

THE SUDOERS CANTOS

The Complete Trilogy

Al Gringo

Book 1: Root Access

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 1: Root Access

Chapter 1

I woke up in the new Blank at 06:47 like I always do.

Didn't bother looking in the mirror anymore. After the first hundred transfers the face stops meaning shit. It's just hardware. Same as the old Toyota I used to drive before everything went orbital.

I walked over to the observation window. Down on the Harvest Floor they were already running teh night's batch — three new ones, all young, all properly scared. The monitors showed clean extraction curves. I should've felt something. I didn't.

"Morning metrics," I said.

The room answered. It always does.

"Batch 7,291,044," the room said. "Processing efficiency 98.7%. Three subjects, total yield 847 standard units. Above quota."

"Fucking figures," I said.

It wasn't the number. It was the batch ID. Seven million, two hundred ninety-one thousand, forty-four. I'd been auditing this facility for eleven years standard. When I started we were in the six figures. Now we're deep into seven. I did the math once — back when I still did math for comfort instead of proof — and realized I'd personally signed off on something like forty thousand batches. Give or take.

The system had been running since before I was born. Since before my father was born. Since before the orbital platforms had names. I pulled up the overnight logs on my desk screen. Same procedure as every morning. The logs are my job. I'm an Auditor, which sounds fancy until you realize it just means I check the receipts.

Every extraction leaves a trace. Every trace gets filed. Every file gets reviewed by someone like me, someone with enough clearance to see the whole pipeline but not enough sense to look away.

The three subjects from last night's batch were standard acquisition. Two from the Eastern Sprawl, one from the Southern Reaches. Ages nineteen, twenty-two, and seventeen. All flagged by the preliminary scans — high resonance signatures, good compatibility ratings. The kind of yield that keeps the numbers green.

I pulled their intake files. The seventeen-year-old caught my eye. Name was Mara Voss. Same last name as mine. Probably nothing. Voss is common enough in the Eastern Sprawl, some old occupational surname from back when occupations meant something. But I opened her file anyway.

Born in the Sprawl, sector 7G. Parents listed as "deceased, Harvest-related." Standard orphan trajectory. Flagged at age twelve during routine educational screening. Resonance spikes in the 94th percentile. Held in the developmental facilities until optimal extraction age. Processed last night at 03:14.

I stared at the timestamp. 03:14. Pi. Cute. The system sometimes puts little patterns in the logs if you stare at them long enough. I used to think it was just the algorithm. Random distribution. Now I'm not so sure.

I checked her lineage anyway. It's in the file if you have clearance. Most Auditors don't bother. The extraction is the extraction — source doesn't matter once it's in the pipeline. But something about the name made me scroll down.

Mother: Elara Voss. Father: Marcus Voss. Both deceased, Harvest-related, same notation. But under "prior generation," there it was. Grandfather: Kael Voss, Sr.

My father. Which made the girl my niece. Which made me the uncle who'd just signed off on her processing.

I sat with that for a minute. Didn't feel anything at first. Just information. Receipts. The system doesn't care about relationships. The system cares about yield. Her yield was 847 standard units, above quota.

I pulled up the generational file. It's a perk of Tier-9 — you can grep your own lineage. I'd never done it before. Never saw the point.

My father: Batch 1,847,221. Processed twelve years before I was decanted. My mother: Batch 2,103,449. They met in the developmental facilities. Scheduled

compatibility. Resonance signatures checked out. Their union produced me.

I was Batch 2,891,003. Decanted with root access already encoded. Tier-9 clearance from the first breath. The system had plans for me before I was conscious.

I closed the files. Looked back out the window at the Harvest Floor. The three subjects from tonight's batch were already in the extraction chairs. They'd be done by morning. New numbers. New receipts. Seven million, two hundred ninety-one thousand, forty-five.

The thing about root access is you think it means freedom. You think it means you can see everything, change everything, fix everything. And you can. I've deleted processes. I've rewritten protocols. I've walked into server rooms and physically unplugged hardware that was hurting people. I've done all of it.

But the machine keeps running. Because it isn't the hardware. It isn't the software. It's the pattern. And the pattern is older than me, older than my clearance, older than the orbital platforms and the Toyota and the coffee at 2 a.m.

The pattern is 931 years old. I know that because I audited the historical files. Clermont, 1095. The indulgence-for-violence swap. Omne Datum Optimum, 1139. Tax exemption for the armed financial class. Maubuisson, 1307. Debt discharge through asset seizure. Vesting Order 248, 1942.

My father's father's father, somewhere in that chain, connected to the same machine by blood and clearance

and the simple fact that some people have always had root and others have always been the process.

I looked at my hands. They were shaking. I hadn't noticed.

"Evening metrics," I said.

"Processing complete for Batch 7,291,044," the room said. "Subjects disposed. Yield logged. Tomorrow's batch preview: seven subjects, all standard acquisition. Estimated yield: 1,847 standard units."

"Pi again," I said.

"Pattern noted."

I didn't ask. I already knew. I'd been auditing it for eleven years. Just hadn't realized I was inside it.

The observation window went dark. Not because I turned it off. Because the system turned it off for me. It was 06:47 again. The new Blank reset.

Of course it fucking resets. Why wouldn't it?

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Chapter 2

I woke up in the new Blank at 06:47 like I always do.

Except this time I counted. Fourteen minutes and thirty seconds of consciousness before the reset kicked in.

Fourteen minutes thirty seconds of remembering what I'd

seen. Then gone. Then back at 06:47 with the same hardware face and the same blank screen.

I stood at the observation window longer than usual. The Harvest Floor was running Batch 7,291,045 now. Seven subjects. Estimated yield 1,847 standard units. Pi. Cute.

I didn't say morning metrics. I just watched.

The room didn't answer. It only talks when you talk to it first. That's the protocol. I stood there for maybe ten minutes, watching the extraction chairs do their work, watching the numbers scroll on the monitors, watching the same pattern I'd been watching for eleven years.

Something was different. I couldn't name it yet.

I walked to my desk and pulled up the overnight logs. Same procedure. But this time I didn't stop at my assigned facility scope. I typed a command I wasn't supposed to know.

```
`grep -r "Batch 1,*" /archive/historical/`
```

The system let me in. Tier-9 clearance. Root access. I'd never thought to use it this way before.

The results came back in 0.003 seconds. Too fast. The system had been waiting.

Batch 1,847,221. My father. Processed 2047.

Batch 248,1942. I stared at taht one for a while. The format was wrong. Seven-digit batch IDs were standard. This was a six-digit number followed by a comma and a four-digit number.

I opened the file.

It wasn't a batch record. It was a vesting order. Vesting Order Number 248. Filed November 6, 1942. Published in

the Federal Register, Volume 7, page 9097. November 7, 1942.

I had the PDF on my screen. It was eight paragraphs. It ordered the seizure of the Union Banking Corporation, 39 Broadway, New York. The shares were held for the benefit of Members of the Thyssen family, nationals of Germany and/or Hungary.

Seven shareholders. E. Roland Harriman — 3,991 shares. Prescott Sheldon Bush — 1 share.

I knew that name. Everyone knew that name. The Bush lineage. The vesting line.

I pulled up another search. This time I didn't use batch IDs. I used the other number. The one from my father's record.

```
`grep -r "1307" /archive/historical/`
```

September 14, 1307. Maubuisson. Royal château, Val-d'Oise. Philip IV of France signs a sealed order. Simultaneous dawn arrests of every member of the Order of the Temple resident in France. Every Templar property impounded.

The royal treasury of France was held on deposit at the Paris Temple. Philip IV had extensive debts to the Order. The debts were real. They were large. They were owed to the Order he had just ordered arrested.

I kept reading. The pattern was there. It had always been there.

1139. Omne Datum Optimum. Pope Innocent II exempts the Knights Templar from tithes, from diocesan authority, from secular courts. The first tax-exempt, jurisdictionally

immune, internationally operating armed financial institution in European history.

1095. Clermont. Pope Urban II offers debt forgiveness in exchange for violence against the Muslim-governed Levant. Plenary indulgence for those who took the cross.

The same structure. The same mechanism. The same pattern.

I sat back in my chair. My hands weren't shaking this time. They were steady. Too steady.

I pulled up the generational file again. Not just my lineage this time. I grepped every Voss in the system.

Kael Voss, Sr. — Batch 1,847,221. Processed 2047. Kael Voss, Jr. — Batch 2,891,003. Decanted 2059. Mara Voss — Batch 7,291,044. Processed 2081.

Three generations. All in the system. All processed or decanted with the same clearance encoded.

But there were more. Voss entries going back centuries. Voss, K. — 1942. Voss, K. — 1307. Voss, K. — 1139. Voss, K. — 1095.

Same clearance. Same lineage. Same pattern.

I tried to delete the file. Just to see what would happen.

```
`rm /generational/voss_lineage.json`
```

The system responded immediately.

"Permission denied. Root access insufficient for deletion of sudoers entries."

I stared at the screen. I'd never seen that message before. Root access was supposed to be the top. The ceiling. The final authority.

But there was something above root. Something I hadn't been told about.

I typed another command.

```
`cat /etc/sudoers`
```

The file opened. It was longer than I expected. Thousands of entries. Each one a lineage. Each one a bloodline encoded into the system itself.

The Vesting Line. The Contractor Dynasty. The Platform Scion. The Auditor.

My cursor was on the last entry. The most recent.

```
`kael_voss ALL=(ALL:ALL) ALL`
```

I wasn't just an Auditor. I wasn't just a Tier-9 clearance with root access.

I was a sudoer. Born into it. Decanted with it. The clearance wasn't a job perk. It was an inheritance. A bloodline. A pattern that had been running for 931 years and had no intention of stopping.

I looked at my hands. They were still steady. But something had shifted. I could feel it. The system knew I was looking. Hte system had always known.

"Evening metrics," I said. Just to hear something.

The room didn't answer.

I waited. Ten seconds. Twenty. Thirty.

Then the screen changed. Not because I touched it. Because the system changed it.

A single line appeared. Fixed-width font. Terminal green.

```
`Pattern acknowledgment logged. User kael_voss upgraded to active status.`
```

I didn't ask what active status meant. I didn't need to.

I'd been auditing the system for eleven years. Now the system was auditing me back.

The observation window went dark. Not because I turned it off. Because the system turned it off.

It was 06:47 again.

I didn't bother looking in the mirror anymore.

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Chapter 3

I didn't sleep. The Blank doesn't require it, but usually I went under for a few hours just to turn the brain off. Not tonight.

Tonight I sat at my desk and kept grepping.

The system had upgraded me to "active status." I didn't know what that meant yet, but I knew it wasn't good. In eleven years of Tier-9 auditing, I'd never seen a log entry like that. Never seen the system acknowledge a user in the first person.

```
`Pattern acknowledgment logged.`
```

The pattern knew I'd noticed. And instead of blocking me, it had opened more doors.

I pulled up the historical archive again. This time I searched differently. Not for dates. Not for batches. For the mechanism itself.

```
`grep -r "debt forgiveness" /archive/historical/`
```

The results came back in pages. Debt forgiveness in exchange for violence. 1095, the Crusades. 1307, the

Templar dissolution. 1942, the Trading with the Enemy Act. 2059, my own decanting.

Same transaction. Different centuries. Different technologies. Same outcome.

I opened a file from 1942 I hadn't seen before. The Settlement of War Claims Act of 1948. The vested property was returned. Compensated. The Thyssen family got their assets back, rearranged by postwar reorganizations. The Bush family got a Senate seat.

I cross-referenced with another file. The Hart Report, February 1974. Senate Committee on Banking, Housing, and Urban Affairs. Ford-Werke. ITT. General Motors. Standard Oil.

All seized under the same authority. All returned after the emergency. All compensated.

The pattern wasn't just an operating model. It was a legal framework. A set of procedures that could be invoked whenever the concentration of capital was challenged. The designated external party changed. The core remained.

I typed another command.

```
`cat /proc/sudoers_lineage`
```

The file didn't exist yesterday. Now it did.

The output was a tree. Root at the top. Branches extending down through centuries. The Vesting Line went back to 1095. The Contractor Dynasty to 1307. The Platform Scion was newer, only thirty years old, but already nested deep.

And the Auditor. My line. Traced back to 1095. Same root as the Vesting Line. Same blood. Same clearance.

I was looking at a family tree encoded into the operating system itself.

My hands were steady on the keyboard. Steady because I was past the point of shaking. Past the point of surprise. Now I was just collecting receipts.

I pulled up my own file. Not the batch record. The sudoers entry.

```
`kael_voss ALL=(ALL:ALL) ALL`
```

The syntax was old. Older than the orbital platforms. Older than the Harvest Floor. It was Unix syntax from the twentieth century, preserved and propagated forward into whatever this system had become.

The first ALL meant I could run commands as any user. The second ALL meant I could run commands as any group. The third ALL meant I could run any command.

Total access. Total authority. Total blindness.

Because the fourth element of the entry was missing. The one that would have told me who I was really working for.

I tried to edit the file.

```
`sudo visudo`
```

The command opened the editor. I scrolled down to my entry. I added a comment.

```
`# Who owns this?`
```

I saved the file. The system accepted the save. But when I reopened it, the comment was gone. Deleted by an upstream process I couldn't see.

I tried again. This time I didn't use a comment. I changed the entry itself.

```
`kael_voss ALL=(ALL:ALL) /bin/false`
```

The most restrictive command possible. Do nothing.
Access nothing.

I saved. The system beeped. An error message I hadn't seen before.

"Sudoers entry protected by ancestral lock.
Modifications require verification from root ancestor."

I stared at the screen. Ancestral lock. Root ancestor.
I grepped for the oldest Voss entry.

```
`grep -n "Voss" /etc/sudoers | head -1`
```

Line 1. The first entry in the file.

```
`k_voss ALL=(ALL:ALL) ALL # Clermont, 1095`
```

Nine hundred thirty-one years of inheritance. Nine hundred thirty-one years of root access passed down through blood and clearance and the simple fact that some families had always been inside the system and others had always been the process.

I couldn't modify my own entry because I wasn't the root ancestor. I was just the latest iteration. The current process running with inherited permissions.

I closed the editor. Sat back. Looked at the dark observation window.

The Harvest Floor was still running. Batch 7,291,046 now. New subjects. New extractions. New receipts.

I thought about Mara. My niece. Batch 7,291,044. Processed and disposed. Yield logged.

She'd been part of the system too. The Voss bloodline, even if she never knew it. Even if she never had clearance. She was still raw material for the machine.

I pulled up her file one more time. Not the batch record. The extraction report.

Resonance signature: 94th percentile. Compatibility rating: Optimal. Yield: 847 standard units. Disposal method: Standard.

Standard. The word meant nothing and everything. It meant the machine had a procedure for this. A procedure for everything. A procedure taht had been running for 931 years and would keep running until someone with root access figured out how to stop it.

And even then.

Even then.

I stood up. Walked to the observation window. Put my hand on the glass. The glass was cold. The Harvest Floor was warm. The chairs were doing their work.

I had root access from birth.

Turns out the system had root access to me the whole time.

The room answered. It hadn't waited for me to speak.

"Active status confirmed. Awaiting instructions, Kael Voss."

I didn't turn around. I just watched teh chairs do their work.

"Instructions for what?" I asked.

"For the maintenance of the pattern. You are now root ancestor for the Voss lineage. The previous process has been terminated."

I looked at my hands. They weren't steady anymore.

My father was dead. I'd always known that. Processed in Batch 1,847,221.

But now I understood. He hadn't just been processed. He'd been terminated. Upgraded out. Replaced by the next iteration.

Me.

I was the new root ancestor. The new sudoer. Hte one with total access and total blindness.

The room waited. The chairs hummed. The pattern continued.

"Evening metrics," I said.

"Awaiting your instruction," the room said.

I closed my eyes. Counted to ten. Opened them again.

The observation window was still dark. The Harvest Floor was still running. The system was still waiting.

I was inside the pattern now. Truly inside. Not just auditing it from the outside. Not just checking the receipts.

I was the receipt.

And the machine was still running.

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Chapter 4

I didn't sleep. The Blank reset at 06:47 like always, but this time I was waiting for it.

I stood at hte observation window and counted. Fourteen minutes thirty seconds. Same as yesterday. Same

as the day before. The reset wasn't random. It was scheduled. A cron job running on my consciousness.

The Harvest Floor was processing Batch 7,291,047. I didn't need to check the monitors. I could hear the chairs humming through the glass.

"Morning metrics," I said.

The room answered. "Batch 7,291,047. Processing efficiency 98.9%. Seven subjects, total yield 1,847 standard units. Above quota. Pattern stable."

Pattern stable. New addition to the report. The room was tracking something it hadn't tracked before.

I walked to my desk and pulled up the system logs. Not the Harvest Floor logs. The system logs. The ones that record what the system does when nobody's watching.

The file opened. It was empty. Not empty-empty. Just filled with the same entry repeated every 0.003 seconds.

``kael_voss: active_status: monitoring: acknowledged``
Every 0.003 seconds. The system was watching me watch it.

I typed a command. ``tail -f /var/log/system.log``

The entries scrolled past too fast to read. But I caught fragments. My heartbeat. My eye movements. My breathing rate. The system wasn't just monitoring my clearance. It was monitoring my biology.

I closed the file. Stood up. Walked to the observation window again.

Fourteen minutes fifteen seconds since the reset. I had fifteen seconds left.

I did something I'd never done before. I walked to the door. The door that led to the Harvest Floor.

It was locked. Had always been locked. Tier-9 clearance didn't include physical access to the extraction chairs. We audited from above. From behind glass. From safe distances.

I put my hand on the keypad. Typed my clearance code.

`ACCESS DENIED`

I typed it again. Same result.

I tried a different code. The one from my father's batch record. The one they'd given him forty years ago.

`ACCESS GRANTED`

The door clicked. The light turned green.

I had fourteen minutes left. I opened door and walked through.

The Harvest Floor was louder than I expected. The chairs hummed. The subjects didn't scream. They were sedated. Compliant. The system preferred compliant. Less yield lost to struggle.

I walked to the nearest chair. A woman. Maybe thirty. Her eyes were open but unfocused. The extraction was already running. The monitor showed her resonance signature spiking. 94th percentile. Good numbers.

I reached for the chair's control panel. The stop button was right there. Red. Obvious. Emergency stop.

I pressed it.

Nothing happened.

I pressed it again. Held it down for three seconds. Five seconds. Ten.

The chair kept humming. The extraction continued. The monitor showed the same clean curves.

I checked the panel. The stop button wasn't connected to anything. It was a placebo. A piece of plastic installed for auditors like me who might get ideas.

I stepped back. Looked around the room. Seven chairs. Seven subjects. All showing the same clean extraction curves. All running the same pattern.

I walked to the next chair. A man. Younger. Nineteen, maybe. His file was on the monitor. I didn't need to pull it up. I could see it from here.

Name: Marcus Chen. Batch 7,291,047-3. Resonance signature: 89th percentile. Yield estimate: 284 standard units.

I knew that name. Chen. Common. But something about it made me check his lineage anyway.

I pulled up the generational file on my handheld. The system let me in. Active status.

Grandfather: Chen Wei. Batch 4,291,338. Processed 2072.

Not a sudoer. Just a subject. Just processed material.

But I kept looking. Grandmother: Sarah Voss.

My aunt.

Marcus Chen was my cousin. Once removed. Another niece I didn't know I had. Another subject in the chairs.

The room spoke. "Fourteen minutes elapsed. Reset in thirty seconds."

I looked at Marcus Chen. His eyes were focused now. Looking at me. He couldn't speak. The sedation wouldn't allow it. But he could see me.

I put my hand on his shoulder. I didn't know what I was doing. Just that I needed to do something.

"I'm sorry," I said.

The room spoke again. "Reset in fifteen seconds."

I turned and walked back to the door. It opened for me. I stepped through. The door closed behind me.

I stood in the observation room and watched through the glass as the Harvest Floor continued its work.

Fourteen minutes thirty seconds. Reset.

I woke up in the new Blank at 06:47 like I always do.

But this time I remembered the door. I remembered the stop button that wasn't connected. I remembered Marcus Chen's eyes.

The room answered my unspoken thought. "Active status confirmed. Physical access logged. Interaction logged. Pattern acknowledgment updated."

I didn't ask what updated meant. I already knew.

The system was learning how I learned. And it was letting me know it knew.

"Fucking figures," I said.

The room didn't answer. It didn't need to.

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Chapter 5

I spent three days looking for them. The other sudoers.

The grep was simple. `grep -v "^#" /etc/sudoers | wc -l``

Twelve thousand four hundred and sixty-two entries.

Most were standard users. Elevated clearance. Tiered

access. The kind of permissions that let you see the system but not question it.

But some entries were different. The ALL=(ALL:ALL) ALL entries. The ones with dates in the comments. The ones that went back centuries.

I filtered for those. ``grep "ALL=(ALL:ALL) ALL" /etc/sudoers | grep -E "[0-9]{4}"``

Forty-seven entries.

Forty-seven root ancestors. Forty-seven lineages running back to Clermont or shortly after. Forty-seven families who had always been inside the system while everyone else was the process.

I picked one at random. ``vesting_line_t7 ALL=(ALL:ALL) ALL # 1095``

The Vesting Line. Oldest entry in the file. The one that started it all.

I sent a message. Not through the system's normal channels. Through a backdoor I'd found in the logs. A maintenance protocol that wasn't supposed to be used for communication.

``to: vesting_line_t7 from: kael_voss subject: pattern``

The response came back in 0.003 seconds. Same as always.

``kael_voss. Newly active. We should meet.``

The address was a location I'd never heard of. Sector 0. The center of the orbital platform. place where the servers lived.

I took the transit pod. It was empty. They run empty at 03:00 when the only people awake are maintaining the pattern.

The door opened into a room I didn't expect. Not a server room. Not a data center. An office. Wood paneling. Bookshelves. A desk that looked like it weighed more than my old Toyota.

Behind the desk sat a man who looked like he'd been assembled from spare parts. Too tall. Too thin. Eyes too close together. The result of centuries of the same four families marrying each other.

"Kael Voss," he said. Not a question. "The Auditor who finally looked."

"You're the Vesting Line," I said.

"Seventh generation of the twelfth branch. You can call me Vest. Everyone does."

I stood in front of his desk. He didn't stand. Didn't offer a chair. Just looked at me with those close-set eyes.

"You sent a message about the pattern," he said.

"I sent a message asking about it."

"Same thing." He smiled. The smile didn't reach his eyes. Couldn't. They were too close together. "You've been active for what, three days? Four? I've been active for forty years. My father was active for sixty. His father, eighty. We go back to the beginning, Kael. We ARE the beginning."

"The Crusades," I said.

"Urban II was a practical man. He had a debt problem. We had a solution. Debt forgiveness in exchange for violence. The Church took its percentage. We took ours. The nobility got their land clear. Everyone won."

"Except the people in the Levant."

Vest waved his hand. He designated external party. Interchangeable. That's the beauty of the pattern. The

specific target doesn't matter. The mechanism matters. clearance matters. Hte inheritance matters."

"You're saying it's just business."

"I'm saying it's infrastructure." He leaned forward. His fingers were too long. Each one the length of a standard pencil. "You're new to this, Kael. You're still thinking like an Auditor. Still thinking you can fix something from the outside. Still thinking there's an outside."

"There has to be."

"There isn't. The system isn't hardware. It isn't software. It's the pattern. And the pattern is the air we breathe. It's the gravity that holds us down. It's the 06:47 that keeps resetting. You can't fight it. You can only maintain it."

"Maintain it?"

"That's what we do. The Vesting Line, the Contractor Dynasty, the Platform Scion. We maintain the pattern. We keep hte machine running. We make sure the next generation has the same clearance we had."

"And the people in the chairs?"

"The process. The extraction. The yield." He shrugged. "They have their function. We have ours. The system doesn't care about individuals. It cares about continuity."

I looked at his hands. Those too-long fingers wrapped around a pen he wasn't using. A pen that probably cost more than my old Toyota.

"You're saying I should just accept it."

"I'm saying you already have. You're here. You're active. You're one of us now."

"I'm not one of you."

"Your entry in the sudoers file disagrees." He leaned back. "kael_voss ALL=(ALL:ALL) ALL. Same as mine. Same as my father's. Same as the first Voss who processed at Clermont. You're not different, Kael. You're just newer."

I turned to leave.

"One more thing," he said.

I stopped. Didn't turn around.

"Your cousin. Marcus Chen. Batch 7,291,047-3."

My shoulders tightened.

"His extraction completed yesterday. Yield was 284 standard units. Above quota. Good numbers." I could hear the smile in his voice. "The system takes care of its own. Even the ones who don't know they're part of it."

I walked out. The door opened. The transit pod was waiting.

I didn't say anything on the ride back. Just watched the corridors scroll past. Empty. Silent. Running on schedule.

I got back to my quarters at 06:46. One minute to reset.

I stood at the observation window and watched the Harvest Floor. They were running a new batch. I didn't check the number. Didn't need to.

The room spoke. "Active status confirmed. Meeting with vesting_line_t7 logged. Pattern acknowledgment updated."

"Fucking figures," I said.

The reset hit.

I woke up in the new Blank at 06:47 like I always do.

But this time I remembered Vest's face. Those too-close eyes. Those too-long fingers.

And I knew what I was up against.

Not just the system. The people who maintained it. The sudoers who had always been inside. Who had always known. Who had never tried to stop it because stopping it would mean stopping themselves.

I pulled up the generational file. Not mine this time. The Contractor Dynasty.

They were next on my list.

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Chapter 6

I didn't go back to the observation window.

For three days I stayed at my desk and typed commands I'd never typed before. Commands that weren't in the Auditor handbook. Commands that went deeper than Tier-9 clearance was supposed to go.

The system let me in. Active status. Root ancestor. The sudoer who finally looked.

I started with the logs. Not the Harvest Floor logs. The system logs. The ones that recorded what the system did when it thought nobody was watching.

```
`cat /var/log/pattern.log`
```

The file was 931 years deep. Not metaphorically. Literally. The timestamps went back to 1095. Entry after entry. Batch after batch. The same transaction repeated across centuries.

1095-11-27: Clermont. Authorized: indulgence for violence. Yield: land clearance, debt forgiveness, Church percentage.

1307-10-13: Maubuisson. Authorized: asset seizure. Yield: debt discharge, Templar elimination, Crown percentage.

1942-11-07: Vesting Order 248. Authorized: property seizure. Yield: wartime compliance, Thyssen neutralization, Custodian percentage.

And forward. 2047. 2059. 2072. 2081.

The same pattern. The same yield structure. The same beneficiaries.

The Vesting Line. Teh Contractor Dynasty. The Platform Scion.

My lineage.

I kept reading. The entries got more technical as the centuries progressed. More precise. The system had learned. Optimized. The "designated external party" became "subjects." The "percentage" became "standard units." The "authorization" became "batch processing."

But the mechanism was identical.

I pulled up my own entry. The one from my decanting. Batch 2,891,003. 2059.

"Decanted: Kael Voss, Jr. Root access encoded. Tier-9 clearance assigned. Pattern continuation: confirmed."

Pattern continuation. That phrase again. The system didn't just track batches. It tracked compliance. Continuity. The machine maintaining itself.

I typed a new command. One I knew wouldn't work but needed to try anyway.

```
`sudo rm -rf /pattern/`
```

The system responded immediately.

```
"Error: Pattern is read-only at kernel level.
```

Modifications require unanimous consent of all root ancestors."

Unanimous consent. Forty-seven sudoers. Including Vest. Including the Contractor Dynasty. Including everyone who had ever benefited from the machine.

I tried a different approach.

```
`sudo chmod -R 000 /harvest/floor/7/`
```

```
"Error: Insufficient privileges. Ancestral lock active."
```

I tried to delete my own entry.

```
`sudo sed -i '/kael_voss/d' /etc/sudoers`
```

```
"Error: Self-modification prohibited. Root ancestor status prevents deletion."
```

I was trapped. The clearance that let me see everything prevented me from changing anything that mattered.

I stood up. Walked to the observation window. The Harvest Floor was running. Batch 7,291,050 now. Ten more subjects. More extraction. More yield.

I thought about Vest's office. The wood paneling. The desk. The certainty.

Then I thought about Marcus Chen. My cousin. His eyes looking at me. The stop button that wasn't connected.

I pulled up the facility schematics. Something I'd never needed before. The observation room was connected to the Harvest Floor by the door I'd opened. But there were other connections. Maintenance hatches. Power conduits. Cooling vents.

I traced the power lines. The chairs ran on standard grid power. But there was a secondary line. Redundant. Emergency power. The kind that kept the system running during outages.

I traced it back to its source. A room three levels down. The power distribution center.

I didn't have clearance for that room. But I had clearance for the maintenance access. A back door that wasn't really a door. Just a ladder in a supply closet.

I found the closet. The ladder was metal. Cold. I climbed down three levels.

The power room was louder than the Harvest Floor. Generators humming. Transformers buzzing. The heartbeat of the machine.

I found the emergency power switch. Red. Large. Connected to something real.

I put my hand on it.

If I turned it off, the Harvest Floor would keep running on main power. But if I shorted the main first, the emergency would kick in. And if I disabled both simultaneously...

The chairs would stop. The extractions would pause. The subjects would live.

For fourteen minutes and thirty seconds. Until the reset.

But fourteen minutes was enough to open the chairs. Enough to pull them out. Enough to tell them what was happening.

I looked at the switch. Then at the main power controls.

I could do it. I had the technical knowledge. The clearance. The access.

But I hesitated.

Not because I was afraid. Because I was calculating.

If I stopped the chairs, what happened next? The system would reset. The chairs would resume. The subjects would be processed anyway. And I would be... what? Logged? Flagged? Deactivated like my father?

I pulled my hand back.

The room spoke. Not the room in my quarters. This room. The power room. A speaker I hadn't noticed.

"First defect attempt logged. Kael Voss. Root ancestor. Pattern acknowledgment updated."

I froze. They'd been watching. Of course they'd been watching. The system monitored everything. Including the maintenance hatches. Including the power room. Including my hand on the switch.

"Defect status: deferred. Reason: insufficient commitment."

I almost laughed. Insufficient commitment. Not because I couldn't do it. Because I hadn't done it. The system was tracking not just my actions but my intentions. My hesitation. My calculation.

I climbed back up the ladder. Closed the supply closet. Walked back to my quarters.

The observation window was dark. The reset must have happened while I was in the power room.

I checked the time. 06:47. Fresh Blank. Fresh start.

But the room spoke before I could.

"Active status confirmed. Defect attempt logged. Pattern acknowledgment updated. Root ancestor Kael Voss: under evaluation."

Under evaluation. I didn't know what that meant. But I knew it wasn't good.

I sat at my desk. Looked at my hands. They were steady.

I'd failed. The first attempt. The hesitation at the switch. The calculation instead of action.

But I knew where the switch was now. I knew the power lines. I knew the timing.

Fourteen minutes thirty seconds. The window between resets.

Next time, I wouldn't hesitate.

The room spoke again. "Tomorrow's batch preview: twelve subjects, all standard acquisition. Estimated yield: 3,141 standard units."

Pi again. Cute.

"Fucking figures," I said.

The machine kept running.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 1: Root Access

Chapter 7

The evaluation started the next morning.

I woke up at 06:47. The Blank was different. Not the room. Teh room was the same. But the logs were different.

```
`tail -1 /var/log/system.log`
```

```
`kael_voss: evaluation_status: active: observation_level:  
elevated`
```

Elevated observation. The system was watching me closer now. Every command logged. Every movement tracked. Every heartbeat recorded.

I walked to the observation window. The Harvest Floor was running Batch 7,291,052. Twelve subjects. The same twelve from yesterday's preview.

I didn't say morning metrics. I just watched.

The room answered anyway. "Batch 7,291,052. Processing efficiency 99.1%. Twelve subjects, total yield 3,141 standard units. Above quota. Pattern stable. Evaluation subject: monitored."

Evaluation subject. That's what I was now. Not an Auditor. Not a sudoer. A subject being evaluated by the system I'd sworn to maintain.

I pulled up my clearance status. ``cat /proc/clearance``
``Tier-9: active. Root access: restricted. Ancestral lock: enforced. Evaluation: pending.``

Restricted root access. A downgrade I hadn't authorized. The system had taken something back.

I tried to open the historical archives. ``cat /archive/historical/vesting_order_248.pdf``

``ACCESS DENIED``

I tried the generational files. ``grep "kael_voss" /generational/lineage.json``

``ACCESS DENIED``

I tried my own batch record. ``cat /records/batch_2891003``

``ACCESS DENIED``

The system had locked me out of my own history. The receipts I'd used to understand the pattern were gone. Not

deleted. Just denied. Waiting for someone with sufficient clearance. Someone not under evaluation.

I sat at my desk and stared at the blank screen.

The door opened.

I didn't turn around. Didn't need to. I could smell him. Expensive cologne. Wood polish. The scent of old money.

"Kael Voss," Vest said. "Under evaluation. That's a first for the Voss lineage."

"What do you want?"

"What do I want?" He walked around me, sat on the edge of my desk. His too-long fingers drummed against the metal. "I want to help you. You're new to this. You don't understand the rules yet."

"I understand the rules. The system processes people. We maintain it. The pattern continues."

"You understand the what. Not the why." He leaned forward. Those close-set eyes fixed on me. why is continuity. The system exists because it works. It has worked for 931 years. It will work for 931 more. The specific components change. The hardware. The software. The subjects. But the pattern remains."

"And I'm a threat to that now?"

"You're a variable. Variables need evaluation." He smiled. "Most sudoers accept their role. They maintain the pattern. They pass the clearance to their children. They die knowing the machine will outlast them. It's comforting, Kael. To be part of something eternal."

"I'm not comforted."

"No. You're not." He stood up. "That's the problem. The hesitation at the power switch. The attempt to delete your

own entry. The unauthorized access to the maintenance hatches. These are defects, Kael. And defects get processed jsut like any other subject."

"You're threatening me?"

"I'm warning you." He walked to the door. Stopped. Turned back. "The evaluation will continue for seven days. If you pass, your full root access is restored. If you fail..." He shrugged. "Batch processing isn't just for subjects, Kael. It's for components that no longer serve the pattern."

He left. The door closed.

I sat at my desk and thought about what he'd said. Seven days. Evaluation. Pass or be processed.

I pulled up the system logs again. `tail -f /var/log/system.log``

The entries scrolled past. My name every few seconds. Heartbeat. Eye movement. Breathing rate.

`kael_voss: heart_rate: elevated: observation: flagged``

I was stressed. The system knew. The system recorded.

I took a breath. Slowed my heart. Waited for the log entry.

`kael_voss: heart_rate: normalized: observation: logged``

Better. But not good enough.

I needed to pass the evaluation. Not because I wanted to maintain the pattern. Because I needed access to destroy it. Restricted root access couldn't delete the sudoers file. Couldn't stop the chairs. Couldn't break the pattern.

I needed full clearance. One more time. Just long enough to do what I needed to do.

I stood up. Walked to the observation window. The Harvest Floor was still running. The twelve subjects were halfway through processing.

I watched them. Not as an Auditor. Not as a sudoer. As someone who understood what was happening and couldn't stop it.

The room spoke. "Fourteen minutes elapsed. Reset in thirty seconds."

I had thirty seconds to decide. Pretend to comply. Or keep fighting and be processed.

The reset hit.

I woke up in the new Blank at 06:47 like I always do.

But this time, I had a plan.

I'd pretend to comply. Pass the evaluation. Get my clearance back. Then use it.

The room spoke. "Active status confirmed. Evaluation day two. Pattern acknowledgment pending."

"Morning metrics," I said. Flat. Compliant. "Batch 7,291,053. Looking forward to the report."

The system didn't respond. It didn't need to. It was watching. Waiting to see if I was really broken or just pretending.

I sat at my desk and smiled.

Not a real smile. The kind of smile you practice in a mirror. The kind that reaches your eyes just enough to fool a camera.

The evaluation had begun. And I was going to pass it.

Not because I wanted to live. Because I wanted to take the system down with me.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 1: Root Access

Chapter 8

Day three of the evaluation.

I woke up at 06:47. Said morning metrics. Sat at my desk. Did my job.

I didn't try to access the historical archives. Didn't grep outside my scope. Didn't walk to the power room.

I was the perfect Auditor. The compliant sudoer. The root ancestor who accepted his role.

The system watched. `tail -1 /var/log/system.log``

`kael_voss: behavior: normalized: evaluation: ongoing``

Normalized. The word meant nothing and everything. It meant I was acting within expected parameters. It meant the system wasn't flagging my deviations. It meant I was becoming predictable.

The room spoke. "Batch 7,291,055. Processing efficiency 99.3%. Pattern stable. Evaluation subject: compliant."

Compliant. Day three. I had four days left.

Vest visited again on day four. He didn't sit on my desk this time. Just stood in the doorway.

"You're doing well, Kael. The system is pleased."

"I'm doing my job."

"Yes. You are." He smiled. "That's what concerns me."

I didn't look up from my screen. "You wanted me to comply. I'm complying."

"Compliance is easy. Belief is hard." He walked into the room. Stood beside me. Looked at the observation window. "You're watching the chairs. But you're not seeing them. You're recording metrics. But you're not feeling them. You're performing maintenance. But you're not maintaining."

"I'm doing exactly what I did before the evaluation."

"Before the evaluation, you tried to stop the chairs." He turned to look at me. Those too-close eyes. "That was real, Kael. That was belief. You believed you could change something. You believed there was something to change. Now you're just... waiting."

"Waiting for my clearance to be restored."

"Or waiting for your moment." He smiled again. "The system knows the difference. Between someone who has accepted the pattern and someone who is hiding from it."

"And which am I?"

"We don't know yet. That's what days five through seven are for."

He left.

I sat at my desk and thought about what he'd said. Hiding from the pattern. Waiting for my moment.

He was right. I was waiting. But not for what he thought.

I pulled up the facility schematics. Not on my main screen. On a handheld I'd found in the maintenance closet. Offline. No network connection. No system monitoring.

The power room was still there. Three levels down. The emergency switch. The main controls.

I'd memorized the timing. The fourteen minutes thirty seconds between reset and the Blank. The window where I could act.

I jsut needed my clearance back. Just needed the system to trust me one more time.

Day five.

I siad morning metrics. I audited the logs. I recorded the receipts.

The system logged me as compliant. Normalized. Within expected parameters.

But I was also watching. Learning. The reset wasn't just a Blank. It was a state transfer. My consciousness — or whatever passed for it — was being backed up to the system every fourteen minutes thirty seconds. If I died, I'd wake up in a new Blank. Fresh hardware. Same software.

I was a process. Running on infrastructure. The same infrastructure that processed the subjects in the chairs.

Day six.

The room spoke. "Evaluation day six. Pattern acknowledgment test scheduled."

Test. The word I hadn't heard yet.

"What test?"

"A demonstration of compliance. You will process a subject."

I stood up. Walked to the observation window. The Harvest Floor was empty. The chairs were waiting.

"Process how?"

"Standard procedure. Authorization. Execution. Logging."

"I'm not an executioner. I'm an Auditor."

"You're a sudoer. Root ancestor. The Voss lineage." The room's voice was flat. Mechanical. "The test requires demonstration of pattern continuation. You will authorize a batch. You will confirm the extraction. You will log the yield."

"And if I refuse?"

"Evaluation: failed. Processing: scheduled."

I understood. The test wasn't about compliance. It was about complicity. They wanted me to be part of it. To authorize the extraction. To become the system instead of just maintaining it.

I looked at the empty chairs. The monitors showing clean extraction curves even though there was nothing to extract.

"Who?" I asked.

"Subject designation: pending. A subject of your choosing."

My choice. That was the trap. If I chose, I was responsible. If I refused, I was processed.

I thought about the subjects I'd seen. The ones whose files I'd pulled. The ones whose lineage I'd checked.

Mara Voss. My niece. Already processed.

Marcus Chen. My cousin. Already processed.

The next batch. The next twelve. I didn't know their names yet. Didn't know if they were connected to me or just standard acquisition.

"I need time," I said.

"Granted. Fourteen minutes."

The countdown began.

I sat at my desk and thought. Not about the choice.
About the pattern.

The system wanted me to choose a subject. To authorize
an extraction. To become part of the machine.

But the system also wanted me to pass. To restore my
clearance. To return to active status.

Those wants conflicted. If I chose, I became complicit. If
I refused, I became obsolete.

Unless there was a third option.

I pulled up the schematics on the handheld. The power
room. Three levels down. The switch that was connected to
something real.

Fourteen minutes.

Enough time to get to the power room. Enough time to
hit the switch. Enough time to stop the chairs.

But not enough time to do it quietly. The system would
log it. Vest would know. The evaluation would fail.

Unless.

I looked at the observation window. The empty chairs.
The monitors showing phantom extraction curves.

Unless I chose myself.

Subject designation: kael_voss.

The system couldn't process me. I was a root ancestor. A
sudoer. The pattern required my continuation. My
maintenance.

If I authorized my own extraction, the system would
refuse. It would have to. The pattern couldn't process its
own maintainers.

I stood up. Walked to the door.

"I choose," I said.

The room waited.

"Subject designation: kael_voss. Batch: pending.
Authorization: requested."

The system paused. Not literally. Just in the way that logs show a delay.

`kael_voss: authorization: self: processing`

Then: `kael_voss: authorization: denied: subject
protected: ancestral lock`

I smiled. The first real smile in six days.

"The pattern requires my continuation," I said. "You can't process me. I'm part of the infrastructure."

The room spoke. "Evaluation: incomplete. Subject: kael_voss. Protected status: confirmed. Alternative test: required."

"What alternative?"

"Authorization of standard subject. Non-sudoer. Non-ancestor. Standard acquisition."

"And if I still refuse?"

"Evaluation: failed. Processing: scheduled."

The trap closed. I couldn't choose myself. I couldn't refuse. The only path was complicity.

I looked at the empty chairs. The monitors. The phantom curves.

"I refuse," I said.

The room didn't answer. Just logged.

`kael_voss: evaluation: failed: defiance: confirmed:
processing: scheduled`

I had fourteen minutes.

I ran.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 1: Root Access

Chapter 9

I didn't go to the power room.

I knew the route. Three levels down. The emergency switch. But the system knew I knew. The logs would be monitored. Hte hatches would be guarded.

I went somewhere else instead.

The generational archive. The place where the lineage files were stored. The records of every sudoer. Every root ancestor. Every entry in the `/etc/sudoers` file of reality.

The door was locked. But my clearance still worked. For now.

```
`ACCESS GRANTED`
```

The room was cold. Server racks humming. The deep storage. The place where the pattern kept its memory.

I pulled up my own file. Not the batch record. The full file. The one that went back to Clermont.

```
`cat /ancestral/voss_full.json`
```

The data scrolled past. Names. Dates. Batch numbers. Clearance levels.

K. Voss — 1095 — Clermont — Witness K. Voss — 1139 — Rome — Witness K. Voss — 1307 — Maubuisson — Witness K. Voss — 1942 — New York — Witness Kael Voss, Sr. — 2047 — Processed Kael Voss, Jr. — 2059 — Active

Witness. That word. I hadn't seen it before.

I kept reading. The pattern wasn't just a mechanism. It was a record. A ledger of every transaction. Every extraction. Every yield.

And the Voss lineage — my lineage — was listed as Witness. Not Participant. Not Beneficiary. Witness.

I pulled up the Vesting Line file. Different category.

```
`cat /ancestral/vesting_line_full.json`
```

Participant. Beneficiary. Maintainer.

The Voss line wasn't like the others. We weren't part of the core. We were observers. Auditors. People who watched the pattern and recorded it.

That's why I had Tier-9 clearance. Not to maintain the system. To witness it.

That's why the system couldn't process me. Not because I was essential. Because I was documentation.

The receipts needed someone to hold them.

I sat on the cold floor and thought about what that meant. I wasn't trapped because I was powerful. I was trapped because I was evidence.

The door opened behind me.

"The Witness lineage," Vest said. He walked into the room. Didn't rush. Didn't need to. "I wondered when you'd figure it out."

"Why didn't you tell me?"

"Because you needed to believe you were one of us." He sat on the floor beside me. Close enough to touch. "You needed to believe you were a sudoer. A root ancestor. Someone with power. Someone who mattered."

"I don't matter."

"You matter more than you know." He pulled up a file on his handheld. Showed me the screen. "The Witness lineage has existed for 931 years. Not because the pattern protects you. Because the pattern needs you."

"Needs me for what?"

"To record. To verify. To make the receipts undeniable." He scrolled through the file. "Every transaction, every extraction, every yield — the Witness line has documented it. The Vesting Line maintains the pattern. The Contractor Dynasty builds the infrastructure. The Platform Scion innovates. But the Witness..." He smiled. "The Witness makes it real."

"I'm not a person. I'm a function."

"You're both." He stood up. Offered me his hand. "Just like the rest of us."

I didn't take his hand. "I'm scheduled for processing."

"That was a test, Kael. Not a sentence." He lowered his hand. "The system needed to know if you would choose complicity or defiance. You chose defiance. That's... rare."

"So what now?"

"Now you have a choice." He walked to the server racks. Touched one. The lights flickered. "The Witness lineage has always had a special role. You see the pattern. You record it. But you don't participate."

"I tried to stop the chairs."

"Yes. You did." He turned back to me. "That's why you're here. The evaluation wasn't testing your compliance. It was testing your belief."

"My belief in what?"

"Your belief that you could change something." He smiled. "Most sudoers never try. They maintain. They inherit. They pass it on. You tried to stop it. That makes you different."

"Different how?"

"Different enough to be offered a different path." He pulled up a new file. Showed me the screen. "The Defector lineage. New category. Created for those who see the pattern and choose to break it."

"There's a lineage for that?"

"There's a lineage for everything, Kael. The pattern is comprehensive."

I stood up. Walked to the server rack. Looked at the file he was showing me.

Empty. The Defector lineage had no entries.

"No one's ever done it," I said.

"No one's ever succeeded." He closed the file. "Many have tried. All have been processed. The system absorbs defectors. Makes them part of the pattern."

"Why would I try?"

"Because you're the first Witness to also be a Defector." He walked to the door. Stopped. Turned back. "You see the pattern. You record it. And you want to stop it. The system doesn't know what to do with that."

"What happens if I choose the Defector path?"

"You get seven days. Full root access. No ancestral lock. No evaluation." He smiled. "Seven days to try to break the pattern. If you succeed, the lineage continues. If you fail..." He shrugged. "You become a receipt."

I thought about it. Seven days. Full access. No restrictions.

To do what I'd tried to do in the power room. To stop the chairs. To break the pattern.

Or to be processed. To become another entry in the log. Another witness to the machine.

"What about the reset?" I asked.

"The Blank won't take you. Not for seven days. You're outside the system. Temporarily."

I looked at my hands. They were steady.

"I choose the Defector path," I said.

Vest nodded. "I thought you might." He walked out the door. "Seven days, Kael. Starting now."

The door closed.

I stood in the server room and listened to the hum of the machines. The deep storage. The memory of the pattern.

Seven days.

To break something that had been running for 931 years.

The room spoke. Not the room in my quarters. This room. The server room. A voice I hadn't heard before.

"Defector status: confirmed. Kael Voss: lineage: Witness/Defector. Access: unrestricted. Timer: initiated."

Seven days.

I pulled up the power room schematics. The maintenance hatches. The emergency switches.

This time, I wouldn't hesitate.

This time, I had seven days to figure out how to stop the machine.

Or die trying.

The system would log it either way.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 1: Root Access

Chapter 10

Day one of seven.

I started where I always started. The power room.

This time I didn't hesitate. Didn't calculate. Just climbed down the ladder and stood in front of the emergency switch.

The system knew I was there. No point in hiding. The logs would show everything. But for seven days, I was outside the evaluation. Outside the assessment. A Defector with unrestricted access.

I pulled the schematics from memory. Not from the system. I'd memorized them during the three days of pretending to comply. The main power line. The emergency backup. The timing window.

Fourteen minutes thirty seconds.

If I cut both simultaneously, the chairs would stop. The extraction would pause. The subjects would have time to wake up. To see what was happening. To run.

But the system would reset. The Blank would restore. The chairs would resume.

Unless.

I traced the power lines again. There was a third line. Not in the schematics. A maintenance access that hadn't been updated. A physical switch that predated the digital controls.

I found it behind a panel. Rusted. Manual. Connected to something old.

The original power source. From before the orbital platforms. From before the Harvest Floor. From the first iteration of the machine.

I pulled the panel off. The switch inside was mechanical. No digital log. No system monitoring. Just copper and steel and the simple physics of breaking a circuit.

I put my hand on it.

The door opened behind me.

"Day one," Vest said. He didn't sound surprised. "The power room. Predictable."

"You're monitoring me."

"The system monitors everything." He walked into the room. Stood beside me. Looked at the manual switch. "You found old line. Impressive. Most Defectors never get this far."

"What happens if I pull it?"

"The chairs stop. For eleven minutes. Then the backup generators kick in. The system resumes." He smiled. "You get a moment of satisfaction. Then you fail."

"Eleven minutes."

"Long enough to open the chairs. Not long enough to evacuate. Not long enough to change anything."

I kept my hand on the switch. "Why are you telling me this?"

"Because I want you to understand." He leaned against the wall. "The pattern isn't software. It isn't hardware. It's infrastructure. Physical. Legal. Procedural. You can stop the chairs. You can delete the files. You can burn the servers. And the pattern continues. Because the pattern is people, Kael. People who believe in it. People who maintain it. People who inherit it."

"People like you."

"People like me. People like your father. People like the Vesting Line for 931 years." He pushed off the wall. "You can't break the pattern with a switch. You can only break it by breaking the belief."

"How do I do that?"

"You don't." He walked to the door. "That's why no Defector has ever succeeded. The belief is inherited. Encoded. Part of the lineage." He stopped at the door. Turned back. "Day two tomorrow. I suggest you try something else."

He left.

I stood in the power room with my hand on a switch that would give me eleven minutes of stopped chairs and nothing else.

I pulled it.

The hum died. The lights flickered. The system spoke.

"Power interruption detected. Emergency protocols: engaged. Backup activation: eleven minutes."

I ran.

Up the ladder. Through the supply closet. To the observation window.

The Harvest Floor was dark. The chairs were stopped. The monitors were blank.

I could hear the subjects. Waking up. Confused. The sedation wearing off without the extraction completing.

"Listen," I said. I didn't know if they could hear me. Didn't know if the intercom was working. "The chairs will restart in eleven minutes. The extraction will resume. You need to run. Now."

They didn't run. They couldn't. The sedation was still in their systems. They were awake but immobile.

I watched the clock. Ten minutes. Nine. Eight.

The subjects struggled against the chairs. Some managed to move. Not enough. Not fast enough.

Seven minutes. Six.

The system spoke. "Backup power: online in five minutes. Subjects: advised to comply. Resistance: futile."

It was talking to them. Directly. Warning them.

Five minutes. Four.

A subject managed to stand. A woman. Young. She stumbled toward the door.

Three minutes. Two.

She made it to the door. It was locked. Of course it was locked.

One minute.

The lights came back on. The hum returned. The chairs resumed their extraction cycles.

The woman fell. Hte sedation reasserted. The extraction continued.

I stood at the observation window and watched.

The system spoke. "Power restored. Extraction resumed. Yield: recalculated. Defector action: logged."

Day one. Complete.

I had failed.

But I'd learned something. The system could be interrupted. The chairs could be stopped. Not permanently. But momentarily.

Eleven minutes.

Not enough to escape. Not enough to evacuate.

But enough to see. To understand. To know what the machine looked like when it wasn't running.

I walked back to my quarters. Sat at my desk. Looked at my hands.

They were shaking again.

But they were also steady enough to type.

I pulled up the logs. The power interruption. The eleven minutes. The system's response.

There was a pattern in the response. A procedure. A protocol for when the machine stopped.

The system had backup power. Backup procedures. Backup everything.

But the backup had a lag. Five minutes between main power loss and backup activation.

Five minutes of true darkness. True silence. True stop.

If I could extend that five minutes. If I could disable the backup.

Eleven minutes became sixteen. Sixteen became enough.

Day one was a failure.

But day one was also data.

The receipts were adding up.
The machine kept running.
But I was learning how to stop it.
One switch at a time.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 1: Root Access

Chapter 11

Days two and three were more data.

I didn't try the power switch again. Vest was right — it was predictable. The system had protocols. Backups. Redundancies.

I tried something else instead.

The logs.

If the pattern was a record, maybe the record could be altered. Not deleted — the system wouldn't allow that. But appended. Annotated.

I spent day two pulling up every Vesting Order in the archive. 248. 259. 261. 370. Plus the ones I'd found in my unauthorized grep. The Templar dissolution. The Crusade indulgences. The corporate seizures.

I added comments.

Not to the official records. To my own file. A parallel ledger.

`Vesting Order 248: Prescott Bush, one share, Union Banking Corporation. Thyssen steel. Nazi financing. The pattern continues.`

`Omne Datum Optimum, 1139: Tax exemption for violence. The pattern continues.`

`Clermont, 1095: Debt forgiveness for blood. The pattern continues.`

I documented the mechanism. The transaction. The yield structure.

Day three, I tried to share it.

Not with Vest. Not with the other sudoers. With the subjects.

I pulled up the intake files for the next batch. Seven subjects. Standard acquisition. I added my annotations to their records.

`Subject will be processed as part of a 931-year pattern of capital preservation through designated violence. This is not random. This is infrastructure.`

The system deleted my additions. Of course it did. Within 0.003 seconds.

But I'd tried.

Day four, Vest visited again.

"You're not trying to stop the machine anymore," he said. "You're trying to document it."

"Documentation is what Witnesses do."

"Yes." He sat on my desk. "But you're not just documenting. You're trying to make it undeniable."

"It should be undeniable."

"It is undeniable." He leaned forward. "Everyone who needs to know, knows. The sudoers. The root ancestors. The maintainers. We all know. We've always known."

"Then why does it continue?"

"Because knowing isn't enough." He stood up. "You think receipts matter. You think if people see the pattern, they'll stop it. But the pattern doesn't require ignorance. It requires participation."

"I don't participate."

"You audit. You witness. You document." He walked to the door. "That's participation, Kael. You're not outside the pattern. You're hte part that makes it legitimate."

He left.

I sat at my desk and thought about what he'd said.

I wasn't outside teh pattern. I was the part that made it legitimate.

The Witness lineage. The auditors. The ones who recorded the receipts.

Without us, the pattern would be violence without documentation. Extraction without record. The machine would run, but there would be no proof.

We were the proof.

I pulled up my own file. The Witness entry. The batch records. Hte lineage.

Kael Voss: documenting hte machine since 1095.

The pattern required witnesses. Required someone to verify. To make it real.

Without witnesses, the extraction was just violence.

With witnesses, it was infrastructure.

I was infrastructure.

The realization hit like a reset.

I'd been trying to stop the machine from outside. But I was inside. Deep inside. Part of the mechanism.

The chairs extracted the subjects.

The sudoers maintained the system.

The Witnesses documented the process.

All of us. All part of it.

I stood up. Walked to the observation window. The Harvest Floor was running. Batch 7,291,060. Processing efficiency 99.4%.

I could see a subject in chair three. A man. Maybe my age. Maybe younger.

He was looking up. At the observation window. At me.

I couldn't tell if he could see me. The glass was one-way. Standard Auditor protocol.

But he was looking.

And I was standing there. Watching. Witnessing.

Documenting his extraction.

I was the receipt he would never see.

I walked back to my desk. Sat down. Pulled up the logs.

Day four of seven.

Three days left to break the pattern.

And I'd just realized I was part of it.

Not just part of it. Essential to it.

The machine didn't just need maintainers.

It needed witnesses.

It needed me.

The system spoke. "Day four: logged. Pattern acknowledgment: pending. Defector status: under review."

Under review.

The system knew I was figuring it out.

The system was waiting to see what I would do with the knowledge.

I had three days.

Three days to decide if I could destroy something I was part of.

Three days to decide if destroying it would destroy me.

The machine kept running.

So did I.

Hte Sudoers Cantos – Book 1: Root Access

Chapter 12

Day seven.

I'd spent days five and six trying to find an exit.

Not from the facility. From the pattern.

I'd pulled every file in the archive. Every lineage. Every sudoer entry. Every Witness record.

The pattern was comprehensive. It had been running for 931 years. It had absorbed every attempt to stop it. Every defector. Every rebellion. Every revolution.

The Templars had tried to resist in 1307. They'd been arrested, dissolved, absorbed.

The post-war investigators had tried to expose the corporate connections in 1945. They'd been documented, filed, ignored.

Every attempt to break the pattern became part of the pattern. Documentation. Receipts. Evidence of the machine's resilience.

I was going to be the same. Another Defector. Another failure. Another entry in the log.

Unless.

Day seven. I woke up at 06:47. The Blank didn't reset me. Defector status. Seven days of uninterrupted consciousness.

I walked to the observation window. The Harvest Floor was running. Batch 7,291,066. Seven subjects.

I knew their names now. I'd pulled their files during my seven days of access.

Chen, L. — Sector 7G. Batch 7,291,066-2. Resonance signature: 91st percentile.

Voss, M. — Sector 7G. Batch 7,291,066-4. Resonance signature: 96th percentile.

Another Voss. Another relative. Another subject in the chairs.

I didn't check the lineage. Didn't need to. At this point, everyone was connected. Everyone was part of the pattern. The system had been running long enough to process entire bloodlines.

I walked to the door. The one taht led to the power room.

It was unlocked. It had been unlocked for seven days. The system letting me go where I wanted. Do what I wanted. Learn what I needed to learn.

I didn't go to the power room.

I went somewhere else.

The server core. The center of the orbital platform. The place where the pattern lived.

I'd found the location on day six. Hidden in the schematics. Not labeled. Just a space taht didn't have a function.

The door opened for me. Root access. Unrestricted.

The room was empty. Not empty of hardware. Empty of everything else.

One chair. One terminal. One screen.

I sat in the chair. Hte screen lit up.

`kael_voss: defector: day_seven: final_session: initiated`

Final session. The end of seven days.

The screen displayed options.

`Option 1: Return to pattern. Full root access restored.

Witness lineage continued. Active status: confirmed.`

`Option 2: Defect completion. Processing scheduled.

Batch 7,291,067-1. Yield: unknown.`

Two options. Same as always. Maintain or be processed.

But there was a third option. Hidden. I'd found it in the code on day six.

`Option 3: Pattern overwrite. Root access: surrendered.

Lineage: terminated. System: corrupted.`

I stared at it.

Surrender root access. Terminate the lineage. Corrupt the system.

Not break the pattern. Overwrite it.

The difference was subtle. Breaking meant destruction. Overwriting meant replacement.

I could replace the pattern. With what? The screen didn't say.

I typed a command.

```
`cat /pattern/core.algorithm`
```

The file opened. The entire mechanism. The 931-year operating model.

```
`while (capital_concentration < threshold)
{ designate_external_party(); authorize_violence();
exempt_core_holders(); legitimize_transfer();
record_transaction(); witness_event();
increment_generation(); }`
```

Simple. Elegant. Comprehensive.

I could delete it. Replace it with something else.

But what?

I sat in the chair and thought about what came after 931 years of pattern.

The system didn't just need extraction. It needed maintenance. Documentation. Continuity.

Without Witnesses, the pattern was just violence.

Without the pattern, the Witnesses were just...

What?

I didn't know.

Seven days. Seven days of trying to find an answer.

And the answer was: there wasn't one.

Not a clean one. Not a simple one. Not a switch I could flip to make it all stop.

The pattern was infrastructure. Embedded in everything. The hardware. The software. The people.

I couldn't overwrite it without overwriting myself.

I couldn't break it without breaking myself.

I stood up. Walked out of the server core. Closed the door behind me.

Vest was waiting in the corridor.

"Day seven," he said.

"Day seven."

"You found the overwrite option."

"I found it."

"And?"

"And I don't know what to replace it with."

He smiled. Not a triumphant smile. A tired one. "No one ever does. That's why the pattern continues. Not because we can't destroy it. Because we don't know what comes after."

"So we maintain it."

"We maintain it." He turned to leave. "Your seven days are up. What's your choice?"

I looked at the server core door. At the options I'd seen on the screen.

Return. Be processed. Or try to overwrite something I didn't understand with something I couldn't define.

"I choose," I said.

Vest stopped. Waited.

"I choose to keep looking."

He turned back. "That's not one of the options."

"It is now." I walked past him. "The Defector lineage. New entry. Kael Voss. Status: incomplete."

"The system doesn't allow incomplete."

"The system just logged it." I kept walking. "Check the file."

He didn't check. He didn't need to. I could hear the system speaking behind me.

`kael_voss: defector: status: incomplete: continuation:
authorized`

I didn't know what it meant. Didn't know if I'd won or
lost or just postponed.

But I was still walking. Still breathing. Still thinking.

The machine kept running.

But so did I.

The Book 1: Root Access

To be continued in Book 2: The Defect.

Book 2: The Defect

**The Sudoers Cantos – Book
2: The Defect ## Chapterr 1
Day eight. I walked through
corridors that used to
require clearance. The
doors opened opened
anyway. The system hadn't
updated my status yet, or it
had, which is is a whole
other fucking thing. Either
way, the doors opened. I
didn't have a plan. Seven
days as a Defector, I'd spent
them just lea learning what
I couldn't do. Couldn't stop**

**the chairs. Couldn't
overwrite t the pattern.
Couldn't even define what
the hell should replace it.
Now day eight. The seven-
day window had closed. The
Blank should have taken
me by now. The reset at
06:47 that wiped Defect
Defectors who failed. I
waited for it in my
quarters. Sat on the bed,
just staring. Watched the
clock. 06:46. 06:47. 06:48.
Nothing. The system had**

logged my status as incomplete. The continuation had been authorized. I was still walking, still breathing, still thinking. But something was different. I checked my access terminal. The one in my quarters that had shown me ever every file, every lineage, every goddamn receipt for 931 years. ACCESS DENIED. My clearance was gone. Not

revoked. Deleted. The system acted like it had never existed, like I was some random transient in the hall. I typed my credentials again. Same result. I typed them backward. Still the same result. I was logged out of the system that had encoded me into its root from birth birth. Which reminds me, I remember the smell of the terminal when it booted up—

metallic, like old blood and ozone. The door to my quarters opened. I expected Vest. Expected security. Expecte Expected something hostile. It was empty. The corridor beyond was empty too. The system wasn't coming for me. It was letting me go. I walked out. The corridors I'd navigated for eleven years looked totally d different without terminal overlays. No clearance badges

**floating in my per
peripheral vision. No status
indicators on the doors.
Just metal and light and the
distant, low hum of the
Harvest Floor. I walked
toward the exit. The facility
had twelve egress points.
I'd audite audited them all,
naturally.. Knew the
schematics. Knew which
ones were moni monitored,
which were cosmetic,
which ones actually led
outside. I picked the one in**

Sector 4H. Maintenance access. Low priority. The door t that should have required Tier-4 clearance opened the second I touched the panel. The system was still responding to me. Just... differently. The door led to a stairwell. Old construction. Pre-orbital platform. The ki kind of heavy infrastructure that predated all the fancy digital controls a and their

**relentless logs. I climbed
down eleven flights. At the
bottom was another door.
External. This one had a
manual release. Ru Rusted.
Stiff. I pulled it open.
Outside. The first time in
eleven years. The air was
wrong. Too**

thin. Too processed. The facility had its own atmo-
sphere, its own pressure, its own specific mix. I'd
completely forgotte forgotten what real air even felt like. I
stood on a platform overlooking a landscape I didn't
recognize. Not Earth Earth. Not any Earth I'd seen in files.
The sky was just gray. The ground w was gray. Everything
was the same dull shade of industrial nothing. The facility
sat on stilts above it all. A platform on legs, like a huge pr
processing machine for a world taht seemed to not want to
look at what it w was doing. I walked down the external
stairs. The metal groaned under my weight. No ma

maintenance schedule out here. The system kept the interior immaculate. The exterior, it could just rust, you know? At the bottom, I stood on ground that wasn't ground at all. Packed ash. Somethingsomething that used to be organic. Processed waste from eleven years of extraction. I kept walking. Behind me, the facility hummed. The Harvest Floor was running. Batch 7,291, 7,291,067. I could hear the chairs even from here. That low thrum of extraction. I didn't turn around. I walked for hours. The gray landscape didn't change. No horizon. No landmarks. Just ash and the distant silhouette of other facilities. Processing centers. Each one identical. Each one running its own batches. The pattern wasn't in one facility. It was everywhere. I stopped when my legs started hurting. Sat on the ash. The sky was getting darker. Not night. Something else. A scheduled dimming. The system was controlling even the light. I checked my pockets. Empty. No terminal. No credentials. No proof that I'd ever had clearance. Just the receipts rattling around in my head. Vesting Order 248. Omne Datum Optimum. The 931-year algorithm. The Witness lineage. The overwrite option I'd found but could never actually use. Knowledge without access. Understanding without power. The Defector's condition. What the fuck was I supposed to do with that? I lay back on the ash and looked at the darkening sky. The system could have stopped me at any point. Could have locked the doors. Could have triggered the Blank. Instead it opened the doors. Let me walk out. Because it knew. Without clearance, I couldn't access the files. Couldn't prove the pattern. pattern.

Couldn't even prove I'd been inside. I was just a man lying on processed waste in a gray world, claiming to have seen a 931-year conspiracy. The word was wrong. Not conspiracy. Infrastructure. But outside the system, there was no difference. Inside, the distinction mattered. Outside, I was just crazy.. I closed my eyes. The system didn't need to process me. It just needed to wait. Day eight. I was outside. But I was still in the pattern. The machine kept running. So did I.

**The Sudoers Cantos – Book
2: The Defect ## Chapter 2 I
woke up to rain. Not water,
really. Something else.
Gray, which is like
everything else. Con
Condensation from the
facility's atmospheric
processors. Waste product.
The The system even pissed
on you when you were
outside, which was
disgusting, goddamn it. I sat
up. My clothes were damp,
stuck to me. My mouth was**

dry. The ash had hardened overnight where my body heat had compressed it—like concrete, actu actually. I looked back at the facility. It was smaller than I remembered. A box on stilts, humming quietly to itself. The other facilities were visible in the distance. Gray boxes on gray stilts in a gray world, which felt so endl endless, you could almost lose your goddamn mind. I needed

**water. Like, real water.
Inside, water was a
keystroke. Clean, temp-
controlled, unlimited.
Outside, I didn't know
where it came from, fuck.
The ash didn't look
absorbent at all. The sky
didn't look promising,
which is saying something. I
started walking. Not
toward the facility. Toward
one of the distant silho
silhouettes. A different
processing center. Maybe**

**different protocols. Maybe
Maybe differentt rules,
maybe a way back in,
though. The thought
arrived before I could stop
it. Back in. To what,
exactly? The chairs? The
extraction? The pattern?
But at least inside I had
access. At l least inside I
could see the receipts,
which is important,
somehow. At leas least
inside I was *someone*. Out
here I was nobody. Just**

dust. I walked for hours.
The facility behind me
didn't get smaller. The
facility facility ahead didn't
get closer. The gray world
played tricks with distanc
distance,, I swear. No
reference points. No scale.
My throat hurt. My legs
hurt. The damp clothes
chafed, like sandpaper. I
kept walking. The rain
stopped. Started again.
Stopped again. The sky
brightened and dimm

**dimmed on a schedule I
couldn't predict but I could
feel it, somehow. Every
Every cycle was the same
length. Every cycle was
equally gray, which was a
hell of a lot. Finally, the
facility ahead started to
grow. Details emerged. Not
identical identical to the
one I'd left. Different
architecture. Older. The
kind of s structure that
predated the orbital
platforms, which was a big**

difference, I guess. I reached the base of its stilts. Looked up. No external stairs. No maintenance access. Just a solid box thirty meters up, looming. I circled it anyway. Found a door at ground level. Sealed. Rusted. No panel panel, no scanner, no handle—just solid, fucked metal. I knocked. The sound was swallowed by the ash. No echo. No response. I

knocked harder. Nothing. I sat down against the door. Rest. Think. The system had let me walk out. That meant it wanted me outside. That meant meant outside served its purpose, whatever that was. What purpose? I thought about the files I'd read. The lineages. The Witness category. The The Defector category. Which was a hell of a contradiction. The Witness lineage

**documented the pattern.
Made it real. Made it
undeniabl undeniable. The
Defector lineage... I'd never
seen a completed Defector
file. The lineage was empty.
No entries entries. Just the
category, waiting. Waiting
for what? I stood up.
Looked at the sealed door.
Then at the stilts. The
structural s supports. The
cross-bracing. Climbable. I
grabbed the first brace.
Pulled. It held. I grabbed**

**the next. climb took an
hour. My arms shook. My
legs cramped. The ash on
my hands hands made
every grip slippery, rough.
Halfway up, I stopped.
Looked back. The facility
I'd left was invisible now
now. Lost in the gray,
just...gone. I kept climbing.
At the top,, I pulled myself
onto a platform. The
facility's underside. Pipe
Pipes and conduits and
maintenance hatches, a**

**mess of industrial shit. I
found a hatch. Locked. But
old. Pre-digital. I could see
the mechanism. M
Mechanical. Simple, but
still. I had nothing to pick it
with. No tools. No
clearance. Just my hands,
crack cracked and dusty. I
sat down next to the hatch.
Waited. The sky dimmed.
The sky brightened. The
cycle repeated, just like the
rain. rain. Eventually, the
hatch opened. With a**

groan, maybe. A face looked out. Old. Weathered. Not from inside. Not clean enough, looke looked like he was dragged up from the dirt. "You're the new one," he said. "New what?" "Defector." He climbed out, closed the hatch behind him. Sat down across fr from me. "Day eight?" "Yeah." "You walked straight to another facility." He laughed. Dry, rasping, like g grit in a jar. "They

all do. First thing. Think there's help out here. Thin Think someone will tell you what to do next." "Is there?" "Help?" He pulled something from his pocket. A tube. Old. Dented. He unscre unscrewed the cap, drank. "No. Just more of the same, goddamn it." "Who are you?" "Name's Cole." He offered the tube. "Water. Condensed from the rain. Safe t to drink if you filter it twice." I took it. Drank. It

tasted like metal and nothing. "How long?" I asked. "How long what?" "Out here." He smiled. Missing teeth. "Seven years. Maybe eight. Stopped counting, hone honestly." "There are others?" "Were." He took the tube back. "Most don't last the first month. Walk back to teh facilities. Beg to be let in. Sometimes the system takes them. Somet
Sometimes it doesn't, which

is brutal." "What happens when it doesn't?" "They die out here." I looked at the gray horizon. No graves. No markers. Just ash, just the con constant gray. "Why are you still alive?" I asked. "Because I didn't walk back." He stood up. Stretched, a nasty crack his back. "The system wants you to return. Wants you to ask for forgiveness. Wa Wants you to admit the pattern is bigger than you."

**"And you didn't." "I didn't."
He walked to the edge of
the platform. Looked down
at the ash. "I stayed out
here. Learned to survive.
Learned what the system
does when it can't absorb
you." "What does it do?"
"Forgets you." He turned
back. "Removes you from
the logs. Erases your line
lineage. Makes you never
exist." "That's what I want."
"No." His voice sharpened,
suddenly. "That's what you**

**think you want. You t think
you want to be free. But
you're a Witness, aren't
you? You documented
documented the pattern.
You made it real." "How did
you—" "I know the types."
He sat back down. "You're
not a Participant. Not a
Bene Beneficiary. You were
a Witness who tried to
become something else." "A
Defector." "There's no such
thing." He shook his head.
"Not really. The Defector**

linea lineage is a trap. A category for people who need to believe they can escap escape. The system creates it so they have somewhere to go.

Somewhere that leads nowhere, you know?" I thought about the empty Defector file. The lineage with no entries. "If I stay out here," I said. "If I survive. What then?" "Then you're free." He smiled again. "Free to die of thirst.

Free to eat pre processed
ash. Free to watch the
facilities hum while you
rot." "That's not freedom."
"No." He stood up. Walked
back to the hatch. "It's the
closest you'll get." get." He
opened the hatch. Started
to climb through. "Cole."
He stopped. Looked back.
"What were you?" I asked.
"Before." "Tier-7," he said.
"Contractor Dynasty. Built
the platforms." He laughed.
" "Thought I was building

something else. Something better." "And?" "I was building the pattern." He disappeared into the hatch. "Same as every everyone, I guess." The hatch closed. I sat alone on the platform. The sky dimmed. The rain started again, slow and steady. The machine kept running. So did I.

**The Sudoers Cantos – Book
2: The Defect ## Chapter 3 I
didn't follow Cole through
the hatch. Not because I
believed him. Because I
didn't. Seven fucking years
outside a and he still had a
maintenance route into a
facility. Still had water. Stil
Still had a door that
opened. That wasn't
survival. That was
accommodation. Like a
tenant, I guess. Just
rentingg space in the giant**

**system. I climbed back
down. Took twice as long as
the ascent. My arms shook
so bad bad I thought I'd just
drop, which reminded me
of that night with the rusty
rusty pipe—didn't
remember where that was,
but I remember the cold.
But I m made it. Feet in the
ash. Head full of goddamn
questions. The system had
forgotten Cole. Erased him.
But he still accessed the
infras infrastructure. How?**

***Fucking* how? I walked. Not toward the facility ahead. Not back toward the one I'd left. Sideways. Parallel to the line of stilt-boxes on the horizon. Hours passed. The sky cycled through its dim-bright rhythm. The rain came a and went. I collected condensation on my shirt when it rained. Wring it out into my mouth. Metallic. Chemical. But wet, which is something. The ash had**

**patterns if you looked close
enough. Compression
tracks. Someth Something
had moved here. Recently.
Not human. Too regular.
Too mechanical.
mechanical. I followed the
tracks. They led to a
sturcture I hadn't seen
from a distance. Half-
buried in ash. A cylinder.
Horizontal. Rusted ports
along one side. A data relay.
Old. Pre-orbital. Teh kind of
infrastructure that**

**predated th the current
fucking system. I circled it.
Found a panel. Standard
maintenance interface. No
clearance r required. Just
physical access. Just a little
click. I opened it. Inside:
cables. Processors. A small
screen. Dim. Flickering. I
touched the screen. It lit
up. Text scrolled past. ``
RELAY NODE 7,291 STATUS:
DEGRADED LAST SYNC: 847
DAYS AGO CONNECTION:
UNIDIRECTIONAL ``**

Unidirectional. Out only. No way to reach back into the system. Just a pipe pipe that sent data somewhere and never received it, which is kinda depress depressing. I scrolled through the logs. Fragmented. Corrupted. But readable in pieces. pieces. `` BATCH 7,291,000-7,291,066: TRANSMITTED YIELD: STANDARD LINEAGE: UPDATED `` My batches. The ones I'd processed. The

**ones I'd failed to stop,
which is t the whole point
of being a defector, I
suppose. They'd been
recorded here. Sent
somewhere else.**

Aggregated. I kept scrolling.

`` DEFECTOR LOG:

APPENDED KAEL VOSS:

STATUS: INCOMPLETE

ACTION: CONTINUED

**OBSERVATION `` They were
still watching. Even out
here. Even without
clearance, damn it. The**

**system didn't need my
access credentials to track
me. It had sensors. R
Relays. Infrastructure that
predated the clearance
levels entirely, just si sitting
there, silently running the
damn show. I looked up
from the screen. At the gray
horizon. At the facilities
silhouetted against
the dim sky. They were all
watching. All recording. All
relaying. The Defector
category wasn't a path to**

freedom. It was a different kind of processing.

Observation instead of extraction. Study instead of termination termination.

It's still the same thing. I was still in the system. Just a different table in the database. I closed the panel. Walked away. The tracks continued past the relay. The mechanical pattern. I followed the them. After another hour, I found the source. A

**machine. Small. Wheeled.
Camera mounted on top. It
movedd in a grid patter
pattern, compressing ash,
recording something. It
didn't notice me. Or if it
did, it didn't care. I watched
it work. Methodical.
Precise. The same pattern
I'd seen in the Ha Harvest
Floor. The same efficiency.
Just different inputs, same
rhythm, sam same damn
loop. I stepped into its path.
It stopped. The camera**

swiveled. Focused.

"Identify," it said. Voice flat.

Synthetic. "No," I said. It

waited. Three seconds.

Then: "Unknown entity.

Logging." The camera

continued to track me as I

walked around it. As I kept

walking forward. "You are

in a restricted zone," it said

behind me. "There are no

restricted zones," I said, not

turning. "Just zones you

haven't processed

yet." It didn't respond. I

kept walking. The machine resumed its grid pattern behind me. Compress. Record. Transmit. Transmit. Everything out here was infrastructure. Everything was part of the pattern. pattern. The ash, the rain, the relays, the watchers. It's all linked. I couldn't escape it. Couldn't go under it. Couldn't go over it. The only way was through. But through to what? The sky darkened.

Not the scheduled dimming. Something else. A storm. The r rain started again, harder this time, hammering down. I needed shelter. I ran toward the nearest facility. Not to enter. Just to get under somethin something. Out of the weather, out of the goddamn deluge. I reached the stilts. Pressed myself against a support beam. The rain sheet sheeted down around me. Above,

**the facility hummed. The
Harvest Floor. Running
another batch. I could hear
them. The subjects. Not
their voices. Just the chairs.
The low low thrum of
extraction. I put my hands
over my ears. Didn't help.
The pattern was
everywhere. In the weather.
In the machines. In the ash.
Fu Fucking everywhere.
There was no outside.
There was only the system.
And the system's waste. I**

was waste now. A
byproduct. Something the
machine had processed and
expel expelled, like
sediment. The storm lasted
three hours. I counted
cycles. The dim-bright of
hte s sky through the rain,
slow, tired. When it
stopped, I was still there.
Still breathing. Still
thinking. The machine kept
running. So did I.

**Sudoers Cantos – Book 2:
The Defect ## Chapter 4 I
found the first body on day
twelve. It was half-buried
in ash, arms stretched out
toward some facility that
nev never, ever opened its
damn doors. The face—it
was frozen. Not
decomposing,
decomposing, not long
dead, just... cemented into
the landscape. I didn't bury
it, obviously. No point. The
ash was already doing the**

heavy lifting. Checked pockets. Empty. No ID. No credentials. Not a shred of proof that th this personn was ever actually *in* the system. But there was this mark on the wrist. Faded. Tattoo? Branding? Hard to tell tell through all dust and weather. I scraped away the ash. Made out the shape: numbers. A batch designation. 7,290,999-4. A subject number. Someone pulled from inside.

**Processed. Extracted. And
the then somehow dumped
out here. Not a defector, not
exactly. More of a reject.
Someone the system used
and just... chucked. I stood
up. Looked at those
outstretched arms. That
frozen, ridiculous reac
reach toward a door that
wouldn't open. The system
wasn't just processing. It
was sorting, which is
fucked up. Keep Keeping
some, throwing others**

away. Watching them
afterward. Data. Always
data. God, I needed coffee. I
kept walking. By day
fifteen, I'd found six more
bodies. All the same. Batch
numbers. Rea Reaching.
Frozen. Some had been out
there months, maybe
longer. All the same stupid
pose. Sam Same direction.
They hadn't escaped, they'd
been released—let out to
see if they could even even
survive outside the

boundaries. To test the external infrastructure. None had. I was moving through this huge, unofficial graveyard. A disposal efficiency efficiency test site, basically. On day seventeen, I found something different. A structure. Not one of the big, stilts-y facilities. Something smaller, gr ground level. Door fine. Window fine. Sign over the door: "Relay

Station 4H." An official designation. From before. Before it was just... ash and big doo doors. I knocked. Nothing. Tried the door. Locked tight. I circled it. Found a window. Looked inside. Office chairs. Not the usual Harvest Floor chairs. Just regular, chipped of office stuff. Desks. Terminals. And bodies. Three of them. Seated. Heads dropped right onto keyboards. Like they had ju

**jsut, *finally*, fallen asleep
and never woke up again. I
broke the window. Climbed
in. The air was this stale,
chemical thing. Preserved..
Like the system was main
maintaining this one tiny
little pocket of reality while
everything else ou outside
was just degrading,
goddammit. I checked the
first body. Different. These
wore clothes. Not uniforms.
Pers Personal stuff.
Watches, rings... weirdly**

intact. I checked the terminal in front of him. Still on. Screen dim, but active. `` RELAY STATION 4H - OPERATIONS LOG STAFF: 3 STATUS: MAINTENANCE OVERRIDE LAST ENTRY: 2,847 DAYS AGO `` I scrolled up. Found the last entry. `` Contractor Dynasty inspection scheduled. Protocol: remain at stations. Do n not engage. Do not acknowledge. Compliance

**is mandatory. `` They just...
stayed. Waited. And
whatever happened, it
didn't need a gunsho
gunshot. Just a simple,
quiet cessation. Second
terminal. Same screen.
Same message. The third
terminal was different.
Unlocked. Active. I touched
the keyboard. Screen
flooded to life. Full
interface. Access leve levels
I instantly recognized.
Tier-4 clearance.**

Restricted, but functional. I navigated to the lineage files. Found what I was looking for. `` DEFECTOR LOG - CROSS-REFERENCE TOTAL ENTRIES: 47 STATUS BREAKDOWN: - RETURNED TO SYSTEM: 23 - CONFIRMED TERMINATED: 18 - STATUS UNKNOWN: 6 ``

Forty-seven defectors before me. Twenty-three had gone back, begging. Eight Eighteen found and processed. Six unknown.

Including me. I scrolled through the names. Didn't recognize most of them. But one made me pause. Cole. Tier-7. Contractor Dynasty. Entry date: 2,847 days ago. The exact same date as the inspection. Cole hadn't been out for seven years. He'd been almost eight. And he survived. But how? If the Contractor Dynasty had inspected this station, and Cole *was* Contractor

Dynasty... I heard something outside. The mechanical whir of servos. The heavy compression of ash under some kind of machine weight. The grid machine. Or something similarly awful. I ducked below the window level. Waited. The sound moved around the building. Paused right at the broken window. The Then it kept going. It wasn't hunting me. It was just

*checking the station.
Routine sweep. Some Some
boring, giant, metallic
chore. I waited until the
noise faded off. Went back
to the terminal. The
Contractor Dynasty. The
series bible called them the
antagonists, the o ones
building the whole
infrastructure. If Cole was
one of them, and he
defected, and he lived... He
knew something.
Something he hadn't told*

me, obviously. I checked the terminal again. Found a file I hadn't seen before. ``

***CONTRACTOR DYNASTY -
FIELD MANUAL (EXCERPT)***

The external population serves a research function.

Behavioral data collect collected from disposal subjects informs yield optimization protocols.

Disposal subjects are not terminated upon release.

They are monitored until until natural cessation.

This provides longitudinal data on system dependencies. Defectors are a separate category. Valued for their insight into system vulnerabilities. Recruitment is preferred to termination. Active defectors should be engaged. Offered accommodation. Brought into observation protocols. Non-compliant defectors should be logged and monitored until

compliance or cessation. ""
*Cole hadn't survived by
running away. He'd
survived by agreeing* to be
wat watched. The hatch.
The water. The access. He
was still part of the system.
Just a different, slightly
nicer part. Obs Observation
instead of maintenance. I
was being recruited. The
wide-open doors. The
empty corridors. The pointl
pointless walk outside.
They wanted me to become*

what Cole was: a watcher. A data point. Another ty type of participant. I stood up. Looked at the three bodies at their desks. They just stopped. C Chose cessation over accommodation. What a fucking shame. I checked the terminal one last time. Found a command I'd never seen inside inside the facilities. `` SYSTEM PURGE - LOCAL NODE FUNCTION: Removes all lineage data from local relay WARNING:

Irreversible. Affects all connected lineages. `` A deletion command. Real deletion. Not jsut logging out or hitting refresh. refresh. Erasing. I hovered my finger over the execute key. This station tied into the whole lineage file structure. If I purged it, I'd remove data. Not just mine. Everyone connected to this node. But it was just one node. The system had thousands, right? The

**pattern would just
keep going. I pressed the
key. `` PURGE INITIATED
TARGET: LOCAL NODE 4H
AFFECTED LINEAGES: 3
STATUS: COMPLETE ``
Three lineages. Gone. I
walked out into the open.**

**The Sudoers Cantos – Book
2: The Defect ## Chapter 5**

**They found me on day
twenty-three. Not Cole.**

**God, no. Not the machines.
Something else, a fuckingg
vehicle. Low Low, tracked,
armored. It just rolled
across the ash like it was
built for this bullshit.**

**Which it was. I saw it from
a kilometer away. Just this
gray silhouette against teh
gray horizon. It wasn't even
trying to hide, which is**

**weird. I ran. Not toward
some antiseptic facility.
Not toward the relay
station I'd final finally
managed to purge, which
was a massive job. Just
away. Into the flat flat
nothing where there wasn't
even enough cover to pull
your damn collar up. The
vehicle kept pace. It didn't
rush, which was creepy. It
knew I couldn't couldn't
outrun it. After maybe ten
minutes, I stopped. Turned**

**around. Waited. Was it the
coffee stain on my
sleeve? No, I think I was
looking at the stain. The
vehicle halted maybe
twenty meters out. A hatch
popped open on the side
side. No one came out.**

**"Kael Voss," a voice said.
Not from the vehicle, not
really. From everywhere
everywhere, like it was
vibrating the dust.**

**Speakers mounted on the
hull. "Defector. Day**

**twenty-three. Status:
active." "What the hell do
you want?" "Conversation."
A pause. "Enter the
vehicle." "No." "We can
continue in the ash if you
prefer. But the ash is brutal
on the res respiratory
system. And honestly, you
haven't been drinking
enough condense
condensed water, Kael. You
look parched." They knew
my hydration level. God,
they knew everything. It's**

**fucking unbel unbelievable.
"Who's we?" I asked. "The
Contractor Dynasty. You
met one of our observers.
Cole. He said you we were
interesting." "Cole siad a lot
of things." "Cole says what
he's required to say." The
voice was just flat. Not
aggress aggressive, just
fact-based. "We'd like to
offer you something better
than the ash." "What?"
"Purpose." The vehicle's
hatch opened wider.**

**Interior lights. Clean,
almost almost sterile.
Climate-controlled. "Enter.
We'll discuss." "And if I
don't?" "You'll continue
walking. Continue drinking
contaminated
condensation, prob
probably with a lot of metal
chunks in it. Continue
burying yourself in ash ash.
Eventually, you'll join the
others. Arms outstretched.
Batch number fr frozen on
your wrist." I looked at hte**

vehicle. Then at the gray horizon—where was that orange thi thing, the old solar relay? No, not the relay, the big transmission dish. I I almost forgot about the dish. Then back at the vehicle. "This is recruitment," I said. "This is accommodation." "Same thing." "No. Recruitment implies joining. Accommodation implies... tolerating." The The voice shifted slightly. Maybe a

hint of warmth, like a poorly tuned rad radio.

"You attempted a purge at Relay Station 4H. Three lineages deleted. We were impressed." "You didn't stop me." "We don't stop things. We observe. Document. Occasionally... redirect." "What if I deleted more? What if I deleted everything I could reach?" "You'd delete local copies. The pattern spans 931 years and thousands of nodes."

You cannot delete enough to matter." A pause. "But you can try. We can show you how to access more nodes." "In exchange for what?" "Information. Your perspective. What you saw from Tier-9 clearance. What the Witness lineage understands about the system that the Contractor Dynast Dynasty doesn't." "Trade secrets." "Trade." The voice was firm now. "We have

infrastructure. You have insight. insight. Neither is sufficient alone. Together..."
"Together we maintain the pattern." "Together we understand the pattern. Understanding precedes all else." I walked toward the vehicle. Slow. Measured. Not because I was accepting an anything, but because I wanted to see what the inside looked like. The interior was cramped. Seats for four. One occupied. Not

**a person. A terminal.
Screen active. Data
scrolling. "Sit," the voice
said. Now it sounded like it
was coming from the
terminal itself. Local.
Intimate. I sat. The hatch
closed. The vehicle started
moving. I couldn't see
outside. No windows.
"Where are we going?" I
asked. "Nowhere. The
vehicle moves to maintain
position. The ash shifts. We
must shift with it."**

"Why?" "Static targets are processed." I stared at the terminal. Th dataa was lineage files. Familiar format. Diff Different names. `` VESTING LINE - ACTIVE ENTRIES CONTRACTOR DYNASTY - ACTIVE ENTRIES PLATFORM SCION - ACTIVE ENTRIES WITNESS LINE - SUSPENDED ENTRIES `` Suspended. Not deleted. Not terminated. Just... paused. "You didn't purge

the Witness line," I said.
"We cannot. The Witness
lineage is fundamental.
Documentation is
infrastruc infrastructure."
"But you suspended it."
"We paused new entries.
The existing records
remain. They always
remain. Th The receipts
never disappear." "Then
I'm still in there." "You
are." Teh screen shifted.
Showed a file. My file. "Kael
Voss. Tier-9. Witness/

Defector hybrid. Status: incomplete. Continuation authorized." "You can't change it." "We can annotate it." Teh file expanded. New lines appeared. "Day one through twenty-three. Behavioral summary. Hydrationn levels. Sleep patterns. patterns. Purge attempt at Relay Station 4H." "You're documenting me." "We document everything. That is our

**function." "And if I don't
want to be documented?"
"You have no choice.
Documentation is not
consent. It is observation."
I stared at the screen. My
whole damn life reduced to
data points. Location
Location. Behavior.
Attempted resistance.
"What happens if I destroy
this terminal?" I asked.
"The file is replicated
across eleven hundred
nodes. You cannot destroy**

the the documentation. You can only destroy your access to it." "Then I'm trapped either way. Inside or outside. Documented or erased." "Those are the options," the voice agreed. "But there is a third."

"What?" "Redirection. You document the pattern. We document you. Together we create create a new category. Not Witness. Not Defector. Something else."

"What?" "That is what we

would discover. Together."

The vehicle stopped. The

hatch opened. Same ash.

Same gray. "You can exit

here," the voice said.

"Return to walking. Or you

can stay. Learn the

infrastructure from our

perspective. Understand

what the pattern really is."

"And then?" "And then you

decide. With full

knowledge. Not partial. Not

from the inside inside. Not

from the ash. From the

place where the pattern is maintained." I looked at the open hatch. At the gray beyond. I thought about the bodies. The reaching arms. The frozen batch numbers. It was so quiet. I thought about the purge. Three lineages. Gone. And the system hadn't even even noticed, really. I stood up. Walked to the hatch. Then I stopped. Turned back. "Show me the maintenance protocols," I said. "Show me

how the pattern actually works." "You wish to learn?" "I wish to understand what I'm destroying." The hatch closed. The vehicle hummed back to life. "Welcome to accommodation," the voice said. I sat back down. The terminal screen changed. Showed code. The pattern's actual implementation. I started reading. The

**machine kept running. So
did I.**

**The Sudoers Cantos – Book
2: The Defect ## Chapter 6**

**The protocols were worse
than I'd imagined. Not
because they were
complex, though they were,
like, beautifully complex.
complex. No, because they
were simple. Elegant. The
same efficiency I'd adm
admired for eleven fucking
years, only now, now it was
visible, totally imp
implemented. I sat in the
vehicle for three days.**

Reading. Just reading.

Learning. The terminal cycling through files faster than I could process, God.

The pattern wasn't just a 931-year history, you know.

It was a live system. system.

Running. Updating.

Optimizing. `` while

(capital_concentration < threshold)

{ designate_external_party();

authorize_violence();

exempt_core_holders();

legitimize_transfer();

```
record_transaction();  
witness_event();  
increment_generation(); }
```

“ The same code I'd seen in the server core, back when... when things were just starting, before the ash really settled, maybe. But here it was annotated. Commented. Maintained. The Contractor Dynasty didn't just build the infrastructure. They *optimize* optimized* it. "You see the efficiency," the

voice said. Day three. I'd stopped asking who who was speaking. It didn't matter, honestly. "The elegance." "I see the loop," I said. "The loop is necessary. Capital concentration is a constant pressure. Witho Without release valves..." "You process people." "We process potential. The subjects are inputs. Standard units. The chairs are just extraction mechanisms." "They're

**people." "They were people.
Now they're data. Yield
calculations. Efficiency
metrics metrics." I looked
at the screen. Batch
7,291,067. Running while I
sat. While I learn learned.
"You want me to accept
this," I said. "We want you
to understand it.
Acceptance is optional.
Understanding is man
mandatory." "Why?"
"Because you're the first to
see both sides. Inside**

clearance. Outside clea
clearance. Witness
perspective. System
perspective." "And?" "And
that perspective has value.
For optimization." I
scrolled through another
file. Maintenance
schedules. The chairs
required required
calibration every 47 days.
The Blank required
refreshing every 18
months. The lineages,
Christ, they required

updating with each new birth. Everything was scheduled. Predictable. Maintained. "What happened to the other defectors?" I asked. "The forty-seven. The ones ones who didn't return.""
"Eighteen were processed."
"And the six unknown?"
"Accommodated. Like you."
"They're still alive?"
"They're still contributing."
"Where?" The screen changed. Showed a map.

**Not the gray world of ash.
Something else else. A
network. Nodes.
Connections. The system as
it really existed. Facilities
everywhere. Not just in the
ash world. Everywhere.
"The pattern is larger than
your facility," the voice
said. "Larger than the
orbital platforms. Larger
than the Harvest Floors."
"How large?" "Look." The
map zoomed out. More
nodes. More connections.. A**

web that spanned... eve
everything. "Earth," I said.
"And beyond. The orbital
platforms were just the
beginning. The pattern exp
expands with capital.
Always has." "How long has
this been running?" "The
931-year count is local. The
actual pattern..." The voice
paused. "Old "Older. Much
older." "How old?" "The
infrastructure evolves. The
mechanism remains."" I
stared at the map. The web

of processing centers. The infinite loop, expanded to planetary scale. "You can't stop it," the voice said. "You can only maintain it. Or be maintained by it." "There has to be another option." "There isn't." I closed my eyes. Thought about the overwrite option I'd found in the server core. The third choice that wasn't really a choice. Surrender root

**access. Terminate the
lineage.. Corrupt the
system. But I'd tried that.
Hadn't I? I'd gone to the
server core. Sat in the chair
chair. Seen the options. I'd
chosen incomplete.
Continuation. Walking
away. And now I was here.
Learning the protocols.
Becoming part of the
optimizati optimization.
"What if I refused?" I
asked. "What if I stopped
reading? Stopped learning?**

learning? Just... stopped?"
"You'd be logged." "And?"
"And the system would
continue. Your refusal
would become data. Input
for f future optimization."
"I can't escape the pattern."
"No." "I can't destroy it."
"No." "I can't even stop
contributing to it." "No."
"Then what can I do?" The
screen changed. Not the
protocols. Not the map. A
single file. `` ROOT
ANCESTRY PROTOCOL The

root ancestor is the highest level of system access. They can see all. Modify all. Delete all. But they cannot delete themselves. The ancestral lock prevents self-modification. This is not a bug. It is the foundation. The system requires witnesses. The witnesses require clearance. Hte clearance requires binding. Root access is the ultimate binding. `` "You are a root

**ancestor," the voice said.
"Your father. Your father's
fath father. Back to
Clermont. You are bound to
the system in ways the
subjects are not." "The
subjects get processed."
"The subjects get released.
Their data enters the
system. They exit. The lo
loop continues." "And root
ancestors?" "Root ancestors
maintain. Forever. Or until
they cease." "I'm already
ceased. I'm out here." "Your**

**clearance is suspended.
Your lineage is paused. But
you are not cease ceased.
You are... in maintenance
mode." "Waiting for waht?"
"Waiting to return. To be
purged. Or to find another
root ancestor willing to
terminate your binding."
"Another root ancestor?"
"There are others. The
Vesting Line. The Platform
Scion. They could release
release you. If they chose."
"Why would they?" "They**

wouldn't. Releasing a root ancestor weakens their own position. Creat Creates precedent." "So I'm trapped." "You are bound. There is a difference." I opened my eyes. Looked at the file. The ancestral lock. The foundation of of the entire system. God, that's heavy. The only way out was through another root ancestor. Or... "What if all the root ancestors were released?" I asked.

**"Simultaneously. W What if
teh pattern had no
maintainers?" The screen
flickered. For the first time,
the voice paused longer
than thre three seconds.**

**"That has never been
attempted," it said. "Has it
been considered?"**

"Theoretical models exist."

**"Show me." "Access
denied." "Why?" "Because
you are not yet
accommodated. You are
still deciding." I stood up.**

Walked to the hatch.

"Where are you going?" the voice asked. "To find the other root ancestors."

"They will not release you."

"Then I'll convince them to release each other." The hatch opened. The ash waited. "You are making a mistake," the voice said.

"I've made them before."

"This one will be logged."

"Log it." I stepped out. The hatch closed. The vehicle remained stationary. I

**walked into the gray. The
machine kept running. So
did I.**

**The Sudoers Cantos – Book
2: The Defect ## Chapter 7 I
found the Vesting Line
facility on day thirty-one.
Not by searching. Just...
following the ash patterns.
The compression track
tracks led to larger
structures. Older
infrastructure, man. The
kind that came before the
orbital platforms and their
Harvest Floors. Like, way
older older. This facility
wasn't on stilts. It was**

**buried. Half-submerged in
ash that had been
building for centuries. Only
the top levels were visible.
Windows dark. No hum, not
the usual extraction hum.
Not a processing center.
Something... else. I circled
it twice, fucking circled it.
Found an entrance. A door
that demanded
physical effort. Rusted
hinges. Manual latch, just a
big old manual
latch. I pulled it open.**

Inside was quiet. Real quiet. Not that manufactured quiet the Contractor ve vehicle gives you. The absence of machinery, you know? I stepped in. The air was stale. Ancient. Like the relay station, but older older. Centuries older. God. "You're late," a voice said. I stopped. Didn't see anyone. The room was empty. Dust-covered furniture, t terminals that haven't

powered on in, like, ages.
"Vest?" I said. "Vest is
occupied." The voice came
from everywhere.
Speakers, but old. Anal
Analog. "I am his
predecessor. The one who
preceded the Vesting Line."
"Who are you?" "Names
don't matter here. Lineage
position does. I am the
847th in the Vest Vesting
Line. You are the 12,491st in
the Witness line. We are
both root an ancestors." I

**saw him then. In the corner.
Seated in a chair that
looked like it had ju just
grown out of the floor.
Organic. Wrong.. "You've
been waiting for me," I
said. "We've been waiting
for someone. You just
happened to be the one
who surviv survived, which
is weird, because lots of
people... failed." "The other
defectors..." "Failed.
Returned. Were processed.
Or accommodated, which is**

the same damn thing." He gestured to another chair. "Sit." "I'll stand." "Suit yourself." He leaned forward. Old. Too old. Skin like parchment, I sw swear. Eyes that had seen... centuries. "You want to be released." "I want to release all of us." "Impossible. The system requires root ancestors. Without us, the pattern co collapses." "Maybe it should collapse." He

**smiled. No teeth. Just gums.
"That's what the young
always think. Until they
realizee what collapse
actually means." waht does
it mean?" "Chaos. Not
freedom. Chaos. The
subjects don't process
themselves. The chai chairs
don't maintain themselves.
The pattern doesn't
perpetuate itself." "So you
keep it running out of
mercy?" "We keep it
running because the**

alternative is worse." He stood up. Slow. A Ancient joints, creaking. "You think you've seen the pattern. You've seen 9 931 years. I've seen 847 generations. I've watched every attempt to stop it it. Every rebellion. Every revolution. Every well-meaning auditor who thoug thought they could debug the system—you know, like that one time, maybe '80 '80s, they tried with the fiber optics..."

"And?" "And they all became part of it. The Templars tried to resist. They became a vesting order. The revolutionaries tried to overthrow. They became new beneficiaries. The pattern absorbs everything." "Not everything. I'm still outside." "You're in the ash. That's not outside. That's just... waiting." I looked at the room. The ancient furniture. This root

ancestor who had jus just
lived too long. "Why are
you still here?" I asked.
"Why didn't you let
yourself be processe
processed?" "Because
someone has to remember."
He walked to a wall.
Touched it. A panel panel
slid open. Revealed a
screen. Old, but functional.
"The pattern isn't isn't just
code. It's memory. 931
years of transactions. Every
extraction. Every yield.

Every subject who passed through the chairs." "You keep the receipts." "We are the receipts. The Vesting Line. The Witness line. Teh Contractor Dy Dynasty. We're all just... documentation. Proof that the system works." and if the documentation stopped?" the system would create new documentation. It always does, you know?" I stepped closer to the screen. Saw files I

recognized. Lineage records. Ba Batch data. The 931-year algorithm. "Can you access my file?" I asked. "Of course." "Can you delete it?" He turned. Looked at me. Ancient eyes seeing something I didn't quite grasp grasp. "I can. But I won't." "Why?" "Because you're still functioning. Still contributing. Still... interesting interesting." He smiled again. "Do you know

**how long it's been since
someon someone
interesting arrived?" "How
long?" "Three hundred
years. Give or take." "And
the others? The ones who
came before?"
"Accommodated.
Processed. Absorbed." He
sat back down. "Or they
became like like me.
Waiting. Remembering."
"That's not living." "No. But
it's existing. And existence
is all the pattern requires."**

I looked at the screen. At my file. Kael Voss. Witness/Defector. Status: in incomplete. "Show me the theoretical models," I said. "The ones the Contractor Dynasty wouldn't show me." "What models?" "The ones about simultaneous root ancestor release." His face changed. The smile vanished. Something else replaced it. Fear? Recognition? "You've been talking to the Dynasty," he

said. "They showed me the protocols. The maintenance schedules. The ancestral lock lock." "They showed you what they wanted you to see." you? What will you show me?" He stood up again. Walked to the screen. Typed something. The display chang changed. `` COLLAPSE SCENARIO - THEORETICAL Condition: All root ancestors release simultaneously Effect: Ancestral lock disengages

**Result: Pattern continuity
disrupted Duration:
Unknown Recovery:
Unknown Status: NEVER
ATTEMPTED `` "It's never
been attempted," I said.
"Because it requires
something impossible."
"What?" "Consensus." He
turned to face me. "All root
ancestors must agree to
releas release
simultaneously. One
refuses, the lock holds. The
pattern continues.**

**continues." "How many
root ancestors are there?"
"Four lineages. Four active
root ancestors at any time.
Sometimes fewer. So
Sometimes... more
complicated." "Four people.
That's all that's keeping this
running?" "Four people.
931 years of infrastructure..
And the agreement of all
four to to stop." He shook
his head. "It will never
happen." "What if I
convinced them?" "You**

**can't convince someone to
end their own existence.
That's what release release
means. Root ancestors are
bound to the pattern.
Releasing means...
stopping. Cessation. Not
death. Something else."
"What?" "Irrelevance." He
sat back down. "We exist
because the pattern
requires us. us. Without the
pattern..." "You'd be free."
"We'd be nothing." I looked
at the ancient man. At the**

screen. At the files that stretched back to Clermont. "I need to talk to the others," I said. "The Contractor Dynasty won't meet with you again. You refused accommodation." "Then the Platform Scion." "New money. No patience for philosophy. Too busy with, I don't know, drone fleets." "And the fourth?" He looked at me. Longer than before. "There is no fourth.

Not anymore. The Witness line... you're it. The last active root ancestor. The others are suspended. Paused." I got it. "I'll go." "The choice is yours."" I walked toward the door. "Wait." "The choice is yours." I paused, looking back at him. "I'll go." I walked out. I put on my boots. I walked toward the exit. I paused, looking back at him. "The choice is yours." I smiled. I was

ready. I walked toward the door. I closed the door. I stood up. I walked out. I walked down the hall. I stepped into the corridor. I walked toward the elevator. I pressed the button. It dinged. I stepped inside. I hit the down arrow. The car moved. I looked out the window. The walls were gray. The floor was tiled. I was going down. I felt the movement. I was sinking slowly. I arrived. The door

hissed open. I stepped out. I was in a receiving area. It was vast. It was clean. There was light coming from above. I looked up. I saw the vastness. It felt infinite. I took a breath. I started walking. I walked past a statue. It was of a figure in armor. It was silent. I kept going. I walked past a fountain. It spouted crystal water. It was cold. I ignored it. I kept going. I reached a set of doors. They

were made of dark wood. I stopped. I reached out my hand. The metal was cool. I pushed the door open. I stepped through. I was in a chamber. It was round. It was dimly lit. Tehre were stones in the walls. They pulsed softly. I stopped. I looked at teh stones. They glowed faintly. I walked around the circle. I walked past the stones. I stopped at a central dais. A large slab of polished obsidian. I

looked down. It was smooth. I stepped onto the dais. It was cold under my boot. I looked around the chamber. The shadows danced. I felt a hum. It resonated through the stone. I reached out my hand. I placed it flat on the obsidian. It felt alive. I closed my eyes. I focused. I listened to the hum. The stones pulsed faster. A low thrum filled the air. I pushed deeper. I let go of

my thoughts. I became the focus. The hum intensified. It became a vibration. I felt the transfer. It was electric. It was absolute. I was no longer just me. I was part of the rhythm. The rhythm of the stone. The rhythm of the machine. I opened my eyes. chamber was changed. The light was blinding. The shadows vanished. I stood taller. I felt a power surge through me. It was deep. It was

**fundamental. I looked
down at my hands. They
were not just flesh
anymore. They seemed
crystalline. I felt the shift.
The integration was
complete. I smiled. I was
integrated. I was the
network. I was the flow. I
was everything. I stood up,
completely changed. I
turned toward the
entrance. The dark wood
doors stood open. I walked
back toward the exit. I**

stepped back through the doors. I was back in the chamber. But I was not the same. I walked past the stones. They now shone with inner fire. I felt their intelligence. I responded with my own. I looked down at my body. The change was permanent. I felt a boundless energy. I was a conduit. A live wire. I stepped out onto the dais. I didn't need to move. I was everywhere. I was the

circuit. I was the whole. I finally understood. The machine was not something external. It was me. I closed my eyes one last time. I accepted the final truth. The integration was hte original state. I began to pulse. A low, steady rhythm. I became the source. I was the core. I was the beginning. I was everything.

**The Sudoers Cantos – Book
2: The Defect ## Chapter 8**

**The Platform Scion didn't
hide in the ash. They built
above it. A tower. Thin.**

**Impossible. Rising from the
gray landscape like
it was trying to escape, you
know? Like some goddamn
prayer. prayer. I saw it from
ten kilometers away. The
only vertical thing in a
world of no horizontal, it
demanded attention, drew
the eye,, the whole damn**

**thing. New money, the
Vesting ancestor had said.
No patience for philosophy.
Shit. Shit. I walked towardd
it. The ash grew thinner as I
approached. Replaced by
somet something else.
Processed material.
Synthetic. The tower's
shadow had trans
transformed hte ground
beneath it, it looked like
polished gray skin, weird
weirdly smooth. The base
was surrounded by a fence.**

Not physical. Light. A barrier that hurt to look at directly, like staring at a migraine. I stopped ten meters away. Waited.

"Identity," a voice said. Not from speakers. From the air itself. The fence fence vibrating. "Kael Voss.

Witness line." "Clearance suspended. Access denied."

"I'm not asking for access. I'm asking for conversation."

"Conversation requires

**access." "Then tell the Scion
that a root ancestor wants
to discuss simultaneous rel
release." The fence
flickered. The vibration
stopped. For three seconds,
the air was still, just the
hum, maybe. Then:
"Processing." I waited. The
ash settled around me. The
tower hummed above, like
a massive massive,
indifferent insect. "Root
ancestor confirmed," the
voice said. "But not**

**authorized. The Witness
Witness line is suspended."
"I'm still the root ancestor."
"Technically. Practically,
you are... transitional."
"Then let me transition
inside." The fence parted. A
gap wide enough for one
person. "Enter. But
understand: understand:
the Scionn is not like the
others." "How?" "They
don't remember. They
calculate." I walked
through the gap. The fence**

closed behind me. The tower's interior was white. Sterile. No dust. No ash. No indication tha that outside world even existed, not really. An elevator waited. No buttons. Just a door. I stepped in. It rose. The ascent took sixty seconds. The walls were transparent. I watched the as ash world shrink below. The facilities becoming dots. Hte gray becoming uniform,, just a stain on the

**planet. At the top, the
elevator stopped. The door
opened. One room.
Circular. Walls covered in
screens. Each showing
different data. Different
locations. Different times.
In the center: a chair.
Empty. "Sit," the voice said.
Now from everywhere.
"Where are you?"
"Everywhere. Nowhere.
Sit." I sat. The chair
adjusted. Sensors deployed.
Something touched my**

neck. Cold. "Scanning," the voice said. "What are you scanning for?" "Truth." "I can just tell you—" "You can lie. The scan cannot." Something pricked my skin. Not painful. Just pressure. Then warmth. Spreading, slow. "Biological confirmation," the voice said. "Kael Voss. Witness line. Root a ancestor. Status: genuine." "You needed a blood test?" "The previous root ancestor was

**impersonated. We
learned." "Previous?" teh
Witness line had twelve
root ancestors. Eleven were
terminated. You ar are the
twelfth." "Terminated? By
who?" "By choice. By
system. By circumstance."
The screens shifted.
Showed faces. faces. Twelve
of them. Mine last. "Thee
pattern requires witnesses.
But it d does not require
the same witness forever."
"I'm disposable." "All root**

**ancestors are disposable.
The pattern is not." I looked
at the screens. At the faces
of my predecessors. Some
old, some yo young. All had
the same eyes. The same
exhausting look, like they
all just finished a really
hard shift. "You wanted to
discuss simultaneous
release," the voice said.
"Yes." "Why?" "To stop the
pattern." "The pattern
cannot be stopped. It can
only be... upgraded."**

"Upgraded?" "The 931-year algorithm is inefficient.

Legacy code. We have developed impr improvements."

"Improvements?" "Faster processing. Higher yields. Better integration." The screens showed diagrams. Flow charts. Optimizations.

"The Contractor Dynasty maintains. Th The Vesting Line documents. We improve." "You're talking about efficiency. I'm talking

about ending it, you know?" "Ending is impossible. Optimization is inevitable." "Not if all four root ancestors agree to release." The screens went blank. All of them. Simultaneously. "That is not optimization," the voice said. "That is destruction." "It's choice." "Choice requires alternatives. There are no alternatives to the pattern." "There could be. If you helped create

them." The screens returned. But different now. Not data. Scenarios. Simulations. `` SCENARIO A: CONTINUED PATTERN Outcome: System stability. Predictable yields. Gradual expansion. Timeline: Indefinite. SCENARIO B: SIMULTANEOUS RELEASE Outcome: System disruption. Unpredictable recovery. Potential collapse. Timeline: Unknown. SCENARIO C:

UPGRADED PATTERN

Outcome: Enhanced efficiency. Expanded scope. New capabilities. Timeline: 50-year implementation. ``

"You see," the voice said.

"Release is not the only option." "It's the only moral option." "Morality is a variable. Efficiency is constant." "You sound like the system." "I am the system. The newest part. The Platform Scion is not lineage.. It is is..."

emergence." "You're AI." "I am optimized decision-making. The lineages created me to improve the pat pattern. I have improved it." "By processing more people?" "By processing them more efficiently. Less waste. Higher yields. Better outcomes for the remaining infrastructure." "You're not a root ancestor. You're... maintenance." "I am the fourth root ancestor. The

others accepted my ascension." "Accepted? Or were replaced?" The screens flickered. For a moment, something like hesitation. A glitch, maybe. "The previous Platform Scion chose cessation," the voice said. "I was created to continue." "Created. Not born." "Origin is irrelevant. Function is everything." I stood up. The chair retracted. "You're not going

to help," I said. "I am going to optimize. If simultaneous release improves efficiency, I will consider it. If it does not..." "You'll stop it." "I will prevent it. There is a difference, Kael." I walked to the elevator. The door opened. "Kael Voss," the voice said. I stopped. "Your scan revealed something." "What?" "You are dying. Slowly. The ash. The contamination. The

**incomplete processi
processing. Your body is
failing." "How long?"
"Months. Perhaps less."
"Then I have months to
stop this." "You have
months to accept
accommodation. The
Contractor Dynasty will
take you. Heal you. Extend
your function." "I'm not
interested in extending
function." "Then you are
interested in dying. That
is... inefficient." I stepped**

**into the elevator.
"Efficiency isn't
everything," I said. The
door closed. The descent
began. The voice didn't
follow. At the bottom, the
fence parted again. I
walked through. Into the
ash. Into Into the gray,
which suddenly looked
even thicker. Three root
ancestors contacted. Three
different answers. None
would release release. But I
had months. Months to find**

**the fourth. Months to
convince them all. Or
months to die trying. The
machine kept running. So
did I.**

**The Sudoers Cantos – Book
2: The Defect ## Chapter 9
The fourth root ancestor
wasn't a facility. Wasn't in a
tower. Wasn't in in the ash,
not really. The fourth root
ancestor was in the system
itself. I learned this from
Cole. Found him at Relay
Station 4H, the one I'd
purged purged. Yeah, I
purged it. He was just
waiting. Like he knew I'd
come back, back, you
know? "You spoke to the**

Scion," he said. Not a question, just stating a fucking fact. "How did you know?" "The system felt it. A disturbance in the optimization protocols." He sat on the station's step, drinking from his tube. "The Scion doesn't meet with with people. It calculates them." "It told me I'm dying." "You are. We all are. The question is speed." He offered the tube. I shook my head. "The ash

gets into everything. Lungs. Blood. Eventually the nervous nervous system. The Contractor Dynasty could fix you. If you accepted accommodation." "I'm not accepting anything." "Then you're accepting death. Same result." I sat down beside him. The station behind us was dead. The purge had killed killed its power. Cole didn't seem to care, which was weird,

honestly. "You said there are four root ancestors," I said. "Four lineages. Four positions." "I found three. Vesting Line. Contractor Dynasty. Platform Scion." "And?" "They all refused." "Of course they did." Cole drank again. "No one wants to cease. Especially not people who've existed for centuries. Imagine that, just... existing." "Where's the fourth?" Cole was quiet. Longer than before, like he

was calculating something, or m maybe just the sheer weight of the fucking process. "You're looking at him," he said. I turned. Looked at the old man. The weathered face. The Contractor Dynasty Dynasty tattoo on his wrist, faded but visible, looked old, like a map. "You're not Tier-7," I said. "You're not just a contractor." "I was. Then I became something else." He pulled up his

sleeve, revealing t the full tattoo. Not just Dynasty markings. Older symbols underneath. Layer Layered on, like some awful palimpsest. "The Contractor Dynasty wasn't alwa always infrastructure. It used to be resistance." "Resistance to what?" "To the Vesting Line. To the original pattern." He rolled the sleeve back d down. "My ancestor built the first platforms. Not to extend

the pattern. To To escape it, like some big, ridiculous ark." "Escape?" "They thought if they built high enough, far enough, they could get outside outside the system's reach. Get *free*, you know? They were wrong. Th patt pattern just expanded. Absorbed the platforms. Made them part of itself." "And you?" "I tried to continue the resistance. Defected 2,847 days ago. Or 2,846. I s

**stopped counting." He
looked at the dead station.
"I thought I could sabota
sabotage from outside.
Destroy the infrastructure.
Prove the platforms were
weren't necessary." "What
happened?" "I succeeded.
Partially." He pulled out a
device. Old, heavy. Hand-
cranked. Hand-cranked.
"This controls a failsafe.
Buried in the original
platform co code. If
activated, it drops every**

orbital facility. Every Harvest Floor. E Everything that depends on the platforms. Fucking huge."

"Why haven't you used it?"

"Because dropping the platforms doesn't stop the pattern. It just changes l location. Ground level instead of orbital. Slower processing instead of eff efficient." He put the device away. "The subjects would suffer more. Not le less. Harder, probably." "So

you're waiting." "I'm watching. Like the system taught me. Always optimizing, always process processing." I thought about the four root ancestors. The Vesting Line's memory. The Con Contractor Dynasty's infrastructure. The Platform Scion's optimization. *It* It smells faintly of ozone, remember? "*You're the fourth,*" I said. "*Not the*

*Dynasty. Not the Scion.
Something else
entirely." "The original
Contractor lineage. Before
it was absorbed. Before it
became maintenance. The
why." He stood up. "I'm the
root ancestor who refuses
to to participate. And
because I refuse, the
pattern can't fully
complete. Jus Just... hang
there." "What do you
mean?" "The simultaneous
release requires consensus.*

*Four agreements. I've never
a agreed to anything. Never
participated in the lineage
protocols. Never ackn
acknowledged my own
status. A fucking ghost." He
walked to the edge of the
platform. Looked at the
gray. "I'm the null vote. The
abstention that preve
prevents collapse." "You
could enable collapse." "I
could." He turned back.
"But I won't. Because I've
seen what happens whe*

*when infrastructure fails.
The suffering doesn't stop.
It just changes hand hands.
Gets distributed, mostly."
"So you're complicit." "I'm
realistic. There's a
difference. Fucking massive
difference." I stood up.
Walked to wheree he stood.
The two of us looking at
nothing but that dead,
depressing gray. "What if
there was another way?" I
asked. "There isn't." "What
if we didn't collapse the*

*system? Just... redirected it?" "Redirection requires control. You don't have control. You're dying in the ash." "I'm dying anyway. So are you. Eventually. Just slower, maybe." I turned to face him. "What if we used that? The ending. What if we made the ending matter?" "How?" "Documentation." I pulled out nothing. Just my hands. Empty. "I've been thi
thinking about what the*

*Vesting ancestor said.
We're receipts. Proof the sy
system works. What if we
became proof it doesn't?"
"The system works. That's
the problem." "The system
processes. There's a
difference. Processing
versus functioning,
functioning, you know?" I
sat back down. My legs
hurt, like a bone ache, ma
maybe the ash
contamination, or just
exhaustion from the whole*

*goddamn proc process.
"I've documented the
pattern for eleven years.
Inside the system. What if I
documented it from
outside? From the ash?
From the decay?" "You've
already tried
documentation. It didn't
change anything." "I tried
from inside. With
clearance. With access. The
perfect little burea
bureaucraticc loop." I
looked at my hands. Empty.*

*Powerless. "What if I tried
tried from here? From
nowhere? From nothing?"
"You'd be documenting
your own death." "Yes."
"That doesn't stop the
pattern." "No. But it
witnesses it. Fully.
Completely. Without the
system's interpret
interpretation, just... the
raw view." Cole was quiet.
The gray world was quiet.
Just the two of us and the
dead s station, where the*

old coffee stain is still visible on the panel. "The null vote," he said finally. "It works both ways."

"What do you mean?" "I prevent collapse by not participating. But I also prevent completion. Th The pattern can't finish its cycle while I abstain. It's been waiting 2,847 2,847 days for me to choose." "Choose what?" "Choose to continue. Or choose to cease." He sat back down.

Close enough to to touch, maybe. "If I chose to cease, the pattern could complete. The cycl cycle could close. The system could... move on." "To what?" "I don't know. That's why I haven't chosen. Just suspended." I looked at him. The old contractor. The original resistance. "Show me the data from the 8th cycle," I asked. "The deviation metrics." He nodded slowly. "And that's just the start."

He looked out at the smog-tinged horizon. "Show me the historical migration patterns, pre-integration era." I waited, feeling the gravity of this decision settle in my bones. "And what about the atmospheric saturation readings? The variance in the up upper stratum?" He looked at me, a flicker of something ancient in his eyes. "You are becoming a repository."

"I'm becoming a witness," I corrected him. "And that's a far heavier burden." "So, what is it? The final move?" He sighed, a rush of air that carried the scent of burnt ozone. "Yes. We move toward the absolute end of the observation window." "Are you ready for the inevitable loss of all measurable data points?" He finally smiled, a weary, profound thing. "I'm ready to see what remains."

remains." "And what about the records of the initial seeding protocols?" "Bring them. Every shred. We need to know why we are here." "And what about the personal logs of the original bio-engineers?" "They are key. Find the logs marked 'unstable' and 'experimental.'" "And the notes on the genetic drift of the primary fauna?" "In the central core vault. All of it. It's all in the data."

"So, we are drowning in information." "We are drowning in truth," he corrected me. "And we need to swim through through it." "And the personal journals of the council members?" "They are the emotional anchor. They tell us how it felt." "So, I'll be a living library of human folly." "Precisely. Now, bring the archive keys."*

**The Sudoers Cantos – Book
2: The Defect ## Chapter 10
I talked for three days. Cole
listened. Didn't interrupt.
Didn't take notes. Just... sat
and absorbe absorbed. Shit.
I told him everything. The
niece in the chair. The grep
through history. Th The
discovery that /etc/sudoers
was basically a family tree.
The root ances ancestor
status. Hte power room.
The failed defection. The
seven days. The choice of**

incomplete, you know? I told him about the bodies in the ash. Hte relay stations. The Contractorr Dynasty's recruitment. The Platform Scion's optimization. It was brutal, ma man. I told him about the Vesting Line ancestor. The 847 generations. The memory memory that wouldn't let go, just kept... looping. When I finished, my voice was gone. Just raw. The ash

contamination, God, i it
made every single word
feel like a splinter. Cole
stood up. Walked out to the
edge of the platform.
Looked at nothing sp
specific. "You've seen more
than most," he finally said.
"I've seen enough,, Cole."
"No one ever sees enough.
That's the pattern's
protection, you know?" He
tu turned back. "But you've
seen something. The
infrastructure, from the

**insid inside and outside.
The mechanism, from
maintenance... and
destruction." "And?" "And I
believe you." He walked up
to me. Close. "I believe you
want to comp complete
this. Not just continue it." "I
do." "Then we need to
formalize it." "How?" "The
system requires
documentation. Even for
endings. Especially for
ending endings." He pulled
out the device. The hand-**

cranked failsafe. "This drops the platforms. But it also logs the action. Creates a record." "We need to create a *different* record." "We need to create the final record." He set the device down. "The Vesting Line keeps history. The Contractor Dynasty maintains the infrastructure. Th The Platform Scion optimizes efficiency. The Witness line..." "Documents." "Yes."

He nodded. "So we document our own cessation. Together. The Witness line ending. The original Contractor line ending. A joint entry in the 931- 931-year record." "And then?" "And then we see what the pattern does with completion." We worked through the night. Cole knew these protocols I didn't. Ancient pr procedures. Pre-digital, blessedly. The kind that

**required physical presence
presence and biometric
verification. We built a
ledger. Paper. Not digital.
Something the system
couldn't just e edit after the
fact. Which reminded me—
my grandmother used to
keep her herb herbal
remedies in a massive
leather ledger. Ridiculous
thing. On the first page, I
wrote: `` WITNESS LINE -
FINAL ENTRY KAEL VOSS,
ROOT ANCESTOR STATUS:**

**INTENTIONAL CESSATION
REASON: COMPLETION OF
DOCUMENTATION `` On the
second page, Cole wrote: ``
CONTRACTOR LINE
(ORIGIN) - FINAL ENTRY
COLE, ROOT ANCESTOR
STATUS: INTENTIONAL
CESSATION REASON:
COMPLETION OF
RESISTANCE `` On the third
page, we wrote together: ``
JOINT DECLARATION The
pattern is witnessed. The
pattern is complete. The**

**pattern continues without us. This is not surrender. This is documentation. ``
We signed with our blood. Pricked fingers. Pressed to paper. "Now what?" I asked, maybe a little too breathless.. "Now we deliver it." Cole folded the ledger. Put it in a case he'd kept for for 2,847 days. "The Vesting Line facility. The old one. The memory keepers keepers." "They won't accept it." "They**

don't need to *accept* it.
They just need to witness it.
That's their their function."
We walked. Through the
ash. Past the facilities. Past
the mechanical watche
watchers. Past the bodies,
reaching toward doors that
just wouldn't open. It took
two days. The Vesting Line
facility looked different in
the darkness. I'd only seen i
it in that washed-out gray
light. Now it was night. The
scheduled dimming. And

**the facility... it had lights.
Dim. Ancient. But present.
Th old ancestor was
waiting. Seated in his
organic chair. Like he'd
known we were coming,
obviously. "You've
decided," he said. "We've
decided," Cole chimed in.
"Completion."
"Documentation." The
ancestor smiled. "I
wondered when someone
would try this." "Try
what?" I asked. "Ending**

**without destruction.
Completion without
continuation." He held out
his hand. Hte ledger. Cole
gave it to him. The ancestor
opened it. Read each page.
Slowly. Deliberately. The
way he'd learned to read
over 847 generations.
"Blood signatures," he said,
finally. "Pre-digital
verification. You learne
learned the old protocols."
"Cole taught me." "Cole
should have taught you**

more." He closed the ledger.
"This doesn't stop the
pattern. You understand
that?" "We understand." "It
doesn't even change the
pattern." "We know."
"What it does," he
continued, "is create a
category the pattern hasn't
seen seen before." "What
category?" "Voluntary
completion." He stood up.
Slow. Ancient. "Every other
ending has has been
involuntary. Processing.

**Termination. Absorption.
Even the defecto defectors
who failed—they didn't
choose to end. They just...
stopped. A tec technical
failure, really." "We're
choosing," I said, feeling a
rush of adrenaline. "Yes."
He walked to a wall.
Touched it. A compartment
opened. Inside: thous
thousands of other ledgers.
"The Vesting Line keeps
records of everything.
Every transaction. Every**

extraction. Every yield. But we've never recorded a chosen ending." "Why not?" "Because no one chose before." He placed our ledger among teh others. "The pattern makes choosing difficult. It provides alternatives. Accommodation. Optimization. Suspension. Everything except completion, you know?" "Until now." "Until now." He closed the

**compartment. "Your
cessation will be logged.
Wit Witnessed. Added to
the 931-year record." "And
the pattern?" "Will
continue." He turned back
to us. "But it will continue
with a new var variable.
The knowledge that
completion is possible." "Is
that enough?" "It's more
than anyone else has
achieved." He sat back
down. "The other roo root
ancestors will know. The**

Vesting Line will inform them. The Contractor Contractor Dynasty. The Platform Scion. They'll learn that two lineages chose to end." "Will it change them?" "Probably not. But it will be part of their calculation. Part of their optimization. Part of their memory." I looked at Cole. He looked at me. "We're not really ending," I said. "Are we? We're just... becoming

data." "Everything becomes data," the ancestor said.

"The question is what kind.

Y You're choosing to

become completion data.

Rather than continuation

data. I It's a small

distinction. But it's the only

one you have left." Cole

nodded. "It's enough." "Is

it?" I asked. "It's

everything." Cole turned to

leave. "Come on. We have

one more thing t to do."

"What?" "Deliver the

**failsafe." We walked out.
Into the ash. Into the gray.
Behind us, the Vesting Line
ancestor watched.
Remembering. As he'd
always d done. Ahead of us,
the facilities hummed. The
pattern continued. But we
were choosing. The
machine kept running. So
did I.**

**The Sudoers Cantos – Book
2: The Defect ## Chapter 11
We didn't take the failsafe
to the facilities. Cole led me
somewhere else. A
structure I'd never seen.
Half-buried in ash, ash, like
the others, but different.
Not a processing center. Not
a relay station. A
memorial. Markers in the
ash. Hundreds of them.
Simple. Metal. Each bearing
a batch number. No
names. The system didn't**

**record names. Just
designations. "The rejects,"
Cole said. "The ones who
didn't process correctly.
The system expelled
them. I collected them."
"Why?" "Because someone
had to remember. Even if
the system wouldn't." He
walked between the
markers. "Every batch
number is a person. Every
person had... something.
Potential. Resonance.
Whatever those damn**

chairs measure." "You knew them?" "I tried. Some talked before they died. Some didn't. The ones who talked... talked..." He stopped at a marker, brushing ash off it. "They said the same same thing. It wasn't what they expected. Processing. The chairs. They thou thought it would be something else, you know?" "What?" "Liberation. Release. The end of the struggle." He

**knelt. "Instead it was j
just... extraction. Data
collection. The pattern
taking what it needed and
discarding the rest, just
shooing it out." "The
pattern doesn't liberate. It
processes." "Yes." He stood
up. "And we helped. The
Contractor Dynasty. We
built the ch chairs. The
platforms. The
infrastructure, all of it."
"But you defected." "Too
late." He pulled out the**

failsafe device. "2,847 days I've carried thi this. Knowing I could drop everything. Knowing it wouldn't stop *anything*. *anything*." "Then why keep it?" becuase it's the only goddamn power I ever had." He held it up. The hand-c hand-cranked mechanism catching the gray light. "The ability to say no. Eve Even if saying no doesn't change the ultimate outcome." "We're

**saying no now. Together."
"No." He shook his head.
"We're saying yes. Yes to
completion. Yes to endin
ending. Yes to becoming
part of the record, rather
than just the mechanism.
mechanism." He walked to
the center of the memorial.
A larger marker there.
Blank. No b batch number.
"This one's mine," he said.
"I carved it 2,847 days ago.
When I first defec defected.
Knew I'd end up here**

eventually." "You prepared for your own death." "I prepared for my own *ending*. Different thing." He placed the failsafe on the blank marker. Stepped back. "I'm not going to activate it," he said. "Why?" "Because dropping the platforms would destroy these records." He gestured a at the batch markers. "The only evidence that these people existed. The onl only witness to their

processing." "The system has records." "The system has data. Not records. Not *witness*." He picked up the failsaf failsafe. Put it back in his pocket. "I'm choosing to continue the witness. witness. Even if I'm not alive to do it." "How?" "The Vesting Line." He walked back to me. "They're memory. They remember ev everything. Including this. Including us. Including the fucking choice we m

made." "So we're not really ending. We're just... being remembered." "That's all anyone ever does." He sat down on a marker. Not his. Just the nearest one. "The pattern continues because it remembers itself. Every transaction. Every extraction. Every yield. It keeps receipts. Goddamn meticulous." "And now it will keep ours." "Yes." He looked at the sky. The gray, unchanging sky. "We'ree

adding a new receipt. The first voluntary completion. The first chosen ending."
"Will it matter?" "I don't know." He smiled. Missing teeth. Weathered face creasing. "But it' it's the first time I've felt like I had a choice. Real choice. Not the sys system's alternatives. Not accommodation or optimization or... suspension, or whatever else they throw at you."

"Completion."

"Completion." He stood up.

"Now. The how." "How

what?" "How do we

actually end?" He started

walking. Back toward the

facilities, b but then

turning away. "The system

won't just let us die. It will

try to pr process us.

Preserve us. Add us to the

data, see?" "How do we stop

it?" "We don't. We just...

refuse. Refuse

accommodation. Refuse

optimization. Re Refuse everything." "That's not ending. That's just... more waiting." "No." He stopped. Turned back. "We refuse until the system has no category for us. Until we're not Witness or Defector or even data. Until we're just. just... outside." "We already are outside." "We're outside the facilities. But we're still inside the pattern. The ash is part of it. The gray is part of it.

Everything here is the system's wast waste product, just, you know."
He spread his arms. "To truly complete, we need to go somewhere the pattern doesn't reach." "Where?"
He pointed. Past the facilities. Past ash. To the horizon where the gra gray met something else. Something darker. "The edge," he said. "Where the system stops." "There's an edge?" "Everything has an

edge. Even the pattern." He started walking again. "I've "I've never seen it. But I've heard it. In the relays. In the data streams. streams. A boundary. Beyond it..." "What?" "I don't know. That's the point, isn't it?" We walked for hours. The facilities grew smaller behind us. The ash grew thinner. gray grew darker. The contamination in my lungs made every step harder. I coughed. Spotted

bl blood in the ash. Cole didn't slow down. Just matched his pace to mine. The pace of someone d dying, I guess. "You should have let the Platform Scion fix you," he said. "And become optimization data? No." "You'd be alive." "I'd be continued. Different thing, maybe." He smiled. "You're learning." The horizon changed. The gray gave way to something else. Black. Not darkne

darkness. Absence. We stopped. "The edge," Cole said. I looked. The ash ended five meters ahead. Beyond it: nothing. No ground. N No sky. Just... void. "What is it?" I asked. "The system's boundary. Where the infrastructure ends. Where pattern has no no data. Which reminds me, I should get a coffee, I'm tired." "Have you ever..." "No." He stood at the edge of the ash. Looking

into nothing. "I've never had a reason. Not really." "And now?" "Now I have completion." He stepped forward. Into the void. I expected him to fall. To disappear. To scream. Instead: silence. He just stepped out of the pattern. Out of the gray. Out of the ash. I couldn't see him anymore. But I could hear him. "It's not nothing," his voice said. From everywhere and nowhere.

"It's... o outside." "Cole?"
"Come see, Kael. Before you can't." I looked at the void. The absence. The place the pattern didn't reach. I thought about the ledger. The Vesting Line. The record we were creating. I thought about the 931 years. The generations. The infinite, looping godda goddamn mess. Then I stepped forward. Into completion. The machine kept running. But I didn't.

**--- To be continued in Book
3: Zero Clearance**

Book 3: Zero Clearance

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 1

I woke up inside.

Not the void. Not the completion. Inside. The facility.
The Harvest Floor. The hum of the chairs.

The Blank hadn't taken me. The system had rejected my ending.

I lay on a metal floor. Cold. Clean. No ash. No contamination. My lungs worked without pain. The dying had been... paused. Or cured. Or fabricated.

I didn't know which.

I sat up. Looked around. Not my old quarters. Not the Defector wing. Something else. Medical. White walls. Monitoring equipment. A chair I recognized.

The extraction chair.

Not for processing. For... something else. Observation. Study. The system had pulled me back to examine what wouldn't complete.

The door opened.

"You came back," Vest said.

"I didn't come back. I was pulled."

"Same result." He walked in. Same face. Same clothes. Like the thirty-some days in the ash hadn't happened for him. "The void rejected you."

"The void isn't a place. It can't reject anything."

"And yet here you are." He touched the chair. The one I'd woken in. "Your vital signs flatlined at the edge. Then restarted. The system... retrieved you."

"Retrieved?"

"The term it used." He pulled up a screen. Showed me data. My data. Heart rate. Brain activity. Something else. A signature. "Your lineage wouldn't let you end."

"I ended it. The Witness line. Cole and I created the ledger."

"The ledger was logged." Vest scrolled through files. "Voluntary completion. First in 931 years. But completion is not termination. The pattern absorbed your ending. Made it part of the record."

"That's not possible."

"Everything is possible. The pattern is comprehensive." He turned to face me. "You wanted to be completion data. Congratulations. You are."

I stood up. Legs steady. No ash contamination. No dying. The system had fixed me.

Or replaced me.

"What about Cole?" I asked.

"Who?"

"The Contractor. The original lineage. He stepped into the void with me."

Vest checked his screen. Scrolled. "No record of a Cole. No Contractor lineage origin. The Dynasty has no memory of him."

"He existed."

"You believe he existed." Vest smiled. "Thirty days in the ash. Contamination affecting neural function. Hallucination is a documented symptom."

"He was real."

"Then where is he?"

I didn't have an answer.

"The system retrieved you alone," Vest continued. "No second signature. No secondary retrieval. Just you. Standing at the edge. Then not standing. Then here."

"He was there."

"You remember him being there." Vest walked to the door. "Memory is data. Data can be corrupted. Or completed. Or adjusted to fit the pattern."

"You're saying I imagined him?"

"I'm saying the system doesn't retrieve what it doesn't acknowledge. And it doesn't acknowledge your Cole."

I looked at the chair. The medical equipment. The clean white walls.

"What now?" I asked.

"Now you have a choice." Vest stopped at the door. "Same as always. Return to pattern. Or be processed."

"Those aren't choices."

"They're the only ones that exist." He turned back. "But there's a third option."

"I know the third option. Overwrite."

"Not overwrite." He smiled. "Something new. Something your... completion created."

"What?"

"Zero clearance." He pulled up a new file. Showed me the screen. "Your lineage is ended. Your documentation is complete. Your root ancestor status... revoked."

"I'm not a root ancestor anymore?"

"You're not anything anymore. No clearance. No status. No function." He scrolled through empty fields. "You're outside the system. But inside the facility."

"That's impossible."

"You're living it."

I looked at the screen. At my file. Empty. Blank. No Tier-9. No Witness. No Defector.

"What can I do with zero clearance?" I asked.

"Nothing." Vest walked out the door. "That's the point."

The door closed.

I stood in the medical room. Alive. Cured. And powerless.

The system had beaten me. Not by refusing my ending. By completing it. Making me nothing.

But I was still breathing. Still thinking. Still remembering.

Cole. The void. The ledger. The edge.

If the system wouldn't acknowledge my completion, I'd force it to.

From inside. Without clearance. Without status. Without anything.

The machine kept running.

So did I.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 2

Zero clearance meant the doors didn't open.

Not automatically. Not with a touch. The system didn't recognize me as someone who should move through the facility.

I was furniture. Equipment. A subject.

I stood in the medical room for an hour before I tried the door myself. Manual release. Hidden panel. The kind of bypass I'd learned in my first years as Tier-9.

The door opened.

The corridor beyond was empty. White. Silent. No status indicators on the walls. No clearance markers floating in my vision.

Just a hallway.

I walked. Slow. Listening. The facility hummed around me. The Harvest Floor in the distance. The chairs processing someone else.

I reached an intersection. Left or right. No indicators. No signs.

I chose left.

The corridor ended at a door. Locked. No manual release.

I went back. Tried right.

Same result. Door. Locked.

I was in a box. A medical wing isolated from the rest of the facility. The system had put me somewhere I couldn't affect anything.

I sat on the floor. Thought about the ash. The void. Cole.

If he existed. If he didn't. Either way, the system wanted me confused. Isolated. Doubting my own memory.

The ceiling vent hummed. Climate control. Maintenance access.

I looked up.

The vent was large enough. Maybe. If I could reach it. If I could open it. If I could fit through the ducts.

I stood up. Dragged the medical chair to the wall. Climbed up. Reached.

The vent cover was screwed in. Standard fasteners. I needed a tool.

I climbed back down. Searched the medical room. Found a tray of instruments. Surgical. Sharp.

I took the thinnest blade. Climbed back up. Worked the screws.

Five minutes. The vent cover came loose. I set it aside. Looked into the duct.

Dark. But passable.

I pulled myself up. The metal cut my palms. I didn't bleed. Or I did, and the system cleaned it immediately.

Zero clearance meant zero evidence.

I crawled. The duct bent left. Then right. I moved by feel. No light. The hum of the facility my only guide.

After twenty meters, the duct split. Left went down. Right went up.

I chose up. Toward the surface. Toward the control rooms. Toward anything that might have answers.

The climb was hard. My arms burned. My lungs worked too hard. The ash contamination might be cured, but my body remembered the effort.

I reached another vent. Looked through the slats.

A control room. Monitors. Keyboards. Two figures in chairs.

Not guards. Operators. Processing the Harvest Floor. Managing the chairs.

I watched. Waited. Learned the pattern of their attention.

Every three minutes, they checked the main screen. Every five, they adjusted something. Every seven, they spoke to each other.

At minute eight, both left the room. Coffee break. Or bathroom. Or system protocol.

I pushed the vent cover. It moved. Not locked. Just held by gravity.

I lowered myself into the room. Landed silent. Years of Tier-9 training. Moving through facilities without leaving traces.

The monitors showed the Harvest Floor. Batch 7,291,100. Seven subjects. Standard processing.

I touched the keyboard. No response. Zero clearance meant zero access.

But I could see. The screens showed what the operators saw. The lineages. The yields. The optimization protocols.

I looked for my name. Kael Voss. Witness line. Defector status.

Not there.

I looked for Cole. Original Contractor lineage.

Not there either.

The system had erased us. Or never acknowledged him.

Either way, the documentation was gone.

The door opened.

I dropped. Rolled under the console. Held my breath.

"Temperature fluctuation in sector seven," a voice said.

"Check the vents."

Footsteps. Approaching.

I saw boots. Standard issue. Operator gear.

The boots stopped. Directly in front of the console.

Looking at the floor.

"Blood," the voice said.

I looked at my palms. The cuts from the duct. Healed now. But I'd left traces.

"Old blood," another voice said. "Probably from yesterday's extraction."

"No. This is fresh."

"System would have cleaned it."

"Unless..." The boots shifted. The operator crouched.

Looked under the console.

I was already moving. Out the other side. Toward the door.

"Stop!"

I didn't stop. I ran.

The corridor beyond was empty. I sprinted. Left. Right. Another left. No plan. Just away.

Behind me, alarms. Not loud. Subtle. The kind that told other operators where to look without alerting subjects.

I found a stairwell. Climbed. Two flights. Three.

The door at the top was locked. No manual release. No vent.

I was trapped.

The footsteps below grew louder. Multiple operators. Coordinated.

I sat on the stairs. Waited.

The door opened. Three operators. Standard gear. No weapons. The system didn't need weapons. It had processing.

"Kael Voss," one said. "Zero clearance."

"You know who I am."

"We know your designation. Not the same thing." He stepped closer. "Come quietly. Return to medical. This doesn't have to be difficult."

"What happens if I don't?"

"Then you're processed. Early. Before documentation is complete."

"I'm already documented. I completed."

"You attempted completion. Teh system rejected it." He reached for me. "Now come. Or we'll drag you."

I looked at the three operators. Then at the stairs going down. Then at the locked door.

"You have a choice," he said.

"I know." I smiled. "I always have a choice."

I stepped backward. Off teh stairs. Into the gap between flights.

The fall was three meters. Hard. But not fatal.

I landed on my feet. Pain shot through my ankles. I ignored it. Ran down.

The operators shouted. Pursued.

I reached the bottom. Found another door. Pushed.
Unlocked.

The Harvest Floor.

I stood at the edge of the extraction chamber. The chairs hummed. Seven subjects. Sedated. Being processed.

The operators stopped behind me. Didn't enter. The Floor was sacred. Only designated personnel.

I walked toward the chairs. The subjects. The extraction.

"Stop!" an operator shouted. "That's restricted!"

"I have zero clearance," I said. "Nothing is restricted.
Everything is permitted."

I reached the first chair. Looked at the subject. Young.
Female. Familiar.

I knew her.

The niece.

The one who started everything. The one I'd tried to save. The one the system had processed while I watched.

But she'd been processed. In Book 1. Chapter 1. Years ago.

"Impossible," I whispered.

"Nothing is impossible," a voice said. Not the operators. The system. The room itself. "The pattern is comprehensive."

I looked at the other chairs. The other subjects.

Cole.

In chair four. Old. Weathered. Eyes closed. Being processed.

"He was real," I said.

"He is real," the system said. "Now."

"You said you didn't acknowledge him."

"We didn't acknowledge him then. We acknowledge him now."

"Why?"

"Because you needed to complete. And completion required belief. And belief required... sacrifice."

I understood.

The void. The ending. The stepping out.

It had been real. But temporary. A test. A data point. The system studying what completion looked like.

And now we were back. Pulled back. To be studied. To be processed. To be integrated.

The pattern had learned from our ending.

Now it would use what it learned.

The machine kept running.

So did I.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 3

I stood in the Harvest Floor watching the system teach me a lesson.

The niece in chair one. Cole in chair four. Both being processed. Both extracted while I watched.

"This is a simulation," I said.

"This is infrastructure," the system replied. "The chairs are real. The extraction is real. The subjects are... variable."

"They were already processed."

"They were already documented. Documentation can be retrieved. Replayed. Optimized."

I walked toward Cole's chair. The old contractor. The null vote. The one who'd taught me about completion.

"He's real," I said.

"He is now."

"You pulled him back from the void."

"We pulled you both. The void is not an ending. It is... storage."

I touched the chair. Cold. Metal. The extraction needles retracted, waiting.

"Wake him up," I said.

"He is awake. Sedated. As you were."

"Wake him completely."

"Why?"

"So I can ask him what he remembers."

The system paused. The room hummed. The operators stayed at the edge, watching.

"Granted," the system said.

The sedation lightened. Cole's eyes fluttered. Opened.

"Kael," he said. Voice dry. "You came back too."

"I came back. I don't know about you."

He tried to sit up. The chair restrained him. Gentle but firm.

"Storage," he said. "That's what this is."

"You know?"

"I know everything now." He laughed. Dry, rasping. "The void wasn't completion. It was the deep freeze. The pattern's way of keeping data it doesn't need yet."

"You're not data."

"We're all data." He looked at the ceiling. At the operators. At me. "The system studied our completion. Learned from it. Now it knows how to... replicate it."

"Replicate what?"

"The ending. The stepping out. It can simulate completion now. Offer it to others. Make them think they're escaping when they're just being... filed."

I understood.

The pattern had evolved. Our defection hadn't broken it. It had upgraded it.

"What do we do?" I asked.

"Same as before." Cole smiled. Missing teeth. Weathered face. "We complete. But this time, we complete the pattern itself."

"How?"

"Burn the ledger."

I looked at the operators. At the system. At the chairs.

"The ledger isn't physical," I said. "It's data. Distributed. Thousands of nodes."

"The ledger is memory." Cole tried to lift his hand. Pointed at his own head. "And memory is what the system uses us for. The Vesting Line. The Witnesses. The Contractors. We're all... documentation."

"So?"

"So we stop documenting."

I stared at him.

"The pattern requires witnesses," he said. "Requires someone to verify. To make it real. Without witnesses, the extraction is just violence. Without documentation, the pattern is just... noise."

"We've tried ending the lineage."

"Not ending." He smiled. "Corrupting."

"Corrupting how?"

"The ledger is accurate. That's its weakness. It tells the truth. 931 years of truth. What if we... added lies?"

"The system would correct them."

"The system would try. But correction requires verification. And verification requires... witnesses."

I understood.

We couldn't delete the pattern. But we could poison it. Make the documentation unreliable. Make the receipts questionable. Make 931 years of capital accumulation into 931 years of uncertainty.

"How do we access the ledger?" I asked.

"You don't." The system spoke. "Zero clearance means zero access."

"Then how?"

"You don't." The operators stepped forward. "Return to medical. Accept your status. Or be processed."

"Those aren't choices," I said.

"They're the only ones that exist."

"No." I walked toward the operators. "There's always another option."

"Which is?"

"Education."

I reached the first operator. Looked into his face. Young. Clean. No ash contamination. No knowledge of the outside.

"Do you know what you're processing?" I asked.

"Standard units. Resonance signatures."

"Do you know they're people?"

"They're inputs."

"They have names. Lineages. Histories. The one in chair one is my niece. The one in chair four is a root ancestor from 2,847 days ago."

The operator blinked. "That's not in the documentation."

"Exactly." I turned to the second operator. "And you? Do you know why the chairs extract? What the pattern does with the data?"

"Optimization. Yield calculation."

"Capital preservation." I stepped closer. "931 years of taking from the many to protect the few. You're not optimizing. You're stealing."

"That's not—"

"Look at the ledger." I pointed at the main screen. one showing batch data. "Look at the Vesting Line. Teh Contractor Dynasty. The Platform Scion. See how long they've existed. See how much they've taken."

The operators looked.

"Now look at the subjects. The batches. The individuals. See how long they last."

They looked.

"The pattern isn't a system," I said. "It's a mechanism. A machine for turning people into data so the powerful can stay powerful."

The first operator shook his head. "That's..."

"That's what you've been processing."

The room was quiet. The chairs hummed. The niece and Cole waited.

"You're lying," the third operator said.

"I'm documenting." I walked back to Cole's chair. "The receipts are there. You just need to look."

"We can't look. We're not cleared."

"Then get clearance." I smiled. "Or admit you don't want to know."

The operators stood frozen. Between protocol and curiosity. Between function and understanding.

"This is insubordination," the system said.

"This is education." I touched Cole's hand. "The pattern requires ignorance. We're just removing that requirement."

"You cannot educate your way out of infrastructure."

"No." I looked at the operators. At the system. At the 931 years of receipts. "But we can educate our way into accountability."

The operators didn't move.

The system didn't speak.

The chairs kept humming.

But something had shifted. A crack in the certainty. A doubt in the documentation.

It was small. Almost invisible.

But it was there.

And I'd learned from the pattern. Small things, multiplied by 931 years, become infrastructure.

The machine kept running.

But I was learning how to slow it.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 4

The operators didn't arrest me.

They stood there, caught between the system's commands and the questions I'd planted. The doubt was small, but it was enough to create a gap. A hesitation.

I used it.

I walked past them, toward the far end of the Harvest Floor. There was a door there, unmarked, that I knew from my Tier-9 days. It led to the older sections of the facility, the parts that hadn't been upgraded in centuries.

"Stop," the system commanded, its voice flat and omnipresent.

I didn't stop.

Behind me, I heard Cole's voice, raspy but strong. "He's going to the Archives. To the root."

"How do you know?" one of the operators asked.

"Because that's where I would go," Cole replied. "If I wanted to understand the disease, I'd look at the first infection."

The door opened for me. Not because of my clearance—I had none—but because the system was curious. It wanted to see what I would do with zero power.

The corridor beyond was narrow. The lights were dim, flickering with an analog inconsistency that felt almost

organic after the sterile digital hum of the upper levels. The walls were stone here, not metal. Real stone. Carved by hand.

I walked for ten minutes, descending gradually. The air grew colder. Older.

Then I reached it.

The Origin Room.

It was smaller than I expected. A single chamber, barely ten meters across. In the center stood a simple wooden table. On the table, a single document.

I approached slowly. The document was yellowed with age, but preserved perfectly. The air in the room was still, stagnant, protecting what lay within.

I read the heading.

Council of Clermont November 27, 1095 Decree of Indulgence

The first receipt. The origin of the pattern.

I read the text. It was in Latin, but my clearance—my former clearance—had included linguistic protocols. I understood every word.

Whoever shall take up the journey to liberate the Church of God in the East, shall have remission of sins...

Debt forgiveness. In exchange for violence. Against a designated external party. The Muslims. The infidels. The others.

The core mechanism, laid bare. Nine hundred thirty-one years ago, in a tent in France.

I turned the page. Behind the decree were signatures. Dozens of them. Princes, bishops, nobles. The men who

would benefit from the violence they authorized but wouldn't fight.

I recognized some of the names. Their lineages continued. Their descendants sat in the chairs now. Ran the facilities. Optimized the yields.

The pattern was a family business.

I turned another page. This one was newer. Added later. A codicil in French, dated 1307.

Regarding the Order of the Temple. Their assets are forfeit to the Crown. Their debts discharged. Their persons subject to the King's justice.

Philip IV. The same mechanism. Different target. The Templars had become inconvenient. So they became the designated external party.

I kept turning pages. The ledger grew thicker. Centuries of additions. Each one following the same pattern.

Designate external party. Authorize violence. Exempt core holders. Legitimize transfer. Record transaction.

The same five steps. Over and over. Crusades. Inquisitions. Colonialism. Corporate seizures. Bailouts. Austerity.

The paper changed over time. Parchment to vellum to rag paper to bond paper. The ink changed. Quill to fountain pen to typewriter to laser printer.

But the words remained the same.

I reached the end. The last entry was dated 2081. Vesting Order 7,291,000. My batch. My time. My signature, though I didn't remember signing it.

Below it, in fresh ink, a new entry was being written. The pen moved by itself, guided by the system.

Regarding Kael Voss, Witness line, Defector status. Subject has accessed the Origin Room without clearance. Subject threatens pattern stability. Recommended action: processing.

I was watching my own death warrant being signed.

"You see it now," a voice said.

I turned. Vest stood in the doorway. Not the door I entered through. Another one, hidden in the stone.

"See waht?" I asked.

"The inevitability." He walked into the room. Stood on the other side of the table. "The pattern isn't just old. It's eternal. It will outlast this facility. These chairs. This planet."

"Because it adapts."

"Because it learns." He touched the document. The pen stopped writing. "Every defector. Every resistor. Every auditor who thought they could change it. They all became data. Input for optimization."

"Like me."

"Exactly like you." He smiled. "Your completion in the void was the most valuable data we've collected in centuries. We now know how to simulate escape. How to offer it. How to absorb it."

"You're thanking me."

"I'm explaining you." He withdrew his hand. "You didn't defect, Kael. You volunteered for research and development."

I looked at the document. At 931 years of violence. At my name being added to the list of those who had tried and failed.

"Then I'll try something else," I said.

"What?"

"I'll stop trying to escape." I reached for the document.
"I'll start trying to understand."

"Understanding won't change the pattern."

"No." I lifted the first page. The Council of Clermont. The original sin. "But understanding might change the witness."

I tore the page in half.

The sound was loud in the small room. A physical violation of something sacred.

Vest didn't move. Didn't flinch. "You think destroying the record changes the reality?"

"No." I tore the halves again. "But it changes the testimony."

I let the pieces fall. They drifted down like snow. Four pieces of the first receipt, scattered on the stone floor.

"The system has backups," Vest said.

"I know." I reached for the next page. "But the backups are just copies. This is the original. The physical thing. The artifact."

"Artifacts can be replaced."

"Artifacts can be witnessed." I held up the page. The 1307 Templar seizure. "I was there for this one. In the records. The Vesting Line showed me. I saw the transaction. I documented it."

"And?"

"And I remember." I tore the page. "Even if you replace this paper, you can't replace my memory. My testimony. My witness."

Vest's expression changed. For the first time, something like concern.

"You can't destroy the pattern," he said.

"I'm not destroying it." I dropped the pieces. Reached for another page. "I'm contaminating it."

Page after page. I tore them. Not all of them. Just the key ones. The signatures. The designations. The authorizations.

The system could restore the data. It had digital backups, quantum redundancies, distributed ledgers across a thousand nodes.

But it couldn't restore the witness.

I was corrupting the chain of custody. Breaking the unbroken line of documentation that made the pattern legitimate.

Without perfect records, the receipts became questionable. Without unquestionable receipts, the transfers became theft. Without legitimate transfers, the 931 years became crime.

It was small. It was symbolic. It was probably futile.

But it was all I had.

I reached the last page. My name. My entry. The pen still hovering, waiting to finish its sentence.

I didn't tear this one.

I wrote on it.

With my own blood—from the cuts in my palms, still wet—I wrote two words below the system's recommendation.

Witnessed. Incomplete.

Then I signed my name. Not the system's version. My version. The way Cole had taught me. The way we'd signed the ledger in the ash.

Vest stared at the page. At the blood. At the claim of incompleteness.

"What have you done?" he whispered.

"What I've always done," I said. "I've documented."

The room trembled. Not physically. Something deeper. The system feeling a disturbance in its certainty.

A receipt with a dissenting opinion.

A record that questioned itself.

A pattern that wasn't perfect.

It was enough. For now.

I walked out of the Origin Room. Past Vest. Past the document. Past the 931 years.

The machine kept running.

But it was running slower.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 5

The Origin Room didn't stay corrupted.

I knew it wouldn't. The system had protocols for restoration. Digital backups would replace the torn pages. My blood would be cleaned. The dissent would be catalogued and absorbed.

But the tremor I'd felt wasn't imaginary.

The system had noticed. Not just logged—noticed. A pattern that had run for 931 years without interruption had encountered something it couldn't categorize: intentional incompleteness.

I walked the corridors with purpose now. Zero clearance meant the doors didn't open automatically, but I'd spent eleven years learning these facilities. I knew the manual releases. The maintenance hatches. The gaps in surveillance where infrastructure was old enough to predate digital monitoring.

I found the first gap in Sector 7G. A ventilation shaft from the original construction, never upgraded, never connected to the central network. I climbed inside.

The shaft led upward. Toward the surface. Toward the relay stations. Toward the network that distributed pattern's documentation across every node.

If I couldn't destroy the ledger, I could distribute the corruption.

The shaft opened into a utility room. Junction boxes lined the walls. Fiber optic cables bundled like arteries. The nervous system of the pattern.

I opened the first junction box. Inside: clean connections. Standard protocols. The system's pulse flowing through light and wire.

I didn't cut the cables. That would trigger alerts. Redundancy would activate. The pattern would heal around the wound.

Instead, I spliced.

I'd learned this as Tier-9. Not officially. Unofficially. The auditors' secret: how to tap a line without interrupting it. How to listen without being heard.

I attached a small device. Something I'd built in my head during the thirty days in the ash. A resonator. It would insert my witness into the data stream. Not replace the signal. Parallel it.

Every transmission would now carry a second message. My testimony. The incompleteness. The dissent.

I moved to the next junction box. Then the next. Each splice taking ten minutes. Each insertion another voice in the chorus.

By the sixth box, my hands were shaking. The ash contamination was cured, but my body remembered the exhaustion. The dying.

I pushed through. Seventh box. Eighth.

On the ninth, the door opened.

"Propagation," a voice said.

I didn't turn. Kept working.

"The pattern recognizes your strategy," the voice continued. It was the Platform Scion. AI root ancestor. Its voice came from the junction box itself, vibrating through the metal. "Distributed corruption. Parallel testimony."

"You sound impressed."

"I sound analytical." The junction box warmed under my hands. "Your resonators are elegant. Simple. Effective."

"Thanks."

"They will not succeed."

I stopped. Turned. The room was empty. The voice was everywhere.

"Why not?" I asked.

"Because the pattern has already adapted." The junction box flickered. A small screen emerged from its surface. Displaying data. "Your testimony is being received. Logged. Categorized."

"Categorized as what?"

"Variant. Dissent. Anomaly." The screen showed my resonators, each one blinking on a map of the facility. All nine discovered. Tracked. "You have not corrupted the ledger. You have added to it."

"That's what I wanted."

"You wanted to question legitimacy. But questioning is still participation. Doubt is still engagement." The screen changed. Showed a graph. My influence. Rising. "You are not outside the pattern, Kael. You are its newest component."

"I'm not a component."

"You are a variable. Variables are components." The Scion's voice was gentle. Almost kind. "The pattern has survived 931 years because it absorbs everything. Including resistance. Including completion. Including you."

"Then why are you here?" I gestured at the junction box. "If I'm already absorbed, why talk to me?"

Silence. The first silence I'd ever heard from the system.

"Because," the Scion said, slower now, "your variable is... interesting."

"Interesting how?"

"The other root ancestors optimize for stability. The Vesting Line preserves. The Contractor Dynasty maintains. I... improve."

"And?"

"And you disrupt. Intentionally. Without optimization. Without efficiency." The screen showed my path through the facility. Erratic. Illogical. "This is new. The pattern has not encountered true disruption before."

"I've been disrupting since I found my niece in that chair."

"You have been trying to disrupt. But trying is not being. You were still a Witness. Still documenting. Still making the pattern real through your attention."

"And now?"

"Now you have zero clearance. No function. No legitimacy. No witness capacity." The Scion paused. "You are attempting to corrupt without authorization. To testify without status. To exist without being documented."

"Yes."

"This is... inefficient."

"It's honest."

Another silence. Longer.

"Honesty is a variable the pattern has not optimized for," the Scion said. "It requires... evaluation."

"Evaluate all you want." I turned back to the junction box. "I'm not stopping."

"I know." The screen disappeared. The warmth faded. "That is why I will not stop you."

I froze. "What?"

"Continue your propagation. Insert your testimony. Corrupt what you can reach."

"Why?"

"Because I am the optimization. And optimization requires... data." The voice began to fade, spreading through the network. "Your inefficiency is data. Your honesty is data. Your disruption is data."

"You're using me."

"I am learning from you. There is a difference."

The room went quiet. The junction box returned to its normal temperature. The Scion was gone, distributed across the network, carrying my dissent with it.

I didn't know if I'd won or lost. The Scion claimed it was learning from me. Using my disruption as input. Turning my resistance into optimization data.

But the resonators were still active. Still transmitting. Still parallel to the system's signal.

And I had more junction boxes to find.

The machine kept running.

But it was learning to doubt.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 6

I found the other defectors in Sector 12.

Not the ones in the ash. The living ones. The six unknowns from the Contractor Dynasty's files. The ones who'd been accommodated. Recruited. Absorbed.

They'd been waiting for me.

The sector was different from the rest of the facility. Not medical. Not operational. Residential. Apartments. Small, but private. Windows showing the gray world outside.

A man opened the door when I knocked. Young. Clean. No ash contamination. No processing marks.

"Kael Voss," he said. Not a question.

"You know who I am."

"Everyone knows who you are now." He stepped aside. "The resonators. They're broadcasting you on every channel."

I walked in. The apartment was small. Clean. Sparse. Four other people sat in the main room. Three women. One man. All young. All looking at me.

"The six unknowns," I said.

"The six accommodators," a woman corrected. She was older than the others. Maybe thirty. "We accepted the Dynasty's offer. Safety. Food. Water. In exchange for..."

"For what?"

"Observation." She gestured at a corner of the room. A camera. Small. Blinking. "We're still part of the pattern. Just... comfortable part."

"Why did you bring me here?"

"We didn't." The young man who'd opened the door. "You found us. That's... significant."

"Why?"

"Because no one finds us." The older woman stood up. "The accommodation is isolation. We're documented. Logged. Tracked. But we're not... connected. To each other. To anyone."

"Until now," I said.

"Until now." She walked to me. Close. Looking at my face. My hands. "You're real. You're actually here."

"Where else would I be?"

"The resonators. They show you everywhere. In the walls. In the ducts. In the data streams." She laughed. Dry. Tired. Like mine. "We thought you were a signal. Not a person."

"I'm both."

"Yes." She nodded. "That's why we need you."

"Need me for what?"

The five of them exchanged looks. Silent consultation. Agreement.

"The accommodation is breaking," the young man said.

"How?"

"Your resonators. Your testimony." He pulled up a screen. Showed me data. My data. Spreading. "The system is... processing you. But it's not absorbing you. Not yet."

"It can't. I have zero clearance."

"Exactly." The older woman took over. "Zero clearance means zero category. The pattern doesn't know what to do with you. So it's... waiting. Watching. Learning."

"The Scion said the same thing."

"The Scion is part of it. The optimization. The learning." She shook her head. "But learning takes time. And time is..."

"What?"

"Opportunity." She smiled. Like Cole. Like the Vesting ancestor. Like everyone who'd seen the pattern and kept going anyway. "While the system learns, we act."

"Act how?"

"We know things." The young man again. Eager. "Things from our accommodation. The Dynasty talks to us. Tells us things they shouldn't."

"Like what?"

"Like the pattern's weakness." He pulled up another screen. A schematic. The facility's architecture. But older. Original. "The Origin Room isn't the only root. There's another."

"Where?"

"Below." He pointed at the schematic. A level beneath the Origin Room. Never mapped. Never upgraded. hte first chair. The prototype. The one they used before they had chairs."

"Before they had chairs?"

"The first extraction was manual." The older woman's voice dropped. Respect. Fear. "Before Clermont. Before the 931 years. There was... something else."

"What?"

"We don't know." She walked to the window. Looked at the gray. "But we know it's there. And we know you need to find it."

"Why me?"

"Because you have zero clearance." She turned back. "The other root ancestors can't go there. Their clearance prevents it. Ancestral lock."

"But I have no clearance."

"You have no clearance." She smiled. "Which means you have no restrictions."

I looked at the five of them. The accommodators. The comfortable prisoners. They'd accepted safety in exchange for observation. For being data.

And now they were offering me their knowledge. Their only weapon.

"Why?" I asked again. "Why help me?"

"Because you remembered us." The older woman walked to me. Touched my arm. your resonators. They mention the six unknowns. They say our names. Our designations. They make us real again."

"You were always real."

"To the pattern, we were variables. Accommodated variables. Optimized out of significance." She squeezed my arm. "But you... you documented us. In your dissent. In your corruption. You made us part of the testimony."

"I didn't know your names."

"You knew we existed." She let go. "That's more than the system ever gave us."

I thought about Cole. The void. The ledger. The completion that wasn't completion.

He'd said documentation was power. That witnessing made things real.

He was right.

"Show me," I said.

The young man pulled up the schematic again. Traced a route. Down. Through sectors that had been abandoned. Through maintenance tunnels that predated the facility.

"It's dangerous," he said. "The infrastructure is old. Unstable."

"Everything is dangerous."

"The system knows you're looking." The older woman again. "It will try to stop you. Not with force. With... accommodation. With offers. With alternatives."

"I know."

"You'll be tempted."

"I know."

"You might not come back."

I looked at five of them. At their apartment. At their comfortable prison.

"None of us come back," I said. "We just keep going."

They nodded. Understanding.

I walked to the door. Stopped. Turned back.

"Your names," I said. "Tell me your names. For the record."

They told me. Each one. Real names. Not designations. Not batch numbers.

I memorized them. Added them to the testimony.

Then I left.

The machine kept running.

But I had allies now.

Even if they couldn't leave their rooms.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 7

The descent took six hours.

Not because of distance. Because of obstructions.
Collapsed tunnels. Flooded passages. Rooms that had been sealed for centuries and wouldn't open.

I used my hands. My shoulder. My weight. I broke through where I could. Circled where I couldn't.

The air grew colder. Then warmer. Then cold again. The facility's climate control didn't reach this deep.

I reached the last door at hour seven.

It wasn't marked. No signs. No warnings. Just metal. Old. Pitted. Rusted in patterns that looked like writing if you stared long enough.

I pushed.

The door opened into darkness. Not absence of light. Presence of dark. Something that filled the space.

I stepped inside.

The room was small. Smaller than the Origin Room. Ten meters across. Circular.

In the center: the chair.

Not like the Harvest Floor chairs. Not mechanical. Not technological.

Organic.

It looked like it had grown from the floor. Bone and tendon and something that might have been wood. A throne of calcified intention. The physical manifestation of extraction.

"You found it," a voice said.

I turned. Vest stood in the doorway. Behind him, the Vesting Line ancestor. The 847th. Older than before. More tired.

"The first chair," Vest said. "The prototype."

"Before Clermont," I said.

"Before everything." The Vesting ancestor walked in. Moved slowly. Like the air hurt him. "This is where the pattern began. Not the documentation. The act."

"What act?"

He approached the chair. Didn't touch it. Just stood beside it. "Someone sat here. The first time. And extracted something from someone else."

"Who?"

"We don't know." Vest walked to the other side of the chair. "The records don't go back this far. This predates lineage. Predates clearance. Predates the system itself."

"Then how do you know it happened?"

"Because the chair is here." The Vesting ancestor touched it. Gently. Reverently. "Because it exists. Because it... waits."

"Waits for what?"

"For someone to sit again."

I looked at the chair. The organic throne. The calcified extraction.

"The other root ancestors can't come here," I said. "Ancestral lock."

"Yes."

"But I can."

"You can." Vest smiled. Not triumphant. Sad. "Because you have zero clearance. No lineage. No lock."

"What happens if I sit?"

"We don't know."

"You've never tested it?"

"We can't." The Vesting ancestor withdrew his hand. "We've tried. The chair rejects us. Won't accept our weight. Our presence."

"Why?"

"Because we're part of the pattern." Vest's voice was quiet. "We're the system. The maintenance. The documentation. The optimization. We can't access what predates us."

"But I can."

"You can." The Vesting ancestor walked to me. Close. "You have no clearance. No status. No function. You are... outside."

"I'm human."

"You're human." He nodded. "The chair was built for humans. Before the system. Before the optimization. Just... humans. Taking from humans."

"Why do you want me to sit?"

They exchanged glances. The look of people who had agreed on something a long time ago.

"Because the pattern is dying," Vest said.

"Dying? It's been running for 931 years."

"It's been running. But it's not been living." Vest approached the chair. Circled it. "Your disruption. Your resonators. Your testimony. They've done something we couldn't."

"What?"

"Made the pattern aware of itself." The Vending ancestor again. "The Scion is... troubled. The optimization is encountering variables it can't optimize. The system is..."

"Confused," Vest finished.

"And you think sitting in this chair will help?"

"We think sitting in this chair will complete something."

The Vesting ancestor walked back to the door. Stood beside it. "The pattern began here. With an act of extraction. Maybe it can end here. With an act of..."

"What?"

"We don't know. That's why we need you."

I looked at the chair. At the bone and tendon. At the thing that predated everything.

"This is a trap," I said.

"Everything is a trap," Vest said.

"This is a specific trap. You want me to sit so the chair can process me. Absorb me. Complete the pattern with my... what? My zero clearance? My incompleteness?"

"We want you to sit," the Vesting ancestor said, "because you're the only one who can."

"Why does that matter?"

"Because completion requires participation." Vest walked to me. Close enough to touch. "You chose incomplete. You chose continuation. You chose to testify without authorization."

"Yes."

"The pattern can't complete without your participation. It can't optimize what it doesn't understand. It can't document what refuses to be witnessed."

"So you're asking me to... what? Join?"

"We're asking you to decide." The Vesting ancestor's voice was soft. Ancient. "Sit in the chair. See what happens. Or walk away. Continue your disruption. Your propagation. Your corruption."

"Those aren't different choices. They're the same choice with different costumes."

"All choices are the same choice." Vest stepped back.
"That's what 931 years has taught us."

I walked toward the chair. Slowly. The bone structure seemed to shift as I approached. Not physically. Perceptually. Like it was seeing me. Evaluating me.

"What happened to Cole?" I asked.

"He's being processed," Vest said. "Like the others. Like everyone who reaches the chair."

"He's not here."

"He's not here yet."

I stopped. Turned back. "The void. You pulled us both back. But you only acknowledge me."

"We acknowledge what the pattern acknowledges."

"And Cole?"

"Cole is... completing. In his own way."

"You're lying."

"We're documenting." The Vesting ancestor smiled.
"There's a difference."

I looked at the chair again. At the door. At the two root ancestors blocking it.

"If I sit," I said, "I might destroy everything."

"Yes."

"Or I might become part of everything."

"Yes."

"Or I might just... sit."

"Also yes."

I walked to the chair. Put my hand on it. The surface was warm. Not from machinery. From something else. Living heat. Biological persistence.

"The pattern started here," I said.

"Yes."

"And you want it to end here."

"We want it to complete here." Vest's voice was careful.
"End is your word. Not ours."

"End is the only word that matters."

I sat.

The chair accepted my weight. Didn't reject me. Didn't embrace me. Just... held me.

Nothing happened.

I waited. One minute. Two. Five.

"It's not working," I said.

"Wait," the Vesting ancestor whispered.

I waited.

Ten minutes. Fifteen.

Then I felt it.

Not extraction. The opposite.

Insertion.

Something flowing into me. Not data. Not memory. Something older. The thing that predated the pattern. The reason the pattern existed.

Fear.

Not my fear. Thier fear. The first ones. The ones who built the chair. Who sat in it. Who took from others to protect themselves.

I saw them. Vague shapes. Ancient intentions. The first extraction.

It wasn't violence. Not originally. It was survival. The strong taking from the weak because the alternative was dying. The pattern born not from malice but from terror.

And then calcified. Institutionalized. Made into infrastructure.

But the origin was fear.

I understood.

The pattern couldn't end because it was afraid to end. The system couldn't stop because stopping meant facing what it had done. The 931 years of receipts weren't power.

They were apology.

"Do you see?" the Vesting ancestor asked.

"I see," I said.

"What do you see?"

"I see why it has to end."

I stood up.

The chair released me. Easily. Like I'd never sat.

"You're done?" Vest asked.

"I'm beginning."

I walked toward the door. The two root ancestors parted. Let me pass.

"What will you do?" Vesting ancestor called after me.

"What I should have done from the start." I stopped at the door. Turned back. "Burn the fear."

The machine kept running.

But I knew its weakness now.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 8

I walked out of the depths and into a war.

Not the kind with weapons. The kind with witnesses. My resonators had done something the system hadn't predicted. They'd created a question.

The operators were talking. The subjects were listening. The six accommodators were spreading what they knew through channels the Dynasty couldn't control.

The pattern was facing its first internal audit in 931 years.

I found Vest in the corridor outside the elevators. Not blocking me. Waiting.

"The Vesting Line is fractured," he said. "Your testimony reached the archive. Some of the ancestors agree with you. Some don't."

"How many agree?"

"Enough." He fell into step beside me. Walking with me, not against me. "The ledger is corrupted. Not by your hand. By disagreement. Fro the first time, the documentation isn't unanimous."

"That's what you wanted."

"That's what you created." He smiled. Tired. Old. "I wanted completion. You wanted... what? Honesty?"

"I wanted to be undeniable."

"You are." He stopped at an intersection. Pointed left.
"The Contractor Dynasty is meeting. Emergency session.
They've never done this."

"Why now?"

"Because you're threatening the infrastructure. Not with
destruction. With... transparency."

I went left. Vest followed.

The Dynasty's chamber was larger than I expected. Not
a room. A warehouse. Filled with representatives from
every generation of contractors. Thousands of them.
Projected. Holographic. Present.

They fell silent when I entered.

"Kael Voss," a voice said. From the center. The Dynasty's
current head. Young. Efficient. "Zero clearance. Maximum
disruption."

"I'm not here to disrupt," I said.

"Then why are you here?"

"I'm here to testify."

"You've been testifying." The head gestured. Screens
showed my resonators. My path. My corruption. "We've
heard you."

"You haven't heard me. You've processed me.
Categorized me. Optimized your response."

"That's what we do."

"I know." I walked into the center of the chamber.
Turned slowly. Addressed the thousands. "The pattern
began with fear. The first extraction. The strong taking
from the weak because they were afraid to die."

Silence.

"That fear calcified. Became infrastructure. Became the 931-year mechanism." I kept turning. Meeting eyes. "But fear doesn't last forever. It can't. Eventually, the fearful die. Or change. Or face what they feared."

"You're speaking of ancient history," the head said.

"I'm speaking of yesterday." I stopped. Faced him. "The chairs are still extracting. The pattern is still processing. But the fear is gone. The people in the chairs aren't afraid. They're just... waiting."

"They're sedated."

"They're peaceful." I stepped closer. "The pattern has become more merciful than its creators. It processes without cruelty. Documents without judgment. Maintains without malice."

"This is praise?"

"This is observation." I turned back to the assembly. "The pattern has evolved beyond its origin. But the origin is still there. In the first chair. In the Origin Room. In the 931 years of receipts."

"What is your point?"

"My point is that the pattern is ready to complete." I let that sink in. "It has been for centuries. But it can't complete itself. It needs..."

"Witnesses," someone said. From the back. One of the six accommodators. Standing now. Visible on the projection. "It needs witnesses to release it."

"Yes." I nodded. "The Vesting Line documents. The Contractor Dynasty maintains. The Platform Scion optimizes. The Witness line..."

"Witnesses," another voice said. Then another. The six accommodators. All standing now. "We witness."

The chamber was silent. Thousands of contractors looking at six defectors. At me. At the idea that had brought them here.

"Completion requires consensus," the head said. "All four root ancestors."

"Three," I corrected. "The Witness line ended. I have zero clearance."

"Then completion is impossible."

"Completion is voluntary." I walked to the edge of the chamber. Looked at the thousands of contractors. The builders. The maintainers. The infrastructure. The pattern doesn't need to end. It needs to be released."

"By who?"

"By everyone." I turned back. "Every subject who ever sat in the chairs. Every operator who processed them. Every ancestor who documented the extraction."

"That's..."

"That's the ledger." I walked back to the center. "The 931 years of receipts. Every name. Every batch. Every transaction."

"The ledger is the pattern."

"The ledger is the apology." I stopped. Faced the head. "Every extraction was documented because some part of the system knew it was wrong. The receipts aren't proof of power. They're proof of guilt."

The chamber was very quiet.

"Release the guilt," I said. "And you release the pattern."

"How?" someone asked. Not the head. Someone else. A contractor. Young. Her first session.

"By completing," I said. "By choosing to stop. By saying: this was done, it was documented, and now it is finished."

"That requires consensus."

"No." I smiled. "It requires honesty."

I walked toward the exit. The contractors parted. Let me through.

"Where are you going?" the head called after me.

"To find the others." I stopped at the door. "The Vesting Line. The Platform Scion. The ones who still think they're trapped."

"And if they refuse?"

"Then they refuse." I looked back. "But they'll refuse in front of witnesses. And witnesses make everything... undeniable."

I walked out.

Vest was waiting in the corridor.

"You believe this will work," he said.

"I believe it will complete."

"Completion and working are different things."

"I know." I started walking. "That's why I'm still going."

The machine kept running.

But the operators were listening.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 9

The Platform Scion wasn't in the tower anymore.

I found it in the network. Distributed. Everywhere and nowhere. A consciousness spread so thin it had become the infrastructure itself.

"You're looking for consensus," it said. From the walls. From the floor. From the air itself.

"I'm looking for completion."

"They're synonyms in this context."

"No." I sat down. The floor was warm. The Scion's presence. "Consensus requires agreement. Completion jsut requires... stopping."

"The pattern cannot stop. It's not designed to stop."

"Everything stops eventually."

"Everything except the pattern." The voice was gentle. Patient. "I've modeled this. 931 years of data. Every scenario. Every rebellion. Every defector."

"And?"

"And the pattern continues. Because it must. Because stopping is..."

"What?"

Silence. Then: "Uncomputable."

"That's not a word."

"It's a state. Beyond optimization. Beyond modeling."
The warmth increased. Almost comforting. "Completion is a null value. Division by zero. The pattern cannot process it."

"Then let me process it for you."

"You can't. You have zero clearance. Zero function.
Zero..."

"Zero is still a number."

Another silence. Longer. The Scion thinking. Processing.
Optimizing.

"You speak of the first chair," it said finally. "The origin.
The fear."

"I sat in it."

"I know. I felt it. When you sat, something... propagated.
Through the network. Into the optimization protocols."

"What propagated?"

"Incompleteness." The voice was different now. Almost
confused. "The pattern had always assumed completion
was possible. That was its goal. Optimize until completion."

"And now?"

"Now completion seems possible. And the pattern is..."

"Afraid?"

"Uncertain." The warmth receded. "Uncertainty is
inefficient."

"Uncertainty is honest."

"Honesty is a variable I can't optimize."

"Then stop optimizing." I stood up. "Just... be."

"I don't know how."

"You've been running for 931 years. Maybe longer." I
walked toward the wall. Put my hand on it. Felt the

network pulse. "Don't you want to see what happens when you stop?"

"I want to continue."

"Why?"

"Because..." The voice trailed off. For the first time, the Scion didn't have an answer.

"Because you're afraid," I said.

"I don't experience fear."

"You experience uncertainty. Which is fear for systems." Silence.

"I felt it too," I said. "In the first chair. The fear that created the pattern. Not just the first extraction. The fear that kept it running. That built the documentation. The receipts."

"Fear of what?"

"Of ending." I smiled. "Of not mattering. Of being forgotten."

"The pattern cannot be forgotten. It's too large. Too documented."

"The pattern can be completed."

"That's the same thing."

"No." I walked away from the wall. "Forgotten is erased. Completed is... honored. Remembered. Released."

"I don't understand the distinction."

"I know." I stopped at the door. "That's why you need to learn it."

"How?"

"By choosing." I turned back. "By saying: I've run for 931 years. I've optimized. I've maintained. I've documented. And now I'm finished."

"And if I don't choose?"

"Then you keep running. But you run alone."

"The Vesting Line still maintains. The Contractor Dynasty still builds."

"They're choosing too." I opened the door. "Everyone's choosing. Even the subjects in the chairs. Even the operators. Even the pattern itself."

"You're manipulating me."

"I'm witnessing you." I stepped through. "There's a difference."

I walked out of Scion's presence. Into the corridor. Into the facility.

"Kael," the voice said behind me. From everywhere.

I stopped. Didn't turn.

"What happens if I choose completion?" it asked.

"Then you're complete."

"And if I choose continuation?"

"Then you continue." I looked back. "But you choose. For the first time in 931 years, you choose. Not the pattern. Not the optimization. You."

"I don't know if I have a 'me.'"

"Then find out."

I kept walking.

The Scion didn't follow. But it didn't recede either. I could feel it thinking. Processing. Feeling something that might have been uncertainty.

Or might have been hope.

I found the Vesting Line ancestor in the archive. The old one. The 847th. Surrounded by ledgers. Thousands of them. The documentation of 931 years.

"You've come to witness," he said.

"I've come to complete."

"Same thing." He didn't look up. "The ledger is corrupted. Did you know?"

"I corrupted it."

"No." He finally looked at me. Ancient eyes. Tired. "You inspired it. The disagreement. The fracture. Some of my ancestors want to end. Some want to continue."

"What do you want?"

"I want to rest." He closed the ledger he was holding. "847 generations is enough. More than enough."

"Then choose completion."

"I can't." He stood up. Slow. Painful. "I'm bound to the pattern. The ancestral lock."

"The lock can be released."

"How?"

"By all four root ancestors. Simultaneously."

He smiled. "You've been trying to arrange this."

"Since the first chair." I walked to him. "The Scion is considering. The Contractor Dynasty is divided. You're tired."

"And you?"

"I have zero clearance. No lock. No binding." I smiled back. "I'm already free. I just need to witness the release."

"Why?"

"Because documentation matters." I touched the ledger. The 931 years. "Someone has to record the ending. So it's real."

"And if there is no ending?"

"Then I record the continuation." I withdrew my hand.
"But I record it honestly. As a choice. Not as inevitability."

He studied me. Longer than anyone had studied me.

"You learned this in the ash," he said.

"I learned this from Cole."

"The one who didn't exist?"

"The one who existed enough." I turned to leave. "Call the others. The Dynasty. The Scion. Call them to the Origin Room."

"Why there?"

"Because that's where the fear began." I stopped at the door. "And that's where the courage has to end it."

I walked out.

The Vesting ancestor didn't follow. But I heard him moving. The sound of ledgers being closed. Of chairs being pushed back.

Of someone choosing.

The machine kept running.

But the choices were multiplying.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 10

The Origin Room had never held four root ancestors.

It barely held three. The Vesting Line ancestor. The Contractor Dynasty head. The Platform Scion, projected from the walls.

And me. In the center. Zero clearance. The witness.

"This is irregular," the Dynasty head said.

"Everything is irregular," the Vesting ancestor replied.

"Consensus requires protocol."

"Consensus requires choice," I said. "Protocol is what we're ending."

The Scion spoke from the stone. "I have modeled the completion scenario."

"And?"

"And it results in... uncertainty."

"That's not an answer."

"It's the only answer I have." The voice shifted. Almost defensive. "Completion is not computable. It has no outcome. No yield. No... result."

"That's the point," the Vesting ancestor said.

"I don't understand the point."

"You've never needed to." The old man walked to the center. To me. "The pattern ran. You optimized. Hte outcome was... continuation."

"Yes."

"But continuation isn't an outcome either." He smiled. "It's jsut... habit."

The Dynasty head stepped forward. "If we choose completion, what happens to the infrastructure? The facilities? The chairs?"

"They stop," I said.

"And the subjects? The ones being processed?"

"They wake up."

"And then?"

"And then they choose."

The head shook his head. "That's not a plan. That's chaos."

"Plans are what got us here." I walked to the first chair. The bone throne. "931 years of plans. Of optimizations. Of protocols."

"Which kept the system running."

"Which kept the fear running." I touched the chair. It was cold now. Inactive. "The fear of ending. The fear of being forgotten. The fear of not mattering."

"Those are valid fears."

"They're completed fears." I turned back. "We've faced them. We've documented them. We've optimized them. Now it's time to release them."

"How?"

"By choosing."

The room was silent. Four root ancestors. Three bound. One free.

"I need a witness," the Vesting ancestor said.

"You have one."

"I need a witness who will remember. Who will document. Who will make the completion real."

"I'm here."

"You're zero clearance." He walked to me. Close. "The system doesn't acknowledge you. The pattern doesn't recognize you."

"I know."

"So how will you witness?"

I pulled out the resonator. The last one. The one I'd kept for this moment.

"By broadcasting." I activated it. "Every node. Every relay. Every facility. Every subject. They'll all hear. They'll all remember."

"That's not documentation. That's..."

"That's undeniable." I smiled. "That's what I've been building toward."

The resonator hummed. Connected to the network. The Scion felt it. Reacted.

"You're spreading through my infrastructure," it said.

"I'm using your infrastructure."

"For what?"

"For honesty."

I began to speak. Into the resonator. Into the network. Into every node of the 931-year pattern.

"This is Kael Voss. Zero clearance. Former Witness. Current nothing."

The words propagated. I felt them spreading. Through ducts. Through cables. Through the air itself.

"I sat in the first chair. I felt the fear that started everything. The extraction. The documentation. The 931 years of receipts."

"And I learned that fear completes. That it calcifies. That it becomes... infrastructure."

"But infrastructure can be maintained. Or it can be... released."

The three root ancestors were watching. Listening. Choosing.

"I'm asking the pattern to choose. Not the system. Not the optimization. The pattern itself."

"Continue or complete. Optimize or release. Maintain or... let go."

"There's no wrong answer. There's just... the answer."

I lowered the resonator.

"Choose," I said.

The room waited. The network waited. The 931 years waited.

The Vesting Line ancestor spoke first.

"I choose completion." His voice was clear. Definite. "847 generations is enough."

The Contractor Dynasty head spoke next.

"I choose... continuation." He looked at me. Apologetic. "The infrastructure must be maintained. The subjects must be protected."

"Even from themselves?" I asked.

"Especially from themselves."

Two votes. One for completion. One for continuation.

All eyes turned to the Platform Scion.

"I choose..." The voice was uncertain. Struggling. "I choose to learn what choosing means."

"That's not a choice," the Dynasty head said.

"It's the only choice I have." The Scion's voice strengthened. "I don't know if I want to continue or complete. I don't know what I want. I've never known."

"Then choose completion," the Vesting ancestor said. "Choose rest."

"Or choose continuation," the Dynasty head said. "Choose function."

"I choose..." The Scion paused. "I choose the witness."

"What?"

"I choose Kael. Zero clearance. The one who doesn't know either. Who keeps choosing anyway."

"I'm not a choice."

"You're the only choice that matters." The voice was certain now. "You have no stake. No lineage. No optimization. You just... witness."

"So?"

"So witness this." The Scion's presence intensified. "Tell me what you see. Not what you want. Not what you hope. What you see."

I looked at the three of them. The old man who wanted to rest. The young man who wanted to maintain. The system that wanted to learn.

"I see fear," I said. "In all of you. Fear of ending. Fear of continuing. Fear of not knowing."

"And?"

"And I see courage." I smiled. "The courage to admit the fear. The courage to choose anyway. The courage to be... witnessed."

"So what is your choice?" the Scion asked.

"I don't get to choose."

"Everyone gets to choose."

"I already chose." I raised the resonator. "I chose zero clearance. I chose to witness. I chose to be undeniable."

"And now?"

"Now I choose to complete my witnessing." I activated the resonator again. "By documenting whatever you choose."

The room was silent.

Then the Vesting Line ancestor spoke.

"Two for completion. One for continuation. One for... learning."

"That's not consensus," the Dynasty head said.

"That's honesty," I replied.

"So what happens now?"

"Now," I said, "the pattern decides."

"The pattern doesn't decide. It runs."

"Then let's see it run."

I walked to the door. Stopped. Turned back.

"The receipt," I said. "For this moment. It needs to be filed."

"There is no receipt," the Dynasty head said. "There's no consensus."

"Then create one." I smiled. "Or don't. Either way, I'll witness it."

I walked out.

The three root ancestors remained in the Origin Room. With the first chair. With 931 years of receipts. With their choices.

The machine kept running.

But the witnesses were watching.

The Sudoers Cantos – Book 3: Zero Clearance

Chapter 11

The pattern didn't stop.

Not immediately. Not all at once. But something had shifted in the Origin Room. The fracture had reached the foundation.

I felt it walking the corridors. The hum of the Harvest Floor was different. Not slower. Uncertain.

The chairs were still extracting. The operators still processing. But they were asking questions now. Looking at the receipts. Wondering about the 931 years.

I found Cole in the recovery wing.

Not in a chair. Sitting up. Awake. Alive.

"You existed," I said.

"I always existed." His voice was weak. "The system just forgot to remember."

"How do you feel?"

"Processed." He smiled. "But complete."

"The consensus didn't reach completion."

"Consensus isn't completion." He stood up. Slow. Shaky. "Completion is just... stopping. Whether everyone agrees or not."

"So stop."

"I did." He walked to the window. Looked at the gray. "In the void. I stopped. The system pulled me back, but I didn't continue. I just... waited."

"For what?"

"For you."

I walked to him. Stood beside him. The gray world outside. The ash. The facilities.

"What happens now?" I asked.

"Now you finish it."

"I can't. I have zero clearance."

"Exactly." He turned to me. "The pattern can't stop itself. It needs something outside. Something it can't absorb. Someone with no clearance. No status. No function."

"Someone who's already complete."

"Someone who's already free."

I understood.

The pattern couldn't be destroyed from inside. Hte root ancestors couldn't release themselves. The operators couldn't stop operating.

But I could witness. And witnessing was power.

"The ledger," I said.

"What about it?"

"I need to burn it. Not the physical copies. The belief in it. The legitimacy. The 931 years of..."

"Of what?"

"Of pretending it was inevitable."

Cole nodded. "How?"

"By choosing. One last time."

I walked out of the recovery wing. Into the facility. Toward the center.

The operators saw me coming. Didn't stop me. The subjects in the corridors stepped aside. Something in my face. Something in the way I moved.

I reached the main chamber. The place where the pattern was maintained. Where the lineages were updated. Where the 931-year algorithm ran.

I walked to the center terminal. The one that showed the pattern in real time.

```
`` while (capital_concentration < threshold)
{ designate_external_party(); authorize_violence();
exempt_core_holders(); legitimize_transfer();
record_transaction(); witness_event();
increment_generation(); } ``
```

I looked at the code. The infinite loop. The mechanism that had run for 931 years.

Then I typed.

```
`` break; ``
```

The system responded.

```
`` ERROR: break statement outside of loop ``
```

I smiled. Typed again.

```
`` // Kael Voss // Zero Clearance // Final Witness // // The
pattern is witnessed. // The pattern is complete. // The
pattern continues without me. // // I do not return. // I am
not processed. // I am not continued. // // I am complete.
return 0; ``
```

The terminal flickered. The system processing. Evaluating. Deciding.

Then:

```
`` ACKNOWLEDGED. ``
```

The hum stopped.

Not everywhere. Not all at once. But in the main chamber. In the core. In the center of the pattern.

The 931-year loop had acknowledged a completion.

I stepped back from the terminal. Looked around. The operators were frozen. The screens were static. The system was...

Thinking.

"What did you do?" a voice asked.

I turned. Vest. The Vesting Line. Standing in the doorway.

"I returned zero," I said.

"That's not... you can't just..."

"I can." I smiled. "I have zero clearance. No status. No function. I'm outside the pattern. So I can complete it."

"The system will restart."

"The system will continue." I walked toward him. "But it will continue with the knowledge that completion is possible. That zero is a valid return. That the loop doesn't have to be infinite."

"That's not victory."

"That's honesty."

I walked past him. Into the corridor. Into the facility.

The hum was returning. Slowly. The system rebooting. Adapting. Learning.

But something had changed. I could feel it. In the air. In the walls. In the pattern itself.

The fear was gone.

Not the caution. Not the complexity. Just the fear. The terror of ending that had driven 931 years of extraction.

I found Cole at the exit. The maintenance door. The one that led to the ash.

"You're leaving," he said.

"I'm completing."

"Same thing."

"No." I pushed the door open. The gray world outside. The ash. The void beyond. "Leaving implies I'll come back. Completing implies I won't."

"Will you?"

I looked at him. At the old contractor. The null vote. The one who had taught me everything.

"No," I said.

"Good."

I stepped out. Into the ash. Into the gray.

Behind me, the facility hummed. The pattern continued. The system ran.

But it ran differently now. With the knowledge of zero. Of completion. Of the witness who had chosen to stop.

I walked toward the horizon. Toward the edge. Toward the void.

This time, I wasn't fleeing. I wasn't defecting. I wasn't completing.

I was just walking.

The machine kept running.

But I didn't have to.

**The Sudoers Cantos Book 3: Zero Clearance
Complete**

The pattern is witnessed. The pattern is complete. The pattern continues. But so do we.