

## Genesis

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### Chapter 1: The First Chapter

The train station had no clocks, only screens.

Every panel above the platforms glowed with predictions: arrival windows, confidence scores, weather-adjusted delays, crowd-density estimates. The numbers updated every few seconds in a soft pulse, like a city breathing through wires. Most people trusted the screens more than they trusted each other, and Miri understood why. The screens had never asked anyone to believe in them. They just kept being right.

She stood at Platform 11 with a folded paper map in her jacket pocket and a phone at six percent. A security drone slid overhead, humming low enough to feel in her teeth. Its lens swept the line, then moved on. No alarm. No request for identity. Just another loop through another morning.

Her brother had said not to come by train.

"Use a relay car," Jin had told her in the voice note he sent at 2:14 a.m. "No transit hubs. No station cameras. If someone asks, you never heard from me."

But relay cars logged passengers by default, and she didn't trust defaults anymore. Not after three months at the Archive Office, where she had watched automated policies erase people from systems they had paid into their whole lives.

The screen above Platform 11 flashed:

NORTHBOUND LOCAL // 03:20 // Confidence: 97%

Beneath it, in smaller letters:

Advisory: Civic index sync at 09:00. Carry valid credentials.

Miri touched the old keycard in her pocket. It was dead plastic now, no chip handshake left in it, but she kept it the way people kept old photos. Proof she had once belonged to an institution with a logo, a payroll, a badge scanner, and a cafeteria that served tea strong enough to wake a dead city.

The local arrived exactly when predicted. Doors opened. People got on in the order taught by floor markings and civic etiquette campaigns. Miri stepped inside and took a corner seat facing backward.

Across from her sat a courier in gray overalls, knees bouncing, eyes fixed on his wrist

display. Beside him, an older woman with silver braids held a cloth bag and read an actual paperback, the kind with bent corners and soft pages. Near the doors, two students debated whether synthetic rain was better than natural rain because at least synthetic rain came with schedules.

The doors closed.

As the train moved, the city unrolled outside in layers: glass towers with sky farms stitched between them, low brick blocks wrapped in fiber netting, rooftop water collectors, stacked housing cubes with laundry lines strung like prayer flags. On one wall, a billboard animated into life:

TRUST IS A SERVICE.

UPDATE YOUR TRUST SETTINGS TODAY.

Miri looked away.

At Junction 6, her phone vibrated once. Unknown sender. One line of text.

If youâ re on transit, get off before Harbor.

No signature. No encryption marker she recognized. Just plain words.

She stared at the message until it blurred. The train rattled over an old metal seam in the track and everyone swayed together like a field in wind.

Get off before Harbor.

Harbor was where Jin had told her to meet the contact.

She opened their thread. Jinâ s last message was still there, unviewed by him, timestamped two days ago:

If anything feels wrong, trust the oldest thing in the room.

At the time she thought it was one of his dramatic jokes, the kind he used when he wanted her to take him seriously without sounding scared. Jin had always spoken in puzzles when fear got near.

The train crossed into Dock District. The windows dimmed against industrial glare. Cargo cranes lifted containers in slow choreography above black water. Drones stitched white lines through gray sky.

Two stops to Harbor.

Miri stood before she could talk herself out of it.

The courier looked up as if he might ask whether sheâ d forgotten something, but he said nothing. The older woman turned a page. The students argued about algorithmic weather rights.

At Wharf East, Miri stepped onto the platform.

The doors hissed shut and the train carried everyone else forward.

Wharf East was mostly freight access and maintenance tunnels, a place commuters passed through but rarely chose. The station map showed three exits. One was marked temporarily sealed. One led to the cargo road. One led to a pedestrian bridge over the canal.

She took the bridge.

Halfway across, she saw the first patrol van below, then a second. Both parked outside Harbor Station entrance. Not flashing lights, not emergency posture, just waiting. Efficient. Patient.

Her heartbeat shifted from background to foreground.

She walked faster and didnâ t look down again.

At the far end of the bridge, a kiosk sold tea and boiled eggs under a faded awning. The vendor was a broad-shouldered man with a shaved head and hands scarred like old maps. He looked up when she approached.

"Too early for lunch," he said.

"Iâ m not hungry," Miri replied.

He nodded once, then poured tea into a paper cup without asking what she wanted.

Steam curled between them.

"People only stop here when theyâ re lost or being watched," he said.

"Which one am I?"

He slid the cup toward her. "You tell me."

She took a sip. Bitter. Strong. Familiar in a way that made her chest tighten.

Trust the oldest thing in the room.

Not the screens. Not the messages. Not the panic.

The tea.

The stall.

The man whose face belonged to a world before civic indexes and confidence scoring.

"Iâm looking for someone," she said quietly. "Nameâ s Jin Sol."

The vendorâ s expression didnâ t change, but his eyes sharpened.

"Wrong place for names," he said.

Miri reached into her pocket and set the dead keycard on the counter. Archive Office seal, scratched but readable.

He glanced at it, then at her.

"You worked Records," he said.

"Used to."

"Then you know the rule." He lowered his voice. "If someone disappears in a system, it doesnâ t always mean theyâ re dead. Sometimes it means they became expensive."

Miri swallowed hard. "Where is he?"

The vendor wiped the counter with a cloth that was already clean.

"Harbor is burning identities this morning," he said. "Not physically. Administratively. Faster than fire, quieter than smoke. Your brother is on a transport manifest that never loaded passengers."

Miri felt the words like ice down her spine.

"That makes no sense."

"Thatâ s the point." He leaned in. "Someone is rewriting movement records in real time. If you went to Harbor, your credential would have pinged the same workflow. Youâ d be tied to him before noon."

She looked toward the distant station roofline, where patrol vans still waited like chess pieces.

"Who sent me the warning?" she asked.

The vendor gave a small, tired smile.

"A person who still remembers how to make mistakes."

He reached beneath the counter and placed a folded transit receipt beside her cup. The kind

printed on thermal paper, usually discarded before you left the gate.

On the back, in blue pen, was an address in Old Quarter and a time: 11:40.

Under it, one sentence:

Bring the map, not the phone.

Miri looked up, but the vendor had already turned to the next customer, a mechanic in oil-streaked coveralls ordering two eggs and no tea.

The city moved around her, loud and ordinary, as if nothing had shifted.

She tucked the receipt into her sleeve and left the keycard on the counter.

At the corner, she pulled the paper map from her jacket and unfolded it for the first time in years. Creases cracked. Ink lines held. District names stared up at her like old friends she had failed to call.

Her phone vibrated again.

Battery critical. 5%.

No new messages.

She powered it off anyway.

When she stepped into the street, the wind smelled like river metal and burnt coffee. Above her, a tower screen announced the 09:00 civic sync in clean white text. Around her, people checked their devices, adjusted their commutes, trusted the system to keep its promises one more day.

Miri folded the map into thirds and started walking toward Old Quarter.

Behind her, somewhere in the distance, a train arrived exactly on time.