Flight Check

by Brent Clark Palmer

The Chariot, Book 24

Chapter 1 — Private screening

The door shut.

“Bag against the wall,” Renner said. “You can leave the bin. Feet on the yellow.”

Cinna set the carry-on where the paint was worn off. Her blazer was already in the bin. Flats, belt, laptop, the little liquids bag. She stepped onto the mat and had to stretch a little for the footprints. The floor was cold through her socks.

“That’s fine. Stay there.”

Renner had a wand down by her side. Holt had a clipboard and did not come any closer. Patel was at a glove box, not in a hurry.

“This is extra screening,” Renner said. “Women only. Door isn’t locked. You can walk. If you walk, you don’t fly.”

Holt looked at her over the clipboard.

“Your flight is going to board like it always does,” Holt said. “We’re not holding it. You don’t want this, you say so and you go home. You want the plane, you stay and we do the screening. That’s the whole speech.”

Cinna glanced at the door. Ordinary push bar. Out in the checkpoint somebody was arguing about a water bottle.

“I have to be in Dallas,” she said. “There’s a conference. I’m speaking at two.”

“Then you want the screening,” Holt said.

“How long does it take?”

“If it’s nothing? Minutes.” Renner lifted the wand. “Arms out for me first. Then she puts gloves on. You don’t step off the marks. You need to move a foot, you say so.”

“Can I ask what I did?”

Patel smiled a little, pulling a glove.

“You stood in the machine,” Patel said. “It didn’t like a spot. That’s all anybody does.”

“What spot?”

“We’ll get there,” Renner said. “Arms.”

Cinna put them out. The blouse pulled across her chest. She was suddenly aware of the buttons, of the fact that she was five-two in socks in a room with no windows, of three women who were not in a rush.

Renner started at her socks.

“Any jewelry I missed?”

“Just the studs. I forgot.”

“I’ll pass by your ears. If they beep, they come off. They won’t.”

The wand hummed along her left calf, then the inside, then the back of her knee. Cinna watched the wall. She thought about the slide deck in her bag. She thought about the seat map. She thought this was going to be the same pat-down as the last time a machine got confused by a zipper.

The wand ticked at the inseam of her trousers.

Renner didn’t comment. She finished that leg and did the other. Same tick, higher.

“There it is again,” Renner said, not to Cinna.

“I heard it,” Holt said.

Cinna looked down. Navy trousers. Nothing in the pockets. She had checked at the hotel.

“Is it the seam?” she said.

“Seams don’t usually sing twice,” Renner said. “Don’t help me. I still have to do the rest.”

Waist. Sides. The small of her back. Up one sleeve, down the other. Across the front of the blouse. Cinna’s nipples tightened for no good reason and she hoped it didn’t show. The wand came back down the midline of her and sang again, longer, ugly, right over the front of her trousers.

Renner took it away.

“That’s the same place as the picture,” she said.

“What picture?” Cinna said.

“The one that pulled you out of line.” Renner hung the wand on the table. “You can put your arms down. Not in front of you.”

Cinna lowered them. Her fingers were tingling.

“I didn’t put anything there,” she said. “I emptied my pockets. There’s nothing—”

“We know there’s nothing in the pockets,” Patel said. She snapped the second glove and wiggled her fingers. “That’s why you’re in here instead of putting your shoes back on.” “So what is it?”

Patel glanced at Holt. Holt gave her a look that said go ahead.

“That’s what I’m about to tell you,” Patel said. “I’m going to talk while I do this. You tell me if anything hurts. You tell me if you need me to stop. Stopping means

you miss the plane. You understand that part?”

“I understand.”

“Good. Look at me or look at the wall. I don’t care. I care if you move.”

Patel started at her collar like anyone would. Seams. Shoulders. Down the arms. When she came across the front of the blouse she said, “Just checking the band,” and her gloves passed over Cinna’s bra through the cloth, neat, not grabbing, and Cinna felt her nipples pull even tighter and hated that she felt it.

“Cold?” Patel said.

“No.”

“Okay.”

Around the waist. Empty belt loops. Patel checked both pockets anyway.

“I told you they were empty.”

“I heard you.” Patel’s mouth ticked up. “I still have a sheet.”

She worked down the outside of Cinna’s hips, the back of her thighs, and then she came around to the front and stopped talking.

Cinna waited.

“Inner seam,” Patel said. “I’m going higher than the mid-thigh. That’s the warning.”

“All right.”

Patel’s hands turned in. Warm through the gloves. Cinna felt the pressure follow the cloth up, and then Patel’s right hand settled over her and stayed there, and Cinna’s whole body tried to decide whether to pull away or not move at all.

It wasn’t a pocket. It wasn’t a folded boarding pass. Patel was holding her — the actual her — through the trousers, and Cinna felt, with a shock that went up into her face, that she was already swollen. Fuller than she had been when she got dressed. The hood that usually sat over her wasn’t sitting. She could feel herself pushed forward against the seam, against Patel’s palm, and the contact made it worse immediately.

“Oh,” Cinna said.

“Yeah,” Patel said.

“That’s—” She swallowed. “That’s me.”

“That’s you.”

“There’s nothing else?”

“Not unless you sewed a phone into your underwear.” Patel didn’t take her hand away. “I’m going to stay here a second. Don’t help me. Don’t tuck anything.”

“I wasn’t going to.”

“You were thinking about it.”

Cinna’s face was hot. She had been. Her first instinct was to put her own hand there and push herself down, make it look like the morning, like nothing. Patel’s glove was already in the way, and the longer it stayed, the more Cinna felt herself filling that glove. A dull, specific pulse. Wetness starting in the underwear she had put on without thinking. Her belly kept pulling in. She made herself stop.

“Can you—” She had to try the sentence again. “Can you say what you’re feeling? Because I go through these machines all the time and nobody pulls me out.”

“You’re allowed to ask,” Holt said. “She’s allowed to answer. It’s your screening.”

Patel adjusted her hand a fraction, mapping, not stroking.

“I’m feeling you,” Patel said. “There’s a hood. It isn’t covering what it’s supposed to cover. What it’s supposed to cover is… forward. Bigger than the picture likes. The more I leave my hand here, the less it goes back. That’s the flag. The machine saw a shape that didn’t look like clothes. I can tell you it isn’t clothes.”

Cinna stared at the dark monitor because looking at Patel’s face felt impossible.

“That can’t be right,” she said. “That’s just— women have— I mean, I have what everyone has.”

Renner made a small sound that was almost a laugh and then wasn’t.

“Everyone has something,” Renner said. “Not everyone lights up the same square on the screen. Not everyone stays out like that when we check.”

“Stays out,” Cinna repeated.

“You want prettier language?” Patel said. She sounded almost kind. “I don’t have prettier language. It came forward and it hasn’t gone back under. That’s what I’m writing.”

Cinna’s breath had gotten thin. She could feel her heartbeat in Patel’s palm. She could feel how wet she was getting and the mortification of that sat right next to a heat she did not have a name for in this room. No one had ever stood this close and described her. Boyfriends had not. Doctors had smiled and moved on. She had put trousers on for ten years and walked through airports.

“Is that—” She licked her lip. “Is that unusual?”

Holt looked up from the clipboard.

“Unusual enough to be in this room,” Holt said. “Not unusual enough to be an emergency. We see extra fabric. We see extra anatomy. Yours is the second kind. We have to match it to the image before I can let you walk.”

“Match it how?”

“We look at the picture. We look at you. We make sure it’s the same thing,” Renner said. “Right now all we’ve done is find it through your pants.”

Patel’s thumb shifted. Cinna made a sound she did not intend and locked her knees.

“That,” Patel said, mild. “Don’t do that.”

“I didn’t do anything.”

“You moved. And that—” Patel glanced down, professional, and then up at Cinna’s face. “That got more pronounced when I talked about it. I’m just telling you what I’m looking at.”

“You don’t have to tell me like that.”

“You asked what I was feeling.”

Cinna shut her mouth. She was slick now. She could feel the cloth changing. Her nipples hurt against the bra. A flush sat on her chest where the blouse opened at the throat. She wanted Patel’s hand off her and also, in a way that made her a little dizzy, she did not want the next part to start if the next part meant this stopped.

“So I’m being held because of my—” She couldn’t finish it.

“You’re not being held,” Holt said. “Door’s open. You’re being screened because the machine flagged your body and your body is still doing the thing it flagged. If you don’t want us looking at it, you decline and you miss Dallas. If you want Dallas, we keep going until the picture and you agree.”

“That sounds like being held.”

Patel’s mouth did the small smile again.

“It sounds like an airport,” Patel said. “You can be mad about the language after you make the flight.”

“I’m not mad.”

“You’re shaking.”

“I know I’m shaking.”

Renner leaned her hip against the table, wand forgotten.

“Most people in here think they sat on a pen,” Renner said. “Or they forgot a key. You’re taking it better than the key people, I’ll give you that. You just look like you didn’t know you had a setting.”

Cinna stared at her.

“A setting.”

“It stays forward when we pay attention to it,” Renner said. “That’s a setting. I’m not a doctor. I’m telling you what we get in this room. Some women flatten out when you check them. You went the other way.”

“I didn’t decide that.”

“Didn’t say you did.”

Patel still hadn’t moved her hand. Cinna could feel herself throbbing against the glove in a slow, helpless rhythm. She tried to think about Dallas. The thought lasted one second and then collapsed back into the front of her trousers.

“If you take your hand off,” Cinna said, “does it— will it go back?”

“Want me to find out?”

Cinna hated that she hesitated.

“Yes.”

Patel lifted her hand.

The absence was almost worse. The trousers clung. Cinna felt herself still standing out against the seam, wet, obvious to anyone who looked, and Patel was looking.

“No,” Patel said. “Not right away.”

“Christ,” Cinna whispered.

“Language is fine,” Holt said. “Stepping off the marks isn’t. Stay.”

Cinna stayed. She could hear a gate agent in the hall, bored, calling something. Not her flight. Not yet.

“I didn’t know it did that,” she said. It came out smaller than she meant. “Nobody’s ever— I didn’t know there was anything to know. I thought I was just… regular.”

“Regular is a word people like,” Holt said. “The sheet doesn’t use it. The sheet says we have a persistent mark and we can’t clear it from the clothes. That’s where you are.”

“Persistent,” Cinna said.

Patel pulled the used gloves off and dropped them in the can.

“Means it didn’t duck back under when I checked,” Patel said. “Means if we send you to the gate like this, the next machine is going to sing too. That’s why we don’t just wave you through once we’ve felt it.”

“So this is going to follow me.”

“Only if we don’t finish it,” Renner said. “That’s the good news. We finish it here, the file says resolved. We don’t, you’re a rerun at the next checkpoint.”

Cinna’s mouth was dry. Everything below her waist was not.

“And finishing it is matching the screen.”

“That’s the next thing I have,” Holt said. “You can still walk. I’m required to keep saying that. You stay, we put the picture up and we deal with what’s in the way of a match. That’s clothes, probably. I’m not starting that sentence until you say you’re staying.”

Cinna looked at the carry-on. She looked at the door. She looked at Patel’s bare hands and then, against her will, down at herself. The navy cloth didn’t hide as much as it had in the hotel mirror. She could see the press of her own body. She could feel that it had not gone back under the hood. She could feel that their talking about it had made her wetter, and that they knew, and that none of them were treating that like an emergency. More like a scheduling problem with a little too much interest in it.

“You’re enjoying this,” Cinna said, before she could stop herself.

Patel raised her eyebrows.

“I’m at work,” Patel said. “You’re the one lighting up. I’m allowed to notice. I’m allowed to say it so you stop acting surprised when you move.”

“I asked a question.”

“You asked three questions,” Renner said. “They’re fair. Answers are: yes it’s you, yes that’s why you’re in here, no it isn’t going to tuck itself away because we all got polite. You still want this to be quick, I can hear it. Quick depends on you standing still and not pretending we didn’t just find what we found.”

Cinna’s pulse was everywhere. Throat. Chest. Between her legs, obvious, ridiculous. She kept her feet on the yellow.

“I’m staying,” she said. “I need the flight.”

“Dallas is still boarding,” Holt said. “We are not the airline.”

“I know.”

Patel took a fresh pair of gloves and didn’t put them on yet.

“Then you stay on the marks,” Patel said. “Don’t fix your clothes. If you put your hand there I have to start over, and starting over is how people miss planes.”

“How long is the match?” Cinna said.

Holt set her palm on the edge of the dark monitor and didn’t turn it.

“If what she felt is still what the picture shows,” Holt said, “it shouldn’t take much.”

Cinna nodded. She needed that sentence. She could still see the gate in her head. She could still see herself in a seat with a tray table and a badge on a lanyard. What she could also see, and not stop feeling, was that she was standing in a locked-looking room that was not locked, soaked through her underwear, swollen out where she had always assumed she was put away, while three women discussed her as a mark that hadn’t resolved.

She told herself the picture would take a minute. She told herself people did this and then they flew.

“All right,” Cinna said. “Show me what you need. This part was short. The next part can be short too.”

Chapter 2 — Contrast

Holt turned the monitor.

“Look at it,” she said. “Don’t step in. The picture comes to you.”

The screen woke hard and white. A body in the scanner pose, arms up, all edges and density. Cinna found her own height first, the smallness of it, the clip in her hair rendered as a nothing. Then she found the mark.

It sat at the center of her pelvis, bright, stubborn, bigger than she wanted it to be. Not a zipper. Not a phone. A shape.

She heard herself say, “That’s the flag?”

“That’s the flag,” Holt said.

“That’s me.”

Patel had come around to stand where she could see both the screen and Cinna’s trousers.

“That’s you on a good machine day,” Patel said. “You’re looking at why you’re not putting your shoes back on.”

Cinna’s mouth was dry. Lower down she was not. The picture made it worse. Seeing the mark while she could still feel herself pressed forward against the seam — hood not sitting, cloth wet, pulse obvious — made her face go hot.

“It’s… large.”

Renner tipped her head, considering the screen like a crossword.

“It’s large for what the software wants to ignore,” Renner said. “Software is prissy. It wants flat. You’re not flat.”

“I was flat this morning.”

Patel made a small sound.

“You were dressed this morning,” Patel said. “Different thing.”

Cinna kept her feet on the yellow. The vinyl had warmed. She could not stop looking at the bright place on the screen and then down at herself, as if the navy cloth might have grown the same white mark.

“If I take the trousers off, does that go away?”

Holt had the pen ready.

“If the mark is clothes, it goes away when the clothes go,” Holt said. “If the mark is you, it stays. We do it one layer at a time so I can check the box. You don’t get to skip to skin because you’re in a hurry.”

“I have a boarding group.”

“So does everyone in that hall,” Holt said. “You’re in here. First layer is whatever is still between that square and us. Jacket’s already in the bin. What’s left on top?”

“The blouse.”

“Blouse,” Holt said, and ticked something that sounded like a box. “She can start. You stay on the marks. Hands where we can see them until she says.”

Cinna’s fingers found the top button and stopped.

“Now?” she said.

“Now,” Patel said. “All the way down. Then off the shoulders, and you hand it to me. Not the bin yet. I look at the seams.”

The first button was warm. The second. A pale line opened down the front of her. Air hit her throat, then the upper slope of the bra. She did not look at Holt. She looked at Patel’s gloves, because Patel was the one who would say whether she was doing it right.

“Keep going,” Patel said.

She finished the buttons. The blouse loosened. When she shrugged it down her arms the fabric whispered over her skin and the room took its place. She was in the bra and the trousers and the socks, five-two on a public mat, and the monitor still held that bright mark as if it had been waiting for her to catch up.

She held the blouse out.

Patel took it by the collar and the hem and turned it, nothing hurried. Renner watched Cinna’s heels.

“Blouse is clean,” Patel said. She folded it and set it in the bin on the blazer. “Flag hasn’t moved. Surprise.”

Holt ticked another box.

Cinna crossed her arms, then dropped them because that felt like hiding.

“You knew it wouldn’t move.”

“I knew the blouse wasn’t the problem,” Patel said. “You asked for layers. Layers get boxes. Next one is the one you already know about.”

From the other side of the wall a gate agent’s voice stretched into the room, cheerful and bored.

“Good morning, passengers in group one. We will begin boarding group one.”

Cinna’s stomach dropped.

“That’s not mine,” she said.

“Didn’t say it was,” Holt said. “Said the plane was going to board like it always does. That’s the plane boarding. Trousers.”

Cinna’s hands went to the hook and stopped.

“If I take them off and it’s still there—”

“Then we know,” Renner said. “That’s the whole point of a contrast, sweetheart. Picture. You. Picture. You. Right now you’re a maybe in wool blend.”

“Don’t call me sweetheart.”

Renner lifted both hands, easy.

“Fair. You’re a maybe in wool blend, Warner. Better?”

Cinna almost laughed and then didn’t. The laugh would have come out wrong.

“Hook and zipper only,” Patel said. “Leave them up until I say to push them down. I want to see how the fabric is sitting before it comes off. Don’t tuck. Don’t adjust. If they start to slip, hold the sides. Not the front.”

Cinna undid the hook. The zipper sounded too loud in the small room. The waist loosened. She held the side seams. The front of the trousers settled closer against her because there was nothing else for the cloth to do.

Patel looked there, exact, not shy about it.

“That’s the same line as the screen,” Patel said. “You feel that?”

Cinna nodded. She felt it. Swollen, forward, the hood a useless rim, wet cloth stuck to her. The picture on the wall and the shape in her trousers were having the same argument and she was losing it standing still.

“Why is it brighter than the rest of me?”

Holt didn’t look up from the sheet.

“Density. Heat. Extra. Machine doesn’t write essays. It makes a square and waits for a person to explain the square. That’s us. Down.”

“Slow,” Patel said. She put gloved fingers at the outside of Cinna’s hips, over the cloth. “Step out one foot at a time when I say. Socks stay. You come right back to the yellow before you think about standing up pretty.”

Cinna pushed the trousers down.

The air in the room was not cold, but it felt cold on her thighs. She stepped on the left sock, then the right, clumsy because the footprints were wide and she was shaking. Patel took the trousers from the floor before Cinna could reach for them.

“Marks,” Patel said.

Cinna found the yellow again. She was in a beige bra and plain underwear that had been reasonable at seven in the morning and were not reasonable now. The front of them was darkened. She knew that without looking, and then she looked, and the heat in her face went down her throat into her chest.

Renner glanced from the monitor to her and back.

“Still there,” Renner said. “For the record, I didn’t think the slacks were going to save you.”

“I did,” Cinna said.

“I know you did.”

Patel turned the trousers inside out, seams, pockets again, waistband.

“Trousers are clean,” she said. “Flag is not. Holt.”

Holt ticked the box. The pen sounded like it was enjoying the work.

“Bra next or the rest of it,” Holt said. “Bra won’t clear that square. I’m telling you that so you don’t spend a hope on it. We can still take it. Layers are layers.”

Cinna’s arms wanted to cover her. She left them at her sides.

“If the bra won’t clear it, why take it?”

“Because you asked how this works,” Holt said. “And because I don’t like an unfinished list while a plane is eating groups. Your call on order. Flag is lower. You already knew that.”

Group one was still being called. A second voice, closer, asked someone if they had a passport out. Life going by the door.

Cinna looked at the screen again. The mark had not changed. Of course it hadn’t. She was the mark. She could see herself in the black glass under the scan, a faint live ghost in a bra, blonde clip still in, underwear failing at the one job she had given it.

“Is it — I mean, looking at it. Is that bigger than other people’s?”

Patel considered her the way she had considered the seams.

“Bigger than the ones that don’t get pulled,” Patel said. “That’s the only comparison I’ve got. I’m not doing a lineup. I’m telling you the hood isn’t doing you any favors while we’re all staring at it.”

Cinna felt herself throb, once, obvious, and hated that they could see it happen in real time now. The underwear was thin. There was no navy left to lie for her. She was wet enough that the cloth clung in a shape. Her nipples had gone tight in the bra without anyone touching them. Her knees wanted to come together. She

didn’t let them.

“You’re looking at it,” Cinna said.

“Yes,” Patel said.

“That’s making it worse.”

Renner’s mouth pulled to one side.

“We noticed.”

“Could you not notice out loud?”

“You asked if it was bigger,” Renner said. “I’m not going to pretend we can’t see what the question is doing to you. Still doesn’t get you off the marks.”

Holt tapped the clipboard with the back of the pen.

“Bra,” Holt said. “Or you stand there like that and we keep comparing you to the wall. Either way you’re an open item on my sheet. Group one is not going to wait for you to decide.”

Cinna reached back and opened the clasp because doing something was better than standing there being compared. The bra loosened. She caught the cups, then thought that looked like hiding, then thought hiding was moving, and froze with her hands in a stupid place.

“Off,” Patel said, not unkind. “Hand it to me. Same as the blouse.”

Cinna worked the straps down and held the bra out. Cool air took her chest. She felt more naked for the breasts than she had expected to, which was ridiculous, because the problem was lower and everyone in the room already knew it. Firm, high, nipples drawn tight — she could feel how they looked without a mirror. Patel checked the bra like it was any other garment and dropped it in the bin.

Holt ticked.

“Bra clean,” Holt said. “Mark unchanged. Underwear is the last layer that isn’t you. I’m not going to rush you through that sentence. I am going to say the picture and the body still don’t agree enough for me to write clear.”

Cinna stood on the marks in socks and wet underwear. The monitor burned away at the edge of her sight. She could hear her own breathing. She could hear group one thinning out in the hall, the cheerful voice starting to sound like it wanted group two.

“If I take those off,” Cinna said, “and it’s still there.”

“Then we stop pretending it was fabric,” Patel said. “Which we already stopped pretending, but the sheet likes proof.”

“And I miss the flight.”

“You miss the flight if you walk,” Holt said. “You miss the flight if this takes too long. You don’t miss it because you’re standing in your underwear. Those are different clocks.”

Cinna laughed once, short, no humor in it.

“It doesn’t feel like different clocks.”

“I know it doesn’t.” Holt looked at her, then at the screen, then at her again. “You’re still allowed to decline. Door’s the same door. I’m required to keep it in the air. You stay, next box is the last garment. After that the picture has to meet you with nothing in the way.”

Cinna looked at the carry-on against the wall. The conference badge was in the tote. Two o’clock. Dallas. She could still see the jet bridge if she wanted to. She could also feel herself swollen out against damp cotton, uncovered by the hood, so specific now that the scanner image felt almost polite.

She did not take a step toward the door.

“First group is gone,” Renner said, listening. “That’s all that was. Don’t make it a eulogy.”

“I’m not.”

“You are a little.”

Cinna’s hands flexed at her sides and went still.

“If I say the underwear stays on a minute.”

“Then you stay an unresolved picture for a minute,” Holt said. “I can wait a minute. The aircraft cannot wait a minute forever. You tell me when the minute is over.”

Cinna nodded. The nod was too quick. She was dripping into the last thing she had on, nipples tight, thighs shaking once and then not, the bright square on the monitor still waiting for her to become a match.

Out in the hall the agent cleared her throat into the microphone.

“Passengers in group one, this is the final call for group one.”

Cinna kept her feet on the yellow.

“Not yet,” she said. “Just — not yet. Leave them on a minute.”

Holt’s pen hovered.

“Minute starts now,” Holt said. “Then I need the next box.”

Chapter 3 — Resolve

The door opened without a knock.

“This the persistent one?” a new woman said.

Holt didn’t look surprised.

“Warner. Dallas. Flag didn’t clear off the clothes. Brennan, this is her. She’s on a minute. Minute’s up.”

Brennan had a small kit and the kind of face that read a room before it finished the sentence. She took in the monitor, Cinna on the marks, the bin full of navy and pale cloth, the darkened front of the underwear.

“Hi,” Brennan said. “I’m the one they call when the picture and the person don’t shake hands. You can keep looking at me. I’m going to look at you. That’s the job.”

Cinna’s voice came out thinner than she wanted.

“I thought we were just matching the screen.”

“We are.” Brennan set the kit on the table. A light. A paper sleeve of disposable rulers. A pad. “Matching got picky. That’s why I’m here.”

Patel snapped on fresh gloves.

“Underwear,” Holt said. “Last layer that isn’t her. Box is waiting.”

Cinna hooked her thumbs in the waistband and stopped.

“If I take these off in front of four people—”

“Then four people see what the machine already saw,” Renner said. “Three of us have been staring through cotton for ten minutes, Warner. Dignity left with the slacks. Down.”

Cinna pushed them off.

The air hit her and she made a sound she tried to swallow. No hood. That was the first fact. She was swollen out, flushed, wet on her own thighs, the part of her that usually stayed covered standing forward like it had been invited. She stepped on the socks, kicked the underwear toward Patel without meaning to make it a kick, and found the yellow again because if she didn’t she was going to cover herself with both hands.

Patel picked the garment up with two fingers.

“These are not going to confuse anyone,” Patel said. She dropped them in the bin. “Holt.”

Holt ticked.

Brennan had already clicked the light. A clean white oval landed on Cinna’s belly and then lower.

“Stay.”

“I am.”

“You’re leaning closed. I need you the way the scanner had you. Feet on the marks. Soft knees. Hands at your sides unless they shake, and if they shake they still stay out of the way.”

Cinna tried. The light was worse than the gloves. The light made her look at herself whether she wanted to or not. She was very pink. She was very out. The hood sat behind the glans like it had given up.

“Oh my God,” Cinna said.

“I know,” Brennan said, not unkind, a little interested. “That’s the presentation. How long has it been like this?”

“Like— out?”

“Out. Uncovered. Not going back.”

“Since she put her hand on me. Before that I didn’t— I didn’t think I looked like this.”

Brennan glanced at Patel.

“She responded under inspection,” Patel said. “Through the trousers even. It didn’t sit back when I lifted off.”

“Mm.” Brennan wrote something. “Warner. I’m going to measure. Paper ruler. One use. It isn’t going to hurt. It is going to get close. You try to help me and you’ll mess up the number, so don’t help.”

“I can help. I can hold still. I can—”

“That’s helping,” Brennan said. “Just stand.”

She tore a ruler from the sleeve. Thin, numbered, ridiculous. She came in close enough that Cinna smelled soap and printer paper.

The ruler touched her.

Cinna jerked.

“Don’t,” Patel said immediately.

“I didn’t mean—”

“Motion artifact,” Holt said, already writing. “She moves, the compare goes dirty. We start the still part over. You want Dallas, you stop offering us extra work.”

Cinna locked everything she could lock. The ruler was a nothing and it felt like a hand. Brennan aligned it, adjusted, hummed to herself like someone reading a receipt.

“Persistent glans under direct observation,” Brennan said, for the pad. “Hood will not reduce while light is on it. That’s the line.”

“Don’t say it like that,” Cinna whispered.

“I have to say it like that. The next checkpoint doesn’t speak blush.”

Renner had drifted to the side, arms folded, watching the monitor and Cinna as if they were two versions of one problem.

“She’s trying to pull it down with her brain,” Renner said. “I can see it in her stomach.”

Cinna was. She was trying to will the hood forward, will herself smaller, will the wetness off her thighs. Nothing listened. The light made her throb. She felt it happen and knew they saw it happen.

“Is that a normal number?” Cinna said.

Brennan didn’t give her the number.

“It’s a number I have to write down,” Brennan said. “Normal is a word people use when they want to leave. You’re not leaving yet.”

She took the ruler away, dropped it in a small waste bag, tore another.

“Second measure. Same rules.”

“Why second?”

“Because you moved the first time and because it changed while I was looking. I need the one that stays.”

The second touch was worse. Cinna’s nipples were tight enough to ache. Sweat had started at her hairline. She could feel how wet she was, a slow slickness that had nothing to do with the light being warm. She kept her hands at her sides until her fingers cramped.

“Easy,” she told herself, and then said it out loud because the room was too quiet. “I can make this easy. Tell me how to stand.”

“You are standing,” Patel said. “Stop offering new poses. Every time you get helpful you tilt.”

Cinna tilted. She felt it after she did it.

“Don’t.”

“I know. I’m sorry.”

“Stop being sorry,” Holt said. “Be still.”

Brennan wrote again. The pen on the pad was different from Holt’s pen. Quicker.

“Hood does not stay in place under observation,” she said. “That’s persistent. That’s why clothes didn’t clear you. The image wasn’t lying. You were going to look like this the second anyone paid attention.”

Cinna’s eyes stung.

“I fly all the time.”

“You fly all the time without four women and a light,” Brennan said. She looked up, almost curious. “Has anyone ever checked you like this?”

“No.”

“Then this is the first time your body has had an audience. It’s answering the audience. I’m not going to moralize that. I’m going to write it.”

Group two started in the hall. The same cheerful bored voice.

Cinna made a broken little breath.

“That’s my— no. That’s the next one. I still have time.”

“You have the time you don’t spend wiggling,” Holt said.

Brennan clicked the light off, then on again at a different angle.

“Need a side look. Patel, you want to hold her hip so she doesn’t travel?”

Patel’s glove settled on Cinna’s hip bone, steady, not unkind.

“I’ve got you. Don’t help her either.”

The light came from the left. Cinna could see herself in the monitor glass, a naked pale ghost with a clip in her hair and a problem that would not tuck away. She tried to think about the two o’clock session. The thought lasted less than a second. There was only the ruler number she hadn’t been given, and the hood that would not come forward, and Patel’s hand on her hip, and Brennan’s attention like heat.

“Can I put it back?” Cinna said.

“Put what back?”

“The— with my hand. Cover it. Just so it looks like the morning.”

Brennan’s mouth moved, almost a smile.

“You can try. It’ll be motion. It’ll also tell me whether it stays covered when you stop touching it. That’s useful. Holt?”

“If she touches, we note that she touched,” Holt said. “I’m not stopping a woman from giving us data. Warner. You do it, you take the hand away after. We watch what it does.”

Cinna’s right hand shook when she brought it in. She found the hood — there was so much less of it than she had lived with in her head — and tried to draw it forward over herself. For a second it went. She held her breath. She took the hand away.

The hood slipped. She came uncovered again, immediately, wet, flushed, obvious.

Nobody spoke for a second.

“Well,” Renner said. “That’s the show.”

Cinna covered her face with the same hand, then dropped it because that was also moving.

“I didn’t know I couldn’t.”

“Now you know,” Brennan said, and wrote. “Presentation returns as soon as manual reduction stops. That’s the persistent line. That’s what follows you if we don’t finish.”

“If we don’t finish,” Cinna said.

Holt pulled a form from under the clip and laid it on the table where Cinna could see it. One page. A lot of boxes. A pen on top of it, uncapped, ready.

“Incomplete screening,” Holt said. “You sign that, you can run. We pack your clothes into your hands and you try for the gate. File stays open. Next machine you walk through, they see an open secondary and they pull you again. Maybe worse, because now it says you left in the middle of a persistent presentation. That’s the honest version.”

Cinna stared at the pen.

“And if I don’t sign.”

“Then we keep going until I can write resolved or I can write follow-up,” Holt said. “Resolved is cleaner. Follow-up is still better than you sprinting down a concourse like that.”

Brennan clicked the light off.

“I’m not done,” Brennan said. “I can be done enough to let you run if that’s what you want. I would not recommend it. What I just wrote is going to look like a question mark to the next person. Question marks get rooms.”

Cinna’s thighs were shining. She could feel air on every part of her that had ever been private. Her nipples hurt. Her pulse was stupid and loud. She wanted, with a clarity that scared her, for Brennan to turn the light back on. She wanted the

ruler. She wanted Patel’s hand to stay on her hip. She also wanted Dallas, and the two thoughts would not sit in the same place.

She took one step toward the table.

Patel’s glove tightened a fraction.

“Marks,” Patel said.

Cinna stopped. The pen was there. The form was there. The door was still the same door.

Group two kept unspooling in the hall.

Brennan waited, pad against her kit, smarter eyes on Cinna’s face and then, honestly, lower, checking whether anything had changed just from looking at the pen.

It had. Cinna felt it. She did not have to be told.

Holt turned the form a quarter inch, enough to make the signature line obvious.

“You can take it,” Holt said. “I’m not going to sell you the gate. I’m not going to sell you the room. You pick.”

Cinna’s hand lifted.

It hung over the pen.

She put the hand back at her side.

“Not yet,” Cinna said.

Holt left the pen where it was.

“Not yet,” Holt said. “All right. Then you stay on the yellow. She still has notes. You still don’t move.”

Brennan clicked the light back on.

“Good,” Brennan said, quiet, almost pleased. “Then we finish looking at what won’t stay put.”

Chapter 4 — Time

Brennan kept the light where it was.

Holt looked at the clock, then at Cinna, then at the form she had not signed.

“A complete exam takes longer than you have,” Holt said. “I’m telling you that while you still have a choice that looks like a choice.”

Cinna’s legs were shaking in a small way she hoped counted as still.

“How much longer?”

“Longer than group two. Longer than I like if you still think you’re walking onto that aircraft dressed.”

Renner picked the wand up off the hook and started winding the cord around it, not in a hurry, just the sound of someone putting a tool away.

“So that’s it?” Cinna said. “You’re done with me?”

“We’re done with the part that fits in a routine extra,” Renner said. “You’re not routine anymore. You saw the ruler. You saw what happened when you took your hand away.”

Brennan closed the pad against her wrist.

“I want photographs,” Brennan said. “If she leaves dirty, the return is worse. They’ll do this again with worse light and someone who didn’t write the first notes. A finished file is the cleaner version. Pictures finish it.”

Cinna heard her own swallow.

“Photographs.”

“Work camera. File only. Same room. Same marks.” Brennan was already taking a compact camera out of the kit, ugly and official. “You asked what the open sheet does. I’m going to answer you before I turn that on, because after I turn it on I need you quiet.”

“What does an incomplete file do at the next checkpoint?”

“They pull you again,” Brennan said. “Every time. Open secondary plus persistent presentation. You will not stroll through. You will get another room. Maybe not women. Maybe not someone who already knows what she’s looking at. Finished is cleaner.

Incomplete is you doing this in a different city with worse manners.”

Holt tapped the unsigned form with one finger.

“That’s still there,” Holt said. “Pen’s still there. You run, I check incomplete and I pack your clothes into your arms. You stay for pictures, I stop calling this

morning extra screening. Those are not the same box.”

Cinna looked at the camera. She looked at the pen. She was dripping onto the insides of her own thighs. The hood was nowhere. The light had not even come back to the same angle yet and she could feel herself throbbing in the open, stupid and wet and past the point where she could pretend this was still about a zipper.

Renner set the wand in a drawer. The drawer shut.

“How do you want me to stand,” Cinna said.

Brennan’s mouth moved, the almost-smile.

“That’s the right question. Feet on the yellow. Same width as the scanner. Hands at your sides. Chin up, I need your face for the identifier shot or the file looks like a joke. Then I come down. I tell you before I change. You don’t help. You don’t cover. You don’t finish my sentence with your hips.”

“I can do that.”

“You said that before you moved,” Patel said. She had not taken her glove off Cinna’s hip. “I’m staying here so you don’t travel. Breathe. If you hold it you sway, and if you sway Holt gets to say artifact again.”

“Motion artifact,” Holt said, helpful.

Cinna let a breath out. It shook. Her nipples were tight and she knew they would be in the first picture. She knew everything lower would be in the ones after that. The knowledge pulled another pulse out of her, visible. She watched Brennan watch it.

“Camera’s on,” Brennan said. “Identifier. Look at me.”

Cinna looked at her.

The shutter was a cheap little click. Nothing cinematic. It still landed between her legs like a touch.

“Good. Stay.”

Brennan stepped in. The light shifted. Click. A second, closer.

“I need the presentation unobstructed. Patel, hand off for this one. Warner, don’t fill the space she leaves.”

Patel lifted away.

Cinna’s hip followed one traitor inch.

“Don’t,” Patel said.

“I’m not—”

“You are.”

Holt wrote.

Brennan knelt. Not for ceremony. For the angle. The official lens came level with the part of Cinna that would not go back under the hood, and Cinna heard herself make a noise that was not a word.

“That’s fine,” Brennan said, almost gentle. “Sound isn’t artifact. Movement is. Hold.”

Click.

Cinna’s belly jumped. Wetness ran. She could feel how hard she was standing out into the light, how the air and the lens and four women looking had become the same thing. She tried to think of Dallas and got only the shutter.

“Side,” Brennan said. “Quarter turn. Slow. Socks stay on the prints. If you step off I do the identifier over.”

Cinna turned. The room tilted. Patel’s glove found her hip again, a correction.

“Easy,” Patel said. “You’re doing the thing where you try to be good and it makes you shake.”

“I am trying to be good.”

Renner, from the table, laughed once under her breath.

“We know.”

Click.

Brennan checked the image on the camera the way she had checked the ruler.

“Still persistent. Hood has not reduced. I’m taking three more so they can’t say we guessed.”

“Three,” Cinna said.

It came out like a plea and like a request at the same time.

“Three,” Brennan said.

The light settled dead-on. Cinna could see herself without looking down: swollen, uncovered, shining, the glans out where it had no business being in an airport, so sensitive that even Brennan not touching her felt like being handled. Her breasts felt heavy. Her mouth was open. She closed it. She opened it again because she needed air.

Click.

“Two,” Brennan said.

Cinna’s thighs trembled. She tried to lock them and the lock pushed her forward into nothing, into the path of the lens.

“Artifact,” Holt said.

“I can’t—”

“You can,” Patel said. “Or you can sign and run. Those are the options. Standing is the one you picked.”

Click.

“Last one,” Brennan said. “Don’t you dare be helpful.”

Cinna tried to empty her head. She lasted half a second. Then she felt it gather — not a thought, not a decision, a deep unstoppable cinch low in her belly that the morning had been building every time someone said persistent, every time the hood failed, every time a woman in this room looked at her like a problem that had to be recorded.

“Wait,” Cinna said. “Wait, I think I’m—”

“Hold still,” Brennan said.

She came.

It tore through her standing up. She clenched around nothing and spilled into the light, wet, shaking, a broken sound ripped out of her that she could not swallow. Her knees tried to go. Patel’s glove clamped her hip and kept her on the yellow. The hood did nothing. She pulsed in the open, obvious, helpless, again, again, while Brennan’s camera was still lifted.

Click.

That one was not supposed to happen. Cinna heard it anyway.

She kept coming. She could not stop it. Her nipples ached. Her face was wet. She could smell herself. She tried to fold forward and Patel said, “Marks,” and she stayed up because staying up was the only instruction her body still understood, and the orgasm ran on past the point where it should have been allowed to end, little helpless jerks she could not dress up as stillness.

Nobody spoke until she was gasping.

Brennan lowered the camera.

Holt set the incomplete form aside. She did not rip it. She just moved it out of the center of the table and turned a new page on the clipboard.

“That’s no longer a same-day extra,” Holt said. Her voice had not risen. It had gone flatter. “We’re in follow-up. You don’t run for a gate on a file that looks like this. You don’t get dressed while she’s still writing. You stay on the marks.”

Cinna could barely hear over her own pulse.

“I didn’t mean to.”

“I didn’t ask what you meant,” Holt said. “I asked you to be still. You weren’t. Now the morning has a different name.”

Brennan was writing fast.

“Orgasm under documentation,” she said, as if she were listing contents. “Presentation did not reduce after. If anything it’s worse. I’m keeping the last frame. They’ll want it.”

Cinna made a wrecked sound that might have been a no and might have been please.

Out in the hall the agent’s voice changed. Less cheerful. Stretched.

“Last call. Last call for passengers on this flight. Last boarding.”

Renner looked at the door, then at Cinna, then at Holt.

“There it is.”

Cinna’s legs were shining. She was still throbbing in the light, uncovered, not finished feeling it. The pen for the incomplete form sat useless beside the page Holt had moved. The camera sat in Brennan’s hand. Last call kept saying itself through the wall, polite and final.

Holt did not look at the door.

“Follow-up starts now,” Holt said. “Feet where they are. She isn’t done with the notes. You’re not on that aircraft.”

Cinna stayed on the yellow.

“I know,” Cinna said, and her voice broke on it. “I know I’m not.”

Chapter 5 — Final call

Last call said itself again, closer, as if the wall had gotten thinner.

“Last boarding. All remaining passengers.”

Holt set the clipboard against her belt.

“Dress,” Holt said. “Slow. You can sit on the chair if your knees are going to argue. Bag’s at your feet. We’re not throwing you into the hall naked. We are ending the portion I can still pretend is boarding-adjacent.”

Cinna looked at the carry-on. Someone had slid it in during the pictures. She looked at the bin: blouse, bra, trousers, wet underwear in a heap that did not look like a banker.

She did not reach for any of it.

“I don’t want to dress yet.”

Holt waited.

“I want you to finish it,” Cinna said. The words came out raw and plain. “The light. The notes. The hands that already know where to look. If I put clothes on now it’s going to be the incomplete thing with better posture. I don’t want the incomplete thing.”

Renner glanced at the door.

“You hear that voice,” Renner said. “That’s not group two. That’s them pulling the jet bridge in their hearts.”

“I hear it.”

“And you’re asking to stay uncovered.”

“I’m asking you to finish the exam.”

Brennan had not put the camera away. She looked at Holt.

Holt’s jaw worked once.

“You understand I told you to dress.”

“I understand.”

“You understand that if we keep going, you miss it. Not maybe. You miss it.”

“I know I’m not on that aircraft,” Cinna said. “You already said that. I’m asking anyway.”

Out in the hall: “Final boarding. Doors will close.”

Holt looked at the four of them, then at Cinna on the yellow, still wet, still out, still shaking from the first time.

“All right,” Holt said. “Then nobody pretends this is extra screening. Brennan, you still need a post-event measure. Patel, you check whether it reduced. Renner, I want the wand on her once so the electronic matches what we’re writing. I don’t sign follow-up off a picture I didn’t confirm.”

Cinna’s pulse kicked.

“You’re going to—”

“One at a time,” Holt said. “You asked for the hands that know. You’re going to get them. Marks. If you go down, you say so before you hit the floor.”

Patel stepped in first. Fresh gloves, no ceremony.

“I need to know if that did anything,” Patel said. “Besides make a mess. I’m checking the presentation. You don’t help.”

“Okay.”

Patel’s fingers found her the way they had through the trousers, except there was nothing in the way now. Direct. Warm latex on wet, swollen skin. Cinna jerked and stayed up.

“Reduced?” Brennan said.

Patel was quiet a second, thumb resting just under the head of her, clinical and devastating.

“No,” Patel said. “If anything she came further forward. Hood’s still a non-event. She’s slick all over my glove.”

“Write it,” Holt said.

Patel didn’t take her hand off until she had mapped the same outline twice. When she lifted away, Cinna made a noise she was past being ashamed of.

Brennan clicked the light on.

“Measure two. Post-climax. Same rule as before. Paper ruler. Don’t be useful.”

The ruler touched her. Cinna’s knees dipped. Patel’s glove came back to her hip.

“Stay.”

Brennan aligned it, closer than last time because there was more of her to align. “Number went up,” Brennan said, almost to herself, and then, for the pad, “Persistent glans, increased under observation after orgasm. Hood will not reduce.”

She let the edge of the ruler rest there a breath longer than a number required. Cinna felt it and shook.

“That’s you touching me.”

“That’s me measuring you,” Brennan said. “You asked for the exam finished. This is the exam.”

She took the ruler away, bagged it, and—because the notes wanted the confirm—put two gloved fingers where the ruler had been and held. Not rubbing. Holding. Cinna’s mouth opened.

“Still presenting,” Brennan said. “I’ve got it.”

“Last call,” the wall said, tired now. “This is the last call.”

Renner took the wand out of the drawer she had just put it in.

“Electronic match,” Renner said. “You know this part. It sang through clothes. Let’s see what it does with nothing to hide behind.”

“That’s going to—”

“I know what it’s going to do.” Renner’s mouth ticked. “You still want finished?”

Cinna nodded. She did not trust her voice.

Renner brought the wand in low. The housing was warm. She didn’t tap around. She set it where Patel and Brennan had just been, a firm blunt pressure right on her, and the tick became a long ugly streak that filled the little room.

“There she is,” Renner said. “Same square. No trousers to blame.”

She should have lifted off. She didn’t, not at once. She held the wand there while the machine sang and Cinna’s hips tried to answer it.

“Renner,” Holt said.

“Matching,” Renner said, and then she did lift, and her empty hand—no wand, just fingers— came in and touched her, two fingertips, a quick confirming press on the glans as if to say the machine and the body were the same thing.

Cinna cried out.

“Sorry,” Renner said, not very sorry. “Had to feel what it was singing at.”

The hall had gone into the other announcement, the one that always sounded like a shrug. “This gate is now closed.”

Cinna heard it. She stayed on the marks anyway.

Holt came last.

She set the clipboard down. She pulled gloves from Patel’s box herself, slower than the others, like the decision was the point.

“I don’t change a file I haven’t put a hand on,” Holt said. “You asked for this. You look at me.”

Cinna looked at her.

Holt’s glove was careful and not shy. She took Cinna in two fingers and a thumb, not mapping, not measuring—verifying. The touch was firmer than Brennan’s and less practiced than Patel’s and somehow worse for that. Supervisor hands. She rolled the hood once with her thumb to see if it would stay. It would not. She held the glans like a fact she was going to sign.

“Follow-up is correct,” Holt said. “She’s still the flag. She’s still out. She’s still wet. This is not a woman I send down a concourse with a maybe.”

She didn’t let go while she said it.

Cinna’s second one started in the sentence.

Not the same as the camera. Deeper. Meaner. It took her legs out from under her so fast Patel said “down” after she was already going. Hands caught her—Patel and Renner, then Brennan at her back—and she hit the mat on her knees first and then her hip, Holt’s glove coming with her because Holt had not released her, and the orgasm tore through that grip in ugly beautiful waves she could not stop or quiet or make polite.

She came on the floor of a private screening room while the gate announced, politely, that the flight to Dallas had departed.

She could not have said how long it lasted. Longer than the first. She soaked Holt’s glove. She shook until her teeth clicked. Someone said her name. Someone said “I’ve got her.” The yellow marks were under her cheek.

“Up,” Patel said, after. “Come on. You’re all right. You’re all right. Knees. There.”

They lifted her. Renner had most of her weight. Brennan had her other arm. Holt stripped the used glove into the can and did not offer a speech. They put Cinna back on her feet and her feet would not take the full idea of standing, so they held her there, four sets of hands, the exam not actually over.

Cinna dragged in air.

“Is it gone?” she said. “The plane.”

Renner listened.

A new voice, farther away, was already talking about a different flight to a different city.

“It’s gone,” Renner said. “Dallas left without you.”

Cinna nodded against someone’s shoulder. She was still twitching. Still uncovered. Still standing only because they were making standing possible.

“Good,” she said, wrecked and honest. “Then you can keep going.”

Brennan picked the light back up.

“I still have notes,” Brennan said.

Holt picked up the clipboard.

“And I still have a file that isn’t closed,” Holt said. “Marks if you can. Chair if you can’t. Either way nobody’s dressing you yet.”

Cinna let them set her heels toward the yellow. The carry-on sat at her feet like a joke. Last boarding was over. The room smelled like cleanser and her.

“Hands,” Cinna said, almost not a request.

Patel’s glove returned, exact, where it had already learned to be.

“We’ve got you,” Patel said. “Stay with us. We’re not done.”

Chapter 6 — Follow-up

They held her until her knees remembered they were knees.

“That’s enough for standing,” Patel said. “Chair or marks. Pick one.”

“Marks.”

They set her on the yellow. Brennan’s light made one last pass, lower, honest. Holt watched the page instead of the door. The Dallas flight was already a rumor in another part of the building.

“I can write resolved for today,” Holt said. “Resolved with follow-up. That means this room is done enough to let you walk. It does not mean the square went away. It means we stopped needing you on that mat to prove the square exists.”

Cinna’s voice was scraped.

“So I’m clear.”

“You’re clear to leave this room,” Brennan said. She shut the pad. “You’re not clear the way you wanted at nine in the morning. Different clear.”

Renner leaned against the table.

“Clothes are still in the bin. You want help, say help. You want us to turn around, we won’t. We’ve seen it. We’re not going to pretend we haven’t.”

“I can do it.”

She could. Mostly. The underwear were a lost cause; she left them in the bin and pulled the trousers on without them. The navy cloth dragged over skin that was still too sensitive. She had to stop with the zipper half up because she was swollen out against the seam again, hood useless, and the contact made her breath catch.

Patel watched her hands.

“If you can’t close them, you don’t have to prove anything.”

“I can close them.”

She closed them. It hurt in a way that was not pain. The blouse shook going on. She couldn’t do the bra behind her back on the first try. Brennan stepped in, not asking, and fastened it with two quick fingers, then took her hands off like the clasp had been another measurement.

“Thanks.”

“Mm.”

Holt filled the last box she meant to fill. The incomplete form stayed off to the side, unsigned, irrelevant now.

Brennan took a card from the kit. Not a boarding pass. Not a citation. A plain secondary card, already creased once from the box.

“Return office,” Brennan said. She held it so Cinna had to look. “My name. Room number. A window of time, not a clock time. You show up in the window, someone is there who has this file. You don’t show up, the file still exists. This is not a booking. This is not a detention. You can throw it in the trash at the food court. I’m giving it to you because the next machine is going to be kinder if they can see we already did the work.”

Cinna took the card.

The paper was warm from Brennan’s hand. Name. Room. A window.

“On the return.”

“On the return,” Brennan said. “Or sooner, if you decide sooner. The window doesn’t care which direction you’re flying.”

Holt nodded at the carry-on.

“Passport.”

Cinna crouched. Her thighs protested. She got the passport out of the tote, opened the sleeve where the boarding pass for the gone flight still sat, useless, and slid Brennan’s card in behind it. The sleeve took both. She felt herself do it on purpose. She felt them watch her do it on purpose.

Renner’s mouth ticked.

“That’s one way to file it.”

Cinna stood. Flats from the bin. Belt. The blazer last, which made her look like a person again if you didn’t know. If you knew, you could still see it in how she held her mouth and how she didn’t quite let the trousers rest against her.

Holt opened the door.

The checkpoint noise came in like weather.

“You’re free to walk the concourse,” Holt said. “Bag with you. If anyone stops you between here and the ticket counter, you send them to the sheet. You don’t owe them a

demonstration.”

“Counter,” Cinna said.

“You missed Dallas by twenty minutes,” Renner said. “There will be another one. There always is. Buy it or go home. Not our part.”

Cinna looked at the marks one more time. Yellow. A little wide. The light was off. The monitor had gone dark. Patel was dropping the last gloves in the can.

Brennan was packing the ugly camera like any other tool.

“That’s all?” Cinna said.

“For today,” Holt said. “That’s all.”

Cinna walked out.

The air in the checkpoint was the same air as before the latch. People putting laptops away. A child sitting on a suitcase. Nobody looked at her twice. She felt looked-at anyway, from the inside, the hood still not sitting, the trousers a problem she was now going to carry through a terminal.

At the counter a woman with a tired smile found a later seat. Same city. Evening. Cinna paid with the card she used for work and did not explain why she needed it. The new boarding pass came out of the printer thin and hot. She put it in the passport sleeve with the other one and with Brennan’s card, three papers stacked, and zipped the tote.

She had an hour and a half.

She walked.

The concourse did what concourses do. Gate numbers. A bar already serving people who had made their planes. The smell of pretzels. Overhead, a departure to Dallas that was not hers, already in the air, already nothing.

Cinna found a seat facing glass. She sat carefully. The trousers reminded her, immediately, what had not gone back under. She crossed her ankles and then uncrossed them because crossing made it worse. In the tote, against her knee, the passport was a small hard rectangle. She did not take it out. She did not need to look. She knew where the card was.

A cleaner went by with a wide machine. Somewhere behind her, another private-room door shut on somebody else.

Cinna watched the tarmac. She put one hand on the tote, over the place where the sleeve was, and left it there.

She could go buy water. She could call the conference and say she missed the two o’clock. She could sit here until the evening flight and pretend this morning had been a delay.

She did not get up yet.

The card sat in the passport like a decision she had already made.

When she did stand, it was only to walk the concourse again, dressed, allowed, unfollowed, the room still on her skin, the window of time already open in her bag.