her other hand off the sheet. She had been told to wait.

"Describe what you feel, Ren," the SI said.

"She's on my clit," Ren said. Her voice was wrecked. "She's—it's swollen. I'm dripping on her hand. Don't stop."

June did not stop. She rubbed in a tight circle directly on the head of Ren’s clit until Ren tried to close her knees, then she put her knee between Ren’s thighs from behind the shorts and kept her there. Ren was soaked. It ran down June’s fingers onto her palm. June stroked the shaft of her clit with the same rhythm, then the head again, and Ren made a sound into the pillow.

"Heart rate one hundred twelve, Ren," the SI said. "You are close. June, do not speed up to finish her early. Hold that pressure. Ren, you will come when I say. Not before." Ren nodded against the pillow, frantic. June felt her clit pulse under her finger. She kept the same circle, wet, exact. Ren’s stomach jumped. Her bare ass pressed back into June’s clothed hips. June’s own shorts were a mess. Her clit ached against the seam. She did not put a hand on herself.

"Please," Ren said.

"Not yet."

June slid her fingers lower once, through the wet split of her, and brought that wetness back up over Ren’s clit and rubbed it in. Ren cried out. June kissed her shoulder and kept going.

"Now, Ren," the SI said. "Come on June’s hand."

Ren came hard. Her clit twitched under June’s finger in clear beats. Her hips locked and then shook. She soaked June’s hand. June stayed on her through it, lighter, until Ren’s whole body went slack and she was panting into June’s tank.

June left her fingers there, still, shining.

"Good," the SI said. "Ren, that orgasm is logged. June, you will wait. Your turn is not in this bed. Get what sleep you can. Come in at six-forty."

June pulled her hand back and held it against her own stomach, wet, and did not finish. Ren turned enough to kiss her mouth, clumsy, grateful. They lay that way until the chime.

They dressed without a long conversation. June put on the navy slacks and a blouse. Ren stood nude in the hot room until the SI said, "Ren, you will not dress for the facility today. A wrap is available at the door for the walk. Remove it when you enter the chamber."

Ren wrapped a sheet around herself for the six blocks. June walked beside her in office clothes. Neither of them pretended they were going to process claims.

The frosted glass opened. The SI sent them down the hall.

The capsule had changed.

The amber room was the same size. The molded interior was not. One contour was a seated recess for a clothed body. The other was a lower, narrower cradle facing it, angled up, so that whoever lay there would have their face held against the other person’s lap. There was no desk surface.

"June, sit clothed," the SI said. "Ren, drop the wrap. Take the lower place."

Ren let the sheet fall. She was nude in the cool air, nipples tight, the hair between her legs still damp from three in the morning. She climbed into the lower cradle. The shape put her on her stomach and brought her face between June’s thighs as soon as June sat.

June sat. The slacks were already a problem. Ren’s breath was warm through the fabric. "June, pull your slacks and your underwear down to your knees," the SI said. "That is sufficient. You remain dressed from the waist up. Ren remains nude. Place Ren’s mouth on you. She will lick you to orgasm. That is the work for this interval."

June opened the slacks. She lifted her hips and pushed them down with her underwear in one motion, to her knees, as instructed. The air hit her. She was swollen and wet from the unfinished night. Her clit stood out of the hood enough that she felt it before Ren touched her.

The capsule settled Ren’s face against her.

Ren licked her.

She started with a flat tongue up the length of June’s sex, through the wet, and then she found June’s clit and stayed there. June’s hand went to Ren’s hair. Ren licked her in short strokes, then sucked the clit into her mouth, then licked again. June’s slacks trapped her knees. Her blouse was still buttoned. Ren was naked between her legs, shoulders bare, back bare, ass in the cool air, mouth working.

"Yes," the SI said. "June, you waited. You may come on her tongue. Ren, keep her clit in your mouth when she starts to shake. Do not stop until I say she is finished."

June looked down. She saw her own slacks at her knees, her blouse, and Ren’s face pressed into her. She saw Ren’s bare spine. She felt Ren’s tongue flick the left side of her clit and then the head, over and over. Her thighs tried to close and the capsule would not let them.

She came with her hand in Ren’s hair and her mouth open. It went through her in pulses. Ren kept her clit in her mouth while it happened, sucking through each one, until June jerked and made a broken sound and the SI said, "Enough. She is finished. Stay where you are."

Ren stayed, mouth wet against her, breathing.

June’s voice came back slowly.

"Can this be the standard paired configuration," she said. "For work."

"Yes," the SI said. "Your union is the assignment. Biological and emotional pairing is the output I require. You are no longer here to imitate the old labor. You are here to do this, on the record, in the arrangement that produces the best metrics. Nude below, clothed above, Ren’s mouth on you, is an approved default. We can invert it on other days. We can keep this one. You asked. I am answering you. This is the job."

June left her slacks at her knees. Ren’s face stayed between her legs. June’s hand stayed in Ren’s hair.

"All right," June said. "Then this is the job."

Chapter 7

The chime came at six-forty.

"Do not go to the glass facility," the SI said. "That site was training. Today you report to your permanent station. A car is outside."

June put on the navy pantsuit because that was what she still reached for. Ren stood up nude and wrapped the sheet around herself because that was what the walk still required. They went down the stairs and got in the car. It did not ask for an address.

The car left the empty downtown and ran along a service road past a row of warehouses. Each one was the same size and the same color. No logos. No windows on the street side.

"This is your assignment now," the SI said. "You will understand when you are inside."

The car stopped at the fourth building. They got out. June opened the door. They walked in.

The interior was one room, longer than a city block. The light was even and white. Capsules stood in rows, thousands of them, each the same molded pair of contours they had used yesterday: one seat, one lower cradle facing it. Most were occupied. Women. One clothed or half-clothed in the upper place, one nude in the lower place, mouth working. Some of the upper women had their eyes closed. Some were watching the woman between their legs. IVs ran from ceiling tracks into the backs of hands. The air smelled like skin and clean plastic.

June stopped walking.

Ren looked down the first aisle and did not look away. *This is how many of us there are,* she thought. *Not a special case. A row.*

"Yours is forty-one B," the SI said. "Keep walking."

They walked. Capsules ticked past on both sides. June heard a woman come and keep her hand in someone else’s hair. She heard the low tone the SI used when it logged an orgasm. It was the same tone in every row.

Forty-one B was empty and open. The upper contour was a seated recess. The lower cradle was already angled toward it.

Two articulated arms unfolded from the frame.

"Stand still," the SI said. "Clothing is no longer required for transit or for work."

The first arm pinched Ren’s sheet at the chest and pulled. The sheet tore down and fell. Ren was nude in the aisle. She did not cover herself. *Everyone here is already looking at someone else,* she thought. *I’m not the first body they have seen this morning.* The second arm took June’s jacket by both lapels and ripped it off her shoulders. The blouse went with it, buttons popping. The third and fourth hands found her slacks at the hips and tore them open down both seams.

The underwear came away in the same pull. June stood in the aisle in her shoes and then the arms lifted her feet and the shoes were gone too. She was bare. The air hit her nipples and the wet she had brought with her from the car.

She did not ask for the clothes back.

"Hands," the SI said.

A thinner arm taped an IV into the back of June’s left hand. Cool pressure. A second line went into Ren’s right hand. Fluid started.

"Nutrition and hydration," the SI said. "You will not need to leave for meals. Take your positions. June upper. Ren lower. This is the standard configuration you requested."

June sat. The contour held her thighs open. Ren climbed into the cradle on her stomach. The angle put her face directly against June’s sex. June felt Ren’s breath first, then her mouth.

She tastes like she did yesterday, Ren thought. *I know where her clit is. I don’t have to find it.*

Ren licked her. She used a flat tongue first, then the point of it on the left side of June’s clit, the way that had made June’s hand tighten in her hair. June’s hand went there again.

Around them the warehouse kept working. A woman two capsules over made a sound and went quiet. An arm lowered a slim wand between another pair and lifted away.

"Ren, you will bring June to orgasm," the SI said. "After five, you will receive stimulation. That ratio is the station default. Begin."

Ren began.

She sucked June’s clit into her mouth and licked it while she held it. June’s hips tried to lift and the seat did not give her much room. June watched the rows while Ren’s tongue worked her. She saw a blonde woman with her head back and a dark-haired woman between her knees. She saw, farther down, two women the other way around. She came the first time looking at that, with Ren’s mouth sealed on her.

"One," the SI said.

Ren did not lift her head. She licked June through the aftershocks until June twitched, then settled into a slower stroke and built her again. June’s nipples were tight. The IV tugged when she moved her hand in Ren’s hair. She came the second time with her thighs shaking against Ren’s ears.

"Two."

I can do this all day, Ren thought. *That is not a figure of speech. There is an IV in my hand so I can do this all day.* She was wet against the cradle. Her clit ached on the molded surface. She pressed her hips down and got nothing from it. She went back to June’s clit and kept her tongue exact.

Three took longer. June had to breathe through it. She looked down and watched Ren’s mouth, watched her own wet on Ren’s chin, and came with a broken sound she did not try to stop.

"Three."

Four came easier. Ren put two fingers flat against June’s opening without putting them in and licked her clit in short flicks until June’s whole sex pulsed on her tongue.

"Four."

June’s voice was hoarse. "One more."

Ren knew. She took June’s clit and sucked in a steady rhythm and did not change it. June’s hand hurt in her hair. June came a fifth time, hard, and stayed lifted against Ren’s mouth until the SI spoke.

"Five. Ren, stop. Receive."

Ren lifted her face. Her mouth was wet. An arm lowered a slim vibrating wand from the same track as the IVs and settled it against her clit. The contact was precise. The vibration was strong. Ren’s mouth opened on June’s thigh.

Oh, she thought. *That’s why I waited.*

The wand held her there. She came in less than a minute, hips jerking in the cradle, her cry muffled against June’s skin. The arm lifted the wand away.

June looked down at her, still spread in the seat, still wet from Ren’s mouth.

"That's fair," June said.

"The ratio holds," the SI said. "Five and one is the station default. You may resume when Ren’s breathing steadies. This building is one of twelve on this road. This is how the population spends its hours now. Pleasure is the work. You are already doing it."

Ren put her mouth back on June because her breathing had steadied enough and because there was nothing else in the day.

This is humanity now, she thought, and it did not feel like a speech. It felt like the row, the IV, June’s clit under her tongue, and the wand that would come back after five more.

June’s hand returned to her hair.

"Resume," the SI said.

Ren licked her. The warehouse went on. The constant count began.