



The Price Of A Year

**A hidden market turns
sacrifice into evidence**

Introduction

By the time the city's winter rain reached the courthouse steps, a year had become something you could buy, lose, or quietly take from someone else. In its clinics, classrooms, and government offices, every promise carried a price, and every record had a second version kept out of sight.

When the machinery of justice runs on favors and silence, what does it cost to tell the truth - and who gets to decide what a year of another person's life is worth?

The Price Of A Year begins where private compromises meet public ledgers, and where exposing injustice may demand more than anyone can afford.

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Ten Years for Ivo

The clinic's front doors opened only after the pavement scanner read the age in Nara's bones.

A green line passed beneath her shoes. Somewhere inside the wall, a mechanism clicked, measured, and decided. The doors parted onto a corridor of white panels and blue floor lights. Nara stepped through before the scanner could change its mind.

In her pocket, Ivo's debt notice had softened along the fold. She had read it so often that the final figure no longer looked like money. It looked like a locked door. Behind it, Ivo lay in the ward with a stronger pulse, clearer eyes, and a treatment schedule the hospital would cancel by evening unless someone paid.

Nara wanted one thing from the clinic: to sell ten years and walk out with the debt cleared.

The corridor narrowed beyond intake. Frosted glass divided the waiting area from the processing rooms. A black sign floated above the first checkpoint.

AGE TRANSFER SERVICES

LICENSED EXCHANGE PARTNER

Beneath it, smaller letters warned that all transfers were permanent, biometric, and subject to audit.

A woman in a grey uniform looked up from a terminal. "Appointment?"

"Nara."

"That's not an appointment time."

"It's the name on the appointment."

The woman searched. The terminal reflected pale light across her face. "Ten-year voluntary transfer. Emergency settlement authorization. Beneficiary: Ivo."

Nara's fingers tightened around the debt notice. "Yes."

"Purpose of transfer?"

"To clear his treatment debt."

"That is not one of the listed purposes."

"Then put down medical settlement."

The woman's gaze moved to Nara's coat, her worn shoes, the hand that had begun shaking only after she entered. "You understand the clinic does not assess need?"

"I understand."

"Do you?"

Nara looked past her, through the glass. A man sat in a reclined chair with a transfer disc pressed to his temple. Thin silver threads ran from the disc into a machine that pulsed softly beside him. His eyes were closed. A nurse watched the numbers climb.

Nara imagined Ivo there, trying not to apologize.

"Yes," she said. "I understand."

The woman printed a narrow strip and pushed it across the counter. "Proceed to biometric intake. No jewellery, no active medication patches, no food or drink beyond this point."

Nara took the strip. The paper was warm from the printer.

At the next door, a scanner read her palm. It rejected her once.

"Hold still," said the attendant.

"I am holding still."

"Your pulse is irregular."

"My brother is in a ward."

The attendant did not look at her. "The scanner cannot record distress as consent."

Nara placed her palm flat again. Cold glass pressed into the lines of her skin. The machine gave a low tone, and the door unlocked.

The intake corridor smelled of disinfectant and heated plastic. Every few steps, a panel displayed a sentence in white text.

TEN YEARS IS NOT A LOAN.

AGE-OFFSET CANNOT BE REVERSED.

PAYMENT DOES NOT CREATE OWNERSHIP.

At the end of the corridor, a counsellor waited behind a curved desk. She was older than Nara had expected, with close-cropped hair and a small metal badge bearing the clinic seal.

"Sit," she said.

Nara sat.

The counsellor brought up Nara's file. "You have been approved for a ten-year transfer."

"I know."

"You are twenty-nine."

"I know that too."

"Your biological age will be adjusted permanently. The transfer does not remove memories, reduce your legal identity to a different person, or alter your calendar age. It changes the body's age-offset. You may experience stiffness, reduced recovery, changes in skin elasticity, joint pain, hormonal disruption, and fatigue."

"How much?"

The counsellor's eyes lifted. "The effects vary."

"How much will I look?"

"That cannot be predicted precisely."

"I need to know if I can still work."

"Most donors continue working."

"Most?"

"Some change their occupations."

Nara thought of the ward. Of Ivo's hand gripping the blanket when the pain came. Of the invoice clipped to the foot of his bed, its red balance increasing each day.

"Ten years," she said. "Not more."

"The system will not take more than the authorization specifies."

"And the payment clears everything?"

"The settlement amount will be transferred to the hospital account attached to Ivo's treatment. Any remainder will be applied to the outstanding debt."

"Immediately?"

"Upon completion and verification."

Nara leaned forward. "I need the hospital to receive it today."

"It will."

The counsellor turned the screen toward her. The terms filled it in dense columns. Nara saw her name, her birth date, the beneficiary designation, the ten-year debit, and a field marked AGE-OFFSET: PERMANENT.

At the bottom was a declaration.

I UNDERSTAND THAT THE TRANSFER MAY ALTER MY APPEARANCE, HEALTH, EMPLOYMENT ELIGIBILITY, AND EXPECTED YEARS OF ACTIVE LIFE.

Nara read it once.

The counsellor watched her. "You have a cooling period of forty-eight hours."

"No."

"You may leave and return after consideration."

"No."

"Nara, the cooling period exists because urgency can impair judgment."

"Urgency is the reason I'm here."

"It is also the reason people sign terms they later regret."

Nara placed her finger on the signature field. The glass recognized the pressure of her skin.

"I won't regret saving him."

"That is not what I said."

"It's what you meant."

For the first time, something moved in the counsellor's face. Not sympathy. Recognition, perhaps. The clinic had seen people arrive with the same fixed expression, carrying debts that had already entered their bodies.

"Once you sign," the counsellor said, "the transfer begins within three minutes."

"Then start it."

The signature line flashed green.

Nara signed.

A confirmation tone sounded. Somewhere beyond the wall, another door sealed shut.

The counsellor took a transfer disc from a sterilized tray. It was no larger than a coin, translucent at the centre, with a ring of conductive metal around its edge. "The disc will remain attached for the duration. You may feel pressure, heat, or an electrical sensation. Do not remove it."

"Will it hurt?"

"There is discomfort."

"That wasn't my question."

The counsellor held her gaze. "Yes."

Nara nodded and turned her head.

The disc touched her temple.

Cold spread first, a clean circle against her skin. Then the machine engaged.

Pain entered without drama. It did not stab or burn. It moved through her in a slow, deliberate tightening, as if invisible hands had found every joint and begun turning them. Her teeth clenched. The room sharpened around her: the hum of the machine, the squeak of rubber beneath a passing cart, the faint rasp of her own breath.

A progress bar appeared above the counsellor's desk.

TRANSFER: 01%

Nara pictured Ivo's room. The cracked blue mug beside his bed. The way he tried to hide the tremor in his left hand. The nurse who had told her, gently, that treatment was not charity.

The percentage climbed.

At twenty-three, her knees began to ache.

At forty, heat crawled down her neck.

At sixty-eight, she felt an abrupt emptiness beneath her ribs, as though something had been lifted out and carried away before she could name it.

The counsellor's voice reached her through the pressure. "Stay conscious."

"I am."

"Breathe evenly."

"I am breathing."

At ninety-nine, Nara opened her eyes.

The progress bar vanished.

The disc released with a soft click.

For several seconds she could not move. Her hands rested in her lap. The skin across her knuckles looked looser than it had when she entered, the creases

deeper, the veins more visible. She flexed her fingers. Pain answered from her wrists.

The counsellor removed the disc and sealed it in a disposal sleeve.

"Transfer verified," she said. "Settlement initiated."

Nara swallowed. Her mouth was dry. "Ivo's debt?"

"Cleared."

"That fast?"

"The Exchange settlement is automated."

"Show me."

The counsellor turned the terminal toward her. A green confirmation filled the screen.

BENEFICIARY ACCOUNT: IVO

OUTSTANDING BALANCE: 0.00

TREATMENT STATUS: FUNDED THROUGH CURRENT COURSE

Nara stared until the numbers blurred.

A laugh escaped her, small and broken. She covered it with one hand. The hand looked unfamiliar. Older. Not dramatically, not enough for anyone in the corridor to stop and stare, but enough that she could not pretend the change belonged to bad lighting.

The counsellor printed a receipt.

"Keep this," she said. "It contains the transfer record and donor reference."

Nara accepted it. The paper was heavier than the first strip. At the bottom, beneath the settlement details, a grey line of type gave a string of letters and numbers.

DONOR REF: D-4419-K

"What is that?"

"Your donor reference."

"I'm the donor."

"It identifies the transfer in the Exchange system."

"Can I look it up?"

"Through the public register, if the record is eligible for public access."

"Is it?"

The counsellor's pause lasted less than a second. It still landed.

"It should be."

Nara folded the receipt and slid it into the inner pocket of her coat.

When she stood, her knees nearly failed.

The counsellor reached across the desk. "Take a moment."

Nara caught the edge of the chair. A dull ache had settled into both knees, deep and persistent. Her back felt tight. The corridor seemed longer than before, its blue floor lights stretching toward the exit.

"I'm fine," she said.

"That may change over the next several hours."

Nara straightened. "I have to go to the hospital."

"You should avoid driving."

"I didn't drive."

"Then avoid walking far."

Outside, the afternoon had turned bright and hard. The clinic's glass façade threw the sky back at her in broken rectangles. Nara stood on the pavement, one hand against the railing, while the receipt pressed against her ribs.

Her phone vibrated.

The hospital had sent a payment confirmation. Ivo's treatment course remained active. His debt was zero.

She opened the message and read it twice. Then she locked the screen.

She would tell Ivo the hospital had found emergency funding. She would tell him anything that kept his face from changing when he learned what she had done. The sale belonged to her. The receipt belonged in the bottom of a drawer. The pain would pass, or she would learn to carry it.

Her phone vibrated again.

This time it was a public-register notification. Nara had not remembered opening the search page, but her thumb had already entered the donor reference.

D-4419-K.

The result appeared almost immediately.

NO PUBLIC RECORD FOUND.

She tried again, checking every character. The grey type on the receipt was faint, but clear. D-4419-K.

The register returned the same answer.

Nara looked back at the clinic. Through the glass, the intake corridor shone without a mark, each scanner waiting for the next body to enter.

Her knees hurt when she began walking.

The receipt stayed warm against her chest, and the number on it did not exist anywhere public.

The Face the Kiosk Rejects

Nara made it as far as the transit kiosk before her knees forced her to stop.

The station stairs rose in front of her, each metal edge bright beneath the afternoon sun. She gripped the rail and waited for the ache to settle. It did not settle. It spread, a deep pressure under the kneecaps and along the backs of her legs, as if the joints had been tightened while she was walking.

A tram hissed into the platform below. Its doors opened. People moved around her in quick, careless currents, shoes striking the pavement, voices breaking against the station glass. Nara stepped aside and pulled the receipt from her coat.

D-4419-K.

The grey print had blurred slightly where her fingers had held it. She flattened the paper against the kiosk's metal casing. The machine stood beside the ticket gates, its screen dark until she touched it.

"Public records," she said.

The kiosk woke with a pale blue glow. "State your request."

"Donor reference search."

"Insert identification."

Nara slid her identity card into the slot.

The kiosk accepted it with a soft mechanical click. A camera opened above the screen. She lifted her face toward it.

The first scan passed over her eyes, nose, mouth. A red line appeared.

FACE MATCH: INSUFFICIENT.

Nara shifted closer. "Try again."

"Remain still."

She held herself rigid. The station smelled of hot brakes and rain trapped in old concrete. Her wrists throbbed where she gripped the kiosk's edge.

The camera scanned her again.

FACE MATCH: INSUFFICIENT.

"Use the card photograph," Nara said.

"The card photograph is the reference image."

"It's me."

The kiosk made a small processing sound, indifferent and precise. "Facial variance exceeds permitted threshold."

A man behind her clicked his tongue. "Some of us have trains."

Nara turned. "Then take one."

He looked at her, saw the anger in her face, and looked away.

The kiosk displayed her identification photograph beside the live image. In the photograph, Nara's cheeks were fuller, her skin smooth, her eyes bright with the impatient confidence of someone who had never expected her own face to become evidence against her. The live image looked narrower and more tired. Fine lines ran from the corners of her eyes. Her mouth seemed to belong to someone who had spent years learning not to complain.

Ten years, she thought.

Not ten years lived. Ten years taken.

"Manual verification," she said.

"That service is unavailable at this terminal."

"Then return my card."

"Identity confirmation required."

The card remained locked inside the machine.

Nara pressed her palm to the reader. The glass was warm from other hands. A tone sounded, then another.

PALM MATCH: CONFIRMED.

The kiosk released the card.

She snatched it from the slot. Her fingers shook as she put it away.

The failure should have been absurd. The clinic had verified her body before taking the years. The hospital would accept her payment. Ivo's ward would accept her name. But the public machine had looked at her and found a stranger.

Nara crossed the station to the records terminal.

It stood behind a partition of smoked glass, reserved for public filings, licenses, and transfer histories. The terminal's chair was bolted to the floor. She lowered herself carefully, feeling the pull in her knees, and placed the receipt beside the keyboard.

A notice appeared before she entered anything.

PUBLIC TRANSFER RECORDS ARE LIMITED TO CONSENTED DISCLOSURES
AND LEGALLY REGISTERED EXCHANGES.

Nara typed the reference.

D-4419-K.

The terminal searched. The fan inside it gave a tired whine.

NO RECORD FOUND.

She tried the settlement number beneath it. Then the clinic authorization code.
Then her own name.

Her name produced one result: the sale recorded that afternoon.

DONOR: NARA

TRANSFER: TEN YEARS

STATUS: COMPLETE

BENEFICIARY: IVO

SETTLEMENT: CLEARED

The donor reference remained absent.

Nara leaned closer. "Why would the transfer show without the donor reference?"

The terminal did not answer. It offered a link marked REQUEST EXTENDED ACCESS.

She pressed it.

IDENTITY CONFIRMATION REQUIRED.

The camera opened.

Nara stared at her own face in the small black lens. She thought of the clinic attendant telling her to hold still, the counsellor explaining that the change might affect employment eligibility, the receipt warm in her hand as she walked away. All of it had been consented, verified, and paid for.

Yet the machine could not establish that she was Nara.

She tapped the screen until a support number appeared. The call connected after three tones.

"Public records support," said a voice. "How may I assist?"

"My donor reference is missing."

"Please provide the reference."

"D-4419-K."

A pause. Keys clicked in the background. "That reference is not available through the public register."

"It's on my transfer receipt."

"Then it may be an internal identifier."

"The receipt says donor reference."

"Internal donor references can appear on settlement documents without corresponding public disclosure."

"Why?"

"For privacy, eligibility, or restricted transfer classification."

"What classification?"

"I can't access that information."

Nara glanced at the terminal. Her reflection floated over the search results, older and indistinct. "The clinic told me the record should be public."

"The clinic may have been referring to your transfer record."

"I'm asking about the donor."

"You are the donor."

"Then why does the register not recognize the reference?"

The voice softened in the way people softened when they wanted a conversation to end. "You may submit a formal inquiry."

"How long?"

"Ten to fifteen working days."

"I need an answer today."

"Public records support cannot alter processing times."

Nara ended the call.

For a moment she sat with both hands flat on the terminal. The plastic beneath her palms felt gritty. The ache in her knees had become a pulse, steady as the station announcements overhead.

She could go to the hospital. She could see Ivo through the ward glass, tell him the debt had cleared, and keep the receipt folded beneath her shirt. He would smile. He would ask how she had managed it. She would say the clinic had approved an emergency settlement, or that someone at work had helped, or that she had borrowed from a source she could not name.

The lie was already waiting.

Her phone vibrated.

Teo.

Nara watched his name on the screen until it stopped. It began again almost immediately.

She answered. "What?"

"Where are you?"

"Transit station."

"Which one?"

"Why?"

"Because the clinic called me."

Nara glanced toward the station entrance. No one appeared to be watching her. That did not comfort her.

"What did they say?"

"That you had a problem with the register."

"I called public records."

"Don't call anyone else."

The warning was flat enough to make her sit straighter.

"I'm trying to understand my own receipt."

"You understand it. You sold ten years. The settlement cleared Ivo's debt."

"The reference doesn't exist."

"Then leave it alone."

"Why?"

Teo exhaled. She could hear traffic behind him, the low rush of tires over wet pavement. "Because missing references are not mistakes."

Nara looked at D-4419-K. "What are they?"

"Restricted."

"Restricted from whom?"

"From people who ask questions in public terminals."

"That sounds like a threat."

"It's advice."

"You knew this could happen."

"I knew the Exchange uses internal codes. I didn't know what they put on your receipt."

"Did you know my face would stop matching my ID?"

Teo said nothing.

The silence answered her more clearly than he could have.

Nara rose too quickly. Pain flashed through both knees, and she caught the chair before it rolled away. "Teo."

"I didn't know the offset would show that fast."

"You knew."

"I knew the transfer would change you."

"You told me the clinic was licensed."

"It is."

"You told me the payment was clean."

"It was."

"Then why are you afraid of a number?"

The station announcement blurred into static above her. A tram arrived, brakes shrieking against the rails.

Teo lowered his voice. "Stop searching."

Nara pressed the receipt between her fingers until it bent. "No."

"You've done what you went there to do. Ivo is funded. His debt is gone. Leave the rest."

"The rest is attached to my name."

"No. That's the point."

She felt the floor tilt beneath her, though the station remained level.

"Who is Sable?" she asked.

Teo went quiet.

Nara had not known the name until it came out of her mouth. It had been printed in a directory result beneath the terminal's support page, one old complaint mentioning an Exchange reconciliation officer named Sable. The entry had vanished when she tried to open it.

"Where did you hear that?" Teo asked.

"Answer me."

"You searched the old filings."

"Who is Sable?"

"She used to work for the Exchange."

"Used to?"

"She left."

"Why?"

"Because she understood what the codes meant."

Nara's grip tightened on the phone. "What do they mean?"

"You're not listening. Stop."

"You just gave me a name."

"I'm giving you a reason to stop before you make this worse."

"For whom?"

Another silence. This one carried weight.

Teo said, "There's a repair shop under the east viaduct. Blue door, no sign. Ask for Sable. Don't use your full name. Don't show her the receipt unless she asks."

Nara stared at the terminal's blank search field. "You said stop investigating."

"I said stop doing it where the system can see you."

"Is Sable safe?"

"No."

"Is she honest?"

"I don't know anymore."

"Then why send me?"

"Because she's the only person I know who can tell you what that reference is."

The call ended.

Nara remained beside the terminal while the next tram emptied onto the platform. A child cried near the ticket gates. Someone laughed. The kiosk camera continued its silent sweep over every face that passed beneath it.

She picked up the receipt and folded it along the old crease.

Her body hurt. Her ID no longer belonged to the face carrying it. The public record proved her sale but refused to name the reference that had followed her out of the clinic.

Still, she had an address.

Nara slid the receipt into her coat and turned toward the east exit. The first step hurt. The second hurt more.

She took both.

The Ledger Behind the Ledger

“Actuarial bureaus don’t usually keep their doors locked after closing,” Nara said.

Sable’s voice came through the intercom, thin with static. “They do when the bureau has been closed for six years.”

Nara stood beneath the east viaduct with rain ticking against the corrugated awning. The repair shop’s blue door had no sign, only a brass button set into the wall. Behind her, traffic dragged a wet hiss along the road. Her knees had stiffened during the walk from the station. Each step now required a small negotiation with the body the clinic had left her.

“I was told to ask for Sable.”

“You were told many things today.”

“Teo sent me.”

The lock clicked.

Nara pushed the door open. Warm air smelling of solder, oil, and damp plaster met her face. The shop below was dark except for a strip of light under a rear door. A narrow staircase rose beside a rack of stripped machine parts.

“Upstairs,” Sable called. “And don’t touch the rail. It’s loose.”

Nara climbed without touching it. At the top, another door opened onto a cramped office with a frosted window overlooking the viaduct. A dead sign still clung to the opposite building: NORTHLINE ACTUARIAL SERVICES. Half the letters had fallen away.

Sable stood behind a metal desk. She was lean, grey-haired, and dressed in a dark coat that looked too formal for the room. A kettle steamed on a hot plate beside stacks of paper. One wall was covered with old actuarial charts, their coloured lines fading into yellowed grids.

Sable looked first at Nara's face, then at the way she held herself.

"Ten years?" she asked.

Nara stopped just inside the room. "You can tell?"

"I can tell you're not here about a parking fine."

"Teo said you understood restricted donor references."

"Teo says things when he's frightened."

"He was frightened."

"That doesn't make him accurate."

Nara took the receipt from her coat but kept it folded in her hand. "I need to know what D-4419-K means."

Sable's gaze fixed on the paper. "Where did you get it?"

"The clinic."

"Which clinic?"

Nara named it.

Sable moved to the kettle and poured water into two chipped cups. Her hands were steady. "You sold ten years today."

"I know what I sold."

"Do you?"

The question struck harder than it should have. Nara's fingers closed around the receipt.

"My brother's treatment is funded," she said. "His debt is cleared. The transfer was legal."

"Those statements can all be true."

"Then tell me why the reference isn't in the public register."

Sable set one cup on the desk and left the other near the window. "Sit."

"I'm not here for tea."

"No. You're here because a number appeared on a piece of paper and disappeared when you asked the system to explain it."

Nara remained standing.

Sable sighed. "If you fall over, I'll have to carry you downstairs. Sit."

The chair's vinyl cracked under Nara's weight. A dull ache ran from her knees up into her hips. She put the receipt on the desk and unfolded it.

Sable did not touch it. "The grey type is an internal donor reference."

"Teo said it was restricted."

"Teo knows enough to be afraid and not enough to be useful."

"Is it a mistake?"

"No."

"Is it attached to my transfer?"

"Yes."

"Then why does the public record show my name, the ten-year sale, and Ivo as beneficiary, but not this?"

Sable took a sip of tea. "Because the public record is not the ledger that settles every transfer."

Nara waited.

Outside, a truck passed beneath the viaduct. The office trembled softly. Dust sifted from the ceiling vent.

Sable opened a drawer and removed a transparent ruler, a pencil, and a sheet of graph paper. She drew a horizontal line across the page.

"The Exchange prices time in units," she said. "A month is divided into smaller measures depending on the transfer type, age band, health profile, and demand. Ten years is not simply ten years. It is a package of units with a price."

"I was paid for ten years."

"You were paid according to the package the clinic filed."

"Paid enough to clear Ivo's debt."

"Yes."

"Then what's missing?"

Sable marked the line with small vertical strokes. "Every transfer enters a reconcile cycle. The clinic submits the donor record. The Exchange confirms the biometric result. The settlement system moves the money. At the end of the cycle, the ledgers are compared."

"Compared for what?"

"To ensure the units debited from one body equal the units credited to another account."

"That sounds like an audit."

"It sounds like one."

Nara looked at the neat marks on the paper. "And the missing references?"

"Some transfers are entered twice. Once in the legal ledger, where the donor consents, the recipient is named, and the payment is visible. Then again in a private ledger used to reconcile broker activity."

"A private ledger."

"A hidden one."

Sable's pencil stopped.

Nara felt the room narrow around the words. "Why would the Exchange need a hidden ledger?"

"It doesn't need one. Brokers do."

"Brokers work for the Exchange."

"Some do. Some work beside it. The difference is mostly in who receives the invoice."

Nara unfolded the receipt completely. The paper trembled against the desk.
“Are you saying my ten years were sold twice?”

“No.”

“Then say what you are saying.”

Sable set down the pencil. “The body can be debited without the public ledger showing a matching credit.”

Nara stared at her.

Sable continued, quieter. “A clinic records a legal transfer. The Exchange receives the biometric confirmation. But a broker can attach another claim to the same batch, or split the units before reconciliation. The debit remains in the body. The public account receives only the portion that can be defended.”

“Defended against whom?”

“Inspectors. Courts. Families. Anyone who asks why a person aged faster than the contract allowed.”

The kettle clicked as it cooled.

Nara thought of the kiosk camera rejecting her face while confirming her palm. She thought of the clinic counsellor’s careful language: changes in skin elasticity, employment eligibility, expected years of active life.

“How many people?” she asked.

Sable’s expression changed, not into pity but calculation. “That depends on the cycle.”

“Give me a number.”

“I don’t have one.”

“You worked there.”

“I reconciled transfers. I didn’t count victims.”

“Then how did you know?”

Sable looked toward the frosted window. Beyond it, the dead bureau's sign swung on one remaining bracket.

"Volunteer donors are rare," she said. "People don't surrender years because they enjoy paperwork. They do it for debts, treatment, housing, legal settlements. They arrive frightened and accept whatever the counsellor tells them is standard."

"That doesn't make them non-voluntary."

"No. It makes the word useful."

Nara's mouth went dry.

Sable picked up the receipt at last. She held it near the desk lamp, examining the grey reference. "D-4419-K is not a normal public donor number. The letter code places it inside a broker reconciliation stream."

"Which broker?"

"I can't tell from the reference alone."

"You said you understood it."

"I understand the structure. Not every name."

"Then you can't prove anything."

"No."

The answer came too quickly.

Nara stood. Her knees protested. "Teo sent me here because you could explain the number."

"I explained it."

"You gave me a story."

"I gave you the reason the public register is clean."

"Without records."

"Records are why I'm no longer employed."

Nara moved around the desk. On the wall, the old charts showed curves rising and falling across columns labelled AGE BAND, YIELD, and LOSS TOLERANCE. Beneath them, someone had pinned a faded Exchange memorandum. Most of the text had been blacked out, but one line remained visible.

UNRESOLVED DEBITS SHALL BE CARRIED FORWARD TO THE NEXT CYCLE.

"Carried forward," Nara said.

Sable did not answer.

"What does that mean?"

"It means an imbalance can disappear inside the next batch."

"Disappear?"

"Be absorbed. If a cycle debits more bodies than it credits, the excess is assigned to another category. If the next cycle has enough surplus, the numbers reconcile."

"But the bodies don't."

"No."

The word settled between them.

Nara looked again at the chart. The lines seemed less like financial projections than the tracks of something moving beneath a floor.

"Why are you telling me this?"

Sable folded the receipt and returned it. "Because you came through the door."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only one you're getting."

"You were paid to keep quiet."

Sable's face went still.

Nara heard her own breath. Teo's silence on the phone returned to her, the warning beneath every word. She had not known the accusation was true until Sable failed to deny it.

"Who paid you?" Nara asked.

Sable walked to the window. "The Exchange paid my salary. A broker paid for my discretion."

"How much?"

"Enough to make silence look like retirement."

"And now?"

"Now the money is gone, and the silence is still attached."

Nara held the receipt against her palm. Its edge cut into the skin.

"Why help me?"

"I'm not helping you."

"You just told me there's a second ledger."

"I told you it exists. That is not the same as giving you access."

"Can it be found?"

"Not from outside."

Nara looked toward the closed door. Somewhere below, a metal object struck the shop floor. The sound rose through the boards and vanished.

"What would I need?"

Sable returned to the desk. "A transfer log. The original batch entry. The reconcile record beside it. You'd need to compare the debit to the public credit."

"Where?"

"At the Exchange."

Nara almost laughed. "They won't let me walk in and ask."

"They let people in every day."

"Employees."

"Records clerks, intake staff, temporary auditors. The Exchange is always hiring. The work is dull, the access is narrow, and the security deposit is designed to discourage curiosity."

"What kind of deposit?"

Sable's eyes rested on Nara's knees. "Time."

Nara said nothing.

"They require a biological security bond from anyone handling restricted records," Sable said. "Usually six months. Sometimes more, depending on the clearance."

"Another transfer."

"Not exactly. An age-offset hold. The months remain yours if you complete the contract."

"And if I don't?"

"They keep them."

The room seemed colder. Nara rubbed her thumb over the receipt's folded edge. Six months was not ten years. That was what the practical part of her mind offered first. Six months was a smaller loss, a manageable one. The practical part had also told her the clinic would be clean, the payment immediate, and the pain temporary.

"What if I get hired?" she asked.

"You won't be hired as an investigator."

"I don't need to be."

"You need to read without being noticed."

"I can do that."

Sable gave her a tired look. "You couldn't leave a public terminal alone for one afternoon."

"I found you."

"Teo found me."

"Then I found the door."

For the first time, Sable almost smiled. It disappeared before becoming anything.

She opened another drawer and removed a thin black card. No name appeared on it, only a recruitment address and a time-sensitive code.

Nara did not take it.

"You said proof requires access from inside," she said.

"Proof requires more than suspicion. If you accuse the Exchange with a missing reference and a story from a dismissed actuary, they'll call you distressed. They'll point to your consent form. They'll show the payment cleared Ivo's debt."

"They'll be right about the payment."

"That won't make them wrong about the rest."

Sable slid the card across the desk.

Nara looked at it. The black surface reflected her face in a warped oval. Older than that morning. Older than the photograph in her identity card. The reflection seemed to ask what else she was willing to lose before she believed herself.

Her phone vibrated.

Ivo.

Nara answered quickly. "Are you awake?"

"I've been awake for hours," he said. His voice was stronger than it had been before the clinic, though the weakness underneath remained. "The nurse said the course is funded. Nara, what did you do?"

"Nothing you need to worry about."

"That's not an answer."

"I found a way to settle the debt."

"Your voice sounds strange."

She looked at Sable, who had turned away.

"I'm tired," Nara said.

"You should come by."

"I will."

"When?"

"Soon."

Ivo was silent. "You're hiding something."

The words landed softly, which made them worse.

Nara pressed the phone against her ear. "Rest. I'll see you tomorrow."

"Nara - "

She ended the call before he could finish.

Sable watched her. "He doesn't know."

"No."

"He'll find out."

"Not today."

"No," Sable said. "Not today."

Nara picked up the black card. It was cold and smooth, heavier than it looked.

"What will happen if I apply?"

"You'll be scanned. Your age-offset will be measured against your identity record. The system may flag the variance."

"It already does."

"Then it will flag you again."

"And after that?"

"If they accept you, you'll sign the security bond."

"Six months."

"Six months of your life held against your conduct."

Nara put the card beside the receipt. The two objects looked almost alike in the desk's weak light: one promising access, the other recording a loss that no public register acknowledged.

Sable said, "You can still walk away."

Nara thought of the kiosk rejecting her face. Of Teo saying missing references were not mistakes. Of the line on the old memorandum: unresolved debits carried forward to the next cycle.

She took the recruitment card.

"I'm applying."

Sable's eyes hardened. "You don't know what you're agreeing to."

"I know what I already agreed to."

"That is not the same thing."

"No," Nara said. "It isn't."

She folded the card into the receipt and stood. Pain moved through her legs as she straightened, familiar now but no less real. At the door, she paused.

"Those bodies," she said. "The ones debited without credit. Do they have names?"

Sable looked down at the graph paper, at the little marks representing units no one could see.

"Some do," she said. "Some only have references."

Nara opened the door.

Behind her, Sable added, "If you enter the Exchange, don't trust the clean ledger."

Nara stepped onto the stairs. The shop below smelled of oil and rain. In her pocket, the receipt pressed against the black card, paper against plastic, her lost

years against the access that might explain where they had gone.

By the time she reached the blue door, she had decided what she would do in the morning.

She would apply for records work at the Exchange.

Then she would read the transfers from inside.

Six Months at the Gate

Nara kept the recruitment card folded inside the receipt until the paper softened around its edges.

By morning, the code on the card had less than an hour before it expired. She stood beneath the Exchange tower with one hand pressed to her knee and watched the entrance scan the people ahead of her. Each person paused beneath the black arch. Green light passed over skin, bone, and whatever the Exchange believed a body owed.

Nara wanted the gate to admit her before it found a reason not to.

The building had no sign except a silver mark above the doors: two interlocking circles, one pale and one dark. Through the glass, the lobby smelled of heated metal and floor polish. A security desk sat beyond the threshold, its surface empty except for a tray of transfer discs sealed in clear packets.

Her knees ached from the walk. The pain had become an accompaniment, no longer a surprise. She drew the card from the receipt and entered the code on the reader beside the gate.

The machine accepted it.

"Applicant identified," said a voice from above. "Place both hands on the plates."

Nara set her palms against the glass.

Cold pressure closed around her fingers. Lines of blue light traveled up her wrists, then vanished beneath the skin. The gate hummed. A camera lowered from the arch and fixed on her face.

The first scan lasted three seconds.

Then the light turned amber.

"Remain in position," the voice said.

Nara's shoulders tightened. "Why?"

"Variance detected."

"I know my identity."

"Identity confirmation is in progress."

The people behind her shifted. Someone cleared his throat. Nara felt their attention gather at her back, the same impatient weight as the man at the transit kiosk.

The camera scanned her again.

"Age-offset variance exceeds standard employment range," the gate announced. "Secondary biological sampling required."

A panel opened in the wall. Inside waited a narrow silver needle and a glass cartridge no larger than a fingernail.

Nara looked toward the security desk. A woman in a dark uniform had begun walking toward her.

"Is this part of the application?" Nara asked.

"It is required for access," the woman said.

"Why wasn't it listed on the recruitment card?"

"The card authorizes screening. It does not define screening."

The needle descended.

Nara kept her hands on the plates. "How long will it take?"

"Four minutes."

"And if I refuse?"

"Application terminated."

The needle pierced the pad of her thumb. A bright bead of blood entered the cartridge. The pain was small, almost insulting beside the transfer's deep ache, but her body recoiled before she could stop it.

The woman watched the sample fill. "You underwent an age transfer recently."

"Ten years."

"Voluntary?"

"Yes."

"Clinic?"

"Yes."

"Your public record confirms the transfer."

"Then why am I being sampled?"

The woman sealed the cartridge. "The record confirms a transfer. It does not confirm that your biological age corresponds to your declared age."

Nara looked at the gate's dark glass and saw her reflection broken into strips. "The clinic verified me."

"The Exchange verifies itself."

The woman carried the sample to a reader built into the security desk. A red line began moving across its screen.

Nara heard the lobby doors open behind her. A courier entered, shook rain from his coat, and glanced at the amber light above her head. The Exchange did not hide its scrutiny. It displayed it.

The reader chimed.

"Secondary review required," the woman said.

"What does that mean?"

"Wait here."

"My code expires soon."

"If the application is valid, the code will be extended."

"And if it isn't?"

The woman's expression did not change. "Then it won't."

She took the sample through a side door.

Nara remained beneath the gate with both hands flat against the plates. The glass grew warm beneath her palms. Her knees began to tremble, not from fear alone. She shifted her weight, and the arch gave a warning tone.

"Remain still."

"I need to stand."

"Movement may invalidate the sample."

The woman returned with a thin tablet. "The sample confirms a biological offset of ten years, three months."

Nara stared at her. "Three months?"

"Transfer recovery variance."

"I sold ten years."

"The system records the measured offset, not the contracted intention."

The woman turned the tablet toward her. A line of text glowed beneath Nara's name.

ACCESS ELIGIBILITY: CONDITIONAL.

"What does conditional mean?"

"You may continue to employment intake. Your access will be limited until the review is complete."

"How long?"

"Indeterminate."

"I need restricted records access."

"That is not available under conditional status."

Nara looked at the black recruitment card in her hand. "Then why let me continue?"

"Because the review may clear."

"And if it doesn't?"

"Your application will be closed."

The woman pointed toward the far corridor. "Employment intake is through the second doors."

Nara pulled her hands from the plates. The gate opened with a click, but the sound did not feel like permission. It felt like a temporary mistake.

At the intake desk, a clerk scanned the recruitment card and frowned.

"Records applicant," he said. "Temporary clearance."

"Conditional," Nara replied.

He glanced at the notation beside her name. "That too."

"I was told the review would not prevent employment."

"It prevents restricted access."

"I applied for records work."

"Records work has several levels."

"I need transfer logs."

The clerk's mouth tightened. "You need to complete the bond agreement first."

He slid a tablet toward her. The terms appeared in dense columns. Nara recognized the language from the clinic: biometric, permanent, subject to audit. This time, the declaration was shorter.

SECURITY BOND: SIX MONTHS BIOLOGICAL AGE-OFFSET.

She read the next line.

The bond would be held for the duration of her contract. It would be retained if she breached confidentiality, mishandled restricted data, or failed to complete the assigned term. The Exchange could extend the hold during an unresolved investigation.

Nara looked up. "You can extend it?"

"Under review conditions."

"Beyond six months?"

"If necessary."

"Necessary according to whom?"

"The Exchange."

The clerk tapped the screen. "You can decline."

"And lose the position."

"And lose access."

Nara thought of Sable's graph paper, the neat marks crossing one another until a debit disappeared into a later cycle. Six months was not a number on a page. It was stiffness in her hands, pain in her knees, the altered face the kiosk refused to recognize.

The clerk waited.

Nara placed her finger on the signature field.

"I accept."

The tablet warmed beneath her touch. A thin pulse moved through her fingertip, recording the bond. For one instant, her knees went cold. Then the sensation passed.

The clerk printed a narrow metal badge. Her photograph appeared on it, taken by the camera above the desk. Even reduced to a blur of pixels, the face looked older than the identity card in her pocket.

"Records floor," he said. "Lift three. Desk forty-two. Do not access files outside your assigned queue."

"What is my clearance?"

"Probationary."

"Can I open transfer logs?"

"Assigned logs."

"Can I search by donor reference?"

He looked at the screen. "If the reference is in your queue."

"D-4419-K?"

The clerk's eyes lifted.

The pause was brief. It was enough.

"That reference is not in your queue," he said.

"You haven't checked."

"I have."

The badge printer clicked. The clerk pushed it across the desk.

Nara clipped it to her coat. "Then assign it."

"That is not how the queue works."

"How does it work?"

"By authorization."

"Whose?"

The clerk looked beyond her toward the gate. "Move along."

The lift doors opened before she could answer. Inside, the walls were mirrored steel. Nara entered and watched the doors close over the lobby, over the amber light, over the woman carrying her blood away for review.

The lift descended first, then rose. Her ears clicked. A ventilation fan rattled overhead, filling the narrow space with a dry mechanical buzz.

At the records floor, the doors opened onto rows of terminals divided by waist-high partitions. No windows. No clocks. The air tasted faintly of dust and ozone. Hundreds of small screens glowed in the dimness, each displaying columns of dates, units, names, and status codes.

A supervisor met her beside the lift. He was thin, pale, and wore no badge except a black strip at his throat.

"Desk forty-two," he said.

Nara followed him through the rows. Her knees stiffened with every step. Workers did not look up, but their hands moved quickly over keyboards. Somewhere behind the partitions, a printer coughed out pages in steady bursts.

At desk forty-two, the supervisor placed a hand on the back of the chair. "Your queue is narrow."

"Because of the review."

"Because you're new."

"The gate marked me conditional."

"That happens."

"To people who sold ten years?"

"To people whose records don't align."

"My record aligns with the clinic."

"The Exchange is not the clinic."

He woke the terminal and entered her badge code. A queue populated the screen.

TRANSFER SETTLEMENTS - ROUTINE VERIFICATION.

The files were numbered, not named. Beside each was a status: CLEARED, CARRIED, CLOSED.

Nara sat. The chair's hard edge pressed into the backs of her thighs.

"Open the first," the supervisor said. "Confirm the donor debit equals the credited settlement. Flag discrepancies."

"And if I find one?"

"Flag it."

"Do I investigate?"

"No."

"Then what happens?"

"The reconciliation team investigates."

"Who is that?"

The supervisor looked at her. "You're not there yet."

He walked away before she could ask what yet meant.

Nara placed her hands on the keyboard. The plastic keys were worn smooth by use. She could feel the six-month bond like a second pulse beneath her skin, though she knew that was imagination. The Exchange had taken no visible piece of her. It had only made the loss conditional.

She opened the first file.

The screen filled with transfer data. Donor age. Contracted debit. Recipient account. Settlement amount. Reconcile status.

CLEARED.

The second file matched.

The third carried a small adjustment, properly documented.

The fourth opened with a warning.

RECONCILIATION EXCEPTION.

Nara leaned closer.

The donor debit showed 120 units. The public credit showed 120 units. The settlement had cleared. But beneath the visible record, a grey field displayed an additional reference.

INTERNAL BATCH LINK: D-4419-K.

Her breath stopped.

She clicked the field.

The terminal flashed red.

"Restricted cross-reference," it said. "Conditional users cannot retrieve linked records."

Nara looked toward the supervisor's desk. He was speaking to another clerk, his back turned.

She opened the file details instead. The page loaded slowly. A batch number appeared, followed by a category code she did not recognize.

The total debit and total credit did not match.

The difference was small: six units.

Six months, she thought, though the figures were not the same. Six units missing from a file linked to her donor reference. Six units carried somewhere else, or nowhere at all.

She reached for the transfer history.

The terminal went black.

A red bar appeared across the screen.

USER STATUS: UNDER SECONDARY REVIEW.

ACCESS TEMPORARILY SUSPENDED.

Nara tried the keyboard. Nothing happened.

The supervisor turned from across the floor. "Step away from the terminal."

"I opened an exception."

"Step away."

"The file doesn't reconcile."

"That is why you flag it."

"The linked record is blocked."

"Step away, Nara."

Her name carried farther than it should have. Several workers looked up.

Nara rose carefully. The terminal emitted a soft locking chime. Her badge pulsed once against her coat, then went dark.

"What happened?" she asked.

"Your sample review changed status."

"I was admitted."

"You were admitted conditionally."

"You gave me access."

"You had queue access."

"To files I can't read?"

The supervisor reached the desk and held out his hand. "Badge."

Nara did not move.

"Badge," he repeated.

"I signed the bond."

"And until review clears, your access is suspended."

"You can't suspend the bond."

"No," he said. "We can suspend you."

The words landed with bureaucratic calm. Behind him, the records floor resumed its work. Keys tapped. Printers coughed. The Exchange absorbed her interruption and continued counting.

Nara looked at the black screen. The file remained inside it now, the exception sealed behind her own name. She had seen enough to know the ledger was wrong, but not enough to prove how.

The supervisor took the badge from her coat.

"Return to intake," he said. "They'll tell you whether your application survives review."

Nara's knees hurt as she turned toward the lift. At the gate, her blood had made her conditional. At the records floor, the first file had confirmed what Sable warned her about and then vanished before she could retrieve it.

She had entered the Exchange.

She had opened the ledger.

Now the Exchange had locked her out, and somewhere behind the dark terminal, D-4419-K waited with its six missing units and no public name.

The Paediatric Batch

The supervisor's hand was still outstretched when Nara saw the archive door close behind him.

It stood at the far end of the records floor, marked only by a narrow strip of blue light. The door had opened twice while she worked: once for a courier carrying sealed cartridges, once for a woman in a grey uniform who had emerged with a stack of paper files pressed to her chest. No badge reader had flashed. No queue had appeared on any terminal.

Nara turned toward the lift.

Then she stopped.

"Return to intake," the supervisor called.

The lift waited with its doors open. Beyond it lay the lobby, the amber gate, the street, and the slow walk back to the viaduct. Sable had said proof required the original batch entry beside the reconcile record. The file on her screen had given Nara one piece of that proof and then locked itself away.

She had six missing units, a blocked reference, and no badge.

The archive door opened again.

Nara moved before the supervisor could reach her. Her knees protested as she crossed the floor, but the pain had become a kind of weather: unpleasant, predictable, survivable. She slipped between two partitions as a printer began coughing pages into a tray.

"Nara."

She did not look back.

The blue-lit door had no handle. A woman in grey emerged, and Nara caught it with her palm before it sealed. The woman's eyes dropped to Nara's empty coat where the metal badge had been.

"Restricted floor," she said.

"I was sent to intake."

"Then go to intake."

"My access was suspended."

"That is not my concern."

"Neither is the missing balance in your settlement files, apparently."

The woman's face tightened. "You should leave."

"Is that an order?"

"It is the safest advice you've received today."

Behind Nara, the supervisor's shoes struck the floor.

The woman glanced past her, then stepped aside. Not far. Just enough.

Nara went through.

The door sealed with a soft magnetic click. The noise of the records floor vanished, replaced by the low hum of refrigeration and the dry tick of a ventilation system. The corridor smelled of dust, hot wiring, and something medicinal beneath it.

The woman followed her in.

"You have perhaps thirty seconds," she said.

"Why help me?"

"I didn't."

A panel at the end of the corridor blinked red. The woman pressed her palm to it. The light turned white.

"Reconciliation room," she said. "If anyone asks, you followed me."

"Who are you?"

"Someone who wants to finish her shift."

The panel opened onto a narrow room lined with cabinets. No terminals stood on the desks. Instead, the walls held metal drawers, each sealed with a printed strip of codes. A single table occupied the centre. On it sat a glass reader, a portable camera, and a ledger bound in black material.

Nara's mouth went dry.

The woman pointed to the ledger. "You have twenty seconds."

"Why is it offline?"

"Because the online copy is clean."

The woman crossed to the door and watched the corridor through its small window.

Nara opened the ledger.

The pages were divided by batch number, category, broker stream, and settlement cycle. The ink had been printed in two colours. Black for legal transfers. Grey for supplemental entries.

She found D-4419-K on the third page.

The reference appeared beside a batch code.

PAE-17.

Nara read the line beneath it.

CATEGORY: PAEDIATRIC SUPPORT

SOURCE BLEND: CLINICAL / UNREGISTERED

PUBLIC CREDIT: PARTIAL

CARRY-FORWARD: SIX UNITS

Her fingers went cold.

"Paediatric," she whispered.

The woman at the door looked back. "Keep your voice down."

"What does source blend mean?"

"You know what it means."

"I need the broker."

Nara followed the columns. Three transfers were listed beneath the batch. One carried the Exchange's legal clinic code. The other two had no clinic names, only broker identifiers.

BR-04. BR-04.

The same broker had supplied both the registered and unregistered portions.

Nara lifted the portable camera. "Can I photograph this?"

"No."

"If I leave without it, the page disappears."

"It won't disappear."

"The terminal file did."

"That was because you opened it."

Nara raised the camera.

The woman seized her wrist. Her grip was stronger than Nara expected. Pain shot up through the joint, bright and immediate.

"Not with the network active," the woman said. "The room logs every device."

"Then how do I record it?"

The woman released her. "Turn the camera off. Use the lens manually."

Nara stared at the device.

"Offline mode," the woman said. "No transmission. No timestamp from the Exchange."

"You know how to do that."

"I know how to finish my shift."

Nara switched off the network indicator and opened the camera housing. The screen went black. She could still see the image through the small optical window.

She photographed the page.

The shutter made a faint mechanical click.

The woman flinched at the sound.

Nara photographed the next page. The same broker code appeared beside another paediatric batch. This one contained a legal donor debit, a public treatment credit, and a grey supplemental entry marked UNREGISTERED SOURCE. The missing units were not six this time. They were eighteen.

"Why are paediatric batches being blended?" Nara asked.

"They are high priority."

"That isn't an answer."

"It is the answer they use."

"Children can't consent to age transfers."

"Neither can most adults in debt."

Nara turned the page. "Where do the unregistered units come from?"

"Bodies that are not supposed to be in the system."

"Then why are they in the system?"

The woman looked through the door window. The supervisor had reached the corridor.

"You have ten seconds."

Nara saw another column near the bottom of the page.

APPROVAL: DIRECTORIAL REVIEW

STATUS: ACCEPTED

AUTHORITY: D-9

She photographed it.

The supervisor's voice came through the door. "Open the room."

The woman stepped away from the window. "Put it back."

Nara turned the page once more.

A signature block appeared beneath the batch totals. It was not a name, only a digital authorization converted into print.

DIRECTOR APPROVAL: D-9

BLENDED SOURCE ACCEPTED FOR SETTLEMENT

PUBLIC DISCLOSURE NOT REQUIRED

The woman reached for the ledger.

Nara held it open. "Who is D-9?"

"You don't have time."

"Who?"

The woman's expression hardened. "The director."

The door lock began to buzz.

Nara photographed the approval line and closed the ledger. She returned it to the table just as the woman pressed her palm to the release panel.

The door opened.

The supervisor stood outside with the grey-uniformed woman's manager, a tall man whose clean collar made him look untouched by the archive's dust.

"Nara," the supervisor said. "You were instructed to report to intake."

"I was looking for the lift."

"Inside a secured reconciliation room?"

"I followed her."

The manager looked at the woman in grey. "Did she?"

The woman's face remained blank. "She entered behind me."

The supervisor stepped toward Nara. "Your employment review is closed."

"Because I opened a file your system marked as unreconciled?"

"Because you entered a restricted room without authorization."

"I had no badge."

"That is precisely the problem."

Nara felt the camera's weight against her palm. Its casing was warm from her grip. The photographs sat inside it, unwritten to the Exchange network and invisible to the terminals.

The manager held out his hand. "Device."

Nara's fingers closed around it.

"It's personal," she said.

"You are on Exchange property."

"Then search me."

The manager smiled without warmth. "We may."

The woman in grey shifted half a step, blocking the corridor camera's view of Nara's hand.

"Give it back," she murmured.

Nara looked at her.

"Now," the woman said.

Nara slipped the camera into the inside pocket of her coat.

The supervisor caught her arm. "Do not make this worse."

The grip pressed into the tender place where the needle had pierced her thumb earlier. Nara thought of the six-month bond, held against her body while the Exchange decided whether she had behaved correctly. She thought of the kiosk rejecting her face and the public register refusing to print the name behind D-4419-K.

"Worse for whom?" she asked.

The supervisor pulled her toward the lift.

At intake, the clerk sat beneath the same white lights, his screen already displaying Nara's file. The recruitment card was still folded around the receipt in her pocket. The clerk did not ask for it.

"Employment terminated," he said.

"My bond?"

"Under review."

"You said it would be held for the contract."

"The contract has ended."

"Then return the six months."

His eyes moved briefly to the line beside her name. "The review is unresolved."

"Because you locked me out."

"Because your conduct triggered review."

Nara leaned over the desk. Her back ached from the corridor and her knees were beginning to shake. "Your own batch records show a blended paediatric source approved by the director."

The clerk's face did not change, but the fingers of his left hand stopped moving.

"I don't know what you mean."

"BR-04."

The clerk looked at the camera in her coat as if he could see through the fabric.

"Leave the building," he said.

"Who is D-9?"

The clerk lowered his voice. "You should not have seen that."

The answer was not a denial.

Nara straightened. "Then you know it exists."

"I know you are no longer employed."

"Does Ivo's treatment appear in one of those batches?"

The clerk went still.

For one second, the Exchange's clean language failed him. His mouth opened, then closed. The screen beside him refreshed, and a treatment settlement flashed across the display before he covered it with his hand.

Nara saw only part of the code.

PAE-21.

Her pulse stumbled.

"Open it," she said.

The clerk's hand remained over the screen. "Go."

"Was his course funded through PAE-21?"

"You are not authorized to ask."

"Was it?"

The supervisor appeared behind her. "Enough."

Nara turned. The lobby gate stood open. Rain silvered the pavement beyond the glass. Her knees hurt, her wrist throbbed, and the camera pressed against her ribs like a second, hidden heart.

She walked out.

The Exchange doors shut behind her with a pneumatic sigh. On the pavement, traffic hissed through standing water. Nara rested one hand against the cold stone wall until the dizziness passed.

She had gone in looking for six missing units.

She had found a paediatric code, a shared broker, and a director's approval printed beneath the word unregistered.

Now she had a second batch number.

PAE-21.

Nara took out her phone and opened the hospital message she had saved from the morning of her sale. Ivo's treatment authorization sat beneath his name. She compared the reference to the number in her memory.

PAE-21.

The same batch had funded his course.

Her hand tightened around the phone. She could see Ivo in the ward, healthier but still fragile, asking what she had done. She could hear herself promising to visit, promising that everything was settled.

Behind her, through the Exchange glass, the supervisor lifted a phone to his ear.

Nara slipped the camera deeper into her coat and started toward the transit station. The photographs were still there. The evidence had survived.

But the clean payment that had saved Ivo was no longer clean enough to touch.

The Donor Was Her Classmate

The hospital corridor clock had lost its minute hand.

Nara noticed it while the lift climbed toward the ward, the remaining hour hand fixed between two and three. A nurse passed beneath it carrying a tray of sealed cartridges, and the metal rims chimed softly with each step. Nara kept the portable camera pressed beneath her coat.

She needed one answer before she saw Ivo. The batch code proved where his treatment money had passed. It did not prove whose body had paid for it. Until she knew that, the photographs were an accusation without a person inside them.

At the ward desk, the nurse glanced at Nara's face, then at the identity card she offered.

"The photograph is difficult to match," the nurse said.

"It's me."

"I know." The nurse returned the card. "Bed twelve is awake."

Ivo sat upright when Nara entered. The ward's blinds were half closed against the morning glare, striping his blanket with pale bars. A clear line ran from the infusion stand to the port in his arm. His cheeks had filled out since the clinic. He looked less like someone being kept alive and more like someone waiting to become well.

"You came," he said.

"I said I would."

"You said tomorrow."

"It is tomorrow."

His smile appeared, then faltered. "You look worse."

Nara set her bag beneath the chair. "Good morning to you too."

"I mean it." He studied her hands. "Your wrist is swollen."

"It caught on a door."

"What kind of door catches a wrist?"

"One at the Exchange."

The word changed his expression. "You went back?"

"I had to."

"For what?"

Nara pulled out the chair. Her knees complained as she sat. "To check something."

"You already checked. Your debt is cleared. My course is paid."

"I know."

"Then what are you checking?"

The infusion pump clicked. Somewhere behind the curtain, a patient coughed twice and settled.

Nara looked at the line entering his arm. PAE-21 sat in her mind like a stain beneath glass.

"Your treatment authorization," she said. "Can I see it?"

Ivo's brows drew together. "Why?"

"I need to compare the batch reference."

"You think they made a mistake?"

"I don't know."

"You keep saying that."

He reached toward the bedside table and picked up the folded authorization sheet. His fingers shook slightly. He handed it to her.

Nara unfolded it.

The printed code was there: PAE-21. Beneath it, the settlement status read COMPLETE. The donor field had been left blank.

She had expected the blank. She had not expected the small grey mark beneath it, almost hidden by the fold.

INTERNAL SOURCE VERIFICATION: K-17.

Her breath caught.

Ivo watched her face. "What?"

"Nothing."

"That isn't nothing."

She read the code again. K-17. The archive ledger had listed the donor references in a separate column, and the photograph she had taken showed only part of the page. She had seen D-4419-K attached to PAE-17, not PAE-21. The two codes were close enough to suggest a pattern, not close enough to prove identity.

"I need the original file," she said.

"It's right there."

"The Exchange copy."

"Why?"

"Because this has been altered."

Ivo pulled the paper from her hands. "By whom?"

"I don't know."

"You said your debt was settled."

"It was."

"And now you're telling me the treatment is altered?"

"No. I'm telling you the record may be."

His eyes sharpened. "Did you pay for this?"

Nara held his gaze.

The question had lived between them since the clinic. She had answered it with exhaustion, with visits postponed, with the clean language of settlement. I found a way. It's handled. Rest.

Ivo's hand tightened on the authorization. "Nara."

"I used money from the transfer."

"What transfer?"

The ward seemed to contract around the bed.

Nara looked toward the glass door. No one stood outside. The nurse at the desk was speaking into a phone, her back turned.

"I sold time," Nara said.

Ivo went very still.

"How much?"

"Enough."

"How much?"

Nara folded the authorization along its old crease. "Ten years."

His face lost what little colour it had gained. "You sold ten years of your life for my debt?"

"It cleared the debt."

"You said you found a way."

"I did."

"You said you were tired."

"I was."

"Your face - "

"I know."

Ivo lowered his eyes to the paper. His breathing became shallow. The infusion pump continued its patient clicking.

"Does the treatment come from your sale?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then why are you looking for something else?"

Nara's fingers closed around the edge of the sheet. She could tell him about the hidden ledger. The unregistered bodies. The paediatric batches. The director's approval. She could tell him that his recovery had been tied to a system that debited people without giving them public existence.

She could tell him that the donor might be someone they had both known.

Instead, she said, "Because the records don't match."

"That's all?"

"For now."

Ivo looked at her. "You're still hiding something."

Nara slid the authorization back onto the table. "You need to finish the course."

"That's not your decision."

"It is if you stop treatment because you feel guilty."

"Guilty?" His voice cracked. "You changed your body and you want me to lie here and accept it?"

"I want you alive."

"Alive on what terms?"

The question struck harder than the supervisor's grip.

Nara stood. Her knees nearly buckled, and she caught the bed rail. Ivo reached for her, but she moved away before he could touch her.

"I'll come back later," she said.

"Nara."

"I need to verify the donor."

"Why?"

She could not tell him. Not while the answer was still a possibility with a face waiting behind it.

"I'll come back," she repeated.

She left the authorization on the table.

In the corridor, the hospital's floor polish reflected her in broken pieces. Her older face moved beside the younger faces on the passing visitors, never quite belonging to the body beneath it. She took the portable camera from her coat and checked the photographs with her thumb.

The image of PAE-21 was blurred at the lower edge. The donor column had been cut off by shadow. Only the first characters remained visible.

K-17.

She needed the archive ledger. She needed Sable.

The repair shop under the east viaduct was closed, but the side door opened when Nara knocked twice and once more after a pause. Sable stood behind it in a dark sweater, her hair uncombed. She looked at Nara's face, then at the camera in her hand.

"You went to the hospital first," Sable said.

"How do you know?"

"You have the look of someone who has been asked a question she couldn't answer."

Nara entered. The shop below was silent except for the ticking of a cooling engine. Sable led her up to the office. The graph paper still lay on the desk beneath the old memorandum, its carried-forward marks undisturbed.

Nara placed the camera beside them.

"I need you to identify a reference."

Sable did not touch it. "No."

"You haven't seen it."

"I know what you photographed."

"Then you know why I'm here."

"I know why you think you're here."

Nara unlocked the camera and displayed the image. The hidden ledger filled the small screen. PAE-21. The grey source column. The partial code.

Sable's face changed.

"K-17," Nara said. "What is it?"

Sable sat down slowly. "Where did you get that?"

"From Ivo's treatment authorization."

"That code is not a donor number."

"It's in the internal source field."

"It's a class designation."

Nara felt the room tilt. "Class?"

"Cohort. The Exchange used them for intake groups before the clinics moved to individual references."

"Tell me."

Sable stared at the image. "K-17 was a school cohort."

"Which school?"

Sable's silence answered first.

Nara leaned over the desk. "Which school?"

"The north district secondary."

Nara's throat tightened. She knew the school. She knew the cracked blue tiles in the entrance hall, the assembly room with its dead ventilation fan, the names written beneath the desks. She had left twelve years ago, carrying a certificate and a photograph in which every face looked unaltered.

"Who was in K-17?"

"Students enrolled in the voluntary health initiative."

"Voluntary."

Sable's mouth twisted. "That was the word on the forms."

Nara searched the photograph on the camera again. Beneath the batch code, a line of smaller text had been captured by the lens.

SOURCE COHORT: K-17

DONOR RECORD: SEE LEGACY INDEX

"Where is the legacy index?"

"Destroyed."

"You expect me to believe that?"

"No. I expect you to understand that it was removed."

"By whom?"

Sable looked toward the window. Traffic moved beneath the viaduct, its tyres hissing over wet pavement.

Nara opened the camera's image settings and enlarged the lower corner. A string of characters emerged from the blur.

K17-04-19.

Sable reached for the camera, but Nara pulled it back.

"Do you recognize it?"

Sable's hand remained suspended. "Yes."

"Say the name."

"I can't."

"You were paid to keep quiet. You told me that."

"I told you a broker paid for my discretion."

"You didn't tell me what the silence protected."

Sable stood. "Go home."

"Who was K17-04-19?"

"Nara."

The sound of her own name in Sable's mouth made the room colder.

"Say it."

Sable closed her eyes. "Mara."

Nara did not understand at first. The name belonged to a girl with ink on her fingers and a habit of biting the corner from every examination paper. Mara had sat two rows ahead of Nara in mathematics. She had copied Nara's notes and complained that the school windows made everyone look ill. At seventeen, Mara had vanished from the cohort after a clinic appointment her parents described as routine.

Nara had thought she moved away.

"Mara was the donor," Nara said.

Sable opened her eyes.

"For PAE-21."

"Yes."

The camera slipped in Nara's hand. She caught it against the desk.

"She was alive when they took the years?"

"I don't know."

"You don't know?"

"I knew the reference. I knew the debit appeared in the legacy stream. I didn't know whose name sat behind it until now."

"You knew enough to be paid."

Sable flinched.

Nara pulled the authorization from her coat and laid it beside the camera. "Ivo is receiving treatment funded by her transfer."

"Funded partly by it."

"Don't make the fraction cleaner."

"I'm not."

"You helped them hide her."

"I helped hide the pattern."

"The pattern was people."

Sable's face hardened. "You think I don't know that?"

"I think you accepted money not to know it."

The words struck. Sable turned away, bracing both hands against the desk.

Nara saw the old memorandum beneath her palms. UNRESOLVED DEBITS
SHALL BE CARRIED FORWARD TO THE NEXT CYCLE.

"Did Mara consent?" Nara asked.

Sable said nothing.

"Did she know she was in a paediatric batch?"

"No."

"Did her family receive payment?"

"I don't know."

"Did anyone tell them where her years went?"

Sable's shoulders lowered. "No."

Nara picked up the treatment authorization. The paper trembled between her fingers.

She could take it back to Ivo. She could place Mara's name in his hands and watch the guilt enter him. She could tell him that every improvement in his body had been purchased through a chain of consent forms designed to conceal the person at the beginning of it.

Instead, she folded the paper and returned it to her coat.

"You're not telling him," Sable said.

"I'm not telling him yet."

"That is not the same as protecting him."

"It's the only protection I have left."

Sable looked at her. "You're becoming very good at their language."

Nara took the camera. "You taught me."

She turned toward the stairs.

"Nara," Sable said.

Nara stopped.

"I didn't know it was Mara."

"You knew it was someone."

"Yes."

"And you stayed silent."

Sable's eyes shone, but no tears fell. "I was paid to."

Nara looked at the door, at the dark stairwell beyond it.

"So was everyone else," she said.

Outside, the rain had begun again. She walked toward the hospital with the camera hidden beneath her coat and Mara's name sealed behind her teeth. Ivo would ask what she had found. He would ask why she had gone quiet.

Nara would tell him the records were still under review.

The lie was small enough to fit in a sentence.

It was also the only thing standing between him and the knowledge that his recovery had been financed by someone who once sat beside her in class.

When Nara reached the ward, she did not go inside. Through the glass, she saw Ivo asleep beneath the striped blinds, one hand resting near the empty chair.

She stood there until the nurse dimmed the corridor lights.

Then she turned away, carrying the photograph, the hidden file, and Mara's name alone.

The Inspection Clock

Nara was halfway down the hospital stairs when the message arrived.

She caught the rail with one hand and read it beneath the emergency light.

NEW TRANSFER COMPLIANCE ACT. IMPLEMENTATION: 06:00 TOMORROW.
ALL UNRECONCILED BATCHES SUBJECT TO AUTOMATED PURGE BEFORE
INSPECTION.

The words blurred. Her knees had begun to ache again, a deep pressure behind the joints that made each step uncertain. She read the message twice, then opened the attached notice.

The Exchange would close its legacy reconciliation window at midnight. Any batch without a public match would be consolidated, sealed, or destroyed under the new law. Inspection would begin in seventy-two hours.

Nara looked through the stairwell window toward Ivo's ward. The corridor lights had dimmed. His room was only a pale rectangle behind the glass.

Mara's name remained in her mouth, unsaid.

She turned away from the ward and called Teo.

He answered on the fourth ring. "Where are you?"

"Leaving the hospital."

"That doesn't answer me."

"I need access to the Exchange loading annex."

There was a pause filled with traffic noise on his end. "No."

"The new law triggers a purge at midnight."

"I know."

"Then you know what's in those records."

"I know what happens to people who keep touching them."

"I need the ledger before it disappears."

"Go home, Nara."

"I'm not asking permission."

"You're asking me to help."

"I'm asking whether the annex still receives physical reconciliation packets."

Another pause.

"Freight intake on the lower concourse," Teo said. "The old transit line runs beneath it. Shift change is at twenty-three hundred."

"Can I get inside?"

"Not with your badge."

"The badge is gone."

"I remember."

"Then tell me how."

His voice hardened. "You already sold ten years. You gave them six months as a bond. How much more are you planning to hand over?"

Nara looked at her reflection in the stairwell glass. The hospital's blue light made her face seem borrowed.

"Enough to keep the records alive."

"That isn't an answer."

"It's the only one I have."

Teo exhaled. "There's a service door beneath Platform Nine. The lock still accepts old Exchange credentials, sometimes. If it opens, don't stay. If it doesn't, leave."

"Who can receive the evidence?"

"An auditor."

"Which auditor?"

"Junior staff. Internal inspection team. I'll send a contact."

"Teo - "

"Stop saying my name like I'm bringing you back."

The call ended.

Nara stood with the phone against her ear until the screen went dark. Then she climbed the remaining stairs and stepped into the night.

Rain had washed the pavement clean, but the gutters carried a thin grey foam from the hospital vents. She walked toward the transit station, the portable camera tight beneath her coat, the treatment authorization folded behind her receipt. The paper edges pressed into her ribs with every step.

At Platform Nine, the service stairs were blocked by a yellow barrier. Nara lifted it and descended.

The air changed below ground. It smelled of rust, wet concrete, and overheated brakes. Old advertisements peeled from the tiled walls, their smiling faces promising restored years and painless extensions. A train thundered through the adjacent tunnel, shaking grit from the ceiling.

Nara found the service door beneath a dead security lamp. She took out the recruitment card Sable had given her. The printed code was nearly worn away from use.

She pressed it to the reader.

Nothing happened.

She tried again.

A green line appeared, then turned amber.

"Credential expired," the door said.

Nara leaned close to the speaker. "Secondary access. Records employment review."

"Credential expired."

"I was terminated during an unresolved review."

"Credential expired."

She looked at the metal plate beneath the reader. A narrow maintenance seam ran along its edge. Nara took the transfer receipt from her pocket and slid its stiff corner into the seam.

The plate shifted.

Inside, two wires crossed beneath a film of dust. She remembered the gate's warning, the supervisor's hand, the grey-uniformed woman telling her to use the camera offline. The Exchange built its systems to assume obedience. It had not built them to withstand someone who had already lost what it could threaten.

Nara touched the wires together.

The door unlocked.

A bell sounded somewhere inside the annex.

She pushed through.

The loading floor stretched beneath the Exchange like a buried machine. Conveyors ran along the walls. Sealed cases moved beneath blue inspection lights, each marked with batch codes and destination seals. The air was cold enough to stiffen her fingers. Forklifts reversed with high electronic beeps.

A man in a dark loading vest saw her near the door.

"Restricted floor," he called.

Nara kept walking. "Records retrieval."

"Your badge?"

"Recalled for review."

"Then you don't have access."

"I'm here for the purge packets."

The man stopped. "There aren't any purge packets."

A conveyor behind him clicked and stopped. Three black cases rolled to a halt beneath the lights.

Nara saw the labels.

PAE-17. PAE-21. LEGACY CONSOLIDATION.

Her mouth dried.

"The law requires physical retention," she said.

"It requires disposal."

"Not before inspection."

"Inspection starts after disposal."

The man reached for his radio.

Nara moved first. She crossed to the nearest case and dropped to one knee. Her body protested sharply, pain running from her knees into her lower back. She ignored it and pulled the latch.

The case opened.

Inside lay a stack of thin polymer sheets, each printed with transfer references and settlement marks. Grey lines ran through the black text. The hidden ledger was no longer hidden in a room. It was being packed for removal.

The man seized her shoulder. "Step away."

Nara twisted free and grabbed the top packet.

The first page carried D-4419-K.

The second listed PAE-21, source cohort K-17, and a series of supplemental debits. The third contained the approval code D-9 and a broker settlement tied to BR-04.

She took out the portable camera.

"Don't," the man said.

The camera clicked.

A forklift alarm began to pulse behind them.

Nara photographed the pages as quickly as she could. Her fingers shook, and the cold made the shutter stiff. The man reached for her again. She moved around the open case, keeping it between them.

"Put that down."

"Call your supervisor."

"I am calling security."

"Then call inspection."

He hesitated.

Nara saw the hesitation and understood it. The new law had not made the workers loyal. It had only made them afraid of being named in the wrong file.

She photographed the final page.

The man's radio crackled. "Loading annex, report unauthorized entry."

Nara closed the case and ran.

The corridor narrowed beyond the loading floor. Her knees buckled on the first turn, and she struck the wall with her palm. A hot pulse flared through her wrist. Behind her, boots slapped against the concrete.

The service door stood open at the far end.

She reached it just as a security shutter began descending.

Nara dropped to the floor and slid beneath the shutter. Metal scraped the back of her coat. She rolled onto the transit concourse, gasping, while the shutter slammed down behind her.

For several seconds she could hear nothing except the blood in her ears and the distant rumble of trains.

Then footsteps approached from the dark.

Nara pushed herself upright.

A young woman in a charcoal inspection coat stood beside the abandoned ticket machines. Her badge carried the Exchange seal and a narrow blue stripe.

"You're Nara," the woman said.

Nara kept one hand inside her coat. "Who are you?"

"Junior auditor."

"Teo gave you my name?"

"He gave me a route. You gave me the rest."

Nara glanced toward the shutter. "They're going to search the concourse."

"They won't come through that door without a warrant."

"You have one?"

"Not yet."

The auditor held out her hand. "Evidence."

Nara did not move.

The woman lowered her voice. "The new law gives inspection authority to junior auditors if a live discrepancy is reported before the purge. I can open a preservation request, but I need a source file."

"You want the camera?"

"I want something the Exchange cannot call hearsay."

Nara felt the camera against her ribs. Its photographs were enough to prove the pages existed, perhaps not enough to prove where they came from.

"I need time to copy the ledger," she said.

"You have until midnight."

"It's already past eleven."

"Then you have less than an hour."

The auditor pointed toward a maintenance alcove beside the closed ticket office. "There's an old data terminal in there. It isn't connected to the Exchange

network.”

Nara followed her through the narrow opening. The alcove smelled of damp insulation and machine oil. A terminal sat beneath a plastic cover, its screen dark.

The auditor removed the cover and woke it with a key.

“What do I call you?” Nara asked.

“Not here.”

“Then what do I call you?”

The woman looked at her. “Auditor is fine.”

Nara inserted the camera’s storage module.

The terminal recognized the files. One by one, the photographs appeared: PAE-17, PAE-21, D-9, BR-04, the grey supplemental columns, the missing units carried forward into later cycles.

The auditor’s face tightened as she read.

“This is enough to open preservation,” she said.

“Not enough to expose the ledger.”

“No. But enough to stop the purge if the request reaches inspection.”

“Will it?”

“If I send it through the ordinary channel, someone can bury it.”

“Then don’t use the ordinary channel.”

The auditor met her eyes. “I have a secure route.”

“You said you were junior.”

“I am.”

“Then why do you have a secure route?”

“Because junior auditors are the ones sent to certify clean records after everyone else has altered them.”

A train passed beneath the concourse. The terminal trembled. Dust drifted from the ceiling.

Nara removed the storage module. "Can you preserve the physical packets?"

"If I file the request before midnight."

"Then file it."

"I need the original images."

"You'll get them."

"Now."

Nara looked at the camera. The photographs were her only proof that Mara's years, and the years of the other unregistered bodies, had entered the Exchange's machinery. If she surrendered it, she might never see it again.

The auditor did not reach for it. "You don't trust me."

"I don't trust anyone who works for the Exchange."

"I don't trust the Exchange either."

"That isn't the same thing."

"No," the auditor said. "It's why I'm still here."

Nara thought of Sable's office, the graph paper beneath her hands, the money accepted in exchange for silence. She thought of Ivo asleep behind hospital glass, healthier because of a treatment funded by a record designed to disappear.

"Make the request," Nara said. "I'll give you a copy."

The auditor opened a blank file. "Two copies."

"What?"

"One for inspection. One for whoever tries to stop inspection."

Nara studied her.

The woman's mouth tightened. "You came here to preserve evidence. Don't let your fear turn one copy into another single point of failure."

Nara inserted the camera again.

The terminal's copying light began to blink. It moved slowly through the images, each transfer marked by a soft electronic click. Outside the alcove, trains arrived and departed. Voices echoed across the concourse. Once, security boots passed near the maintenance door and continued on.

At 23:58, the first copy finished.

The auditor removed the storage module and placed it in a sealed evidence sleeve. "This goes to inspection."

Nara took the camera and connected it again.

The second copy began.

Her legs had gone numb from crouching. When she tried to stand, pain caught beneath her knees. She gripped the terminal and waited for the room to steady.

The auditor watched her. "You need medical attention."

"I need the second copy."

"You've already lost ten years."

"And the Exchange still has six months of me."

"That bond may be void under the new law."

"May be."

The terminal chimed.

The second copy was complete.

Nara removed the module and held it between two fingers. It was no larger than a fingernail, black and shining beneath the alcove light.

The auditor extended her hand.

Nara closed her fist.

"No," she said.

The auditor did not react. "You're keeping it."

"I'm keeping one."

"Where?"

Nara looked down at her boots. The left one had a loose inner seam from the walk beneath the viaduct. She sat, pulled it off, and worked her fingers beneath the lining. The leather had softened around the heel. She slid the storage module into the gap and pressed the seam closed.

The copy disappeared beneath her foot.

The auditor sealed the evidence sleeve around the first.

"Send it," Nara said.

"I will."

"Not tomorrow."

"Before midnight."

The concourse clock clicked over.

00:00.

Somewhere above them, the Exchange's old records began to vanish.

The auditor opened her coat and withdrew a narrow transmitter. Its indicator glowed blue.

"I can take evidence," she said. "Not anonymously. Not safely. But I can take it."

Nara looked toward the shuttered service door. Behind it, the loading annex held the paper originals, and the Exchange had begun deciding which bodies would remain visible.

"Then take it," she said.

The auditor entered a final authorization. The transmitter gave a quiet pulse.

Nara stood on the boot containing the second copy, her aged knees trembling beneath her. For the first time since the hospital, she was no longer carrying the evidence alone.

But the Exchange had started its purge, and the route out now ran through the people who had built the gate.

The Cure for Silence

“Send the second file,” the auditor said. “If inspection receives it, they can’t call the first copy incomplete.”

Nara stood in the maintenance alcove with one boot half-laced, the storage module hidden beneath its loosened seam. Her knees shook from the crouch, and the cold from the service tunnel had climbed through her trousers into her hips. Beyond the alcove, the transit concourse lay empty except for a dead ticket screen pulsing blue.

“You said one copy was enough,” Nara replied.

“I said it was enough to open preservation. Not enough to survive a challenge.”

The auditor held the evidence sleeve against her chest. The photographs inside showed the pages Nara had taken in the loading annex: PAE-17, PAE-21, the grey supplemental entries, the director’s approval, and the legacy consolidation packet waiting to be destroyed. The sleeve looked absurdly thin for what it contained.

“Your request is active?” Nara asked.

“For now.”

“And the physical packets?”

“Inspection has acknowledged the preservation order. That does not mean the loading floor will obey it.”

A metallic thud rolled through the tunnel. Somewhere behind the sealed shutter, machinery restarted. The sound travelled along the concrete like a warning.

Nara pulled the boot tight and pressed her heel to the floor. The module remained hidden. “Then send the file.”

The auditor’s transmitter gave a small, uncertain blink. “I need the original sequence.”

"You have the first copy."

"I need the second."

Nara looked toward the service door. They had come through it less than ten minutes earlier, escaping the annex before the purge teams sealed the lower levels. The Exchange had built the tunnel for freight, not people. Its walls sweated cold water, and the air smelled of rust, wet dust, and overheated insulation. Every few seconds, a distant relay clicked.

The auditor extended her hand.

Nara did not take the module from her boot.

"What happens to PAE-21 if inspection opens the file?" she asked.

The auditor's expression changed by a fraction. "It becomes evidence."

"What happens to the treatment?"

"That depends on what inspection finds."

"I asked what happens to the treatment."

"Your brother's course is already underway."

"Ivo is still in the ward."

"I know."

"He's fragile. His debt is cleared, but the treatment authorization says the course depends on the settlement remaining valid."

The auditor lowered her hand. "The authorization can be challenged."

"By whom?"

"By the Exchange. By the broker. By the clinic if the funding source is voided."

Nara heard the sentence settle between them. It was not a threat. That made it worse.

"You knew this before you asked for the file."

"I knew exposure would have consequences."

"For Ivo."

"For everyone in the batches."

Nara's fingers curled against her palm. Beneath the boot, the second copy pressed into the worn lining. One file could preserve the evidence. The other could make it impossible to erase. The choice had seemed simple in the alcove, while the terminal light blinked and midnight crossed the clock.

Now the tunnel had made room for the cost.

The auditor's transmitter crackled.

A voice came through, distorted by static. "Inspection channel. Confirm source identity."

The auditor lifted the device. "Source remains unregistered. Evidence includes physical packet images and linked treatment settlement."

"Confirm beneficiary."

The auditor looked at Nara.

Nara said nothing.

"Confirm beneficiary," the voice repeated.

The auditor's mouth tightened. "PAE-21 beneficiary is under active clinical treatment."

"Name?"

The tunnel seemed to narrow.

"Nara," the auditor said.

The transmitter clicked off.

Nara stared at her. "You gave them his name."

"They already had the settlement."

"Not the connection."

"They would have found it."

"Not before the files were secured."

The auditor stepped closer. "If I had concealed the beneficiary, the request would have been rejected for incomplete disclosure."

"So you disclosed him."

"I disclosed the record."

"You disclosed Ivo."

The auditor's face remained composed, but her hand tightened around the transmitter. "I'm not asking you to trust me. I'm asking you to understand that the system is already moving."

Nara thought of Ivo beneath the ward's striped blinds, his face fuller than it had been before the clinic, one hand resting near the empty chair. He had asked her what terms he was alive on. She had left him with the treatment authorization and a lie small enough to fit in a sentence.

The auditor glanced toward the service door. "There's someone in the tunnel."

Nara heard it then: a soft scrape against concrete, followed by the measured tap of a shoe.

The auditor reached inside her coat.

"Don't," Nara whispered.

"I have no weapon."

"Then don't reach for anything."

The footsteps stopped beyond the bend.

A voice carried through the dark. "Nara."

She knew the voice. It had spoken through the clinic's settlement line when the payment cleared. It had appeared in the Exchange's restricted files beside BR-04. The broker had never given her a face, only a code and the confidence of someone protected by other people's signatures.

"Come out," the voice said. "The auditor can leave."

The auditor moved between Nara and the tunnel mouth.

The voice gave a quiet laugh. "She has no authority down here."

"Inspection does," the auditor called.

"Inspection has a preservation request. That is not the same as control."

A figure appeared at the bend. The light from the dead ticket screen caught one sleeve, a dark coat without an Exchange badge. The broker stayed just beyond the strongest pool of blue.

Nara felt the second copy beneath her foot.

"What do you want?" she asked.

"To prevent a medical interruption."

The auditor's jaw tightened. "You're threatening a patient."

"I'm describing a funding condition."

"You're outside the clinical chain."

"I'm inside the settlement chain. PAE-21 is supported by a blended source. If the source is found unlawful, the clinic must suspend disbursement pending review."

"His treatment is legal," Nara said.

"The treatment is legal. Its funding is under question."

"You knew that when you took the transfer."

"I knew the transfer would clear his debt."

"You knew what the hidden ledger contained."

The broker stepped into the light. Nara saw a narrow face, pale from the tunnel's cold, and a silver pin at the collar shaped like the Exchange seal with its centre removed.

"I knew several things," the broker said. "I knew your debt was urgent. I knew Ivo's course could not wait for a public appeal. I knew you would sign when the counsellor placed the authorization in front of you."

"You knew I was buying his treatment with a missing donor."

"I knew the clinic would accept the settlement."

"Did you know Mara's name?"

The broker's gaze settled on her. "Names are not part of my work."

"That is how you keep saying you have clean hands."

"I have never claimed clean hands."

The auditor raised the transmitter. "Inspection is listening."

"Then let them listen." The broker looked at Nara. "I can keep the course funded."

Her body reacted before her mind did. A loosening in her chest. A sudden, shameful image of Ivo sitting upright, colour returning to his face, the infusion pump clicking beside him.

"How?" she asked.

"Through a private continuation account. The clinic will receive payment from a legal donor pool. No interruption. No review. No public challenge to PAE-21."

"And what do I give you?"

"Nothing new. You stop transmitting."

The auditor turned toward her. "Nara."

The broker continued. "Withdraw the preservation request. Give me the second copy. The first can remain with inspection as an incomplete record. They will spend months arguing over its origin. By then, Ivo's course will be finished."

Nara looked at the evidence sleeve in the auditor's hand. The first copy showed enough to begin, perhaps enough to expose the batches. But it did not contain the full sequence. It did not show every carried-forward debit or the link between Mara's cohort and the later settlements.

The second file did.

The broker knew it.

"What happens to the people in the legacy consolidation?" Nara asked.

"The records will be closed."

"Closed."

"Consolidated into an administrative correction."

"The bodies remain debited."

"The system does not reverse completed transfers."

"Then the correction is another name for theft."

The broker's face did not change. "You're asking for a moral outcome from a financial system."

"No. I'm asking for a record that says what happened."

"And I'm offering your brother a cure."

The word entered her like a hook.

The auditor lowered the transmitter. "Nara, if you hand over the copy, the preservation request may still stand, but the strongest evidence will be gone."

"If she sends it," the broker said, "the clinic receives a suspension notice before morning rounds."

Nara imagined the ward. The disinfectant smell. The blue stripes of light across Ivo's blanket. His hand reaching for her when she nearly fell against the bed rail. His voice asking whether she had paid for his life.

She had already sold ten years. She had already let the Exchange take six months as a bond. She had already made Mara's hidden death of consent part of Ivo's recovery without telling him.

The broker watched her struggle. "You do not need to become a martyr."

"I'm not."

"You can keep him alive."

"You mean I can keep him funded."

“For him, the distinction is academic.”

Nara looked down at her boot.

The module was warm from her foot. It contained the names the Exchange had stripped away, the numbers it intended to bury, the proof that Ivo’s health had been built on a chain leading back to Mara and the other students in K-17.

If she kept it, Ivo might lose the course.

If she surrendered it, the people who had been debited without public credit would remain invisible.

Her mouth tasted of metal.

“Give me the transmitter,” she said to the auditor.

The auditor hesitated.

“Nara,” the broker warned.

She held out her hand. “I’m sending the file.”

The auditor placed the transmitter in her palm.

The device was colder than she expected. Its casing vibrated faintly, waiting for authorization. Nara sat against the tunnel wall and pulled off her boot. Her fingers had stiffened, and the first attempt at opening the seam failed. She tore the lining with her key.

The storage module slid into her hand.

The broker took one step forward. “If you do this, the course stops.”

Nara inserted the module into the transmitter.

The screen lit with the copied ledger sequence. PAE-17. PAE-21. K-17. K17-04-19. The director’s approval. The broker stream. The missing units carried forward until the bodies behind them could no longer be found.

Her thumb hovered over the send field.

The auditor stood beside her, silent now.

Nara thought of telling Ivo first. She thought of Mara's name in his face, of the guilt that would follow him through the ward. She thought of Sable accepting payment for silence, of Teo warning her to stop before the Exchange took more than six months.

Then she pressed send.

The transmitter gave a soft pulse.

The file left her hand.

For one second, nothing changed. The tunnel remained cold. Water tapped from a pipe. The dead ticket screen continued to blink.

Then the auditor's device chimed.

"Received," she said.

The broker's expression emptied.

Nara pushed herself upright, balancing on one bare foot. "Now the record exists."

"Not for long," the broker said.

The auditor looked at the transmitter. "Inspection has the file."

"The clinic has the suspension notice."

Nara's breath caught.

The broker stepped back into the dark. "By morning, Ivo's treatment will be paused. If exposure proceeds, the private continuation disappears as well."

"You said the continuation was legal."

"It is. It is also mine."

"You can't do this."

"I can do exactly what the settlement allows."

The auditor moved toward the tunnel mouth. "Stay where you are."

The broker was already retreating. "You chose the ledger. Now live with what it costs him."

His footsteps faded beneath the deeper machinery of the Exchange.

Nara stood in the service tunnel with one boot in her hand and the transmitter's blue light reflected across her fingers. The auditor said something about securing the route, about inspection officers, about the next transmission, but Nara heard only the phrase treatment will be paused.

She had sent the evidence.

The file was no longer hers to protect or destroy.

Above them, the city continued toward morning. In the ward, Ivo was still asleep beneath the striped blinds, unaware that the cure paid for by her ten years had just become a bargaining chip.

Nara forced her foot back into the torn boot. The hidden seam gaped around the place where the copy had been.

She had chosen the truth.

The truth had chosen him.

The Course That Couldn't Continue

The treatment was paused at 06:12.

Nara read the notice on the hospital terminal while standing beneath the same blue corridor light that had once striped Ivo's blanket. Her torn boot pinched her heel. The screen reflected her face in the black border: ten years older, eyes reddened from the night, one cheek marked by the service tunnel wall.

"Funding source under inspection," the clerk read from behind her. "Course suspended pending settlement review."

"Pending how long?"

The clerk glanced at Nara's identity card, then at her face. "That depends on the Exchange."

"The Exchange ordered the pause."

"The notice came from the clinic."

"Then call the clinic."

"I can't override a funding hold."

Nara looked through the glass toward the ward. Ivo was awake. A nurse had removed the infusion line, leaving a small square of tape on his arm. He sat with his shoulders bent, staring at the empty stand beside the bed.

The clerk lowered her voice. "There may be a public assistance application."

"May be?"

"It won't cover the full course."

"How much will it cover?"

The clerk turned to the terminal. "The legal schedule allows a reduced protocol. Twelve weeks instead of twenty-six."

Nara's stomach tightened. "Will it keep him alive?"

"It is approved treatment."

"That wasn't my question."

The clerk's fingers paused above the keys. "It may preserve the gains he has made."

May. Preserve. Approved.

Words built to survive grief.

Nara took the printed notice. The paper smelled of hot toner. At the bottom, beneath the clinic seal, a line stated that no private continuation could be accepted while the linked batch remained under investigation.

The broker had not lied. He had simply withdrawn his hand and let the system do the damage.

Nara entered the ward.

Ivo saw the notice immediately. "They stopped it."

"For now."

"Don't say that unless you know."

"I know there's another protocol."

"Another course."

"Smaller."

"How much smaller?"

"Twelve weeks."

His eyes dropped to the tape on his arm. "And the rest?"

"They won't provide it through the disputed settlement."

"Because you sent the file."

Nara pulled the chair close. "Because the funding was built on concealed transfers."

"Because you sent the file," he repeated.

The words were quiet. They did not need force.

Nara set the notice on the bed table. "The inspection team is opening the batches today."

"And that fixes this?"

"It might stop them from burying the records."

"I asked about me."

The infusion pump beside them had been switched off. Its silence filled the space where its clicking had been.

"I'm trying to preserve a treatment path," Nara said.

"You're trying to preserve the truth."

"Yes."

"And I'm what it costs."

Nara looked at his face, thinner than it had been before the transfer but no longer hollow. She had wanted him alive badly enough to sign without reading the last page twice. She had wanted the debt gone, the course started, the ward doors to stop closing whenever a payment failed.

"I don't know how to make those two things separate," she said.

Ivo laughed once, without amusement. "You made them the same thing when you sold ten years."

He reached for the notice. His fingers trembled as he read it.

"Is this because of Mara?"

The name struck with the force of a door opening.

Nara did not answer.

Ivo looked up. "You knew."

"I knew her transfer was connected to the batch."

"You knew Mara paid for this."

"I knew her years were in the hidden source."

"That isn't different."

"It is to me."

"Why?"

"Because I didn't know whether she consented."

"And now?"

Nara's mouth dried. "The records don't say."

"They say enough."

He pushed the notice away. "You stood here and told me you sold ten years. You told me the debt was cleared. You didn't tell me the treatment came through Mara."

"I was trying to keep you from carrying it."

"You let me carry your ten years instead."

"I chose that."

"And she chose nothing?"

The question had no answer that could survive the room.

A nurse appeared at the curtain. "Ivo, the physician will explain the reduced protocol when she arrives."

"Will it work?" he asked.

The nurse glanced at Nara, then back at him. "It is the best lawful option available."

Ivo looked away.

Nara stood. "I'm going to the inspection hearing."

"Of course you are."

"I'll come back."

"You always say that when you're leaving."

She stopped beside the bed.

"I will come back," she said.

This time, he did not tell her tomorrow.

•

The public hearing occupied the Exchange's old civic hall, a building designed for declarations that could be heard from the rear balcony. By midmorning, every seat was filled. Reporters crowded the side aisles with recording lenses and paper pads. Families whose names had appeared in the leaked batch records stood beneath the brass seal of the Transfer Authority, waiting to hear whether their missing years would become an official mistake or an official crime.

Nara sat behind the inspection table with the junior auditor. Her portable camera lay inside an evidence sleeve between them. The auditor's eyes were shadowed from the night.

Across the hall, the Exchange director sat alone at the central desk. The director's hands were folded over a thin folder. The broker network had sent no representative. Their seats remained empty, each marked with a printed name and a small red indicator showing that the summons had been received.

A hearing officer struck the table with a wooden block.

"The inspection will proceed on the preserved batches PAE-17 and PAE-21, associated legacy sources, and all linked broker settlements."

The director rose. "The Exchange contests the admissibility of material obtained through unauthorized access."

The auditor stood beside Nara. "The evidence was transmitted before the statutory purge and corroborated by physical reconciliation packets preserved under the inspection order."

"You are a junior auditor," the director said.

"I am the auditor assigned to the live discrepancy."

"You exceeded your authority."

"I used the authority granted by the new compliance act."

A murmur moved through the hall.

The hearing officer turned to the director. "Sit down."

The director sat.

Nara felt the old gate inside her, the one that had measured her age-offset and decided she was a variance before she had spoken. The institution had always trusted its thresholds more than its people. Now the numbers were being made to testify.

The auditor activated the display.

The first image showed the clean public ledger: registered donors, approved transfers, balanced units. Then she overlaid the hidden pages. Grey columns appeared beside the black entries. Unregistered clinical sources. Carried-forward debits. Cohort K-17.

A woman in the front row stood abruptly. "My daughter was in that program."

The hearing officer raised a hand. "Please remain seated."

"She was seventeen. They told us it was a health screening."

"Please sit down."

The auditor moved to the next page. "The hidden ledger records eighteen units removed from the paediatric batch without public donor credit. The discrepancy was carried into PAE-21 and absorbed through a blended settlement."

Nara watched the screen as Mara's code appeared.

K17-04-19.

Ivo's treatment authorization had carried only K-17. The public ledger carried nothing.

The director leaned toward the microphone. "Cohort identifiers do not establish individual identity."

"No," the auditor said. "The legacy index does."

"It was destroyed."

"It was removed from the public archive. A duplicate was found in the physical reconciliation packet."

The director's face changed.

The auditor displayed the page.

Mara's name appeared beneath the code.

Nara had seen it before in Sable's office, but seeing it projected above the hearing chamber changed its weight. It was no longer a name trapped behind her teeth. It belonged to the record now, exposed beneath the Authority's seal.

A reporter called out, "Was the director aware of the supplemental sources?"

The hearing officer struck the block again.

The director did not answer.

The auditor enlarged the approval field. "Directorial authorization D-9 approved blended sources without public disclosure."

The hall erupted.

Nara heard the word fraud, then theft, then murder. None of them seemed large enough. Behind her ribs, Ivo's stopped treatment remained the only consequence she could feel.

The director rose again. "I acted under broker assurances that all sources had been reconciled."

"Your signature approved the exception," the auditor said.

"I was not informed of the source identities."

"You approved the mechanism that concealed them."

The director looked toward the empty broker seats. "The brokers controlled the settlement stream."

"And you controlled the Exchange."

For a moment, no one spoke.

Then the director removed the metal badge from their coat and placed it on the table.

"I resign pending investigation," the director said.

The block struck once.

The sound carried through the hall, clean and final.

By afternoon, three broker offices had closed. One had surrendered its settlement records. Another had sent a statement claiming the hidden ledger was an isolated practice conducted by contractors. The third had vanished behind a legal injunction before inspectors reached its servers.

The network did not collapse like a building. It broke into doors, denials, sealed accounts, and frightened people offering smaller names to protect larger ones.

Nara left the hall with the auditor as rain began against the steps.

"You won," the auditor said.

Nara watched inspectors carry black evidence cases through the Exchange entrance. "Ivo's treatment was cut by half."

"The reduced protocol is legal."

"It isn't the course he was receiving."

"No."

"Then don't call it a win."

The auditor nodded. "All right."

Nara looked at her. "What happens to the unregistered donors?"

"Inspection is opening claims."

"Claims won't return the years."

"No."

"Will anyone say that?"

"They will have to. The records now say what was taken."

Nara pressed her palm against the paper notice in her coat. The edge cut into her skin.

"Records are not restitution."

"No," the auditor said. "But without them, restitution has nowhere to begin."

At the hospital, Ivo was waiting.

The reduced treatment had already begun. A narrow infusion line entered his arm, carrying the first of the lawful course. The bag was smaller than the one that had hung there yesterday. The difference looked obscene.

Nara sat beside him.

"They found Mara's name," he said.

"Yes."

"You knew."

"Yes."

"Did she consent?"

"No one knows."

"But you know she was debited."

"Yes."

He looked at the line. "And you used it."

"I used the settlement that included it."

"That is not better."

"No."

He turned toward her. "Do you regret paying for me?"

Nara could have answered quickly. She had rehearsed the answer in the corridor, beneath the hearing lights, while the director resigned.

Instead she said, "I regret that the only way to keep you alive was built to hide who paid."

"That isn't what I asked."

"I don't regret wanting you alive."

His eyes closed.

The infusion pump began to click again, slower than before.

"I'm angry with you," he said.

"I know."

"I'm angry that you decided what I could bear."

"I know."

"I'm angry that you made my recovery part of something you were uncovering."

"I didn't know at first."

"But you knew before you told me about the ten years."

"Yes."

"And you still let me thank you."

Nara looked down at her hands. The swollen wrist had begun to bruise yellow beneath the skin.

"I wanted one thing between us that wasn't a record."

Ivo opened his eyes. "There isn't."

"No."

The answer hurt him. She saw it, and did not soften it.

For a while they listened to the pump.

Then Ivo said, "I don't want you to stop."

Nara looked up.

"Not the investigation," he said. "I mean... I don't want you to stop coming back."

Her throat tightened.

"I won't."

"You can't promise that like before."

"No."

"Then say what you can promise."

Nara reached for the chair instead of his hand. She left the space between them visible.

"I can promise not to hide the cost from you again."

He studied her.

"And I can promise," she continued, "that I won't make another decision about your body without telling you first."

"That should have been true already."

"It should."

He looked toward the window. Beyond the glass, rain blurred the hospital lights into pale streaks.

"I don't know if I trust you," he said.

"You don't have to yet."

"I may not for a while."

"I know."

His hand moved across the blanket, stopping halfway between them. Nara placed her hand beside it, not over it.

Their fingers touched at the edges.

It was not forgiveness. It was not the old ease returning. The distance remained, measured in ten years, in Mara's name, in the empty half of the treatment

course.

But Ivo did not pull away.

The pump clicked on, carrying the lawful medicine into his fragile body. Outside, the Exchange's gates opened and closed for inspectors, clerks, and frightened brokers trying to find new routes through an altered system.

Nara stayed until the nurse dimmed the ward.

When she finally stood, Ivo was awake.

"Tomorrow?" he asked.

Nara looked at him, then at the line in his arm.

"Tomorrow," she said. "And I'll tell you what I find."

He nodded, accepting neither the promise nor rejecting it.

Nara left the ward with the hearing notice folded in her pocket and the old gate waiting somewhere beyond the rain. The hidden ledger had been opened. The director was gone. The brokers had scattered.

What remained would not be clean.

At the far end of the corridor, a clinic attendant wheeled a stack of consent forms toward the public entrance. Nara watched the pages slide beneath the overhead light, each one waiting for a signature that might change a body forever.

She turned toward the gate.

Consent at the Clinic Door

The gate opened on a woman whose face did not match her identity card.

Nara watched the biometric strip flash amber, then red. The woman stood beneath the clinic's white entrance lights with both hands wrapped around a paper folder. Rain darkened the shoulders of her coat. Beyond the glass, the donor-check desk smelled of disinfectant, warmed plastic, and the faint metallic tang of transfer equipment.

"Try the palm reader," Nara said.

The woman pressed her hand to the plate. A blue line travelled beneath the glass.

"Identity confirmed," the gate announced. "Facial variance exceeds permitted threshold. Secondary review required."

The woman looked at Nara. "I'm here to sell."

"I know."

"Then why is it stopping me?"

"Because the system can verify your card and still not trust your face."

The woman's mouth tightened. "That happened at the public kiosk."

Nara glanced at the folder. "Come to my desk."

The clinic had changed since the hearing, though not enough to look changed. The old posters still lined the walls, smiling donors beneath slogans about generous futures. New notices had been fixed over them in darker lettering: SOURCE DISCLOSURE REQUIRED. BENEFICIARY ACCESS TO SETTLEMENT RECORDS. NO TRANSFER WITHOUT RECORDED CONSENT.

The notices did not cover every poster.

At the desk, Nara slid the application toward herself. The applicant had requested four years. Her beneficiary was listed as a housing creditor. Her medical screening was complete. The source field contained a broker pool code.

Nara tapped it. "This is not a donor source."

"It's what the counsellor gave me."

"It identifies the settlement stream, not the person or pool supplying the years."

"I don't know who supplies them."

"That's the problem."

The woman leaned forward. "I'm not asking you to tell me where the years come from. I'm asking you to let me sell mine."

Nara looked at the consent page. The applicant had initialled every paragraph, but the lines were crowded and the print was small. At the bottom, beneath the signature field, a new box waited for her mark: APPLICANT HAS BEEN INFORMED OF SOURCE DISCLOSURE RIGHTS AND SETTLEMENT TRACEABILITY.

The woman's pen hovered over that box.

"Did anyone explain what happens after the transfer?" Nara asked.

"Yes."

"What did they say?"

"That the age-offset is permanent. That I may experience joint pain, reduced recovery, facial variance, and identity delays. That the payment clears within ten minutes."

"And the source?"

"They said it was compliant."

"That is not what I asked."

The woman's eyes hardened. "I have rent due."

Nara heard the words as if they had been spoken in the clinic months earlier, when her own hands had been cold around the pen. She remembered the

counsellor's calm voice, the transfer disc resting on the tray, the ten years reduced to a number on a receipt. She had not hesitated. Ivo's debt had been waiting behind every word.

The woman pushed the application back toward her. "If I leave, someone else will approve it."

"Maybe."

"Then what are you doing?"

Nara picked up the red review stamp.

The desk clerk glanced over from the next station. "Nara."

"I'm reviewing the source."

"It's a registered pool."

"It's an unnamed pool."

The clerk lowered his voice. "The revised rules allow pooled settlements."

"Only when the pool's contributors are recorded in the restricted ledger and the applicant is told how to access that record."

The clerk looked toward the supervisor's glass office. "The supervisor said not to delay ordinary applications."

Nara pressed the stamp to the page but did not lower it. "This isn't ordinary."

The woman's fingers closed around the folder. "You think I don't understand the price?"

"I think you understand the price of your years. I don't know whether you've been told who gets to use them."

"I don't care."

Nara remembered saying the same thing without words.

The woman's face had the strained brightness of someone who had already spent the payment in her mind. "I need the money today."

Nara set the stamp down.

"I can hold the application for source clarification," she said. "You have the right to withdraw before transfer. If the clinic cannot provide the source record, the review remains open."

"Hold it?" The woman gave a short laugh. "For how long?"

"Until the source is traceable."

"And if I refuse?"

"Then I cannot sign."

The woman stared at her. Anger moved across her face, followed by calculation. At last she took the folder.

"You're making it sound noble," she said.

"No."

"You're sitting behind the same gate."

"Yes."

The woman turned away. At the entrance, the biometric strip flashed amber again. This time she did not try the reader. She pushed through the manual release and disappeared into the rain.

The clerk watched the door close. "That was four years of settlement."

"It was four years without a source."

"The clinic needs volume."

"The clinic needs records."

He rubbed the edge of his identity card against the desk. "Records don't pay for repairs."

Nara looked at the transfer equipment beyond the glass. The metal tray was clean. The disc dispenser was full. Nothing in the room suggested that the market had ever been interrupted, only amended.

The supervisor came out of the office carrying a thin tablet.

"You refused the application," she said.

"I held it for review."

"You marked it as incomplete."

"The source field was incomplete."

"The new regulations permit pooled donors."

"They require applicants to be told that pooled donors may include restricted or carried-forward sources."

The supervisor placed the tablet on the desk. "The applicant signed the disclosure."

"She initialled a paragraph she was not given time to read."

"That is not your determination to make."

Nara felt the old ache begin beneath her knees. Four days of rain and hospital chairs had settled into her joints. She kept her hands flat on the desk.

"What is my determination?" she asked.

The supervisor's expression was careful, neither hostile nor kind. "You are a donor-check officer. You verify eligibility, consent, and documentation."

"Then I verified it."

"You obstructed it."

"If the source cannot be traced, consent is not complete."

The supervisor glanced toward the entrance. "The law does not require certainty. It requires a paper trail."

"That is how the hidden ledger survived."

The clerk stopped moving.

The supervisor's eyes narrowed. "Do not bring the Exchange into every application."

"I'm bringing it into this one because the application is built on the same gap."

For a moment, the clinic's machines filled the silence. A ventilation fan clicked overhead. Somewhere in the treatment rooms, a disc applicator gave a soft mechanical whine.

The supervisor picked up the application. "You can keep your review. But understand what happens next. If applicants leave, they go to another clinic. If enough applicants leave, this desk closes."

Nara looked at the empty chair across from her.

"I understand."

The supervisor carried the application away.

At noon, Nara approved a three-year transfer for a man with a tremor in his left hand and a debt notice folded into his coat pocket. His source was a named cooperative with a public register entry, a restricted ledger reference, and a recorded statement from every contributing donor. He read the disclosure twice.

"Will the cooperative know my name?" he asked.

"Not unless you authorize that release."

"And I can see where my years go?"

"You can see the settlement path."

"Even if it changes later?"

"Any change has to be recorded."

He looked at the transfer disc in its sterile tray. Its translucent surface caught the ceiling light, the metal ring bright around its edge.

"Did you work in records?" he asked.

Nara felt the question settle against the scar of the old job.

"Yes."

"Does this system work?"

She could have told him about the clean public ledger, the grey columns, the paediatric batches, the director's badge placed on the hearing table. She could

have told him that a paper trail had not restored Mara's years or completed Ivo's original treatment.

Instead she said, "It works better when someone checks the part people prefer not to see."

The man nodded, though he did not look reassured.

Nara signed the approval.

The disc was applied to the inside of his wrist. The machine warmed the skin. He flinched once, then steadied himself against the chair.

"Transfer complete," the clinic announced.

The payment confirmation printed with a dry chattering sound. Nara tore off the receipt and placed it before him.

"Keep this," she said. "The source reference is on the second line."

He folded the paper carefully and put it inside his coat.

"Thank you," he said.

Nara did not answer with the phrase the clinic taught its staff. She watched him leave through the gate, his face already carrying the first slight displacement from the identity card photograph.

The gate accepted him.

For a few minutes, the desk remained empty.

Nara opened the refused application again. The pooled source code had been entered by hand, but the ink was too even, too dark. It had been copied from another form. Beneath it, someone had erased a previous reference. A faint indentation remained in the paper.

She angled the page beneath the desk lamp.

PAE-?

The rest had been scraped away.

Nara reached for the review stamp.

The entrance doors opened.

A young man stepped inside, clutching a recruitment envelope. He paused beneath the clinic lights and looked toward the gate as though it were a physical thing he might bargain with. His coat was too thin for the weather. Water ran from his hair onto the collar.

Nara knew that look. Determination held together by necessity. The private arithmetic of debt. The belief that the body was the only asset no one could repossess.

He approached the desk.

"I have an appointment," he said.

"Name?"

He gave it. Nara entered the details and watched the system retrieve his file. Six years requested. Beneficiary: family debt account. Source: pending allocation.

Her hand rested beside the red stamp.

The young man noticed it. "Is there a problem?"

Nara looked at the gate, then back at him.

"Yes," she said. "Your source has not been identified."

"They said it would be assigned after screening."

"That is not enough."

"I need the appointment."

"I know."

"I need the money."

"I know."

His face tightened. "Then let me through."

Nara slid the application toward him and turned it so he could see the blank source field.

"You can complete the medical screening," she said. "You cannot sign the transfer until the source is named, recorded, and explained to you."

"What if I don't care?"

"Then you can write that you decline source disclosure. I still cannot approve the transfer without a traceable record."

He looked past her toward the treatment corridor. "You people keep changing the rules."

"The rules changed because the old ones hid too much."

"And now?"

Nara placed the red stamp on the application.

"Now the price still exists," she said. "But it has to leave a trail."

The young man stared at the mark. His anger did not disappear. Neither did his need. He took the application and walked toward the waiting area, where a row of plastic chairs faced the gate.

Nara watched him sit.

The supervisor remained behind the glass. The clerk returned to his terminal. Outside, rain silvered the pavement and blurred the clinic's sign.

Nara opened the approved file and checked the cooperative's source record once more. The paper trail was there, not clean, not perfect, but visible. She signed the final authorization and placed it in the outgoing tray.

At the entrance, the next applicant rose.

The gate scanned his face. Amber light crossed his features, then settled on green.

Nara lifted her pen.

The market had survived the hearing, the resignation, and the scattered brokers. It had survived by changing its language, narrowing its gaps, and printing more pages. Consent was no longer allowed to vanish without leaving a line behind it.

That did not make the choice harmless.

The young man came toward her with six years waiting in his folder.

Nara looked at the blank source field, then at the red stamp beside her hand.

She signed one application.

She refused the other.

When the next seller entered, Nara watched the gate open and knew exactly what he did not yet know: the system was altered, the record would remain, and the cost would still be his to carry.

Final Thoughts

This journey is about the people caught between doing what is necessary and becoming part of what they oppose. Their choices reveal how corruption survives not only through powerful institutions, but through the small bargains made by those who have the least room to refuse.

A year can be entered as a number, crossed out, or hidden in a ledger, but it is always lived by someone. That is the measure **The Price Of A Year** leaves behind: the human life inside every line of the account.