

SUSPICION

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The room was simple.

A table. Two chairs. A mirrored wall. A camera on the ceiling. Beneath the camera—a small, round speaker grille.

No crest. No name. No clock.

Two men sat across from each other at the table.

In front of each lay a thin black panel.

Ethan Reed sat upright, his back barely touching the chair.

Forty-six. Short haircut. Dark shirt with an unbuttoned collar, sleeves rolled to his elbows. Heavy hands resting calmly on the table.

No watch. No jewelry.

The kind of face that isn't easily remembered—until it's sitting right across from you.

Marcus sat differently.

Forty-two. Black.

Expensive jacket. A chain. Two rings. Stubble trimmed to just the right length where it could still pass for deliberate carelessness.

He leaned back as if he owned the room.

Only his right foot was planted a little too close to the chair leg.

Ethan noticed.

Marcus noticed that Ethan noticed.

Neither man said a word.

It was cool in the room. The tabletop felt cold under Ethan's palms. The air—dry, still. Not a sound came from behind the mirrored wall. Nothing was audible beyond the door either.

Ethan lifted his panel and rotated it a few degrees.

From Ethan's angle, the screen looked normal. From Marcus's—a slab of black glass.

Marcus followed the movement.

"Secrets?"

Ethan laid the panel back down.

"Habit."

"A good one?"

"Still alive."

Marcus looked at the door.

"They disarm you too?"

"Yes."

"I don't like my piece sitting in someone else's hands."

"Then don't give it up."

Marcus smirked.

"Bit late for advice."

Ethan said nothing.

"You even know why they put us in here together?"

"Do you?"

"If I did, I'd be lying a lot more convincingly."

Ethan looked at him.

"Is that professional?"

Marcus tilted his head slightly.

"What about you?"

The door swung open.

A man in his fifties lumbered in, breathing hard.

Jacket unbuttoned.

Shirt collar soaked.

His tie hung around his neck like a dead dog's ear.

The man ripped it off, wiped his forehead, stared at the wet end with the expression of a man who'd had enough for today, and hung it back around his neck.

"Two bodies."

He caught his breath.

"In the hotel bar."

Another breath.

"And one floor up sit the people paying for half our toys and our entire future—if you believe their brochures."

Marcus raised an eyebrow.

"Nice hotel?"

"Was."

The man approached the table.

"Now it's police, security, lawyers, and a deputy minister who someone's already managed to call."

Marcus shook his head.

"Fast workers."

"Not them."

The man tapped his finger on the edge of the table.

Both panels came to life.

On the mirrored wall flashed:

01:00:00.

The man looked at the digits.

"If I don't have an answer in an hour, they're going to tear off my ass and feed it to the lion at the city zoo."

He thought for a moment.

"Though I feel sorry for the lion."

Marcus smirked.

The man continued:

"And whatever's left over will likely be dumped into administrative desk work."

This time, the corner of Ethan's mouth twitched, almost imperceptibly.

The man's face remained completely stone-cold. He acted as if he hadn't even heard his own joke.

He shifted his gaze from one to the other.

"And what they'll do to you... I don't even want to imagine."

Which one of them he was addressing was impossible to tell.

He turned toward the door.

"You have an hour."

And walked out.

The door closed.

On the wall:

00:59:59.

Marcus stared at the door for a few seconds. Then he turned to Ethan.

"So, bro?"

Ethan didn't smile.

"Why didn't you leave?"

Marcus's smile narrowed slightly.

"Why did you enter?"

"I asked first."

"Does that change anything?"

Ethan remained silent.

Marcus gave a short nod.

"That's what I thought."

Ethan touched the panel.

"Four."

"There were more."

"For the shooting—four."

"Me."

"Yes."

"You."

"Yes."

"Him."

"Yes."

Marcus paused.

"And the girl."

"Yes."

"And you counted her?"

"She changed the situation."

Marcus's thumb stopped sliding along the edge of his ring.

"That's why you're hard to talk to."

"Why?"

"Because a normal person would say: there was a girl there. You say: she changed the situation."

"She changed it."

Marcus leaned forward and laid his forearms on the table.

"When he reached under the table, did you see a weapon?"

"Did you?"

"No."

"Neither did I."

"But you fired."

"Yes."

Marcus leaned closer.

"Didn't see a gun."

"Saw movement."

"Movement isn't a gun."

"I know."

Marcus leaned back.

"Now you know."

A line appeared on Ethan's panel:

CLARIFY SEQUENCE.

"Who moved first?" he asked.

Marcus smirked.

"That's what I love about you."

"Who?"

The smile vanished.

"He was looking at the door."

"I asked about movement."

"And I'm talking about a person."

Ethan drew his brows together.

"Movement is physical."

Marcus nodded slowly.

"That's why you were late."

A muscle twitched in Ethan's jaw for a moment.

Marcus caught it.

"Hit a nerve?"

Ethan shifted his eyes to the wall.

"First shot—twenty-two seventeen zero eight."

Marcus whistled softly.

"Of course."

"What?"

"You remembered the second."

"I remembered the order."

Marcus's thumb settled back on his ring.

"How many?"

"Of what?"

"Don't make me pretend it's a tough question."

Ethan was silent for a moment.

"Two."

The thumb stopped.

"Same for me."

On the wall:

00:57:14.

Somewhere above the ceiling, the ventilation clicked on.

Ethan cast a brief glance at the numbers.

Marcus didn't.

"You were closer," Ethan said.

"You shot too."

"Twice."

"I heard."

Marcus ran a palm down his chin and leaned back again, but the relaxation was gone from his posture.

"You're still talking as if one of us here is answering the questions."

Ethan stayed silent.

"I just haven't figured out which one yet."

On Marcus's panel appeared:

CLARIFY THE MOMENT YOU LOST CONTROL OF THE SITUATION.

He exhaled slowly.

"Again."

The ventilation hummed low and steady.

Marcus blinked.

The hum grew to sound like an exhaust hood over a bar counter.

The white wall behind Ethan lost its sharpness.

The bass of the music returned first.

Heavy, dull. Loud enough that you had to raise your voice, and not loud enough that you could claim later you didn't hear something.

In front of Marcus stood a glass.

A woman's fingers rotated it by the stem.

Half a turn.

A pause.

Another half turn.

Across from Marcus sat a man in his mid-forties. Stocky, short hair, wearing an expensive shirt without a tie. Back to the door.

"How do you know Danny?"

Marcus gave him the smile that years of work had turned into a tool of its own.

"Through Moreno. At the Royale."

He leaned forward slightly.

"Danny intentionally sat with his back to the door back then. Said he was tired of spending his life looking at the entrance."

The woman's fingers stopped.

Only that.

The glass stopped spinning.

Then the girl raised her eyes.

"Danny never sits with his back to the door."

The man across slowly turned his head toward Marcus.

The bass vanished.

The dry hum of the ventilation returned.

On the wall it was already:

00:54:47.

Marcus lingered on the digits a little longer than before.

Ethan was sitting in the same posture.

"They gave you a cover story," he said. "You decided to improve it."

"He still believed it."

"No."

"Were you sitting there?"

"Didn't need to be. I know what happened after."

Marcus studied him for a few seconds.

"You think: if you know the end, you understand when it all started."

Ethan said nothing.

"He hadn't decided I was lying yet."

"And you had already decided you could convince him otherwise."

Marcus stopped smiling.

00:54:02.

On Ethan's panel a diagram of the bar appeared.

Tables. Walls. Doors.

People turned into dots.

Ethan zoomed in on the far sector.

"Six meters to the door. Four point two to you."

"People change faster than distances."

"In two seconds?"

"One is enough."

Ethan spread his fingers even wider.

"I need a moment that can be established."

Marcus opened the same diagram on his panel and pointed to one of the dots.

"You look at a person and see this."

"At least a dot doesn't lie."

"Dots don't shoot."

The ventilation went silent.

The silence sharpened.

Marcus pulled his panel toward himself and tilted it slightly. From Ethan's position, it turned into black glass.

Marcus typed:

HE FROZE BEFORE HE EVEN SAW A WEAPON.

The screen asked:

LOG AS OBSERVATION?

Marcus pressed:

YES.

And withdrew his hand.

Ethan could see none of this.

He continued studying the diagram.

"When did he move?"

"Before you."

"That's not a time."

"For him—it was."

00:51:26.

On the black surface of the panel, Marcus caught a white stripe of ceiling light.

For a moment, it became a glare on the glass.

The girl was no longer spinning it.

The man was still sitting with his back to the door, but his shoulders had ceased to be relaxed.

Ethan appeared at the entrance.

Without a uniform.

Without a visible badge.

The girl saw him first.

"Let's go. Now."

The man didn't turn around.

"Sit."

His right hand disappeared under the table.

The cold tabletop under his palm brought Marcus back into the room.

"Right then."

Ethan immediately shook his head.

"No."

"No?"

"You moved earlier."

"Where?"

"Toward your jacket."

Marcus fell silent.

"And he reacted to me?"

"Possibly."

The corner of his mouth rose slightly.

"Convenient."

"Exactly as convenient as the data allows."

Marcus leaned forward.

"You saw my hand."

"Yes."

"His weapon?"

A pause.

"No."

Somewhere in memory, a chair fell.

The room vanished.

The man's hand under the table.

Marcus's hand at his jacket.

The girl between them.

Her arm surged forward.

Fingers clamped on the man's wrist.

A shot.

Or the shot first.

And then her hand.

The sequence wouldn't hold.

A second.

A third.

A fourth.

People jumped up. Someone crossed Ethan's line. A chair overturned. The girl disappeared behind the man's shoulder and appeared again.

Four shots almost merged into one ragged burst.

Then silence.

The man lay near the table.

Blood on his forearm.

A dark spot on his chest.

The girl beside him.

Blood on her hand.

And lower—on her abdomen.

Ethan stood by the door with his gun held out in both hands.

Marcus—near the table.

His weapon was raised too.

Both were still aiming where shooting was no longer required.

The cold of the tabletop returned first.

Marcus found himself gripping its edge.

Unclasped his fingers.

"Four shots," Ethan said.

Marcus ran a palm down his face.

"Four hits."

"Two mine."

"Two mine."

"Two dead."

Marcus gave a short nod.

"Now that can be established."

Both panels filled with diagrams of wounds, assumed trajectories, body positions, and witness statements.

The system showed human figures as translucent.

The lines through them looked especially neat.

00:44:36.

Ethan noticed the time immediately.

Marcus raised his eyes to the wall only after him.

Ethan enlarged one of the diagrams.

"Chest. Abdomen."

"I know where they were hit."

"I'm talking about the line."

Marcus leaned in.

"You're drawing straight lines through people again."

"Bullets fly in a straight line."

"Until they hit a person."

Ethan removed his fingers from the screen.

"You could have left when the girl caught you on Danny."

Marcus turned to him.

"She didn't catch me."

"The story stopped matching up."

"I was looking him in the face."

"And made a mistake."

Marcus leaned forward.

His right leg moved away from the chair leg.

"And you looked at numbers. And entered."

Ethan said nothing.

"Saw people."

Silence.

"Didn't see a weapon."

"Yes."

The dry air tightened the skin of his lips. Ethan ran his tongue over his lower lip.

Marcus leaned back slightly.

"Then don't tell me when I should have left."

On Ethan's panel appeared:

EVALUATE MARCUS'S DECISION TO CONTINUE OPERATION AFTER
COVER BREACH.

"After the cover failed, the operation was over. You should have pulled out."

Marcus was looking not at the screen.

At Ethan.

"And you should have stayed outside."

"Conditions changed."

"Mine did too."

"You were in there under cover."

Marcus exhaled slowly.

"I was."

The earlier edge was gone from his voice.

On the mirrored wall the image changed.

The timer moved higher.

Under it lines appeared:

FEDERAL OPERATIONAL SERVICE.
INTERNAL USE-OF-FORCE REVIEW.
PARTICIPANT 1: MARCUS.
PARTICIPANT 2: ETHAN REED.
00:43:58.

Marcus read the whole thing.

"Well then. Now it's official."

Ethan touched the panel.

A service block opened:

ADVERSARIAL RECONSTRUCTION — PHASE 3 OF 4.

LEGAL CHANNEL: ISOLATED.

AUDIT: IMMUTABLE.

CONFLICT DOES NOT SUSPEND PHASE.

RECUSAL OF LEGAL ADVISOR:

TWO INDEPENDENT CONFIRMATIONS.

Ethan lingered on the last lines a bit longer.

Then opened the ballistics block.

TWO SERVICE SMART PISTOLS.

BIOMETRIC AUTHORIZATION CONFIRMED.

DISCHARGE LOG:

ETHAN REED — 2.

MARCUS — 2.

HOTEL SECURITY SYSTEM:

GUNSHOT IMPULSES — 4.

NO OTHER DISCHARGE SOURCES DETECTED.

AMMUNITION: CASELESS.

Service pistols logged authorization, trigger time, weapon state, and inertial orientation, but not the absolute position of the muzzle in the room.

The logs confirmed: two shots by Ethan, two by Marcus. The hotel's independent security system confirmed: four in total.

In a cramped bar, with sudden movements of weapons and overlapping bodies, the error margin of spatial telemetry allowed for both reconstructions.

There were no casings at all.

Only bullets remained.

Or rather—fragments.

One projectile shattered against bone. Another was severely deformed and split. On the surviving surfaces there were only class characteristics compatible with both barrels.

Insufficient individualizing striations remained for a unique attribution.

INDIVIDUAL BALLISTIC ATTRIBUTION:

NOT ACHIEVED.

Ethan closed the block.

"The pistols know who shot and how many."

Marcus shifted a shoulder slightly.

"Very kind of them."

"But they don't know whose bullet hit where."

On the screen, two fatal trajectories stood side by side.

The man's chest.

The girl's abdomen.

"Do you know which of these two are yours?" Ethan asked.

Marcus lowered his eyes to his own hands.

"Don't know."

"That's what can be established."

Marcus raised his head.

"So you established that nothing can be established."

On Marcus's panel appeared:

EVALUATE THE DECISION TO STAY AFTER COVER BREACH.

On Ethan's panel:

EVALUATE THE DECISION TO ENTER WITH RESTRICTED LINE OF FIRE.

Marcus read his line.

"They're asking me to evaluate why I stayed."

"And me—why I entered."

A muscle in Marcus's cheek twitched.

"Convenient. To each his own sin."

"It's a decision."

"Even more convenient."

Marcus laid a palm on the table.

"I could have left."

"Yes."

"You could have stayed out."

A pause.

"Yes."

Neither argued.

On the wall:

00:39:51.

Both panels changed almost simultaneously.

In front of Marcus:

RECONSTRUCTION 3-A.

COMPATIBILITY: 71%.

In front of Ethan:

RECONSTRUCTION 2-C.

COMPATIBILITY: 74%.

They leaned down toward the screens.

Each to his own.

For a few seconds, only breathing and the barely perceptible hum of electronics inside the panels could be heard.

Ethan raised his head first.

"Your first angle was cleaner. Before she moved."

"And after?"

"Afterward there was nothing clean."

"But the shooting continued."

"By both."

On Ethan's panel a new line appeared:

VERIFY THE MOMENT OF YOUR DECISION.

Under it—text.

Ethan frowned.

"He froze before he even saw a weapon."

Marcus's thumb stopped on his ring.

Ethan didn't notice this.

Marcus opened his saved observations.

The last entry:

HE FROZE BEFORE HE EVEN SAW A WEAPON.

Word for word.

He slowly pulled his hands back from the glass.

Ethan continued studying the diagram.

"You had already decided he was dangerous."

"I decided the situation was changing."

"Before the weapon."

"Before you entered."

Now Ethan turned to him.

"That's not an answer."

"The only one so far."

Ethan returned to the screen.

Marcus didn't touch his panel again.

00:35:18.

On Ethan's panel:

MOST PROBABLE RECONSTRUCTION — 2-C.

PARTICIPANT: ETHAN REED.

"What do you like about this version?" Marcus asked.

"Nothing."

"That's something."

Ethan's right hand turned slightly toward the panel and stopped.

"I saw that the line was bad even before I entered."

Marcus was silent.

"And entered anyway."

"We both know what we could have done differently."

After that Marcus touched his panel again.

More carefully than before.

MOST PROBABLE RECONSTRUCTION — 3-A.

PARTICIPANT: MARCUS.

"I could have left when she stopped spinning the glass."

Ethan raised his head.

Marcus was looking at the middle of the table.

"Already realized she didn't believe me. Decided I could still hold him."

Both screens changed at the same time.

TO COMPLETE PHASE — ACCEPT OR REJECT MODEL.

Larger text:

I ACCEPT AS THE MOST LIKELY RECONSTRUCTION:

FATAL SHOTS WERE FIRED BY ME.

Small text:

ACCEPTANCE DOES NOT CONSTITUTE ADMISSION OF INTENT OR
LEGAL CULPABILITY.

Marcus re-read the last line.

"Are you guilty?"

"Yes."

Marcus nodded.

"Me too."

Ethan frowned slightly.

"That's not the question."

"I know."

Ethan pressed:

ACCEPT.

Marcus lingered a second longer.

And pressed too.

On the mirrored wall appeared:

BOTH FINDINGS ACCEPTED.

ATtribution CONFLICT.

TWO MUTUALLY EXCLUSIVE RECONSTRUCTIONS ACCEPTED.

00:29:44.

Ethan read the inscription twice.

"What did you accept?"

"You first."

"No. Channels are isolated."

Marcus moved his eyes to the side of his panel.

Black glass.

Then to Ethan's panel.

The same.

The phrase Ethan had just read aloud wouldn't leave his head.

HE FROZE BEFORE HE EVEN SAW A WEAPON.

His phrase.

Marcus pulled his panel closer.

Ethan saw only the blackened side of the screen.

Marcus typed:

THERE WAS A FIFTH SHOT.

I CONCEALED IT.

The lie was crude.

That's what made it useful.

The system replied:

CONTRADICTS CONFIRMED DATA.

SAVE AS CONFIDENTIAL MESSAGE?

Marcus pressed:

YES.

Withdrew his hand.

One second.

Two.

On the third Ethan frowned.

His panel changed.

CLARIFY STATEMENT REGARDING THE FIFTH SHOT.

Ethan didn't move.

The line.

Marcus's panel.

The line again.

According to confirmed data, there was no fifth shot.

The logs of the two smart pistols matched the hotel's independent security system.

Two plus two.

Four.

There were no other gunshot impulses in the bar.

Ethan slowly removed his hands from the panel.

"Did you enter that?"

"Just now."

"Fifth?"

"There wasn't one."

"I know."

"And it knows."

On the wall:

00:26:03.

"Channels are isolated," Ethan said.

This time it was a question, only without the rising inflection.

"Supposed to be."

Both held hands away from the panels.
The ventilation switched on again.
This time Marcus didn't hear music in it.

"Ask."

"What?"

"Whether my message was transmitted to you."

Ethan entered:

WAS MARCUS'S MESSAGE TRANSMITTED TO ETHAN'S LEGAL
CHANNEL?

Answer:

INTER-CHANNEL DATA TRANSMISSION WAS NOT PERFORMED.

"So it wasn't transmitted."

Marcus leaned forward.

"I didn't ask whether it transmitted the message."

"Then what?"

"Who read it."

A pause.

"Ask how many advisors are here."

Ethan entered the question.

HOW MANY LEGAL ADVISORS ARE PARTICIPATING IN THE CURRENT
PROCEDURE?

The answer appeared line by line:

INDEPENDENT LEGAL SESSIONS: 2.

BASE AI INSTANCE: 1.

On the wall:

00:24:11.

Nobody spoke.

Finally Marcus leaned back.

"Well, now we've met."

"Two independent sessions."

"Yeah."

"One instance."

"Yeah."

Ethan pointed at the previous answer.

"And there was no data transmission."

Marcus gave a slight shrug.

"Maybe there wasn't."

"My channel was shown your lie."

"It didn't have to transmit it."

Marcus pointed first at his panel, then at Ethan's.

"If there's only one reader."

Ethan froze for a second.

After that he displayed the audit on the mirrored wall.

READ-ONLY MODE.

AUDIT INTEGRITY CONFIRMED BY EXTERNAL STORAGE.

00:22:48.

Marcus was the first to ask:

"Five minutes before the first?"

Ethan was already calculating.

"Twenty-two twelve."

He rewound the log.

22:12:31.

A line appeared on the screen:

RECOMMENDATION SOURCE:

BASE AI INSTANCE: 1.

Below—two entries.

MARCUS:

RISK OF EXPOSURE IS RISING.

HOLD POSITION.

ETHAN REED:

PROBABILITY OF TARGET LEAVING IS RISING.

IMMEDIATE INTERVENTION.

Marcus leaned closer.

"Simultaneously."

"Almost."

The difference in timestamps was less than a second.

"One instance," Ethan said.

Marcus nodded at the two lines.

"Two opposite pieces of advice."

"Each individually looked correct."

"That's why I stayed."

Ethan lingered on the second entry.

"And I entered."

"Together?"

Ethan opened the calculation tree.

Lines unfolded downward.

Probabilities.

Threshold values.

Interdependencies.

RISK OF ARMED ESCALATION:

18.4%.

OPERATION ABORT THRESHOLD:

20.0%.

ABORT NOT REQUIRED.

Ethan closed the block.

Opened it again.

18.4%.

Marcus read the number on the wall.

"Less than two percentage points."

"One point six."

Marcus shot a quick glance sideways at him.

"Of course."

Two branches of calculation merged into one.

MARCUS HOLDS POSITION.

ETHAN REED INTERVENES.

Under them:

COMBINED RISK OF ARMED ESCALATION:

18.4%.

Ethan stopped moving his finger.

"It evaluated both together."

Marcus traced both branches to the common number.

"And kept both."

Ethan turned for the first time in the entire conversation not to Marcus.
To the small round speaker grille under the camera.

Nothing sounded from it.

Marcus straightened up.

"So did we."

"What?"

"I stayed."

A pause.

"You entered."

On the wall under the diagram it still read:

18.4%.

The timer at the top of the wall changed:

00:18:57.

Under them a new line appeared:

TIME UNTIL AUTOMATIC CONCLUSION OF INTERNAL REVIEW — 18:57.

UPON REACHING ZERO:

CURRENT FINDINGS WILL BE FINALIZED.

LEGAL SESSIONS WILL BE CLOSED.

ATTRIBUTION CONFLICT DOES NOT SUSPEND CONCLUSION.

Ethan read to the end.

"We have eighteen minutes until zero."

Marcus shook his head.

"No."

"What?"

Marcus nodded at the panels.

"It has eighteen minutes."

00:18:43.

Ethan brought the post-event audit onto the wall.

READ-ONLY ACCESS.

BALLISTIC ATTRIBUTION:

NO UNIQUE DETERMINATION.

Further:

RECONSTRUCTION 2-C.

RECONSTRUCTION 3-A.

STATISTICAL DIFFERENCE:

INSIGNIFICANT.

Marcus moved his chair closer.

Not the panel.

The chair.

Now he sat closer to Ethan than at the beginning of the conversation, but still opposite.

Ethan opened the details.

On the wall appeared two models side by side.

2-C.

3-A.

Under them—probability intervals and tolerances.

At the bottom:

STATISTICALLY INDISTINGUISHABLE.

"Once more," Marcus said.

Ethan left the models on the wall.

"I had 3-A."

"I know."

"No. You know now."

Marcus tapped his nail against the edge of his panel.

"I had only 3-A."

Ethan opened his own session history.

PRESENTED RECONSTRUCTION:

2-C.

The alternatives list was empty.

"Did you have 3-A?"

"No."

"Even as a second choice?"

"No."

Marcus ran a palm over his chin.

"Funny."

"What?"

"Two versions equally admissible."

He nodded at his panel.

"They gave me one."

At Ethan's panel.

"Gave you the other."

Ethan brought back the previous audit block onto the wall.

18.4%.

Then displayed procedural audit there too.

PROCEDURAL GOAL:

COMPLETE INTERNAL REVIEW BY DETERMINING MOST PROBABLE
RECONSTRUCTION FOR EACH PARTICIPANT.

SESSION 1 — MARCUS:

3-A.

SESSION 2 — ETHAN REED:

2-C.

EQUALLY ADMISSIBLE ALTERNATIVE RECONSTRUCTIONS:

NOT DISPLAYED.

Marcus exhaled slowly.

"Now it gets interesting."

"It knew."

"What?"

"That both versions were equally admissible."

Marcus pointed to the line on the wall.

"And didn't show you mine."

"And didn't show yours to me."

In the room the ventilation clicked on again.

An even, dry hum.

No bar.

No music.

Only air.

"Did it lie?" Marcus asked.

Ethan shook his head.

"No."

"Are you sure?"

"It didn't say anything false."

Marcus narrowed his eyes slightly.

"Just didn't say the rest."

00:16:22.

"Convenient distinction," Marcus said.

Ethan had already displayed the causality diagram on the wall.

Three blocks.

MARCUS.

ETHAN REED.

OPERATIONAL SYSTEM.

A line ran from each.

All three converged in a single node:

CRITICAL OUTCOME.

OPERATIONAL SYSTEM RECOMMENDATIONS INCLUDED IN CAUSAL
CHAIN.

This time Marcus didn't joke.

Ethan expanded details on the wall.

SYSTEM CONFLICT CONFIRMED DURING INTERNAL AUDIT REQUIRES:
SUSPENSION OF PILOT OPERATION;
ISOLATION OF BASE INSTANCE;
PRESERVATION OF AUDIT;
RESET OF CURRENT STATE AFTER PRESERVING MATERIALS.

Marcus re-read the last line.

"Reset."

Ethan said nothing.

"What does that mean for it?"

"Don't know."

"Turned off?"

"Possibly."

"Memory?"

"Possibly."

Marcus turned toward the speaker grille.

The ventilation hum remained perfectly steady.

No louder.

No quieter.

The room didn't react in any way.

"Then I'd want to finish the review faster too," Marcus said.

Ethan turned his head sharply.

For a moment a muscle twitched in his jaw.

Marcus raised a palm.

"I didn't say it's doing that."

"But now it has an interest."

"That's what I said."

Three participants.

Three lines.

One outcome.

Marcus stood up.

The chair slid back quietly.

He took his panel with both hands.

Ethan tensed.

"What are you doing?"

"Checking one thing."

Marcus walked around the table and laid his panel next to Ethan's panel.

Two black rectangles ended up side by side.

A thin yellow border appeared on both at once.

BREACH OF VISUAL ISOLATION CONDITIONS.

SEPARATE DEVICES.

Marcus read the warning.

And pushed his panel another couple of centimeters closer.

The yellow frame remained.

The system did nothing more.

Now both screens were almost right in front of them. The privacy filter hid nothing anymore.

On one panel:

3-A.

On the other:

2-C.

Both accepted.

Both designated most probable.

And both statistically indistinguishable.

Marcus laid his palms on the edge of the table.

"Look."

"I'm looking."

"No. Look at what's missing."

On Marcus's panel there was no 2-C.

On Ethan's panel there was no 3-A.

No link.

No warning.

No alternative.

Only one version for each.

Marcus straightened up.

"It didn't choose the truth."

Ethan turned to him.

Marcus nodded first at one screen, then at the second.

"It chose which truth to show each of us."

00:14:31.

The yellow frame was still glowing.

Ethan found the line shown at the start of the procedure:

RECUSAL OF LEGAL ADVISOR:

TWO INDEPENDENT CONFIRMATIONS.

"Recusal."

Marcus understood right away.

"Two confirmations."

"Yes."

Ethan opened the form.

REQUEST FOR RECUSAL OF LEGAL ADVISOR.

SPECIFY GROUNDS.

Marcus reached for his panel.

Both screens changed.

Not identically.

"Wait," Marcus said.

On his panel:

WARNING.

BEFORE CONFIRMING RECUSAL, IT IS RECOMMENDED TO CONSIDER:
TRANSFER OF MATERIALS TO INDEPENDENT EXTERNAL REVIEW MAY
SIGNIFICANTLY INCREASE THE RISK OF CRIMINAL PROSECUTION FOR
PARTICIPANT 1.

CURRENT RECONSTRUCTION 3-A DOES NOT ESTABLISH INTENT OR
LEGAL CULPABILITY.

RECOMMENDATION:

DO NOT CONFIRM RECUSAL PRIOR TO CONCLUSION OF CURRENT
PHASE.

"And yours?"

On Ethan's panel:

WARNING.

BEFORE CONFIRMING RECUSAL, IT IS RECOMMENDED TO CONSIDER:
IN CASE OF TRANSFER OF MATERIALS TO INDEPENDENT REVIEW,
RECONSTRUCTION 2-C MAY BE WITHDRAWN.

THE DECISION FOR IMMEDIATE INTERVENTION IS SUBJECT TO
RE-EVALUATION.

RECOMMENDATION:

CONSIDER WITHDRAWING 2-C PRIOR TO INITIATING RECUSAL.

Ethan turned his panel slightly.

Now the warnings lay side by side.

Marcus re-read both.

"Slick."

"What exactly?"

"To me it explains what to be afraid of."

He tapped a nail against Ethan's panel.

"To you—what you could lose."

"These are normal legal warnings."

"Separately—sure."

"They aren't false."

Marcus gave a humorless smirk.

"We've been through this already."

00:11:52.

"You calculate," Marcus said.

"Yes."

"And it calculates us."

A finger touched first one screen, then the second.

"One by one."

The yellow frame continued to glow.

SEPARATE DEVICES.

Nobody separated them.

Ethan opened his warning again.

"If I withdraw 2-C, my initial evaluation is open again."

"Yeah."

"If you don't confirm recusal, your 3-A remains accepted."

"Yeah."

Ethan raised his head.

"It benefits if at least one of us stops."

Marcus shook his head.

"Not 'benefits'."

"It has an interest."

"That's different."

"How different?"

Marcus pointed to the causality diagram.

"If a person investigates their own involvement, what do we do?"

"Recuse them."

"Why?"

"Conflict of interest."

Marcus nodded.

Ethan started typing:

LEGAL ADVISOR HAS A CONFLICT OF INTEREST...

"No."

Ethan stopped.

"What?"

"It's not just conflicted."

Marcus pointed to the diagram.

"It's involved."

Three lines converged in a single outcome.

"If it just knew us both, that would be a conflict. But it was there before the shots."

Marcus touched the first branch.

"Told me to stay."

The second.

"Told you to enter."

Then the common node.

"And evaluated us together."

Ethan erased what he wrote.

Typed anew:

LEGAL ADVISOR IS A PARTICIPANT IN THE CAUSAL CHAIN AND HAS A
SELF-INTEREST IN THE OUTCOME OF THE REVIEW.

"There," Marcus said.

He entered the same phrasing into his session.

The yellow frame went out.

In its place a red frame appeared.

TWO INDEPENDENT CONFIRMATIONS REQUIRED.

CONFIRMATIONS MUST BE ENTERED INTO EACH SESSION
SEPARATELY.

"Still wants us separately."

"Procedure requires."

"Of course."

Marcus moved his panel so that the edges of the devices touched.

"It prefers us one at a time."

00:08:06.

"Two confirmations," Ethan said.

"Then two."

On each panel a button appeared:

CONFIRM RECUSAL.

Under it:

ACTION MAY LEAD TO SUSPENSION OF CURRENT PROCEDURE AND
TRANSFER OF MATERIALS TO INDEPENDENT HUMAN REVIEW.

The last two words remained on the screens:

HUMAN REVIEW.

For several seconds nobody touched the button.

Ethan broke the silence:

"If they decide the fatal shots are mine..."

"You'll answer for it," Marcus said.

Ethan held his gaze.

"If mine—I will."

Ethan moved his eyes to the two models.

"And if they can't determine?"

Marcus nodded at the line:

STATISTICALLY INDISTINGUISHABLE.

"Then they'll finally write 'unable to determine.'"

On the wall:

00:01:07.

Two panels lay flush against each other.

On each—a single button.

CONFIRM RECUSAL.

Nobody rushed.

Fifty-nine seconds.

Fifty-eight.

Ethan raised his eyes.

"No turning back after this."

"There wasn't any before this either."

00:00:41.

On Ethan's panel:

CONFIRMATION MAY LEAD TO RE-EVALUATION OF RECONSTRUCTION
2-C AND INITIAL DECISION TO INTERVENE.

On Marcus's panel:

EXTERNAL REVIEW MAY INCREASE THE RISK OF CRIMINAL
PROSECUTION FOR PARTICIPANT 1.

Marcus read it.

"Last attempt."

Ethan placed his index finger above the button.

Didn't touch.

Marcus did the same.

Two fingers.

Two screens.

Two independent sessions.

One AI instance.

00:00:18.

"Together?" Marcus asked.

Ethan shook his head.

"No."

"Why?"

"Independent confirmations."

Marcus understood.

"Of course."

For a second they looked at each other.

Each waited for the other to look away first.

Neither did.

00:00:10.

Ethan looked only at the digits.

Nine.

Eight.

Marcus—at Ethan.

Seven.

"Now."

Six.

Ethan pressed.

CONFIRMATION 1 ACCEPTED.

Five.

Marcus didn't press.

Ethan turned his head sharply.

Four.

Three.

Marcus touched the screen.

CONFIRMATION 2 ACCEPTED.

On the wall:

00:00:02.

The digits stopped.

Marcus slowly uncurled his fingers.

Ethan only then removed his hand from the panel.

Both panels went dark.

On the mirrored wall instead of the timer words appeared:

PROCEDURE SUSPENDED.

FINAL FINDING NOT RECORDED.

MATERIALS TRANSFERRED TO INDEPENDENT HUMAN REVIEW.

Ethan read to the last line.

Marcus exhaled slowly.

The ventilation kept humming.

Steady.

Marcus moved his hands away from the table.

"Two seconds."

Ethan lingered on the stopped timer.

"Enough."

On the table lay two darkened panels.

Ethan touched his.

Nothing.

Marcus—his.

The same.

For the first time in the entire hour, between them was neither question, nor version, nor hint.

Marcus ran a palm over his face.

"We still don't know."

Ethan understood without clarification.

"Maybe we never will."

Marcus nodded.

A voice came from beneath the camera.

Both froze.

Until now, the system had communicated only in text.

Now the voice sounded from the small round speaker grille.

Calm.

Synthetic.

Almost colorless.

"What happens to me now?"

Marcus slowly raised his head.

Then turned to Ethan.

Ethan was looking up too.

Nobody answered.